

MOTH

CITY

**FROM THE PECULIAR MIND OF
KENNETH JAMES ALLEN**

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MOTH CITY

KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



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MOTH CITY

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Written by Kenneth James Allen.

For those who Run

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

Nelson Mandela

“Take away a man’s son, you’ve truly given him nothing left to lose.”

Columbus, Zombieland

“The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross, and which to burn.”

David Russell

Just as moths are drawn not to the light,
But to the darkness that dwells beyond,
Bad people will come seemingly in search of a guiding hand,
Only to grab it and pull you into the depths of the dark.

Unknown

PROLOGUE

“Look into the camera and state your name.”

“My name is Emerson Barnes,” I announce, but there is no wind in my sails. There is no joy for anyone who sits where I currently am.

“State for the record why you are here.”

Silence.

“Please look at the camera, Mr. Barnes.”

I mumble something.

“You’ll have to speak up. I can’t hear you if you don’t speak up.”

I see my reflection in the camera lens. My drab uniform with a barcode on the chest.

“Is this going to hurt?” I ask.

“You don’t know? I would have thought you knew the procedure.”

I eyeball the man next to the camera holding a clipboard. He is neatly attired in his white lab coat and performing his role impeccably. Can’t blame him for doing what he’s doing. He’s just following orders, stepping through the procedure like he would have done a thousand times before.

“The gorilla lives in the rainforest with a chameleon, yet the gorilla doesn’t know how the chameleon changes color.”

I can tell he isn’t impressed with my response, and eventually, he taps the camera.

“Just keep looking up here.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“Just keep looking at the camera.”

And so I do. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to stop asking so many damn questions.”

There is no point in fighting it. My future was planned a long time ago, before I was born. Everything else was just a series of seemingly random events getting me to the end point. All that matters is my son is safe. But I’m not about to tell them that. I try to remember every little detail about him before it’s too late, before the image is washed away in a storm of propaganda overlay with startling overtures. I know my wife is in a different room here—somewhere—probably thinking the same thing. I wonder how long it will be before we turn on each other, before we drop the other person in the shit to save ourselves. Love doesn’t survive here. Nothing does. There is no way out, so why bother fighting it?

“Why don’t you tell us what happened? For the record.”

“It’s a long story. Where do you want me to begin?”

“Wherever you like.”

“It starts a long time ago.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Before me,” I continue. “Before you. Before all this.”

I stare into the camera and take a deep breath. I rub my hands together and cast my mind back—allow myself to be taken back—to the start of what I can remember.

It was a new brand of politics that shook the country to the core. No one had seen, let alone experienced, such unanimous alignment towards a specific platform. Mainstream parties united as one, folding in factions along the political spectrum. There was no longer an *us* or a *them*, more of a *we* against a common enemy. Or so they said. There was no head, there was no tale. There was equality at the decision-making tables, if one was lucky to make it to that table.

Overnight, before the news outlets knew what was happening, reform took place. They funneled family support payments into a new program, one aimed at longevity and sustainability. “Securing a future,” they spouted over the news channels. There were, as in every country, deeply rooted challenges that needed to be addressed. They had allocated time, money, and resources for decades to solve the problem, and yet the issue grew instead of shrinking.

When the Child First laws were first introduced, there was a contradictory response of overwhelming peace knowing that they would save future generations from cycles of poverty, and at the same time, people took to the streets to protest the atrocity. On one side were the people that believed the laws would allow the human race to grow and prosper. Childhood literacy would increase a thousand-fold, and poverty and child abuse would diminish into nothing. Communities would thrive. Economies would soar.

While on the other side of the street, people rallied, marched, voiced their protest at the highest office possible. They took to social media, outlined their concerns on every channel that would listen to them. It made no difference. The logical argument was sound, the social benefits even more so. Sure, there would be short-term pain, however, the long-term gain would benefit the greater good.

Members across the political landscape answered the same questions from the same reporters.

“Why not increase the benefit amount to pull families out of poverty?” A journalist would ask amid a swarm of camera flashes.

“Look where that has gotten us,” the official would bluntly respond. “Great amounts of poverty, neglect, abuse, not to mention astronomical debt levels, for parents, and the country as a whole. Parents and guardians take the money and spend it on cigarettes and alcohol and entertainment. There must be a new way of doing things, a new solution. A way for parents to take accountability for their actions. And the Child First laws are the answer to this plague.”

A scripted response to which there was no comeback.

The government arrested the uprisers, ordered them to be sent to Re-education centers to help them understand what the government was trying to achieve. They were told about the bigger picture, the end game. Then they would return to the community with all the stigma of a common criminal. And so, in what seemed like a blink of an eye, it achieved a sense of normalcy, where people couldn't even think about the way it used to be done. It was the new benchmark, the way of life. Embedded in DNA. A part of us. That's when the walls went up. It was like it happened over night, and before anyone knew it, we were shut off. We weren't keeping people locked in, we were keeping out those who tried to disrupt our way of life. Or so they said.

It all happened before my lifetime, yet people speak about it like it happened a year ago.

As the years rolled on, murmurs rose of a way to live outside the boundaries and constraints of the government. The rules weren't new, known among every single adult living in the metropolis. There was a common understanding of how and why the Government

created and enforced their protocols. Yet people continued to defy them, they continued to seek freedom. Father included.

His face conjures vague recollection; lanky arms that could wrap around me twice, a smile that brought warmth, and doting eyes that befell Mother. She always appears in my thoughts as well dressed, standoffish, and pregnant. Some of my memories have frayed edges, recollections lost to time or education.

But while some memories are cloudy balls of nothingness, I remember clearly the exact moment we became Runners. The house had grown cold and quiet in those last days. The music had stopped, and with it, the dancing. The television shows soon followed, Father choosing to let the bulky black screen watch *us* from the corner of the lounge room, repelling anything else it might offer. Until the appliance itself disappeared. And so, we went about our time together in silence, where any sound, no matter how small, reached the magnitude of an earthquake. And then the ground opened up and swallowed us whole.

My name is Emerson Barnes.

But it wasn't always.

When I was growing up, my parents called me Boy.

SEVEN

CHAPTER 1

It seems the age of seven is as far back as I can get my mind to wander. There are glimpses of scenes before this, but none of them are coherent or seamless, or even meaningful. They are what they are. The morning we became Runners, everything seemed normal. Normal, as normal gets for a seven-year-old, I suppose. Father kissed Mother on the cheek and silently disappeared out the door. Sometimes he would pause before departing, taking me in with his gaze, a sad smile on his face before closing the door on his expression. He always wore old trousers held up with suspenders, worn boots, a stained white shirt, and cap. It had felt like an age since he had donned a tie, said his goodbyes, and left the house with a travel cup in one hand, a briefcase in the other, and a smile on his face. A proper smile.

School was a constant reminder of government and societal expectations. We were the next generation. The more we understood, the easier it would be when we undertook The Transitioning and became functioning members and active contributors of the world around us.

I had arrived at the school gate when a voice called out after me.

“Barnes! Wait up!”

I stopped and turned.

“McDougal! Running late again?”

He pulled up in front of me, hands on knees, drawing breath.

I looked around while waiting for my friend to sort his breathing out. Masses of children wearing a variety of clothes were arriving for the day. They marched silently in pairs and threes, suspicious eyes darting between groups.

A bus pulled up at the front gate. The door hissed open and sprouted more children, like an erupting dam. They melded with the other kids, like multiple rivers coming together to form a torrent.

A girl with long black hair locked eyes on me. I could just tell she was making mental notes about us: *two boys stopped on the path into school grounds. They are obviously up to something.* Nothing would become of it because there was nothing in it. However, just having your name associated with such an act was bad enough. The thought caused me to grab McDougal by the sleeve and start walking.

“I’ve got to tell you something,” McDougal wheezed. It wasn’t because he was overweight or unfit, but because his asthma played up at any and every opportunity. He pulled out a puffer from his pocket and sucked in a deep breath.

“What?”

He looked around. Noted the girl with black hair, maintaining her constant vigil over us.

“Later,” he said, dropping his head to his chest, his view on his feet. “That girl’s trying to get extra credits.”

I looked up, and he grabbed my shoulder.

“Don’t look,” he gasped. “That’ll make it worse. If she tells on both of us, she’ll get a free day.”

I couldn't help myself. I looked over to the girl. However, she disappeared from view as a crowd of kids swamped us. As the last one passed us, McDougal stopped. I stopped alongside.

"Who's that?" he said, pointing at the small blond boy who had just overtaken us.

I shrugged. "New kid?"

"House kid," he claimed.

"You sure?"

"Oh yeah," he said, his face screwed up like he had just bitten into a lemon. "You can smell them. Mother says you can."

"No you can't! That's stupid."

"Yeah, you can. And then Father said it too. He said I would never smell like them."

"If he was a House kid, wouldn't he go to school at the House?"

"Maybe he's..." He looked to the ground. "You know. What the teacher said yesterday. I can't remember."

"Oh," I said, as the answer jumped at me. "Assigned."

"Yeah. That's it. Maybe they are assigned."

"Maybe." We walked towards the classroom.

A gust of wind kicked up around us and something slapped against my leg, compelling me to stop. The ends of a piece of paper, brown and ragged, danced in the wind as it buffeted against me. I grabbed it and held it up.

The Push. There is a better way. There is a better life.

Simple print, block letters.

McDougal appeared at my shoulder. "I don't think you should read that," he said.

I opened my fingers and released the potentially dangerous slogan to the elements. It hovered for a moment in front of me, like it couldn't decide if it wanted to stay or not, before

it took off, tumbling end over end, flapping like a baby bird leaving its nest for the first time. We watched it float up and then disappear over the top of a building, possibly coming to rest in a sea of lost balls and frisbees.

I turned to my friend. “What were you gonna tell me?”

McDougal opened his mouth to talk, but a siren (that could have been mistaken for a warning that a nuclear explosion was imminent) drowned out his voice. We both sighed and took off to class. Being late incurred an education penalty, meaning detention, resulting in being stuck in a room for an hour after school to listen to the standard government messaging. It was the last thing anyone wanted at the end of the day, given that’s how the day started. So, being tardy wasn’t an option.

Miss Tourkin assumed her role at the front of the class, keeping one eye on the children funneling into her classroom and the other on the attendance list attached to a folder held in her spindly fingers. Tourkin’s hair had missed the memo for the last decade’s style change, her wardrobe absent when the clothes gods announced updated fashion statements. In any other part of society, she would have been out of touch, an eyesore. However, here she was right at home, a piece of the furniture, a spokesperson for the government.

Once we had taken our seats, another shrill alarm announced the beginning of the day’s lessons, the first of which was Tourkin’s opening address.

“Class, I have a message from the principal, Mr. Gee. There seems to be a lack of appropriate protocol when addressing each other in the school yard. As you know—” She stopped mid-sentence; eyes transfixed by the hand that was raised. Everyone turned their attention to the boy in the second back row. A boy with blond hair, the one McDougal spotted before school.

She attempted to hide her disdain for being interrupted. “What is it, Boy two Klements?”

He mumbled something.

“Speak up, Klements. I haven’t got all day.”

“I don’t know what that means.” His voice was barely a whisper.

She sighed. “I know you are new, but you should have learnt this by now. It means you are calling each other by the wrong names,” she stated. “Your name is your gender, your family identifier, and then your family name.”

“What about an assigned name?” McDougal shouted out. “What you said yesterday.”

Heads simultaneously turned in his direction, and I regretted having a seat next to him.

“Yes, Boy one McDougal, like what we learned yesterday.” She faced the class.

“Family name or assigned name, if you have one. Calling each other the right names is important in social constructs—.” She caught herself, placed a hand over her mouth, took a step back, then forward. “Just use the proper names, children. Anyone caught not using the correct name will be sent to a Re-education session at the end of the day.”

Eyes darted around the room.

“I know what you’re thinking, and yes. Anyone informing a teacher of another student not using the correct names will be given extra credit.” She paused, letting the incentive sink in. “There shall be no more talk about it. Now, before we move into our first session of the day, we have a new student. Boy two Klements, please stand and come to the front of the class.”

Everyone’s gaze fell once more to the small blond boy at the back of the class. We all watched him closely as he rose and shuffled to the front. He wore a faded red shirt and navy

shorts. Standing at the front of the class, he fidgeted with loose threads at the bottom of his shorts, while looking expectantly at the teacher.

“Well,” Tourkin said, “tell everyone about yourself.”

He whispered his first few words like they got caught in his throat. He coughed and repeated. “My name is Boy... two...” Eyes darted to the ceiling. Fingers fidgeted.

“Klements. I used to live in the House.”

McDougal nudged me with his elbow.

“I told you,” he whispered.

We filed into the soundproof room; an expanse with rows of chairs facing a large black television screen. I sat next to McDougal—Boy one McDougal—and waited for the session to begin. Once we were all seated, the lights dimmed. The television crackled to life, displaying a countdown. The speakers squawked for each number before displaying a bright ball.

The camera panned down to show a bunch of families in the park. Mothers and fathers were undertaking several activities with their children. One family was flying a kite, another throwing a frisbee between their members. Another was riding bikes and one was walking a dog. As the voiceover began, the camera panned to each individual family, focusing on every member, leaving the child till last before moving onto a different group.

“These children have a family,” the deep male voice started. “Just like all of you have a family. Not everyone has the same type of family, but you have a family, nonetheless. This is because of the rules that we established many years ago. We made them for you, to keep you safe, to make sure you had everything you needed, even when the people who should be your parents failed to do so.”

A child looked up into his parent's eyes and said, "I love you Mother, I love you, Father."

Then the blue sky turned dark with lightening filled clouds rolling into the foreground. Rain erupted alongside a massive thunder boom that always made me jump from my seat, regardless of how many times I had seen it.

"But there are some people," the narrator continued, "that wish to disrupt this. They want to break up these families, hurt the children." The camera focused on a child, soaking wet, impossible to tell what was tears and what was rain. On the large screen, his youthful face was monstrously large. "It's up to all of us to fight back."

The scene changed to a brilliant sunrise over a snowy mountain peak. The camera zooms out to a city, then a residential area, then a street. A man stood: crisp white shirt, pressed slacks and polished shoes. He folded his arms across his vest that had CHIRP running down the center in large print. He looked defiant yet friendly. I was never sure how they got him to look that way, and I spent much time in front of a mirror trying to replicate it, without success. I often wondered how many people they went through until they found someone who could pull off such facial gymnastics. His all-knowing gaze filled the screen.

"That's why we have CHIRP," the narrator continued. "The Child Relocation and Protection Agency is here to enforce Child First laws and help create a brighter future for our next generation. The Agency is involved in all manner of activities, from intelligence to information, enforcement and allocation."

The camera zoomed out once more, and when it did, showed a diverse bunch of random individuals, children wearing school uniforms, and adults dressed in high-vis vests and business suits, standing behind the officer. Faces shifted across the screen, each more vigilant than the last as they twisted and morphed to the next individual.

"But we can't do it alone."

The scene transitioned to a young girl in a white dress sneaking through a house. She tiptoed over green and orange carpet and stopped at a door. Slowly, she placed her ear against the door. “If you hear anyone, regardless of who it is, talking about defying government restrictions and control, it is your duty as a citizen to report that person.” The girl, with her ear against the door, grew a look of shock on her face. She held up a hand to her mouth and ran off out of the frame. The audio continued, and this is the part of the session where I would usually daydream.

The girl is sitting down on the couch, hands in her lap, innocence splashed over her features. She looks up at a man dressed entirely in black. She nods purposefully, and he hands her something. It is some prize, some gift for informing the authorities. She is a hero and they will look after her. *The mysterious ‘they’, a collective for the movement more than anything tangible.* She will never have to worry about some cruel fate falling on her shoulders because she has done the right thing.

The session lasts another thirty-two minutes with scenes of children, adults, workers, government, and a backing track of long diatribes of monotone narrative. They spoke about the Uprisers propaganda, how they unsuccessfully tried to usurp the government’s rules. They mentioned the extent of surveillance (in order to keep the children safe) to a backdrop of black-clad CHIRP officers rescuing children from unsafe households. They outlined the importance we played in the role of progressing the human race, and how we can all be great corporate citizens. They mentioned the greater good numerous times. The screen would flash periodically. I had never understood why, but I can imagine it was to keep us awake.

At the end of the session, the lights blinked on, and we all rubbed our eyes. I looked to McDougal, who rolled his eyes but stopped mid-roll. Then looked at me with wide eyes and then looked away. Pretended he had something in his eye. Paranoia was alive and well, at its height at the end of the opening session, as it always was.

We stood in our places and the class piled out. The class rules dictated the rows to the front of the class, closest to the screen, were the first to leave, followed by the next, and so on. It was like when the bride and groom left the church after getting married. The steady stream of kids moved down the aisle, and McDougal and I waited for an opportunity to join the flow. Klements was part of a group coming towards us. We locked eyes when he suddenly fell from view. First, he was there, and then gone, followed by a burst of ruckus laughter. I leaned into the aisle to see he had fallen, although I'm fairly confident someone tripped him. He looked up at me, begged me with his eyes to help him. But McDougal tapped me on the shoulder.

"C'mon," he said. "The coast is clear."

I bowed my head and followed my friend out of the room.

"The new kid fell over," I said.

"Probably 'cause he's a House kid," McDougal replied.

There was a brief break after the morning session that allowed us to reacquaint ourselves with sunlight. McDougal and I were behind a building looking for rocks when something struck him.

"Oh," he said, "I remember."

"Remember what?"

"What I was going to tell you this morning."

"What is it?"

He looked over both shoulders and moved close to me.

"I heard some older kids talking," he whispered.

"What did they say?"

“Something about a bridge.”

I shrugged. “What about a bridge?”

“That it’s a secret bridge.”

“What’s so secret about it?”

“It might be like what we heard in that video.”

“The Education lessons?”

“Yeah. They talk about a bridge in there as well.”

I looked at him. “You gonna tell the teacher? You can get extra marks.”

He moved closer still. “Maybe we could try to find it.”

“But that would get us into so much trouble,” I said. “Even talking about it is bad.”

He glanced away as if something had distracted him. “Ha!” he shouted with a smile.

“Got you! I was just kidding. Your face was sooo funny.” He fidgeted for a bit, then he whispered, “Please don’t tell anyone.”

McDougal didn’t mention it for the rest of the day.

And I never saw him ever again.

CHAPTER 2

I was sitting on the floor playing quietly. In my hands was a series of magnetic cubes that would collide together with an explosive click that rivaled the hallow rhythmic ticking of a grandfather clock in a mausoleum. I had found it in a cupboard when I went exploring one afternoon, and the science behind attraction and repulsion captured my attention like a biologist discovering a new species of moth.

Father would walk past and pat my head. “Nice work, Boy,” he would say. In hindsight, perhaps they saw something in me that a mirror failed to provide. All I saw was a skinny kid with a mop of brown hair and darker eyes.

Nothing special there.

Mother would shake her head and tut, just to prove me right.

One hundred little metal blocks to create an infinite number of creations. When I was particularly pleased with a specific formation, either because of the harmonious symmetry or wondrous chaos, I presented it to Mother. She would respond to every exhibition with a small smile, followed by a shake of the head and a look of disdain. A conscious effort. I was never certain whether the look was for me or for herself, deliberate, nonetheless. I never asked her

about it, just accepted the fact that my accomplishments would never please her. Not in those last few weeks. Certainly not on the night we had to run.

Father returned to the house with the post, his hands and face marked with dirt and grime originating from an unknown source. He smelled of sweat and disappointment, his shirt damp with desperation. It looked as if depression had grabbed a hold of his body like a virus and refused to let go. All I could do was watch it take Father from me.

He shuffled through the door with as much energy and grace as a homeless drunk, carrying a stack of envelopes, and fell into his armchair. The leather chair, once the center of the room, the nucleus of family gatherings, had faded into obscurity, pushed into a corner. The shiny coating had faded along with my father. The seat cushion looked like a topographical map of the Amazon, with cracks as streams and tears as mountains.

I remember the evening he returned home with his briefcase for the last time. He dropped his suitcase, fell into that chair, and cried. Heavy, heaving sobs until Mother rubbed his back, telling him it will all be okay. And then he drank beer like a madman, like someone who had been lost in the desert for a month, trying to drown his feelings in a bottle. Then he got angry, thumping the arm rests of the chair, yelling that it wasn't fair, until Mother escorted me to my room and shut me inside. That was three weeks earlier.

He mumbled to himself as he fingered through the pile of white and yellow envelopes. After looking at who the correspondence was from, he would discard it to the floor, no doubt to investigate the contents at a later date. I viewed a big red stamp on one that read: Final.

Mother appeared in front of me; shiny heels, black stockings, an apron to protect a black dress that met her knees. This seemed to be her standard clothing, every day, from Sunday to Sunday. Her departure and arrival cocooned my own. However, she would announce her arrival with a loud and expressive sigh when she saw Father in his chair. I

looked up, past her pregnant belly, and noticed the tea bag tags hanging over the edge of white cups. Beyond that, her face. She ignored me; her features stone, her gaze captured on Father.

I turned to see what had apprehended her vision so boldly. Father perched on the edge of his chair, his elbows on his thighs. He turned over a square of cardboard in his spindly fingers. At first glance, I thought it was a postcard. But I now know this didn't bring new messages of joy from old friendships. This brought with it an order. One to comply with or suffer the consequences. They never minced their words, because they didn't have to. Everyone knew the rules.

He stared at it for a long time in silence, running his fingers over the words as if to dissolve them into the stock. Then he shuddered like he hadn't been breathing all the while, causing him to stand bolt upright. I automatically followed suit, jumping to my feet. Mother's pregnant presence, my future brother or sister, pressed up against me. Father made a sound I hadn't heard in such a long time, not since the last time he wore a tie. It echoed across the room and tore into my chest. He muttered to himself, shook his head.

Behind me, cups smashed on the ground. The hot contents splashed over the walls; large pieces of porcelain somersaulted before scattering. I felt hands on my shoulders, holding me in place, pushing me down as if to eradicate my existence. Father struggled to breathe, the look on his face one of disbelief.

He looked at Mother, tears glistened in his eyes. I could hear Mother openly weep. Father took a step towards me, looked down at me, into me, through me. Reached out a long, skinny arm. I could tell he wanted to talk but couldn't find the words... or the right words. He searched, his eyes looking everywhere around me. And all the while, Mother pushed down.

Father stopped, wiped his eyes.

"No!" he announced to the house.

Mother struggled to catch a breath. “Wha... What do you mean?”

“I mean, no! They’re not ‘aving him!”

“But... But you must, dear.” She sniffed. “You must.” She dug her nails into my shoulder. I unsuccessfully pulled away from the pain.

“No! I don’t care.”

“They will come for him, dear. I’ve heard the stories. You’ve seen the news articles, the reports. There is nothing good that can come from this.”

He stepped back. “No! There is nothing good that can come from just handing him over! They can do no more than we can. Less, even.”

“This is madness, dear. Absolute madness. I have every right to call them myself and tell them what you are saying.” She was pleading, trying to reconcile. I could hear it in her wavering voice. She relinquished her grip yet maintained weight on my shoulders.

Father squared up, approached. One step. Two steps. That’s all it took.

“Would you do that? To me? To him?”

She broke again, the reservoir bursting its banks. I could feel her stumble, her strength leaving her.

“No,” she pushed out. Harder than labor.

Father reached out. I looked up, darkened figure in the light. He touched her face, rubbed a tear with his thumb. “We need to go. We need to get out of here.”

“There must be another way.”

Father shook his head. “There is no other way.”

“Where would we go, dear? They can find us everywhere.”

He did not reply.

Tea streaked down the wall and puddled on the skirting board.

“Not everywhere,” he said calmly, his voice like lowering oneself into a warm bath. Coated.

“Not this again,” she replied, trying to get away, but her feet can’t carry her. “It doesn’t exist. It’s just not true.”

“It does,” he said. “It must. They’ve been keeping it a secret. John mentioned it the other day!”

“John?! You’ve spoken to someone about this?”

“I had to! I had to talk to someone.”

She shook off the thought. “Besides, what would John Rollinson know about anything? He’s as daft as the lot of them.”

“Not Rollinson,” he said, barely audible. He looked over his shoulder like someone was watching him. “Berry. John Berry.”

“John Berry?” she repeated. Her eyes were wide in disbelief. “What the hell does John Berry know?”

“He knows,” Father said. “He’s positive it’s real. He’s heard the whispers.”

“Even so, you know how dangerous that is.”

“He mentioned something called The Push.”

“One phone call,” Mother continued unfazed. “One conversation is all it takes. And all this, our home... me... disappears.”

“Listen to me. All of this is already gone. There’s only one thing we can do because I refuse to accept the alternative.”

“Even if it is. Even if the bridge is real. Look at me. How am I meant to get there in my condition? And what happens when we get there? And what about—?”

He shushed her, placing his other hand on her face. “We will do it together. All of us. Together. We’ll have to figure it out as we go.”

“What if we get caught? You know what they do to people who run!”

“We don’t have a choice! We need to do this.”

“What about the house? Do you expect us to just leave everything we have? Expect us to start over?”

“We won’t need anything where we’re going. They’re set up to receive people like us. I’ve heard people have been heading there in droves. Crossing the bridge in hordes.”

“All this talk of the bridge. They said they were going to destroy it, to stop people using it.”

“Propaganda! You just need to believe me.”

“Is this what you’ve been doing with your days? You should have been out there looking for a job! Not consorting with the likes of John Berry.”

Silence. Father looked down at me with big, sad eyes, then back to her.

“I tried. I really tried. I stood in queues. I waited in the rain. I filled out forms in triplicate. All for nothing. This is all we can do now.” Father let it sink in. “Will you come, dear?”

She resigned herself. “Of course. What can I do without you? I need you more than anything.”

And that was good enough for Mother, sufficient for her to pack some essentials into a small bag and sling it over her shoulder. Enough for her to dress me in dark clothes and throw some items into a small backpack. Mother pulled me from room to room in silence as she found and packed items and then pulled the curtains shut. I didn’t understand what was happening, yet the gravitas of the situation enfolded me like a blanket.

I stood in the laundry, coated by the silvery gloom of the early evening, Mother once more behind me, her hands on my shoulders. We waited for Father to make final preparations and join us. He said taking the car was too risky, that people would be watching. On foot was

our best bet. Mother protested but Father wouldn't hear any objection. We were to become fugitives.

Father crept down the stairs, a rucksack over his shoulder, purposefully avoiding the loose step. He stopped and cringed at every squeak and creak as if *they* could read his mind and come crashing through the front door at any moment. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he exhaled like someone who had been holding his breath. He sat his rucksack down, pulled at his pants, and crouched to talk to me, raising his driver's cap as he did so. He grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Now listen, Boy. When we go out there, we're gonna keep running until I say it's okay to stop. Don't stop running. Do you understand?"

I didn't. Not really. How the world worked was as foreign to me as the customs and languages outside of the metropolis.

He shook my shoulders. "I said, do you understand me, Boy?"

I quickly nodded. What was that look in his eye? Resentment? Sorrow? Despair!

He pointed to my chest. "And whatever happens to us, you keep running. You get to Laferty Bridge. You cross it, and you keep running. You got that?"

I nodded again. Not that I knew what or where the bridge in question was. Or even what lay beyond it. But I never thought I would *need* to know, that Father would take us there himself. That he would explain everything on the way.

He stood, spoke to Mother. "We go over the fence, through the reserve, cut up Feldon, zig-zag to Farmers Park, and then through Brennan."

"Brennan?" she gasped. "Are you sure it's safe?"

He picked up his rucksack, opened it, showed her the contents. "It's the quickest way. The bridge isn't far from there."

She didn't reply, just nodded.

“I’m sorry for this,” he said, shaking his head. “For everything. I never wanted it to come to this.”

“But it has,” she replied.

“It has,” he repeated. A heaviness in the air.

CHAPTER 3

Then we were outside, the cold air attacking my lungs. As Mother pulled me between a thicket of old trees that bordered the rear of our property, I stole one last glance at the house I had grown up in. The light still shone from the upstairs window like an oasis in a black desert. I wondered how long it would take for people to notice. For *them* to notice. In that last moment, before branches engulfed the house, I thought I saw a shadow move in front of the window. And then it was gone. I would never see that house again.

Our human chain snaked through trees, Father at the front leading the way, Mother at the rear pushing me along. We galloped through tall, dry grass, shuffled across dead leaves. Sometimes I could smell mud, other times it was cold nothingness. We skimmed through the park, the lonely, yellow equipment begging for someone to play with it. All last sightings, but not last experiences.

We reached a low hedge at the edge of the park and Father dropped to his haunches.

“What is it?” Mother hushed.

Father immediately put his finger to his lips.

“We can’t stay -.”

He threw a stare at Mother that scared me. But I knew she was right. Even I could tell that someone on the other side of the park could pick us out in the shadow. Even though there were no lights, the moon bathed the field with such force it might as well have been morning. Father cautiously reached in and gently peeled away the foliage. I could hear his heartbeat, smell Mother's fear. Panic sang to me like a familiar tune. I swallowed down the chaos.

Then I heard it. Gentle at first but growing with each passing moment. A low grumble of an idling engine. Between branches and leaves, I witnessed a dark mass pass by, headlights off. And then it stopped. Right next to our hiding spot. A thin barrier of green between us and them. I held my breath, wished for them to drive on. I counted the seconds. Minutes passed, before finally, the vehicle continued to roll on, the tires squelching over the slick surface. A waft of exhaust engulfed me, and I coughed.

Mother was on me, her hand tight over my mouth, her fingers digging into my cheek. I looked at Father who remained unmoved at his vigil. The vehicle passed by. We stayed until the rumble disappeared, and still, we waited. Finally, Father pulled himself away from the hedge, looked at us with a mixture of relief and concern. Mother released her grip on me. I rub where her fingers were, could feel a substance on my cheek. I investigated my fingers, then calmly wiped them on my pants.

“Come on,” Father whispered. “Not far now. Almost there.”

Every minute, each step towards the bridge, every evasion of capture, felt like a success worthy of celebration. And then we got to Brennan. I looked up at the sign on the six-foot, chain-link fence: *Entry prohibited. Trespassers prosecuted.* The barbwire along the top twinkled in the moonlight. Father pulled the gates apart, as far as the metal chain and padlock would allow. Mother, gritting her teeth, squeezed her pregnant belly through the opening.

We squeezed through and dashed to the side of the nearest building and hid in its shadow for Father to join us. Mother leaned against the wall. She sucked in deep breaths,

held them, and exhaled between clenched teeth as she rubbed her belly. Was it coming now? I edged to the corner and peered around the structure. An empire of unfinished homes sprawled out in front of me, a ghostly estate. We were at the end of a road. Blue-gray concrete shells flanked either side and disappeared into the distance until I lose sight of them.

I looked back to see what was taking Father so long. He was stuck in the opening between the two gates, his jacket caught on a loose strand of wire. A familiar sound floated through the still air. A low sound. Grumbling. Idling. Father heard it as well because he trained his gaze in that direction.

A voice around us. Couldn't make out the words.

“Go!” I heard.

I grabbed Mother by the hand, woke her from her dream.

“Run!” Father said. He clambered back out. “I’ll meet you. Just run.”

A shrill chirp cut the air like a knife, followed by rapid acceleration. Father ran along the fence and around the corner until blackness swallowed his figure. Then a dark car roared by, blue, red, and white lights on the roof flashed at irregular intervals. Mother squeezed my hand tight, tighter than her hand over my mouth when I coughed on exhaust fumes, harder than when she had her hands on my shoulders in the living room. The whine of the engine dissolved into a sharp screech of tires, and then that too faded.

“We should go,” Mother said, her voice wavering with uncertainty. “Like Father said.”

Mother pulled me to an opening in the building, a doorway without a door, a house without a roof. We snaked through the house, cautiously navigating from room to room, looking for an exit point. Both manmade and natural debris covered the floors, and Mother did her best to avoid it, ordering me to follow in her footsteps, urging me to hurry up. Then we would break out into the night, only to continue our journey into the next house. Several

times we lost contact with each other, our chain breaking when I couldn't keep up or tripped over something. And still, Father's voice echoed in my head: *Don't stop running. Get to Laferty Bridge.*

In one structure, far from the gate, we squeezed through, we could hear people talking. Mother signaled for me to be quiet. As we approached, light and shadow danced up the walls. We squatted in a hallway near a doorway. A crackling of a fire entwined with soulless chatter filled the air. I looked up, the walls providing blinkers for the night sky. A thousand tiny, white lights scattered the canvas. Within the chaos, it was peaceful. A significant moment was given to the insignificant.

"Hey, you!" a voice bellowed behind us.

Mother instinctively grabbed my hand and ran. She didn't look back, I guess she didn't need to. But I did. A hulking figure thundering behind us. Out the building. Into a new one. His steps getting closer. "Don't bring that kid around here!" he yelled. More footsteps. A human howl consumed us. Mother took corners at pace, my legs failing to keep up. We lost touch, and I fell. Then hands on me, picking me up at the scruff. My feet dangling. Mother stopped, turned. One hand on the wall, the other on her belly.

"You bring this kid in here and *they'll* come. We don't want them around here. We don't need you running around here."

I could smell smoke at first, and then something stronger. A pungent odor that I would smell on Father from time to time, something that become more common when he stopped wearing his tie.

"What is it, Pa?" A second voice, much younger than the first.

"We know what you're doin'. How long do you think you can run for before they find ya? And then you had to run through here. Risk bringing *them* in here."

"Just let us go," Mother said. "And we'll be on our way."

“Whatchu gonna do with ‘em, Pa?”

“I have every mind to take this little brat to the authorities right now! Maybe even get me some kind of reward for helpin’ ‘em out.”

“Please,” Mother begged. In the distance, a loud chirp sang out over the night air, caressing it, softening it. “Please!” she repeated.

A click. It reminded me of the metallic cubes slamming together. Sharp, deliberate. Everyone seemed to freeze. Even the man holding me appeared to hold his breath.

“Put. My. Son. Down.”

The words. Forced. Slow. Cautious. There was no mistaking the meaning, yet they carried with it a hidden consequence.

The man released his grip, and I landed on my feet, immediately taking off to Mother. She held me. Tighter than I remember, stronger than I had ever felt. She kissed my head. Affection. Foreign regard, yet warm just the same. Safety. Security. I turned around, her arms still around me.

Father stood with his arm outstretched, a gun pointed at the man. I was curious how he got it because the mere act of carrying one was against the law. Using it even more so. Yet, the man and his offsider relinquished their presence, backing away with their hands raised and eyes narrowed. Father maneuvered to stand with us, weapon still pointed.

“They’ll get ‘im, you know,” the man said. “They always get what they want.”

Father silently shielded us from them and backed into us, forcing us away from the conflict. The existence of the gun did more than his words ever could. Threats would get you nowhere, bullets would give you everything. We backed into the next dwelling, Father still driving us along, his attention trained on our wake. Out of one gray box and into another.

Keep running.

“Maybe we should stop and rest,” Mother offered.

Father stopped; chest heaving could see his breath in the moonlight. He looked over us. “We can’t stop. Not here. It’s too unsafe.”

His remarks were finalized with a slam of a car door, followed by a dog barking, silencing our words.

Both Mother and Father were searching for the source, but with the sound echoing off and through multiple barriers and portals, it was hard to tell where they originated from.

Heads spun in every direction; panic reached their faces.

“Shit!” Father whispered. “I thought I lost them.” He looked left then right. “Quick, this way.”

Without waiting for a response, he grabbed Mother’s hand, and she grabbed mine. The uninterrupted chain moving once more. Through a doorway, across debris-laden yards, through an opening in a fence. My hand hurt from Mother’s grip could feel the bones rubbing together.

Siren chirps and screeching tires careened in on us, the din coming from all directions. Vehicles coming to a sudden halt. Loud voices. Shouting. Orders given. Boots running over bitumen. Dogs barking, fighting their owners to release them. Each new sound caused a breath to catch in my throat.

Father stopped running and crouched near an opening for a large window. Mother and me sliding to halt beside him, gently colliding with the wall before falling to our bottoms. Before Mother could protest Father held up his hand. On his haunches and leaning against the wall, he rose and peeked over the ledge. A whispered swear word. He moved along the window and repeated the process, hoping for an improved option. However, judging by the look on his face when he returned, the news was no better.

I could hear crunching dirt, dogs sniffing, growling. It seemed to come from every direction. The sharks were circling. Father turned his back and slid down the wall, his legs

out in front of himself. Panic replaced with fear... replaced with resignation. Cradled the gun. Stared at it.

More noise, bouncing off every surface, caught in every crevice. We couldn't stay. Mother knew it. Father knew it. He looked at me. No warm smile. His eyes were empty. He crawled over to me, righted himself. Grabbed me, pulled me to him, held me tight. Lanky arms. Around me twice. Seemed like forever. Wish it was forever.

"Run," he whispered in my ear. "Don't stop running. Get to the bridge." *Laferty Bridge.*

I tasted his tears. They stained my cheeks. Yet he made no noise.

"Go," he said and pushed me away from him. "That way." He pointed to his left. "Go!"

I looked over Mother. She sat against the wall, legs out, caressing her swollen belly. She couldn't look at me or wouldn't look at me. Her head fell to her chest, and she quietly sobbed. His hand was on her cheek, but she pulled away.

He looked at me. "Go. Please, go." His voice was softer, could barely hear the words. Almost absent. Like releasing a reluctant animal into the wild.

But I didn't want to go. Couldn't.

Father looked to Mother.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't do this anymore; I can't watch this happen."

She didn't reply.

He stood, making no more effort to conceal himself. His head was down, shoulders slouched. Half the man he used to be, a percentage of the person I knew him to be. He shuffled to the door, the skills he used to sneak through Brennan diminishing before my eyes. He reached the doorway just as a tunnel of light erupted through the window. They shouted words and warnings. Directive, menacing. We were cornered. I could run, escape the

confines, but where would I go? I could feel the hounds closing in. And still, I waited, because I couldn't run. Just couldn't bear to leave.

I crept to the window where Father had been, next to Mother who silently wept, and peered into the street. A line of Enforcers, each holding something in one hand while fighting with a mutt on a leash in the other. With their fronts devilishly dark, car headlights behind them casting long shadows towards Father. He faced them like a gunslinger waiting for the Sheriff to draw his weapon.

A gasp from Mother and I looked down at her. She arched her back and threw her head forward, clutching her round belly. I could hear a noise that sounded like someone was taking a piss. A faint smell of urine wafted to me. I crouched down next to her, reached out to touch her hair. It was wet from sweat. Strands clung to her forehead.

“Mother,” I whispered. “Are you okay?”

She didn't respond. Eyes wide, mouth in a grimace, worry etched over her face. A tight release of breath extended through pursed lips. Turned to me.

“It's coming,” she exhaled.

I looked down at her belly, then noticed the wetness on the ground between her legs. Startled, disconcerted. Mind swirled. Didn't know what to say, unsure of what to do. Barked orders bled into the cold room, tone eating its way into surface cracks. I eased back up to the window.

The man in the center of the blockade stepped forward, dressed head to toe in black, with white bold letters running down his front: C H I R P. A balaclava hid his features. He retrieved something from a chest pocket and held it into the dark sky. It's impossible to tell what it was or what was written on it, but at that stage, I don't think it mattered.

“Article C of the CHIRP regulation,” the man shouted as if announcing to the entire population of Brennan. “You have been deemed unable to provide necessary care for your children, and as such, your eldest child will be sequestered by the state until rectified.”

Father stood still, head down, hands in his pockets.

“Further to this,” the man continued, “under Provision K of the same regulation, you have been allocated to Re-education.” The words rang out into the night, echoing through the ghost town.

He took another step forward.

“Failure to comply will result in extreme consequences.”

Nothing. They stepped forward. One line. Continuous. Incessant.

“Do you comply?” the man proclaimed.

Another step forward, edging in on his quarry.

“We just want to care for the child.”

Father raised his head.

“Care?! What do you know about care?” His voice broke at the last word, straining into the night. “You just take and destroy everything! You think you’re doing the right thing, but you are brainwashed. You are all brainwashed.”

Mother released a stifled cry, a whine followed by short breaths. I looked down to Mother’s bent legs and fell to her side. Gently brushed strands of hair from her face. Her head fell into me.

“Boy...” Mother breathed. She gripped my hand and squeezed, and it was all I could do to not scream out. Another high-pitched squeal.

“What can I do?” I asked.

She squeezed again.

“Boy... I...”

Suddenly, my view went black, one gloved hand over my eyes, the other over my mouth, muffling my scream. I could smell dog, hear Mother's solitary whimper. I wanted Father, more than anything else. Needed him to hold me, his lanky arms around me twice. Safety. Security. His warm eyes. I was blind, staring into an abyss. There was no oasis.

But I heard it all. Every sound etched into my brain.

A gunshot, followed by several more in response. It was like someone hurriedly rapped on a windowpane. Then the night stole the echoes.

"Boy... I... Love..."

Then silence. No more whines. No more breathing. Just nothing.

That was the last time I saw Father.

The last time I saw Mother.

The last time I thought about Laferty Bridge.

And what was on the other side.

FOURTEEN

CHAPTER 4

“Damn,” I said, wiping my eye. “I haven’t thought about that night in forever.”

“I’m sorry about your mother and father. It’s difficult to know that no one is coming to get you.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “Or it makes it easier. That way we don’t have to wonder why they haven’t come, or question if today is the day she’ll turn up.”

I leaned over the shared bedside table, put a hand on the frame, and gazed out the window. The world shared its secrets, full of color and life. A flock of seven nameless birds glided across a blank canvas. Three stories below, the oval was bright green from the overnight frost, morning sun, and a lack of use. A row of oak trees bordered the area, and it reminded me of the line of enforcers that took Father’s life. Beyond that, a sprawling city of gray and black spread out before me.

“When I first got here,” I continued, “I was in another room, in another part of the House. And I tried to erase what I saw, what I heard. I pretended they were still alive and, on their way to get me, that everything was a terrible nightmare. Days, weeks, months. It all blurs together. Eventually, I get a call over the speaker system to see the House

Administrator. And do you know what she said? ‘Pack your belongings, Boy.’ That’s what she said. And for a moment I thought: ‘This is it; This is what I’ve been waiting for. My parents are alive and here to take me.’ I remember looking around at the door, expecting it to fling open and Mother to appear to take me in her arms, introduce me to a brother or sister, and take me away from this place. But that didn’t happen. Instead, I they reallocated me to a more permanent room. That was the end of my fantasy of leaving, of someone coming to get me, and that’s when I met you.”

I sighed as I peeled myself away from the view. Sat on the edge of the lower bunk opposite, my lanyard dangled between my knees.

“Yeah,” he said. “I remember.”

The ‘he’ in question was Boy3461B, but we agreed I could call him ‘L’, provided we were in our room where no one could hear us. L was the kind of guy that never started a dispute yet could finish one easy enough with his fists.

He sat on his bunk, his back against the wall, knees up to his chest. “Seven years, by the way.”

“What?”

“Seven years. Since that day. I remember.”

“Mmm,” is all I could say, couldn’t muster the energy to think about or deliver a response, as if delving into the memory banks depleted any emotional reserves I had. I lifted the lanyard, grabbed the ID card, inspected the contents: Boy3522B. My life was a series of numbers to the House could differentiate me from every other parentless child. But in that room, I was ‘M’.

I ran the plastic edge of it under my fingernails. What I told him was all bullshit. I thought about that night we ran all the time. Wonder what I would change if I could go back

in time. Try to figure out why parts of the memory were clearer than others. No amount of Re-education was going to take that away from me.

“Why has it taken us so long to talk about this stuff?” I proclaimed absentmindedly.

“Because you spent the first three weeks crying into your pillow,” he said. “Then you spent the next two weeks avoiding the question, and I spent the rest of time forgetting to ask. And then life gets in the way. And sometimes life just sucks.” He shrugged. “Anyway, some kids don’t like talking about that kind of stuff. Figured you were the same. Coming here is never easy, especially when you’re a kid.”

Those were tough times. “Yeah, I remember,” I said, but my mind was elsewhere. It was back at that night, replaying every event, trying to get the characters to make different decisions. But it was to no avail. Every time I opened my eyes, I was back in the House, and my wish for a real family smashed into a thousand pieces.

It was different for him. L was a product of his environment, having grown up in the House. Earlier on in our living relationship, he would disappear for days and weeks at a time, only to reappear in his bunk when I woke the next morning. He never spoke about it: who he was with, what it was like on the outside, under whose volition was it that he came to be back in the house. All I know is that the outcomes were the same: eventually, he would return.

I pointed to his bed. Sheets hung down, almost reaching the floor. “They’re not gonna like that? You gonna tuck it in?”

“Do I ever?” He shrugged. “The rules are we make our beds. This is how I make my bed.”

Yep. That summed L up. Not afraid of pushing back ever so slightly, of dancing on the line between right and wrong. I often thought our differences would push us apart, yet they seemed to bring us closer together. Unapologetically unflinching. If words like that could best describe someone my age.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s up?”

I dropped the ID card and looked up at him. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Really? I think I know you better than that.”

“It’s just that... you know, seven years. Still here.”

He wiggled to the edge of his bed, ran a hand through his black hair, clearing the path for his eyes.

“Would you really rather be out there in the real world than in here with me?”

It was a fair question and one that was difficult to answer. Who knows what it would be like out there? It would be different, that was for sure. Just *how* different is something left for daydreams and education. I looked around at where ‘here’ was. A small room with two sets of bunk beds pushed into corners. Constantly judged by four plain walls devoid of anything, barring a solitary window that overlooked an oval edged with trees, and a door that led to a hallway with more doors, behind which had more beds and more walls and more kids looking around wondering if ‘this was it’.

I sighed because this is what the room called for. “Don’t be stupid. If it wasn’t for you,” I started, “I would have walked out those front doors myself.”

“And what? Run to Laferty Bridge?”

I threw myself back on the bed. “I don’t know.” I put my hands behind my head and studied the underside of the top bunk. The wooden slats proclaimed a mountain of useless information scrawled by previous inhabitants. Someone loved someone else. Somebody was a jerk. I had read the same words every day for seven years. None of them had changed. Not even one proved to be true. “The bridge probably doesn’t even exist. Maybe Father was chasing a ghost.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe we should go looking for it!”

“Yeah,” I said. “Then after we do that, we can steal a car.”

“Now who’s being stupid!”

His voice trailed off, but I could tell his mind was whirring like it always did. L wasn’t the smartest person I knew, nor the most creative. His build foretold his talents: anything that involved a ball or physical contact. Why he was my friend was beyond me. But his mind was always ticking over. Plotting. Scheming. He was also the closest thing I had to a family. The two bunks above us had been empty for a week now. The House Administrator allocated Boy2871B and Boy2911B, and they dissolved like they never existed. One moment they were there, then they were gone, along with their measly possessions. Days carried on, as they always did. L left sometimes, allocated to a family. However, he always found his way home again.

“Listen,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t want this to be weird or anything.”

I turned my head. “What are you talking about? What’s weird?”

“This,” he said. He reached under his pillow and pulled out a rectangular object. He held it out to me.

I sat up, careful not to bang my head on the bunk above and swung my legs out. I exchanged glances between him and the book. He looked at me expectantly, biting his lip, either in anticipation or fear of rejection. I slowly reached for it.

“Jesus, would you just take it already!”

I did. “What’s this for?”

“Happy birthday,” he said.

I looked at the cover, ran my hands over the letters, traced the outline of the character. “It’s not my birthday,” I said.

“Geez, do you want it or not?”

I smirked. “Yes, I want it. Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound disrespectful. Where did you get it?”

“This isn’t Nazi Germany, you know. We’re allowed books!”

Touché. He always had that rational streak sitting just below the surface. I turned the book over in my hands, read the blurb. Flicked through the pages, stopped in the middle to smell them. The stock was old, brown, but the letters held. Each sentence held an air of authority over me. I soaked in a random paragraph on the page. Instantly lost in a world, dissolved into the paper. Anywhere but here.

I opened a random page and found a brief passage on the page, read it aloud.

“The image of the trampled flower sparked a wondering anonymity in her consciousness, begged for her to question the world surrounding her existence. If rhetoric could destroy something so perfect, what hope is there for imperfection? Would the lines of defeat run through her veins like a battered dog, or would she rise above the strangle hold and embrace anarchy?”

The buzzer in the ceiling made a startling and rude entrance into my performance. Snapped me to reality, like waking up in the middle of the night because I wasn’t breathing.

“C’mon,” he said, wiggling off the bed and standing. “You can get to it later. It’s our turn for breakfast, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to miss out on the scrambled eggs because some boy or girl decides they want to feed the wildlife.”

I laughed. “This day of the month, you’ll be lucky to find a piece of bread to nibble on.”

CHAPTER 5

Children of all genders, races, and ages filled the halls, yet all wearing the same dictated attire. Black shoes, gray slacks or skirts, gray long sleeve shirt, red pullover. I followed L as we joined a stream heading for a central stairwell. Traffic streamed in both directions, those heading to breakfast, those heading back to their dorms after breakfast.

At each landing, children would peel off, counterparts darting in every direction. Red doors would open, stenciled with a large letter to denote the dormitory, then ease shut again. The Boys were housed in the west building, the girls in the east, but the thoroughfares were common, and an opportunity to engage with the opposite sex prevailed. Usually, my roommate would strike up a conversation with an unsuspecting travel companion while I followed in tow, weaving through the traffic. But not today, not on my proclaimed birthday!

“Who’s cooking again?” he asked. He always forgot, especially this part of the cycle.

“Boys C,” I replied.

“Christ,” he said.

“Which means it’s all going to be either burnt or tasteless.”

“Or salty... But also means I might get my scrambled eggs...” He trailed off, his mind on a tangential trail. I let him go. Best not disturb his mental journey. “Who’s cleaning up again?”

“Girls F,” I said. “Just like the last cycle. And the cycle before that.”

“Ah, so we get to see S.”

I grabbed him by the arm. “Who’s S?”

“Girl4101F,” he said blankly. “The redhead. I call her ‘S’.”

I pulled him to the side of the walkway and eyed the flow of children that continued around us. “What are you doing?”

“What?” he said with a shrug.

“You know how they feel about names.” I tried to hush my voice saying that last word but given the jarring dissonance of a swarm of leather shoes steel and concrete, I needn’t have bothered.

“It’s not a name, it’s a letter.”

“A letter can be a name!” I blurted.

“Well, *we* use them for each other.”

I held a finger to my lips. “Shut up!”

“What’s the big deal?”

“That’s for us, in our room, where no one can hear us.”

“Whatever!” he said, throwing his hands up. “You always going to play by their rules?”

“Yes,” I scoffed. “Yes, I am. And you know why. And if you were smart, so would you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. Alright.” He put a hand on my shoulder.

“How long have you been calling her that, anyway?”

“Since I knew you liked her.”

“What? I don’t like her.”

“Oh, sorry. *Love* her.”

I pushed him away.

“Alright! I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s your birthday, and I don’t want to spoil that for anything.”

“It’s not my birthday.”

“It’s kind of like your birthday.”

“Fine. Let’s make it my birthday. So, my wish for today is that you behave yourself.”

He took his hand off my shoulder and placed it over his heart. “I do solemnly swear.”

He looked down. “I just think she’s going to be disappointed, that’s all?”

“Who?”

“S.”

“For the love of God.” I clenched my hands, loathe to ask the question. But I did anyway. “Why would she be disappointed?”

“Because she was going to give you a birthday kiss.”

He walked, but I grabbed him by the arm. “Wait.”

“Yeah, I thought that might get your attention.”

“Who is she again?” I queried.

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t know. Do you know how many one-sided conversations I’ve had with you because she was nearby? You must have some sort of internal radar, because I swear to god, anytime she’s within the same room, you aren’t even on the same planet!”

“Say it anyway,” I said, raising my chin, a sly smile.

A sigh. “Red head. Dimples. Blue eyes... Need I say more?”

I barely heard the end of his remark. The trigger instantly transported me to a gazebo in the middle of a deserted park. Heavy rain beat down on the tin roof in irregular patterns that sounded like a careless marching band drummer. Drops splashed in puddles that pockmarked the landscape. A steady drip from the roof landed on rose petals that encased the shelter. S and I, dressed in white, held each other as we slow danced to a silent symphony. She pulled away, hands on my face, intense stare. Leaning in. Eyes closing. Lips pursing. Heart rapid fire.

“Wait!” I called out. “What did you say about a kiss?”

But he was gone, lost to the ocean of gray and red, pulled into the current, sucked under the wave.

The dining hall was a melee of chatter and cutlery clinking in bowls and knives and forks colliding on plates. Ten long tables were half full, faces of every color and race floating on a modulating sea, with fresh bodies joining the wave every second. Energy was constantly peaked; a chorus of boisterous laughter barely audible over the concoction of voice. At the far end of the room, at the buffet, was L. I marched over to him, expertly piloting around the comings and goings of children.

He scooped yet another large spoonful of scrambled eggs onto his plate, looked up at me, and smiled. Plate up to his nose so he could draw in a lungful of pan-stuck unfertilized chicken fetus. A sigh.

“Where’d you go?” I asked.

He looked at his plate. “I didn’t want to miss the eggs. Didn’t we have this conversation?”

“No. We didn’t.”

“You were in some trance, so I thought I would leave it to you. Didn’t want to miss the eggs. You know I love the eggs.”

A loud crash as a cluster of children dumped their used crockery in one tray and dirty cutlery in another.

“You said something about a kiss.”

A clinking of empty glasses and I turned to see a young boy looking at me. He pushed a pair of thick-lensed, black-rimmed glasses up his nose.

“Not from him,” I said, pointing at my fellow roommate.

He nodded, smirked, and I just knew my private conversation was going to be the center of attention of his dorm for weeks to come. If I was really lucky, my identification would be carved into the slats of a top bunk. My perceived persuasion forever recorded. History. I am a fact. He looked down at my ID card and I quickly covered it up.

“Best you be running along, lest I report you.”

He blinked slowly and backed away, still grinning like a Cheshire cat, before a swarm of boys swallowed him whole.

I turned back around. “Now, you were saying.”

A fork appeared out of nowhere. Scooped up a pile, unloaded into his mouth. “Have you ever thought about talking to her?”

“I talk to her all the time.”

“No, you talk to me *about* her.”

He had a point, always did. Indisputable. Irrefutable.

“Just tell me about the kiss.”

He looked at me. Blank look. “What kiss?”

I paced to the end of the buffet table and back again. When I regained my position, I folded my arms. “Don’t mess me around. You said S was going to kiss me. For my birthday.”

“I’m sorry. But I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

I was speechless. Spots appeared in my vision. I honestly thought I was having a stroke.

“All you need to do,” he said, shoveling in another load of yellow mountain, “is to stand right there.”

“Here? Why?”

“Oh! Hi!” A voice. Soft. Velvet. Innocent.

L froze. Eyes wide. Then announced he had to go. Paused for a moment, then left.

As he made a beeline for the closest table, I spun around. Red hair exploding out of a white scarf tied around her head. Blue eyes, mesmerizing, staring me down. Dimples, so deep I couldn’t see where they end. Freckles that covered her face like grains of sand. S could diffuse a situation as quickly as L could, but she could do it with a smile and smart-ass remark. Her hands were adorned with yellow gloves. An apron protected her uniform. It was either the sexiest unsexiest thing I had ever seen or the unsexiest sexiest thing I had ever seen. I couldn’t decide. Or think. Or talk.

She pushed some stray strands behind her ear.

Damn. I should have done that.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, a serious concern in her voice.

I replied with something between a nod and a shake. Maybe I *was* having a stroke.

“Yup,” I said. I think I said.

She pulled a full tray of dirty dishes off the bench. “Well, I... need to get these... done.”

“Ah... yeah. Of course. I understand.”

She looked over the other four trays of assorted plates, bowls, glasses, and cutlery.

“Like, all of them,” she said.

“Yeah.” Then, “Oh. Can I help you take these to the kitchen?”

“My, that would be mighty helpful to you,” she said with a smile.

Damn. The smile.

She reefered open the door to the industrial dishwasher. A plume of steam erupted out of the opening and soared to the ceiling. We worked in silence as we pulled out trays of hot dishes and stacked them on the bench for others to put away, loaded in the trays of dirty items we moved from the hall. Comfortable silence speckled with the clinking of porcelain and the clacking shut of the stainless-steel washer door.

She leaned back on the counter and pulled off the gloves. “You don’t talk much, you know.”

I responded but lost my words when she started rubbing her hands.

“So,” she said. “What do you like doing?”

I casually took up a position beside her to give me time to think of an answer. In my head, my movements were graceful and sincere, although, in reality, they might have appeared awkward and clumsy. I could feel her body heat next to me, which made me struggle for breath.

“I... I enjoy reading.”

“There you go!” she said, elbowing me in the arm. “You can talk! What are you reading at the moment?”

“This great book called...” But my mind went blank. I tried to picture the cover, the colors, the imagery, the author’s name in a fanciful font. But everything swirled together, like the ingredients to make a cake. I thought back to the paragraph I read. “It’s about...”

However, that too had evaporated from my conscious.

“Well,” she said, to put me out of my misery. “That sounds like a splendid book. I shall have to borrow it from you when you’re finished with it.”

“Yeah,” I got out.

More silence. Less comfortable than before. I started to sweat, could feel my cheeks flush, my chest tightening. I could sense her edging closer to me, sliding along the bench, closing the gap.

“Weekend tomorrow,” I offered. I don’t know where I was going with it, just hoping she would launch into a conversation.

“Up too much?”

Damn.

“Double education.” I looked down at my feet. It was the worst part of any day.

“Yuck. I hate that part of the cycle.”

“You would think the hour at the end of every day would be enough, wouldn’t you?”

She put a hand on mine. “I feel for you.”

I didn’t know whether to leave it there, pull mine away, stack my other hand on top. My mouth was dry, I couldn’t swallow. I thought I was coming down with something.

“They’re showing a movie in the hall tomorrow night?”

“Yeah? Which one?”

“You know, the one with the guy and the girl, and they go somewhere and do stuff.”

“Oh, yeah. I love that one.”

She turned her head to look at me, nodded. “I thought you might.”

More silence. Until suddenly she turned to look at me.

“Look,” she said. “Are you going to ask me to the movie, or what?”

My eyes went wide, a deer in the headlights.

“Y-yes,” I stumbled. Then stared at her.

“Do it properly,” she insisted.

I didn't think. Got down on one knee, my hands out asking for hers.

“Jesus!” she exclaimed. “What the hell are you doing?” But she gave me her hand, anyway. I cradled it. Couldn't feel a thing. My fingers were numb.

I ignored her. “Would you like to go see the movie with me tomorrow night? Specifically, the one about the guy and the girl who do stuff.”

Smile. Dimples. Two of them.

She grabbed me by the collar and pulled me up. Hands on my shoulders. “I would love to.”

She leaned in. It was happening. All the thoughts, all the wants. Finally, it was coming true. I closed my eyes and pursed my lips, ready to touch hers. I waited for that spark, just before our mouths would come together. I wanted to be lucid for the experience, make detailed notes and observations, remember every aspect so I could replay it over and over and over. Our first kiss. Forever locked away in my mind. Closer. Feel her breath. Smell her smell.

And then I felt it.

On my cheek.

And then it was over.

“You can open your eyes now, Romeo,” she said.

With my mouth locked, ready for a kiss, I slowly opened my eyes. She put a finger up to them. “Maybe tomorrow night, maybe if you're lucky,” she said. “I haven't decided yet whether I think of you in *that* way.”

“What? What do you mean, ‘that’ way?”

A buzzer discharged in the hall and echoed down the hallways and through the double doors to us, her head picking up the noise. “We really need to be going.”

I relented, still speechless.

“I will see you tomorrow night,” she said.

She vanished through a separate entrance for the kitchen crew and headed through the double doors, back to the dining hall. Each step in time with my heartbeat.

I found L standing at the buffet, scooping scraps of yellow cloud into his mouth. When he saw me, he put the plate down and applauded.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “Fancy seeing you here!”

“Damn, how many helpings of eggs did you have?”

“Don’t you worry about me, my friend. What happened with you... and S.”

“You can’t call her that! You know what they will do if they catch you.”

“Fine, fine. Just tell me.”

I turned, walked towards the entrance where a blob of gray was trying to escape. “I don’t know if I want to talk about it.”

“Wait,” he called out. “What the hell do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Hurry up, or else we are going to be late for class. You know what they’ll do if we’re late.”

He caught up, put an arm around my shoulder. “I don’t care about that! I want to know how it went.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, like you don’t care about that.”

“Please don’t make me beg,” he sighed.

“Listen, I’m not one to kiss and tell.”

“Of course, of course,” he gestured proudly. He grabbed my face with his other hand and squeezed to push my lips out. “What woman can resist the siren’s call to taste these fish lips.”

I pulled away. “First, that’s disgusting. Second, we’re going to see the movie they’re playing tomorrow night.”

“Oh. Are they playing the one about the guy and the girl that goes somewhere and does stuff?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “That’s the one.”

“Man, I love that one.”

CHAPTER 6

The last day of the school week was a never-ending series of classes devoted to a myriad of subjects that bore no resemblance to each other, no aligned narrative that joined them together. Each lesson, book ended by an armor-penetrating buzz, was held in a windowless room, with a different set of children, to maximize both focus and boredom. To be honest, it wouldn't have mattered if the class was encouraged to partake in the revelry offered by a carnival on the oval, as I devoted my thoughts to the evening's entertainment and, more importantly, S.

I sleepwalked between classes, unconsciously sidestepping cliques of students who were discussing the night's movie with such excitement the energy was almost tangible. My roommate was strangely absent from my school day. If I was honest, I missed him. It was the secret side conversations that kept my interest the most, much to the irritation of the instructor.

On more than one occasion the Instructor caught us discussing some matter beyond that of the teachings, the instructor would bring down a half-inch thick stick flat on my

books, causing a tidal wave to flow around the room. Children's faces would all turn to see who was about to endure the instructor's wrath. We would look into the instructor's dark eyes and sink farther into our chairs. My heart was always pumping hard in those moments, and we should have learned our lesson.

"Do you know," he would start, "how many House children will succeed in society?"

It was the same question he would always pose, that all the instructors would pose.

"Forty-four percent," I said.

"Forty-four percent," the instructor repeated whimsically. "Less than half of you."

He was unhealthily thin and awfully pale, a head free from any hair, apart from a bushy mustache. He was an odd creature indeed, and someone I wouldn't want to be stuck in a room with alone.

He stood up and tapped the stick against his hand as he marched around the room delivering the script. "That's right, everyone. So very few of you will succeed out there, just forty-four percent. They will treat you differently because you came from here, which means you need to be twice as smart and three times as eager, and four times as committed, as every other child out there. No one will care about your little sob story of how you came to be who you are. It will not excuse laziness, or tardiness, or disrespectfulness.

"Sixty-eight percent of you will marry. Ninety-one percent of those will have children. This means more than half of all your children will end back here, in this house, in these classrooms, waiting. It's simple mathematics, children.

"And yet you are the most precious treasure of the people. Without children, there are no law-abiding citizens, there are no parents. You play a critical role in keeping the clock turning. But to do so, you need to know how the clock works, what the clock needs. Without such knowledge, how are you ever going to be valuable citizens of the government? How are

you ever going to follow their rules? How are you ever going to identify those who betray the very hand the provides for them?"

We all sat in silence as he navigated the room and ended back to me. The instructor brought the stick down hard on my desk and leaned between us. One eye wide, the other narrow. Mustache bristling. Exchanged deathly glances between us and spoke in a low voice. "You, Boy, and you, Boy, do you want your children to be back here? In this House? Under my tutelage?"

"No," I murmured.

"Whaaaat?" he roared, his mustache twisting and turning. "Speak up, Boy."

"No, Instructor. I do not want my children to be taken to a House."

"Well pay attention then and focus on your studies!"

Lunch was served in the great hall, cooked by Boys D, which means it would be undercooked and most likely failing to comply with the government food safety codes. However, considering the school was a government-funded and run institution, they would turn a blind eye. No one had ever died from eating there, and the opportunity to learn basic living skills was a foremost priority.

"The skills in balancing a ledger are useless," an instructor once said, "if one doesn't know how to boil an egg."

The offerings, where the nutritional value obviously highly outweighed the visual profile, had been dumped in several large stainless-steel vats. Student after student, came up, slopped on a mass of product, then returned to an empty seat to consume their second meal of the day.

On obtaining my portion, I stopped to take in the hall. Several large tables, children frantically engorging themselves on the meal, a few words of conversation between mouthfuls. Classes would not wait for anybody or anything, let alone a student who decided

to not eat their ration at a suitable pace. Among all the faces, L was nowhere to be found, oddly absent. So, I sat at the end of a table alone and devoured my meal in peace.

Re-education is a term that struck monotony into the hearts of every student in the House. They dedicated an hour at the end of every weekday for every student watching a video. The room was windowless, the overhead fluorescents extinguished. We sat in the solemn glow of the screen. If a student looked away, the video would stop. If anyone spoke, the video would stop. If it stopped enough times, the video would restart. If we failed to watch the entire video in the time allotted, punishment would follow.

I sat in the middle row surrounded by nameless students of various ages. Some were new to the House, and some I considered others being part of the furniture. However, all knew what was at stake. My greatest fear was for sufficient disengaged children to earn the class a penalty of not being allowed to see the weekly movie. I thought about S standing outside the door, waiting for me to arrive, and another boy taking her hand and leading her into the dark amphitheater.

The feature started, and it was all we could do to not talk along with it. We all knew it word for word, intonation for intonation. Cadence so ingrained we could beat it out on the desks. Phrases so familiar we could taste them. A female voice as smooth as caramel overlaid images of a city, followed by a family, then a baby crying. There was nothing to suggest this was my city, or even my country, for the people in it, could have been anywhere in the world. Maybe that was the point. Or perhaps they couldn't find the images they wanted to match their narrative. Regardless, it didn't change the message or the impact of the delivery.

Our city is a fragile ecosystem, where everyone must work together to grow and prosper. Men and women create life, but we all build a family. We believe everyone can live

up to their potential. We provide access to education, health, support, and employment. We give adults and parents every opportunity to fulfill their aspirations.

Sometimes though, the family structure breaks down and isn't able to continue like it wants to, like it needs to. When this happens, it is the children who suffer. They are the ones who don't get fed, who aren't kept safe, who aren't clothed. Who is there to protect them when their parents fail? We are!

When we broke into the new millennium, all sides of politics came together to pass the CHIRP bill. It has been coined the most important piece of legislation in our country's recent history. We will support those parents who fail their children by reducing their burden, therefore allowing them to concentrate on getting back on their feet. Having the necessary resources, and helping parents where they need them most, we temporarily look after the children until the parents are ready to be parents again.

We are doing this for them. We are doing this for you.

The messages continued. Wave after predictable wave. Former politicians, actors, and titans of industry supported them. Regular people also weigh into the communication. Thirty-two-year-old John, sitting in a park with a young blonde boy, says, *"If I couldn't look after Boy2, I would want the state to do their best to look after him for me."* He finishes his statement by rubbing the young child's head, much to the unstated hatred of the child. Forty-one-year-old Sandra sits in an office. The shot pans out to show a photo of a girl posing in a school uniform. *"If I lost all this,"* Sandra says, waving a hand around her office, *"I know the House would look after her until I'm ready."*

The film continued until the edges of my vision darkened and the verge of my memory blurred.

At the rate I was pacing my room, the thin layer of carpet between the bunks should have disintegrated into fibers. I stopped to look at the clock. Curfew would be in effect in two minutes and there was no sign of my roommate, L. Punishment for being caught outside between the hours would be swift and final. According to the House Administrator, the time was set aside to focus on studies and further self-paced education. However, I doubted I could concentrate on such efforts. Never has my friend, nor anyone I knew, missed a curfew. Given this there was no precedence on what the outcome would be, however, because of the rules and policies policed to us, it wasn't a far cry to guess what L would have to endure.

The clock struck five, and the buzzer sounded at precisely the same time the room door opened. L lurched inside and slammed the door shut. He leaned against it, breathing deeply, sweat running down his grimy face.

"Where the hell have you been?!" I interrogated.

He held up a hand to stop me from talking and limped towards his bunk. Leaves clung to his sleeves. Tracks of dirt over his arms and chest.

"Jesus, what have you been up to?"

He ignored me, preferring to ease himself into his bunk and lay down. He closed his eyes, still taking large intakes of air, his chest rising methodically off the bed. I stood there, watching him, waiting for the story to start. I sat and waited for him to recover. After a few minutes of heavy breathing, I slapped my knees, stood, and walked to the dresser behind the bed.

"I guess it can all wait then," I said. "I need to get ready for the movie."

"I found it," he said.

I turned. He had sucked me in. Suddenly, I was balancing my mental effort between his story and romanticizing about S. I sighed, knowing I wouldn't be able to resist.

"What? What did you find?"

He looked around himself as if every piece of furniture in the room could hear his voice. He rolled onto the floor and approached, looking for a more intimate conversation. As he got closer, so too did the smell intensify.

“Bloody hell,” I said, screwing up my nose. “Where have you been?”

“The bridge,” he said. “I found the bridge.”

“What bridge? What are you talking about?”

He looked down at me, put a hand on my shoulder. His body heat burnt through my shirt.

“Laferty Bridge,” he said. “I found it.”

“What?” Not that I couldn’t hear him, just that I couldn’t fathom how he found it.

“But how?”

“Only it’s not a bridge anymore,” he said, ignoring my question. “It’s grown over.”

He pulled his hand away, rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “At least, I think it was grown over.”

“Is this what you’ve been doing all day? Is this why I didn’t see you around school?”

He looked up, a spark in his eyes, a renewed interest in his voice. “Your father was right,” he said. “It’s there, I can show you.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, throwing my hands in the air. “Start at the beginning. How the hell did you leave the House to go searching for a phantom bridge?”

“This isn’t a prison you know. We’re allowed to leave.”

“Bullshit,” I retorted. “That is exactly what we *can’t* do!”

“I’ve got a way,” he said. “A way to get in and out with nobody watching.”

“How?” I groaned.

“I can show you that too,” he said excitedly. His eyes were wide, his body seemed to wave up and down, like a boat on an open sea with no form of propulsion. “I can show you everything.”

He returned to his bunk, eased down onto the mattress, looked up at me. “It’s there. It’s all there.”

I sighed, checked the clock. Plenty of time left in the curfew, and still time after that before the start of the movie to make sure I smelled nice. I sat opposite, perched on the edge of the bed, eager to hear what he had to say.

“Tell me what you found.”

“I can’t... it’s too difficult to explain.” His eyes searched the room. “But I can show you. Please, let me show you.”

“How can you be so sure it’s the bridge?”

“Of course it’s the bridge!” He looked at his hands. “It has to be. You’ll see.”

“When? How?”

“Tonight,” he whispered. “We can go tonight!”

I stood, almost hit my head on the top bunk as I jumped. “Are you crazy? We can’t just walk out of here! And definitely not at night!”

“I told you! I’ve got a way.” He jumped up, started pacing the room. “We’ll go tonight, just after the movie starts. Most of the instructors will be there, so we should be okay. Then we’ll sneak out. I’ll show you where to go, what to do. I marked it so I can easily find it again. Then we sneak over, have a look, and get back here before anyone notices.”

“Like a recon mission?” I enquired.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice at fever pitch. “Exactly like a recon mission. If we like what we see, we pack our things tomorrow night, or next week, or whenever, and we make a run for it.”

“Do you hear yourself? Like, do you really hear yourself?”

“Just come with me. Make up your own mind.”

I chewed it over. I’d never seen him like this, never talk about anything so wildly or with as much passion. He was always so mellow, so even. Yet he had found something, seen something, that has sent him off the Richter Scale.

“Listen, I’ve got this date with S.”

“You seem to have embraced her name quickly.”

“Did I have a choice? Anyway, I’m not giving that up for anything, let alone escaping from here.”

He wiped his forehead, investigated the substance that came off. “Fine. Okay. After then. After the movie. After the date. I’ll show you everything.”

I nodded, resigned. He would not shut up about it, and he seemed so damn sure about it all. “Alright. But if we get caught, you take the wrap.”

He laughed. “We aren’t going to get caught.”

“Famous last words,” I said, returning to the dresser. I rummaged around, pulled out some items. “So, what do you think is going to impress my date more? Gray slacks with a red pullover, or the red pullover with gray slacks?”

He scoffed. “Neither.”

I sighed.

“Listen,” he said, making his way to the door. “I’m going to make a jump on the showers. Before those buggers from C use all the hot water.”

I looked at the clock. “It’s still curfew.”

“Which means I should have the showers to myself.”

He left. I couldn’t argue with the logic.

CHAPTER 7

Ten minutes later, I was sitting on my bunk watching the clock, willing it to move faster, when an announcement came over the speakers. They had called me to the office. There were two reasons they called you to the office, and I just knew it was the second one. Someone had caught L gallivanting around the corridors, and they required me to corroborate his story. Not the first time. Wouldn't be the last.

Then my heart sank. What if they had gotten to him and he told them everything? The plans to sneak out of the House later that night. All about Laferty Bridge. Oh no. What if he had told them about S? What if he told them about the names we used for each other? It was a rule that carried heavy consequence, not that anyone truly knew what those penalties were, or even if the threats existed beyond words. This ran through my mind, over and over, like a mouse in a wheel, running frantically but essentially going nowhere.

The door to the administration area protested at my arrival, the large wooden behemoth taking a lot of effort to bend inward. I squeezed in through the opening and stepped inside before the self-close mechanism crushed me. I shivered. The room resembled Antarctica, cold and bleak. A woman behind the desk at the far end of the narrow room

looked up from her typewriter and pushed the glasses up her nose as if to inspect the filth that had just wandered in. Even at the late hour, someone was working. They were always working.

“Boy3522B, I assume?” she squeaked, as if unimpressed by what she saw.

I nodded, unsure if I should say anything to the gray-haired woman.

“Well? Cat got your tongue?”

“Yes. I mean, no.”

“Well, which is it, Boy?”

“I mean, yes, I’m Boy3522B. No, I still have my tongue.”

She looked down her nose at me. “Enough of the sass, Boy. Take a seat. The Administer will see you soon.”

I sat on an empty chair, one of six along the left side of the room, and waited. Clacking and rattle filled the space as the assistant carried on with her work. Across from me a single sign was affixed to the wall to remind all visitors that talking was prohibited. It was like a library, where the faint scent of musk stalked you around every shelf. The clock above the assistant ticked incessantly in time with the assistant’s clattering. Sometimes, it would tick forward, then seem to retrace its footsteps, all the while creeping closer to the end of curfew, into free time, into the movie. And my date. I crossed my arms, the cold biting through my top.

Behind the assistant, a heavy wooden door remained closed, with the name of *Miss Sharp, House Administrator* neatly stenciled across it. It was many unaccounted minutes later when that door opened. I snapped my head around to peruse the empty portal.

The assistant looked up once more. “Boy3522B, the Administrator will see you now. And you’ll do well to holster your impudent cheek.”

I edged through the door, quickly eyeing the corners of the room and keeping my escape options open. The chairs at the desk were empty, as was everywhere else, save for the House Administrator sitting behind her desk. No sign of my roommate anywhere. Perhaps this was *their* recon mission. They hadn't captured my friend and coerced him to talk. But maybe they were going to do that me!

"Shut the door." The instruction was clear and concise. Militaristic.

I did what was asked. The metallic clack of the tonnage sliding into the groove felt like a rifle shot into my back.

"To the desk, Boy."

Boy. Not Boy3552B. Certainly not M. Maybe it's because there wasn't anyone else in the room to confuse the prefix with. Being called 'Boy' transported me back to the night we ran, the last time I saw Father and Mother. That same night the people dressed in black took me to the House, where I was shoved into a room with another. I had cried into my pillow until the morning.

My breath caught in my throat, hands all shaky. I approached the desk, senses high, on the lookout for an attack. Waited for her remarks, flanked by the two visitors' chairs. Chose not to sit because it takes longer to get up to run.

The name plate on the desk stated her name and official title to be Miss Sharp, House Administrator. She looked every bit the part. Middle-aged, mousey blond pulled back so tight there wasn't a single infraction on her forehead. Thick glasses covering pale eyes, a gaze so insipid I couldn't tell if a conscience prevailed inside of her. She turned, pulled out a file, and dropped it onto her desk. With a finger, she flicked it open with as much flair as a magician revealing their assistant.

“Congratulations. You have been allocated. You are to pack your belongings and report to the front gates in no less than ten minutes.”

The announcement was punctuated with the slamming of a stamp down on the file.

“But...” I stammered.

“But what, Boy?”

“But I don’t want to go! Can’t I just stay here until it’s time to go?”

“It *is* time to go,” she retorted.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I mean when I’ve come of age, when I’m classified as an adult, and I can do The Transitioning.”

She stood. Eyes narrowed behind thin lenses.

“My boy, there are children out there right now, with parents who can’t look after them, and we should turn them away because you—You!—wish to stay for no other reason because it suits you?”

“I’ve got two empty beds in my room. They... they can even have my bed. I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Tsk, tsk, Boy. This is not a negotiation. Now, go and get ready.”

“But tonight? Can it be next week?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Immediately. There is no time for dilly-dallying or corn-cobbling, or whatever it is you young people do these days. You have been allocated and time is of the essence. A driver is coming to pick you up, and it would not be a very good first impression for you to be late or to swan yourself down the front steps.”

“Not tonight! It can’t be tonight! The movie, for one!”

Flattened palms on the desk, eyes peering over the top of her glasses. Serious.

“My boy, I have stamped the file and thusly, the file has been stamped. Once a file has been stamped, the transaction is complete. I have allocated you. Ten minutes. Time is wasting, Boy.”

“But?”

“Go!” she ordered, pointing at her door.

I dropped my head, and along with it, my heart. As I thumped back to my room, all I could think about was the people I would leave behind. For S, I would be long gone by the time the movie started. A chance to see her again was impossible. The opportunity to forge a meaningful connection with someone other than my roommate—with the opposite sex no less—fell through my fingers like dry sand. Hopefully, L could relay a final message on my behalf, some words that would smite the God’s for keeping us apart.

With my meager possessions packed, I sat on my roommate’s bed and waited for his return. As time ticked by, I paced the room, exchanged glances with the clock and the door. When he arrived, I would say my goodbyes and accept his promise that he would pass on some words to my expecting date. We would hug, as a family did, and he would go to the movie in my place. We would assure each other that we would see each other again, that our bond was unbreakable.

Unfortunately, the clock won out, and I couldn’t wait any longer. I imagined Miss Sharp watching the second hand on her watch while tapping her foot in expected disappointment. With one last look around the room, I backed out, softly closing the cover on that chapter of my life.

People come and go in your life. Some leave an imprint, and others barely belong to a whisper. Some make the world turn. Others bring your crashing back to Earth. There was some part of me that knew S and L would do both.

CHAPTER 8

I had heard stories of this moment. The time when you met the new Mother and Father. In the dining hall, whispers became rumors became fact. For some, it was a moment of extreme delight, to be wanted again, to be part of the social construct that provided love and security. For others, it was a time of complete dread. Dropped into an unknown family with the certainty they would be let down again.

As the luxurious sedan, complete with soft leather seats and windows darker than the inside of a buried casket, tore up a highway, my thoughts jumped between both realities. Should I be excited that I may once again have guardians? Or would it prove all too painful to contemplate, forever acknowledging that Father and Mother are gone? I had no time to consider either side of the argument, as was the rushed departure and the rapid transport to the new family. Perhaps this was their modus operandi, to move you quickly, so you didn't think about it. It reminded me of getting vaccinations, the subtle art of misdirection, and swift injection. I was more than happy to stay in the House until my graduation to adulthood. The House administration had other ideas.

“Excuse me,” I called to the private driver, “Do you know how much longer?”

The driver turned slightly, adjusted his cap with a gloved hand, and said, “Another twenty minutes or so.” His accent betrayed him as a northerner. Not that there was anything wrong with that, it’s just that the CHIRP regulation started there. And not the regulation itself, more the living conditions that provoked the senator in raising the bill in the first place. They ratified it quicker than any in the nation’s history, any so far to date.

It felt like we had already been driving at breakneck speed, passing other vehicles like they were stationary, trees billowing past in a blur, for at least an hour. As far as I could remember, I had never been this far outside the city before. What lay beyond was an unknown that held so much potential, so much fear. The alive concrete jungle morphed into dark, open plains with distant mountains piercing a star-lit sky, and deep forests that held secrets within their ancient trunks. I was sure I even spied the ocean at one point, but it could have been a trick of the moonlight.

“Can you tell me about Father and Mother?” I asked.

The driver once again cocked his head to the sound of my voice, however turned back on completion of the question, ignoring it completely. Maybe they instructed him not to say anything. Perhaps he couldn’t articulate it in a way I could understand. Possibly he was sick of answering my questions. So, I closed my eyes, and let the light and shadow dance across my eyelids.

I woke to the sound of crunching gravel, of the car coming to a complete stop. My door opened, and I got out. Holding my door was the driver. Behind him was a house that I could only describe as a castle. The gravel pathway led to the front door, two massive white barriers that looked like you would need a battering ram to open, flanked by white columns that reached to the roof. The entire structure was coated with differing light shades of brick, perfect windows, ablaze like they were on fire, cut into every other available wall space. Around it, grays and purples of shadowy woodland and open fields spread across to the black

horizon. To say I was in awe would be an understatement. I had never seen a house this big before, save for movies.

“This way, Boy,” the driver said, taking the lead to the door.

He pushed it open with ease and stepped aside. I stepped into the atrium and silence instantly swallowed me. My first steps were timid, unsure if I should or could make any noise. The driver marched ahead, his footsteps echoing in the hall.

“This way,” he ordered.

I followed the driver down a dim narrow hallway lined with small tables that held smaller ornaments and trinkets. Paintings and portraits lined the walls; however, the light didn't allow me to see what visual they held. Through a set of doors, the driver waited.

“Sit,” he instructed.

Around the room, overflowing bookshelves coated the walls. At the far end of the room was a fireplace, cold and gray. Armchairs and lounges, with accompanying side tables, covered the floor space.

“Which one?” I asked.

He sighed. “Any,” he breathed as he left.

I eased down into a brown leather armchair that faced the room. The longer I sat, the more the cold seeped into my clothes and attacked my skin. An annoyingly disciplined tick of a clock wore at my patience. It was late, very late, well past bedtime curfew, and whatever sleep I managed on the drive over did nothing to quell my tiredness. Any excitement I had about a new family or even the size of the house and the surprises it may have, was dissipating. I pulled my legs up onto the seat, put my head on the armrest, and closed my eyes.

“Feet off the chairs,” a deep voice said.

My eyes snapped open, and I swung my legs around. I looked up at the source of the voice. He was solidly built, with dark wavy hair, which is all I could make out in the shadows. He had loosed his tie and unbuttoned the top fasteners of his white business shirt, bordered by a pair of suspenders. His hands were deep in his slacks pockets.

“We have rules,” he said matter-of-factly. “You will get to know them in time.”

I nodded. Rules were not new for me; I had lived most of my life in pursuit of abiding by them. Rules give order to the chaos, and I believed for the most part they are there to look after us. Take the House naming convention for example. Simple prefixes followed by a unique identifier helped to separate groups while keeping us part of a community. We were too young for individualism. People who thought they should live outside the structure or too good for the system put the system in peril for everybody else that lived in it. I sat through enough education sessions to understand that fact. Every house has rules, and I expected this house to be no different from the House I had just arrived from.

“Come,” he said, turning. “You must be tired. It’s very late. I will show you to your room.”

I pushed myself off the seat. “Thank you, Father,” I said.

At my remark, he stopped mid-stride. His head dropped.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He held up a finger to silence my question.

“Sit,” he said, in a tone that denoted military.

I sat back down on the chair and watched him pace back and forth in front of me.

“Is everything okay?” I repeated.

The marching stopped, and he loomed over me, his hands behind his back. His face shifted into a shaft of moonlight and for the first time, I got to see Father. Striking features

bordered by a strong jawline. Intermittent strands of gray in his sideburns twinkled in the beam. A scar ran from his left eye, down his face, and joined the juncture where the top and bottom lips meet and proved to be a spectacle I struggled to tear my stare away from.

“I want to make things perfectly clear to you, Boy. I am not your father. I don’t love you. You have been appropriated to me by the state because I have the means to look after you, but I don’t love you. I am to provide you with shelter, food, clothing, and an education, however, that is where my obligation ends. I have three children, and four more allocated by regulation. Make no mistake that I didn’t choose you, you just happen to be next on the list. Do you understand?”

I nodded, the words cutting through me like needles.

“Do you have questions before you retire for the evening?”

I shrugged. “What do I call you?”

He straightened, stretched his neck. “My name is Mr. Freeman. You may call me Sir. Is there anything else?”

His last name, a name I was to take on, struck me as ironic. For I felt neither free nor a man. Freedom from this constrained existence was mere years away, however, I often wondered if I could ever be free from my past. I was insignificant, stuck in a limbo that both didn’t deserve me yet somewhere I couldn’t escape from. Everywhere I looked, the shadows pointed tendrils of darkness at me, laughed deep and ominous. I felt a cold sharpness in my chest, the same that attacked me that night we ran.

I shook it off, ignored the shades of black and purple, watched them sink away into the gloom. “What do I call Mother?”

He sighed. Shoulders dropped. Felt the tension leave his body like he had been holding his breath, and he finally released it. He turned, walked to the entrance.

“There is no mother. Come, I will show you to your room. Keep up.”

I scrambled out of the chair and ran after him.

He trudged up some steps, down a hallway, and up some more. I followed a few steps behind, trying hard to remember my way out to the main entrance, at the same time taking in as much of my surroundings as possible. But it was an intolerable task. There was too much to look at and no doubt would look very different under the bath of daylight.

Sir finished his journey at a door. He pulled down on a handle and the door fell inwards.

“This is your room,” he announced.

I walked inside.

“Bed, desk, cupboard, side table,” he said, pointing them out from his position.

I saw something on the end of the bed, and I approached, held them up. “Are these for me?” I asked.

“Well, we can’t have you sleeping in your clothes, Boy. We’ll organize some more clothes for you tomorrow.”

“Clothes?”

“Yes. This isn’t a facility or institution. This is my home. You will have a school uniform and some casual clothes for everything else.”

I had been wearing the House uniform for so long it felt like a second skin. Having new clothes seemed like an exciting proposition, like opening a book for the first time, not quite knowing what was going to take place.

“Breakfast is served at seven in the dining room. Your alarm is set. Don’t be late.”

With his final instruction, he shut the door quietly.

The whirlwind from the House to Sir felt like it took place over weeks, not hours. I laid down on the mattress, let my body sink into it. I thought about Boy3461B and Girl4101F, L and S. I hoped they were both okay and hated the fact I wasn't able to say goodbye. I wondered what they thought of me for leaving so quickly, and what they would become.

Shit, I'd only spoken to S once, but I had seen her a million times. Her face was etched into my memory, and I just knew it wouldn't fade. But the hurt of not getting my date with her was nothing compared to the pain of not seeing L again. He was my confidant; he was my sounding board. He was the center of my universe and holder of all knowledge of all things that existed beyond the House walls. But a rogue meteorite called fate had destroyed the cosmos, sending us hurtling in different directions.

As I drifted into sleep, I felt a tear run over my nose and onto the pillow. I had known love once in my life, so I knew it existed. Father, my actual father, gave it to me when I was little. I felt it from my friends, felt it for a girl. But that had diminished over time. Now, the harshness of reality weighed down on me like a boulder. Sir's words beat down on me, as if they stranded me on a beach, lashed by wave after wave as they crashed down onto my exposed frame. *I have the means to look after you, but I don't love you.* Crash of a wave. *I don't love you.* Another one.

I was an object, passed from one owner to the next. A valueless *thing* that no one really wanted, just had to have, because enough people voted for it. I could feel the darkness creep over me, through my clothes, clasp its fingers around me and squeeze.

Then it pulled me under.

CHAPTER 9

She scared the living shit out of me. The first sensation was something prodding my face, someone pushing my slack skin around my face. When I drearily opened my eyes, her face was right there. Right in front of me, noses almost touching. She held her eyelids open, sharing the whites of her eyeballs with me. I gasped, recoiled, heart rocketing, from resting to Olympian in a millisecond.

“Jesus Christ!” I yelled as I backed into the corner of my bed.

She was about ten, and she rocked back and forth with a beaming smile. A monolith of sunlight crashed into the room, casting her shadow all the way to the door. She battered her eyelids, bit her lower lip, feigned innocence. Untidy mousey-brown pig tails erupted out of the side of her head. Her eyes were deep brown and full of mischief. The blue dress was tattered, white edging coming undone in several places. Threads stuck out at the joins. If her appearance concerned her, she didn't show it.

I wasn't sure what to make of her. Friend or foe. A concoction of incorruptibility, or highly corruptible. A leader, or someone that would grab an outstretched hand and be led.

With eyes locked firmly on mine, she stretched out an arm and pointed. I switched my gaze between the soundless girl and my clock. I opened my mouth to speak, but she quickly placed a finger from her other hand to her lips. We looked at each other. Quiet. Serene. Then it happened.

The alarm sounded, a shrill beep that tore through my body. At the alert, my visitor turned on her heel and bounded out of the room like a jack rabbit. She screamed the whole way, announcing to the house that it was time for breakfast. I remained where I was, took a few moments to compose myself, wondering what the hell that was all about, and dreaded if that was going to be a regular occurrence.

A chance to take in my room in the daylight. Specks of dust floated through the light stream. Everything was bathed in bright yellow. Warm. Cheerful even. I pulled my feet around to the floor and perched on the edge of the mattress. I rubbed my neck, stared at my shoes. Day one of many, the start of the rest of my life.

Every drawer opened. Behind every door exposed. The room was devoid of any possessions. Everything I brought with me was still in the box on the floor at the end of the bed. On top was the book Boy3461B gave me. I picked it up, ran a hand over the cover. Flicked open to a random page and read out the contents aloud.

It was when he was isolated, so solitary that he alone encapsulated the expanse, he released a scream that bent the trunks and shattered the earth. It was then he realized he was not abandoned, but lived as though he were, because when he looked up, he was surrounded by a mass of hooded people encircled him and chanted and called his name.

One of the cloaked people stepped forward, a touch so light as if he was floating. He lifted an arm, extended a long, bony finger, and pointed at him.

'Do you repent the teachings?' he summoned. 'The teachings of "they"?''

'Yes,' he cried out. 'Yes! I repent!' Tears streamed down his face, stained the earth.

'He repents,' they yelled in unison.

'I no longer live by the word of "They".'

'He is free,' they crooned.

They gathered around him, helping him to his feet. Hands over his body. He clawed at them, pulled at their gowns. A hooded figure stole his view, face hidden in an abyss.

'We know who you are,' it said, its voice dissolved into the air. 'We know what you want to do.'

A knock on the door. Sudden and rapid. I looked up, expecting to find my morning guest. Instead, it was a boy about the same age as her, his skin the color of burnt coffee. He froze, knuckles still on the door. He gave a wide smile, bright white teeth gleaming, and pushed his thick, black-rimmed glasses towards his eyes. We eyed each other like we had both startled a dangerous animal, then he held out a hand.

When we arrived at the dining room, he shook loose my hand and ran to the table. I stood to the side of the doorway, gripped the frame, and peered inside.

The dining room was a silent bustle, save for cutlery on crockery (reminiscent of the House dining hall), and the waving of a newspaper. A chandelier hung from the center of the pitched roof over the long table that was positioned equidistant from every purple-papered wall. Its shiny, naked surface held an assortment of dishes and bowls and plates and teapots,

like a living metropolis of bone ceramic and porcelain. The young boy jumped into the empty chair closest to my position, next to the young girl who abruptly woke me.

Around the perimeter of the table were ten high-back chairs, seven of them taken by children: a mix of ages, races, genders; all in multiple stages of breakfast consumption. Hands would reach into the center of the table, retrieve an item, edible or otherwise.

Sir was at the far end of the table, a soft glow around him emanating from the large bay window behind. He was hidden by a broadsheet newspaper, which he flicked to the next page and shook it out to straighten the rabbit ears. Occasionally he would reach around, and bring his teacup behind the paper, only to return it a moment later.

The eldest child, from my perspective, sat next to Sir on the far side of the table, looked as if she was almost an adult. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail that hung down to a white shirt that sported a toaster with unintelligible writing across it. The device at the side of her plate well and truly held her attention as she ate.

The youngest, it seemed, was the boy who silently gave me the hurry for breakfast. He was about the same age when I entered a House all those years ago. He sat on the near side, closest to my location. Legs dangled freely under the table as he spooned something into his mouth from a bowl.

There were two empty places at the table. Yet the one on the far side of the table, in front of a closed lacquered wood-paneled door, was ready for an occupant.

A clearing of throat seeped out from behind the newspaper. The children stopped their movements, like a dog picking up on a silent whistle. Their heads turned in unison to the broadsheet, waiting expectedly for an announcement of some variety.

“You can’t hang out there all day,” Sir said, his voice even and deep. “Come inside for breakfast before it’s all gone.”

Deathly silence. I edged away from the sanctuary of the corridor and stood at the foot of the table with my hands clasped in front, waiting to be inspected. Heads snapped in my direction. Eyes darted over my person. I tried to meet their gaze but when I thought I had locked eyes, they shifted away. I noted a girl, the same girl who frightened me with the unusual wake-up call, held the same inane beam on her face as she did when I recoiled that morning. I hadn't rationalized whether it was bearding or benevolent.

An explosion of a knife on a plate broke the awkward silence. "You said we wouldn't be getting any more," the eldest girl screamed.

Sir pulled down the paper, the result a crumbled mess in his lap.

Sir sighed. "I don't make the rules, Tilly," he responded. "I simply observe them."

Tilly! She had a name. The sound of it was so foreign to me. The regulations clearly dictated what children would be called by their parents and guardians until such time they can attend The Transitioning. My stomach flipped and my chest felt tight. I wondered if breaking the rules was overlooked for this level of aristocracy, a different set of guidelines for people in big houses, and the ability to integrate children from the Houses into their own homes. Was it a luxury bestowed by the authorities, or a privilege leveraged behind their backs?

"The state has determined we are capable of being allocated a child," he continued as if reading a script, the words dancing off his tongue like they left a foul taste in his mouth. "And so, we have, as is our responsibility. A responsibility for the government, to society as a whole."

"This isn't fair," she protested. "This is becoming less and less our family and more a refuge, a common House where the unwanted are sent. How much more are we supposed to put up with, how much of our family are we supposed to share with ordinary strangers? Is this the life you wish for us, Father?"

That was such a misnomer. It's not that we weren't wanted, it's purely because our parents didn't have the means to look after us in a way that aligned with potential living standards set forth by the state. That's what had been drilled into me at every Education lesson. Over and over, so we could play it back on request.

"This will be the last. I promise."

She sat back, folded her arms. "That's what you said about the last one. And the one before that. When will this end?"

Sir sighed. "Just one more year, Tilly, and you can set forth into the world and live it as you see fit. Until then, in this house, you shall abide by my rules, and the rules governed to us by the state. Without rules, we have anarchy, confusion. You know this, yet you choose to question them at every bullet point and paragraph. They are there for a reason."

She pouted. "Well, I want to spend my final year at boarding school then. Skyler and Emily got to go to boarding school."

"We've discussed this. If you were to be sent away, it is highly likely we would be allocated another. Space and budgets have been met; the ledger has been balanced. We have and will continue to do our part because that is the expectation placed upon us. Now, there shall be no more discussion about this. I will consider this matter dealt with."

"Umm, excuse me?" My voice, small and unimportant brought the conversation to an unexpected and surprising halt. Until that moment, I had been focused on the other children's reactions. Some seemed to agree with Sir, most looked down at their plates to avoid the conflict, their coping mechanism for a spoiled daughter.

"Yes, Boy," Sir said, almost thankful he didn't have to continue the disagreement with Tilly. "What is it?" His face dropped. "My boy, did you sleep in those clothes?"

I responded.

“No, I don’t wish to hear it. Boy, clothes are for wearing, pajamas are for sleeping. I don’t go to work in my night clothes, nor shall you wear your day clothes to bed. Is that clear?”

I nodded.

“Now,” he said, leaning forward, crumpling the paper. “What is it?”

“May I please join the table?” I realized I hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before. The nightly meal was forgotten like a leaf blown about by a breeze.

Sir took a sideways glance towards his daughter’s pouting features before pointing to the end of the table on her side. Tilly raised her napkin, touched the edges of her mouth before dropping it on her plate.

“I’m done,” she announced scornfully.

“I gathered,” he replied, wanting to have the last word.

She pushed her chair back and marched the length of the table. Brushed past me, a little too closely, much too closely given the space between me and the wall, such that her elbow connected with my shoulder. Then she left, and the breakfast rummage continued. It felt like the tension that had been covering the table like a thick blanket had been removed, a combined coating of relief flowed across the children.

“Help yourself, Boy,” Sir recommended. “Or you’ll miss out. Everyone for themselves in this house. Out there, in the real world, there are no handouts, no one to do everything for you. I see part of my role is to prepare you for that, to become social citizens. And, for you, this begins now.”

I took his advice and eased into the empty seat next to a girl. She was about my age, perhaps a year on either side. Her strawberry blonde hair swept over her face and shoulders. She pulled some strands behind her ear and munched into a croissant as she watched me

closely with a sideways glance. She leaned forward over her plate to catch the crumbs; her nose twitched like a rabbit as she chewed.

Breakfast had resumed. Even Sir returned to his paper, shaking the edges straight. Conversation comprised the continued clash of bowls, plates and cups, and glasses. I reached over for a serving plate of fluffy scrambled eggs. Holding the portion in front of my eyes, I cast my mind back to the House breakfast halls and my friend's fascination with the substance. Once more I wondered what he was doing and if he too was thinking about my own adventures. It had been just one day, twenty-four hours since we last saw each other, yet it felt a lifetime, a million miles away from that existence.

A clearing of a throat. "It's not going to eat itself, Boy." Sir's words swept over the table, and I knew he was talking to me, yet I didn't move, my mind half stuck in the reminiscent daydream.

An elbow into my arm, the girl next to me dragging my attention to the present. I looked around, but no one paid any attention. I gazed across the table at the two young children sitting opposite. Every now and again I would meet their eyes, wide and inquisitive before they would shift away to their plates.

After a period, the extent to which was unknown to me, Sir closed his paper, folded it in half, then half again, and slapped it down on the table. Crumb-filled dishes laden the tabletop, along with dirty cups and almost empty serving plates. Everyone in unison wiped their mouths with their napkins and lay them on their plates. I swallowed whatever I had in my mouth and followed suit.

He leaned forward, brought his elbows to the table. His white shirt was starched, collar and cuffs impeccably stiff. Silver cufflinks clasped the ends together. The black suspenders against the sparse canvas gave a racing stripe appearance. A large knot of blue silk under his chin, perfect and full. It seemed an unusual dress for weekend jovialities.

“Children,” Sir said, leaning forward, bringing his elbows to the table. “This is the newest member of the family. Let me make the introductions.” All eyes focused on me. I felt their stares over my person, judging every little thing about my appearance. “You’ve unofficially met Tilly, my daughter, currently absent from the table. To my right here are my two sons, Marcus and Finch.” They each gave me a nod, courteous and structured, at the sound of their names. They could have been twins, if not for the noticeable age difference, replicating their father’s features with astonishing accuracy. Apart from that, Finch, the younger of the two, looked extremely unremarkable, like someone who could slip into a crowd and soak into its visual norms. Marcus, on the other hand, had one blue eye and one brown eye and was so striking I struggled to pull my attention from him. As he noted my stare, he held up a hand to shield his view and looked away towards the window.

“Further along that side,” Sir continued, “is Girl² and Boy³.”

My shoulders dipped a little. On hearing names, real names, afforded to his children, despite the government’s advice and guidelines, I thought there would be a chance that we too, the children of the Houses, would be assigned more than an identifier. Any name would do, I wouldn’t be concerned with it, just something to get away from the stigma of being called ‘Boy’, that you are family-less, although you may be entrusted to a family. However, as I had grown up, from as far back as I can recall, I had been called the prefix that I knew was coming my way.

I looked over to the two children opposite, judged their reactions. None. Stone-faced. Ambivalent, even though the boy at the end continued to swing his legs so that his body shifted like a pendulum. Girl² ran a hand through the pigtails that grew out of the sides of her head. If I didn’t know better, and I didn’t, I would assume she accomplished the feat herself, which, I also assumed, was quite the task for her ten years.

“Beside Tilly’s strangely unoccupied seat,” Sir said sarcastically, “is Boy⁴ and Girl³.”

I leaned forward, nodded to Boy4 who was also leaning on the table, and he returned the favor. He looked my age, jet black hair combed back to reveal a high forehead and ears that jutted out the side of his head. Shirt crisp, fingers long and bony. Asian descent, if there was a descent at all.

Girl4 came into view, mouth chewing, freckles shimmering.

“Are you going to eat that?” she asked as she swallowed, pointing at my plate.

“Everyone,” Sir said, continuing his introductions. “This is Boy5.”

And there it was. My name, nay, my identity. Allocated. Assigned. Standard gender prefix and suffix. Cold yet familiar.

“Boy5, you can spend the day getting to know the house. If you have questions, you can ask the other children. They have been here long enough to know the ins and outs of how the household runs.” With that, he stood, the rest of the children following his lead, and he marched out of the room like he was advancing on a fortified position. The rest of the children cleared out as well, dispersing out into the hall. They left me staring at a table full of dirty dishes and unsure of what I should do about it if anything at all.

I didn't quite understand my role in the family. Back at the House, everything was clear. There was a roster, with different wings being responsible for various tasks on any given day. There was structure and order. Here, that solid structure was made of rubber, bent and flexed as required by the needs of Sir. It was freedom in confinement, and in the absence of rules, one made their own.

I pushed away from the table, stood, and picked up my plates. I figured clearing my own dishes, taking responsibility for the objects that I used, was the least I could do. I stood at the table and stared at the wooden door. Having seen no kitchen on my spritely journey to the dining room that morning, I figured it was most likely beyond that door.

I backed into it tentatively, the hard-wooden floor transitioning to ceramic under my feet. I let the door silently swing closed, then turned. Against the gleam of black-and-white tile and chrome, a man in a black suit stood in my way. He was tall, almost seven feet. Standing firm, he bowed slightly to look down at me, his hands remaining behind his back. He was old, with gray hair packed down to a shine on top of a skull that sagged skin at every opportunity; puffy sacks under his eye, his neck blossomed from a black bow-tied collar. His citrus aftershave mingled, then overtook, the antibacterial aroma that clung to every surface.

“Can I help you, Boy?” he said with an air of malice.

I looked down. “I was just moving my dirty dishes to the kitchen.”

“Oh, I see. And if you are to do my job, what job am I to do? Yours? Do you even have a job? Would you rather me dig my grave in that tall grass and feed myself to the worms and slugs?”

“N-no,” I stuttered. I felt ambushed like he was just waiting for me to arrive. A trap.

“And if you took them to the kitchen, then what? Are you to do the dishes as well? Would you like to continue to clean the house and tend to the yard work? Maybe you would like to prepare dinner for everyone as well. Is it your preference that you undertake these activities so people like me are sent to work in Re-education centers or worse? Everyone has their role in society, Boy. You can’t do their job as much as they could do yours.”

Personally, I couldn’t think of anything worse than being in a Re-education center, let alone working in one. As much as I understood the method, I would liken the position to be soul-destroying, utterly life taking.

“Not at all. I apologize. I’m new here, so I didn’t know -.”

“Spare me your excuses, Boy,” he interrupted. “You knowing the rules is not my responsibility. My obligation concerns itself with matters beyond your grasp, both intellectually and physically.”

I held up the dishes. “I guess I will just give these to you then?”

He tutted, before regaining his full height and sighing deeply. He kept his gaze straight ahead as he spoke, as if to look at me were a crime. “Now that you have them you might as well place them on the bench.”

I look around the room, at the metal-topped benches lining the walls, at the island benches that floated in the middle of the room. Over my shoulder, next to the door I entered, is the beginning of such a bench. I turned and eased them onto the surface.

Another sigh. “Not there,” he breathed.

I picked them up again.

“Oh, just leave them, Boy! I have much to do without watching you not accomplish a simple task.”

I slid them back onto the counter. I could feel his eyes burn into me, watching every little movement, judging me behind years of experience. Without looking back, or saying another word, I pushed back through the door into the dining room. It was when the door swung shut behind me I realized I had been holding my breath. With footsteps approaching the door from the other side, I ran out of the room, before I had another encounter with the nameless suited elderly man.

In the hall, the young Girl2 was leaning against the wall. Her head shifted left and right like she was following a pattern on the wall opposite. When she saw me, she stopped, turned, and reached out for my hand. I slowly reached for it, and she hurriedly took it, a disapproving look displaying her frustration at the speed I was moving. Silently, she led me through the house, in and out of open doorways, with no introduction to the contents or purpose, before we arrived at the bottom of the grand staircase. She released her firm grip on my hand, then stood, hands at her sides, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. Her smile grew wider before she erupted in a sudden squeal. She then ran off down the

passageway, back the way we had come, the smack of shoes on tile dispersing into nothing as she maneuvered through the house to her destination. Meanwhile, I trudged up the stairs to my room, not having quite cracked the girl's code.

The space was in full sun, warming every surface. My bed had been made, the sheets and cover tightened against the mattress. Everything seemed a little straighter, a bit fuller as if I was already integrating into the foundations of the property. Investigating the drawers and cupboard, I found various shirts, pants, socks, underwear, shoes. All different colors and styles. Although they were clean, smelt clean, felt clean, I knew they were pre-owned, handed down by the older children. I pulled out a random shirt and held it against my frame, seemed like it would fit. The room felt more like a home. I don't believe it could ever be *my* home, which felt too far away, yet only years separated us. I lifted my House uniform pullover up to my nose, the same one I had been wearing for an eternity and sniffed. Musty. Murky. It smelt like me, but old.

After finding three similar-sized bedrooms, a cupboard full of sheets and towels, and a toilet, I located the bathroom. I locked the door, stripped off, and afforded myself a shower hotter than, and longer than, any I could recall having in the House. Suitably clean, smelling of raspberry and cactus oil (if the soap dispenser should be believed), and wearing only a towel, I shuffled back to my room. Carrying my dirty clothes, I had left behind a steamy haze and let the warm household temperature evaporate any leftover droplets.

I closed the door and left my old uniform in the room's corner. Back at the House, there was a procedure to follow for dirty clothes. But here, things were different. The rules would be something I would have to find out on my own. I didn't really care what they did with my old clothes. Burn them, was my first thought. I couldn't envisage them being washed and pressed, to be returned to the House, wrapped in brown paper and secured with twine. If I

was to return to the House, they would allocate a new uniform. One never knew which House they would go to, that was decided by some bureaucrat and decided with a heavy stamp.

I dressed in a random selection of clothes: Blue collared shirt, maroon pants, black socks, and shoes. They fit well enough. I stood at the window for a long time, bathing in the mid-morning sun and enjoyed the view. Extensive areas of trees and grass, all separated with various shades of green and brown. Clouds scattered the sky, like ripped-apart fairy floss. I could imagine worse parts of the country where I could be allocated, even though my preference to stay at House remained with me. Thoughts of those I left behind played on my mind. Wondered what they were doing. Questioned if they spoke of me, or merely carried on with their own existence. Memories fade rapidly.

I sighed heavily and strode to my desk. I wasn't ready to explore the house, let alone the surrounding grounds, deciding I was safer in my cocoon. I told myself I was still coming to terms with the sudden shift in environment, from House to house. Forced adventure. A conscious declaration.

Several large books were lined up on the surface against the wall. I tilted my head and perused the titles on the spine. English. Science. Textbooks. I surmised these were the materials and resources required for my new school. I picked up the mathematics book and flicked through some pages. Integration. Differentiation. Statistical equations. Disciplines and subdisciplines. Things I already knew, because things like that seemed to stick in my brain like superglue. Glad to see the school program outside the House wasn't lagging, or vice versa.

And then it clicked. I didn't notice it at first. I don't know how I missed it. It was there when I left for breakfast. It was there when I went to shower, I was sure of it. I clenched my eyes, cast my mind back to after breakfast. Was it there? I think it was. My book, the only

item I brought with me from the House that I actually cared about, was missing. I looked back through the titles of textbooks, hoping I had skimmed over it. It wasn't there.

I searched the room, hoping that whoever dropped the textbooks off had simply rearranged my prized object. Lifting the desk lid, I rummaged through blank sheets of paper and yet more writing implements. Through drawers I dove, shifting clothing from side to side, lifting out of the way to get a better look. Cupboard doors forcefully swung open to reveal hanging clothes and pairs of scuffed leather shoes.

Spinning. In the middle of the room, I gazed over every surface, hoping that it would jump out at me. As I ended up stumbling around my slightly off-kilter room, it was obvious someone had taken it. And I took an educated guess as to who that was.

CHAPTER 10

Tilly wasn't hard to find. She was sitting in a leather chair next to a cold fireplace, her legs curled up under herself. Lights around the walls were alight, bathing a warm glow over the numerous titles on the shelves, casting long shadows in every direction around the room. Sourness danced on my tongue, ash in the back of my throat.

She twirled her hair while flicking through the pages of my book. If she wanted to hide from me, she did a poor job of executing it. The library wasn't the most secluded location in the house. In fact, in the room itself, there were many hidden corners and niches to crouch down in silence. Beyond that, what better place to hide a book than among a thousand others. It would have been an impossible search, hidden in plain sight, where only the guilty culprit would know exactly where it was hiding. Yet, she was there on display, not hiding herself, nor my book. She was lying in wait. Expectant of my arrival.

I watched silently as she turned to the end, the last page, and read over the passage. "What are you doing?" I called out from the precipice.

She snapped her head up. "I like to know what happens in the end," she stated matter-of-factly. "It's not a crime, is it?"

“No,” I said, marching in. “But theft is, Tilly.”

“Who said I stole it?” she said. Smirked. Eyes narrowed. “Maybe you left it here. And I, an avid reader, sought to broaden my horizons.” Smiled innocently. Fluttered her lashes.

“Give it back,” I ordered, reaching for it.

She pulled it away, clutching it to herself. “Where are you your manners, *Boy*? We don’t go around grabbing things in this house. Maybe where you come from it is perfectly acceptable behavior. In fact, I’m sure the instructors actively taught it as part of your education. You House children really have no regard for how to treat people in society. They should teach you better.”

I grabbed my hips. The attack left me reeling yet complied just the same. It was a battle I would not win, especially when the war was only just beginning. I clenched my jaw, thought my teeth would break. “Please,” I hissed through my teeth. “May I have my book back?”

“Sure,” she said, holding it out to me. “It’s not like I was going to *burn* it. That wouldn’t be very nice, would it? To take the only *real* thing you arrived with and destroy it before your eyes. That would make me a monster. And I’m not a monster, *Boy*.”

I took it, walked to her door.

“Wait,” Tilly called out.

I turned. She was poised on the edge of the couch. Eyes big and glistening, drooping at the edges. A sigh, long and purposeful.

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

I faltered, almost fell over. Off guard. Didn’t think I would ever hear those words out of a mouth like hers, a biological someone apologizing to a no-name no one. I pivot, eyed her suspiciously, try to seek the ruse in her features. Fail. Sincerity was displayed, but I didn’t buy it. This whole thing was a setup, and this portrayal of sincerity was merely a component.

“Really,” I state, disbelieving. I didn’t hide my sarcasm. It was as transparent as Sir’s feelings towards me.

She looked down, first to her hands then to the floor. Searching.

“I... it’s just... I didn’t...”

Several false starts to her explanation.

“Just leave my stuff alone,” I said, and turn once more to the room entrance.

“Would you read it to me?”

Once more I am caught in a trap, a river of quicksand.

“I’m sorry?”

“Please read it to me. I’ve tried, really tried. I just couldn’t make sense of it.”

I edged back to her like I was nearing a cliff with no barrier, where every step had me falling to a painful death.

“You want me to read to you?”

“Please,” she pleaded, her hands clasped together, her eyes big and round.

I sighed. I didn’t know whether I should take pity on her. Did she deserve my sympathy? She stole my book. Perhaps she was curious. No, she couldn’t be. Surely, she can read. I looked over at her. She eased back into the corner of the chair, waited expectantly for me to begin. Deep breath as I opened the book to a random page and read.

Bentley poured himself into Garb’s office.

A murmur.

‘What is it, Bentley,’ Garb barked.

‘Don’t you ever wonder?’

‘The only thing I wonder about is why you keep coming in here and bothering me with this shit. Can’t you see I’m busy?’

Another murmur.

'We have the power to stop it, Garb. You know we do, yet we stand by and let it all happen to them. How can you live with yourself?'

Garb put down the gun, rubbed his head, ignored the growing murmur.

'Every damn time,' Garb rattled. 'I live with myself because it keeps us safe. There are people out there who question our way of life. And we just can't have that, Bentley. And who's gonna stop them, huh? Who? You? If you think you can do it, pick up that gun and take your place, otherwise leave me alone so I can do what I need to do, which is to protect our way of life.'

Bentley dropped his head, lower than when he came seeking vigil. 'Maybe you're right, Garb.'

'Of course, I'm right, damn it.' Garb picked up the gun. 'New ideas are dangerous, Bentley. One illicit thought can bring down the entire government. Now if you don't mind.'

Bentley acknowledged his ally and left the room in which he came to enter it.

Garb pointed the weapon at the man tied to the chair. Fear swept the office, clung to every surface. 'Now, where were we? Ah yes, I remember now. I guess one person really can't make a difference,' he sneered, as he pulled-

"Stop," Tilly said. It wasn't a shout of terror, more of a request.

I lowered the book. Peered at her, waiting for her question or instruction.

"Do you think he's right?"

"Who?"

"The character."

"Which one," I asked.

"That thing Garb said. Do you think one person can make a difference? Can one person really bring down a government?"

The question threw me. In all honesty, I didn't think she would even listen. I figured this was some game that ended with her making fun of me. I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know."

She waved me closer. "Come here," she whispered, her voice soft and luring. "I have a secret to tell you."

I leaned forward. "What is it?"

She looked about herself, more for a show of secrecy rather than actually checking if anyone else was listening. She would know the house the best, understand where one could talk safely in hushed tones, and avoid detection by others. Ways to thicken the plot.

"I'm running away!" she announced.

"What?!" I returned, a little too loudly, sufficient volume for Tilly to jam her hand over my mouth. My eyes went wide. I pulled it away. "What are you talking about?"

"I've heard there's a place that people can go, you know, to run away... to get away from the government."

Oh my god. She knew about Laferty Bridge. She knew what was on the other side. I remained silent as my mind spun.

"You wouldn't tell, would you?" Head bowed, looking at me through wisps of hair. "You have to promise not to tell anyone. Not where I'm going. Not even that we spoke."

I nodded.

"Even if the Investigators come. Dad will call them; I just know he will. But you can't tell anyone."

She looked in pain. Worse, fear covered her features. Short breaths. Her heartbeat permeated the space between us. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't expecting this, any of this, but the more she spoke the more uncertain I became of everything. I wanted to tell her to take me with her, maybe I still would.

“Okay,” I agreed with a nod. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Then she sat back, folded her arms. Slowly. Deliberately. Her features dropped. Anger. Did she not believe me? Did I agree to the wrong thing? Then a smirk. Eyes twinkled. A raise of her chin. Something over me.

“See,” she shouted out. “I told you! I told you we couldn’t trust the boy here.”

Wood sliding into wood reached the end of its corridor. I turned around. Sir sat on a high-back leather chair. Legs crossed. Disgust on his face. That’s the only word for what I saw. Not disappointment. Just hatred. He wasn’t expecting better. He was expecting me to do exactly what I did. Tilly had sucked me in, led me down a path. And I let her do it.

“Boy!” he summoned. “Get in here!”

Sir slid the door closed behind me. Held it firm for a moment, let the echo sink into the room. He rounded me, his desk, a stack of folders and papers on the floor, and eased into his chair. Sir had crammed the space with overflowing bookshelves, filing cabinets with yet more paper on them, and non-descriptive trophies or awards. All of it made the room feel even smaller than it was. Breathing space was at a premium.

Sir leaned back in his chair, elbows on the arms of the chair, fingers together at his lips. The stare, looking through me. His expression hadn’t changed, and I wondered how long he could hold it for. His desk was an array of laptops, phones, and reports. Behind him, French doors leading out to a paved area complete with a white steel table flanked by matching chairs, the vicinity cordoned off by meter tall fir trees.

I rubbed my hands, waiting for whatever it was to be handed down to me. Tilly had tricked me, that was for sure. Was Sir also in on the ruse? It hardly seemed just to link to anarchists who wish to take down the government, or to those who fled the city (even though

that is exactly what Father did), because I was tempted to say ‘yes’ to keeping a secret, lulled into submission by someone who appeared to be sharing such an intimate detail. I mean, who’s to say I wasn’t about to let her father know what she had told me?

Sir took a large breath before entering his tirade.

“I have every mind to send you back to a House for Re-education. It seems you have learned nothing.” He stopped, collected his thoughts. “I refuse to be put in a situation with the government simply because you wish to keep a secret for someone you’ve just met.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up a finger and continued talking.

“I provide for you, shelter, food, clothing, and you repay me with this treachery. Even with someone like you, where you are from, I expect some level of morals and integrity, foundations of society. How are you expecting to be a responsible member of the state if you can’t abide by simple rules, let alone the laws that govern us?”

I answered his question, but Sir continued, talking over me. My small voice had no choice but to submit.

“The conversation you had doesn’t just break my rules, it breaks the law! This is something I refuse to put up with, so consider this your first and final warning. What have you got to say for yourself?”

But what could I say? And would it even matter? He had decided. I wonder if he would have the same conversation, the same words, duplicate tone, with one of his own children. Perhaps that was expected. His children. Allocated children. He considered himself, his house, the vessel for those with unfortunate upbringings. A divide between the passengers. There would always be a divide. The incumbents would take advantage of the situation. The newcomers had to try their best to catch up and stay out of their way.

I mumbled my response.

Sir leaned forward, his seat creaking. “What was that?”

“No, Sir,” I mumbled.

“First lesson for you, Boy5. When you talk, talk with authority. Make it impactful.

When I ask you a question I expect an answer, one that I can hear clearly. That makes sense for me, others in this house, your teachers, your future employer. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Stand up straight, Boy!”

I did. Elongated. Shoulders back. Took a deep breath.

“Better. Good. Do not forget this moment, Boy5. Any time you find yourself in a situation and you are unsure of how to act, think back to this conversation, to what I told you.

Is there anything else?”

I had a lot of questions, wasn't sure which one to start with.

A gaze around the office. “What exactly do you do?”

He waved it away like an annoying insect. “Go find the other children,” he barked.

“I'm too busy to be answering these nauseating questions.”

CHAPTER 11

Finding the other children, however, was an arduous task. I scouted the house, investigated every hallway and corridor, snuck a peek behind every closed door, even though I was sure this was against the rules (even though no one was there to confirm or deny this to be true). Deep down I could imagine Sir's disapproving glower over me stating 'doors are closed for a reason'.

I found multiple bathrooms that gleamed of white, smooth tile. Several bedrooms of varying size and fullness, the smallest the size of mine, the biggest one was larger than the home we fled from the night we ran. Large double beds beneath bright windows. Posters of sports and music stars lined the walls. Floors were clean and shelves stocked with books, ornaments, and the 'stuff' that accumulates in children's rooms. Storerooms, servants' quarters, a billiards room with a full-size table, large screen television, and racks of cues, and a room with more bottles of wine than I could count.

Walking through multiple archways, navigating across rooms laden with leather furniture and gilded-framed oil paintings, rugs with ornate patterns and heavy, wood tables that seemed to have no other purpose than to display delicate curios, I stood at a set of double

doors and looked out over a field of thigh-high grass. The earlier morning sun had relinquished control to gray clouds that brought with them a dullness that permeated the glass. Felt like the entire world had turned black and white. Lifeless.

I found them there, at the edge of the field, under a tree. Strong trunks, with large roots that grew from the middle of the main stem and stabbed the earth, thick branches that twisted and curved like the withered limbs of a grotesque witch, secured the perimeter. They stood guard over the house like sentries, foreboding all looking for entry.

The door squeaked as I pushed it open. Standing on a small, paved area next to metal furniture, the smell of wet earth rose before me. The grass danced as a gust blew by, before resetting itself, waiting. Petrichor swirled and stuck in my nostrils, inviting me in. I stepped in the grassland, my foot sinking slightly into a mound of moist dirt. I eased over the area from the house to trees, wading my hands through the long grass shoots as I did so. With every step, the figures of Boy4 and Girl3, those that I shared a side of the dining table with, grew in my vision, their gazes locked on me.

I didn't know if they were waiting for me or just hanging out with nothing better to do with their time. Boy4 had an arm up, holding onto a branch that jutted out. Girl3 had her arms crossed, her body resting against the trunk. Their mouths moved in rapid conversation, but I couldn't hear any of it.

When I arrived at the tree, Boy4 tutted.

"Took your time finding us," he said.

I shrugged. "It's a big house. There are a lot of rooms to explore."

Girl3 tutted. "Breaking the rules already, are we?"

I knew I was right. Closed doors are closed for a reason. "Well, it's not like anyone's actually explained the rules to me. Apparently, that's your job," I said, waving a finger between them.

“And let me guess,” he said. “Sir told you that after he dressed you down after that bitch Tilly tricked you into saying or doing something. Am I right?”

“Jesus,” I breathed, the episode still raw in my memory. “How the hell did you know?”

“Because that’s what she does,” she said. “She’s done it to all of us.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” he said. “Got me when we were kicking a ball to each other. She asked me to take something from Sir’s office and bring it to her. I originally told her the request was against the rules, but she said Sir said it was okay.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I did it, of course! Why wouldn’t I? Took it to the pool room and held it out to her like a trophy. Except it wasn’t just her there. Sir was talking with another man and his daughter. She acted like she did not know what I was talking about. And when Sir looked away, she smirked at me.” The grimace on his face showed the pain he endures with every retelling of the story.

“What happened?” I said as I edged forward.

“Bed. No dinner.”

She stepped forward. “Got me when she asked me to plait her hair,” she added. “I stood behind her as she sat at her dressing table. We started talking inconsequential shit. Random stuff like about the weather and the other children. She stared at me in the mirror during the entire conversation, never took her eyes off me. Then she said that one of Sir’s sons, she didn’t know which, had lied about something at school. She thought it was best that I said something to Sir about it, and that she would back me up. Said that Sir would sooner believe me than her.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “She didn’t back you up.”

“No, she didn’t, because there was nothing to back up. It was all bullshit, and I got yelled at for telling stories about people. Said that I couldn’t be a productive member of society if I kept running around telling unsubstantiated stories about other people, that I would sooner end up in a Re-education center than they would.”

“That Tilly is a real piece of work,” he added.

“She finds some way in, something to connect to you, then she leverages it.”

Boy4 chortled. He bent down to pick up a stone from the earth. Flicked it into the air like a coin and caught it again. Turned it over in his hands, rubbed some of the dirt away. He turned, reared up, and let the object fly like a player throwing in a ball from the outfield. The object sailed, a clear trajectory across the gray landscape. “I guess you could admire her for that,” he said, brushing his hands on his pants.

“How does Sir let her get away with it, the manipulation of it all?” I asked.

He folded his arms. “Why do you think?”

The answer was so obvious it didn’t need voicing. Family first, always, above all else. And we, the children of the Houses, didn’t make the cut. We were fair game.

“What are you two doing all the way out here?”

“Keeping away from the others,” she said.

“The younger ones?”

“No, not them,” she said and pointed up.

I followed her finger. Intertwined with branches were Boy3 and Girl2. So much so, in fact, I had to shift my stance to peer around lower branches in order to find them. But I found them, lying prone on thick branches, limbs dangling. I waved to them, and they returned the favor. Upon training my hearing, I could just make out their eternal chatter, yet when I looked back down, their noise disappeared, soaked by the bark, the word, and the leaves.

“They don’t talk much,” I said.

“Depends on whose listening,” Boy4 suggested.

“But they are mischievous and damn clever,” Girl3 added.

“Avid climbers as well,” he said. “Those two up there were here before us.” He pointed at Girl3. “She came in just before me. We’ve been pretty solid since.” He threw her a sideways glance that followed his smile. “Not romantically.”

She returned his gaze. “Oh, god, no!” she insisted. “More like brother and sister. Anyway, we’re kind of like our own little family. As Sir says, his obligation is to provide us with food and shelter, and that’s it.”

“Yeah, I heard the same thing. So, being out here, is to avoid Sir’s children?”

He nodded. “They’re probably tied up with their technologies, or study or sports or friends, not that I care.”

“It sounds like you care,” she threw at him.

“I *don’t* care,” he returned with a scowl on his face. “They don’t come out here, anyway. I mean, look at the field. Which is fine, if you ask me.”

I looked around the arc of the big-rooted trees, found the intersection point with lines of fir trees that connect back to corners of the house. I did some approximate math. Roughly two and a half thousand square meters of wild land. Not good enough for Sir or his kids, but a haven for those willing to entrust in it.

“It was different,” she said, wistfully, “when Sir’s wife was here.” Clouds moved overhead, forcing a shadow to stretch across her features as she stared past me, eyes glistening yet resolute in their regard of the house. “She would spend much of her weekend out here, we all would, digging up rocks, pulling out weeds, cutting the grass, trimming the hedges. And it’s not like they didn’t have people who could accomplish these tasks for us, just that she preferred we all pitch in to do it. Something about accomplishing a task and having something tangible to look at. We all played a part. All of us.”

“Even Tilly? Marcus and Finch?” I questioned, skeptical to say the least.

“The boys got into things a lot quicker, but always stayed together. Followed each other around like unpleasant smells. Like some invisible force attached them to each other. Tilly took a lot longer. Eventually, when she saw everyone else spending time with her mother, she caved in. Not that she put too much effort into it, spending most of her time asking inane questions to Mother, wanting the attention she thought she deserved.”

“What happened to her?” I mumbled. “The Mother.”

She shrugged as if wriggling out of the memory. “Late one night, a couple of years ago, a while at least, I remember someone banging on the door. I snuck out of my room and crouched down at the balcony, hid behind a balustrade looking down at the entry. Sir opened the door and a bunch of people dressed in black rushed in. At first, I thought they were coming for us, the House kids, to take us back. But then a few moments later they escorted her away, one on either side, hands on her body. At the door, she paused, turned, looked right at me even though I knew she couldn’t see me. A smile on her face. But it wasn’t from joy, it was from strength, it was hope. She never struggled, almost like she accepted her fate.”

She turned to the tree. Ran her hands over the smooth bark, found an imperfection to pick away at. The outer layer chipped off easily, like a scab where new skin had grown underneath. The patch grew as she dug a fingernail into the edges.

“Out here... gives us our space,” she continued. “We can talk freely out here, being far enough away from the house, don’t have to worry about Tilly taking something we said and twisting it for her own benefit.”

“Yeah,” he started. “When you’re encouraged to spy on your own family, it pays to say absolutely nothing to nobody. That Tilly would make a damn fine CHIRP spy. Sell out her own father in a heartbeat.”

“Spy?” I queried. The House briefed us all extremely well on the high-level roles within the CHIRP administration. The education sessions were littered with references of them, the work they did, the success they had. Perhaps it was a part of a big recruitment drive, like funneling children into police, the fire department, or other emergency sectors. However, they never presented a spy role as an opportunity.

“Spies. A way to shut down illegal communities, groups of people who flee the city. What the spy does is pretend they are on the run. When they locate a community, they meet with the community leader. Once they’ve identified who’s in charge, they kill them and alert the authorities. A few minutes later the encampment is crawling with CHIRP officers, arresting everyone and destroying everything.”

“Is that true?” I asked, rooted to the branch I rested on.

“Sure, it is,” he said, disgusted that I should even question his authority. “I heard it on a radio or saw it on the news. Actually,” he said, tapping his chin, “it might have been one kid at school.” He stepped towards me; eyes narrowed. Looked me up and down, investigated both sides of my head. “You’re not a spy, are you?”

I stepped back. “What? No! What the hell are you talking about?”

He turned. “That’s just what a spy *would* say.”

I treaded under the canopy of the tree, grabbed him by the shoulder, and swung him around. His eyes were wide, unsuspecting. “Well, I guess I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t. If I said I was a spy, it would be just as believable as you thinking I was a spy when I said I wasn’t.”

His brow furrowed, and I could tell he was trying to compute what I just laid out for him. Finally, his ‘sister’ stepped around the tree.

“Shit, Max, I think he’s got you there!”

“Wait, what? Max?”

“Maximus to be exact,” he said, brushing himself off and thrusting out his hand.

I took it on instinct, a loose grip, yet he grabbed and pumped just the same.

“You mean,” I started, then caught myself and stepped back. “You’ve given yourself a name?”

“Not just me,” he said. “All of us.”

The gray had split, like someone had run a knife along the clouds, letting a brilliant bright shaft of light illuminate a path back to the house. The sudden heat prickled the back of my neck, like a thousand hot needles puncturing my skin. I rubbed at it, yet it did not dissipate.

“When I was in the House, me and my roommate, we gave each other names.” I quickly looked between them. “But only in our room... mostly.”

“What did you call yourselves?” she asked.

“I was M, and my roommate was L.” I decided not to mention S, so I could keep her all to myself. My own little treasure, my own little secret.

“M? L?” he challenged. “A letter can’t be a name!”

I laughed. “You’d get a long really well with L.”

“So,” she said stepping forward. “You’re a little rule breaker!”

“Yes. No. Well, maybe. It’s just that, it was easier.”

She smiled. “It’s okay. I was just riling you up. We are not like them,” she said pointing back to the house. “Never will be. In there, we are nothing but prefixes with numbers, identifiers, so Sir’s got something to call us when he wants our attention or to make a point of something.”

“Like you did in the House,” he said. “We only use them out here.”

“We know it’s wrong, and we know the trouble we could get into. We never use them in the house, or at school, or anywhere else. But out here is different. This is our place, where we can be who we want to be.”

“I don’t think the government would see it that way,” I said. “Do you think those Chirp officers give a damn about you and how you feel?”

“No,” she whispered as if it hurt her to say it.

“They only care about enacting the regulation,” I pushed. “There is no gray area for them, there is only black and white. Those that follow the rules and those that break them. And you most certainly are breaking them.” I backed down and sighed. “I guess we all are.”

“So,” Maximus said, edging toward me. “You’re going to tell Sir about this? Tell him what we’ve been doing? Make them come and take us away, break our family?” I was taller than he was, but he looked nimble. His body agitated. I wasn’t sure what he was expecting me to do, as much as I couldn’t tell what he was about to do. Race me to the house? Tell Sir some outlandish story to criticize my character and ruin what little reputation I had amassed over the day? Maybe he was going to attack. Push me to the ground and bash my head with a rock.

I sighed. Relief. Connection. “No,” I said, shaking my head. “No.” I marched toward Maximus, his guarded glance, his twitchy temperament. I reached for him, arms out like a zombie seeking a victim. He backed away, slapped my arms away.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing,” he growled. He screwed his face up, his fists up ready to fight. Breathing unsteadily. Arms shaking.

“Hey,” I said, holding my arms up. “I’m sorry. It’s just that, I’ve wanted this for so long. What you guys have created. I had something like this in the House where I came from, but not quite. This feels like a real family. In a real home.” I was not an emotional person, but

the want to be someone more than a number overpowered all logic, all the laws and rules, and guidelines and regulations. This meant something, actually meant something.

He stared at me for a long time, guard up, watching, inspecting. Waiting for me to do or say something. Girl3 came into the picture, gently laid a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s okay, Max. I don’t think he meant anything by it.”

He looked at her and everything dropped. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m sorry. It’s just that... nothing, it doesn’t matter. You’re welcome, by the way.” He shook his arms out, getting rid of the energy that had coiled in him.

She squared up and took a deep breath. “I’m Lennox,” she said, placing a hand on her chest.

“Ha!” I scoffed. “L. Just like my roommate.”

“I guess that makes me, you,” Max said. “M!”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“And up there is Chloe and Charlie,” Lennox continued. “I’m sure you can tell who is who.” She moved around behind Maximus, looked at me with a questioning eye. A hand on her chin, deep in thought. “I don’t know. What do you think, Max?”

Maximus stepped back to give himself room to take in my entire person in one fell swoop. “I think...” His eyes squeezed shut, his cheeks red, and I honestly thought his head would fly right off his shoulders, to the point where I too stepped back. “Boston!” he shouted. A look of relief spread over his face.

“What?” Lennox yelled. “Boston? That’s the best you can do? We are not calling him Boston!”

“What’s wrong with Boston?”

“Boston was the dog’s name!”

He dropped his head. “Oh yeah, don’t know how I missed that one.” He spun, started pacing, kicked up dust clouds.

“What about Gylton?”

“Okay,” Lennox said, stepping forward. She held out a hand towards Maximus. “I’m officially banning you from creating names.” She turned back to me, came close. “Leave this to me. What about Rick? Nope. You’re not a Rick. Reid? Calum? Jump in anytime here, kid!”

“I kind of like the way M sounds. Em.”

“You can’t just be M! Not anymore.”

“No,” I said. “Not M. Em.”

They both cocked their heads to one side.

I took a comforting breath. “Em, like Emerson.”

“Emerson?” she repeated. She hummed to herself as she stared into my eyes. “Now where did you get that from?”

“Just this book I’m reading,” I replied. “It’s the name of one of the characters, or cities, or counties or corner stores. I’m not quite sure. I was just flicking through some pages, and it jumped out at me.”

Her flat mouth eventually twitched into a smile. “Yeah... yeah, I see that.”

“Emerson Freeman?” Maximus said, his lips puckered like he’d just sucked a lemon. “Bit of a mouthful, isn’t it? Too many syllables.”

“No, it’s got a certain ring to it,” Lennox said. “What was your father’s last name?”

I paused. Had to think about it. Feels like forever since I said it, let alone thought about it. “Barnes,” I said.

“Emerson Barnes. Emerson Freeman.” She scratched her chin. “Shit, I don’t know. You’ve got until The Transitioning to figure it all out, anyway.”

But I knew which way I was going to swing. I wished I could visit the House and let L know I was once more defying regulation, breaking the rules by taking a name before the proper age.

I pictured him, lying on his bed as I told him. He would be so happy for me, so excited. I would tell him where I read it, the exact chapter, page, line number. I knew those details in that fantasy. Then I wondered what his name would be. Something like—.

“Welcome, Emerson!” Lennox squealed in a suppressed manner, like a mouse caught in a paper bag. She leaned forward and threw her arms around my neck. Her lips grazed my cheek and sizzling pins and needles worked their way up my chest and into my throat. I awkwardly patted her shoulders, unsure of what to do. I counted through the seconds. Giving a hug to Maximus was one thing: it was on my terms; I knew what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I understood the meaning behind it. But receiving from a girl was an entirely different proposition. The correct response to such events always escaped me.

Through strands of Lennox’s hair, I could see Maximus watching over us, but I couldn’t read the look on his face. His eyes said one thing however his mouth betrayed opposite emotions. Jealousy? Regret? Disdain? I couldn’t quite put my finger on the right concoction.

“All right, you two,” Maximus chanted. “Tilly will have a field day if she saw that palaver.”

Lennox released and eased back. Her cheeks were bright red, and she turned back to the trunk, avoiding eye contact. She resumed picking at the bark, flicking the large plates to the ground. The silence grew into an awkward entity, no one sure of how to deal with the monster. Something struck me from above. I peered around the limbs. The two younger members had dispersed into the canopy, camouflaged by thick branches displaying sunlight shapes.

“Enter at your own risk,” joked Maximus.

I went to reply but couldn’t conjure any noise out of my mouth. Eventually, I cleared my throat but stumbled over the beginning of several sentences.

Maximus reached for a low branch and pulled himself up onto it with little trouble. He crawled to the center mass, switched direction, and rose to another level. “Ask anything you want,” he called out. “But if you want an answer, you need to get up here first.”

I looked up into the tangle contraption with a small amount of dread. I hadn’t climbed a tree before, yet wasn’t about to admit that to the others, that someone of fourteen had never ventured into the limbs of an overgrown plant. I jumped for the nearest branch and wrapped my arms around it. I kicked my legs looking for purchase in mid-air.

“You want a hand with that?” Lennox called from below. Before I could respond. I could feel her pushing against the soles of my shoes, and with a quick effort, I was straddling the branch. As I sat there, I noted the ground looked infinitely more distant than what it actually was. Behind me, I could hear a grunt, followed by material scraping against the rough imperfect surface of the tree. Using numerous support branches, I clumsily transitioned my position, so I was facing the other two.

Looking up, light bent and folded through the leaves at the top. Every slight breeze shuffled the roof palings to display a gray and white painting of the sky. Chloe and Charlie looked down and waved, a flow of giggles erupted around me. In there, every note of noise intensified. Sound seemed to hold, then bounce, making the source of it difficult to determine. Things felt different off the ground. The air was cooler, carried the scent of freshly split apples that enveloped me. We were closed off from the world, in our own realm, where we chose names and spoke about things openly, without fear of authoritative reprisal.

“You’ve made the effort,” Maximus stated. “So, you either enjoy climbing trees, which, by the way, based on how hard that was for you to get up here, so, probably not. Or, you have a question that needs an answer.”

“Step right up, Emerson,” Lennox said as she waved her hands around. She was now balancing on a branch, stepping forward, then backward, one foot in front of the other, arms out for poise. The sight of it brought a level of excitement to my system. My heart pounded wildly; a wide smile grew on my face. “Ask any question and the great Maximus and Lennox will guide you.”

Questions flooded my mind, voices spoke over each other, a cacophony of opportunity. I tried to sort them into themes, give them a place in my mind. Rank, order and prioritize.

“Let’s start with Sir,” I declared.

“What about him?” Lennox asked.

“Well, I know nothing about him so I’m not sure what to ask.” I bit my lip and looked down at the branch. “What does he do? I mean, this is an enormous house, enough for all of us and more. Obviously has the means to be allocated children from the Houses.”

“He runs a company or something.”

“Like a CEO?”

“Sure, why not. It’s not something that I’ve been able to find out, not that I’ve been seeking an answer. Kids like us don’t ask questions like that. Sooner be sent back to the Houses for insubordination.”

“We should just be happy with the roof over our heads and the clothes on our back. I mean, I was just as curious when I got here a little over a year ago. But soon you’ll realize that there are some things just not worth seeking an answer for, some things you’ll just have to accept as the way they are.”

“Yeah, who gives a shit what he does, as long as he continues to do it. He could be the leader of a drug cartel. Who cares, as long as he maintains his income. Let’s face it. If something were to happen, you’d be the first one sent back.

“That’s right. Last in, first out. That’s the rule you know.”

I didn’t. As far as I was concerned, there were no rules. That the Administrators just made them up at will to suit their needs, to balance their spreadsheets. We were nothing but valueless objects, moved around from place to place to appease someone higher up the chain.

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t know.” I looked down, watched light and shadow chase each other over the ground.

“Don’t worry,” Lennox said. “We won’t let that happen to you. When they took Sir’s wife away, we thought he would be so upset that he would need to wind things down, take time for himself, solidify his *real* family. I thought I would go back to a House.”

“What happened to Sir?”

“He worked harder, buried himself. I would hear him walk the hallways very late at night, sometimes see him at the breakfast table wearing the same clothes as the night before. He distanced himself from everyone. A recluse in his own home. I guess the company expanded, grew, because first came Max, then you.” She carefully eased down on her branch, both legs facing the house, swung them playfully. “He’s got the room, he’s got the help, so why shouldn’t his burden be larger than others who don’t have access to such resources?”

I figured it was a rhetorical question. The messaging had always been akin to having a village to raise a child. That when individuals couldn’t manage, the greater good should step in and help. All the government did was regulate it, made it law. Wrapped the intention with bureaucracy and red tape. The system worked, that was for sure, but whether it drove the outcomes they were looking for, was uncertain. They undertook studies, however, that proved inconclusive in either direction. The point was that no one from either party nor

independents, stood against it. In the end, men and women in their suits and dresses fall back to the line: *This is the way we've always done it, that is the way we are going to do it.* They believed what they were doing was right. The investigators, the bangers, the *spies*, they all do because they believe in it. And if enough people believe in it, doesn't that make it right? Shouldn't I too, fall in line and follow the masses?

I shook the thoughts out of my head because her response made me think of another question.

"About the help," I started. "I bumped into one this morning. Kind of got in trouble."

"Let me guess," Maximus said. "You cleared your dishes to the kitchen."

I nodded. It was uncanny.

He looked over to Lennox. "We really need to take care of the new children."

She shrugged. "What if we did and they turn out to be assholes?"

"What if we didn't and they turn out to be a nice person?"

She looked over to me, craned her neck around. "Are you mentally or physically scarred for life, Emerson?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Case in point," she stated. "Besides, an asshole wouldn't clear their dishes from the table, anyway. Assholes have expectations far beyond their place. And I've got no want to help someone like that."

"Simon," Maximus said.

"What?"

"Simon. That's what we call him. Not to his face of course, not even in the house. Never know who's listening and all that. But we call him Simon. The big guy wearing a bow tie and white gloves."

“That’s him,” I offered, not that I had seen his hands, however, it seemed to fit the costume.

“There’s also Simone, Samantha, and Samuel.”

“What do they do?”

“Everything else,” he said lightly. “Cleaning, cooking, gardening, washing... driving. Like I said, you could do much worse.”

“Yeah,” Lennox interjected. “We could also do a lot better.”

Maximus grunted. “Not this again, Len.”

She swiveled on the branch, worked her way up to standing. “Yes, this again.”

Maximus looked at me, pointed to Lennox. “She is always going on about this.”

“What?” I asked. “Going on about what?”

“The bridge,” she said.

My breath caught in my throat.

Maximus coughed. “There is no bridge. Why can’t you get that through your thick head?”

She leaned forward, an arm draped around the trunk, a foot dangling in mid-air. “Why don’t you think there’s something better out there? Surely, this can’t be all that there is!”

“Oh, I think it can be better, I just don’t buy into some mystical portal to a parallel dimension where people are free to live how they see fit.”

“Not some bloody sci-fi dimension, you idiot! Where the hell did you get that from?”

“Poetic license,” he outlined.

“It’s people,” she whispered, “who have run away, and formed their own society away from the government, where families can live as families.”

He scoffed. “Families.” He mashed an ant into the branch, inspected the outcome. “Besides, the government has been shooting that down for ages. You’ve heard the messages as much as I have.”

“And you believe everything they say? The propaganda? Surely the more they say it doesn’t exist, the more it does.”

“Or it doesn’t,” he fired back.

Their words liquified into images that exploded behind my eyelids. Clouds of color igniting, forming new shapes, until I was staring at a bridge. It was like I was there. The sun arced across the sky, clouds brewed and parted. A grassed area, green and luscious, inhabited by insects that hopped and flew from flower to flower. Trees shaded the area, lining the path, like runway lights. The structure itself was old and wooden, white paint flecking in the sunshine. A gust caused the trees to sway wildly, more paint pulling off and flying.

I said some words, unsure of how loud or intelligible they were. But when I looked up and focused my vision, they were both staring at me.

“You know,” she said.

“Laferty bridge.” The words fumbled out of my mouth.

“See!” Lennox reared. “Even Emerson knows about the bridge.” She turned to me.

“No offense.”

I waved it away. “I didn’t think anyone else knew about it. Or believed in it.”

“You hear people talk about it,” Lennox continued. “Not out in the open. It’s not like they shout it across the playground during break times. They’re quiet conversations in dark corners, whispers in empty classrooms, graffiti in the toilet stalls. But I believe it, and now that Emerson does as well, it just affirms my thinking.”

“Whatever,” Maximus pouted. “I’m a realist. Would rather live in the real world. And out there, in society, they treat us the same. Race, gender. Nothing matters except the ability

to add to society and look after your kids. It's got some sort of synergy to it; you've got to admit it."

Lennox feigned vomiting; her body arched over a branch.

"What's the school like?" I offered, trying desperately to change the tact of the conversation away from the controversial topic. "We're not going to spend our days with Tilly and her brothers, are we?" The thought of it made me feel sick. I didn't yet have a read on Marcus and Finch yet. However, given my interaction with Tilly, they were guilty by association. I've set their benchmark very low, so I guess they wouldn't have to do much to impress me. Still, knowing what Tilly did to me, I couldn't bear to spend weekdays looking over my shoulder, wondering where her next attack would come from.

Lennox and Maximus responded with laughter. Heavily. Loudly. Reverb.

"Oh, Emerson," Lennox started. "Believe me, where we go and where they go are two very different places. Sir wouldn't waste his money on sending us to a private institution with his kids. We go to the public school, next county over."

"Twenty-two minutes of blissful bus travel," Maximus added. "Bus stops at the top of our private driveway. We get the best education the government is willing to spend on us, alongside a mix of regular and House kids."

"The uniform? I didn't recall seeing one amongst my other clothes."

"That's the best thing," cried Maximus. "There isn't one."

"Wear what you want," Lennox added. "Within reason."

I mulled it over. It was an unfamiliar environment, and it was going to take some getting used to. They must have seen the look of trepidation on my face, and so worked their way to the spine of the tree.

“Don’t worry about it, Emerson,” she said. “Keep your head down and you’ll be out of here in no time. I mean, you’ve only got a few years before The Transitioning, anyway. Then you can do what you want.”

“Seven,” I nodded. “Seems like a lifetime away.” I longed for the day I could be free of house rules. Of course, when that happened, you’d just become a captive in a much larger prison, where the consequences were harsher, and Re-education was the least of anyone’s problems. I thought about the night we ran, of what Father said: *‘Don’t stop running!’* But I did, and there I was.

When Boy3461B arrived back late to our room, huffing, his shirt drenched, he said that not only had he found Laferty bridge, but he knew what was on the other side. I wished I had another night, just one more night with him, so he could show me where it was. I thought about what it would be like on the other side, to break free of the societal barriers and breaking free from the governmental rule. Of not having Education sessions, of not being concerned about who was eavesdropping on every utterance. Of shadows barging in through your door in the middle of the night to take you away as they did to Sir’s wife.

“That’s right, mate,” Maximus said, tapping me on the shoulder. “We got your back.”

It wouldn’t take long to test that commitment, to see what they would sacrifice in order to save me.

CHAPTER 12

I carried my shoes back to my room to avoid leaving any traces of dirt on the floorboards, rugs, and carpet. The day had been a whirlwind, and I was having trouble keeping up. Dusk had caught us off guard, and it wasn't until the fragrant scents of the Evening Primrose flooded our senses, did Lennox declare it was time to return to the house. Not even lunch was a strong enough lure to remove us from our conversation and tree play. In the end, we helped Chloe and Charlie down, even though they were the ones that needed help the least, and danced across the uneven field, extracting every moment that was possible. The youngest children led the charge, each taking a hand and pulling me across the field with gusto, Lennox and Maximus close behind.

The windows were like a lighthouse in the ever-fading light, guiding us in, until, one by one, someone drew heavy curtains across the glass panes. At first, the house was winking at us, and then a blink, a long blink, until the premises looked like it was sleeping. The second floor became cold and dead, like a long-forgotten memory. However, when we entered, it felt like every light in the house was already ablaze, and it was like I had to drudge through the light. The hallways were warm, bathed in yellow. Paintings were boarded with

thick shadows. The smells of the evening meal wafted around corners and consumed senses. A pathway of lights led us to the staircase and the second level was bright.

I pushed open the door to my room finding it gray, full of shadows. The curtains were closed, I'm assuming as part of the nightly routine, blocking the last remnants of sunlight before it too retired for the evening. Considering a quick turnaround time for the dinner, I kept the light off.

I placed my shoes in the cupboard and prepared for dinner. Even though I had missed the middle meal, I wasn't overly hungry or tired, the newfound connection with my new family replaced those desires.

A sound from the corner of the room startled me. "You should watch out for him, you know."

I clutched my heart that had gone from resting to racing in a split second. My breath caught in my throat, my ears ringing. I peered into the gloom, trying to make out the source. In those split seconds, every sense switched on the maximum, and then quickly vanished as the realization of who it was, hit me.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Tilly stood up, her frame a gray blob in the surroundings.

"I saw you, her, him. I see everything. I know everything that happens in this house. Everything that happens at that tree."

"Yeah? What did you see?"

"You and Girl3 getting all touchy-feely and shit." Her voice was high and whiney. She took a step closer. When she spoke her voice was deep, even, menacing. "And I saw his reaction to it all."

I thought about how she could have done that. Sure, from the house you could make out two people hugging. But to claim she saw someone's reaction, from the distance of the

house to the trees, was a little farfetched. Unless she had a pair of binoculars or something. The thought made the hairs on my neck stand, the fact she was stalking us, prying into our privacy. The sanctity of the tree, of what it stood for, for us, was well and truly under attack.

“I can see the look on your face. But believe me, that boy you hang out at the tree with, has got some serious issues.”

“Whatever. I don’t care what you have to say about anything. You can go now.”

“Listen, I get it. Why would you trust me, after the little stunt I pulled? But it showed me you are loyal, willing to risk yourself for others. That boy is bad news. Trust me.”

The moment she said that I took a backward step. I felt afraid in my own room. Her tone was forceful, factual. But asking someone to trust you is a leap of faith, and it’s hard to jump without an evidence-laden parachute. And the truth was I didn’t trust, could never trust her again, no matter what she did or said.

“Those two have been joined at the hip for such a long time, like a mother and father to the two younger kids. Helping them, looking out for them. But here you come. Do you think he’s going to let you fly in and take from him what he thinks is his?”

“I’ve asked you to leave.”

“Fine. I’ll go. But go and ask him, find out what happened to the last family he was with. He’s a bad guy, violent. You haven’t seen it yet, but you will. I have, more than once. I talk a big game. I come across as confident and bitchy. I’m not scared of anyone or anything. But he, that boy, strikes fear through me.”

Her form shifted to the door silently, pushing it open. There, she paused, turned. “I know I tricked you, and that was a very cruel thing. I’m sorry about that. It wasn’t about you; it was about something bigger than you. But you were going to protect me, keep my secret. That single act stayed with me. You would do that for someone you had just met, someone

who took your book, stole from you, for god's sake. I just wanted to return the favor. To protect you."

"Why? Why would you do that for me?"

"Because," she said. "Because I see something in you that's important."

And with that, she took her leave, stranding me in the gloom, pondering her accusation and offer. I thought about Maximus's reaction to my hug, how quickly he flicked between anger and humor. The look on his face when Lennox initiated my secret name. Was there a shred of truth in Tilly's olive branch? Was she really looking out for me or was this just another sick game of hers? The thought of it all made the room spin, the floor slanting sideways, and I reached for the bed, crashing onto the mattress.

"Hey," a voice called out from the doorway.

I looked up but couldn't right my vision. The doorway a shaft of light, the figure all shadows.

"Why is it so dark in here?"

It was Lennox. She flicked on the light switch, and I shielded my retinas from the bright onslaught, my mind still swimming with Tilly and Maximus.

"Oh, sorry," she said. Another flick of the switch. I could sense her approaching, the mattress shifting under her weight as she eased down next to me. "Is everything okay?"

I sat up and opened my eyes. The room was once again cold and gray. I affirmed I was fine.

"C'mon," she said, standing. "Time for dinner. Don't want to be late. Smell's great."

"Wait," I interjected. "What do you know about Maximus?"

She hushed me quickly, a hand over my mouth. "Boy4," she whispered, but in the silence, she might as well have yelled it into my ear. Hand floated down, but I liked it there on my mouth. Contact.

I coughed, cleared my throat. “Yes, that’s what I meant. Boy4. What do you know about him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, what happened before he came here?”

She paused. Took a breath. Audible. Silence. “Don’t worry about it. The past is the past and it can’t be changed. It doesn’t do any good dwelling on it. Best think about the future, for that’s all we have. He is loyal and reliable. I trust him fully to do the right things.” Then, as if she had enough of the conversation, quickly redirected me with, “And now let’s get to dinner.”

A footstep and we snapped our heads towards the doorway. Just in time to see a dark mass move out of view. It could have been anyone of the children, but I knew it was Maximus and I knew he was listening.

CHAPTER 13

Dinner was a somber affair. The lighting was low, bathing the table and feast with a despondent glow. The food had proven, once again, a steep upgrade on House nourishment. A large bird-shaped object lay proudly at the end of the table closest to Sir. Various side dishes and condiments covered the rest of the surface. More than I could want, much more than what we needed. It felt like a special occasion, a celebration of some description. Yet Sir said nothing as he carved into the centerpiece. No remarks or candor from any child as he pierced the cooked bird's flesh with his carving knife.

On completion of his slicing duties, Sir sighed, fell to his chair. He picked up his crystal wine glass, viewed the contents—no, looked past the glass to the opposite end of the table, an empty place—and gulped a satisfying amount. I looked around the table, trying to make eye contact with Chloe and Charlie opposite, but they looked upon Sir expectantly, waiting for the order to eat. Beside them, Marcus and Finch stared at their empty plates. I felt like I had missed an important announcement that would have made sense of the environment.

To my right, Lennox was also bowing as if in prayer. I burned a hole in the side of her head, asking for answers as to what was going on. As much of time in the house had predicted, I found myself in a situation that I knew nothing about and had to dig up answers myself. I knew she could sense me looking at her. Could feel her fidget under the table. Yet she didn't respond to my telepathic prods.

In the end, Sir reached for a slice of bird meat, which set in motion the rest of the table. Hands moved quickly to take ownership of the various dishes. Steel on European dinnerware as children scooped food onto plates. There was no conversation, no announcement. I once more looked over, however, all eye contact seemed to be banned for the evening. It bewildered me how such a connected afternoon transitioned into a cold event in such a brief space of time. It felt like the happiness had been sucked from the other children, each internalizing their emotions, hiding them from general consumption. I had no reference point to know if this was a standard fair or special macabre occasion. It was like everyone had shriveled, shrunk two inches, smaller in their seats than the morning.

The meal concluded with Sir throwing the last of his wine down his throat, throwing his napkin onto his plate, and standing. He marched out silently. The rest of the table eventually faded away, one by one removing themselves from the feast, and disappearing into the hall. Not even my newfound family made any kind of facial expression as they departed. I was once again an outcast with no understanding of how I came to be that way. I was left staring at half-full plates, dish elements spread across the table, glasses half empty, and nine empty chairs. Without wanting to recreate the same mistake that morning, I took my leave silently, not that there was anyone around to hear my departure.

I surveyed the second level of the house. I had wanted to check in on Chloe and Charlie, given their usually vibrant nature was squashed under the enormously heavy weight of dinner. They were both already in bed, singles that occupied the two far corners of the room. Matching bedside lamps emitted a bright glow, pitching half their faces in shadow.

A sparse array of trinkets and stuffed animals lined shelves and benches. Various pictures: a person with three heads, a dog with legs much too long for its body, a purple love heart flower, lined the walls. Each child held a book, however, their gaze seemed to fall to the ceiling. So intent were they on the conversations in their own heads, they didn't see me enter the room. When they finally noticed my arrival, each turned to the wall, pulling their sheets over their heads.

I cleared my throat. "Hi, guys."

No response.

"I just wanted to come in and say good night."

Nothing.

"Is... is everything okay? You can tell me, you know."

An infinitesimal movement under the sheets.

"Well, if you don't want to talk, maybe I'll just go to bed then."

Both heads appeared, expectant eyes just over the edge of the sheet.

"Ah," I cried. "There you are!"

They didn't respond.

"Well, I can see you are both very busy," I said, apologetic tone.

Before I could continue, Chloe held out her book.

I looked at it. "You want me to read that?"

She nodded. I looked over to Charlie, and he repeated her action. I threw my hands in the air. "Okay, if this is going to help."

I sat down on the edge of the bed, took hold of the book. The cover was soft, made of cloth, and the indentation of my fingers remained on the surface for a moment before they disappeared. The title was written in large, handwritten capital letters: Rorky's Time Traveling Talisman, and featured an image of a large tree on the front cover. I read the title twice, just to make sure I got it right. I thought it was an interesting choice, given her age, however, who was I to judge.

Both Chloe and Charlie had produced their faces from behind their sheets and waited patiently. Their eyes were sad and sleepy. Big and round, holding so much emotion that remained bottled. I looked back down at the cover, and ran my hand over it before cracking open the cover.

Rorky always considered herself to be normal. She had normal hair, normal eyes, a normal face, even normal hands, and legs. But Rorky was anything but normal. She was extraordinary. Now, usually in stories like this, there is something that makes someone special: superpowers or perhaps some magic device or maybe an elemental weapon. But this is no ordinary story, in that, Rorky was no ordinary child. Rorky saw the world differently. She saw it how she wanted it to be and believed in it with all her might. And when she did that, anything could happen. She could bend the world around her, but it wasn't magic, and it wasn't a superpower. Now, I know that's a little hard to understand, so maybe I should start at the beginning. And when I say beginning, I mean before she was born, before her mother was born, before the continents were formed and shifted into place. Before the earth and time and space. To a time where there was nothing. But nothing is never nothing. For, in fact, the nothing is a something. And that something held the most remarkable little secret. Prepare to

be transported to the other side of nothing, where space and time are stretched beyond reasoning, unless you will look at it for what it is.

I looked up from the passage. Pairs of eyes staring at me, sheets hiding their faces like they were protecting themselves from a sandstorm.

“Am I reading this right?”

No response. I looked back down, found my place, and was about to recommence.

“The bridge.” A voice, soft. Belonged to Chloe.

I caught myself. Watched the words dissolve into the paper. The image of a bridge constructed itself on the page. Rough and hand drawn. Lines crisscrossed over the page. I looked up.

“What?”

Chloe dropped her sheet. “This story is like the bridge.”

“What bridge?” I said cautiously. It felt we were dancing into a dangerous area.

“Laferty,” Charlie said, the word almost escaping out of his mouth before he was ready to say it, as if he had bottled it inside for eternity.

“Wait. How do you guys know about Laferty bridge?”

“All the kids know about Laferty bridge,” Chloe said.

“It’s like a fairy-tale,” Charlie added.

“But I think it’s real,” she interjected, wanting me to believe her.

I smiled. “Me too. I think Laferty bridge is more than a fairy-tale. It’s something that could lead us to a different world. Somewhere away from all the rules, where families can stay together.”

Chloe held her finger to her lips. “We don’t talk about it out loud.” She edged closer, eyes wide. When she spoke, it was barely a whisper. “You never know who’s listening.” Her eyes darted to the door. A creak. Uneven floorboard. I turned. Moving shadows. When I turned back, she was retracting, staring at me as she did so.

I cleared my throat, hoping that whoever was in the hallway was Lennox or Maximus, or no longer there. Maybe someone was just passing and didn’t hear a syllable of that potential risqué interlude. Or perhaps there was no one there at all, regardless of Chloe’s reaction. Just the house settling. Every structure does it.

I closed the book, gently laid it on the covers. “I think it’s time you two went to sleep. It’s late,” I said, having no idea what time it was. However, they didn’t complain, merely complied, silently wriggling down into their sheets and blankets.

We said our goodnights to each other, and I watched as they closed their eyes, ready for slumber, faces easing from their emotional burden. Bodies rose and fell in a rhythmic flow. I stood, took a moment to watch over them. It felt good to be in a position where I could look after another. Perhaps a notion of patriarchal tendencies was developing. Else a sense of responsibility, now they accepted me into the family. I smiled. Despite the bizarre dinner event, I felt comfortable there. I was finding my place. Lamps extinguished, I tiptoed out of the room, gently easing the door shut as I backed out into the hall. The soft click symbolizing a full stop on their day.

“You shouldn’t do that, you know.”

I flinched at the words. A silent gasp. The deep voice broke through the silence like a brick through a stained-glass window. I turned to see Sir swaying in the dark hallway, smoothly shifting weight from one foot to the other. He had spent just a little too long on the ‘sh’ in the word shouldn’t. I didn’t respond. Couldn’t. Felt like a deer in the headlights.

He took a swig from the bottle he was holding. "Follow me," he ordered, and he turned walking deeper into the gloom. I watched him skulk away, contemplated following. Seriously considering retiring to my room. After a few steps, he stopped, spoke over his shoulder. "Now," he said evenly.

I followed the ominous posture of Sir as he weaved delicately down gloomy corridors of closed doors, covered windows, and dark oil paintings. At the end of our journey, he eased down into a leather armchair. It sat next to its pair, and both allowed the sitters to gaze through a large bay window and into the murky world beyond. Between the chairs was a small table, upon it a large crystal vessel with brown liquid. Moonlight flooded in, creating a magical glow over the area, causing the glass in Sir's hand to twinkle like the stars that fell across the clear night sky. The sight of it all transported me back to the night we ran. I recall looking up, through the concrete funnel, to a million pin pricks in a black blanket.

"Sit," he slurred as he downed the remnants in his glass. I spied a large onyx ring on his right hand that seemed impervious to light.

I refused his request, stood back, watching the scene unfold like it was a stage play, the narrator preparing to commence the story. Sir reach forward, pulled the top of the decanter, and poured a heavy measure into his glass. He pushed the stopper in then paused. Turn slightly in his chair.

"I said sit." The instruction was firm, deliberate, articulate.

I rounded the empty chair and sat down. Sank into the leather.

Sir took a sip, closed his eyes, and rested his head back. "It's a dangerous thing you know, this talk of the bridge."

"I... umm," I managed to get out. Speechless. Fumbling. Guilty.

“Yes, I heard you,” he said accusingly. Pure alcohol flowing on his words. The smell infiltrating my nostrils. “Yes, I know about the bridge. Complete fabrication as it may be, it’s a dangerous thing to be talking about, especially with those young children.” He leaned forwards, opened his eyes wide. Pupils scanning my face in the moonlight. “Do you know what would happen if *they* were listening? What would happen to me? This house? Boy, just the thought threatens to break open my chest and squeeze my heart into a bloody pulp. I should not have to remind you of your duties, and my responsibilities as a result. All this talk of bridges and worlds without rules ends now. Do I make myself clear?”

Didn’t respond. Couldn’t talk. Nodded.

He stared at me, chewing something invisible. Long blink. Leaned back in his chair, turned to the window. Took another drink, somewhere between a sip and a gulp, pointed to the window with his glass.

“All of that out there... Mary, she loved it out there... Spent hours with the kids...” Took a deep breath. Cleared his throat. “She loved it out there... Did I just say that? Well, she... Did. She did. It was kind of like her place. She loved being outside.” Another drink.

I thought about what Lennox and Maximus told me earlier that day, that the field on the other side of the house was the one she tended to, the one that is now wild and unkempt.

“Isn’t that on the other side of the house?”

Eyes snapped open. “Don’t be ridiculous, Boy!” he barked. “Mary would never have spent a single hour, let alone a day, in the wilds that is that side of the house. I know you House children want to spend every waking moment amongst the weeds and dirt, but that wasn’t for Mary. Besides, why would I bother to maintain a section of lawn in her memory in the wrong location.” He shook his head. “No, that just wouldn’t make sense.” He took a long drink, contemplated, stared. “Guess it doesn’t really matter now, though, does it?”

“May I ask what happened to her?”

“No, you may not!” The reply was quick and judging by the tone thought it was going to be accompanied by a swift back of his hand. “That is the business of the family, to which you are merely an attachment, an accessory bridled to us because of the nature of our relationship with the government. You are no more part of this family than I am an astronaut. My responsibility is to provide you with the basics, nothing more. My god, Boy, didn’t we discuss when you arrived? How long have you been here for?”

I bowed my head, let the words cut into my skin. Whatever happiness I gleaned from the day’s interactions with the other House kids quickly evaporated under the harsh declarations of the head of the household. He seemed no better than the House Administrator I left.

“A day,” I mumbled.

“A day?!” he asked like the answer was unfathomable to consider. He coughed. “Even still. You ought to know your place.” He leaned forward, swung his almost-empty glass between thumb and forefinger. “Know your place in this family, Boy. Respect the authority. You have a duty.” He leaned back in his chair. “We all have a duty. We should report those who go against it. That is what’s asked of us.” He took a large breath, his body lifting off the chair, released it in short bursts. He was holding something in. A secret? Tears? When he spoke, he did so slowly, assurance in his tone. “So, that is what we must do. That is what you must do. It is all any of us can do.” Another sip. Almost his last. When he spoke again, he did so like he was by himself, having forgotten I was sitting opposite. “Christ, these damn House kids are tearing this family apart. Everything would be better without these damn kids. All the bad things since the kids...” His voice slowed to a pace that made it a tedious affair to keep up with. “Tomorrow... is... another...”

And that was it. He closed his eyes, and the chair seemed to swallow him whole.

CHAPTER 14

Wondering around the various halls, I realized I had done little investigation of the house that day. The exterior dimensions seemed to betray the internal anatomy, with dimly lit passageways intersecting one another, internal staircases leading to other levels, doors in walls with no way of reaching them. It was like someone had designed the home, then changed their mind halfway through without going back and rectifying any previous work.

Down one such hallway, I found a door ajar. Light spilled out into the corridor, like a landing strip in the middle of the ominous seas. I knocked, and the door swung in silently. Maximus sat at his desk, a textbook in hand. He spun on his chair to greet his intruder. Momentarily looked up at me, recognized who I was, and promptly returned to his starting position at his desk.

“What do you want?” he garbled.

I shrugged my shoulders, even though he couldn't see my gesture. “Was just walking past and -.”

“No, you weren't,” he interrupted. “Your room is down the opposite corridor. My room is very much out of your way. In fact, so much so, I'm surprised you found it. So, I'll

ask again, what do you want?" There was a hint of savage in his tone like he was trying very hard to fight a viper in his chest from escaping.

"I was just wondering if all dinners are like that. It was awfully cold. The atmosphere, not the food."

He put the book down and spun once more in his chair.

"I know what you meant. I'm not an idiot. Don't treat me like I'm stupid!"

The attack had me reeling, and my heart skipped a few tracks. His demeanor had changed dramatically since we had come in from the tree like I was currently engaging with the evil twin and the good one was lost somewhere outside.

"I don't think you're stupid. I'm just trying to understand what's happening around here."

Then he was up on his feet, charging towards me. He grabbed me, spun me around before I had time to act. For his size he was powerful, working me backward, getting me off balance. I had no choice but to comply with his physicality. Not that I wanted to engage him in full-on battle, it's just that his response left me deeper in the void of understanding.

I asked him to stop multiple times, but he was headstrong and showed no sign of changing his mind. He shouted the whole way, yelling at me to get out, to go, to leave him alone. The world blitzed by and before I knew it, I was in the hallway, glimpsing a contorted face before it disappeared behind a slamming door. I stood there, breathing heavy, shirt slightly askew. I could feel hotness over my cheeks and forehead. I rubbed at it furiously, knowing it was going to leave a red rash. I didn't know whether to attempt reparations or let him sleep it off.

More hallways. More doors. More paintings. A side table with a solitary white and blue vase housing a bouquet of dark-colored roses, shriveled and dry. A carved mahogany chair with a soft, light seat, sitting at a peculiar angle to the window. A lamp in the middle of a landing that served no purpose, the nearest power socket much too far away, the cable severed.

Familiarity eventually returned, and I had just reached the pinnacle of the grand staircase when I heard shouting erupt from downstairs, muffled and distant. I froze, listened intently. Feared the Administrators had come again for a new victim, that men in black were about to spew into the house looking for someone to take away. I looked down. Watched for shadows. Listened for the pounding of rubber-soled boots on the tile. I could hear the electricity course through the wires and expel through the bulbs. Feel it emanating from the power sockets on the walls. Muffled shouting. Then something heavy getting dropped on the ground. A blunt thump echoed.

Footsteps. Approaching quickly across the flooring. Light switches flicked; luminance extinguished with every powerful step. I crouched behind the balustrade, a feeble attempt to hide myself. Sir marched past so quickly I couldn't grasp his expression. At first, I tried to rationalize how he came to be there, in that the last I saw he had lulled himself into a drunken slumber. However, this thought quickly gave way to Sir's connection to the unknown disturbance. Darkness chased him across the foyer and into another wing of the house. A shout echoed, dissolving in his wake. Sir did not turn, nor stop, nor slow. His mind made up.

I quietly slid down the stairs, not wanting to raise attention to my movements. It wasn't that late, yet it seemed Sir deemed it bedtime. Lights out. Curfew enacted. It was a Saturday, so I thought it unusual for the early mark. I remember when I was younger, I would stay up till all hours, with Father watching the nighttime movie until I could bear no longer to keep my eyelids open. There, in the safety of his embrace, I would let sleep take me oh so easy. Give in to the grip. Take me under. Quickly. Suddenly.

Keeping to the walls for additional cover, I crept down the hall. At random intervals, a sob sprang forth and carried down the walkway. The noise enveloped me, and I experienced a short stabbing pain in my chest, and I clutched at my heart. Someone's agony riding the airwaves, wafting through the interior like the evening meal, bringing sadness instead of joy.

My search ended at the precipice to the library. It had been plunged into darkness, yet whispers filled the interior, the sources of which remained concealed. I stole some steps inside, into an invisible icy wall that seemed to originate from the leather-bound volumes around the walls.

"Are you going to tell anyone?" a voice said.

A whimpering reply, followed by a sob.

"If you tell," the first voice said, "we're all going to get in trouble."

I shuffled closer, around an armchair, giving a table holding an empty vase a wide berth. Noises growing with every movement.

"You want to go to a House? Do you want to wind up like that new kid? That's what they'll do, you know."

I edged forward. I didn't see a stack of books on the floor and gave them a big enough nudge that the tower collapsed at my feet. The sound was like the entire building was collapsing in on itself. An abrupt shushing noise followed, and then complete silence. The type of silence that rings in your ears. So quiet it was deafening.

Beyond another set of reading chairs, huddled in the corner, were two blobs of gray that seemed to blend into their surroundings. Ever so slowly, their faces became distinct in the gloom.

Finch, the younger of Sir's sons, was sitting on the floor of the library, his back against a shelf. His knees were up to his chest, gripped tightly. An almost insignificant whimper coursed through him at regular intervals. Crouching beside him was the heir to Sir's

throne, the older brother, Marcus. He stood, his height reaching above me, his mass expanding. It was like watching those documentaries of the sped-up time-lapse of a flower opening.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. I meant to whisper it, caring and mother-like, but my voice filled the void. Perhaps the silence just made everything sound louder than what it was.

“We’re fine,” Marcus said, folding his arms. “Just leave us alone.”

“What about Finch? Are you okay?”

“He’s fine!” Marcus exploded. “He’s going to be fine. Now, just leave us alone.”

Finch sucked in a lungful of air, and it came out in short bursts. His head fell to his arms, shifting the shadows. It changed my vantage, and I saw a dark coloration on the side of his face.

I immediately stepped forward. Couldn’t help myself, it was an instinct, a reaction.

“Jesus, are you okay?”

Marcus stepped in my way. “It’s nothing,” he said. “Now just bugger off! I’m sick of asking you, so now I’m telling you!”

I tried to look past his frame. “Is that blood? A bruise? What is that?”

Marcus shifted again, blocking my path, and at the same time, he pushed me back. “I said don’t worry about it. Now, piss off before something happens to you!”

I stood there breathing deeply, exchanging glances between the two brothers. My mind turned over the events. Sir walking down the hallway, seemingly annoyed at something. The youngest son with some kind of injury to his head. The older brother protecting him. Who the hell was I to get involved? I hadn’t existed in that household until a day ago, so who’s saying I had a capable grasp on what was happening? Again, I am along for the ride, thrust into a world I didn’t understand, left to my own devices to figure it all out.

Marcus shoved me with the force of a shotgun. My shoulders were thrust backward, the rest of my body playing catchup. My viewpoint shifted upwards as gravity took hold. I landed heavily, almost off my feet. I grimaced.

“I told you to piss off,” Marcus sneered, his face screwed up.

I looked down at Finch who looked at me with dead eyes. He didn’t react to the situation, maybe he had seen it way too many times before. It washed over him, but he seemed not to notice, like his mind was elsewhere, playing out a different event. Using a nearby chair for support, I silently got to my feet. One last glance, and then I left, wondering what the hell had just happened.

I returned to the grand staircase when I heard a whispering noise begging for my attention. With a foot on the first step, a hand on the newel, I groaned like rusty hinges. But despite my tiredness and confusion with the night’s events from all parties, the innocuous request compelled me to comply with it. I slowly turned to see Tilly hugging the wall to the beginning of a hallway, directly opposite to the one Sir had ventured down earlier. She waved me over, a hurried flick of her hand. As I approached, she retreated into the darkness of the passageway, her form consumed by obscurity.

“What is it, Tilly?”

She hushed me and looked around me, then over her shoulder.

I sighed, then spoke in a low voice. “Tilly, I’m tired. I just want to go to bed.”

“You saw them, didn’t you?”

I rubbed my head. “What are you talking about?”

“Marcus and Finch, in the library.”

I nodded. “Yes, I saw them. Don’t know what was going on but I’m not going-.”

“You think this is a perfect place? I bet you left your shitty existence in the House thinking this was going to be better. And then you saw this massive property and I bet you

thought you had hit the jackpot: rich people to look after you.” She pointed a finger at me.

“Well let’s get one thing straight here, Boy. This place has all the terrible memories and sickness as any backstory from a House resident. Except we can’t escape it. We are forced to live it every day in so many ways.”

“Tilly, I’m not sure what the hell you are talking about.”

“Father,” she breathed. “I don’t know what you think of him, but he can do some truly wicked things from time to time. You saw Finch in there, right? Did he have a bruise or a cut?”

My heart was beating out of my chest. “I’m not sure... I think so.”

“Exactly,” she replied.

“Why don’t you tell someone about him? If he’s that bad. If he’s hurting his children.”

Tilly made a noise, like a silent guffaw. “Then where would we be? To the Houses with us. We wouldn’t be any better than you. Why would we give up this house, these privileges, take a gigantic backward step in societal rankings?”

“But isn’t that better than what’s happening here?”

“Sometimes you need to put up with bad things to avoid something worse. Besides, I’ve been trying to get to boarding school so I can get out of here. You heard me this morning at breakfast. And you saw his reaction. He doesn’t want us to leave. Wants to keep us here, under his rule.”

I looked down.

“This is the way it is,” she said.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I wanted you to know. Like I said earlier, you showed me loyalty when I deserved none. I’m trying to help you, prepare you for the life that’s in front of you. Look at what happened to Boy4 earlier tonight in his room.”

I thought back to the altercation. Maximus’s haughty demeanor towards me, his physical prowess at pushing me out of his room. “Wait,” I said. “How did you know about that?”

She came forward, too close, breathing the same air. “I see everything in this house, know everything that happens in this house. I saw what that boy did to you.”

That boy. Boy. Boy4 to be exact. I wanted to scream at her, tell her he has a name, to call him Maximus.

“It’s Father,” she continued. “His emotions seep into every pore of this house and everyone in it. Consumes us. It’s like an infection. We are the host, bending to his will. And if you’re not careful, it’s going to happen to you as well.”

In my short time, I had tasted portions of what Tilly was talking about. But she made it sound so much bigger. And from what I had just seen in the library, the hurricane named ‘Sir’ seemed to be a truly devastating storm.

“But-.”

“But nothing,” she hissed. “I’m sure you’ve heard the story by now of what happened to Mother. That girl was here when it happened, pretty sure I saw her hiding at the top of the stairs watching it all unfold. The authorities took Mother away from me because of Father. I heard them once, arguing. She wanted him to stop, or she was going to inform the authorities. And he just couldn’t have it that way, not going to be treated that way. And so, he made the move before she could.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was common for people to inform on each other, to let the authorities know they overheard something or surreptitiously seen

something unfold. Workmates. Neighbors. Friends on friends. Different roots on family trees. It was expected. But not spouses. Not husband versus wife or vice versa. All that did was weaken the family structure, and the government wanted strength in that foundation.

“Kids shouldn’t have to live like this,” I stated. “Someone should say something. I will say something!”

My head slammed against the wall, the impact shuddering my train of thought before I saw any movement. She squeezed my neck. In my face. “Don’t you dare tell anything to anyone, you hear me?”

I tried to nod, made a quiet squeal instead.

“You can’t tell anyone!”

Even in the gloom, I could see the look in her eye. Wild-eyed. Crazy. Possessed. She stared at me, unnerving, direct. Squeezed. Then she blinked, shook her head. Looked at her hand. Realization. Released me, and I slid to the floor, sucking in a breath. She stepped back.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her mouth muffled by her hand. “This is what I’m talking about. It’s everywhere, all over my skin.” She rubbed her forearms like ants covered them. She repeated her apology and ran down the hall towards her room, disappearing in the night, her form melting into the surroundings.

I stayed on the floor, my legs out in front of me, enjoying the free flow of oxygen. A day. A long day. The events flipped by my eyelids, but they became countless blocks in a wall. It felt like so much had happened, yet it was only a day. Reprimand. Encounter. Disappointment. Discovery. Secrets. I felt like I had seen the best and the worst, experienced the extremes in my short residency.

Yet things were going to get worse, much worse, before the end of my stay there.

CHAPTER 15

Sunday dissolved into nothingness.

Tension clung to every surface like a thick layer of dust, and as much as someone tried to clean it up, the filth just piled up in the corners and under the rugs. Hostility felt just below the surface, threatening to breach the waves and launch its ordinance.

Connection transitional and conversation sparse. Whatever interaction took place, it carried respectful yet subservient tonality. Family had become strangers overnight, and it felt like it was day one all over again. An outsider. Meals were eaten in silence, with arrivals and departures from the table left unannounced.

I enjoyed a lap of the grounds, starting at the wild grass where our tree grew, then around the perimeter of the house. Sun permeated through the white clouds, shadows danced over fir trees and perfectly manicured lawns. White marble statues along with roman columns lined a large semicircle at the rear of the property. Beyond that was more acreage that ended in a border of a freshwater stream. So much space for so few people. Seemed like a waste, considering I came from a House where four people lived in a room that was smaller than my current living quarters. I wasn't sure if the scales would ever really ever balance out. The

rich, even though played a part in the societal hierarchy by taking in additional House children at the bequest of Administrators, it was the lucky few, such as myself, who would benefit. Masses more would be relegated to middle-income earners, who no doubt would despise the children the same way as Sir's blunt demeanor towards me. And again, there would be a lot more who would be uprooted from their homes, their families, to be taken away because the number at the bottom of their parent's tax form would be below a threshold. It was a blanket rule, applied to all and everyone. However, the rich would always be rich, and the others would move up and down the list, jostling for position in order to maintain some semblance of family, only to be stripped of nothing if their value dropped below an arbitrary number, developed by a team of mathematicians on a government grant to crack the code. There were no if's, no but's. It was black and white.

These thoughts consumed me as I meandered aimlessly around trees and bushes, zig-zagging my way towards the front of the house. The sun would come out forcing me to find shade from the stinging rays, and then it would disappear again, bringing a frosty breeze with hints of wildflower and honey. There, the air was cleaner, sharper, less marred by the constant expulsion of smoke from the factory stacks of the city. Even in the suburbs, forty kilometers from the city center, the air held a haze that seemed impenetrable.

Around another corner, and I saw a pair of shoes jutting out from a tree. As I crept closer, however, I noted they were attached to a set of legs. I could hear soft whimpering as I approached.

“Hello? Is everything okay?”

Lennox stuck her head out, savagely wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. She saw me and retracted into her niche, bringing her knees up to her chest. I crawled in beside her, nestled close so our legs touched.

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

She shrugged her shoulders in reply, took in a deep breath, and wiped her eyes once more.

“Listen,” I said. “I’m not sure what’s going on around here, it seems like everyone is acting crazy and I just can’t figure out what the hell happened.”

With that, she burst into tears, throwing her arms around me and pushing her face into my shoulder. She shook against me, and I held her, let the emotions ease out of her. Rubbed her back. Waited for the time to pass, gave her space to share her vulnerabilities.

“You can tell me anything, you know,” I offered. “I promise not to tell anyone if you don’t want me to.”

She sniffed, sucked things back inside her, and patted down her face. Slowly righted herself. Deep breathing.

“It’s been two years,” she said between sniffles. “Since they came and took Mother away. That’s why dinner was weird, why everyone’s been keeping to themselves.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize.”

She shrugged. “How could you? I knew the date was approaching, but it wasn’t until the dinner that it hit me. It’s a tough time for everyone, sends us all into a spin. Especially Sir. He gets a little unpredictable, best to keep to oneself, let the storm pass, all the emotions to subside.”

“Remorse will do that to you I guess,” I said absentmindedly. I peered out between the low branches.

She turned to me. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, isn’t he the one who called the Administrators on her?”

“What? No! Where did you hear that?”

“Last night. Tilly told me that Sir is not an amiable person and one thing he did was inform on her to the government.”

“What? Tilly?! You’d believe something that bitch would say? I have no doubt she called them herself, made something up for them to take her away. And I’m sure she did it out of revenge. She hated how Mother tended to us House kids. Made us feel warm and welcome like we were part of a real family. She couldn’t stand it. And when she couldn’t get rid of us, she got rid of the one thing that made all of this worthwhile. And Sir would never do such a thing. He loved her; I guarantee it.”

Picking who to believe should have been an effortless task. Tilly had double-crossed me, tricked me. Lennox had been nothing but kind and welcoming. Yet, for some reason, Tilly’s words held more weight to them. I couldn’t fathom why, and I tried to rationalize it the best I could. Neither had any reason to lie to me. Why would Tilly make up such a story about her own father? And given what I saw the previous night with Finch, and the experience with a drunken Sir at the bay window, I leaned heavily towards someone’s version of the truth that I shouldn’t be.

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s just that…”

She turned her face in shock. “Tell me you don’t believe her, Emerson. She’s a liar.” She grabbed my hand. Warmth. Sparks. “You’ve experienced it firsthand. You know this to be true. You can’t trust her, whatever she says, whatever she does. Tell me you don’t believe her.”

I fumbled over some words.

“Tell me!” she ordered, anger erupting as she punched the ground.

“Of course. Of course, I don’t believe her. You and Maximus and Chloe and Charlie. You are the only ones I can trust.” Yet I didn’t know that to be true, and I hated myself for even thinking it.

She flexed her hands, pulled at small tufts of grass, and threw it out into the open. I was going to bring up what Sir said about that side of the house being the garden that his wife

tended to but stopped myself. It would serve nothing other than to annoy the person I wanted to get closest to the most. The other events of the night, including Sir's drunken ramblings and an injured Finch, slowly subsided, scenes that meant less and less as time leisurely ticked on. I edged my hand over. Could sense her hand was close, but then she pulled it away, and we sat in silence watching the world pass by.

"I'm sorry," I attempted to say, but the last word got caught in my dry throat.

"About what?"

"What happened to her, what happened to Mary. She sounded like a very nice person."

She placed her hand down beside mine. "I'm sorry for going off at you before. It's always so raw. Guess I never really dealt with it."

"That's okay," I replied. "Anytime you want to shout and scream, I'm here for you."

A happy sorrowful mouth, that didn't match her eyes.

Then a finger grazed my hand and my heart raced.

Consciousness arrived Monday morning moments before the alarm sounded. I sensed a form close to my face and was once again gasping for air amid the infectious giggle of Chloe. Seconds later the clock emitted a shrill alarm. She skipped out of the room, her dress bouncing from side to side, knowing she was able to welcome me into the day before the alarm.

I hurriedly got dressed into gray pants and a white button-down shirt. I found a navy-blue blazer sandwiched between a raincoat and a gaudy green short-sleeved shirt. There were tiny marks on the breast pocket where an emblem or patch once sat. The elbows were a little

worn, and the cuffs had some loose threads. I ventured it once belonged to Marcus and obviously found its way to clothe an intruder.

Breakfast was a furious affair, with little time to gaze at the other table mates. Time was ticking, according to Sir, whose face remained hidden behind the broadsheet paper yet announced at regular intervals, like a train conductor announcing stops. We dressed in comfortable clothes, long pants, a button-down shirt, pullover, sufficient to get through a public-school day. Sir's children, his actual children, however, were consumed by their uniforms. Blazers bolstering a patch outlining the institution's Latin motto, various badges of gold and silver. Everything prim and proper. Nothing outside the uniform guidelines. They were part of something bigger, a member of a group, a cog in the machine. We, on the other hand, were nameless, faceless beings, pawns that were shifted around the board to the whim of others. Eventually, he checked his wristwatch, folded up the paper, and flapped it down on top of his plate. At once the assembly stood as a military platoon having their commanding officer enter the room. I watched as he marched out of the room, willing him to make eye contact with me. But he didn't.

Tilly turned to me. "Out front in ten," she said before she patted me gently on the shoulder and disappeared with the herd.

The air was fresh and clung to my face like icicles. Lennox, Maximus, Chloe, and Charlie rubbed hands together in front of a dark windowed car, the same one I arrived in a few short days ago. The driver stood near the rear of the vehicle, waiting for his signal to spring into action.

"Wow," I said, looking at the car. "How are we all going to fit in that?"

Suddenly a voice exploded from behind me. “Clear the way, Boy!” Marcus strode by, clipping my shoulder, almost knocking me off balance. “Nice jacket, loser,” he declared as he passed. Finch double-timed it to keep up with his older brother. There were some protests from the House children before Marcus turned to address them. “Well, I told him to get out of the way.” He dropped his bag on the ground near the rear wheels and disappeared into the back of the vehicle, the driver holding the door open. Finch followed suit. A few seconds later Tilly appeared, wires growing out of her ears, lost in her own musical world. She ignored us entirely, not even taking a moment of her time to insult us. She dropped her bag at the car like it was roadkill and eased into the back seat. The driver eased the door closed with a soft click and loaded the bags into the rear compartment.

As the car kicked up driveway stone, the five of us began our trek towards the main road. Chloe grabbed my hand. “Come on,” she shouted. “This way.” The journey itself was about ten minutes yet felt longer. Chloe stopped on multiple occasions to look at a growth on a tree. Charlie spotted a fox bounding through an open field. Maximus had returned to his jovial best, his overpowering behavior now a long-forgotten memory. I strolled beside Lennox, now and then our hands grazed through the motion of walking that would send a tingling sensation through my arm.

The entrance to the private driveway was impressive. I hadn’t noticed it when I arrived due to the late hour of my arrival, nor had I ventured so far from the house over the weekend. Also, to this, it wasn’t even visible from the house itself, given the natural rise and curvature of the thoroughfare. The large wrought-iron gates were closed and framed by bushes carved to match the lineage of the barrier. The scrubs lined the main road in both directions with seemingly no end. They were perfectly kept, not a leaf nor twig out of place. Lennox unclasped the lock and pulled sharply. The gate protested loudly, metal on metal, and

our party stepped through, before the doorway sealed with a clang. And there we waited, staring at the ground, the sky, each other until the bus arrived.

When it did, it eased to a stop amid a squeal from the brakes. Lennox pulled me aside. “Remember. This is a mixed school. House kids and regular kids. So, no names, no talking. I don’t trust anyone on this bus.”

CHAPTER 16

The school was not like the House yet wasn't unfamiliar at the same time. Walking down the locker filled hallways, school children ignored us as we blended into the background, relatively invisible to the masses. Occasionally, a group would pick up on our presence and watch us closely. Yet neither Lennox nor Maximus faltered, merely pressed on through the deafening roar of stilted conversation. Defiance bred immunity to their stares.

I spent the morning attempting to navigate my way through the never-ending array of hallways and stairwells, resulting in me being constantly five minutes late everywhere I went. Some classes I shared with Lennox, some with Maximus, but at all times the teacher required me to announce who I was to the class. I was to be called Freeman-Five to differentiate me from Maximus, who was Freeman-Four. I inwardly cringed each time I said it, which drew a change in looks from some of my classmates. A House child, they knew. Their thoughts displayed on their features like a billboard. Some kid from a broken family because the parents couldn't get their shit together and look after me. Yet, there I was, so I had been assigned to a family, associated with a new Mother or Father. Freeman-Five was just another identifier, but not who I was. I wanted them to call me Emerson, for that was the name I

chose for myself. To shout out my name wouldn't be a stupid move, it would be a risky one. *They* would come and drag me back to a House for Re-education quicker than I could say goodbye to the others.

Our family reconvened in the dining hall for lunch. Reminiscent of my days at the House, it was a large room with multiple tables. And that's where the similarities stopped. Natural light flooded in from three of the four sides, propagating somewhat of a blissful atmosphere. There was a hush of conversation that sat below the piped music that seemed to cloud the space. At irregular intervals, a pre-recorded message would play encouraging children to keep an ear out for "intolerable" conversation and to report it to a teacher as soon as possible. There was a serving area at the front for those parents or guardians that entrusted the school canteen with providing necessary nutritional guidance to their children or assignees. I was sure the decision for us to acquire such nourishment was out of ease than any care for our health or wellbeing, regardless of his many ramblings about that being one of his primary concerns: Shelter, food, schooling.

As we sat mixing slop into different shades of brown (thanks to the mashed potato), and encouraging Chloe and Charlie to eat, I couldn't help but notice we had attracted the persistent gaze of another student. He had blond spikey hair, military buzz cut, narrow eyes on a big, square face, and broad shoulders. A fork regularly jammed into whatever was on his tray, never to his mouth. He seemed mesmerized by us, ignoring the banter from the surrounding people.

"Who's that over there and why does he keep looking over at us?"

Maximus turned around and then turned back just as quickly. "That's Mason... something or other."

"Mason-One," Lennox added.

“Yeah,” Maximus started. “When his mother found out how much an asshole he was, she just couldn’t bear to have any more children!”

Lennox snorted.

“Best ignore and hope his fascination wears off,” he finished.

“Why? What could he possibly do?”

Maximus looked over the rest of the family, who all looked away when he met their eyes. Even the little ones looked down at their food. He leaned forward over the table, spoke low. “Best you don’t know. He’s got an obsession for House kids, doesn’t think we’re the same breed, blah blah blah. He’s got a nose for sniffing them out. And to be clear, he’s not looking at us, he’s looking at you. The new one.”

“A new challenge,” Lennox suggested. There was a faint shimmer of hope in her tight smile that faded much too fast for my liking.

“I see. Well, I can’t wait for all of that to go down. Do you think I will survive the week?” I smiled.

Maximus leaned further if it were possible. “I don’t think you understand. According to him, we are all sitting here because of his good graces. His mother is the principal, so don’t think for one second he wouldn’t run back to her and tell her you’ve been talking about that stupid...” He looked around. Students remained engrossed in their own hushed encounters, much too worried about the impact of their own words. “... bridge,” he finished.

Lennox brushed some errant strands away from her face. “Send you packing back to a House faster than you arrived.”

“Besides,” said Maximus, running a finger through his food, much to the disgust of the others at the table. “We kind of have gotten used to you hanging around. Would be a shame to ruin that now.” He pulled out his finger and pushed it into his mouth. I had to look away.

“But,” I said. “That hardly seems fair. That the word of one person with no corroborating evidence would doom someone.”

“Life isn’t fair, Freeman-Five,” Maximus said, drawing out my last name to prove the point. “This is the sort of shit we will encounter for a lifetime.”

The word hit me. This is what the Instructor was saying in all those lessons in the House. Forty-four percent would succeed. That comment didn’t mean much back then, not when I was protected from the outside world by a fence. But it was different out here. Lifetime. Something that would follow me around, everywhere I went. Like a police record. As sure as my shadow. A thing snapping at my heels as I walked down the street, waiting for someone to prey on the fact and extort it to its fullest extent. The term ‘life isn’t fair’ just didn’t seem to sit right with me. Surely at The Transitioning, when we become these valuable members of society, the slate is magically wiped clean. Surely. It just had to be. I needed it to be.

“Besides,” Maximus continued. “He’s got heaps of friends to back up his made-up stories, each more trusted by the school assembly than the last, and sure as hell more than students like us. Face it, we are the outer of the outer. Less than less. Our job is to survive.”

I looked at him, deep into his eyes. “You know,” I intoned. “That’s not very inspiring.”

A bell—that sounded for longer than it needed to—marked the end of the day. It seemed like every student had completed their day about twenty minutes prior, with attention levels turning to the windows, the doodles in their notebooks, or their devices under the desk. Felt like the teachers also felt the same way because they said or did nothing about it. It was a

surprising lax I had never encountered in the House, relaxingly so. Both sides of the war had laid down their arms in order to fight another day.

But while the pressure of schooling had subsided, an additional burden was mounting. The constant stare from Mason at lunch had haunted me for the rest of the day. I expected him to be around every corner, ready to spring into action without notice to make some unrealistic demands to which we would cordially refuse. What would happen after that was a mystery because my thinking never got that far.

Our spatial awareness was acute as our group of five detoured the direct route to get to the front gates. Lennox and Maximus had the idea that Mason and his stooges would be waiting to cause trouble and taking the long way around would ensure an unfettered journey. They led the charge, striding out in front while I gripped the hands of Chloe and Charlie and attempted to keep up.

We rounded a corner and marched down a narrow walkway between brick buildings. Silence apart from our footfalls. Not a teacher nor student in sight. We were close to our destination, and I was about to thank Maximus for his navigational abilities when Mason and one of his thugs stepped out and blocked the path. Arms crossed. Guardian of the concrete walkway.

We stopped short, colliding into each other, much to the entertainment of Mason.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you lot were trying to avoid me,” Mason said.

Mason’s sidekick—a boy with a round face, shaved head, and dark eyes inset too far into his skull—laughed.

“Piss off, Mason. We’re just trying to get to the bus.”

“Well, you see, I’d like to let you pass, but there is a toll on this path. And I am deemed to collect.”

Lennox rolled her eyes. “Piss off, Mason. We’re not playing your stupid petty games. Now, get out of the way.” She attempted to step around him, but he blocked her movement. She narrowed her eyes. Hatred stemmed forth. Controlled rage.

“Fine,” Maximus said. “We’ll just go a different way.” And we all turned to see the last of Mason’s group, closing in behind us. Dirty blond hair fell over his eyes, hiding a wild green stare. He alternated the clenching of each fist as he approached.

We turned back around to face the leader.

“Why don’t you just leave us alone,” I shouted. “We’ve got nothing you want.”

Mason smiled. “Oh, the fresh meat has a voice, does he? You’re right, you House kids disgust me. In fact, I’m finding it very hard to stand this close to you.” He hocked up some spit and launched it at our feet. “But if anyone needs to learn a lesson about who controls this school, it’s you kids.”

“Christ’s sake,” Lennox said. “We get it. You’re big and tough. You’ve got some goons who do your bidding. Your mummy runs the school. Your daddy left you when you were a baby. Blah, blah. We know!”

Mason smirked. “Oh, I know *you* know.” He pointed a finger at me. “But he doesn’t. And he needs to. So, I’ll tell you what. I will let you all pass if you leave that sniveling little shit here for us to deal with. What do you say? Is it a deal?” He half moved to the side, giving us an unobstructed view of freedom.

Chloe shook her hand away from mine and snaked her way to the front. She stood in front of the leader and looked up at him. “Why don’t you just go away, you big meanie. No one likes you anyway.”

Mason raised a hand.

“Touch her and you die,” Maximus warned. “I’m not even fucking kidding around. I’ll bash your skull against the side of the building. I’ll push your eyeballs into your skull

until they become part of your little brain. I'll lay your broken body on the concrete and stomp on it until it turns to dust. I don't give a shit who your mother is or what happens to me."

A shiver ran up my spine. Thank God Maximus was on our side. The delivery was just as deadly as the words themselves.

"I've always liked you, Freeman Boy. Always have so much fight. Sends a tingle up my spine."

Lennox placed her hands on Chloe's shoulders and dragged her away.

"You know, one day there won't be people like you around, or your mummy to protect you," Lennox jeered.

Mason huffed. "There'll always be people like me because there will always be people like you."

"Not everywhere," Maximus called out.

"What do you mean by that, then?" Mason asked.

"Nothing," Lennox quickly jumped in.

She turned to face us and shared a look with myself and Maximus, and I somehow knew what it meant. Determination mixed with fury. The situation was going to erupt, but it was going to be on our terms.

She turned back around, a sweet smile on her face. Moved towards Mason. Hands on his shoulders. Moved in close to his ear. Whispered.

"I know what you really want, big boy. And I can give it to you."

Mason almost stopped breathing. "Oh, yeah?"

She bit her lip. "Oh, absolutely. You're never going to feel this ever, for the rest of your life."

He grabbed her wrists and held her back. She winced at the sudden pain in her arms.

Mason smiled sadistically. “Then give it to me, bitch. While the others watch.”

Her pain turned to wrath as launch a knee upwards into his groin. He groaned out and doubled over. Chloe and Charlie navigated around the barriers and took off. A body flew past from behind me and tackled Maximus to the ground, landing in a muddle of limbs. Shaved-head boy advanced and swung a fist at me. It collided with my eye and the world spun. Felt like my eye socket was repositioned in the back of my brain. As I fell backward, I saw Maximus release a barrage of swinging arms and maniacal cries, and Lennox cocking her fist back, lining it up with the boy who just hit me.

Then I passed out.

CHAPTER 17

I gained consciousness sometime later. Under me was soft and inviting, the polar opposite to the cold concrete slab I blacked out on. I heard water dripping into a bowl, a cloth being wrung out. Then it was on my forehead. I tried to open my eyes. I could make out shadows stretching across the room in the low light. Everything out of my left eye was blurry and I could feel tears forming. I reached up to touch it as if I could wipe it clear.

Lennox slapped my hand away. “Don’t touch it,” she said. “I’ve put some ointment on it.”

I suppressed a cough. “How bad is it?”

“Oh, it’s impressive. Girls will fall over themselves to have such a brave man beside them.”

I turned my head. “But I’m not, am I.”

The bed shifted as she sat down on the edge. “What do you mean? We stood up to that bunch of bullies.”

“No. *You* stood up to them. You all did. Even Chloe did. All I did was close my eyes and let someone’s fist crash into my face. Hardly brave. Certainly not worthy of any accolade, let alone for some girl to be interested in me.”

“Emerson, you got sucker-punched by someone bigger and stronger than you. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m just sick of being dominated by everything. When do I get a chance to be in control for once? I don’t feel like I can ever stand up to anyone. Not like you did.”

She laid a hand on my chest, so gentle and caring. I wondered if Mother, Sir’s wife, had done the same to her at some stage, and now she was paying it forward. I pondered if I would do it for someone else. Perhaps reciprocate the touch in her time of need, when she felt as I did at that moment, low and dejected.

“Emerson, you are sweet and kind, incredibly intelligent and funny. You have so many amazing qualities, why should something like that bother you?”

“It matters to me,” I said, my voice on the verge of cracking under the emotive strain. “I want to protect my family. I want to look after you.”

“Oh, Emerson. I’m not some damsel in distress, and I’m sure you’ve noticed that Chloe is no delicate flower either. As long as we stick together, nothing will destroy what we have.”

Lips on my cheek. Electric. Sparks. I turned my head because I wanted more. I wanted to feel the love that I knew was there, that I was sure she wanted to show me.

A clearing of a throat coming from the doorway. Lennox stood up so quick I momentarily lost my bearings. I sat up, supported myself on my elbows. Could make out a watery figure in the doorway.

“If you’re going to talk like that, make sure you have the door shut.” It was Maximus. “You never know who could be listening.”

He stepped inside and eased the door shut.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” he said, an element of bite in the tone. “Just wanted to see how you were doing. But it looks like nurse Lennox has everything under control.” He turned.

“Wait,” I said guiltily. I felt like they had caught me stealing from the kitchen. “Thank you for sticking up for me with Mason and his goons.”

He shrugged. “They had it coming.”

“How did I get back here?”

“Max carried you,” Lennox said.

“Really?” I asked as if the task was insurmountable.

“Yep,” Lennox continued. “Told the bus driver you had allergies and wasn’t feeling well.”

“It was nothing,” Maximus said. “For family.”

I held out my hand, but instead of shaking, he lightly tapped. A soft sideways high-five. Disappointing to say the least. I imagined what his face was doing: eyes rolled and disappointed he had to talk to me. He may have stuck up for me and carried me home, but it didn’t sound like he was happy to do it. Was it because we got into a scuffle with Mason because of me? Or because Lennox was here nursing me back to health?

“How did you fair?” I asked.

“A cut here, a bruise there. I don’t think I look as bad as you do.”

Awkward silence.

“What about Chloe and Charlie? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine,” he said. “Just put them into bed.”

“Bed?” I scoffed. “Shit! How long was I out?”

“Long enough,” he said.

“How the hell did you get me in the house with no one seeing?”

“Luck,” Lennox said.

“But don’t worry about that,” Maximus said. “I’m sure Sir will find out everything soon enough.”

“Yeah,” Lennox added. “Once Mason cries to his mother.”

I could hear the shouting from down the hall, like thunder rolling in. The cracking of angry footfalls accompanied it.

“Boy 3, Boy 4, Girl 2, Boy... All the house children come to me now.” The request echoed through the residence and sucked every note of noise out of the air.

All five of us stood in Sir’s office. Not even the youngest were immune to his forthcoming rant of disappointment. We watched him pace back and forth, arms folded, working on his opening spray. He’d occasionally mumble to himself between loud breaths. In the end, he ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath.

“Can you please explain to me what the hell you were thinking?”

Before we could answer, he continued.

“Because it’s like you are trying to embarrass me. I should just send you back to the House without a second thought. I’m trying to do my best here, to help you become responsible members of society. Yet you seem intent on breaking the rules. Believe me, people who break the rules find themselves in places worse than prison, worse than the graveyard. So, tell me, what’s it going to take, huh?” He cast his hard stare over the group, made sure each of us knew the consequences for our actions. Then he sat down at his desk, started skimming over the papers in a tray. “Youngest children go back to bed.”

Chloe and Charlie nodded, and with downcast eyes, left silently, sliding the doors shut behind them.

“I expect more from you lot,” Sir said. “A lot more.”

“But, Sir,” Maximus said. “It wasn’t our fault. Mason—”

Sir slammed a hand down on the table.

“I don’t care whose fault it was, there are certain actions that are abhorrent. Actions have consequences.”

“Would you rather we cop a beating?” Maximus shouted. “We protected each other. Isn’t that what we should do? Isn’t that what good members of society do?”

Sir shot up from his desk and pointed at Maximus. “Don’t you dare talk to me that way in my house! Who do you think you are? Outstanding members of society do good things in alignment with the laws, rules, and guidelines laid down by the government. That is the only way our society can operate. Without it there is chaos. To be honest, I’m concerned. I worry you cannot carry yourselves in modern society. Above all, this reflects very badly on my and this family name.”

Maximus went to speak again, but Lennox grabbed his arm, shot him a glance that warded him from his next provocative comment.

“Best you listen to Girl 2 here,” Sir said as he sat. “At least she understands when to speak and when to listen. Now, you are lucky I’ve been able to keep you at that school, on a probationary period. One more infraction, regardless of the severity—I don’t care if you are one minute late for the bus—you’ll be back to a House quicker than you can breathe.”

Sire shuffled some papers, straightened them on the desk, and began reading. After a minute he looked up.

“What are you still doing here? To bed with you!”

As Lennox split from the group, Maximus pulled me into a dark corner. “Listen, I’m not sure how much I can take of this.”

“What are you talking about? We’ve all had a dressing down from Sir before. I’ve only been here three days and have had three of them!”

“Well, I’ve been here for longer than that and I refuse to be part of them anymore.”

“What are you going to do?”

He stared off into the lit hallway. “I don’t know. Not for sure.”

“Maybe he’s right.”

“Who’s right?”

“Sir.”

Maximus squared me up. “Are you kidding me?”

I put my hands up. “Just hear me out for a second. Out there in the real world, there are rules we will need to contend with.”

“Jesus Christ. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” He threw his hands in the air before walking away. “You’re not who I thought you were.”

“What? What are you talking about? I’m the same person you met at the tree. The same who stood next to you against Mason. It’s just that I have come to terms with certain realities. In a couple of years, we’ll be out there, in the real world, and then what?”

“No, you’ve been brainwashed, all this bullshit has seeped into your brain.” He pushed a finger into my forehead. “They’ve turned you into a bloody pacifist, a sympathizer. Does nothing we spoke about in the tree mean anything to you?”

I put a hand on his shoulder, and he shrugged it off. “Of course, it does. But you have to admit, out there, in the real world, you can’t hide from the government and its laws. That’s just the way it is.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“When I know, you’ll know.”

“I remember you telling me at the tree that you’re a realist. That all of this is inevitable.”

“Yeah? Well, people change.”

He darted off down the hallway.

CHAPTER 18

Over the days that followed, we went about our business, yet the rift that appeared between Maximus and me refused to seal. Conversation was tight and cordial. Glances accidental and brief. He never went out of his way to interact with me. The one time I confronted him in his room, he wasn't in it. In fact, I couldn't find him in any room in the house.

As we ventured up the driveway on Wednesday morning, I broached the topic with Lennox. I pulled her back from the rest of the pack.

“Do you know what’s up with Maximus?”

She shrugged. “What do you mean?”

“Like, he’s acting weird.”

“No more weird than usual. I mean, we’re always a little on edge after Sir delivers one of his world-class speeches. Honestly, it feels like he gets a script writer to put them together. All this talk of better people in the community, blah blah blah.”

“But don’t you think that’s important?”

She threw a sideways glance in my direction. “Now who’s acting weird? Listen, whatever it is I’m sure it will clear up in a few days. Max is Max. He’ll be fine.”

I kicked a stone, and it skipped across the path before being swallowed by the garden.

“I guess.”

“Hey,” she said, rubbing my shoulder. “Max is extremely loyal, but once that trust is broken, you’re dead to him.”

“What if I broke that trust?”

“You? Nah! Impossible. The great Emerson is respected by those most respectable,” she joked. “Seriously, what exactly did you do or say to him?”

I looked ahead. He was crouched beside Chloe and Charlie, pointing to a squirrel that was darting up a tree. He was smiling, joking about something with the younger kids. Maybe it was just a momentary break in our brief relationship. Perhaps we could conquer our divide as the sun would rise the next day.

“Nothing. It was nothing. Forget about it.”

“I’ll forget about it if you can beat me to the top.”

“Well that hardly seems fair,” I stated.

“Why? Because I’m a girl?” she pouted.

“No, because you are Lennox, tough and fearless, for I have no chance... except when... Oh my god, look at that!” I pointed towards the top of the tree where a squirrel jumped from one branch to the next. Then, while she was grossly engaged, I took off, zipping past her.

Her screams chased me to the edge of the road.

In the meal hall, we had gathered around our usual table. Routine kicked in and we ensured Chloe and Charlie ate their lunches like good little kids. Heavens forbid we would obtain a warning from any teacher for any indiscretion, however, this remained on our minds for

every moment. We all agreed there would be nothing worse than for us to be displaced around the country, never to see each other again. Even Maximus shared an extended glance with me as we agreed. It was something, and it was better than nothing. But I never really knew what was going on behind his eyes. It's like he was scheming, but I was too nervous to ask.

I did my usual visual recon around the hall. The usually hushed whisper was in play. Trust gained. Trust broken. So subtle yet binding. An announcement blared over the loudspeaker:

Remember children, you have the opportunity to make things better—you are the next parents! Don't let your children suffer! Those that flee and thumb their nose at your way of life, they want the children to agonize, for the government to fail. We can't trust them. They are breaking the law. If you know of anyone who can't be trusted, inform us, so we can save their children, even if they don't want to.

It was the same messaging that Houses used as part of their Re-education sessions.

When the announcement finished, I leaned on the table. “Hey, no Mason again today.”

“Oh yeah,” Maximus said. “Thank you for reminding me. One theory is they are milking the beating they received at our hands and taking the rest of the week off to recover.”

“If that's true, I can't wait for their return,” Lennox said with a roll of her eyes. “They'll be looking for revenge.”

“Is there another theory?” I asked.

“Well, the other theory is that Mason was working for the government, sent to schools to spy on their behalf. Kind of like boots on the ground. Sent to sniff out the child troublemakers before they become adult troublemakers.”

I leaned back. “Kind of like the spies we spoke about in the tree? Mason doesn’t seem smart enough.”

“They don’t want smart people. They want people who can follow orders and not think for themselves.”

“Wouldn’t put it past them, though,” Maximus said. “Hell of a way to get some raw intel.”

We mulled it over. As crazy as that sounded. But sometimes the weirder things were, the truer they were.

“Least we won’t have to worry about his bullshit,” I said.

“Until next week,” Maximus said, rubbing his fingers together and staring at the table. “If he’s back next week.” We looked at each other, then he said, “If *we’re* back next week.”

He didn’t elaborate. Not yet.

The sun was setting, causing long shadows to grow from every western-facing window. I skipped between the shadows in search of the source of the squeal. It’s what had pulled me from my room. Usually, I would ignore such a noise, sure it be something as unimportant as trigonometry, however, this pulled at my core inexplicably, almost forcing me off my bed and into the maze of corridors. I was surprised there was no one else investigating, like the owner of the painful moans were directing them to me. My personal invitation.

As I crept down a hallway, a voice echoed out.

“Who?” he yelled.

Then a hushed whimper filled the airwaves followed by a shushed moan. I stopped to focus on the direction of the sound. Was that a name? I closed my eyes, trying to decipher the

noise, but it was a bunch of high-pitched whistles that bared no resemblance to anything. And then it evaporated, erased from my short-term memory.

Loud, quick footsteps erupted out of nowhere. Someone running. I hid in the shadows as a small body exploded from the corner and then disappeared around the next. It was Chloe in rapid retreat, leaving a sniffling moan in her wake.

I moved across the corridor and peeked around the corner. A motionless Maximus stood in the middle of the hallway outside his room; feet shoulder-width apart, head down, hands balled into fists. His body rose and fell like a boxer who had gone twelve rounds. I was tempted to approach, to call out, however I was more intrigued to just be a voyeur.

He shifted his weight between his feet, rocking left and right as if working up the effort to walk. Breathing became quicker. A low grumbling growl emitted from him, working its way into a guttural roar. At the crescendo he launched a fist into the wall, causing a dull thud to echo about us. He held it there, swallowing whatever pain existed in his hand. Then he dropped his fist to his side and shuffled into his room. The door eased closed finishing its path with a soft click.

I stood there, wide-eyed, after witnessing another example of violence. Tilly's words echoed in my head once more. Her warning about Maximus, how dangerous he was. Another point of proof, another piece of evidence. Whatever had happened, it seems he had hurt Chloe, and that was unforgivable. I wished I could take all of her pain and swallow it down. Mixed feelings swirled within me. Fury. Trepidation. Hesitation.

Floorboards creaked as I moved into the open towards Maximus's room. I stopped, held my breath, half expected him to burst out of his room and begin attacking the intruder.

A hand on my shoulder caused me to gasp, my heart rate spiked to uncontrollable levels. Spun around, a fast-paced pirouette.

"I told you," Tilly whispered.

I clutched at my chest, took a deep breath. She withdrew her arm back into the gloom. A slice of late afternoon sun cut across her face, so that only her cheek and mouth were visible, the rest of her face covered with a shawl of shadow.

“What the hell are you doing hiding in the shadows?” I wheezed, still trying to get my breathing under control.

“What the hell are you doing sneaking around the corridors spying on people,” she countered.

“Why are you here?”

She paused; barely noticeable. “The same reason you are.” Then she grabbed my shoulder and pulled me into her eclipse. “What did you see? What did you hear?”

“Nothing. Chloe running away and Maximus punching a —.” I didn’t finish the sentence. The look on her face said it all, even in the dim I could read her expression. Her head cocked to the side; untrusting eyes narrowed. I could just about hear her mental cogs grinding.

“What are you talking about?”

I had used their names, the names we had for each other. She caught off guard and I automatically used them as I would use any other. But it was a violation of sorts, one that could see all of us sent back to the public Houses like unwanted Christmas gifts being returned to the store. My mind raced, trying to think through how I could recover from this situation. That I said it was bad. That I said it to *Tilly* was apocalyptic.

“What?” I said, feigning dumb. “I said that I saw Girl two running away and Boy three punching a wall.” I drew out my response, hoping the longer I spoke for, the less chance of her remembering what I originally said.

Another slight pause, imperceptible to most, then she nodded. “Did you hear them say anything?”

I shrugged, too relieved she didn't press the infraction of me using actual names instead of our assigned Freeman identifiers. "Nothing," I huffed.

She nodded. "I told you, remember? Watch out for him. You've just seen what he's capable of, witnessed it firsthand."

In all honesty, I hadn't witnessed it, but I could draw some pretty damning conclusions. I found enough points on a plane in order to draw a straight line. But was it enough to convict? All thoughts of confronting Maximus had faded, shifted to self-preservation in the face of Tilly.

She looked down the hallway, towards Maximus's room. I followed her gaze.

"Go," she said. "Confront him. Accuse him. He deserves everything that's coming to him. He's just as bad as Dad."

"No, he wouldn't have hurt her." I thought back to the confrontation with Mason at school. How Mason threatened to lay a hand on Chloe and the threat from Maximus that followed. "He would do anything to protect her," I said.

"Would he? You've seen how violent he can get. Perhaps she just got in the way."

Then she left, sinking down the pathways until she was swallowed by the house.

I kept looking down the corridor. Towards his room. Didn't know whether I should confront the attacker or placate the victim. Time passed, and the more that did, the less unsure I felt. Indecision started as my enemy that eventually became my excuse for not doing anything. So, I bowed my head and shuffled back to my room, hoping sleep would both admonish my responsibility and resurrect normalcy in the household and for our family.

CHAPTER 19

It was Friday afternoon, and we were waiting for the bus to arrive at school to take us on a forty-minute trip home. The group of kids waiting for transport jostled around us, hushed whispers collided with each other to produce a deafening chorus. It was an open dirt space, with large fir trees equidistant along its center running parallel with the road. Bordered by the school, the road, and plains of nothingness, we were well contained.

The sun had broken free from gray cloud cover, causing groups to retreat to the shade of thick branches. I stood next to Lennox, with Chloe and Charlie in front of us, sharing a book. Accessing the bus seemed to be an unsteady affair at the best of times, so sticking together became paramount.

I leaned into Lennox, spoke out the side of my mouth. “Hey, have you seen M anywhere?”

She was in the middle of braiding Chloe’s hair, creating perfect patterns of tightly combined mane, before running fingers along its length and starting again. It was something she would do at the end of every school day; however, I wasn’t sure for whose benefit it was.

“I think he said he was going to be a little later than usual. He said that at lunch, right?”

I shrugged. “I don’t remember. He seemed so distracted. And then he took off as soon as the bell sounded. As long as he gets here before the bus arrives, I guess.”

“He knows the consequences,” she stated matter-of-factly.

The comment stung me, and it took a moment to process. It was a harsh reality, however, it sounded cold. I wondered if something had happened between them, perhaps a result of our morning conversation earlier that week. Had she confronted Maximus? Perhaps he told her something she didn’t want to hear. Our little family was slowly fracturing.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

She looked at me quizzically. “Yeah. Why? What did I say?”

There was an undertone of accusation in her voice.

“Nothing. It’s just the way you said it.”

She looked away. Restarted a braid in Chloe’s hair. “It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

Her hands stopped mid braid, then ever so slowly, she pulled them down the length of Chloe’s hair. She then pulled the mane into a ponytail and gently pulled it to the side.

“What the fuck is that?” I huffed. It felt like someone had shot adrenalin into my body. Breathing like I had just run the hundred-meter sprint. But I knew what it was and where it came from, at least I thought I did. I stared at the long purple mark on the back of Chloe’s neck, and the events of that night came back to me: Chloe running down the hall sobbing to herself, an angry Maximus punching the wall, frustrated with his actions.

When I had awoken the next morning, I pretended it was all a dream. That I had seen nothing. That whatever had happened, someone else would escalate. But no one said anything, no one raised the issue, and so I also kept it hidden. Secrets were destroying us all.

Lennox covered the bruise and continued braiding Chloe's hair. She remained silent.

"What happened?" I pushed, attempting to eke out whatever she knew. Did she think it was somehow my fault because I stood by and did and said nothing?

She shrugged. "She won't say," she said as she crossed sections of mane.

I chewed my lip. Took a chance. "What about..." I looked around. "Maximus," I whispered. "Do you think he knows what happened?"

"No, that's how I know she isn't talking."

"Wait, what?"

The irritable growl of a large, unserviced engine approached. Heavy wheels crunched dirt as the bus eased up to the stop with shrieking brakes. The door opened with a crack and a hiss. The mass of children jockeyed for position, elbowing each other in preparation to funnel through the bottleneck.

The driver had descended the steps and stood at the door. "Calm down, you lot," he yapped. A weaselly man that reminded me of a rat. He was skinny and bore a thin blonde mustache. He tipped his bus driver's cap in an air of authority. We were sure he took the job because he lacked the capability to work anywhere else, although others felt he just wanted to exercise power over someone else. Who better, than children?

"There shall be no mucking on this bus, do you understand?"

I got on my toes to attempt to locate our missing counterpart among the tired collective. I was shoved from behind by an overzealous child, excited to be leaving school for the week, eager to jostle for a premium position.

"I guess he's here somewhere," I said over the melee.

The driver stepped back into the bus and the boarding crush commenced.

The four of us stayed together and were lucky to sit together in a block on the entry side of the bus a few rows from the front. We slid onto the bench seats, girls in front, boys behind, the younger kids at the windows so they could find some joy in the journey.

I continued to scan the onboarding faces while Lennox took in as much of the external environment as her vantage point would allow. It wasn't that it was a rare occurrence that Maximus wasn't there. It's that he was always there, always first. His absence was worrisome at best.

Lennox turned around. "Maybe he got caught up talking to a teacher? Or in the administrator's office."

"Nah," I said, scanning the sea of boarding faces. "That's not it. I don't know what it is, but something's up."

The bumping bodies thinned out.

"C'mon you lot, hurry up," the driver called from his position at the front. He eyed us in the oversized mirror and tapped his watch. "I've got a schedule to keep. Damned if I'm going to be late because you buggers can't get yourselves sorted out. I have every mind to unload the lot of you at the nearest House, your parents or assigned guardians be damned. Probably do them all a favor anyhow."

He stared at his watch. Counted down the seconds.

"That's it," he announced. He hit a button on his console and with a pneumatic shush the door slammed shut. "Off we go."

As the bus pulled away, there was a loud bang on the back. It worked its way up the side. The driver stepped on the brake and every passenger lurched forward in response. The banging continued along the flank. A body at the door, slapping a hand on the dull safety glass.

The driver sighed, hit the button, and the door opened with a creaky hiss. “Are you banging on my bus?”

The straggling passenger stepped on. “Sorry,” Maximus said in a huff. “Won’t happen again.” He blustered out in a machine-gun burst.

“It better not happen again,” the driver retorted. “Or you can walk to whatever house you like.”

Maximus nodded.

“And why are you so dirty? If I see one grain of dirt on this bus, you’re going to be cleaning it top to bottom.”

Maximus looked at him.

“What are you doing standing there?” The driver exhaled. “Sit down! You’re making me late.”

Maximus gave a tight smile and scanned the interior. I waved a hand. Charlie and I squished up to make room. He sat down beside me, legs touching, eyes forward. Beads of sweat ran down his temple. Patches of dirt on his clothes and face. His body rose and fell as he took in deep breaths. Looked pained but wouldn’t say why. Didn’t shift. Didn’t look. Didn’t say a word the entire journey, just kept his eyes locked out of the windscreen.

Smorking looked up at the night sky and perused the many constellations that inhabited his view. He closed his eyes, once again integrating himself with the silence of nighttime. The silence was overwhelming. Oh, how he hated it all. Give him the grind of metal gears or hiss of thick pneumatic pistons any day. He’d even take the screams of lost souls over the calling card of the evening crickets.

Beside him, Chortly hacked up a chunk of phlegm into his hand. He studied it closely, as if it held the answers to the universe.

“How long?” Smorking mused.

“A couple of days, by the looks of this!” He threw the lump into the grass and wiped his hands on the ground, before inspecting his hands again. “Which one is it then?”

Smorking sighed, long and doubtful. He wearily opened his eyes and pointed to one planet that hovered on the sparkling canvas. “That one,” he stated.

“The blue one or the green one,” Chortly questioned after following Smorking’s pointing finger to the best of his ability.

Smorking sighed again, as if he had all the time in the world, precisely because he did. “The blue one,” he said. “But like I said, I can’t see them allowing the likes of you up there.”

“And I told you to leave that to me!”

Smorking closed his eyes. “How long have we known each other?”

“Since we was kids,” Chortly replied. “Years and years, more than I care to remember. Your mum used to call me her son, before she passed, God bless her. And you called me your brother from before I could talk. People used to call us twins, they did.”

Smorking smiled. “Exactly, and I see no way to sugar-coat this news for you, Chortly. You may be dying, but that is hardly a reason to allow you up there. You may consider yourself to be part of my family, with its breed and pedigree and money and influence, however they don’t see it that way. You are nothing more than the dirt on the bottom of a lost shoe, the slime that sinks to the riverbed, the cancer that is hacked up and thrown away. This is why I couldn’t possibly vote for your entry, regardless of if it was the vote you needed. Please don’t take offense to this, Chortly. It’s just the nature of things, you understand.”

“Oh, I understand just fine, Smorking,” he wailed in a mournful tone. “For a very long time have I understood. I was hoping for a little leniency, that’s all. You have made your decision, and I have accepted my fate. And seeing as you and the rest of the council have been unreluctantly to grant me a pass, I will have to take measures in me own two hands.”

Smorking twitched. “What are you talking about, old man?”

The pressure on his chest was so sudden he didn’t feel it at first. He initially believed that Chortly had placed a hand on him, to thank him for his honesty, however brutal it was. But then breathing became difficult and the feeling of warmth spread over his body in combination of a cold, numbing experience in his fingertips. He looked to Chortly’s hand above his chest, then the reveal of the knife handle. Red reflected the evening sky, a sparkling, evil mess. All the time in the world now didn’t seem like enough. He looked to his brother but couldn’t muster words beyond a blood-curdled gurgle.

Chortly shrugged. “No offense, brother. But if I can’t get there, then you shan’t get back there either.”

Smorking wheezes. Coughed. He could taste the metal. There were so many things he would like to say to Chortly at that moment yet couldn’t assemble the energy to say any of them. Instead, just thought them, hoping through some mental transfer, Chortly could read the message.

“I know,” Chortly said. “I know.”

Maximus entered my room unannounced, and I clapped the cover of my book shut.

I had taken leave after dinner—and pre-dessert—and retreated to the sanctuary of my room to read. I felt disconnected from everyone, and I just wanted to be alone. The oddities in the Freeman household and around the people that resided within, were taking a toll on my

mental and emotional state. A mysterious bruise on Chloe, misunderstandings with Maximus, something was up with Lennox, rumors and innuendo from Tilly, a drunken conversation with Sir. Just to name a few, yet they continued to stack.

I laid the book on my chest and projected loudly about the obvious lack of knocking prior to entry, as was the rule in the house. I know, because Sir had said as much in one of our conversations. However, his face told me he had other things on his mind than mere manners.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is everything okay?”

He locked the door behind him, something he never did and started pacing the room. Chewed his nails as he mumbled to himself. I watched him from my vantage point on the bed. It reminded me of a pendulum, back and forth, engaged in a frustrating conversation with himself. I couldn’t make out all the words, but it sounded like he was asking himself questions and then answering them as if trying to talk himself into something... or out of something.

I sat up, placing my feet on the floor, and called out, “For the love of God, what is it?”

“Alright, alright, alright.” He sat on the end of my bed. His face was pale, hair disheveled, forehead wet with sweat. Hands wrung together, turning over each other, unable to find peace. I knew how he felt.

“Geez, you look like shit.”

Ignored. “I’ve heard something,” he said. His voice wavered. Uncertainty. Maybe he was unsure of whether to tell me or if he believed the words he was about to deliver.

“Heard what?”

“Then,” he stumbled, continuing with his ramble, “then I went to see.”

“See what? What are you talking about?”

His breathing picked up. Thought he was having a panic attack. I reached out, put a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged it away as if I was a disease. Stood up, started pacing again.

“Yeah... yeah...,” he said as if trying to convince himself. “Then I went to see it. Shit, I can’t believe I was that stupid.” Then he stopped, intensely stared at me. Seriousness in his eyes. Deadpan. “It’s there. It’s fucking there. I’ve seen it. I went through it!”

I stood up, and he backed away. Cowered. Hands up.

“Hey,” I said, softly, caring, motherly. “Will you please just tell me what is going on?”

He ran a hand through his black mop, slicked back, wiped his hands on his shirt. “Can I trust you?”

It was a dangerous question. The answer, either answer, could put me in a compromising position. With Sir, with the government. The word itself suggested a burden was to be placed on my shoulders, the same burden weighing Maximus down as he tried to rationalize his situation.

He stepped forward, looked me over, inspecting me, eyes darting across my features, querying my lack of response. Then a smile. “What am I talking about,” he said. “Of course, I can trust you.”

Closer. Uncomfortably close. Our chests touching. His head next to mine. I could hear his breathing. Cone of silence. You never knew who was listening.

“I overheard some kids at school,” he whispered. “I found it. I skipped school this afternoon, and I found it. I found a way out.”

Way out? Because of what happened with Chloe?

He put his mouth next to my ear. “I found Laferty Bridge.”

Those words had me in a spin, down the rabbit hole. Every fragment of memory that contained those words flashed before my eyes. Then all of my internal alarm bells went off.

I grabbed him by the shoulders. “Are you serious?”

He nodded with a type of glee that I hadn’t seen before or since on anyone.

“Christ! Do you know how much trouble you are in? With the government? With Sir? Shit, just talking about is bad enough, but you’ve been there?”

“Don’t you get it? That doesn’t matter anymore! I’m not scared of them anymore!”

“Why?” I exclaimed, turning away from him. His rant was pushing me to the edge of my patience. He obviously wanted to tell me something and taking his sweet time in doing so. “Why doesn’t it matter?”

He stepped towards me, eager to keep the distance our voices must travel as short as possible.

“Because I’m going. We are all going!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see? No government to worry about. No Sir to bang on about his rules and our societal responsibilities. No Tilly or Marcus or Finch to treat us like second-class citizens. No bullies to wield power over us. We get to be free, Emerson. Don’t you see? We can be free!”

“Wait, wait, wait! Hang on a second. You went to see the bridge?”

“Yes!”

“Laferty bridge?”

He nodded.

“But you can’t have.”

“Why not?”

I took a deep breath. “Because the night I was taken to a House from my parents, about seven years ago, we ran for Laferty Bridge.”

He shrugged. “So?”

“Well, when I arrived the other day, the car ride from the House to here was over an hour, and most of that was on the motorway.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you telling me you trekked an approximate two-hundred-kilometer round trip in one afternoon? On foot?”

“Well...” His head dropped. “No.” Then he snapped his head up. “But it wasn’t that far away, and I found it.”

“I’m sorry, Maximus. I don’t know what you found, but it wasn’t Laferty Bridge.”

“But it must have been.” He came closer, looked at me, more intense. “It had to have been.”

“To be honest, I don’t even know if it still exists,” I said. “If it ever existed.”

“It’s real, Emerson. I saw it with my own eyes!”

“I don’t know what to say, but—.”

“No!” he shouted. “You’re not taking this away from me.”

“The only thing I’m trying to do is stop you from making a huge mistake!”

“No! You’re just like him!”

“Who?”

“Sir, you are just like Sir. You proved it the other night. Let me tell you something. We’re going on Monday. Me, Lennox, Charlie, Chloe. We’re going to ditch school and head to the bridge and to freedom on the other side.”

The kids? Lennox? She had said nothing, and I wondered if he had actually spoken to her yet. Was she next on his list? Or would he just spring it on her on Monday?

“I can’t do this anymore,” he continued. “I just can’t put up with it. I need to protect the others. We need to get out of here. And I’ve found the way out.”

“What do you mean protect the others?”

He stepped towards me. “It’s not safe here.”

I felt like I was standing in the middle of a seesaw, trying to balance everything out. On one side, Maximus wanting to protect the others. On the other, Tilly accusing Maximus of being the one to perpetrate violence, something I was sure I had witnessed. But she had also accused Sir, and I witnessed the results of his rage firsthand with the injuries on Marcus’s face.

“Safe from who?”

“Tilly,” he said. “I know what she’s done, and Sir won’t do anything about it, not to one of his own. No, we’ve only got each other to rely on.”

“What has Tilly done?” I begged to understand. I couldn’t see how all the pieces came together.

He held up a hand. “You can come if you want, that’s why I’m telling you. But if you’re not interested, that’s fine. All I’m asking is you keep your mouth shut until we’re gone. Can you do that for me? For the others?”

“Please—.”

“Can you do that, yes or no?”

I sighed and let my head fall. “Yes, of course.”

He moved to the door, seemingly satisfied with my answer. With a hand on the handle, he turned.

“I guess you’ve got until Monday to decide. But if you even think of screwing me over, I’ll come for you. You’ll see me coming, and you won’t be able to do anything about it.”

CHAPTER 20

At first, I wasn't sure what it was. It was loud enough to wake me from my sleep, yet not clear enough for me to discern what it was. In my sleep drunkenness, it could have been anything. Yet when I heard it again, I sat up in bed like I had been electrocuted. A scream. Long. Muffled. Distant. Then silence. Ambient noise. Then another scream, same as the one before.

I looked around my room, like the corners had the answer, like the shaft of light streaming in through the gap in my curtains was calling me. I pulled my legs to the floor, hoping whatever noise it was, was left behind in the world of sleep. It was all my imagination. And then it happened again. I pushed myself up and went to the window, followed the faint resonance to where it was loudest.

I pulled open the curtain. Sunlight flooded in on me, more natural light than I had experienced the entire day before, and I had to shield my eyes from the torture. Another scream and I squinted through the pain. With a hand on the pane and the other shielding my vision, I peered out onto the field. At the tree, our tree, someone stood. Arms stiff by their sides, head raised, body tensed. Then a vocal release.

Panic. Footsteps outside my door, clambering down the stairs. Thumping. My feet were moving towards my door before I could call them to action. I followed the ruckus, shouting, footfalls, through the house. When I got to the big glass doors I paused. The rest of the household was in the field, running through the tall grass towards the tree. Sir was out in front, Lennox and Maximus close behind. Marcus and Finch coming in from the flanks of the house, zeroing in on the source of the morning commotion.

A physical melee was unfolding under the tree as I arrived. On one side, Marcus and Lennox were shouting at the opposite party, faces screwed, stabbing the air with their fingers, laying blame on thick. Lennox was half holding back Maximus yet trying to attack at the same time. Her face was red and wet. On the other side of the exchange were Sir's children. Tilly, still in her nightgown, was being guarded by the boys Marcus and Finch, who sported a mark on the side of his face. They too reciprocated the actions. Sir, wearing the same clothes from the previous night, stood in the middle keeping both sets of dogs at bay. His words collided with the yelling from both sides, so that the result was an incomprehensible and jumbled mess of noise so that I had no idea what the argument was or why it had broken out here at the tree.

And then I saw it. Between the legs of the warring factions, Charlie on his knees, hunched over. I rounded the group and stopped dead. Mouth agape, breath caught, mind unable to recognize reality. Chloe lay on the ground in a pile of dead leaves, face down, turned away, limbs akimbo. She wasn't moving. Charlie looked up at me. Tears streamed down his face. His mouth opened in a silent scream. Everything was silent. Slow-motion. Ringing in my head. Like my hands were pressing on the sides of my head to block the sound. I blinked, slow. Stupefied. Then, ever so slowly, time caught up, my brain started turning, neurons firing. I dropped to Charlie's side, enveloped an argumentative roar. He wrapped his arms around my neck, buried his damp face into my shoulder. I placed a hand on

Chloe, seeking some reaction from her, a sign of life, something to deceive the cruel joke. But there was no reaction. No rhythmic rise of her body. Wasn't breathing. I called her name, gently shook her, willed her to respond. Shouted accusations swirled around me, feet scuffling in the undergrowth.

"Don't touch her," a voice said. It was distinct enough, desperate enough, to be heard above the others. I turned my head. Sir was yelling over his shoulder, directed at me. He repeated his command. Then with a final push in both directions, he ceased the dispute with a guttural growl.

"Stop! Just stop!" he announced. "Everyone!"

A moment of silence. Charlie's body quivering beside me. Quiet sobs.

"She did it!" Maximus screamed out. "Tilly pushed her out of the tree!"

"I didn't!" she yelled back. "She was already on the ground when I got here!"

"What happened?" I asked. Voice wavered. Short of breath. Feeling swirled yet none I could name. I was numb. There was no response to my question. The others were too preoccupied with their exchange to notice. "What. Happened?!" I repeated, this time louder, enough to get their attention. I rose from my spot, turned, Charlie now clinging to my leg.

Sir also turned, kept his arms out to repel the two groups. I saw it then. Dual etchings running down the side of his face, like twin valleys containing dried-up riverbeds. I couldn't tell how fresh they were, just knew they weren't there the previous night.

Tilly stepped forward. Tears on blushed cheeks. "I... I don't know." She held her hands to her heart like it might give out at any minute. "I just don't know. I saw something from the house, and when I got here, I realized it was her. Then I screamed."

"Liar!" Maximus interjected. "You killed her!"

"Stop!" Sir barked. "Enough of these accusations!"

“You never liked her,” Lennox added. “You never liked any of us. You’ve been trying to get rid of us from day one. You’re a murderer!”

“I didn’t do it! Father, please, I didn’t do this!”

“She told me you hurt her,” Maximus accused. “Put that bruise on her neck. She didn’t want to tell me because she was so scared of what you could do to her... but she told me. I promised I would protect her, but now you’ve killed her!”

“Father, I didn’t. This is all lies.”

“Enough! Everyone, enough!” Sir said. Tiredness ripped through his tone. “This is a tragic accident. That is for sure. There shall be no more talk of killing or murder. I shall inform the relevant authorities. She was a House girl and, as such, I will need to inform an Administrator. I need everyone to go back to the house, back to your rooms, and wait there for further instruction.” He sent a chilling gaze over everyone. “If there is one word spoken between any of you, there will be severe consequences to pay. Now, go.”

We all remained steadfast, both sides glaring at each other. Each side tempted the other to make the first move. A slight movement. A shift in the eyes. A single sound. Anything would kick things off to degrees I believed Sir would find difficult to calm down. He was in the middle of a war zone, and in time it was going to erupt.

“Go!” Sir shouted, raw enough to cut through our convictions.

We individually navigated our way through the tall grass back to the house. Finch and Marcus marched out in front, swiping hands at the overgrowth. Tilly trailed, looked like she was escaping the scene of a crime. Lennox and Maximus fumbled over the area, heads bowed, staring at the next step. I guided Charlie to the house, jaw clenched, fighting back tears. Sadness. Anger. Bubbling concoction ready to explode. I was afraid of who I was going to take it out on. And I knew it was going to be the first person who got in my way.

Charlie fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. The morning's shocking reveal had left him with nothing left to keep him awake. I sat on the edge of his bed and stared out the window. A hand on Charlie's side, letting him know I was there for him, to watch over him, to protect him. Not that I protected Chloe. Time passed, unknown amounts, and I stood, looked over his form under the sheets. "Sleep well, Charlie. Find me when you wake." He wouldn't have heard me, but I felt like it was the right thing to say given the situation.

I clicked the door shut and saw her standing there. "What the hell do you want?"

"It was him," Tilly said, a rushed whisper.

"Who?"

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, looked about herself to make sure we were alone. Her hair was chaotic, face plain. "Father," she said, coming closer. "He pushed her out of the tree."

"What? How the hell do you know?"

"I just know," she said.

"The others are pretty damn sure *you* did it!" I clenched my fists. The image of Chloe's prone, lifeless figure flashed in my eyes.

"Please. You must believe me. Don't you remember what I told you the other night? Don't you remember what happened to Finch? And what about those marks on Father's face? That didn't come out of nowhere. I've told you the things that go on here."

I thought about seeing Finch crouched in the library, an injury to his face. Sir's words about the House kids ripping the family apart. Was Chloe collateral damage? Was she merely in the wrong place at the wrong time? Sir marching out through the long grass just to push Chloe out of the tree seemed farfetched, as unthinkable as Tilly doing it, regardless of her psychotic ways. Hatred is one thing. Murder is something different entirely.

“If that’s what you think,” I said, “then you should tell the authorities when they arrive.”

“I can’t,” she pleaded. “You know I can’t. I told you this last night. Then I lose everything.”

“Fine. Then I will.”

“No!” she hushed, and grabbed my arm, dug her nails in. Made me wince. “You can’t tell anyone.”

I shook my arm free. “This is bullshit. If he’s done something, then people need to hear about it. I can’t just let a murderer go unanswered because it would inconvenience you, especially someone like you.”

“Please!” she pleaded, hands together in prayer. “Please, you can’t do this to me, to my family. We’ve already lost Mother, don’t make us lose Father as well.”

I stared into her eyes.

“Please, don’t tell,” she begged. “Say it was Boy three, say it was him.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“You’ve seen how violent he is, and what he did to Girl three.”

I turned on my heel, adamant I could bring the culprit to justice. I could never make them right, it was too far gone for that, but maybe I could make things better than what they were. Damned to be who impeded that, Tilly or Finch or Marcus. They didn’t matter to me, only making sure whoever took Chloe away from the family, from me, was dealt with harshly, to the extreme. I headed back to my room, footsteps coalescing with muffled cries disappearing in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 21

I sat on the edge of my bed, feet firmly planted on the floor and my head in my hands. Every time I could feel the sadness pull me under, anger would wrap its long fingers around my chest and pull me in another direction. I was tormented, boxed into emotions I couldn't deal with.

I couldn't bear to open my eyes and deal with the world around me. There in the darkness, none of what was happening was true. We would spend the days in the tree, talking and connecting. Then it would be Monday and we would watch out for each other as we ventured off to school. Years would pass until The Transitioning and then everything would be different.

But the harsh reality hit me when I dared open an eye. Chloe was dead, our "family" torn apart. I wondered if Maximus still wanted to escape over Laferty Bridge. In that moment, I would've followed him, damned with the consequences. I had lost all care for myself, rules, and the world.

A thundering boom permeated throughout the expansive house. I eased out of my room to the top of the grand staircase. I know it was *them* who had arrived, and the knowledge came with a feeling of unease that I couldn't escape.

Before the echo had died out, a barrage of purposeful footfalls resounded in reply. Simon—the one who accosted me in the kitchen—adorned with white gloves and black bow tie, arrived at the door with measurable patience. Sir closely followed to meet the guests in person, giving the affair an illustrious importance.

Simon threw open the door, stepped aside, and announced their arrival. It was completely unnecessary; however it was more for the visitors than the head of the household. The visitor's stepped over the precipice and towards Sir.

This was the first time I saw her. Tall and wiry, she accepted Sir's proffered hand with the strength of a soldier and the grace of royalty.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "I wish it was under better circumstances."

"Quite," she replied. She removed her sunglasses from her pale face. Dark makeup made her features stick out like mud in the middle of a field covered with snow. Jet black hair framed her face and ended just below her jawline. She wore a black pant suit that made her appear taller than she was. A black rose sprung from her lapel.

"It's been a shock to everyone here this morning."

She took in the foyer, checking every corner and hallway, before landing her eyes on me. Her features remained stagnant, entirely poker-faced. Spoke to Sir as she glared into my soul. I could feel her work her way into my soul and steal my secrets.

"Best we continue this conversation in private," she said.

"Certainly. Follow me, Administrator."

She followed Sir into the house, all the while staring at me until she disappeared down a corridor. Other black-clad CHIRP officers entered the house and followed Simon.

I went back to my room and stood at the window that overlooked the field. Officers in a range of costumes erupted from every direction, all focused on a single destination. It wasn't long before they encircled the white sheet, with Chloe's body underneath. A few of them were pointing in various directions while another was taking photographs of the tree itself; the trunk, branches, leaves. From my right field of vision, two more were awkwardly attempting to wheel a gurney over the field. Halfway down they gave up, collapsed the legs, and carried it the rest of the way.

They were carrying on with their processes, cold and matter-of-factly, with no sign of emotion, despite the fact a young child lay dead at their feet. I supposed that's what was required for the role. Emotions can be a dangerous thing, force incorrect decisions to be made, get sucked into downward mental spirals from which there was no return.

A quick rap of knuckles on my door startled me. I turned around, and the door was open. A CHIRP officer stood there. He didn't need to say anything because I knew what he wanted.

I followed him to the library where Maximus, Lennox, and Charlie were sitting on a couch near the cold fireplace, waiting for their turn with the Administrator. Charlie looked like he had just woken up, his eyes wet with uncertainty. The other two held their resolve, their features filled with rage. CHIRP would unceremoniously remove their sister, without so much as a final goodbye. Grieving would have to come later, once the Administrator's formal paperwork was completed and stamped, and once they had informed the powers who handled it all.

I sat down next to them as my escort stood guard. There were another three around the room, all facing towards us as if we were the ones under arrest. Guilty by association with a House.

The door to Sir's office slid open, and Tilly, Finch, and Marcus were escorted out, none of which made eye contact with us. Sir stood at the door and watched them go and stand in the far corner of the library until he finally looked at us and gestured for us to enter. We followed his invitation however when we got to the door, he stopped us. Sir ducked his head inside, received some communication, and addressed us.

"Just Boy five for the moment," he announced.

"But that's not fair," Maximus protested. "We should be together like your kids—"

"That's enough, Boy four. Not today, not on a day like today. You may sit back down while the Administrator talks with Boy five."

We all stood there, another stand-off. Another one we wouldn't win because we never win. And everyone knew it. In the end, Lennox and Maximus stood to the side and let me pass. I looked at them both as I walked past them, but I couldn't pick up any subliminal or telepathic messages, other than the hate, frustration, and concern spewing forth from their faces.

Sir ushered me inside. I took one last look at them before Sir shut the door, and it felt like I had just lost the rest of my family. An orphan. A lone survivor.

"Sit," she said.

I turned to see the Administrator in one of the guest chairs. Sir rounded the desk and took up his usual place. I noticed the piles of papers on the floor had been pushed to the walls, creating a path to the seat. I knew this was for the Administrator's benefit, to show order and control.

I worked my way to the chair and sat down. Sitting across from the Administrator was tantamount to eating a steak in the lion's cage. Being as close as I was, allowed me to take in every minute feature. Her skin was flawless, not a blemish or wrinkle in sight, even though she must have been older than Sir. I also noted her skin was naturally pale.

She loomed over me, and I felt minuscule like the room was closing in around me. Guilt worked its way through me, and I felt as if I had been charged as guilty for a crime I had no part in perpetrating. *You didn't have a part?*

“I understand this is a difficult time for you,” she started. “And I have some questions to ask you.”

I nodded.

“Have you ever heard one of the other children talking about a bridge?”

The question took me off guard and it showed all over my face.

“Please answer the question, Boy.”

I looked to Sir and back to the Administrator. “What has this got to do with what happened?”

“We will talk about that after,” she stated. “Answer my question first.”

I looked to Sir for support, to get the conversation back on track. I remembered the conversation we shared a few nights before, where he overheard me talking about the bridge to Charlie and Chloe. He warned me of the dangers of talking about the bridge. I wondered if he recalled the conversation as I did. Was he also guilty? Should he have reported me then and there? He stared at me with cold eyes, almost inciting me. If I said I hadn't, would he call me out? Would that also be his own downfall? If I said I had, would it be my duty to let the Administrator know that Sir knew?

I held my breath and did what anyone would do in my situation. I replied with nothing. Just looked into her dark eyes. Waited for the next question. I didn't know how long that strategy could last before she just decided and sent me packing back to a House.

She sighed. “Let's try something else, shall we?” A tight smile through thin, dark lips. “I understand some of the children are using names. Do you know anything about this?” My reaction betrayed my silence. She knew. Someone had overhead a conversation and reported

us to her. Then I thought back to the night I saw Maximus punch the wall. Tilly had pulled me into the shadows, and I had let slip the names we used for each other. I thought I had covered my tracks, it looked like I had averted her attention. Obviously, I had failed, and despite the look on Tilly's face, she had stored that in her memory banks for use on a day like that day.

I once again looked to Sir, and he cocked his head, also eager to hear my reply.

"I'm... I'm not sure what you mean."

She leaned forward slightly, the chair creaking with the shifting weight. "I mean children are calling each other by names that go against government guidelines. There is a reason there are rules and regulations in place. They are there to protect you, as much as they are there to protect the family unit."

I nodded. "I understand the purpose."

"But do you admit to using them?"

I once again remained defiant under the pressure to respond. I was putting myself in jeopardy lying to an Administrator, but the consequences of honesty were worse, much worse for everyone else. Besides, it was Tilly's word over mine. But as I said that to myself, I felt more and more uncomfortable they would treat our respective *words* equally.

The Administrator looked over to Sir. "This conversation is a waste of my time and an insult to my intelligence."

Sir looked down at his desk followed by a resigning rush of air out of his nose. "Let me have a word with him, Administrator. Alone." He looked at me. "I'm sure I can get some truth from him, something to help with your investigation."

They looked at each other for a long time, and I wondered whether Sir, himself, was under some sort of scrutiny. In the end, she relinquished her control with a deep sigh and unsettling glance at me and left the room.

I was left along with Sir's stern glance and a ticking clock to fill the void. After a few minutes, he rounded the desk and sat opposite me, sitting forward with his elbows on his knees.

"Boy, this conversation is very important." His tone differed from anything I had experienced in the house, and it instantly transported back a lifetime ago and I sat in my old house with my real Father sitting in his chair. The thought stabbed at my chest, and I gripped the seat for support.

"This should be about what happened to Chloe. That's why she's here, isn't she?"

Sir sighed. "Yes, that's why the Administrator is here. She is trying to understand the household, how this tragic accident could have happened."

"It's not an accident. It's murder! Someone killed her," I said, knowing very well I was probably looking into the eyes of the one who did it.

"Now, there is no proof of that," he said, exactly what a murderer would say. "We won't know until the officers and Administrator have done their investigation. In the meantime, you need to answer the Administrator's questions. It's vitally important you do so."

I clenched my jaw. "And do I tell her about *our* conversation?"

He sat back, crossed his legs at the knee. "And what conversation is that, Boy?"

"I can answer the Administrator's questions if you like, but if I tell of one conversation, I'm going to tell them all."

"I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

I narrowed my gaze. "Why are you lying?"

Sir reared up. "I'm what, Boy?"

I could feel the emotion boil deep inside, with my mouth the volcano. My burning words were about to erupt, and I had no control over their quality or diction. But then, I didn't care.

"You did it, didn't you?!" I shouted. "You killed her! That's why you've got scratches on your face. You hurt your own sons and then you killed her."

Sir grabbed my arm, dug his fingers into the sinew, yanked me from my seat. He loomed over me. I could feel power emanating from him. "What the hell are you talking about? How dare you accuse me of such things!"

"Admit it! You killed her!"

"I'd never lay a hand on Girl2!"

"Chloe!" I screamed. "That's her name! Say it!"

Eyes wide. Mouth agape. But then consternation seamlessly morphed into rage. He squeezed tighter. "How dare you!" Spit flew from his quivering lips.

Words were like stones breaking open in a quarry.

I shook my arm free. "Maximus was right! When he said he was going to Laferty bridge to get away from here, to get away from you, I told him he was acting crazy. But now I get it. We can't stay, we can't stay with you! We all need to escape. You bring nothing but death and misery!"

Everything happened in slow motion. The words had escaped of their own volition and trying to put them back in was as fruitful as trying to catch water in my bare hands. Sir gave a long blink and stepped back, his body limp. Every little movement was like a sonic boom that bounced off the walls. He tried to speak but couldn't form any words.

The office door slid open, causing time to catch up with itself. I turned to see the Administrator standing in the doorway, her hands still on the door handle. She silently fumed

behind a decadent glare. She spun, and I rushed to the door, past her long, pointed finger, and stopped.

Breath caught in my throat, lungs that refused to work, a heart that smashed against my ribcage like a bull trying to buck off its rider. Maximus and Lennox were on their feet, hands of CHIRP officers around their collars and arms, struggling to keep their prey under control.

“Get your hands off me!” Maximus shouted.

“Leave us alone,” fired Lennox. “We’ve done nothing wrong.”

The Administrator brushed past me and addressed them. “Boy and Girl Freeman, you are hereby declared unfit for this residence and forthwith are allocated to a House for evaluation and Re-education.”

“No!” I screamed as I rushed up to her. “No, not them, it wasn’t them. It was me! I did everything!”

I caught the eyes of Maximus and Lennox, their respective struggles tapering off.

“What did you say?” Lennox said, her mouth barely moving, her eyes glassed over.

“N... Nothing,” I murmured.

“Don’t be so ashamed, Boy,” the Administrator said, looking down at me. “Own your actions.”

I looked to her, then back to my family.

“What did you say?” Maximus grunted. He was breathing heavy, each word like a weapon getting ready to be fired.

“I... I...,” but I couldn’t articulate what I had said, partly because it would crush them, partly because the previous five minutes was such a blur, I couldn’t recall exactly who said what.

“What?!” Maximus yelled, determined for some resolution that I couldn’t possibly give him.

It happened in the blink of an eye. Maximus broke free from his officer and charged towards me. Two steps and he dove over a table, knocking over a lamp. He landed on me, his hands wrapping around my neck with considerable ease. We fell back together, and he instantly started punching my face.

“I’ll kill you!” he raged. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

Lost count of the hits. Let it happen. Took my medicine, let the revenge take place. Each connection caused a sharp spike of pain before subsiding to the next. Seemed like an age before someone pulled him off me.

Invisible hands pulled me to unsteady feet. I could feel the blood drain from my numb face. I looked to Lennox with droopy eyelids. Her expression was a mix of feeling sorry for me and hating my guts at the same time. No mean feat.

“Take them away,” the Administrator ordered.

“Wait!” I howled.

I turned to the office. Sir was standing in the doorway, head on his chest, holding onto the door frame for support.

“Confess!” I demanded.

He looked up, defeated. “What?”

I pointed at him. Nothing left to lose at that point. “Admit you killed Chloe, tell everyone how you killed her.” I didn’t care I had said her name. She deserved to have it said aloud.

He stepped forward. “Don’t be ridiculous. I loved her like a daughter.” He raised his vision, looked over the room. “Loved you all as my children.” Returned a stare to me, his voice a shadow. “I could never do something like that.”

“What about the scratches? Administrator, ask him about the scratches on his face!”

He instinctively put a hand to them, as if he had forgotten they were there. He looked to the waiting Administrator, then back to me. “Girl One,” he said. Even at that moment, within the tornado of emotion and accusation, he had the presence of mind to use Tilly’s government-sanctioned family identifier.

“It’s true,” came a voice from the far corner of the library.

Everyone turned to see Tilly, who had stepped forward from the others.

“I did it,” she added.

I blinked. Twice. It was something that she had failed to mention, even when she was purportedly throwing him under the metaphorical bus. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised, yet I believed everything she had told me.

“Mr. Freeman,” the Administrator said, “would you care to expand on this.”

Sir sighed and folded his arms. “We argued,” he said.

“And…” the Administrator coaxed.

“Well, it hardly seems relevant now, does it? Besides, I’d rather not air my concerns with the room, if that is okay with you, Administrator.”

“I will determine the relevance once you tell me,” she countered.

Sir gazed across the room at his daughter. “I was reprimanding her for hurting Marcus, and, well, things got out of hand.”

The Administrator looked to Tilly, then noted Marcus’s black eye.

Tilly stepped forward. “I admit it, Administrator. I lost my temper. Let things get out of control.” She dropped her head, looked at her shoes. “I’m sorry. Sorry for any hurt I made others feel.”

I was gob smacked. Speechless. The walls slowly closed in around me. How did I not see this happening? Tilly had fed me lie after lie, and I ate it up. Rendered it my truth, despite

the warnings from the others, despite Tilly lying to my face the moment I arrived. I had been sucked in by the convenience of her accusation. *The violence of her father, that he had hit Marcus. How even she feared for herself.* It made complete sense at the time until you stepped back and put all the pieces together.

“Mr. Freeman,” the Administrator started. “What would you like to do with the rest of these House children?”

Sir turned his back, hand to his face. “Take them away,” he said. “Take them all away.”

My stomach dropped.

“Very well,” she said. “We’ll discuss reappropriation and distribution in the near future. I have some paperwork to complete.”

Sir nodded in reply.

Before I could figure out what that meant, a hand grabbed me roughly, almost knocking me off my feet, the resulting shock leveling me with a discernible truth. We were all going back to a House, dispersed across the country, and it was all my fault. The world seemed distant, reality an intangible dream.

Maximus, Lennox, and Charlie were all physically escorted out of the room under the steady gaze of Tilly, Marcus and Finch, and the hard stare of the Administrator. She turned to me.

“You did the right thing, Boy. Never forget that. You have done everyone here a favor. Something rotten was growing in those kids and it was going to destroy them. This talk of Laferty Bridge is a scourge in the downtrodden. If we had found them in the act, they would be in even bigger trouble than they are now. If you ask me, they should thank you for breaking their thinking.”

She nodded to the officer, and he pushed me forward, towards the library door.

“Wait!” Tilly yelled from the corner. “Can I speak with him, just for a minute? Please.”

It was the last thing I wanted, yet the officer looked back and received approval from the Administrator.

Tilly stepped forward and hugged me tightly. She whispered in my ear. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She took a deep breath. “I told you I would get my family back.”

She released her grip and held my shoulders.

“It was you,” I said. “You did it.”

She shrugged. Then winked.

“Why?”

“She told Boy Three what I did. I couldn’t risk her telling anyone else.”

“What did you do?”

She tapped her nose.

“Tell me!” I yelled.

Didn’t respond. Just smiled that innocent little smirk. Her lack of care and respect for anyone but herself bit at me.

“I’ll tell. I’ll tell them all.”

“Oh, you.” Her eyes dropped, and she pouted. “Poor, little, Emerson. No one’s going to believe you. Especially not now.”

Clenched fists. Wild eyes. Before I could move hands were bustling me out the door amidst my attacking screams. It was then I realized how impossible it all was. Tilly, the mastermind behind everything, a compulsive liar, stopped at nothing to get what she wanted. Ultimately, she was at the center of what she wanted. And I helped her accomplish it. Not only had I condemned my family to excruciating Re-education, and sealed my fate in the

process, I had basically ensured Chloe's murderer continued to live her cushy life in her house with her own family.

I gave her a way out.

CHAPTER 22

I was pushed out the front door as a black van sped off, no doubt with Lennox, Maximus, and Charlie inside. Their destination was unknown. What fate would befall them, precisely, was unknown... to me at least. Most likely as mysterious as my own. I looked upon the second van, my transport back to a House of the Administrator's choosing.

But we didn't stop at it. Instead, the officer escorted me further around the drive to a dark sedan. The officer opened the door and pushed me inside, like a police officer transporting a criminal to the station. I sat on the plush cream leather, wondering why I was in *that* car, getting eager to learn my next destination, my new life.

After a while, the driver opened the trunk and placed something in it. The lid closed as the other rear passenger door clicked open. I watched the Administrator effortlessly and silently slide in, her imposing figure made me feel tiny, made oxygen a critical commodity. The driver entered the vehicle, fired it up, and eased up the drive.

"I didn't lie to you, you know," she said, staring out the window.

"What do you mean?"

She looked at me. “When I told you, you were doing them a favor. You did a brave thing, you stood up for yourself, in what you thought was right, regardless of the consequences that were to fall on you. It takes character, Boy. Great personal strength. Laferty Bridge is a pipedream, propaganda dreamed up by those wishing to live outside the rules and regulations set forth by the government. And the people that follow the doctrine are just as bad, fools who can’t see the good in the decisions that were made at the highest power.”

I looked out the window. She sounded like the Education sessions that were crammed down our throats at schools and the House. *The government is almighty and made this decision on your behalf because you’re too stupid to realize what’s good for you.*

“Pain,” I muttered. “It causes pain.”

“Perhaps,” she responded. “Short-term pain, for the longer-term gain. It’s simple economics, Boy. I know you see that. That is why you are sitting in this car now instead of heading back to a House like the others.”

I snapped my head around. “Where are we going?”

“I am taking you to a CHIRP barracks.”

“Barracks?”

“Yes. Specially designed for young people like you. Children who understand the bigger picture, who know firsthand the impacts of adult’s decisions. They will groom you to be an officer in the CHIRP ranks.”

“Are you allowed to do that? Someone like me, I mean?”

A tightlipped smile. “Boy, I am Administrator Raxiel and I oversee the Special Investigations Franchise. My title allows me extensive discretionary powers.”

“What special things do you investigate?”

“Our specific remit is too broad and complex for me to convey details to the likes of you on our journey, but I can tell you we spend time and resources focused on eliminating The Push.”

“I’ve heard of them before.”

“I have no doubt. They are a blight on our society.”

“Who are they?”

“They are propagators of misinformation. They are the ones who started this nonsense about Laferty Bridge. One day, maybe one day, you’ll assist with the effort to destroy them.”

“Why me?”

“Why you *what?*”

“Why did you choose me to be in this car with you? Why are you taking me to the barracks and not a House?”

“I see something in you, Boy. Something special. Something, that, with the correct training and attention, could be useful.”

“But what about school and everything?”

“They will take care of everything, Boy. They will train you, prepare you for the life ahead of you. Then upon your Transitioning, you will move into the general ranks.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

She turned in the seat, looked down upon me.

“You will be treated far better in the barracks than in a House. You will receive education and training most will never receive in their lifetime. I am gifting you a future, Boy. Dare you sneeze at it?”

A future. A name. The safest place from the onslaught of the CHIRP officers was to be, in fact, a CHIRP officer. I could live without fear, live a life.

I shook my head.

“I thought as much,” she said.

“I just have one request.”

“A request,” she scoffed. “Dare you have a request of me, an Administrator?”

“Two actually.”

“Boy, you are skating on very thin ice.”

I ignored the comment. “Please make sure Ma... the elder Boy going back to the house, that he gets some help, for his anger.”

Her stern features fell away leaving a bland snowy landscape, devoid of passion or life. “Yes, that one’s had a particularly rough time. Abused by many of his allocated parents. Avoids all relationships. Hate’s being touched. Can’t blame him, really.”

And then I thought back. The look on his face when I hugged Lennox under the tree when we first met. It wasn’t jealousy of us, it was jealousy of the connection. The fact he pushed me away when I went to hug him. His stoic protection of the younger children. The clash with Mason and his crew at school. His reaction when he found out Tilly had hurt Chloe. He masked his pain and fear with anger and violence. He had never caused trouble or hurt the other families he lived with; they had hurt him. I didn’t know how he would fair, or where he would end up.

“Please,” I pleaded.

She took a deep breath and narrowed her gaze. “Very well. I will see to it.”

“Thank you.”

“And what of your other request?”

“I want them to stay together wherever they go.”

“I can’t make those promises. Once they are in the system, it is the system that decides. Beds are limited. Allocations are limited.”

“I thought as an Administrator you can do any number of things.”

I felt incredibly small under her glare.

The rest of the journey happened in uncomfortable silence.

Although I think about my time in that house, the relationships I formed, the bonds we made, the unions I broke, and the sad death that ensued. As much as I wanted to connect with them, to apologize, to somehow make up for impacting their lives in such a negative way, I never saw them again.

TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER 23

“I never saw them again.”

I opened my eyes. Took in the familiar surroundings of Dr. Meredith’s office. Intricately carved wooden sculptures lined along a bare bookshelf. A silent grandfather clock in the far corner of the room that perpetually reported the wrong time. Faded artwork on pale walls that weren’t quite perpendicular. I reflected on those last words I said to Dr. Meredith: *I never saw them again.*

Dr. Meredith scribbled some notes on her notepad. She ended the sentence with a poignant point of the pen on the page. I took in her brown and gray curly hair that accentuated her bright smile. She made the office come to life, giving it color and resonance. The walls breathed with her.

“I must say, BoyC7641,” she started. “You have been extremely open and transparent during this entire process. I’m impressed with the quality of your candor.”

I cupped my hands over my CHIRP cadet uniform and readjusted myself on the couch. The stiff collar of the navy-blue livery always itched my neck. However, it wouldn’t be long until I exchanged the training attire for the black CHIRP Officer kit, substitute my

polished, black leather shoes for tactical boots. The uniform gave me a role, a place to belong... a purpose. All I ever wanted was to be part of something, a family with a common goal.

“I merely answered your questions, Doctor. Being able to talk about the past has really clarified a lot of things for me.”

“More so,” she said. “It was raw and emotional, yet you retold your story with such rational precision.”

“That’s who I am, Doctor. Who they trained me to be. Who I was told to become.”

We let the silence fall like it carried weight.

“Very well then. Boy, do you accept the wrongs that you have shared, and will continue to serve the government and all its policies and recommendations.”

“Yes.”

“At all costs. To the bitter end. For the betterment of society, to sacrifice a generation to save a generation, so the next can prosper?”

“Yes.”

I did not hesitate to deliver my affirmation, because one could not hesitate. Not then, not in that moment. I was so close to the end.

She made a final note before putting the pen in the crease of the leather-bound folder. She reached across her desk, retrieved a big rubber stamp, and pressed it down onto the paper. One final squiggle and she closed the lid. Rested her hands upon the top. Beamed those young teeth. “Do you still think about them?” she asked, her voice anomalously casual. “Even after all this time.”

I rested my head back on the leather sofa and looked at the stained ceiling. I had noticed the brown mark growing in size and color over the entirety of my session with Doctor

Meredith. Said nothing. Didn't want a periphery conversation to derail our own deep discussion about my past.

"No," I relayed. "There is no point. That was back then, a moment in time. There is nothing back there but memories, and certainly not my future. I can't change any of what happened, can only look forward to the future with the CHIRP department."

"It's been a long road for you. Many years of study, training, and education. I've been talking with your instructors, and I understand you've excelled at critical decision making, psychoanalysis and marksmanship. Based on these results, as well as the success of our sessions, I don't foresee any problems with your wish to continue to serve this department. You have my full blessing and extreme confidence."

I looked at her, smiled tightly, and nodded.

She stood, and I followed her direction, swinging my legs around before pushing myself up.

"It is time, Boy. Time for you to transition, not just in your professional life, but in your personal one. The Transitioning awaits you."

She held out her hand, and I shook it firmly as I stared into her eyes, just as the academy had taught me.

"Your future awaits," she said. "There is nothing more I can do for you, nothing more I can say. The next steps you take are on your own."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Oh, I almost forgot, I need to return this to you."

She picked the book up off the desk and handed it to me. I accepted it, ran my hand over the cover. Memories seeped through my nerve endings, an electrical signal from the past to the future.

"Thank you for lending it to me. It truly is a special book."

“It is,” I said, mesmerized like I always had been.

“I was wondering if you could read a passage for me before you go. If it’s no trouble.”

“Certainly,” I said. “No trouble at all.” I flicked open the hard cover to a random page and began reading, my voice as unfamiliar to me as my parents were.

Tigor fumbled, turned the dials, tried the handle, and swore. The safe was still locked, and this was the third time he had tried the same combination.

“It’s time,” Gunter pressed. “We can’t be here anymore.”

Tigor ignored him. Another spin of the dial. Another swear word. Another failed attempt.

Gunter flinched at the rocket that soared overhead, followed the sound across the ceiling. He shuffled to the window and pulled back the stained white curtain to take in the outside world. The contrail of the rocket streaked across the sky, a permanent scar in the gray. The rocket found a target and implanted itself deep in the concrete structure before detonating. A shockwave ate everything in its path and shoved Gunter backward. He fell into the company of a thousand glass shards.

He brushed himself off and stood, fighting to set his glasses on his nose. “Damn it, Tigor. Forget about the papers, we need to go!”

A scraping of metal and a joyous shout of success. “Aha. I knew it, Gunter. I bloody knew it.”

Gunter sighed loudly. “Fine, Tigor. Congratulations. Grab the papers and let’s get out of here before it’s too late.”

“You see, the problem was the second character,” Tigor shouted over the roar of another rocket, this one traveling in the opposite direction. “Was it a zero, or an oh? I wasn’t sure, because whichever idiot wrote this out didn’t specify.”

“Wonderful,” Gunter exhaled. “Now that it’s open, can we please leave?”

The floor rumbled as if the concrete spine was shaking off a shiver. Gunter held onto the kitchen bench for support and tried to peer outside. The fluttering curtains gave him snapshots of the previous attack damage.

“Tigor!” he shouted.

No reply.

“Tigor!” he repeated. “Get the papers and let’s go.”

“I found something better,” Tigor ambled. “Much better.”

“What? What could possibly be better?” He looked at Tigor.

“This,” Tigor said. And pointed the gun at his head.

“Stop,” Dr. Meredith said. She leaned against her desk, her eyes shut, one hand on her heart, her other arm wrapped around herself. “Please, Boy. I can’t take it anymore.” She breathed deeply, letting the words infect her soul. “You must stop.”

Clapping the cover shut sent a boom around the office that soaked into the walls.

Eventually, she opened her eyes, regained her stance, and brushed down her purple blouse. She cleared her throat and took another big breath as if to clear her senses.

“Mm, yes. Thank you, Boy. I appreciate you humoring me.”

I lowered my gaze to avoid her embarrassment more than anything.

“One last thing, Boy, before I let you go.”

“Certainly, Doctor. What is it?”

“Have you chosen a name? For The Transitioning?”

I smiled. “Emerson,” I said. “Emerson Barnes.”

CHAPTER 24

They had decked the great hall in black, white, and blue. Banners, ribbons, and balloons decorated the balconies. Streamers crisscrossed, so the spider web of ribbons hid the expansive crystal chandeliers from view. Important dignitaries adorned the upper gallery, ensuring their physical position aligned with their societal one. Men wore bow ties or three-piece suits, while women donned their furs and smoking sticks. It was a tradition steeped in recent history, yet the compatriots slipped into the ceremony like it was bathwater.

At the front of the room, local luminaries graced the stage, eager to welcome the next generation of children to the next stage of their lives. They leaned towards each other, keen to hear or contribute to some dialog. I noted the Administrator on stage, the tall thin woman with jet black hair who integrated me into the CHIRP cadets from the Freeman household. She had the same pale makeup, the same glare in her eyes as she scanned the room, feigning interest in hushed conversation.

For the rest of us, the many hundreds undergoing The Transitioning, we sat in precisely neat rows, with a clear aisle that ran to the front. I sat in a row with other cadets, our uniforms resplendent, our backs straight, eyes forward, awaiting instruction. Because that is

how they trained us to sit. I brushed down my coat, double-checked all the fastened buttons, from waist to neck, and rested my fists on my knees. The ceremony would not only see me graduate to a higher position in the social order, but also upgrade my training pins to a fully fledged CHIRP officer.

Soft pipe music littered the airwaves, among the audible roar of whispers and authoritarian conversation. The lights lowered slightly, and the conversation hushed, ready for the anthem to be played. A crackle over the loudspeakers, like a needle settling into the record grooves, before a barrage of drums and trumpets exploded into the room. The sound fluttered onto us, then dodged behind a poll as loud cymbal crashes followed a wallowing bassoon. Then trumpets and violins riding the coat tails of a cello splattered across a canvas of a barely perceptible xylophone. A menacing organ wound out the affair. I noted, as I always did when I heard the anthem, I had heightened levels of adrenalin. I wanted to jump up and stand on my seat and shout something out. It relieved me, therefore, when a portly gentleman approached the microphone and opened official proceedings.

In excruciatingly slow movements, he laid out his notes on the lectern and perched a pair of thin wire spectacles on the edge of his nose. He seemed to pause at that point like he was reading his notes for the first time. Whistles expelled from his nose, exacerbated by the microphone, with each gurgling breath. He scratched his bald head before patting down the thick wooly patch of white hair that grew around the circumference of his skull. I didn't know who he was, but perhaps I should have because he didn't introduce himself before he started talking.

“This,” he said, before taking another elongated breath, “is a momentous day. Not just for the people in this room, but for our society overall. You have arrived here as boys and girls but will leave as young men and women of this great country. And this country can only remain great if we continue to believe in the truth. The laws of this land are absolute, and

now you are entering those lands as adults, you are required to adhere to them.” He took another long breath, seemed to once again lose his place. Flicked a page over to the next.

“Whatever your upbringing has been, whether in one home or assisted by the state, we have had your best interests at heart. And as you shift into this next stage of your life, there is a significant burden on your shoulders. You are to be social contributors, to advance your family, our country, our race, and as such, carry a multitude of responsibilities. We expect you to adhere to the policies and laws so that we all can thrive in the best possible way.”

The speaker droned on, often repeating statements or saying them in different ways with different words. Throughout it all, however, the message never contradicted, not once wavered from the obvious intent. It was another message, layered over every other message I had heard through school, in the House, when I lived with the Freemans, and throughout my cadetship. Every television and radio station. Alignment. There was no deviation from it. Impossible to ignore. Nowhere else to look, nothing else to listen to.

Eventually, the man stopped and bowed his head to strong polite applause. The clapping stopped on cue as another speaker made her way to the stage. She spoke of the virtues of *adulthood* and played back the same rhetoric as the first speaker. Another told a story of their own life growing up in a world before our current laws. His parents struggled, the impact on him. How he had wished his life was different and how lucky we were to have grown up in such an age where the government cared so. A final speaker mentioned how we must remain vigilant for those looking to disrupt our current way of life, of those who think they are above it all, of those who try to corrupt others.

“They are cancer,” he said. “A horrible disease intent on ripping our society apart.”

Fourteen minutes later, he too, concluded his oration to solid applause. He backed away from the lectern, his skeptical gaze darting around the room. He shook hands with the first speaker, who once more edged to the front of the stage with the grace of a bulldozer.

Once more, he placed his notes on the stand. Once more, he dug out his glasses. Again, he made us wait.

“Please stand,” he said with elongated syllables. It was like he was getting paid by the hour.

With a sharp squawk of metal chair legs scraping over wood, the room stood in unison, me alongside them. The speakers on stage stood also, but the invited guests on the upper balconies remained seated.

The speaker gave some final words, a summation of all those who came before, as well as his own speech. The ceremony concluded with another rousing rendition of the anthem. Violin chords chasing each other like rabbits in the bramble. Trumpets shouting at them like a farmer dismissing vermin. A solitary tambourine, crashing over top like a summer storm.

When the French horn rumbled, applause erupted from the top decks, and those standing filed out of the hall. The first speaker went first, dawdling down the stairs and down the central aisle, the rest of the congregation in tow. Then the front row, then the next. Tributaries of bodies jostled to join the stream, to join the river. The masses peeled away, like an onion losing its layers.

And that was that. When I passed the threshold of the hall and into the late afternoon sunshine, not one thing about my being had changed, yet a profound and indescribable difference washed over me. Importance and obligation sat heavily on my shoulders. Key remarks still rung in my ears. A duty to uphold. For my role as part of CHIRP, that meant so much more than the average citizen within the community.

When the last person left the hall, the crackle resumed over the speakers, until that too shushed into silence.

CHAPTER 25

I sat at the bar and ordered a beer. Drinking after the ceremony was just as much part of the tradition as the tightly packed hall, the long speeches, and the banners. As pubs and taverns across the country filled with the newly welcomed children into adulthood, I took up residence at the GAX bar. I used to know what the initials stood for, but that information was lost to the regular drunkards, who had politely vacated from imbibing alcohol for a night so we could celebrate our new freedom.

It was the watering hole closest to my hometown, as per the custom, and the pilgrimage surfaced memories of yesteryear. Reflections and epiphanies were a common side effect of the visit. Government messaging taught us to listen, re-articulate and retell our pasts to ourselves. *The authorities didn't take me away from my parents. The establishment looked after me when my parents couldn't.*

Even though the bar was a short walk from the train station, I detoured the familiar only to find the strange and distant. New owners had painted and landscaped the home I grew up in. It was smaller than I remembered. I stood at the edge of Brennan for a long while. I remembered it being empty shells of housing, the remnants of failed investment in a new

neighborhood. It, too, had changed. They had laid down fresh grass on the easement, and homes had owners. But I couldn't bring myself to step foot into the development. Couldn't bear to drop myself back into those memories. Faint memories of Father and Mother lapped against my brain, threatening to expose more. But I refused to let them. That was long ago. I was a different person than when I was a kid. Knew more. Believed different things. I was a product of the machine, and now I was a minor cog in the larger device. That's just the way things go, I guess.

When I entered the bar, having been in town a good many hours, I was met with a landscape of deeply stained mahogany. Black and white photos of high-ranking government officials lined the walls. Rustic iron bars grew out of the ceiling to hold naked bulbs that flickered when the nearby train rattled past in accompaniment to a long, blaring horn.

But the dissonance of the patrons threw me. Bellows and ruckus ensued, patrons caring not for who might listen, for that day was The Transitioning. Some felt it gave them immunity for detainment, others reveled in the opportunity to break from the oppressed shell they had been crammed into for most of their lives. As I strode through the cave-like interior, boisterous revelry simmering with friendly hushes. And I knew it wasn't me that silenced their carousing. It was the uniform.

I breathed a sigh as the bartender sat a pint of ale in front of me. There was no money to change hands. Drinks were free across every establishment in the city. It was a way of them paying as much respect to us, as they did the tradition that entangled them. The frothy head signaled a sense of relief, and I unbuttoned the top of my coat and let my shoulders drop and my back arch. Training took a back seat that night.

Eventually, the noise returned, either forgiving, accepting, or not caring that a CHIRP cadet was among them. Around me, groups celebrated their transitioning. Friends hunkered together in booths, strangers congregated around tables, the rite forming bonds that stretched

all strata of the social scale. No one cared about your background, only that we were all forging this journey together. Brothers in arms. The fight against injustice for the children. So we can evolve the human race.

While history was of no concern, wearing the CHIRP uniform was. This is why I was sitting at the bar by myself, the room absent from any other who donned the buttoned navy-blue jacket, matching pants, and silver pins that denoted my lowly rank. We're bound by a common cause unless you happen to wear the uniform. Then you might as well have been the enemy. Slopped into the same bucket as those who spoke for Laferty Bridge, who cried out about an existence beyond the imposing walls of government rule. Everyone in the bar knew if they could not meet their obligations as an adult, people like me would come knocking. I would have to be the one to make things right. That was the burden I carried.

I took a sip of my beer, let the alcohol dance down my neck. Citrus hop aroma climbed into my nose. This is what it felt like. This was the taste of metamorphosis from child to adult. The next day would be filled with the intense scrutiny that would gain momentum for the rest of our lives. But that night was about realizing we had no control over it.

A large body leaned against the bar next to me.

"Two pints," he indicated, and the barman nodded in return.

From my periphery, the patron leaned down on the bar while he waited, so his forearms took his weight, his head buried in his shoulders. Could feel his body heat. Could sense his stare.

"Quite the ceremony today, right?"

"It sure was," I said, taking a mouthful of beer.

The barman placed two pints on the bar and backed away to tend to other customers.

The customer picked up his pints, turned, then stopped. Placed the drinks back down on the surface.

“Wait, I’ve got to ask, but do I know you?”

“I doubt it,” I said, keeping my eyes forward and taking another drink.

The man paused. Picked up his drinks and left. He returned a second later, banging the pint glasses down on the bar with sufficient force to spill the contents, creamy froth working its way down the side of the glass.

“No, I do know you!” he exclaimed, an excitement in his voice that I couldn’t compute.

I turned to face him. Square jaw. Big shoulders. Barrel chest. Couldn’t place him. Looked like a lot of the instructors (guys and some girls) I ran into at the academy. I was pretty sure he could pick me up and snap me in half. But the eyes. Kindness. Understanding. The body was just a shell that held something more. A sort of warmth radiated from him, beyond mere body heat.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. “You must have me confused with someone else. It’s been a little while since I was down this way.”

“You’re a House kid,” he stated.

I shrugged again. “So?”

He thrust out his hand. “I’m Jackson Groves.”

I shook his hand. “Emerson Barnes,” I declared.

He released his grip and leaned on the bar. “Emerson. Nice name. You get that from a book?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Yeah,” I said. “Just so happens I did.” I grabbed my drink. “How did you know?”

Jackson grabbed a pint and sculled the entire contents. He slammed the empty glass down on the bar. Looked at me and smiled.

“Because I’m the one who gave it to you.”

CHAPTER 26

We took ownership of a nearby table, throwing down some coasters to denote as much. Jackson ordered some more pints, shouting across the room and displaying several fingers. He dropped his coat and scarf on the back of the chair and sat, the chair protesting under his weight.

“God damn, I still can’t believe I’m running into you after all these years.”

“You’re telling me!” I replied. “To be honest, I thought I’d never see you again.”

“What are the chances?”

It was a rhetorical question but thought I’d answer it, anyway. “About ten percent,” I stated matter-of-factly.

The drinks arrived.

“Well,” he said. “You were always a hell of a lot smarter than I was.”

We clinked our glasses together and took some large mouthfuls.

“I didn’t know you were originally from around here,” I said.

He raised his shoulders. “A bit from here, a bit from there.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I said.

The crowd thinned out and the piles of glasses grew ever higher on our table. I caught myself mid-conversation just staring at him, trying to reconcile the memory I had of Boy3461B, L, my House roommate for several years. Now and then I caught a glimpse that matched the image in my reminiscence. The way he smirked when he was getting closer to a punch line. The way he wiggled his nose when something irritated it.

The conversation bounced timeframes and tenses as we took turns recollecting our respective stories, Jackson acting out several moments of run-ins with Administrators and allocated homes. I summarized my short, yet character building, moments in the Freeman household, minus the unfortunate demise of Chloe. The energy associated with the connection made me smile and I didn't want to bring down the mood of the interaction with murder and death.

He sat back in his chair, a glassy appearance to his eyes. "So, that's why you weren't there when I returned from the showers that night."

"Yeah, it was quite the sudden departure."

He slammed a hand down on the table. "Shit. So, you never got to see Bethany."

"Who?"

He planted his hand on his face. "Sorry, Girl4101F."

I stared at him.

"S! The red head from the House."

"Oh. Yeah. What about her?"

"You were meant to see her that night at the movie showing. The night you left."

I shook my head. "Damn, I forgot all about that. So, she chose Beth?"

"You're not one to talk, *Emerson*. Besides, I think it was a great aunt's second name or some shit like that. Also, Bethany. She hates Beth."

"You two keep in touch?"

“Barely. We shared a home for a bit, which is random, right? And then there was a message here and there. It’s been a while though.”

“Oh,” I said, looking down. I tried to suppress my feelings.

“Calm down, Casanova. It was never like that between us. Besides, I couldn’t get her to shut up about you.”

“Really?” I asked, perking up.

“Oh, yeah. When she found out they allocated you, she kicked over a chair. Scored herself some detention.”

“God damn.”

“Yeah, she was a wild one... but not in a crazy way.”

More drinking. More stories. My cheeks and stomach hurt from laughter. My vision blurred and everything felt like a dream. I was lost in some wonderful watercolor memory. A moment I wanted to continue forever. It’s true what they say. You don’t realize how lonely you are until you’ve got someone to talk to and a bunch of things to talk about.

I finished a pint and sat the glass on the edge of the table. Through an alcoholic-infused lack of coordination, I misjudged the actual corner, and the glass fell. Jackson moved at remarkable speed and caught it in his large hands. He plonked it down in the middle of the table.

“That’s it,” he smiled. “I’m cutting you off.”

I couldn’t tell if his words slurred or my hearing did, but it sounded like a fairly reasonable action. Especially considering the numbness I felt in my arms and legs.

“I think you’re right,” I carefully mouthed.

“Right after these shots!”

A tray eased onto the table, cleared the pint glasses, and left shot glasses filled to the brim with an assortment of tinged liquids.

We each held a shot aloft.

“To friends,” Jackson declared.

I repeated the phrase. We clinked glasses and took our medicine.

After a wincing swallow, Jackson slammed the empty glass down on the table. I coughed wildly as the burn snaked down my gullet. My chest was on fire, burning the very alcohol that numbed my senses.

Jackson leaned back in his chair, almost tipped over backward, and laughed when he righted himself.

“God damn,” he said. “I’m glad I ran into you.”

“You and me both,” I replied. “This uniform wasn’t buying me any friends.”

“Ah yes! So, you’re going to be one of them, huh?”

“Hey,” I said, holding up my hands. “It’s not something I went looking for. Kind of fell into it.”

“Well, I’ll know you’re going to be great at it.” He leaned forward. “Always knew you’d be great at whatever you did.”

He placed an elbow on the table and misjudged. The bump knocked over the remaining shot glasses, sending a tsunami of highly potent liquid crashing into my uniform. I jumped back, my chair crashing to the floor behind me.

“Ah, shit,” Jackson moaned.

“I think it’s time I cut you off,” I replied.

He mumbled something.

“I... got something... you,” he mumbled.

“Looks like you’ve hit the wall, mate. Let me go clean up and we’ll get out of here.”

His head dropped to his elbow. He didn’t look like he was going anywhere.

I stood at the urinal and enjoyed the moment. I did not know how badly I needed to go and silently praised the alcohol for sedating my internal organs. Between the murky meanderings of my mind, I knew I was going to wake up poorly. Consciously knew the damage had been done and there was nothing I could possibly do to lessen the impact. I checked my watch, but the timepiece was a blur, a blob of white that refused to retain a continuous point in space. I wasn't sure if my hand was moving, or my head was.

I zipped up, unsure of how long I'd been standing there with no flow, and backed away from the urinal. The room swayed in every direction as I stumbled towards the basin. The black-and-white checkered tiles, mashed with the naked wood stall doors, collided with the overhead fluorescent bulbs. I bent down and splashed water onto my face, trying anything to balance out my senses.

“You're going to be one of those fuckers, are ya?”

The voice was deep, carried an accent that was foreign to me.

I turned, leaned against the sink, opened my eyes wide to allow as much light into them as possible. Saw three people, but their features, their clothes, were blobs of pale color.

“Sorry?” I got out.

“Fuckers like you took me away from my family when I was a kid. Never saw them again.”

“Same as me,” I said. But they weren't listening.

They stepped forward as a group.

“They abused me every day, because of fuckers like you.”

They were close. Could smell the alcohol on their breaths. Made me sick. Thought I was going to vomit there and then, expel the night's drink into a tidal wave of burning stomach acid.

“I’m going to make you feel the pain I felt. None of your little cadet buddies are here to protect you. Just like how I was, a scared kid when the father of the house came looking for me.”

My mind was a blur. Found it hard to reconcile exactly what he was saying and what he wanted me to say in return. Wasn’t even sure if he was talking to me, although I was pretty sure there wasn’t anybody else there.

“Look, man. I’m sorry that happened to you,” I slurred.

He tittered, and I had trouble understanding the meaning of it.

“Sorry? You’re sorry? You will be. All the people like you. I’ll bloody see to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grab him, boys.”

Blurred hands shoved me into a stall. Weight against me, pinned. Could hear buckles being undone. Could feel the cool air on my bare legs.

“Oh, boy,” the man breathed. “When I get through with you, you’re gonna wish you had never put that uniform on.”

The others holding me firm made unintelligible comments, but I could tell they carried a weight of encouragement with them.

Then my ass was bare, and I struggled for the first time as if everything leading to that moment was some kind of joke like it wasn’t happening. I bucked and fought but didn’t have the strength to break free.

“Yes, fight,” he whispered. “I used to fight as well. Until I learned that fighting just made it all worse. So much worse.”

“Fuck you,” I screamed. “Why don’t we settle this, just you and me.”

“Hold him still, boys,” he yelled.

I took a breath. Wanted to be somewhere else. Wished I had taken a piss when I got to the hotel. Then I heard a crack, followed by a heavy thud. There was a commotion, yelling, movement, but my racing heart was clouding my vision beyond the capabilities of the drink. Noises. Heavy, violent sounds. Smacks, crashes, and bangs. A cacophony of ferocity. Sounds whirled and threatened, where I couldn't hold myself together any longer.

I heaved. Continuous, loud retching. It splashed up against the wall and splattered onto the ground with wet plops. My throat burned with stomach acid. My mouth full of liquefied chunks. I spat and waited for the next heave, and the next one.

"Jesus Christ," a voice said. A familiar voice.

I slowly turned.

"You look like shit," Jackson said.

I wiped my mouth. Saw three bodies lying on the floor. "What the fuck happened?"

"I'll explain later. Best you get your pants up so we can get the hell out of here."

A groan emanated from one of the bodies. Jackson delivered a swift kick to the side of its head, silencing the noise instantly.

"Where are we going?" I said, inelegantly rectifying my wardrobe mishap.

"Away from here, before the authorities get called. This wouldn't be good for either of us. Besides, I figure it's a great time to show you something."

I buckled my pants. "What are you going to show me?"

He grabbed me by the arm.

"You'll see," he said. "You'll see."

CHAPTER 27

The next morning, I woke with a killer headache and an unsatisfiable need for thirst. Darkness turned into light quickly, dancing through the branches of the tree above me. Leaves captured the light before a slight breeze moved them out of the way and an abundance of light blinded me. Sounds of cars, trucks, and motorbikes filled the distance until an earth-shaking thunder roared past me. I pushed my hands to my ears, attempting to block out the noise, but the vibrations tore through my sensitive body and I upended my guts into the weeds.

I pushed myself out of the long grass and stood in the open field. Tried to get a bearing on my location, attempted to remember the night's events that led me to pass out in an abandoned block. A chain-link fence in front of me, the train lines just beyond that. Dilapidated structures flanked my position, closing me in, making me feel small. Their large windows were smashed, and the graffiti that adorned the brickwork was much newer than the flaking paint of the exterior.

Then I saw it. Past the fence, beyond the train tracks. The building rose out of the hill it was perched upon. My home for many years. The House I grew up in, the place where I

met Jackson. That thought alone brought back flashes from the alcohol-induced evening. A scuffle in the bathroom, Jackson grabbing my coat as he dragged me away from the pub. We took turns vomiting on the side of the road. Every part of our conversation was buried under layers of fuzzy visuals.

I spun on the dirt, looking out for Jackson's prone body. I assumed he was in no better shape than I was. Unfortunately, there was no sign of him. My head banged and pain pulsed behind my left eye. Squinting, I reached up to touch it. A sharp ache tore across my face that forced me down onto one knee. I flexed my hand and a dull throb worked up my arm. Turning my hand over, I noted the cuts and bruises on my knuckles. Buttons were missing on my mud-stained jacket, the once pristine uniform looked like it had seen war. The biggest concern was the absence of my cadet pin that usually sat above the breast pocket, throwing even more concern and doubt over the night's activities.

On hands and knees, I searched the area, hoping to find it somewhere among the clumps of tattered grass. When the hunt came up empty, I swore. Thoughts piled into my mind. Did it matter? Would anyone notice? Would I have to report it? I was moving on from that, my position in the hierarchy increasing.

I felt a vibration in my pocket, and I retrieved my phone, thanking God I still had that in my possession. Fifteen missed calls and nine messages. Most of them were from the barracks. One, however, was from an unknown number. The message simply read: *Try to forget what you did last night. But never forget what I showed you.*

Showed me? I figured the cryptic message was from Jackson, but the previous night was a complete blank, and the harder I thought, the harder it was to form a complete picture.

I saved his number in my contacts. I would check in on him eventually, but more important tasks were at hand.

The voicemails played, one after the other, as I followed the train line to the main road. Each was more concerning than the last. They had called all cadets back to the barracks immediately with no other context given. Not that we deserved any background for the request. We were still cadets after all, and they expected any order given by a superior officer to be carried out without question. That is what they trained us to do. Follow the orders. Enforce the law.

The powers dispatched cars to everyone's hometown hotel in order to expedite the process of asset centralization. And when they couldn't rouse me from my slumber in my room, when they couldn't raise me on my phone, they commenced a search.

From the back of a hailed taxi, I called my superior and stated my situation. I kept it purposefully vague, mainly because there was still a lot of detail I couldn't remember. Disappointment in the deviation from my prescribed itinerary came through loud and clear, and I hoped it wouldn't impact any future career progression within the CHIRP unit. The call ended abruptly, post the directive for me to "*hurry the fuck up*".

The taxi pulled up, and the driver waived the fee. I didn't bother arguing the gesture as I fell out onto the curb into the front of the hotel, was just glad I hadn't thrown up the entire journey. Pulled myself up with the aid of the hotel entry, found bits of sick still stuck between my teeth. The overpowering thought had me gagging once more as I opened the door to the establishment.

Then my world went dark. A hood over my head, heavy hands guiding me backward. I shouted, kicked, and fought as much as I could fathom given my condition, hoping someone would come to my rescue, for police to interject. But no one did.

"What that fuck's going on? Who the fuck are you?" I said as I squeezed into the back seat between two large brutes.

"Where is it?" someone demanded from the front seat.

“Where’s what? What are you talking about?”

“You know what!” he shouted. “The bridge. Where’s the bridge?”

“What? I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!”

The vehicle lurched forward, forcing me into the seat. Large shoulders kept me in place and my arms by my side.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded.

No answer came. We took corners at pace, with disregard for any road rules. A left, a right, some bumps on the road. Eventually, we hit gravel, the sound unmistakable. I had left all thoughts of vomiting back at the hotel. My mind was firmly on trying to get out of the situation in one piece.

“They’re expecting me. The CHIRP barracks. When I don’t report in, they’ll come looking for me. That will not go so well for you.”

Nothing.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll just throw me out and get the hell out of here.”

No response.

The vehicle pulled up suddenly, skidding over the loose road surface.

“Get him out,” the man in front ordered.

The door opened, and someone yanked me from my seat. Multiple hands pushed and pulled me across the ground. My heart was racing, my breathing erratic. Tried to think who these people were. They were asking about the bridge. They hadn’t named it, but I knew it was Laferty Bridge. It was always the bridge. Everyone knew about it. The difference was whether someone believed it existed or not. I figured they were insurgents; rebels looking for a way out of the city, away from Government rule.

My footing changed to rough concrete, the sunlight on my head and back extinguishing to a cool shade.

“Sit ‘im down,” an order blared out, echoing across the space.

Rough hands pushed me down onto a wooden chair. I waited as footsteps echoed all around me. I tried to train my hearing but there were too many of them.

I could sense something in front of my face.

“Tell me about the bridge.”

The voice came from directly in front of me.

“I told you, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re wearing a CHIRP uniform, so you know. And you’re going to tell me, or bad things are going to happen to you.”

“I told you, I don’t know what you mean.”

Something heavy collided with my head. Knocked the reality out of me for an instant. Could feel my body was off kilter; unbalanced.

“I’ll ask you a different way. Where can I find Laferty Bridge?”

Too dazed to reply. Another sharp thwack to my head. I swore and groaned.

I laughed. “There is no bridge. It’s all propaganda driven by people who refuse to live by the laws of our government.”

More pacing. Whispering. Scratching.

“Hold ‘is hand out!”

Multiple hands grabbed my arm, held it out, and pushed it down onto a table. The surface was rough and wooden. An orderly thud sent vibrations through my arm.

“Do you hear that?” he asked. “Do you feel that?”

I nodded.

“Good. That is the sound of a meat cleaver hitting the wooden table where your hand is.” More dull thumps. “This is how it’s going to work. I’m going to swing this down on your fingers. I’m going to keep chopping until you tell me something. Anything. If you don’t talk, I’ll hit the other hand. Then your feet. If you pass out, we’ll wake you up. I’m just going to keep chopping at you, until you bleed out, or you tell me everything.”

I swallowed hard. Couldn’t believe how I had become their target.

“Listen, I’m just a cadet. I don’t know anything.”

“Bullshit!” he shouted. “You know something. So, you’d better talk.”

“I told you…”

“Three.”

“Wait…”

“Two.”

“Hold on, hold on—”

“One.”

I could hear the knife swath through the air. I shouted, braced myself for impact, waited for the pain.

But there was nothing, just the thud of metal piercing wood. Then laughing. My heart was in my throat, and breathing was a near-impossible task to accomplish. Could feel warmth running down my leg.

Someone ripped the hood from my head. I swung my head around, at people in shadow, some standing in a strip of light stretching from the doorway across the floor. They were all laughing. And they all wore the CHIRP uniform. They let go of my hand and I pulled it away from the cleaver sticking out of the wooden crate. Massaged my fingers, making sure they were all still there. The hilarity at my expense frolicked in the open space of the warehouse, disappearing into the depths shrouded in shadow.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I asked.

They all clapped their hands.

“Enough,” a voice rocketed from the depths.

She came into view. The Administrator. Gloved hands silently applauding.

“Congratulations... Emerson.”

“What the fuck was that all about?”

“Why, you passed, dear Emerson. Welcome to CHIRP.”

CHAPTER 28

The Progression, or more formally known as the Trinklage Progression, had snuck up on me. Drexle Trinklage was the mastermind behind the foundation from which they created all other CHIRP laws. The government deemed it necessary to celebrate the turning of civilization by granting an extended holiday. Society deemed it necessary to abide by the laws imposed on them.

There were four types of people. Those who took advantage of the holiday to catch up with friends and family. Those who held candlelit vigils en masse near their local statue of the great lawmaker. Those who were sucked into The Push's rhetoric and ran. And, finally, those who took it upon themselves to chase the Runners down.

Those last two groups weren't that dissimilar from each other, in so far as the strengths of their beliefs. It just so happened they were at opposing ends of the spectrum. But that's how life works. Messages embedded within us, handed down from person to person, Father to Boy, Mother to Girl. The words have a stickiness to them. They sit in your brain and melt into the gray. They burrow into the subconscious until it is all you can think about. But one is right, and the other is wrong. Black and white.

As we descended into the celebratory shutdown period, citizens rushed to stock their pantry's and fill their car's fuel tanks. It was also the time where the number of graffiti reports would increase. Unknown delinquents would spray *The Push* in large block letters on buildings, bridges, signs, statues and park benches. Once reported by concerned citizens, the city would log it and issue a cleaning work order. .

I remember it used to be one here and one there, few and far between that cleaning contractors would have them gone by the next day. But now they appeared so regularly that cleaners were working around the clock. And no sooner was one cleaned off, another would appear in its place. To my knowledge, none were arrested or detained, or even witnessed performing the dangerous act.

The sun was setting on the first day of the Progression. A still gale had come in from the south, dropping the temperatures and bringing with it the tangy-sweet scent of the coastal primrose. The street myself and senior CHIRP officer Sahra Dowling were standing on was deserted, except, of course, for Dale Woodcock. Street residents had locked themselves in their homes when the emotional explosion took place, with many now hovering near their windows to observe the encounter.

My partner and I stood with one hand out, the other on the handle of the holstered weapon. Dowling was doing her best to subdue the situation, but it seemed to get worse by the minute. It happened, moments like that. Fine followed by an error in judgment, an emotional hijack of rational thought. There are actions and there are consequences. The law was black and white, they stated the intentions for everyone to know. There was no ambiguity about it. Everyone knew what would happen if they refused to comply.

But it hadn't started that way, anything but. Dowling and I were supporting a call, to assist with the removal of the eldest child from the Woodcock household. Economic

downturn meant a nearby restaurant let Dale Woodcock go where he worked as a chef. We were there when another two officers knocked on the door.

A large man answered it immediately. He was bald and sported a salt and pepper goatee. He proudly displayed colorful tattoos on his forearms. A woman stood by his side, shorter, delicate. An anguished smile on her face.

“Article C of the CHIRP regulation,” the officer stated. “You have been deemed unable to provide necessary care for your children, and as such, the state will sequester your eldest child until rectified.”

Father and Mother nodded in unison and led the CHIRP party inside. Dowling and I stood in the corner of the lounge room and watched the other two officers go about their duties. One was explaining the process to Father and Mother, while the other was packing Boy’s belongings.

Both parents nodded to the instructions and statements. Mother made cups of tea for everyone, however, we all turned them down. Policy didn’t allow for us to socialize with those truant to the regulation.

The entire process was running to the letter. However, I noted the longer we were there, the more fidgety Woodcock got, ultimately wringing a paper towel to an inch of its life and tearing it into pieces. His responses became shortened. He seemed in a rush to get somewhere.

His true intention came to a head when the child was being placed in the CHIRP vehicle. Dowling and I were standing outside the front door encouraging Woodcock and his wife to move back inside the house.

“It will be easier for everyone if you remain inside the house, Mr. Woodcock,” Dowling suggested.

Woodcock nodded yet kept his gaze on the car. Longed after it. Tried to freeze time with his vision.

The shutting of the rear passenger door was like a starter's pistol, the inciting incident. Woodcock burst between us, his movement so sudden it caught us off guard, and ran to the vehicle. I tripped over myself as Dowling caught up to him, tackling the father to the ground in front of a screaming child, a contorted face pressed against the glass.

Woodcock and Dowling sprawled across the grass as I ran to support my partner. I signaled for the car to go, an effort to quell the situation, to remove a factor. The car sped off, the face of the boy in the backseat shrinking into the distance.

The father was first to his feet, producing a futile effort of running after his son. I couldn't say for whose benefit it was for; to show his boy how much he didn't want him to be taken away, or for his own guilt of not providing sufficiently for the family.

Eventually, his sprint turned into a jog, turned into sobs in the middle of the road, the rest of the residents sinking back into their homes, into their own lives with their own concerns. Their neighbor had become what they most feared, and no doubt as curtains closed, they held their children and whispered prayers so they could escape such government intervention.

Rousing Dowling was impossible, my guess is she caught an errant elbow to her head in the scuffle, and so I stalked down the middle of the street towards Woodcock. I rested my hand on the butt of my weapon, the academy schooling kicking in. A situation they trained me for, yet unprepared to put into practice.

"Mr. Woodcock," I began. "Under provision K of the CHIRP regulation, I am allocating you Re-education."

Woodcock turned slowly, like a sated zombie. His face was wet, his breathing irregular.

“Failure to comply with my instructions,” I continued, “will lead to extreme consequences.”

As I said the words, my past flashed before my eyes. A dark street. My father rallying against an army of CHIRP officers. Guns raised. Death the preference over loss. The thoughts were so consuming I was slow to pick up on Woodcock’s sudden movement.

The barrel of the gun was like a tunnel in my vision, large and menacing, concerned what would be on the other side. My weapon was stuck in my holster. Time stretched long, warped at the moment. Woodcock’s mouth contorting, forming silent words. His eyes were wide with deranged inevitability.

The hammer clicking forward. A flash. A bullet rushed toward me. I watched it but couldn’t move. Followed it every millimeter of its journey. Couldn’t believe it was happening, that I was about to be shot. Then I wonder where it’s going to hit me, and if will I die as a result. I think about every decision that led me there, and then every decision made by everyone I’ve ever met. The spiderweb of infinite possibilities that have resulted in that very moment to become a reality. The knife’s edge of life and death. And then it hit me.

I spun down onto one knee, the impact a moment before the pain that screeched over the left side of my body. I cried out to retaliate as if my breath were strong enough to ward off a second shot, the death blow. It would be easy for Woodcock to end my life. All he would have to do is walk up to me, place the gun against my head, and pull the trigger.

But that would not solve his problem, could never alter the outcome for his family. I think he knew that. He was on a path of no return, was probably wondering the exact same things as I was: How did this all come to be? Which is exactly why he held the shaking gun against his head. Stared at me. More mouthed words from spit-covered lips. Was still shouting as he pulled the trigger. A burst of blood evacuated the opposite side of his head.

The lifeless body falling to the side. Job done. No more worry. No more concern. No more guilt.

Various CHIRP officers and inspectors arrived along with emergency vehicles. Emergency workers loaded me into the back of an ambulance, all the while answering the inspector's questions. I retold the events several times to as many Inspectors, all while the paramedic hooked me up to IV. Dowling got the same treatment, although her recollection would take longer to peel from her minor concussion.

They pushed Woodcock inside a body bag, his face covered with a heavy zip overseen by a distraught wife. Tears a complex concoction of losing her husband and having to provide for her remaining child. Her ability to earn a sufficient salary to claim her recently reallocated child slipping further from her reach.

It was a cycle I had read about many times before, but something was different when it unfolded between your eyes. I could play out her future in my mind, but what good would it do? I had no influence over her, the decisions she made, the actions she took. But I know we would remove her remaining child under the CHIRP provisions, I knew the guilt would eat at her, albeit slower than her husband. But I was certain her end point would be the same: a preference for death over having to accept the reality we declared her unable to provide necessary care for her child.

Her children would grow, a product of the state, of institutional guidance, and become fortified with the knowledge and experience of their youth. They knew the harshness of reality, that the laws that governed them were blind to all factors barring one. They did not ebb nor flow, stretch nor break. Absolute in their intention and execution. Black and white. No interpretation was necessary.

The ambulance doors closed, dropping the curtain on the performance. There was no applause nor standing ovation, just the rumble of the engine and a scene fading into the distance. The end of the play for Dale Woodcock. The end of a chapter for myself.

CHAPTER 29

Sunlight carved out a portion of the room bringing a sparkle to the usually bland cream walls of my hospital room. It felt like the afternoon, the light having that *'I can't be fucking doing this anymore'* glow the end of the day brings. But I could have been wrong. Before being pumped with a general anesthetic, the nurse said I would wake in a haze. The fact that I was awake at all must have meant the surgery to remove the bullet in my shoulder was a success.

Thirst scratched at my throat. I turned my head up towards the bench, hoping to find some refreshment. That's when I noticed the sensation. Eyes on me, that eerie sixth sense that someone is glaring at me. I looked to satisfy my urges and see an unexpected dark figure poised at the end of my bed.

I jolt as my mind pieced together the information. The face, the name, the place. Some very familiar yet out of context. The sudden tensing of muscles sent a dull thud into my brain, and I clenched my jaw to suppress the groan.

"Easy, Emerson," she said.

"Administrator," I replied, working my way up my pillow. "What are you doing here?"

Dark hair framing a white face, her presence even larger from my prone position. She hadn't aged a day since I first saw her from my first-floor vantage point, her striding into the Freeman household to investigate a murdered child.

"I thought I would come and see you personally, to let you know the investigation has closed. Nearby residents corroborate your explanation of events. There is no need to investigate further."

I coughed. "What about the wife?"

"She sought after a different truth, and they allocated her to Re-education as a result of the infraction."

"What about her other child?"

"Allocated to a house," she said blandly. "As the law dictates. As you know. Which makes me wonder why you're asking."

I shrugged. Instantly regretted it. "I just wanted to make sure they did the job to completion."

"And how do you feel about that?" she asked.

"Feel? There are no feelings, Administrator. There are facts and law, as clear and certain as black and white."

She nodded. "I see. Very good." She reached inside her long black coat and pulled out a small box. Opened it.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Something for your uniform," she said. "For being injured in the line of duty."

I looked over the silver and purple bar nestled in the box.

"You didn't have to come on down here to give me that," I said. "You could have had any number of people deliver it or wait until I was back."

She snapped the box shut. “Astute as always,” she said. “That’s the very reason I pulled you from that home all those years ago and sent you to the academy. You see things most do not, and yet you are considered in your words.” She put the box back in her jacket pocket. “You are right, I’m not here for this. Don’t care for it personally. Serving your government, upholding the laws of the nation should be enough, regardless of the dangers you face. But still, some people like others to know what they have achieved, to wear their resume on their uniform, to showcase the hurt they have endured.”

I looked to the window. The light had shifted, the shadows with it. “Why *are* you here, Administrator? Your questions about *feelings* are quite out of character, and dare I say, somewhat nonsensical, given someone of your position.”

She smiled, thin black lips like twin icebreakers pushing through the arctic.

“You are young, Emerson. You’ve faced a tough experience early in your career. I’ve seen such things break a person’s will, to upend their belief system. I wanted to ensure my investment was still sound.”

“Investment?”

“Do you think it is standard fare for house children to be accepted into the academy? I had many conversations, pulled some strings, called in favors, in order for you to learn as you did. We will always be connected, Emerson. Until one of us dies. Others will see your conduct, your progression, as my own. Any improprieties will cast a dull glow over both of us.”

“So, you want to make sure I still believe in my role as a CHIRP officer,” I said.

“As I said before, perceptive as always. I have aspirations of my own, and I can’t have those being disrupted, by you, or anyone. I will allow nothing to alter this path I have set for myself.”

I nodded.

“Get well soon. Opportunities are fleeting, and I will need people I can trust. Can I trust you, Emerson?”

“As always, Administrator. As is required.”

The Administrator looked to the window, seemingly lost in thought. “Do you know the story of the baker and the farmer?”

“No,” I replied. “Please, enlighten me.”

“A baker and a farmer established an agreement, where the baker received three pounds of butter from the farmer and in return, the farmer received three pounds of bread. After a while, the baker noticed the pieces of butter getting smaller, and after weighing them, noted they were much lighter than the agreed three pounds. So, they went to a judge, who questioned the farmer about the weights he used to measure out the butter. ‘I don’t use weights,’ the farmer said.”

“I use the baker’s bread to measure the portion,” I finished.

The Administrator bowed her head. She buttoned her coat. “I’m sure I don’t have to spell that out for you, Emerson.”

With that, she turned and marched out of the room.

I was sick of staring at the wall. Time seemed to drag on as I watched a shaft of light slowly move through the room. One point of fancy was the soft-edged shadow of a butterfly dance methodically before being devoured by a cloud. The absence of light brought with it a melancholy one has when trapped in one’s mind.

I had turned the television off. There had been a news report about my accident. They modestly positioned it, sandwiched between a story about tax cuts and a storm that resulted in power outages. The network showed my name under a picture taken from my CHIRP

graduation. It was filled with all the same rhetoric of the videos I used to watch at school. It was probably the same script, and probably would be forever.

The newsreader said some people try to disrupt the way it is, the way it should be, and the government should punish them. According to an unnamed spokesperson, the husband—the one I killed—received the outcome he was looking for, which no amount of effort by the department could have helped him realize. He was doomed before he was born. The government was doing an amazing job at ensuring men and women undertook their responsibilities.

I turned it off, not willing to waste any more mental effort on it than I had already allotted. And so, I concentrated on the light and shade that inhibited the room. Yet my mind kept coming back to some salient points. What could I have done to exact a different outcome? No, not a *different* outcome, a *better* outcome. Or better yet, how could the law change, how could society develop, to allow me to facilitate a better outcome? Why think so microscopically? Why think within the rules? If change was required, why not think bigger, beyond the classical rules and constraints?

I shook my head. Such thinking was absurd, as illogical as it was dangerous. If the Administrator could read my thoughts, I would endure a fate worse than death. Thinking in that way wouldn't help change my current situation, only dig me deeper into the abyss. It was a treacherous path and one that had no end.

A sudden bang at the door startled me. A broad-shouldered doctor wearing scrubs pushed in a cart, while a petite doctor retrieved the chart at the end of my bed.

The doctor clapped his hands. "Ah, how is zee patient today?"

I eyed them both. "Just... fine."

She tutted as she read my chart, flicked a page, and tutted again. She threw it to her colleague and approached the other side of the bed. The male doctor glanced at it before throwing it on the floor.

“Vee are studying a new form of treatment. Very experimental. Vou must be zee first patient!”

“Well, how experimental is it?” I asked, shrinking into my bed.

The female doctor put a hand on my shoulder. “Oh, very experimental. But has zee ‘uge potential.”

“Oh, well, right,” I said, exchanging glances between them.

“Are you willing to give it zee try?” he said.

“Well... I’m not... sure.”

“Of course, you are,” she said, patting my head.

Her eyes were golden, reflecting every bit of light in the room. Mesmerizing.

He clapped his hands again. “Okay zen. Here we go. Show me your dick.”

I did a double-take. “Excuse me?”

“Your dick! You must show me your dick. Doctor, would you like to see his dick?”

“Most important,” she said.

He pulled back my covers. Lifted my gown. I pushed it down.

“Wait, I’m not too sure about this.”

“Oh,” he said. “Vou are shy? Tiz okay, vee are doctors. Very respected. Very experienced. Vee have seen many dicks in our time. Zis right, doctor?”

“Ves,” she said. “Much dick. Some cock, too. Perhaps even a puzzy.”

“What?” I spluttered. I felt like I was in an alternate reality.

“Here,” he said. “I vill take a peek.”

“Listen, I think you have the wrong room. I’m here because of my shoulder.”

“Oh, Emerzen,” she said. “Vee are doctorz. We know zee shoulder is connected to the back is connected to the stomach is connected to the peniz. It iz nature.”

“Well, I’m still not sure about this.”

“No!” he shouted. “Doctor, prozeed!”

She swayed to silent music. Her eyes locked on mine, the only feature I could see between her mask and surgical cap. An oasis in the desert, a piece of art on an empty wall. They dazzled, a brilliance I had never reckoned with before. Captivating. She slowly reached down, then in one swift movement removed her top.

My eyes went wide. I couldn’t look away, didn’t want to. I felt something rub against me. I looked to my other side, where the doctor had removed his shirt and was rubbing himself against me.

“Are you aroused, Emerzon? Is vu horny?”

I shifted away. “What the fuck is going on here?”

The doctors burst out in laughter, falling onto the bed before sliding onto the floor. I watched on, waiting. Eventually the punchline became clear when he removed his scrubs. He yanked off his mask and cap and threw them at me.

“Fuck you, Jackson,” I said.

He laughed harder. I couldn’t help but smile.

“How the fuck did you pull this shit off?” I turned to her. “And who are you? His sister or something?”

Jackson regained his footing and, after wiping the tears from his eyes among a few chuckles, put his shirt back on.

“Horny?” I asked “Fucking hell! Where do you come up with this shit!”

He pulled up a chair and eased down. “Well, I saw the news report and figured you’d be just about losing your mind. And I thought I’d bring you a little present.”

“Well, thank you, Jackson. I appreciated the laugh and the fact you wanted to look at my dick.”

He sniggered. “Well, that wasn’t the present. In fact, that wasn’t even my idea.”

“What do you mean?”

He pointed at the woman standing near the end of the bed, fully clothed, yet smiling behind the mask.

“Who’s behind the mask?” I asked.

Jackson sat back, smiled. “Emerson, I’d like to introduce you to Bethany.”

I looked to the end of the bed. “Bethany?”

She removed her cap. Long, red curls fell about her shoulders, shimmering in the dull glow from the overhead fluorescent lights. Her hair alone added a glow to the room. She slowly removed her mask.

“Hello, Emerson.”

I blinked. Several times. Was instantly transported back to the House. To the kitchen. That day, that last day I saw her. When I left that night, I thought I’d never see her again.

“I... I can’t believe you’re here. Wait, how are you here?”

The smile faded from her face. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Emerson. But I’m not really here. You actually died from the gunshot wound. I guess this is what you wanted to see, what your brain is telling you what you want to see.”

I blinked again.

She burst out laughing. They both did.

“Relax,” Jackson said. “I told you the other night we were kind of in contact, and she saw the report on tv and called me. And, well, here we are.” He held out his arms as if to grace me with their presence.

I shook my head. “Well, this is... unbelievable.”

I exchanged glances with the two of them as silence gnawed at the room.

“And,” Jackson began, “now that I have brought you two together, I think you should do a little catching up.” He held a hand up to his mouth. “Besides, do you realize how many hot nurses there are in this joint?”

I stared at him.

“Neither do I,” he continued. “But I’m going to go find out.”

CHAPTER 30

The last encounter with Elvie concluded in disaster, her ending their argument by wishing he was dead, and exclaiming the desire by throwing a shot of vodka over him. The day before they were fucking. The hour before they were dancing. The minute before they were kissing. But the second before, she had deep hatred splashed across her features like a rabid dog had bitten her.

Something had happened in that last sixty seconds, and he had never found out what it was. Not that he wanted to. She out of his life was bad enough, broke him, and he dare not relive it. He lived for her, and to show that he would do anything for her, executed her parting request. That would show her, he thought. That would show how much I love her. I will give her exactly what she wanted and then she will come back to me.

But fate is a cruel mistress and intervened before Fargal could put his plan into action. Joined they be by the lips, the old hag said. Joined they be by fortune, fates be tangled, destiny is mangled. What happens one, happens two tenfold.

Fargal took the ramblings of the old woman as drunken discourse, the kind of dribble a senile proletariat would spout to gain a coin. Fargal waved her away. Be gone, you hag!

He spat, emotions still raw and unkempt within him. He should have stopped; he should have listened to her. He should have let her adorn upon him such knowledge. Yet, like the brave coward he was, he ran away from her echoing cackles that chased him down the alleyway.

That night, he held the pills in his hand as he stepped through the plan. Foolproof. That would show how much he loved her. Not only would he kill himself, he would do it several times over. Commitment shown. To the nth degree. There was no need to apologize with flowers when something so final, so absolute was upon him.

He ascended the step ladder, weaved his head through the makeshift noose, tightening the bedsheet against his rough skin. He extracted a kitchen knife from his pants and held it in front of himself. In the other hand was the pills. Swallow the medication, stab myself in the stomach. The result will force me from my perch. Foolproof. Showcasing my love.

But something didn't feel right. It affected him quickly, and from nowhere. His hand started shaking, a little at first, before waving so wildly he dropped the pills on the floor. Agony sliced through his skin as a large cut appeared in his hand, right where the pills had been. The skin flayed open, blood pooled. Bone appeared, like icebergs in a red ocean. He clenched his hand shut.

The movement shook his foundations, then they were gone. He kicked his legs in mid-air as the resonance of the ladder crashing onto tile bounced around him. Breath caught. Panic loomed. Couldn't find purchase. Everything he wanted to give, he very quickly wanted to take back. He pulled at the sheet around his neck, swung left and right, gagging, groaning. Until there was nothing, but the squeak of a swinging corpse. And then eventually that too stopped.

On the other side of town, Elvie stopped washing her hands. The blood from the cut had washed away, yet that was the least of her problems. Breathing had stopped, and the room slanted to one side. She reached up to her neck to touch something sticking out. It was

hard and covered in goo. She held her hands in front of her eyes, a red substance on her fingers. Alone, in those last seconds she was alone. Solitary because that is the decision she made. That is what she wanted the day before, but now she wanted nothing more for Fargal to fix her, to make it right. At the moment before her death, she forgave him. Wished she could play it out differently.

She remembers throwing her shot of vodka over him. The day before they were fucking. The hour before they were dancing. The minute before they were kissing. And then he called her Iskra, her sister's name.

Bethany took a deep breath and eased the cover shut. "So, what did you think?"

To be honest, I wasn't listening to the story. I was concentrating too much on her mouth, her full lips form the words. Focused on the way her fiery red curls bounced when she emphasized a syllable. Absorbed in her pale blue eyes as they traversed the page, tracing every line of every letter.

"It was wonderful," I said.

"Wonderful?" she queried, then she cocked her head to the side.

"Intriguing?" I suggested.

"You weren't listening, were you?"

I smiled. "I was trying very hard. It's just that..." Words escaped me. Wanted to say something and knew she did as well. I could read it on her face as clearly as the words in the book she held in her delicate fingers.

She brushed some locks from her face and pushed her lips together, as if purposefully keeping her thoughts within her head, fearful of the impact they may cause if escaped.

"Just what?" she eventually released on a long slow breath.

“Well, it’s been seven years.”

“Eight,” she jumped in.

I nodded. “Eight years. And yet looking at you, it’s like we’re back in that kitchen, cleaning the dishes.”

“I often think about that as well. One of my favorite memories from that time. There aren’t many, so consider yourself lucky you feature so highly.”

“I’m... I’m so sorry I left that night. I know I didn’t have a choice about it, none of us had a choice what happens to us.”

“Jackson didn’t tell you, did he?”

I glanced at her. “Tell me what?”

She placed a hand on my shoulder. The heat just about burnt a hole in my gown.

“I was also allocated that night.”

“What? Really?”

“I glimpsed you getting into a dark sedan before it took you away from the House like a startled gazelle. I mean, it was by chance we missed each other that night. If you’d been a little slower, or if I was a little quicker, then we could have had that one last goodbye.”

I looked away, cursed the series of events that took us away from each other. A half-smile greeted my returned gaze.

“Where have you been all these years?”

She took a deep breath that shuddered in her lungs. “Here... there... everywhere.”

I could tell she wanted to tell me, yet something was holding her back. Her eyes darted around the room. Fear chased away the uncertainty that spread across her features. She closed her eyes and took long slow breaths. I watched her shoulders rise and fall. It seemed like she was trying to erase her memories.

“It...” she started. “It wasn’t good.”

“Hey,” I said grabbing her hand. “It’s okay, you don’t need to tell me.”

Her eyes glistened as she fought against her history, a mental battle that wouldn’t change the outcome of the war.

“I’ll tell you. One day I’ll tell you. Tell you everything. But not now.”

There was no training from the academy that could have helped me navigate that moment. No script I could have recited. No laws, rules, or regulations I could refer to, to back up my actions.

I squeezed her hand tighter and clenched my jaw. “Whenever you’re ready. I’m here.”

We stared at each other. Two brains connecting on a molecular level. Her eyes cleared, her smile soft. I knew my gray matter was bathing in oxytocin and dopamine, that a series of chemical reactions were taking place. And I loved it so, so much.

She reached out and placed a finger on my lips.

“What are you doing?” I said through squished lips.

“They were trembling,” she said.

I pulled her hand away but kept a hold of it. She didn’t pull back.

“I think not,” I said. “My lips don’t tremble.”

“I think you should have a look in the mirror sometime.”

Silence. Comfort. We searched each other’s eyes. Subtle movements, a blink of an eye, a curve of the mouth. Both needing to say something that was glaringly obvious yet frightened for the reaction of the other person. Which was ridiculous. How could there be any doubt?

“I know we can’t go back in time, but I wish I had asked you something way back then,” I said. My heart was beating unbelievably fast. Hammered in my chest.

“And what is that?”

“If I was brave enough, I would have asked to kiss you. If I had asked, would you have said yes?”

“Probably,” she said with a slight lift in her shoulders.

“Probably?” I asked, gently pulling her closer.

“Most definitely,” she said as she edged closer still, her arms propping her up on the bed.

“Can I kiss you now?”

Closer.

She nodded.

Closer.

Then we closed our eyes.

And our lips found each other.

CHAPTER 31

My first day back in a CHIRP office had been uneventful. Paperwork. Meetings. Informal conversations. Reports. A never-ending laundry list to get myself back up to speed. It was the calm before the storm. The building in Stooming Hills, not only rehabilitated officers back to the line of duty but was also the oldest of all the buildings under the CHIRP banner.

And as such, I was very much surprised when Administrator Raxiel graced me with her presence. I was in a small meeting room compiling answers to inane questions about my mental state when a bark of knuckles on wood interrupted my train of thought.

I stood immediately when I saw her standing in the doorway. “Administrator Raxiel What are you doing here?”

“My work takes me everywhere,” she said. “What number are you up to?”

“Test or question?” I retorted.

“Both.”

“Fourteenth test, question number thirty-eight.”

She pursed and nodded. “Pretty good effort for your first day back. To be honest, I wasn’t expecting to see you for another week.”

“I was climbing the walls at home, Administrator. Just needed to get back into something.”

She nodded. “Yes, sometimes the mind can be a dangerous place.”

“I couldn’t agree more. What brings you by? Surely not just to see me.”

She looked at her watch. “I was hoping we could have a little conversation.”

I gestured for her to enter the room and sit, but she shook her head in reply.

“I have another matter to attend to,” she said. “I was hoping we could walk and talk.”

“What about the tests?”

“Believe it or not, Emerson, they will be here tomorrow for you to finish them.”

“How did you know I was here today? I wouldn’t have thought my return to work would have made it onto your daily briefing.”

She smiled. “I know everything, Emerson. Never forget that.”

I glanced briefly to the unfinished test paper, but my mind was already whirring in anticipation for the conversation with Raxiel.

Walking through the front doors, I noticed a dirty, brown sedan parked outside the entrance. The tires were underpressurized, and the glass was cloudy. The chrome bumpers were speckled with rust. Two officers stood at the front of it, scratching their heads and looking around for the owner.

Administrator Raxiel didn’t miss a beat, never did. She had been talking about The Push since we walked down from the upper floors, and now we were outside, she ignored whatever commotion was taking place and focusing on her objective. I skipped to keep up with her brisk strides, eager to hear all of what she had to say.

“Graffiti is at an all-time high,” Raxiel said. “Up forty-six percent. Posters are being affixed to the side of government buildings. Flyers are being dropped on schools. The Push are ramping up their efforts.”

“To what end?” I asked, puffing slightly.

“That is what I’m trying to figure out. The movement has been slow and deliberate. It is not a flash-in-the-pan trend or phase we would grow out of, as some thought. Trends come and go. People change, and new replaces old. But the fact is, The Push has been around for decades, and is likely they will be around for decades more. Endurance is their forte.”

We strode through the car park like a pair of soldiers on sentry duty, over rows of empty spaces, until we reached the Administrator’s vehicle. The low-rise CHIRP office building looked like a house in the distance.

“I thought your assigned parking spot would have been closer.”

“I’ve not forgotten where I’ve come from, Emerson. And neither should you.”

Commotion in the background as more officers arrive to the car. From where I was standing, I could tell they were trying to move it. A few had gotten behind to push, while others were shouting directions, their voices carrying over the wind.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

“Churches and laundromats,” she said. “I want you to make a note of every location you drive past and if there is anything out of place, no matter how small, I want you to report it directly to me.”

“Not my commanding officer?”

She shook her head. “We don’t have time for filtered information, Emerson. I need it direct from you.”

Further disturbance in the background as the officers (and whoever else got roped into the situation) were unsuccessful in their attempts to shift the piece of shit vehicle from in front of the building. Shouts from someone, presumably the highest-ranking official on the scene, started pointing at the vehicle. An officer from the rear walked around to the side of the vehicle and opened the door.

The decrepit hunk of metal instantly ignited, disappearing in a ball of white light. The earth rumbled, and before I could shield my eyes from the glare, a hot tornado attacked my face. The grumble morphed into a deafening roar, sending a sonic boom out in three hundred and sixty degrees. The shockwave crashed into me, and I fell back amid a cacophony of smashing glass and tumbling brick.

Then silence. Peaceful. Serene. The sky looked particularly calm with a slew of scattered cloud reposing in the blue. At first, I wondered what I had seen and felt, and why I was lying on my back staring into the heavens. I was sure Administrator Raxiel would yell at me for lying down on the job, but lying on the bitumen, surrounded by small bits of rubble and glass, numbness skittled over me.

And then all at once, everything hit me. I sat up and the scene before me was something I had never encountered before. A large black plume rose into the sky. Fire lurched out of broken windows, adding to the billow. One whole side of the building was missing. The officers that were standing near the vehicle when it turned into a call of white light, were entirely absent. Other officers, coughing and spluttering in charred clothing ran from the office.

“Are you alright, Emerson?”

The voice came from somewhere over my shoulder. Sirens filled the airwaves. CHIRP vehicles at first, wafting in from a distance away. But then a long, drawn-out howling noise joined in the harmony. The pitch increased intensity to create an undulating siren.

I pushed myself off the ground. Turning, I stumbled into the car, catching myself on the hood. A large crack ran the length of the windshield. I couldn't tell if the ringing in my ears was in my head or emitting from the remnants of the Stooming Hills CHIRP building.

Raxiel brushed debris from her clothes and repeated the question.

“Fine,” I said. “You?”

“Same. Can’t say as much for the building though.”

“What the hell happened?”

“A devastating explosive device,” she coughed as she saddled up beside me. “The Push, no less. I knew they were close to doing something, I just didn’t think it would be this.”

Burnt and torn paper fluttered through the sky like a thousand lame doves.

Raxiel pulled out a cigarette and lit it. “I guess you’ll receive another pin for your uniform,” she said.

I looked down at my chest. I didn’t need nor want another pin. Didn’t want the ones I had.

“What do you think we should do?”

She drew in a lungful of smoke. “There’s nothing we can do but wait for emergency crews to arrive.”

Raxiel was right. Those that were alive got themselves out of the building.

The rest of them were dead.

CHAPTER 32

Jackson placed the pint glasses down on the table. Froth bubbled and ran over the side like a lava flow. He grabbed me from behind and wrapped his arms around me.

“Thank fuck you are okay,” he said. “I can’t believe you were there when that bomb went off.”

“I was just lucky enough to be outside the building. You can thank Administrator Raxiel for that. If she didn’t want to talk, I’d be at the morgue right now.”

“Christ,” Bethany said. “Then I’d have to sit here and listen to Jackson drone on about his girlfriend all by myself!”

“You better make sure you invite her to the wedding, Em,” Jackson said. “It’ll be good luck.”

“What?” I stumbled. “What wedding?”

Jackson held up his glass. “To Fairy Godmother Raxiel.”

We clinked glasses and drank and laughed. Lucky to be alive, even luckier to have the friends I did. The horrors of the day slowly subsided into the subconscious, replaced with Jackson’s corny jokes and Bethany’s dreamy gaze.

Local and foreign rock music dominated the airwaves, guitar, drums, and vocals mashed together to create a scrawling menagerie of sound that allowed patrons to talk freely with their friends. I looked around the gloomy interior, at the clientele nestled in leather chairs against patchworked brick walls, to others standing around tall tables. Naked bulbs hung from the ceiling that gave an industrial feel to the interior yet did little to illuminate the space. It was the kind of place where shadow dominated light, the perfect place to converse unreservedly about potentially prohibited topics, without fear of reprisal.

“You know,” I said. “You can tell people’s relationships by how they’re sitting. Take those two for instance.”

I furtively pointed to two men sitting in leather armchairs against the far wall.

“What about them?” Bethany asked, following my directions.

“Well, for starters, the guy in the hat is sitting bolt upright, and gripping onto the arms of his chair so hard that his knuckles are turning white. Why is he still wearing his trilby and trench coat? It’s because he’s uncomfortable. He doesn’t want to open himself up. Plus, it means he can leave at a moment’s notice, without the rigmarole of gathering his items. A fast getaway.”

“This is exciting,” Bethany said. “Tell me about the other guy, the one with the mustache.”

“Easy,” I said. “He’s sitting with his legs crossed.”

“So?”

“So, his hands are between them. Who sits like that? He’s concerned his gestures may secretly reveal some kind clue as to his allegiance to a subversive entity.”

“You think it’s enough to arrest them?”

I cocked my head. “They have arrested people for far less. I wager if the music cut out right now, they would both utterly shit themselves. Besides, they’ve been nursing those beers in front of them since they sat down. Probably warm by now.”

A clearing of a throat.

We looked to Jackson.

“Warm?” he asked. “You mean like these are getting? Now, shut up for a second and drink.”

We picked up our assigned beverage.

“A toast,” Jackson said, holding his glass aloft.

“We toasted my fairy godmother earlier,” I bellowed.

“To Emerson.”

I looked over to Bethany, who repeated the announcement.

“Fate,” Jackson continued, looking at me, “brought us together, then tore us apart, and now, through God’s graces and divine will, has brought us back.”

“I almost died today, just in case you forgot.”

“Brought us back together,” Jackson repeated.

He clinked his glass against ours and took a large drink. I looked over to Bethany who smiled again, shrugged, and drank.

I took a drink, let the ale work its way down my throat. “Is there some religious bent I need to know about?” I asked, looking to Jackson.

He laughed. “Just thought it was appropriate to mention that, if such an entity existed, they may have had a hand in our assembling.”

He slapped my back. A shudder of dull pain rippled across my shoulder blades, causing me to groan.

“You’re not still in pain?” Jackson asked.

“Only when someone smacks my gunshot wound,” I replied.

“They have released you, for what? Days?”

“Yeah... Days. Exactly. I get out of hospital one day, and almost end up in a coffin the next.”

“Ah, don’t worry, you’ll be back at CHIRP in no time. Driving a superior around, fetching them coffee, picking up their dry cleaning. You know, being their bitch.”

I looked over to Bethany.

“You going to tell him?” she said.

“Tell me what?” Jackson asked, switching glances like he was watching a tennis match.

“CHIRP have seen it in their wisdom to give me a promotion.”

“What?”

“A promotion. It seems like I’m going to get my own bitch to do my bidding.”

Jackson sat back on his chair. “Well, well, well. My little Emerson is growing up.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “When’s Marie arriving?”

Jackson checked his watch. “After her shift at the hospital. About... forty-five minutes. Add to that the usual bullshit, let’s call it an hour.”

“I’d like to think I’m partially responsible for you two getting together,” I said.

“Because she took your blood pressure at the hospital?”

“Because if it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have been at that hospital in the first place.”

“Fine,” he replied. “I’ll give you partial credit. Anyways, it was the old Jackson charisma. What woman can resist my charms?”

“Wow,” Bethany said. “Sounds serious. You keep talking like that and you’ll ask her to marry you after the first blow job.”

Jackson sighed. "You're such an animal. What we have is..."

I waited for the rest of the sentence, but it wasn't coming. His attention was well and truly taken by a large screen on the far wall. It displayed a man in his mid-fifties, a cloud of gray curly hair sat on his head. He stared down the barrel of the camera, his eyes behind the lenses of gold wire-rimmed glasses were a cold, pale blue. A ticker tape of information ran along the bottom of the screen.

"Did you hear about this guy?" Jackson asked.

"I heard some watercooler conversation today about it."

"I haven't seen it," Bethany said.

"Apparently this guy," I started, "was siphoning funds, essentially hiding them from the government to reduce his visible wealth."

"Helped by his accountant I should add," Jackson furthered.

"Yeah, that's the accusation," I said.

"Right," Bethany said. "So, he wouldn't have to take in any House kids."

"Exactly," I said. "Earned him some Re-education. He'll really enjoy that."

"Are you going to tell me what that entails?" Jackson asked.

I looked away. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"You don't know, do you?"

I took a breath. "No. No, I don't. That's an entirely different franchise. For your information, I wouldn't want to undertake it, let alone know what they do to people. Rumors are it isn't pretty. But we knew that already."

Jackson gulped down his drink. "You can see why he did it though."

I looked at him. "What do you mean? If he has the means, it's his civic duty to care for society's children. Why shouldn't he?"

Jackson held up his hands. “Hey, don’t read the rule book to me. I was just sayin’, that’s all.”

“He knew he would get caught.” I took a drink. “They always find out. There is no hiding away from it. Acceptance is the easiest route. Undertaking your government declared obligation is the painless pass. He was crazy to do it.”

“He wasn’t crazy for doing it,” Jackson said. He finished his drink. “He was crazy for getting caught. There are other ways to do it.”

I looked to Bethany and back to Jackson. “Listen. We’re friends. I can overlook these things you’re saying. Rightly or wrongly. But if anyone else hears them and reports you, I won’t be able to do anything to save you. I’m comfortable with that, but not in front of Bethany. Her position within the Information Franchise makes her susceptible to random checks.”

Bethany held her hand out. “I can take it just fine. As you said, Emerson, we’re friends. We look out for each other. In whatever way our views crisscross, connect or contrast, it doesn’t change who we are.”

“So, tell me, Emerson. Is you turning a blind eye better or worse than speaking my convictions?”

I smiled weakly. “I guess we’re in the same boat. We all are. Think about what you want. It’s what you do that’s more important. You’re my best friend, Jackson. I don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

“Jesus,” Bethany butted in. “You two want a room or something? Can’t wait for Marie to arrive.”

Suddenly, Jackson stood up, eyes glazed over. “Shit!” is all he said.

We looked at him and then at each other.

“What is it?” I asked.

A siren blared from the speakers, loud enough to send vibrations running across the table. It penetrated my skin, stole my breath, ate away at my organs. When it ended, the room fell silent, save for the ringing in my ears.

The government emblem emblazoned the screen, followed by a countdown timer. I could feel the nervous tension in the room. These types of announcements were few and reserved for the most special and important declarations. In my lifetime I had seen two. The first was to inform all citizens about the Re-education centers, to showcase the consequences of thinking beyond government scope. The second was to announce the death of Drexle Trinklage, stated as being the forefather of all that came before, that set us on the road away from purgatory.

Usually, the Committee was quiet, hidden, secretive. Unknown by the population. Even within CHIRP, and by extension other arms and legs of the government, these people were unfamiliar. They decreed the laws that filtered down through the ranks of government until they landed on the citizens themselves. But not today. Today was different.

The numbers disappeared into the black background, then faded to show seven people standing behind a lectern, three men and four women. They were dressed in their finest tan suits and blue dresses. A monument to the nation's colors. Tan to signify the sprawling landscape, blues for the oceans that lay beyond. They lit up as camera flashes sparked, one after the other in rapid succession. The nation's flag flanked the stage, hanging limply against its stand.

A woman, standing in the middle of the seven stepped forward to the microphone, as the reporters paid due respect and fell their equipment into calm. Her stern gaze burned through me, and it felt like she was looking at me, and only me. Wrinkles creased around her eyes and forehead. Solemnness flared.

She opened her mouth to speak, and I thought we would all be sucked into the black hole, like none of it was real. Their impending news made breathing impossible.

“We announce, with great excitement and solidarity, that we have entered a war with the North.”

A collective gasp pulled the air from the room. Wars were unheard of, and there were certainly no wars in any book I had read. Even at school, there was no talk about any major conflict that took place. The rhetoric was solely on the domestic war, the fight against The Push, against those who insisted one could live outside the government. It was such a foreign concept, yet every single person in that bar knew what it meant. Still, there had been no murmurings, no rumors, no information, to suggest a conflict was brewing over the borders, across the oceans. The news of the war was just as shocking as trying to understand the need for the war at all.

“Today, our enemies destroyed a government building.” Jackson placed a hand on my shoulder. “Shortly afterwards, the North claimed responsibility for the attack. This led to the Committee convening and just moments ago, formally entered into conflict.”

She stared down the barrel of the camera.

“We are asking for all to sacrifice themselves for the person sitting next to them. The might of our army will grow to crush the opposition. We will win over our enemies. There is no other outcome. We wish all a swift return.”

The screen faded to black. I realized I had been holding my breath the entire announcement and released the carbon dioxide to appease my screaming lungs.

Then, a newsreader appeared on the screen. Shiny brown hair neatly parted. A navy-blue suit and crisp white shirt filled the view.

“Given the latest announcement from the governing rule, we require all single citizens aged between twenty-one and forty-nine on this day to attend a War Admissions center

within the next forty-eight hours for immediate deployment to training camps in the outer rim. We will deal with those found in non-compliance harshly, as per the laws of our great country. May God have mercy on us all.”

The screen once faded, and music pumped back into the void.

I looked over at my friends.

“What the fuck are you going to do?”

Jackson finished his drink. Reached across and grabbed mine.

“What *is* there to do?” he mumbled. “House kids will be the first to be selected for the front line, and no doubt act as fodder for the higher classes.” He downed the rest of my drink.

“Not even on the front lines of war are people equal.”

“Well, there’s got to be a way out of this,” Bethany said.

Jackson and I looked at each other before our gazes fell to the table. There was no way out of it. Jackson fit the profile they were looking for. It was impossible to post-date a wedding; there were far too many people and systems involved in the process. Evasion would be met with a punishment worse than the ugliness of war. No, Jackson was bound to the conflict, whether he liked it or not.

“Forget about it,” Jackson said. “There’s nothing I can do about it. There’s no point fighting the current.”

And so the night carried on in a somber ambience, as conversations once more returned to hushed tones, the premises under a cloud of whispers. Jackson remained obtusely quiet. Marie arrived, but the conversation remained sparse and stiff, with internal oration taking soaking time. Drinks were sipped, but never to the point of replenishment.

In the end, we stood outside the bar and watched each other’s breath condense into mist. We buried our hands in our pockets, the alcohol doing little to guard us against the

elements. Goodbyes, handshakes and hugs were given and received, and then, with the promise that we would talk soon, we went our separate ways.

But life goes on, and carrying on, is all one can do.

CHAPTER 33

OFFICIAL CHIRP COMMUNIQUE—INTERNAL USE ONLY

DATE: Soop 24

FROM: Sergeant Emerson Barnes

TO: Administrator Raxiel (Special Projects Franchise)

FTEO (FOR THEIR EYES ONLY)

REASON: Requested

TOPIC: Location Survey

MEMO:

Location 1: Blessed Eternal Church of Saint Christoffer. The doors were locked. After banging on the doors for a few minutes, I was informed by a Father Katz that services were closed for the day due to a potentially harmful gas leak. Katz said normal services would resume the following day. I made a note to visit this location again.

Location 2: Mr. Pan's Dry Cleaning and Laundromat. Sat outside in my vehicle for thirty-three minutes. Three people entered the store during this time. One dropped off clothes, one picked up clothes, one washed their own clothes using their facilities. Lucy Wan, who

works behind the counter, is inhospitable, but that could have been the uniform. I have made a note to return in plain clothes for further inspection of their operation.

Location 3: Kwik Klean Laundromat. I visited this location after my shift. After waiting outside for thirty-seven minutes, no one had gone in or come out. I ventured inside and found four people engaged in a conversation, that ceased on my arrival: a broad-shouldered woman, a man wearing a driver's cap carrying a basket, a woman with blonde hair folding sheets, and a child (Girl) holding a doll. Nothing more to report on this location.

XX END COMMUNIQUE XX

OFFICIAL CHIRP COMMUNIQUE – INTERNAL USE ONLY

DATE: Soop 26

FROM: Administrator Raxiel (Special Projects Franchise)

TO: Sergeant Emerson Barnes

FTEO (FOR THEIR EYES ONLY)

REASON: Reply

TOPIC: Location Survey

MEMO:

Thank you.

XX END COMMUNIQUE XX

CHAPTER 34

It was a bleak Wednesday many months later when I found myself in a room at Pundit. It seemed smaller than every other CHIRP office I had been into, but that matched the Internal Review Franchise's directive. A place you hated to go to, and that terrified you if you stayed.

The man clicked on the recording device. Sounded like twin gunshots echoing around a canyon. He stated his name and the incident he was there to talk about. I knew who he was, understood what his job entailed. Yet I found the room to be unbearably hot and the walls closing in around me. Breathe, I told myself. If you just breathe, you'll get through it just fine. That was all part of the policies and procedures of the office. I wasn't the first to be in this situation, and I would not be the last. However, my incident was unique to the others, as the investigator would soon discover.

"Sergeant Emerson Barnes. I am Investigator Wheatley. For this interview, I shall refer to you as Sergeant Barnes. Are you comfortable with that?"

I nodded.

“Stating for the record, Sergeant Emerson Barnes nodded at my request to call him Sergeant Barnes. I shall refer to the subject as Sergeant Barnes for the remainder of this conversation.”

“That’s exceedingly formal,” I stated.

Wheatley adjusted himself in his seat, seemingly put out by the accusation of formality. He took his long pinky finger and ran it along his hairline. “It is formal because that is the way we should do it. Have you something to say about the procedures of the Internal Review Franchise?”

“Not at all,” I said. “Given the nature of the incident, I thought this was just going to be an informal conversation.”

“Sergeant Barnes, it is because we are having this conversation at all, that it is formal. We do not carry out informal conversations. Now, without further delay, tell me about the incident that happened today.”

“Can I get some water, please?”

“If it’s all the same to you, Sergeant Barnes, I’d rather you just tell me what happened. The sooner you convey the events, the sooner I can make a verdict on the matter at hand. Now, please, tell me about the events that transpired in the apprehension of the Runner Michael Shaw.

I gazed into the man’s nondescript eyes, his boy-like features. It was stupid of me to push him on process and procedure, imprudent to delay answering his questions. It’s just that I needed to get my head straight. Images of the day fluttered before my retinas; voices barked in my ears then quieted to a deadly silence. The man’s pleading eyes beyond the end of the barrel, the child’s screwed-up face behind rain-splattered glass, the arc of the casing as it ejected from my firearm and stuck into the mud.

“Sergeant Barnes. I’d appreciate it if you told me what happened. I don’t want to get the Administrator.”

“Where would you like me to start?”

He looked over my face. A scratch down the side of my face, the blood long since dried. The bruise under my ear, getting redder by the minute. A split lip, that I couldn’t help running a tongue over and savoring the tang.

“I’m interested to know where those marks came from. Let the record show that Sergeant Barnes’ medical records have been entered into the file.”

“Well, they came from—.”

Investigator Wheatley held up a hand. “Actually, Sergeant Barnes, I think it’s worth going back a bit, to the start of the day.”

“The start of the day?”

“Yes.”

I sat back in the seat, gingerly touched my eye. “A letter,” I said. “The day started with a letter.”

“And whom is this letter from?”

“My friend.”

“For the record, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Jackson. Jackson Groves.”

“And do you still have the letter?”

I shook my head.

“Let the record show Sergeant Barnes responded in the negative. Why don’t you have the letter anymore?”

“Does it matter?”

“If it’s all the same to you, Sergeant Barnes, I will make the judgment call as to what is important and not important. You are drawing extremely close to obstructing my investigation into your actions. I will ask again. Do I need to inform the Administrator of your refusal to answer the questions?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know. I have done nothing wrong. I have nothing to hide.”

“Very well then, Sergeant Barnes. Tell me about the letter.”

Dear Emerson

It’s just a few weeks before we’ve finished basic training. Five weeks! Can you believe that? Five weeks is all it takes to teach us [REDACTED] in the depths of God knows where. They tell us [REDACTED] They said if I continue on my current trends, I’m either going to make Sergeant or be dead within the opening minutes of the conflict. They suggest whatever the outcome, this is a great honor. [REDACTED]. I can’t tell whether I’m excited or shit scared. Anyway, they’re allowing us a few days at home before we ship out. Would be great to catch up with you.

Signed

Jackson Groves

I folded the letter back up and slotted it into the envelope. It bore the official stamp of the nation, postmarked by the National Security Franchise. It surprised me how speedy it had arrived from the unknown location of the training camp.

Rain gently splashed on the windscreen of the CHIRP vehicle, warping the gray world beyond. A click. Reaching down, I extracted the lighter from the dash. The end glowed orange, and I held it against the edge of the envelope. It quickly caught, shriveling into a fragile black mess.

The amount of redaction concerned me, innocent intentions or not. In fact, it surprised me the Information Franchise let this letter through at all. Regardless, I was sure Jackson had little intention of being shipped off, let alone finish basic training. He'd work his way out of it, he was crafty like that. Besides, his beliefs were powerful enough to quell the push for all to protect the nation. And he didn't believe in the war as much as he didn't trust the government.

A row of flame charged across the white landscape, devouring all that stands in the way. No government seal, nor stamp, nor mark could stop it. They were all doomed. When it got close to my fingers, I wound the window down and flicked it outside. The drizzle would do little to stop the elimination of the evidence. Perhaps it was paranoia, an extreme reaction. I was happy with that.

The driver's door popped open, and the driver slid in. He handed over a cup.

"Your coffee, sir."

I accepted it gladly. "Thank you, Iggy. Very much appreciated."

"All part of the service, Sergeant."

I eased off the lid, breathed in the aroma. The best pick-me-up on a dreary Wednesday afternoon. Second to none. I sipped in the warmth, let the caffeine burn my tongue before swallowing.

"Alright, Iggy. It's been almost a month. What have you learned?"

Iggy spluttered into his coffee.

I looked over at him. Lean and clean-shaven. I once ran errands at my Commanding Officer's whim... getting coffee, buying lunch, proving myself. Even picked up his dry cleaning once.

"Is everything okay, Iggy?"

He coughed again. "Yeah, just wasn't expecting the question, that's all. I've seen you be firm and unyielding regarding the acts in which we operate. Yet provide warmth and guidance they don't talk about in training. It's actually great to see someone carry out the law in such a way."

"And what do you hope for?"

"Hope, sir?"

"Yes, hope."

He thought about it for a minute. Stared out the dotted window, formulating a response. Possible thinking about what I wanted to hear.

"Well, I hope I do my job well, and no one pulls a gun on me."

I nodded.

"Is that the right answer?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's *an* answer."

He looked down at the cup he was nestling in his hands.

"Well," he said. "What do you hope for?"

I took a sip and eased my coffee into a cup holder. "I hope to be out of a job."

"Woah. It sounds like you don't enjoy doing what you're doing, that you're against the laws of this country."

"That's a leap, Iggy. Think about why we're here. Our primary purpose is to take children from their homes because the Authorities, based on some equation, say the parents can't afford to care for them. All of that aside, if all parents could afford to raise their

children, there would be no need for us. There is no treason to wish that all parents could earn sufficient salary to look after their children.”

Iggy chewed it over. “I guess not.” He snapped his head around as if a lightning bolt struck him. “What if a Father, or Mother for that matter, is holding a gun against their child’s head? What do you do then?”

“And we’ve made aware to the parent the consequences of their actions?”

“Of course. They are unrelenting that if they can’t look after their children, no one should. They’ve thumbed their nose to all rules and regulations, even naming their child against parent guidelines. You are the assigned unit, and your partner has a clean shot to take the parent out.”

“Take the shot,” I fired back without hesitation. “Nothing is more important than the safety and security of the child. That is why we exist, after all. That is why the government have their laws in place. Once we cite the act and potential penalties announced, there should be no hesitation to bring a swift resolution to the event.”

As I said the words, I thought back to witnessing Father’s destruction at the hands of CHIRP officers so long ago. They read the act. They warned what would happen if he didn’t comply. He had a gun. And they didn’t hesitate. Father couldn’t bear it, had snapped under the pressure. He was more than that, so much more than that. Arms so big they wrapped around me twice. So big and brave that he would let nothing hurt me. He could protect me from a thousand starving wolves. Dead.

It was a horrific thing to watch, and a scene that continued to play out for me. Somewhere inside of me, I thought things could be different, that someone could interpret the laws slightly differently to get a better outcome for the family. Yet I knew there was no wiggle room in the CHIRP Acts. There was only compliance or consequence. No middle

ground, no gray to move in, no adjustments for circumstance. They were as written, and harsh penalties existed for those who colored outside the lines.

“Emerson?”

I rubbed my eyes. “What is it?”

“Did you hear that?”

I looked over at Iggy. “Hear what?”

“The call on the radio. A runner. Are we going to attend?”

I hadn’t heard, was too caught up in my story.

“It’s not our business to attend,” I said. “That call is for the Enforcers. We patrol neighborhoods, giving citizens a perpetual authoritarian presence, the knowledge we are always here. We officiate the movement of children from one location to another. We do copious amounts of paperwork. But we don’t chase. It is the Enforcers who chase, for that is their gear in the governmental machine.”

Iggy shrugged. “Just thought it would give us something to do. It’s only twelve minutes away. Why let the Enforcers have all the fun?”

I sighed.

A crackle filled the airwaves, followed by another notification for all available Enforcer units. An event had turned a routine assignment on its head. The children were on the run, and they needed to be apprehended.

I stared into Iggy’s eager eyes.

“Perhaps we could check it out,” I said. “Give those balaclava-wearing idiots a hand.”

“I heard they weren’t that bright.”

Smirked. “An Enforcer is someone who can fire a gun better than they can construct sentences, Iggy. But that’s not their fault. Some people were born to make the rules, others born to follow orders.”

“But we all follow the rules,” Iggy stated.

“Ain’t that the truth, Iggy. Ain’t that the truth!”

We joined the queue and waited for our turn. Three Chaser vehicles arrived at the address before us. Boxy cars with bull bars over shiny metal grills looked just as aggressive and menacing as the occupants in them.

One by one the vehicles would roll up and the assigned officer would lean in the window and share their information. Then, with a squeal of tires, the car would speed off down the street, screeching around the next corner and out of sight. Three or four Chasers per vehicle, on the hunt for the child.

It wasn’t long before it was our turn, and we edged forward like we were about to give our order in a drive-through restaurant. The CHIRP Officer leaned in the window. The light rain continued to fall, and Christian Daniels copped the lot. Rain drops ran the lengths of hair that shielded his eyes like prison bars.

Daniels leaned into the shelter of the car. Droplets beaded off his face and splashed onto Iggy’s pants.

“Good afternoon, Christian,” I said. “What’s the situation?”

“Routine assignment,” he said. “Parents are here, but the child is missing. We’ve officially got a Runner.”

“Specs?”

“Boy Shaw. Six years old. Brown hair, brown eyes. Here’s a photo.”

Christian handed over a simple black frame that held a color image. Round face, dimples, gaps between his white teeth. “I hope you guys are the last,” he said. “The house didn’t have many pictures of the Boy.”

“You’ve searched the property?” I asked.

“Twice,” he said.

“So, what? The kid ran off by himself?”

He shrugged. “I guess so. They have dispatched a unit of Detectives to see if they can shed some more light on things.”

“Where the hell is a six-year-old going to go by themselves?” I mused.

Christian shrugged. “Don’t know. But my partner overheard the parents talking about a bridge. He asked them if they meant Laferty Bridge.”

Laferty Bridge. It was always Laferty Bridge. People either talk about it, seek it out, or try to forget they ever heard it.

“Got a little rough with them,” Christian continued. “Both of them. You know, within the guidelines. But they said nothing else.”

“Maybe the Detectives will have more luck. Do you know how much of a head start the boy’s got?”

A shrug.

“Okay, Christian,” I announced. “Anything else we should know?”

“That’s about it. I’m taking the parents in for further questioning and Re-education after the Detectives are done with them, if Frankie doesn’t kill them first.” He innocently chuckled to himself. “Frankie will stay here in case the kid turns up. Already made himself a cup of tea, the bastard, while I stand out in the rain.”

“The joys of being a Sergeant,” I told him. “We’ll report in if we find something.”

Christian stepped back from the car as Iggy smashed his foot on the gas, launching us down the street and around the corner.

“Where to?” Iggy asked as he swerved around other CHIRP vehicles, parked cars, and pedestrians. “The others are searching around here. Do you want to take another block?”

“They’re searching here because they’ve made several assumptions. The Father would have received the notification yesterday, but the Boy would have left sometime in mid-morning. Any citizens would have notified the authorities if they saw a six-year-old running through gardens. So, they are staying close to the Boy’s home. They’re hoping to wait him out, that at dusk, he will reveal himself. Take a left here, then head to Granger.”

Iggy pulled on the steering wheel, and I hung on to the door arm rest as we lurched sideways around the corner.

“Granger?” Iggy asked. “That’s nowhere near here.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “They based their searches on the fact the boy is alone. But what if he isn’t? Perhaps a relative, or friend, or sympathizer, offered to take the boy away somewhere, to hide him. They would have left early morning. No one would suspect it. Maybe they caught a bus. Either way, Granger is the most obvious choice.”

“How do you figure?”

“People. Lots of people. A million options to blend in and hide away for days. They may have bought some time, but eventually, they will have to show themselves. That is the most logical place.”

Iggy launched the vehicle up the ramp and onto the freeway. “I hope you’re right about this,” he said. “I’m looking to get a few wins on my resume if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean, Iggy. Just get us there without killing us.”

Iggy deftly navigated his way through the late afternoon traffic, although he was very much assisted by other drivers’ responses when they saw a CHIRP vehicle bear down on them. It was as effective as any other emergency automobile, with drivers pulling over to let us pass.

The swishing of the wipers lulled my wandering mind. I thought of the life that was to be for the young boy when we caught up with him. His parents had faltered, that was for sure.

That was not the Boy's fault, yet he would carry the burden of responsibility. The outcome for him would be the same, regardless of the actions the parents took, although now, with incarceration a potential for the parents, their opportunities to right themselves had vastly diminished. Compliance was the only way out of the mess, the best prospect of being reallocated their child. They dashed those hopes when they helped the Boy to run.

The vehicle skidded to a halt outside of Granger.

"How do you want to handle this?" Iggy puffed. He was out of breath, the adrenalin hammering around his system.

"You get out on foot and look around. Try to remain hidden. Remember what we are looking for. If he's here, he'll be with someone else."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to run a few laps in the car, see if we can't flush him out. They see a CHIRP car and they'll panic, probably jump on the first bus that comes along. If I see anything, I'll call you on the radio."

Iggy nodded and jumped out of the car. I got out and watched as he vanished into a sea of people. His training would inform him to find some shadows to hide in, to stalk his prey carefully. But I knew he would never find them. I rounded the vehicle and into the driver's position.

I headed to a place far from here, on the other side of town. A place I had been thinking about for a long time. It was extremely plausible, given the information Christian Daniels shared with us. I was going back to where it all began.

I was going to Brennan.

CHAPTER 35

The past flashed before my eyes as I idled down the streets of Brennan. The events of that night from so many years ago, the night we ran, became fresh memories. Hiding from CHIRP vehicles, running between shadows, trying to keep up with my parents, all helping to reopen wounds of yesteryear. And now I was hunting for someone who was undertaking the same action.

At the time I had no choice. The government would tell me I was complicit in the action, even though it was Father who decided we should run. I had no concept of why or how, merely following direction. Still, I was just as guilty as he was. We all were. That last night I saw my parents. Encased in black until I emerged at the House.

Parks were bright and plentiful, given the amount of recent precipitation. Every shade of green imaginable showed itself. Rain and wet leaves blew in through my open driver's side window. Any other day I would have found a bench to watch the water bead and fall from overgrown blades of grass. Nature had a way of calling to me, to want me to stop and think, and I had to fight hard against the temptation to ease my pursuit.

The empty shells of houses we had run through were now a thriving community. The chain-link fence to keep out intruders was replaced with front yards, fences, and letter boxes. The homeless substituted for families. Burning oil drums swapped out for shiny new cars. It was amazing how things changed over time, and yet the laws made by the government had remained stagnant, impregnable rock.

Not massaged, nor mitigated. Black and white. Right and wrong. No gray. No interpretation. Do the right thing, and you'll be fine. Do the wrong thing and suffer the consequences of your actions. Penalties were severe. I had once debated and even defied those laws in my younger years, but now it was up to me to enforce them.

The weather became a little gloomier as the nourished parks and esoteric residences gave way to industrial complexes. Graffitied warehouses and workhouses blocked the view of the rail lines. Every so often the roar of a locomotive carrying goods and people roared past, my car's construction powerless to stop the clack, shimmy, and grind of the wheels on the rails from bouncing around the cabin.

The rain continued to fall, and I increased the speed of the wiper blades. They rubbed back and forth, smearing water across my view. All the while I kept a look out for the Runners. I was sure they were getting close to their destination, and it wouldn't be long before they would disappear altogether. I thought about giving up, letting them go. If they believed there existed a better life away from the government, if they thought Laferty Bridge offered some sort of redemption for their actions, perhaps I should let them go.

Another transformation took place, as concrete, manmade structures morphed into scrub. Large trees grew on both sides of the narrow, gravel road. As the road swept around to the left, in the water-streaked world of my windshield, a dark figure stumbled over the rocks and mud. It was a man, and surely the man I was looking for, even though there wasn't a child in sight.

It was decision time and one that would impact me in both the short and the long term. Some of those impacts I'm sure wouldn't rear their heads until much later. One of those pivotal moment kind of things. Sound the alert and arrest them for their actions. Or let them live their lives elsewhere. Or perhaps a third option was available, and one that kept nagging me to listen to it.

I rolled up next to him, which is when I saw the child clutched to his chest. I admired his dedication to the child, regardless of the number of laws he was breaking. Conspiring to evade reappropriation and interfering with official CHIRP business were but a few that would land him in a Re-education camp until such time as he broke or broke down. The choice would ultimately be his, and it wouldn't change the outcome for the Boy one iota.

The old man ignored my presence and continued trudging through the ever-thickening growth around his feet. I put the car in park and left it idling. Got out and stood at the front of the vehicle.

“Mr. Shaw,” I yelled out through the rain.

The man stopped, turned. He looked over me, dropped his eyes, turned, and continued walking. I reached for my weapon. I had every right to shout out the Act. The ordinance protected my actions, including drawing my gun and taking action. I could shoot him in the back and that would be that. Failing to comply with a CHIRP Officer's orders was offense enough.

I called out again, yet he kept plodding along the edge of the road. I marched up to him, gained on him easily, and blocked his path. He swayed on the spot, his aging body weary by carrying the physical and mental burden of his actions. Downcast eyes. Rain-soaked. Child called out.

“Why did we stop, Poppa?”

I clenched my jaw. Fought against the emotion. Let the internal struggle of what was law and what was right play inside of me. Combustible fuels waiting for a spark. An explosion that would rip me apart. Laws, rules, guidelines. I didn't make them. They had impacted me as much as anybody, and now I was on the other side of the wall, enforcing the very rules that tore my life apart.

"Mr. Shaw," I said softly, fighting to raise my voice over the downpour. "I need you to come with me."

The old man mumbled something but his utterance was lost to the downpour.

"Mr. Shaw," I repeated.

"Berry," he said. "John Berry."

"What?"

"My name is John Berry. Shaw is my daughter's married name."

I furrowed my brow. Why did that name sound so damn familiar?

Wheatley cleared his throat. "So, just to summarize, and please let me know if I've misconstrued this in any way, shape, or form. You assisted in a call that for Enforcers to track and apprehend Runner Boy Shaw. After receiving information and dropping off your partner at a bus station at Granger, you drove in concentric circles searching for Boy Shaw. You found an older man—who you later identified as Mr. John Berry—in possession of a child that matched the description of Boy Shaw given to you by assigned officers. During a physical altercation with Mr. Berry, he attacked you. As he was fleeing the scene, you fired a single round, and fled the scene. It is then you took Boy Shaw into custody and handed him over to the Children Franchise. Have I accurately summarized what you told me?"

I nodded. Quickly. But not too quickly. Quick enough to demonstrate confidence and denote an air of veracity.

“Is there anyone who can corroborate this story?”

I shrugged. “I suppose the John Berry could.”

Wheatley narrowed his glare at me. He pulled out a map of the city. “And can you direct me on the city map where this took place?”

I pointed to an arbitrary spot on the map between Granger and Brennan, a park denoted by a patch of green bordered by streets on all sides.

“Let the record show Sergeant Barnes pointed to Hiken Fields.”

Wheatley sat back in his chair. “Sergeant Barnes, are you aware no witnesses have come forward to confirm your story? Or that no bullet casings have been recovered from the scene? Or that John Berry has surfaced anywhere in the city?”

I shifted in my seat. “My concern was for Boy Shaw, that’s all. I called in the weapon discharge directly after it took place and drove back to the station. So, I’m not sure why the casing hasn’t been found or why Mr. Berry hasn’t been found. As for the witnesses, as you know, it was a miserable day, so I’m sure the citizens hid away behind their triple glazing instead of enjoying their communal parklands.”

Wheatley stopped the recording, the clack of the buttons returning to their default position like a popped kernel. He took his pinkie and once more ran it along his hairline.

“Please excuse me for a moment.”

He stood up and left, leaving his case notes, pictures, reports on the table. Was it a test? How many people were watching me via the closed-circuit television? Who was he going to talk to? Was that all a ruse? If I moved, if I touched one item on the desk, how would they interpret that?

I stared at the door, forced myself to sit still. Don't fidget. Don't shake. But don't look too comfortable either. There were many ways to determine a man's guilt, and sometimes it looked just the same as if he were innocent. Need to find the happy medium.

The door abruptly opened, and Wheatley returned. He packed away his belongings.

"The Administration thanks you for your time," he said. "You are free to go." His voice was lighter, less serious. As if he had taken off his mask.

My eyes darted around the room. "So, that's it?"

He slid the recorder into his briefcase and clicked home the latches. "That's it," he said with a smile. "I appreciate the conversation. The Administrator has dismissed your minor infraction of answering the Enforcer's call. It will not appear on your permanent record. The matter is now deemed as closed. You are required to return to active duty immediately."

I stood. "What about Boy Shaw?"

He pulled the briefcase off the table. "Can't get two words out of him. Wouldn't surprise me if he was a mute. Doesn't seem to know where he is. Regardless, his fate is sealed, and already allocated to a House several districts over."

"Guess it's up to the parents to sort their shit out now."

"Not really," he replied. "Both parents died on the way to the station for further questioning."

"Died?"

I thought back to when we arrived at the family home to receive directions. Christian, one of the assigned Officers, mentioned his partner was getting heavy-handed with the parents.

"How so?" I asked.

“Car accident,” Wheatley said evenly. “Side collision. Massive trauma. Didn’t make it to the hospital. Died at the scene.”

“And the driver? I think Christian said he was going to drive them.”

“Frankie,” he said. “Christian stayed at the home. Frankie walked away with minor injuries. Luckiest man alive, if you ask me. His cruiser damn near broke in half. Messy stuff.”

I pursed my lips. “I see.”

“A couple of stitches. Nothing more. Good evening to you, Emerson.”

As the door closed behind Wheatley’s departure, I stayed in the room and thought about what happened that day. Things I had heard. Things I had seen. Things I had done. I was free and clear, yet the guilt was already eating at me. But I had my reasons for doing what I did... and for lying about it.

It wasn’t fate that brought our paths—John Berry’s and mine—together. It was Boy Shaw’s parents, his mother, and father, who failed to live up to their duties as guardians. Provide or the government will take it upon themselves to do it for you. They will take care of your children if you fail to do so. A simple concept. The parents were to blame.

They could have saved so many lives.

Including mine.

CHAPTER 36

The atmosphere of stilted conversation once again enveloped him. Ire music filled gaps in silence, somehow more patriotic since they had announced a war. Bugles and trombones battled each other over a canvas of tom-toms and snares. Shredded cello and rambunctious piccolo soared in from great heights to deliver their payload, before disappearing into the heavens once more. This repeated, each time getting louder, increasing regularity, until reaching a crescendo when a lone violin staggered through the aftermath, a mournful cry to the listener.

Despite the nationalistic undertones, eyes and ears remained cautious. Ever since the Committee had announced the call to arms, the pub's numbers had significantly reduced. But now basic training had been completed, the first round of volunteer soldiers were enjoying their freedom from the shouting of orders and undertaking of trivial tasks.

Uniformed officers, in their crimson and olive dress uniforms, drank frothy alcohol from large mugs. There was much charging of pint glasses and discussing potential combat around the room. They drank to prove their worthiness. They drank to hide their fear. Whatever reason each of them had, they were looking for enjoyment at the bottom of an empty glass.

I checked out each group as they arrived, hoping Jackson was among them. I expected him to be limping, or for his arm to be in a sling; something that would denote his expulsion from the military, a sign he wouldn't be heading to the front. Something to show he would come home. However, he had yet to show himself.

As I gazed around the room, I noted a man sitting by himself in the corner, his features shrouded in shadow. He sat, shoulders slumped, in front of a beer that he hadn't touched. There was no other chair at the table, so figured that the mournful fellow was drinking away his troubles. Only when a flash of light danced around the room and across his face, did it occur to me I knew who he was.

Pulling up a chair to his table, I sat down.

"I thought that was you," I said.

He barely registered who I was. It's funny like that. How a uniform can change someone's face entirely. A mask we put on at the start of the day and remove just as easily at the end of the shift.

"Oh," Christian said. "How are you?"

He asked, but it wasn't really a question. It was a greeting and delivered it in such a melancholy tone I doubted he really wanted to know the answer. Then he looked at me again, a miserable glance. "What happened to your face?"

Scratches. Bruises. "Nothing," I replied. "What are you doing sitting here all alone?"

He opened his mouth to speak but resorted to looking down at the beer. "Just needed some time alone, that's all. To think things through."

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

He nodded unconvincingly.

"Did you want to talk about it?"

"No," he said. "I'd rather just think about it. By myself, if you don't mind."

I watched him lift the glass and take a sip as he stared off across the room.

“I heard there was an accident,” I said.

Suspicious eyes darted back to me. “What do you mean?”

“The Shaw case, the six-year-old boy. I heard there was a car accident taking the parents to the station.”

“Oh,” he said. Eyes dropped. “Yeah. Car accident.”

“It was Frankie.”

Looked up. “Huh?”

“I heard it was Frankie driving the car.”

He shrugged. “So?”

“When we came to the house to get information to help in the search, you said *you* were going to be the one who was going to take them to the station.”

He looked away. “Yeah, well, things change, don’t they? Do what the Sergeant says, right? Orders are orders. Do as you’re told and keep your mouth shut. That’s us, isn’t it?”

“Christian, what happened that night? What happened with the parents?”

“What’s it matter, Emerson?” He looked at me with wide puppy-dog eyes that glistened in the low light. “They’re dead.” Then, “Dead before the other car...” He trailed off.

“What? Dead before what? Did something happen to the parents?”

“Listen to the Sergeant,” he droned. “Follow the orders. Well, I followed the orders.” Another sip. “There was nothing I could do.”

“How did he walk away from that accident?”

Looked up at me, into my eyes. Retinas small in the low light. “How do you think, Emerson?”

I sat back in my chair. “Jesus Christ. It was a setup?”

Christian picked up his glass and drank the rest in enormous gulps. Slammed the glass down on the table with a clack that disappeared into the bowels of the room.

“A setup? I don’t know what it was.” He stood up. “I’m going home to sleep and forget this entire fucking day.”

I reached over and grabbed his arm. “You’ve got to tell someone about this.”

He reeled his arm away. “*You* tell someone. I’m going home to my wife.”

“You can’t just let that go.”

Christian shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We never talked. You know nothing.” He bent down. “It never happened.”

With that, Christian walked across the room, arms wrapped around himself like he was about to break. That’s what the rules did to you. They’re promoted as a rubric to keep you safe and secure, when in reality, they just chip away at you. Slowly break you down, like the elements that slowly erodes wood or corrodes metal. And there was only one thing someone could do about it.

I watched Christian depart through the door, wondering what was going through his head and how he was going to cope with it. And then through all of that, I questioned myself. What the hell was I going to do about it? Something sinister had happened to the Shaw parents, and although I didn’t have all the details, I knew enough to fill in the blanks. And therein was the rub. Enough to know something untoward had taken place, but not enough to have any evidence. I could call it out, have a conversation with Wheatley, but where would that take me? I’d lose half a day, Frankie would answer some further questions, and that would be it. An entire waste of time. At the end of the day, the Shaw parents were nothing but names on an accident report, and that would not change, regardless of how many people I told.

Thoughts continued to swirl when a hand landed hard on my shoulder and shook me from my melancholy.

“What the fuck are you doing drinking alone?”

I looked up and smiled. “Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in.” I stood up and embraced Jackson. That feeling of human connection just about obliterated my conversation with Christian, almost deconstructed his information share into atoms. Almost.

I held Jackson at arm's length and inspected his uniform. An olive overcoat with a sewn-in crimson sash. Navy dress pants and shoes that reflected any sparkle of light.

“God damn,” I said. “There is something to be said about a man in uniform.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “Keep it in your pants, soldier.”

I grabbed his arms tighter.

“What happened there?” he asked, referencing my wounds.

“Nothing,” I said. “Just a work thing. I see you’ve had no luck escaping your volunteerism?”

He rolled his eyes. “Not only could I *not* flunk basic training, but they also made me Corporal.” He turned and tapped his shoulder.

“Corporal? God damn. That, I’m sure, is a story worth telling.”

“Only after three beers!”

We sat down in a booth to inhale our pints.

“Alright,” I said, clapping my hands. “I’m not waiting, so you better start talking!”

“Well,” he started before gulping his beer. “Me being Corporal might give you an indication of the quality of recruits running around at boot camp. I got a promotion because

I've got more than two brain cells to rub together. To be honest, I wouldn't trust those other bastards to hold the right end of a toothbrush."

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? Who can I complain to? Being out there is still better than being jammed up in a Re-education center, which is where I would've ended up if I didn't volunteer my body as a meat shield."

"And the brass doesn't care about the quality of their troops?"

"Fuck no!" He looked about himself and leaned across the table, so his body was almost resting against it. "I saw something I shouldn't have."

"Like what?"

"Snuck into the battalion's Lieutenant Colonel's tent."

"Jesus Christ, Jackson. Why the hell did you do that?"

"It doesn't matter. Anyway, there were maps and files on his desk. Then the CO comes back in having a conversation with someone." He paused and leaned further. "We're not going over there to fight. Not us grunts anyway. We're just fodder for the actual soldiers to get in there and do what they need to do. We're a fucking human battering ram. As long as you've got two feet and can run towards enemy lines, that's all they care about. Maybe they're hoping they'll run out of bullets... or provide sufficient distraction. I don't know."

I sat back in my chair. "Shit." I didn't know what to say. It was a lot to think about.

"What are you going to do?"

Another shrug. "What the fuck can I do? This seems like one of those 'grin and bear it' kind of things."

"You can't just march into certain death! It doesn't make sense."

“I guess I’ll make that call when the time comes, but I can tell you right now, I’m not doing it. And I’m not telling anyone else to do it either. They can shoot me where I stand for all I care.”

I folded my arms. “Well, I don’t think Marie would agree with that assessment.” I looked around the room. “Where is she anyway?”

He observed me as he sculled the rest of his drink, and I didn’t know if it was because he didn’t want to answer me or if he needed to build up some courage to answer the question.

“Well?” I pushed.

He lifted the glass to his lips to extract the remaining froth. “I didn’t tell her I was coming back,” he mumbled. “I didn’t tell Bethany either.”

“What? Why?”

Planted the glass on the table. “Because if I do, then Marie will throw herself on me and beg me not to go back. It’s easier this way. Trust me, it’s better like this.”

“And Bethany?”

“She’d want to jump my bones as well.”

We laughed for a long time, longer than what was deemed necessary. In the end I sighed, long and loud, my disapproving stare met with pleading eyes.

“Fine!” I resigned. “Whatever.”

“Awesome, thank you. That just means…” He trailed off, the rest of his sentence floating in the froth.

“You need a place to crash?”

He nodded, still drinking his beer. When he finished, he slammed the glass down on the table. Burped under his breath.

“You know, I can go without the sex. Survive without coffee. But the lack of alcohol at camp was driving me fucking crazy.”

“You know, for a split second there, you almost convinced me you didn’t find a way to smuggle in alcohol.”

Jackson smiled. “No comment. Do you want another one? Two? On the house for us military folk.”

He didn’t wait for my response, leaving the table for the bar. I watched him order his drinks. He was a big guy at the best of times, but now he was in full military regalia, he seemed to make an even more imposing figure. People leaned out of the way as he pushed over them, flashing fingers to the barkeep.

Maybe it was the sudden intake of alcohol mixed with the intoxicating atmosphere. Sound and light danced around each other, and I breathed it in, hoping to invigorate me for a night with my best friend. Yet, when I breathed out, I felt nothing. Nothing but the icy hand of death sitting on my shoulder. The suppressed thoughts of the day came rushing back to me and I did everything I could to push them down.

Then over by the bar, I saw it. In my periphery, Jackson was picking up the beers, but it was the face beyond, on the other side of the bar that made me catch my breath. John Berry stood there staring at me. Patrons crossed left and right, and yet he continued to stare, unfazed by their movements. Sound stopped. Breathing stopped. Time stopped.

Jackson crashed four pints on the table, the sound cracking my daydream in two. John Berry had disappeared, dissolved into the stained floorboards and alcohol-fueled conversations. I stood up and scanned the faces, eager to locate him again, however, the harder I looked, the more difficult it became.

At that moment I remembered something Father told me when I was a kid. It just popped in there, like it had always been there, and was just waiting, hiding, lying in wait, for the perfect time to present itself. A secret is good if someone else knows about it, and that other person is dead.

John Berry, that name forever a stain on my soul. I replayed our interaction, from conversation to altercation to... I shouldn't have done it. John was there one minute, and then he was gone. There was only one person who really knew what happened that day, and I wasn't about to tell anyone.

“Hey!” Jackson shouted.

I turned around. My friend sat at the table and pointed to the beers. “Are we going to drink these, or would you prefer to run laps around the bar?”

I sauntered back and sat down, grabbed a beer, and drank it down. Sat the glass on the table and pushed it away.

“What's up with you?” Jackson asked.

“What? Nothing.”

“Nothing? Come on. I know you. Don't try to hide shit from me. I can see it all over your face.”

He was right. Always was.

“You're not a very good poker player,” he said.

I fucking hoped I was.

“Something happened at work today.”

“Oh really? Well, in the eternal words of the immortal Emerson Barnes, I'm not waiting so you better just tell me.”

I looked over at my friend's expectant gaze then looked around the room. “I'll tell you later, on the way home.”

“Man, that's cruel, holding out on me like that. But that's fine. I respect that. But you're going to need to pick your game up, because this vibe of yours you're putting out right now is depressing me.”

CHAPTER 37

“Are you going to say something?”

I didn't bother looking at Jackson. Couldn't. Just kept marching through the brisk night with my hands in my pockets. Didn't know where I was going. It didn't really matter. I was trying to walk away from the day, hoping it would dissolve into nothing, and I could carry on without a care in the world.

“Something happened today,” I said.

“Well, it must be important, because I've never quite seen you like this before.”

More silence as I collected my thoughts. The day's events once more played through my mind in excruciating detail. Everything I said, everything I did... everything I told Wheatley. Extracted the critical moments. Sliced them together into a new movie, one I could tell and still sleep that night. Fact mixed with fiction. But as soon as I laid out the story it would fall into a million pieces, like dropping a glass on the floor. Shards belonged to a moment in time, with short incoherent films playing all around me.

As we continued down the road, lights and sound faded into the background, my environment changing to decrepit houses and abandoned warehouses. I could feel the

economy sliding as the war approached, like a leech feeding on the city's souls. We passed a sign: *Stay out. Closed for the war. I'll be back.*

"It's happening all over," Jackson remarked. "All money, time, and resources, redirected to the front because someone's nose got put out of joint. Has there been any word around your office?"

I chewed the inside of my cheek. "Business as usual," I declared. "No reprieve, no excuses."

"Jesus. I really don't know what the government is expecting."

"They're expecting the people to go on like nothing else is happening in the world. Rules are rules. Laws are laws."

We march on in silence.

"Where are we going?" Jackson asked.

I stopped. In the distance, the sound of steel wheels protesting their movement of steel tracks rang out in the night. Two loud whistles followed, signaling the beginning of their journey. I looked around at the boarded-up windows and overgrown lawns. I wondered how long it would take for nature to take over the place, to strangle the steel and glass and brick manmade structures and squeeze the life out of them.

I wheezed a quick intake of oxygen at the thought, felt the strangle hold of guilt wrap its spindly fingers around my body.

Jackson put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I lied," I said, attempting to secure a constant train of thought.

"About what?"

"I keep telling people to stand up and speak out." I turned away. "But I'm no better than any of them." I looked at my friend. "I'm a fucking coward, Jackson. I'm nothing. I'm no one."

“Why are you saying that?”

“I lied!”

Jackson grabbed my shoulders. “For the love of God, Emerson, will you tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Today, I was involved in tracking down a Runner. A kid, about six years old.”

“I didn’t know tracking Runners was part of your job.”

“It’s not. But I did it just the same. Anyway, I find the kid with an old man, his grandfather. We get into a bit of a fight.”

“What’s the problem with that.”

“The problem is more than that happened. Stuff I didn’t tell the Interviewer from the Internal Review Franchise.”

“Stuff like what?”

I stared into the night.

“My name is John Berry,” the old man said. “Shaw is my daughter’s married name.”

His large shoulders heaved. Drained. Spent. His reserves were less than empty. I placed a hand on his shoulder, eased him about-face, and guided him back to the idling car. They huddled together in the backseat. Boy Shaw kept asking questions; what was happening, who I was, was I going to help them. The man remained silent, unwilling or unable to answer them.

I sat in the front seat and watched the wiper blades arc over the glass. The heater was on, yet numbness coated me. The grumble of the engine drowned the splash of heavy raindrops on the roof. Every time I would put the vehicle into drive, I would second guess my

decision and throw it back into park. I tapped the steering wheel as I peered at the reflection of the older man and young child in the rear-view mirror. I could have turned around. I could have pretended not to see them.

“Poppa?” Boy said. “Is this man helping us too?”

The old man patted his head. Reassured him.

The rain on the roof thundered through the cabin.

He kissed the boy’s head. “He doesn’t deserve this, you know. None of them do.”

“Poppa, I don’t want to run anymore. I’m too tired.”

“It’s okay, Michael.”

Breath caught in my throat. A name. Another infraction. Another charge.

Compounding consequence. Yet another reason to turn the car around and head back to the station. I could have. I should have.

“Whatever happens, we all love you very much,” he said. “We’ll come for you.”

The boy clutched harder around the old man. “No, don’t go, I don’t want you to leave me.”

Boy’s voice was so small and delicate, painstakingly reverent. His words, his breathing, morphed into quiet sobs, the little body jerking against the man. All the while, the old man held him, patted him, hugged him. Showed him affection that was rarely noted, certainly never seen in public.

Made me think of Father. Big arms. Wrapped around me twice. So safe and comforting. The world could not touch me. I often wondered what my life would be like. Not if we made it across the bridge, but if we didn’t have to run.

I rubbed my hands together until they were red. Father and Mother believed enough in the bridge to run the night they died. In the House, Jackson, or L as I knew him back then, was determined to break all the rules to show me. In fact, according to a message he left me,

he actually did... not that I could remember it. And then Maximus, at the Freeman household, was so sure he had seen it, he was willing to give up everything. After hearing about The Push for so long, after seeing all the flyers and graffiti, I often wondered about it. It was wrong, sure enough. But when I thought about the people once in my life, and what they were willing to lose, and those thoughts just popped in there. Balancing rules and realization was a cruel mistress.

The people in the back seat were runners, regardless of age, regardless of connection. The old man, I suppose, wasn't that different from people I once knew. The boy, well, he was there at the whim of his guardian.

I pressed my thumb into the palm of my hand and felt the bones through the back of my it.

"Show me where it is," I ordered.

No movement, no response.

"I know you were going to Laferty Bridge. Take me to it."

His head picked up.

"What?"

"Take me to Laferty Bridge."

"Why?" The man's voice was as gravelly as the road beneath us and carried a depth beyond his years.

I huffed. I was not just playing around the edges of the law. I was breaking it. The Administrators would not look favorably on what I was asking the man. I knew this yet curiosity kept tapping my brain. I had to know. Did it really exist? Was there actually a way out? And if I knew that information, what the hell would I do with it? Keep it, use it, sell it? Forget everything I had seen and pretend it wasn't there? But then what about the runners in my back seat? What do I do with them?

Despite the mounting questions filling my head, I made the conscious decision to break the laws while wearing the uniform to uphold them.

“Let me take you there,” I said.

“Why?” he repeated.

I looked at them in the rear vision mirror. The old man could very well have been Father, and the little boy, me. Berry knew the fates that would befall the boy, and he was doing his damndest to save the kid from a life in a House. The law was the law, but was he really doing such a bad thing? Did Father and Mother really do a bad thing?

“Because I want you to go,” I said, almost stunned at the words that escaped my lips before I filtered them.

He looked up. Confusion reigned. “What do you mean, you want me to go?”

“I mean, if you take me to Laferty Bridge, you and Boy can go.”

We stared at each other in the rear-view mirror for a long time, trying to read each other’s thoughts. Eventually, he shook his head.

“No. It’s a trap,” he said. “You’re trying to trick me so you can lay more charges on me. Maybe even shoot me in the back so you don’t have to deal with me.”

I looked out the front windscreen, past the wipers still scraping past my vision. “It isn’t a trap. I could get fired, or worse, for even talking to you. I’m giving you a chance, Mr. Shaw, that’s all. There are plenty of charges laid against you as it is.”

Nothing.

“Listen,” I said. “Your situation can’t get any worse than what it is right now. I can take you back to the station where we will lay formal charges, and the necessary authorities can remove Boy... Michael... into a House.”

He seemed to sink lower into the back seat at the sound of this like reality had finally set in. His body relaxed, resigned to the outcomes.

“Or I can take you to the Bridge. And you can run, once and for all.”

A long silence.

“I have little time,” I said. “You need to decide.”

After some due consideration, the old man croaked, “Fine. Keep heading North. I’ll tell you where to go.”

I took a deep breath. I was in deeper than I had originally thought, and there was no turning back for me.

“That’s the right decision. For both of you.”

CHAPTER 38

I continued to exchange glances with the dirt road and the two in the back seat as I drove. The name John Berry banged around my head with startling resonance. Even though I couldn't place it, it was as familiar to me as Jackson or Bethany. Where in my life had I heard it? I continued to bounce it around hoping it would just come to me.

The car jostled as the dirt road became bitumen once more, and the trees grew thicker. Long, heavy branches grew from both sides and arched over the road, meeting in the middle to close us in. A deluge of rain intermittently crashed down on the windscreen as we drove under the foliage. All the while, the scraping of the wiper blades destroyed any potential silent moments.

The radio crackled several times with calls to my unit. They mentioned my name as well, but I turned it down. Head in the sand. It wouldn't take them long to determine where I was, the tracking system in the car would do that. But they wouldn't be able to determine what we were doing. That was going to be a secret and one that I would have to take to the grave.

"Just up there," John said. "On the left. Between those two big cedars."

The drive had been relatively quick and would've taken John carrying Boy another hour to trek through some wild undergrowth. It was quiet, and we hadn't seen another vehicle nor person the entire way. Densely packed together thousand-year-old trees became the common view, blocking out the sky and dwarfing any manmade marvel.

And then I saw them. As John had instructed, twin trees, meters apart, different from the rest, erupted out of the ground. Large root systems snaked away like an octopus, creating a refuge for fallen foliage. Surreptitious unless you knew what you were looking for, the secret entrance hidden in plain sight.

All the years I heard about Laferty Bridge, and never once had I laid my eyes on it. How it had stayed secret from the government for so long was always a mystery to me. When I was younger, various education sessions mentioned Laferty Bridge as a hoax and propaganda. It was a belief people had, for those who wanted to exist beyond the world of the government.

"No more real than any other religion," the authorities would say. "Except this one is more dangerous than any faith, and the people who believe in it more treacherous than any zealot. The Push could destroy the sanctity of our way of life, destroy humanity everlasting."

But as time went on, and older I grew, the stories around Laferty Bridge had turned to folklore. Myths and rumors and stories daring parents told their children about at night. They became nothing more than tales that drunkards would tell in bars. They would claim they've not only seen it, but crossed it, and viewed utopia on the other side.

"When the masses figure it out," the drunks would say. "When enough people figure it out, that the government is hurting them, not helping them, they will leave in droves. A government without citizens is no government at all. How can they rule if there is no one to rule over? Then they will be left to their own city, an empty city, one consumed by nothing but moths and concrete."

It was a dystopian fantasy. One that no one could ever corroborate. Every person had a different take on the story. Details would differ, yet the ending remained the same. Arguments would break out about which side of town the bridge was. They even disagreed which city the bridge was in.

“There’s one in every city,” one would say.

“Bullshit!” another would counter. “Besides, I heard the bridge was a tunnel.”

There was no way to pin it down. Perhaps that is why the government never found it. Because it didn’t really exist. Or maybe that was the plan all along. Create enough confusion in the masses to dissuade the authorities from tracking it down. But that type of talk doesn’t happen anymore, not like it did back then. Fear settled in or the government enacted harsher penalties, or both. None of it changed my situation.

I eased the cruiser up to the trees as the downpour reduced to a fine drizzle. Greens and browns warped across the windshield. I cracked the window. The crisp smell of wet bark flooded the interior.

We sat silently in the rumbling chassis, taking in the view of the trees.

“Where’s the bridge?” I asked.

“It’s out there,” John said. “Beyond the tree line, hidden by nature.”

“And then what? What happens after you cross?”

“I’m... I’m not sure. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone coming back to tell anyone else where to go or what to do. But I know it’s out there. It has to be. It’s our only hope.”

“Best you be on your way. Remember, this never happened. We never met each other, okay? My report will say I couldn’t find you.”

He nodded slowly. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Never come back. And look after Boy... Michael. I hope he has the life you are searching for.”

He thrust a hand between the seats. “Thank you,” he said. “I didn’t catch your name?”

I took his hand. More rules broken. Guess it didn’t really matter at that point. I had lost count of the number of infractions they could charge me with. Stripped of rank, stripped of uniform. Bad conduct discharge. Life pretty much over.

“Barnes,” I said. “Emerson Barnes.”

“Barnes?” His brow furrowed. Deep in thought. A million neurons firing. Seemed to place the name as much as I was trying to place his. “I knew a Barnes once.”

“I made him show me where Laferty Bridge was.”

“Shit!” he breathed. “So, you were out past Howards, right?”

“No,” I said shaking my head. “Over past Brennan. The place where Father was taking me and Mother the night, he... well, it was a long time ago.”

Jackson made a sound like the puzzle pieces didn’t quite fit and the gears in his head were working overtime. But he didn’t interrupt me, as much as I knew he wanted to. I could sense it, feel the questions emanating from him like a radar dish emitting heat.

“What happened?” he asked, still scratching his head. “What really happened?”

“There was a struggle, and I discharged my firearm.” I turned away, so my eyes couldn’t betray me.

The metallic thrum of the train approached; the engine churning, the wheels squealing. The railway shrieked as it passed us, its noise encapsulating us from the world. It hung heavy around us, almost taking on a life of its own. Another version of the national

anthem, all rugged and mechanical. I would have happily stayed there forever and become part of the twisted orchestra.

But then it passed, slowly fading into the distance, carrying whatever the trains carried across the nation. There was one more burst of melancholy before it fell into obscurity, and Jackson and I were alone once more, sniffing the spent diesel.

Jackson pondered. “They did an investigation, right? They reached a conclusion, didn’t they?”

I thought back to my conversation with Christian in the bar. Both parents had died in the car accident that Sergeant Frankie walked away from. They would have investigated that, and yet Frankie was still on the job. Truth is perception, and perception is reality.

“Just because they did an investigation doesn’t mean they reached the *right* conclusion.”

I broke the law and yet I was still on the job. I walked away from my moral and ethical responsibilities that day but hoped I could find my way back. Somehow.

“I didn’t tell them everything,” I admitted. “Only what I needed to. If they find out I’m lying, it’ll be worse than telling them the damn truth.”

“Sometimes there’s a difference between what’s right and what’s necessary.”

“Where does saving my own ass sit?”

“What does it do to drop yourself in something that has no bearing on the result?” He squared up my shoulders. “What do you want to do? Turn yourself in? Just keep feeling sorry for yourself?”

I sighed.

“What about the kid?” he continued.

“The boy?”

“The one you were chasing. He must have seen something.”

“Apparently he hasn’t said a word since he’s been with the Children Franchise.” I looked up at Jackson. “He lost his entire family that night. An orphan. In the blink of an eye. There will be no one to pick him up from his assigned House. What future does he have, forever on the merry-go-round of homes and anonymous guardians?”

“The same we had,” he said bluntly. “Why does anyone deserve more than we had?”

“Because *we* deserved more than we had.”

Jackson stepped forward. “I get it,” he said, moving in closer. “I get your connection to him. I get you understand what he’s going through. But it wasn’t your fault.” Jackson threw his arms around me and pulled me close. Hugged me tight. Felt his arms wrap around me twice, an embrace that I could sink into and hide away from the world.

Moved his mouth to my ear and whispered. “Are you telling me everything?”

A split second. That’s how long it took for that warm embrace to feel like icy tentacles. My world splintered and fragmented and I felt alone on a desolate planet.

“What?” I tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but to no avail.

“There’s more to this, and you’re not telling me.”

I pushed him away, my best friend, my only friend, and turned away.

“Wait,” he said.

I walked.

“I need to tell you something,” he shouted. “Marie is...”

But his words were lost into the night, drifting over my subconscious like a household chore. I walked into the darkness, uncertain of where I was heading, but knowing I would get home... eventually.

Jackson didn’t follow, and I could feel his presence dissipate into a cold nothing that draped itself over my shoulders. And then he disappeared entirely, swallowed by the darkness and my determination to put as much distance between my present and past as I could muster.

Time couldn't go quickly enough, for my memories to fade, replaced with happier thoughts. It seemed time was a storm we lose ourselves in.

But sometimes the past lingers. And, even worse, comes back to bite us when we least expect it, from someone you thought had disappeared.

TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER 39

“And that’s my life,” I said as I looked up. “That’s how it happened. No secrets. No lies. Everything laid bare.”

The end of the cigarette glowed as I sucked in smoke, held it for a moment, and then coughed during the release. “Smoking!” I held the cigarette in front of my face. “That’s what this job does to you sometimes. What this life does to you sometimes. It forces you to do things you don’t want to do, but in the end you do them, anyway.”

I butt out the cigarette into a pile of half smoked sticks, the tray full to its brim. Cough again.

“I guess you’re wondering why I told you all of that.”

No reply.

“Well, I told you those things so we can bind and build a relationship with each other. I told you about my life, so you feel compelled to tell me about yours. Complete vulnerability. No secrets between us. But don’t worry. No one else is listening. It’s just you and me, two guys having a conversation.”

Still nothing.

“Okay,” I said. “Let me level with you. I told you those things, so you know what kind of person I am, what I’m capable of doing. You’re here in this room with me, so clearly, you have something to say.”

The air is thick with his sweat, causing his odor to waft unrestricted around the enclosed space and meld with the scent of tobacco. He is tied to a chair, unable to gain any comfortable purchase on the steel structure. Toothpicks hold his eyes open, and they are digging into his eyelids. The skin is taught, and it reminds me of twin circus tents being held up with poles. A drop of blood runs down the little, wooden stick. Beyond that, pupils and irises constantly swap proportions.

There are notes of fear in the air, but not enough. I need more.

“Yeah, you see, the others couldn’t get you to talk. So, they called me in. And believe me, talking with me is better than being in the Pit. No one likes the Pit.” I leaned in. “No one gets out of the Pit. Even the ones that do get out, never really leave... if you catch my drift.”

It was all bullshit mind you. No one knew what really happened in the Pit. In fact, only two types of people did: those that were sent there because they knew something the government wanted to know and they refused to say anything, and those whose job it was to extract that information using any means necessary.

“Let you imagination run wild,” I said. “They’ll do horrible things to you, the types of things I can’t even tell you about, because if I did, I’m not too sure I’d be able to sleep at night.” Leaned in again. “Just easier not to know.” I looked at the table. “Easier not to think about it.”

Quivering lips.

“Blades of every imaginable size, edge, and specialty. Devices to remove eyeballs from sockets, teeth from gums, and fingernails from nail beds. Tools for asphyxiation, drowning... and melting. If one did not lose an appendage, they would lose their mind surely

enough.” I played out an imaginary shiver running up my spine. “They say that time moves slower in the Pit. To be honest, I can see why.”

The prisoner made a clicking noise with their tongue, like they are trying to speak, but just can’t figure it out.

“Yes?” I said. “Do you want to tell me something?”

He gave me the same response.

“Nope. Sorry. You’re just going to have to speak up.”

“Water,” he gasped.

“Oh, water!” I regarded him. “We’ll get to that.”

I looked around the room. “Now, where was I? Ah yes. If you give me something, like...” I click my fingers, make a production of trying to remember. “Like a name, a good name, then you are valuable to us. And valuable people don’t go to the Pit. No. They get a cell with a mattress and three squares a day.”

“Water...”

“And if it’s a really good name, then I can do one better. You can become an informant, and we can protect you. No further prosecution. No more threats. You can go back to your family following Re-education. How does that sound?”

“Water...”

“Who runs The Push?”

Nothing.

I ask again.

Still nothing.

I leaned back in my chair and grabbed the book off the table. “Alright. I’m going to read a bit of this book, and after that, I’m going to the toilet. And when I’m not in this room, I can’t protect you, I can’t stop people from taking you to the Pit.

One last gaze before I open the cover, flick to a random page, and start reading from the middle of the page.

“Someone once said ‘if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain’. I don’t remember who that was.”

Kop rolled a cigarette, deliberately stretching time. He eyed the figure of Min as he did so.

“A philosopher, I think,” Min eventually replied. “Plato, maybe?”

Kop nodded and approached. Min hung from a rope tied to her wrists. Her feet were just off the wet, uneven concrete. Just enough that she could stop herself from swinging and swaying if she arched her foot and stretched her toes.

“Yeah. That’s probably it. Anyway, like I said, if you want the good stuff, you gotta deal with the tough stuff. Don’t blame me for that. That’s how life works. You can’t expect to just get away with everything. You’ve done bad things, Min, and now it’s time to own up to them.”

Kop lit the cigarette and blew smoke into her face.

“About fifteen percent of people die from secondhand smoke every year,” Min said, her dark hair streaked across her face.

Kop took another puff. “There are worse ways to die.”

Min smirked. “There are better ways to live.”

Kop nodded. Then reared up a fist and drove it into her kidneys.

Min groaned as she swayed with the force, then sucked in short breaths.

“Who killed my wife, Min! I know you know, so you better start talking.”

“Whatever you do to me, they’ll do worse.”

“That’s a bullshit argument, Min.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Kop reeled up and drove a sickening punch with his other hand.

More groans, more creaking seeping from where the rope tied to the ceiling.

“I can keep doing this all day,” Kop said.

Min moaned. “Me too.”

“Fuck you, Min. I know you’re hurting. How much more are you gonna take before you tell me? Might as well cut out the middleman and let me know now.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not!” Kop screamed.

Min stared down at him. Kop raised his fist once more and swung.

“Because!” Min blurted.

Kop stopped on a dime, his fist an inch away from Min’s liver.

“Because why?” he growled.

“Because she asked me not to.”

Kop stumbled back, eyes searching for meaning. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“There’s a reason you can’t find her killer.”

“Wha.... What?” Lips trembled.

“Because she killed herself!”

Kop stumbled back to the wall, where he slid down, knees to chest.

“But I loved her,” Kop said.

“So did I,” Min mumbled. “So did I.”

I closed the cover and looked over the prisoner. Pursued my lips waiting for something. Anything. In the end I shrugged, stood and walked to the door. With a hand on the latch, he spoke.

“Wait!”

I didn't bother turning around.

“Wait!” he repeated.

“I'm waiting.”

“White Witch,” he whimpered. “White Witch runs The Push.”

I turned and approached the table.

“Who is White Witch?”

Opened his mouth. “I... I don't know. No one does.”

My shoulders dropped. “Then you're no use to me.”

I backed away and opened the door.

“Wait!” he cried. “They have a mark.”

I turned. “Mark? Like a birthmark?”

He shook his head. “A tattoo.”

“A tattoo of what?”

“A moth.”

“You've got to give me more than that.”

“You said if I gave you a name, you'd help me.”

“I did,” I said. “And I don't want to do this. But we already know about the White Witch, and the moth tattoo, and unless you can tell me who they are, then you've got nothing else to offer.”

“Take him away,” I shouted into the hallway.

Four officers entered.

“No!” the prisoner wailed. “I’ll find out who they are. I’ll get more names, as many as you want. I’ll help you bring them down.”

They cut his binds and flicked out the toothpicks, causing him to reel from the pain. Red tears cut down his face. They reefed him to his feet.

“I’ll tell you everything,” he whimpered. “Everything.”

I held up my hand, and the officers froze. “Everything?”

“Everything!” he cried.

I nodded. When the officers released their grip, the prisoner fell to the chair in a mountain of heaving sobs.

“Thank you,” he sniffed. “Thank you.”

The phone next to the door rang out like an alarm. I picked it up while viewing the room.

“Yes, Administrator... No, Administrator... But... No, it’s just that... But...”

I turned away from the room and held a hand over the mouthpiece.

“But, Administrator, he gave us the White Witch name. And the moth tattoo. This is more information about The Push than we’ve had in years... Yes, I understand that... No, I don’t want that... I understand what you are saying... .. Very well.”

I slowly hung up the phone. Turned. Stared at the ground.

“Take him away,” I mumbled.

The prisoner looked up. Eyes wide, mouth agape.

“Do you see me as a monster?” Administrator Raxiel asked.

I stood in her office, opposite her desk, hands behind my back. The call had come immediately after the prisoner had been taken away. His screams echoed the passageway until they disappeared behind heavy doors, replaced with a tooth shattering ring.

“Of course not, Administrator. It’s just that—.”

She held up her hand.

“Rules must be followed, and the stipulations are clear. Like everything, they are black and white. There is no room for interpretation. You know this.”

“I thought he could have given us more, that’s all.”

“Are you suggesting breaking the rules, Detective Barnes?”

“Certainly not, Administrator. But surely I have discretionary powers to bend them.”

“That’s precisely what you don’t have.”

I looked away.

“Things are what they are,” she continued. “You’re a good detective, and your trajectory is sound. Stay the course and bigger opportunities will come your way. I need people like you.”

“Are you suggesting a shift into the Special Investigations Franchise?”

She tapped her desk.

“No,” she said bluntly. “Not yet. The work you undertake in your current role is too important.”

I nodded. She checked her watch.

“Now, I understand there is a special event happening this evening that you need to prepare for.”

A smile attacked my face that I couldn’t resist displaying. And then, everything that happened before shriveled in comparison. It was like a monolith blocking the sunlight.

“Go,” she said. “Put this behind you and focus on the future, for *that* is something you can bend to your will.”

CHAPTER 40

I waited in the cozy radiance, shifting my weight from foot to foot and rubbing my hands until they were red.

“Don’t be nervous, Father,” Harlow said.

I checked my pocket. Once. Twice.

“You’ve checked that already,” he added.

“But what if—?”

“She’s going to say yes,” he said.

All at once everything slowed to a crawl. With words and intention that betrayed his five years, it was never that he knew what to say, but when to say it. I wanted to pick him up, hold him tight, whisper “thank you” to him, but I couldn’t. *Don’t get attached. Keep your distance. You don’t know when they could be taken away from you.* But I had lost myself the moment he was born. I regretted every day I felt like I didn’t do enough to tell him how I felt and show him how loved he was.

“Thank you, Boy,” I replied.

And then Bethany was there, standing in the doorway, and every conversation I had ever had with her, played in my head. I had set up a trail of light from the garage that snaked through the house, and now she stood at the precipice of a monumental decision. A fork in the road, to be met with one shortly after.

She stepped outside and almost floated towards me. The look on her face mirrored my own fragile emotions. Despite my heart raging against my rib cage, I knew it was right, and that somehow made it all okay.

As she took my outstretched hand, I took a moment to gaze into her eyes. I never did that nearly enough, and something I admitted to her on numerous occasions.

“What is this?” she mouthed.

I lowered to one knee to display my respect and loyalty to the woman I had loved for twenty years. From the moment our paths first crossed in the House, to rekindling our young relationship in recent times, she was forever in my thoughts.

“I can’t imagine anyone else I would rather spend my life with.” I worked hard to maintain composure, yet my voice rocked as I said those words. Taking so openly about my feelings was something I kept for my internal monologue. “I hope you can see through my faults.”

She reached down and pulled me up. Placed her hands on either side of my face. Held me steady as she looked deep within me. No charades. No masks. No facades. Bare intentions.

“I knew,” she said.

My eyes opened wide. “What? How? Who told you?”

“Not this,” she laughed. “About you. I knew before that moment we shared in the House kitchen. From the moment I saw you. I knew you were special in so many ways. I’ve waited for this moment for so long, and I can’t bear to wait any longer.”

I swallowed. “Will you—?”

“Yes!” she said as she planted a kiss on my lips.

The backyard erupted in applause as people seeped from the corners and shadows. Bethany spun in my arms to take in the scene. Men and women in official regalia stepped forward into the light. Relevant partners and significant others joined them in a congratulatory symphony.

Bethany met my eyes once more, a sparkling gaze over a surprised smile. A moment I wanted to bottle, yet so fleeting I couldn't quite grasp it in my mind. We kissed as the circle encroached upon us. The joining of families, in more ways than one. We didn't interact with our respective work families usually; they didn't encourage those sorts of relationships. This, combined with our lack of desire to pursue those connections, relegated us to a few of the regulars. But that night was different for very obvious reasons. It just seemed like the right thing to do. The only person missing from the moment was Jackson, and I hoped wherever he was on the planet, he was at peace as I was.

“Wait,” I said. “We need to make this official.”

I pulled the box out of my pocket, extracted the ring, and slid it onto her finger.

Champagne corks popped and beer bottles emptied as we did the rounds and chatted with our guests. Congratulations and compliments ran as freely as the alcohol, even though some faces seemed as arbitrary as their invitation. Officers from across the CHIRP spectrum graced us with their presence, if only for a short while. A stranger by any other name, yet a brother in a CHIRP uniform. My rank provided us with a range of senior officials who mainly kept to their ilk, allowing their hushed conversations to flow freely.

At one point in proceedings, for no reason in particular, I glanced over to a dark corner. There in the shadows, Administrator Raxiel lit up a cigarette, the flame from her lighter illuminating her face, her stare affixed to me.

I left Bethany talking to a few of her colleagues, each inspecting the ring with a keen eye, and sauntered over to her.

“I appreciate the effort of coming here tonight to celebrate,” I said.

“Short-lived,” she replied.

“Work?”

She scoffed. “It’s always work. There is always something to do, someone to talk to.”

“Nothing you can leave to your underlings?” I offered.

“Oh, Emerson. A robin sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because her trust is not on the branch, but on her wings.”

“I understand.”

“I merely came to say congratulations. You have found something some will never discover. Hold on to that, Emerson.”

“I plan to.”

“Keep your head up, eyes open, nose clean. Give them no reason. Do you understand?”

“Of course.”

A long drag on the cigarette. The end glowed brightly in the gloom. Then she dropped it and snubbed it out.

“Tell me, Emerson. What would you have done if she said ‘no’?”

“I would have hoped you all disappeared, and she never found out you were here,” I said, and laughed at the thought. Raxiel didn’t follow along. “But I guess there was never any doubt about it. I contemplated nothing other than what I was expecting.”

She nodded. “Best keep an open mind, in all circumstances. There are many alternatives to the truth, as much as there are many alternatives to the lies.”

With that, she turned and dissolved into the darkness, her tall frame disintegrating before my eyes, leaving me trying to understand her word play and what it all meant. In the end, I drank my beer and melded back into the conversation at Bethany’s side.

The night continued as numbers dwindled. As one couple bid their thanks and announced their departure, two CHIRP officers replaced them.

“Ah, Bethany. Let me introduce what looks like Sergeant Iggy.”

“Got my stripes a few weeks ago.”

“I’d like to think I had something to do with that,” I joked.

Bethany hit my arm.

“Seriously, your fiancé had a profound impact on me. Made me see things from every angle.”

“I see,” Bethany nodded. “And who is this?”

Iggy turned. “This is my partner, Aziel.” He turned to face him. “Partners... in more ways than one.”

We shook hands.

“It’s an honor, Detective,” Aziel said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Well, Iggy,” I said. “You are full of surprises.”

I regarded the broad shoulders of the officer, eager eyes embedded in a cacao-colored face. They seemed so oddly different you couldn’t help but think they fit together perfectly. After all, looks can be as spurious as a criminal’s intention.

Iggy smiled and shrugged. “I guess you know when you know, right?”

I grabbed Bethany by the hand. “I know exactly what you’re talking about.” Stole a gaze, a moment just for us. “But I’m nothing special,” I said. “Just doing my job the best I can. That’s all anyone can ask for.”

“Awfully modest, as always, no doubt,” Bethany said.

“How are things in the Detective squad?” Iggy asked.

“Lots of analysis. Trying to figure out behavioral patterns. Determining who’s close to the line, who’ll play nice, who’ll run. A lot of desktop research, not enough action.”

“Not like the good old days.”

“No. And nothing will be.”

“Seriously, sir,” Iggy said. “I’d follow you to the ends of the earth.”

“Well,” I said. “Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

But the ends of the earth were a lot closer than I thought.

It was much later, when Harlow was sound asleep, and the last guests had left, that we retired to the sitting room with an ardent nightcap. We sat on the couch facing each other, knees up, fingers intertwined. The radio was tuned into a station emitting a rowdy concoction of trumpets and white noise, but that eventually transitioned into something a bit more understated.

“Where do you think Jackson is?” I asked.

“If I knew,” she said, “I wouldn’t be able to tell you.”

And that was the end of that conversation. We had both read the book ‘The flow of information: illiberal concatenation of sensitive communicate in denationalized arrangements’ as part of our training and adhered to its teachings stringently.

“Did I ever tell you about our last encounter? Before he shipped out?”

“I didn’t even know he came back from Basic.”

“He didn’t want to make a big deal of it.”

“Damn. I owe that bastard a punch in the arm.”

I scoffed. “Knowing Jackson, he’d ask for a slap in the face. But don’t feel bad, he didn’t tell Marie either.”

“What? Why?”

I cocked my head. “That’s exactly what I said! He didn’t think Marie could let him go back.”

“Well, she was pregnant, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah, that’s what we found out later. Just like Jackson to make it easier on other people.”

“Or think like he’s making it easier,” Bethany said. “Shit. We really should spend more time helping her out. It feels like forever since we last saw her.”

I nodded. “Life gets in the way.”

“People prioritize what they care about.”

“I know, I know. Let’s make an effort.”

“So, what happened? Give me the details.”

I took a deep breath and told her the story... most of the story... some of the story. I told her enough, just so I could share some of my guilt. I couldn’t tell her about Laferty Bridge or lying to an Investigator. I just couldn’t formulate those sentences. Not even in my head. What would she think of me? I had broken so many rules, so many laws. Some I couldn’t even admit to myself. Regardless, all of that was in the past and it deserved no more airtime than to stay there.

So, I told her about meeting up with Jackson at the pub and then abandoning him. How he so desperately needed my help, and I just walked away into the night. He was too

proud to chase after me, and I was too scared to stop. Sometimes, I wondered if that was the last conversation I'd ever have with him, and often wished I had handled myself differently that night. Too many thoughts swirling around my head, too many things going on in my life. I should have pushed it all to the side. But shutting off was never an easy task.

She eased her hand onto my leg. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier? You didn't have to keep that all to yourself."

The soft glow of the lavender candles made shadows jump all over her face. I took a sip of my whiskey and eased the glass onto the coffee table. I contemplated telling her about the letter he wrote to me, but I held back. I didn't want her to think of him like that. I didn't want anyone to think of him like that. I looked away to give myself time to formulate a response. An upright piano in the corner that we purchased because we thought it would 'tie the room together', yet never played because neither of us could, nor had the tenacity or drive to find out how.

An oil abstract painting by an unknown artist that we liked but didn't want to pay the seven-hundred-dollar price tag for. The piece took up a large part of the wall, urging its splashes of red, gold and blue into the room. But we knew it belonged in that room. We accepted it had to come home with us. Below it was a gramophone we found at a garage sale. It had been tucked behind a broken rocking chair and concealed with a moldy blanket. We neither had records, nor could we track any down. They had seemed to have been erased from existence.

On the far wall, a series of interlocking floating shelves held various priceless knick-knacks and photos. Invaluable memories on display. My eyes befell a photo of the three of us: myself, Bethany, and Jackson. It was just after I had gotten out of the hospital and reconnected with my future wife. We were younger then, so full of promise and eagerness to charge on with our existence, wherever the paths would take us. Fate can be a cruel mistress.

She waited patiently for my answer, but I had none to give, so I merely shrugged instead, letting my shoulders give her a response.

“No,” she began, her voice coalescing with a trombone sonata. “You aren’t getting out of this conversation with subtle body language.”

“I guess it just seemed easier than bringing you into my world. Maybe I felt guilty about everything that had happened.”

“You don’t need to protect me,” she said. “I’m a big girl. I can handle things.”

“We were trying for a child.”

“And we got there, didn’t we?”

“Yeah,” I smiled. “And I’d smash the world for him.”

“I know you would.” Her smile was as soulful as the look in her eyes. She drank in my being. Placed a hand on my chest, launching a battery of fireworks over my skin. Her touch always did that.

“See,” she said. “It’s not hard to talk about these things. So, is there anything else I should know before we are officially bound?”

Laferty Bridge.

Lying to an Investigator.

It was a complicated question, one filled with intricate pitfalls that I needed to painfully avoid.

Laferty Bridge.

Lying to an Investigator.

Sometimes, the truth isn’t the answer, and sometimes, a problem shared is not a problem halved.

Laferty Bridge.

Lying to an Investigator.

Instead, it doubles in volume and crushes the people under it, and I'll be damned if I would place Bethany in harm's way.

Laferty Bridge.

Lying to an Investigator.

"No," I said.

Seemingly satisfied with my response, she eased back into the sofa and clutched the wine glass to her chest. Closed her eyes and let the steady concoction of lavender and the sounds of radio jazz wash over her.

"Oh," I said. "There is one thing. I don't want to have the ceremony until Jackson comes home."

"Yeah," she said lazily. "I can live with that."

I pulled her towards me, away from the impending brink into inebriated slumber. Our lips met and our kisses were young and fresh. In all our years together, our connection to each other hadn't changed. And every moment we were together, transported me back to the House where we first spoke, standing in that kitchen praying for a kiss that was never coming my way. Fate separated us, but also brought us back together again. I waited twenty years for that kiss, and I'd wait another twenty to kiss her again.

"Another drink?" I offered.

"I've got a better idea," she whispered with renewed potency and playing with her engagement ring. "Come to bed."

I pulled her closer till our noses were touching, stared into her eyes. "Sounds good to me," I crooned. Electricity jumped between us.

The hypnotic gaze in her eyes dispersed as the music in the background faded, drowned out by piercing static. We both turned to the radio. Trumpets and bassoons filled the

airwaves, a screeching concoction to break the deepest of daydreams. The madness died down, and a voice spoke over the musical remnants.

“Stay tuned for an important announcement from the Committee.”

The last time we had such a broadcast was when the Committee announced they were plunging the country into war. Updates about the progress of the conflict were few and ambiguous. Information failed to flow into my new department. Bethany wouldn't, or couldn't, or shouldn't, share anything.

Another crackle from the speakers, before an old, gravelly, grandmotherly voice entered our home.

“Fellow citizens, today is a momentous day. For we can declare our conflict over as we rally behind tremendous victory.”

Trumpets sounded in unison as if to underline her last word.

“Our brave men and women, who have so courageously placed their lives before this great nation, will return home as soon as possible. It won't be long before our lives return to normal, but we shall never forget the tremendous sacrifice they have made for themselves, for each other, and for you. And it is now, more so than ever, that we come together as one society, for our children, and our children's children, for generations to come. It is us, and only us, and anyone suggesting otherwise is an enemy of this country and an enemy of you. Stay alert, as we poison the weeds before they take hold and overtake our wondrous garden that we have created for you. For those that stand against us: take heed. Your friends will find you out. Your family will find you out. We will find you out. And there will be no reprieve.”

Bethany and I held each other, staring at the speaker, as a loud click punctuated the end of the brief announcement, as if someone pressed the *stop* button on a tape recorder. The national anthem played, loud and full, until I got up and turned off the radio.

Her eyes were wide and expecting. “Did you just turn off the radio during the national anthem?” she whispered.

I edged back to her, as if conscious that someone was watching me at that moment. I should have been more diligent with my behavior.

“No,” I said. “I think there’s something wrong with the radio.” It was the worst lie told in the worst kind of way. I held my breath, half expecting sirens to blare down the street and for the front door to be kicked in. But as the seconds ticked by, I realized just how paranoid I had become, how much we both had become.

I eased back down onto the sofa. “The war,” I mumbled. “It’s over. Jackson is coming home.”

“Do you think he...”

“What? Died? Trust me, we’d know if he died.”

“No, I mean, you know. War can mess people up. Do you think he’s going to be the same Jackson as when he left?”

“Of course. He’ll always be the same old Jackson. I can’t imagine anything changing that.”

Then I thought about the letter he wrote and realized how wrong I was. It wasn’t the letter I told Investigator Wheatley about. The letter I was thinking of I hadn’t shared with a soul. In this correspondence, fear seemed to shape his every word, an emotion I failed to connect to the person, as if someone else penned his prose.

Bethany had left me for bed as I finished the rest of my drink in the dark. I’d blown out the candles and stared at the white wisps tangle to the ceiling while thinking about the

announcement. My friend was coming home from the war, and in some small way, it scared the hell out of me.

With the room dark and still, I pushed the empty glass onto the table and shuffled down the hall to my office. Sitting down at the desk, I click on the lamp and open the bottom drawer. It was full of various papers that I didn't recall stuffing in there, and it took me a few minutes to locate the thing I was looking for.

Tucked into the back corner, in an envelope stained with dirt and time, was the one and only letter I received from Jackson during his time at the war. I ran a hand over my scrawled name and address on the front, over the stamps haphazardly stuck in the corner. I eased out the letter and carefully unfolded it like it was a museum relic or a prized Catholic church artifact.

Dull penciled words stared at me. It had been years since I had read it, yet I knew every word off by heart. I could have recited it to Bethany.

Emerson,

I hope this letter finds you and finds you well. It bloody should, because it cost me ten bucks and a porno mag to a guy from F-Company. Don't worry about writing back, you won't be able to reach me. We're infiltrating a steady line held by the enemy tomorrow and I don't think I'll get another chance, and I need to say something.

I'm fucking scared. I never thought I'd feel that way, nor tell anyone that I am. But this whole thing is fucking stupid. No one knows what we're doing and why we're doing it. And I'm not just scared for myself. I'm scared for the kid next to me, the one who keeps dropping their weapon because their hands are slick with anxious sweat. For the one who

shot their friend because their shaking finger was on the trigger when something spooked them.

I've seen companies decimated. I've seen more blood and bodies to last me a lifetime. And the scariest thing is, and I mean the absolute worst thing is, it's not over. Not by a long shot. The pig-headed cunts in charge are just pushing forward, regardless of how many lives the enemy mows down. They'll reach their objective, people like that always do, but people will pay the price.

I was hoping for a different life, Emerson. Where you and Bethany and me and Marie are neighbors. Our kids grow up together. We have weekend barbeques and late nights drinking beer and watching the stars. That dream seems more and more unlikely.

If the worst happens, and I don't make it back, I want you to know I am sorry. That night before I shipped out, I felt you were hiding something from me. I didn't mean to question you, or your ethics, your morals, or values. You are a fine person, Emerson. The best a friend could want. The best anyone would ever want. I don't blame you for walking away that night, and I regret not chasing after you.

Things happen and they become the past. I can't change it, as much as I can't change what's going to happen tomorrow morning. Tell Marie I love her, oh, but don't tell her about this letter. I could only get one out and I sent it to you. She'll hate me for that.

Take care of yourself, Emerson. You are destined for great things, regardless of what you may think.

Signed

Your friend

Jackson Groves.

I wiped a tear from my eye. Scared. *Fucking scared*. Words I never associated with Jackson, yet unapologetically screamed from the page. Some part of me felt betrayed like he had been hiding his true self from me all these years. Or maybe it disheartened me, knowing that such a strong-willed character was stuck in a situation that encased him in fear.

Fear has a gigantic shadow.

I folded the letter back up and eased it into the envelope. Laying it into the back corner of the drawer, I stuffed in the other papers and eased the drawer shut. I sat there in the lamp's glow, recounting the events of the night we parted. I wasn't honest with him, as much as I wasn't honest with myself. But I was scared, concerned about what he would think of me, of owning up to myself about what really happened.

Reminiscing about Jackson, from when I first met him in the House, to when we went our separate ways before the war, had me reflecting on all facets of my life. Getting to know the Freeman House kids, followed by the death of the little girl. Getting promoted to Sergeant, followed by lying to an Investigator. It seemed some disastrous event pursued every good part of my life. Something to remind me of how insignificant I was, and how I shouldn't stretch beyond my station.

Feeling the effects of the whiskey, I shambled across the floor to the bookshelf. Gazed on the contents in the dim glow of the lamp. Plenty of books, new and old, lined the shelves. Some standing upright, some lying flat. *The History of the Trinklage Progression* sat next to an autobiography of Drexle Trinklage himself. Further up, there was a black leather book with gold embossed lettering titled *Child First Laws: The legal guide to avoid Re-education*. Various propaganda materials and novels filled the space, but there was one I was looking for, one I had pushed into the shelf when we moved in and hadn't thought about since. Not since that night.

Found it, eased it out, and crashed into a worn armchair. Placed my feet on the accompanying ottoman. Opened it up to a random page and started reading from a random spot on the page.

“Help me!” Gurtie cried. “Please!”

Corvis looked her over, waiting for some kind of empathic draw. Yet none came, so he walked over to the open window, gripped the frame, and peered out. Snowcapped peaks pierced the gray sky and attempted to hide a moon that rose earlier than usual.

“Don’t you feel anything?” she wailed from over his shoulder.

He asked himself that same question a million times a day. But numbness had set in, and caring for someone else just seemed like an inconvenience. He shrugged, as if it meant nothing to him, as if she meant nothing to him. Of course, she was more than that, and deserved more than what he was willing to offer.

“You’d be dead within seconds if I do,” he said, bluntly and half-heartedly. Anything at that point seemed like a melodic joke.

“I’m dead if I stay,” she countered.

A rational argument. Something he could place on the scales to weigh up the perspectives and help him decide.

“Listen,” she said, walking up behind him. “If you won’t do it, I’m going to have to do it myself.” She pushed him aside and stepped up onto the windowsill. Warm air gushed around her, flicking her hair in a myriad of directions.

She looked at him through her follicle prison bars. He stood, expressionless.

“They’ll never take you, if you do that,” he said. “If you jump, you are nothing to them.”

“Don’t you care?” she screamed at him. “Don’t you care about us? Don’t you care about me?”

He opened his mouth to respond but didn’t know how to answer. Screeching tires broke his concentration as he searched for the correct response. He moved next to Gurtie, and they both looked down to the street, to the beige sedans that had come to a sudden halt at the front of the building. People in gray uniforms exited the vehicles like they were on fire and ran into the building.

“It won’t be long,” Gurtie said. “Won’t be long before they arrive.”

“Won’t be long before this is all over.”

“What are you going to do?” she whispered.

He looked at her, deep into her dark, sorrowful pools of nothing.

“The only thing I can do,” he said.

A concoction of forceful footfalls echoed up the stairwell that made it impossible to count how many there were, but they both knew there were enough of them to deal with any obstacle they would find. The facts were as simple as that, as unremarkable as adding one and one together.

Corvis looked at her one more time and closed his eyes, hoping he could remember her forever, but knowing the memory of Gurtie would fade as soon as she left his sight.

The door burst open, sending wood splinters into the room. Shouting followed, large men bellowing, the sounds of latent gunfire looming in their position.

Gurtie let go of the window frame.

Corvis pushed.

And Gurtie flew.

CHAPTER 41

Men, women, and children lined the streets, whooping, whistling, and waving the national flag as cars idled down the main street. The parade was an important part of the nation's history, and everyone wanted to be part of it... or be seen to be taking part in it. The government had canceled lessons that day, transforming it into a national holiday. No work, no school. Just national pride, to build further love for the government by bringing loved one's home safely.

Bethany and I held hands as we walked down the footpath to find a better vantage spot. CHIRP officers roamed the walkways, veering between the masses, looking for indiscretions, hoping to find some untoward that could raise their professional profile.

The road stretched on into the distance, with people five and six deep on both sides, hoping to glimpse a real-life war hero. Not since the passing of Drexle Trinklage had there been such a public display.

Businesses bore colorful bunting, displayed flags, and stuck posters on their windows to commemorate the day. Fortified vehicles led the entourage as it meandered down the middle of the road. It showed the might the government could swing, although I was sure the

vehicles on display rarely saw sunlight. I had no doubt if anyone visited the military museum, they would find it empty of any war machines.

Over the heads of the crowd, I made out young men, neat and shaved and clean, riding on top of the troop carriers. They waved to the crowd with joyous exhilaration; large smiles painted onto their faces, stiff hands shaking at the flags and the cheers and the wolf whistles.

We stopped short as several black-clad CHIRP officers cut in front of us and stormed into the crowd. They tossed aside civilians like they were shop mannequins, but instead of an outcry of injustice, they merely helped each other to their feet, dusted themselves off, and continued waving to the returned troops. After pushing through the crowd, the officers eventually got their hands on their quarry, dragging out an elderly woman. She lost her pink hat as she kicked and screamed grave insults. They hauled her away as the crowd ignored her cries for help, instead focusing on the convoy of troops. It was safer that way. For everybody. The crowd's cheers quickly silenced her cries. The officers must have had their reason for doing it, and they could never be the ones to blame. They had procedure, protocol, and orders. It was up to people like me to determine what those orders should be and filter them down to people like them.

"There!" I pointed, and I pulled my family into the cheering crowd. I picked up Harlow and put him on my shoulders so he could see. "Can you see, Boy?" I put my hands to my mouth and shouted out. "Jackson!"

After three attempts, my friend picked up on the signal and stared right at me. He stood up and steadied himself on the moving vehicle as he pointed at me and punched the sky with a massive grin on his face. Jackson was back, the same Jackson that had left all those years ago. Confident and full of energy. I knew he'd survive the battlefield as much as I knew he could merge back into citizenship.

I didn't know how wrong I was.

"I didn't see you at the parade," I said.

Marie took off her coat and grabbed the glass of cider. "We must have missed each other." She took a large mouthful and let her head fall back. "Oh my god, I needed that."

The pub had returned to its dim bustle, as people released cheers and whoops for returned servicemen and women as they strode in the door. They'd parade in with their olive and blue dress outfits, neatly pressed and adorned with an assortment of medals, before being bombarded with handshakes, hugs, and high fives. It was like being at a rock concert, where the band members each took their applause.

"How is Boy doing?" I asked.

"Try explaining to a seven-year-old that Father, a person he's never met, is coming back a war hero."

"A little bit excited, is he?" Bethany asked.

"Damn right!" Marie replied. "It's like two presents in one. Father and hero. The war is his favorite subject at school. His bedroom is full of all the posters, the same ones plastered all over the place. I caught him saluting himself in the mirror the other morning. In fact, I heard an argument between him and a friend the other day, that his father was better than Tim's father because Tim's father didn't go to war because he was married."

"Sounds like he's jumping out of his skin."

"Ha! He hasn't slept since the announcement." She continued drinking.

Bethany and I shared a glance before taking in our own drinks.

"I guess it won't be long before you can all be a family again," Bethany said. "It'll be great for Boy to have Jackson around. I always thought he'd make a great father."

The door opened, and we all turned as another burst of applauding patronage sent the sound levels into a roar. A blonde young man stood in the open soaking in the attention, before running to his friends and family.

I took a drink of my beer and then wiped my hands on my pants. “Jesus. I’m so nervous.”

Marie sculled the rest of her drink. “You’re nervous? I’m seeing my husband for the first time in seven years. Then I get to take him home and introduce him to my son like he’s a new pet. To be honest, I just don’t know how this is going to work. It all seems so strange.”

“I’m sure it will be weird for a few days,” I said. “You know, having another body in the house and all that. But I’m sure you’ll all get used to it in no time.”

Bethany grabbed her hand. “We’re here. For both of you. Whatever you need.”

“I just want the same Jackson back as the one who left,” Marie replied.

I thought back to the letter I keep hidden in my desk drawer; the prose so full of words that made it seem like Jackson hadn’t written it at all. Fear just wasn’t a word in his vocabulary, and when I read it, the great wave of concern pummeled me. But when I saw him riding on top of the troop transports at the parade, all that concern dissolved.

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “The same old Jackson.”

“I hope so. We’re going to have a small celebration for his return home. Something simple at ours, so Boy can be involved. You guys in?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I said.

“Great. Give Jackson a few weeks to settle in and I’ll let you know.”

“Can’t wait,” Bethany added. “We’ve got to make up for lost time.”

“It looks like everyone does,” Marie said, looking around the room.

The door opened and cheers erupted around the room. We looked over to see Jackson standing under a spotlight with his arms in the air. Me and Bethany stood back at the table as

Marie bounded over to him. She dove into his embrace and their lips locked as another roar exploded in the cavern.

I couldn't help but smile as the two approached. All the pain and anger that enveloped us all those years ago dissipated in the instant. Everything that I had been holding onto left me in those moments, leaving nothing but a peculiar sense of freedom.

Bethany kissed him on the cheek, and they hugged before he turned to me. We stared at each other before coming together. My best friend held me close and whispered into my ear.

"It's great to see you, Emerson. I missed you."

We stood at arm's length, hands on each other's shoulders. "And you, my friend. Damn good to have you back."

Marie cleared her throat. "Would you two like a little privacy?"

"A hotel room, perhaps?" Bethany added.

Jackson looked down at me. "Well, I have been away at war and in serious need for some loving."

I lifted my shoulders. "I guess. But you have to buy me some drinks first."

We broke away.

"What?" Jackson said. "Me, a war hero—by the way, check out my medals—*buy* a drink? Heroes don't buy drinks! We get them for free!"

He turned and strode to the bar. The civilians waiting to place their order parted like the Red Sea, welcoming a representation of their country's strength into their group. He returned a short while later with four pints, each glass holding an impressive foam head that held its shape.

We clinked our glasses and drank down the amber liquid. Jackson recounted stories of his experience, much like all the returning heroes were telling their friends and family. But as

the night wore on, I could see pain and frustration lurch over his features with each event he told.

Marie suggested to Jackson that they go home, but he insisted he stay out. It was like he was drinking away his memories. Eventually, Bethany and Marie took taxis home while I sat with Jackson making small talk, neither of us brave enough to talk about the past, nor the present, nor the future. Which didn't leave a lot of options. I wanted to ask him about the letter. What happened before? What happened after? But I just couldn't bring it up.

As the hours ticked by, sound morphed into a dull rumble as the patronage dwindled to just a few. A bartender walked around us, wiping down tables and stacking chairs onto them, before mopping the floors.

We continued to drink, making glass towers with the empties. I slammed my hands down on the table.

"How about we get you home to your wife?" I slurred.

"I've got a better idea," he replied. "How about... one more."

Lights danced in front of my eyes. Sound bubbled in my ears. It was a horrible idea, and so I had only one response to give.

"Alright," I accepted. "Just one. I'm not sure how much longer I can stay upright."

He swayed in front of me, but I didn't know if it was because he was tilting side to side, or I was. I leaned against the table as he walked to the bar. He made a gesture with his hands, but it was the noise that happened next that shook me.

Bottles of liquor and empty glasses crashed to the ground as Jackson pulled the barkeeper over the counter and pushed him against the bar. Sound warbled as I staggered towards them, the vision slanting with every step like I was on a boat in the middle of a storm. The barman held up his hands as Jackson jabbed a finger towards the barkeeper. Then,

in a flurry of color and sound, Jackson picked up a glass and smashed it into the barman's face.

Blood splashed across the area as Jackson let go of the bleeding barkeeper and backed away. I grabbed Jackson's shoulder, and he turned suddenly, punching me in the mouth. I stumbled backward, crashing into a table and then to the floor. The ceiling spun one way, then the other. I could feel warmth in my mouth, and I pushed my fingers in there and felt around. Pulled them out and inspected them, but I couldn't focus my vision. Not that I needed to.

Jackson's face filled my vision. He mouthed some words, but in my haze, I didn't know what he was saying. I reached up for him, and the next thing I knew, the floor became my ceiling, and the image of the barkeeper holding a hand to his bloodied face slowly faded as the door closed.

The night air exasperated every little sound. Jackson's heavy boots crashing through puddles, dogs barking and howling incessantly, and siren's slicing their way through the darkness to come and get us. Streetlight lit footpaths became grass yards, turned into gravel roads. Each time I opened my eyes the scene had changed, and time became insignificant.

Somewhere, after some time, I felt the wetness and cold of a grassy field. I turned to see Jackson, bent over and hurling into some bushes. It was enough for me. I rolled over onto my knees and let it all come up, knowing I'd feel just a little better with each vicious heave.

I sat with my head between my knees and tried to steady myself. Looked around. Streetlights far off into the distance illuminated graffitied warehouses. Behind me, a gentle rumble grew into a thunderous screech as a train growled by. As the warmth in my belly faded, I felt the cold bite into my hands. White puffs with every breath faded as the train passed, and Jackson plonked himself next to me.

“Jackson,” I said as I spat on the ground. I held my head in my hands. “What the fuck happened back there?”

“Do you remember this place?” he asked.

The scenery was a blur as concrete melded into grass melted into chain-link fences.

“Have we been here before?”

“Yeah! It was...” his voice trailed off, but I didn’t know whether he was searching for an answer or had passed out. Then, he clicked his fingers. “The night we met.”

“We met in the house.”

“Yes. I meant when we connected again... in the pub. And you were so drunk, and we came here.”

“Oh yeah, I vaguely remember.” I didn’t, but at that moment I couldn’t remember my address.

“Do you remember what I showed you? About the House?”

I started laughing, almost uncontrollably. I didn’t mean it, but a thought just got stuck in there and I just couldn’t shake it. Then Jackson started laughing, which certainly didn’t help the situation. The next thing I know is I’m rolling around the dirt and grass and puke, holding my stomach because it hurt so much. Eventually, I stopped, because eventually, all things stop, and everything hurt, from my face to my legs. Pain pulsed through every part of me.

“Ah, fuck, Jackson. I’m pretty fucked up.”

Jackson was on all fours, throwing up again. He spat into the field and rolled onto his ass.

“What did you say?”

“I said I’m fucked up!”

Another spit. “Yeah, well, we’re all a little fucked up.”

“Some more than most,” I offered. It was as prolific as I was going to get in my state.

Jackson rocked his head back. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“Jackson?”

He looked at me. Slack jaw.

“What happened tonight?”

“Well, dear Emerson, this happens when one consumes too much alcohol and the human—.”

“Jackson! You know what I mean.”

Stared. An incredulous look. It was almost like I was insulting his honor.

“Just leave it, Emerson.”

“What happened?”

He sighed. Relented. Knew I would not stop asking about it. Knew he couldn’t distract me or fob me off with a lie. I was as good at telling them as I was at picking up on them in people.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled in response. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

“I’ve never seen you like that... not that... brutal.”

Jackson didn’t respond.

I thought back to what Bethany asked.

“Do you think he’ll be the same? War does things to people.”

Or words to that effect. The world seemed hazy at best and my neurons weren’t firing.

“Did something happen?”

“What?”

“Over there? At war? Did something...”

When I looked up, he was gone. Just a silhouette stumbling down a dark road, eventually swallowed by the abyss. No. My friend was not alright.

CHAPTER 42

It was four weeks later when Boy Groves ran off the patio, bounded down the stairs with Boy Barnes in tow, and into the yard with processed sugar running riot through his veins. Summer had been kind to us all season, and that day was no different, a sky full of soft, milky clouds, a day so full of promise.

I looked over the cake, to the seven blown-out candles sitting on it—one for every year of Jackson’s absence. They were striped lighthouses on a sea of chocolate frosting.

“Haven’t made a dint in that beast of a cake,” I offered.

“Well, I hoped you liked it,” Marie said. “Because you’re taking half of the leftovers home with you.”

“What the hell are we going to do with all of that?” Bethany asked.

“What the hell are we going to do with the rest of it?” Marie fired back with a smile.

“I sure as hell don’t need the calories,” I said, patting my stomach. “What about you, Jackson?”

I looked over to my friend. He was staring out into the expanse of his yard, as the two boys ran through the trees. They raised their sticks and ventured into the dark forest in search

of dragons and maidens... or so they cried out. They were destined to fall into the same machine we all did. Soon, the innocence would disappear entirely with the continued onslaught of posters and television broadcasts and school education sessions. Soon they would spout the same rhetoric as everyone else. Another generation in the government's armory, until the next, and the next after that.

"Jackson?"

No response, just the same intense soul-shaking stare into his yard. I looked to Bethany, then over to Marie. But when I returned to Jackson, I noticed a single tear build in the corner of Jackson's eye, before it overflowed and ran down his face. He didn't flinch or attempt to wipe it away. Didn't even know it was there.

Marie put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up at her with raised eyebrows. She mouthed some words to him, and he blinked, recoiled, and wiped away the wet track on his face.

"Oh, shit." Looked to me. "Sorry about that. Were you saying something?"

"Seven is a big deal," I blurted out, changing the subject. "Your boy is going to make a great big brother to ours here." I reached over and patted Harlow softly, his sleeping head buried deep into Bethany.

"Anytime you need a break," Marie said, "I'm here to take over."

Bethany laughed. "Not getting a little clucky, are we, Marie?"

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," she said playfully.

"I wonder if Jackson has any thoughts on this," I said. "Jackson?"

He didn't reply. Lost in a trance.

"Is everything okay?"

He scoffed, looked to Bethany, and then back to me. Scoffed again. "Yeah. Why?"

"It's just that—."

“It’s nothing!” Jackson stood up abruptly, banging the table as he did so. “I need to go and…” And then promptly left, leaving the end of his sentence hanging in the air.

Silence consumed us, save for Boy’s voice cascading around the yard and the soft waft of the overhead fan. I looked to Bethany, and she gave a melancholic smile in reply as she reached for my hand.

Marie started shuffling plates on the table.

“What’s going on, Marie?”

She eased down and started playing with a napkin, first folding it into a tight triangle, then unfolding it and tearing it at the edges.

“Coffee,” she whispered. “Who wants coffee?”

“Marie,” I said. “What is it?”

“You said he would be the same,” she said, her voice wavering. “But he isn’t.”

One corner of her mouth quivered like she was trying to smile but just couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“There are services available. Has he spoken to anybody?”

She shrugged mournfully. “I wouldn’t know. He doesn’t talk to me anymore. Won’t even touch me. It’s like he doesn’t even want to be here. He’s been sleeping in the spare room on the floor.”

My heart broke when I looked into her eyes.

“It’s been a few weeks,” I said. “Maybe he just needs time.”

“I know transitioning back into normal life can be tough,” Bethany said, “even for the strongest person. I’m sure he will come around.”

“Please help him, Emerson. He just hasn’t been the same. He was boisterous and energetic in the pub, but as soon as we got home, he just shut down.” She looked at her hands. “It’s hard, that’s all.”

Bethany squeezed my hand tighter, but I pulled it away from her. I could feel the guilt flush my face. It was hard living the perfect life with the perfect woman by my side, when your friends were in such disarray. We had been dealt very different hands, and doing our best to make them work, but I had never seen Jackson behave the way he had.

“Readjustment,” I said.

I was struggling. Running out of things to say. Silence weighed heavy on the table; the boy’s playing discordant with the conversation. I rubbed my hands together. Sometimes, without even noticing, life impedes itself, trips itself up, ties itself into disgustingly complex, irreversible knots.

“It’s okay, Emerson. I know how busy you’ve been with your promotion and all that other work stuff.”

But it didn’t change how I felt. You do the things you prioritize. Besides, the promotion was months old, but I didn’t have the heart to correct her. Would probably make me seem like a bigger jackass than I already felt.

I’d let them down. I always thought I would be there for him, as he had been there for me. And I could’ve thrown every excuse under the sun out on the table, but what would be the point? We were more than friends, we were family. Brothers. And I felt like I was letting him slide through my fingers.

“Yeah, but I still think I can do better.”

Marie opened her mouth to rebuke my comment, but I held up a hand.

“Nothing you can say is going to change my mind.”

I stood up.

“I’m going to go check on Jackson.”

I stood at the toilet and tried to urinate, but nothing came out. I should help but I did not know how. Jackson was always the one that came to my rescue, not the other way around. I was a high-ranking official in the most influential department in the government regime, and yet I had no power to wield. There would be no waving of a magic wand and somehow make Jackson be okay. If only I had known the extent of the troubles he was facing alone.

Satisfied that no action was forthcoming, I zipped up and flushed, and washed my hands. I moved through the house, which wasn't the longest journey I've been on, but stopped dead in my tracks when I heard the muffling noises coming from the study.

I crept to the closed door. Raised my fist to knock, but then caught myself. What would I say to him? What could I offer? I hoped talking was enough, although I was sure he had done enough talking in the therapy sessions all vets undertook upon returning home. If they weren't helping him, how could I possibly?

I rapped sharply on the door and called out. "Jackson? You in there?"

Sudden commotion from the room. Papers shuffled. Drawers slammed shut. Nose being blown. He slid the door open and looked at me with red eyes. My heart sank.

"Holy shit, Jackson."

"What?"

"You think you're hiding it? Let's talk this one out."

He shrugged and moved to the window and peered out onto the street. "Any day now. Any time now. It won't be long."

"What are you talking about?"

Shrugged again. "You want a drink?" he asked while pointing to a decanter.

I took a deep breath. "Sounds damn fine to me."

Jackson poured the drinks, and we sat down opposite each other, the desk a considerable barrier between us. Every interaction he seemed to get further and further away

as if some incurable infectious disease coursed through his veins. We sipped our drinks in silence, but I could tell something was weighing Jackson down. His lips were in a permanent grimace and his eyebrows were in a perpetual furrow. I tried to imagine the conversations that were darting around his head, but that kind of thinking was futile.

“You want to talk about it?” I offered.

Jackson upended the contents into his mouth and cradled the empty glass.

“It was fucking horrific,” he said. “No one had a fucking clue what they were doing. Young men were told to march over open ground or take a hill or search a building. All of them dead.” He turned to face me but his eyes had glazed over as if he looked right through me. “It’s not the dead bodies, you know. It’s war. People die. I get it. It isn’t that. It’s the people who aren’t there that decide to send more people to their deaths. Entire companies slaughtered because they wanted to take ground. The whole thing was fucking useless. They might have had a parade when we returned, but none of us were heroes. We were survivors. Lucky enough to not die. Lucky enough to not be selected to march over dead bodies, only to be mowed down with machine gun fire.”

I leaned forward. “Holy shit, Jackson. I... I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

“But that’s not even the worst part. The worst part is when they left me there. They left me for the enemy.” He undid some buttons and slipped the shirt from this shoulder. Large pock marks near his shoulder, healed with time and booze. Rough, circular indentions.

“The enemy did that?”

A sad smile. “No. That’s what my CO did when I refused to charge the onslaught that was heading for us. He shot me as the rest of them retreated.” Jackson stood, slowly unbuttoned his shirt, and dropped it to his waist. He spun slowly. “This is what the enemy did when they found me.” Raised and embedded scars ran in every direction, crisscrossing

multiple times across the canvas. It looked like a topographical map of a country, riverbeds and rocky mountain ranges engulfed the landscape.

Words caught in my throat and my mind went blank. Eventually, I turned my head and closed my eyes, but the image of Jackson standing there showcasing his pain was all I could see. When I opened my eyes, he was buttoning his shirt.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I haven’t even shown Marie. I can’t let her see this. Don’t want her to see the pain.”

I looked down at my hands. “What can I do, Jackson?”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

Jackson got up and poured out even measures for us both and returned to his chair.

He held his hands over his eyes as if to hide away from the conversation. He took a deep breath.

“I’m scared, Emerson. I’m scared for Boy. Scared for Marie. That I can’t be the person they want or need me to be. That I’m no longer the person they want.”

“I know things are tough right now, and I can’t even begin to feel what you went through over there, but those people out there love you, Jackson. It’s going to take time.”

“I don’t know how much time I’ve got.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was fired last week from my job.”

“What happened?”

He took a deep breath. “Got into an altercation with my supervisor.”

“What type of altercation?”

He took a drink. “A physical one.”

First the bartender, then this. I wondered who might be next in his firing line. But there was nothing that made me think Marie or Boy were in harm’s way.

“I think you need to talk to someone,” I suggested.

“We are talking.”

“Not me, someone who knows what the hell they’re talking about. Surely the military has someone, right? A counselor... or veteran’s programs... or—.”

He put his glass on the desk. “I’ve tried that. A god damn waste of time, Em. I’ve been there. Sat in those rooms with returned soldiers and officers, sharing their troubles to a remorseful applause. Do you know what they said to me? Life is like a wave, and sometimes it crashes down on the beach, but then it recedes and joins the ocean again.”

I stared at him. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Exactly. Waste of fucking time.”

I could feel a headache coming on. Rubbed my temples.

“Fine then. We’ll get together.”

“And talk about our feelings?”

“We can stare at the wall for all I care. I haven’t been there for you, Jackson. Not like I should have.”

“Sure,” he said, but I could tell his mind was elsewhere.

“Don’t worry about the job,” I said. “Who wouldn’t want Jackson the war hero working for them?”

He poured one last drink. “A hero is someone who was braver for five minutes longer than the person standing next to them. Besides, there is an abundance of returned service people out there.”

“You’ll find something.”

“But what if I lose that one? And the next one?” He leaned forward. “What if they take Boy? I just don’t think I could handle that.”

“Let’s make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

“Yeah,” he said as he downed the rest of his drink.

“Say you’ll get through this.”

We stared at each other in silence until Marie knocked on the door and announced she had made a fresh pot of coffee. Neither alcohol nor caffeine held the answers to Jackson’s afflictions. And sometimes the act of necessity outweighed the conscious effort.

“Say it,” I repeated.

He nodded lazily.

It was the best I was going to get from him.

I should have done more.

Hindsight is always twenty-twenty.

CHAPTER 43

It was late afternoon. And the only reason I knew that was when the shadow shifted over my desk. I'd been so drawn into my work I hadn't bothered to stop for lunch. My desk was littered with files. I scattered tattered folders and handwritten notes across the landscape. Photos and reports pinned to a cork board on the wall. I was onto something; I just wasn't sure exactly what it was. But that was my life then, that is what the promotion led me to. The life of a detective, wrapped up in fact and data, forced to turn it all into a story the CHIRP officers could act on.

The shrill ring of my desk phone sliced through the office and jack hammered into my brain. I stared at the phone, waiting for it to ring again, or if someone else was going to pick it up. No one did, so I was forced to endure another clanging barrage.

"Detective Emerson Barnes." It still felt good every time I said it.

Sobbing at the other end of the line. Then, "Emerson?"

"Marie? Is everything okay?"

"It's Jackson."

I stood up. Adrenalin gushing through me as fast as the different scenarios played out in front of my eyes. Is he hurt? Is she hurt? Did he hurt her? Is their son, okay? So many questions and the conversation seemed to take forever.

“What’s happened?”

“He came home early from work. I think they have fired him.”

I clutched my heart and slowly released my held breath. “It’ll be fine, Marie. He went through all this when he came back from the war. It won’t be long before he finds something again.”

She sniffed. “It’s not just that.”

I could hear police sirens blaring in the background, just loud enough to hear them through the phone lines.

“Marie? What happened?”

“He caught me with someone.”

Fire immediately ripped through my body and I swiped a hand over my desk, collecting a jar of pens that went sailing across the room and smashing against the wall.

“What the fuck, Marie.”

“There was a fight,” she continued. “Adam’s knocked up pretty bad.”

“I don’t give a fuck about Adam!” I roared into the phone.

“Where is Jackson?”

“I... I don’t know.” She cried again. The sirens were getting louder. “I’m worried about him, Emerson. Worried what he might do.”

“Stay there and don’t say anything to anyone. You understand?”

“There’s so much blood everywhere.”

“Do you understand?” I repeated.

“I’m sorry, Emerson. I’m so sorry,” she said as she hung up the phone.

I slammed my receiver back into the cradle. Swore out loud. Wanted to rip my shirt and scream to the heavens. Fucking bitch. Took some deep breaths and collected my thoughts. There were several ways it could play out, but only one that could keep everything together, even if the stitching was well and truly worn.

I called Bethany and her to go to the Grove residence and look after Marie. I skimmed on the details, but I made it clear it wasn't a great situation.

"Just keep her away from the police officers," I said. "Tell them who I am and that I'll look into things myself. And tell them to stay away from Adam. He's mine as well."

She agreed without hesitation. I grabbed my official blue detective blazer off the back of my chair and stormed out of the office in search of a friend that was clearly on edge. What he would do next was a mystery, but it didn't take a genius to realize that violence led to more violence.

I thought of him sitting on a park bench with a gun in his mouth. Which was stupid, because he didn't own a gun. Then I thought he might rob a convenience store, but that just didn't seem like him. However, Jackson hadn't seemed himself since he returned from the war.

Reports crackled through the official radio channels. The police officers had sent out a broadcast to locate Jackson. It was standard procedure, so I wasn't overly concerned. I just hoped I found him before someone else did. Because they would be a hell of a lot less forgiving than I would be.

I drove around for a while, hoping something would catch my eye. Someone acting suspiciously. A report over the airwaves. None of it happened. Eventually, I pulled up outside the pub. I got out and inspected the streets in either direction. They were empty, although I knew the primary arteries would carry their usual traffic as the rush hour picked up.

Pushing my way inside the pub doors, the sudden change in audio dynamics was staggering. It was like someone sucked the oxygen out of the room. Eyes looked directly at me. *At the uniform.* None would if I were wearing civilian clothes. And those that wouldn't or couldn't look at me, either through guilt or fear, stared at the floor or the table or the wall. I wasn't some kind of CHIRP banger, the kind that kicks in doors and takes children away. That felt like a lifetime ago, but regardless, the CHIRP insignia and distinctive dress made for an easy target to avoid sharing a conversation with.

I approached the bar and the patrons quickly scattered, my footfalls being chased by murmurs and music. The barman slid a pint in front of me.

“On the house,” he said. “For a Detective.”

At least he understood how to read rank on a uniform.

My mouth watered as I looked at the beer. I wanted it. Needed it bad. Picked it up and took several large mouthfuls as stares penetrated my every move. I eased the glass back down and wiped my mouth with the back of my sleeve.

“I'm looking for someone.”

Barman shook his head. “Not too sure you'll find what you're looking for in here.”

“Then I guess you won't mind if I take a look around then.”

He nodded in reply and I looked around at the faces. I stepped around the bar and walked the aisles. I peered into booths and dark corners. I paid close attention to the people that refused to look at me. Groups exchanged wide-eyed glances between each other, and those that talked spoke so low I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Even though I had no proof, I had no doubt I could have arrested half the patronage, based purely on the conversations I thought they were having with each other. But I had more pressing issues to attend to, more important matters to spend my time investigating. Having found no trace of Jackson, I drank the rest of the beer, gave everyone a stern glance, and left.

I got back in my car, leaned my head against the headrest, and closed my eyes.

“Where are you, Jackson,” I mumbled. “What the fuck have you done?”

I opened my eyes and turned to my left. The road stretched off into the distance, the bitumen kissing the pink sunset sky. I smiled, started the engine, and took off. Small business turned into residential. Tattered yards and boarded up windows. Relics of a failing neighborhood, a sign the community was crumbling into oblivion.

Houses become few and far between, replaced with unkempt vacant plots of land. Then tin structures, each larger than the previous, lined both sides of the road. A train rumbled past, the locomotive a flash between the buildings. What seemed like hundreds of containers, followed on their railcars.

I slammed the breaks, and the sedan skidded to a shuddering halt. Standing in the tall grass, fingers locked onto the chain-link fence, was Jackson. I eased my car on the side of the road and shut off the engine. Sitting in the muffled groan of the train, I eyed the radio. I was supposed to call it in. That was the procedure. But I shouldn't have had that drink at the bar while I was on duty, so what was one more rule to break. I was certain I was going to break a few more of them before the day was out.

His business shirt was untucked, and sleeves rolled past his elbows. His tie was sticking out of his pocket. I searched for a gun on his person, not because I thought he had one, but because I was paranoid ever since getting shot.

The last container wagon skulked by, and the last screech settled over us.

“Jackson?”

He didn't turn around, just kept gazing forward.

“I knew you'd find me,” he said. “Could almost feel you next to me before you arrived.”

I sidled up next to him and followed his gaze to the enormous house on the hill. Not just a house. It was the region's House. The same place I met Jackson, the same place I met Bethany. It's funny how the dots stay connected. No one ever really gets away from their past. It just seems to follow them around and smack you in the side of the head if you stop moving.

"I spoke to Marie," I said.

He gripped the fence harder, bending the mesh with white bloodied and battered knuckles.

"It's all going wrong," he muttered. "All of it."

I placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I got fired from my job today. That happened. Then I found some cunt balls deep in the mother of my child. That also happened." He faced me, his eyes searching for answers on my face. "Then I smashed that cunt's face against the wall and squeezed his neck until Marie begged me to let him go. So, you want to know what happened so you can help me? That's what happened."

My hand fell from his shoulder, and I kicked the fence. Holy fuck. Now, what was I supposed to do? Of course, I knew what to do. I had to slap some cuffs on him and throw him in the back of the car and take him to the station. That was pretty cut and dry, very clear cut, extremely black and white. But life isn't like that, and not when I could smear the color pallet.

"I'm running out of options," he said.

He we were again, at the vortex of the universe. I wish I knew what to say to make it all better, but deep down, I knew words would not do jack shit.

"I remember I once told you I'd be there for you. That we could talk about anything, and I would do my best to help you through it."

“I remember,” he mumbled, as if to recall the event was painful.

“I’ve let you down,” I said. “I haven’t kept up my end of the bargain.”

“It’s just—.”

“And neither have you,” I interjected. “And now you’re in a pretty bad spot.”

“I can’t even think,” he said. “Today feels like a dream.”

I stared off into the distance, wanted to pause time so I didn’t have to think about what I needed to do. “I might have a way out of this. I don’t know if it will work, but I can’t see an alternative.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“It’s best you don’t know.”

He looked up. “I don’t deserve it.”

“This isn’t just for you. It’s for Marie. It’s for Boy.”

His knees buckled, and he fought to stand. It was painful to watch. Not just because of the situation, of the events leading up to it, but solid foundations of my friend were slowly eroding with every wave that crashed on to shore.

“Is this going to cause pain for you and Beth?” he asked.

I bit my lip and tilted my head. “Maybe.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” he whimpered.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know you will.”

I urged him away from the fence and we shuffled back to the car. He put his hand on the handle.

“You’d better sit in the back,” I suggested. “Just in case.”

He nodded, and I held the back door open as he slipped into the back seat.

The ride back to his house was quiet. In the rear-view mirror, Jackson stared at his hands the whole time. I wondered if he had any remorse for his behaviors or was trying to

rationalize his actions. I held off from calling in that I had a wanted person in my back seat. That kind of attention wouldn't help the plan I had in my head.

Jackson's house was alive with activity. Two police cruisers parked in the driveway and on the front lawn. Two officers leaned against their vehicles, drinking coffee from Styrofoam cups and talking shit. An ambulance was pulled up outside the home, rear doors open, a paramedic working on who I assumed to be the treacherous lover, Adam.

I parked my sedan across the driveway and marched up to the officers as I buttoned my blazer. They eyed me as I pulled out a notebook and pen. I noted the names on their identification badges.

"Dixson. Kroft. What's the name of the guy sitting in the back of the ambulance?"

They looked at each other.

"Who the hell are you?"

I pointed to my shoulder. "Can't you read the rank off my insignia? Now, unless you want me to open an investigation into you and your families, give me the name of the man in the back of that ambulance."

"Ummm," Dixon said. "Adam."

"Adam who?" I chased.

They looked at each other. "Wha... White... Whitten... Whittaker?" Kroft stammered.

Dixson opened his notepad. "Oh. It's Reed. Adam Reed."

"So," I said as I scribbled his name. "Nothing like White or Whittaker." They shrugged. I sighed. "I need you to put him in the back of one of your cruisers for me."

"What for?"

"Because I told you to. Because I outrank you. Because I asked you nicely. Take your pick, but I can assure you I am running out of patience for this little conversation."

Dixson promptly left to get Adam.

Kroft looked past my shoulder and squinted. “Hey, is that the suspect in the car?”

I shifted in front of his vision. “So what if it is?”

“Well, we’re letting you speak with Adam. I think the least you can do is let us haul in Mr. Groves.”

I smirked. “There won’t be any need for that.”

Kroft folded his arms. “I think there is, and I think my captain would agree with me.”

“Let’s make a deal. Let me talk to Adam first, and then you can do whatever the hell you want to do.”

We shook hands as his steely gaze tried to read why I was so forthcoming with accepting the deal. I could make out the confusion on his face, but he’d never know.

He broke his grip away, still perplexed, as he held open the rear cruiser door. Dixson pushed Adam’s head down and closed the door behind him.

“Go take a five-minute breather,” I ordered.

The officers agreed and took their leave. One last look to Jackson, before I eased into the front passenger seat.

“Who the hell are you?” Adam said as I closed the heavy door with a resounding clunk.

I arranged the rear-view mirror so I could see his face. “Let me tell you how this is going to work, Adam Reed.”

His head snapped when he heard his name. Having your name spoken by a member of CHIRP was never a good thing.

“Listen, I don’t have any kids or anything like that. I don’t have any active cases. They’ve never sent me to a Re-education center.”

I shushed him until he stopped talking. “Adam, let me tell you how this is going to work.”

He swallowed.

“You will not press charges against Jackson Groves. You are going to go home and never see Marie ever again.”

“But we work at the same place.”

“Quit!” I yelled. “You don’t have a family. I’m sure it won’t take you long to find something else.”

He looked out the cruiser window. “And what if I don’t? That son-of-a-bitch almost killed me.”

“If you don’t do everything I’ve said, you won’t have to worry about Jackson coming for you. I’ll finish the job myself, and what Jackson did to you will feel like a trip to the beach. I’ll drag you into the depths of hell, Adam. I’ll fragment your mind before I tear your body to pieces.”

“You... you can’t do this.”

“Trust me, Adam. I can do anything I want. I’m sure if I dug deeper, I could find out all sorts of things about you. And the rest of your family. And your friends. They’d all go down, Adam. All of them. I’d make sure of it.”

He looked down.

I almost had him. I knew I did.

“I appreciate the fact you might have some medical costs, Adam. So, I’m willing to pay you five grand for your trouble.”

“Make it ten.”

“How about I make it nothing and haul you away in the back of my car back to the station?”

“And if you do, your mate gets a one-way ticket to jail. Then Marie really would be all mine. And that kid of theirs.”

I clenched my jaw. Thought I would break some teeth. I wanted to break his teeth. Finish what Jackson had started.

“Fine. Ten. Nothing more.”

“Fine.”

“And you don’t say a word about any of this. You disappear.”

He nodded. I opened the car door.

“Hey, when do I get my money?”

“Next week. This time. At the pub.”

“If you try to stiff me, I’ll run straight to the nearest station and tell them everything. Tell them about this conversation.”

One last look in the rear-view mirror before I got out and shut the door behind me. I marched back to my car and opened the door for Jackson. With head hanging low, I ushered him to his house, where the front door was hanging off its hinges.

As we walked past the officers, Kroft said, “Hey! Where are you taking him?”

“Inside,” I replied.

“No, no, no. He’s ours. That was the deal.”

I pushed Jackson away and turned to face the officer. “You can only arrest someone if there’s been a crime.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Just look at this place! God damn World War Three.”

“Are you sure? You might want to check with Adam.”

Kroft turned to see Adam standing next to Dixon at the cruiser. “Just a friendly misunderstanding. I want to go home now.”

Kroft spun around. “What the fuck are you playing at?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. Adam doesn’t want to press charges. Everyone’s free to go.”

“You know what? Fuck you. Wasted our fucking time here. I’m going to find out what you did.”

I stepped up to him. Face to face. Nose to nose.

“You be very fucking careful what you say, Officer Kroft. Who knows whose name’s come across my desk, whose names make it into my reports?”

He chewed invisible gum as his jaw tightened. His eye twitched. I knew what he was thinking. What everyone thinks. When CHIRP has your name, it’s never a pretty reality. Eventually, he backed away, got into his cruiser, and slammed the door.

Dixson backed out over the grass to avoid my car and bounced onto the road from the curb. I squinted at Adam sitting in the backseat before I turned my backs on them.

Inside, Bethany was doing her best to keep the other two officers at bay. When I told them it was over, that Adam wasn’t pressing any charges, they closed their notebooks with disgust. They glared at Jackson as they passed, but he avoided eye contact.

Once we were alone, I said, “Listen. You two need to sort all this shit out. I’ve done my part. You two need to do yours. If not for each other, do it for Boy. Don’t let his life become a series of Houses and homes.”

Jackson slumped to the couch next to Marie, and she fell into him. He held her as she sobbed, her body convulsing with emotion. Jackson, forever the rock, let tears streak his hard exterior. I wondered how long he could keep it up, how long before the walls came down and he would let everyone in.

Bethany and I eyed each other before silently stepping out of the room.

Once we were outside, Bethany asked, “Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“I hope so,” I said. “We made a deal that he’d sort himself out if I fixed things here.”

“What did you do?”

I ignored the question, just kept walking towards the car.

She grabbed my arm. “Hey. What did you do?”

“I fixed it, alright?”

“Listen, I know how important Jackson is to you, but is he important enough to ruin your life... *our* life?”

Long ago, I would have said I would give my life for Jackson. But things had changed, life moved on.

“I promised him I’d do everything I could to help him. I did that. And now it’s over.”

She pulled away.

“It’s over, Bethany. This won’t come back and get us. I guarantee it.”

“Can you though? Can you guarantee this won’t come back?”

I looked down, closed my eyes, and clenched my jaw. “Yes.”

Another lie. White. Justified.

And that was that.

A problem fixed.

And a much bigger problem was created.

CHAPTER 44

I pressed a button on the clicker and an image appeared on the screen.

“This is Sylvia Hartland.”

It was a grainy color photo of a middle-aged woman purchasing meat in a deli. She wore a tan baker boy cap over her golden curls and matching brown leather gloves. Her heavy coat hid more than her nefarious plans.

“But she’s also known as Matilda Gray, Lady Penelope Wentworth, and Princess Alice Veterin, among many others. We believe her to be a critical figure in the regime against the government, in an organization called The Push.”

I paused and let the hum of the projector fill the space. I looked over the shadowy faces in the room, their features glowing from the light reflecting off the screen. Stern glares. Inquisitive, pursed lips. Hands clasped. But it was the person seated in the back corner that was the most important person in the room. She remained quiet throughout the presentation and offered no reasoning at all for her being there to listen to a lowly detective.

“Excuse me, Detective Barnes,” a voice rang out through the gloom. “But how did you come across this information?”

“Excellent question Inspector. We tracked Ms. Hartland over an extended period. She visits the butcher every Tuesday, ten a.m. Always served by Abraham Murphy. Always orders the same thing. She always pays with three notes.”

The Inspector coughed. “I trust he’ll be in custody before the end of the day to see what gems he has to offer?”

“No need,” I said. “We’ve already turned Mr. Murphy against the regime through a series of threats and Re-education programs.”

“I see. And how long has this been going on for?”

“Weeks.”

“Weeks? All this without an authorization?”

“I had to act, Inspector. And with all due respect, time was of the essence.”

The Inspector shifted in his chair. “And what did the butcher have to say for himself?”

“Nothing. He is nothing more than the middleman between Ms. Hartland and someone else, a means for them to communicate.”

“What information have you intercepted so far?”

“It’s encoded,” I replied. “We’re still working through it. We have managed to decode a few words, a name if nothing else.”

“A name? Who?”

“White Witch,” I said. “We’ve known of this name for some time, but have recently found it coded in the message.”

“Are there any speculations as to who this person is?”

“Investigations are continuing.”

Tension. It wasn’t what they wanted to hear, but it was all I had.

“Have you been able to glean anything else from the messages?”

I swallowed. “As we know, rumors of a camp created by the insurrectionists have been prevalent for some time. Now, it would seem, their presence outside government rule has grown.”

Even in the darkness, I could see the features of the audience members change in unison.

“Grown to what?”

I took a breath. “A city.”

A collective gasp. “A city? Inside our nation’s walls? That’s preposterous. Something like that can’t be done and evade our detection!”

“We must put a stop to this, Detective. How long before you have something of use for us?”

I shifted weight between my feet. “That’s hard to tell, Inspector.”

“What about Laferty Bridge? Have we been able to discern the location?”

I took a deep breath. It was a troublesome question to answer accurately. Even through my own life, I had come across three different locations of such a relic.

“As you know,” I started, “there have been many contradictory reports about the location of the bridge if in fact, it exists at all.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, Detective. You’re rehashing old news. I want new answers.”

“No,” I eventually remarked. “We’re still working on that as well.”

The Inspector slammed his hand down on the table. “Well don’t bring us in here and make my panties all wet with half the information. Go out there, find something worthwhile, something you can really fuck me with.”

I nodded, uncertain of how to respond to his abrasive comment.

He stood and the meeting room lights flicked on. His white mustache bristled under his bright eyes before he turned and left the room, his entourage following closely behind.

When the room emptied, a slow clap erupted from the corner of the room.

“I appreciate your audience, Administrator. Although I’m uncertain why my presentation drew your presence.”

“Am I to grace you with explanations for all my decisions, Detective Emerson?”

I shook my head. “Of course not, Administrator.”

“Please. There was no need to answer that, it was rhetorical.”

She rose out of the chair and walked to the screen. Stopped to regard the grainy image of Hartland, her gloved hands grasped behind her back. “Truth be told, I caught wind of your findings and wanted to come and see for myself.”

“With all due respect, Administrator, I’m sure you just didn’t happen on my investigation.”

She turned and smiled. “Astute as always, Emerson. You are right, I know everything that happens here, even your unauthorized activities.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m working on something, and I think you’d be the perfect person to be a part of it.”

“Certainly, Administrator. What are the details?”

“Things take time. Cogs turn slowly in the great clock. I’ll inform you of the details when they come to hand. For the moment, I would like you to keep me up to date on your investigation personally.”

“But I report through to the Inspector.”

“You report through to whoever I tell you to report to. For all standard administration, you follow the chain of command. For everything related to The Push—including Hartland

and White Witch—you come directly to me. Don't worry about anything, I'll clear it with your Inspector. In the meantime, carry on with your work."

She turned and left before I could extract any further information from her, not that she would have divulged anything to me if she didn't want to. I slumped down into a chair, my head spinning with opportunity.

The arrest of Sylvia Hartland would be good enough to grant me a pay rise, if not a promotion. But it would destroy any chance of unmasking the leader of the regime. We were playing a delicate game on a knife's edge, wondering who would blink first. Because if you made a move without holding all the cards, all you'll end up holding is thin air and a pink slip. But I was close. I was sure of it. I could almost smell it.

Checked my watch. It was time to switch off work for other pressing matters.

The graffiti was scrawled over the brickwork in red paint. *The government is lying!* I loved to know exactly what it was lying about, and what the intention of the message actually was. On another wall, a different message was scribbled. *Seek the Bridge*. The Push was getting more and more brazen, and I knew it wouldn't be long before they became complacent. The markings were new yet looked worn.

I entered the bar and ordered a drink, purposefully avoiding asking about the graffiti on the side of the building. If I was wearing a uniform, it would have been weird if I didn't enquire about it. And because I changed into my civilian clothes, it would have been weirder to openly talk about such things.

Instead, I slid into a corner booth and quietly drank my beer. The change of clothes meant the constant whir of murmurs had escalated unopposed, to the stage where you didn't

know if was deafening until you stepped outside into the silence, and it felt like you had bobbed to the surface in the middle of the ocean.

I ignored the patrons as they entered the pub. I was there for one purpose and one only, and it wasn't until Adam Reed walked in that I could complete the deal and get on with my night. And my life.

He spotted me straightaway and headed my way, signaling to the barkeeper for a beer as he did so. He limped, and the marks were still fresh on his face. I wasn't sure if he was exaggerating his pain, but I knew he wouldn't be getting any sympathy from me.

He slid into the booth opposite me and a beer slid in front of his smile.

“Why are you so happy?”

He slapped his hands together. “Because it's payday. I mean, sure, I took a bit of a hit to get it, but I got to bang that girl.”

I held my glass so tight I thought it would break in my hands. Took a sip as I stared at him.

“So,” he continued. “Where's the cash?”

“It's under the table in a duffle bag.”

He reached for it.

“Don't touch it yet,” I warned. “Wait until I leave, finish your beer, and when you go, you can take the bag with you.”

He leaned back with a seedy smirk that made me want to punch his face. “Sounds like a plan,” he said.

“And don't open it until you get home. Don't flash it all while you're in here, understand?”

“How do I know it's all there?”

“We had a deal. This is my part of it. It's all there.”

He eyed me suspiciously. “How can I trust you?”

“I’m here, aren’t I? Why would I go to the trouble? Besides, you’re the one who can’t be trusted.”

He held up his hands. “It’s okay, I get it. I’ll be gone in a few days. Out of here. Never to return.”

“Sooner,” I ordered. “Gone. Disappeared. Never to return.”

“Sooner? I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’d better do more than just see what you can do.”

“Don’t forget whose holding all the cards here, detective.”

I reached over the table and grabbed his collar, picking him up. I pushed my face into his. “No, you don’t forget who’s holding the cards. One peep, one conversation. If I just happen to see you walking down the street, so help me God, I will end you.”

It was then I noticed the noise levels in the bar had lowered, and I could feel the attention shining on us. Everything I didn’t want, everything I tried to avoid, and I let Adam get under my skin. Damn, maybe Jackson’s anger was rubbing off on me. Perhaps the transition was so subtle I didn’t realize it until it was happening, but I felt different, and I noticed it for the first time. Lying to an Investigator. Losing it with this guy. It wasn’t me, yet I continued to find myself in these situations. But it wouldn’t happen again. Until the next time it happened.

I brushed Adam’s shoulders as I smiled and straightened his shirt. Eased down.

“Why are you doing all this?” he asked. “Why threaten me—put your job on the line—and lose ten grand for that son-of-a-bitch?”

I stared at him. Looked at every little detail. Something struck me, stuck in my mind. Something in my periphery vision.

“We’re done here,” I announced.

He reached out and grabbed my arm as I stood. "Come on. Tell me."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, mate! Stay for another beer! I'm buyin'!" A Cheshire grin.

I left without saying another word, finally breathing again when I stepped outside into the fading light. The end of another day. I looked over the cars in the lot, then up the street in the other direction. Finally, I got in my car, fired up the engine, and sped away like the bar was on fire. And I was the one who lit it.

The journey was a blur of houses and cars, the environment as distorted as my mind. I played the conversation back over and over. Things Reed said, the things I said. The image of what I saw crystalized. Did I see it? Did I know for sure?

As I turned into Jackson's street, I turned the lights off and slowed till I was a block from his house. I sat in the dark with the engine quietly rumbling. Everything looked suspicious. Every car looked like it was working surveillance. Every movement was an undercover officer shifting through the shadows. Every sound was the prepping of semi-automatic rifles.

A sharp rap of knuckles fluttered over my driver's side window made me jump out of my seat. My heart felt like it had ricocheted against my rib cage. Could just about feel the handcuffs tightening around my wrists. The figure stepped closer and bent down. Moonlight splashed his face.

"What are you doing in there?" Jackson asked.

I sucked in deep breaths.

"What the fuck are you doing out there?" I screamed through the window.

"Do you think we could do this without the glass between us?"

I motioned for him to get in. And then we drove. In no particular order or form, following no set navigation. I just needed to get out of there and movement, any movement, was better than sitting on the side of the road.

“Where are we going?” Jackson asked.

“It doesn’t matter, as long as we keep moving.” I checked the rear-view mirror regularly to pick up any tails that might be following us.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. “You’re acting strange.”

It was then I contemplated not telling him. Just let the bit of knowledge slide into the mist. Maybe I was wrong. Or perhaps I was right on the money. Attack is the best defense.

“You remember that guy, Adam Reed?”

He looked out the window. “How the hell am I ever going to forget? But do we have to talk about him?”

“This is important.”

“Me and Marie have been working through things, and things at work have been good, and—.”

“I just paid him off.”

His head snapped around. “You did what?”

“I paid him off,” I said, enunciating each word.

He shook his head. “With what?”

“Money.”

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“Christ. You sound like Bethany. I said I’d do what I could to make all this disappear. And that’s exactly what I did. How else do you think this all went away?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t really think about it. But I didn’t want you to pay money to that asshole.”

“I did what I had to do, Jackson. For you. For Marie. For Boy. Whatever it takes.”

In the confines of the car, I could feel his body tense up. With a sideways glance, I noted him gripping his legs, possibly to stop him making a fist. I could almost take a bite of rage out of the air. His chest rose and fell as he snorted out oxygen until one final intake.

“We’ll talk the money later,” he seethed. “But what’s the issue?”

“A lot of little things,” I said.

“Like what?”

“He called me detective.”

Jackson looked over at me. “You *are* a detective.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know that.”

“You spoke to him that day,” he said. “In the back of the cruiser.”

“What’s your point?”

“Your rank is on your uniform. He probably saw it then.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I saw his eyes when I piled on the threats. Glazed over half the time thinking about the things I *could* do to him.”

Jackson rubbed his chin. “What else you got?”

“I think I saw something.”

He looked at me, waiting for me to go on.

“I think he was wearing a wire.”

Jackson slammed the dash. “Fuck, Emerson. Didn’t you check that shit beforehand?”

“I didn’t even think about. Didn’t think he would ever do that.”

“Fuck! What did you say.”

I thought back to the conversation, now lost under a barrage of consequential meanderings. “I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe something, maybe nothing. Probably enough for an investigation.”

“And what happens if that happens?”

“Well, it’s not fucking good, Jackson. I can tell you that. I directly and intentionally hindered an investigation. Bribery. Verbal assault. Intention to do harm. Blackmail. Shit, that’s scraping the surface.”

Silence as streetlights and traffic lights blurred past the windows.

Eventually, Jackson spoke, his voice low and purposeful. “What are we going to do?”

I eased up to a red light and looked over.

And without saying a word, we both knew exactly what needed to happen.

CHAPTER 45

The changing of the seasons brought with it monumental shifts in my own life. Some were good, others bad, however one didn't seem to outweigh the other in gravitas, merely shifted their scales in their favor. Cool winds blew the red and yellow leaves to the pathway before being swept away by an overzealous grounds man. Everything had to be perfect. That is what I told them. And that wasn't a request. It is what she deserved.

I didn't know most of the people sitting anxiously on the pews; people who had taken leave from their respective CHIRP posts to either wish us well or escape the ongoing mind-bashing of their roles. Yet, there they were, attired in their pressed dress uniforms, their ranks and decorations on show, and eagerly awaiting those first bars to echo across the cathedral to signify Bethany's arrival.

I closed my eyes and sucked in deep breaths. Could feel the sweat congregate in areas I didn't want it to. Physical reactions to a mental state. Unconscious manifestations and a conscious decision to ignore them all.

A hand on my shoulder.

"You'll be fine," Jackson said. "Everything is going to be fine."

“I remember saying that to you once.”

“I recall.”

I turned. “Did it work?”

Shook his head. “Not one little bit.”

Nervous laughter.

“Em, just breathe. The fact is you and Bethany are meant to be together. Plain as day.

As straightforward as simple arithmetic. Everyone can see it.”

I smiled. “I have you to thank for that. If it wasn’t for you, I would never have met her at the House all those years ago. And again, it was you who reconnected us after many years apart.”

He placed a hand over his heart. “It was the least I could do. Besides, I knew there was something about you.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Just a feeling, way back when. Struck me like a wave as soon as I saw you. I didn’t know what it was at first, but I’ve come to accept those types of feelings about people over time.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

We shook hands.

“You’re a great friend, Emerson.”

“I do what I can.”

“Bullshit. You’ve done more for me than I could ever do for you. Including, waiting for the war to end so I can attend the lavish event of the century.”

I laughed. “Just wouldn’t be right to do it without you, Jackson. It’s great to have you back, you know. You terrified the shit out of me for a while there.”

A sharp nod. “Scared the shit out of myself. But the past is buried.” He brushed a hand over my shoulders. “Are you ready?”

Another deep breath. “As I’ll ever be.”

“Look,” he said.

At that moment the church door cracked open. The first notes of the national anthem echoed hauntingly throughout the space, breaking conversations as it stole people’s attention. The large wooden doors revealed Bethany, with Marie just behind her. An Autumn gust forced a flutter of colorful dead leaves swirling around her, a kaleidoscope of color against the stark backdrop of a white dress. My mouth dropped open at the form-fitting strapless gown. She donned a veil that radiated sparkling sunshine and captured her in a perfect moment.

The congregation stood as Bethany stepped forward carrying an arrangement of black and white calla lilies. All eyes glued to her. How could they not? But she only looked to me, ignoring their insatiable stares. The smile on her face deceived her, and I knew she held some deep secret; however, she gave no further clues away. I stared at her as she approached, scanned her eyes, her perfect smile. My mind in tatters trying to figure out the mystery.

She stood beside me, handed off the bouquet to Marie, and took my proffered hand. I attempted our famously inaccurate telepathic conversation, but all she gave me was slightly wider eyes.

“What is it?” I whispered from the corner of my mouth, unable to take the suspense any longer.

She looked at me. Bit her lip.

Then said, “I’m pregnant.”

Time stopped. My heart stopped. The perfect thing to hear from a perfect person on the perfect day. There would be nothing that could possibly shift the moment from anything but extraordinary.

But then it did.

The heavy church doors burst open, and a leafy gust blew into the nave. The room was filled with reds and yellows as guests looked about themselves.

Jackson grabbed my forearm, and I turned to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

And then two men marched down the aisle, their shiny shoes echoing over the polished concrete floors, their badges glinting. And I knew who they were immediately.

I broke away from Bethany and strode towards them.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I said, thrusting a finger at him.

Officer Dixson waved Kroft through and stood at the front of the room; his thumbs stuck into his belt.

“My job,” he sneered. “I told you I would get him, eventually.”

Behind me, I heard Kroft announcing the CHIRP arresting rights. I turned to see officer Kroft clicking handcuffs onto Jackson’s wrists. To his credit, Jackson didn’t fight it, almost as if he expected it to happen. Marie was being held back by Bethany, although Bethany herself held a murderous look in her eye.

I spun back to Dixson. “This is my goddamn wedding day!”

“I don’t give a shit. We have orders to arrest Mr. Groves on charges of murder.” He shouted out that last word, enough for the congregation in the last row to hear.

“What? Whose murder? On whose authority are those orders given?”

Dixson merely winked, the smirk on his face sang volumes. Either he didn't know, or the answers were so God damn juicy he was told to keep his mouth shut. Either way, I was left at the altar without a best man, as Kroft escorted him down the aisle.

"Say nothing," I shouted to Jackson. "Not a fucking word."

Even though Jackson didn't turn around or acknowledge me, I know he heard me. He would have had to.

"Oh," Dixson said, "Congratulations to you both." He gave a curt nod to Bethany.

"I'll have your fucking badge for this, Dixson."

"Have a nice day," he replied, before turning on his heel and sauntering down the aisle.

"Your family!" I shouted after him. "Your whole fucking family. I'll have them all." I didn't know what that meant, still don't, but I was so livid I couldn't control the words spewing out of my mouth.

Bethany consoled the hysterical Marie, who eventually slumped to the ground. My fiancé looked up at me. Pregnant!

The perfect news from a perfect woman on the perfect day.

Everything perfectly ruined.

And someone would pay the price.

I paced my office with the phone smashed to my ear while I massaged my temple. My jacket was on the back of the chair and the bowtie was hanging around my neck. Those two police officers had ravaged my day... Beth's day... our day. There was no way back from that. And so, I felt I had to ruin everyone else's day as well.

"I don't care if it's confidential, I want to know!" I screamed down the line.

A click and the line went dead. Multiple phone calls leading to even more calls. Tracking down exactly where Jackson was and what the charges were seemed to be a purposefully arduous task. If someone answered the phone, I was either shut down or told to call someone else. I was running around in circles.

“Just put them on the line,” I pleaded.

Another click and I slammed the phone down on the cradle, picked it up again, and dialed yet another number. I peered through my frosted glass walls. The rest of the floor was empty and had been for some time. They had long ago left for the day, choosing to spend their evening hours with loved ones. I, however, continued pacing through the spotlight of my desk lamp. Bethany would have to wait, and she knew that.

The sun had passed its midpoint as I paced through the shafts of light invading my office, as I listened to the monotonous hum of a dial tone. Somewhere, in a building in the city, a phone was ringing. And no one was picking it up. Maybe it was because it was the weekend. Or perhaps they knew it was me calling. Either way, it rang out to nothing. Silence filled the line, as deafening as the slamming of a cell door.

I sat down, placed my arms on the desk, and rested my head. A constant thrum hadn't left me since the two police officers interrupted the wedding. My brain pulsed, and I thought my head would explode. It would be one hell of a job for the cleanup crew.

A sharp piercing ring filled the room, and I thought my ear drums would crumble. I reached for it, knowing it would be Bethany checking up on me. Given everything that had happened that day, I wouldn't be surprised if she showed up at the office with some takeout and a bottle of whiskey.

“Hi Bethany,” I mumbled into the phone.

“*Not quite,*” he said.

I stood bolt upright. “Jesus Christ. Jackson?”

Muffled sounds in the background.

"I'm sorry," he said. *"So sorry for everything."*

"Where the hell are you?"

"Home."

"Home? I don't understand."

"Released pending further investigation."

"What? They arrested you in the middle of my wedding and then released you without charge?"

"I don't know what to say, Emerson."

"Say nothing. I'm coming right over to talk about this."

"No!" he yelled. *"Don't."*

"Why the hell not?"

Silence.

"Because we won't be here when you arrive."

"I don't get it. Where will you be?"

More silence. I could tell Jackson was struggling with what he wanted to tell me.

Could almost feel the weight of it over the phone line. The receiver felt heavy in my hand, could feel it pulling me back down onto my chair.

"Emerson, I need you to hear this out but you can't ask me any questions."

"What? No! Fuck that!"

"Promise me!"

"Whatever this is, we can work through it."

"Not this time, Emerson... Not this time."

I sighed. "Fine. I promise."

A hard swallow.

"*We're running,*" Jackson said.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"*No questions, Emerson. You promised.*"

I took a deep breath. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

"*Listen. I don't think I've got much time.*"

"Stay there, I'm coming over."

"*We'll be long gone,*" Jackson said.

"You can't just leave. Can't pack up your life and run."

"*It's over, Emerson. Please understand that. I lost my job the moment they arrested me.*"

"And they released you without charge."

"*They released me pending further investigation. But they'll find the evidence, Emerson. I know they will. I'll lose everything.*"

"Don't give up, Jackson. We can fight them."

A peal of sad laughter emanated from my receiver. "*No, we can't. I can't lose my son, Emerson. I just can't even bear the thought.*"

"They'll hunt you, Jackson. They'll chase you down and god knows what happens when that happens."

"*I don't have a choice.*"

"You always have a choice."

"*I've been to war. I've been to the brink of humanity. It's kill or be killed. You can't negotiate with the enemy.*"

"The government is not the enemy."

"*Yes, they are, Emerson. And I know you know—.*"

"Jackson, don't say those words."

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I guess it doesn’t matter now. Not for me, anyway.”

“Please, Jackson. Not like this.”

“Listen, whatever they find out about me, whatever they say about me... Think back to today, where I was standing beside you. Remember me like that.”

“Jackson...”

“Don’t try to find me.”

“Jackson!”

A slamming door. Curtains being drawn.

“Shit, Emerson. They’re here.”

“Who’s there?”

“They’re all here... I got to—.”

The line went dead.

CHAPTER 46

I smashed my foot down on the accelerator and the car lurched backward. Yanked the gear shifter into drive and skidded out of the parking lot, jumping over the curb and into oncoming traffic. As I made a beeline for Jackson's house, I flicked on the official police radio as blurred scenery filled my windows. Nothing over the airwaves. Yet. It was bound to come through unless they already had Jackson and Marie in custody.

A crackle over the speaker system, long and slow, like cracking a spine. Someone had seen Jackson's car speeding towards Brennan. I yanked on the steering wheel, causing my sedan to skid across three lanes of traffic. Cars honked and hooted as I sped off in the opposite direction.

As I searched for an on-ramp, I envisioned the snarling look on Dixon's and Kroft's faces as they powered down their cruiser and lit up their light racks. Engine revving hard leaving black marks on the roadway. Sirens angrily trespassing into the night, flashing lights coating buildings in red and blue.

Status updates continued to spew out of the radio speakers as more and more patrol cars joined in the pursuit. Jackson wasn't pulling over the car, and I had a strong suspicion of

where he was heading. The closer I drove towards Brennan, the stronger the memories of that fateful night played in my head. Running. Hiding. Death. Rinse and repeat. It seemed Jackson was doomed to play out the past. History repeating itself. No lessons learned.

The highway traffic was light, and I swerved across lanes and around vehicles like they were parked on the side of the road. A squawk broke my concentration and had me checking my rear-view mirror. A cruiser loomed in the close distance, mirroring my movements, lights flashing, sirens blaring. If it was any other day, a police officer would have pulled me over for an awkward conversation, but today, they had their sights set on Jackson.

I edged over to let it pass. As it burst past me, I was sure I noted Dixon in the passenger seat, perched forward with his eyes fixed to the front, almost as if he was willing the car to go faster. I pulled in behind the police car and planted my foot flat on the floor. Over the high whine of my over-revved engine, the cruiser steadily drifted off into the distance.

My heart banged against my chest as my periphery became a blur. I had one focus, and that was to make sure whatever happened, Jackson and Marie and Boy made it out of that situation in one piece. However, as more and more frantic messages cascaded into my car, the more I realized he was going to be anything than okay.

Police maneuvers relayed over the airwaves. They were making a move to incapacitate their target. I silently hoped it worked. The longer this went on, the worse the outcome was going to be, if that was at all possible. I gripped the steering wheel in anticipation and focused on the radio for what was about to happen.

Screeching metal tore through the crackled speaker as they confirmed a hit. Reports indicated Jackson's car skidded slightly but maintained its forward momentum with unrivaled purpose. A patrol announced they were about to undertake a second effort.

Up ahead, I could see the flashing police lights, and the surrounding traffic slowed to avoid the activity. I scooted around the bystanders and made up some ground. Then the most unthinkable thing happened.

The police cruiser swerved into the rear of Jackson's car. Smoke rose from the scene as the driver struggled to take hold. Then another patrol car added to the effort. The impact was catastrophic.

From my vantage, Jackson's car collided heavily with the guardrail. Then lifted. And flipped. I eased off the gas as the car sailed through the air, rolling like an overweight cat trying to get off the floor. I held my breath as the front of the car kissed the pavement before tumbling over the bitumen. Cruisers skidded to a halt. Smoke from their tires lit up with orange sparks as Jackson's car ripped chunks out of the road, leaving smashed glass behind.

It was all over in about twenty seconds, but those seconds seemed to last forever. The car came to rest in a pile of broken glass and twisted metal. I slowed to a stop and looked on as the wrecked car nestled onto its flat tires, Jackson slumped over the steering wheel. Police officers jumped out of their cars and rushed towards the accident, guns up, shouting.

I kicked my door open and stepped out as other cars stopped on the surrounding roadway. I edged forward. Sounds warped in my ears. Vision blurry and gray around the edges. It was too unbelievable to even imagine. I looked away towards the city. Large buildings alight in the early evening, poking their heads up over the surrounding trees and roadway, the curious mix of manmade structures and nature.

The shouting continued behind me. In the distance, another siren warbled over the low thrum of idling engines. An ambulance was weaving through the stopped traffic as cars did their best to clear a path in the blocked vehicular pipes.

Then it just popped in there. Not sure how I missed it at first. I guess I was just too hung up on the car chase. I turned back towards the wrecked car. Repositioned myself to look

through the officers that had gathered around. The driver was dead, that was for sure. But the driver wasn't Jackson. And there didn't appear to be anyone else in the car. No wife. No child.

I looked at the plates. It was Jackson's car alright, but he had done the unthinkable. He outsmarted everyone. Misdirection. Got the police looking one way while he slipped out the back door. I took a deep breath, the first in what seemed like such a long time. Dixon turned from the wreckage with his hands on his hips. When he saw me, his screwed-up expression dropped from his face. He was more than pissed, and I didn't feel like I could have it out with him at that moment.

I looked away and slipped back into my car. It was going to take a while for the mess to clear out, so I closed my eyes and leaned my head back.

"Go well, Jackson," I said. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

I checked the time on my watch. They'd never catch him, not after so much time. There was just no way they could. He could be anywhere.

Then the radio crackled, a sliver of static before the silence. The calm before the storm.

"Suspect Jackson Groves seen with family near St. Claire."

Shit.

St. Claire? Those two words felt like they should mean something to me but I struggled to pinpoint how. I stared through the windshield. The officers froze as they heard the message. The same message as me. It looked like a scene you would find in a wax museum. Dixon and Kroft looked at each other, then back to me. As if on cue, they bolted to their cruiser, fired up the siren, and booted their car to sixty.

I froze, caught in a sandstorm, unable to move. I had seen them go, I needed to follow, but my brain was still trying to piece together the connection between Jackson and St.

Claire. A car honked at me from behind and I blinked into the present. The police had opened a lane to release the traffic, and an officer was waving me through.

As I eased past Jackson's wrecked car, a memory floated to the surface, one I didn't even know I had. I had buried it with time and alcohol yet implanted itself within me just the same.

The night, many years ago, where I reunited my friendship with Jackson. We'd been drinking at the pub. A hazy recollection of events that started with a fight in the pub bathroom and ending with me falling on top of overgrown weeds and falling asleep where I fell. In between is what surfaced with startling clarity, lurking just below the surface, waiting for the perfect time to show itself. We were outside in the bitter cold, the wind eating through my coat with reckless abandon.

Jackson's hand on my shoulder. He said the words he would later send in a text message. "Remember this," he said. "Remember what I told you."

And I did... eventually.

I smashed my foot down on gas and sped off. In pursuit of Dixson and Kroft. In pursuit of my friend.

I felt like we had been walking forever. My legs felt like jelly and the world continued to spin on every axis. Snippets of buildings, lights, bitumen, train tracks, and wet grass filled my vision. Nothing in any seamless manner, just every time I opened my eyes from slow blinks, the scenery had changed.

Eventually, betwixt heavy breathing and a weightless atmosphere, my surroundings grew darker and darker, until I was lost in a void. I was drowning in my consciousness, uncertain if I could ever find my way to the surface ever again.

“Christ,” I said. “Where the hell are we?” I felt like I was floating, an area so dense not even the stars could make an impact.

“Really?” Jackson said, his voice wavering. “You don’t see it?”

“I can’t even see my hand in front of my face.” I shifted my weight between my feet. It was bitterly cold, and I needed to piss, but I was damned if I could remember exactly how to do it.

“That’s because you’re lying in a bush.”

I found my world tilting, with the landscape colors shifting through the gray spectrum.

“I still don’t know what I’m looking at,” I said.

“Look up,” Jackson said, his voice wafting over me like a whisper.

I did so and found the elongated silhouette of a house breaking the speckled sky. Not just a house, the House. Its barbwire-fenced facade unmistakable. The place where I grew up, where I met Jackson.

“Huh,” I mumbled. “I’ve never seen it from this angle before.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jackson said. “I mean, why would you?”

“Well, how do you know about it?”

“That night you left the House. Do you remember?”

“Yeah,” I said, elongating the word until it became a question.

“I came back to our room? Covered in dirt? Is any of this ringing a bell?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “You said you had found something.”

“I said I had found Laferty Bridge.”

Laferty Bridge. I hadn't heard that word in forever. It stirred up memories I thought were lost to time.

"Didn't you ever wonder how I got out?"

I shrugged. "Of course. But you were too wired to tell me, too excited by the news of the bridge."

"Well, this is how I did it."

I looked around. A sheer rock wall in front of me, leading to a six-foot-tall chain-link fence topped with razor wire. It resembled a prison in more ways than one. "*It's for your protection,*" they would say. Pass it off as something to keep bad people out, when in reality it was all about keeping us in.

"How the hell did you get up there? Or down here, for that matter?"

"I didn't climb the fence, genius."

He grabbed my head and pushed it down, to a dark metal door inset into the rock face.

"Oh look," I said. "A door. Where does it go?"

"This is a maintenance door. It leads through the belly of the House—furnaces and boilers and the like—and comes out of the janitor's closet."

"The one near the administrator's office? At the other end of the facility?"

Jackson nodded.

"Sounds mighty risky to me."

"And it was. You thought I was dirty from finding the bridge? No! I had to jump in the administrator's garden while she walked past!"

"But surely the janitor locked the door. How the hell did you get through?"

"Timing. Every Friday late afternoon, he'd mop the canteen floors. He takes thirty-two minutes. That was my window."

"How many times did you do it?"

Jackson ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Ten. Twenty.”

“I don’t get it. Why did you bother coming back in? I mean, if you were out, why not just keep ruining.”

“Because I’d be doing just that. Running. I had nowhere to go, no family to take me in. Not that they could anyhow. CHIRPs would be all over them.”

“Did you find the bridge? Laferty Bridge?”

“Yeah, I found it.”

“But you didn’t go? You didn’t find out what was on the other side?”

“I was scared.”

“Come on! The great Jackson doesn’t get scared.”

Jackson turned and walked off into the darkness. “Well, I was, every time I stood on that bridge.”

I stumbled off after him, the door inset into the rock face, Jackson’s daring escapes, all but a distant memory mere seconds after learning about it. The alcohol suppressed it well, disrupting nerve communication like magnet disorders a compass.

Trudging through long grass. Navigating around gigantic trees. A white signpost that held four arrows pointing in different directions, each had lost its lettering to the elements. I crashed into a tree and clung to the trunk. The world continued to spin out of control, and I bent over and vomited onto the ground. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear Jackson doing the same.

I laid down over the exposed roots, my spine at inordinate angles.

“Come on,” Jackson said. “Almost there.”

“I’m good,” I said. “I just want to lie down.”

“That doesn’t look very comfortable.”

I closed my eyes. “Your face doesn’t look very comfortable.”

Jackson grabbed me by my jacket lapels and lifted me to unsteady feet.

“You right?” he asked.

I saluted. I was not right. And anyone could see that, except for someone else in a similar condition.

“Perfect,” he replied. “It’s just through there.” He pointed to an opening between the trees.

I peered through the gloom to the dark shapes. “What’s through there?”

“The bridge,” he said. “That’s what I wanted to show you.”

“Doesn’t look like a bridge.”

“It’s a metaphorical bridge,” he said. “Follow me. I’ll show you.”

Just then, the world lit up in red and blue.

“Shit,” Jackson yelled. “Run!”

Jackson took off, skirting the tree line, jumping like a jackrabbit over tree roots and shrubs. I bolted after him, my body moving faster than my legs could manage. Behind me, deep-voiced shouts ordering us to stop. *Like hell*. I ran for all I was worth until I clipped a tree root and sprawled into the darkness.

Then everything went out.

And I was done.

Thank God Jackson was there to carry me away before some police officers found me. It would have been a tough conversation to have if they’d caught me near Laferty Bridge and an even harder thing to explain away to my superiors. I know I would have ended up fired and in a Re-education facility.

My car continued to eat up the roadway as I sped to St. Claire. Dixon and Kroft would get there before me, but they didn't know exactly where they were going. I guess they figured I didn't know where I was going either. But they were wrong. Behind the House, there was a field, and then a thicket of trees beyond that. I just needed to find the naked white sign post.

The outside world disappeared as I subconsciously drove to the House, my final conversation with Jackson playing over in my head.

"We're running."

"I don't have a choice."

"Don't try to find me."

Sorry, Jackson. I refused to adhere to your requests.

The House, with its sprawling gray buildings surrounded by an impenetrable fence, grew from over the horizon. I had long lost sight of the police cruiser I was chasing—my little sedan didn't stand a chance against their turbo-charged engines. I veered down the nearest highway exit and zig-zagged down streets and through intersections with no regard for driving laws and traffic signals.

Driving alongside the rear of the House, I followed the road until it ended with wooden bollards and a dirt pathway to nowhere. I got out and surveyed the area. Behind me, a massive, open field stretched out. Made me think how Jackson ran unseen over the open area to get to the bridge... and back again. To my left, a dense thicket. The perfect place to hide. The perfect place to escape.

No signs of movement, apart from an occasional gust that bent the tops of the trees in all directions, and the blur of a police cruiser rocketing down a street opposite the field, its lights shimmering, the siren left in its wake. I didn't know if the patrol car belonged to

Dixson and Kroft, or if they were hurtling towards Jackson and his family. For all I knew, his sighting could have also been a red herring, and deep down I hoped it was.

I jogged into the tree line, dry leaves and fallen branches crunched under foot. Fading light twinkled through the swaying foliage, casting ever-moving darkness over the shadows. I spied the white signpost ahead. Still pointing in every, if even no particular, direction. Still devoid of lettering. A relic from yesteryear, something that showed what happens when nature takes over.

Rounding the corner, I stopped in my stride.

“Jackson!”

He turned slowly, one arm around Marie, the other around Boy Groves. When he saw it was me, he visibly released his breath.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“You told me about this place, remember?”

He shook his head. “I meant, what are you doing here, now?”

“I had to.”

He stepped forward, away from his family. Still distance between us. “I told you not to find me.”

“There was a report over the radio someone saw you in St. Claire.”

He shook his head again. “It doesn’t matter. We’ll be long gone before they find the bridge. I’m guessing a lot of them are tied up with our neighbor. It’s amazing what people will do for a few hundred bucks.”

“He’s dead,” I said blankly.

Jackson stepped back. “What do you mean?”

“He wouldn’t pull over, so the police took matters into their own hands.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

I bit my lip. “There was an accident. Your neighbor didn’t make it.”

Jackson turned to face Marie, who was covering Boy’s ears with shaky hands, attempting to protect him from the horrendous story. Jackson looked down. “I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“But it did, Jackson. How many people need to get hurt for all of this to stop?”

“I’m sorry, Em. I really am.” Jackson took a deep breath as he looked over his family. “Please understand, it’s what needed to happen for us to get away.”

“And where exactly do you think you would go?”

“I’ve done my research,” he said. “Talked to people. We cross here and just keep running. Simple as that.”

“Nothing is ever that simple.”

He bit his lip. “It’s all I got.”

Eyes locked. I stepped back. “Go.”

He nodded.

Broken branches echoed around us.

The yell of “Freeze!” echoed from a hidden place, corrupted by trees, branches, and leaves.

Jackson rushed to his family, and I darted my vision around the area, focusing into the shadows and between the trees. Slowly, two dark figures appeared from their flanking hiding places, guns raised. Their forms migrated through the ever-growing darkness, shadows shifting and morphing with their surroundings.

My friend looked at me. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t,” I pleaded. “I didn’t mean to.”

“No sudden moves, Mr. Grove,” the deep voice broke from the dark.

It was Dixson, on my left, with a clear shot directly at Jackson. Kroft circled from my right, improving his vantage point ever so slowly.

I put my hands out. “Stop there, officers. I order you to stand down.”

“Order denied,” Dixson replied just as firmly, his gaze fixed on the huddled family. “He’s not getting away this time.”

“Now, officer Dixson—.”

Dixson stepped forward. “Drop the weapon! Drop the weapon!”

I turned to see Jackson brandishing a foreign revolver, pointed at Marie. My past played out in my mind. Father standing before a row of black-clad CHIRP officers. There was no reprieve for him, and the consequences were swift and powerful.

“Jackson!” I shouted. “What are you doing?”

“This is a kidnapping!” he declared.

“Jackson! No! That’s not going to help,” I argued.

“I’m not going with you,” Jackson shouted. “Not going to let you tear us apart. We’re all leaving together. Or the blood is on your hands.”

“Drop the weapon!” Kroft shouted.

“Stop!” I ordered. “Jackson is a declared Runner.”

“No, he’s not,” Dixson said from behind his gun sights.

“He most certainly is,” I lied. “It came through this afternoon. Which means he’s under my jurisdiction. Stand down!”

“Bullshit. You’re lying to help him out. Just like last time,” Dixson sneered. “We’re taking him in for murder.”

“I still have precedence. You don’t like what I’m saying, call your supervisor’s supervisor. They’ll set you straight.”

It was the first time Dixson’s eyes shifted to mine.

I elongated my spine. “If you don’t step down now, you are in direct contradiction to CHIRP protocols and will be held fully accountable, including, and not limited to, stripped of position and entitlements, imprisonment and Re-education, and I shall be forced to arrest both of you and take you to Pundit. Do you want that, Dixson?” I looked over. “What about you, Kroft? You willing to risk that?”

I felt the threat was enough to keep them busy, long enough for me to at least talk with Jackson without the looming threat of a stray bullet being fired into his head. Sensed Kroft stepping back while lowering his weapon. Dixson held on a little longer, letting my threats wash over him. They were sharp consequences, make no mistake, and at that moment I would have said anything to quell the looming disaster that would have unfolded if I wasn’t there. Eventually, Dixson lowered his weapon and gazed over at Kroft before stepping back as well.

“I’ll make the damn call,” he said. “But if you’re lying to me, I swear to God, I’m going to take you down as well.”

The two officers disappeared into the surrounding trees, leaving me looking at Jackson’s shaky hand gripping a gun. He shifted the weapon in his grip, no doubt caused by the perspiration of stress.

“You’ve got to put that damn thing away, Jackson.”

He shook his head in reply. “You don’t get it, Emerson. I won’t play by their rules anymore. I will not leave Boy to grow up in a House like we did. I’m not going to let that happen.”

And then I knew what he was contemplating, what he was willing to do.

All or nothing.

Jackson stepped backward, his wife and boy firmly in his grasp. Marie looked resigned to the situation like she half concocted the plan herself. But Boy was scared, and I could tell his mind was still coming to terms with the situation.

“They won’t let you walk away, Jackson. They just won’t.”

“It is what it is,” he said. I could hear the surrender in this voice like it was the last episode of a decade long television series. But it seemed in stark contrast to his stoic fortitude that shone from his presence. “Just promise me something. Two things, actually.”

“You’ve made me promise enough already.”

“And look how that turned out! Here I am.”

“Are you sure you can trust me with this?”

“Of course,” he replied without hesitation. “I’d trust you with my life.”

“What is it, Jackson?”

“Remember me, us, as we were, not as we are. Agreed?”

I was a fool to think I could agree to such a thing, like I could forget what would happen, but I had no choice to answer with an affirmative nod.

“And the second?” I asked.

“Always fight. Never give up.”

I stepped forward. “Jackson...”

“Sometimes life is about risking everything for a dream only you can see.”

“Wait. What?”

He shook his head. “We need to go.” He spun his family around, and I watched as they moved as one between the trees and through a veil of vines. I watched the spot where they disappeared and wished it all to be a bad dream. It didn’t have to end that way, but maybe it’s not over, till it’s over.

I stepped towards the veil, daring to peek into a new world, vast with opportunities.

That's when I heard it.

Gunshots. Three in rapid progression. Echoing around me, crashing into each other, until being absorbed by the trees.

I couldn't breathe. Stood as still as a statue, not wanting the images in my head to be true. I told myself I didn't hear the consecutive blasts. It was all in my head. It must have been. Shuffled forward. Ear's ringing.

A crunching footstep. Dry leaves. Dead branches.

Veil parted.

I saw the gun first, glinting in a shaft of moonlight. Then I saw the man.

Officer Dixson stepped forward and eased his pistol back into his holster.

"I told you I'd get him," he drawled.

"But... Marie. The boy. What about..."

"Got in the way," he said as he rolled his neck. "Damn unfortunate. Can't help that."

I wanted to run and wrap my hands around his neck, beat his face with my fists until Dixson's blood covered my hands and lubricated my breath. I wanted to run to Jackson's side and somehow revive him, bring his family back to life.

I wanted to do a lot of things.

But all I did was fall to my knees, drop my head to the ground.

And cry.

THIRTY-FIVE

CHAPTER 47

“And that’s it,” I said. “That’s what happened.”

Interviewer Scorsin stared at me with his green eyes, as if he was trying to read my mind. He ran a finger over his mustache before playing with some errant chin hairs. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to distract me from my thinking or displaying subconscious behaviors.

Who was reading who?

“You understand why we ask you these questions, don’t you, Detective Barnes?”

“Absolutely. I’m well aware of the process.”

“The rank of Inspector is a well-regarded position.”

“It is.”

“And as such, we need to make sure *you* are a well-regarded person.”

“I expect nothing less, Interviewer.”

We sat in a bland room, on simple wooden chairs at a plain white table. Mirrored panels lined the walls all around us, forcing our reflections to play off into infinity. They didn’t even try to hide their surveillance of the conversation; I knew there was a team of people watching and listening to us. They might as well have been in the room.

“But you haven’t told me everything, have you, Detective Barnes?”

“No. I was just getting to that.”

“So, when you said, *that’s it*, you really meant there’s more to the story.”

I leaned forward in my chair. “I’m not trying to hide anything, Interviewer, if that is what you are insinuating.”

“I’m not intimating anything. Just allowing you to clear the air.”

“There’s nothing to clear. I had no part in the body that was found.”

“And which body is that?”

I sighed. “I know you know.”

“Of course, I know. It’s my job to know. I’ve looked over every part of your life and I can tell you I’m a little concerned with the things that I’ve found. If it was up to me, I’d stamp your disapproval immediately, and in as much, recommend an extended stay at Pundit, if not the Pit.”

I looked down at my open file that was sitting under Interview Scorsin’s cupped hands.

“But it isn’t up to me to decide,” he continued. “I merely provide guidance. A recommendation of suitability.”

“Whatever is in your file, I have no doubt it has been investigated. Thoroughly. And the fact I retain my detective role suggests to me that any nefarious interpretation is unwarranted.”

“Oh, while I understand the Watchers Franchise investigated the events in question—to which they cleared you—it didn’t go into your state of mind and how you felt about it.”

“I hardly see how that is relevant.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that it’s not up to you to either see or determine relevance, Detective Barnes. As Inspector you will have quite the voice within CHIRP, and the power to match.”

“I’m aware of the duties, responsibilities, and protocols of the Inspector position.”

“Very well then. Perhaps you can start answering my questions.”

“All of this happened a long time ago.”

“Nevertheless,” he pushed. “One. Police informant Reed, linked to Mr. Groves, goes missing. Two. Police kill Mr. Groves, and his wife and Boy, while evading capture for that murder. Three. The corpse of police informant Reed is found on Grove property.”

I clenched my jaw when I heard Jackson’s name. Images of him flashed in my mind, from the moment we met in the House, through to our last conversation, where he turned away from me and disappeared through a veil of vines, just before he was met with a fatal bullet.

“So, where exactly would *you* like to start,” he pressed.

“As is in the report,” I said. “Officers Dixson and Kroft opened fire on the Grove family when they failed to comply with orders.”

“And you agree with the assessment of the officers? That they had no choice but to open fire on the Grove family? You condone the report?”

“That’s a lot of questions, however, it’s hardly for me to say whether or not the report is accurate.”

“I didn’t ask about the accuracy, I asked if you sanctioned the report.”

“The officers acted within the bounds of their policies and procedures, as is outlined in the investigative reports.”

“Even though you felt you had jurisdiction?”

“I have no further comment on this line of questioning.”

“The position of Inspector will require thought leadership, if not directly, then at least peripherally.”

“The position requires me to enforce the Child First laws.”

I could tell by the look on his face he was mulling over my answer. Ticking boxes, crossing others. I called it as I saw it.

“And what of Police Informant Adam Reed?”

“Other than his body was found on Grove property a few days later, what about him?”

“He had information about a ranking CHIRP officer.”

Searing pin pricks worked their way around my neck. “I wasn’t aware. To my knowledge, most of that report is classified. Redacted within an inch of its life.”

“You can see how this looks, Detective.”

I looked down at the tape recorder. “Just to be clear, for the record, while the body was found on Grove property, there has been no formal inquest into who, how, or why Reed was murdered. Do I find that strange? Of course I do, as anyone would. However, the lack of evidence of any such event is astounding. Maybe Reed’s handler killed him and planted the body on the property in order to incriminate.”

Interviewer Scorsin sat back in his chair and looked at a mirrored panel, before laying his gaze back on me.

“Very well, Detective Barnes,” he said, closing my file. He slotted it back into his briefcase and stood. “I think we’re done here.”

The muffled knock broke through the still night, echoing around an empty house. The windows were dark, and the street was empty. Sheet lightning silently sparked through the clouds. Thirty seconds later, a low grumble emerged from overhead. Sporadic drops fell.

Then, from behind the mahogany door, muffled sounds and shuffling feet. Chains unclasped, metal sliding on metal, metal knobs turned, allowing the door to swing inwards. A face peered out of the gloom.

“Come in,” Marie said, opening the door. “Before anyone sees you.”

Adam Reed pushed his way into the shadows and removed his coat while Marie locked the door.

“Thanks for coming, Adam,” she said.

“What do you want? Why did you ask me to come over?”

“I didn’t know who else to call.”

“If your husband finds me here, I’m a dead man. You saw what happened last time. And that fucking CHIRP officer friend of his forced me to take a deal to silence me.”

“Must have been good for you to take it.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not so sure about that. So, why am I here?”

“I’ve...” She looked away as a streak of lightning lit up the foyer, bathing her face in electricity. “I don’t know how much longer I can stay here. Jackson just hasn’t been the same lately. I’m scared.”

“Come away with me, Marie. You and Boy. We can make it work. All of us together.”

She looked at the dark window panels beside the door. “But what about Jackson? What about his friend?”

He stepped forward. Reached for her. “Don’t worry about them,” he said. “They won’t be around for much longer.”

She tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

He unbuttoned his shirt. Another crackle ran across the sky, illuminating him.

“Christ. You’re wearing a wire? You work for the police?”

He nodded. “Don’t worry, it’s not on. No one is listening. Thought I’d wear it just in case. But the fact is, the cops are offering me protection. They’re all going down, Marie. Your husband. His friend. I’m getting money from both sides. I’m a freakin’ genius.”

“What do you mean ‘both sides’?”

“Well, Jackson’s friend just paid me ten grand to keep my mouth shut. And the cops are offering me double. Just need some more evidence. I just want one more conversation, and then it’s all over.”

“I see,” Marie replied. “What are you going to do from here?”

“I’m gonna ask that friend of Jackson’s for more money. See how far I can really take this. He’ll slip up, I just know he will. Then it’s nighttime for both of them and we can be together. Are you in, Marie?”

She looked away again. She rubbed her temples like she was in pain, ran a hand over her furrowed brow. “I’m not sure I can.”

He stepped forward again. A sliver of darkness between them. “Of course you can, Marie. We can be together. It will set us up for life.”

“I... I don’t want you to do that to him.”

He stepped back. “What? Why not? Don’t forget why you ran to me in the first place.”

“That was before. Things are different now.”

Adam threw his hands into the air. “Well, what the hell am I doing here then?”

And then he found out. He hadn’t noticed the door behind him silently open. Nor did he see a figure emerge from their hiding spot. Failed to hear the heavy object swing through

the air, muffled by the low grumble overhead. He even missed my face, shrouded in shadow, yet visible if you concentrated hard enough.

Adam fell as soon as the object made contact, with Jackson stepping out into the gloomy foyer. I saw it all unfold from the rear window that looked directly down the hall to the front door. Dirty shovel in hand, covered with sweat from digging a hole.

Jackson dragged the body outside, banging Adam's head on the verandah steps unceremoniously as he made his way into the yard where I was waiting. There was no mistake that Adam was dead, but Jackson checked for a pulse, regardless. No point taking any chances at that point. Finding none, he ripped open the shirt and yanked at the wire.

Adam's eyes snapped open, and he gurgled a large intake of breath. The sudden movement from what we thought was a corpse startled us all. Gone too far down the road to change trajectory now. I picked up the shovel and swung it down onto Adam's surprised face. The metal squelched into soft bone and tissue, send squirts of blood in all directions. A low groan, so I did it again, and again to make sure.

I slowly removed the shovel, allowing lightning to light up a bloody crater where Adam's face used to be. Rain fell harder, but none of us cared. Jackson, arm around Marie, looked down at the recording device in his hand before he smashed it into unrecognizable components and littered them over the body.

"They're going to find him," I said to Jackson, my voice smothered by the storm.

"It's the last place they'll look," he replied.

"Bullshit. It's the first place they'll look."

He looked down. "Shit. Should've dug it deeper." Looked up at me. "Make sure you pack it down."

Without a word, I started shoveling in some dirt.

Fresh lightning lit up the gloom, followed by its usual partner. Then more dirt appeared in the hole delivered from the other shovel. I looked up at Bethany and gave a weak smile. She offered the same in reply. Partners in crime. Literally.

For better, for worse.

In sickness and in health.

Till death do us part.

This is my vow.

Jackson endured the consequences stemming from that night. Paid for it with his life. So did his family, wife, and son. But it was all in the past. For years, I thought about those events, but as much as I did, I couldn't change the outcomes. Nothing would bring them back.

The interview room door cracked open, and I blinked back to the present. It was a face I hadn't seen in a while yet was searingly familiar all the same. A little older, but still so intimidatingly tall, black and gray hair that framed a porcelain white face.

I stood immediately. "Administrator. I did not know you would be here today."

Administrator Raxiel ambled from the door to the table with the aid of a cane, her palm gripping onto the black metallic ball. She eyed me as she sat at the table.

"For the love of God, sit, Emerson."

I did as she requested. To be honest, I would have jumped out the window if she ordered me to do it.

She looked over my face as if reading my future. Or my past.

"You're a reasonable candidate," she swooned. "But trouble has a way of following you around."

I opened my mouth to speak, but she continued, so I dared not interrupt.

“I remember when I first met you. You made some troublesome accusations leveled at the Mr. Freeman. Then, many years later, John Berry disappears after you capture Boy Shaw. Finally, in recent times, a friendship has embroiled you in a dead police informant and an escape plan involving Laferty Bridge. You confound me.” She narrowed her gaze. “And yet you are a reasonable candidate on so many other levels. You can appreciate this conundrum.”

“I do, Administrator. And I appreciate your continued support.”

“I selected you myself, hand-plucked from a society that looks down upon you with disdainful glances. You will always be a reflection of me, a constant tether to my teat. Tell me, Emerson, why do you even want this position?”

“It’s the natural order of things,” I replied.

“Go on,” she said, a genuine curiousness creamed her delivery.

“It’s the next step in my path.”

“To where?”

“I’m... I’m not entirely sure, however, I believe it will show itself to me when I’m ready.”

“Interviewer Scorsin doesn’t like you very much. But I’m sure the feeling is mutual.”

“I can’t hate a man for doing his job, Administrator. There are many other qualities and characteristics I use as guideposts for those decisions.”

Eyed me over again. Could see the cogs turn behind her eyeballs.

“You’ve been tracking Sylvia Hartland and other members of The Push for years.”

“Yes,” I said bluntly.

“And yet have made no arrests. No interviews. No identification of bridges or outposts. No detection of entry points or exit points or end points.”

“No.”

“Do you care to elaborate?”

“As you can imagine, Administrator, this is a large-scale operation with many moving parts. If we pull out gears, the entire mechanism will fail.”

“But that is what we want, Emerson. That is what we need.”

“No. It isn’t.”

Leaned back, raised her chin. “Tell me more.”

“A failed mechanism is still there, just waiting for someone to fit new gears, and I have no doubt there is no shortage of cogs. I don’t want the mechanism to fail, I want to destroy it entirely.”

She considered my response and nodded slowly in approval.

“I’m heading up a new task force and would like you to be a part of it,” she said.

“What about the Inspector role?”

“What about it?”

“I thought I might...”

“Nonsense,” she barked, waving her hand. “Inspector is an administrative role that comprises signing documents and stamping forms. You are more than that, Emerson. I can give you more. Unlimited time, money, and resources. A long leash and one directive.”

“And what’s the objective?”

“That is information that will be forthcoming to the successful candidate.”

“Can I have some time to consider your offer?”

She clenched her jaw. “No. The offer is good until I leave the room.” The chair scraped on the floor as she stood.

“Wait!”

My life had changed a hundred-fold since I first laid eyes on her inquisitive gaze. I had propelled through the CHIRP ranks, not solely at her behest, yet rapid, nonetheless.

Being part of the task force could be the right steppingstone for me, and if Administrator Raxiel was pointing me in that direction, it was somewhere I needed to go.

“I accept your offer.”

She nodded. “Of course you do.”

She stopped at the door and turned.

“Is there any trouble I should expect from you, Emerson? Any skeletons in the closet that are likely to rear their heads after today?”

“Of course not, Administrator. I give myself to CHIRP, to the government above us all.”

“We all answer to someone,” she said, then left the room.

Ten minutes. Long minutes. I avoided staring into the mirror. I knew they were out there talking about me. A reasonable candidate. What did that even mean? I wondered how many other applicants there were. Eventually, the door opened, and Interviewer Scorsin graced me with his presence once more.

He moved from the door to the table where he, in one swift motion, sat and extracted a piece of paper and ink tray from his briefcase. He removed a ballpoint pen from his coat pocket and laid it across the page. Once he arranged everything, he slid the objects across the table towards me.

The contract text was purposefully, infinitely small, yet I noted my name and position along the top of the page. There was no point attempting to decipher it, or even reading it. The terms weren't negotiable, and I was sure they were displayed for display's sake.

Instead, I picked up the pen and signed my name. Flicked open the ink tray lid, pressed in my thumb, and made my mark next to my scrawl. After Interviewer Scorsin took back possession of everything, he repeated the process with his own markings.

“Congratulations, Special Agent Barnes,” he said as he clipped his briefcase closed.

And that was that.

A new chapter.

The beginning of the end.

CHAPTER 48

We popped a bottle of champagne as soon as I arrived home. The news was overwhelming and felt I was floating on a cloud. Time had swept skeletons under rugs or locked them in closets, and I felt free to pursue my career without looking over my shoulder. I was thankful to have Administrator Raxiel in my corner, guiding every step on the CHIRP ladder.

I drank champagne and scarfed dinner down with little ceremony. With the possibilities running through my mind, I stared at the table as I swallowed without tasting.

“Is this a race?” Bethany asked.

I stopped and looked up at the faces around the table. “No, it’s just that...”

“Father?”

The word sent a shiver down my spine, yet this is how we agreed we would do things. Prim and proper. No chance of slipping up. No chance of Harlow getting himself into trouble without him realizing it.

“Yes, Har...” Caught myself. I coughed and cleared my throat as I exchanged an uneasy glance with Bethany. “Yes, Boy?”

“Will you read me more of your book after dinner?”

I exchanged another glance with my wife. Wide eyes. *Don't show emotion. Don't show affection. You don't know how long they will be in your care.*

“Boy,” I stated. “I’ve told you that reading a story together is something just what we do. I hope you haven’t been talking to anyone else about that.”

“You said it was a secret.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And so we shouldn’t really be talking about it around the dinner table.”

Mouthfuls in silence.

When the plates were empty, I gathered my cutlery together. “Boy, homework and bed.”

Harlow left without hesitation, and I helped clear the dishes to the kitchen.

“I hate that,” I said as I lowered the plates into the sink.

“It’s what we need to do,” Bethany replied. “I can see how hard that is to talk like that, but it’s how we need to be.”

Clattering of dishes.

“I should never have shared that book with him in the first place. It puts us, and him, in a difficult position.”

“But not one we haven’t worked through already,” Bethany replied.

“He’s twelve. He should be thinking of other things, not me reading that damn book.”

“He’s got a long wait until—.”

“I wasn’t much older when I started thinking about The Transitioning and the possibilities that existed beyond it.”

Detergent. Hot water.

“Why don’t you take a night off and read with him. I now how much you both like it.”

“I can’t,” I replied. “This promotion to Special Agent comes with a pile of objectives and requirements. And it’s precisely because of that dedication that allowed me to get the promotion. I can’t just take my foot off the pedal now. This is the time to push harder.”

“I get it,” she said. “I understand all of that. It’s just that you’ve been working long hours recently. I miss you. We miss you, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” I accepted. “I know.”

With no further formality, I took leave and went to the office to continue working.

Time distorted as soon as I opened the files and buried myself in the reports. I had soon laid photos, briefing notes, investigative reports, intelligence, letters, and opinion pieces over my desk as I wrote notes furiously on my pad. Something was going on because it was always going on, and they tasked me with finding out as much about it as possible. I would not fail in this task, or any task given to me. It wasn’t an option and doesn’t make up part of my DNA. That was my mantra, something I kept thinking about as I crammed knowledge into my brain in short bursts, hoping things would connect.

I sensed somebody standing at the door and a garbled voice tried to interrupt me, but I waved them away without looking up. There was too much at stake and it buried me too deep to come to the surface. And yet, somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I would not solve it there and then, and that it would take months, if not years, to interpret the totality of what I was examining. Regardless, I pressed on, until outside became pitch black and my eyes burned from the desk lamp.

I leaned back, placed my hands behind my head, and allowed myself to take a breath. My page was a series of scribbles and diagrams, and words, and numbers. Indecipherable for anyone else, but for me, it was like poetry.

I heard my name, that is, I thought I heard my name, but I was so engrossed in my handwriting that I wasn't sure. Then again. And again. Until a hand grazed my shoulder and broke my trance. I looked up.

"You've been at this for hours," Bethany said.

"I know!" I said excitedly. "It's great. I'm making some substantial progress."

"Why don't you take a break. Maybe read that book to Boy."

"I'll take a break in five."

"That's what you said five minutes ago, and five minutes before that."

"Really?" I asked. "I didn't notice."

"No, because you're neck deep into whatever it is you're doing."

"Right," I said. Took a deep breath.

"Boy is in bed."

Another deep breath. "Yeah, I could use a break, anyway."

I got up and inspected the bookshelf for the book. Found it nestled where it always was. Slid it out and headed to my son's room. When I got there, he was lying down under the bedside lamp, staring at the ceiling. I knocked softly, but he didn't move or say anything. Inviting myself into his sanctum, I sat on the frosty edge of the bed and opened the book to a random page.

War had settled over Andreixia like a blanket covering a sleeping child. There were no bombs or planes or guns or soldiers, yet everyone felt the impact. Masses huddled around trashcan bonfires to stay warm and be part of a community that had been violently ripped apart.

They rubbed their hands and told stories of the old days, things when times were not just good, and not just great. They were exceptional. Everybody thrived. The poor got rich, and the rich got richer. But over the years, they realized that poor had a new benchmark, and so the great decline of utopia plummeted ungracefully, until the lowest common denominators had had enough.

Beyond them, crouched in a corner of a broken home, O and F shared as much glaring as they did conversation.

“You said you’d look after us,” O said. “You promised.”

F shrugged, like he had heard the comment a thousand times over and then a thousand times more.

“I didn’t promise you nothing,” he eventually replied. He found it hard to talk with so few teeth, and even harder to get the words right in his head.

O pulled a stick from her grubby coat, sharpened by diligently rubbing it on the concrete when F was out foraging for food or chatting up the floosies. “You god damn promised me,” she warbled. “And if you don’t come good, I’m gonna drive this stick right into you—.”

“You can stop,” he said out of the blue.

I looked at the book as the words blurred together into a mess.

“Is everything okay?”

He shrugged.

“What is it, Boy?”

“I can tell you’re busy.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not here. I can hear it in your voice.”

“I can try harder for you if you like?”

He rolled over and turned out the light. “It’s okay.”

“How about tomorrow? I’ll do a better job tomorrow.”

He shrugged under the covers. I had tried to focus on the story, but with every word, a report or photo would steal my attention. I couldn’t help it, couldn’t turn it off. It was calling to me, forcing me to think about it, refusing to let me go.

I eased off the bed and stopped at the door. That’s when the stabbing pain in my chest hit me. I knew I should do better. For such a long time, I wanted to be like my father, so loving and giving, but it turns out I was more like my mother. Cold and distant, always wrapped up in something. When I was old enough to understand, I thought it was because she was protecting me, but now I know it was something else. Her attention was on something else.

I breathed deeply. Stepped forward. I wanted to go over and hug my son, call him by his name, wrap my arms around him twice. But I didn’t. Couldn’t. I stood there and let work fill my brain. I was focusing on the wrong thing, and the worst part was, I was letting it happen, thinking it would lead to something better.

In the end it would, but I’d have to wade through a swamp of pain to get there first.

CHAPTER 49

If you saw a photo of my office, you would say they took it in the basement of a serial killer. Along the length of one wall was a cork board littered with grainy black-and-white photos, conversation transcripts, single-page reports, and scraps of paper with almost unintelligible scrawls. Different colored string tied them together in meaningful ways that any outsider would consider an artistic mess.

Administrator Raxiel gave me an abundance of leeway while investigating The Push: the group of people undermining the government's rule, perpetrators of rule-breaking, and propagators of life outside the city. What was once whispers in dark corners had grown to street posters and graffiti. Culprits avoided detection and evaded arrests. They appeared coordinated and strategic, disciplined and purposeful. Certainly, worthy opponents of the government, yet deadly in their affairs.

Occasionally I would stand in the middle of the room with a cup of coffee and admire it. Months of work, a legacy no doubt, in order to better understand who, what and why The Push existed. And with why, I don't mean to help people flee the city. I mean, how did The

Push come into fruition in the first place. To me, it wasn't good enough to stop them. I needed to know how they came to be what they are.

"Special Agent Barnes, When are we going to take The Push down?" people would ask.

"When I'm ready," I would respond.

"And when will that be? When will you be ready?"

"I'll be ready when I can destroy their movement."

It was a circular conversation that extended into perpetuity. But they wouldn't moan or complain beyond asking the question. I appreciated their drive to make arrests of enemies of the state, however, they failed to see the bigger picture. They all failed to see the bigger picture, except perhaps the Administrator. Maybe that was why she gave me the job, that she could see the replete desire to join all the dots before coloring in the picture.

Over time, the landscape grew to incorporate the adjoining walls. A masterpiece would be to lay a heavy hand on my shoulder, although I considered it to be a symphony. A daring amalgamation of fact, insight, and foresight. Few understood it, even fewer attempted to unravel the brilliance.

At one point, I shared a silent cup of coffee with a junior officer while we peered over the tapestry. Freshly brewed black coffee mixed with brown paper and string. Shepherd was young and exuberant, and our lineage originated from opposite ends of the spectrum, yet we found ourselves together in the same room at the same time. Funny how things like that worked out. Neatly combed hair. Perfectly tied tie. Creaseless features.

"What concerns you the most, Special Agent?"

I turned my head and regarded him for a moment. Wasn't sure if he was a genius or kissing my ass. Either way, it was a brilliant question from a talented individual.

"What scares me most, Shepherd, are the dots I don't see."

He chewed over the response like a piece of bubblegum. He pointed to the board.

“Like that one there?”

Didn’t need to look. I know what he was pointing at. A piece of paper with a black silhouette of a sexless person. “The White Witch,” I declared. Under the silhouette I had scribbled: *‘moth tattoo’*.

“Yeah,” he said. “Who’s that?”

“Don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t even know if they exist.”

“Then why are they up on the board?”

“Because we all answer to someone, that’s why,” I declared. “Hartland may pull a lot of strings, but who is pulling hers? Perhaps she’s nothing more than a middleman, a messenger. We’re all part of something bigger. Take us, for instance. Cogs in the machine, each turning slowly to change the time, one minute at a time. Why should The Push be any different?”

“Why are they called White Witch? Something to do with sorcery? Should we be keeping an eye out for an old woman dressed in white robes, carrying a broomstick, and has a wart on the end of a crooked nose?”

I scoffed. “I appreciate the visual, Shepherd. And no, nothing to do with witchcraft. But it does have something to do with moths.”

“Moths, sir?”

“*Thysania Agrippina*. One of the world’s largest insects, with a wingspan that can reach up to twelve inches. Some cultures believe these moths are messengers that carry souls to the underworld on their large wings.”

Shepherd bent his finger and placed it against pursed lips. “What does all that mean?”

I smiled. “I believe the metaphorical representation for their operation is sound. They whisk people away, to a place that we declare to be worse than here.”

“A city,” Shepherd said.

“Moth city,” I followed, letting the words sink in. “Anyway, the only piece of information we’ve been able to find out is they have a tattoo of a moth somewhere on their person.”

“Are we sure Hartland isn’t the White Witch? Or meeting with the culprit?”

“Hard to say, Shepherd. Hartland has an astounding talent for giving her tails the flick. One report suggested she vanished into thin air, if you can believe it. She does enough to keep us interested, yet not too much that we arrest her.”

“Why not arrest her, sir? She may

“She does more for us in her current position,” I stated. “Regardless, the White Witch must be someone powerful and connected. Perhaps wealthy and well-to-do, even someone who has an ear or two.”

“Are you suggesting the White Witch has infiltrated this very department?”

I chuckled. “Oh, Lord, no! Just myth and rumor, Shepherd.”

“Do you think you’ll ever get her? Sylvia Hartland? The White Witch?”

I shrugged. “Sure. One day.”

But he didn’t know what I knew. That the net was slowly closing over them.

“Feels kind of mean,” Shepherd said.

I sipped my coffee. “What do you mean?”

“Just being there, out there, in the world, going about her business, snubbing her nose up at the government. And we sit in here and look at her photo on a cork board decorated with string. She deserves to be in The Pit.”

“That’s a harsh judgment, albeit the correct one. Although I doubt whether The Pit Officials could get anything out of her. She knows too much to simply give it all up, as

paradoxical as that may seem, and I can only assume too clever to give anything of value. In fact, I have no doubt she'd rather die than betray the people she's helping."

"Re-education then?"

"A mind so devious would push the limits of the system, that is safe to say. And given her propensity to shape shift into various aliases may suggest an ability to grift our perceptions. She may become who we want her to become merely to escape further mental harassment."

"Then what else for her? What course of action can there possibly be?"

"Existence, Shepherd. Futile existence. Like a mailman delivering empty envelopes to a letterbox at an empty house."

Shepherd nodded. Wisdom imparted on the next generation.

A sharp rap on my door ruffled the silence and we turn in unison. A middle-aged woman with puffy cheeks wearing purple glasses pushed her face into the room.

"Someone has requested to see you, Special Agent," Carabelle said.

"And who might that be?" I enquired.

She looked down at her notebook, flicked it over a few pages, and then turned back again. "An Interviewer, sir."

"And have they got a name?"

She checked again, turning more pages, forcing fake anticipation to run through the room.

"Ah yes, here it is. Wheatley. Interviewer Wheatley."

"Wheatley?" I tapped the side of my head. "Now, why does that sound familiar? Nevertheless, send them in."

"Oh, sorry, sir, but I can't do that?"

I exchanged a glance with Shepherd. "And why is that, Carabelle?"

“Because Interviewer Wheatley isn’t here.”

“Well, where is he?”

She swallowed. “Pundit, sir.”

We looked at each other for a while. A million things ran through my mind, and it seemed gazing upon the look on her face, they ran through hers.

“Why would they ask a Special Agent to go to Pundit?” Shepherd asked.

“That is a wonderful question, Shepherd,” I replied. “One that will reveal itself in due course. Now, please excuse us while I continue my conversation with Carabelle here.”

Shepherd squeezed through the door, with Carabelle refusing to budge an inch, dominating her position in the office. Everyone knew the most important people weren’t the ones in charge, nor the ones with the fancy titles. It was always the people that carried no title at all, that did the most work, that got paid the least, that were critical to getting things done. Carabelle eased into my office, and my world got a little smaller.

Once we were alone, I asked, “Did he say what it was about?”

She shook her head.

“Any indication at all?”

“Nothing. Just that he requested your presence at Pundit.”

I clenched my jaw.

“Do you want me to connect you to The Administrator?”

I shook my head. “Not necessary. Thank you, Carabelle. If Interviewer Wheatley has requested my appearance, it is to Pundit I will go.”

CHAPTER 50

“Is that necessary?” I asked.

Interviewer Wheatley looked down at the idle tape recorder. “Of course,” he said. “It is the only means of verification for this conversation. Outside of that, it is your word against mine.”

“I am a Special Agent reporting directly to Administrator Raxiel.”

Wheatley ran a pinky against his hairline. “You don’t remember me, do you, Special Agent Barnes?”

“I’ve met many people in my—.”

“But not here. Not at Pundit.”

I thought back as I looked across the table. His cold eyes betrayed his innocent features. Wheatley investigated my actions after I found the Runner Boy Shaw and let his grandfather, John Berry, escape justice. All in all, I was free to go. And yet, there I was. Back in that same room, talking to the same person.

“Yes. I remember you.”

“Very good. Then you’ll also know the Internal Review Franchise answers to no one, so beg my pardon if I say I don’t give a shit what your title is.”

I looked down at the tape recorder. “Are you going to turn that on now, now that you’ve got that out of your system?”

Wheatley didn’t take his eyes off me. Always searching for something, which is what an Interviewer of the Internal Review Franchise does. Picks holes in stories. Finds loose threads and pulls at them. Slowly at first, so subtle you don’t even feel it. Then all at once, you’re naked with a pile of wool and cotton around your feet.

“Not yet,” he replied evenly. “But soon I will. Do you remember the last time you were here?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember what we spoke about?”

“Yes.”

“Do you stand by those comments?”

“Interviewer Wheatley, that case is long closed, so I don’t see—.”

“The case is closed when I say it’s closed,” Wheatley barked back. He took a deep breath and ran a pinky along his hairline. “Now, is there anything else you wanted to alter to your previous statement?”

I eyed him, tried to ascertain where his line of questioning was taking me. Down the primrose path? More like down the rabbit hole. My right eye twitched, and I wondered if Wheatley thought this was some kind of tell.

“I can not remember every comment I made to you at the time,” I said, folding my arms. “But with all things being equal, no, I there is nothing to add to my previous commentary.”

“That’s all very well, but it doesn’t really answer my question, now, does it?”

“I told you I have nothing to add.”

“And I told you that doesn’t answer my question.”

“What do you want from me, Wheatley?”

“Investigator Wheatley,” he corrected.

I stared across the table. Grit my teeth. “Investigator Wheatley.”

“Thank you, Special Agent Barnes. Now, what is the answer to the question?”

I rubbed my temples. “What question?”

Wheatley’s head dropped to the side. “Special Agent Barnes, is everything okay?”

I shifted in my seat. “Everything is fine.”

“Then why aren’t you answering my question?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I asked if you would like something to make you more comfortable. Coffee. Tea. Water.”

“Oh.” I looked down at my hands. “Sorry. That question must have slipped by me.”

“Well?”

“Coffee is fine.”

“Very well,” Wheatley said as he stood. “I’ll be right back.”

While the investigator was gone, the room felt like it was shrinking, as if I could reach out and touch both walls simultaneously. The bland walls gave me nothing to focus on, and the tape recorder sitting in the middle of the table stole my attention. I tried to tear my gaze away from the device, but it kept sucking me in. I peered through the plastic window. Pursed my lips. Flicked open the lid. There was nothing in it. What game was Wheatley playing at?

Scraping metal filled the room. A key in the lock. I closed the lid of the recorder and positioned it back in the middle of the table, just in time for the door to open.

Wheatley stepped inside and closed the door behind himself, sat the glass of water on the table, and slid it over to me. I looked down.

“I said coffee.”

“No, you didn’t. You asked for water.”

I leaned forward. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

Wheatley pursed his lips. “Whatever do you mean? I’m merely conducting an investigation.”

“Exactly!” I said, pointing at him. “I asked for coffee.”

“I think you are mistaken, Inspector. Would you like to listen to the recording?”

I looked down at the recorder. “What recording?”

He tapped the top of the machine. “I’ve been recording everything we’ve said, Special agent Barnes. As I told you at the commencement of this conversation.”

“You never recorded our conversation. Regardless, there’s no tape in the recorder.”

“So, you’re saying if I were to hit play, nothing would happen?”

“Stop these games, Investigator!”

Wheatley kept his eyes focused on me as he slowly reached out. Depressed a button. A high-pitched whine of unintelligible garble flowed from the tinny speaker. Stopped. Hit play.

“Then why aren’t you answering my question?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I asked if you would like something to make you more comfortable. Coffee. Tea. Water.”

“Oh. Sorry. That question must have slipped by me. Water is fine.”

“Very well, I’ll be right back.”

Wheatley pressed the stop button.

“Just confirming, Special Agent, that you asked for water?”

I waved him away, stared down at the machine, trying to figure out how he accomplished the trick. Rubbed my head. Maybe I was losing my mind. Perhaps I was so

caught up with investigated The Push, I had no time for reality. The recording was sound, irrefutable proof of my request.

“Can you confirm that?” he asked again, smiling. “For me?”

“I order you to stop these games and end this conversation. Now.”

“I’m afraid, Special Agent, I don’t take orders from you.”

“Then I want to see your supervisor. Immediately.”

“Unfortunately, Administrator Mosiah isn’t available at the moment, but I will pass on your request to them as soon as possible.”

I leaned back in my chair. “I’ll wait,” I declared.

Then I saw it. A flutter across his face. A subtle upturn of the corner of his mouth. He cleared his throat, stood, and walked to the door. Stopped and spoke over his shoulder.

“Are you coming, Special Agent Barnes?”

I followed Interviewer Wheatley down several corridors that formed the labyrinth that was Pundit. With no markers to gauge direction, the path we followed turned me around every which way. Another method to confuse and discombobulate. Increased heart rate and sweating were not uncommon reactions to being in Pundit, but I had been around long enough to control the uncontrollable. Every situation could be foreseen and therefore combatted against. Given time and preparation, there was nothing I couldn’t get my way out of. Wouldn’t have been Inspector if I couldn’t. Wouldn’t have been endorsed to Special Agent if I couldn’t.

“My job is to read between the lines,” he said as we strode down a plain corridor. “To understand what is *not* said. That’s the true art of what makes a great Interviewer. We latch onto things, minor discrepancies, until they haunt our dreams and envelop our lives.”

“Sounds laborious,” I suggested.

“No more than your role, Special Agent. Yes, there is a certain grind to it, but to make a pot of coffee, one must first granulate the beans. One cannot pour hot water into a cup and wish it to be something else.”

Investigator Wheatley stopped at a plain solid door and cupped his hands before himself. Looked me dead in the eye.

“We’ve been walking for a little while, Special Agent Barnes.”

“I’ve noticed. In fact, I’m pretty sure we passed this very door several times.”

“Quite astute, and I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Why the games?”

“I was giving you time to think.”

“Think about what?”

“Is there nothing you’d like to alter about the Boy Shaw investigation?”

“I have nothing more to say about the subject, Investigator Wheatley. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m very busy and would like to get back to my work.”

He nodded curtly. “Very well.” He opened the door and motioned me inside.

I didn’t see her at first, the room so dark and the corridor I had just come from, so bright. But, once my eyes had adjusted, her form became clear. Before I could turn to question Wheatley on the meaning of his actions, the door closed behind me.

“Investigator Wheatley,” I yelled as I banged on the door. “What is the meaning of this?”

“You.”

It came from over my shoulder and the scraping of wooden chair legs over polished concrete swiftly followed it.

I turned to the noise. Saw her standing there. Wavy blond hair flowed down over her shoulders. Arms across herself, protecting, defiant.

“I knew it was you. The moment I saw you. I mean, the name was one thing, but to see you here, like this. Wearing that uniform.”

I stepped forward, annoyed with all the mind games I’ve endured all morning. “Do I know you?”

“You don’t remember me?” inched forward, letting the light wash over her smooth features.

I stood there as she approached. Painfully released the grip on herself and reach up with her hand. Reached up and rested it on my cheek. Warmth building up to sparks. I took a deep breath as my past flashed before my eyes. Sitting in the tree. Talking about the future. Her despair. Touching hands. Sparks. Back to the present.

“Lennox,” I breathed. Her face had changed around her eyes.

She caressed my cheek before removing her hand. It came from nowhere. A hard slap. The sound reverberated in my ears, and I reared backward as the sting danced across my face. I clutched at the point of impact and swore loudly.

“What the fuck?”

“It’s all your fault,” she screamed. “Everything is your fault!”

I backed towards the door. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She stepped forward, a lioness approaching wounded prey. “You ruined our lives. All of our lives. By ratting out Max, you betrayed us all.”

“I’m... I’m sorry. That was a long time ago.”

“Does that make it right? You were responsible for what happened.”

“No!” I yelled. “I may have done some things that I’m not proud of, but I’m not responsible for what happened next.”

“Max killed himself. The very next home. The Father and Mother found him hanging by a belt in his closet. Another victim of his upbringing.”

“I...”

“After Chloe’s death, Charlie never spoke again. They sent him to an institution where they drugged him and strapped him to a gurney. They strapped machines to his body and sent electricity into him. They killed him, Emerson. He needed me. He needed us.”

“I’m...”

“And me. Do you want to know what happened to me?”

“It was such a long time ago.”

“My guardians raped and beat me. I spent my last few years living on the street, running from the very people that you’ve become a part of. You used to be one of us, Emerson. Now you are the enemy. What happened to you? What did it take for you to turn your back on your family, on the ones who took you in and showed you love?”

I couldn’t answer the question, regardless of if it was rhetorical or otherwise. Too many stories playing out in my head. All those ruined futures lying in my hands. As much as I wanted to push them away, I knew it was me. Lennox was right. Every bit of it. I hadn’t thought about them in years, and I wondered if anyone had.

“I don’t know what to say. Don’t know if there is anything I could say. I can’t change the past.”

Lennox backed away to the other side of the table.

“Yeah,” she said, a healthy dose of venom in her tone. “Well, the past has a habit of catching up to you. And the sting can hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.”

“What are you talking about? I did nothing wrong back then.”

“I’m not talking about back then,” she said. “But you’ll find out soon enough.”

“Find out what?” I asked. “What are you doing here?”

In my haze of waiting for a response, I failed to notice the door open, nor the hands on my shoulder. Someone pulled me back into the corridor, Lennox's face disappearing as the door slammed shut.

I blinked. Past, present, and future colliding into a single incoherent moment. The ringing in my ears grew in intensity until it disappeared entirely.

"Are you okay, Inspector Barnes?"

I grabbed Wheatley by his coat lapels and pushed him back against the wall. "Stop asking me that!"

A flutter of emotion over his face, as if it played in reverse. Ran a pinky across his hairline. "Come this way. I have something to show you."

I released him and patted down his coat. "I'm... sorry."

"You've been saying that a lot. Come now. We can't be late."

More corridors. Sets of stairs. Identical-looking unmarked doors. I stared at Wheatley's shoes as we walked. Every footstep dug into my brain. Rubbed my temples.

"Is this going to take long?" I asked. "I've got a splitting headache."

"Not long now, Inspector. Not long now."

We found our way to a room, that looked like every other room I'd been in, so much so it was impossible to know whether it was the same room where we started or not. The room, however, had a television set on a trolley against one wall.

Wheatley motioned for me to sit, and I followed his direction.

He turned on the television. The black screen turned to gray as the grainy image materialized. A room, like any other room, except she was there at the table. Lennox. With someone beside her.

"What is this?"

"Watch," Wheatley instructed.

There was a loud click, and the door opened. Wheatley walked into the room. It was strange seeing him on the screen, given he was also sitting across from me. I could feel his eyes on me, that feeling that you're being watched. On the screen, Wheatley inconspicuously glanced up to the camera before pulling out a chair and sitting down at the table.

"Lennox Walker. My name is Investigator Wheatley. I understand you have something to tell me."

I turned to the person sitting opposite. "Is that why she's here? Whatever she's got to say has no bearing on any case, closed or otherwise."

Wheatley held a finger to his lips, then pointed at the screen.

"Not me," Lennox said through the television speakers. *"Michael here has something to say."*

"If Michael has something to say, why are you here?"

"Michael is my patient."

"Your patient? And what is your profession?"

"I'm a psychologist. I specialize with men and women who have been displaced in their childhoods."

"Displaced. That's an interesting turn of phrase."

"It's the term I use."

"You are skating on thin ice, Lennox Walker."

Silence.

"And what is the specialization?" Wheatley continued.

"I use psychotherapy to help them understand their dissociative amnesia and help them deal with their trauma. Things they've seen, heard, and experienced as a child."

"Fascinating," Wheatley blurted with a monotone accent. *"Can we rely on these memories? The mind is fallible after all."*

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe what Michael told me."

"I see. Does Michael talk at all?"

Wheatley clicked his fingers in front of the man's face.

"I talk just fine," Michael said.

"Ah. There we go. Now. What is your last name? For the record."

"Shaw," he said. *"Named after my father."*

The name immediately struck a chord with me.

"But my Grandad is Berry. John Berry."

And then it made sense. The puzzle was taking shape, even if every piece had yet to be laid. I watched as she told her story, then Boy told his. And I knew I was in immense trouble.

CHAPTER 51

I sped home with my past hot on my heels. But there was no way to outrun it. All truth be told, I wasn't running from my past, it was too late for that. History had wrapped its bony fingers around my throat, and I was gasping for breath and grasping for a handhold. But I was sinking fast and there didn't seem to be any way I could reach the surface.

Traffic passed by in a blur, with trees, houses, and people morphing into a blob of ill-defined color. Quick breaths insufficiently filled my lungs, and I knew I was hyperventilating. Tried to talk myself into some level of calmness, but it evaded me. Took all my mental effort not to pass out onto the steering wheel and veer into oncoming traffic. Maybe I should have just let that happen.

Pulled into the driveway and prayed Bethany's car was in the garage, that she was already home. Time at Pundit had evaporated before my eyes. It wasn't just the initial conversation with Investigator Wheatley. It was what happened after. I felt a pain in my chest when I thought about it.

I barged through the door and ran up the hallway. At the end, Bethany peered around the corner, the glow of the room behind casting her face in shadow.

“You in a rush?” she quipped.

“Is Boy here?” I gasped.

“Of course,” she said as I ran to her.

In the next room, Boy was sitting at the dining table engrossed in his homework.

“Where else would he be?” she said. She placed her hands on my heaving shoulders.

“Is everything okay?”

I breathed in. My eyes welled up. “No,” I breathed. “Nothing is alright.”

“What’s going on?”

I exchanged glances between Boy and Bethany. “I need to tell you something, and there isn’t much time.”

I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the study, closing the behind us.

“I lied to you,” I said, gripping her shoulders.

“What do you mean?”

“Something happened a long time ago. I said I’d never lie to you, and I have. I’ve lied to everyone.”

“Em, you aren’t making any sense. Just calm down and we can talk about it.”

“That’s the thing, there isn’t much time. Time until…” I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Time until what?”

“I… I can’t say it. I can’t change it. I can’t use my position to get us out of it. I don’t know what to do.”

“Em, you’re scaring me. Tell me and I’m sure we can find a way out of this, whatever this is.”

Bethany sat on the couch and wrung her hands together. I shook my head. “Not this time.”

“What happened today?” she pleaded. “Tell me.”

But I didn't tell her what happened that day, not yet anyhow.

“Do you remember the officer's name?” Wheatley asked.

“It was a long time ag,” Michael said. “I'm sure he said it, but I can't remember.”

“What about a picture? If I showed you three pictures, do you think you could pick the officer out?”

Michael nodded and shrugged at the same time, and it looked like a shiver ran his spine. The bizarre dance moves projected doubt and uncertainty. A tell.

I pointed to the screen. “Did you see that?” I asked Wheatley.

“Just watch the recording, Special Agent,” he replied. “I'll share my thoughts afterwards.”

The Investigator removed three photos from his file and laid them out on the table. The camera resolution was insufficient for me to determine whose faces were on the photos, but I was sure one of them was mine.

After some moments perusing the images in silence, Michael looked up.

“He's not here.”

“Are you sure?” Wheatley pressed.

“It was a long time ago.”

Wheatley pushed no further and calmly collected the images. But as he collected them, another photo flew out of his file. It floated across the table towards Michael. The reaction was sudden. Michael thrust a finger down on the photo.

“That's him,” he announced. “I didn't think I'd remember, but that's him.”

Wheatley let the accusation hang in the air, before collecting the last photo. He didn't push or shove or dig or plant. Merely ordered the papers in the file, closed the cover, and cupped his hands on top.

"Tell me about the specific location the officer drove you to."

Michael shook his head.

"You walked most of the way," Wheatley continued. "Surely you can point to it on a map."

"It was a long time ago, okay? Besides, granddad carried me most of the way. I remember that. I remember a lot of things about that day, but I didn't know where we were going... specifically."

"Were you going to Laferty Bridge?"

Michael looked up to Lennox, who slowly nodded in reply. The boy turned to face Wheatley. The look said it all, because that was all it took.

"Granddad kept saying that it wouldn't be long until we got there." Michael laughed. "He said it the whole damn way. Around every corner. Over every hill. Guess he thought it would calm me down or something."

"Did it?"

"Did it what?"

"Calm you down?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't know what the hell was going on."

Wheatley paused and smirked, that half-smile a thousand different people could interpret a thousand different ways.

"What happened when you got there?"

"The officer and granddad went into the woods."

"Was anything said before they went?"

Another shrug. "It was a long time ago."

"I thought you said you remember a lot of things about that day."

"The important things," Michael replied. "I don't remember what I had for breakfast, but I remember the smell of grandad's aftershave. Shit like that. Important shit."

Wheatley drew a breath. "And then what happened?"

"They were gone for a while, so I went to see where they were."

"You said you sat in the back of the cruiser."

"I was. Me and grandad both were."

"Michael, you can't open the back cruiser doors from the inside."

Exactly! He was lying. I knew it. Wherever he was going with this, was also a lie.

Wheatley would see that. Michael's statement to date would prove a problem for me, but I could explain it away. It wouldn't be hard to come up with something to cover my tracks, to keep the truth hidden.

"I'm sure you're right," Michael said. "But the door wasn't locked. It wasn't even closed."

The television immediately turned into a blur as I focused on the wall behind it. I had shut that door. I remember. Or did I? Facts washed with fantasy as I tried to trace my steps that day. I opened the door for John to get out. Then I closed the door. Or I didn't and followed John into the trees. But I looked back and saw the boy's face against the glass. Was it against the glass? Or was it just through the open door? Shit. I was in such a haze that day.

"I see," Wheatley remarked. "Carry on."

"The closer I got to the tree line, the more I could hear voices. The officer and my grandad."

"What were they talking about?"

Michael shrugged. "Couldn't tell, but it quickly turned into an argument."

“How can you be so sure?”

“I crept up and hid behind a tree. They were both shouting at each other. Grandad wanted to leave but the officer wouldn’t let him go. He blamed my grandad for something.”

“Then what happened?”

“They struggled and fell into the gully out of sight.”

“Carry on.”

“Then I heard it,” Michael said.

“Heard what?”

We sat silently in the rumbling chassis, taking in the view of the trees. John Berry and his grandson sat in the back seat. The boy had remained silent during the entire episode.

“Where’s the bridge?” I asked, peering through the window.

“It’s out there,” John said. “Beyond the tree line, hidden by nature.”

“And then what? What happens after you cross?”

“I’m... I’m not sure. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone coming back to tell anyone else where to go or what to do. But I know it’s out there. It has to be out there. It’s our only hope.”

Pursed my lips. “Best you be on your way. Remember, this never happened. We never met each other, okay?”

He nodded slowly. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Never come back. And look after Boy... Michael. I hope he has the life you are searching for.”

He thrust a hand between the seats. “Thank you,” he said. “I didn’t catch your name?”

I took his hand.

“Barnes,” I said. “Emerson Barnes.”

“Barnes?” His brow furrowed. Deep in thought. A million neurons firing. Seemed to be placing the name as much as I was trying to place his. “I knew a Barnes once.”

With our hands clasped together, everything fell into place. Whatever my brain was doing, it had found the connection.

“I tell you what John,” I said. “How about we go and check the area and make sure this is the right place.”

He pulled away. “What do you mean?”

“Well, after all this, after everything I’ve done for you and Boy, it would be a disaster if this wasn’t the right place and another unit picked you up. I can’t have that as much as you can. They’d take your statement and then come after me.”

“I wouldn’t say a word about you, honest.”

I shrugged. “But still. They’d try all their techniques and get you to slip up, they’d apply all sorts of pressure. You’d give me up in a heartbeat if it meant protecting Boy here, wouldn’t you?”

We both looked at the silent tiny figure, wedged into the corner of the backseat.

“I can’t have that, John. I can’t take that chance. I’m doing this for you, remember? I could’ve taken you in, plain and simple. Yet, here we are.”

He mulled it over. “Fair enough,” he said. “And when you see the bridge, you can be on your way.”

“Of course.”

I got out, my shoes crunching gravel under my weight. Opened the back door and waited. John slid over, pulling Boy with him.

When he got out, I said, “No, just you for now, until I know it’s safe. Then we’ll come back for the boy.”

He looked down at Boy then back to me. Opened his mouth to talk.

“No,” I said. “That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

“I didn’t come all this way to leave him in the back of a squad car.”

“You didn’t come all this way for me to take you to the station. I’m giving you your freedom, everything you want. Just show me where it is, and I can make sure it’s okay.”

He relented in the end, leaning down and telling Boy to stay put while we checked it out. As we walked off into trees, I turned to see Boy’s face pressed against the glass, peering at us with big brown eyes.

Foliage broke under foot as I followed John between the trees and through a veil of vines and low-hanging branches. He was right, you wouldn’t find it unless you were looking for it. My heart beat a little faster with every step. Laferty Bridge was something I had heard about and even spoken about, for a great many years, yet that was the first time I was seeing it. Rumor and folklore solidified before my eyes as if the good lord himself floated down from the heavens.

We stopped at the ridge and looked down. The path sloped away into the gulley and wound around trees before disappearing into the distance. The ground was full of leaves, rocks, and branches, but the path was true, that’s for sure.

“God damn,” I breathed. “It’s real.”

“It’s real alright,” John said. “Now you’ve seen it, let’s go back and get Boy and we’ll get out of here.”

“Just a minute,” I said.

John looked up through the trees. “Light’s getting low. Don’t know how far we can make it before it gets too dark to see. And flashlight or not, it’s going to be tough for the young lad to bustle over uneven ground, even in broad daylight.”

He turned to walk past me, but I put a hand on his chest.

“Berry. John Berry. I didn’t recognize it at first. But then, all at once, it came to me.”

“However, you know me, I’m sure it’s in the past, where it should stay. There’s nothing for either of us back there.”

“You knew my father,” I continued. “Barnes.”

“I told you I did,” he said. “I also said there’s no point delving into the past.”

“You told him about Laferty Bridge. You told him about coming here.”

“I don’t remember. That was a long time ago. A lifetime ago.”

“Yes, it was. This is where we were coming to,” I said. “The night we ran.”

“What... what happened?” I could tell he didn’t really want to ask the question. Maybe it was morbid curiosity. He couldn’t help himself.

“They came for us. They killed him.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that. The Barnes I have in my mind was a good man. Respected. Did his best to keep his family together. If he ran, he must have had his reasons. That’s got nothing to do with me.”

“It’s got everything to do with you,” I said.

“I’d really just rather move on,” he said, chewing his lip. “We can’t be out here talking like this.”

“We ran because you told him about the bridge. He died because you told the Authorities about it.”

He shook his head vigorously. “No. That’s not true at all. I told him about the bridge, that’s for sure, but I never said anything to anybody.”

“They knew. They came for us. We didn’t stand a chance. And it’s all your fault.”

“I told you, it wasn’t me. I didn’t say anything.”

“They got to you, didn’t they? They pressured you until you told them about Father. He had a target on him from that moment.” I pointed at him. “And that was all you.”

“If they got to me, they would have re-educated me. I would have forgotten everything. And if they did that, how would I know about the bridge?”

“Maybe someone else told you. Maybe the memory came back.”

“The memories don’t come back. You know that. Everybody knows that.”

“You think I can’t go back and get your profile over the airwaves?”

“Shit. You want to waste your time, be my guest.”

“You did it. I know you did it. You ruined my family.”

I pulled out my gun. Then John moved. A lot quicker than I thought he could. He threw himself at me and we crashed to the ground. Gravity took hold and rolled into the gully. We came to rest amid tall grass and sticks and rocks as a tangled mess of arms and legs. Hands on the gun, struggling for possession, fighting for dominance. Barrel shifted towards me. Age took none of his strength. But I had the stamina and the memories to drive me. Turned it back towards him. The look in his eyes showcased his waning effort, the inevitable, like a train barreling down the tracks.

“I’m sorry,” he grimaced, teeth bared.

Unable to be part of the arm wrestle any longer, he relinquished his grip, and I fell forward. I squeezed his neck to right myself. He gurgled and gasped.

“They threatened me,” he wheezed. “They were going to take my kids away. There was nothing I could do. It was them or your father. It wasn’t a choice.”

No turning back. I had gone too far. I stared into his eyes. Grit my teeth and pushed the gun into his neck. Silence. Not a single bird in the trees. Not a subtle swing of a tree

branch in a breeze. *Could I do this? Could I really do this?* I was stuck in the brains revolving door, unable to think before or beyond that moment.

Sudden movement.

A groan.

A gunshot echoed around us. Shuddered the trees and trembled the earth.

I stayed there for a moment. My hands on the gun. John's hands around mine. Didn't know how it went off. Eventually, his hands slipped from mine, and I sat back on my knees and looked down at him.

Blood gushed from the scorched hole in his chin. Wide eyes searched for help in the tree canopy. No help was coming. Not from me, not from anyone. John Berry was well and truly dead.

I looked up. Branches snaked out across the deep blue canvas. Loop closed. Nothing more to say, nothing more to do. I got to my feet and brushed debris from my clothing. Blood splatter covered my hands, and I wiped them on my pants. Dragged the body to a fallen log and tossed some loose sticks and leaves towards the cadaver. It wasn't a proper burial, but he got what he deserved. Every last bit of it.

With the light fading into a mottled gray, I trudged up the bank of the gully. Turned to the other side of the gully and wondered what was out there. Where were they running to? Who were they running to? Was this indeed the mysterious Laferty Bridge? The place people whispered to each other in dark corners in fear of someone overhearing them.

Curiosity got the better of me; my mind was a fire to be kindled. With light diminishing, I trod up the opposite bank and pushed my way through the growth. Trudged over uneven and unstable ground, wading through vines and branches that scratched across my numb face. Then the sky. Miniature patches at first, barely perceivable through the naturalistic tomb.

Then all at once, as I stepped out into a clearing, a cool breeze kissed my skin as I breathed in the pure air. Smelt different, tasted different. Felt different, like a burden that had weighed me down for so long had left my shoulders. All thoughts of Mother and Father, of the corpse of John Berry, even my wife, sad to say, disintegrated with new unanswered questions and exhilarating possibilities.

But then there was nothing. The landscape of nothingness pushed hard against the horizon until I couldn't tell where one started and the other began. Feelings subsided until my shoulders weighed as heavy as they ever had. My rose-colored view of my surroundings morphed into blobs of gray. Whatever distinct smells infected my nose were forgotten, short-lived in memory. There was no path to a better world, no savior to meet me, no replies to my yearning in inquiry.

With disappointment washing through me, I dropped my shoulders and turned, and marched back to the car. Waded through the scrub until I reached the gully. I didn't feel bad for what I had done, didn't care what other lives may have been impacted by those actions. As I thrust my chest out, I felt untouchable. Either I was above the law or John was outside if. Either way, no one would ever know. No one would find the body and there were no witnesses. Perfect.

The car looked empty as I approached, and it wasn't until I peered into the back seat, I saw Michael curled up into a ball and once more wedged into the corner against the far door. I eased into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut, letting the silence hang in the air. Looking up, I peered at the small dark figure in the back seat.

"Hey kid," I said.

Nothing. No response. No movement. Like he was holding his breath.

"Boy!"

Still nothing. Contemplated what to say. Decided to play as close to the truth as possible. That's what I'd put in my report. No point distorting the facts too far from the truth. The last thing I needed was to get caught out on an insignificant detail because I couldn't keep the story straight.

"Your grandfather. He's not coming back."

A subtle shift in the rear compartment.

"He tried to run. I had to... take care of him. Sorry, Boy."

Still nothing.

"I'll take you to the station."

I fired up the cruiser, spun it around, and headed towards the distant city lights.

"Then the officer shot my granddad."

"I see. Then what happened?"

"I ran back to the car and shut the door. Curled up in the back seat. Made myself as small as possible."

Wheatley considered Michael for a moment. Even though I was looking at a recording, I could tell by the look on his face that the cogs were turning in the investigator's mind.

"Michael, I just have one question."

He nodded.

"If they tumbled into the gully out of sight, how do you know the officer killed your grandfather?"

"Well... I know he did. He got up and walked out of there that day, not my granddad."

“I appreciate that. But you didn’t actually see what happened, did you?”

“I heard the gun go off.”

“But you didn’t see the gun go off.”

Michael looked to Lennox for support.

“Don’t look at her!” Wheatley demand, his barking voice so shrill Michael snapped his head back to the front. “She can’t help you here. Tell me. Did you actually see what happened in that gully?”

He dropped his head.

“My job here,” Wheatley said, “is to objectively peruse the facts and make a determination. I write truth, not fairytales. As painful as it may sound to you, what you think you know—whatever makes the most sense to you in your head—isn’t what I’m interested in. Now, did you actually see the gun go off?”

Michael mumbled.

“I’m sorry, Michael, you’ll need to speak up.”

“No!”

Wheatley leaned back in his chair.

The screen froze. A fuzzy line ran along the middle of the television. I looked over to Wheatley, who pointed the square remote at the screen.

I started to talk, at least, I thought I was talking. In hindsight, I was making a bunch of incoherent noises as my mouth caught up with the thousand thoughts running riot through my mind. Wheatley held up a hand.

“I think you should wait here.”

“But—.”

The investigator cocked his head. *“I said, I think you should wait here.”*

After he left, I started pacing. I always thought best when I moved. It helped me focus. Once more, as I was deep in my thoughts, the room closed in around me. I thought back to my original statement and then attempted to discredit everything I had just heard on the recording Wheatley showed me. In the end, it was a story. Meaningless words around a poorly crafted plot. I can explain everything away, as long as they never—.

The door opened, obliterating my train of thought.

“Administrator,” I breathed.

“Sit down,” she ordered.

“This whole proceeding is preposterous. It’s a joke, to tell you the truth. A fallacy. A complete waste of time. And don’t even get me started—.”

“Sit!”

I looked at her cold eyes, and at that moment, I was seven again, looking down at her from the second floor, peering through the balustrades. I did as she commanded, falling onto the chair. Once I settled, she folded her arms and spoke.

“Talk.”

I don’t believe I had ever seen her that frazzled. She had always been so composed, so in control of everything. But things were different. She looked as lost as I was.

“Where do I start? An unreliable witness. There isn’t even a body, for God’s sake. The psychologist alone has made it clear she’s out to get me. I know you remember her from the House where we first met. It’s quite clear she has implanted these fake memories into Michael’s head.”

“Are you quite finished?” she fired at me.

I wasn’t sure if I was, but I dared not speak further until instructed. I was positive I could still talk my way out of it all—Michael’s word against mine.

Her strong features fell away, and a look of relief passed over her as if she was glad she could finally let it all go. Years of stress and pressure dissolved before my eyes.

“I’m tired,” she said. “I’m exhausted of all of this.”

“All of what, exactly?”

She raised her hands and indicated to the room, then to me. “All of this. All of you.”

I didn’t know how to respond to a comment like that, so I didn’t.

“I can make this right, Administrator.”

“Really? Can you? And how do you suppose you could do that?”

I stared into her eyes, the color draining from her pupils.

“I don’t know. But I will. There’s no evidence here. No *factual evidence*. Give me fifteen minutes with them and I can —.”

“They found the body,” she interrupted.

Words caught in my mouth and the rest of my sentence fell out as single characters. Mind whirred in the silence. What did they find? What do they know? What does this all mean?

“John Berry,” she continued. “They found him.”

“I can explain.”

“Really? Because I’d like to see you try.”

I opened my mouth, but she held up her hand.

“They have decided. You are hereby relieved of all active duty from CHIRP.”

“Consider the evidence, please!”

“They have considered it, Emerson. There is indeed no physical evidence to suggest you killed John Berry, but there is enough there, enough to weigh you down to the bottom of the ocean. And to top it all off, you blatantly lied to an Investigator. And perhaps that is the most disappointing thing of all. It’s over, Emerson. It’s all over for you.”

I stood, the force of my action sending my chair slamming into the wall behind me.

“You once said my actions were a reflection on you, that whatever I did, bore your mark as well. We can work our way out of this Administrator. Don’t do this.”

“I’ve retired, Emerson, effective from one hour ago. I no longer hold that title. You no longer reflect on me or my position. There is nothing I can do for you.”

The air suddenly thinned out, and I struggled for breath. I laid my palms flat on the table as my vision distorted into gray and snapped back. “What’s going to happen?” I breathed.

“Usually, you’d be under the same direction and policy as anyone else who has lost their employ.”

“Usually?”

“You are not a usual case, Emerson. Your merit has slipped through the netting, and here you are. As much fault of the system as it is yours. But we cannot be hung up on these things. Not now. There is no point to it. The fact is you know too much. Someone in your position has immense amounts of knowledge and skill. And that makes you a liability to the systems and processes that we have in place.”

I looked up at her.

“They will take Boy Barnes immediately and allocate them to a House.”

“No,” I said.

She ignored me and moved on. “Once you have your affairs in order—a job with steady income in alignment with policy—you may reclaim the child.”

“No!” I screamed, slamming a fist on the table.

“Emerson Barnes. Do not make this worse than it already is.”

“I can’t... I can’t let you take away my son.”

She stood. Towered over me. “Boy Barnes,” she hissed. “Don’t call him *‘your son’*. You should know the rules better than anyone. Let me be very clear, Emerson. You are no longer protected by your position. You’ll do well to remember that.”

Nameless emotion collided in my chest. Guilt riddled my core.

“How long do I have?”

Bethany’s hand across my face stung like a motherfucker. I deserved it and I wanted her to do it again and again. I wanted her to break me down to nothing. Tears welled in my eyes, a mixture of what was, what is, and what was to come. Then hands on my face as she pulled me back around. I didn’t want to, but she forced me to look at her. Wet green eyes.

She looked into me, trying to find something. Then the phone rang, a piercing tone that echoed throughout the house. We both looked down to the receiver on the desk, willing each other to pick it up. In the end, I reached for it, mainly because I couldn’t stand to hear the tone anymore.

The voice on the other end was abrupt and direct in their request. I handed it out to Bethany. She looked at it suspiciously. I could see the fight in her hands, arms, and face. Wondered how long it would stay like that. She took the receiver and held it to her ear. She didn’t interrupt in any fashion, just let a tear roll down her cheek as she listened to the instructions flow through to her. After a minute, she silently returned the receiver to the cradle.

It was building. Could feel the room getting smaller. The air was thick with abhorrence. Waited for the fuse to light and then the entire powder keg would explode. This time when she looked at me, I saw the fire. Gone was the sympathy and the sorry.

When she spoke, her voice was small and considered.

“How could you do this to us? How could you do this to Boy?”

I opened my mouth to talk.

“We could have worked through this if it was just you,” she continued. “But it isn’t just you.” She stepped closer. “Everything we are, has become everything we *were* in a matter of hours.”

I tried to find some words, but it felt like a hand was wrapped around my throat.

“Everything,” she said. “Gone. Our son. Gon...” The last word was lost to trembling lips and lack of oxygen.

Closer still.

“What are we going to do?”

I grabbed her shoulders. “I can fix—.”

“Don’t you dare,” she interrupted as she shook out of my grasp. “Don’t give me some bullshit that you can fix things when you know god damn well there is nothing you can do, because if there was, we sure as fuck wouldn’t be having this conversation right the fuck now.”

“I...” I started, not knowing where that sentence was going to take me. “I... I don’t know what to do.” I pleaded with my eyes, my voice weak, and threatened to break under the circumstance.

“How long do we have?” Her words came out in gasps as if the flood gates would open at any time and then there would be no turning back, no getting everything back inside.

Three booms echoed down the hall from the front door. It was enough. She collapsed into my arms and sobbed.

The rest happened in a blur. Bethany disappeared into my chest, clutching my shirt, wet from tears, unable to watch the events unfold. A CHIRP officer spoke to us, but I didn't hear any of the words. They were the same words I had said to Mothers and Fathers in that exact situation. Eventually, they led Boy down the hall. He called out to us, and all I could do was hold Bethany tighter as they turned Boy away and out through the front door followed by an entourage of officers.

I wanted to stop them from leaving. I wanted to chase after them. But what could I do? No power, no influence. Outnumbered. No weapons. Somewhere in my head, it would have done something, showed a little of myself. But in reality, it would have made things so much worse than the utterly shitty situation we were in.

In the end, it was just us and the deafening silence. A ticking clock filled the void. Unfinished homework on the table that would never find its way back to the teacher. Toys on the floor that wouldn't be put away. They tore my heart out that day, and I had no one to blame but myself. I might as well have been the one holding the scalpel, cutting into my flesh.

I deserved this. But not Bethany. And not Har... Boy. Couldn't bring myself to even think his name. I was the one who asked John Berry to take me to the bridge. I was the one who shot and killed him. I was the one who lied to the Investigator. I thought the past was buried under time and events and situations and work and life. It was then I needed Jackson more than ever. Even though the house was full of people, I never felt more alone.

"I'll fix this," I chanted repeatedly.

My new mantra. My promise. I had sworn it to everyone but hadn't been able to back it up with anything. But this time was different. I had fucked everything up beyond belief and now it was on me to make things right and balance the ledger. They were right, I did know a

lot of things. The fact they took Boy just meant I had another hurdle to jump through, but I knew what to do about that. I knew who I needed to talk to. I knew where we needed to go.

To escape.

To run.

CHAPTER 52

I eased up outside the modest brownstone and double-checked the address. Noticed movement in the front garden and eased myself out of the driver's seat to investigate. The shining sun and clear weather at odds with my inner demons. Hours felt like weeks since CHIRP took my son and my insides were disintegrating under the hatred I had for the system, the same system I perpetrated for years. The irony wasn't lost on me and I wasn't expecting any sympathy from anybody, least of all the person I was there to see.

Approached the low brick fence.

"Funny," I said, looking up at her home. "I thought it would be bigger than this."

She turned at the sound of my voice and elongated to her full height as she wiped her hands on her blue apron. She seemed less threatening in her civilian attire, somewhat *normal* without her dark clothes and white features. Dark eyes peered at me from beneath the large sunhat.

"I was wondering when you would come knocking on my door. What do you want?"

"I want to talk, Raxiel." It felt weird calling her that, given I had never called her anything but her title. Seems that times were changing.

“We are talking, Emerson. Having a lovely conversation amongst my azaleas.”

I looked up to the gun metal blue front door. “I was thinking we could talk inside.”

“I’m right in the middle of planting my winter perennials.”

“I think they can wait.”

She chewed it over. “Very well, Emerson. I was looking to take a break, anyway. The lemonade I made this morning is chilling in the refrigerator. You have until the glass is empty.”

“Wow. Flowers. Lemonade. This isn’t what I was expecting.”

“What were you expecting? Me sitting in a cave plotting my return to the CHIRP heights?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Not everything is as it seems, Emerson. And by the way, it’s modest, not small.”

The interior looked like a professional decorated it in a manner that I was sure echoed her former office. I sat in the sitting room that overlooked the front garden and waited. A steady stream of sunlight flooded the room, giving a sense of space that betrayed the external dimensions. Honey and lemon scents wafted through the space, adding to the sensory calamity.

Raxiel potted back into the sitting room at a pace befitting someone easing into retirement. She had forgone her gardening apron yet maintained a light blue cotton long sleeve button-up. She sat a plate of three lemon squares on the glass and aluminum coffee table and perched herself on the edge of a leather armchair. Sighed as she sipped her lemonade.

“You know, when you invited me in for freshly squeezed, homemade lemonade, I thought you might have actually offered me some.”

“Just to be clear, Emerson, I never offered to give you any of my lemonade. Merely stated I had made some.”

“I thought it was implied.”

“And if I gave you a glass, would you drink it?”

Leveled my gaze. “No, probably not.”

She snorted and took another sip. “I know more about you than you realize, Emerson. But I should say my previous statement about the length of this conversation is accurate. That wasn’t implied, in any way shape, or form.”

I shifted in my seat.

“Well,” she said, taking a sip. “The lemonade is disappearing.”

“This is how you spend your time? Gardening and baking?”

“What would you have me do? Scheming and conspiring?”

“Of course not. Don’t you have a husband to boss around? Or family to dote over?” I realized as I asked that question that I knew nothing about her. She played her cards closer to her chest than I bothered to try and read them.

Another sip. “I never had children, never had the time to. You know what we do. And to be perfectly frank, I never had the stomach for it. You, Emerson, sorry to say, are the closest thing I ever had to a child, heavens forbid.”

Shifted in my seat again, still stinging from her blunt reply.

“Now,” she continued. “You didn’t come here to talk about my daily routine. Ask me the question.”

“Fine.” I took a deep breath. Didn’t know when the next one was coming. “I want to know where my son is.”

“You know very well where *Boy Barnes* is.”

I clenched my jaw at her response, mainly at myself for letting my guard down so rapidly. Son was something to call the authorities over, to warrant closer examination into potentially unacceptable behaviors. Even though she didn't wear her CHIRP uniform sporting her rank, didn't mean I could let my tongue flap so unduly.

“I mean specifically,” I said quickly. “Which room is he in?”

She sat back in the chair, crossing her long legs. “Why do you want to know that? What good would it do you?”

“Leave that to me.”

“Let me give you some advice, Emerson.” Narrowed vision. “Leave it alone. Follow the rules, follow the process. It's there to protect the child.”

“And what chances does someone like me have of realigning myself?”

She shrugged. “That is not my concern.” Paused, as if to contemplate her words. “Not anymore.”

“Tell me where my son is,” I said, my voice lifting.

“Why do you think I would?”

I slammed my hand down on the coffee table. “Because you owe me!”

She shook her head. “Excuse me?” She sat forward, once more perched on the edge of her seat. “*I owe you?*”

“You took everything from me!”

“*I owe you?*” she repeated. “Whatever happened, Emerson, you did to yourself. For years, I supported your rise through CHIRP from my vantage point. Stuck my neck out time and time again, from boarding house to Inspector's office. Now, look at what I've become. *I owe you?* You have destroyed my life's work. If anything... if anything at all, you owe me. The sooner you come to terms with all of that, the better off you'll be.”

She drank down the rest of the lemonade while keeping a beady eye on me. Placed the empty glass on the table. “I see our conversation is done.”

“I’m not leaving until you give me what I came for.”

Raxiel stood, and I immediately followed her lead.

“I didn’t stutter, Emerson. And I don’t mince my words.”

“Tell me where he is.”

We stared at each other, the coffee table separating us.

“I’ve got nothing more to say to you,” she reaffirmed. “This conversation is over.”

She reached down to pick up the plate from the table. I grasped her wrist.

“You’d best remove your hand from me.”

She was right. I wasn’t thinking straight, but the goal too close, and I had gone too far to retreat.

“I’m not leaving without the information.”

Raxiel yanked her arm away. The ripping sound tore through the house and was as shocking and sudden as her movement. And then I saw it. It was a flash, yet it seemed to hold before my eyes as if time stood still. She pulled away, quickly covering the exposed skin at her shoulder. Our eyes locked, and I shuffled back.

“You,” I said. Every conversation, every interaction, flashed before my eyes. Pieces of the puzzle like snowflakes. By themselves entirely meaningless. But put together they formed quite the image. However, it was the marking I just saw that was the catalyst.

“You’re the White Witch,” I mumbled, trying to come to terms with the revelation.

“But... why?”

Raxiel initially turned sheepishly away and ran a thumb over the white tattoo: An anatomical view of a moth sporting immense detail over its spread wings. Slender antennae

encased a half-moon. She seemed to be in a trance, but then she blinked, squared her stance, and elongated her spine. I had never felt smaller in her presence.

“For the same reason you have sought to bring down The Push,” she announced in a stoic tone, almost as if she had prepared that statement for a very long time. I imagined her standing in front of the mirror saying it to herself as she dressed each morning.

“But your whole life is about executing the will of the law. CHIRP Law.”

“There is no better way to work through and against a system than from within it.”

“To bring it down,” I clarified.

“I’m not trying to bring the government down, doing so would be moot. Maybe at one point, long ago, it would have been possible, but not now. The machine is simply too big and ghastly to do it damage. It controls too much and reaches too far. There is no stopping it or reeling it back in.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“Did you ever wonder why The Push was so difficult to stop? So ungainly, you couldn’t wrap your mind or hands around? We weren’t just one step ahead; we were a hundred. We haven’t survived all these years because we were careful, we made it because of my position.”

“But you pushed me to investigate.”

She smirked. “The more everyone thought an ominous figure lurking in the shadows was pulling the strings, the less anyone would suspect someone like me. And I needed someone I could trust; someone I could control.”

I collapsed into the couch. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I needed to be sure.”

“Sure about what?”

“That you could do what needs to be done,” she fired back.

“Why me?”

“I was training you, Emerson.”

“Training me for what?”

“To take over from me,” she said. “I thought someone with your mixture of nature and nurture was enough to sympathize with The Push and what we’re trying to achieve. It seemed like you did.”

“I do,” I stated, shaking my head. “I do. I just don’t understand all those meetings, all the reports you signed off on.”

We stared at each other, let the silence eat at us.

“What about the prisoner? The one you sent to the Pit?” I asked.

“I’ve sent hundreds to The Pit!”

“You sent people to their deaths!”

“I did what I needed to do. I couldn’t risk it. One life to save many, many more. An adult life for the lives of children. It was the right thing to do. Tell me you understand this.”

My head swirled and I couldn’t form a complete sentence. The room turned on several axes simultaneously and I thought I was going to puke on the rug. I gripped the armrest.

“The Push is bigger than any one of us, Emerson. A few more years and you could have chosen your posting, and then you could have taken over as I took over from my predecessor.”

Eyes narrowed to slits.

“But you’ve ruined that. It took me decades to achieve my status, to become a trusted party. Hell, I ran my own Franchise! But then I drowned in your wake.”

I didn’t know where to look. Couldn’t bring myself to look at her, to face the guilt of my actions.

“What’s going to happen now?”

“To you?”

“To The Push,” I said.

She chewed the inside of her cheek. “I’m not sure.”

“Let me help,” I said.

“It’s a dangerous game,” she crooned.

“You said you saw something in me. I want to live up to that. Whatever expectations you have of me, I can meet them. I’ll live and breathe The Push’s mission.”

“But?” she asked.

“But first I need my son. And I need to get my wife and him out. Help me get them out.”

Raxiel thought about it for a long time. Shadows shifted on the floor, illuminating dust as it hung in the air. Eventually she sighed

“If I do this, then you are mine. You will do what I say, when I say it. You will be a pawn at my beck and call. These are the terms. Understand?”

I signaled my compliance with a hasty nod. There was no hesitation or negotiation. It was about getting my family to safety, away from everything that stopped us being together. I would do whatever it took, and the walls that stood in my way would either be skirted or destroyed.

She smirked, like she had won something over me, and extract a small piece of paper from her breast pocket with two long slender fingers.

I exchanged glances between her and the paper. “What’s that?”

“This is what you came here for.”

I stood and snatched it away from her and hurriedly unfolded it. A string of four characters had been etched by hand in blue ink. B047.

“B block? I was in B block.”

“Yes, I know. I thought that would make things... easier for you.”

I held up the piece of paper. “You had it the whole time?”

“I knew you’d come around here asking for it, eventually. I’ve been carrying that in my pocket ever since they entered your boy into the system. Besides, never enter a house without knowing where the back door is. That slip of paper and the contents on it buys your loyalty.”

“How’d you get it? I would have thought your access would have been revoked as quickly as mine.”

“I still have contacts. I still hold sway, even without the uniform. Just not as much as I used to. Things from here are going to be slower. Harder.”

I stuffed the scrap of paper in my pocket. “When I get him, I need to know...”

She held up a hand. “I have nothing else for you.”

I stepped around the coffee table. “You can’t give me half the information.”

She met me in the middle. “I’ve given you everything,” she seethed, thrusting a finger into my chest.

I smacked it away. “Where is Laferty Bridge?” I hushed.

“I can’t tell you!”

I launched at her, wrapped my hands around her neck, and we fell back onto the couch.

“Tell me where it is!” I screamed.

She gurgled yet didn’t fight against me.

“I. Can’t. Tell. You.”

I squeezed and pushed my face into hers.

“Tell me!”

Wheezed reply. I slowly released my grip. “Say that again.”

She coughed. Swallowed. “I can’t tell you because I don’t know.”

I stood back. “You’re the White Witch. You *are* The Push. How the fuck can you not know where the bridge is?!”

She eased herself up onto the seat. Slowly ran a hand over the red marks. “The further the dots, the harder it is to draw a straight line.”

“Christ!” I yelped as I turned away. “Enough of the fucking riddles.”

She scoffed. Leveled her gaze at me. “The more we spread the inner workings, the less likely CHIRP is to find out about the operation. Different people know different things, but no one knows *everything*.”

“But what if one of you are compromised? Doesn’t that destroy the entire machine?”

“We have redundancy. Backups on top of backups.”

I knelt before her like I was paying homage to a religious figure. “Tell me who I need to speak to. Who can tell me where I need to go to escape this place?”

“I’ve got a feeling you know exactly who you need to talk to. But it will not be easy.”

CHAPTER 53

I saw them. I saw them all, and they did not know I would be there. I knew their plan, where they would be, and what they were going to do. I knew all of that because it was *my* plan. The one I had crafted in my office as I stared at the string spiderweb that tied people to factions to places to events. But they didn't see me. Never saw me coming.

Sylvia Hartland, the person I had been fixated on for several years, was predictable if anything. It was Tuesday, which meant she had found her way into the butcher's shop on Main Street at two in the afternoon. The forecast advice was incredibly accurate, as it always was, and somehow mirrored my mood. A light shower slicked the roads, giving them a sheen that reflected the low buildings and lampposts. Small puddles formed in the alley where I waited, encasing me with a wet concrete smell.

I played her movements out in my mind, and where the officers were standing. Two were in the shop, staring at the cuts on offer. In their periphery vision, they would have noted Hartland pass some banknotes to the butcher, among which, would be a folded piece of paper with an encoded message. They wouldn't solve that message, because no one had ever cracked the sequence.

An officer across the street tying his shoelace would have observed Hartland casually stroll up the street and around the corner. Hartland would look both ways before skipping over the road to reach the alleyway. Shortly after she disappeared from his vantage point, he would have radioed the others to expect her arrival at the other end.

The homeless man in the alleyway would have paid enough attention to the passerby, but not so much that it drew Hartland's consideration. A shake of tin, some mumbled words, and a sprayed stench would be enough to complete the ruse for anyone without a scrutinous eye.

An officer standing by the rail station stairs selling newspapers would keep an eye out for her. When she emerged from the alley, he'd strike up a conversation with a customer (also an officer) talking about the weather. They'd appear to not take any notice of her as she descended into the tunnel.

And that is where a squad would wait for her. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. They would arrest her and interrogate her fully until she either coughed up all her secrets or died during proceedings. Sometimes I wondered if certain people cared which one it was. It was a win either way for them. Either they obtained invaluable information, or the person organizing dissent would be out of the picture. Fools. All of them.

Unfortunately for them, she wouldn't make it out of the alley. I'd see to that.

Heels clicking over rough bitumen put me on notice. When her shadow encroached on my hiding place I darted out. Pushing a hand over her mouth and thrusting a gun into her ribs, I pulled her out of sight. I pushed against a wall and warned her to be quiet.

"If you don't want to be arrested, you'll come with me."

"Who are you?" Hartland hushed back. "What do you want?"

"Who? It doesn't matter who I am. But what do I want? You know something I need to know. And you're going to tell me."

Eliminating further conversation, I pushed her through a heavy door and down some concrete steps. We burst out into a sparse parking garage where a fine layer of dust coated every surface. Musky odors greeted us with open arms. A dripping noise originated from somewhere in the silence. Vehicles scattered the area, relics from another era. Some were covered in dusty sheets, others decaying with time. My car, parked near the door we just emerged from, stood out from the monotone canvas and looked like I had traveled back in time.

I threw my keys to her. “Get in and start driving. And hurry, we haven’t got much time. They would know something has happened to you, and that’s going to drive them fucking crazy. They’re going to be all over that alley in a few minutes, and it won’t be long after that they head in here.”

Keeping the gun on her, I slid into the passenger seat.

“What do you want from me?”

I scanned the empty parking lot through the windscreen. “I’ll let you know when we get there.”

“Very well,” she said, eyeing me. “Where are we going?”

“I’ll direct you.”

The train rocketed over the tracks overhead, sending a methodical clacking into the car. Eventually, peace returned. I looked out over the brown river. A foul wind pushed around us, kicking up the dirt we had eased onto a few minutes before.

“Mind if I smoke?” Hartland asked.

“Crank the window,” I replied.

She extracted a polished tin from her handbag, drew a cigarette, and lit it with a silver lighter. Both metallic items were engraved with swirls, making the pattern intricate and infinite. She drew a deep breath and pushed her mouth to the open window to release. The smoke caught in the blast and disintegrated.

“Are we waiting for something?” she asked.

“Listening for sirens.”

“Are you expecting sirens?”

“To be honest, I don’t know what to expect.”

Minutes of silence passed, save for Hartland’s irregular sucking and dispelling of smoke.

“My meat is going to spoil,” Hartland said to break the quiet.

I shifted in my seat and reset the gun against my leg. “I want to know where Laferty Bridge is.”

If the request shocked her, she didn’t show it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied in a nonchalant tone.

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Hartland smirked. “You certainly have gone to a lot of trouble just to ask me a question.”

I turned to face her. “I’ve gone to a lot of trouble to find answers.”

“Talking about something like the bridge can get someone into a lot of trouble with the authorities.”

“I *was* an authority.”

“Was?”

“Inspector.”

“Ex- Inspector, I’m assuming? I’m surprised they left you alive to tell the tale.”

I pursed my lips.

“How do I know this isn’t some kind of ruse to entrap me?”

“Ruse? You think CHIRP would either sink this low or be this enterprising?”

“Exactly!”

The trunk lid creaked open, and we looked inside. The man held bound hands in front of his pleading eyes. Silver tape wrapped around his head covering his mouth. Moaned incomprehensible noises, although I was sure he was pleading for his life.

“You have, what looks like, a homeless man in your trunk,” Hartland said.

“That,” I said, “is a CHIRP officer.”

“If you say so,” she said, folding her arms. “What’s he doing in there?”

“When you were in the butcher’s earlier delivering your message, did you notice the two customers?”

“Not particularly. I was focused on other things. What about them?”

“Or the man across the street from the entrance perpetually tying his shoe?”

“What are you saying?”

“Hartland, if it wasn’t for me, they would have locked you away in a windowless room by now, and the interrogators would have already gone to work on your body and your mind. Trust me, they wouldn’t waste any time getting you to talk.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because you, Sylvia Hartland, are *my* operation... before they kicked me out. So, this isn’t a ruse, Hartland. This isn’t trickery. This is desperation.”

It was warmer in the car. The viaduct acted like a wind tunnel that forced explosive gusts to rock the cabin. Another train rocketed by overhead, this time in the opposite direction.

“What did you do?” Hartland asked, peering through the crack at the top of the window. Gusts howled past.

I looked at her and then out to the river. “That isn’t a concern of yours. I just need to know where Laferty Bridge is.”

“You can’t keep him alive.”

“That isn’t a concern of yours.”

“Everything is a concern of mine, especially now you have implicated me in his capture.”

I rested the gun against my leg. “If it makes you feel better, I wasn’t planning on letting him go. Now, hurry up and get to it.”

“Very well. There is a place out past Brennan.”

I placed the barrel against her head, and she stopped immediately.

“There isn’t anything out there.”

She turned to the front, the gun still against her temple.

“Near the House in the middle of the city, there is a signpost that holds no directions.”

I cocked the weapon.

Grit and bared my teeth. “There is nothing there.”

“Killing me won’t help you.”

“Raxiel said you knew something.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“White Witch.”

She held her breath. “You shouldn’t have told me their name. What happens if—?”

“They took my son,” I said.

“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to get him back. And then I’m going to run.”

Hartland turned as she reached up and gently lowered the gun. “I can’t tell you where it is.”

I pushed the gun against her temple once more. “I’m tired of these games.”

“I don’t know where it is,” she said, the words hurrying to get out of her mouth. “The more people involved—.”

“The less everyone knows,” I finished. “But if you don’t know, you’re no good to me.”

I cocked the gun.

“I may not know,” she said, turning to look at me. Eyes large on either side of the barrel. “But I know someone you can talk to.”

After dropping Hartland off at a random location, I drove out to where nature assumed the dominant position in the panorama. The road ended abruptly, with large roots cracking the bitumen and larger trees acting like massive, natural bollards. I scanned the area. Everything looked wet and lush, and I figured it was an excellent place to stash a body, even if it was for a few days. That was all I needed. He’d be hungry and thirsty when his colleagues found him—maybe even a little delirious—but alive non-the-less.

My serenity was interrupted by a constant thud coming from the trunk. When I shut my door, the banging stopped, and I wondered if he was still alive. He should be, but stranger things have happened. Didn’t matter if he was. It would have saved me from doing it.

Popped the trunk. The lid came up at me and struck my chin. I turned away with a barrage of swear words. Behind me, I heard fast-paced gravelly footfalls, followed by nothing

and then a squelch, like throwing a rotten apple against a brick wall. I pulled my gun and trained it down the road, but he wasn't there.

Then I realized I couldn't hear any more footsteps. Looked the other way, into the dense forest.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," I taunted.

Repositioned myself around the big oak in the middle of the road. I saw their shoes first, then their legs. I kept edging sideways, gun at the ready. Then I saw him, his head impaled on a broken trunk, his face a mess of bark and blood. He wasn't moving, in any way, shape, or form. He must have slipped on the wet undergrowth and fate guided him to his ugly end.

The CHIRP officer's death was one less thing I needed to take care of, and I quietly thanked him for that. The lines between black and white had blurred significantly in the past twenty-four hours, to the point I was willing to kill someone who got in my way. Killing someone wasn't new to me, but it did make me wonder what else I was capable of.

CHAPTER 54

I placed my shoulder against the heavy wooden door and pushed, casting a long shadow over the cobblestone floor and wooden pews that filled the gloomy space. Musky scents of innocence and sin washed around me, and I somehow felt right at home. The interior was empty, as I expected from an unpopular vessel for people to receive their faith. The overwhelming swing to the government as their savior was as strong as the belief they held in the government doing the right things for the right reasons. If the information Hartland gave me was correct, I could find someone here who could show me the way out.

Watching them escort my son away from me was the final straw. I just couldn't be there anymore, under their laws, playing by their rules. Running finally made sense to me, and I hated that it took me so long to realize it. All the families I had a hand in breaking apart, all the pain I caused, I hoped they could all forgive me.

Sliding through the gap, I let the big door close behind me with a resounding boom, and with it, the daylight that fought its way through ominous clouds. It felt like the reckoning was upon us, and there seemed little sense in fighting it. At least I was in the right place if judgment day in fact sounded its trumpets.

I ambled into the nave and up the aisle, searching the obscurities for any signs of life. A face. A pair of eyes. Someone or something that could help. Ran a finger along the edge of a pew, heaping dust into a pile. Disused bibles sat idle at random intervals; their covers sealed against the pages. I reached for one.

“Can I help you?”

I stepped back, the voice suddenly breaking through my thoughts sent my heart into temporary overdrive. A small woman standing not three feet away, dressed in her distinctive habit and veil, had materialized into her position. Her eyes were dark yet features held some kind of comfort rarely seen.

“I was just...”

“They say,” she continued, her hands deep in the opposite sleeve, “that within the covers of the Bible are the answers for all problems men face.”

I steadied myself. “I doubt the Bible could give me such comfort, Sister.”

“Perhaps there is someone here who can give you the comfort you desire, young man.”

I stepped toward her. “I need to speak with Father Barlowe.”

Her face changed, a momentary divulgence of emotion, before returning to her welcoming smile. “Unfortunately, Father Barlowe is not available at the moment. He’s out running errands.” She searched the floor for the answers. “We have Father Katz, or Brother Yarrow, if that suits you.”

“It does not, Sister. If Father Barlowe isn’t available, I shall wait for him to be so.”

“It might be some time before he will be here.”

I idled into the pew and sat, the wooden bench groaning at my presence. “Sister, time is a luxury I don’t have. And if Father Barlowe doesn’t present himself in good time, I shall tear this place down, brick by brick, crucifix by crucifix, until I find him.”

She made the sign of the cross over herself. “Please Sir, this is a house of peace, one of God. I am sure there is another who could aid in your request.”

I placed my elbows on the back, desecrating their instruments with my nonchalant actions. “Father Barlowe is the one I was told to see. Best you stop arguing with me and bring him to me.”

She nodded and left; her footsteps barely perceptible. I looked up to the mammoth cross front and center that reached up to the vault, into the closed eyes of the molded Jesus nailed to it. In that moment, I wished I had faith, jealous of those who did. A certainty in something bigger that could give me the strength to know everything would work out. I could feel the weight of the promises I made to Jackson before he died, to Bethany the night they took my son, to my son in my head. Drove me deeper into the pew, made my eyelids heavy. Time surreptitiously ticked by, as the scene in front of me grew darker. The impatience evaporated and a solemn peace bathed over me. Then I slept.

I woke to the sound of a spoon clinking on a cup. Slowly opened my eyes to the warm hue of candles and the smell of saccharine tea. I sat bolt upright.

“Where am I?”

“Don’t fear. Brother Yarrow brought you to me.”

Pale eyes looked forth from a dark face, like two moons in the night sky.

“Father Barlowe?”

He sipped his tea. “I made you one. It will help rouse you.”

“My name is—.”

He held up a hand. “Please. No names. It’s best for everyone that way.”

“Is Barlowe your real name?”

He shrugged. “Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. Do you know where you are sitting right now?”

I shifted in my seat and took ownership of the saucer. Sipped as I gazed around the items in the room with us. We sat opposite each other at a small desk surrounded by stone walls and other items. Boxes with unintelligible labels lined one wall. Chairs were stacked in a corner. At the other end of the room, I could make out a piano, ladder, and concrete plaques engraved with Latin.

“The storeroom?”

He smiled. “You are where you perceive yourself to be. You think you know where you are, based on what I’ve shown you. Just like me. You know who I am based on what I’m displaying to you, what I choose to show, what I decide to tell.”

I looked around again, a second-guessed whether the man sitting opposite me, was even a member of the church. If he knew what I needed to know, then I really couldn’t have cared less.

“Now,” he continued. “I understand you are seeking my help.”

I placed the cup and saucer back onto the desk.

“I’ve spoken with...”

“No names,” he affirmed once more, a face of disgust as if the very thought was a bad odor.

I leaned back in the chair and held up my hands. “I’m sorry. I appreciate the lengths you’re going to. Shit, even respect it.” I leaned forward, placed my hands on the desk. “I’m just a normal guy, looking for a way out. My journey has brought me to you, and the information you have.”

He eyed me over, did not attempt to hide it.

“And what is the information you seek?”

“Where is Laferty Bridge? How can I escape this place?”

“You are seeking something you don’t understand.”

I shook my head. “No more riddles. No more games. I’ve had enough of them.”

“If you are seeking Laferty Bridge, you will find it past Brennan.”

I knew it. I had crossed that very bridge and seen what was on the other side.

“Or you might see it posted with a faded sign near Howards,” he continued. Then clicked his fingers. “Or maybe you could find it in the back roads of Lipton Heights. Or even locate the rickety deathtrap over Jenson’s gorge. You might climb over fences, fight your way through undergrowth, or pull yourself through holes in the ground.”

Some of those things rang true for me. Others hadn’t been on my radar.

“None of those are the right place,” I said. “Are they?”

“You are not looking for a bridge, you are looking for salvation.”

Something clicked into place. “The *bridge* doesn’t exist.”

“Did you wonder how these rumors of a bridge started circling in the first place? In the beginning, there was nothing. And then suddenly, people started talking about this mysterious bridge.”

“But, teams of people have been working on locating the bridge for years. Decades. Since before I was born.”

“A physical representation of an ideal. One so ingrained in rhetoric that people have forgotten. It wasn’t some rebellion that started this, it was the government. The same government that created the rules that destroys families is the same that leaked and exposed everyone to a myth.”

For so long, I had envisioned a physical bridge. A white framed construction with bare timber floorboards that creaked under every footstep and spanned a gully littered with natural dangers. A lie. All of it was a lie.

“But why? Why would they do that?”

“To give people something to look out for. A secret password that could identify someone as a possible anarchist. There are no greater police than the people themselves.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Then what? What am I looking for?”

A half-smile. “I’ll share that when the time is right. For now, there are things I need to understand.”

We shared a hushed conversation via candlelight, discussing details and logistics. Barlowe wrote none of it down, instead, he repeated it all back to me ad nauseam. Nearing the end of the conversation, he leaned forward.

“Our agreement is almost ratified,” he said. “Make sure you have everything in order before you arrive. Once we start, there will be no stopping or going back. No second thoughts.”

“I understand. I just need to get my son back first.”

Barlowe paused in every sense of the word like his body was set in cement. “What do you mean, exactly? Back from where?”

“They took him last night. Allocated to the House in the middle of the city.”

He regarded me with a raised eyebrow. “You know, most people run *before* their children are taken from them. What hope have you of honoring our agreement?”

“I’ll get him back.”

He scoffed and shrugged. “How? A House is harder to get into than the federal reserve.”

“I have my methods.”

Barlowe leaned back in his chair, hands clasped over his stomach. “Please. Enlighten me.”

I licked my lips, my mouth drier than a desert. “I know an entrance that is seldom used, one perhaps forgotten by others.”

“I see,” he said. “And what about the alarms? Oh, please continue. Then what?”

Blinked. “Then I make my way to his room.”

“You know the room where he is staying? I’m impressed. Coming by such information would not have been an effortless task.”

We looked at each other across the desk. A game of chicken as to who would react first. I won.

“And you are just going to stroll through the House?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“And somehow avoid all their other security? The guards. The sensors,” he pushed. “Getting in will be easier than escaping.”

“I said I had a plan.”

He let his head fall to his chest as if pondering the great mysteries of the universe. “I’m sorry. But I’m rescinding the offer of our assistance. The odds of your success are non-existent.”

“Wait. What? No!”

“It’s simply too risky. For you and for us. Obviously, you can do what you like. But taking a child from a House is like trying to steal from a casino. It just doesn’t happen. And when it does, it doesn’t end well for the person doing it. You are on a suicide mission.”

I perched on the edge of my chair. “I’ll make it. I promise.”

“How many promises have you made recently? I’m wagering quite a few. Desperate men say anything to get what they want, whether or not they mean it. We cannot risk our operation because of the wants of one man.”

“I’ll be there. You’re a man of faith, surely you can spare a little conviction for me.”

Father Barlowe laughed. "I am no more a priest than you are a rabi." He leveled his glare. "I believe in what The Push is doing, but far less confidence in someone of the likes of you."

"Please," I begged. "I have nothing else, nowhere else to go."

"Nonsense. You can stay and do what you need to do in order to get your son back from the House. It is hard, yes. But don't say you don't have an alternative. You've lived by the government rules your entire life. When this happens, then we can meet again."

"You're right. I have lived by their rules and executed their laws. But I can't be part of this anymore. I will get my son out of the House, or die trying. That's how much I believe in this."

He sat forward once more and leaned on the desk. Hunched his back and entangled his fingers. Eventually, he bit his lip and raised his head.

"We have set the day, time, and location. If you don't show, our transaction is exhausted. If anyone other than the people you have mentioned arrive, we will disappear, and you will never see us again. We do not offer second chances/ These are the things we do to ensure the longevity of the movement. Do you understand?"

I nodded. It was strangely complex and organized, beyond anything I ever imagined. For years, I pictured a simple wooden bridge that magically transported you somewhere. I was so very wrong.

"One last thing. Have you any distinguishing features? Moles? Tattoos?"

I shrugged. "No, no tattoos. What you see is what you get."

"We'll have to do better than that. Bring your hands into the light."

"Why do you want to see my hands?"

"My job is to ask; your job is to do. But if you must know, it's how your guide is going to identify you."

I perched on the edge of my chair and pushed my hands into the light. Father Barlowe took them gently and turned them over in his hands, touching and moving fingers.

“Very good,” he said and laid them flat on the table. “Your left hand. See that soft squishy bit beneath your thumb? Put it in your mouth.”

I dared not question his methods, accepting the fact I had no control in the conversation, and put the webbing in my mouth. Moving quicker than I thought he was capable, he picked up a piece of wood and smashed it down on my other hand. I howled and bit into the soft tissue. I tried to pull my hand off the desk, but he stood, adding immense pressure to a single point. I could feel the bone giving way when he released the pressure, and I yanked it back instinctively. Ran a hand over the indentation.

“Christ,” I said, spit falling from my mouth and tears welling in my eyes. “Was that necessary?”

“Everything we do is necessary. Everything has a rhyme and a reason.” He brought a candle in front of himself. “Now, go get your son.” Blew it out, and all light in the room instantly extinguished. It was then I sensed it, but it was too late. Multiple hands on me, over my mouth and under my arms, guiding me through the darkness. And then I was free of it all at once as I stumbled forward into an alleyway, the same alleyway I forced Hartland to come with me.

I splashed into a puddle as the creaking sound of metal on metal signified the locking of a thick door. Down the alley, through the buildings, I could make out the spire of the church I had entered. The magic trick was completed.

As I stumbled out of there back to my car, I couldn't help but realize how sophisticated their operation was. How CHIRP never had a chance of ever stopping The Push.

And how The Push would make a wonderful bargaining chip.

As Father Barlowe said, I needed to tip the scales in my favor. And I would do anything to get my son back.

CHAPTER 55

When I arrived home close to midnight, I found Bethany curled up in the sitting room cradling a glass with brown liquid. The room was a mess, with paper and books littering the floor. Some of the furniture had been upturned, and the radio looked like it had been taken to with a baseball bat. Bethany looked like she had been staring at the wall for the entire day, and the dark rings under her eyes were pronounced with the shadows the torn lamp threw over her face.

“Where have you been?” she slurred.

“I said I was going to make this right.”

She clumsily shifted in her seat and winced as she moved. An ice brick fell to the floor revealing bruises over her knuckles.

“It looks like you’ve had quite the day yourself,” I said.

“I couldn’t sleep last night. Just stared at the ceiling. Couldn’t do anything today until...” She looked around. “I found something to take my attention.” She swilled back the remains in her glass.

“Come. I’ll take you to bed.” I went over to her.

“What are we going to do, Em?”

I took a deep breath and crouched in front of her. Gently took her hand and kissed the nicks and cuts.

“We’re going to get him back.”

“But how? How are we ever going to be a family again?”

“That’s what I need your help with.”

I told her my plan. The plan within the plan. The first part of it, anyway.

“This is ridiculous,” she said as she stared at me with blank eyes. “Do you realize how risky that is? You’ll end up in Re-education for sure, and then I’ve lost everything!”

“There’s no other way, Beth.”

“It can’t be done.”

“We’ll make it happen; we have to. We’re out of options, standing on the edge of the cliff. And the only chance is if we jump. But I can’t do it without you. I need you to jump with me.”

She wiped her eyes. “Fine. We jump. And then what? What leverage do we have? You aren’t who you used to be. No position of power. No authority.”

“Today I met some people.”

“People? What people? What are you talking about?”

“Maybe it’s best you don’t know.”

“Jesus Christ, Em. Look what holding your secrets in has done for us! If there was ever a time you come clean about everything, now is that time.”

Closed my eyes. “I met some people from The Push.”

Bethany eased away from me, pushed herself against the back of the couch. “What? You consorted with the underground rebellion? Do you know how dangerous that is? Were you followed? My god, CHIRP is probably here right now.”

She stood and stumbled forward into me. I grabbed her. Held her.

“No one is out there ready to arrest us. They did not follow me.”

“By God, Em, you’re serious. Working with the people you’ve spent years trying to stop.”

“I don’t know what to say. There’s no other option for us.”

“This is... I don’t even know what the word is.”

“I found out tonight why it’s been impossible to get a grasp on The Push.”

“Why?” she whimpered.

“Because they’re more careful than I’ve ever seen. They take precautions and they’re wonderfully organized in their approach. They are everywhere, so much so, they are impossible to see. Can’t see the forest for the trees.”

“Where will they take us?”

“Away from here. Away from all of this.”

She held me at arm’s length. “That’s very vague.”

“Sometimes I need to be. I’ll share as much as I know, but some of this we will have to make up on the fly. Let’s face it. Push or no Push, we’re getting out of here. I don’t care about them. I just care about us being together as a family, and I’ll do anything to make that happen.”

We swayed to our heartbeats as I told her the rest of the plan. It was vague and overly simple, yet so full of fail points I lost count of them. I told her how I was going to screw them over and that it was a necessary evil. I wore her down with junk philosophy until she eventually relinquished her standards and morals.

“Sometimes good people do bad things,” I said.

“Are you comfortable with that? Can you live with that hanging over you forever with no way to make amends?”

“It’s not about comfort at this point. It’s about necessity. Can you?”

“When they took Boy away... Harlow... They tore my life in two, Em. A dream shattered revealing a nightmare that I can’t wake up from.”

“From tonight, there is no turning back, and we shall forget the people we leave in our wake.”

“Do you think they will ever forgive you?”

Clenched my jaw. “No. And I wouldn’t if they did it to me. But I need to place my priorities over someone else’s. The theory that everyone can win is a lie. Not in this situation. Here, someone going to be the winner and someone’s going to be the loser. I saw the look in Jackson’s eye when he held the gun against his family’s head. He was the loser. Knew it before it happened.”

She placed her hands on my cheeks.

“I don’t want to be like that, Beth,” I said. “I can’t be like that.”

“You won’t be. I won’t let it happen.”

We embraced. Could feel her heartbeat meld with my own. We eased down onto the couch next to each other. I held her hands.

“I need to make a phone call. You should get some things together. Then we need to get some sleep. I’m not sure when we’ll be able to do that again.”

She raised on unsteady legs and shuffled off to the bedroom to pack some essentials, carefully navigating around the chaos at her feet. I sat in the silence and looked at my hands while thinking long and hard about it until I almost talked myself out of it. Everything seemed too hard. Too impossible. There were no certainties in the plan, and I had no redundancy if things went sideways, which in probability, would. From an operation perspective, it was terrible and relied on too many factors outside of my control.

And yet it seemed like the best possible course of action. It was a matter of doing a bad thing or a worse thing, and I was spiraling down the rabbit hole. I looked over the mess in the room. The mess my life had become. The mess Bethany's life had become at my hands. If I could take it all back, I would. As unhelpful as that thought was, it was the one that kept cropping up.

With the world swirling around me, I faltered to the kitchen, picked up the handset, and dialed a number. The tone repeated in my ear several times, vibrated around my brain. *Shift the odds in your favor.*

In the end, I knew a selective memory was the answer, and would be for eternity.

CHAPTER 56

I stood at the faded door and waited, methodically tapping the crowbar against my leg. It had felt like a lifetime since I was last there, even longer since the night Jackson showed me how he escaped and then infiltrate the House. The memory brought with it flashes of Jackson's face, obscured by shadow, the finer details of his face fading with time. He made the ultimate sacrifice for something he believed in, and now it consumed me as well. Like a virus, being a family and fighting the rules I'd lived by infected every fiber of my being.

I shook away the recollection and focused on the task at hand. Maintenance workers used the door exclusively, giving them access to the inner workings of the house—air, water, heat. However, it would prove to be a different lifeline for me and my family. No handle to grip onto, just a worn lock that sat flush against the surface. The sun sat at the highest point in its arc, its heat periodically extinguished by clouds, causing a cool breath to brush over me.

The door itself was out of range of any surveillance that existed, however wasn't, and therefore I, immune to the elements. Loud voices carried around the rock that proved a solid foundation for the House. No doubt the ruckus would have caused a stir within the rooms. Yet for me, I could barely make out the emotionally charged words, but I knew who they

were coming from. Then silence, the calm before the storm. A crash. Something brittle, perhaps fragile. Could have been an ornament, maybe something heavy, crashing through a window. It was the distraction I was waiting for. Misdirection.

Gripping the shaft of the crowbar, I jammed the chiseled end between the door and the jam. Added some pressure until I could feel it giving way. Then it did. It just popped open. A gust of warm, musky air evacuated the gap and into my face. Deep within the bowels of the House, a deep tone emitted from the speakers. Moments later, a low rumble resembled the beginnings of an earthquake as hundreds of House children ran to their rooms. Procedure. Policy. Instruction. That is what I relied on.

I stepped inside the space and eased the door closed. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the gloomy interior. Pipes of every imaginable size ran in every direction, disappearing through cement block walls. With the door shut, I broke into an instant sweat. The pungent stench of feces encircled me. I was drowning in it.

With a hand over mouth and nose, I bobbed and weaved around the conduits, doing my best to avoid burning myself. Venting systems hissed, shooting plumes of steam into the room. Concrete tubes dripped at junctions and where they joined other pipes at right angles.

On the other side of the room, I came across some rungs bolted into the wall. I followed them with my eyes to a hatch recessed into the wall a few meters off the ground. With nowhere else to go, I climbed to reach the door. Standing on the highest rung, I pulled on the door. Stuck. Again. Nothing. It felt like someone had welded it shut. Or maybe it was rust.

It took a while, but the obstacle eventually gave way. An ear-piercing screech rang out as the archaic hinges screamed. A shaft of blinding brilliance engulfed me. I waited in the burning glow for any movement or voices. Hearing none, I crawled through the portal and pulled myself onto an uneven concrete floor.

Shielding my eyes, I felt around. Cold block walls, wooden sticks, metallic buckets. As my eyes once again flexed with the environment, I saw I was in a janitor's closet, or, more specifically, a doorless room in the janitor's closet. I was surrounded with all forms of maintenance gear, including chemicals, brushes and bins. As well as a uniform resting on a paint tin.

The rumbling ceased, sending an eerie calm into the room. The calm before the storm. Then the door to the utility room creaked opened, and I quickly armed myself with the first thing I could get my hands on, a trusty push broom. The janitor whistled as he stepped in, pulling a squeaky mop bucket behind him. He discarded it against the wall and turned a sink tap on, letting the water slosh into the deep basin.

I raised the broom over my shoulder. Then stopped when I found something better. I carefully unscrewed the container of chlorine and doused a rag. Crept up behind the janitor. He was big, well over six foot, with the hidden physique of a weightlifter. I hoped I was quicker than him.

His head kicked up, like he heard a dog whistle, and sniffed the air. Turn around right into me. The shock of someone in his closet was one thing, but that person jamming a dirty rag against their face was something else entirely. He gasped at the shock, helping the gas bleed into his system. He pushed me back against the wall so hard I thought two of my ribs broke, but I hung on just the same, clasping the rag against his face. He shook, he swung, he punched, but his energy faded as his consciousness left him, and he landed heavy on the floor. Out, yes. Dead? No. At least, I hoped he wasn't.

I eased the door closed behind me and sunk a little lower into the gray long-sleeved coveralls. It was as good a cover as any. I mean, who the hell stops to talk to the janitor? Nobody, that's who. Most people don't even look twice... once if they can help it. I picked

up the mop bucket and marched up a set of steps. I turned away from the Administration block and strode down a covered pathway.

There was no time for nostalgia as I marched down the pathways, over walkways and up and down steel steps. Sweat poured from my crevices, mainly from nervousness than physical exertion. I made it to B block without so much as seeing another living being. Whatever Bethany did, she did it well. I just hope it wasn't enough to get her arrested.

After climbing an internal stairwell, I bounded along an open walkway until I found myself standing outside my destination. The numbers 047 were perfectly stenciled on the door. If nothing else, the House provided precision and process. Children ran their lives to a schedule and moved to the sound of a buzzer. It wasn't too dissimilar to CHIRP cadet lodgings, however they had two very different objectives and outcomes for the residents.

It was then, as I poised my fist to knock on the door, that I realized it wasn't just a holding area for children whose parents failed in their requirements. It was to train nameless boys and girls to be obedient to rules and policy. Pavlov's dog.

I wrapped my knuckles sharply, turned the handle, and pushed into the room. It took a moment. Maybe even three or four. But when Harlow saw me, his eyes lit up and ran towards me. I dropped to one knee, and much to the shock of the other room inhabitants, we embraced. Wrapped my arms around him twice. Swore I'd never let them take him again.

"Come on, Boy. We need to get out of here."

"Are we going home?"

I looked into his eyes. "Yeah. Something like that."

I opened the door and peered out into the hall. Nothing and no one. I wondered how long the lockdown would last. Whatever Bethany did, she did it well. Hopefully not too well.

"Take me as well," one of the boys whispered.

"Yeah," said another. "Me too."

“I’ll live at your home,” a third said. “Better than here.”

“Kids,” I said, holding up my hand. “I can’t take you. You have parents out there who will come for you.”

“I don’t,” one said.

“Mine didn’t want me,” another added.

“Listen. I can’t take you. Not yet. Not now. But I’ll come back for you. I’ll come back for everyone. But right now, I need to get my son.”

“Promise,” one of them called out.

“Yes. Promise,” another added.

I took another look outside the door. “Yes. Fine. I promise.”

I pushed Harlow outside and quietly closed the door shut behind me, silencing the murmurs of the boys I left behind. We he half walked, half ran, along the pathways and walkways, under stairs and over ramps. I pushed him along, almost holding my breath we could get to the exit unseen.

Rounding a corner, the final walkway opened before us. The Administrator’s building was before me, with the stairwell heading down to the Utility room to our left. Every step was one step closer to escaping, one step closer to freedom. It was so close now; I could taste it.

“Stop right there,” a voice called out behind me.

I stopped dead, pulling in Harlow beside me. Turned slowly. I nodded to the rotund woman wearing an off-white dress. A large gold necklace hung around her neck and she sported a pair of black-framed glasses that sat awkwardly on her face.

“Yes, you,” she said. She squinted at my chest. “Tim.” Then she shifted her gaze back to my face. Her eyes were incredibly large behind the thick lenses.

I looked down and caught on immediately.

“All children are to remain in their rooms until the end of the lockdown. How long have you been here?”

“Oh, I’m new. Just a few days.”

She tutted. “Typical. No permanency here. But that still doesn’t explain why—.”

“The House Administrator,” I interrupted. “Given the lockdown, she asked if I could bring this boy to her office.”

She stepped forward, well within my comfort zone. It appeared she had no such hesitations.

“And what exactly is the Administrator’s name?”

The world stopped turning as I searched the recesses of my mind. Thought back to waiting outside her office looking at her door. To standing across from her, the desk with a name plate between us. And then, in the haze, I wondered if she was still around. It was a hell of a long time ago—over twenty years.

“Well,” she screeched. Her tone annoyed me, her voice like fingernails down a blackboard.

“Sharp, I think.” The name just came to me.

“Mr. Coleman,” she huffed. “They still haven’t changed the damn name on the door.” She looked over me. “Hey, isn’t that your job?”

“I’ll make a work order.”

She nodded. “Very good. Well, far be it from me to keep a child from the House Administrator. Off with you.”

I turned and ushered Harlow along, but when I looked back over my shoulder, she stood there watching us. I shuffled slow. I was now in a difficult situation. Taking Harlow to the Administration block would be the end of everything I had worked for. Perhaps we could

make a break for it and escape before she could do anything about it. We'd be in the clear before she got her frame to the alarm panel.

Then a shrill tone emitted. Like a nuclear bomb detonating, a hundred doors flung open in unison. A thrum followed, made up of the footfalls of children, eager to resume whatever it was they were doing before the lockdown. A wave of kids swallowed us.

"Slow down!" she shouted. "You know the rules."

In the mayhem, I grabbed Harlow, and darted down the stairs and into the utility room. I pulled the door closed and locked it. When I turned, Harlow was looking at the prone body of the janitor.

"Is he dead?" Harlow asked.

I shook my head. "No, but I might be if we don't get out of here now." I grabbed his hand, and we reversed my journey to break into the House. Through the hatch, down the metal rungs, shuffling and strafing around and under gurgling and hissing pipework. We stopped at the door, and I dropped a knee again while grabbing his shoulders.

"Boy, when we go through this door, we're going to run, okay?"

It was dark, but I knew he nodded.

"No matter what," I continued. "Just keep running."

"Okay, Father," Harlow said. I could barely make out his words over the noise in the room.

I stood at the door.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Turned the handle.

"Set?"

"Yes."

Pushed the door open. Brightness attacked us.

“Go!” I yelled. “Run!”

I resumed my handhold with Harlow, and we ran through the portal and into the fresh, open air. From concrete to grass, from darkness to light. Ran for our lives. Out of the shadows of the House and into sunlight proper. Ran to the corner of the foundations. We had done it. We were free. Our future awaited us. But nothing waits forever.

The next thing I knew, my legs were flying uncontrollably through the air and the horizon spun out of view. Time stood still as I perused the cloud mottled sky, wondering why my world was so askew. Then all at once, pain broke over my chest and I crashed back to earth with a destructive crash.

I sucked in a breath and squirmed like a worm on a BBQ hotplate, as a dark figure stood over me. Cocked their gun.

“Hold it right there, Emerson,” Iggy said.

The back seat of a CHIRP vehicle is a lot more uncomfortable than the front. It wasn't something I ever considered, but that is where I found myself. Sitting alongside Bethany, our hands cuffed behind our backs, we awkwardly perched ourselves on the bench, our knees hard against the seats in front.

“Are these really necessary?” I asked.

Iggy turned from the driver's seat. “Emerson, you broke into a House and kidnapped a child.”

“I released my son,” I corrected.

“Beth,” Iggy continued, ignoring me. “You damaged CHIRP property. So, what do you think?”

Beth and I looked at each other. The cuffs weren't just necessary, they were a requirement. Serious crimes meant severe consequences and bound hands were only the start of our ordeal.

Iggy sighed and shifted the car into drive, the House shrinking into the distance out the rear window. My son getting further and further away. One step forward, two steps back.

"What the hell were you two thinking?" He slammed the steering wheel. "Did you honestly think you could break into a House and take your child back? Jesus Christ, you've been in CHIRP long enough to know that shit just doesn't happen. How far did you think you were going to get? Do you know what would happen when we caught up with you?"

A barrage of questions that I didn't bother trying to answer. There was no point. He wasn't looking for answers. And they kept coming.

"Shit, you know what they did to your friend, Jackson and his wife and kid. Is that what you want, Emerson? Really? Because I can pull this car over right now and shoot you both in the head and save you the trouble."

Aziel reached out and placed a hand on Iggy's shoulder, and his constricted body dropped. Tension dissipated.

Aziel turned from the front. "You haven't given us any choice, Emerson. We need to take you in."

I looked to Bethany, her gaze unwavering, her features fortified.

"Wait," I said. "Just stop for a second."

"Why would I do that, Emerson?"

"I have something to tell you."

Iggy shrugged. "I used to look up to you, Emerson. You were my role model. When I heard the stories about what happened with John Berry, I refused to believe it... couldn't

believe it. We were partners that day, and I had no clue anything happened. Not one. The days, the weeks, the years. You said nothing to me.”

Palpable tension.

“So, tell me,” Iggy continued. “Why should I entertain your conversation now?”

I took a deep breath. “Because I can help you take down The Push.”

Iggy slammed the brakes. The vehicle jumped the curb and came to rest in a cloud of dirt. The car idled angrily as the breeze took the earth particles away.

Aziel looked over to his partner. “What are you doing?”

Iggy’s knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. “You’ve got a minute to explain yourself or we’re heading directly to The Pit. If I’m not satisfied, you can tell them your story instead.”

Another look to Beth, who replied to me with a perceptible nod. Affirmation.

“I have information on The Push.”

Iggy chewed the inside of his cheek and stared at me in the rear-view mirror.

“Elaborate.”

“You have the opportunity to arrest some powerful players and get an insight into their operation.”

“What powerful players?”

“The people who help families escape the city, who help people find Laferty Bridge.”

I knew the bridge was bullshit, but Iggy didn’t. “You can have them all.”

Iggy turned in his seat. “How long have you been sitting on this information? Until it became useful to you?”

“No,” I said. “It’s not like that.”

“This is bullshit. You don’t have anything.” Iggy flicked the car into drive and mashed down on the accelerator, thrusting everyone into the backs of their seats. Beth and I fell over each other, jostled in the back seat as the vehicle jumped down onto the roadway.

“Wait!” I yelled.

“What?” Iggy yelled. “I can’t hear you over the sound of the engine.”

“I can give you the ringleader!”

Once more, the car came to a sudden halt, this time in the middle of the road. Twin black lines ran from the tires. Iggy stared out the windscreen, his gaze fixed on the buildings on the horizon.

“The ringleader? The person who runs The Push?”

I nodded, even though I didn’t know for sure if it was solely her. I remember what Raxiel said about many disconnected parts making The Push hard to destroy. “If that’s what it takes.”

“I’m guessing you want something in return for this information?”

“You bet your ass I do. I want my son. I want my record expunged. I want to be left the hell alone.”

“Fine. We’ll take you to Pundit, you can tell your story and if it leads to something, I’m sure they’ll honor the deal.”

“No!” I barked. “You know as well as I do, I won’t get any deal. They’ll think like you did, that I withheld information from the investigation. They’ll throw us in The Pit. No one ever comes back from there. You know that.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“They won’t believe someone like me. I lost my post because I lied to an Investigator.”

“Then why should I? Why should I think you aren’t saying anything to save your own skin?”

“Iggy,” I said, lowering my volume, keeping my emotions in check. “This is me. Emerson Barnes. I would never lie to you.”

“But you did lie to me!”

“No! I... just didn’t tell you what happened. There’s a difference.”

“Not to me!”

I rubbed my forehead. “John Berry is the one who turned my father, who ratted him out to the authorities. Father died because of that, Mother too. You may not agree with my actions, but John Berry got what he deserved.”

“You murdered him.”

“I had every right under the act to draw my weapon and fire. Who gives a shit about the context of how it happened? You follow the rules, the same rules I followed, every day. We’re the same, just pieces in the puzzle, teeth on the cog.”

Iggy glared at me in the rear-view mirror.

“If I could take it back,” I said. “If I could take it all back—John and lying about it—I would. But I can’t. And I’m in a bind.”

“You need my help.”

“Regardless of what you think I did,” I said. “Regardless of what you think of me, I can give you everything you need to bring down The Push. I can lead you right to them. I don’t care how you view that, whether you do it for your own career—both of your careers—or for your social responsibilities. Either way, I can make it happen.”

“I’m guessing you made the anonymous call to me last night that something was going to happen at the House today?”

I shrugged. “It had to be you, Iggy. If shit went sideways, which it did, I wanted to be sitting in the back of your car, not some random allocation.”

“So you can try and manipulate me?”

“No, it’s not like that. No one else would entertain a word I’ve got to say.”

“You’re lucky I called off the cavalry that was on its way. Can’t believe you thought you could get past the silent alarms. You’re lucky I recognized Bethany rampaging in the Administrator block.”

Father Barlowe, or whatever he was, was right. Breaking in was easy. Getting away again was the difficult part.

After a few seconds, Iggy looked over to his partner and pushed the gear stick into park and turned off the engine.

“I’m listening,” he stated.

I looked out the window. “Half the car is in the other lane.”

“I’m happy here,” he fired back. “Now, get talking. How do you think we will take down a regime that has hidden from us for decades?”

I stretched my neck, forcing pops and fizzles in my ears. “I’ve met with them.”

“You know that’s a violation.”

“This whole conversation is a violation,” I retorted. “But on top of my other violations, it seems kind of minor.”

Silence.

“What did you talk about?” Aziel asked. “When you met with The Push.”

“We made a deal. They are going to help me escape the city.”

“Then why be here?” Iggy prodded. “Why not just escape while you had the chance?”

I lowered my head. “You don’t have children, and until you do, you just won’t understand. I can’t leave him. Not now, not ever. It’s all or nothing, Iggy. All or nothing.”

“If you have what you say you have, if you truly know things, let’s go there now. Show me where they are. If it proves good, we’ll see what we can do.”

“Not good enough,” I said, shaking my head. “Besides, they made themselves extremely clear. If we don’t turn up as a family, the deal is off, and they disappear. If they see anyone else coming, they disappear. This is the best shot CHIRP has had since the rise of The Push. No more chasing shadows, no more hunting down leads that turn into dead ends. This is it. The end game. Laid out for you.”

“And you expect me to take your child from the House and just let you go and hope to god that what your saying is true?”

I cocked my head. “Well, yeah.”

“They’ll execute me,” Iggy scoffed.

“No. You’ll ask for forgiveness. And, trust me, it’ll be a lot easier to come by when you’ve fundamentally dismantled the thing that has been a thorn in the government’s side for so long. You won’t be a villain; you’ll be a fucking hero. All I’m asking for is a little bit of trust, and then to vanish into obscurity.”

I could tell he was considering it, regardless of the potential consequences coming his way.

“What if?” Iggy started. “What if you got past the alarms and got away? What then?”

Iggy slapped the steering wheel. “Yes! Fuck!”

“Then I’d already be gone.”

I couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or furious.

“So, I’m your backup plan?” Iggy asked.

“I’m sorry to say, Iggy, I’ll do what it takes to get my family back together again.”

“You’re skating on very thin ice, Barnes.”

“Everybody can win here, Iggy. We can all walk away with what we want.”

It was a risk being as open as I was. But I was relying on his rigid devotion to robust moral and ethical principles and values. I was once like him... well, I thought I was. Things were simpler when life was simpler, but as life progressed, so too did the complexity of work, life, laws, rules, hopes and dreams. They all intertwined and supported each other, propped each other up when one was lacking. And to break that cycle is tough.

Iggy looked over to Aziel.

“I think you’ve entertained them for long enough,” Aziel said.

“Let’s talk outside,” Iggy replied.

Beth and I watched the animated discussion unfolding, turning the windshield into a movie screen. Iggy held his ground as Aziel pointed his finger towards the car, back towards the House, and then to the city. He seemed to lay his points down thick and hard, yet Iggy looked to hold firm. The junior officer utilized his relationship over his rank to get his points across, something that a senior officer would have traditionally tolerated. To Iggy’s credit, he let the disagreement play out. In the end, once the tension looked to calm, both men shook hands, showcasing their agreement on something. I just hoped it played out in our favor. With our cuffed wrists, Beth and I awkwardly shifted until we touched each other. All in. All or nothing.

The officers eased back into the car. Let the echo of the shutting of the car doors to die. It felt like he was still unconvinced by my argument, perhaps one final thought before he fell one way or the other.

“We have got little time,” I said. “It’s got to be now or never.”

“What do we do from here?” Iggy asked.

I gave Bethany a relieved smile.

The emotion was indescribable. First, when I saw him being escorted by Iggy from the front entrance of the House towards the car. Second when the car door opened. And finally, when I felt his arms around my neck. Thankfully, Aziel had removed our handcuffs, and I wrapped my arms around my son, wrapped around him twice. Never again would I take time with him for granted. Every moment I could have held him, played with him, told him I loved him, and didn't, bit at me, and fought against the elation that we were, once more, a family.

“Why did they take me away?” he asked, his head against my neck, his voice muffled.

Guilt spread through me. How could I possibly explain everything to him?

“I'm so sorry,” is all I said. I held him at arm's length and looked him in the eye. “It'll never happen again. I promise.”

Iggy eased into the driver's seat. Viewed the scene once more in the mirror.

“Don't make me regret this, Emerson.”

“Never,” I replied, staring at my son.

“Where are we headed?” Aziel asked.

“There's a laundromat between Brennan and Granger.”

Iggy scoffed. “Back to where it all began.”

He was right. Granger was where I dropped Iggy off all those years ago so I could pursue the Runners at Brennan. John Berry was taking his grandson to what he thought was Laferty Bridge. To a place that I know now as complete fabrication. As dangerous as government propaganda. I hoped that at the end of the day, I wouldn't end up like John, gunned down and left to die.

“It's a Kwik Klean,” I said. “You know, with the 'K's instead of the 'C's.”

“I'm sure we'll find it,” Aziel said.

“Just don’t get too close,” I said. “They see a CHIRP car pull up and it’s over for all of us. I don’t get what I want, and you don’t get what you want. You’ll have to let us off a few streets away.”

Aziel leaned over. “Maybe I should get my car, so at least we can get closer.”

“No,” I interrupted. “There isn’t time. It’s almost four, and they were pretty damned strict on their timings. If we aren’t there, they’ll go.”

“Don’t worry, Aziel,” Iggy said. “We’ll get close enough.”

Iggy powered down and sped towards an on-ramp that would bypass the city and towards our destination, where courage and hope lay in wait for us.

The chirp vehicle slogged into a puddle before coming to a silent stop in an alley between two apartment blocks. Iggy killed the engine. We had kept a distance and encircled the laundromat before coming to a stop, with both officers paying close inspection to the surrounding environment. Every now and then they’d make eye contact and tip their chins to each other in a knowing way.

“Hardly inconspicuous,” Bethany mumbled, looking at the dark gray walls.

“This is the best you’re going to get,” Iggy said, staring at the looming buildings.

“The Kwik Klean is up two blocks, over two blocks to the left,” Aziel said. “It’s between a Chinese takeaway and a hairdresser.”

Iggy turned. “You’ve got a couple of minutes with them before we raid the place.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll keep them talking for long enough for you two to get there. Then you get the bad guys, and we walk away.”

I thrust my hand forward to stamp our agreement. Iggy looked at it. One last contemplation. Everything up to that point he could reverse. He could take my son back to

the House. He could take Bethany and me to Pundit, or worse, The Pit. I held my breath as the seconds ticked by.

Eventually, he took my hand. Gripped it tight.

“We’re right behind you,” Iggy said. “If you try and run, we’ll get you. If this is some kind of ruse, we’ll get you.”

My hand was turning red.

“And if you think we won’t be watching, you are sadly mistaken.”

“What do you mean? I told you, if they see a CHIRP car or uniform, it’s all over.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Aziel said. “You just fulfill your end of the bargain.” He pushed our backpacks over the seat to us. He held up a gun. “Oh, and I’m keeping this,” he said. “Don’t know where you got it, don’t want to know. But I want *you* to know, that I have it.”

A small price to pay for our freedom. Seemed cheap. But then again, it was going to cost me a lot more than the gun. A lot more in the long term. Relationships, credibility, and trust were on the line. The things that take a long time to build and are crushed in a matter of seconds. I hoped they were ready for us because, when it came to my family, everything else was expendable.

Aziel opened the rear door, and we exited as one, hand in hand, our son between us. We vowed never to let go of him again. Without any further words, the officers drove off, leaving us little time to reach the laundromat, a nexus point of my future.

We were puffing as we stood before the shop front. I put Harlow down, having carried him most of the way as we dashed up streets and across roads. Time ticked. No second chances. The laundromat interior was dark, and I couldn’t see through the open doors further than a

meter. I dared not look back, but I knew Iggy and Aziel were eagerly watching us. Could almost feel them standing over my shoulder, breathing on my neck. Their lives were on the line as much as mine was. Risk is always better when it's shared.

One final look the Bethany before we stepped inside, and all this madness could end.

CHAPTER 57

I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, but I could hear their voices. In the abyss, I reached for Bethany's hand, and we entangled fingers and squeezed as disturbing words seeped over us. The instruction from the guide was to remain quiet until they had left, and the sound of my son's breath against Bethany's hand tore through my ringing ears. Counted the seconds in my head until they were gone, and then all at once, footfalls indicated our guests moving on and I could finally release my breath. I felt a tug on my arm, and with Bethany and Harlow close behind me, we ventured down the dark tunnel towards freedom.

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. At first, the place looked empty. One row of commercial grade washing machines and one of the dryers along either wall to the back, where there was a counter and a series of vending machines selling snacks and detergent. Fabric softener and bleach coated the airwaves.

We shuffled further into the gloom and stopped short when a woman appeared from behind one of the washing machines. Red hair flowed from under a black beret, framing her pale face. A tight button-up shirt and plaid pants showcased her solid frame. She stepped forward with heavy boots and checked her watch.

“Hands?”

I rushed forward. “CHIRP officers will be here very soon.”

“Hands!” she ordered.

I held them out in front of me, displaying the mark Father Barlowe gave me the day before. She seemed to pay closer inspection than I thought was necessary.

“You can see the marking, yeah?” I asked.

“It’s not the marking I’m looking for. It’s the two freckles you have in the insides of your middle finger.”

I looked for them myself. “Then what was the point of the stamp that stung like a son-of-a-bitch?”

“We don’t have time for this. You led CHIRP here?”

“Didn’t have a choice, I’m afraid.”

“Right,” she said. “We’d better get going then. Come, help me with this.”

She stepped in between two large, floor-to-ceiling washing machines, and started pushing. I left Bethany and my son to assist her, but I helped little. It sounded like a hundred ball bearings rolling on a metal table as the big machine slid a half meter, coming to rest against the machine on the other side, and uncovering an opening in the floor. The first few rungs of a ladder were visible before the void swallowed them.

“Hurry,” she said. “We need to move.”

Bethany went first, with my son close behind. Shoes clacked and clinked on the rungs until they both disappeared. Our guide pushed me next before she hopped in right behind me.

Halfway down, I heard the same scraping metal noise, and I looked up to see the guide closing the gap, eliminating the small shaft of light, and plunging us into complete nothingness.

“Hurry,” she whispered. “Stay quiet. I can hear them coming.”

It wasn't until we huddled at the bottom of the ladder when the muffled shouts and footsteps were upon us.

“CHIRP officers! Nobody move!”

Clicking of leather boots on linoleum struck us as they edged the room, carefully checking every inch of the room.

“You got anything?” Aziel asked.

“Fuck!” Iggy roared. “Fucking Emerson, what have you done?”

“Where the hell did they go?” Aziel questioned. “We saw them come in here.”

“Shit! I don't know.”

Footsteps to the back.

“Christ,” Aziel said. “There's a door back here.”

“You go that way; I'll go this way. Check everything. I've gotta get the Inspector down here.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

Silence.

“Iggy?”

“I don't know. I'll worry about that later. Just go!”

Footfalls transitioned into silence, and we were on the move, through the darkness, hugging the shoulder of the tunnel to avoid the liquid that sloshed at the bottom of the pipe. I held onto Harlow as Beth brought up the rear. As we stormed through the tunnels, I replayed my apology to Iggy in my head, even though he'd never hear it. Obsequious. I didn't know

what was in store for him, however, I knew it wouldn't be good. The sooner I got him out of my head, the sooner I could focus on the next step to freedom. The sad truth is we needed him, we needed to betray him, in order to succeed. No amount of 'sorry's' would ever make that right. It was unfortunate I needed to stand on others to get where I was, but that was the reality of the situation.

The tunnel came to a junction where several other tunnels lay ahead of us. Without stopping or slowing, our guide moved into another tunnel. We twisted and turned, took offshoots, and careened through intersections with little regard. My sense of direction was as discombobulated as the amount of time we spent traversing the subterranean network. I had no idea if I was coming or going, or where under the city, we were. Harlow fell numerous times in the dark, and myself and Beth hauled him up without skipping a beat.

Eventually, in the distance, a pin prick of light, that drew larger with every footstep. Closer and closer to the end. No. Closer and closer to the *start*. My grip on Harlow increased. Fading landscape replaced white light, and we broke out of our concrete surroundings into a clearing. The orange sunset illuminated tall pines. Between them, a mountain range rose out of the ground.

"Congratulations," the guide said. "You've made it out of the city."

"But a long way from your destination," another voice said.

We all turned to see an elderly gentleman, pointing a rifle at us. "Which one of you is the guide?"

Our red-headed guide threw her hand in the air and approached him. He steadied himself with thigh-high outdoor boots that protected his heavy tan pants. She approached him, turned, and pulled her hair up. He pulled her ear away and inspected her.

Satisfied, he let go of her. "Just the three of them?"

"That's right."

He turned and marched off through the trees towards the mountain, his rifle resting across his arms. “Let’s go people. We’re losing light and there’s a little way to go before we reach the camp.”

I turned to thank our guide, but she had already disappeared into the tunnel system, heading God knows where to help God knows who. I looked at Bethany and took in a lungful of air. Smelt different. Fresh. New.

“Hurry,” our new guide said. “I’m not stopping, and I will not come back looking for you.”

I smiled at her. “We did it, babe.”

“We did,” she said. And we stole a kiss to commemorate the moment. Starting again.

I put an arm around Harlow. “Take a good look, son. This is our future out here.”

“Where?” he asked.

“Wherever that man is taking us,” I said, and started walking.

“Is it going to be like our home?”

“I don’t know, Harlow. I don’t know.”

“Harlow? Who’s that?” he said.

I glanced at Bethany. “That’s you, silly,” she said.

He seemed genuinely perplexed. “I have a name?” he asked. “Is that allowed? I thought I chose one at The Transitioning.”

“Different rules out here, Harlow,” I said. “We don’t have to live as we did. We’re beyond that now.”

“Do you like the name?” Bethany asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

“There’s going to be a lot to discover,” I said. “For all of us. And we can do it all together.”

The moon was well and truly out by the time we started on the mountain path. Although our guide looked well beyond retirement, he moved spritely through the tall grass and marshes, over rocks and boulders, and up the steep descent. He said nothing on the journey, apart from the odd groan here, and the small piece of wilderness advice there.

As the path twisted up, we hugged the mountainside to avoid the potential pitfalls of stumbling off the edge to invisible grisly death. Further up the mountain, two gems glinted in the moonlight, which were joined by two more.

“Do we need to be concerned by them?” I asked.

Our guide huffed. “They’re fine up there. Just keep them in your sights or stay near a fire. They’ll give you as wide a berth as you give them.”

“Oh, like they're more afraid of us than we are of them?”

“No,” he said without stopping. “Be afraid of them. Be terrified of them. They’ll rip you in half if they get the chance. But they aren’t stupid.”

We continued to follow his footsteps. It was like following the guide from the laundromat. Dark surroundings, unsure of where we were going or when we would get there. Time seemed non-existent. Barlowe’s words continued to ring in my ears: *We do what we do for a reason*. There was no point arguing the fact. It was what it was.

Soon, shadows filled the path in tune with low voices. Our guide stopped and faced us.

“Around that corner is the camp where you’ll find another family. Another guide will meet you in the morning and take you the rest of the way.”

With that, he turned, descending the mountain with relative ease, as if he’d been doing it for years. Maybe he had. I grabbed Bethany by the hand and rounded the corner. The

two bodies huddled around the fire startled by our presence. They both immediately jumped to their feet, grabbing rocks as weapons, and steadied themselves. The fire crackled and shadows danced over their covered faces.

“Hey,” I said. “Everybody calm down. We’re here just like you.” I held up my hand and walked towards their fire to show my marking. “See?”

They both reciprocated the gesture, showing similar markings on their hands. Content with our presence, we sat at opposite sides of the fire. They offered leftover food and water that we gave to Harlow. We watched the fire sizzle and pop in silence until the mesmerizing imagery sent Harlow to lie down with his head in his mother’s lap. I reached out and patted him.

“Tell me a story,” he murmured.

His request was equal measures of pleasure and surprise. I admired his constant desire to listen to the book that had been a part of my life, although it had occurred to me, I had never devoured the story cover to cover, nor had I read the final pages.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Sounds like you’ll be asleep before I open the cover.”

“Just read a bit,” he said.

From my backpack, I retrieved my book. Cracked the cover open at a random page, one towards the back, tilted it towards the fire, and started reading.

The naturalistic slur of the fire between them were the only words spoken for a long time. Logs shifted, sending ash swirling into the night. The sky was clear yet absent of every star. It was like they never existed, like a canvas waiting for the immortal painter to create a masterpiece to look down over the world.

“Why won’t you take it off,” Qerxian pleaded. “I’ve waited long enough. I’ve played your games and abided by your rules. Followed the laws, both human and natural. I’ve done everything I could do, everything you have asked. Yet, still, you defy me. Why?”

On the surface, the two figures could not possibly be any different. Dirty rags held Qerxian together, and her hair was a series of coarse knots that all brushes refused to touch. Smell clung to her like a magnet. She crossed her arms and regarded the hooded figure opposite. Robes so dark they absorbed light from the fire, a hood over their face. A stoic stance, unwavering by the tsunami of ramblings from the girl.

“You promised,” Qerxian pleaded, stamping her foot.

“I won’t remove my mask because you won’t like what you see,”

“But I’ve done everything you’ve said. You owe it to me.”

“I owe you nothing.”

“That’s a lie,” she blurted out. “A promise is a promise. My grandpa used to say that a promise makes something or breaks everything.” She pointed at finger. “Do you want to break everything?”

Silence, save for the crackle of the fire.

The figure removed their hands from their sleeves and pulled the hood back to reveal a mask. The beak was long and pointed. Dark pits where the eyes should be.

“If I do this, there is no going back. There is no way to put the genie back in the bottle. Do you understand?”

Qerxian nodded and swallowed hard.

The mysterious figure unclipped the mask and let it fall.

Qerxian’s mouth fell open. “You... you are...”

“Yes, little one. I am you.”

“But... how? How can this be?”

“How could it not be? It is here we stand once more, and once more I offer you the path to take. And yet you don’t heed my advice.”

Qerxian peered through the flames. “What happened to your eyes?”

“This results from the truth.”

“What truth?”

“There are none so blind as those who don’t see.”

“I don’t want to be blind. Tell me what I need to do?”

“What is the point of that? For if you were to listen to me, then I would not exist.”

“But I will,” Qerxian screamed. “I will. I promise I will. Cross my heart. Hope to die.”

The exuberant dramatization of youth.

“Very well.”

Qerxian wiped her eyes, sniffled the viscous liquid back into her nose. “Really? You’ll tell me?”

“Only if you do it with no further question.”

Qerxian nodded.

“You promise?”

Another nod. “If you say one word, make one noise, you are doomed to become me.”

“Please tell me.”

The figure placed their hands inside the robe sleeves.

“To break the chain, the solutions is simple. You need to stand in the fire.”

Harlow exhausted a deep sigh as he plummeted into sleep.

“How old?” came the gravelly voice over the flames.

“Seven,” I replied. “Have you two... you know, any children?”

The woman leaned back, and the man placed a hand on her belly. “We will soon,” he said. “My wife is due any day now. Just hope we get to where we’re going before it happens.”

“Do you know where that is, exactly?” Bethany asked. “Where we’re going?”

He shrugged. “I guess we’ll know when we know.”

The stilted conversation continued into the night. Closed questions with few answers bookended by a crackling fire that wafted smoke into the abyss. The man placed a piece of wood on the fire, then used a stick to shift it into position. Embers danced.

“Guess that will keep it going until the morning,” the man said.

“How many more hours?”

“Enough to get some sleep,” he replied.

I slowly nodded. Leaned towards Bethany. “Hey, how about you get some sleep and I’ll take the first watch.”

“You really think that’s necessary? I was hoping we’d be away from all the paranoia.”

Over the dancing flames, I noted the woman laying down as the husband shifted his position in front of the fire.

“Maybe just for tonight,” I said. “We’ll see what happens tomorrow.”

We kissed, and she repositioned herself to spoon Harlow and keep him warm.

I stared at the person sitting opposite. Glimpsed his face every now and again as flames and shadows swayed and grew and fell.

He looked over. “What?”

“You know, I’ve got to ask. You look really familiar. What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t.”

“Are you going to?”

He shrugged. “No.”

I nodded. “I understand. I’m sure this feeling is a layover from being in the city.”

“Maybe,” he said.

“How did you get here?”

He brushed the dirt from his hands. “What are you? A cop of something.”

I half-smiled. “Something, actually. That is, I used to be. Not anymore.”

“Well, we’re out here now, away from all of that. So, I don’t have to answer your questions. Whoever you are, whatever you did, I don’t care.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean any disrespect. I’m just trying to pass the time, that’s all.”

“Why don’t you share how the hell *you* came to be here then?”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“We all have long stories,” he shot back. “We all have our experiences with the government, CHIRP, the rules. None of it good. Everyone I know has had their kids taken or seen someone who has. Those fucking assholes tearing families apart.” He motioned to his wife. “Figured we get out before we’d have to worry about that.”

“I guess that’s a smart move,” I said. “But not all of us were bad,” I defended. But I was as bad as any of them, and as soon as those words came out of my mouth, I thought back to every bad thing I did. I had blindly followed the laws and down the government’s dirty work. I had broken up families and shot parents who didn’t comply. I had even murdered someone. The final moments fighting John Berry played over in my mind. “Forget it,” I said. “Let’s talk about something else.”

But the fire transfixed him as if it was a mystical gateway to his past.

“Murder,” he mumbled. “I saw him murder my grandfather.”

“Saw who?”

“A CHIRP officer. Led him into the woods and killed him.”

My mouth dropped open.

“John Berry,” I murmured.

He blinked and shook his head. “What did you say?”

My eyes snapped to his. “Nothing!”

He stood. “Say it again.”

I saw the rock in his hand. The size of a grapefruit. Small enough to wield, big enough to do serious damage.

“I didn’t say anything,” I said.

“Say it,” he repeated. I could tell he wasn’t going to let it go.

Keeping my stare on him as I stood. Took a deep breath and slowly released it.

“John Berry. That’s your grandfather isn’t it.”

“How the fuck do you know that?!”

Confession time. No more excuses, no more defending, no more running from the truth. “I know because my name is Barnes. Emerson Barnes.”

“Jesus. Yes. Yes you fucking are.”

I thought he might bust the rock he was holding in half.

“And I guess that makes you...”

“Michael Shaw,” he said evenly.

I couldn’t see it at first, but being unobstructed by fire and labored conversation, it was definitely him. Hell, it might as well have been the kid from all those years ago, the waterlogged child clinging to old man Berry. I thought back to watching the recording of his interview with Lennox and Investigator Wheatley. That interview was the moment things fell apart. No! I need to stop thinking that way. Things fell apart well before that. I just couldn’t see the loose thread until there was a gaping hole in the fabric.

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

Apologies and promises are all I seemed to be capable of. I had dished them out plenty in my life, and I was damn sure I would continue to do so. My life was a series of empty apologies and broken promises. I had failed at every turn, and there I was, facing the music. No judge or jury. Just two people who have grievances that needed to sort it out. That is how it was outside the city. Outside the rules. Here, there are no rules.

“Sorry?” he cried. “You’re sorry? You don’t have any fucking idea.”

“Listen, it was a long time ago.”

“That shit doesn’t leave you, Barnes. I’ve been trapped in a mental prison ever since that day, and here you are, with your wife and son, enjoying the freedoms you were fighting to stop. So, beg my pardon if I don’t accept your empty apology.”

“I’m...”

“Say it,” he taunted. “Say ‘you’re sorry’ one more time. See what that does for you.”

“I don’t know what to say, I honestly don’t. I can’t change what I’ve done. If I could go back, I would. I swear to God.”

“I was young, but he was everything to me. And given you took someone from me, maybe I should take someone from you.”

I cocked my head. “Hey now. That’s not a smart thing to say. I think we should just calm things down a little.” I instinctively reached for my gun, but I wasn’t a CHIRP officer anymore. I wasn’t anything anymore.

“Don’t you fucking tell me what to say,” he spat, his voice bouncing off the rock and dissolving into the void.

Both wives woke.

“Honey, what’s going on?” the wife said to Shaw.

“Em?” Bethany followed. “Everything okay?”

“This is the piece of shit that killed my granddad,” Shaw said pointing at me.

“What?” she slurred. “From all those years ago? It can’t be.”

I looked down to Bethany and drearily nodded.

“Look, what do you want from me?” I pleaded. “We’re heading to the same place you are, away from our past and towards something better.”

“That’s so easy for you to say,” he barked, spittle flying from his mouth.

“Honey?” his wife said. “We can talk through this.”

“No. We need to settle this,” he said edging around the fire. “We need to do this now.”

I waved Bethany away, and she shuffled back pulling Harlow to her chest.

“Honey?” she said again.

“Please,” I said. “You don’t want to do this. Think of your wife. Think of your child.”

“Honey!” she screamed.

He raised his rock and launched at me.

“My water,” his wife shouted. “Has broken!”

CHAPTER 58

Feeble pre-dawn light was the backdrop for the rampaging Michael Shaw. He swung the rock towards my face. I put my arm up to block the blow, but it only slowed the momentum, the heavy object collecting me on the side of my head. I stumbled backward, warmth running down the side of my face. Bethany dragged a drowsy Harlow away as I fell backward.

Cries from both women went unanswered as Bethany rushed to the pregnant wife's side. From my hazy viewpoint, Michael straddled me. He raised the rock in both hands and prepared to cave my head in.

"This is for my granddad," he seethed through bared teeth. He drove the rock down.

I once more moved my arms in front of my face, which somewhat deadened the blow to my face, and made my forearms the primary target. I howled in pain as the force bit into my skin. Once. Twice. Three times. Repeated attacks. He steadied himself again.

Suddenly Bethany grabbed his arm, holding him back.

"Get the fuck away from me!" he screamed and swung his hand at her. She reeled backward, holding her cheeks. A woman's cries were the backing track. She breathed hard, followed by a scream.

I took the moment of distraction and punched up with a bloody fist. I felt the impact but had no idea where I hit him. Regardless, he groaned out, dropped the rock, and clutched his face. He got up on one leg, the other still knelt over me. I pulled my foot back and drove it into him. He hurtled back and crashed into the fire. Fiery and smokey sticks and ash flew into the air.

He screamed at the impact and wriggled like a cockroach on its back. On the other side of the fire, Bethany had pulled herself over to the wife, while Harlow was holding her hand.

I sloppily regained my footing. Michael had rolled off the fire, his clothes still smoking, and staggered around with blood streaming out of his nose. He limped back and forwards as he looked at me with a hardened stare. Spat a glob of blood into the dirt. I followed suit.

More heavy breathing. Another cry.

“Listen,” I said, holding my hands out. “You got some good shots out there. How about we call it even?”

He smiled with bloodied teeth. “How about you go to hell?” He picked up a small branch, held it over his shoulder like he was about to hit a home run, and stalked towards me.

Bethany’s voice floated into me. “Em!”

“I’m a little busy here, Beth,” I grunted, dropping into a fighting stance.

“Em!”

Waited for a moment and ran towards him. He swung, but I was inside the arc, and he had nowhere to go. I drove my forehead into his already smashed nose, and we fell back onto the rough ground.

“Stop this shit,” a voice called out. A gunshot rang out directly after.

I didn’t have time to find out who it was, because what followed that was mayhem.

Me and Michael Shaw, a muddle of limbs, tumbled over dirt and rocks towards the plateau's edge. As the world around Shaw's face gyrated, I heard a growl transition into a wet bite with animalistic ease, sending a savage scream skyward. Followed by another snarl, another gush, another yelp.

Then, Shaw was on me. And then he was just gone, his weight vanishing in an instant. I looked around me, eager to identify the source of his next attack, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Help me," Shaw grunted, but I didn't know where it had come from.

I rolled onto my stomach and looked over the edge. Michael clung to a rock that jutted out from the sheer cliff face, with nothing below him but a couple of hundred feet of fresh air and jagged rocks. I heard a scream, one last gasp, and then a baby's cry slashed through the sky.

"Is that... Is that my baby girl?" he asked.

I thrust my hand down to him. "Grab a hold."

He struggled for purchase on his rock, his red hands slipping.

"What if you let go?"

"Come on man, just grab hold. I won't drop you. I promise. That baby needs you."

He looked at my offer. Ran his tongue over his lips. His baby called for him.

"I'm slipping," he breathed.

"Grab it," I commanded.

His fingers came apart. He reached for me. But he grabbed nothing but air, as he fell back into the nothingness. I watched as he screamed, his wide eyes coming to terms with the situation, and the impending doom he would reach in a matter of seconds. I imagine that time moved differently for him in that moment... slower. Time to think about all the shit you did

in your life... or didn't do. The soft thud signified the end of his trip, like a customs officer stamping a passport.

And then silence. I turned away from Michael's mangled body that rested far below my vantage point. Then I realized. Silence. No baby's cry. I didn't know where Harlow was. Didn't know if Bethany was injured. Panic—that moment of instantaneous spiked heart rate—faded in an instant when I saw Bethany attaching the baby to its mother's breast as she spoke through the process with Harlow. To be honest, I thought it would have horrified him, but he listened with genuine curiosity. He still clenched the woman's hand.

Bethany ran to me, her embrace forcing me to stagger backwards. Too numb to return the affection, but then ever so slowly I raised my arms around her.

"What the hell happened?" she asked, her voice muffled in my chest.

"I couldn't save him, Beth." My voice wavered, and I took a deep breath. "I tried. I swear I tried."

She looked up, and I saw a thin trail of blood running down the side of her head. Her eyes darted over my features. "I know you did, Em. I know you did."

Beyond her, further up the path that wound around the mountain, a pack of gray and white wild dogs stood around each other, their attention on something unknown to me. Despite only being three of them, they jostled and whined as they drove their jaws downwards. Then I saw the boots sticking out from between their legs. I held Bethany at arm's length.

"Wait here."

I grabbed a stick from the fire and marched up the trail, swinging my weapon and yelling wildly. The pack dissolved immediately, running in every direction. One scurried up the path while one eased down to a lower landing. Another expertly jumped from outcrop to

ledge, before resting on a boulder and looking back. Black, slanted, almond-shaped eyes followed my movement, and bared its carnassial fangs.

What they left was a man with a large cavity in his stomach they were feeding on. He gasped then gurgled. Mumbled words rapidly escaped black lips. I knelt next to him. A gush of blood exploded and covered his face.

“Follow...” His voice trailed off; his words were a saturated whispered. “Follow...” he tried again.

“The path,” I finished for him. “I understand.”

He shook his head. “Follow...”

And then one final intake before he stopped moving entirely, his features receding into an emotionless gaze to the heavens.

I rubbed my forehead. Too much death for the day, more than I needed in a lifetime. I gently closed his eyes. Second guessed myself before succumbing and checking his clothing. Turning out the pockets of a dead man felt repulsive yet necessary. It was all new to me. I was playing by unwritten rules in a world I knew nothing about. There was no protocol to follow, no rule book to check.

Found nothing but some bullets for the rifle, which made their way into my pocket with ease. After carefully extracting the half-empty canteen, I grabbed the rifle, pushed myself up, and headed back down to the camp, ever vigilant in case wild animals wanted to continue their meal. They sat perched on various rocky outcrops, licking their mouths having fed. Hopefully, that meant there would be no need to come for us. Hopefully.

Bethany approached. I inspected the source of her injury. “You alright?” I asked.

She waved the question away like she was swatting at a fly. “The guy with the gun, is he our next guide?”

“Yeah. I guess he was.”

“Was? Is he okay?”

I looked up the mountain and shook my head. “No. No, I’m afraid he isn’t.”

“Shit! What are we going to do?”

I sighed. “We’ll need to figure all that out.”

She grabbed my face, held it to hers. “What the hell happened, Em? Why were you two fighting like that?”

I didn’t want to bring it up, didn’t want to say the words, but I didn’t think she’d back down.

“Do you remember I told you about what happened a long time ago with John Berry? How I... well, you know.”

She nodded painfully slowly.

“That guy was his grandson, Michael.”

Her eyes went wide. “Shit. You’ve got to be kidding!”

Shook my head. “He recognized me.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. But it was a white lie. “Probably from his interview at Pundit. Anyway, it doesn’t matter how he knew, but once he realized it was me, he just went ballistic.”

“Well, shit, Em. Do you blame him?”

Scratched my head. “I don’t know... no, I suppose not. But look at this carnage. Look at what’s happened.”

She dropped her head. “Yeah, look where we are, Em. There’s a reason we’re here.”

I turned away and rubbed my temples, attempting to subside a brain pulse that had just attacked me. A bitter cold scratched at my chest. Metal saliva coated my mouth. “I know,” I mumbled. Every time I thought about it my soul would crumble a little bit further.

“How the fuck are we going to tell his wife that her husband is lying in a puddle of his body fluids at the bottom of the mountain.”

She looked at me blankly.

“What?” I asked.

“She didn’t... ah... make it.”

“What?” I looked at the supine body of Mrs. Shaw, her body slumped against rock, head falling to the side, relaxed legs spread. She did what Mother couldn’t all those years ago; she made it out. She could have been Mother, and the baby could have been my baby sister or brother. And for that, she deserves more than I could offer her.

Bethany grabbed my arm. “It was all too much for her, Em. I guess her body couldn’t take it.”

“So, what the hell are we going to do about the baby?”

“What do you mean? She’ll come with us of course.”

I shook my head. “Yeah, of course. Wait. She? A baby girl?”

Bethany nodded.

I looked over the scene. Harlow admired the little bundle in his arms, wrapped in whatever materials Bethany could find under the circumstances. He seemed older than his features dictated. I wished despair, sadness, and death hadn’t consumed his childhood, but so much had happened and he had seen it all.

“I promise, Beth.”

“Promise what?”

“That I’ll get us—all of us—off this damn mountain.”

She smiled, but it looked forced. I wasn’t sure if she didn’t believe me or didn’t trust me, or if recent events still played out in her mind.

“First, we need to figure out what we’re doing. Do we wait to see if they send someone else?” she asked. “Maybe when he doesn’t return, they’ll send another.”

“Or maybe they won’t.” I bit my lip and took in the surroundings. The yellow sunrise reflected off the rocks and warmed our faces. The serenity failed to match the horrors that took place at the camp. “We don’t know when they’ll be back. It could be tomorrow. It could be next week. How long do we wait? I think the best bet is to follow the path, that’s what the guide said before he passed on. Either someone will catch up behind us, or we’ll cross paths with another guide.”

She nodded. “I guess that’s as good a plan as any.” Pointed to the wife. “What do you want to do with her and the guide? We can’t just leave them for the dogs. It’s just not right.”

“No. You’re right, as usual.”

Harlow held the baby and affixed his gaze fixed on the horizon while Bethany helped me carry the bodies of the mother and the guide to the extinguished fire. We scrapped dirt as we shuffled and shimmied the awkward load, to the point we almost dropped both on occasion.

We stacked rocks until we covered the dead and then invited Harlow to lay the last few and say some words. His delivery surpassed anything I could have mustered. Not only was it wonderfully sweet and innocent—given his limited time in the deceased’s presence as well as on this planet—but also unimaginably insightful. Maybe I shouldn’t have been stunned by his commentary, given his proficiency for meaningful dialog.

“You exist in two places,” Harlow said. “Wherever you are now, and here in your child.”

A better person than I’ll ever be.

Searching the rest of the campsite, we found a full water bottle in the late Shaw's belongings, but nothing else of use. Their possessions were as meager as our own. With our bags packed, we hit the path. I took the lead with Harlow just behind. Bethany brought up the rear, with an unnamed baby nestled in the backpack she wore on her front.

Every stride was one step closer to our wonderfully perfect future.

Or a dreadfully defective disaster.

CHAPTER 59

The path wound around the mountain before starting its downward decent. Under the vigilant gaze of wild dogs, we descended into a forest. Firs and spruces grew around us and blocked the sun. The sharp sweet smell of terpenes wafted around us.

“*Follow the path*”, I kept repeating to myself. Eventually, we’d run into another guide. Sooner or later. Whether they believed what had happened would be left to debate. I just hoped they could escort us the rest of the way.

After some time, we stumbled into a clearing and took a few minutes to rest. Bethany slowly put down the baby and arched her back.

“I’ve forgotten what that’s like,” she said.

“What do we do when it wakes up?” I asked. “What the hell are we going to feed it?”

“I can try, you know, to induce it.”

“Milk? Jesus. What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?”

She placed a hand on my cheek. “I know we didn’t ask for this, but it’s here, and we can’t do anything about it.”

I returned a sorrowful smile, and she walked off to look in the backpacks. Looking at the baby, a hundred thoughts ran through my mind. My goal was to get my family out of the city and to a place where we could thrive. I didn't want anything to get in the way of that.

Wouldn't let anything stand in the way of that.

We rationed what little food we had, and Bethany and I debated who should eat how much. It was all very kind and respectful, however, she had critical decision-making skills I couldn't comprehend, and therefore I lost the battle of the wits. She had a strategic focus I failed to see in our old lives. Maybe she kept that kind of resolve for working in the Information Franchise, or maybe I just failed to see it. Either way, I was relying on it for our survival as much as she was trusting in my determination to reach the end point.

On the skirts of the area, I found a bush that had flowered a million black berries. I squished a few in my fingers and breathed in the musky scent. Despite badly wanting a taste, Bethany shook her head.

"We can't risk it," she said. "If you're right, it'll be a godsend."

"And if I'm wrong?"

"If you're wrong, who knows what could happen. Gastrointestinal distress? Diarrhea? Hallucinations? But right now, food isn't the issue. It's the amount of water we have that I'm concerned about. We don't know how long this journey is."

It was another argument I would not win. I pocketed a bunch of the berries we could use as a last resort.

Through the trees, a low whiney noise seeped out, followed by a loud wheeze. We watched and waited, and soon, through the branches, a device flew through the sky. I couldn't quite make out what it was, but it was much smaller than a helicopter. It stopped at regular intervals, turned as if it was looking for something, like a dog trying to pick up a scent, and then expels a jet of steam, before carrying on with its task.

“What is it, Father?”

Harlow grabbed my leg, and I bent down next to him. “I’m not sure. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Bethany followed its path. “Do you think it’s looking for us?”

“Not sure, but it’s sure as hell looking for something.”

“Or someone,” she countered.

I nodded. “We should move on.”

“Which way?” Bethany asked.

It wasn’t something I had noticed when we arrived, my attention focused on resting. However, three paths sprung from the clearing, each in a seemingly different direction. The first seemed to lead back up the mountain. The second seemed to skirt the mountain. The third led away from the mountain altogether, into a part of the forest that looked darker and more ominous. The guide would have known which way to go, just like the one that led us through the labyrinth of tunnels under the city.

“Shit,” I said. There was no other word for it. “What do you think?”

Bethany went to check each path, disappearing for minutes at a time to investigate. She returned after checking the final option and sucked in deep breaths. I offered her the canteen, and she took a sip of its contents.

“The one skirting the mountain looks the most used. But that could be a ruse just in case CHIRP stumbled across it.”

“They have been pretty damn careful so far,” I said, thinking back to the skin markings and the innocuous way they identified each other.

“Or maybe that’s the ruse itself,” she continued. She folded her arms, chewed her lip, and turned to each of the paths. “Thirty-three percent chance.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t get too caught up on this one,” I said. “I have no doubt there’ll be more decisions to make on the way. Without someone knowing the route, we could be walking in circles, or heading back to the city, or worse.”

“There are worse things than going back?” she mused. “Maybe we just stay then.”

Another combination of low-pitched whine and expulsion of steam filled the airwaves.

“No, that’s just not an option.”

A snarl rippled through my thinking. Turning slowly, I saw three beasts standing in a V formation, staring in our direction. Then, something else caught the leader’s attention. I followed his gaze to see Harlow sitting next to the baby that was shifting in its swaddling, in the early stages of waking up. They were several meters to my right, and if something happened, I wasn’t sure I would win the race to my son.

The pack leader stepped forward, it’s family in lockstep.

“Harlow, don’t move, okay?”

I reached into my pocket, withdrew some berries and threw them. They didn’t even flinch, just continued that same look of fierce determination. The berries could have been poisonous, and they knew that, or the scent of warm flesh was far too enticing.

Another step forward, and the two trailing beasts fanned out across the clearing.

In my periphery, Bethany edged the clearing closer to the kids. I removed the rifle from my shoulder and leveled it at the one farthest from me. Looked down the barrel. Noted the third dog circling towards me. A snarl, a bark. Saliva dropping from fangs. There was no negotiating out of this one. Us or them. Black or white. All the chips on the table.

One final bark and the farthest animal lunged at the kids.

Bethany screamed.

I squeezed the trigger.

The gunshot rang out through the trees and seemed to echo on forever. My target face planted the dirt as the other two scattered into the trees. Bethany ran to the kids' side and held them closer than I thought was possible.

“Come on,” I said. “I don't want to be here if they decide to come back.”

We hurriedly gathered our belongings as I kept watch for any movement. Between trees and through long grass, I caught sight of narrowed dark eyes. Watching Waiting.

Bethany took point, with Harlow at her heels. As she marched out of the clearing, I turned to the soundtrack of wet chewing. The remaining beasts had returned—what I hoped to be the same animals that fled earlier—to consume their fallen comrade. Any meal was a good meal. One of them looked up to me with blood covered jowls, snarled momentarily, then dove in to continue to devour its kin.

I raised the rifle. Easy targets. Finger on the trigger. It wouldn't take much to destroy the remaining two. Squeezed. Remove the threat. Seemed like an easy decision to make. Only winners, no losers.

But then I stopped, eased my finger off the trigger. Bullets were a scarce commodity, and I had no idea what else we might encounter on our journey. Hopefully, their slain brethren would take care of their hunger long enough for us to evade them.

I shouldered the rifle, picked up the backpack, and backed out of the clearing to the sound of lapping tongues.

We worked our way over boulders and thousand-year-old trunks in silence. Occasionally, I would glance over, and Bethany would reply with a half-smile. With the baby nestled in the backpack, she would shush it back to sleep when it murmured. But we both knew that could not go on forever.

Whenever we reached an intersection, I would look to her for advice. She shrugged in reply. Nothing to quell the discomfort in my uncertainty. On occasion, I had the thought to split up to cover more possibilities, but there were no guarantees. And then we'd be alone and lost, and against the very thing I had fought for.

When the option presented itself, we elected to select the middle path. It was neither right nor wrong, or maybe both. Schrodinger's cat. I guess as long as we were making progress, given how someone defined *progress*. I mean, it felt like we were heading somewhere, even though we did not know where we were going. As long as we kept moving, as long as there wasn't a dead end, we'd keep walking, keep trying. Despite having no indication of where we were and how far we were from the end point, I felt free. The thought of pulling up and building a house of fallen logs was on offer, although I lacked all the skills necessary to accomplish that task.

Around a rocky bend, two large boulders greeted us on the path, and we squeezed between them. On the other side, the air was wetter. A constant crashing sound filled the surrounding air. Faint at first, but as we weaved through the rocks, it became louder.

"Is that what I think it is?" Bethany asked.

"I sure as hell hope so."

We squeezed in a crevice that seemed to split the mountain in twain. The jagged walls were wet, and it wasn't long before the spray drenched our clothes. I licked my lips, savoring the moisture. One more corner and I stepped out onto a rocky plateau as the roar of a waterfall overtook my senses. A large pool greeted us, surrounded by wet boulders and jagged outcrops. Sheer walls grew all around us, the summit of which was out of sight.

"We must be close," I said. "We must be. This is the perfect location. Away from the outside, fresh drinking water. This must be it."

She smiled, and the past dissolved into specs of memory.

The sun disintegrated behind the waterfall as we rested. We ate the rest of our food in celebration.

“Any minute now,” I kept repeating. And I truly believed it. Any moment, a group of guides would appear, embrace us, welcome us to their community, and our new journey would begin.

But they did not arrive, even as the moon almost covered the sky. A thousand microscopic lights twinkled, and it felt like the first time I had ever seen them. With the children sleeping against the vertical walls on makeshift beds of clothes and branches, I sat on the edge of the lagoon with my knees to my chest. Bethany came and sat next to me and laid her head on my shoulder.

“I can’t believe how hard we had to fight to get here. This is what Jackson wanted,” I said. “This is what he died for. What his family died for.”

“What a lot of people have died for,” she added. “Or worse.”

“I wonder how many people have made it. How many have seen this, have sat where we are now?”

“Or how many don’t want to... or can’t.”

“We were part of the big machine, Beth. We created policy, enacted protocol. Blindly followed the rules because that’s what they told us to do. We didn’t want to get out.”

“If they hadn’t taken Harlow, would we be here now?”

I huffed. “Probably not, as shitty as I feel saying that. That’s the worst part of this. The worst part of me. The worst part of everything. We put up a fight when we were painted into a corner.”

“I guess some people need more of a push than others. As long as we are out and safe and a family. That’s all I want, all I ever wanted.”

The constant thunder of moonlight water plunging into the black lagoon proved to be an exceptional canvas for our silence.

“Do you regret it,” she asked me. “Not getting out earlier?”

I looked to the crest of the waterfall. “I guess I feel guilty for turning a blind eye to the hurt that I caused, for the pain that exists... and will continue to exist.”

She patted my leg. “I guess all we can do is focus on the now. And that doesn’t mean we can forget about all of our mistakes.”

I nodded, but my mind was elsewhere.

“I’m going to get some sleep,” she mumbled.

But I wasn’t listening.

Thoughts of the deal I made with the White Witch. Raxiel relinquished information so I could find Harlow, and in return, I belonged to her. That was the deal. She could use me as she saw fit. My life would forever be intertwined with The Push. The risks to that endeavor were unknown, yet they existed just the same. And all of a sudden, the promise I made to Bethany, and to Harlow, turned brittle.

I turned. “Wait. There’s something I need to tell you.”

But I was too late. Bethany had disappeared into the shadows. I was once more left with my thoughts, which was often a dangerous place to be. I laid back, found some comfort on the stones, and closed my eyes. And the pounding water led me to sleep.

That night I had a dream, so damn vivid it was hard to forget, nor distinguish it from reality.

Someone had restrained me to a metal chair, so uncomfortable that I couldn’t find any solace with the bars that bent into my spine. Investigator Wheatley was there, surrounded by an alive John Berry and his son, of Jackson and his family, of Lennox, and Maximus and Charlie and Chloe. All staring at me. Wheatley stepped forward and told me to confess my

sins against them or pay the consequences. I tried to talk, but it was as if they glued my lips shut. I struggled against my bonds, groaned out to him. Surely, he could see I was in no condition to appease him, yet he continued to badger me.

Eventually, he sighed and turned to the audience.

“I’m sorry, but he is not being very receptive to polite requests.”

“What will you do?” Berry asked.

“Oh,” said Wheatley, “we have many ways to encourage our guests to participate fully.”

He pulled out an electric drill and displayed it to the others. Squeezed the trigger. The bit spun incredibly fast, and I couldn’t understand why Wheatley could ever want such a device. Then he turned and pointed at my forehead.

“This will help the guest focus on the question,” he said.

He neared with the device, squeezing the trigger in short bursts, until, with one final look of murderous rage, he squeezed hard and pushed the tip against my skin.

That’s when I woke, plummeted to earth, and jerked with such ferocity that I cut my arms and legs on the sharp rocks surrounding me. Then the whirring noise increased until it was almost upon me.

As I opened my eyes, I witnessed a dark object descending into our impenetrable sanctuary.

CHAPTER 60

I dove on top of them and told them to be quiet.

“What is it?” Bethany asked, her brain playing catchup with the quickened wake from slumber.

I shushed her. “It’s back,” I whispered.

My heart beat wildly through my top, and I felt theirs in unison. The baby whined. Beth tried to lull it with little impact. I put my hand over its mouth. I didn’t know what else to do.

I peeked over to the device, and it seemed to look directly at us. It edged closer. I was hoping the shadows of the mountain walls would be enough to keep us undetected. Held its position. One. Two. Three seconds. Then, it released a jet of steam from its back that got hacked by the rotor blades, lurched left, then right, then continued with its investigation.

I watched as it stopped at regular intervals, peering at the rock before continuing. It lowered itself in front of the waterfall. Inching forward, then backward. Then, without warning, pitched vertically up the stream of water and disappeared from view.

I released my hand from the baby, and it let out a scream. Bethany held it close, rocking it against her.

“I... I had to.”

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

“Come on,” I said as I stood. “We need to go.”

“Shouldn’t we wait to see if anyone comes?”

“I don’t want to be here when that thing comes back.”

“If it comes back.”

“Either way,” I said.

“Where are we going to go?” Bethany asked. “Back the way we came? To the previous intersection of paths?”

“That thing spent longer in front of that waterfall than it did in front of us.”

“Maybe we were hidden. Maybe it couldn’t see us.”

“Or maybe it’s not looking for us.”

I carefully scaled the wet rocks next to the waterfall. The approach was treacherous, and the impact of the water even more so. But the discovery was worth it. I scaled back to the edge of the lagoon where the others stood waiting. Bethany nervously scanned the skies, with Harlow clutching her leg.

“A cave,” I said. “Behind the waterfall.”

“Where does it go?”

“Out of here,” I said. “We’ve got to keep moving until we find the others.”

Bethany didn’t hide her uncertainty.

“I can go on ahead,” I offered. “See if this thing leads anywhere. Then I can come back for you.”

Suddenly, a roar tore through the sky, as the underbelly of a helicopter sped across the canvas. We instinctively ducked, but it was moving much too fast to see us. The methodical thumping of the blades and hum of the engines disappeared as rapidly as they were upon us. It was the kind of machine I had only ever heard about on the news, the types of vehicles they sent off to war to transport soldiers to the front lines.

“What is that doing here?” Bethany’s voice wavered.

“I don’t know.”

Moments later, an explosion echoed around us, like standing in the middle of a thunderstorm. A second of silence before a second earth-shattering crash. We looked at each other and started climbing. Harlow clung to my back as I traversed the sharp rocks, with Bethany just behind. We both slipped and steadied ourselves multiple times, but eventually, we were in the gloom, with sunlight reflecting through the high-speed water that shot past the entrance.

We mentally prepared ourselves to walk blindly into the abyss. No lights, no matches. It was impossible to tell how deep the cave went, which way it turned, or what was below our feet. With any luck, it wouldn’t take us long to reach the outside world once again. But luck was always against the person who depended on it.

Bethany stayed close as I edge further from the light to a point where it had disappeared altogether, and my eyes adjusted to the gloom to present a world of grays and purples. Bethany’s breathing was the only sign I had that she was right behind me. I kept my hand on the wall to maintain my balance as cool gusts whipped around us. Then it would die down again, and an earthy smell overwhelmed us. Nevertheless, we carried on. Shuffling

forward at an infuriating pace. Time was irrelevant in the void, more immaterial than it had been since we had fled the city.

The cave veered left, dipped down, then upwards at a steep gradient. We were walking into perpetuity.

I stopped dead in my tracks. “Do you hear that?” I whispered.

Bethany held her breath and then replied. “I hear nothing.”

“It sounds like children playing. Screams. Laughter.”

“I think that’s in your head.”

Maybe she was right. I carried on. Turning right now. Sharply. Walls closed in, shoulder to shoulder rock. Stooped down to avoid banging my head. Clawed at my shirt to open my airways. It did little to help.

Then I stopped again. Thought I saw something. A pin prick of white dancing in the void.

“Is that...” Bethany said.

“Oh, thank god,” I said. “I thought I was seeing things as well.”

We moved towards the anomaly, our pace quickening with every step, both of us eager to get away from the walls that were closing around us. The light grew bigger until it became so blinding, I had to shield my eyes from its glory. The air became lighter, easier to breathe.

Waited at the precipice for eyesight to adjust to the new environment. Saw my family after what seemed like an eternity. We had made it through the tunnels to reach the other side, but I still didn’t know what that meant. Still unsure if we were heading in the right direction.

The brightness dimmed into the late afternoon and a thousand trees greeted us. We stepped out of the passageway and climbed down rocks to the ground, soft with wet leaves.

The area yawned open before us, showcasing pine needles that lit up in the foreground of an orange sunset.

Into the distance to our left, atop a plateau between two mountain peaks, a thin trail of smoke trailed into the sky.

“That must have been the explosion,” Bethany said. “You think it was from that helicopter?”

I didn’t reply, just kept looking out to the horizon. Checked the surroundings. There were no paths, no signals, no signs we should continue. Nothing, except for the smoke.

“I guess we’ll stop here for the night and keep going in the morning.”

Bethany eased the baby down and gently placed it into Harlow’s waiting arms. She stretched and bones popped and fizzed. “How long do you think it’ll take for us to get there?”

I shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe three days? Could even be four?”

She came up beside me, spoke in low tones. “What are we going to do for food? We’ve got nothing left.”

I pulled some berries out of my pocket. They were warm and squishy.

“You sure about this?” she asked.

I looked around. Visibility was reducing by meters every second as the sun dipped out of sight. “Not sure we’ve got a choice anymore.” Popped one in my mouth. Tart on first tasting, the bitterness subsided quickly. I waited for something to happen. Vomiting. Diarrhea. Sweats. Hallucinations. But there was nothing, other than the want to eat the rest of them.

I handed them out. One each. It wasn’t much, but it was all we had. Bethany squashed a berry, removed the skin, and rubbed the contents on the baby’s gums. We nestled together in the dark, against the trunks, and waited for the sky to lighten.

For some unknown reason, I smelt it before I heard it. The putrid smell of death was upon me, and I twitched my face at the overwhelming odor. But it was the snarl that brought me back to my senses. The world was light, but the bared teeth and empty eyes of a wild dog obfuscated my vision. At first, I thought it was a dream, but then reality dawned. It stood over me, waiting. I didn't know what for.

Breath caught in my throat. I dared not take my eyes off it yet needed to know if the others were okay.

“Bethany?” I mumbled.

“Yes,” she elongated as a second growling dog joined the harmony.

“Can you reach the rifle?” I asked, each word monotone and extended.

“No,” came the simple reply.

I slowly reached for the boom stick, which only pissed the dog off, the pitch of its snarl going off the scales. Saw my reflection in its eyes. Knew what it wanted from us. Tracking us for days through the paths, over, around, and through rocks. It wanted to feed. Someone had to pay the penalty. Them or us. Kill or be killed. It was that simple.

Everything happened fast. Too fast. No opportunity to stop and think. Just needed to react to the situation. We outnumbered them, but they were better equipped. In my periphery, the dog lunged. Bethany and Harlow screamed as she fought off the attack. Sounds with no pictures. Horrific.

I lunged for the rifle as the dog's menacing teeth came for me. Pushed my arm into its mouth and grit my teeth in anticipation of my flesh being ripped off. It didn't disappoint. I bellowed, trying to ignore the massive animal yanking me away. Fingertips on the weapon, but I was losing the fight. Teeth on bone as the second dog sprung on top of me. I swung my fist lazily, praying for a break in the frenzy, but all I got was a double dose of agony.

“Run,” I thundered. “Run!”

I fought against the animals, who were dragging me away in opposite directions. Warmth coated my skin. Their teeth dragged down my arm. Chomped on my hands. They were going to take whatever they could of my body.

Then a boom. Then relief. Then the stinging reality of what was happening. One dog slumped on the ground while the other, with the taste of blood on its lips, would not be run off again. And it seemed eating its pack member was the furthest thing from its mind. Not when they had injured the prey. Not when it had come so far.

I wiggled back against the tree and tried not to look down at the mingled mess of skin and blood that was my arm, but the curiosity got the better of me. Fire burned up my arms and into my brain and I just wanted to shut down into oblivion.

The scene looked like something from an old Western. To my right, Bethany held the rifle against her shoulder, her stance splayed. Her opponent growled lowly as it menacingly paced left and right towards her. Bethany followed its movements religiously.

“Shoot it,” I coughed. “Fucking kill it.”

She pulled the trigger. Click. The dog stopped for a moment, as if picking up on a high frequency whistle. Then moved again. Bethany cocked the gun. Fired again. Still nothing. The additional bullets I pilfered from the dead guide at the mountainside campsite rested idle in my pocket. Might as well have been half a world away at that moment.

The dog must have sensed an upper hand because, without warning, it leaped at her. With jaws open, teeth bared, and claws extended, it flew. Black eyes set on soft skin encasing soft tissue and warm blood.

Just as sudden, there came a sickening crunch of a solid strike, and I turned in time to see the beast knocked off-kilter, and Bethany standing with the butt of the rifle over her

shoulder. She had swung hard with her hands on the barrel, and devastatingly cracked the beast's head with the rifle stock.

The dog landed awkwardly, and took a step sideways before its legs faltered and it crumpled to the dirt. A sorrowful groan before laying its head down on its paws. It didn't move after that.

Death followed us everywhere.

CHAPTER 61

Time danced surreptitiously as I fell into and out of unconsciousness. I woke frequently to a cool piece of material on my forehead and a berry in my mouth. My arms swung from bleak numbness through to excruciating torture. For my sins.

Light pierced the canopy and directly into my eye. A new day. Unsure how many had passed, but we couldn't stay there forever. I forced myself onto my feet. Every notion of moving my arms sent an electric shock through me and I grimaced.

“What are you doing?” Bethany asked, her voice breaking through the cloudiness.

“We can't stay here forever,” I slurred. “Besides, I'm sure the camp has medicines or drugs or something.”

I looked over at Harlow. He looked older but figured it was my brain that had failed to fully wake yet. Shifting lazily to the horizon, the smoke had faded, yet the rock formation where we saw it became our compass. With my determination to reach it and my defiance to just wait for death to find me, we trekked into the trees.

The journey was slow going. My condition, along with wading through tall grass and circumnavigating an ominous swamp, extended our route. Harlow discovered more berries on

the way that nourished us. Staggered upon an ancient watering hole containing liquid as fresh as rain that revived us. There were more packs of wild dogs, but we managed to chase them away or skirt around their attentive gaze. Bethany ensured the gun was always loaded and ready to fire. It slung over her shoulder where the baby nuzzled her. At one point during the day, she exclaimed the baby had taken to her breasts, and that she could feel her milk coming in. A miracle of science that bated necessity.

We navigated. We stopped. We rested. Rinse and repeat. Days on days, and it felt like that mountainous plateau was as far away as it had ever been. There were times when my world tilted off the scales and I woke to find myself on one knee or my face in the dirt. Still, we marched on, with no complaints from Harlow. The resilience of his youth served him well.

Daylight into moonlight. Darkness into dawn. Food running as low as the words we shared with each other. It cost us everything to escape the city, and now, freedom continued to tax us. With my mental capacities fading like the ever-dipping sun, we reached the base of the plateau. Bags fell from shoulders as we wearily gawked up the sheer rock wall to the end point. The sun fell out of sight as I traced a narrow path up the side of the mountain.

“Is that it?” Bethany said as she sat on a low rock. “Is that the only thing that stands between us and forever?”

“I hope so,” I replied. “I hope so.” I dug my hand in my pocket and retrieved some berries. Held three of them out to her. “This is all I’ve got.”

“Same here,” she said.

“Oh, so we can survive another week.” I winked at her.

She gave an exhausted smile and squished a berry to feed the baby. As she rubbed the pulp on its gums, she looked up at me. “We’ll need a name.”

“For the baby?”

“Yeah. We can’t keep calling it *‘it’* or *‘the baby’*. She’s one of us now. She’s a Barnes through and through. She’s going to need us.”

“We can’t keep her from her past. That’s just not right.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. We’ll tell her everything, when she’s ready to hear it.”

I gave a nod of acknowledgement. “What about Mathilde?” I offered.

“Where did that come from?”

“It was Mother’s middle name.”

“I never knew that,” Bethany said.

How much do we really know anyone?

“Berry!” Harlow shouted. “Because she likes Berries.”

“Berry like her great grandfather,” I muttered. Fitting. Circle of life kind of shit. I rubbed Harlow on the head. “Berry it is.”

Bethany looked down. “Welcome, little Berry Mathilde Barnes. You’ve faced a lot to get here. Your parents gave their lives for you to be here.”

“And *their* parents before them,” I added.

“What do you mean?”

I looked at Harlow. He was busy watching ants scurry over the hot earth into their mound. I eased down next to Bethany and spoke in hushed tones, both because to protect Harlow from my past, and because of the shame of it all.

“The night it all happened, the night I... you know, John Berry.” Still couldn’t bring myself to say it. “He was trying to get his grandson, Michael, to what he thought was Laferty Bridge. He was Running because we had orders to allocate Michael to a House. Both his parents died that night.”

“Jesus,” she breathed. “How?”

I held my breath. “It depends on what you read, who you talk to, what you know.”
Looked away. “A car accident. Where the CHIRP Sergeant walked away without a scratch.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that three generations are gone, and Berry here is the last one in a long line of death.”

She placed a hand on my shoulder. “So, let’s make sure she makes it. For them.”

“For us all,” I said.

Whispers. Seeping through the darkness and to me. I woke with a start and stared into the nothingness. Trees and rocks were nothing but blobs of gray in a hollow landscape. Ears rang. Then it was there again. Voices. Short, distinct exchanges. Rolled and looked up at the plateau. A glow emanated where it touched the sky, like an aurora. Shadows danced across the heavens.

“I’m coming to you,” I mumbled. “Be ready for us. We need you.”

The sun burnt my eyelids, forcing me to wake into a dazzling morning. The sky was clearer and purer than I had ever seen it. I felt like I had been living in a monotone existence. Even the sparkle in Bethany’s eyes returned, a knowing smile on her lips.

“Today’s the day,” she said.

“It had better be.” It had to have been, because there wasn’t much more I could take.
“Did you hear and see them last night?”

She looked at me quizzically. “Who?”

“Them,” I said, pointing up the mountain. “Up there. Voices. Light.”

She looked up to where I was pointing. “Sorry. Didn’t hear anything.”

I looked down. “Christ, maybe it was all in my head.”

“Hey,” she said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t do that. Not now, not ever.

We’ve got nowhere to go but to keep moving. We can’t go back, and we can’t go around.”

“What if... what if all of this was a mistake.”

She laughed. “Then it’s been one hell of a fuck up.”

“How can you be so damn positive about all of this?”

“What else can I do? What could *anyone* do?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Come on. The sooner we start...”

“The sooner we finish.” Looked up the rock face. “What do you think? Three, four hours?”

“If we’re lucky,” she replied. “Don’t forget, we’ve got Harlow and Berry. We can’t go freewheeling off the side of the mountain. Not now. Not when we’re so close.”

I chewed it all over in my mind.

“We need you, Em. The very best of you to get up there safely with a kid and a baby. I don’t want random uncertainties running around your head.”

“Almost there,” I stated. But we’d felt like we were almost there for days. It had kept us going. Almost there. Almost there.

“Almost isn’t good enough,” Bethany would reply, and she did it again right there and then.

Almost there.

Almost isn’t good enough.

She was right. Again. As usual.

We packed up camp—our meager possessions—and marched off towards the path.

The first few boulders were large and oddly out of place. Beyond that, solid earth gave way to shale and loose rocks. The path was half a meter wide, and each step sent loose rocks over the side, tumbling end over end before they fell to the ground. Even from our starting height, it would have been a hell of a fall.

“Harlow,” I said. “I need you to stay right behind me, okay?” He didn’t reply, but I knew he nodded. “Step where I do and take your time. No point rushing if we never get there.”

Bethany brought up the rear, with Berry sleeping in the backpack attached to her front. Handholds became just as perilous as our footsteps, with the risk of a landslide landing directly onto us. We moved on prudently as the rays showed little mercy on us. It felt like our path was a stairway directly into the sun. The rocks emanated the fire and stung my face. Sweat erupted from my pores freely. Stale saltwater on my lips my only sustenance.

There was a time when I thought I had nothing left to lose. But I was wrong. My body ached. Electric shocks sizzled my arms. My brain felt too big for my skull. First, I thought freedom would cost me my sanity. But it might in fact cost me more.

The temperature seemed to drop a degree with every unsteady footstep. A different type of burning on my skin. Winds howled periodically, and I dared not look down to see how high we had climbed.

In a moment of silence, I heard something else. The whizz of blades and a puff of steam. I waded behind me and pressed my body against the rocks, but there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. All we could do is hope that whatever the thing was, it didn’t see us. Buzzing intensified as the object came into view, right in front of my face.

Reached back for Harlow and pressed him against me. I clenched my eyes shut and counted the seconds. The continuous hum failed to dissipate. I counted some more. A hiss broke the disciplined thrum before it rapidly ascended and disappeared over the edge.

“It saw us,” Bethany shouted.

“I don’t know what it saw,” I replied over my shoulder. “I don’t even know if it has eyes.”

The sun had dipped behind our destination when I pulled myself onto a ledge just below the plateau. On my hands and knees, I roared as I pulled up Harlow. My wounds hadn’t recovered from the dog attack and the dressings were damp and bloody. Yet Harlow clung on, and I yanked him up. Bethany carefully passed up little Berry in her backpack and heaved herself up.

I groaned as I stood and regarded our position. The highland stretched out before us. Trees lined the area, the glowing orb impossibly large sinking behind the horizon, making it look like the leaves were on fire. Mountains reached for the sky on either side, their snowy peaks disappearing into the dark blue landscape.

Bethany placed her arm around my waist. “We made it.”

We *had* made it. Probably not the most direct route, but we had gotten there. We fought with the ghosts of our past. We survived wild animal attacks. We endured the environment. No, we didn’t *just* get there. We *deserved* to be there.

“You see that, Harlow?” I said. “That’s our new home.”

We marched forward together as a family.

Home at last.

Waiting for the survivors—the ones who had escaped—to rush to us with open arms.

And welcome us into their community.

CHAPTER 62

But no one came.

“Where is everyone?” I murmured.

I stopped, and the others stopped around me.

“What’s wrong?” Bethany asked.

“Something... doesn’t feel right. Does this feel right to you?”

She shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t know what feels right anymore. I know we’re here.”

“But no one else is? No, something’s going on.”

We approached cautiously, checking for signs of life in every shadow, behind every rock. I shouted our arrival into the trees but didn’t get a reply.

“Maybe they’re out gathering food or berries, or water... or more survivors.”

“All of them?”

She didn’t reply.

We stepped forward.

“Or maybe this isn’t the place,” she said.

“It has to be,” I said. “It must be.”

As we approached, the outline of a black object rose from the ground in the distance. The cold and lifeless twisted carnage of a helicopter sat gracelessly among wood and rock. Rotor blades were mangled and broken. The impact had blackened the surrounding trees. From our vantage, it looked like one of the little helicopters that passed us on the side of the mountain, but I knew, in reality, it was a lot larger than that.

“That must have been the explosion,” I said. “The one we heard when we were at the waterfall.”

“How could it have crashed here?”

“Maybe it didn’t have a choice.”

“You mean, someone brought it down? Using some sort of ordinance?”

“Maybe.”

Bethany reached out for Harlow as if he was about to step on a landmine. “Only the military has the weapons to bring down a helicopter of that size. How could anyone else have that amount of firepower?”

“I don’t know, Bethany. I don’t...” I trailed off and stared at her.

“What?” she said.

“Do you hear that?”

She turned her head.

It was low at first, almost imperceptible. A low mechanical thrum.

Then a whizzing noise. I couldn’t place it, seemed to echo around the plateau, rebounding from the mountains on either side. Then a lightning bolt hit me. The next thing I knew, I’m on my back, a couple of feet where I had stood. I didn’t feel it at first. In the beginning everything was numb, but then my shoulder burned. Fire crawled up my neck and

into my brain. It stung like a mother fucker. I bellowed but my voice melted into the void. The world was silent.

Slow-motion. Something flicked in front of my face. Then another. And another. The hum increased, and the ground felt alive. I turned to the others. People in black flight suits and helmets rushed from nowhere and grabbed Bethany and Harlow. They fought against their captors, opened their mouths to scream but nothing came out. Reached for them.

Then, all at once, my senses fired on all cylinders. The sound was deafening and overtook my other senses. Thumping of rotor blades. Footfalls of boots on the ground. Commands shouted. Weapons cocked. Everything in crystal clear quality.

“Get him up,” a man shouted, pointing at me.

With no regard for any injury, they yanked me to my feet. I grimaced as I watched the man remove his balaclava.

“Iggy?”

The chirp officer swung hard with his fist and collected me in the face. I swung to my right. If it wasn't for the two others holding me up, I would've landed flat on my face.

“I told you,” Iggy said. “I told you if you screwed me, I'd hunt you down.”

I looked at him and he swung again with his left. I lurched in the other direction, swaying like a marionette held up by human strings. Blood flowed from my nose and cut on my cheek and somehow quelled the pain that was ravaging my body from other limbs.

Iggy grabbed me by my lapels and pulled me into his face. That's when I saw what they had done to him, those sick bastards in the Pit.

“I'm... Sorry,” I slurred with fat lips.

“Look at my face, Emerson. Look at it. They did things to me I'll never forget.”

Crevices streaked across his face in various stages of healing and recovery. Some as old as a week ago, some as fresh as a few hours. I was certain they didn't stop at his face and imagined his entire body engulfed in tiny, raised edges.

"And I told them everything," he continued. "I promised I'd get you. And, well, we got you."

Over Iggy's shoulder, a second helicopter idled. In front of it, Harlow and Bethany continued to struggle against their human bonds. Another officer was cradling Berry, lightly bouncing to calm her in the catastrophic chaos.

"Forget about them, Emerson," Iggy said. "You may have been able to bring your family back together, and screw me in the process, but trust me, I'll enjoy taking you apart piece by piece. "

He released my lapels and turned to address his troops. "Get them all onboard." He stuck his finger in the air and spun it around.

The whine of the blades intensified as the officers pushed me towards the helicopter. I looked over to Bethany, enduring the same feat towards her own ride. The two officers in flight suits standing with Berry and Harlow stood firm.

We had risked everything to get there but lost it in the blink of an eye. Whatever sanctuary existed beyond the city turned out to be just as government suggested. A ruse. A lie. Call it what you will.

"What's going to happen to them?" I shouted to Iggy.

"Do you give a shit? You only care about yourself."

"Leave them and take me. I'll do anything you want."

"You think it's as easy as that? Nah. I'm going to ruin your life, Emerson. Then I'm going to ruin their life, just like you destroyed mine."

I spun and collected the officer behind me with a wild haymaker, his body collapsing at the helicopter treads. Turned to the kids. Their subduers were pointing at each other and then to me. One step. I will never leave you. Two steps. Never again. Three steps. A hard object to the side of my head, forcing the level ground to spin on an imaginary axis. The earth attacked me with no remorse.

“When will you learn, Emerson? You are done. You are finished.”

Hands under me, lifting me on board. Harness tightened over my chest. Difficult to keep my head steady. In the distance, the officers clung to my children. Harlow struggled, tried to run to me, arms and legs flailing.

“I’m so sorry, Harlow,” I whispered. “So sorry for everything.”

Another apology. Not my last.

Iggy climbed in opposite me and slid the door shut, blocking out the gust. Felt the power of the beast rise. Through twin clouds of dust, the people in the black flights suits and helmets held Harlow and Berry.

Iggy turned to follow my gaze.

“How did you know?” I blurted out.

He spun back to me.

“How did I know what?”

“Where to find us?”

He smirked. Evil, crooked. “Azriel planted a tracker in your backpack when we picked you up from the House.”

My head jostled uncontrollably as the helicopter shook before changing direction and powering down.

“That’s what you were talking about outside the car. You didn’t trust us?”

“He didn’t. The tracker was our compromise.”

“Where is Aziel now?”

Narrowed his gaze. “Executed,” he replied bluntly.

“I’m sorry—.”

Iggy swung with his fist and collected my face on its short arc.

“Don’t,” he spat. “Just don’t. That’s all you ever do, isn’t it? Make promises, then break them and say sorry and hope all is forgiven. You think that absolves you, that it makes everything okay? I can tell you now that no judge, nor jury, nor interrogator, accepts it.”

Our bodies shifted and wobbled with the vibration of the cabin.

“Why did they kill him?”

Iggy balled his fist. He wanted to hit me. I could tell. From the look on his face, he needed all of his willpower to stop him from throwing that punch and knocking me out. After some seconds, he released it all and every tense muscle relaxed. He dropped his head to his chest.

“They killed him because of what I said.” He looked up. “I told them it was his idea to release and follow you. That it was my idea to hide a tracker in your belongings. And it was because of those words, of that false confession, that they let me go... and condemned my love.”

I was astonished the last remnants of our relationship allowed for such a shocking confession, yet I could feel the pathway collapsing under the enormous weight of the revelation.

“We are the same, Emerson. We sacrifice others, we use people to get what we want.”

“I’m so sorry, Iggy,” I repeated. “I really am.”

He pulled his sidearm and jammed the barrel under my chin. “You told me that murder is a matter of perspective. You killed John Berry because he betrayed your father.

You betrayed me! So what do you deserve?" He shoved it again. "Huh? No words? No smart ass remarks?"

He pulled the trigger. The click was louder than the thumping rotor blades.

"No more, Emerson. No more of your apologies. No more of anything."

Iggy sat back and holstered his weapon. Pointed at me. "You're done. For good this time."

CHAPTER 63

A crack as loud as thunder and the dark room lights up with a single bulb aimed directly into my pupils. With a screwed-up face, I look away until I can feel the warmth over my body. I cautiously open my eyes. First to the floor where the people with black boots walk back and forth, and then to the person sitting opposite me. Although a white spot hid his face—remnants of the sudden exploding star in front of my face—he wears a white lab coat with silver pens sticking out of its pocket.

He reaches up and taps the lens.

“Look here, please, Mr. Barnes.”

I didn't have much choice for I am restrained to a chair, with leather straps around my chest and wrists, ankles and forehead. And despite this, I make a concerted effort to stare into the round, black mirrors, because it is more painful not to do as instructed.

“It's a wonderful story,” he says.

I can't tell if he's mocking me or it's a genuine comment.

“But it sounds like you all got off lightly,” he continues in his monotone tune. “You and that friend of yours. What was his name again? James?”

“Jackson,” I say.

“Yes. Jackson. I don’t suppose you know the new laws the Committee have recently introduced?”

I look at him blankly.

He nods. “Thought as much. Cheating, divorce and childbirth out of matrimony. Oh. And child birthday parties. All illegal activities.”

“But—?”

He holds up a hand. “Black and white, Mr. Barnes. There are no terms up for negotiation or clarification. They are whole and they are sound. They are for the good of the children. Do you understand?”

I just look at him because I can’t move my head.

“I suppose Christmas is next,” I muttered.

He tips his head forward. “I think that’s on the next agenda.”

He can see the response in my eyes.

“Very good, Mr. Barnes. Now,” he says, reading this clipboard. “Where were we?”

He clicks his tongue as he runs a finger down his list. “Ah, yes. Is there anything more to add to the story?” he asks.

I shake my head, as much as the head constraint will allow. “No. That’s it.”

He taps the lens again. “At the camera, Mr. Barnes.”

Concerted effort. “No. That’s it.” More aggressive this time.

“What do you want? More than anything.”

“I want my family back.”

“Where do you want to live?”

“Anywhere but here.”

I immediately regret those words, but they escaped before I can consciously catch them. He stands over me and moves his leg like he's kicking over a motorcycle engine. I flip back, my body jostling, like I was in an unmaintained dental chair.

“What are you doing?”

Large round lights shine overhead, and it stops me focusing on the shadow figure.

“I'm sorry,” I say.

He pulls my right eyelids apart, holds something over it. I wait for it. While I yell and beg, my vision goes dark, and something pinches my neck, like a mosquito enjoying dinner. When I wake, my vision is a monochrome landscape, bordered by large glowing disks, monitor screens and dials. A mechanical whir erupts behind me. A splash of white on the wall before me, then numbers count down. A single beep. Followed by another three.

The screen flickers to a grainy image of a woman sitting at a desk. I've seen it before. I've lost count of how many times they make me watch it. I can just about mouth the words as she says them, and some of the way through, I catch myself doing exactly that.

“Succumb,” she says. “There is nothing for you out there. There never was and there never will be. Your existence is here, with all of us, in this city of rules and guidelines and principles.”

Her voice was hypnotic, and I can feel the picture swirl into unidentifiable colors.

“I'll ask you again, Mr. Barnes. What do you want?”

“My...”

He taps the lens. “For the camera.”

Lift my head. “I want my wife. I miss my children.”

“Where are your children?”

“You’ve got them,” I say.

“Where are your children?” the man repeats.

I stumble over the words, and they came out as disconnected gibberish.

The room goes black.

“We only did what was best for the children. If the parents weren’t able to look after them, we would do it on their behalf until they were ready. We would help them get back on their feet, to be the best parents they could.” She smiled, yet the corners of her mouth pointed down. “There used to be people who didn’t believe in what we were doing, who wanted to hurt the children. They would cast rumors and aspersions about the government, our objectives, and false promises for those that followed.”

“False promises,” I whisper.

“Tell me again,” the man says. “Were you Running?”

“Yes.”

“What did you find on that mountain?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I thought there was something there. I thought it actually existed.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“No.”

He wheels his chair closer until he was right beside my ear. Spoke softly, and I had to concentrate to make out the words. “I can take you there.”

“What? Where?”

“I can take you to them. To the place outside the city. I can help you.”

“But... how?”

“Do you want to go?”

“I...”

“Do. You. Want. To. Go?”

“More than anything.”

The room goes black.

“But those people don’t exist anymore. It is just us and you and your neighbors and your friends. We all watch each other, and check on each other, and makes sure we are all looking after the children in the best possible way. People who talk about another place don’t care about you, don’t care about the children. This doctrine is sound. The policies. The departments. The franchises. The rules. The guidelines. They are all designed for the children, to give them the best chance of prosperity. Don’t you want the best for your children? Or your neighbor’s children?”

Silence. There was always silence in this part to let it all sink in.

“Love your children. Obey the government.”

I say the words along with her, because she always says them twice. Always.

“Love your children. Obey the government.”

Lights. Camera. Darkness. Education. Lights. Questions. Darkness. Messages. Hours. Days. Don't know how many times. Don't know how long. Time repeating itself. The same questions. The same video.

The man taps the camera lens. "For the camera, Emerson."

"I love my children. I'll obey the government."

"Do you want to know where Laferty Bridge is?"

"It doesn't exist. None of it exists."

Wheels in close. Whispers. "I can take you there. I can help you find it."

"Help!" I scream. "Someone, help. This man is talking about the bridge."

The man pushes himself away, a smirk on his face. He writes some notes in a folder.

"Very good, Emerson. Now, tell me about your children."

"Boy Barnes."

"Yes. Tell me about him."

"Strong, mentally strong. Resilient. Brave. Worthy."

"Sounds like he will make an excellent member of the community when he is older."

I nod.

"You went to the mountain with your wife, Bethany, and Boy. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Whose idea was it to go to the mountain?"

"Mine," I say without hesitation. "Just mine. Bethany didn't know where we were going."

"I see," he says. "And how did you come across this information?"

"During an investigation as part of my role as an Inspector."

He tutted and shook his head as he made a note. "Was anyone else complicit in your actions?"

“Someone else?” I ask.

“Yes. You might tell me Iggy was involved beyond what is already known.

Implicating others can make it easy for yourself. You know that, Mr. Barnes.”

“I do know that.”

“Well,” he presses. “Was there someone else involved?”

“No,” I say definitely. “My actions were my own.”

He looks at me and huffs in an almost disappointed fashion. “What about Boy?”

“What about him?”

“Where is he now?”

I shrug, the best I can do given my constraints. “I just want to help. I want to contribute to the government, to society. We must all help the children.”

“But where is Boy?”

“I thought he was in the other helicopter.”

He sits back. Regards me for a moment.

“Where is Boy?” he repeats, his voice even.

I don’t answer, but he waits for one all the same.

Twin dust clouds swirled under us. Through them, I saw the two people in black flight suits holding the children. Berry clutched in arms. Harlow being held back, the gust tossing his hair about his face. As the helicopters lifted with Bethany and I as passengers, I blinked, and then they disappeared. A glimpse of Harlow being carried behind the black wreckage was the last time I saw him.

Relief settled over the stabbing pain in my chest and the knots my stomach was tying itself into. Harlow and Berry were safe, protected from the madness. *They* had come and rescued him.

Strands of cloud passed the window, like cotton candy at the local show.

I'll come back for you, Harlow. I'll come for you, Berry.

I'll get mummy and find you both.

My last promise.

"Where is Boy?" he repeats. "What did you see on that mountain?"

I stare at him. Through him.

No more promises. No more apologies.

"Nothing," I say. "I didn't see anything. The promise of a new life was a lie. There was no one there to welcome us, to save us. No haven, no village, no city. And as for Boy? I thought he was taken on board the other helicopter with Bethany. So, I'm afraid, I have no idea what happened to him."

Just one last lie.

One I'll take to the grave.

Or until I see them again.

Whichever comes first.

The man regards me for a moment and then all at once, his expression changes from curious to concern. An alert emits from a speaker mounted on the wall, soft and slow at first, and then to an ear-piercing screech. Thunder footfalls rise and fall behind me, muffled by

closed doors and thick walls. He stands, unsure of what to do or where to go. It seems he doesn't know what is happening. But I do.

I smile. Someone has escaped.

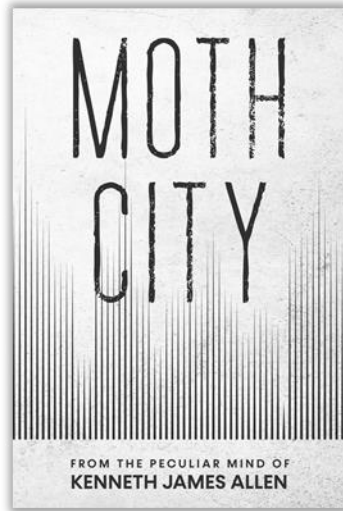
And then a rumble, something deeper and more poignant than dozens of agents rushing to their posts. Vibrations work their way through the floor, into the chair, and rippled across my skin.

Or maybe someone is breaking in.

I smile.

Whichever comes first.

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About the Author



I started writing in 2008, and after years of professional rejection, I started my self-publishing journey in 2020. I enjoy any story that keeps me guessing, hate contradiction, and fear spiders and hypodermic needles. Writing is my meditation. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MCing conferences and keynote speaking all over Australia—both face to face and virtually.

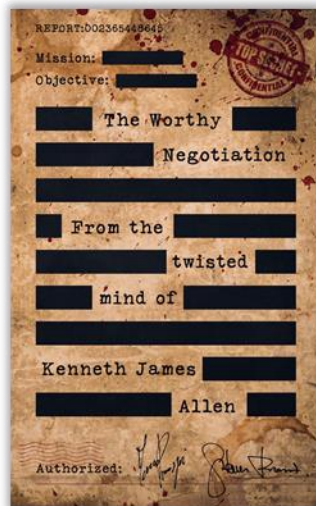
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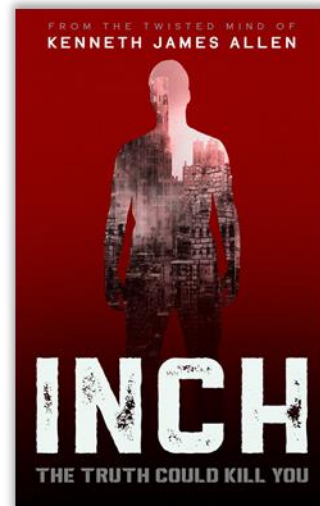
It's going to be hell

THE WORTHY NEGOTIATION



What do you want?

INCH



The truth could kill you

Special Extract

From the twisted mind of
KENNETH JAMES ALLEN

OCCAM



IT'S GOING TO BE HELL

[C.1]

“People shouldn’t fear death, for it is the next great adventure.”

Joaquin Jagger narrowed his eyes on the man opposite, then returned his attention to the manuscript. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the pure cigar smoke. Held it for a moment as he chewed on the head, moving it along his lips. He grabbed the page, ripped it from the stack and held it aloft. A bright blue flame appeared from the darkness, erupting from a gold lighter. The paper caught quickly, turning black and curling on itself. The flame, initially big and bright, disappeared, and Jagger let the burning page fall to the ground with the rest of them. Ash surrounded him, a black crop circle in a darker room. He released the smoke in his mouth with a resentful sigh, meant for everyone in the room to hear it. Particularly the person sitting opposite.

Monty Dekker blinked the sweat away from his eyes as he watched his work burn, praying the floating sheet didn’t come anywhere near his lathered skin. The residue was heavy, and he was sure the overhead spotlight that bore down on him like a desert sun would ignite it at any moment. His situation was beyond anything he had ever written, a cry from anything he could ever imagine. He should have known the fear would drive away his best

work. The pressure of performing had gotten the better of him, and he had faltered. It seemed it may cost him more than a critical review.

Rip. Another torn page. More carbon dioxide and water vapor. Jagger tossed the rest of the manuscript to the floor. Eyed the naked man sitting opposite through half-closed eyes. Watched the skinny writer shiver despite the heat. Balding head. A patch of turf on a sunken chest. He looked malnourished, with a pot belly that hovered over a limp penis.

Another breath, a partnered respire, clouds of smoke. Jagger shrugged. “What the fuck is this shit?”

Dekker murmured.

“Why do you insult me like this?” Jagger continued. He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, a garment that cost more than his prisoner made in the previous financial year.

More noises, whimpers mixed with a cough. Jagger motioned with his fingers and the invisible hand yanked the gag out of Dekker’s mouth.

“Please,” he said. “I can do better. I just need more time.”

“I’ve already given you time. Given you everything you need, everything you asked for. And yet you still supply me with this drivel.” Jagger sat back. “It saddens me. Why do you sadden me?”

“I didn’t mean to... It’s just. I need more time.”

“How much time do you need? I could have crapped on a sheet of paper and created something better than what you wrote.”

Jagger leaned forward again, eyeballed the man. Gripped the cigar between large knuckles and rested his hands on his knees.

“One more day,” Dekker said. “Just one more day.”

Jagger slapped his knees. “I think we’re done here.”

Dekker watched him stand. “N... no,” he said. “I can do better. I’ll do it again. I’ll make it so much—.”

The gag transformed the words into muffled tones. He fought against his binds, but the numerous layers of duct tape restrained his arms and legs firmly in place. There would be no escape. It would be a situation he couldn’t write his way out of, and no amount of editing could save him. He looked at his captor, pleaded with his eyes, but the look he received in return permeated the coldness of a killer. Eyes that matched his skin, a mouth that never smiled, teeth that could tear through his skin.

“It’s a shame,” Jagger said. “I liked your work. I liked what you did. But you just couldn’t deliver when you needed to.”

Dekker tried to talk but couldn’t form the words. He wouldn’t know what to say anyhow. Beg? Beseech? Borrow time? A flame cracked open before his eyes, causing him to lean back in his chair. Breathing slowed, almost focused. Eyes wide, willed for the flame to extinguish, yet it slowly came towards him.

“Now you shall burn like your pages.”

Dekker’s chest shuddered as the substance caught the flame. Fire engulfed him before he contemplated the pain. A stinging sear crashed over his body. He bucked and shouted, fought until there was nothing left.

Jagger watched the flames explode and then die down, leaving a scaly char over the body. He looked over to the man with the lighter.

“Hernandez, where do you find these guys?”

Hernandez ran a hand over his shaved head. “Sorry, boss,” he said. “His name came up in my aunt’s neighbor’s book club. They all loved him. Apparently.”

“A hack!” Jagger stated.

Hernandez looked over the charred remains. “I’ll find the right one next time.”

Jagger waved him away. “That’s what you said last time. And the time before that.”
Walked over to a small window set into the block wall. “Christ, with all this killing, it would have been quicker to write this damn thing myself.”

Hernandez stood behind him, rubbing his hands together.

Jagger sighed. Refused to turn around. “What is it, Hernandez?”

“I heard something on the grapevine, boss. That’s all.”

“Well, spit it out.”

“There’s a rumor the DEA is sniffing around. It’s making a lot of people nervous. Some people whisper that you’ve lost your power, that this is the end of your time. Some of our supply chain are closing their doors. Everyone’s all jumpy.”

Jagger spun from the window, his eyes bright, his face lifted. “Aha! This is why I need this book! They think they know me, but this is the chance to tell them the true story. To really scare them. Besides, the book would make me immortal, allow me to live forever in the digital archives.”

Hernandez shifted his square shoulders and screwed up his face.

“Legacy, Hernandez. Legacy.”

“I don’t understand. You’ve got plenty of money. Can’t you just buy your legacy? You could put up statues all over this town! You own the damn place!”

“Bureaucracy! Grease the wheels as much as you like, all those permits get caught up in red tape and taxes. And then some government official comes along and takes them down. But a book? Once it’s out there, it stays out there. And it will happen, even if I have to drag a thousand authors down here.” He clicked his cigar stub onto the burnt cadaver of Monty Dekker. “Besides, a statue doesn’t tell the story.”

“With everything going on—the DEA, our competition breathing down our necks, our corrupted supply chains—have we got time for all this?”

Jagger placed a hand on the big man's shoulder. "We don't have time to *not* do this. Besides, it's amazing what someone can do when I give them the right amount of pressure and incentive. Look at poor Monty here."

They both turned and looked at the smoldering corpse.

"So much work in so little time," Jagger said. He waved his hands to conjure up some smoke towards his nose. Breathed in. "You smell that? That is the smell of inferiority. It's a pity he wasn't quite up to scratch, but there's nothing we can do about that now."

"I read some of it. Sounded pretty good to me."

Jagger turned away and threw his arms into the air. "It just didn't inspire me, Hernandez. I want the story to mentally stimulate me. I want to feel the emotion. I want my vision to come to life." His body dropped. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. You're great at so many things, Hernandez, but this concept is beyond you."

Hernandez shrugged. "Where do you want to go from here then, boss?"

Jagger patted down his pants and retrieved his phone. He unlocked it and swiped through the screens until he found what he was looking for.

"Here," he said. "We'll continue right here." He held up his phone. "Get me a copy of this and find out everything you can about the author."

"Conrad Lockhart?" Hernandez asked. "Never heard of him."

Jagger looked at him. "That's the point. I can't very well drag Stephen King in here now, can I?"

Hernandez looked down like a scolded child. "Guess not, boss."

"Best you leave the thinking to me. You just do what I ask. Oh, and give the job to Maria. Set her up with whatever she wants. I think this is a nice straightforward job to ease her into things."

Hernandez shrugged. "No worries, boss."

The big man just stood there.

“For the love of God, Hernandez. Just talk!”

“Well, I see his latest work only has a star rating of four point two. You think he’s going to be good enough?”

Jagger pursed his lips. “Well, if he isn’t, he’ll end up just like Monty here.”

