**Chapter One**

“You’re too dependent,” I hear Kylee say.

I look up to see her moving food around on her plate, purposely not making eye contact with me.

“I mean, I’m not trying to be mean, but you need to hear it from someone,” she continues.

Kylee never makes eye contact when she’s telling someone something they don’t want to hear.

“I’m your best friend, so you know I love you, right? I love you to death, Ana, which is why I’m bringing this up. I want to help you.”

The cafeteria is filled with tons of obnoxiously loud people from grades nine through twelve. As for me and Kylee, we are the oldest, from grade twelve. In fact, we are about to graduate, in six days to be precise; which is why, I’m guessing, Kylee is bringing this up.

Kylee swishes her long, wavy, hair to the side as she looks off pretending to be more interested in something other than harassing me.

“Listen, I know you don’t want to be hearing this from me because of how you feel about Felix and how you think you two are going to last forever and everything, but what if you don’t?”

Felix is my boyfriend, whom I have been with since my freshman year. He is the one and only person I have ever loved and the only person I ever plan on loving. This is why Kylee has a problem. She, just like everyone else, thinks that Felix and I are going to break up eventually. The reason why this scares everyone so much is that, when we get out of high school, we are moving in together. We already have it all planned out, and his parents even approved and bought us a condominium near the college he is going to be attending.

But apparently in western culture, when you move in with someone, your whole life is ruined, and everyone thinks you’re an idiot, which is why I am getting this talk.

“Yeah, Felix has enough to support you, but if he leaves you, you’ll be left in the dust completely broke. Maybe if your parents supported your decision, it wouldn’t be so bad, but they don’t, and they said that they will cut you off if you move out with him. So what’ll you do if it doesn’t work out, then?”

“Move in with you,” I respond uninterested, chewing my food.

“No, you will not,” Kylee states firmly, finally looking up at me. “You know that I’m going to be living in a dorm so I couldn’t be your plan B even if I wanted to.”

“Cool,” I say.

I hate when people talk to me about this. Kylee thinks she’s helping me, but she’s not. I’ve already made my decision, and she’s just giving me a hard time about it.

Kylee just looks at me with a face that is half annoyed, half pouty. After a moment she asks, “Ana, seriously though, what would you do?”

I don’t want to answer. I don’t, because this conversation is stupid. Because this conversation makes me feel bad. Because I don’t even have an answer.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I’d rather not think about it.”

By the looks of her completely unamused face, this didn’t seem to be the answer she was looking for.

“Fine,” she sighs. “Well, when you come crying to me, all I’m gonna say is ‘I told you so!’”

With that, she says she’s going to go get something from the snack bar, and she gets up and leaves.

I can tell she really didn’t want to have that talk much more than I did. She just wanted to do it, so she could say she was a good friend just watching out for me when things turn to shit. A warning label.

I gaze off blankly into the cafeteria, no longer feeling hungry due to the unsettling conversation I just endured. I brush my long, brown hair out of my face and reach to pull my phone from my jeans, when I suddenly feel hands clasp around my eyes

“Guess who!”

I smile, knowing that voice better than anything else in my entire life.

“Felix,” I reply sweetly, as I remove one of his hands from my eye and hold it, looking up with the other still covered.

Felix is everything to me and has everything that I could ever want. He is gentle, kind, and incredibly charming, with a smile that makes my whole body go warm.

Without delay, he leans in and kisses me, wrapping his strong, tan arms around my sides, and just like that, my mood is lifted.

Standing back up straight, Felix swishes his long black hair out of his eyes, and says, “It looked like Kylee was giving you some trouble.”

His voice is so deep; you would think he was much older than just eighteen.

“Just a little; mostly about you leaving me one day.” I shrug, shutting my eyes, but then opening one with a smile to hear his uplifting, reassuring response he always gives to these sorts of things.

“How ridiculous!” he exclaims in a silly accent. “The sky will fall before that happens! The only thing I’m ‘leaving’ is this blasted school and all these awful people who are always pulling you down.” He smiles as he lifts me out of my seat and into the air, then places me gently back onto the ground and into his arms.

Everyone is staring at us, but everyone always stares at us. Felix makes such a scene with his affection that it’s difficult to go unnoticed.

“So how has your day been? Has everything been going well?” I ask as I pull back and stare into him.

Felix nods with a cheerful smile as he responds, “Yeah, absolutely! With it being the end of the year and all, I’ve had time to draw in every class. Maybe after school I can show you some of them, if you want.”

I smile wide at hearing this and I reply, “I love seeing your drawings, of course I’ll take a look at them!”

Felix’s eyes light up. “Great! I’ve worked so hard on all of them; I would be honored for your eyes to grace my work.” He winks with a silly bow. “Anyways, how was your day, my dear?”

Just as I am about to open my mouth to speak, a shrill ringing echoes through the lunch hall, and I hang my head in disappointment.

“What? Lunch is over already?” I groan.

Felix sighs with a comforting smile. “Ah, well. It’s alright, it’s only an hour. We are meeting after school, anyways, so we will have plenty of time to see each other then.”

“Yeah, I know,” I mumble, cracking a grin. “But that doesn’t mean that I won’t miss you until then, you know.”

“I know,” he chuckles back. “Same goes for you. But, hey, listen, my next class is on the opposite side of the school, so I’ve got to get moving, but I will see you in just a little bit.”

“Okay,” I sigh, in acceptance as I give him a soft smile. “I love you, Felix.”

Felix stares into me with the most amazing eyes that I have ever seen, as he replies, “I love you too, Ana.”

With that, he gives me a sweet peck on the lips as our grasp weakens, until I have to let him go into the mass of stampeding students, all hustling their way to class.

I turn to push through the crowds to get out the door, but the moment that I swing my body around, my face smashes against something hard.

I hold my hands over my face as it throbs in pain, and I open my eyes through blurry sight to see nothing in front of me but waving and rippling space.

*What the…?*

I watch as the space in front of me slowly returns to normal and the watery vision of my rushing classmates becomes clear again.

I look in all directions to see what I hit, to see if maybe I ran into someone, but nowhere in sight can I see any kind of obstacle whatsoever.

Everyone ignores me and passes me on, and not wanting to feel stupid for standing in the middle of the crowd looking completely clueless and dazed, I embarrassingly reconvene my walking and join the bustling hoard of students as I make my way to class.

~\*~

Since it’s the end of the school year, no one pays attention. We just sit in our classrooms watching whatever film the teacher puts on to keep us distracted and out of trouble. I look down past my grey crop top to my phone in my lap, sliding it open and closed, waiting for a response from Felix.

The entire class period is almost over and I haven’t gotten a single reply.

*Maybe the teacher took his phone away.*

I groan as I lean over and grab my bag, waiting for that second hand to hit twelve so I can get the hell out of here and mark one less day that I have to suffer in this imprisonment. Most people get all sappy at the end of the year, hugging and crying while saying how much they will miss each other, but not me. I hate this place and pretty much everyone in it, save Felix and Kylee.

I look to the clock impatiently, just minutes until the bell rings. My eyes trace the calendar right underneath it, seeing today’s date, June 1, 2015 and the words “GRADUATION” in bright green ink marked on the seventh. I sit back, impatiently, and palm the necklace I’m wearing; then I open my hand to see the beautiful pendant inside: a dichroic glass star.

Felix gave me this amazing piece to me for our two year anniversary. I tilt and turn the star, hitting the light in all the right folds of the stunning turquoise foil to create a blinding white gleam.

I absolutely love this necklace. It was given to me out of love and worn every day to represent that. When I get upset or scared, I just hold it tightly to my heart, and I instantly feel better. It’s like having a piece of Felix with me everywhere I go.

I slide my finger up and down the slick glass, waiting for the time to pass by, before I look to the clock and see that the second hand is just moments away from freedom.

Three…Two…One…! The second hand shifts to the right onto its final sixtieth stroke, and I’m the first one out of the door.

I walk as fast as I can to avoid the crowds so I can just get to my car and call Felix. I slide my phone up and down again to see that there are still no new messages.

“Felix…” I groan to myself, extremely displeased with his inability to just let me know he’s okay.

Maybe it’s just in my nature, but I tend to turn to anger before worry, sadness, or any other emotion for that matter. I just have a short fuse.

Once I make it to my car, I lean to the side and text Felix again.

*Where are you? I’m worried about you. Text me back, please.  :(*

I always sound nicer over text than I actually feel. I do my best to censor over my poor nature, so I don’t sound like a bitch.

Before I can shut my phone and get in the car, it starts vibrating, with Felix’s name over the top and a picture of us together flashing on the screen. I pick up.

“Where have you been, love?” I ask, sounding much more concerned than I thought I would.

“Hey, sweetie, I’m sorry. On my way to class, something happened and things got a bit complicated. Don’t worry, though, nothing is wrong, but I do have something to show you.”

“Something to show me?” I question.

“Mhm,” he replies. “Something I found. I had to leave school early to deal with the issue though, so just get to the tree house as soon as you can, alright?”

“Oh, okay, I’ll be right there,” I respond unsurely with worry in my voice. “Are you sure everything is alright, though?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Nothing is wrong, but this is quite the surprise. Anyways, I have to go to take care of things. I can’t wait to see you though, darling. I love you, Analiese.”

I sigh, still a bit uneasy, but trusting Felix that things are under control, I reply, “Alright, Felix. I love you too.”

With that, he says “goodbye,” and the phone clicks off. Residual worry clouds my mind as I get into the car and start making my way out of the school and towards the tree house.

A long time ago, back when my family still had money, my dad bought a plot of land and built me a tree house out in the woods. Not a junky tree house either. This place has hard wood floors, built in lights, and just about everything but running water. Once Felix and I started dating, we would go there to get some alone time, and slowly, it just became our little summer home.

Pulling onto the back roadways, I see the cars begin to disappear and the trees begin to multiply. I never liked the city much; if the world just became over grown with vines and wildlife, it would be fine by me.

The sky fades as it is eaten by treetops, and I can see our little abode floating right up high with the bird nests. If no one knew to look up, nobody would ever notice it. It was built up so high, that it is far beyond the walking view.

I stop my car and get out, making my way to the base of the tree then climbing up the wooden ladder to the top. I pop my head in the rest of the way and start to pull myself up, when I hear a soft whisper.

“Analiese,” it repeats.

“Felix?” I respond, in an equally soft tone.

“Yeah, I can’t talk loud. Come in here,” he whispers as loud as he can without using his vocals.

I follow his faint voice into the next room, where I find him on the floor kneeling next to a cardboard box, with his hands outstretched and reaching in.

I walk towards him and kneel down by his side, looking straight into the box to see the furthest thing from what I ever expected to find.

There, inside the old, dusty container was a fox. A baby fox.

“Oh, my,” I utter, staring in.

Hearing my voice, it opens its eyes, but then almost immediately, it closes them again.

“What’s wrong with him?” I gasp, looking at the poor thing.

“I don’t know. I was on my way to class when I noticed the orange of his fur standing out from the greenery he was under. I looked closer to see that he wasn’t doing so well, and so I skipped class and snatched a box from the science lab to put him in. I didn’t want to take a chance with telling the administration and having them call a service that would just treat him like a pest and kill him, and I didn’t want to just leave him there, so I came back here, feeling it was the only choice.”

“Oh, gosh,” I mutter, taking in the situation. “Are you sure that his mother wouldn’t have come back for him, though?”

“I didn’t want to take any chances,” he states. “If he was with another kit, or two, I would have let him be, but since he was alone, I knew something wasn’t right. Sometimes mother foxes will abandon their children if something traumatizing happens, and looking at the state that this little one is in, that wouldn’t surprise me if that is exactly what had happened.”

I gaze back uneasily at the little fox, watching as he stretches and moves his legs a bit, doing his best to wake up.

Suddenly, I feel Felix’s hand on my shoulder and I turn to see him just inches from my face, staring into my dark green eyes as he says, “Hey, beautiful, let me go call the rescue, real quick, and I’ll be right back. Could you please watch this little one for me while I’m gone?”

I blush and nod my head in agreement as he gets up and leans over, kissing my forehead. “Thank you sweetie,” he whispers as he makes his way just around the corner into the next room.

I turn back and look into the box at the kit, who is now doing his best to get to his feet and stumble around.

*Poor thing, he is probably so scared and confused. This is far from the wooded home he is used to.*

I stare at the small creature trying to understand the big walls around it, moving left and right, back and forth, trying to find a way out. I smile, feeling a bit relieved that he is at least moving, when something out of the corner of my eye catches my attention.

There, stuck in between two of the wooden floor planks, is a small folded piece of paper.

Curious and surprised, I grasp it between my two fingers and pull it out, examining it and unfolding its tiny creases.

Inside is a note. A note that Felix must’ve given to me a long time ago; one I had forgotten about up until now. Written in his old italicized cursive he used to use years ago when we first started dating it reads:

*“My Dearest Analiese,*

*I know it’s only been an hour since I’ve last seen you, but I can’t go that long without talking to you, so this letter will have to suffice.*

*This is what got me thinking, in this time that we are apart, what exactly you are to me. For a long time, I’ve heard people talk about love. How it feels, what it’s like, and most of all, all the troubles that come along with it. Well, that is where things differ for me. Nothing is trouble when it comes to you. To me, everything is an investment. Any snag or tangle we have along the way is worth it for you, and I could never view it otherwise. I believe with every fiber of my being that we are meant to be together. We were supposed to meet each other, I just know it! There’s no one in the world I could ever see myself with besides you. I know that sounds so young and immature of me, but that’s how I feel.*

*You are my everything, Analiese, and I will love you until the day I die. Nothing will ever stand in our way. I promise.*

*Para Siempre,*

*Felix”*

My whole body goes warm. I forgot these beautiful notes he used to give me. One after another, in succession, every day that he would see me. These were the little things that won my heart, the building blocks to what we have now.

Smiling fondly at his faded words, I turn back to the little one’s box to make sure that he is doing alright, but upon doing this, I see that the box is toppled over and there is nothing inside but dust.

“Little One?” I gasp.

I shoot my head down at floor level and peer under the couch to see nothing but a dark gaping crevasses.

*Oh God, I lost the dying baby fox.*

I pull myself back up and begin to frantically search the room, lifting up boxes and bags and turning over furniture.

*How could I lose him? He was just there!*

I continue in my heated search, when I hear Felix’s voice in the next room over.

“Oh hey, what are you doing over here?”

I pop my head in the room where he is, but stay shy of the walkway so he doesn’t see me. From my half view of Felix and half view of the wall, I see him reach down and pick up the orange and white ball of fur and hold it close to his chest. “Did you lose your second mother too?” he jeers softly as he spins his finger around its head.

*Felix, you’re really something else…*

“Ana, what are you doing over there?” He laughs as he gently holds Little One in his hands.

Just out of shock, I pull myself the rest of the way behind the wall in hiding; then instantly feeling stupid and shy, I return back into his view. My face flushes red and I look up and just say:

“Hi.”

His expression changes to surprise then, almost instantly, pools into happy laughter. “Analiese, you’re precious.”

He smiles and walks towards me, shifting Little One to the other hand, then places his free one on my shoulder. “You didn’t go losing our baby did you?” he asks with resonating laughter.

Before I can even open my mouth to speak, he pulls me in and kisses me, then releases my lips. Still holding me close, touching his forehead to mine, he smiles softly with all the love and understanding in his eyes. “I’m just kidding, my love. You will make a wonderful mother one day.”

My heart stops and I look into him, with the evening sun illuminating his face, his long black hair lightly brushes over his deep brown eyes.

I stutter to come to words. “D-did you call the rescue?”

His presence makes my heart flutter, no different than the first day I met him.

“Yes, I did,” he replies. “They will be open tomorrow. We will take him in then.”

I gaze into Felix, breathing in his scent, watching the way the sun gleams into his eyes, turning them a beautiful charred auburn.

“I love you, Felix.” My mouth speaks the words straight out of my mind.

“Well that is a great coincidence, because I love you, too, my dear. Always have and always will,” he whispers with a smile as he brushes his lips across my cheek to my jaw, breathing the words warm into my ear, making my whole body heat up.

He grabs my hand and leads me back into the room where Little One’s box is, quietly tilting the box back into place and placing the now sleeping ball of life back into its home. He pushes the box tight in between the two bookshelves nearby, as he utters, “That should hold him.” With that, he turns back to me, and together, we walk into our bedroom in the next room over.

The room is small and cramped without much space, but just big enough of a cubby hole to put a small single bed in. Enclosed by three walls and a sun roof, Felix lies down on the bed and pulls me into him.

Running his fingertips across my arm, he slowly moves his body, shifting mine into position over him. With the golden sun glistening off his skin, our bodies intertwine as he runs his fingers through my hair, opening his mouth ever so slightly to kiss my neck.

“You know you’re everything to me,” he whispers into my ear. “Everything I could ever want, don’t ever forget that.”

He pulls my chest against his as our heart beats fall in synch. Barely able to speak, with my breath completely taken away, I utter, “You are too,” and before I can even take another breath in, he presses his lips to mine and I’m his.

Moving and melding, our bodies becoming one, he runs his hands up and down me, under my shirt, skin to skin. I raise my arms and clench his black, tight shirt in between my fingers, lifting it up and off of him, and he eagerly complies. He braces his hand on the back of my neck, controlling my motion and keeping me in rhythm with his own. With my heartbeat racing, I break from our kiss to get a breath of air, but he pulls me back, locking his mouth back onto mine, with our tongues intertwining. The pheromones coming off his body drown out my common sense with the heat affecting my consciousness, and I begin to lose myself in him.

“Felix,” I utter, as I break away again to breathe.

Without hesitation, he presses his lips to my neck. “Yes?” he whispers slowly, taking one of his hands and returning it to the side of my face, caressing me. With our faces are so close in this enclosed space and our eyes now locked onto one another’s, my mind goes blank.

I’m not sure I even had anything to say to him now; I feel I just wanted to hear the sound of his voice. I just look at him, my vision blurring and my body swaying from the summer heat. “Nothing,” I murmur passively with a faint smile, as I slow my movements and gently lay my head on his chest.

“I just…” I pause, running my fingers along his collar bone. “I just don’t know what I would ever do without you.”

With his energy calming, he tilts my chin up until he can see my eyes and he softly replies, “Well, that’s something you’ll never have to worry about, now is it?”

I smile and return my face to his chest, kissing his collar bone before tracing it once again with my fingertips. I feel his body decompress and his shoulders shift down, getting comfortable, as he moves me with him. As the evening light creeps in, I watch his tanned skin become illuminated under the glistening humidity now clung to him.

My heart beat slows down, matching my pace with his, as we breathe unsteadily, holding one another in each other’s arms. A moment passes before I look up and softly kiss him only to realize he’s no longer awake.

I brush the hair from his face and just look at him. It’s hard to believe I got so lucky to end up with such a beautiful person.

I lay down beside him, loving the way the warmth of his skin warms mine. That every breath he exhales, I inhale. That whether he is awake or asleep, his presence gives me butterflies no different than the first day we met. Lying here next to him is all I can ever ask for in this world and all I could ever want.

I feel the pull of my necklace tangled between us, and I unclip it, not wanting the movements of our bodies to possibly damage it. I turn to place it on the ground under the bed, but as I set it down, the wood underneath it waves and ripples like a pebble being tossed into a pond. I rub my eyes in confusion and stare back at it again to see nothing else but the same, stiff, wooden floor that I have always been used to.

*That… was weird…*

I rub my eyes again, figuring that it’s just the afternoon summer haze coupled with fatigue, as I bend back up and lean into him, brushing my lips across his smooth skin.

My eyes grow tired and weigh down, as his scent encompasses me, calming every inch of my body. I wrap my arms around him and drop my face into his chest, listening to the beat of his heart as my consciousness fades.

In this very moment, here with him, I am completely and perfectly happy.

**Chapter Two**

Darkness surrounds the world outside my mind.

With my eyes still shut, the whole world is silent and absolutely everything feels at peace.

“Felix,” I mumble as I lazily reach my hand up and drop it on top of him.

Only, my hand doesn’t fall on a warm, soft body.

It falls on cold.

Wet.

Dirt.

My eyes shoot open in shock, and I fly up in bed. “Felix!?” I gasp.

Except, I’m not in bed. I’m outside.

Outside in pitch black darkness.

Frozen in fear, my mouth gapes open in horror, with my mind trying to understand what happened. Coming to no logical conclusion, my lips open again and I stutter to speak, yelling, “Felix!?”

My voice echoes through the dark valley, and everything is silent. The reverberation of my voice fades, and there is no other sound but the wind.

I sit there, tears welding in my eyes, completely terrified. I look around, panicking, searching desperately for the tree house. “Felix, where are you!?”

*I’m dreaming.*

*I have to be.*

I get to my feet and scan all around me, only to turn completely around, and what I see paralyzes me.

“Wha-”

Planted there, in the faded darkness, is a barbed wire fence.

I stand there unable to move, staring at this structure that I have never seen before. Well over my height, it towers over me, stretching farther into the night sky than my eyes will allow me to see. I look to the left and the right of it seeing no beginning and no end, disappearing into the darkness as well.

Standing here alone, a huge gust of wind blows by, chilling me to the bone, and it isn’t until now that I realize how cold it is.

It’s freezing.

It’s freezing, and it’s the middle of summer.

I jolt down and hold myself from the chill, cradling my whole body in an attempt for warmth. I look down at my hands and feet, beginning to shiver from the cold, from the fear, from the confusion, and from the adrenaline. Grabbing for my necklace in a desperate attempt for comfort, my grasp falls short onto nothing but my collar bone, and I look down to remember that I took it off before going to sleep.

This causes me to panic even more, and I am about to scream for Felix once again, but I realize that it’s no good. I am far from the familiar and yelling will only attract unwanted attention from God knows what. I am alone.

Or, at least, I hope I am.

*I have to get out of here.*

I turn from the fence and take a few cautious steps forward, feeling the damp earth beneath me. Step by step, I walk further and further from the fence, and my paranoia starts to take hold of me.

*Something is watching me. Something is following me. I can’t be walking right now.*

*I have to run.*

My pace speeds up, and my legs move without me telling them to, faster and faster until sweat runs down my face and my lungs fill with freezing air, forcing me to pant. I dart into the nothingness, away from the invisible monsters, speed increasing, and my body becoming numb.

I can’t feel my legs anymore.

Beyond my control, I’m jolting, to somewhere, anywhere except here.

And then I see something move.

As if my whole body becomes paralyzed, I freeze. The momentum of running throws my body forwards, and I stumble to a halt.

And it moves again.

Giant and bulky, in a humanoid shape, it moves just yards in front of me.

Towards me.

I stay frozen, not moving an inch, and it stops. Beads of sweat roll down my face, and I don’t know what to do. Maybe it didn’t see me. Maybe I didn’t even see it. Maybe I’m just seeing things. With the humanoid figure I was staring at now melded back into the darkness, I wonder if I even saw anything at all.

Slowly and carefully, I crouch down to the ground. I tilt my head up just enough to see where the figure was, and everything is still. Little by little, I descend even further until I feel the cold dirt on my palms and the wet grass in between my fingers. Staring into the darkness, I begin to move again, inch by inch as I make my way through the night, until I see it again.

The darkness moved.

I freeze once again, but this time it doesn’t stop with me. It continues to move towards me.

It’s coming.

I hear it yell something, mumbled and muffled, and suddenly, the darkness begins to move in the left corner of my eye, then the right. I hear more muffled yells of words I can’t make out, coming from all over. The darkness is moving in. The darkness is taking shape into the same figure as the original one and they are all moving in towards me.

*Oh God.*

*Oh God, this can’t be happening.*

Frozen in the darkness, I am surrounded, looking for an escape.

*I’m going to die.*

*I’m going to be murdered.*

Torturous thoughts race through my mind, and I see everything flash before me. Without any hesitation, I let out a high pitched scream, louder than any other I ever had before.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of a roaring motor, and the figures stop moving. Twisting and turning, they look to see where it is coming from, when a white flash of light beams across my vision and I hear gunfire.

“Hey!” I hear a voice yell. “Get on!”

I open my tear stricken eyes to see the silhouette of someone on a motorcycle with their gun holding hand raised in the air.

“I said, come on! Do you want to live or not?!” he screams again.

Staring in frozen shock, I force my legs to move, and I run for it.

The figures turn back to me and lunge forward and I hear two more gun shots.

My body is moving so fast I can’t stop myself. I run full speed ahead and slam into the side of the motorcycle, screaming and crying hysterically.

“Hey, calm down and hold on!” he demands as he grabs my waist and hoists me onto the bike. I latch onto him with all my strength, and the bike revs as we speed off, the gunshots from his barrel rivaling the volume of the motor.

I dig my nails into his body and cry into his back, shrieking, completely terrified.

“Hey!” he yells. “Calm down. I need you to calm down. I can’t drive straight like this.”

Hearing his demand, I choke up and shut up, with tears still steaming down my face.

“I know you’re scared, but you can trust me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I release my nails from his thick leather jacket but keep my arms wrapped around him tight. With the wind slapping and stinging my face, I tense up and burrow deeper into his warm back.

*What the hell just happened?!*

*Where am I?!*

*Where’s Felix?!*

I look up and try to strain my eyes against the wind to see where we are going. Off in the distance I see houses and buildings, silhouetted against the deep blue sky, now visible to my adjusted eyes. Faster and faster, the buildings approach until I can no longer look up from the stinging wind. I plant my face back down into his jacket until the bike finally begins to slow.

The motor rumbles to a halt, and I’m still clinging onto him. I lift my head up to see flickering lamp posts and empty, barren streets. He grasps my clenched fists and squeezes them, making me release him into the darkness. The bike shifts off balance as he gets off and walks away towards the lights. His leaving triggers me to panic, and I shout, “Where are we!?”

He walks a few steps away, taking off his jacket. When he steps into the light, he turns to me and says, “We are in Braxton.”

For that single moment I see him. Long, straight blond hair, tall, pale, around my age, wearing a white shirt, ripped blue jeans, and a red paisley bandanna around his neck.

I come to my senses. “Braxton?” I stutter. “But that’s where I live.”

He sighs and impatiently, yet sympathetically. “Yes, that’s where we all live. Now look, I know you are in shock and everything, but I really have someone I’m looking for, and I can’t waste any time. She could be hurt.” The boy walks towards me and asks, “What’s your name? Where’s your shelter?”

“I, uh...” I stutter as I get off the bike and step into the light, “My name is Analiese.”

Suddenly, he stops and his face contorts into wide-eyed confusion. He just looks at me without saying a word, and I don’t understand his reaction, so I carefully continue by answering the rest of his question. “And, um, my home is on West Oak Street.”

Looking into his sea green eyes, with his mouth still gaping and face still plastered in confusion, he whispers under his breath, “Analiese?”

I break eye contact and look down, becoming very nervous of his strange reaction. I simply reply, “Y-yes.”

Without warning, he grabs my hair, and I panic. Jumping back and ramming into the bike, I pull my hands up to my chest in defense.

The boy just stands still, staring at me in concern and confusion, his hand still limp in the air from reaching for me.

No one says a word, and I’m taking panicked breaths. On edge, with adrenaline rushing through my veins, I am ready to flee at a moment’s notice of anymore unpredictable behavior.

Finally, the boy breaks eye contact with me and looks to the ground, dropping his hand, uttering, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, I just-” He cuts off as he looks back up to me, his deep sea green eyes staring into mine. “I just thought…”

He trails off and looks back down, silence filling the empty space as he puts his jacket back on and mumbles, “Nothing, I’m sorry.”

Still on edge, I stand close to the bike with my fists up and my teeth clenched. He walks towards me, and I jump out of the way, only for him to ignore my behavior and remount the bike.

“Hey, where are you going!?” I shout, “What are you doing!?”

“I’m going home,” he replies, starting the engine.

Fear of abandonment in this strange world strikes through me, and I lower my defenses and yell, “You can’t just leave me here!”

He turns back to me, placing goggles over his eyes as he shouts over the motor, “I wasn’t planning on it.”

I stand, silent and still, looking at the bike, hearing its loud roar, not sure whether to trust him and get on or not.

*He saved me once.*

*My chances of being safe with him are greater than my chances out on my own.*

*I can’t be left here alone.*

“Come on, we’ve got to get out of here. It’s not safe to stay here long,” he yells over the thundering motor.

I stare at the bike for a moment more, double checking with myself that this is really what I want to do, then I nod my head and jump on the back of the bike.

“Alright, let’s go,” he shouts as he kicks the gas pedal, and the bike races off.

Speeding down the empty roads, he twists and turns at terrifying speeds. I shoot my head down into his back, scared and not wanting to watch. With my eyes shut tight, my emotions are rising back up again, and I choke out the only words I can manage. “What’s your name?”

The bike races through the night, and I look up at him only for a moment to see his bright blond hair under the fleeting street lights as he says, “My name’s Chance.”

**Chapter Three**

While driving down the roads and weaving in and out of damp alleyways, Chance says that if he is going to drop me off at home, he needs to stop off at his place to get supplies first.

“I’m out of bullets,” he shouts over the motor. “We aren’t safe without them.”

I hold on tighter, not out of fear this time, but for warmth. “Shouldn’t we just go to the police?” I yell.

Chance looks back at me for a moment in confusion, then looks forward to the street again and shouts, “Doll, those were the police.”

Taken aback, I don’t know how to respond, but before I can say anything, he continues, “Or something like that.”

“Wha-” I begin, but then I stop to think out what I am going to say first. “Why did you attack them then? If they’re cops, they could have helped us!”

The bike runs over a curb and both of us jolt to hold on tighter, and he yells, “Sweetie, are you new here or something?” The bike bounces again, running over a manhole. “‘Helping’ is the last thing these people will do for us.”

The bike continues on for some time, steering and rearing out of the way of obstacles I can’t keep my eyes open long enough to see. Trusting that Chance knows what he is doing and won’t crash, I tilt my head back down to shelter myself from the stinging wind.

Hundreds of questions rush through my head, but competing with the volume of the motor is only hurting my throat. It’s no good asking now.

*This is so messed up. How can this be happening?*

*I was in bed with Felix, sleeping peacefully, and then the next thing I know is that I’m here in this nightmare trying to survive!*

*I don’t even have any idea how I got in that damn field!*

*This needs to be a dream. It has to be.*

Uneasy and pensive, I dig my face deeper into Chance’s jacket. Feelings of doom surge through my core, never having been in a situation even remotely like this in my entire life.

All of a sudden, the smooth pavement beneath us disappears, and we are riding on rough dirt and gravel. The abrupt change in flooring throws me off guard, and I latch onto Chance even tighter.

*Where does he live that has no roads? Braxton is a city; we don’t have gravel roads here.*

I look up for as long as my eyes can withstand to see hundreds of canopying trees covering the night sky, then turning to the side, I can only see the trunks that hold them up. I take in as much of my surroundings as I can before I can take no more, and I burrow my face back into the safety of his leather coat.

*Why are we in a forest?*

*Does he really live back here?*

Before I can ask any questions, the bike begins to come to a slow halt.

“Here,” he states as he dismounts.

I rub my arms for warmth as I dismount the bike, wiping and rubbing my eyes, adjusting to the lack of light. I look all around and see nothing but trees and more trees. No house in sight.

I begin to feel very uneasy, and I ask, “So…where is your house?”

Chance turns and looks at me, simply raising his hand and pointing up. My eyes follow his finger and what it trails to stuns me.

Up and above, in between the branches among the treetops, there it is, sitting up top.

My tree house.

I stare in shock for a moment before turning back down to eye level with him, only to see that he has already begun to climb up the ladder.

Panic surges through me and I feel a horrible coldness chill me to the bone. In the heat of the moment, I run towards him and tug on his shirt yelling, “Hey, I thought we were going to your place, how the hell did you know where this was?”

He looks down at me in annoyed confusion and replies, “Huh? This is my place. What’s your proble-?”

And suddenly, his expression changes again, back to shock, staring at my moonlit face. He squints his eyes and leans forward, with my instant response of stepping back.

“H-hey, I’m grateful and everything buddy,” I stammer, taking another careful step back, “but I don’t like this.”

He continues to stare at me as if in a trance, when suddenly, he drops from the ladder bars to the ground, not breaking eye contact for a second. He steps forward and I step back again, now feeling threatened.

*What the hell is up with this guy?*

I stumble to speak, “H-hey, cut it ou-”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he interrupts my words. “I just need to see something.”

Before I have time to think, he has me pinned. Face to face, just inches away, backed against the motorcycle, unable to move. He is so close that I can feel his warm breath on my face, and I don’t know how to feel.

I should be scared, but I’m not. I feel strange, like I’ve known him before somehow, and that he really means it when he says he won’t hurt me.

I flinch, feeling his hand touch my face, directing mine towards his, with his bright green eyes piercing into me.

He stares at me, unmoving and frozen, and my feeling of safety begins to dwindle in comparison to my instinct to survive.

I break away from his grasp, and the freezing air takes the place of his warm breath. Panting, as if I was underwater for too long and just reaching the open air, I yell “Okay, what’s going on!?”

“How long has your hair been brown?” he questions calmly, before I can even hardly finish my sentence.

I stare blankly at him, processing his ridiculous question, and I reply, “Wha-”

“Just answer me. How long have you had brown hair?”

His eyes stare into me, making me very uncomfortable, and I look down and mumble, “Um, awhile, I don’t know, four years?”

“You were born a blond,” he states.

 Stunned, I just stand, staring at him.

*How did he know that?*

“Well, were you?” he asks.

“Uh,” I stutter, “yeah, how did you know that?”

“And you are sure your name is Analiese?” he presses.

My expression of confusion and concern turns to uneasy irritability, and I quietly scowl, “I think I would know my own name.”

Unsatisfied, Chance continues to stare at me, holding his gaze for a moment too long, as if waiting for me to admit that I’m lying. Finally, he breaks eye contact and sighs, “Come on,” as he walks back towards the ladder.

I stand there, processing all that just happened, and then suddenly, I remember where this all started from.

“Hey!” I yell, this time keeping my distance. “You still haven’t explained how you knew where this was. And what do you mean this is your place? This is my place with my boyfriend!”

Again, he stops in his tracks and turns around for a moment, his face plastered with discomfort, as he asks, “Who is your boyfriend?”

Taken aback by the only thing I said that stood out to him in question, I reply, “It’s none of your business who my boyfriend is, but what my business is, is why you are in my tree house!”

Chance’s expression drops, and for the first time he appears sad. Defeated. Tired.

“Just come up with me, please,” he utters quietly. He then turns back around and makes his way back up towards the tree house.

“Hey, where are you going!? I’m not following you up there until I know what’s going on! Felix!? Felix, are you up there!?” I scream to the darkened tree house.

“Shut up or someone is going to find us!” Chance hisses at me, still climbing up and no longer even taking the time to turn around anymore. “Stay down there if you feel it’s safer, but I don’t recommend it.”

Shock and fear run through me as I panic towards a decision.

*Why isn’t Felix responding? There’s no way this isn’t our tree house; it’s identical! He has to be lying! What should I do? If I go up there with him, I will be cornered, but it isn’t safe down here either.*

When I look up to see where Chance is, he has almost completely disappeared from the darkness and into the house.

*Time is running out, and if I am left down here alone, who knows what could happen to me?*

*He saved me once; I have got to trust him. I can’t stay down here.*

I grab onto the ladder bars and make my way up. Anxiety creeps through me, feeling as though something absolutely terrible is coming. With every step, I reenact in my head how all the victims were able to get away from their murderers. Going over the floor plan of the house. Thinking of what rooms not to go into if I need to escape.

Once I reach the latch door, I pop it open, and I am blinded by light. Reaching my hand over my eyes in cover, I squint, trying to see into the room as fast as I can as not to be caught off guard.

Coming to, I make out shapes, figures, and most oddly, colors. Lots of colors.

When my eyes fully adjust I can see posters, paint, dream catchers and crystals strewn all throughout the tree house.

*This was not the way I left it.*

“You coming in or not? It’s freezing outside. You’re letting all the cold air in.”

I look up to see Chance, to truly see him for the first time, directly in the light. All his features I saw before but accentuated. Beautiful long blond hair, emerald green eyes, tall and lean.

Much more handsome than I first thought.

I stare a moment too long, but when I come to, I notice I am not the only one. He is staring as well, and even longer than I was.

I blush and look away trying to ignore his gaze as I crawl the rest of the way in and shut the door behind me. Immediately, I stand up and survey my surroundings, and what I see leaves me feeling very uneasy.

I scan over the plain walls that I was so used to just hours ago, to see them now plastered with drawings and paint. Dream catchers and crystals hang everywhere, and when I look up, I see bandanas and ribbons strewn across the ceiling with tiny shards of mirror hanging down, reflecting and beaming the light.

Everything is changed. Everything is different.

If it weren’t for the floor plan, I wouldn’t even recognize the place.

I turn back to Chance and shakily ask, “What happened?”

In my peripheral vision, the colors are so overwhelming that there is nothing but a rainbow blur behind him, void of any white.

Chance just looks to me, having no idea what I am referring to, and he replies, “What do you mean?”

“What do you mean 'what do I mean'?!” I snap back, “I mean my house, my tree house, why is it like this?”

I sound angry, but I’m not. I’m terrified.

My whole body is shaking and quivering, and I feel as though my knees are about to cave in. Feeling as if the whole world is collapsing in and I am at the epicenter.

*There is something horribly wrong about all this.*

“Uh, I…” Chance trails off, no longer cold and rough, but nervous and uneasy. “I really don’t know what you are talking about. It’s been this way for years.”

“Don’t lie to me!” I snap. “I was sleeping in here just a few hours ago, and nothing was like this! Tell me, how did you change everything, and where’s Felix?”

Defensively, he looks back up at me and sneers, “Is that your boyfriend?”

I look him dead in the eyes and answer, “Yes. Yes that is, and this is our house. Now tell me how you did th-”

All of a sudden, shrieking and screaming, my hair being ripped out of the follicles, I'm interrupted by something jumping on my head, making the most terrible high pitched screech I’ve ever heard. I just start screaming, grabbing at my head trying to get it off, but meeting nothing but teeth and claws. Tiny sharp daggers puncture through my skin, and I scream in a panic, managing my hands around the furry creature and throwing it as far away from me as possible and into the next room. Falling to my knees, I collapse in on myself.

“Oh my God!” Chance screams, shooting down to the floor beside me.

He gasps, staring at me, seeing what I can’t; my mangled hair and bloody smeared make up, in a complete and total mess. Gaping at him, the sudden rush of everything is all too much for me, as the tears in my eyes weld up and I start bawling.

Hardly able to speak through my incomprehensible sobbing, I grab my head tightly between my hands, feeling the sticky blood pasting to my scalp, and I wail, “What the H-Hell was th-that!?”

Suddenly, I feel Chance wrap his arms around me in a tight embrace, and I’m too broken to have any other response but to cry.

The shrieking starts again in the other room, high pitched and wailing viciously.

“Shut up, Meiko! Why the Hell did you do that?!” he screams, still holding me tight.

I hear a hiss emit from somewhere and then the sound of the creature scurrying away.

Chance immediately returns his attention back to me, looking down into my weary eyes. “Oh my God, you’re bleeding. We need to get some bandages on you now.” He panics, about to turn and stand up, but before he can, I grab his shirt and tug him back down towards me.

“What’s going on!?” I cry. “Please just tell me, please!”

I look up into his crystal green eyes that are looking down at me, shaking away his own shock and setting it aside to tend to my crisis. With such empathy and care, he instantly returns back to me in an embrace, then briefly lets me go just long enough to grab my shoulders and look me in the eyes.

“I don’t know, sweetie. I don’t know. You are confused, and I am, too. We will sort this out, though, and it will be okay. I promise. You are just going to have to trust me,” he softly replies. With his grasp around me firm, he pulls me into him, not caring about the mess my blood and tears make on his clean, white shirt. “It’s ok, I’m here.”

My body relaxes, falling limp in his reassuring embrace as security washes over me, and my eyelids fall heavy. I breathe in and out in tiny breaths, the air in my lungs entering and exiting unsteadily.

I don’t know who he is, but he’s keeping that thing away from me and he isn’t going to hurt me. That’s all that matters right now.

With my mouth smothered in his shirt sleeve, I mumble, “I just want to go home.”

He starts to speak, but then stops. Choosing his words carefully and coming to a conclusion, he opens his mouth again and replies:

“Me too, love, me too…”

**Chapter Four**

Most of the time when terrible things happen, the world feels like its spinning. It’s like everything is out of control, and no one has a grasp on anything. Your head gets hot, and you panic, with your body temperature rising and your mind in a blur. You feel light headed, like whatever is happening isn’t possible.

That is the exact opposite of how I feel right now.

Everything feels real; Cold, hard reality. Contrary to the world spinning, everything feels still, like being frozen in time, as if only the inside of this tree house is still moving forward, but the rest of the world has stopped.

I look up to see a clock that was never there before letting me know it's 12:43 A.M., and I wonder when Chance is getting back.

An hour ago, after that thing ripped out my hair, he went off to go get me some bandages, but couldn't find any. He said he would go into town to see if there were any left in a convenience store, or something, and hasn’t been back since.

I sit on the couch, drinking the tea he left me with, curled up in a blanket that I remember being brought from my house a long time ago. Adjusting the make-shift paper towel bandages on my head and dabbing off any left behind blood out of my hair, I look off by the latch door where my missing hair is. Still on the ground in a piled mess, it sits there looking like a dead animal.

*“I’m sorry. I’ve never seen Meiko like this before. I can’t believe she did this. Maybe hearing you raise your voice startled her.*” Chance’s words resound in my mind.

Apparently, what attacked me was a monkey. A monkey named Meiko that he claims has been the house pet for the past few months. He said that, in one of the nearby zoos, two teenage kids ran through and broke open a bunch of the cages, letting a ton of animals loose. This little guy wasn’t used to the wild, and somehow, it ended up with him.

*“I’ll cage her up while I’m gone. I don’t want to come back and find you any more ripped apart than you already are now.”*

Then he left.

He left from a door that never existed before, as well, for the record.

This is so messed up.

I spin my tea around in my cup, still not having drunk any of it yet. It could be poisoned; you can never be too careful.

I don’t know. Too many thoughts, not enough answers. Felix is gone, and for that matter, Little One isn’t here either. Things aren’t in their right places, and most confusing of all, the whole world is cold when it shouldn’t be. That’s all I know, and none of it makes any sense.

Suddenly, I hear the door creak open, and Chance yells, “I’m back.”

Walking towards the couch where I am, he’s carrying five completely full grocery bags, most of them looking rather heavy. I just sit and watch him lug them over, still curled in my little ball and holding my possibly poisoned tea.

“Hey, are you feeling any better?” he asks as he kneels down and reaches for my sloppily bandaged head, lifting up one of the paper towels that got stuck in dried blood. Attempting to remove it, he pulls on my scalp, resulting in my immediate backlash of “Ow!” and me pulling away.

He looks at me concerned as he stands back up and sighs. “Well, if they’re stuck on there, we are going to have to soak them off. We need to put real bandages on you.”

“No,” I refuse, holding my hand protectively over my wound.

“No?” he repeats, “But you need it…" he trails off, forgetting my name.

“Analiese.” I state.

“Right… Analiese…” he trails off again, like he’s just playing along.

I look at him, irritated and concerned, and I ask, “Why is it so hard to just believe my name is Analiese? I don’t question that your name is Chance.”

He looks down and just sighs again, returning back to his kneeling position at eye level with me, brushing his blond hair from his eyes. “Look, I don’t know what happened, but I’m going to be forward with you. Something isn’t right.”

“No shit,” I state. “You’ve commandeered my house overnight and turned it into an art gallery.”

Chance looks at me wide-eyed. Concerned, yet frustrated, he breaths out heavily and sighs. “Okay, well, let me tell you my problem. My problem is, is that there is a scared, aggressive, mangled girl in my house who apparently doesn’t understand the way this world works and is accusing me of ‘commandeering’ her home.”

“Well, you did,” I argue under my breath.

“Okay. Then please tell me, even if I did take over your living quarters, why the hell I would play interior designer in this apocalypse!” he blurts out, now desperate with frustration.

“Apocalypse? What ‘apocalypse’?” I question suspiciously.

“The one we are in!” He sarcastically laughs. “The one we have all been trying to survive for the past three months! Have you been living in a cave? Almost everyone is dead, and the few of us who remain are being hunted.”

I just stare at him, in shock, fear, confusion, and defensiveness, looking to the ground, then at all the things around the room that never existed before, trying to know what to think.

*Apocalypse or not, he is right about one thing. I was just sleeping here. Why would someone come in and drive me to the outskirts of town just to redecorate my house? And, even if someone did something as crazy as that, there’s no way they could have set up that fence in that time, or the so called police men in huge suits, or the freezing temperatures in the middle of blazing summer.*

*No one could have done that.*

*It’s impossible.*

“Hey,” he whispers as I feel his hand on mine. I turn to see him much closer to me than he was before, and he looks at me with empathetic eyes and asks, “Did you lose your memory maybe?”

*My memory?*

*I have all my memories.*

*Of Felix and Kylee and school and home.*

*But wait-*

*What if that wasn’t just a few hours ago?*

*What if something did happen, and I’ve lost my memory to this point?*

*That would make sense why the weather is so cold.*

“What is the date?” I ask frantically.

“The date?” he asks as he gets up and walks to a calendar that I have never seen before, covered in red x’s. His eyes trace across the calendar until the red x’s stop, and he turns to me and says, “December 15.”

My stomach drops, and my mouth gapes open.

“D-December?” I stutter. “Wha-? Are you absolutely sure?”

Chance just nods his head like I am the crazy one and slowly replies, “Yes?”

I stare at Chance for a moment, waiting for him to say ‘just kidding’, waiting for him to tell me it isn’t true, but he doesn’t. I look down to the ground, wide-eyed and in shock, with chills running up and down my body.

*It has to be true; there’s no way it could be this cold in summer.*

*He can’t be lying.*

I clear my throat and, looking back up, I ask, “What happened since the date of June 1?”

“June 1?” he repeats. “Well, my, I couldn’t tell you exactly, but I can tell you this. Everything was normal until September 12. That’s when this hell broke loose.”

I try to stay focused, to not lose it, to believe what he is saying, and I choke out, “Chance.” I take in a breath to continue my thought as calmly as I can. “Please explain to me what happened here.”

Chance just looks at me concerned and asks, “Are you sure you really want to know right now? I feel a lot has happened to you tonight, and maybe you’re not rea-”

“No, tell me now,” I demand, acting as strong as I possibly can. “I need to know.”

Chance takes in a deep breath and sighs, “Well, if you’re sure…”

He then takes in another deep breath and exhales, saying, “Three months ago, a biological weapon was released on our city. No one expected it. Everyone was out and about, minding their day, when suddenly, a jet appeared, flying so low to the ground that the sound was deafening. Before anyone could understand what was going on, what seemed to be gas bombs were dropped everywhere. Choking and screaming, everyone panicked, trying to find shelter, but it didn’t matter. They were already infected.”

I stare at him, trying to keep my composure.

“I had just started college that week. I was in the middle of chemistry class, when it happened. The first thing I saw were huge flashes of light and a deafening crash, and suddenly, everyone was running, so I ran too…” His voice slows and his expression clearly shows that this is where it gets difficult to talk about things.

He shifts his eyes from mine and looks to the floor, putting his hands in between his knees. He continues, “The crowd was overwhelming, and people started getting trampled. I felt hands, legs, and faces under my feet. My own classmates were getting trampled to death, but everyone was moving too fast to save anyone. I branched off and ran to the school cellar where the pools were in hopes of finding…” he trails off, looking up into my eyes for a moment then looking to the side and mumbling, “my girlfriend.”

I stare at him as he takes a moment to recompose himself. He takes in another deep breath and looks up to the ceiling, saying, “Since she always went there to read, I figured that's where I would find her, and I was absolutely right. She was there, huddled in a corner crying, too scared of leaving, not knowing what was going on.”

I wince, imagining the scene painted out in my head.

“I ran up and grabbed her telling her we had to go, but she wouldn’t budge. She cried and cried and begged that it would be safer to stay there, and I’m glad I listened. I locked the door and waited until there were no more sounds. We must have been down there for at least three hours before we felt safe enough to come out, and that’s when we saw everything.”

He stops again, swallowing, trying to keep his emotions bottled to tell me the rest.

“Bodies,” he chokes out. "We found bodies everywhere.” He pauses, recomposing himself enough to continue. “Up and down the halls, they were strewn everywhere, some smashed and flat from the trampling, but all of them, without exception, were covered in horrid black bruises.”

“Bruises?” I question.

Chance nods and replies, “Yes, pitch black, covering all the bodies in random splotches from head to toe. That wasn’t it, either. Many of them also had huge blisters all over their body, popped and oozing fluids. It was a horrifying sight. I just remember her letting out a bone chilling scream, and my only reaction was to grab her and cover her eyes. It was the best I could do to make it all go away.”

My heart drops, trying to take everything in, feeling sick to my stomach hearing that description. I’m trying to believe it, but it’s not processing well.

“I wish I could have made it all go away; I wish this would have never happened… ” His voice trails off, and his story slows into emotions. “That was the start of the Black Epidemic.”

I look to him and place my hand on his knee, in an attempt to comfort, but I’m in no position to do so. Every word he says, my mind rejects in self-defense to try and keep my sanity. Shock is plastered all over my face, and there is no way to hide that.

Without even noticing, a moment passes, and he gets ahold of himself, then opens his mouth to speak. “After we left the building, we saw the damage. Smashed windows, totaled cars, and just like in the halls, the streets were strewn with bodies. We did our best to step over them, to land on any piece of asphalt over putrid black flesh. That’s when I heard her scream.” He pauses a moment, taking in a long breath. “One of them was still alive, and it grabbed her ankle. It was a woman. I remember she had long brown hair and normal clothes, but her face was covered in the festering blackness and exploded blisters. Her outstretched arms had them too. She just looked up at us, terrified, her mouth opening and shutting like she was trying to say something, but no words would come out. My girlfriend kept screaming, and in the heat of the moment, I didn’t know what to do, so I stomped and crushed the woman’s deteriorated wrist until she let go of her. I didn’t know what was wrong with the woman, and I was afraid, so we ran. I turned just long enough to watch her silently scream in pain.”

With my hands cupped around my mouth in horror, I stare at Chance in disbelief.

“I’ve felt terrible about it ever since. I just didn’t know what else to do!” he defends against my reaction. “But either way, we had to get to shelter, so we went to the first place that was nearest to the school; her parents. The door was locked, and no one would come out, so we went around the back way.” He stops, taking in a deep breath and continues, “Once we got inside, the first person we found was her mother. She was lying on the couch, face down, covered in blisters, and my girlfriend collapsed in horror. It was just too much for her to handle.”

I just look down and mumble, “Oh, God.”

Chance sighs. “And as for her dad, we couldn’t find him. He wasn’t there.”

Chance shifts into a more comfortable position, and I hear him say, “After that, we knew it wouldn’t be safe there. Really, we didn’t know if it would be safe anywhere. Either way, though, we knew a house like hers, with so many windows, was no good. So we went out here to the tree house her dad had built for her, and we have been out here ever since.”

I just stare. *How can this be happening?*

I curl into myself, just looking to the floor, terrified.

Chance moves to the ground and wraps his arm around me, holding me tightly. He tilts my chin up to his face and my horrified eyes meet his secure ones. “Hey, it’s going to be okay, though,” he coos, looking into my frail psyche. When I don’t respond, his expression drops and he asks, “Did that ring any bells?”

I look up at him with tired eyes and whimper, “What?”

“Did that remind you of anything? Does that sound familiar?” he repeats in clarification.

My eyes dart to the ground, jumping from one spot to the next, thinking of what to say as if it is a right or wrong answer. “No,” I reply. “Why?”

Chance just drops his head in defeat, then turns to the side just enough for me to see his expression of pain and frustration, and he mumbles, “I was hoping it would.”

Before I can say anything, Chance stands up and walks to a corner of the room, where he reaches over and picks something up. I sit, waiting and wondering why he got up so abruptly, and before I can think another thought on the matter, he places a picture frame in my lap, face down.

I just look at it, then back up at Chance, waiting for instructions on what to do. He nods his head to the side, telling me to flip it over. I press my fingers to both sides of the wooden frame and turn it right side up, and what I see makes my jaw drop.

It’s me.

Me and Chance.

Smiling happily for the camera inside this tree house, with all the dream catchers and colors in the background.

Chills run down my spine and I almost don’t notice the one difference between the me here and the me there.

In the picture, my hair is blond.

I try to speak, but no words come out. I clear my throat, and all I can think to say is, “Is this why you were asking about my blond hair earlier?”

Chance nods and looks at me with empathetic eyes and utters, “Her name is Lullaby.”

I stare at him, then my eyes dart down to the photo, and I mouth the name Lullaby.

*Lullaby.*

*Lullaby.*

*That can’t be.*

Suddenly, it occurs to me what he is trying to get across, why he keeps acting so weird and why he keeps treating me so strangely. I tilt my head in the same direction as his to see eye to eye, and I ask, “Do you… think I am your girlfriend?”

Both his eyes open wide, wincing and looking into me with the most painful and pleading expression.

Nobody says a thing and the room is completely still. Staring into him, I finally break the silence and utter, “That’s impossible.” Although once the words escape my mouth I realize that every other impossible thing has already happened, so maybe it isn’t as impossible as I think. “That can’t be me,” I utter in disbelief. “There’s no way.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him turn to me and desperately, he blurts out, “Then what are you? Her twin? You look just like her! You two are identical!”

Chance takes in a deep breath and runs his hands through his wispy blond hair as he throws himself back onto the couch in defeat. I just stare at him, then back at the photo, not knowing what to think, much less what to say.

Drowning in this unanswerable dilemma, I stare at the picture, and he stares at the floor. Too many questions and no answers. My head spins in confusion, and suddenly, it hits me.

“Felix,” I whisper as my eyes go wide.

“What?” Chance mumbles, hopelessly.

“Felix, my boyfriend, we need to find him. He will know what happened; he was the last person I was with!” I shout with new hope in my voice.

Chance stares at me with tired eyes and sighs, “Yes, okay, but we have no idea where this person would even be.”

“It doesn’t matter, we will find him. We have to,” I decree, as I get up.

“Where are you going?” he asks, looking up at me as if he is scared I am going to leave.

“I need you to take me outside,” I reply decisively. “I need to see everything that has changed. You need to show me.”

Chance just stares at me like I am crazy, and he asks, “How is that supposed to help anything?”

I put my hands on my hips and explain, “Well, if I am stranded here in a completely changed world, I need to see for myself if I am ever going to hope to navigate myself around to find him.”

Chance stares at me like I am a lunatic, until his expression softens, and he presses his fingers to his chin in thought. He quietly replies, “I mean, I guess if there is any time to show you, it’s now. The guards patrol the gate at night and leave the streets completely empty.” He looks back up to me in concern. “Are you sure you are well enough to go? A lot has happened tonight; maybe you should get some rest.”

“No,” I state defiantly. “I need to go tonight. I can’t wait until tomorrow. I fell asleep when my life was perfect, and then suddenly, I wake up in the middle of the 'apocalypse' with my boyfriend missing. This is something I need to see for myself, and I need to do it now. I can’t wait another day for something that is happening right this second. I need to find him. I need to know he is okay.”

Chance leans back and sighs, “Well, if you say so.” He gets up and stretches, then pulls himself back to his natural posture and says, “Well in the, er, off chance that you are not Lullaby, I should be out there searching for her, too. I promised her I would always keep her safe. If you say you are not her, then I will believe you, but one thing is for certain, something isn’t right here.”

I stand in the middle of the room with the dream catchers and paint absorbing me. I look back to the couch where the picture of Chance and my identical copy is lying, and I utter under my breath, “Oh, I know that buddy. I know.”

**Chapter Five**

Stepping outside, the air is even colder than before. Chance runs back in to fetch me a jacket, and I wait outside, on a balcony that never existed before, for him to return.

Staring out into the dark open air, I see silhouetted tree after tree by the thousands. If anything is different than the forest I was used to, I would never know, so at least this still feels the same.

I hear the door shut behind me, and I turn around to see Chance wearing his own coat along with a big brown leather jacket with two egg shaped lumps in it.

“This is all I could find.” He pauses to take a breath, exhausted from searching for it so quickly. “It’ll have to do.”

I nod, eagerly taking the jacket from him to shelter myself from the cold as he separates it from the round, metallic objects clanking out. Sliding my arms through the long sleeves and making myself comfortable, I ask, “What are those things?”

“Oh these?” he replies, rising up his two cupped hands full of them towards me. “They’re protection.”

“Protection?” I respond confused, squinting my eyes, taking in all the light possible to see what they are.

Chance gives a slight smirk as he quietly whispers, “They’re hand grenades.”

“Hand grenades!?” I gasp. “How did you get ahold of hand grenades!? You’re just a kid!”

Chance just looks at me with a sly and confident smile as he calmly says, “I have my ways. After all, in an apocalypse ‘anything goes’ is just about the only rule there is.”

With my jaw dropped, I just look at the small metal eggs in disbelief that these are actually real grenades.

Before I can ask anything more about the questionable bombs, Chance latches them onto his belt and makes his way across the balcony. Stopping at the very edge, he says, “Anyways,” as he reaches out and grabs something metallic with a clank, “are you ready?”

Slow and unsure, my eyes strain to see what he could have hit to make that sound. “Yeah… ready for what?” I reply.

Chance just looks at me, with his crystal green eyes piercing into mine, and I hear him knock against the metal object again. “Ready to go down,” he states.

“What are you talking about?” I mutter, feeling vulnerable and lost by his intense stare, shifting my eyes to the side to avoid his. “Aren’t we going down the slide?”

“Slide?” he repeats in confusion. He sighs, releasing his hand from the darkness and onto mine. “And this is exactly why we are going on this walk. You have no idea what anything is.”

Grabbing my hand, he pulls it into the darkness where his previously was, and I suddenly feel freezing cold metal in my palm.

“This,” he states, knocking on the metal, and hearing it reverberate in response, “is a fireman’s pole. You’re going to slide down it.”

*What!?*

“Oh whoa, whoa, whoa!” I stammer, pulling away. “I’d love to go on this walk and everything, but there’s no way I’m leaving down that thing.”

He lets go and moves towards me, not even wasting the time to sigh anymore. “Well, I don’t know what you propose because there is no slide here.”

“There is too!” I state as I break from our bickering and run back inside to the wall where the slide is. “It’s right he-”

But the moment I turn to where the slide always is and always has been…

Just as he said: There’s no slide.

Cold sweat runs down my neck as I hear him yell from outside, “Well?”

Silently, shocked and ashamed, I walk back out not saying a word.

“There wasn’t a slide, was there?” he asks.

I shake my head and refuse to look at him, staring aimlessly and in shock at what I just witnessed.

Chance just sighs. “Well, you could always climb down,” he says as he points his thumb to the floor. My eyes widen in hope at this new option. “But it’s a rope ladder and trying to mangle that thing at night is nearly impossible. You’ll kill yourself on the first step.”

The light in my eyes immediately dissipates, and my expression turns sour, displeased with the taunting, unrealistic option that got my hopes up.

“Well, what am I supposed to do then?” I ask, folding my arms, as both options are impossible in my book, and apparently, my slide is gone.

He thinks for a moment, then bounces himself up from the wall he was leaning on and smoothly replies, “Well, then, we’ll do this.”

He grabs my arm and pulls me into him, wrapping his other arm around me. He lets go of my hand and turns around, reaching for the metal pole, and I hear the sound of him grabbing it hard.

“Hey, what are you doing!?” I scream, fighting his tight grasp.

“You’re coming down with me,” he says dominantly. “I’m not giving you a choice.”

He wraps himself around me, with his cool skin touching mine, and our faces are so close that they are brushing. “Are you crazy!? You’re gonna kill-!” But before I can get the words out of my mouth, he pushes in both of my knees. My legs collapse in, and he thrusts his body towards the pole, pushing us both forward and gravity pushing us down.

I shut my eyes tight and scream, feeling the freezing wind hitting my face and my stomach flying into my ribs. Before I can get another breath in to scream again, we’ve already hit the ground. The solid jolt of impact shuts me up and for a second I think I’m dead. It’s not until Chance shifts his body, letting down my legs, that I open my eyes and realize that I’m alright.

I look up to him, wide-eyed and in shock, with all negative emotions shot out of me.

He releases the pole from his hand but keeps his other arm around me, gazing at me again with those crystal green eyes. He smiles, looking at me like the expression I’m making is amusing, but then it fades into a tender smile. A loving one.

Staring into his eyes, I’m still startled by the shock, not moving, frozen like entire world around us.

He takes his other hand and brushes it through my long, dark brown hair, leading it down to my shoulders, and then he breaks away, releasing me back into the cold darkness. He grabs my hand and utters, “Let's go,” as he pulls me into the forest.

Still in shock, I stagger behind quietly. Hearing nothing but the forest shuffling and crackling under our feet and the faint sound of crickets chirping, I look up to the canopied treetops and I begin to get anxious.

*Apocalypse or not, it isn’t safe being out this late.*

*I don’t know why I said I wanted to go right now. I’m beginning to regret that decision. I would rather be safe and alive by tomorrow, than explore and die tonight.*

Suddenly, a huge crow leaps and takes into flight from a branch. The branch snaps from the force, and in a loud crash, it hits the forest floor.

Chills run down my spine from this, and I squeeze Chance’s hand harder.

*It’s easy to talk big about the night while still in the light.*

Only a moment passes before his steps come to a halt and I hear him shuffling around. I look up from the ground to see we are already next to the bike.

“Alright, hop on,” he says, saddling the motorcycle.

I look at him and then to the bike a little uneasily, remembering the uncomfortable drive that we just had not too long ago.

“You coming?” he asks, as he pats the back, waiting.

I shake the fear out of my mind and follow him on, plopping myself on the back.

*Well, I’m the one who said I wanted to go. I have to own up to it. As long as I am with Chance, I should be safe. I need to toughen up and find Felix. That is my main priority right now.*

*Well, that and surviving.*

The bike starts up with a loud purr, and I panic around for a place to hold onto, scared that he’ll ride off before I can.

“Here,” he says, grasping my hands and placing them at his sides, “you hold onto me.”

Our eyes meet for a second, and his intense gaze gives me chills.

He then turns back around and I hear the engine rev, then I feel a jolt, and we’re off.

The forest flies past us, and the cold wind whips my face. I burrow into Chance’s back to avoid the stinging air and shut my eyes tight just wanting this ride to be over.

Wanting all of this to be over.

The bumps and bangs of the bike from the forest grounding startle me, making me cling onto him even tighter.

*I hate this.*

Just as I’m about to yell for him to slow down, I feel a huge jolt, and the bike skids to a turn, now sailing on smooth ground.

*We’re at the road already?*

*That was fast.*

With the wind still breaching my face and the cold still numbing me to the bone, the streets begin to become lighter and lighter.

I look up from Chance’s shoulders to see street lamps appearing, flying by at Mach speed, and then disappearing in the blink of an eye. All around me, I feel like the whole world is empty with no one but me and Chance, and suddenly, I feel shattered.

With the shock re-entering my mind that all of this is real and happening, everything seeps into me in a sudden blow. Tears weld up in my eyes, and I dig my face deeper into Chance’s jacket. My body shivers and shakes, no longer being able to tell if it’s from the cold or from my feelings, and it hits me.

*What if I’m riding on the back of my boyfriend’s murderer? What if everything he’s told me so far is a lie, and I fell for it?*

I look down at the pavement, drowned in terrified, paranoid thoughts. Watching as the yellow division lines flash by me in a blur, they slowly begin to separate as the bike loses speed. Little by little the tiny dashes re-appear, and the bike slows down, coming to a halt.

“Why did you stop? Where are we?” I ask defensively, startled by this sudden stop in the middle of nowhere important.

“Calm down, we’re just on the outskirts of town,” he states, taking off his helmet. “And, if you want to know why we stopped, just look around you.”

I stare at him, taking in his response, then following his orders, I gaze up, and what I see makes my jaw drop.

Car after car after car, bumper to bumper, piled up as far as the eye can see.

“Dear God, why is the traffic so bad?” I ask, looking up at Chance for an answer, but he just continues to stare off, ignoring my words. I keep looking at him in concern and disgust due to his lack of response, and it dawns on me.

There’s no noise.

No engines.

No headlights are on.

I stand, staring at the packed road, void of any sound, far and deep, disappearing into the darkness.

I dart from Chance to the first car I can reach, running up to the driver seat window, and what I see nearly makes me vomit.

I fall to the ground, gagging and wheezing, coughing my lungs up, sick to my stomach. My whole body is shivering and shaking, having never seen anything like that in my entire life.

Inside was a body. A dead body.

Rotted and disfigured, with open wounds and torn out flesh. Sitting in the driver’s seat, still buckled in.

I continue to choke, slumped down on my hands and knees. I hear Chance approach and stop right in front of me, staying silent.

“Wha-” I start, coughing and gagging before I can finish. “What the-”

I look up at him, his tall body towering over me, still staring down the rows of cars.

“I told you,” he utters calmly as I hear him lean down. I feel him wrap his arm around me, and he quietly says, “It’s something you needed to see though.”

A long silence passes as I collect myself, still sick to my stomach, I pick myself up. I dart my eyes back to Chance, eyes filled with confusion, terror and disbelief, and he returns my gaze with almost a shameful sigh for showing me.

I get to my feet, trembling and shaken, but I can't help myself. I need to see more.

I dart away again, running to the next car in line, to show myself, convince myself, that this is all real. That this isn't just a dream.

I reach the next car, and, once again, I fall to my knees coughing and choking.

It’s the same exact scene as before. Only this time, it is a family with children.

Chance walks back up to me again, but he stops short.

A few moments pass, and I stop gagging, staring at the ground in disbelief and horror.

“Had enough yet?” I hear Chance ask.

I don't know what to say or how to respond, and I just stare at the ground in shock, my whole face is flushed and hazy.

Chance just sighs and kneels down to me again and utters, “I’m sorry, Analiese, but this is the world we live in now.”

I shoot up, staring him with watery and desperate eyes, banging my fists in unison against my chest. “This. Is not. The world. I live in!” I cry, tears once again welding in my eyes. “This isn’t home.”

I break down into weeping sobs; all this being too much to take in. I feel his hand on my shoulder and hear his soft voice coo, “It is ok, you have me, and I’ll take care of you.”

Hearing his kind words, I put my face in my knees, and I just cry, with the dried up blood stained bandages on my head falling in my eyes.

There are rows of cars with dead people in them.

And nothing is what it seems.

“How can you be so calm?” I cry, looking up at him like a confused child. “Everyone’s dead!”

“Not everyone is dead,” he replies softly, as he gently rubs my back. “You still have me, and I still have you, and there are others.”

I stare at him for a moment with watery eyes before clenching my head in my hands and balling up, shutting my eyes. Shutting this world out.

A long silence passes, and everything is still.

No noise, no talking, no car horns.

This is now that atmosphere of what used to be the busy streets of Braxton, just hours ago.

And now everyone is dead.

The faint flicker of yellow street lamps pry into my eyes, reminding me that this world outside of my blackened vision still exists and that it isn’t going anywhere.

“I want to go home,” I whimper.

I hear Chance sigh, and he squeezes me tight choking, “I know. I want to go back to the home I knew, too, but this is home now.”

I gaze up, with dried tears streamed down my face, to see he has tears in his eyes as well.

“I watched my family die,” he utters. “All my friends are dead.”

I just stare up at him, completely silent, wanting to hug him, back but too broken already to do so.

His green eyes are wide and his face is red, with his expression of agony now painfully obvious.

“You ask why I’m calm. I’m calm because I don’t have a choice. I have to protect you. I don’t have time to waste on myself and feeling sorry. I need to survive.” He gets to his feet and stands. “We need to go.”

I just sit there, staring wide-eyed at him, with my mind not comprehending what is happening.

“Go?” I repeat stupidly, shaken by all that has just happened.

“Yes, go. There’s more you need to see,” he sniffs, as he wipes at his eyes, then extends his other hand out to help me up.

I numbly hold my hand out as he helps me to my feet. I trail after him, with my eyes tracing along the car windows we pass, seeing more and more horrors until I can’t take it anymore. I turn away and towards the ground, trying to steady my thoughts, trying to get a hold of myself, but I’m too far gone.

I silently and shakily follow behind Chance, staying close as to not get lost in this terrifying world.

 ~\*~

Some time passes, and I still hear nothing from Chance. We’ve been walking for what seems like an eternity, and I still haven’t heard a single word.

The streetlights illuminate the road, and I watch as the bumper-to-bumper streets begin to be cleared, with the cars smashed off to the side and onto the sidewalks. Just as if someone had come and plowed through the road with a giant truck, the street gradually becomes freed of all but small amounts of debris.

Despite the shattered surroundings, I've slowly become numb to what I've seen and, coming to my senses, I catch up to Chance. Still immersed in silence, he continues to walk on.

I keep my pace with him and grab his arm; tugging on it, I murmur, “Hey.”

“Hm?” He looks at me with tired eyes, as if he was sleeping, and I had just woke him up.

“Um,” I mutter shyly, now feeling bad that I've dragged him this far out so late. “How did the roads get cleared like that?” I point directly ahead of us, towards the abandoned street.

Chance slowly looks up, completely exhausted, and mutters, “Oh, street-wipers. They are pretty much giant garbage trucks with grills on the front that push the cars out of the way. The government sent men to do that on a few, select roads just a little bit after the Black Epidemic broke out, in order to make way for rescue vehicles to come through.”

I gaze over the plowed through streets, and ask, “So why hasn’t anyone saved us yet, then?”

Chance just hangs his head low and replies, “Because ‘saving’ us was never their top priority.”

His words hit me hard, and I ask, “Then what was?”

Chance turns to me, only for a moment, and he simply utters, “Experiments,” before he turns back and looks straight ahead, once again.

Chills run down my spine and I don’t know what to say. I want to press further, but at the same time, I already feel too overloaded as it is.

Before I can make any kind of decision one way or the other, I hear Chance change the subject and announce, “We are almost there, just a little bit further.”

I silently follow behind, knowing I’m not the one in control here. Chance is the one who has taken me out at this Godforsaken hour to do what I wanted, and now is not the time to talk about things. I’ll just have to ask about it when we get back.

I look up at the buildings passing by and notice their deterioration. Smashed windows, broken down doors, and rummaged insides.

*He wasn’t lying. This world really is a mess, and I need him to help me through this or I won’t make it. I don’t want to push him anymore than I already have. I know I’m unstable and hard to deal with, but I need to control myself. Maybe Kylee was right.*

*Maybe I am too dependent.*

His steps come to a halt and, without me noticing, I bump into him. Startled, I hear him state, “We’re here,” and I look up.

I gaze into the darkness, stopped in front of a large building. A building I would recognize from anywhere. It’s the front of my school.

I look at it, then look back up at Chance and ask, “Why are we here?”

“Do you know what this is?” he retorts.

I look back, double checking the building, and then look back up to him like it’s a trick question.

“Yeah, it’s my school,” I simply respond.

“So you *did* go to this school? Are you absolutely sure?” he asks carefully.

“Yes,” I state with certainty, “I definitely did.”

“What grade were you in?” he questions again.

“Twelfth, I was just about to graduate,” I respond.

His face turns to shock and almost a look of suspicion, and he asks, “Then why have I never seen you before?”

I just stare at him, his question not registering correctly in my mind, and I reply, “Wait, are you saying you went here?”

“Yes,” he states with complete certainty. “I just graduated a few months ago, which is why it’s odd I never saw you there.”

I just look at him in confusion, then down at the ground, thinking hard if I had ever seen him before, passed him in the hall maybe. The school does have a few thousand students; maybe I just never met him.

“When is your birthday?” he asks, interrupting my thought.

His sudden and random question throws me off, and I almost forget when my birthday is. “Uh, um- May 8, why?” I reply as I look back to him, but when I do, his face is in complete shock.

“That’s-” he chokes up, staring at me in complete disbelief.

I wait for him to finish his sentence, but when he doesn’t, I ask, “What?”

He just stares at me as if he is waiting for me to figure out his shock on my own, but when I stay silent waiting for him, he just replies, “That’s Lullaby’s birthday.”

My expression drops, and I stare at him with the same face he is staring at me with.

He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. He opens his mouth again in a second attempt and utters, “That can’t be a coincidence.”

I look down at the ground, and my earlier suspicions of Chance lying to me about everything flashes through my mind.

I look back up at him staring at me in shock, and I look back down.

No, there’s no reason for him to lie, there can’t-

“I think I get it now,” Chance states firmly, all shock shaken out of his voice.

“Get what?” I ask, turning to him to see his eyes staring off in deep thought.

“I think I get why you look just like Lullaby, but act completely different, have a different colored hair, and possess different memories all of your own.”

I stare at him, surprised and taken off guard by his sudden answer to all our questions that we have wanted to understand this whole time, and I reply, “Why?”

“Because,” he says decisively, “you are her twin.”

For a moment, this shocks me, and I almost believe it until a moment later it occurs to me. “Yes, that would sound the most logical, but only if my memories didn’t specifically contradict yours.”

He blinks, it hitting him that I just shot a hole right through his theory. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that Felix and I have been using the tree house for about three and a half years now,” I state.

Chance stares at me wide-eyed and unhappily, as if what I just said was made up specifically to destroy his theory, and he retorts, “Well, that’s impossible because Lullaby and I have been using it for that same amount of time.”

I look up at him and respond, “That is exactly what I mean. This is where our realities differ, and there is no use arguing about it. It is what it is, but I think that shuts the door on the theory that I am her twin.”

Chance just looks at me completely crestfallen thoroughly and obviously upset that his theory didn’t hold water. “Well, it was just an idea.” He sighs. “Let’s just go.”

Feeling tired and worn, I almost don’t care to ask where we are headed, but I do anyways.

“Where are we going?”

“Just follow me,” he demands, obviously upset and exhausted. “We will be there soon enough.”

I do as he says, trailing behind quietly, not wanting to push him any further. As I walk, I begin to notice all the familiar sites. Shops and stores, places I pass by every day, except they’re all destroyed.

Smashed in windows and broken down doors just like the rest.

It’s a complete ghost town.

The reality of my situation starts truly sinking in. As I walk through the streets, seeing everything dilapidated and abandoned, I begin to accept that this truly is the world I live in now, and there is no denying it.

I don’t know how all this could have happened in just the few hours while I was asleep, and I can’t explain anything that has taken place. All I know is that this is real and that I need to find Felix.

The cold starts sinking in through my jacket and chilling my body. I wrap my arms around myself and start shivering, trying to keep up with Chance.

My second wind came and went a while ago and, though there’s no clock around, I can only guess it’s around four in the morning, and it’s starting to show in my stamina. My eyes begin to droop and my movements slur, and the cold is not helping one bit.

“We’re here,” Chance announces coldly, coming to a halt just yards away.

I catch up, forcing my dulled motor skills to react, rushing over, only to find that we’ve stopped at my house.

*Oh my God.*

I don’t even wait for Chance to speak as my legs carry me to the door before I can think.

“Mom!? Dad!?” I bang on the door, but there’s no response. “Hello!?” I yell, but still nothing.

*No this can’t be. No.*

*No. No. No. No. No. No.*

I continue to pound my fist against the polished wood, yelling and screaming for my parents, on the brink of tears ready to burst. Suddenly, I feel a hand grab my wrist right before I slam on the door again. I look up, teary eyed and terrified, to see Chance holding my arm back. With his face filled with compassion and tears, he grabs ahold of me and embraces me tight, uttering, “Lullaby. It really is you!”

As he burrows his face into my shoulder, holding my body, I just stand there overwhelmed. Confused and terrified. Weepy and wide-eyed. Paralyzed from the cold and exhausted from the lack of sleep. I fall limp into his arms, and my eyes begin to shut, becoming numb to this world.

*This can’t be real.*

*This has to be a dream.*

*I need to wake up.*

*Please, wake up.*

**Chapter Six**

I shoot my eyes open, and the sun gleams bright in my face, lying in my own bed at home.

It takes me a moment to begin to function as I stare up at the ceiling trying to remember the last thing that happened.

I sit up and look around, my vision still blurry from just waking up, but even without sharp detail, I know for a fact this is my room.

I stay there for a moment, coming to my senses, and suddenly, I remember all the events that occurred.

My heartbeat stops for a second with the thought that all of that could be real, when suddenly, a great rush of relief washes over me when I realize that none of it actually was.

“It was all just a dream,” I whisper to myself.

Excitement begins to build up inside of me. All the hell that I thought was real. The nightmare that I thought had become my life.

Gone.

I begin to laugh to myself in small crackling giggles.

*I really thought that I was in an apocalypse!*

*I really thought it had all happened!*

“Oh my God.” I sigh in relief as I plummet back down to my bed. Lying flat on my back and looking at the ceiling, I mumble, “It was just a dream.”

I lay there silently cuddled in the warm safety of the blanket with the cool breeze of the AC on my face.

*My home, my life, everything is normal.*

*And that means…*

“Felix,” I whisper to myself.

I burst out of bed and run to the door, swinging it open with the biggest smile on my face when suddenly, my expression shatters.

There, sitting outside on the couch in the darkened living room is Chance.

He stares at me and I stare at him, and slowly my surroundings begin to soak into me.

Nothing in the room is in order, with tables knocked over, books on the ground, and shattered glass everywhere.

“No,” I choke out in a small gasp.

I quickly turn and look back into my bedroom to find that, while many of the items I’ve always had in my room are still the same, there were many more that I had never even seen before, and nothing was in its right place.

*No.*

*No, no, no, no, no.*

*It can’t be.*

Suddenly, I feel a presence behind me, and I quickly turn around to see Chance standing there, incredibly close.

I just look straight ahead at him, then slowly move my broken, desperate, tearful gaze up to his empathetic eyes, and without any control over it, I just burst into tears.

“Oh, Lullaby…” he coos as he embraces me tightly.

I bawl into him, soaking his white, blood stained, dirty shirt from yesterday as I clench onto the fabric and sob.

*It wasn’t a dream.*

*This all is real.*

*Everyone is dead.*

Tears stream down my face as I wail into his chest.

*My parents, my friends, everyone.*

*It’s just me and Chance.*

*And Felix is missing.*

I continue to cry when Chance speaks again and softly mutters, “Hey, now, I know it’s hard, but you have to be quiet. If the guards hear you, they will come in and take us away.”

“T-take us away?” I stutter through my tears.

“Yes,” he calmly states, “which is why you need to stop crying, love, please.” He pauses for a moment as he looks back down, squeezing me just a little tighter. “And because I hate to see you cry, darling.”

I try to calm down the best I can, hiccupping and sniffling, as his words soak in.

*Love.*

*Darling.*

I slowly stop my tears and look up at him and into his pitiful eyes.

*Why is he…?*

And then it hits me, and I remember.

Lullaby.

He thinks I’m his girlfriend Lullaby.

Slowly, I move my hand up and wipe the tears from my eyes as I take a deep breath and carefully pull away from him, not feeling comfortable with this situation.

Chance just stands and looks at me with an expression of worry and concern because I pulled away, and I just pat his chest in reassurance that it’s alright.

I cover my dirty, grief stricken face and sniffle up my tears as I walk to the couch and plop down, putting my head in my hands.

Chance takes a moment before coming over to me, as if he wasn’t sure if I was okay with him doing that or not, and he sits down next to me.

Everything is silent and still, and he is the first to speak. “I know it’s a lot. I’m sorry.”

I don’t respond, just sitting in place, staring out into the broken, empty room.

Everything is destroyed.

“You know,” he mutters, breaking the deafening silence, “you used to have night terrors a lot. That, or you would wake up from dreaming of a normal life and believing things were still the same way. You haven’t had those for a while, though. I thought they had stopped.”

Staring across the barren room, it isn’t until now that his words finally rub me the wrong way, and I feel the need to speak.

“You didn’t know me before. I’m not your girlfriend,” I blurt through my clogged nose and raspy voice. “I don’t care what you say. I’m not her, and that’s a fact.”

Chance stays completely silent, and I turn to see his broken yet still hopeful face. He utters, “Yes you are,” with his expression leaking a small amount of desperation. “Remember?”

I’m about to open my mouth and tell him ‘no’, but he cuts me off, saying, “Last night you recognized this house. If you weren’t Lullaby, then this would have just been another house to you.”

My words stop and my mind tries to process his statement, and I respond, “Wait, this is Lullaby’s house?” I ask, squinting my eyes, afraid of his next answer.

“Yes,” he states, “it is.”

He then leans forward, placing one hand on my shoulder saying, “I know you are confused, but we are going to get through this together. I’m here for you.”

My mind freezes, and I don’t know what to say.

*How can all this be happening?*

“That’s not possible. I’m me; I can’t be someone else!” I state, starting to feel like I’m the crazy one. “I have my own memories and personality and everything. I can’t be two different people!”

My stomach drops from this disturbing turn of conversation, and I just stare at him speechless, my expression begging for him to say something that will make this all ok.

He just sits silently, exchanging my expression of desperation with one of pity. “I know all of this is a lot to take in, but it will get better. I promise,” he barging, trying to help the situation. “And I’m not going anywhere, alright? You’re safe with me.”

I just look down, with shock now surging through my body again. I wince, trying to wish this all away, but the reality of it all is sinking in, regardless of what I do.

*This is the world I live in now.*

*This is my life.*

*This is all really happening.*

“So…” I trail off, sniffing up my tears and rattled shock, not even really knowing what I’m supposed to say. “What do I do now, then?”

Chance looks at me confused as if the sentence I just said made no coherent sense, and he replies, “What do you mean?”

I look up with teary eyes, searching for words to say, and I explain further, “I mean, how am I just supposed to start my life back up from a place where it never began? I fell asleep in a perfect world and woke up six months in the future in this destroyed one. I have no memories of any kind of life here, and now I am just supposed to survive.” I grasp my head in between my hands and I choke, “I can’t handle this kind of change.”

Tears weld up in my eyes again, and I feel Chance put his arm around me. “Hey,” he whispers, “it’s going to be alright.” His face is so close to mine that I can feel his warm breath against my skin. “I don’t know what happened to you, and your memories are a little scrambled, but you will readjust. I will help you, just like I always do.” He lifts up my hand and intertwines my fingers with his. “I will always take care of you, my darling, no matter what. I love you.”

His words send chills down my spine, and I don’t know how to feel.

Warmth encompasses my body, and I turn to look into his loving sea green eyes staring into mine.

His gaze pulls me in and my mind goes blank, as if in this very moment nothing is wrong. But just as quickly as the feeling comes, it goes, and once again, a surge of hopelessness fills inside of me.

I sigh and turn away, returning my gaze to the floor, trying to make heads or tails of the situation.

*What are the facts? Okay, well, for one, this is real life. There is no debating that. Two, I have taken the place of someone else whom I have never seen or met. Three, this world is incredibly dangerous, and four, everyone I know is either dead or missing.*

*These are all very terrible things.*

I sit silently in thought, until suddenly, I hear people talking outside in muffled voices.

“Chance, did you hear tha-”

“Shh!” Chance quickly hisses as he jumps up from the couch, pulling out a switchblade from his back pocket. “Get down!” he whispers to me.

I immediately do what he says and drop from the couch to the floor, lying on my stomach in army crawl position.

Carefully, Chance creeps towards the front door and looks out the peep hole.

“No one there,” he whispers.

We both stay silent and listen for more sounds, but when we hear don’t hear anything, Chance quietly murmurs, “This is why we have to be quiet and careful. Guards walk around everywhere. If we get caught, we are as good as dead.”

I look at Chance wanting to ask why, but now is not the time. We need to get out of here and go somewhere safe.

“So, what are we going to do?” I whisper.

Chance peers out one of the windows, and seeing no one in sight, he says, “We need to leave, but I don’t want to take any chances. You fainted here last night and wouldn’t wake up, so I had no choice but to camp out here with you. If we leave, we could be caught, but if we stay here, we are just sitting ducks."

Chance puts his hand to his chin in thought and continues, “At night, the streets are safer without the guards, but in the day, they are everywhere. Without the bike, there is no way to escape them. We would need a vehicle to even have a shot at escaping.”

Displeased and nervous, I look around the room as if something in this rummaged old house could possibly help us, but nothing in sight comes to any aid.

*Wait.*

“That’s it!” I exclaim quietly. “My parent's car keys!”

“What?” Chance replies, turning around to look at me.

“Yeah! They always keep them on the rack in the kitchen!” I state as I hurriedly dart to the next room, going straight to the wall where they are always hung.

As I make my way through the broken dishes and scattered silverware, I don’t have to go far to see that the keys are not there.

And neither is the rack.

“Did you find them?” Chance asks quietly.

Disappointed, yet still hopeful, I stare in the dim lit area, soaking in every ounce of the afternoon light shining through the window, looking to see if maybe the rack was knocked to the floor in the chaos.

“Hey,” Chance speaks again.

I continue looking, ignoring Chance on a mission to find the lost keys.

“Lullaby,” Chance voices once more.

“What!?” I snap, completely frustrated as I turn to see Chance standing across the room with a ring of keys around his finger.

“Are these them?” he asks innocently.

Embarrassed, yet relieved to find them, I turn away mumbling, “Er, yeah, those seem to be them,” as I make my way towards the garage. “Come this way, the car is out here.”

Avoiding every piece of broken glass and splintered wood, I walk down the dark hallway. Looking up at the walls surrounding me, I see pictures of my family hanging crooked on the walls just on the edge of falling off.

Due to the dim lighting, it takes me a moment to realize that the photographs that are still hanging are not the ones I am used to.

I stop short in the hallway, and Chance bumps into me, whispering, “Hey, what’s wrong? Did you hear something?”

I don’t respond. With my gaze locked on the slanted photograph, I reach up and grab for it, pulling it off the hook and bringing it close enough to my face to see that something isn’t right.

Just like the one that has always hung in the same spot, it is a photograph of my mother, father, and me, except everything else is different.

In the image, my mother has curly light brown hair instead of the straight dark brown hair that was always photographed. My father, instead of the clean shaven look he always sports, has a moustache. As for me, my hair is sandy blond, just like in the photo Chance showed me before, and I am wearing a light blue sundress.

I don’t even own a sundress.

“Lullaby?” Chance voices, rather concerned.

I just stare at the photo in a trance.

*This is impossible.*

*This picture was never like this.*

*We never looked like this.*

I break my train of thought and look all around the room surrounding me.

*None of this ever looked like this, though.*

*Everything is different.*

I turn back to Chance, shaken but remaining calm, and I whisper softly, “It’s nothing. Let’s keep going.”

We make our way to the garage, and Chance goes to open the door.

“It’s locked,” he mumbles as he unlatches the deadbolt.

In this moment, a part of me wants to stop him. That maybe the door was locked for a reason.

Before I can say anything though, the bolt unlatches with a snap, and I hear a low pitched growl.

“Did you hear that?” I quickly ask Chance before he opens the door.

“Hear what?” he responds.

“That growling,” I state.

Chance remains quiet, and nothing else persists.

We stay silent for a few moments, and when we don’t hear anything else, he whispers, “Are you sure you heard something?”

I look to the door as if doing so would make the sound repeat again, but nothing happens. I begin to think I just imagined it.

“I don’t know,” I reply.

Chance just stares at me, deciding what to do, and he says, “Alright, stand back.”

Following his orders, I back myself into the laundry room just adjacent to the door to the garage. Chance carefully maneuvers to the side of the door where the hinges are, as to not be in direct fire of whatever may be beyond it, and he silently pulls out his gun.

“Ready?” he whispers to me.

I nod in response, and he turns around, slowly twisting the knob.

With a small amount of force, Chance pushes the door open, and nothing happens.

Neither of us say a word, and we just stare intensely into the darkness beyond. Chance turns to me, just for a moment to see what I think, and just as he does this, I see a deranged animal paw step out onto the floor right next to him. “Chance, watch out!” I scream.

Suddenly, Chance swings around as the creature screeches out a terrible cry and pounces out of the garage. Without any hesitation, I hear the boom of his gun and then silence.

Smoke and dust fills the air, and I hide behind the door, straining my eyes to see. With adrenaline pumping in my blood, I want to call out for Chance, but I am scared that the beast may still be alive.

Slowly, the dust begins to settle, and I can make out a figure crouching over.

I panic, thinking that Chance has been injured, when I hear him choke out the words, “Lullaby, you okay?”

Relieved but still on edge, I reply, “I’m fine, are you?”

The dust clears enough for me to see the shot up, dead body of some kind of wild cat, deranged and deformed with blackened skin and open sores.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Chance exhales in a deflating breath.

I stare at Chance then back at the wild cat, and I ask, “What happened to it?”

Chance just sighs. “It looks like he contracted the plague. He must have been surviving on the edge for some time now, it appears. When we alerted him, he did the only thing he knew how to do, and he attacked."

I examine the putrid creature closer, staring at its blackened wounds and popped blisters. Its fur is knotted and missing in random patches, with the bullet wound pierced straight through its chest.

I continue to stare, when suddenly, I hear muffled shouting.

“Oh God, the guards, they heard the gun. Lullaby, we have to go!”

Chance grabs my wrist, and before I can think anything else, he yanks me into the garage.

Taking in all the broken and trashed scenery so quickly, boxes knocked over, dog food scattered everywhere, animal droppings covering the floor, and the side door to the backyard left wide open, I run behind Chance. I hear the car unlock, and I turn to see him already jumping in the driver’s seat. “Come on!” he yells, as he jams the keys into the ignition, starting the car.

Frantically, I jump from where I am to in the car, and I yelp, “The garage door, what about the garage door?!”

“Shit!” Chance snaps, as he bolts from the seat to the door, “Is it electric or manual?”

“It’s electric!” I reply as he runs to the wall and repeatedly presses the button.

Nothing happens in response, and Chance yells, “God damn it!”

Immediately, Chance darts back to the garage door and latches his fingers underneath, lifting up the door with all his strength.

The door budges and opens about a foot off the ground, but as fast as he opens it, he slams it shut. “The guards,” he chokes. “The guards are already outside.”

Cold sweat drips down my neck, and nobody says a word until Chance breaks the silence and yells, “Alright, shut your door and get ready. I’ll distract them!”

Without question, I slam the door, turning to see Chance, with all his might, grasping the door and swinging it up with incredible strength.

The garage door flies open and by time it hits the ceiling, Chance already has a grenade in his hand and he yells, “Lullaby, cover your ears!”

I do what he says and I watch as the crowd of seven or eight guards, wearing strange, bulky, orange suits suddenly disperse in a panic. They yell and run in all directions away from Chance, and suddenly, the grenade is in the air.

Chance darts back to the car, hops in the driver’s seat and shifts into reverse. We turn just in time to see the grenade hit the ground, and in a huge explosion, it detonates, consuming everything immediately surrounding it in flames.

Suddenly, Chance slams the gas, and the car flies back in reverse, tearing out into the road. “Alright, let’s go!” he shouts as he shifts the car into drive and rips through the destruction and debris.

The roads are filled with smashed and backed up vehicles, and I scream as Chance avoids them by swerving off road and into people’s front yards, smashing lawn gnomes and white fences.

“Hold on!” he yells, as I clench the leather seat and scream in terror.

Suddenly, the sound of loud motors begin to come from outside the car, and I turn to see three of the guards on motorcycles coming right at us.

“Chance, faster!” I scream.

“I can’t! If I go any faster, I’ll run into something!” he shouts back.

All of a sudden, a cold, heavy weight is placed in my lap, and I look down to see a grenade. “Roll down the window, pull the pin, and then toss it!” he yells to me.

Terrified I’ll screw it up, but more terrified of the guards, I do as he says, and I roll down the window. I stare at the metal object, never thinking I would have held one of these in my life, and I quickly find the pin. As fast as I can, I grip and pull it with all my might and send it flying out the window behind us.

The guards skid and swerve to avoid the grenade, but it’s no use. The bomb detonates, igniting not only itself but two nearby cars, causing an explosion larger than any I have ever seen.

Screams and shouts are just barely audible over the sound of the destruction, and I slowly roll up the window in complete horror.

*I just killed three people.*

*I’m a murderer.*

“Good job,” Chance says. “Keep an eye on our back and watch to make sure no one else follows us.”

I do as he says, and I stay turned, staring outside, completely shaken by what I just did. After a few minutes of keeping watch, no one comes into view.

“I think they’re gone,” I utter as the car bumps and runs over debris.

I turn back to see the car, now going much slower, carefully driving on the thin strip of pavement and sidewalk, sandwiched in between the crashed cars and streetlamps.

I look up at Chance to see him staring straight ahead and focused, making sure as not to crash the car or scathe it against any of the dangerously close obstacles.

“They’ll be back,” Chance states. “They stopped chasing us now, but to be perfectly honest, we will probably run into another group of them soon. They are all over the city in the day. I’m stupid for ever deciding to leave. We should have just waited it out in the house and hid.”

I stay silent, feeling partially guilty for agreeing to leave as well, and I sit back in my seat and stare at the destruction ahead. Passing by the totaled and stopped cars at such a slow speed, it isn’t difficult for the eye to catch views of the horribly disfigured and decayed bodies inside.

I begin to feel sick as I slouch down in my seat and wait it out until it is over.

*He’s right; we should’ve just stayed in the house. While the house wasn’t safe, this is even worse. We are a moving target with a loud engine that can easily alert someone that we are here.*

*What the hell was I thinking?*

“Shit,” Chance utters, as the car comes to a sudden halt.

I shoot my head up and gasp, “What!?” when suddenly, I see why we stopped.

Cars, fences, lamp posts, as well as many other objects and debris, clutter the road in a barricading fashion that makes it impossible to continue.

“Can you back up and go another way?” I ask timidly.

Chance stares in thought and says, “We can try, but I’ve been following the only path I see viable. Look around us.”

From left to right, I scope the surrounding area, and he does have a point. It’s not that everything is completely covered in debris; it’s just, there is too much for a minivan to get through. I stare out, looking for maybe some other way, but just like Chance, I see none either.

Suddenly, the car shifts, and I turn to see that Chance put it in reverse as the car slowly moves backwards. Rolling over random debris, the car bumps into another parked car with a screeching fit.

“Damn it,” Chance mumbles as he shifts it back into drive and tries to make a three point turn.

This results in him hitting two more cars and a lamp post, but eventually, he makes it out of the tight area.

“What now?” I ask as he stares ahead, looking for a passage large enough to get by.

Chance stays silent as he puts the car back into drive and makes his way towards a small gap between a fire hydrant and a half knocked over wooden fence.

“Chance,” I utter, slowly and unsure. “Chance, I don’t think we can make that.”

Chance stares ahead as if he can’t hear me and continues on, looking determined as ever. Slowly, the car knocks against the fence and in a high pitched squeal, the fence bends and bends but to no avail.

“Shit,” he murmurs.

I look at him, disappointed and worried but not making a sound as not to disturb his train of thought.

“Well,” he sighs, “let’s go. We can’t stay here.”

“Go?” I stammer, not sure if I heard correctly. “How? The car is stuck!”

“On foot,” he sighs. “We don’t have a choice.”

I stare at him completely unsure, and I reply, “But the guards-”

“I know, but we don’t have a choice. We are just sitting ducks here. These windows have no tint, and I’m sure those other few guards that are still alive will be on our trail soon enough, so we have to move. The bike is just a few blocks away from here. If we are fast, we can make it.” And with that, Chance unlocks the car and gets out.

Scared and totally insecure about this decision, I slowly unlatch the door, when suddenly, Chance pulls it open the rest of the way, whispering, “Come on, we can’t be slow!”

Startled but understanding the circumstances, I quickly exit the car and get onto the ground with Chance. I go to close the door, when he grabs my wrist and snaps, “Are you crazy? They’ll hear us!”

Thrown off and slightly hurt by this second snappy comment, I sadly utter, “Sorry,” but he is already ahead of me, making his way over the fire hydrant to the bike.

I follow close behind, watching as Chance pulls out his gun to use at any moment. Carefully and swiftly, we move through the streets, ducking and hiding at the faintest noise.

*God, I hate this.*

*At least in the car, I felt somewhat safe.*

*Now, I am completely out in the open.*

Feeling completely vulnerable, I follow Chance’s movement down to a tee, when suddenly, we hear a loud crash coming from one of the houses down the road.

“Get down!” he whispers at me, and we both duck behind a totaled car.

We peer over the sides, looking down the street, and we see a group of four teenagers run out of a house carrying random items and supplies.

“Looters,” he whispers to me. “They’re scavenging.”

We watch them run down the street towards us, but on the opposite side, when suddenly, we hear muffled yells and hear motorcycles start up. We both snap our necks in the direction of the sound to see two guards on their bikes speeding down towards them.

“Fuck!” one of them yells, as another lets out a small scream and they all drop their supplies.

Running as fast as they can, they all disperse in different directions, but despite their best efforts, the bikes catch up to two of them.

“Help!” a girl screams, as one of the guards pulls up as close as possible to her and shoots two metal wires out of a handle and into her side. Rapidly, her body goes into stuttered convulsions and she goes tumbling to the ground in a paralyzed mess.

By the time I look at the other person, he is already on the ground screaming with the same wires shot into him as well.

Petrified, I watch as the guards pull a white cloth from their cargo box inside the bike and lean over their victims, putting it over their mouths. Both of the captured looters all of a sudden go completely limp, and the guards begin to lift them off the ground and onto their bikes.

“Oh my God,” I whimper, completely horrified.

Suddenly, I feel a strong pull on my wrist, and I look up to see Chance already on his feet whispering, “Run!”

I jump up and dart as fast as I can after Chance, sprinting and ducking low behind the cars in cover, avoiding debris as much as possible.

I lift my head up to look ahead, and just barely, through the small and quickly passing gaps in between cars, I can see the bike. My heart pounds in excitement and relief as I push my legs to run even faster.

*Almost there!*

I turn behind me just for a moment to see if the guards have noticed us yet, when suddenly, I step on something soft and my ankle bends in. I crash to the ground, skidding and smashing directly into a car door.

Wincing in agonizing pain, I strain to open my eyes to see Chance stopped, staring at me in horror. He runs to me and kneels next to my totaled body in a complete panic as he whispers, “Lullaby, are you okay!? Lullaby, come on!”

I watch his panicked expression as he quickly turns to look at the guards then back at me. “Lullaby, we’ve got to go! Can you walk!?”

Dazed but still aware of the urgency of the situation, I clumsily attempt to stand as my legs cave in, and I stumble.

For only a moment, I turn to see what it was that tripped me, and in horror, my eyes fall on a dead, rotted out body.

“Lullaby, focus! Come on!” Chance utters as he supports most of my weight, helping me stand.

With my eyes locked on the putrid atrocity, I hear yelling in the distance, and I look up to see the guards both staring directly at us.

"Oh God," I whisper in terror.

Chance pulls me to my feet, and I brace myself as I take my first careful step forward.

"Lullaby, hurry!" he screams, no longer being quiet for the guards who have already spotted us. "Run!"

Panicking, I do my best to move. I take my second step onto the asphalt, and once I'm sure I won’t fall, I just run. Making a mad dash for the bike, Chance quickly takes after this idea and darts with me.

“They’ve seen us, just run! Don’t look back! Hurry!” Chance screams.

A shot of adrenaline pumps through me, and I’m on high speed. My head pounds with intensity from slamming into the car, and my lungs fill with painful cold air as I sprint, just yards from the bike.

Suddenly, Chance passes me and jumps on the bike before I can reach it, and I hear engines start up that are not our own.

I turn around to see the two guards coming our way with the kidnapped teens on their backside, cold and knocked out.

“Come on, *come on!*” Chance yells as he jams the bike keys into the ignition, and within seconds, the sound of his motor joins theirs.

“Chance!” I scream, as I plummet into his open arms. Grabbing me in a sudden embrace, he lifts me up and onto the bike.

Immediately, he reaches down to his holster and pulls out his gun, pointing it directly at the guards, who are now just yards away. “Plug your ears!” he yells, suddenly followed by the boom of gunfire.

I open my eyes to see one of the guards, crashed onto the ground with an exploded front tire.

The other guard, still on the bike, slowly halts to a wobbly crash with a bullet in his chest, sliding off and smashing his head against the ground.

Before I can witness anymore, the bike jolts and speeds off as I twist around and latch as tight as I can onto Chance. Digging my face into his back, I shut my eyes tight, and without a second thought or any ability to stop it, I begin to cry.

Wailing in terror, in horror, and in fear, I just bawl, releasing all these pent up emotions that I don’t know how to deal with.

Watching four men die, three by my own hand. Running for my life in an apocalyptic world and nearly having to face the consequences of being captured. All of it is too much for me.

I scream into Chance’s cold, tear stricken shirt, for some kind of relief as he drives off, tearing into the forest towards the tree house.

**Chapter Seven**

After we reached the treehouse, it took some time for me to calm down. Chance layered the couch with blankets and made some tea, followed by a lot of counseling. We talked for hours, about this world and the way things worked and there were a lot of repeated sentences about how everything will be okay, everything will be okay.

Chance explained that the guards patrol the gate at night, and during the day, they patrol the city, picking up dead bodies to take back to the lab for study. They usually tend to the deceased, but if they can find someone living, that's even better, and whenever the opportunity arises, they take it.

Feeling sick and incredibly exhausted from the events that ensued earlier, I began to get pretty burnt out and started falling asleep. Chance could clearly see that I needed to rest for a bit, so he left me to myself here in the bedroom.

Taking off the heavy leather jacket he lent me, I washed my face and did my best to relax, but by now, too many things are running through my head. Staring up at the sunroof-less ceiling, I shut my eyes and think.

*The last thing I remember before waking up next to that horrible fence was falling asleep here in this room.*

*I was here with Felix, and it was summer.*

Upon thinking this, I take special notice to how absolutely freezing it is now, and I roll over in the fleece blanket Chance gave me.

*We were lying in bed together, and I fell asleep, and the next thing I knew, everything was different. On top of that, Chance doesn’t even believe me, and there’s no way to prove it. Nothing is the same.*

I begin to feel hopeless and distressed and I grab for my dichroic star necklace for reassurance. Once again, my hand falls short onto nothing, and I painfully remember that I took it off.

*Wait.*

*I took it off.*

*Here in this room!*

Immediately, I jolt from the bed and swing my head down under, peering in the creaks and crevices under the cot.

*It has to be here! I left it here!*

*I know that for a fact!*

Leaning over, further and further, I strain my body trying to see, when suddenly, I lose my balance and tumble to the ground in a thud.

“Ow,” I whimper, as I rub the part of my head that hit the ground hardest.

Chance comes running into the room in a panic, asking, “Hey, is everything okay?”

I stare up at him from the ground, with my hand still on my head, completely ignoring the pain, and I ask, “Chance, have you seen a necklace anywhere?”

“Necklace?” Chance utters. “You don’t ever wear jewelry, love.”

Chance’s use of the word “love” slightly bothers me, but knowing where my precious necklace’s whereabouts are, is the most pressing matter at the moment.

“It’s a sparkly glass star on a silver chain, about the size of a quarter. I need it.”

Chance just stares at me with a blank expression as he shrugs his shoulders. “Never seen it.”

My face drops into severe disappointment, as not only is my most prized possession missing, but it was also some kind of show for proof that I’m not crazy.

Or Lullaby.

Chance looks off, adjusting his bandanna, clearly uncomfortable and unsure on how to change the subject, when he mutters, “So, I’m not sure if you’re interested, but I made some food.”

I keep my gaze on the floor, my long, straight hair masking my face, now flushed completely red with disappointment.

A silence passes, and he opens his mouth and again. “I made your favorite…”

I continue my gaze, not interested in looking up.

“It's french toast…” he utters.

My ears perk up at this.

“French toast?” I ask curiously, looking up from my consistent stare. “How did you know?”

His eyes light up, excited for doing something right, and he lets out a long relieved breath, turning into a gentle smile. “Because,” he replies, “the things you like are important to me.”

For the first time, I notice how nice his smile is, with his perfectly white teeth and dimples on either side. I blush, not knowing how to respond, and just utter a dazed, “Huh...”

I even forget that didn’t exactly answer my question.

Before I can come to any words, he takes the silence as an opportunity to walk into the kitchen, excitedly shouting, “Here, I’ll go get you some! Go sit down at the dining room table and I’ll bring it to you!”

Having not eaten anything for almost twenty-four hours, I do as he says and I walk towards our small, round dining room table.

Looking all around me, I take in how all the basic furniture is the same as before, but the decorations are completely different. Paint splattered walls and colorful artwork hang everywhere. Tie dye bandannas are nailed to the ceiling like tents, and dream catchers are plastered all over the walls. I look around in amazement, feeling less and less like this could have ever even been my tree house.

So taken aback by all of the colors and beauty, I nearly miss my seat while attempting to sit down, and I stumble back up to my seat.

Chance returns back into the room with a full plate of freshly cut french toast and syrup to find me staring all around wide-eyed.

“It’s all pretty beautiful, isn’t it?” he asks with a proud smile. “You did most of this, you know.”

I turn to him about to combat this statement, but as soon as I open my mouth, I am met with a piece of sugary toast in my mouth.

“Here you go. Try it!” He smiles happily.

I jolt, surprised from his fast movement, and I chew. Taking in all the tastes and flavors, I am surprised to find that it’s actually pretty good.

“Wow, that’s really amazing,” I state, looking at the rest of the toast in front of him, completely famished.

His smile grows even wider and he chuckles, “I knew you would. Here, have some more,” as he pushes the plate in front of me. “Eat up. You must be starved.”

Having no problem whatsoever with this offer, I take my fork and begin to chow down, savoring every last bite.

Chance just watches with a hazy smile, gazing into me with loving eyes.

His stare strikes me in an odd way and I feel warm. Despite my best efforts, I begin to blush, and I turn away.

Quickly, I try to think of something to change the subject to, anything other than staring, but before I can, he utters, “You know, you really are cute, Lullaby.”

Suddenly, my feeling of warmth leaves, and it is immediately replaced with dissatisfaction at his still persisting inability to recognize me as myself instead of my creepy doppelganger. I slump my fork to a clank against my plate, as I groan, “Chance, I already told you. I’m not Lullaby.”

His face stutters, as if my words just stabbed him, but within a second, it heals, and he’s smiling again, just slightly dimmer and more damaged.

“I’m sorry,” he states. “Analiese, correct?”

I nod, staring at him critically, letting him know that I can tell he doesn’t believe that is really my name.

Chance just sighs, still holding his partially broken smile on his face as he pushes back his chair and begins to walk away.

“Hey,” I utter, “where are you going?”

Chance continues to walk towards the kitchen as he chokes out in a broken voice, pretending to be strong, “Oh, just into the kitchen to clean. Don’t worry about me, you just eat and get your strength up!” And with that, he disappears behind the corner.

I hang my head low, feeling guilty for bringing down his mood so terribly, especially right after he made me all this wonderful food, but he really does need to know the truth.

*He doesn’t believe me though.*

*No matter what I say, he just won’t. There is too much proof against me.*

*Even I’m beginning to think I’m crazy sometimes.*

I sigh, moving the toast around on my plate with the fork.

*Maybe I should just let him believe that I am Lullaby.*

*At least then he would be happy.*

I turn my head and look out the window, staring at the evening light that falls on all the forest treetops. The warming orange light pours overtop the endless green, and suddenly, I just feel the need to be outside. To be in the one place that still looks the same as before I woke up.

I quickly finish off the few remaining pieces of toast on my plate, and I push out my chair and stand up. Leaving the plate behind, I walk to the door and turn the knob as a sudden rush of cold blows through the crack.

The freezing air is unwelcoming, but my need to be somewhere that will give me solace is much stronger. I push the door open the rest of the way onto the same balcony as the night before, and I settle on the floor, hanging my legs off the side.

Staring out into the broad open forest, more than ever I long for Felix. For his touch, his love, and his reassurance. Sitting here in the freezing air, overlooking the same forest we always had, takes me back to last winter and the winter before that and the winter before that. All spent with him in this tree house.

And now, he is gone.

I begin to choke up, confused, cold, and far too nostalgic.

Suddenly, I feel a blanket placed around my shoulders, and I look up to see Chance, smiling warmly, as he holds the remaining edge of the blanket.

“Oh,” I utter, trying to suck back in all my feelings. “I didn’t hear you there.”

Chance just smiles and softly says, “It’s okay. You just looked cold, so I thought I would bring this to you.”

I stare up at Chance, watching the golden light illuminate his shimmering blond hair, with the sun shining into his eyes at just the right angle to make them the perfect shade of bright green.

My mind becomes still, and warmth flushes through me. In this very moment, even though everything around me is chaos and nothing is at all okay, looking into his eyes makes me feel safe. Makes me feel loved.

Chance grins brokenly only for a moment before turning away to go back inside and without my mind telling my mouth to speak, I just utter, “Wait, I need you.”

Chance turns around surprised and thrown off by my words, and immediately, I am too. Not knowing why I said that, I flush red, and I stutter, “I’m just, it’s just, um, cold out here. I think I would like the company, maybe, you know?”

Chance stares at me a moment before gently smiling at me. Seeing through my badly put together excuses, he understands.

As he walks towards me, my heart flutters a little, and I turn away, trying my best not to not let him see my flushed face.

Chance sits himself right next to me, as our bodies touch, just ever so slightly. We both look out into the sun lit forest, and nobody says a word. Nobody needs to say a word. The sound of the wind speaks for us, and the view is so breathtaking that as long as he is by my side, I feel as if everything is alright.

I feel safe.

We sit here together, under the setting sun, not knowing. Confused and misunderstanding all that has happened, but for some reason, right now, it doesn’t matter. We are okay, and though everything else is in chaos around us, in this very moment, there is peace.

The night slowly creeps in, and without us noticing, the orange light begins to fade, eventually letting the darkness take its place. We sit together in silence, just enjoying each other’s presence. Just enjoying the fact that we are not alone.

Chance softly places his arm around me and chills run down my spine. I turn to see his kind eyes, illuminated by the moonlight, staring into mine.

I smile; despite this crazy world and despite all the unknown I have just entered into, he is here. This person I hardly know, though I feel I have known forever.

He smiles back at me, a warm and loving smile, one that for some reason I am no longer uncomfortable with. One that I understand is here to comfort me and make me feel safe.

I turn back and look into the starry night sky, wondering if it is the same sky I have always slept under. If this is the same world I have always lived in.

With each passing moment, the temperature drops, and I begin to shiver. I scoot closer to Chance, with his body heat inviting me in, and he lifts up the blanket that we both take shelter under.

His warmth encompasses me, and his scent relaxes me as the darkness begins to take me in. With the brisk air against my face and the warmth of our bodies together, my eyelids become heavy, and I lean into him. My head falls against his chest, and I hear the soft beating of his heart as I slowly feel his fingers comb through my hair.

Through the insanity and danger of this world, here in the arms of this amazing and loving person, I have found peace.

**Chapter Eight**

The sunlight beams and breaches into my eyes, and suddenly, I am awake.

*Whoa.*

*When did I come in here?*

I look around to see that I am in the tree house bed, though I have no memory of ever walking here.

With my eyes still blurry from waking up, I get out of bed and place my feet on the tree house floor, feeling the freezing wood beneath me.

Uncomfortably, I get up and make my way out of the tiny room and into the living room to find Chance.

I am about to call for him when I see him, lying face down on the couch asleep. The odd positioning of his body makes me giggle, seeing him lay there in such a silly fashion, and I walk over to him.

I kneel down, debating whether I should wake him or not, staring at his fair skin and his blond hair that is wisped over his face.

*He looks so peaceful.*

*Maybe I shouldn’t wake him.*

I am about to get up, when suddenly, his eyes flutter open, hazily and sleepily. He yawns. “Lullaby?”

I just smile, not wanting to correct him and remind him of all the troubles in this world. Instead, I just reply sweetly, “Hi, Chance.”

He blinks his eyes open and gazes at me with a sleepy smile, muttering, “Good morning, beautiful. You look gorgeous today.”

Immediately, I blush and turn away, with warmth and butterflies fluttering through me. I know I shouldn’t feel this way, but I can't help it.

I take a deep breath and recompose myself. Very calmly, I smile and ask, “Chance, how did I get to bed last night?”

Chance rubs his eyes and starts to sit up, mumbling, “I carried you. You fell asleep on my shoulder, and I felt you had been through enough for one day, so I just put you to bed, myself.”

My face flushes red again with hearing this and I look at the ground. “Oh,” I utter, “thank you.”

Chance chuckles to himself as he gets up and begins to stretch. “You better limber up,” he says. “We have a big day today.”

“A big day?” I ask, curious and thrown off guard.

“Mhm,” he murmurs.

I just stare at him waiting for him to explain, when he turns to me with a smile spread across his face and he says, “What I think you need is something to relax you. You have been through so much, and you need a little break. Let’s go on an adventure.”

I blink in surprise, already feeling I have had enough adventure the past two days. I ask, “Adventure?”

“Yes, I have the perfect thing we can do that will take your mind off all this,” he exclaims, with a beaming and confident smile.

Unsure how anything in this insane world could make me feel any better or more “relaxed”, I look at him, giving him the benefit of the doubt, and I mumble, “Well, I suppose-”

“Great!” he cuts me off. “Let me get some food packed so that we can have lunch when we get there, and then we can go!”

I just stare at him, not knowing how to react to his spontaneous behavior, as he makes his way into the kitchen.

From the living room, I call out to him, “Where are we going exactly?”

“Do you really think I’m going to tell you?” he laughs. “It’s a surprise, of course!”

I stand, thinking to myself how unsafe this world is, and I question, “But what about the guards? Isn’t it dangerous? Yesterday was hell on Earth. I don’t want to go through that again.”

Panic runs through me, remembering how terrifying it was, when I hear Chance reply, “No, no, no. Yesterday wasn’t supposed to happen. Since you passed out, I was put in a bad situation and had to do what I could. Today won’t be like that. We will get to our destination mainly by driving around the perimeter of the city, only using the roads when absolutely necessary.”

I don’t say a word, still unsure and uncomfortable with this idea, when Chance comes out of the kitchen, carrying two brown paper bags filled with food and a hand full of grenades. Holding up his grenade filled hand, he states, “You will be safe with me, I promise, and if worse comes to worse, I will be fully stocked on weapons for protection.”

Still not quite convinced, I look up at him, weary and unsure. He puts his hand on my head and smiles, saying, “I could never let anything happen to you. Trust me.”

Feeling a strong urge to believe him, I nod without even realizing, as he lifts up his hand from my head and instead grabs my wrist. “Alright.” He smiles. “Let’s go then!”

Chance pulls me towards the balcony door and swings it open, and a huge gust blows in against me. I follow him outside into the light, and the air is freezing.

The cold winds ram against my body and chill me to the bone. Incredibly uncomfortable from the temperature, I utter, “I’ll be right back. I’m going to go get my jacket,” as I break from his grasp.

I run back inside and grab it off the arm of the couch where I left it, but something stops me.

In the corner of my eye, I see the framed picture of Lullaby and Chance. I lean over and pick it up, lifting it closer to get a better look. Both of them are standing and smiling, in each other's arms, as Chance holds up the camera to take the photo. I focus in on my double, looking at her long, flowing blond hair and dark green eyes, wearing a beautiful white sundress and my face.

“Nothing like me,” I mumble, tapping the glass frame.

I look at her innocent smile and carefree expression, looking just like me, but seeming nothing at all the same.

*I can see why Chance would assume I’m her, but really, the face is all we have in common, and I suppose the rest of body as well.*

I set the photo down and make my way back outside as I pull my arms through the sleeves of the coat. I shut the door behind me, and the air is brisk against my face again.

“You ready?” Chance asks, leaning against the fire pole.

*Oh no, not this again.*

“No. I’m not doing that ever again,” I state, standing stiff by the door, realizing my immediate future.

Chance looks at me inquisitively. “Oh? Then how do you plan to get down?” His trickster smile is blaring at me, full force.

“You said this adventure was supposed to relax me,” I whine, rather unhappy.

“After you go down the pole, it will be,” he states with confidence.

I’m darting my eyes back between him and the pole of death, trying to think of another way, and suddenly, it hits me.

“There is another way!” I announce, completely sure of myself. “The pulley system!”

Chance looks at me with an unamused stare, and I look at him with a purely challenging one.

*Some things may be different, but the pulley system has to be the same. It was built to lift the furniture up here, and without it, there is no way for the bed or couch or anything to exist in the tree house, so I must be correct!*

Chance shifts his eyes away from me and sighs in defeat.

“Ugh, alright,” he admits. “You win.”

I smile, pleased with myself for getting out of going down that nightmare.

“I was trying to get your strength back up. Boost your bravery, you know?” he explains, with arms outstretched.

I just stay silent, staring at him proudly.

He stops that train of thought, and he sighs with a fond smile. “Alright, come on. Let’s get moving then, you little weasel.”

I smirk as I quietly stay behind and follow him, making our way back through the house again. I eye the photo as we pass, trying to get another glimpse of my surreal twin.

Chance comes to the back door and opens it, leading to a much smaller balcony than I am used to. “Whelp, here you go,” he states.

I walk in front of him to see the pulley, and my face drops.

It’s just a piece of plywood and ropes just as rickety as the ladder’s.

*This is nothing like the one I’ve had all these years! What happened to the crate? It used to be a giant wooden box, not just a thin piece of shitty wood!*

I turn around and look at him, about to open my mouth, but he cuts me off. “Let me guess, ‘there’s no way I’m goin’ on that thing either!’” he whines in a high pitched, mocking voice.

My face reflects how unamused I am.

*There’s no point in questioning it. It’ll just lead to a dead end conflict like it did with the slide that apparently also doesn’t exist.*

“Hey, come on, it’s better than the pole right?” he asks, looking at me a little more sympathetically.

I turn back around and glance at the pulley, nervous to get on it and even more horrified when I look beyond at the long drop.

“Fine,” I sigh as I toughen up and reach for one of the ropes. “Help me on.”

Chance walks over and secures the two ropes as I board on. Tucking into my knees, I grasp onto one of the ropes to stabilize myself.

“Be careful. Don’t tilt to one side too much, or you’ll roll off, okay?” he pleads.

“Okay,” I grumble, bracing myself.

Chance moves over to the lever on the side and begins to crank it as the board I am sitting on starts to shift.

Slowly I descend towards the forest floor, shutting my eyes tight every time a snag in the rope happens or the plank sways too much.

Down farther and farther, each second feeling like forever.

“You’re almost done!” he yells, with a laugh in his voice, amused by my reactions.

*This isn’t funny!*

I lean over the board to see how close I really am to the ground, but before I can even see, I feel a thud and know I’m already there.

I start to get to my feet and hear the sound of Chance sarcastically clapping. I look up at him just in time to hear him shout, “Bravo!”

I roll my eyes and start to walk away, hearing him yell, “I’ll be right down!”

I continue walking as I look for the motorcycle so we can just hurry up and get on with our day, but it’s nowhere to be seen. I walk to the opposite side of the tree house in search of it, just in time to see Chance swirl down the fire pole like he’s been doing it all his life.

His feet hit the ground, and without a second of recovery, his next steps sprint towards me as he wraps his arm around my side chuckling. “You’re quite the adventurer, aren’t you?”

I scoff at him with a sarcastic expression as I fold my arms and say, “Uh, huh. Let’s just go.”

Chance swiftly passes me, walking towards the bike as he replies, “Not before I show you something first.”

“Show me something?” I reply inquisitively as I follow behind him. “What do you want to show me?”

Chance reaches the motorcycle as he pulls the keys from his pocket, saying, “I’m going to show you how to drive a bike.”

My expression deflates a little, expecting a gift of some sort instead of a tutorial on how to ride a beast that I will never use.

Not wanting to be rude, I just nod my head and murmur, “Okay.”

Chance chuckles. “Not too excited, huh?”

I just shrug and look up at him, waiting for his instructions.

“Trust me, this is important information. We only have one mode of transportation here and that’s this bike, so if you ever needed to use it on your own, you need to know how,” he states as he looks down to me.

“Alright.” I sigh, playing along.

*Whatever makes him happy.*

“Okay!” he starts as he begins to point to different parts of the bike. “First off this is the throttle, this is the brake, this is the clutch, and this is the shifter…”

Chance continued on for what seemed like forever, going far beyond any normal sane explanation. He talked about the bike and all its functions, but then he continued on to the type of motor, how fuel injectors work, and even the history of the make of the bike. Eventually, I had to cut him short.

“Chance?” I interrupt him, in the middle of his sentence about how the first motorcycles were called "steam powered velocipedes."

“Oh, uh, what? What’s up?” he responds rather thrown off.

“How do you know this much about bikes?” I ask, hoping that this question will detour his lecturing.

“Oh, well, you see, I’ve always loved bikes. My father never really did though, so I was never allowed to get one, but that never stopped me from surfing the internet researching about them,” he explains with a shrug.

“Huh,” I utter as quickly as possible so he doesn’t start again. “Well, it’s all very interesting, but I think it would be best to go on with our day, you know?”

Chance looks down at me, a bit hurt and deflated, and I feel guilty as I stutter to say, “Hey, don’t worry, we will talk about it more later! I’m just really super excited about this surprise place you are taking me to, and I really want to know!”

I stare at him with a plastered smile, hoping he will cheer up. His expression changes to a peaceful smile, and he says, “Ah, how could I ever say no to a face like that?”

Chance reaches towards the bike and puts the food in the side compartment, before saddling on and getting it started up. I jump on the back, thinking how relieved I am that I didn’t need to hear any more of his speech, and he turns to me just smiling lovingly as ever, saying, “Ready to go, princess?”

I smile, nodding in response to his question. “Yep!”

*Well, at least I know how to ride a motorcycle now, I guess.*

Chance nods in return with an incredibly charming grin as he turns back around, saying, “Hold on!”

I latch onto his warm back with a pleasant and relieved smile on my face as the bike starts up, and we go soaring through the forest.

The trees and brush fly past us, and the world is too much of a blur to see. I press my face against his back and shut my eyes, trusting his driving fully.

*He really is good to me.*

*Despite the Hell I am in, Chance is a haven, keeping me warm and safe.*

*I need to appreciate that, because regardless of what happened or how I got here, I could have been in a much worse situation without him.*

Suddenly, a pang of guilt runs through me remembering that I still have no idea where Felix is, and that this pressing matter keeps being overridden by my need to be comforted.

*I know things are terrible, but I need to be strong. After we go on this surprise outing, I need to put my whining and clinginess aside. I need to find Felix. I have to. He is out there somewhere; I just know it.*

Slowly, the terrain we are driving on becomes smooth, and the bike begins to glide over the ground.

This change alerts me, and I lift my face from his back to see that we are now riding across a grassy green field.

*Oh, we are on the outskirts now.*

I turn my head to the other side, and what I see fills me with anxiety.

There, passing by at rapid speeds is the fence I saw when I first woke up.

I stare out, watching it follow alongside of us about a hundred yards away, reaching as far as the eye can see on either side.

“Chance!” I do my best to yell above the motor. “What is that thing!?”

“What?” Chance shouts back, rather alarmed. “I can’t look. I need to drive!”

“The fence,” I scream. “What is that fence?”

“The what?” he replies.

*It’s no use; he can hardly hear me. I’ll just wait until we stop to ask.*

“Never mind!” I yell back.

Chance just nods and directs his full attention back at driving to our destination, and I return my face into his back.

*I don’t want to look at it. That night was the most terrifying of my life. I don’t want to remember it. I don’t want to think about it.*

Slowly, the reality of this world begins to seep in, with the shock and numbness I’ve had since I got here losing its affects.

*I really am in an apocalypse. Everything is in ruins, and I’m here on a field trip with someone I just met less than two days ago. I shouldn’t be out relaxing. I need to be out looking for Felix!*

I open my eyes just enough to look at Chance, watching as the wind blows his hair in all different directions as he keeps his focus forward.

*Chance doesn’t even believe me, though. He is dead set on the idea that I am just his girlfriend with a scrambled memory. I don’t know how I’m going to break it to him that I need to find my real boyfriend and expect him to help me. God knows I can’t do it by myself. I’ll be killed in the first hour on my own. I need his help.*

*What am I going to do?*

The bike bumps onto pavement, and within seconds, we are zooming through damp and trashed alleyways.

Popping into the main street, Chance weaves in between stopped cars and fallen debris. I latch onto him tighter, terrified of flying off. We speed past lamp posts, post offices, and office buildings, all badly damaged, and I just shut my eyes.

*Just the other day this was my home, and now it’s destroyed. I don’t want to see. I just want to go back.*

All of a sudden, the bike slams to a skidding halt with a soul piercing screech, and the momentum nearly makes me fly off the bike. “Whoa, what the-” I begin to yell, but I’m cut off by Chance grabbing my mouth and pushing my head down as he lowers his own and shuts off the bike.

With his face so close to mine, I am intoxicated with his breath, and my mind goes hazy for a moment, struggling to keep concentration on what’s going on. Slowly and carefully, Chance begins to move by walking the bike backwards into the alleyway he was just soaring through.

Quietly, I peer around Chance’s crouched body and see men in haphazard suits inside the building, diagonal from our alleyway, alerted and looking all around and outside the windows.

“They heard the bike,” Chance whispers, as he continues to walk it back. “They know we are here somewhere.”

The corner of the building eclipses my view, and I can no longer see the men. Looking up at Chance, serious and vigilant, he keeps his eye on the obscured exit of the alleyway, and he whispers, “We have to get out of here.”

Carefully, Chance takes his hand off my mouth and places it back on the handle, slowly guiding the bike and turning it around.

Suddenly, we hear a door slam, and men yelling muffled words, quickly followed by engines starting. “Shit,” Chance snaps as he starts his engine back up, turning the bike around at a much faster pace.

“Oh my God.” I panic. “They saw us! They’re coming. They’re coming!”

Now turned completely around in the opposite direction, I hear Chance snicker as I look up to see him wearing a confident and mischievous smile.

“Don’t worry,” he says casually. “We’re good now.”

Confusion is plastered on my face as I stare at Chance, then shoot my vision down to the far end of the alleyway as the sounds of the engines grow louder and louder. “Chance, we’ve got to go!” I shout as I clench onto his sleeve, now in a full panic.

With worry washed from his face and calm as ever, he raises his hand and says with a confident smile, “Wait for it.”

And without another second passing, the opposite end of the alleyway is blocked off by the guards on much bigger and powerful bikes than our own.

One of the men in front yells something that I can’t understand as he points to us. They all nod in agreement and, without delay, they come after us.

All of a sudden, I hear Chance yell, “Hold on tight!” as he jolts into a sudden movement, hurling something across the air. Slamming against the ground in three metallic clanks, I can only hear a choir of yelling before the sound of our own motor and the tear of us taking off.

Ripping at Chance’s back, I hold on for dear life as I hear his booming laughter, and I look up through stinging wind to see the brightest, toughest, most triumphant smile I have ever seen.

I stare at him, clouded in confusion when I am cut off by a deafening explosion and a huge flash coming from where we just were. “Ha, HA!” Chance booms, rivaling the sound of his own motor. “Those turkeys didn’t expect that! Yeah, woohoo!”

Weaving through stopped cars and past debris, Chance maneuvers like a pro, laughing rejoicefully at his successful attack. “No one is going to mess with a kid with hand grenades!”

Shock plasters my face, but I can’t help but crack into an unbelievable smile, and I immediately find myself laughing too. Soaring down the streets on Chance’s motorbike, laughing like maniacs, we let the wind run through our hair and all the panic and worry washes away with it.

A feeling of complete freedom and adventure surges through me as I pump my fist in the air, and I yell the best battle cry I can as we make our way down in this crazy world back onto our original path.

**Chapter Nine**

Speeding past all the buildings, it wasn’t long until we made it to Chance’s “surprise.”

Still on the bike, surely driving way past whatever the speed limit used to be, I look up to see the zoo fast approaching.

*The zoo?*

The bike comes to a slow, and I feel Chance stabilizing it with his feet, walking it to a halt. I lean up and see that we are at the entrance, and besides being quiet and abandoned, everything appears the same as it always has.

We disembark from the bike, and with the remnants of the smile from our previous adventure still on my face, I ask, “So why did we come here?”

Chance just returns my grin and explains, “Well, after last night and yesterday, I must have scared you pretty badly.” He takes in a deep breath and stretches his arms while we walk. “I wanted to show you that home isn’t so bad once you get used to it.”

“But why the zoo? I thought you said some people let all the animals go, so what's the point?”

Chance looks to me with excitement and anticipation, and he blurts, “Uh, have you ever been to an abandoned zoo?” He smiles big and wide. “You’re going to love it!”

Staring at his beautiful smile and feeling the pure happiness emanating off of him, I can’t help but smile. The thought of it makes me laugh, and Chance jumps in front of me like an excited puppy asking, “Are you happy, sweetheart?”

I feel a pang of sadness, hearing him call me that, and remembering Felix calling me the same exact thing, but then, something strange happens. The sadness didn’t hurt. In this frozen moment of his shining smile and bouncing blond hair in his face, so excited just to see me happy, the pain is blocked out. My body flushes warm and I smile at him, confused but at ease. The first moment since I’ve gotten here that everything doesn’t seem so terrible.

“Lullaby?” he utters, breaking my hazy moment.

Still smiling, with my body feeling light and at peace, I snap out of my thoughts just enough to respond. “Huh?”

Looking into me with gentle and loving eyes, he replies, “I’m so happy I get to see your smile again,”

My heart flutters, just the slightest, and I immediately avert my vision to the ground.

*What am I doing? I’m in love with Felix, not this guy.*

Thoughts of guilt run through my head, but then I notice I’m still smiling, still warm. Still happy.

*Maybe I need this right now. I just need to feel better, and this is doing that.*

*I need to feel better if I’m going to find Felix.*

“Come on!” He grabs my hand and runs inside, breaking my train of thought. With the excitement about him overflowing, we take leaps and bounds as we dash inside together, me panting and wheezing while Chance doesn’t even break a sweat.

“Wait, wait!” I gasp. “I can’t run anymore.”

I kneel over catching my breath when I feel arms wrap around me, and I’m lifted off the ground. “H-hey! Wha-!?”

“Come on, princess. We’ve got a big day ahead of us, remember?” He grins and winks at me with his gorgeous sea green eyes. I instinctively pull my sleeve over my mouth, looking up at him, then away, hoping my face doesn’t look as red as it feels.

Without another word, he starts off again, making his way to some destination that I have no clue about. I want to ask, but in a position such as mine, being so close to someone like this, makes me not one for words.

It’s no more than a minute before we come to a huge enclosure filled with giant swings and tall ledges. “We’re here!” he announces as he sets me down.

“Where is this?” I ask, leaning over the guard rail, inspecting my surroundings.

His mouth spreads far and wide, and he replies, “The tiger den.”

He makes his way over to me but passes me on, grasping the guard rail.

“What are you doing?” I ask, slowly and cautiously.

“Having fun,” he states as he jumps the fence and plummets inside.

“Chance!” I scream, lunging over the edge to see where he fell, hearing the slam of his body against the ground.

“Fine! I’m fine!” he shouts, raising his arms in the air to show me nothings broken as he steps back through the enclosure.

“Chance, what if there is still a tiger left behind or something?” I shout in a panic.

“We made sure all the tigers got out!” he yells as he sits on one of the giant rope swings. “After all, we were the ones who set all of them free.”

“What!?” I scream. “That was us!?”

“Yeah!” He laughs as he twirls around on the swing. “I didn’t want to tell you at first because you were in shock, but I thought now was as good of a time as ever to let the cat out of the bag!”

“Wha-” I take a step back, a bit overwhelmed by all this.

*It’s a nice change of scenery and good to have a lighter note added to this apocalyptic world, but this is too much.*

“Doesn’t that mean there are tigers running around the city!?” I shout over the metal bars.

“Yeah!” he yells back.

“But tigers kill people! That’s a terrible idea! Why on earth would you think that was a good idea!?”

“I didn’t,” he responds, now upside down on the swing, his head flung back, spinning round and round. “You did.”

“What?” I shout back in confusion.

“You remembered the zoo and started to cry, saying that without people to feed all the animals, they would all die, and I didn’t want to see you sad, so I-”

“So you let the tigers out free onto civilization!?” I shout back, nearly falling over the edge.

“And the lions, too. And the bears. Tigers, lions and bears, oh my!” he giggles to himself like a little school girl, just twisting and twirling around without a care in the world. “And if it’s any consolation, I would hardly call this civilization anymore. It’s rather uncivilized.”

I stare at him in disbelief.

*He’s lost his mind.*

“Hey! Come on down!” he yells from below. “I’ve got more to show you, cheer up!”

“I can’t jump down there. I’ll kill myself!” I shout.

“Aw, come on, you scaredy cat!” he teases, as he jumps off the swing and onto his feet. “Look I’ll catch you!” he exclaims with a golden smile and hands outstretched.

“You’re crazy,” I reply, not buying one bit of that.

“But there’s no way back up for me, and what I have to show you is down this way,” he explains, pointing behind him with his thumb.

I uneasily look around for another way down but see none. “Are there any other ways in?”

“None that I know of.” He shrugs. “Just trust me, I’ll catch you. I promise.”

I just stare at him, unsure. A moment passes, and his lips form into a perfect smile. “I could never let such a beautiful girl like you hurt herself on my watch.”

I keep my stare and apprehensively open my mouth. “You’re sure I won’t fall?”

“I would never let that happen, my love,” he assures, with the words gliding off his tongue so naturally.

I avert my eyes; his loving stare makes chills run down my spine.

*I’m not his love, I’m not the girl he thinks I am, this isn’t right, but –*

“Lullaby?” he calls out.

“Alright,” I instinctually respond. “I’m-”

I look down into the steep drop into the enclosure.

“I’m… I’m coming.”

I crawl up onto the railing and dangle my legs off the edge. Looking down, my body goes cold, the drop looking much farther than I thought it would.

“You can do it!” Chance yells with a smile.

I gaze down, blinking and trying to focus myself.

*Come on.*

*One, two…*

*Three!*

I drop down, but in my rapid movements, I panic and twist in midair, attempting to grab the wall. My fingers grate down against the rugged surface, and the next thing I know is that I’m in Chance’s arms.

Only a few inches from the ground, with his back arched over from the impact of my weight on him, I lay still in his embrace.

The adrenaline is pumping through me so fast that I don’t even notice what happened to my hands until Chance gasps, “Oh God, you poor thing!”

I look down to see my palms all scratched and bloody, dirt and grit in the wounds.

“Here, come on, we need to wash all that out,” he states, lifting me up to a stance where he can walk, and with that, he carries me away.

We pass vines and ledges, overgrown grasses and giant swings, until we’ve hit the back of the enclosure at a door.

“Here, can I set you down for a moment?” he utters, the strain in his voice obvious, despite his desperate attempt of trying to cover it up.

I nod and get to my feet, raising my damaged hands up and away from everything as not to make a mess of my blood.

Chance opens up a latched keypad next to the exit and types in a few numbers, and I hear the knob click.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I ask.

“Oh, this?” He jabs his thumb back at the keypad. “I used to work at this zoo. Now, I was never allowed to work in most of these rooms, but one code opens all the doors, so if you know one, you know them all.”

I watch as he turns back around and twists the knob, pushing the door open, and he takes his first steps in.

I peer over his shoulder to see a long, dark hallway, extending farther than my eyes can follow. I stay close behind Chance and follow him until we reach another door. Once again, he types in a key code, and the door unlocks.

“We’re here,” he announces softly with a gentle smile as he lightly grabs my wrist and leads me in.

The first thing I notice is that the air is freezing, far colder than the winter weather outside. Chance takes a few steps forward and moves out of my line of vision, and in awe, I can see everything.

Towering glaciers surround us, snow and ice at our feet, and a great wide pool of water just yards away, incased in glass walls.

“Where are we?” I gasp in complete amazement.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” he whispers, looking up at the huge mountains of crystal clear ice, with his wide, bright eyes staring off into the enclosure. He turns back down and looks at me, saying, “It’s the beluga encounter.”

“Beluga?” I ask. “Aren’t those whales?”

“Go ahead and look,” he responds, pointing towards the pool.

I look to the water and walk forward, carefully watching my step as not to slip on any of the frozen ground beneath me.

Once I reach the pool, I kneel down and look at my reflection, but I don't see anything else besides that and the vast amounts of water before me.

I stare back to my still bloodied hands, and I take the chance to place them in the cool pure water to cleanse them. The blood mixes with the water, and a soft faded red emits from my hands with specks of dirt and dust coming off into the clear blue.

Still staring into the deep waters, I see nothing and turn back around to Chance, hands still submerged, and I state, “I still don’t see anyth-!”

My speech is suddenly cut off by the touch of something wet and slimy against my hands. I tear up from the water and turn around to see a huge, white bump floating on top of the surface. It only takes me a moment to realize what it is.

“Oh my God!” I scream, falling back against the hard ice. “It *is* a whale!”

“I told you!” Chance laughs from behind me.

“But you also told me all the animals were gone!” I shout back.

“Well, what was I supposed to do with a whale?” he asks, with a chuckling shrug.

“How is it still alive?” I yell, almost cutting him off, looking at the magnificent creature with coal black eyes staring right at me.

“I come here every couple of days to feed them. They are mostly bottom feeders though, eating what is already in their tank. When I start to feel their feedings are running low, I forage the stock room for more food for them.”

“Them?” I look at him in exasperated confusion, then turning around to the sound of spurting water to see a new whale, breeching in the water.

Then two.

Then three.

All moving in form next to one another.

“Whoa,” I utter with the cold air encompassing me, making all this seem so unreal. I let go of all negative feelings, and I’m just lost in the moment. “This is incredible.”

“Isn’t it?” he asks. His smooth, calm voice is so close that I can feel his warm breath on my cheek.

I turn around, a bit startled, to see that he is right next to me, looking off into the clear water with a gentle smile on his face.

“I knew you would like it,” he whispers.

I’m so frozen in this moment that I can’t speak. I can only gaze at him.

*Who is this person? This person that I've met under the strangest of conditions.*

*Why is this all happening?*

I look back down into the icy water.

*How is this real?*

I don’t even notice that he’s touching my hand until I feel a tug on my arm.

Slowly, Chance seeps my cut hand under the water, washing it and gently cleansing it with tender strokes.

“I can’t have anything hurt you,” he utters quietly, as his warm breath emits steam into the cold air. “I need to protect you.” He takes his fingertips and removes the last bit of dirt from my wound. “Always.”

I just stare at him, lost not only in my surroundings.

I’m lost in him.

In this gentle loving person. This silly and carefree yet serious and strong, nurturing human being. This person that I’ve just met, but at the same time have known and loved for years.

“Lullaby, may I see your other hand?” My trance is broken by his crystal words.

“Oh,” I utter, forgetting I even had wounds for a moment. “Here.”

I lift up my other hand from the dripping water and place it in his.

He smiles as he traces his fingertips across the top of my hand, as he brings it to his lips and kisses it gently.

I’m so numb from the cold that I feel nothing, but see it as if it were already a memory that I was looking back on, years after. Everything is so distant, so covered in mist.

He takes my hand and places it back into the water, cleaning it out just like the one before, and then taking it out, asking, “Can you hold it up for a moment please?”

Without a single thought, I do as he says, and I watch as he unties his bandanna from around his neck. Spreading it out and refolding it into a thin piece of cloth, he gingerly wraps it around my hand. “I’m sorry I only can wrap one,” he apologizes, tying the knot just the perfect amount, “but I thought one is better than none, right?” He smiles at me with soft eyes, eyes that are almost sorrowful, and just like that, I’m pulled in.

I don’t understand what I’m feeling. The air on my skin is cold and brisk, and everything is so light, so white, so numb. No pain, but no happiness, but not neutral either. Just mesmerized. Mesmerized that such a person exists.

I look into his crystal, sea green eyes that are already staring into mine. His soft, white skin and his wispy blond hair are illuminated by the lighting above. No blemishes, no marks no scratches, like an angel. Someone saving me from this incomprehensible hell I’ve been thrown into. Someone to take care of me. Someone to keep me safe.

Someone to love me.

His body shifts closer to mine, but my gaze doesn’t waver. He lifts his hand and brushes it against my face, compassion pouring from him.

“My darling,” he whispers, “you don’t need to be afraid anymore.”

All in a burst, intense emotion begins to surge through me, and my eyes tear up. I clench onto his outstretched arm with my newly bandaged hand, and I weep. I hold onto him like he’s all I have left.

*He is all I have left.*

*I need this person.*

*This person I’ve just met.*

*This person I’ve always known.*

*I need him.*

I break for a moment, my mouth acting on its own, speaking words that my mind doesn’t agree with. “Chance?” I whisper.

“Yes, love?” he leans in, trying to get close enough to hear my broken voice.

I take in a deep breath, and with the most pitiful, yet sure words I’ve said since I’ve gotten here, I choke,

“Kiss me.”

His eyes stare wide, welded with tears, hearing the words that he’s dreamed of ever since this all began. He falls into me, planting his body over mine, and our lips become one. Every ounce of every emotion I’ve felt since I’ve gotten here is poured into him in this very moment, and I feel peace.

I feel safety.

I feel security.

I feel happiness.

He pulls me closer as his cold lips become warm against mine, and then suddenly, it stops.

*What am I doing?*

*I’m cheating on Felix.*

*Oh God, I can’t be doing this, what’s wrong with me!?*

I squirm underneath him and break from his embrace in a panic, just making any action to reject what I’ve just done.

“Hey! Wha-what’s wrong?” Chance falls back, reacting to my flailing.

“I’m sorry, I-I just-” I stutter, crawling back and away from him as fast as I can. Slipping and slamming my bones against the hard ice, I panic in complete embarrassment.

“Lullaby, come here! Hey, don’t be upset. It’s ok!” he pleads, reaching out to me, but I recoil.

*I’m so damn weak! I just wanted to feel good. How could I do that to Felix? He would have never done that to me!*

I start choking up, trying to form words to explain myself, but between my distress and crazy sounding explanation for my reaction, no words come out.

“I- I just-” My stutter quickly worsens from the frigid cold.

Without warning, he lunges at me, planting himself back on top of me, but this time he doesn’t kiss me.

He just holds me.

Tight and secure, he embraces me. “It’s ok,” he whispers. “I’ve got you. Take your time. I won’t leave you. I’m here.”

My whimpers and stammering fall silent with no other sound but my shivering breath and just like that, the pain is gone again.

Completely caught in his loving embrace, feeling as though nothing is wrong.

“Ch-Chance?” I murmur under my choked breath and weepy voice.

“Yes?” he replies, looking into me with all the concern and care in the world.

I pause a second and stare at him, hoping I don’t sound stupid with my next few words.

“I’m sorry I’m so weird now. I’m sorry I’m not as good as Lullaby. I’m sorry I replaced such a beautiful girl.”

Chance stares at me speechless, clearly not expecting what I just said.

“H-hey, hey now, don’t talk like that. You are beautiful! You just need to get your memories back. That’s all.” He comforts me, with his expression now doused in complete pity.

*I need to tell him. I have to convince him. I can’t have him continuing to go on thinking I’m his girlfriend. It isn’t right.*

“Chance,” I speak, shaking off my weepiness and getting as serious as I can, “there’s something you need to listen to, and you must believe me.”

Chance looks at me unhappily, as if he already knows what I’m going to say.

“Chance, I’m not Lullaby.”

I wait for his reaction, but he does nothing but sigh, looking at me like he just feels bad that I’m convinced of this.

“Chance, you have to believe me. I don’t know what happened or why I’m here, but I’m not her. It doesn’t make sense that you go to sleep with your loving, sweet, wonderful girlfriend, and then you wake up to find an aggressive, irritable, memory lacking double that has a different hair color and is wearing different clothes in the middle of a vacant field. How could I logically be her? I have memories of my own, and the only thing we share is pretty much our face. That’s why I push you away. I’m weak and weary and terrified of this new world. At home, nothing is like this, and I’m so tired. I’m scared I’ll never see my family again, or my best friend, or my real boyfriend, Felix. I was weak and I wanted some form of comfort, and I’m sorry for that. I’m sorry…” I trail off, looking to the ground. “But I’m not your girlfriend.”

Everything is silent, and I look back up from the icy terrain to see that he has tears in his eyes and looks terrified.

Slowly, he opens his mouth and utters, “So, does that mean…you’re…breaking up with me?”

My expression drops into confusion. “What? No, no. That isn’t what this is about. This isn’t a roundabout way to break up with you. This is me telling you the honest truth. I’m just simply not her.”

I stop, looking at him in hopes that he will have a change in facial expression with my new explanation, but his face doesn’t change. Still looking at me like he’s waiting for my words to make sense, he just stares desperately into my eyes.

“Chance, let’s just put it this way. Your girlfriend and I have switched places. If you don’t believe me, then fine, but at least humor me and call me by my own name and treat me as myself, not her.”

Looking at me wide-eyed, tired, and weary, he swallows, “So, Analiese, then?”

“Yes,” I sniff, as I wipe the dried tears off my face. “Please call me that.”

Stunned and broken, Chance’s eyes fall to the ground. He was trying so hard to believe that I was her. He put everything he had into convincing himself of that, but deep down, I think he knew it wasn’t true. He just didn’t want to lose her, so he created a façade.

“I’m sorry,” I utter, staring down at the ground as well. “I know how you feel about her, and you’re an amazing guy. You’re so sweet and gentle, and you treat me so well. I’m sorry for how I act towards you sometimes, but really looking at it now, we are in the same boat. You are missing your girlfriend, and I’m missing my boyfriend, and one thing is clear: we need to find them.”

I look up to see that his expression has completely changed. Looking down at the ground, his eyes are cold and determined.

“Chance?” I ask, placing my bandaged hand on his back.

“I’m fine,” he states, his voice cold and deep. “I won’t abandon you. I’ll keep my promise. I’ll always protect you. Whether you are Lullaby or not, right now, I need you. You are all I have, and I can’t let anything happen to you. You are the closest thing I have to her.”

Surprised by his reaction, I quietly ask, “So, you believe me?”

“I don’t know what I believe right now,” he admits, getting up from his seated position. “All I know is that I need to take care of you and keep you happy. You’re my top priority, so I need to do my best for you.”

I stare down at the floor, scared of that cold voice of his; scared that now that he sees me as myself and not Lullaby, he will start treating me much harsher.

“Analiese?” he questions, looking into me.

“Yes?” I reply, gazing back up.

He extends his arm towards me, and with an open hand, he says, “We are going to get through this.”

I blink, taking in his words, and he smiles at me. “Together.”

I break into a relieved smile and start choking up again.

“Hey, come on! I just got you to stop crying. You don’t need to start again!” he pleads with a smile and a tender laugh as I reach for his hand, and he pulls me to my feet.

He tugs me close, holding both my shoulders, and looks me in the eyes with a soft smile. “It’s going to be ok,” He states.

I smile, but my eyes tear up, and I’m crying again, holding him tight. “Thank you,” I choke, with the sound of my voice muffled by my face in his shirt.

The cries of the whales fill the silence, and speaking above the noise, he says, “And for the record, you may be a bit different, but you are still beautiful.”

**Chapter Ten**

After we left the beluga encounter, we walked through the dark hallway from one door to the next, trying to find a way out. Chance had been to all these rooms before, but since every door looks the same and every pass code is the same, as well, it was just a matter of trial and error.

From empty monkey habitats and lion’s dens, to bird cages and reptile exhibits, we bounced from room to room, searching for a way out. By time we found the exit, Chance and I were rather acquainted. Now that he is actually listening to me, that is.

We opened up the lunch he packed for us and ate while I told him all about home, school, Kylee, Felix, and everyone else I could think of. I still can’t tell whether he believes me or not. At times, it seems he does, and at others, I almost feel like he’s rolling his eyes when I’m not looking. One thing I do notice, though, is that every time I mention Felix, he cringes.

I think he’s jealous.

“Analiese?”

“Hm?” I murmur, my train of thought being broken upon hearing him say my name.

Chance stretches out his body as we walk through the empty zoo together, and he says, “So, let’s just say all of what you’re saying is true. How do you plan to get back to your 'real' home then?”

I uncomfortably look up at him and reply, “See, that’s the thing. I don’t even know how I got here. I just fell asleep, and when I woke back up, there was all of this. So, if I don’t even know how it happened, then how am I supposed to know how to reverse it?”

I stare at Chance, half hoping for him to give usable advice, but instead, he just responds with, “I see,” as he throws away the remnants of our trash from lunch and continues walking.

We continue on in silence for some time, passing by all the abandoned enclosures, when Chance finally speaks. “So on the topic of the world you are in now, there are some things you should know about, like the hospital.”

“Hospital?” I ask inquisitively, if not also a bit crestfallen by his lack of enthusiasm for helping me find a way home.

I look up at Chance scratching his head, looking off, probably wondering where to start.

“Well,” he begins, “after the virus hit and killed almost everyone, there were survivors, like you and I. Most of them were in their older teens or young adult years. See, I never spent much time in the hospital, but after you- er,” he stutters, “I mean Lullaby, got taken to the hospital, she found out a whole lot more than what we thought was going on.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, for one, that’s where all the bodies the guards were picking up go, along with all the living survivors they manage to capture.”

Staring up at Chance, entranced in what he is saying, I watch as he continues, “Secondly, we found out that most of the survivors fit in our age range based off of a mix of health and immunity. Infants and children were too young to be immune, so they couldn’t fight off the virus. Adults, while being immune to most things, their health had deteriorated, making them easier to kill. I think the oldest person I’ve seen so far here was in their early thirties,” he says, looking off, wondering if he’s seen anyone else that tops that age.

I take advantage of his pause and ask, “So, what exactly happens in the hospital?”

He shrugs. “Basically human testing. See, Lullaby wasn’t immune to start out. She contracted the disease but at a much slower rate, so when I noticed she started having symptoms, I rushed her to the hospital…” he trails off, tilting his head up to look at the evening sky. “Everything seemed normal at first. Well, as normal as things could be at any rate. Scared to death she wouldn’t make it, I signed her in, and men in biohazard suits took her away. They made me stay out in the waiting room, and while I was anxiously awaiting an answer about her condition, two men grabbed me from behind. Both dressed in the same outfits, they tried to drag me away. I don’t know what they were expecting, but I had a gun on me, so the moment I whipped that out, they all got the hell back.”

I watch him motioning every part of the story with his hands, reenacting every moment, completely animated.

“I screamed, ‘What the hell are you doing!?’ and they just raised their hands in the air and spoke something muffled under their suit that I couldn’t make out. More started surrounding me and pulling out Tasers, and that’s when I realized one gun wouldn’t be enough to keep them all back. I called out to Lullaby, but there was no response. Regretfully, I had no choice but to flee.” His expression drops into extreme guilt and he mumbles, “I should have never left you there.”

I’m not sure if he just referred to me as her on accident or if he’s speaking metaphorically, but either way, I didn’t comment. I just let him have his moment and waited for him to continue.

“I ran home to get more weapons to break her out of the hell I put her in, but when I came back, they already had heavy security surrounding the building, and there was no way I could get in. I waited a few days, everyday checking to see if they had left, but they still stood guard. It wasn’t until a week later that they let their guard down, and by then, I thought she was already dead…” He trails off lost in thought.

“I don’t know what happened exactly, but I guess the hospital got infiltrated by rebels. The guards were rushing around and there was yelling and screaming. I rushed inside and saw everyone in a panic, and then, there was you.”

I look to him, so enticed in his tale that his name mix up isn’t even bothering me anymore.

“Standing there, dressed in white, standing in the hallway in a daze. I rushed up to you and called out your name, but you didn’t respond well. Very slow and delayed, you turned around to see me, but by then, I heard my name called, and I only saw your face for a moment before I turned to see where the voice came from. Behind me stood four men in biohazard suits, stopping in the middle of the chaos just for me. They mumbled more stuff, and all I could make out was my name, ‘Chance Silver.’ When I didn’t respond to their statements, they began to advance on me, so I did all I could think of doing, and that was to run to you. I hooked my arm around you and said, ‘We have to go,’ but you just stared at me, mouth half opened in a daze. I tried to move you, but you were too slow, and when I turned around to run the other way, there were more men coming in on us. I was panicking. I didn’t know what to do. All I knew was that you and I were clearly valuable test subjects for them, so I did the only thing I saw fit.”

I watch as Chance gives me the thumbs up, then slowly draws out his pointer finger with it as he points it under his chin, saying, “I told them I would kill myself.”

“Did it work?” I gasp, on edge from his daring story.

“I’m getting to it,” he states, then continues on. “I told them to get the fuck away or I would blow all my brains out!” He spreads his arms out wide, acting out every word. “There was a moment of silence where everyone looked at each other, not knowing what to do. No one must’ve expected it. It took them a moment, but they all started to move out of the way, one by one. I made my way out the door dragging you, still holding the gun to my head, just this time against my temple,” he explains, as he demonstrates with his hand. “Once I got a few yards beyond them, I pointed the gun at them and just began firing.”

Looking at him wide-eyed, I ask, “Oh God, what did they do?”

“What do you think?” he asks, as he exasperatedly throws his arms out. “They all ran like hell!”

“But why would they care so much about you killing yourself? There were other survivors, and you made off with another one. Wasn’t it more of a loss for them to let you go?” I ask.

“I think it’s because I never contracted the disease. See, most survivors caught it, then lived, but I never experienced that, so thus, making me rarer," he explains as we walk towards the gate.

“How would they know that, though? That you never got infected,” I question, a bit confused by his extreme story.

“I was never admitted to the hospital,” he states, becoming increasingly short with his responses.

Not wanting to bother him with anymore trivial questions, I become silent as we exit through the gate. His words passively flow through me as I continue to think.

*Well, that might explain why they let him go.*

*And that might explain how they knew he was immune from the start.*

*But how did they know his name?*

“Oh, shit.”

I hear Chance choke as I feel my body pulled back and thrust backwards behind the gate that we were just exiting.

“Whoa, wha-!?” I yelp, as he slaps a cupped hand over my mouth to shut me up.

I muffle a bit, still confused, until I look up with my wide eyes into his, and I see him putting a finger over his mouth, shushing me. I stop squirming and become completely silent in his arms as Chance peers out of the side of the gate. Returning his gaze back to me, he whispers, “Look.”

Chance releases my mouth, and I quietly turn around the corner to see the guards surrounding his bike, opening up all its compartments and taking out whatever they can find.

“Those bastards,” Chance snarls, grinding his teeth. “They found us.”

I turn back to look at Chance, who is pent up with anger and anxiety.

“Well, why don’t you just blow them up like before?” I ask. “You do have one more grenade left, don’t you?”

Chance just looks at me like I’m crazy and whispers, “Yeah, and do what? Blow up the bike too? Then we would have no way out of here!”

I look down at the ground in thought for a moment, and raising my head back up again, I say, “What about your gun?”

“What about it?” he questions. “They’ve got ten more.”

Suddenly, I remember his story that he was just telling me, and I ask, “What about your fake suicide attempt like you did before? If it worked once, it will work again!”

At this point, Chance just looks at me, tired of my bright ideas, and he whispers, “That was a big risk I took that day, and it was only because I had no other choice. There are so many ways that could go wrong, and I don’t want to risk you getting hurt.”

I look down, all out of ideas, when I hear Chance snap, “Fuck.”

I jolt my head up and look through the cracks of the gate, immediately seeing a guard walking right towards us.

“Oh, God!” I whimper as I turn to Chance, who is slowly taking out his gun.

I stay completely frozen, watching the guard approach, when suddenly, as soon as he passes through the gate, Chance jumps up and puts him into a head lock with the gun to his head. “Nobody move, or I kill him!” he screams.

All the guards shoot their heads to look at Chance, standing still, with their expressions covered by black reflective plastic, concealing what they are thinking.

Chance, now the center of attention, is visibly shaking as he yells, “Get away from the bike!”

I stare at Chance, and it is only now that I notice it isn’t Chance who is shaking. It’s the guard.

He’s terrified.

“Go on! Move!” Chance yells to them, as he repositions the gun closer to his head.

Slowly, all the guards move away, taking step by step away from the bike when I hear a grunt and Chance’s scream.

I turn to see the guard flipping him over and off of him, his gun scattering across the ground as his body is slammed into the pavement.

“No!” I gasp as Chance’s face gets smashed into the ground, and the guard begins to restrain him.

Rushing footsteps come at us, and I turn to see all the guards whipping out their Tasers and stampeding our way.

“No! Don’t do this, please!” I scream as I explode into a mess of panicking tears, and I hear gunshots.

“Put your weapons down, you pricks!” a female voice shouts out in the parking lot.

All of our heads quickly turn to see a blond girl with ten other people behind her, all holding guns in their hands and different colored bandannas around their mouths.

“Did you hear me!?” she screams. “Put them down!”

Suddenly, one by one, the guards release all their weapons and set them on the ground, followed by putting their hands in the air.

*That voice.*

*I know that voice.*

“Good,” the blond girl with the green bandanna says as she points a finger at the crowd of guards. “Surround them!”

All the people in back shout, “Yes, ma’am,” as they do what they are told and circle around.

The one guard left standing near us stays perfectly still, standing removed and off of Chance as two rebels point their guns just feet away and yell, “Ma’am, we’ve got two hostages!”

Chance opens his tightly shut eyes as blood drips down his forehead, and he chokes, “Analiese.”

Staring at Chance in fear, I watch as the blond girl passes in front of me, walking just a few feet away to Chance.

“Survivors?” she questions, staring down at him, still on the ground.

Chance nods his head, and I follow him and do the same. The girl just nods and pokes the back of the guard closest to us with her gun saying, “Get your ass over there with the others,” which, he quickly does.

Still standing over Chance, she looks me up and down, then back at him and asks, “Unit?”

“No,” Chance chokes as he tries to sit up, “we are not part of the rebellion. We are just trying to survive.”

The familiar girl just mumbles, “Huh,” then turns back to the guards, their hands still raised in the air. She questions, “Your bike?”

Chance nods, grabbing his dropped gun as he wipes the blood from his face and sighs. “Yes, that is ours.”

The blond girl, with her head still turned towards the men and the rebels, yells, “Make a path for our guests!”

Quickly, just like that, they all part like the red sea with the surrounding rebels stepping with them, guns still pointed.

The girl then turns back to us and states, “You are free to go.” She then gently pulls down her bandanna and holds out her hand, and my jaw drops.

“If you ever would like to join the rebellion, our doors are always open for new recruits. It is nice to meet you.”

Chance stands up and extends out his hand, shaking hers, and I can’t contain myself any longer.

“Kylee?” I blurt out.

The girl, clear as day, who could be no other than my best friend Kylee, just looks at me and replies, “What?”

“Kylee,” I gasp. “Kylee, what happened to you? What are you doing here?”

Kylee just stares at me, releasing Chance’s hand, and replies, “I don’t know who you are talking about. I’m sorry.” She then steps aside and extends her arm out through the path made by the guards and says, “After you.”

Chance just looks at me with a confused expression as he nudges my shoulder and begins to walk towards the bike, but I don’t move.

“No, Kylee, that’s you, that’s your name. Don’t you remember me? It’s me, your best friend, Analiese!”

Kylee just stares at me in complete confusion, and in a cold and disconnected tone, she replies, “I don’t know you.”

My heart sinks as I stare at her with wide and troubled eyes, when I feel my wrist grabbed, and I turn to see Chance incredibly close to my face, whispering, “Ana. Let’s. Go.”

Being pulled by Chance, with my mind not processing this impossible information fast enough to figure out what to say, I stumble back towards the bike.

As I am torn away from Kylee, I examine her with the utmost precision.

*That is Kylee, I know it is! I would know that girl from anywhere!*

Chance mounts the bike, and I forcibly follow on, turning to see Kylee in the distance, staring at us, with her bandanna now put back in place over her mouth.

He turns to her and raises his hand in thanks, and she returns the gesture. Turning back, he puts the key in the ignition and starts up the bike, and within seconds, we are moving out of the parking lot and into the crammed and crowded roads.

Still turned, I stare at Kylee until she is no longer in my field of vision. I return back, squeezing onto Chance a little tighter and I burrow my face into him.

Not knowing what to think, not knowing what to feel, we speed off back towards the tree house.

**Chapter Eleven**

When we returned home, Chance properly bandaged both my hands, and then he made me dinner. He threw everything into one big pot, and we had some stew.

The whole time I couldn’t stop thinking about everything. This world, this epidemic, this boy, and most of all, the weird run in with Kylee, who denied ever knowing me.

*Things like this don’t just happen overnight.*

After dinner, I asked for some time alone to get my head straight. He said, “Of course,” and let me have the bed for the night, while he slept on the couch again.

It’s been hours now that I’ve been in here, thinking and thinking, and I can’t sleep. It must be well past two o’clock now, but I just can’t.

All I can think of is Felix.

*What happened to him? He just disappeared, and now I’m in the future.*

*A future where my past isn’t the same.*

*Does this mean Felix and I won’t be together in the future?*

*Did something happen to him?*

*And I still don’t know why I am known as Lullaby here!*

I run my hand down my face, trying to wipe away my thoughts and trying to welcome some sleep.

I roll over to attempt to relax, but something catches my eye.

A shadow in the doorway. A small one.

“What the…?”

A sharp hiss emits from the shadow, and I know that sound from anywhere.

“You little bitch, look what you did to my head!” I whisper-yell, trying not to wake up Chance, as I point at the small, hairless gaps on my scalp.

The little bitch’s teeth blare wide in a stretched smile, and it claps its tiny, putrid claws together in excitement.

“You think it’s funny!? I’m your owner, Luh-luh-by,” I bluff.

The stupid monkey shouldn’t be able to tell the difference; we look the damn same.

But I guess animals have that sixth sense thing, because the only response I got was shit in my face.

Literally, shit in my face.

“You little-!”

I jump up out of the bed, but as fast as I move, the little bitch moves faster, up and out of sight before I can even make my way to the door.

“Damned monkey.” I scowl. “They should have just left you to die.”

I sit back down and pull the dried up shit it threw at me out of my hair.

*God, this is miserable.*

*And to add on to it, I haven’t showered in almost three days, and there’s no shower here.*

*Just screw it, I’m going to bed.*

I slam my head on the pillow and roll over in the opposite direction.

*I’m done moving.*

*I’m done thinking.*

*I’m getting some damned rest.*

~\*~

“Analiese?”

“Analiese.”

*Wha-*

*Why is everything so…*

*So bright…*

*So white…*

“Analiese.”

*Huh?*

I look up hearing this voice, this deep voice, this calm voice.

With my eyes adjusting to the light, I see a dark figure standing over me.

*Tall, tan…*

*Felix?*

“Felix is that… you?”

I hear the figure’s unsteady breath turn to a short gasp, and before I can comprehend what’s going on, I’m tackled to the ground and, just by the embrace, I know.

“Oh my God! Analiese!” he chokes out.

“Felix! It’s you! Oh, is it really you?” I question, desperately.

I pull away and take his face in my hands, examining it against the harsh light, trying to see.

And he smiles. He smiles bright and wide. His million dollar smile beaming right at me.

*It’s him.*

*It’s really him!*

“Felix!” I cry as I latch on to him. “Oh God, where have you been!? Where are we?” I pull away just enough to look around. “Are we... dead?”

He booms with laughter, holding me still so tight, embracing me for every second’s worth.

“No, no,” he says, calming down from his laughter, “or at least I don’t think so.”

“But,” I utter, taking another moment to take all of this in, “where is all this light coming from? How did you get here?”

“I don’t know!” he laughs. “But you’re here! And I’m here! You can come home now! Please! If you do, all of this nightmare will be over!” he bellows, holding onto me with a desperate smile.

I stare at him, with my expression dropping a little. “Your nightmare?”

“Yes! Oh God, Analiese, when I woke up you were just gone, and I panicked, so I ran to the police to report that you had gone missing, but when I told them what had happened, they took me in as a suspect!” He stares at me in deep desperation. “You have to come home, please!”

I look into him, still holding on to what’s left of my happiness after hearing this, but through his broken smile I can see the truth. A side of him I’ve never really seen before.

He’s afraid.

“But…” I trail off, becoming more and more aware of our surreal surroundings, “but how? How do we get back?”

He jumps to his feet and grabs my hands. “Well, we just go!” he shouts excitedly as he pulls me up with him. “Come on, we’re going home!”

Just hearing those words, I immediately let go of all my fears and just smile.

 “*Home.”*

*We’re going home!*

He pulls me forward, running as fast as he can with me running right behind him.

*All of this will be gone! Like a bad dream, it’ll all be over!*

*Like none of it ever happened!*

I keep running behind him, but a strange feeling starts to come over me, and I begin to slow.

Gliding my eyes over the repeating light, there’s no indication that we have made any movement, and I stop.

 “What? Analiese, what’s wrong?” he asks, looking behind at me with an expression of worry.

“This place…” I utter, pulling my hand back and looking all around me.

“This place isn’t real.”

“What?” he questions, looking at me in fear and confusion. He then breaks into desperate laughter. “Of course it is! Love, come on! We’re almost home!”

“Felix, we’ve been running and have made no progress. Just look around you! Everything is just a bunch of bright light! We aren’t going anywhere!”

He stares at me in complete shock, like the words I’ve just said personally stabbed him.

“Don’t you… want to come home?” he utters.

His words rip into me, looking at me as if I just told him I didn’t love him anymore. My eyes begin to water and bubble over. “Yes.” I sniff, trying to hold it in. “Yes, I want to come home, but this isn’t real! You aren’t-” I cut off, choking into tears, not able to say it.

*He’s not real.*

*None of this is.*

“No…” I cry. “No you have to be, please, no, please.” I break down to the ground, not feeling the floor against my knees, and I cry, “I need you.”

“Analiese?” he utters, interrupting my tears.

Sobbing at the ground, I look up at him, and for the first time that I’ve seen in years, he’s crying.

Standing there, just yards away, with his whole body limp, he stares at me.

“Analiese, I need you too,” he chokes, as a single tear glides down his cheek. “Ana…”

He runs and collides with me onto the ground, hugging me, holding me, embracing me.

“Felix, don’t go, don’t go.” I sob, latching onto him with all of my strength.

“I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere,” he cries. “I’m not leaving you. I would never leave you.”

I smile through my tears, hearing those words, but I continue to cry. As I hold him tighter, with my fingers pressing into his soft skin, I can feel his warmth.

“Analiese,” he quietly says.

“Yes?” I whimper, squeezing tighter into his soft, limp body.

“Analiese,” he repeats, his voice even softer than before.

“Yes? What is it?” I brush my hands down his gentle arms, noticing how cold his skin now is.

“Ana-” he trails off.

“What, Felix?” I choke out as I finally look up at him and open my eyes.

But he’s not here.

In his place only lies a pillow, cold, soft, and limp, and I’m alone in the room, back at the tree house.

“Wha-” I quiver, gazing at the pillow, with tears already streaming down my face.

“What? No… that couldn’t have been a-”

I start to choke, and my voice shatters. I pull the pillow close to my face, and I bawl into it.

*He was so close. He was right there! Why!? This should be a dream, not him! I should be waking up from this hell, not back into it!*

I wail into the pillow, crying harder than I ever have since I got here.

*Seeing him, hearing him, feeling him, just for a second, then getting it ripped away.*

“Torture!” I bawl into the pillow. “It’s not fair!”

*He said he wouldn’t leave, he just said it!*

*You said we were going home!*

I desperately grasp at my neck for my dichroic star, only to find myself empty handed, once again forgetting it’s no longer there. A whole new wave of tears comes on, feeling this extra little stab of loss, and I just cry.

“F-F-Felix,” I stutter, still wailing into the pillow.

I try to calm myself down and take deep breaths in and out.

As my sobs grow weaker, I wipe my tears into the blanket, with the remnants already dried to my face.

*I just wanted to be with you. I want to see your smile again.*

My breathing slows, and my eyes continue to sting. Thinking about how just moments ago, I held his million-dollar smile right in between my own hands.

And now they’re empty.

My cries turn to whimpers, and I shut my eyes.

*Please, take me back to him.*

*I’ll do anything.*

*Just please.*

*Please, take me back.*

~\*~

“Analiese.”

“Mmm?” I mumble as white light pierces into my eyes.

“Hey.”

“Wha-!?” I shoot up, the thought hitting me that Felix is back. “Oh God, I thought I lost y-”

And my eyes are greeted with the blurry image of Chance.

“You…” I trail off in disappointment.

“I was just in the other room,” he says as he jabs his thumb in the direction behind him. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.” He chuckles, closing his lips into a charming smile as he adjusts the bandana around his neck.

I sigh, releasing my built up excitement, and I unenthusiastically reply, “Well, that’s good to know.”

Chance looks at me, a bit confused at my displeased attitude, and he asks, “Hey, what’s the matter?”

Immediately, my eyes begin to water, and I choke, “It's just hard getting used to things here.”

His face falls into surprise, not expecting my reaction, and then instantly it switches to concern.

He moves the covers that are on the bed to make room for himself to sit down. As he does, he coos, “Hey, it’s going to be alright, okay? I told you we’re going to get through this together.” He gently wraps his arm around me in a soft embrace.

I don’t respond, as the lump in my throat hurts too much and my tears are about to bubble over. All I can do is nod.

I latch onto him and bury my face into his chest, and with all my strength, all I can utter is, “Please don’t leave me, too.”

I hear him take in a stunned breath as his fingers press into me just a little harder, and he says, “I’m not-“ He cuts off, taking in a short breath before saying, “I’m never leaving you. You don’t need to be afraid. I’ll always be rights here.” He pulls me into him, and his cool skin presses against my warmth. “So please don’t cry, okay?" he finishes, looking at me with a reassuring smile.

I blink, and the built up tears roll down my cheeks. As I quickly wipe them away, I murmur all I can think to say. “Thank you.”

Chance loosens his grip on me just a bit and asks, “Is there anything I can get you? Anything to make you feel better?”

I just shake my head, "No," as I pull the covers to my face, trying to hide my weakness and fragility.

“Is there anything I can do then?” he asks again as he brushes his hand through my hair.

Once again, I just shake my head and choke, “Thank you though.”

He sighs, with disappointment streamed across his face due to his inability to aid me. I feel bad for seeming so weak but even worse for making him feel useless.

“What were you going to say to me?” I softly ask, trying to change the subject.

“What?” he responds, removing his hand from my shoulder and placing it back on the bed.

“Before,” I state, but he is still looking at me with a confused expression. “Before, when you woke me up. Why did you wake me up?”

“Oh!” he exclaims in realization. “That’s what you’re talking about.”

I look to him, waiting for him to continue, but he pauses, as if that’s all he’s going to say. I still stay silent, and he notices he should probably say a little more.

“Oh, well, um, I was just going to take you somewhere today, but if you need some more time alone, I could certainly leave you be until you’re okay again, or-”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” I cut him off. “It’s fine, I’m fine, everything is okay.” I drop the blanket from my face and wipe at the last of my tears, waving off at him. “Don’t worry.”

He looks at me wearily and lets out a slight unsatisfactorily moan. “Are you sure? If you’re overwhelmed, we don’t have to go.”

“It’s not that,” I groan, wiping at my face. “It's other things, but-” I cut off, really not wanting to continue this conversation. “I need to get out anyways, get some fresh air.” I finish, looking him straight in the eyes with the fakest smile I’ve ever made.

Whether he bought it or not, I’m not sure. He just sighs, looks at me with a pitiful smile, and states, “Well get ready then, I’ll be back in 10 minutes to check up on you.”

He begins to leave the room but stops, turning around and saying, “And if you need me, I really am here for you.”

And with that, he silently exits the room, and I’m left alone again.

I fall back in bed and lay on my back, staring at the wooden ceiling that once was a beautiful window emitting warm and illuminating light. I reach out towards the empty space and grasp the air with my hand.

“How do I find you Felix?” I whisper.

I slowly wave my bandaged hand back and forth, still staring into space, and I see something move.

*Huh?*

I stop moving my hand, and the movement stops as well. I rub my eyes and look back up at the ceiling, and everything is still.

I stretch my hand back out and reach for the ceiling again, but this time nothing happens.

*I must be losing my mind.*

I roll up from the bed and plant my feet on the floor, pushing myself to get up.

*Nothing good is going to come from just sitting here.*

*I need to find Felix.*

I get to my feet and walk out of the tiny room, squinting my eyes from the bright sun as I exit.

“Oh, good to see you out!” Chance happily exclaims. “We're just about to leave.”

I walk through the rainbow plastered room, with the dream catchers and paintings distracting me from responding, and I come to and reply, “We? Is someone else coming?”

Chance shifts uncomfortably and looks at the ground, “Well, um, yes. I figured this would be a good opportunity to reacquaint you and-” but before he can finish that awful hiss emits from behind him.

I just instinctually respond, “No. No, no, no, no, no. Keep that thing away from me.” I put my hands in front of me in rejection. “I am not going *anywhere* with that devil.”

Another hiss screeches from behind him in response to my voice.

Chance sighs and looks at me pitifully. “We need you two to cooperate, though.” He jabs his thumb to the window leading outside. “The weather is too cold to keep caging Meiko up. She needs our body warmth to keep her in good health, but I can't let her free into the house, or she may attack you again.”

I just stare at him, arms folded, standing my ground.

Chance looks at me pleadingly and gives a disgruntled groan. “Please, darling, I know you are stressed, but in order to get back into our regular lives again, we are going to need to do some things we may not want to do.”

“Regular lives?” I snap. “We are in a world where most everyone is dead, we have no communication with the outside world, and we live in the middle of the forest. Being friends with a stupid monkey isn't going to bring *my* regular life back.”

Tears start to form in my eyes, spitting out that last sentence. It's just the morning, and I’m already this emotional. I can't deal with this right now.

“Analiese!” Chance yells after me as I escape from the room, not wanting him to see me crying.

I dart to the back of the tree house where the pulley system is, and I swing the door open into the cool air. The breeze is brisk across my face, and I shut my eyes and breathe in.

Then out.

Then in.

Then out.

“I need to calm down,” I whisper to myself.

I sit down on the ledge and look off into the forest, rubbing my hands on my face, trying to relax and wipe away whatever redness there is.

*I’m not immature, I swear, I’m not even usually emotional, but just the thought of that monkey takes me back to three days ago when all this started. The panic, the confusion, the fear. Then that thing ripping the hair from my scalp.*

*That creature is the embodiment of all this hell.*

“Ana?”

I turn around to see Chance behind me, hiding sheepishly behind the door.

“I-” he cuts off and looks to the ground shamefully.

The cold breeze brushes through his hair, and he shirks back a little. “I shouldn't have pushed Meiko on you, I know you're stressed, I just thought you having another friend is better than an enemy.”

He quickly cuts off as if the apology was extremely uncomfortable. He stares at the ground, awaiting my response.

I sigh, feeling bad that he feels this bad.

He didn't mean any harm; he just doesn't understand that this world isn't my home. That all this is an inescapable nightmare. To him, all this is normal. To him, all this is fine. He has had months to adjust to this life. I haven't, but he thinks that I have. I’m not his Lullaby, and I’m starting to think again that he doesn't truly believe that either.

“Chance,” I utter.

“Yes?” he responds, his head shooting up and ears perked.

“Can you come over here?” I weakly ask as I motion my hand towards myself.

“Of course!” he quickly replies as he pushes his body off the doorframe and comes my way.

I look back down at my feet that are dangling off the ledge and I watch as Chance’s join them. I tilt my head to the side just enough to see Chance's worried eyes awaiting my next words, and I look back down and sigh. “Chance what is the point of all this?”

“The point of what?” he responds, confused.

“Surviving,” I state.

“Surviving?” he repeats, sounding taken aback. “We survive to live. We survive so we can make a better life one day.”

I sit a moment, taking in his obvious response, hearing it like it makes perfect common sense, but for some reason, it doesn't sit right with me.

“But what good is it to survive in a world where all your friends and family are dead and you are barricaded off from the outside world, so you can't meet anyone new? What good is it to rummage through convenience stores and abandoned markets collecting food, just to know it’s going to run out someday, and there will be no way to get any more? To know we will never go to college, never work in a job, never have a family-”

“We don't know that,” he states, cutting me off.

I jolt my head up and stare at him.

“We don't know what is going to happen next. The outside forces could come in and save us tomorrow for all we know. Every morning we wake up, it’s a brand new day where something great could happen. Yes, it's true, we don't have much communication anymore, but there are others here, and all our family isn't dead. Both our dads are still out there somewhere. I know it.”

I stare at him silently, trying to gather a response, when he says, “And yes, the potato chips and convenience store candy will one day run out, but a Home Depot is just a few miles away, and they have seeds there. Hundreds of thousands of them.” His face cracks into a tiny smile. “If worse comes to worse, we can start a garden.”

I look at him as his golden, blond hair is swayed by the wind, and his eyes beam with hope. He puts his hand on mine and squeezes it tight, saying, “We can make it through this. We aren't just surviving. We are living. As long as we have each other to keep us strong, we are living. As long as I have you here, this is a life worth living.”

My mouth gapes just a bit, feeling warm all over from his words. I stare into his loving eyes, but the feeling only lasts a moment before I realize that stare isn't meant for me, it's meant for Lullaby. That it’s a life worth living for him because he has his girlfriend, but what do I have? I don't have Felix. I don't even know if he's alive.

I shoot my head back at the ground and wince, as tears begin to form in my eyes.

“H-hey, what's wrong?” Chance worriedly responds, touching his hand to my back.

The images of Felix from last night flash through my mind, and I hear his words resounding in my head.

*“I’m not going anywhere.”*

*“I’m not leaving you.”*

And then worst of all:

*”Don't you want to come home?”*

My breath becomes unsteady, but I don't cry. I open my eyes and gaze at the ground, staring at what could be a short and simple way to leave all this behind.

The thought enters my head for only a moment, and I wipe it away with the thought of being in Felix's arms again one day. He could be out there in just as much panic as I am, terrified that I am dead, but here I am, safe and sound, and he could be too.

“Chance, I need to see that fence again,” I announce. “I need to see what's keeping me from the outside world.”

“Wha-?” he shifts back, not expecting what I had just said. “You mean the barrier?”

I stare into him, with a gaze that is deep and intense. “Yes, whatever it is called. The device that is keeping us trapped here.”

Chance just blinks in surprise, taken completely off guard. “Well, I mean, we can, of course, sure!” he exclaims, putting his hands up in surrender to my demand. “But there's nothing really to see, and you’ve already seen it the night I found you, and I’m sure you noticed it on the way to the zoo. It's just a huge barbed wire fence and plastic wrap.”

“I don't care,” I reply. “I need to see it for myself, again.”

Chance sighs and looks at me unsure but still gets up and says, “Well, I did have something a little more fun planned for you today, but if you would rather go there, then that's fine.”

Chance extends out his arm and helps me to my feet, then releases me and walks to the door. I follow behind, now more determined than anything.

*No more tears. No more weakness. I had my moment, and I need to be strong now.*

Suddenly, I hear that demonic hiss again.

I turn to see Meiko on the ground at my feet, baring her teeth and jumping up and down.

Chance turns around and groans, “Aw Meiko, come on, everything's alri-”, but I cut him off by holding up my hand.

I lean down and crouch beside the small raging beast that is hissing and snarling at me uncontrollably. When I come down to her level, she backs up and rages even more.

“You're scared of me,” I quietly state, my gaze on her still intense.

At this, she screeches even louder and starts banging her fists against the ground.

I keep my piercing stare into her eyes and outstretch my hand towards her.

“Analiese, what are y-!”

But before he can finish, he is once again interrupted; this time by my scream.

Blood drips down my finger, as its tiny, razor sharp teeth pierce into me, increasing the pressure with its jaw.

I stay firm, and I don't move. I let it take all its anger out on me, all its fear. I keep my unwavering gaze on it and make no movement to pull back. It digs its tiny teeth into me harder and harder, trying to scare me away, make me leave, but I won't go. Its beady black eyes stare at the slab of meat in its mouth, then back at me, switching back and forth until I feel it starting to let go.

The tiny shards exit from my wound, and the blood continues to drip down. Everything is silent, even Meiko, who has no idea what to make of what just happened.

She stares uneasily at me, then begins to whimper. Without a moment’s notice, she darts from the ground to Chance, crawling up to his neck, and then hides behind his hair.

“Meiko...” Chance utters, trying to stretch his vision to the monkey shivering on his shoulder.

His eyes then fall onto me in silence, not knowing what should be said in a moment like this, and I just smile. My lip quivers from the pain, but I stay firm in my expression.

“I’m not running away anymore,” I state. “I’m going to survive. I’m going to live.”

Chance stares at me in astonishment, and little by little, his gaping mouth turns into a smile of disbelief.

“Wha-” he stutters. “Well that's wonderful!” He laughs. “That’s amazing!”

His shocked smile turns into one of compassion, and he shifts, relaxing his shoulders, with Meiko still shaken up and struggling to hold on.

“You really are something,” he says fondly as his loving smile beams at me.

My body feels warm, and I shrug my shoulders. “I’m going to have to be if I want to make it in this world.”

Chance chuckles and walks forward. With every step he takes, Meiko crawls further and further towards the edge of his body until Chance is too close to me for her comfort, and she abandons ship.

Standing over me, he places his hand on my shoulder and softly states, “We are absolutely going to make it.”

I stare past Chance and into the corner of the room at Meiko. Scared and terrified, she claws at me from a distance, and I just smile at her.

*You're not scary.*

*You're nothing to be afraid of.*

*You're nothing to me.*

I shoot my eyes back to Chance's, still loving and sweet, and I smile at him radiantly.

“Let's get going,” I say.

“We have a barrier to see.”

**Chapter Twelve**

Chance gathered up Meiko and put her in her carrier. I must admit, she relaxed quite a lot from the incident but was still a little on edge. She certainly didn't trust me worth a shit.

We walk outside to the front platform and Chance turns to me, surprised and apologetic, quietly saying, “Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot you still don’t like the fire pole.”

I cock my head to the side blankly, and I look behind Chance to the fire pole, then back at him.

"I can do it,” I state freely.

Chance looks at me in shock. “Are you sure? Just because you've gotten over your fear of Meiko doesn't mean I expect this of you, you know.”

“I know,” I state with a coy smile as I walk past him and towards the pole. “I’m doing this for myself.”

I grip the cold metal in my palm and look up to see the short length until it ends at the top. I then look down and see the eternity that exists until the bottom.

My body goes cold for a moment, forgetting in my confidence how terrifying this thing is.

I swallow my fear and lock my eyes on the view of the trees dead ahead of me, bracing my legs and clamping on with my hands. I stand still and count to three.

*One.*

*Two.*

“H-hey,” Chance stutters, “are you sure about th-?”

*Three!*

I shut my eyes tight, blocking out his voice, and I jump.

With the wind whipping my face, I scream like I'm on a roller coaster I didn't know was about to start. I grip on for my life, and the slick, freezing metal numbs my hands. I increase pressure with my palms out of horror, and I slowly slide to a stop, frozen solid, still on the pole.

“Ana!”

I hear Chance screaming my name, and my eyes fly open.

I’m still in midair.

My paralyzed glance just slightly drops below, and to my relief, I see I’m just feet from the ground.

*Oh, God. Oh, thank God.*

I release the tension just slightly as I jaggedly stop-and-go all the way to the ground.

The moment my feet touch the soil, my whole body feels like lead and I deflate.

“That's the last time I do that,” I whisper to myself.

“Ah-nah!” Chance shouts at the top of his lungs once more.

“What?” I scream back, staring up at him from where I just came.

“Are you okay?” he yells back.

“I’m fine!” I state. “Hurry up and get down here!”

“I have to send Meiko down the pulley system first, but after that, I’ll be right there!” he shouts as he darts back inside.

I walk to the other side of the giant tree and stand right below the back platform, and by now, Chance is already there.

I hear the clattering noise of the rope going through the pulley, being prepared for Meiko's departure. Surprisingly, I didn't hear any noise from Meiko.

“Here she comes!” he shouts as he begins to lower her.

Little by little, the jolting pulley makes its way down, but as soon as Meiko is lowered to the point where she makes eye contact with me, she begins to scream.

Banging and thrashing, she wraps her grubby little hand around the bars and rages in defiance. The cage squeaks and creeps to the edge of the board, and within seconds, she's no longer on it.

I hear Chance scream and I leap as far as I can, outstretching my arms in an attempt to catch her. With all of my strength, I catch the cage and its weight rips me to the ground. Everything is silent except for Chance once again screaming, “Are you okay!?”

Still on the ground, collapsed, I lean my head over to the cage where I once again make direct eye contact with Meiko. This time she isn't screaming.

Curled in the back of the cage, she looks at me with horrified eyes, trembling and shaking.

“It's easy for you to shout things from afar, but up close you're nothing but a chicken,” I smirk, but then immediately wincing in pain from the fall I took.

I shift to get to my feet, but I feel a sharp pain, and I’m thrown back to the ground. Chance, upon seeing this, yells, “Analiese!?”

“Ow!” I moan in reply, reaching for my back.

Chance stumbles to his feet and through the back door, yelling, “Oh God, I’ll be right there!”

I lay on the ground, my face smeared in the dirt, and I direct my eyes back at Meiko again.

“You weren't worth this, you little shit,” I groan grudgingly as I try and shift my body back up again.

“Don't move!” I hear Chance shout, as his footsteps fast approach me.

He kneels down to my level and touches my back, asking, “Where does it hurt?”

With my face still flat against the ground, I look up as far as I can to him and unhappily mumble, “Everywhere.”

“Oh geez,” Chance worriedly utters under his breath. “Well, uh, how bad is it? Can I help you get up?”

“You can try.” I sigh unenthusiastically.

“Alright,” he says, looking from point to point on my body, trying to figure out where he should lift me from. “Here we go.”

I feel his hands grip around my arms, and slowly and gently, I feel my torso being lifted off the ground.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow,” I complain the whole way up.

Once he gets me to my feet, he balances me a moment before I’m able to stand on my own.

“Can you walk?” he asks concerned.

“I think so,” I grumble as I take a step forward, looking like a toddler walking for their first time. “It isn't hurting, so I think I’m okay.”

Chance sighs in relief. “Well, that's good. After all, the hospital isn’t really an option.”

“Yeah, seriously,” I agree.

Chance leans over and picks up Meiko’s cage, bringing the barred entrance to his eye level and scolds, “You should really be kinder to Ana, you know. She just saved your life!”

I chuckle at his over exaggerated description of my action and watch as he puts Meiko to his side, saying “Well, if you're alright to go, then let’s get going. We have a whole day ahead of us.”

I smile and nod as I follow him towards the bike. I climb on carefully, as to not upset my back, as Chance hooks Meiko’s cage to the side. He comes around the front and jumps on, starting the bike, and drives only a short distance before he stops again just a few yards away.

“Huh? What are you doing?” I ask, confused.

I watch as he dismounts from the bike and walks towards a small trailer I've never noticed before.

“I thought we would take the caravan today. If we are making a trip this far out of town, we might as well bring it with us.”

“Oh wow,” I whisper under my breath. “That's pretty cool.”

“Yeah, it is,” he agrees, looking up at its side, then turning back to me, he asks, “Wanna ride in it?”

A look of surprise casts across my face, and then it is immediately replaced with a radiant smile. “Hell yeah, I would!” I shout as I jump off the bike, stumbling a bit once I touch the ground, due to my back.

“Hey, watch yourself. I don't want you getting too hurt, dear.” Chance cautions as he walks forward, extending his arms in aid.

“I've got it. I’m ok,” I state as I lift my hand up in reassurance and pass him by.

I get behind the rather large, blue trailer and grasp my hands around the handles. Opening the doors wide, I see a giant, silky, purple curtain hanging in front of the entrance. I push it out of the way and what I see makes my jaw drop.

“It's pretty nice, isn't it?” Chance says as he leans against the side.

Yards and yards of silk and fabric cover the entire walls of the interior, draping and tucked in every corner. The floor is not in the least bit visible due to satin pillows of purple, blue and green decorated with gold trim and tassels. Lastly, the ceiling, adorned with hanging ornaments of the Evil Eye and glass bobbles and bells, catch my eyes. A caravan straight out of a gypsy town.

“Damn,” I utter in pure astonishment, “this is beautiful.”

I turn to Chance still leaning at the doorway and ask, “How did you get all this stuff?”

Chance bounces himself off the wall and walks towards me, explaining, “Well, when most everyone is dead, there is no one to mind the stores, so everything is kind of yours for the taking.”

“Huh," I murmur to myself as I look up at Chance hovering over me.

He smiles a moment at me before asking, “Want me to help you up?”

“Uh, yeah, that would be great,” I stutter, still nervous from how close he is to me.

Chance softly wraps his cold hands at my hips and squeezes them, lifting me up just high enough so I can crawl inside.

“Thanks,” I shout to the outside as I plummet in, now completely consumed by pillows and blankets and relieved to be away from his freezing grasp.

I curl myself into the crisp, cold fabric, which quickly warms from my body heat.

“Mmm,” I hum to myself with a broad smile on my contented face. *This feels so nice.*

“I’m about to start the bike, so when it moves, don't be surprised by the jolt!” Chance shouts from out front.

“Kay!” I shout back, now completely warm and comfortable under the haven of blankets.

*I would rather sleep down here than up in the tree house bed.*

Suddenly, the whole trailer jolts, and we begin to move. I lie on my back and lift up my hand, touching and toying with the hanging accessories from above. I press my two fingers over a sparkling blue piece of glass tied by silver string and swish it back and forth.

“Wow, this is like something out of a movie,” I utter.

I sway my hand back and forth, following the glass's movement, imitating its ebb and flow, when something happens.

“Wha-” I stutter, looking at the ceiling, which is now normal again.

*That's the same thing that happened this morning at the tree house.*

I lift my hand back up and sway it some more, following the same motion of the glass, and it happens again.

Like water in the ocean, my hand glides through the air and makes ripples, tiny indentations in the empty space and it moves them side to side.

“What the hell?” I whisper as I repeat the motion over and over again, following the reaction carefully with my eyes.

I focus more and begin to notice that along with my hand and the tiny ripples, the ornaments also begin to follow my flow, moving side to side with every wisp of my fingertips.

Suddenly, the caravan runs over something, and the whole trailer shakes violently. The ornaments fly in disarray, and I rip my hands down to stabilize my body.

“You okay back there?” I hear Chance yell from out front.

“Yeah!” I shout back, staring at the ornaments slowing in speed. “I’m fine.”

My eyes trace the dangling objects as I lean back and reach my hand out once again.

Just as before, the space directly in front of my palm ripples as if I were touching my fingers to a puddle of water.

“Is this normal here?” I utter to myself.

I place my hand back down and crawl to the front of the caravan where there is a sliding window. Putting my hand on the metal knob, I slide it to the side and stick my head out the window, and I'm battered and slapped by the biting cold.

“Chance!” I yell.

The wind beats and whips my skin, and I get no response as the motor roars far louder than my own voice.

“Chance!” I scream again, louder.

“What?” he shouts back.

“Can you guys move stuff here without touching it?” I scream, trying to throw my voice beyond the cacophonous sound of the wind and bike.

“What?” Chance shouts back again in reply.

“I said-”

“Just talk to me when we get there. I can't hear you,” Chance yells, cutting me off.

A little disappointed but very much in agreement and sick of my hair flying everywhere with the wind stinging my face, I pop my head back inside and comb down my hair with my hands.

*Hey, maybe it's normal here. Maybe I’m the weird one.*

I lay myself back down and continue the swaying motions with my hand, watching every melodic movement the ripples make.

I continue this the whole way there, only stopping when the trailer comes to a halt. I hear Chance dismount the bike and walk towards the back doors of the trailer. “We're here,” he announces as he turns the handles and brings sunlight into the otherwise dark caravan.

I cover my eyes from the bright light I’m not used to, due to the long duration of the trip, and I worm my way out of the pillows and blankets to the opening.

Chance sees my struggle and chuckles. “Need a little help?”

“No, I got thi-” I cut off, cringing from my back injury that I forgot about, but I continue without faltering to look strong.

Chance looks at me with doubt but says, “Aright, whatever you say,” and he smiles and walks off.

“W-wait!” I try to shout, but my voice fizzles out due to a shock of pain surging through my spine.

*I need to ask him about those ripples!*

“Hm? Oh, need my help?” he asks, sarcastically.

I fumble to the entrance, leaning over the edge, muttering, “No, it's not that, just come over he-”

But my voice cuts off from losing my balance, and I feel a shot of adrenaline surge through my veins right before I feel my body hit the cold, hard ground.

“Oh, geez! Analiese!” Chance blurts out as he rushes over to me.

I feel his arms wrap around me, and I just groan in pain.

“Are you okay?!” Chance panics as I open my eyes to see his blacked out face from the sun shining too brightly behind him.

I open my mouth to make a sarcastic remark on how many times he's asked me if I’m okay today, but before I can, he cuts off my thought, stating, “Hey, though, you need to listen to me, when I said I was here for you, I meant it. We're a team. If you keep trying to do everything alone, you’re just going to keep getting yourself hurt.”

I retract the idea of my sarcasm and just look at him silently in my absence of what to say. As the clouds move in front of the sun and I see his worried face clearly, he continues, “I know earlier I made a light comment about the hospital not being an option if you get hurt, but really, it isn't an option. We can't have you getting hurt. I can't lose you again.”

Stunned from the severity of his words and not knowing how to respond, I look at him wide-eyed and just nod. “Okay.”

“You really mean that?” he asks very seriously. “I don't want you just saying that and then trying to be all tough and messing yourself up later. Promise?”

“I promise,” I reply shyly.

Hearing his strong words, my body begins to heat up, and my heart begins to pound, being far too close to his face for my own good.

Chance just looks at me and smiles, and my heart rate only increases as I stutter, “A-As my first cry for help, could I ask you to help me up?”

He chuckles to himself a bit and replies, “Certainly, dear.”

He places me off of him and gets to his feet, outstretching his arm towards me. I take hold of his hand as he gently pulls me up, but my back sends a shock of pain down my spine, and I falter.

Before I can hit the ground, a second hand is put at my back, securing me, and I hear Chance's smooth voice sweetly coo, “Careful.”

I look up to him, seeing his kind smile as his scent encompasses me, momentarily hazing me over. Before I can realize it, I’m already on my feet.

“There you go, princess,” he says, cocking his head and putting a hand on his hip. “Now, want to see what you came here for?”

“Uh, yeah,” I utter, taken off guard by all that just happened so quickly.

“Well, turn around then,” he states calmly.

I do as he says, and what I see answers all of my questions on why we can't leave.

At least 20 feet high, barbed wire extends as far as the eye can see in both directions, and behind that fence is another, and behind that fence is another.

On the very last layer of fences, plastic is wrapped around the perimeter, and metal poles are driven into the ground every couple of feet.

“Dear God,” I whisper under my breath in astonishment, and I quickly fall into hopelessness.

*We are never getting out of here.*

Suddenly, I feel Chance behind me, and I hear his cold voice state, “The barbed wire keeps the people in, the plastic keeps the disease in, and the poles on the outside keeps the cars in, for anyone trying to ram their way through to the outside.”

I stand in silence, completely crestfallen, now understanding why Chance got so used to life here.

“And for those who somehow are magically able to get through to the other side," Chance continues on, “there are men with guns just waiting for them.”

I turn and look at Chance in horror, trying to find words to say, but I can’t come up with any. I retract my eyes to the ground in shock.

*I knew it would be bad, I knew it would be difficult, but I didn’t think it'd be impossible.*

*This ruins everything.*

“To top it all off, at night, the guards patrol this area where we are standing to capture those who are trying to escape. Most people try to make a run for it at night, thinking they will have a better chance of not getting shot if they do, but a lot of them don’t account for the guards on this side who catch them and then use them as lab rats in experiments,” he states remorsefully.

*That explains the first night I was here, and why all those guards were creeping around.*

“I don't know if you know or remember them,” Chance says, interrupting my train of thought, “but a couple we used to go to school with attempted to ram their way out of here once.”

I shoot my eyes back up at Chance in full attention.

“They took the biggest truck they could find that wasn't barricaded in traffic and drove it to the edge of town. At full speed, they slammed through as hard as they could, taking down all the fences, but crashing to a halt at the metal poles.”

Chance bows his head down at the ground respectfully, saying, “The sound of the crash alerted the men, which caused them to hurry to the scene. Once they arrived and found them, they shot them both dead.”

I stare at him with eyes wide and terrified as I open my mouth and ask, “Who were they?”

He shifts back up, and looking at me, he says, "It was Nightingale Tide and Arrow Skyrun.”

I stare at him, trying to register those names to people that I know, but they don't ring a bell.

“Oh,” I sigh, remorsefully. “I never knew them.”

Chance looks back off to the fence, saying, “It’s a shame. They were both really great people.”

There's a moment of silence where neither of us speak and neither of us move.

We stand like statues, just yards away from freedom, looking on to where we could be if not for the barrier.

“Well,” I speak without realizing, “what... do we do?”

“We live,” he states as he tilts his head down and walks back towards the motorcycle.

I just stare at his turned back in disgust.

In fear.

In hopelessness.

“But I can't live like this!” I whimper in defiance, the emotion now breaching my denial into reality.

“Things could be a lot worse, Analiese. We are both lucky to just be alive.” His voice is cold and unmoving as he unlatches Meiko’s cage and lets her free. She crawls from the metal bars onto his shoulder and shyly hides behind his hair.

“At least we are together. At least we don't have to face this alone," he says with a soft smile as Meiko nibbles at his ear.

I tilt my head down but keep my eyes on his.

*I feel ashamed of myself.*

*Pouting won't get me anywhere. I need to stop.*

I sigh and walk forward towards Chance. Right as I’m about to open my mouth and apologize for my behavior, I hear a terrified animalistic scream and see Meiko jump from Chances shoulder to the ground.

“Meiko!” Chance yells, but it’s too late. She darts off and into a faraway huge patch of tall grass.

“Stay right there!” Chance shouts back at me as he chases after her. “Don't leave the caravan!”

My impulse tells me to run after him, but by the time I decide to do it, he's already run so far that I would never be able to catch up with him.

I sigh off all the weight of the apologetic conversation I was about to have and make my way to the caravan, kicking the ground with my feet.

*What am I going to do now? There's no way out. That means Felix has to be here. He has to be.*

I lean my back against the caravan, and by force of habit, I reach to my chest and clasp a necklace that isn't there.

A sharp pain surges through me, once again reminding me that I don't even have a reminder of Felix's existence anymore, and then it hits me.

*I don't have any proof of Felix.*

*I talk and talk about him, about searching for him, about finding him, but that's all I have.*

*The tree house is different, I don't have Little One, my necklace is gone, and the school that Chance attended was the same as mine and Felix's, yet he has never seen Felix in his life.*

*It's as if Felix never even existed.*

I bring my hand to my face in this terrified thought, when I hear a low pitched noise.

A slow, solid hum.

I look up, and just yards away is a dark crouching figure.

It's not until it bares its bright, white fangs that I realize what it is.

“Oh my God,” I terrifyingly whisper. “Oh God.”

A panther.

It's a real, live panther.

"Shit," I utter, shaking in complete terror.

It growls again with its dark eyes piercing into mine.

I stand perfectly still, unmoving and frozen.

*The zoo.*

*This is one of the animals that got let loose from the zoo.*

It releases a low pitched moan again as it raises its tail in the air.

*Oh my God, I am going to die. I’m going to fucking die. I don't want to die!*

I finger the latch on the caravan and slowly turn it, releasing it from the door frame only a crack.

The noise of the hinges alert the panther, and it lets out a creeping hiss as it shifts its position into one ready to pounce.

*Oh no, please no.*

*Chance.*

*Damn it, Chance, come back!*

I stay completely still, but my instincts are screaming for me to run.

Suddenly, my body moves before my mind tells it to, and I swing open the caravan doors, and the last thing I hear is a wicked snarl before my own scream.

I’m nailed to the ground, and I see red everywhere. Ripping, thrashing, screaming, claws, fangs, and then gunshots.

Gunshots, and the weight is off of me.

Limp and numb, I hear a muffled voice, then I see a shadow hanging over me, blocking out the sun.

“Ammalease! Amma, cam you hear me!? Amma!”

*Chance…?*

My head gets foggy, and my eyelids shut.

*My arm…*

*I can’t feel my arm…*

“No!” I hear a fading scream.

My consciousness slowly escapes me, and the last muffled thing I hear is,

“I can't lose you again!”

**Chapter Thirteen**

“Ana?”

I hear Felix’s voice off in the distance.

“Felix!” I shout. “I’m here! Where are you?”

The open air echoes, and I feel breath on my ear, and I hear him say, “Right behind you, my love.”

“Felix!” I scream as I jump into his arms. “Oh, it’s so good to see you again! You wouldn’t believe the nightmare I just had. It was horrible!”

Felix just looks into my eyes, warmly and lovingly, and asks, “Oh dear, my love had night terrors, did she?”

I just nod my head, pouting out my lower lip, and he responds, “Ah, when we get home, we will have to get you a dream catcher.”

My expression melts into a smile, and I sigh. “Oh, it’s just so good to see you. I’ve been seeing absolutely horrible things! Like, I just dreamt that I was in this field and-!”

Suddenly, Felix grasps my wrists, and before I even know what’s happening, I’m pinned to the ground.

“Wha-? Felix?” I look up into his deep brown eyes that are now cold and distant.

I try to pull from his grasp, but I can’t, being latched to the ground by his strong grip. “Felix, what’s going on?” I whimper fearfully.

He just looks at me, unmoving and silent, keeping me pinned to the floor.

“F-Felix?”

Slowly, his face begins to disappear, and his hands begin to morph. His tan skin slowly turns ghost white and narrows horizontally, and before I can call out to him again, I’m somewhere else.

Everything is white.

Everything is cold.

Strange machines behind a pale curtain, partially hiding them.

*Where am I?*

I try to get up, but I feel a jolt, and I scream in agony as I fly back against a bed.

With shock and pain surging through my body, I jolt my vision to where it is coming from in my arm, and through teary eyes, I see stitches.

*Why do I have stitches?*

*I remember being in the field waiting for Chance, and…*

With the pain still consuming me, my mind begins to blur, and I remember:

*The panther. I got attacked by a panther.*

*But how did I get here?*

As the ache in my arm subsides, I blink several times, clearing the haze out of my eyes.

I look to the side, where I see one of the strange machines next to me alongside a table covered in neatly placed implements. I try and shift to see more, when I notice a tugging at my wrists and ankles and another jolt of pain along with a crinkling sound.

I look to my wrists and see that I am strapped in, and looking down, I can see that my clothes are now gone and replaced with a long white gown, and it occurs to me.

*I’m in a hospital.*

Chills run down my spine, and I begin to shiver.

*I don’t remember being taken here. Where is Chance?*

“Help!” I yell. “Is anyone there?!”

“Yes, a lot of people are here!” I hear a voice scream sarcastically from down the hall.

“Where am I?” I shout back. “How do I get out of these things?”

I hear crying off down the opposite hallway, and the voice speaks up again and says in a very cold matter-of-fact way, “You don’t.”

Suddenly, the curtains fly open, and huge figures, men in haphazard suits, rush to my bed.

Mumbling words I can’t understand, they look to me and then to each other, all three conversing and pointing back at me.

My first reaction is to ask them what is going on, to ask them to help me, but I know it won’t do anything. I’m nothing but a lab rat to them.

One of them breaks from the group and walks over to the table of implements, his body blocking the view of the table as he bends down, moving them around.

When he turns around, he is holding a syringe.

“Oh no, no, no, no, you aren’t going to use that, are you?” I panic.

Ignoring me as if I had not said a word, he grabs a glass bottle from the shelf and sticks the needle inside, pulling the liquid into the syringe.

“What is that? Oh, please don’t do this, please,” I plead, as my face turns red and my eyes begin to water.

He dabs a cotton ball full of alcohol and rubs it in small circles in an area on my good arm. “No, stop!” I scream. “What is that stuff in the needle!? What are you putting in me!?”

But he doesn’t listen. I pull away and squirm, but it’s no good. The straps are too tight, and he does it.

The needle punctures my skin, and a cold numb feeling comes over me. My vision hazes over and I begin to go limp. I can’t see.

It’s so dark now.

I can’t-

~\*~

“Get them out of…”

“Move…”

“Shoot em’!”

*Wha-*

I can hear muffled words coming from somewhere.

Everything is still dark.

“Kill every damn…”

“There’s more people back…”

“Keep moving, don’t get caught!”

*What is that?*

*I can hardly hear...*

*My ears...*

*They’re not working right.*

Suddenly, I hear the boom of gunfire off somewhere far away.

*What’s going on…*

*I can’t move…*

“There’s one in here! Hurry, unlatch her!”

I feel hands on my body, then a sharp terrible pain coursing through me somewhere, and I come to.

People with bandanas of all colors around their mouths are surrounding me, unlatching me, freeing me.

“Are you alright?” The person releasing me mouths, though I can hardly hear. “Can you walk?”

Not knowing if I really can or not, I just nod from the urgency in their manner, making me panic.

They nod in return and dash out of the room, and when my eyes follow their exit, I no longer see white walls, but instead, bloodstained ones.

I move quickly as I can, but my motor skills are impaired, and I collapse. A surge of pain runs through me again, and I now recognize its origin is my arm.

I look at it and I am shocked to see that the stitches are now gone and that the scar is already almost healed over. It is only a moment that I can afford to look before my hearing begins to comeback in full, and I hear screams and gunshots abundantly.

*Oh God.*

*I have to run. I have to move.*

I try to get up, but I collapse again, as if I had just run a marathon, then relaxed, then tried to walk again.

I grab one of my legs with my good arm and force it to move in front of the other and stand. Little by little, I get myself to my feet as I see people with bandanas over their mouths running past my room. I stare at them and see everything in normal speed, yet I am the only one in slow motion.

I start to get hazy again, and I just want to collapse, but I can’t. I need to go.

On my feet, I unsteadily wobble out to the hall, and when I look to the left and the right, all I see are bodies. Some in hospital covers like me, others in haphazard suits.

It is in this moment that everything becomes a reality.

My eyes widen in horror, and Chance’s description of the bodies he walked over flash through my mind.

Beyond my control, my legs snap into gear and run. Out and to the left of my room, I run, screams coming from behind me followed by gun shots.

*I don’t know where I am going. I just have to run and keep running.*

Curtained room after curtained room fly past me, and I come to a stairwell, one going up and one going down. I stop for a moment to think, but I hear gunshots from up above, and I make the snap decision to go down.

Running as fast as my legs can take me, I descend the stairs into a dark and cold lower level. Once I reach the end of the hall, I see jail cells, tons of them, and it isn’t until I take a step off the ledge into something soft that I notice what else is down here.

More bodies.

And I am stepping on one.

I let out a yelp of a scream and jump back onto the step, when I hear someone yell, “Is someone here?”

I freeze, not wanting to be hurt, not wanting to be shot, and all of a sudden a boy jumps up to the bars in his cell. “Hey, over here!” he yells. “Help us!”

Stunned and in shock, I just stand frozen as tons of people begin to rush to the bars just like him, all dressed in dirty tee shirts with different colored bandanas around their necks, and he yells, “Come on! Before someone finds you and shoots you, too! Grab the keys!”

“Where?” I croak out of my mouth, feeling like it hasn’t spoken in years.

All down the hall, others run to the bars and start yelling and screaming, pleading and begging, “Release us! Please! Help us!”

I hear the first boy call back to me again, and I focus my attention onto him as he shouts, “Look on the dead guy in the haphazard suit! He shot our friends before they could get the keys, but one of em’ managed his helmet off!”

I look to the ground, seeing the only body different from the rest. The one in the big orange suit with his face covered in black splotches and popped blisters.

I stand, completely frozen in terror, and the boy screams, “What are you waiting for!? Come on!”

Without thinking, I follow his command and jump into the piles of bodies, my bare feet stepping and squishing on every arm, leg, and face in front of me.

I dodge down and dig through the flesh until I feel a metal ring, and I pull it up to see it’s an old set of keys. “Yes, those!” the boy hollers. “Unlock us!”

I jump to my feet like I am a remote controlled robot, and I shove the key into the lock and turn. The door opens, but before I can move on my own, the captives slam the door wide open against the wall, and I am forced back against the bars.

“Thank you!” the boy yells as he runs out, all the others too busy shouting and screaming words of freedom as they flee. “I’ll go up above and send someone down here for you!” And with that, he is gone.

The rest of the captives’ yelling becomes audible words again, and I hear their pleas for freedom. One by one, I open each cell and set them free, each blowing me back by the force of their pent up energy against the door and running out screaming words of victory.

Finally, I get to the last cell, but before I open it, I yell over their screams and pleas, “You’re the last ones. All of you are fr-”

But my words are cut short, and my eyes go wide.

My whole body freezes, and my eyes focus to the back of the cell.

And I see him.

Sitting in the far back corner, his face in his knees, looking down at the ground with his long black hair straight in his eyes.

“Felix!?” I scream, slamming against the bars.

I clench onto them tightly with tears instantly streaming down my face.

*Oh my God, it’s him, it’s him! Oh God!*

“Felix!” I screech through strained vocals.

I open my eyes through blurry tears just enough to see that he’s looking at me. “Hold on!” I shout. “I’ll get you out of there!”

I dart up to the lock and fumble the key into the hole, with the metal clanking in a chaotic fit. I hear the latch click, and I swing the door open.

“Felix, I’m here!” I run to him, with tears pouring down my face and my arms outstretched, but right as I get within an arm’s reach of him, I feel spit in my face.

I stop dead in my tracks, completely frozen, to see Felix wiping the remainder of saliva from his mouth, his eyes piercing into mine like a wild animal.

“You’re a fucking bitch,” he hisses. “And I don’t forgive you for what you did to Robin.”

Just like that, he runs past me, along with the rest of the captives, and I’m left alone, completely paralyzed.

Shock and denial surge through me, and my mind can’t process the fast interaction that completely contradicted what I thought would happen.

I just stand completely still and stare in horror at the empty space where Felix just was.

By the time I turn around, he’s already gone.

“No…”

I drop to the ground with tears now pouring down my face.

“What was that?” I utter, my voice shaking and unsteady, hardly able to speak.

Suddenly, a surge of emotion explodes inside me, and I burst. “What the fuck was that!?”

I bawl, hysteria taking control of me, and I just completely lose it.

*I’ve been looking for Felix for days just to find him, and this happens? No! That’s not fucking fair!*

I scream at the top of my lungs in frustration and sadness, my piecing voice screeching through the halls in one painful bout. I clench my hands into my hair, digging my nails into my recently healed scalp, breaking open the old wounds and creating new ones.

*No, I just found you! You can’t leave. You can’t fucking leave! I need you! How could you do this to me!? Why did you do this to me!? You. Love. Me!*

I break down into a crying fit, my words no longer making sense, and I become numb to the rest of the world.

I’m so far gone that I hardly notice the running footsteps approaching me, and I make no action.

“Hey, here she is!” a voice yells.

Someone runs up and grabs me as tears stream down my face, and I lay in a curled up ball.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?” the man shouts.

I just cry, not making words, only unintelligible noises. Screaming like an animal. Wailing as tears flow down my face.

He grabs me tightly and yells beyond me, “She’s not well! Someone help me out over here!”

I feel bodies surround me and hands encompass me as I begin to feel numb.

Lifted off the ground, I am carried up the stairs, up and out of the dark cellar. I silently cry, not even wanting to live anymore, not caring. My mind begins to go hazy again just as it was when I was first coming to, and I don’t fight it.

As they carry me away, everything fades, the yells and screams become muffled noises, and I just lay in their arms, limp.

*Fine, carry me away, take me wherever, I don’t care. I don’t care about anything without Felix.*

I feel the pounding of their feet against the ground as they carry me, yelling commands to one to another in a muffled tone that I am too hazed over to understand.

I open my eyes and look up to the one main person carrying me, mouthing the words, “What is your name?”

The question processes through my mind, and I utter, “Analiese,” as I close my eyes again and fall back into recession.

Their steps begin to slow, and everything becomes quieter as I feel darkness envelop me. They set me down on something soft, and I open my eyes to see that I am in a car, the backseat of a car.

The door slams, and I feel the motor start, and within seconds, we are moving.

*I just want Felix.*

*I want to know what happened to him.*

*Why did he do that?*

*Robin.*

*I don’t even know a Robin.*

*The world has gone mad.*

The car travels for some distance, and I lose track in the passage of time. Felix is all I care about now, and he hates me. I don’t even know why he hates me. I don’t know where he went or if I am ever even going to see him again. If I am ever going to be able to ask him why he did that.

Slowly, I feel the car come to a stop, and the door next to my laying head is opened, and I hear someone say, “You’re safe here. Can you walk?”

I open my eyes and look up at them.

It’s a girl with short, brown hair and a yellow bandana over her mouth.

“Well, can you?” she repeats.

*I don’t want to move. I want to lay here and die.*

“Yes, I can walk,” I mumble as I move my body by dragging it off the seat towards her.

When I get out, I look all around and see that we are in a warehouse, cold, dark and damp, filled with other vehicles.

“Someone sent us to get you. Follow me," she states as she promptly turns without even waiting for me to follow.

I stumble and stay close behind. My surroundings hardly faze me after all I’ve seen so far.

This is no longer strange. Everything just feels far away and numb, partially because of the drugs they put in me, and partially because of what just happened.

The girl approaches a large steel door and quietly opens it as if it weighs nothing, turning to me and saying, “Right this way.”

I enter through into a large empty room and look around to see Chance standing and talking to a girl with long, red hair, who is standing atop a stage.

“We brought the girl named ‘Analiese,’ Is this the correct one?” the bandana girl asks.

Chance turns, and his bright green eyes meet mine, and in a mad dash, he darts towards me from the far end of the room. “Analiese!” he screams, as he tackles and wraps his arms around me tight, almost knocking me to the ground.

“C-Chance,” I stammer, glad to see him but still miserable overall.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” he questions with worry and panic in his eyes.

Before I can respond, the girl with the red hair, far behind us, says, “Ah, so this is the lovely lady you were waiting for. I’m so glad to see she is free and alive!” She then turns to the girl with the bandana and asks, “How did the rest of the raid go?”

“Six pigs dead, eight soldiers dead, twelve wounded, and twenty-eight freed, to my knowledge, sir!” she responds with a salute.

“Twenty-eight freed? That is fantastic! More than I thought that would be released!” the red head says with glory in her speech.

“They were released by this girl, in fact, sir,” she continues as she points to me. “She released all of them, but she fell in battle after, which is how we found her, sir.”

“Is that so?” the red head bellows triumphantly. “Well, girl, get over here and let me take a look at our hero!”

My eyes widen a bit at this, and I step forward, making my way towards her. As I approach, I see her clearer. Long red hair, tanned skin, wearing a white tank top with a sleeveless army jacket over it and army pants tucked into her black combat boots.

Once I am close enough to see her hazel eyes, her expression changes from one of confidence to horror.

I continue to walk, her sudden change of expression not fazing me quick enough to react, and her face turns to fury as she yells, “You.”

Stopping to take a breath in, she yells, “You little bitch!”

Her furious words hit me immediately, and I stop dead in my tracks in shock.

“You fucking liar!” her voice chokes up in hatred. “You’re name isn’t Analiese!” She then turns to Chance and yells, “You traitor! Why did you lie about her name!? Do you know who this girl is!?”

Chance, staring in confusion and shock, stays silent, not knowing how to respond.

He opens his mouth to try and speak, but the girl cuts him off. “Soldier!” she yells to the bandana girl at the door, “Get the rest of the men and arrest these two!”

Without question, the girl darts out of the door, and the red head turns back to Chance, now taking a step back in thought.

“Come to think of it, you never told me your name either. State your full name and don’t lie, or I will kill both of you right here!”

Chance, who is still in shock, snaps out of it and stands straight, speaking loud and clear, and he yells, “My name is Chance Silver.”

Suddenly, the red head’s expression drops into suspicious shock, and she speaks in a much quieter tone, repeating, “Silver?” She pauses, as if what he had just said meant something very significant, and then continues, asking, “Son of Anvil Silver?”

I look to Chance, and his face turns wide-eyed and alert with his mouth agape. He quickly and quietly utters, “How do you know my father?”

Her face boils up, and in a rage, she screams, “Your father, Anvil Silver, is the one who caused all this! He is the reason everyone is dead!”

All of a sudden, the soldiers burst through the door, half surrounding Chance and half surrounding me. As if completely unfazed by the soldiers’ pointed handguns, he takes a step forward and yells, “That’s impossible. My father doesn’t have anything to do with the government. He is a regular day to day doctor!”

“Liar, liar, *liar*!” she explodes. “Where is he!? Answer me now, or I’ll kill your liar of a girlfriend!”

All the guns around me load with a click, and Chance loses his bravery and shouts, now in desperation, “I don’t know where he is! He’s gone! He’s been gone! Don’t shoot her, she’s all I have!”

“Liar!" she screams. “Guards, shoo-”

All of a sudden, sirens go off. Blaring, screeching sirens, louder than any I have ever heard.

Everyone turns away from the situation and becomes alert, and another bandana-wearing girl runs in and yells, “They found us, we’re under attack! We’ve got to move!”

The red head girl retorts, “No! Not yet! We found the mass murderer’s son! You all can’t leave yet!”

But it’s too late. Everyone is already running, panicking, fleeing in every which way.

I’m in a dazed shock, too stunned to even move, and I feel someone grab my hand. I turn to see Chance yell over the commotion, “We’ve got to go!”

“You can’t fucking leave!” the red head screams. “Leave and I’ll shoot!”

I turn to see her shakily holding a handgun in both hands, pointed towards us, but my legs are already moving, being pulled by Chance’s momentum, and I can’t stop. “Don’t you fucking leave!” she screams, but we are already lost in the crowd, being pushed out the door by everyone else.

Chance pulls me aside once we break from the crowd and slams his hands tightly on both my shoulders. “We need to run. Are you well enough to keep up with me?”

His words feel so distant, like echoes over the screaming crowd. Everything feels like a surreal dream.

I mentally check over myself, seeing if I really am well enough, and to be honest, I’m not.

I shake my head. He responds, “Well, keep up as long as you can. It’s only a little ways,” and then he grabs my hand, and he starts up again.

Running like zebras from a lion, everyone is in a stampede. My legs feel numb and unresponsive, running on their own, and I fear that at any time they will give out.

Suddenly, a loud noise like thunder booms over the shouting, and I look up to see one of the walls folding up like a garage door. Everyone loads into the vehicles of earlier, cramming together, scathing each other’s sides just to get out.

We weave our bodies through the idle cars until I can see Chance’s bike. “Get ready to hop on!” he yells, as he thrusts his body in the air and onto the bike.

Like the feeling of when you are in cold weather and your body is too freezing to respond quickly or clench anything tight, I try to get on the bike and hold on, but I am afraid I’m not strong enough.

Chance starts up the bike, and immediately, carefully yet swiftly, he weaves in between the much larger vehicles that are still idle and waiting to escape.

I start to lean and tilt off the bike, holding on with every ounce of strength I have left, but I know it’s not going to last me in the long run.

“Chance,” I weakly yell. “Chance I’m not going to make it.”

With his gaze staying straight, he yells back, “Don’t talk like that, Ana. We are almost out of here, you have to hold on.”

I hold on as tight as I can as the outdoor light breaches my eyes, and he picks up speed.

I can hear gunshots coming from somewhere not too far away and people yelling and screaming commands. The further we get, the more distant the shots and screams sound, but I’m losing it. I’m losing grip.

“Chance, I really can’t,” I choke.

Chance turns for a moment to check on me and immediately turns back, keeping his eyes on the road, reaching a hand down to my two to keep them from letting go. “I didn’t send a raid to save you just to lose you on the back of my bike!”

I try to smile at this, but I’m too weak. With his hand clenching mine together, my head falls on his shoulders, and I begin to black out.

I feel the bike come to a slow, and it isn’t long before we are stopped. Too tired to open my eyes, Chance dismounts, still holding me up from tipping over, and I feel his warm arms wrap around me. Step by step, being carried away, I hear him quietly whisper, “I’m sorry about what just happened. I had no idea I was putting you back into danger by bringing you there.”

I feel darkness envelope me, and I am set down on something bumpy and soft. I open my eyes just long enough to see the dangling crystals and feathers of the caravan.

I hear the back doors begin to shut, and with the last of my strength, I choke out, “Chance, wait.”

The doors stop mid motion of closing, and there is nothing but the silence of him listening for what I have to say, and I weakly ask, “Who was that girl?”

The doors shut, and I hear him walk to the other side, where he opens the front two windows of the caravan and states, “That was the rebel leader.” I feel Chance latching up the caravan to the bike. “She commands ninety percent of the survivors.”

With my consciousness is fading away, the mixture of the drugs and just pure exhaustion take what’s left of my energy, and I hear him say, “Her name is Robin.”

I shut my eyes as the motor starts back up again, and jolt by jolt, the caravan and everything in it begins to move. Stuttering and rattling, rocking me to sleep, I can no longer stay awake. I can no longer think.

The crisp, cold air overcomes me, and I fade away into a well needed rest.

**Chapter Fourteen**

*Everything feels warm.*

*Warm and safe.*

I cuddle deeper into the huge blanket on top of me and I sleepily open my eyes to see that we are back at the tree house with the lights out.

*Is it night time already?*

*I’ve been out that long?*

Fuzzy and blurred, I can see Chance through the small opening of the door, walking about, picking things up, and putting things down. Probably cleaning.

When he passes by the door I call out to him, and I am surprised to find my voice sounding much better than before.

He stops short and pops his head in the doorway. “Ana? You awake?”

I smile, just glad to be safe, and I drowsily say, “Hi Chance.”

“Oh thank God! I was so worried about you! You were in such poor shape, I was worried you would never wake up!” he acclaims as he walks towards my bed.

He bends over so he is almost eye level with me and asks, “Is there anything I can get you? Food? Water?”

His concerned question pass right through me, not even registering, and I respond, “How long have I been out?”

“Oh geez,” he sighs as he stands back up in the upright position, “it’s been about three days now.”

“Three days!?” I yell. “But I’ve never been out more than a day in my life!”

Chance shifts and folds his arms, looking at me with a concerned expression and he asks, “Ana, how long do you think you were in the hospital?”

“The hospital?” I murmur, looking down trying to think. “Well everything is hazy, but it felt like just a few days maybe.”

“You were in there for two weeks,” he factually responds.

*What.*

*Two. Weeks?*

I look back up at him, with my face in complete shock, and I try to sit up, immediately feeling a jolt of pain in my left arm and I collapse back down again with a yelp.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, easy there, you’re still not completely healed!” Chance yells as he rushes towards me, putting me back in the laying position.

I turn to the source of pain and just see a closed, healed over scar and I remember the panther. “The skin may be healed, but the muscles are not.” He says.

I look back up to him, trying to remember everything, but I quickly realize that there are more holes in my memory than I thought. “Chance, what happened?”

Chance looks at me, his expression changing to one of pity, asking, “What, to your arm?”

“No after that.” I respond quickly, now desperate to know what happened to me when I wasn’t conscious.

Chance sighs and sits at the edge of the bed, taking in a deep breath, he explains, “Well, you were bleeding out pretty heavily, and I know how to bandage wounds, but not ones as bad as yours.” He takes in another deep breath as if to tell me some kind of horrible news and says, “I didn’t want to, trust me, I truly didn’t, but I had to take you to the hospital, I had no other choice.” He looks at me with guilty and pleading eyes as if he expected me to beat him for doing that.

I stay silent and stare at him waiting for him to say more, and when he realizes I’m not mad, he continues, “They admitted you in, but I had to run, or they would have taken me too. So I left and went to the only people where I could get any kind of help. The rebels.” He leans back, reclining in a more comfortable position and says, “I’m not usually affiliated with them, but this was an emergency and I needed their help if I ever wanted to see you again, so I went in and spoke with their leader, Robin.”

“Robin!” I shout, breaking from his story, remembering that was who Felix was talking about. “Robin, who is she!?”

Taken off guard by my seemingly random question, he simply replies, “I just told you, she is the rebel leader.”

I look at him feeling awfully stupid, and I reword my question, “yeah, okay, but what else? Do you know anything else about her?” All my memories of what happened begin to flood back and I ask, “What did I do to her that made her hate me so much?”

“Uh,” Chance stammers, not expecting this barrage of questions, and he says, “I- I really don’t know. I was thrown off guard just as much as you were. I have no idea.”

I look back down in disappointment and resounding shock from all that happened, and I hear him say, “And I also don’t know anything else about her except that she is the rebel leader and that she is around our age, maybe a year older.”

I stare at the bed in a daze, recounting everything else that occurred, and then I try to sit up again, this time using my right arm to support myself instead of my left. “The wound healed pretty fast,” I mutter, as I stare at the scar on my other arm. “It still hurts, but I’m amazed how it’s already healed in two and a half weeks. I mean, that cat was huge!”

Chance just nods his head and says, “Yes, that’s why I felt the hospital was the only option. I know medical procedures and information from my father, but I didn’t have the tools necessary to fix you up.”

Suddenly, I remember what Robin said about Chance’s father, and I ask, “Oh yeah, about what Robin said about your fa-”

But I’m cut off by his stern words, “My dad didn’t cause this, he is a family practitioner, not a scientist. I don’t know where she got that from, but it’s not true.”

I shut my mouth, not wanting to step on his toes any more, and I’m thrown back by his aggressive response. He notices how taken aback I am and he sighs, “I’m sorry,” taking in a deep breath, “my dad is just all I have left, I don’t

I stay quiet and wait to make sure he is calm and won’t snap again, and I respond, “Well, either way we should probably find him.”

Chance nods his head and looks down in thought. Slowly, he pulls his head back up, looks at me, and says, “On a side note, I think I really do understand what happened to you now, or at least some of what happened to you.”

This sudden change in conversation throws me off and I ask, “What do you mean?”

He leans back, as if he is about to give a long explanation, and he sighs, “Your memory.”

Before I can open my mouth to say anything, he continues, “While you were being treated at the hospital, I did some research in what is left in the library and I learned a little about False Memory Disorder.”

I stare at him with almost a look of disgust for him attacking my memories again, but I stay quiet and let him continue. “It is caused by severe trauma which forces the mind to block out bad memories and replace them with good memories that never happened. It fabricates a fantasy world that is easier to handle than the reality one is experiencing at the time.”

I just stare at him, with the disgust now washed from my face and replaced with a dawning of this possible reality.

I don’t like the idea that the memories I have never actually happened, but that would explain a lot. I begin to tear up a bit from the idea that Felix and I were nothing more than a lie and I begin to shut the thought out. “No,” I whisper, “no, that’s impossible.”

Chance sighs, as if he expected this response, and with pity, he looks at me saying, “But it is possible, Ana. I read many cases where this has happened, and they all responded very similarly in the same way that you do.”

I just stare at him, tears welded in my eyes, waiting for him to say it’s not true, that it’s just a joke, but instead, he says, “Now the big question is, what could have been so shocking, so devastating to you, that you can handle a biological apocalypse where everyone we ever knew or loved is dead, but you couldn’t handle whatever happened in the time from you escaping the tree house to the time that I found you. What could have been so God awful that made you lose your memories and replace them with false ones?”

My eyes stare into his, and I break contact and stare at the floor.

*If I disagree with what he is saying, I will just sound even more like the crazy person he already thinks I am, but if I agree, then that means I agree that everything between Felix and I was just a lie.*

“But-” I stutter out, “but I found Felix.”

Chance’s eyes go wide at this and, as if he didn’t comprehend what I just said, he slowly replies, “You ‘found’ Felix?”

The tears in my eyes bubble over hearing him say his name and I start bawling, nodding my head, remembering the horrible words Felix said to me and I cry, “Yes, yes, I found him. I found him in the hospital prison cells and he hates me!” I start to bawl so hard that I can’t speak anymore and I hear Chance begin to panic, not expecting this turn of events.

“Wha- uh, well, um, I-” he scatters for words. “Are you sure? Are you sure it was him?” he asks, concerned and shocked.

“Y-ye-heh-heh-hes!” I bawl, choking out my words. “H-he says he hates me for what I did to R-Robin!”

“Robin!? The rebel leader Robin!?” He stares at me in complete disbelief.

“I d-don’t know!” I cry out to him, and then I just wail.

Through blurry eyes, I can see that Chance is looking at me, though what expression he is making, I can’t tell. Suddenly, I feel arms wrap around me and I’m pulled into him tight and my body is on his. He grabs the back of my head, pulling me close to his neck, and my tears stop, cradled in his arms so close that I can feel his warm breath on my cheek.

My heart beats fast, feeling the touch of his body, and his scent intoxicates me as the world begins to spin.

“I’m sorry,” he utters quietly.

I blink my stinging eyes, not knowing how to respond and I just confusedly choke out, “What?”

He hugs me tighter in a strong embrace and he whispers, “I’m sorry he hurt you.”

All of a sudden, a pain just shoots through my chest, hearing those words come out of his mouth and a weakness comes over me.

“I would never, ever, hurt you, Ana,” he whispers.

A tear rolls down my cheek and falls onto his neck, and I am frozen, but my heart is beating a million miles an hour.

Chance pulls me back and gazes at my red, puffy, tear stricken face, and I shoot my hands up to cover it. “Please don’t look at me!” I peep. “I don’t look good right now!”

With his gaze unwavered, Chance stares at me with concentrated eyes, as he raises his hand and removes one of mine from my face. “Tears or not, you will always be the most beautiful girl in the world.”

My heart pounds and I feel stunned, dropping my other hand into my lap and he whispers, “Don’t ever forget that.”

Stunned, completely frozen, I stare into his amazing sea green eyes, pulling me in and making me his, and just like in that frozen moment inside the zoo, all the pain of this world flushes out of me. In this very moment, it is just me and him and that is all that matters. To find him. To find Chance. To find this amazing, perfect person, strong and loving, caring and gentle, in this crazy mixed up world and he wants me. He wants to take care of me. He never wants to hurt me. He wants to love me.

And I am beginning to believe, that maybe, a part of me wants to love him too.

Suddenly, I feel his hand on my cheek, wiping away a tear I didn’t even know was running down my face, and he whispers, “Don’t cry my love, I am here, and you will never lose me. I will never let you fall. I will never fail you. I promise.”

I see the hand that wiped away my tear, raised up to eye level with me, as he extends out his little finger, and he smiles. “Pinky promise,” he whispers.

Taken aback, I crack a tiny smile and let out a small giggle. I raise my hand up to his, extending out my little finger as well, and I wrap it around his, uttering, “I promise I will never hurt you either.”

His eyes get big and he smiles wide, as his embrace tightens tenfold, and he squeezes me as hard as he can. Halfway laughing and half way chocking, I giggle, “Chance!” and immediately he pulls me back so I can see his bright, beaming face and he smiles wide. “So let’s cheer up, okay?”

I smile back and nod my head, giggling through broken vocals from crying, and I chirp, “Kay!”

“That’s my girl,” he smiles, with his dimples showing and his long blond hair falling in his face. My whole body goes warm and butterflies flutter through me, and I hear him ask, “So, you ready to go?”

“Go?” I repeat, still smiling, but confused by his sudden question.

“Mhm.” He nods his head. “To go shopping!”

“Shop-ing?” I sound out brokenly, as if I had never heard of the word before.

“Yes, shopping.” He smiles. “For the past three days, I’ve been up here watching out for you, so I haven’t had a chance to go get supplies. We need to go out and get more and I figured that, while we are out, how about we get you some new clothes? The people at the hospital took what you were wearing, and you certainly can’t go out in public in just that hospital gown. If we are going to go, now is the best time with the guards out of the city. Let’s have a night out, if you are up to it, of course.”

I just nod my head and stare at the ground, seeing out of the corner of my eye what’s left of the mangled and torn white gown that is still trying to hold on to my body.

*I do need some new clothes, I suppose.*

“And," Chance continues, with a little lift to his voice, “the best part is, is that everything is free!”

This makes me smile and I nod my head as he gets up from the bed and holds out his hand. “Come on princess,” he speaks with a smile.

I nod again and giggle, as he takes my hand and leads me out the door.

Coming out of the bedroom and into the living room, the dim light increases with the shimmering rays of moonlight seeping in through the windows.

Chance gently lets go of my hand saying, “It’s a full moon tonight, so there is plenty of light to see with, even in the areas where there are no street lamps.”

He then turns and walks ahead of me. “Let's go out the back way. I know how strong and brave you are now, but I can’t have you going down the pole or ladder with that arm,” he finishes with a charming wink.

Chance opens the door and everything is even brighter, though the air blows right through me, and I immediately grasp my arms from the cold.

“Oh! I completely forgot, I’m so sorry! Let me go get you your jacket!” Chance calls out, as he runs back inside.

I turn back and stare out into the darkened forest, watching the silvery light lay on top of the branches.

*Wow, it’s so beautiful.*

*It’s crazy that even in a devastated world like this, beauty can still exist.*

I watch as the wind whistles through and the branches rustle, creaking and cracking, as I clench on to my arms even tighter for warmth.

Suddenly, a soft weight is put on my shoulders and I turn to see Chance with a gentle smile, laying the jacket on me. I smile back at him, as I graciously take the jacket and cover myself, burrowing deeper into its haven of warmth.

I walk over to the platform and sit down, and for a moment, I wonder if I could ride it down like a swing.

I scoot over to the edge, no more than an inch, and the whole thing tilts so forward, that I scramble back as not to fall off. Chance hears the commotion and pops his head back over the ledge, shouting, “Hey, everything alright?”

“Yeah!” I yell, not wanting him to know the stupid idea I just had, and he shouts back, “Alright then!” as I feel the platform slowly descend.

Once I reach the bottom, I get off and walk towards the bike. I look down at the ground, and inadvertently, see my roughed up white gown as well, as it sways and flows in the silvery moonlight with every step I take.

I smile, despite everything that has happened so far, and for once, I am just simply happy to still be alive.

*How I was acting the other day was ridiculous, and I can never afford to do that again, especially in a situation like the one I was in. I am going to find Felix and find out what happened, because false memories or not, Felix is real and so is whatever happened between us that made him act the way he did.*

I make it to the caravan and I turn to see Chance off in the distance walking towards me. I take the initiative and unlock the back, crawling in, and diving into the array of gypsy styled pillows.

I feel the pang of pain in my arm but everything else feels so nice, so cool, and so pure, that I almost didn’t even notice. It just feels so damn good to be safe and out of danger.

Chance approaches the caravan and chuckles to himself, seeing me squirm and worm through the pillows, like a happy kitten playing with a ball of yarn, and he says, “My, you seem to be feeling better!”

I smile and nod my head, cuddling close with one of the biggest purple beaded satin pillows and he laughs, “Good, I love seeing you this way.”

He then shuts the back caravan doors and makes his way over to the bike, starting it up and pulling off and out, onto our way into the city.

The caravan jostles, making the dangling bells and bobbles dance in disarray within the thin beam of silvery moonlight that is being emitted through the small, sliding glass window.

I crawl up and finger the latch, pushing the glass with my fingertips, and immediately the roar of the motor increases in clarity and a gust of cool wind blows in.

I lay back down, snuggling deeper into the fabrics as I stare out the window at the passing treetops and the shining stars behind them.

*God, I wish Felix was here.*

I begin to think of all the moments we spent together. All the streets we walked, the theaters we frequented, every day at school, and all the times he would sneak to my house and bring me gifts just to see me smile.

“It had to be real,” I whisper to myself.

*It just had to, there is so much detail. I can’t just be crazy.*

But suddenly, it occurs to me.

A deep dooming feeling comes over me and a sudden epiphany strikes me cold.

“It was too perfect,” I whisper in realization.

*Felix went to the same school, had almost all the same classes, and was perfect in every way. Loving, loyal, dependable, truthful, accountable, and above all, he was going to move me into an all-expenses paid condominium, with everything covered, so I would never have to work a day in my life. To top it all off, he was going to marry me!*

*It’s just too perfect.*

*It is the situation anyone would want to be in.*

*Especially someone who is in a world that is falling apart with almost everyone dead.*

*To imagine a perfect world where everyone is alive and well again and to be taken care of for the rest of your life.*

*Was…*

*Was it too good to be true?*

*Was it really all just something I just…*

*Made up…?*

This dawning shoots through me like a bullet and my whole body gets chills.

*What if I really did just make it up?*

*What if this really is…*

*Home?*

Suddenly, the back doors swing open and I flail back, startled and scared, when I see Chance putting a finger over his lips trying to hush me.

“We need to be quiet,” he whispers. “We don’t know who else is out here.”

Not even noticing that the caravan had stopped, I wearily nod my head as Chance extends his arm to help me out. I take his hand and he pulls me to my feet, as I shakily jump out and look around.

All around us, everything is shrouded in darkness, just barely illuminated by the moonlight, and I ask, “Where are we?”

Chance shuts the doors quietly, turning to me in a low voice, responding, “Doesn’t it look familiar?”

I squint my eyes, doing my best to focus, and I see a wide building that is part of a shopping plaza, though half the name on top of the doorway is knocked off.

Reading the few letters that are left, I say out loud my best guess. “Sam’s Groceries?”

“Yep,” Chance replies, as he begins walking towards the dim and abandoned building. “Stocking up on food.”

I follow behind, passing all of the many parked cars filled with things that I don’t want to think about, as I catch up to Chance’s side and latch onto his arm in comfort.

“Why aren’t the streetlight’s on here?” I ask, rather concerned, looking all around to see not a single one working.

“This block isn’t covered, it seems,” Chance replies. “The word is, is that they keep only certain blocks running with power, mainly the ones having to deal with the hospital or outposts for the guards. All the others, they cut off.”

“Oh,” I respond, instantly accepting this answer in order to focus more on being aware of my surroundings.

With my paranoia mounting, I uneasily look ahead of me into the dark abyss leading into the grocery store. I tense up and squeeze his arm even tighter, when I feel him pat my head as he fondly whispers, “It’s okay, we’ll just be in and out. I do this all the time, don’t worry.”

We walk up to the shut, automatic doors, and Chance breaks from my grasp to press both his hands against the glass. With all his strength, he pries the doors open, then lets go and walks into the darkened store uttering, “Come on, love.”

I do as he says, and I walk forward, immediately smelling the worst rotting smell I had ever experienced.

I grasp and cover my nose in a feeble attempt to block out the stench as Chance walks past me, explaining, “Don’t worry, that smell isn’t rotting bodies, it’s just fish. It’s been left out for too long and I guess nobody grabbed it in time after the generator went out, so they all went bad.” He grabs a grocery basket, and finishes, “I’ve been here a few times, so trust me.”

I’m nervously looking off into the pitch black store, when I feel something freezing touch my arm. I quickly turn to see Chance holding a metal flashlight out towards me and I look up to him in confusion.

With a smile on his face, he whispers, “Be my light, baby.”

Too frightened by this place to feel anything except for more anxiety and fear, I shakily take the flashlight and turn it on, beaming the light into random aisles.

*Holy shit, everything just got ten times creepier.*

I drag the light through the store, looking at all the knocked over displays, scattered food, and rotting fruits and vegetables. I stop the light in one corner of the room and just stare where the flashlight is illuminating, just waiting for some monster or ghost to come out of nowhere and stare at me deer in headlights style.

Feeling rather uncomfortable, I put my head down, as I hear Chance utter, “Well let’s hurry up and get this over with so we can get on to the fun part and get you some new clothes.” He walks ahead of me and I follow behind, wearily looking to the left and right.

*This is not okay.*

*This is not okay at all.*

*What if someone is in here?*

*We are a moving, light beaming target. They’ll see us in an instant!*

Chance begins to just grab things off the shelves with me right behind him. I’m so close that I can almost feel his body heat.

*I don’t care how many times he has done this, this isn’t safe at all! I would rather starve than be in here like this.*

*Oh God, please hurry Chance.*

“Crackers, canned beans, bottled water…” Chance recites to himself casually, as he pulls different items off the shelf.

One by one, he fills the basket, as I hold the light steady on the shelves in front of him, while twisting my neck to look all around, defensively.

Chance turns and walks down the aisle, turning the corner and grabbing more things. “Juice, doughnuts, chips…” he mumbles to himself.

Going from aisle to aisle, he swiftly takes what we need as we pass and very quickly, the basket is almost completely full.

“Damn it, should’ve grabbed another basket,” he murmurs.

Chance moves, just about to take a step forward, but before his foot even touches the ground, we hear an echoed footstep.

Everything freezes and my stomach drops.

We stand perfectly still, not moving, not speaking, not breathing.

Slowly, Chance turns to me as close as he can get, as he pulls out his gun and whispers:

“We. Are going. To run.”

He turns back and readies his gun, and puts out his fist behind him, pulling up his fingers counting:

One…

Two…

Three!

And suddenly, he makes a mad dash out towards the door with me sprinting right behind him.

Screaming like hell inside my head, as the adrenaline rushes through my body, I run as fast as my legs can carry me. I open my eyes and look beyond Chance to see the open door, feeling a pang of relief as we both bolt through it, with groceries scattering everywhere.

We run about thirty yards from the store before stopping, panting, and catching our breath.

“Oh man,” Chance gasps in an exasperated breath as I turn to see him looking into the half empty basket, “we lost half of our groceries.”

“Better than losing our lives,” I peep. “I’m not going back in there!”

Chance looks at me, out of breath and a bit deflated and he responds, “Well, I won’t go back inside, but I’m going back to get the stuff I dropped. You stay here by the caravan.” And before I can say a word to protest, he is already darting away.

As my heart beats a million miles an hour, I just want to go.

*We don’t know who that was in there or if there are others.*

*For all we know, we could be surrounded, this isn’t safe!*

I eyeball Chance, concentrating every bit of my energy as not to lose sight of him, when suddenly, I hear a gurgling noise coming from behind me.

Slowly, and in complete terror, I turn my flashlight to where the noise came from to see a crouched moving lump of flesh, curled in a ball about ten yards away from me.

“Ch-Ch-Ch-” I stammer in absolute horror, as I watch it slowly unball, gurgling and flopping out its blackened, splotched covered arms onto the concrete.

“Chance!” I shriek at the top of my lungs, as the thing rears its hideous face to me and chokes out blood.

Chance slams past me with his gun drawn out and *boom, boom, boom!*

And just like that, the thing is no longer moving.

Chance and I stare in silence, in terror, in horror, making sure that thing doesn’t move again.

Nobody says a word and the creature stays still.

Quickly, Chance turns around and runs back to the basket he dropped just behind me, then grabs my wrist and pulls me to the caravan, saying in the calmest, yet quickest voice possible, “Let’s go.”

I gasp as he rips me forward, releasing me in front of the back doors of the caravan, quickly unlatching it and hoisting me inside, throwing the groceries in along with me.

Chance slams the doors shut and runs to the bike, starting it and rearing off.

*Oh, God, oh, God, oh God.*

*What that fuck was that!?*

*I thought nearly everyone was dead!*

*I though people were either dead or alive, not in between!*

*Oh, God!*

I start to cry, terrified sobs, completely and totally freaked out by what I had just seen.

*I hate this world! I want to go to the one I remember, I want to go home!*

The bike zooms off into the night, running over debris, switching terrains, then switching back again.

I lay in tears, trying to get my nerve back.

*I need to be strong, I have to calm down.*

*I don’t know what that was, but I’m safe now, I’m safe and alive and untouched.*

*I’m good.*

*I’m okay.*

Suddenly, the caravan bumps over a curb and rolls to a stop. I sit apprehensively waiting in the corner for Chance to open up the back, but seconds pass and nothing happens.

*Chance?*

I sit still, staring in wait, every moment making my anxiety rise.

All of a sudden, the doors fly open in a burst and I hear my own voice scream, when quickly, I hear Chance’s over power it, yelling in the quietest tone possible, “Hey, hey, shhhh, it’s okay, it’s okay! It’s me!”

I stare at him with watering eyes, hurt and terrified, no different than if he were a monster himself.

“Hey, hey…” he coos. “I’m so sorry that happened, that has never happened before on any of my rides out at night.”

“Wha-” I stammer, still completely shaken. “What was that thing!?”

Chance looks down in shame as if he doesn’t want to talk about it as he utters, “That was a person.”

I look at him with confused eyes, not even sure if I could believe that thing ever even could have been human.

Chance sighs and continues, "They were one of the badly infected, it seems. Honestly, whoever that was, they were probably harmless. Usually in the last stages of the disease, that is what you turn into. A slothful, deformed, sore-covered meat sack. They can’t run, or chase you, or hurt you, really, but I heard you scream and I panicked…” he trails off, “Just like the first time it grabbed your ankle…”

I continue my gaze as he looks off to the ground mumbling, “I’m sure they didn’t want to live anymore like that though, so I’d like to think I did them a favor.”

I wipe at my eyes, as Chance looks up and states, “That won’t happen again though, and if it does, don’t be scared. This isn’t a zombie movie where they will chase after you and kill you. If you ever see one again, just know that they are a human being, scared and suffering, and worst of all they know they are going to die.”

Much calmer than before, and feeling much more comforted with this description, I nod my head.

Chance just looks at me with pleading eyes as he says, “I’m so sorry you experienced that, but it’s all okay now. We are far away from the grocery store and out by the mall, currently. We don’t have to go clothes shopping if you don’t want to though, I would completely understand if you just wanted to go home."

I stare at Chance calmly, still shaken at my core, but doing my best to be brave.

Doing my best to be strong.

*My whole life, I have been weak and cowardly.*

*If what Chance is saying is true, then I have nothing to worry about regarding those who are infected. They are nothing but scared, dying souls just living out their last hours. They are nothing more than a scary sight.*

“What about other people?” I ask. “What about those who are not infected?”

Chance looks at me, a bit taken off guard, and he responds, “What about them?”

“Are they dangerous?” I quickly reply.

Chance thinks to himself for a moment before saying, “I’ve never had a bad run in with anyone besides the guards. In fact, most survivors have tried to help me. Now that doesn’t mean to let your guard down, that’s just my personal experience, but it’s almost like a code we all have. We are all trying to survive, and night is the only time we are able to scavenge for food and supplies without the guards finding us, so usually there is no fighting just for the fact that we all need to survive. There’s no time for it.”

I nod in response and say, “I see,” as I look down in contemplation.

*If that is the case, I see no reason not to go.*

*No guards, no disease zombies, and most likely no attackers.*

*I’m shaken, but unhurt. If I don’t go, then it’s only because I’m being weak, and in a world like this, there’s no time for weakness.*

Chance coughs, getting my attention, and I look up to him, looking at me with waiting eyes, as he slowly says, “So… what would you like to do then, love?”

“Let’s go,” I state, firmly.

Chance looks at me with uncertainty and replies, “You’re sure?”

I nod, looking at him with a serious and intense gaze, “Yes, I am. I can handle this.”

Chance just shrugs, still not seeming completely convinced, as he takes in a deep breath and sighs, “If you say so.”

I nod. “I know so. I just got scared back there, but I’ll be fine,” I reply as I crawl through the pillows and hop out the back, landing on the ground next to Chance. I turn around, and there it is, looking the same as always: The Braxton Mall.

I take in a deep breath, then exhale, as I begin to walk towards the entrance with Chance following after.

**Chapter Fifteen**

I stare ahead, noticing that, unlike the grocery store, the mall’s streetlamps still work, giving me a great feeling of relief that we don’t have to go on this adventure in the dark.

We walk in silence, being fully aware of our surroundings and constantly on guard, until we reach the swinging glass doors to the mall.

I mentally prepare myself, when Chance takes an abrupt turn and begins to walk to the left of the doors, down the sidewalk.

“Where are you going?” I ask, completely perplexed.

“The breaker room. This block is covered, but they turn the breakers for the mall lighting off to avoid unnecessary power usage, so I need to flip it on so we will have light.”

Chance moves through the shrubs and brush along the wall, until finally, we reach a very plain door hidden behind a tall bush. “Here we go,” he utters, as he cautiously opens it, pulling out the flashlight and clicking it on.

Chance peers in through the doorway and when everything seems clear, he walks in and waves me through as well.

I step forward, looking wherever Chance shines the light in the darkened room. The room is filled with wires and cobwebs, and switches all along the wall.

I’m guessing Chance has done this before, because he walks straight up to the breaker box and knows exactly which switches to flip.

Suddenly, the lights flicker on and, with a confident yet pleasant smile, Chance looks at me and whispers, “Let there be light.”

I giggle at this as he grabs my hand and pulls me forward. Opening the door opposite to the one that we came through, we pop out together into one of the mall hallways.

With everything bright and lit, Chance makes his way down the hall with me, passing the bathrooms and water fountains until we come out and into the main shopping center.

The whole mall, completely void of life and abandoned, has clothing strewn everywhere, tables overturned, and bullet holes riddled throughout the walls.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but for some reason this sight just hits me the wrong way.

*I used to come here every weekend…*

*This place was like my second home…*

I stare in shock, knowing that I should have expected it, but seeing it in person, seeing the reality of it is just so different.

Chance turns and looks at me with concern, and asks, “Hey what’s wrong? What’s the matter?”

He looks up to see what I’m staring at, but only turns back to me and questions again, “What is it?”

I shake my head and look to him, as if it just finally registered that he is trying to communicate with me, and I quietly mutter, “Oh nothing, I guess… I’m just not used to all the destruction quite yet, it seems. That’s all.”

I gaze back up to the mall that I would walk every weekend of every week for the past five years of my life, seeing it trashed and dead, forever void of the crowds that once roamed it.

*I’m not exactly sad, I’m just shocked I guess, and really, I shouldn’t be.*

*I should have expected this.*

*This is an apocalypse after all.*

Chance just looks at me wide-eyed, trying to understand what it feels like to still be shocked by these things, and he just sighs, “I see.”

There is a long silence, just standing and staring at all that has changed, and I feel a hand running down my long hair. I quickly turn to see Chance smiling again, and he coos, “Well hey, it is what it is, and let’s make the best of it. After all, you would never get free clothes at a working mall, now would you?”

I take in his words, making perfect sense, and I nod with a slightly broken smile.

Chance grabs my hand and pulls me forward into what’s left of the Braxton mall as his blond hair swishes from side to side. “Come on, let’s get my darling some clothes!” he announces.

We walk down the messy and rummaged isles, seeing rotten mall food and spilled drinks strewn all over the ground and on top of fallen clothes. We take awkward steps, avoiding the constant obstacles, and make our way down past the shops.

“See any you like?” Chance asks cheerfully.

I look up at him to see a broad smile, but his eyes say differently. Looking and scanning, darting from place to place. Alert. On guard.

My eyes trace down to see the gun at his side.

“Uh, no not yet, I think we will have to go upstairs to see the shops I like.” I think for a moment, wondering if I should ask about how safe it *really* is to be here.

“Ah, then, we have to go the other way,” he states, as he stops and turns, pointing back to where we were first headed. “The elevator is out so we will have to take the escalator.”

He starts walking back from where we came, with my hand still in his, leading me forward.

“Well,” he continues, “I guess they aren’t really escalators anymore without the electricity. They’re more like stairs.”

We backtrack to where we started and continue walking even further, until we reach the escalators, which like he said, were very still without electricity powering them.

Making our way down, I notice that most of the stores are the same, except their locations are different. As if someone had just come and switched them around, and threw a couple of new ones into the mix that I had never even heard of.

*That's strange. How come I remember some of these stores, but not others?*

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I see a store I am definitely rather fond of.

A rush of excitement comes over me and I gasp, “Pac Sun!” as I point to the store with a wide smile. I look back up to him with puppy dog eyes and I yelp, “Can we?”

Chance just stares at me and starts to laugh. “Yes, yes, of course! Have at it!” And with that, I grab his hand and dart full speed ahead into the store.

Coming through the entrance, I see clothing strewn everywhere in an unholy mess, with the tables inside knocked over, completely riddled with bullet holes.

“Damn,” I murmur under my breath.

Chance looks down at me and smiles, saying, “Well, at least everything’s free, right?”

I nod, with my smile returning, as I walk inside and begin to dig through the clothes that were left behind on the tables.

I'm pulling shirt by shirt from the pile when I hear Chance speak, “Come to think of it, I need new clothes too. I haven’t been shopping since this whole apocalypse started.” And with that, he moves to the men’s section and starts perusing as well.

By the time we meet back up in the center, my arms are completely full with boxy tee’s and button ups, while Chance only has one or two shirts and a pair of jeans.

“That’s all you’re getting?” I ask.

He looks down at his small amount of clothing, then looks back up to me and mutters, “Well it’s all I need.”

Looking at the clothes he has chosen, I’m rather displeased to see that he has only picked out a plain gray tee, and another plain white tee, just like the one he is already wearing.

Disgruntled, I turn and look behind him at the tons of scattered men’s clothes available until I see one that catches my eye.

“Ah!” I exclaim in discovery. “This one!”

I drop my pile of clothes on a nearby table and walk over, lifting up the red and black plaid button up blouse, and I ask, “What about this one?”

Like a lost puppy, Chance looks at the shirt I am holding up, then at his plain choosings, then back up at the one I chose, and he murmurs, “Well I guess. I haven’t really thought about being stylish since before the apocalypse happened.”

I abruptly toss the shirt in the air towards him and he scatters to catch it in time. Grabbing it just before it hits the floor, he looks up to me rather surprised as I smile and wink, laughing, “Well give it a shot!”

Chance cracks a blushing smile, and replies, “Alright, but only for you.”

I smile as I grab my pile of clothing and we both make our ways towards the back dressing rooms. I look up at Chance, who is staring straight ahead as he walks with a smile on his face, which causes me to smile in return.

Of all the crazies I could have ended up with in this insane world, I am so happy I ended up with him. He takes my pain away and makes me happier than anything. I feel so incredibly lucky to have met such a wonderful boy.

Chance stops outside the dressing stalls and looks at my huge pile of clothes, chuckling, “Well it looks like you’ll be taking a little longer than me. That’s fine though, I’ll wait outside until you are done.”

With that, he takes the stall on the right, as I smile and state, “Uh huh, well, being stylish and looking good does take time, you know!”

“But you do that naturally!” I hear his voice laugh from the other side of the stall, and I can’t help but crack a smile and blush as I enter in the stall directly across from his.

I step in and plop my clothes on the bench, turning to lock the stall, only to see the lock has been smashed off.

“Huh,” I mumble, as I am too lazy to pick my clothes back up and change stalls.

*Well I can’t expect everything to be perfect in a world that is falling apart, now can I?*

I take off my gown and pull on some black jeans, trying on the first shirt in the pile; a boxy tee covered in sunflower print.

Looking in the mirror, I twist and turn and look all about it as I mumble, “Eh, it looked better in the pile,” as I take it off and cast it aside.

I look back up at the mirror, now no longer distracted by the colorful patterned shirt I was wearing just a moment ago, and I notice something behind me blending in with the black stall door.

*Oh. My. God.*

*It’s a giant.*

*Motherfucking.*

*Spider.*

I scream a high-pitched terrified noise, and within seconds, Chance comes bursting in through my stall, slamming it against the wall. “What’s wrong!? Are you okay!?” he yells.

With wide and terrified eyes, I just stare at him, as he returns my stare with one of urgency and confusion.

Suddenly, the thought of the spider is wiped from my mind and replaced with blushing embarrassed nothingness as my stare drops to his shirtless body and unbuttoned pants.

“Uh, I…” I try to speak, but his body is far more impressive than I thought it would be, and it leaves me speechless. “Spider,” I murmur, as I point to the back of the door, now smeared with the smashed spider’s guts.

Chance just looks at it in confusion, then back at me in shock, and he asks, “Was that really what you were screaming about?”

I just nod, now unsure of what to say, as I stand bashfully staring into his eyes and I mumble, "It was big.”

Chance stares at me as the shock decompresses out of him, when slowly his gaze falls just inches below my face, in realization that I am also shirtless. “Uh- I,” he stutters, looking back up at me apologetically. “I’m sorry, I didn't realize you were undressed.” he pauses and turns away, nervously and uncomfortably, stammering, “I’m going to go now.”

Before he can completely exit the stall, the sunflower print shirt is thrown at his head, falling over part of his face, and he turns very confusedly to see me smirking and already holding another shirt in my hand.

“Huh?” he utters, as another shirt is thrown in his face.

I let out a giggle, as he wipes the newly thrown leopard print off of him and into his hands. “Oh, you think this is funny?” he chuckles as he throws it back at me, hitting me softly in the chest.

All of a sudden, shirts are being thrown everywhere, tossed back and forth like a pillow fight, gently landing every which where on our bodies in a cluttered mess. Both of us laugh and giggle, having the time of our lives. Shirt after shirt are being drawn from my endless pile and into his new one, which he uses as ammo against me. We catapult the clothing with our arms, until finally I begin to lose stamina.

Panting and losing breath, I fall into the mess of scattered clothes, but he keeps tossing them at me, laughing playfully. “Had enough, yet?”

I just snicker and sigh, “You win, you win!” as I raise my hands up in surrender.

A broad smile casts across Chance’s face, as if this was a personal achievement for him. With his perfectly white teeth blaring, he triumphantly shouts, “Yes!”

I let out a small laugh that is quickly cut off by me having to move out of the way quickly for Chance, who plops down right next to me in the pile.

Still laughing, Chance lets out a smiling sigh as he stares straight ahead, then shuts his eyes and slumps down into the pile.

I just look at him and his brilliant body, with his tight white skin and toned muscles.

*Damn, he must work out, there's no other way...*

Suddenly, I feel a hand on mine, and I turn my blushing face to Chance's and he is smiling at me cutely. “Hey, relax. Lie down with me,” he utters.

Nervously, but trusting of Chance, I scoot down to his level and lay next to his warm body as our skin touches just ever so slightly.

Chance begins to laugh softly again, as he turns his head to match eye contact with me. “You really put up a good fight there, tiger.”

His vivid green eyes are pulling me in, and I laugh nervously, “Oh yeah, that's me, I’m a fighter, yup!”

Abruptly, Chance turns his body completely to the side, facing me, and he rests his head on his hand, uttering, “You know, I’ll never get over how cute you are.”

Not expecting those words, my face turns completely red and I look away, stammering, “Oh, um, thank you. You're, uh, cute too, I guess.”

Chance chuckles at this and I feel the hair in front of my eyes removed and put behind my ear, as he charmingly replies, “Well thank you, it means a lot.”

I keep my vision astray, fighting the urge to look at him, because if I do, I’ll want him.

And I don't want to want him.

All of a sudden, he jumps up and his face is just inches away from mine, and the butterflies in my stomach spike up.

“Hey,” he whispers softly, as my eyes trace down to where his words came from.

I move my eyes back, nervous and unsure of how to react, and I just respond with uttering, “Hey.”

Quickly, he lifts himself up just an inch or two, kisses my forehead and tells me, “Never forget how beautiful you are.” And with that, he jumps up to his feet and smiles at me.

“Come on tiger, we have more shopping to do.”

Being a confused, beet-red, blushing mess, I limply raise my arm out towards him and he takes it and pulls me up. Looking at me, seeing me in such a daze, he laughs and waves his hand in front of my eyes. “Hello? You still in there?”

I snap out of my daze, and grab the first shirt I can reach, softly tossing it in his face and replying, “Yes, I am, thank you!” as I immediately retrieve the shirt I threw to cover my blushing face.

Chance just chuckles more and smushes the shirt into my face, teasing me, drawing out the word, “Sure.”

He walks out of my stall and back into his, picking up his new clothes and dressing himself.

I stand there, staring at him changing, and it isn’t long before I feel like a creep, so I turn away and change, myself.

I grab the first long sleeved shirt out of the pile that I can find, and I throw it over me, with my fingers still nervous and shaking from what just happened. I pull the shirt over my head and when I open my eyes, Chance is already there, standing in front of me. Leaning against my stall door, wearing the shirt that I picked out for him, he shines absolutely brilliantly.

I let out a small peep of surprise and jump back a bit, not expecting that he would look that damned good in a new change of clothes.

"You like it?” he laughs.

Slowly, I nod my head, staring at his torso, before looking up and matching my eyes to his.

His crystal green eyes stare into mine, and he says with a charming smile, “Let's go cutie.”

With that, he grabs my hand and leads me out of the store.

Walking side by side, with my hand in his, my body is filled with warmth and butterflies as we walk down the mall aisles.

*I shouldn't feel this way though, I’m with Felix. I should-*

*“You're a fucking bitch.”*

Felix's words resound in my head.

Suddenly, my heart drops at remembering this. Remembering that I’m not his. I’m far from it.

He hates me.

My whole body becomes heavy like lead and the feeling of warmth from Chance is quickly replaced with nausea.

I stare at the ground in realization and, as if in a trance, I just watch my own feet walk as I try to clear my mind from this reality.

“Hey,” I hear Chance speak as he squeezes my hand, “if you keep your eyes on the ground you're going to miss all the shops!”

Immediately hearing his voice, all my pain is swept away and all the terrible thoughts are washed from my mind. "Oh, yeah, sorry,” I mumble, as I lift my head back up and look around me.

Passing the shops left and right, all are a mess, with not a single one spared. Every shop I ever knew, as well as some that seem rather unfamiliar, are all royally trashed.

Avoiding the fallen rummage, we pass a shop that I had never seen before. One that sticks out to me more so than the rest.

With its bright red plastic lettering, in a jagged and edgy font, it reads, “RustPunk.”

Chance keeps walking while I stop, tugging him back.

Feeling the jolt of my paused momentum, he stops too, and looks up to where I am staring. “Hm? You found somewhere you want to go?” he asks.

Looking in through the window, everything is grungy and vintage styled, almost looking like a Hot Topic, but more classy.

“What is this store?” I ask, looking back to him.

“Oh, RustPunk? It’s where all the goths, emos, and people into steampunk go. They have some pretty cool stuff. We can go in if you want.”

I nod my head as I let go of his hand and wander inside, amazed at how much decoration they put into the store. Fake rust on the walls, scratches all over the metal floor, and bullet holes through the counter.

Who knows though, with all that has happened in this world, it could all be real.

I run my hands through the clothing racks, looking at all the shirts and jackets. Old colonial war styled attire, 50’s styled aviator over coats, and green army shirts with shiny gold stars plastered across them. Everything looks antiqued.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn to see Chance, as he says, “It’s some pretty neat stuff, huh?”

I look back down at all the clothing, none of it really being my style, and I sigh, “Eh, I guess.”

I gaze back up to see Chance staring up at something behind me, and he points to it, saying, “Hey, why don’t you try that thing on? Looks pretty cool, if you ask me.”

I turn to see what he is pointing at to see a steampunk corset with metal wings latched to the back of it, high up near the ceiling, on display.

“Wow, that’s pretty awesome, actually,” I mutter, still staring the detailed piece. “It’s just so distant, though.”

“No matter,” Chance states, as he passes me by and walks over to directly below where the corset is. Turning to me with a smile, he asks, “Could you give me a hand, beautiful?”

I blush and my whole tingles. Quickly, I turn to the ground to avoid his charming look, and I utter, “Yeah, sure.”

I walk over to where he is and he gets just inches from my face, whispering, “Do you trust me?”

“Wha-” I stutter, thrown off guard, “Well, yeah, I do. I trust yo-”

But before I can finish, I’m hoisted in the air by Chance and he sets me on his shoulders, commanding, “Grab onto my hair for balance and stand on my shoulders!”

“C-Chance!” I shout, holding on for dear life.

Chance just laughs, “Come on scardey cat, you can do it!” as he looks up at me with those gorgeous sea green eyes, wearing a smile so beautiful that it melts my heart.

My face flushes red and his smile causes me to smile in return, and without thinking much else, I grab his hair and try to keep balance as I step up.

“That’s my girl!” he cheers, as I wobble to my feet. Carefully, I let one of my hands let go of his hair, and I reach up. Stretching out, I’m so close to the corset that I almost have it, when I begin to slip.

“Whoa! Watch out there, love!” he laughs.

I cling back onto his hair, stabilizing myself again as I look back up to the corset.

*Okay, one more time!*

I slowly let go of his hair and balance my way up. Stretching as far as I possibly can, my fingertips just barely manage to tip the corset off its hook, and it comes tumbling down to the ground in a metallic crash.

“Yeah! You got it, sweetie!”

I let out an excited breath and I smile, but my muscles begin to relax too quickly and I start to lose my balance.

“W-whoa!” I scream, as I tip over and plummet off his shoulders, shutting my eyes, waiting for the cold hard ground, when I am met by Chance’s warm arms, instead.

I open my eyes and am met by his, as he softly whispers, “Looks like an angel just fell from the sky.”

As my eyes widen and mouth drops, completely speechless, I stare into him as I feel fluttering butterflies pass though me.

In my absence of speech, he looks over to the ground and says, “My, it looks like you’ve lost your wings though.”

I turn to see the corset lying on the floor with its metal wings facing up towards us.

“Why don’t I set you down and you can go put your wings back on?” He smiles as he releases me onto the ground.

Shyly and quietly, I smile as I walk over to the corset and pick it up, turning back around to see Chance already pointing to the dressing rooms.

I let out a soft giggle as I make my way past him and off behind the dressing room curtains.

I take off my shirt and latch on the corset instead, only to find that I can’t reach the top latch. I fumble with my fingers, just barely touching it, then losing it, then grasping it, then losing it again.

Finally, I get sick of it, and I yell, “Chance, can you come in here for a moment?”

Without even a second’s passing, the curtain opens just a small amount and Chance walks in, replying, “Yes, love?”

“Uh, the latch.” I point to the back of the corset awkwardly, forgetting how to speak. “I can’t reach the latch.”

Chance just smiles and steps close to me, tenderly taking the unclasped latch, and he connects it with ease. He takes a step back, and in a breath of awe, he gasps, “Wow, my darling, you look amazing!”

I let out a stunned breath of happiness and I giggle, shyly looking down at the ground when he says, “No really, my dear,” as he slowly walks up to me, pressing me up against the wall. “I really do mean it.”

My breathing stops and my heart skips a beat. His body presses against mine, face to face, so incredibly close, and his sea green eyes pierce into my own. “My darling,” he whispers. “My darling you are the most beautiful girl to have ever lived.”

I let out a soft choked moan and my mind goes hazy, as his breath encompasses my thoughts and I don’t know what to think.

All I know is that I want to kiss him.

I want his mouth on mine.

I want him.

I need him.

Suddenly, I hear a noise outside the dressing room in the main store and Chance and I freeze.

Wide-eyed and alert, Chance lifts his head up listening for another sound, when he lifts his body off of mine and whispers, “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

He removes his gun from his holster and walks outside and into the store, and my heart starts pounding, not sure if it’s from just a moment ago with Chance or now because there might be an intruder.

I sit down and slowly breathe in and out, trying to calm myself. Within a minute or two, Chance still hasn’t returned and I start to worry.

I don’t want to call out to him because there might be an enemy out there, but he told me to stay here, so I can’t go look for him.

I wait another minute and still nothing happens, and I begin to get anxious.

*Something’s happened to him.*

*I need to go find him.*

Quietly, I stand up, and move the dressing room curtain, carefully sliding it to the side as I step out. I look out to the right to see nothing but a dead end, when suddenly, I hear a click right by my left ear.

I turn around to see a pointed gun in my face, and behind it is a rebel, and behind him are ten more.

Chance is surrounded with his hands raised, looking at me and guiltily mouthing the words, “I’m sorry.”

One of the rebels, seemingly just a few years older than us, with thick black hair and tanned skin, wearing a patched civil war jacket, steps forward.

“Chance Silver?” he asks in a loud and firm tone.

Chance nods and stares deep into rebel’s eyes hatefully and replies in a low and uncomfortable voice, “Yes?”

The rebel responds, “Please hand over all weapons you have.” Then he looks towards me and threatens, “Or your girlfriend will be hurt.”

Chance looks down, those words clearly paining him, as he responsively removes the only gun that he has from his waist and hands it to one of the female rebels surrounding him.

“Does she have any weapons?” he asks the rebel standing next to me.

The rebel’s hand goes up and down me, patting down my clothes while still pointing his gun at my head, stating, “No weapons, sir!”

The black haired rebel nods and commands, “Bring her over here.”

The rebel with the gun to my head nudges me and I walk forward to where the rest of them are. The leading rebel then raises his hand, then slowly lowers it, and all the other rebel’s guns lower with it.

He looks back to Chance and states, “My name is Brigadier General Cobalt Lion, I am the commander of this unit. We didn’t mean to alarm you, but we didn’t want any gunfire.”

Chance takes this short pause as an opportunity to speak, and he asks, “You were sent by Robin, weren’t you?”

The Brigadier General sighs and shakes his head, replying, “Actually, Sir Chance, we were not.”

Suddenly, the Brigadier General kneels to the ground and bows his head to Chance, and all of his team follows with him. Even the rebel who, only a moment ago, was at the other end of the gun pointed at me.

I look to Chance, giving him a face of shock and I mouth the word, “What?” but he just looks back at me wide-eyed and shrugs.

The Brigadier General tilts his head up from the ground and looks to Chance, stating, “Your father, Anvil Silver, was one of the men documented to have created the virus that contaminated our city. General Robin sees to it that you are to be captured and used as a ransom to bait out your father; and your girlfriend, Lullaby Blue, to be killed.”

“Killed!?” I gasp. “W-why does she want me killed!?”

The Brigadier General raises his head and looks to me, calmly explaining, “For the treasonous act of abandonment in St. James Hospital that you committed.” He then looks back at Chance, as if I had never spoken, and he opens his mouth to speak again, but I yell, “What treasonous act? What was it that happened? I need to know!”

The Brigadier General just looks at Chance, then turns back to me in confusion and says, “That is all the records have on you. The only one who has the full story in detail is Robin herself. You should be able to remember your own crime though. You are not innocent.” He then turns back to Chance and concludes, “But that does not matter. We are not here to harm anyone.”

“Then what are you here for?” Chance questions calmly and coldly.

The Brigadier General sighs and rises up, with his team still kneeling on the ground, and he states, “We need your help. We turn to you, Sir Chance.”

I stare in shock with chills running through my spine, not knowing what I did to Robin that was so treasonous, and not knowing what they could possibly want from Chance.

“What?” Chance gasps in amazement. “Help, how?”

The Brigadier General nods his head and explains, “Robin has the policy that is to kill all members of the government that comes into our city. She says they are the enemy and she has nearly everyone convinced of it.” He sighs, “But we believe that her way is a bit too violent and mindless.”

The Brigadier General takes a step forward and continues, “If your father was one of the men that started all this, then we have reason to believe that you are under protection.” He then bows to his knees once again and pleads, “I humbly ask that you take my team and I under your wing and extend your protection to us, and in return, we will fight under your name and protect you.”

Chance just stares in confused shock, clearly not taking all this in very well, and he says, “But my father is missing. I honestly don’t know where he is.”

The Brigadier General just nods and chuckles as if this is no new information. “We know, Sir Chance, we know. But it is possible to find your father, as we have reason to believe that he is still alive.”

Chance's jaw drops slightly at this, with his mouth just barely agape, as he utters, “How do you know that?”

“During the rebel infiltration of the hospitals and prisons, eye witnesses have claimed to see him working alongside men in haphazard suits, completely unsuited,” the Brigadier General states. “Which means he is alive and protected by the government, meaning most likely, beyond your knowledge, you are too.”

Chance just stares with his mouth dropped open, and comes to his thoughts only enough to say, “But-but how? He was just a family practitioner! He had no government affiliation and never dabbled in biological science.”

The Brigadier General looks into Chance’s confused, bright green eyes with his cold, gray ones and softly states, “Then it seems that your father has been keeping secrets from you.”

Chance just gazes at the ground, speechless and completely in shock, as the Brigadier General takes this moment to ask, “Sir Chance, do you accept our offer?”

Chance stays silent, with his intense stare to the floor unwavered, until a moment passes, and he raises his head back up and looks to Brigadier General Cobalt. In a very stern voice, he replies, “I accept your offer, and if reunited with my father I will ask for all of you to have immunity from being experimented on and given safe haven from war.”

The Brigadier General stares at him, as if making sure his word is valid, and then nods. “Then it is agreed.” He reaches out to shake Chance’s hand, and Chance returns the motion.

“Let’s find my father,” Chance speaks, powerfully shaking the Brigadier General’s hand, “and hopefully by us doing this, let us end this ridiculous war.”

General Cobalt smiles, then turns to me, though still speaking to Chance, and says, “Please get Lady Blue into some more appropriate attire, and let us go, as we need to begin the search for your father immediately.”

Chance then also turns to me and comments, “Pick something out real quick.” His tone only slightly softer than the one he used to speak with the Brigadier General. “Get a comfortable shirt and a heavy jacket for the cold, and let’s go.”

Still in shock from everything that just took place, I turn and scramble back to the clothing racks, almost tripping on the kneeling soldier at my feet, who I forgot about.

I run my hands back through the racks, seeing nothing in particular that I actually would buy on my own, but I don’t have time to complain.

I grab a plain black fitted shirt from a clearance bin and a green female fitted army jacket, made to look old and worn, as I hurry into the dressing room. I walk in, shut the door and change, and when I look in the mirror, I am amazed to see how well it fits me.

“Nice,” I murmur under my breath.

I exit the stall, but stepping from the hard wood floors onto the cold frozen concrete again, I realize that I have no shoes.

“You ready to go?” Chance shouts, standing beside Brigadier General Cobalt, who is standing in front of everyone else waiting for me.

Embarrassed, I yell back, “One second!” and I run to the shoe section, grabbing the first pair of boots that I can find in my size. I tear open a pack of socks and put them on, and slide into the black leather combat boots I chose.

I stand back up and walk towards Chance and the others, as Chance nods his head seriously, while on the other hand, the Brigadier General just gives an approving smile, saying, “That’s the best outfit you could have chosen my lady. Perfectly in spirit.”

He then turns and raises his hand up and all guns rise with it. “Let us depart and be on guard!”

All officers respond, “Yes sir!” as they form in a crowd around us and begin to move.

We walk in silence, quickly leaving the inside of the mall and walking out into the parking lot, covered in light by the dawning sun. There, before us, lie tons of vehicles that were not previously there, mostly Jeeps, trucks, and vans. As we walk towards them, I turn to Chance, whispering, “Hey, where are we going?”

Chance looks forward, taking his new role of leader very seriously, and without looking away from the path, he responds, “While you were in the dressing room, the Brigadier General said that we needed to form out a plan, but the mall was not safe or private enough, so we are just going back to the tree house.”

I just stare at him, feeling that his new title of leader is blinding his judgment a bit, and I ask, “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Our tree house is the only safe zone that we have that no one knows about. If we show them and they turn on us, we will never be safe again!”

Chance just shakes his head and says, “Dear, you are paranoid. They need me if they want to survive this all out, they won’t turn on us. I know what I’m doing.”

I just look down, knowing that he’s not going to listen, and arguing won’t do a thing.

*I know I am paranoid, but paranoia really is a defense mechanism. It is something good to have in times like these where nothing is as it seems.*

Suddenly, I remember how everything happened with Felix in the jail cell, and I quickly turn to one of the rebels, asking, “Hey, is there a rebel with straight black hair and tan skin that goes by the name of Felix? Do you know who that is?”

The rebel girl just blinks at me, surprised, and responds, “What kind of name is Felix? It sounds like gibberish.”

I stare blankly at her and disappointedly respond, “So, I’m guessing you don’t know him then.”

“I know a few people that fit that physical description, but no one by that name, no.” She calls out, “General Cobalt?”

“Hm?” he responds, not even turning his head to look at the girl.

“The Lady wants to know about a supposed ‘Felix’, who is believed to be a rebel. Do you have any information?”

“Felix?” the Brigadier General repeats. “There is no such person with that name is all our sectors, I apologize to say.”

I mumble “Oh,” and look to the ground thinking if I have anything else of use to mention.

“He seemed to know Robin though,” I weakly add, feeling that isn’t much of a help.

“Everyone knows Robin,” says the girl who was speaking to me before. “There isn’t a single person left in this entire city, rebel or not, who hasn’t heard of Robin.”

I look back down, feeling embarrassed, and I mumble, “Okay, thanks,” as I keep walking forward in silence towards the cars.

The Brigadier General breaks from the group and walks ahead, now among all the parked vehicles, he commands, “Alright! We split up here and make our way east. Everyone follow behind my lead!”

The crowd all responds in one collaborated voice, shouting in unison, “Yes, sir!” as everyone breaks off and starts filing into cars.

The Brigadier General then approaches us and states, “You two, please ride your own vehicle back, and we will follow.”

Chance nods in agreement as the Brigadier General turns back around and walks towards a giant, black Hummer in the center of the rest of the swarmed vehicles.

I'm staring ahead in a trance, when I feel Chance grab my wrist, whispering, "Come on, let's go," as he pulls me forward towards the caravan.

*I can't help but feel something is wrong.*

*Nobody knew who Felix was, even though he was clearly a rebel.*

*He was dressed just as everyone else was in that jail cell, and nothing set him apart from anyone else.*

*On top of that, why would an entire unit forsake their commander just for a chance of protection, when they already have protection from one another and Robin?*

*Something just doesn't feel right.*

I think to myself as Chance unlatches the back of the caravan and I load in, flopping into the mess of colorful sheets and pillows.

I quickly pull my head back up and call out, "Hey Cha-!"

But the door slams in my face before I can finish, and I hear him get onto the motorcycle as the engine starts up.

A horrible dooming feeling comes over me, and the pit of my stomach drops.

The caravan starts with a jolt, being pulled towards the tree house, and I get on my knees and peer through the small sliding window to watch the journey.

Driving out onto the back roads, I notice that all the cars that would have been blocking the streets have been rolled off and into ditches on either side.

*That must be how Chance originally got here. He must not have taken the highway.*

I turn back and get comfortable, trying to calm my nerves, as I shift deeper into the pillows. The sounds of the bells and bobbles jingling on the ceiling relax and sooth me, as I shut my eyes and let my mind drift.

*I wonder if we will find Chance’s dad.*

*I wonder if we will find my dad.*

*I wonder if I will ever see Felix again.*

*I have to see Felix again.*

*I have to.*

**Chapter sixteen**

“We’re here.”

The Brigadier General’s deep voice sounds, as I flutter my eyes wide to see the back doors open, with his silhouette blocking out a portion of the light.

*I dozed off?*

I sleepily open my eyes that are being pierced by the morning light, and I shuffle from the satin pillows to get to the entrance.

"I'm sorry, my lady, I did not wish to wake you, but you needed to know that we have arrived," the Brigadier General says, as I wearily crawl out of the back.

"Mhm," I mumble.

*I don't trust this guy.*

I plant my feet on the earth and look around, seeing all the rest of the team exiting from their vehicles.

“This way,” I hear Chance coldly yell, as he walks towards the tree house, already far ahead of me.

I straggle behind and run to him, not wanting to be separated at any time around these people that I don’t quite trust.

I catch up to him and tug on his shirt, yelping, “Hey, wait up!” but he only looks down at me for a moment, then back up as he keeps walking.

Shocked by his response, I feel a coldness run through me.

*He was just so warm an hour ago, and now he is like this?*

I shake it off and run back to him, tugging on his shirt again as he starts up the wooden ladder, and I yell, “Hey!”

This time he turns around, sternly and coldly, and he snaps, “Yes, what do you want?”

Taken aback by how cold and distant he is, I can only look up at him in fear, as I stutter, “I, uh, well, I just, um-”

“I’m sorry Ana," Chance cuts me off, "but I have to be strong right now. If I am going to be a leader, I have to act like one. I hope you can understand.”

With that, Chance turns back around and makes his way up the tree house ladder, without me.

I fall back, away from the ladder, and stare up at him, terrified that Chance is going to stay this way. Cold, disconnected and distant.

Abruptly, I feel a slight shove against my shoulder, and turn to see the rebels moving me out of their way, as they make their way up to my home.

I just stand there and watch them ascend, with Brigadier General Cobalt going up last. He climbs nearly to the top, then turns to me, shouting, “My lady, are you coming?”

I just look at him, having not expected him to speak to me, and I gaze to the ground and mumble, “No, I will be staying down here.”

He just stares at me and responds, “As you wish,” then he continues his way up.

I am now alone, on the forest floor, in this bizarre world. Now, more than ever, I feel completely abandoned.

Emotions of sadness and desperation well up inside of me, leaving me feeling emptier than ever before. In a bout of frustrated agony, I kick a fallen pinecone and I watch as it skips across the dirt into a pile of leaves.

*I hate this.*

*I get why he is acting this way, but I hate it.*

I find the pinecone again and kick it even further, this time, towards the cars.

*This world is so messed up. I’m separated from my boyfriend, then I find someone who thinks they’re my boyfriend. Then I find my real boyfriend, who clearly doesn’t believe he is my boyfriend, and then I find out he may never have been my boyfriend and I’m just fucking insane. Great! Fucking fantastic!*

I kick the pinecone a third time, harder than before, and it bounces against the ground and right next to a Jeep.

*And now, the one who thought he was my boyfriend does a one-eighty from hot to cold and is off playing hide and go seek with a pack of dangerous, gun wielding rebels in the middle of the apocalypse!*

I kick the pine cone one last time as hard as I can and immediately it ricochets off the Jeep right into my face.

I swat my hand in front of me to protect myself, and suddenly, I hear a huge glass-shattering crash.

My eyes shoot open and what I see I can’t comprehend, completely horrifying me.

The perfectly fine Jeep that was directly in front of me, is now shoved back five feet, completely smashed in from the side.

More specifically, my side. The side that I am standing on.

Wide-eyed and horrified, with my mouth agape, I stare at the damage.

*I-*

*I just kicked a pinecone at it.*

*How the-*

“Hey! My lady, is all alright?” I hear The Brigadier General call from high above.

I don’t know how to respond. I don’t want to tell him that something just smashed in his car, and I panic, just blurting out, “Yes!”

“What was that noise?” he shouts back.

Stupidly, I have no idea what to say, so I just yell in return, “What noise?”

There is a paused silence where he doesn’t respond, making me fear he will look out of the window, when suddenly, I hear him respond, “Alright then. Thank you my lady!”

The moment he says this, I drop my calm façade and I begin to freak out again.

*Oh my God, oh my God.*

*What just happened?*

Staring at the smashed in car, the back seat door is completely caved in as if a bull had rammed into it. Frozen with fear and confusion, I can’t move.

*The car was just fine a second ago, I was standing here the whole time! There’s no way anything could have smashed it up in the half second that I shut my eyes to deflect the pine co-*

And it occurs to me.

*No. That’s impossible.*

*I bring my hands up to my eye level and stare at them, trembling.*

*There’s no way.*

I hold my hand straight out in front of me and wave it back and forth, and out of nowhere, the air around me acts like ripples in a pond, moving whichever way my hand moves.

“Christ!” I peep, pulling my hand back as if something had just burnt me. “What the-”

*That’s the same thing that happened in the tree house and the caravan! I wasn’t just imagining things!*

Slowly, I bring my hand back up to my eyes again and I stare at it cautiously. I then turn to a nearby tree and hold it up to the tree instead.

*Oh God, what am I doing.*

*I’m going to feel so stupid for this, but I’m not just imagining it, I can’t be!*

Carefully, I pull my hand back and then as fast as I can, I swat it in front of me, just like before, and right before my eyes, the tree’s trunk directly in front of me implodes and the tree begins to collapse.

“Oh God!” I screech, as I dart and hurdle out of the way, immediately hearing the loud crash of it behind me followed by car alarms blaring.

Huddled on the ground, with hands over my head, trembling, I open my eyes to see that I am alright and I turn my head to see the damage.

The entire tree is there, smashed into the ground, spanning at least a hundred feet. All the cars surrounding it are dented in, with branches and limbs protruding out of the smashed windows.

With the alarms still blaring, I get to my feet. Shock runs throughout my entire body and I approach the scene, taking each step in horror, until I get as close as I feel is safe and I freeze.

*I just…*

*I just knocked down a tree.*

I stare at the thing, now dying among the blasting horns.

*I just knocked down a tree and I didn’t even touch it.*

Suddenly, I feel hands grab me from behind, and I am pulled into someone’s embrace. I look up to see Chance ripping me away from the scene screaming over the horns, “Are you alright!?”

I just stare at him in a daze, not comprehending all that just happened, and he screams even louder, “Ana! Are. You. Al-right!?”

“Wha-” I utter, coming to, and I just nod my head, with shock still plastered all over my face.

“Oh my God.” I watch him mouth, unable to hear his words over the cacophonous noise, as he pulls me into him even tighter.

From behind him, I watch as Brigadier General Cobalt and his men dash towards the scene. Yelling wordless commands consumed by the horns, he points frantically to the different cars. Quickly, each of the men and women dart to the cars and thrust open the hoods, pulling out cords and wires until the blaring stops and all is silent except for the quiet murmurs of the soldiers conversing about what they think just happened.

Panting, Chance looks down at me speechless, and I look up at him the same.

The Brigadier General runs up to us and looks me straight in the eyes, asking, “My lady, are you alright?”

I nod my head and, seeing that I am indeed fine, he continues to ask, “What happened?”

Having no idea what to say and, knowing that if I told them the truth they wouldn’t even believe me, I simply reply, “It just fell.”

Both Chance and Cobalt quietly stare at me and Chance just repeats me. “It just fell? Nothing caused it to?”

I just shake my head, feeling awfully stupid, like when you lie to your parents but they already know that you are lying.

Chance just continues to stare at me, cradled in his arms, unsure of what to think, while the Brigadier General takes a step away and turns towards the destruction, staring off, saying, “Well from what it looks like, the only things that are damaged are cosmetic, so the cars can still drive.” He then turns to me, and finishes, “I am just pleased to see that the lady is unharmed.” He then bows and walks away towards the mess.

Still holding me, Chance turns back and looks into my eyes, his tough outer exterior now broken by what just occurred, and he says with a mixture of shock and concern, “Ana, really, what happened? We have lived in this tree house for years and not a single tree has ever fallen, what made it fall?”

I look up at him, unsure of what to tell him, unsure if he will even believe me, but I open my mouth anyways and try to convey what happened in the best words possible.

“My hand, I moved it, and it was like water! And I tried to not get hit by the pinecone and the car got smashed, and then I made the tree fall!”

He just stares at me and I just stare at him.

“What?” he replies, looking at me in utter confusion.

I don’t know what to say, with my words sounding like utter gibberish, so instead, I do the first thing that I can think. I pull my hand in front of my face, carefully and gently waving it in the air in front of his eyes, moving the space in front of me like water, just like before.

Through the rippling air separating me and Chance, I can see him focusing on my hand, completely perplexed, then looking past my hand and the ripples, he look straight at me and says, “Analiese, did that tree hit your head?”

I stop manipulating the space in front of me and the watery ripples cease. Chance’s face becomes clear again and I confusingly respond, “What?”

“What do you mean, ‘what?’’’ he asks, looking at me like I am a complete lunatic. “You’re acting completely weird!”

“Wha-” I try to speak, being thrown off guard by his response. “Don’t you see the ripples?”

Suddenly, Chance’s eyes go teary and he hugs me tight, choking, “Oh God, first your memories, now this! I’m scared for you, Lullaby, I really am scared.”

Limply, I lay in Chance’s arms, not knowing what to think, not knowing what to make out of all this.

*Am I really just crazy?*

*Am I really just making things up?*

Suddenly, I hear Cobalt’s deep voice from behind us. “Sir Chance?”

Chance’s head shoots up and his arms release me, almost so fast that I can hardly catch myself from hitting the ground. “Yes, Brigadier General?”

The Brigadier General looks behind him, to me, with a concerned expression on his face, and he asks, “Am I interrupting anything, sir?”

“No, no, you are fine. What is it you need, Brigadier General?” Chance responds, his strong mask now back in place.

“I just wanted to let you know that we are going to depart now, but we will be back tonight at the time we planned to infiltrate the hospital.”

Standing straight as a board, Chance nods. “Understood. I will be awaiting your arrival.”

With that, the Brigadier General salutes him and walks away. Engines start up, and one by one, the cars depart, branches being pulled from the windows and broken glass being chucked outside.

Once everyone is gone, Chance turns back to me with a look of remorse for dropping me and he sighs, “I’m sorry.”

He lifts me to my feet and brushes me off. Not knowing what to say, I just stare at Chance in silence, and Chance stares back at me with a look saying, "*What am I going to do with you*?"

I blink a few times, trying to shake off my daze, and Chance just exasperatedly runs his fingers through his blond hair. He sighs again, taking my hand in his, and he leads me back up to the tree house.

“Can you climb up the ladder?” he asks.

Normally, this question would insult me, but at this point I have bigger things to worry about. Like the fact that I might be insane.

I just nod, tired and still slightly stunned over what happened, as I make my way up with Chance following behind.

I pop my head up through the entrance and climb in, seeing the little teethy-tailed blur hiss and run out of sight.

Not caring, I immediately walk through the house and take off my jacket, then plop into bed and roll over, facing the wall.

“Hey...” I hear Chance mutter slowly from behind me. “I’m sorry I over reacted earlier, I’m just,” he pauses searching for the right words, “I’m just worried about you.”

I roll back and look at him with wide and tired eyes and I have nothing to say and so he speaks instead.

“I know a lot has happened, and that can put a lot of strain on one’s mind and-”

“You think I’m crazy.” I interrupt him.

Taken aback, he stutters for words. “Well, I- no, no. I don’t think you’re crazy Lulla-” he cuts off his own words, and I stare with eyes daring him to finish his sentence, but there is nothing but silence and him choking up.

“You don’t think I am who I say I am, do you?” I utter.

He exhales, looking tense and anxious, and in a desperate explosion he blurts out, “Do you even believe yourself, anymore?”

His question, like a dagger in my chest, knocks me breathless and scatters my mind.

Suddenly, all this pent up anxiety, panic, and frustration, boils over and Chance breaks down.

“Look, I went to sleep with the most beautiful girl in the world and woke up to find out she was missing. I got up in the middle of the night, searching all over a horribly dangerous city to find her completely dazed and she doesn’t even remember me. Even worse, she remembers being with someone else!” He laughs, a sickly desperate laugh, and chokes, “Listen, maybe all these things in your head seem real to you, but this is reality. I tried to play along, I really did, I tried to keep you happy but I’m losing it. The fact of the matter is, you are my girlfriend, Lullaby Blue. You went out late one night for some unknown reason and something horribly traumatic happened to you and you lost a bit of your mind. I am here to support you, but I can’t pretend anymore, and to be honest Lullaby, it’s hard without you. Without your happy smiles and loving kisses. I was so happy earlier just to see your beautiful smile again. I thought you were getting better! You were my one and only and now you are obsessed with some guy that I’ve never even met that apparently hates you, and now you are hallucinating. God!”

Chance just collapses to the ground and grabs at his hair, pulling and tugging it from its roots.

I just stare in shock that the one strong stable figure, the only figure in my life right now, is on the ground having a mental breakdown. Even worse, he’s having a mental breakdown because of me.

I don’t know what to say or think and the only conclusion with everything that my mind can even remotely drift to is that he is right.

I am crazy.

This is reality, and I’ve fucking lost my mind.

I collapse out of bed to the ground with him, and I reach up and put my hand on his back.

*Felix never loved me. Chance did.*

*This entire time, it was always Chance.*

*And something just happened to me along the way and made me forget that.*

I take my other hand and touch it to Chance’s face, caressing it, feeling the wet residue of his tears.

*Chance has always been there for me, and it’s my turn to be here for him too.*

I turn his face up to me and look into his watery, sea green eyes.

Scared and confused, I whisper, “I’m sorry.” I begin to choke up. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a burden. I’m sorry and I will be stronger for you just as you have been for me. I don’t know what happened to me, but I think I do love you, Chance, I think I do, I just-”

“Lullaby?” he cuts me off.

Thrown off my track of words I stutter, “Y-yes?”

Suddenly, he pins me to the floor and his mouth in on mine. I squirm underneath him, with our tongues intertwining as the steam from our breath pours into the cold air. His warm body encompasses all of my being and I can’t move. I don’t want to move.

He grabs my wrists and pins them above my head, moving his mouth down to my neck, kissing it gently and whispering in my ear, “I need you, Lullaby.”

He moves his hands from my wrists and intertwines his fingers with mine, breathing the words into my ear, “I love you, Lullaby. I truly do.”

A rush of emotion overcomes me, and tears begin to stream down my face, and I can’t stop. All the emotions I ever had for Felix, in this very moment, I feel in a burst for Chance. My friend, my lover, my savior. The one I have always been with this entire time and I never even knew. This whole time, all I believed to be true was nothing but a lie, and he is the truth. Chance is the truth.

I open my eyes for a moment to see Chance’s beautiful crystal green eyes staring into mine, tears smeared across his face, the same as my own, and he desperately pleads, “Please Lullaby, please. Let me be your boyfriend again. I swear I will always take care of you, and I swear I will never hurt you for as long as I live.”

Still staring into his glistening eyes, I just nod as fast and sure as anything in my entire life and I whimper, “Yes. Yes Chance,” swallowing as quickly as I can to blurt out my final words, “I’m yours!”

His expression bubbles over in emotion and his teary eyes overflow, as he pulls me into him and kisses me with all the love and passion in the world. “Oh Lullaby!” he gasps, breaking from our kiss only for a moment before he puts his mouth back onto mine and our tongues intertwine once again.

With our bodies heating the whole room, he grasps my shirt and pulls it over my head, then does the same to his own, as he kisses my neck. He begins to unlatch my bra and I'm so swept away in emotion, I just want him, I want us, skin to skin.

I feel his hand reach down and unbutton my pants, and then I feel it descend even further. Suddenly, a burst of pleasure surges all over my body and I begin to pant. Needing him. Wanting him. And within a moment of unbuttoning his own and removing what was left, I was having him, and we are one.

Together, moving in unison, pleasure fills me inside and out, and I release noises I haven’t in such a long time. “I love you!” he screams, and I scream the same back, as he rocks my body back and forth in fluid movements. With speed increasing, my heart beats faster and faster, matching the tempo of our bodies rhythm. With every thrust, my nails dig deeper into his back, and every moment of him being inside of me, makes me feel the most incredible pleasure I have ever longed for.

His pace increases, and I lay there, taking him with all the passion and feelings I’ve held back from him from the very start, when suddenly, he pulls back and I hear him release a loud moan, and everything falls silent except for our panting breath.

Chance falls onto me in a bout of exhaustion, and I just lay there, limp and sweating, as I slowly feel his arms embrace me. “Lullaby,” he whispers into my ear, “Lullaby, I’m so glad to have you back.”

Breathing in and out unsteadily, with my body completely and utterly exhausted, I utter, “Oh, Chance, I’m so happy.”

He pulls back, just enough for me to see out of the corner of my eye that he is smiling, and he replies, “My darling, that is exactly how I feel about you.” He falls back onto me, holding my body in a tight embrace. “I love you Lullaby.”

Softly, gently, slowly, the world around me begins to fade as fatigue begins to overcome me. I look at Chance, straining to keep my eyes open and I have just enough breath left to say, “I love you too, Chance.”

With those final words, I let the exhaustion take me and I fall into a safe and gentle slumber.

~\*~

Somewhere off in the distance I can hear shifting noises.

Movement.

The sound of clothing being folded.

The crinkling of fabric.

I sleepily open my eyes and I am face to face with a wall, realizing that I am in bed, still naked.

I slowly roll myself over to see the rest of the small closet of a bedroom with a blurry figure standing in the middle of it, moving around. After blinking a few times, and trying to regain focus, I realize it's Chance putting his clothes back on.

“What,” I mumble, clearing my throat to speak louder, “what are you doing?”

Chance turns, surprised to hear my voice, and he quietly murmurs, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up.”

I just stare at him, with my vision still hazy, and I mumble, “Why are you getting dressed?”

He looks down at the pants he just put on as if he, himself, was also surprised that he was getting dressed.

He then looks back up, muttering, “Oh, um, well, Brigadier General Cobalt and his team are here.”’ He pauses, not seeming to want to continue, but he does. “They are taking me to the hospital to find my father.”

Trying to grasp what he is telling me and understand the situation, I vaguely remember Cobalt saying something about that earlier, and I hazily respond, “The hospital?” I blink trying to wake myself up. “But the hospital is dangerous.”

Chance clears his throat and it becomes obvious to me now that he didn't want me knowing he was going anywhere.

“Yes,” he says. “Yes I know, love, but my father is in that hospital and I need to find him, just like I found you.”

He walks over to my bedside and I look up at him with puppy dog eyes, and I whimper, “But you could get hurt.”

Chance pats my head and gently says, “I will be safe my love. I have a whole team of highly trained soldiers on my side. I will be back before you even know it.”

Softly and carefully, he pulls the covers back over my naked body. “Just rest my love. Go back to sleep.”

Hardly awake as it is now, his calming voice relaxes me even further and I begin to shut my eyes.

Between fluttering lashes, my eyes try to stay open as long as possible. I see in bouts, of him putting his usual white shirt on, then his shoes, then finally his red bandanna. My eyelids are so heavy, that I can barely keep them open anymore, and all of a sudden, I feel a hand on my head. I open my eyes up just long enough to see him say, “Goodnight my darling. Sleep well and sweet dreams.”

Without another moment, my eyes shut and I am lost in the darkness.

**Chapter Seventeen**

Opening my eyes, everything is still, everything is cold, everything is quiet.

Hazily, I look around the dark room and call out for Chance, but I hear no response.

I’m about to shout again, but then I remember the hospital. *He left for the hospital.*

Slowly, I worm my way out of the covers and sit up in bed, immediately shivering from the frigid air. I wrap my arms around myself, and I look down to see that I am still naked.

“My clothes,” I murmur, as I scan the floor of the dark room until I see a bunch of lumpy cloth in the corner.

Freezing cold, I quickly stand up and run to the pile, grabbing and dressing as fast as possible. “I can't see anything,” I mumble, as I flick the switch that illuminates the whole room.

I put back on the green and gold starred army shirt with the dark green war jacket over it for warmth. Grabbing my black jeans, I pull them over my legs as I attempt to walk out into the living room at the same time. Yanking them up all the way, I mumble, “What time is it?” as I flick on the lights to see the clock on the wall telling me it is ten o'clock.

“It's ten?” I whisper. “We slept the entire day away?”

*I’m not sure what time all this started, but we fell asleep just after the sun rose, and he left when it was just getting dark again.*

I stare at the ground, trying to see if my biological clock can tell me when I woke up to see him leave, when suddenly, I hear a noise.

My eyes go wide and alert, and I turn to where the origin of the sound came from. “The window?” I quietly utter, as I look up towards the closed glass directly across from me.

I hear the noise again but louder, and I realize that it's the sound of branches moving, outside. “Meiko?” I call out, facing the window, only to hear a hiss. I turn to where the sound came from to see that Meiko is on the complete opposite side of the room.

Chills run down my spine, seeing her so far away, knowing it couldn’t have been her. I stand alert and take a few cautious and careful steps backwards.

*Maybe it was just the wind.*

*Or maybe a wild animal.*

Suddenly, I hear the rustling again, only much louder and much closer, just right outside the thin sheet of glass.

I keep my face forward as I scan whatever is in my field of vision for a weapon, until I see a butter knife out of the corner of my eye, sitting on the table.

I look back at the window, calculating if I can afford to turn my back on it for a moment, and in a split second, I dash to the table and grab the knife.

Standing further away now, I cautiously hold the knife in front of me and keep my eyes locked on the window.

Staring with my piercing gaze locked on the window, I continue to watch until one of the branches slams against the window and retracts, along with the sound of heavily rustling that could have in no way been made by either the wind or an animal.

“Who’s there!?” I scream, now beginning to shake and tremble, with the knife unsteady in my hand.

All of a sudden, the window bursts open, and someone flips in through the window from a branch outside, planting their feet in a slam against the ground. When they look up, my heart stops.

Standing there, with his long straight black hair and coal black eyes, it's him.

It’s Felix.

I try to form words but nothing comes out. I drop the knife I’m holding and it falls to the floor in a metallic clatter, and my whole body freezes with my mouth agape.

Completely paralyzed, I just stare at him and he stares at me. With my shock wearing off, I slowly realize that his stare is not one of anything else but loathing.

“You’re alone?” he finally speaks, his voice deep as ever and colder than I have ever heard in my entire life.

Honestly, stupidly, I nod up and down quickly, giving him the truth.

“Then they’ve already left for the hospital,” he murmurs to himself, as he turns back to leave through the window.

Suddenly, my paralysis breaks and I jolt to him in a panicked leap, shouting, “Wait, I can’t lose you again!” But before I can grab his shirt, he shoves me back onto the cold ground.

“Get the fuck away from me,” he hisses. “You disgust me.”

I shoot my head up and stare into his soulless eyes, as the tears already start to bubble over in my own.

“I didn’t come here for you, bitch; in fact, I was hoping that I could avoid you. I never wanted to see your pathetic face again.”

Speechless, I can do nothing but stare as tears run down my face and I just utter the word, “Why?”

“Why!?” he shouts mockingly, then laughing sickly, he snaps, “Are you so fast to forget what a whore you are!?”

My mind begins to spin, and suddenly, the horror and guilt of what I just did with Chance only a few hours ago rips through my mind. I grab at my face in panic, in terror, in dire confusion, not knowing if he knows what I just did.

I look back up into his cold, dark eyes with my own that are wide and overflowing, staying locked onto his twisted face.

He laughs even more at my agonized state, until he spits, “You left me. You gave me glass promises that you shattered. Are you so quick to forget about the boy you once said you loved?” He lets out one last demented chuckle, and corrects himself, sneering, “Excuse me, I meant to say, the boy you lied about loving.”

Without noticing, I start shaking my head ‘no’, frantically, pathetically, denying what he’s saying and he mockingly replies, “No? Are you trying to tell me, ‘no’?”

I nod my head in one weak attempt and I choke out the words, “I love you.”

All of a sudden bellowing laughter booms from him and he sickly twists over and yells, “Says the liar!” He laughs again. “Oh you just crack me up, Blue.”

All of a sudden, I stop crying, as his words run through and process in my mind.

*Blue.*

*Lullaby Blue.*

*That’s Lullaby’s last name.*

*He remembers me as Lullaby.*

*He doesn’t even recognize me as the Analiese I’ve always been to him.*

“Wait,” I blurt out in a desperate last attempt at keeping my old identity. “Wait, I’m not her, I’m not Lullaby!”

Felix’s face abruptly twists into disgust and he grunts, “Yeah, I heard you already used that one on Robin. She’s smart, unlike you. She already knew you to be a liar. She didn’t believe you for a second. Do you think she would forget a traitorous face like yours?”

“What, did I do!?” I yell, desperately breaking from my fragile existence to find the answer to why my life is hell. “Why do you hate me, why is she trying to kill me!?”

Felix just scoffs at me and leans back, sneering, “Yeah right, like you could forget what happened in the hospital when you abandoned her. When you pretended to be her friend, than ran away in her time of need.” With his last words, I feel spit on my face and he hisses, “Sounds sorta similar to what you did to me. Ring any bells?”

He just stares into me with a sick, sarcastic smile, clearly enjoying every second of my agony, and I blurt, “I lost my memory! You have to believe me, please! All I can remember is you and that I love yo-”

“Shut the fuck up!” he snaps, his deep voice suddenly cracking. “Shut. Up. Shut. Up! You don’t love me, you never did!”

“But I do!” I cry. “I do, I love you with all my heart! All the memories I have are just of you and I, please Felix, I-”

“Felix?” he utters. “Who the hell is Felix?”

Immediately, my crying stops and a terrible coldness comes over me. I stare up to him with broken eyes, wide and confused, as I softly hear him utter, “Ah, you really are a whore, now aren’t you? Can’t even remember my own God damned name.” he turns to leave back out of the window, and I yell, “Wait, but that is you! It has to be! I know you!”

He turns back, just for a moment, his strong mask now leaving a small crack in it, and I see a glimpse of sadness in his eyes. He quietly speaks, “You know what? I always thought that it was perfect, your last name being blue, because you always reminded me of blue things.”

I stare at him stupidly as his sudden words throw me off. “Blue…things?” I repeat, not understanding where he is going with this.

“Yeah,” he utters, “you know, like the sky, the ocean, blue bottle caps, blue gem stones. Blue. Just anything blue.”

I just stare at him, in a loss for words, and I just utter, “Why?”

He softly and sickly laughs to himself, pain now clearly evident in his voice, and I see him look up at me with a broken smile as he says, “I don’t know, but I always hated the color blue.”

And with that, he jumps out of the window and to the branches down below, and he’s gone.

Here, alone in the silence, I sit, not knowing what to make of anything that just happened. Suddenly, all that I’ve been holding back, I just let out in a horrible painful scream and I cry. Bawling my eyes out, my mind is in complete disarray, not understanding and not comprehending anything that just took place.

“H-how?!” I choke.

*How did this all just happen? He talked about a past. We did have a past!*

*It isn’t just a false memory, it was real!*

*But Chance.*

*And Lullaby.*

*And he is claiming that his name isn’t even Felix.*

I slap my hands onto my tear stricken face, all this far too much to take in, and then my eyes go wide in realization.

*Chance.*

*He came here for Chance.*

“Oh my God,” I utter, “I need to warn Chance.”

Quickly, I snap myself out of my fit of tears and I jump up. “Oh, no!” I gasp, wiping at my face more. “He’s in trouble! I have to find him!”

Felix or not, that boy is completely devoted to Robin and Robin wants us both dead. If he is looking for Chance then it is because of Robin.

Panicking, I look all around for a weapon, for something to take with me for protection, but I can’t find anything.

“Damn it, Chance never told me where he stores the weapons,” I mutter, as I open up the cupboards and look under the furniture. “Shit, I don’t have time for this.”

I shoot my head up and my eyes are met with the one good thing this entire night.

“The keys!” I shout, as I run over to the nightstand and snatch up the motorcycle keys.

*He left his bike behind. That means they must have picked him up.*

*Which also means he has no way of getting back here if something happens to Cobalt’s team.*

“God,” I murmur, now realizing how serious this really is. “Chance you better be okay!” I shout to the empty space as I burst open the balcony door. The cold wind greets and beats against my face, and I open my eyes to see the fire pole in the faded darkness.

*My only escape.*

I latch onto the pole, and without letting myself even have enough time to be afraid, I release off the wooden planks and shoot down to the ground at light speed. Silent and stiff, I hit the ground and feel a jolt of pain surge through my body, coming from my left ankle, and I’m sure I’ve sprained it.

“Don’t have time for this!” I grunt. Ignoring the pain, I make a mad dash for the bike.

I dart as fast as I can, but coming up to it, I quickly realize that I have never even driven a motorcycle before.

Anxiety begins to build in me, knowing that this is the only way to reach Chance in time, yet I’ve never actually given it a try.  “Damn it,” I murmur.

*Chance taught me how to use it, I just need to remember and do as I was instructed.*

I saddle it and turn the key. The engine starts up and I do exactly as Chance had showed me. Nervous and unsteady, I hold the clutch as I kick up the gear and twist the handle carefully.

Slowly the huge bike begins to roll as I give it more gas, and within seconds, I’m speeding off down the forest path at light speed.

*I did it! Oh thank God, I actually did something right for once!*

*When I find Chance I’m giving him the biggest hug for showing me this!*

Concentrated and steady, I stay alert as I see all the trees fast approaching, then zooming past me.

*I'm going to make it in time, I have to!*

I spot the glow of the streetlights in the distance and I release the handle. The bike begins to lose momentum, coming to a halt at the start of the concrete road. I look down the way, seeing all the hundreds of cars piled up just like the first night I was here, still unmoved.

I look back down at the bike, remembering how even Chance couldn’t maneuver through the stopped cars and debris at night.

*If he can’t, then there is no way in hell that I can.*

I take the keys out of the ignition and put them in my pocket. Flipping out the kickstand, I hear something metallic clank in the left compartment of the bike.

“A gun?” I whisper excitedly to myself.

*Maybe it’s a gun! I’ll have something to defend myself with!*

Quickly, I swing open the compartment, only to find that instead of a gun, there lays a flashlight.

Not as let down as I thought I’d be, I pick up the flashlight and click it on.

*Well at least it works. This can be useful.*

I shut the compartment and turn from the bike, beaming the light through the hazy mist, taking the rest of the way on foot.

Walking down the foggy night streets, I try to remember which way the hospital is.

“Hospital, hospital, hospital,” I murmur, as I continue on further and further. “I think it was close by the school.”

My walking turns to a jog and my jog turns to a run and within seconds, I am making a sprint for the school, with my ankle killing me every step of the way.

The buildings loom over me and pass by like a horror movie, all smashed and broken with not a person in sight.

*Chance, hold on, I’m coming!*

Finally, I approach the school and I can’t do it anymore, with the pain in my foot now unbearable.

“Damn it.” I mumble, crouching to the ground to hold my ankle, when suddenly, I see something moving in the distance.

My whole body goes cold and I stare, frozen and crouched, looking off into the fog where I saw the movement. Flashbacks of when this happened the first night I was here speed through my mind and I begin to panic. The figure moves again, and I see the hazy silhouette.

*It must be a guard.*

I quietly click off my flashlight and stare intensely at the figure.

*Why is a guard in the city? I thought they patrolled the gates at night!*

*I only see one, but if there is one, there are sure to be more.*

*I have to get out of here.*

Slowly and carefully, I stand and creep away towards the entrance of the school. Reaching the doors, my ankle begins to give out on me and I stumble, slamming against the push bars with gravitational force. The door bursts open and I fall in, now on the ground of the empty and dark hallway.

I stare far down the way to the point where light no longer reaches, then I stare back to the outside where the guard’s silhouette no longer is. Knowing that anywhere is safer than where that person could get me, I pull myself the rest of the way into the school, and quietly close the door.

Grabbing onto the handle and hoisting myself up, I click the flashlight back on as I lean against one of the nearby lockers for support.

I stare down the hallway, only seeing with the light that comes from my flashlight and everything looks the same.

Same hallways, same classroom doors, everything just the way I remember, except all dark and abandoned. I limp my way through the blacked out halls, dragging my injured foot across the tiled linoleum.

*Shit, I’m hurt worse than I thought.*

*I need to hurry and find Chance.*

*If I can make it to the back of the school and use the emergency exit, I think I can get to the hospital easily from there.*

Drudging past the lockers, I begin to notice that there are pictures taped to them. The further I walk, the more photos appear. Within a short amount of time, the lockers aren’t even visible anymore, covered completely under the plastered photographs. I stop and stumble closer to see that they are pictures of people, and more specifically, people I know.

My old classmates.

Under each of their smiling picture perfect faces are words like, “Have you seen this person?” or “Looking for her/him.”

I stop and stare up and down the wall in amazement, when I see in big letters, names that I’ve heard before.

“IN MEMORY OF NIGHTINGALE TIDE AND ARROW SKYRUN.”

“Those were the people Chance was talking about…” I murmur under my cold breath. I tilt the flashlight down to look at the photograph attached, and immediately, I recognize the people in the photo.

*Those two!*

*Their names aren't Nightingale and Arrow, they’re Alice and James. I know them!*

I stare in confusion, not understanding why their names are clearly not the ones I remember, and then it occurs to me.

*Nobody’s names are the same.*

*Not even my own.*

I stare in silence, looking forward as it finally becomes clear to me that we really aren’t different people. We are all who I remember us as, just with different names and different realities.

“What the hell…” I whisper, as I touch the water damaged photo of Nightingale and Arrow.

I turn, flashing my light all the way down the darkened hallway, remembering just a night ago the similar scene in the grocery store and I cringe.

*I have to be strong.*

*Now more than ever.*

*I don’t have time to be scared.*

I continue to walk forward, supporting myself along the lockers as I stare up at the hundreds of photographs.

“Please find him.”

“Missing: Aria wind”

“If you see this person, take them to rebel base A”

“Help, this person is missing.”

Tons of messages scrawled upon the photographs, some with responses, some not. Coming closer to the back exit doors, one in particular catches my eye.

It’s a picture of Robin.

I bring myself as close as I can, pointing the light on it and I focus on the faded words that read:

*“Robin, please, if you see this, I’ll be waiting in the old warehouse for you, every day at noon. Please be safe, I love you.*

*Love, Flip”*

“Flip?” I whisper to myself as I stare back up at her smiling school photo, looking much younger than she does now.

*I didn’t know she went to my school.*

*I’ve never seen her in my entire life.*

My gaze stays locked onto the photo, even as I walk away, until the darkness finally consumes it and I turn to see that I’m just feet from the back door. It’s so covered and plastered in photographs of the lost and missing, that I would just assume it was a dead end wall if I didn’t know this place so well.

I place my hands over where I know the push bars should be and I press down, only for it to punch in and release with my grip.

*Locked.*

“Damn. I have no idea how to unlock this thing,” I whisper as I take a step back and think if there is any other way into the back yard of the school.

Immediately, an idea hits me and I look down at my hands.

*That thing.*

*That thing I did in the forest that knocked down that tree.*

*If it can knock down a tree, it can open a door!*

*Crazy or not, I know what happened back there and if I did it then, I should be able to do it again!*

I take a few more steps back, just to be safe, and then I place my hand in front of myself. Just like before, I slowly recoil and twist my wrist, preparing for what is to come.

“I hope this works!” I mutter, as I release all the built up energy and lash out my hand in a powerful twist. A huge white light flashes over me, blinding my eyes and a thunderous crash like shattering glass fills my ears. Within seconds, the light fades, and I turn to see the most surreal thing I have ever witnessed in my entire life.

The door that was just in front of me is now gone, and in its place is the same old school door that I am used to, uncovered and plain, with what looks like shattered and cracked glass surrounding the space around it.

“Holy shit," I whisper.

I walk closer and reach for the plain, clean door, only to have my hand hit something hard and invisible, stopping me from reaching it.

“A force field?” I whisper as I look up to the side, noticing that it isn’t just the door that is visible, but also the lockers around it within the shattered cracks. “It has dimension,” I quickly utter to myself, completely breathless and in shock. I lean to the side and see just barely a locker or two, clean and shiny just like the last day at school before all this nightmare began.

Suddenly, the view becomes hazy as if everything on the inside is underwater, then slowly, it begins to fade as the cracks creep in and consume the space around the door. Within moments, all the cracks meet at one center point and fade away, leaving me with the same hallway as before, except now there is a huge gaping hole out to the back gate instead of doors.

“What the-” I choke out, as I carefully walk through the new blown through entrance to see that the doors are completely smashed in, just like the Brigadier General’s car, earlier.

*What the hell did I just do?*

*That door.*

*And this door.*

*They were the same exact door, only one was from when everything was okay and this one…*

I stare at the smashed in metal covered in crumpled distorted photographs.

*This one is from here.*

I exit through and look up to see the fence just yards away with the dark abandoned city roads through it, crammed bumper to bumper with stopped cars. I look back down at my hand and whisper, “What if…” as I slowly set down my flashlight and position my hand right in front of the gate. In one quick movement, I recoil and lash out again in a sudden twist.

Once again, a huge flash of light beams in front of my eyes, followed by another shattering crash and when I open them, what I see floors me.

In through the gate and the shattered space, I see cars. Working cars. Driving with their headlights on and beaming as they race down the city streets, then disappearing behind the wall of space that is crammed with the abandoned cars of before.

I stare unmoving as the passing cars soar by, when suddenly, two people walk into my view. Laughing and drunk, leaning onto one another, they stumble down the busy street.

“Hey!” I yell. “Hey, over here!” I try to grab onto the fence, only to be met by the hard invisible wall from before. “Hey!” I scream again, as I pound my fists against the invisible glass.

The couple continue on as if I don’t even exist, walking and giggling as the cracks slowly come in and consume my sight, leaving me with the old dead streets and the same fence as before except with a giant hole in it as if an asteroid had ripped through.

“My God,” I whisper, wide-eyed and jaw dropped, with tears filling my eyes. “That…”

*That was home.*

*That was where I’m from!*

I shake from my paralyzed stance and observe the cold dead world around me, looking at everything that is so familiar to what I am used to, and it occurs to me.

*Could this be…*

*Could this be a parallel universe?*

Suddenly, I hear foot steps behind me, walking from the school halls, and I turn to see nothing but the darkness. The footsteps stop and I stare frozen into the hallway. “Who’s there!?” I shout as I recoil my hand, ready to spring forth and lash out, “Come out or I’ll blow you to pieces!”

I hear a soft gasp and slowly, the footsteps begin again and I see a silhouette beginning to form. Tall and lean, the light begins to softly touch the person’s body, just barely letting me see their figure when I hear it whisper. “Analiese?”

My eyes go wide and my mouth falls agape, knowing that voice better than any in the whole world.

“F-Felix?” I whisper.

Slowly, just yards away, the figure walks forward into the light and I see it’s him.

“Ana?” he chokes out, with teary eyes being reflected in the moonlight, staring into mine. “Is that… Is that you?”

My hand drops to my side and the flashlight falls to the ground as I whimper, “Felix? Are you really Felix?”

I hear an awed and excited gasp, and all in a second, he darts to me, and like a meteor collision, we collide. Body to body, with our skin pressed against one another, I am in his arms. “Analiese, oh God, Analiese! You’re alive!” he shouts as he pulls his face away from my neck and into my vision, and without a single doubt in my mind, I know it really is him.

His warm loving eyes stare into mine, and with the most gentle smile, he chokes, “Ana,” and then pulls me back into him, bawling tears.

My heart races, with butterflies filling me everywhere, and I cry with the first sobs of joy since I’ve gotten here.

*I found him.*

*I really found him!*

*He is real!*

“Felix, oh my God,” I bawl, collapsing into him. “I’m so happy you’re okay! I’m so-”

“Ana, oh Ana, me too, me too!” he chokes out. “I thought you were dead! When I woke up in the tree house and you were gone, I had no idea what happened, I just-” he cuts off for a moment into bawling tears, “I’m just so relived,” he sniffs. “I’m just so relieved that you are alive.”

Tears stream down my face, hearing these words that I have waited so long to hear. Not only relieved to see that he is alive, but that he is real! That all this time, all this doubt that had been piling up in my mind that he never existed, is gone! He’s real, and he’s here!

“Felix,” I cry, biting my lip. With emotion overflowing everywhere, I just explode, bawling, “I love you!”

I wrap my arms around his strong broad shoulders, just the way I remember him and he holds me tight, and cries into me.

“Ana,” he sniffs, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Ana, we have to go, we can’t stay here, it’s not safe! There are these terrible men in horrifying suits and-”

“I know, I know!” I cut him off. “I’ve been here for weeks! I’ve been surviving with-”

*Chance.*

I remember Chance.

“Oh God, Felix, my friend. He’s in trouble, we have to save him!” I yell as I shoot up, only to have my arm grasped by Felix, pulling me back down and shouting desperately, “No! It’s dangerous in this world Ana! We have to get out!”

“I know, but-” I panic, not knowing what to do. “I know but I have to save him. He saved me Felix, he saved me!”

“Ana, Ana, we have to go somewhere safe first though, then we can save your friend, and I know somewhere safe!”

I look into him with worried and panicked eyes, and I stutter, “W-what? Where?”

His beautiful and passionate eyes stare into me, filled with tears, and he says, “It’s this place, it’s safe, just trust me love, I would never take you anywhere dangerous.”

“But my friend…” I whimper, staring into him desperately. “I have to, it’s only right after he saved me!”

I jump up and run to the gate, quickly turning around and shouting, “Come with me! You’ll be safe I have this ability that-”

But suddenly, I feel something heavy smash against the back of my head and everything goes cold.

Everything goes black.

I feel my body slam against the ground and I look up to see Felix standing above me with my flashlight in his hand.

“F-Felix?” I choke out, with my consciousness fading.

My eyes only stay open long enough to see him smirk and say, “Not a chance.”

**Chapter Eighteen**

Coldness encompasses my body and darkness shrouds my eyes.

A pounding pain in the back of my head makes me not want to move, not want to get up.

“Ugh,” I gurgle, as feeling begins to come to my body and I realize that there is drool dripping from my mouth. I go to wipe it off, when my hand is jolted to a stop and I hear the jingling of a chain. Hazily, I open my eyes and turn to see that I am cuffed to a radiator.

I hear a deep sigh coming from the corner of the room and I turn to see a blurry and hazy figure sitting on the ground. I blink, trying to clear the fog from my eyes, and I can make out that the person is pale, lean, and blond.

“Chance?” I utter, my voice echoing through the cold and damp room.

I hear a chuckle and then a raspy voice much deeper than Chance’s, that says, “No, very close though, my dear.”

I blink some more, slowly seeing more and more detail and I ask, “Who are you?”

I hear him scoff, his old raspy voice sounding tired and worn, and he softly says, “Forgotten me already, Lullaby?”

With my eyes now unclouded, I can clearly see an older man, maybe in his fifties or sixties, with long blond hair about Chance’s length, but not even half as full. Wrinkles cover his pale face and he is wearing a dirtied and bloodied lab coat.

“They must have really bumped you on the head, my dear,” he states sympathetically. He then opens his mouth again, and he says, “It’s me, Chance’s father, Anvil.”

Suddenly, everything starts coming back to me about the hospital raid Chance went on, the school, that crazy ability I have and then Felix.

I look down in shock, all these stressful thoughts surging over me and I look up and desperately ask, “Where’s Chance? What happened?”

I hear Anvil recline back a bit by the sound of the jangling chains he is cuffed to, and he replies, “My boy came to find me. I was in the hospital working on patients as usual when he broke in with a band of his friends. They started shooting guns like they were toys, demanding to know where I was.” Anvil lowers his head shamefully and continues, “I’ve been held in that hospital ever since this whole epidemic broke out, I haven’t been allowed to leave. I was never able to let Chance know because we could never catch him.”

“Catch him?” I slowly repeat.

Anvil looks up at me and nods. “Yes. I have been sending scientists like myself out to capture him, but he always saw them as enemies because of rebel propaganda.” Anvil sighs, “Let me start over.”

I lean into a more comfortable position as he takes in a deep breath and begins, “The TK01 Virus broke out September 12, 2015. It was a biological weapon derived from the bubonic plague, developed to kill in just minutes instead of days. My team and I were ordered to develop this for the government to use in the war currently going on overseas. We were flying out early test samples of it on a private jet to a base where more testing could be done, but without us knowing, it seems the enemy had already gotten wind of this weapon being transported, and they sent hijackers.”

My eyes go wide at this as he continues. “They broke in with bombs strapped to themselves and demanded that they have control of the plane or they would blow up the whole facility. No one could stop them and it all happened so fast.” He lowers his head and says, “They took the plane and flew it over the city, dropping the concentrated virus on all the civilians, and within just a few minutes, they lost control of the plane and crashed a just few miles away into rural land.”

I stare at Anvil, in complete shock, confused and feeling misled this whole time, and I ask, “Wait, does that mean that the government didn’t do this to us then? We weren’t just test rats?”

Anvil lets out a huge sick and desperate laugh and booms, “No! Never! My whole family, all my friends and coworkers, everyone lived in this city.*Of course* that wasn’t the plan. *None* of this was ever supposed to happen! We had no idea!”

Suddenly, we hear a screeching followed by white noise and my attention is brought to a different corner of the room where a small radio sits. The noise becomes choppy between a woman’s voice and, little by little, I can make out words. A news report.

“Ah, that thing has been going off like that for hours,” Anvil scowls, annoyed.

I stay staring at the device, listening hard, trying and decipher what is being said, when slowly, the hissing noise clears and the reporter’s voice becomes audible.

“Three months since the beginning of the Black Epidemic which wiped out the entire city of Braxton in the south east, killing every resident in less than twenty four hours, government officials now say that the city will be reopened after decontamination in about eight months.”

The radio announcer switches to a man who begins to explain the cleansing process and I turn to Anvil in confusion. “They think we are all dead?”

Anvil sighs and looks down. “Yes. See, the TK01 virus terminates just minutes after killing its host. We developed it this way purposely, in order to not spread out of control once it is used. What we did not expect was, that if it did not kill the host, it would live dormant in the host forever thereafter without termination. This means that all who contract the disease but survive, are now carriers for the rest of their lives. If a carrier was let loose onto the world, the disease would spread like wild fire and we just could not let that happen. We didn’t want a nationwide panic of terrorism or human rights activists to riot to have survivors released either, so it was just easier to say that everyone was dead in order to keep the population silent.”

The radio begins to become choppy again and my mouth is wide open in desperate confusion. “But,” I trail off, my voice now shaking and weepy, “but we are still here. We are still alive! We are humans and we deserve to live!”

Anvil stares at the ground in shameful silence, and I continue, “Is that why no one has been trying to save us? Why no one has come to our rescue? Just so we can be kept here so you scientists can capture us one by one and experiment on us like guinea pigs?”

“No! No, no, no, Lullaby, please!” He cuts me off. “Listen to me. We haven’t been capturing you all to run tests out of cruelty, we have been doing this to find a cure!”

Taken aback, I respond, “A Cure?”

Anvil looks at me straight in the eyes and says, “Yes dear, a cure. One that not only heals the subject, but also annihilates the disease from their system in order to no longer make them a carrier. We have been trying to capture survivors to inject them with a cure, but due to the strength of rebel propaganda, they all run from us, or worse, they shoot at us. That is why we have to use Tasers. We use them to simply subdue the survivors we capture until we can bring them to the hospital. If we don’t, then our lives are at stake.” Anvil sighs, “See, when all this broke out, a full-fledged cure had not yet been developed. We had a limited number of test vaccines to possibly prevent one from contracting the disease in case of contamination or an unlikely outbreak, but those were only given to myself and a few other coworkers who were assigned on this project.  We had nothing to cure someone once they caught it, and there currently aren’t even enough vaccines to go around. Half of the ones that are being made are so rushed that the formula is either not working, or killing the vaccinated subject straight off. I was able to get ahold of a good batch of vaccine, but not all of my coworkers were as lucky as I.”

My wide-eyed gaze drops to the floor and I hear him continue, “That’s why I never contracted the disease, and neither did Chance. I snuck him a vaccine just in case anything were to happen. You, on the other hand, were very lucky. When you contracted the virus, it was at such a slow rate that it took about a week before you started showing any symptoms. This will occasionally happen to some subjects due to their naturally strong immunity. Chance was smart for bringing you to the hospital, because of that, he saved your life. You were admitted in such an early stage of the disease that the trial cures worked perfectly on you, bringing you back to health.”

I look up at him in confusion and shock, with so many words on the tip of my tongue just ready to come out, but he continues. “When you were first admitted to the hospital, I tried to tell you to let my son know I was okay, but you were too out of it. You were so far gone you did not even respond to spoken word much less recognize who I was. I was planning to visit you again once you fully healed, but before that could happen, the rebels broke in and released you and in the midst of it all, Chance came and took you away.” Anvil lowers his head in shame and admits, “My colleges called out to him and tried to stop him from going, but when he put a gun to his head as a threat, we couldn’t take any chances. We just had to let you two go.”

My eyes now filled with tears at this twisted turn of events, I stare at him, mouth agape, only able to utter the words, “So the guards were never trying to hurt us then?”

“No,” Anvil replies. “No, we were only trying to bring you to safety until this was all over. That was all.”

Shock and disbelief surge through me as Anvil caries on. “During the recent visit you just had to us, we repaired your badly, torn open arm. I don’t even want to know how you did that to yourself," he mumbles. "Anyways, we took blood samples from you to see if the trial cure had been successful, only to find that you had actually re-contracted the virus. In all my years in medicine, I had never seen a single case of anyone being healed, then re-contracting the same disease again. Although, considering that this is a genetically engineered virus, anything is possible, I suppose. We re-injected you with a newer form of the cure, and from what it seems like, now that I'm looking at you, it appears to have worked.”

I stare at Anvil, realizing that it wasn’t that I received the cure and was healed, but that I just am not the same person.

*Lullaby received the first injection, not me.*

*When I was admitted to the hospital for the wildcat attack, that was my first time ever receiving it. That must be why, to me, it always seemed that I was immune.*

With everything making sense now, I stare at the ground in disbelief.

*Everything I thought to be true was a lie.*

*The guards were never bad.*

*The rebels were never good.*

*They were all brainwashed!*

*And the cure…*

*And Chance…*

*Wait.*

*Chance.*

“Chance? Where is Chance?” I call out, with desperation saturating my voice.

Anvil looks up and meets my eyes with his sad and worn ones, and he replies, “I don’t know, everything happened so fast. One minute, he and a small group of rebels came looking for me, and the next second, an entirely new wave of kids with guns came rushing in, shooting hysterically. They were the ones who took him away, and I as well.”

Anvil’s voice suddenly cracks and he chokes out, “Our lab is destroyed now. They set fire to it. All the progress. All the research. All the progression of finding a cure. It’s all gone now. They took it all away because they were reckless and ignorant.”

My heart drops and I begin to shake. Hearing those words ‘all gone’ and ‘destroyed’, completely hopeless words that make my blood go cold.

Coming back to my senses, only for a moment, I stare into his aged, sea green eyes, and I utter, “Then what’s going to happen now?”

Before Anvil even has a chance to process the question, the door unbolts and is opened by a bandanna wearing rebel.

“Lullaby Blue, you are summoned by Grand General Robin,” she states through her yellow bandanna. She walks over to me and unlocks the one cuff attached to the radiator and reattaches it to my other wrist in front of me. “Stand,” she demands.

Fear pumps through my veins, and I do as I am told, when suddenly, Anvil shouts, “Don’t hurt her! She is innoce-” but before he can finish, the rebel swiftly kicks him in the face and he slams to the ground, as blood drips from his agape mouth. “Shut up old man! If it wasn’t for you, none of us would be in this situation! You have no right to talk about innocence!”

Anvil gurgles blood and spits a wad of it onto the ground. His eyes wince in pain and he just groans. I stare in horror for no more than a moment, when the rebel yells, “Come on! The Grand General is waiting for you!” and I feel a gun to my back. Almost instinctually, my legs begin to walk.

The door slams behind me without getting a second look, and I am lead through dark and damp warehouse hallways, until I finally reach a huge door.

The rebel walks in front, still pointing her gun and not taking her eyes off of me, as she opens the door and shoves me in.

“Here is the one you requested Grand General!” the rebel shouts in from behind me as she salutes and then closes and locks the door.

I turn to see a slight hallway leading out into what seems to be a much larger room, and I hear the dooming and familiar voice sing, “Ah, perfect!”

I stand still, her voice being heard, but still not being seen, cut off by the shortened hallway.

I don't move from my spot, terrified of what is to come, when she yells rather sweetly, “Well? Come in, rat.”

Terrified, but knowing that there is no way back, I take shaky and unsure steps as I pass through the compressed walls that feed out into a much larger room. As the room opens up, I see her. The tall red haired girl standing atop a small stage. Grand General Robin’s bright blue eyes pierce right into me.

“Look who we have here,” she chuckles. “Oh goodie.”

I stand firm and try to appear unafraid, but I am shaking too violently to fool anyone. Staring into Robin's eyes, I suddenly hear a choked voice coming from my left side. “Lullaby.”

I turn, completely horrified and unprepared, to see Chance, just a few yards away, with Felix right behind him, with a gun pointed to his head.

My heart drops and my eyes go wide and Robin bursts into uncontrollable laughter. “Isn’t it perfect? Isn’t it just absolutely fantastic!?”

I turn back to her, completely stunned and terrified, and she crackles, “The two love birds, and they get to die together!”

Slowly, Robin pulls a pistol from her holster behind her and points it directly at me. “Now who should die first?” she sneers.

I panic and turn back to Chance and Felix, with my heart racing a thousand miles an hour, and I stare into Felix’s eyes with the most hurt and betrayal I have ever felt. Immediately, he widens his eyes just for the slightest moment, then adverts his gaze, looking to the ground in shame.

“Well?” Robin jeers. “Any volunteers?”

All of us remain quiet, in shock, in fear, in panic, and she continues. “No?”

Once again nothing but the echoes of Robin’s resounding voice fills the room.

“Well then it looks like I get to decide,” she giggles. “As much as I want this bitch to die,” she spits as she shakes the gun ever so slightly in my direction, “I think it would be better to kill you first, Chance. After all, what could be more horrifying than to watch the love of your life get their brains blown out? Huh, Lullaby?”

“No,” I whisper, my head shaking on its own, pleading in disbelief, when all of a sudden, Chance shouts, “You kill me and my father will never tell you anything about what happened! He will never tell you about the cure!”

Robin then looks away from me and to Chance instead, and calmly replies, “Oh? Is that so? Then how do you explain him already telling me everything?”

“What?” Chance whispers in shock.

Robin begins to laugh once again and shouts, “We already threatened your father with your life, and he has already told us everything! The TK01 virus, the terrorists, the plane, the vaccines, the cure, we already know everything!”

Chance just stares in shock, his whole expression falling into devastated hopelessness.

“Then you know all this was just an accident then,” I say as calmly as possible, mustering up all the courage I have to speak.

Robin turns back to me and replies, “Yes, but it was no accident to make that virus. It was no accident to develop it to kill millions of people overseas. Typical. People only think deaths matter if they happen in their own country, as if those who live overseas don’t actually count as human beings. People like you disgust me and it just gives me another reason why I should kill you.” She then switches back to Chance and continues, “Your father knew what he was doing. He knew that the virus he developed would only be used for war, for murder, but he did it anyways for a paycheck. This is why we don’t need people like him in this world, and for that matter, neither do we need people like you who side with them.”

Silence fills the room and no one dares to speak, the pounding of my own heart being the only thing that I can hear, and she speaks once more. “Now if that is all, I believe it’s time to end this.”

I jolt my vision towards Chance to see Felix adjusting the gun to his head and Robin sarcastically giggles, “As cliché as this sounds, I might as well. Do you have any last words, Chance Silver?”

Once again, everything is silent, and I stare at Chance. With my heart plummeting and my mind searching for a way to stop him, I quickly realize that there’s nothing I can do. Even if I use my ability, they are too close together, I could kill them both.

“Yeah, I do,” Chance replies, and all within a second, I see such fast movements and hear a scream, that it is only after I see that Chance has freed himself from the rope that ties he was bound in, and that he has Felix’s gun in his hand, that I realize what had happened.

Chance elbows Felix to his knees, as Felix grabs for the wrist that Chance just twisted, in order to pry his gun from. Once Chance has a tight hold onto him, he stands up straight and presses the gun to Felix’s head. “I’m not going to die here,” Chance states firmly.

Suddenly, Robin’s eyes go wider than anyone’s I have ever seen in my entire life and Chance yells, “Robin, put down your gun.”

Carefully, Robin takes the gun that is in her hand and gently places it on the floor, then rises back up with her hands in the air. Chance then turns to me and demands, “Lullaby, take her gun.”

Staring at Chance in shock and fear, I slowly turn and walk towards Robin. Once I reach her, I lean over and grab her gun and she doesn’t even look at me. With her eyes locked onto Felix, it is in this moment that I notice something.

*My necklace.*

*My dichroic star necklace that I have been missing.*

*It’s on Robin’s neck.*

“Lullaby, go back to where you were standing,” Chance shouts sternly.

Confusion and shock run through me, as I stare at the ground and walk back into place. With my mind now in complete disarray, everything feels numb and frozen, when I hear Chance yell, “These are my demands: I want all my men released. I want my father released. I want myself and Lullaby released.” Robin nods her head fast and swift, agreeing to everything Chance is saying. “I want the rebels to leave the scientists alone to continue their work in search for a cure. I want the rebels to disband as an army and reunite as a survival group. No more unneeded violence is to occur. Is that understood?”

Robin nods quickly, and nervously chokes out a “yes.”

Chance nods in return and readjusts his gun to Felix’s head, as Felix, who already has terror-filled tears streaming down his face, tries his best to shift away from the gun.

My heart not slowing even in the slightest, seeing Felix there, seeing that he could be killed at any moment, I stand terrified and watch in silence.

Nobody moves and the room is completely void of sound, when finally, Robin breaks the silence and barks out, “Well!? I agreed! Now take the damn gun away from his head!”

Chance sighs and speaks quietly, as if talking to a child. “Robin, why did you do all this?”

Taken aback by such a random question, she falls a bit off balance and replies, “What?”

Chance stares up at her with his piercing green eyes and he clarifies, “Why did you start this rebellion? Why did you lead all these attacks?”

Robin shifts uncomfortably and firmly shouts, “To make a better life for the survivors. To fight back against being taken away by the scientists for their cruel testing.”

Chance softly replies, “That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

Robin’s eyes widen and her mouth drops just slightly, as Chance states, “You didn’t do it for all the survivors. You did it for just one.”

Robin’s eyes begin to water and she shakes her head in denial.

Chance sighs. “Flip Uri,” he shouts, as he slightly pushes the gun against who I thought this entire time to be Felix, “found you after the virus killed off most of the city. You were struck inside a car during the panic and it was Flip who found you and nursed you back to health. Soon after, you two fell in love and it was then that the scientists found you both. Flip was captured and taken away, while you were able to escape.”

Robin’s tear filled eyes overflow and stream down her face, and Chance continues, “You led the very first rebellion against the scientists in order to save him. After the attack was successful, it was seen as the first victory, causing many more people to follow you, eventually leading to this,” he states as he raises his other arm and leads our vision around the giant warehouse. “You did this all for one person, and that was Flip.”

I look down at Felix’s double, shaking, wide-eyed and terrified, his face wet with tears.

Robin, now visibly shaking as well, swallows trying to steady her nerves.

Chance calmly sighs, not looking the least bit excited or proud of what he is doing, and he carries on, “The Brigadier General told me all of this on our way to raid the hospital. Although he said they were all just rumors, after seeing your reaction, I can clearly see that they are true.”

Suddenly, Robin blurts out, “Wait, p-please, don’t hurt him. I agreed to your demands, I agreed to them. Please don’t hurt him, he is all I have.”

“Ah,” Chance says, “isn’t it funny how you were just about to blow out my brains in front of my girlfriend without a second thought, yet when it comes to your partner, everything is different. It matters now.”

Robin just stands still, hands in the air, with her whole body shaking.

I stare at Chance, positioning the gun to Flip’s head and it all comes together. The power I have, the perfect world beyond it, this alternate universe I am in, it all makes sense now. Flip is Felix’s double.

“This isn’t for vengeance, Robin. I wish there was another way but there isn’t. Let’s be honest here. The moment I leave from this place, you will just send troops out to kill us, and nothing will change.” Chance sighs and continues, “Nothing will change unless I take away the only reason that you are doing all of this.”

The adrenaline in my body shoots up and reality hits me.

*If Flip dies in this world, Felix will die too.*

“No!” she screams, now bawling tears. “No! Don’t do this, don’t take him from me! I need him! I love him!”

“Exactly,” Chance affirms as he caulks the gun. “I’m sorry Robin.”

All in a moment, unable to contain myself from watching all that is about to take place, I scream, "No!" and without a single thought to my actions, I take the gun in my hand and pull the trigger on Chance.

The resounding boom echoes off the walls, and I watch as Chance drops the gun in his hand as he falls to the ground in a red mess. The moment his body hits the floor, he stares into me with hurt and confused eyes and chokes, “Lu-Lullaby…?”

Flip panics and darts from Chance’s reach to Robin, horrified, with tears still streaming down his face, and everything hits me.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

*What have I done?*

I drop my gun and rush to Chance, falling to the ground beside him and holding up his head. My eyes are drawn to the wound in his shoulder and I hear him mutter, “Luh…luh…by…? How… could you…?”

Overflowing tears stream from my eyes, staring at what I have done to the only person who has protected, loved and saved me in this terrible world.

“No,” I whisper as I shake my head. “No!”

I hear scattered, marching footsteps towards us, and I look up to see that Robin and Flip are gone and instead, a crowd of rebel soldiers have taken their place, surrounding us and pointing their guns ready to shoot. “No!” I scream, as they come in closer. “Get away from us!”

Without another thought, I swat my hand in front of me and all the soldiers from that side go flying across the room and slam against the wall. The rest of the soldiers gasp but before they can react, I swat my hand in the opposite direction knocking them all down too. “Chance, come on!” I panic. “Please, hold onto me!”

Chance is no longer responding, limp in my arms, as the blood flows out of his wound far too quickly for me to help. “Chance!” I scream, as I try to pull at him, but I fail to lift his heavy body.

Quickly, more men, as well as the ones I knocked away, come back to surround us and I begin to be outmatched. “Go away!” I scream, swatting and thrashing my arm around in all directions, hearing the screams and shouts of the soldiers being barreled into the air. Suddenly, I hear gunfire, and Chance is being pulled from my arms by a rebel. With it all happening so fast, I lose it, in a complete frenzied panic.

As if not even by my own free will, my legs just start moving and I run away as fast as I can. Speeding in the first direction that my legs can take me, I reach a wall and I thrash out my hand, smashing it away and breaking open the morning light into the building.

Darting out, away from the gunfire, away from the violence, just away and gone, I can hear shouts and screams and soldiers yelling things that I am now too far away to understand.

I run through the streets until my legs ache and my lungs throb and I can’t go on. Collapsing in a damp alleyway, I skin my knees on my way down to the concrete and I am too exhausted to continue.  I curl into myself and hold my knees to my chest, and in a panting breath, I whisper to myself, “What have I done,” as I lead out a painful wail and I just cry.

**Chapter Nineteen**

After recovering my strength, I slowly and grudgingly move, walking from the alleyway back to the tree house. Hanging my head low, with my eyes wide, the whole time I can only think about what I did.

*If my theory is true that this is an alternate reality, then for all I know, if Chance kills Flip here, Felix will die back in my world. So I had to do it. I just had to. I didn’t have a choice.*

I try to rationalize with myself, try to convince myself, but the more I think of alternate realities, the more insane I feel.

Tired and exhausted, but no longer caring much about anything, I stop dead in my tracks and raise my hand up. I stare aimlessly into the abandoned streets for a moment, then effortlessly I twist my wrist, and just like before, a huge shattering crash booms and when the white blinding light fades, I see the busy and bustling streets before me. No longer shocked or surprised, I walk forward and press my hand to the invisible glass that separates me from my old home.

*I’m not insane, this is real. I really am in a different dimension.*

Slowly, the cracks surrounding the glass view begin to creep inwards, eventually swallowing everything before me, and leaving me back with the abandoned, car piled streets of this Braxton.

*Why am I allowed to see it, but I can’t go through? I’m so close yet so far at the same time.*

I stare down at my hands that look plain as ever, seeing nothing special about these tools that can apparently unlock windows to different worlds. I groan, and squint my eyes in pain, frustrated and miserable, as the guilty thoughts of what I did to Chance come back into my head.

*Chance might be dead now because of me! He was so good to me this entire time and, good reason or not for doing it, now he might be dead. He didn’t deserve death from me, he deserved every last drop of love possible! He deserved everything he gave to me and more in return, and all I gave him was a bullet!*

Tears begin to run down my sweat and dirt stricken face as I try to wipe them away and continue walking. Passing by the empty streets, there are no signs of guards or rebels or anyone. Everything is completely abandoned like a ghost town.

I continue on until I reach an abandoned gas station. After not having eaten for over a full day, my energy is too low to keep moving. I stop in, too tired to care and too lost in my own mind to know what to do about anything that happened earlier. My instinct to keep myself alive kicks in and demands food.

Pushing open the glass doors, the whole place is dark and empty with food still stocked on the shelves. I make my way in and open the fridge to grab a wrapped sandwich, only to find that it is warm and covered in mold.

*Disgusting. I should have expected that.*

Immediately, I turn and grab a few bags of chips and cans of soda instead.

The whole place is much creepier than I originally thought when I came in. I hurry and grab all I need to make my way out of the store, when suddenly, I hear voices coming from outside. Laughing and shouting, I hear a glass bottle break from outside the shop’s doors and I duck behind one of the aisles.

Muffled voices become clear when someone opens the door and I hear one of them laughingly spit, “Fuck those scientists man, they really got what was coming to them!” I hear the rusting of chip bags and drinks, and another adds, “Fuck the rebels too, those lunatics are just wasting their time.” Following that person’s sentence, another chimes in and snorts, “I did fuck one of the rebels once, or two of em! They didn’t like it very much though, struggled like hell to run away from me, but I didn’t let those cuties get away!” Booming laughter follows all of their voices, as I hear beer bottles clatter together and chip bags being ripped open.

I huddle in the corner, now terrified and frozen still, hoping they don’t turn into the aisle and come this way, but no sooner than thinking this all, I hear a voice yell, “Ay! Look what we have here!”

I lift my head up to see a teenage boy with scuffed hair and a missing tooth smiling right at me from behind the corner as three other guys follow behind him; all staring at me like predators watching their prey.

All of a sudden, the one that is missing a tooth breaks from the group and kneels down to me, grabbing my chin with his fingertips and directs my face towards his. “Ay girlie, whatcha doin’ around these parts?”

Terrified, but disgusted by the scent of beer on his breath, I rip my face away from his grasp and he whispers, “Oh? Don’t like me too much, eh?” He begins to sickly laugh, then he forcefully grabs my face with his disgusting hand and rips my vision back to him. “Well that’s too damn bad, 'cause it looks like you owe us a lil' somethin'.”

“I don’t owe you anything!” I protest in between my squished cheeks that are still held by his hand, and he replies, “Oh, but you do. You see, this whole store belongs to us, the Requza gang, and it seems that you,” he says as he points to the chips and soda that are still in my hands, “have been stealin’ from us, ya lil’ girl.”

He smiles once again, wide and stretched, and I see his yellow teeth, as he finishes, “And it’s time that you pay us back.”

Suddenly, he pins me to the floor and begins to unbutton my pants, quickly ripping the zipper down, as the rest of the boys come from behind him and tear my pants off the rest of the way. I begin to scream and wail as they flip me over and touch me everywhere. With it all happening so fast, my adrenaline pumps and fear runs through me.

*I don’t want this, no!*

And as if all in slow motion, I turn to them and stare the demonically smiling toothless one right in the eyes as I twist my wrist and:

Snap.

The cacophonous shattering fills the room and I hear all the boys scream as they run up and off of me. Directly in front of me, I see through the glass into a well-lit convenience store with a rather bored looking employee at the counter waiting for customers, when slowly, the cracks creep in and the scene fades, and what I am left with makes me scream and collapse.

Dead in front of me, is what used to be the toothless man. Still on his knees where he was before, except he now kneels without a head or a torso as his blood shoots and sputters from his veins onto the floor.

My eyes widen and my mouth falls agape as I whimper and take panicked breaths. I get myself to my feet and pull up my pants, running out of the now cluttered and destroyed convenience store.

I hear motorcycles start up and I look to see the rest of the gang speeding off on their bikes screaming, “That girl is a witch!”, “She’s a demon!”, and “Fuck this shit, I want to live!”

And seeing them ride off, seeing them get away after what they just tried to do and what they have already done to so many other girls, I can’t let them go.

I raise my hand up in front of me, and quickly propel my swing towards them, but this time there is no shatter. No portal, no vision of other worlds. Instead, as if a forceful wind just blew them away, I watch as their bodies, along with their motorcycles and anything else in my path, lift off the ground and smash into the building directly behind them.

It is now that I notice the sound of a motorcycle speeding off, and I turn to see that I missed one. He speeds off down the street, fleeing far too fast for me to catch.

Too far out of my range, I put my hand back down and I stare at the bodies about fifty feet away from me, then I look back down at my hands.

“So I can attack in two different ways,” I whisper to myself coldly.

*Close range and long range. With close range, my ability acts on the people and things here as a bomb like effect. While when done in long range, it acts as a powerful force, that can blow people away, but not blow them up or shatter the fabric of space, just like what happened in the warehouse with the rebels.*

I look back up at the two dead bodies not far in front of me, and I walk towards them. Once I come closer, I can hear that one of them is still alive, gurgling up blood.

When I come into his range of sight he begins to panic. “P-please,” he spits, choking on his own fluids, “please don’t kill me, I’m sorry!”

I just stare down at him with cold and hateful eyes and I spit, “I wonder how many girls begged you not to rape them. Why should I listen to your pleas when you didn’t listen to theirs, or mine!” And with that, I swiftly kick him in the face, knocking at least three blood covered teeth scattering across the ground.

I hear him utter soft gurgling noises, but he doesn’t speak. I stare down at him and spit in his face before I turn back and walk away towards his bike.

Knocked over by the force I created, I lift it right side up. With its engine still purring loudly, I get on as I mumble to myself, “At least riding Chance’s bike taught me something.” I grasp the handle bars and twist, speeding off back on my path towards the tree house.

*Damn, this ability I have. It’s more useful than I thought. I don’t know the full extent of its power, but from what I can tell after what just happened, I really can use it as a weapon.*

*Maybe I can use it as a weapon to save Chance if it isn’t already too late.*

With the bike still shaky due to of my lack of practice, it's a struggle to make it home.

“Come on,” I murmur, right before the bike flies off of the concrete and onto the dirt path towards the tree house.

*I’m going to go home and get prepared.*

*I’m going to save Chance.*

I pull up to the base of the tree house and everything is eerily silent.

I shut off and dismount the bike, when suddenly, I hear a gunshot boom. I frantically duck behind the bike and someone from the tree house yells, “State your name and affiliation with the rebellion group.”

Cautiously, I look up, but all I can see is a gun pointing out of one of the living room windows, though the voice is very familiar.

“Brigadier General Cobalt?” I shout, huddled on the ground.

There is nothing but silence, when slowly, I hear the gun shift and I hear his voice once again. “Lullaby Blue?”

He carefully peers over the windowsill down to me and our eyes meet.

“Yes, it’s me! Don’t shoot!” I yell, holding my hands in the air.

“Dear God, milady, you’re alive! Come up here, quickly! I can’t protect you very well when you're down there!” he shouts back in return.

Quickly, I dart from behind the bike to the tree house ladder, and I begin to climb up.

*If Cobalt is still alive, then he can help me fight back against the rebels and save Chance! This is perfect! Oh God, I’m so glad he is here.*

I pop my head in through the latch door, and I sigh in relief, “Oh Brigadier General, I’m so glad you’re-” but before I can finish, I hear a click behind my ear and turn to see a gun to my head with Cobalt behind it.

“B-brigadier?” I stutter.

Cobalt just stares at me with cold and distant eyes and commands, “Get up and walk over to that couch and sit and stay put.”

Startled and confused by his sudden change, I cautiously remove myself from the ladder and onto the wooden ground, heading towards the couch.

I sit down and look up to see Cobalt, still there with the gun pointed right at me, and it occurs to me.

*Cobalt sold out Chance.*

*He was never a friend.*

“Oh my God,” I murmur in realization, as Cobalt interrupts my train of thought, and says, “Why did you do it?”

This throws me off and I respond with a shaken voice, “W-what?”

“Why did you shoot Sir Chance?” he clarifies.

Not expecting this question, I stare at the ground trying to figure out how to respond and all I can think of to say is, “How did you know that?”

“Police radio. Intercepts all other radios within a certain radius, and I got wind of a frequency being sent from one rebel to another speaking of the incident. Now, answer my question. Why did you shoot Sir Chance?”

I stare at the ground knowing he isn’t going to believe me.

*Even if I tell him, he will just think that I’m a liar, that I’m insane.*

I look back up at him and the gun in my face.

*Maybe I’ll have to lie then, so I won’t look like a liar.*

“Accident, sir,” I whimper weakly. “An accident.”

Cobalt looks at me with his expression softening, but his gun still does not move. “The report said that it was a direct shot to the shoulder and that he already had Flip Uri in custody. Why would you even have your gun pointed in that area if Sir Chance already had the situation under control?”

Chills run down my spine as I break into a cold sweat, trying to think of an excuse. “I’m not good with guns, sir. I’ve never even shot one in my life. I didn’t realize the trigger was so sensitive, I meant to point it at Robin, and-”

At this point, I know my story is bullshit. I’m sure Cobalt does too. Staring up at the barrel with his blurry face in my peripheral vision, I do the only thing that I know how to do in situations that I see no way out of.

I cry like hell.

Suddenly, I explode into a mess of tears, babbling and bawling, crying about how it’s all my fault and I hate myself and that I didn’t mean to and oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.

To some extent, what I was saying was true, I really do blame myself for what happened, but I’m not nearly as useless as I make myself out to be. If I want his help, I’m going to have to do a little manipulating.

Slowly, I can hear Cobalt lowering his gun, and he murmurs, “H-hey, it’s okay, please, um, Lullaby, please, uh, calm down.”

I wail and wail and don’t stop until I hear the gun set aside on the floor and I feel him sit next to me.

Slowly, I stop my crying and look to him with broken, puppy dog eyes, and he looks back at me with ones that are surprised and filled with sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” I cry, as I wipe away my tears.

“No, no,” Cobalt replies. “I’m sorry that I was so rough with you, I had no idea.”

I cry a little more, then stop and sniffle, “It’s okay, I just, I, I just-” before breaking out into more tears.

Cobalt just sits there, thrown completely off guard and unsure of how to handle this situation. His reaction makes it clear that he is not used to comforting distraught teenage girls.

“Uh, Lullaby, is the anything I can do for you?” he asks slowly and carefully, afraid that anything he says will make me just cry more.

“Y-yes,” I sniffle. “Please Brigadier General, help me get him back. Help me save him.”

Cobalt takes in a small shocked gasp before exhaling in a sigh. “Robin employs over three hundred rebels. You and I versus all of them will only result in our deaths, there is nothing we can do. I’m sorry, Lullaby.”

At this, my tears stop and I turn to annoyed anger, which to the best of my abilities I try to hide from my face to no avail.

Cobalt sees this change and defends himself, stammering, “I’m sorry, I really would like to help! Sir Chance risked his life to find his father and get immunity for my men and I, but Flip spied on us and tipped off Robin to the unscheduled raid. As it stands now, I was the only one to escape. All the others were either killed on the spot or captured. Without a team,” he begins to choke up, “*my*team, there is nothing I can do.”

There is a long silence, and I am beginning to become too incoherent due to fatigue to continue the conversation. Regardless, Cobalt continues to converse. “Milady, how did you escape, anyways?”

I stare at Cobalt, but to be completely honest, I can barely keep my eyes open anymore. The fatigue has finally gotten to me and his words are now falling on numb ears. My eyelids flicker and I hear him through muffled words, “Milady, are you alright?”

I begin to fade even more as I nod in response, but that is one lie that he can see completely through. “Here, come on,” he sighs, as he lifts me to my feet and walks me to the bedroom. “Let’s get you some sleep. We will talk more after you are fully rested.”

Slowly, almost grudgingly, I drag my feet across the wood flooring. Each step feeling like an eternity.

Once I finally reach the entrance to the bedroom, I break from his gentle hold and stumble myself to bed.

And to be perfectly honest, I don’t even hear a single word from Cobalt’s mouth after that because I am already out before his words can reach my ears.

**Chapter Twenty**

I’m running.

Away from screams, away from bullets, away from complete madness.

I don’t know where I am running to, but I am running away. I run faster and faster until my legs begin to wear out, and all of a sudden, I run into someone.

Bouncing back, onto the floor, I stare up at the person that I collided with.

And it’s Felix.

“Analiese," he gently says.

Suddenly, I remember Flip and how he pretended to be Felix and fear strikes into me.

“Don’t worry, my love,” he responds softly, as if able to read my mind, “I really am Felix. I am real. See?” He reaches back and pulls out a little ball of orange and white fur from behind him. “See? I have Little One.”

My expression softens at this, seeing it is the real Felix and not just an imitator, when out of nowhere, I suddenly hear another incredibly familiar voice come from behind me, uttering, “Lullaby?”

I turn to see Chance standing there, just a few yards away in the opposite direction, and I see his eyes trail up to Felix’s. “Lullaby, who is this guy?” he slowly asks.

Suddenly, all of the happiness that I feel for Chance being alive washes from me and is replaced with a cold hard feeling in my chest as I hear Felix calmly respond, “Don’t worry, my love.”

I turn my head to look at him and the first thing I notice is a gun in his hand pointed right at Chance. With the sweetest smile on his face, he softly says, “We will get rid of him, because you love me right?”

And the sound of my scream and the boom of his gun are synonymous. By the time I turn to see Chance, he is already shot in the shoulder, falling to the ground uttering, “Lu-Lullaby?”

Hitting the ground in a crash, I rush over to him, watching as he bleeds out everywhere. He opens his eyes just enough to see me and whisper, “Lullaby, how could you?”

“Yes, how could you?” I hear Felix’s voice say, as he is now standing immediately in front of me. This makes me jump and I look up at him to see it isn’t the warm face of my boyfriend, but the cold, dark, eyelinered and straight-haired face of Flip.

“How could you?” Chance utters.

“How could you?” Flip yells.

“How could you?” They both say in unison.

“How could you?”

“How could you?”

‘How could you?”

And suddenly, I fly up in bed taking panicked breaths.

And I am awake.

Alone in bed.

I am awake.

I twist out of bed and plant my feet on the ground. I feel disgusting. Absolutely disgusting. Both physically and mentally.

“God,” I murmur as I wipe my hand down my oily and unwashed face.

*I can’t wait any longer. I got my rest, and I’m going to go get some food. After that, I need to go save Chance. With or without Cobalt.*

I get to my feet and walk outside to see Cobalt still asleep on the couch. I look at him, unsure if I should wake him or not and I just decide to leave him be. If he wakes up from the noises of me moving around, then he does, and if he doesn’t, he doesn’t.

I move into the small kitchen area and begin to open up all the pantries in search of food. Luckily for me, Chance stocked the place pretty well from our last adventure so I don’t have to look far before I find boxes of cereal and energy bars.

I continue opening up cupboard after cupboard, when suddenly, something stops me.

There, in the far back corner sits a huddled ball of brown fur, shaking and making a clicking noise.

“Meiko?” I whisper softly.

The little ball or fur stops making the noise and turns to me with its beady eyes holding a cracker in its hand.

*It is Meiko.*

But something is strange. She isn’t hissing, or biting, or scratching. She’s not even running away.

I stare up at her as she stares down at me and I notice that she is trembling.

*She’s scared.*

“Hey, it’s okay,” I coo to her, “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Meiko just stares at me, unsure of what to do, as her eyes dart from me to a far back corner of the room, then back to me again.

“Here,” I gently say as I reach my hand up to her. “It’s okay, come on.”

Meiko backs up a little in fear, and then slowly, but surely, she comes to me, sniffing my hand, before crawling onto it. Calmly and quietly, she sits in the center of my palm.

“There, there,” I coo, as I pull her from the pantry and close to me, “it’s alright.”

Suddenly, she jumps from my hand to my shoulder and curls into my hair, creating a makeshift nest. I can’t help but giggle from the tickling. “Well if you’d like to stay there, then by all means." I then turn back to the food that is on the counter as I begin to open and eat it.

Energy bars, canned fruits, and cereal, without milk, unfortunately.

*I guess this is what it comes to in a post-apocalyptic world. Non-perishable foods only.*

Still standing, I finish the last of my energy bar and stuff the rest of the cereal into my mouth, but as I turn to get the weapons before I leave, it hits me.

*The weapons.*

*I never found out where Chance stores the weapons.*

“God damn it,” I snap, stomping my foot on the wooden ground in frustration.

“Huh?” I hear a muffled voice from the living room. “Milady, is that you?”

“Shit,” I utter to myself. “I’m sorry I didn’t mean to wake you up,” I yell into the other room as I wander out of the kitchen, “I’m just missing some stuff and I kind of need to find them before I leave.”

Cobalt looks at me with tired and weary eyes. Clearing as much fatigue out of his voice as possible, he croaks, “You’re going?”

I look at him with strong and sure eyes, and I just nod.

Cobalt looks down in thought, then back up at me and says, “Well, if that is your choice then I cannot stop you. What you really need before you go though, are weapons.”

*I know that.*

Not wanting to make things any more complicated than they have to be, I just simply nod again and watch as he reaches behind his back and turns around with a black object in his hand.

A gun.

“It isn’t much, but it’s all I can give you. I have my riffle over by the window, but I need that for protection in case anyone tries to come after me. I hope this can help.”

My eyes light up at this as I walk over and take the gun. Flipping it over, then flipping it back again in curiosity, I examine the precise detail on it.

“I know that you said you aren’t so great at shooting, so please be careful with this,” Cobalt sighs. “I do hope Sir Chance is still alive.”

A horrible pain runs through me as the reality that Chance may not even be alive anymore comes into my mind. This whole time I have been bent on saving him, but in all truth, he might already be dead.

Tears weld up in my eyes and begin to bubble over. Cobalt notices this, and worriedly asks, “Milady? Is something wrong?”

Not wanting to show weakness, I wipe away my fragility and replace it with strength. With bravery. And most of all with optimism that Chance is still alive. He has to be.

“I’m fine,” I state calmly and firmly, my own brave tone even surprising myself. “Thank you for the gun Brigadier, it will definitely help.”

I turn to leave when, out of the corner of my eye, I see Cobalt’s hand outstretched and I look back up to him smiling firmly.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, milady. I hope that you will return safely so we can meet again. You are truly the bravest woman I have ever met,” he states with a bow.

Taken off guard, but pleasantly surprised by this, I smile and reply, “Thank you, General.”

He nods his head, and I nod mine in return, as I turn towards the balcony door to leave.

Suddenly, Meiko shuffles ever so slightly in my hair and I remember that she is still there.

“Come on, girl,” I coo softly as I pull her from my hair and into my two hands. “I know this is going to be quite the adventure, but it’s not one for you.”

Her little black eyes stare up into mine and I can tell that she is scared.

Scared that she is out in this crazy world away from her home at the zoo. Scared that the boy she has become so accustomed to and grown to love is now replaced by Cobalt, someone strange and foreign. Scared that she isn’t going to survive.

“I know, sweetie, I know. I know exactly how you feel, but you got to be a big girl now, okay?”

Without knowing if she understood or not, Meiko simply licks the scar of where she first bit me on my finger and hops off and runs away. I turn to see her, on the opposite side of the room, and I wave goodbye to the both of them, and both of them wave back.

Silently, I turn the knob to the balcony door and exit, wondering if this is the last time that I will ever see them.

If I will ever see any of this.

I walk to the fire pole and without a second thought, I grasp the metal and release my legs from the platform. Quickly and fiercely, I plummet towards the forest floor, stopping myself just before I hit the ground and jumping down.

Determined and ready, I turn towards the bike to leave, but suddenly, I freeze.

There’s someone there.

Someone is standing next to the bike.

Quickly and quietly, I crouch to the ground and take out the gun Cobalt gave me, as I slowly creep over to the guy who isn’t facing me. With the view of him eclipsed by another bike I’ve never seen before and Chance’s trailer, I can hardly make out what he looks like besides that he is wearing a black tank top and dark worn jeans. I move in slowly towards him, being absolutely careful not to make any sounds.

I stop just yards away, knowing if I come any closer he will hear my steps. Calmly and cautiously, I speak. “I’ve got a gun pointed straight at you. Turn around slowly and I won’t shoot.”

The person jolts, startled by my presence, and slowly, he turns around and I see who it is.

“Flip?” I utter.

Flip stands there, hands raised, looking at me for the first time with eyes not full of hate, and he softly, yet sarcastically replies, “Hey, looks like you remembered my name for once.”

Instead of feeling love, passion, or any kind of longing for Felix, a surge of rage sears through me. Without thinking, I charge at him, pinning him against the bike with the gun pointed directly at him, and I yell, “Where the fuck is Chance!? I risked his life for you!”

With my emotions completely frantic, I hardly even hear him when he stammers, “I know, I know! I’m grateful, that’s why I’m here! Put the gun down, please!”

With my anger boiling, I struggle to relax but I have to.

*I need to calm down.*

I release him and back off, but I do not lower my gun. “Where. Is. Chance?” I sternly repeat.

Flip clears his throat and returns to a normal standing position as he says, “You shot him pretty badly, you know.”

“Yes, I know!” His words pierce through me with guilt. “I know what I did, is he alive or not!?”

I stand there shaking, terrified to hear his answer. Terrified that I may have just murdered the only person in this world who loved me, when Flip firmly says, “No. He is still alive.”

A rush of relief comes over me and I lower my gun, cracking a slight smile as I stutter, “H-he is?” But almost immediately, the realization that this could just be a trick comes into my mind and I pull my gun back up in a ready position. “How can I trust you, though?” I question.

Flip just sighs. “Because right now, I am trusting you. I came from my grounds to yours, completely unarmed and without backup.”

“Why?” I press further as I look around to make sure no one else really is here. “Why would you come all the way out here to where I live?”

Flip just sighs again, and for the first time since I have been here, I see his face transform into Felix’s. He softly replies, “Because you saved me.”

This answer throws me off guard and I repeat, “Because I saved you?”

Flip nods, his dark straight hair and black eyeliner being the only things that separates him from the Felix I know, and he quietly asks, “You really do still love me, don’t you?”

My mouth drops, not understanding, not comprehending what is happening here and I just utter, “I-I’m very confused right now. Things aren’t what they seem for me and-” but before I can finish he puts a finger to his lips and shushes me softly saying, “It’s okay. It’s confusing for all of us.”

There is a long silence where I don’t know what to say or how to respond, and to be honest, I don’t think he does either. But regardless of this, he is the first to break the silence. “I’m sorry for the things I said about you earlier. I don’t know what got into me…” He trails off before continuing, “I guess since things didn’t work out between us and that you stayed with Chance, I just let the darker thoughts in my head get the best of me.”

I stare at Flip, not knowing anything of what he is referring to, and I slowly speak. “Flip, you may not believe me, but I really don’t have any memories before just a few weeks ago. When I woke up, all I knew was how I felt for you and things have been very difficult since. Please, just tell me what happened between us.”

Flip looks at me with a pained expression and drops his gaze to the ground. I don’t know if he believes me or not, but regardless, he responds, “About a year and a half ago, we became friends. We met in a park nearby the town square and from that point on we would just meet each other there every week. We had so many things in common and got along so well that it didn’t take long for us to become best friends. From there, the lines got blurred.”

Flip takes in a deep breath as if preparing himself, and he continues, “I’ll be honest, I fell in love with you from the start. You were beautiful and kind and I loved everything about you, and for a long time I thought that you felt the same way for me. Our meetings went from every week to every day. You would come after school from the local public school and I would come from the private one just a few miles away. We spent so much time together and yet,” he trails off just a bit before quietly murmuring, “you never told me you had a boyfriend.”

He looks up at me for only a moment before returning his gaze back to the ground. “Since we went to different schools, I never knew about Chance. I never knew about your relationship with him or this tree house you had together or anything. You never mentioned a single word.”

I stare at him, taking in all he is saying, letting the past I never had come to life in my head.

“You would always tease me, and act all cutesy, even hold my hand sometimes. I just figured words didn’t need to be said, considering that if you were in a relationship, you would have never been doing those things in the first place, or so I thought. You were so sweet and innocent, I never imagined that you would be a cheater.”

His words slam me hard, remembering how I’ve already cheated on Felix with Chance. That despite my confusion at the time, in the end I am still a cheater. What Flip is saying about Lullaby isn’t so far from the truth about me now.

I begin to feel sick from just the thought of it, but he carries on. “You always told me to never follow you home after the park, but one day I did because I wanted to leave flowers at your door. I was going to finally confess my feelings for you the next morning and ask you if you would officially be my girlfriend.”

His voice begins to choke up a bit and he says, “When I followed you ‘home’, apparently you lived in a giant tree house, and you weren’t alone either. I didn’t even need to follow you up because a bright, blond haired boy was already waiting for you at the base of the tree. You ran into his arms and kissed him and that was all I needed to see.”

Flip recomposes himself as he continues, “I didn’t go to the park for a few days after that, maybe even a week. I ignored all your calls and texts and I even missed a day or two of school. I was a complete wreck. By the time I finally came back to the park, there you were, waiting for me.” Flip takes in a deep breath and exhales, “The moment you saw me, you came running, and the first thing I did once you got within my reach was to push you away.”

I flinch, remembering how awful it felt the first time I saw him, when I came running and he spit in my face. He sees the pain in my expression and he looks down in response. “I didn’t mean to be so harsh, I just… I couldn’t touch you. I couldn’t hold you. You weren’t mine and I knew it. I wasn’t going to lie to myself anymore and I wasn’t going to have you lie to me either.”

Flip looks to the side. It's completely obvious now that he isn’t over what happened. That he never got over it. That this entire time he has been doing nothing but hurt me so he doesn’t feel the pain, himself.

“You fell to the ground and looked up at me, confused and scared, but I was numb. You asked me what was wrong with me and I just replied, ‘You. There’s nothing wrong with me, but there is something definitely wrong with you.’ I turned around to walk back, realizing it was a bad idea to have come. That in my anger and rage, I was only going to hurt you. I didn’t want to hurt you. I just wanted you to go away.”

He pauses, as if this next part was one he wished to omit, but he goes on. “You ran after me and grabbed my arm, and it was only instinctual for me to throw you off, back onto the ground. You began to cry and people were watching but at that point, I didn’t care. I just kept walking and I didn’t stop. I walked straight out of the park and never saw or spoke to you again.”

A long silence fills the air and Flip lowers his head, speaking quietly and hardly audible. “From that point on, I demonized you. I took away your humanity in my mind. Branded you as a liar, a cheater, but worst of all, someone who was heartless and didn’t care about me. Up until you opened up my jail cell a few days ago, I hadn't seen you in over a year. A year is a damn long time to boil about these things.”

Tears, having been weld up in my eyes for some time now, begin to drop down my face. Seeing an identical copy of the only boy I had ever loved stand right in front of me and tell me how I broke his heart just kills me. Knowing it isn’t really him, and knowing that Felix isn’t even in this world, doesn’t matter. To me, my heart hurts just as much.

“You know,” Flip says, breaking my train of thought, “I really didn’t think you loved me. I thought it was all about Chance and I was just your toy. After seeing what you did yesterday, with not only saving my life, but risking Chance’s life for mine…” Flip trails off for a moment, lacking the right words. “You didn’t have to do that, but you did, and that’s why I’m here.”

I look at him, confused, while I wipe away my tears with my sleeve and he continues, “If I really love you like I said I did all this time, then I wouldn’t be trying to hurt you. True love doesn’t hurt, it’s not jealous, it’s not full of rage. It is unconditional and I am going to hold to that. I am going to make things right.”

Flip moves from where he was standing and he walks towards me. My hearts starts racing a hundred miles an hour and I begin to panic. Not expecting, not knowing, completely thrown off guard by what he is doing, when suddenly, he wraps his arms around me and all my thoughts just stop.

I melt into his grasp and wrap my limp arms around him and without any control over myself I begin to cry.

Hearing these words after all the words he has already said to me. All the words he kicked and abused me with. I feel his warmth and his strong hold, as I breathe in the scent that I have missed for so long. All this time that I’ve felt hated, all this misery that I’ve experienced because of him, all of it is just gone by his embrace. All of it just washes away.

He pulls his face away from mine and our eyes lock. Chills run down my spine when I see that, not only am I crying, but he is too, with tears just barely overflowing from his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry and I love you,” he chokes.

I begin to bawl and I whimper, “I love you too.”

I hold him tight and sob into his shoulder as he kisses my forehead and holds me close.

We stand there for what feels like hours until he finally releases me from his embrace and grabs both of my arms firmly. Looking me straight in the eyes, he speaks softly and slowly. “Lullaby, we are going to save Chance, but you have to listen to me, alright?”

I look into his deep, brown eyes as I nod my head.

“Chance is being held in one of the back rooms with his dad. He was bandaged up pretty well but his health is still not the best it has ever been, so we have to be careful.”

I nod again in response.

“We’ll leave on the bike that I rode here on. You’ll drive and I’ll hitch your trailer onto the back of it and I'll ride in there, pretending to be your hostage. Drive to the warehouse, then let me out and walk in with me tied up, pretending to be captured…” His words trail off as he looks to the ground somberly.

I look at him and wait for him to say something, but when he doesn’t, I ask, “What’s wrong?”

He continues his gaze into the ground and he tries his best to speak. “It’s just- It’s just that I love Robin, I do. But what she is doing just isn’t right. The power has gotten to her head. I hate that I am having to do this, but I don’t have a choice.”

He pauses and the sound of the wind blows and rustles through the trees. “I’m not going to let anyone else die if I can help it, and especially not the son of the guy who could save our asses. Robin is too power crazy to realize that Anvil can save us. This wasteland is her utopia now. The problem is, is that if Anvil does save us, then she goes back to being a regular school girl. Robin does not want this. She wants to stay in command, so she ends up oppressing the people who can save us because of her crazed values. Whether she realizes this is why she doing it or it’s subconscious, that’s why I believe she isn’t thinking straight. She doesn’t want to lose power.” Flip pauses for a moment and looks to the side. “That’s why I have to do this. I have to make things right.”

After convincing himself of this fact, he looks back up at me and states, “I’ll be your hostage. Take me inside the building with a gun to my head, no one will shoot. Robin isn’t stupid though, and after you saved me back there, she won’t buy that you would actually try to kill me, but it will at least buy you time.”

I stare at him, now looking firmly into my eyes and he continues. “From there, demand a trade, Chance and his dad for me. As fucked up as Robin can be, she loves me, and she wouldn’t let me stay in harm’s way for long. She will try to trick you though, so be careful, she is a fox. Don’t release me until you are sure that you are safe with Chance and his father and even then, don’t let your guard down. Get out as fast as you can and I’ll do what I can to delay her.” Flip then releases me and runs to the bike, and he begins to hitch the trailer on. “Come on, we can’t waste any time!” he shouts.

I stand, just for a moment, as my mind tries to process all that just happened, and before I am even ready to move, my legs are already rushing me to the bike. By the time I reach it, Flip already has the trailer hitched and is at the side of the motorcycle taking something from one of the bike’s compartments. With sounds of jangling metal, he pulls out a pair of handcuffs, holding a key in the other hand. “Hurry, put theses on me.”

Immediately, I follow his commands and do exactly that, latching his wrists together behind his back. I hear him tugging at them and he looks up, saying, “Good. Perfect. Now once we arrive, immediately press the gun to my head and walk in with me. Nobody will fuck with you if you do that. But please, please, do me a favor and unload the gun now, so no accidents can happen. I’m sticking my neck out for you here, so I would rather not be doing it under a guillotine.”

I nod my head and obediently open up the magazine, knocking out the bullets inside and shoving them in my jacket pocket.

Flip nods in return and turns around, quickly making his way to the trailer. “Open it up for me," he demands, as I follow behind and unlatch the back doors. Impressively enough, Flip manages in by himself once they are opened.

“Park about a half mile away from the warehouse, we will walk the rest of the way. This way, the bikes motor won’t alert the rebels, and even if it does, I will already be your hostage long before they can even see us. We don’t want to take any chances of a rebel catching you and ‘saving’ me.”

“Right,” I respond, taking in all his commands perfectly.

“Alright, from here on out, I can’t talk to you anymore,” Flip states. “It would make them suspicious. Do you have any more questions before we go?”

I think to myself for a moment and I ask, “Where are the keys to your bike?”

“They’re in the right compartment,” he answers to me as I nod my head in response.

Right as I begin to close the doors, he calls out, “Lullaby, wait.”

I stop and look at him to see his loving eyes and the soft, sensitive smile that I am so used to, as he utters, “No matter what happens, I do want you to know that I really do love you. I still do and I always will.”

A rush of emotions flutter through me, hearing the words that I was terrified I would never hear again. My face flushes red and I can’t help when the smile creeps onto my face and my eyes water, and I respond, “I love you too,” as I slowly close the doors.

Taking in a deep breath, and letting go of all that had just happened, I shake my head and straighten my mind as I hurry back to the bike. I open the right compartment, as Flip said, and exchange my gun for the keys. I shut the compartment tight and jump on to inspect the controls. I shove the keys in the ignition with confidence and turn them as the engine revs up. I shut my eyes tight for a moment, mustering up all the courage and bravery inside of me, as I take one last deep breath and speed off and out of the forest at full force.

**Chapter Twenty-One**

Now that it's light out, and after having a few days experience in driving a motor cycle, things are a bit easier. I race off faster than I had ever gone on my own, and I hit the pavement in no time.

Faster than I thought, the stopped cars begin to come from into view to in my face, and I slow down to safely weave around them. Making my way through the cars and alleyways, I pass by the convenience store where I was assaulted to see the two dead bodies of the rapists lying on the concrete. All flying by in a moment, I continue on until I speed to just yards from the all-too-familiar warehouse.

Pressing the brake, I slow to a halt and dismount. Quickly, I open the compartment and take out the gun while I pocket the keys to the bike, along with the bullets, as I hurry back to the trailer as fast as possible.

I approach the back and everything is silent. Flip isn’t making a single sound.

My heart begins to race in a short panic that something is wrong. I open the doors and I am quickly relieved when I see Flip with his finger over his mouth telling me to remain quiet.

Still handcuffed, Flip agilely jumps out of the back and silently lands on the green grass beneath us. He suspiciously looks all around for any rebels guarding the place, then turns to me and nods.

I nod back, knowing what I have to do, as I raise the gun up and press it to his temple. Flip squints, probably remembering not too long ago when Chance’s gun was pressed to his head just the same, but he takes a deep breath and reopens his eyes. Looking forward he begins to walk, and I follow after, with the gun pressed to his head.

*This is it. For once in my life, I can’t just wait around to be saved. Regardless of how I feel or what I think, the situation has finally arisen where I must take a stand. My entire life, I have passively waited for others to come and save me, even for the most trivial things. I can’t do that anymore. I’m putting my life on the line as well as Flip’s and Chance’s. I need to make things right, and I will. I have no other choice.*

Flip and I walk for some time as the large building comes into plain view, with a few rebels now in sight, sitting outside, guarding the entrance.

Suddenly, one of them looks up and sees us and begins to yell undistinguishable words, no doubt to alert the others of our presence.

We continue on, unfazed and strong, walking towards the warehouse.

Now, one by one, more guards fill out with their guns pointed, yelling for us to identify ourselves, when Flip shouts, “Help! She is holding me hostage! Don’t shoot! It’s me, Flip Uri! She’s got a gun to my head! Do not shoot!”

Slowly, and not sure what to do, one by one, all the rebels begin to lower their weapons as one runs back inside. Most likely to report to Robin what is happening.

Flip looks back to me just for a moment and gives a smile. Not one of warmth or happiness, but one of fear and insecurity. One trying to comfort me, but only showing his own instability instead.

A smile that is saying goodbye.

I return the look the best I can, not knowing what to think, and I return forward. Just a few rebels are now standing outside, only a few yards away, all with their weapons lowered. Slowly and carefully, like walking through a pack of wolves, we pass them by and enter the building, being immediately swallowed up by the huge room.

Flip and I stop, just a few feet after walking in, to see Robin standing at front and center stage with about one hundred rebels in front of her.

Everything is quiet and Robin no longer has the smug grin of the last time we encountered. We all stand in silence for some time before the silence is broken by Robin’s voice.

“Give him back,” she shouts, loud and firm. “You saved him before, you won’t kill him now. We all know that.”

Suddenly, a surge of anger rises in me, and I yell, “Because of his existence, my boyfriend is seriously wounded! What I did was a mistake that I made out of panic, and one I won’t make again. Give Chance and his father back, or I blow his head off.”

Robin’s eyes widen in fear, and she takes a moment to form her next words. “Ch-Chance is too badly wounded to even walk. He can’t even come out if he-”

“Liar!” I shout. “Give him back now! You have ten seconds!”

Fear runs through my head that what she is saying is the truth, but I can’t trust her. Flip says she is a fox and that she will try to trick me. This may just be that and I can’t afford to fall for it.

Robin stares in a panic, not making a single move and I yell, “Ten.”

Still standing in the same place, I watch her begin to squirm.

“Nine.”

“Okay, okay! We are sending someone to get him!” she yells as she points to one of the many soldiers and sends him running out of the room.

A long silence passes once again in wait to see Chance and something doesn’t feel right. I stare at Robin, who is almost too far away to see her expression, but close enough that I can tell that she isn’t as worried as she should be.

Quietly, I stand, listening to the soft shuffles of the soldiers as I keep my eyes on the still stance of Robin. Suddenly, I hear a footstep behind me and I swing around, only to be grabbed by my wrists and sides as Flip is ripped away from my grasp.

“No!” I scream, as one of the rebels rips the gun from my hand and throws me down to the ground.

“Robin!” I grunt at the top of my lungs, when one of them suddenly punches my face into the ground.

All I can hear is Robin’s loud and sadistic laugh resounding throughout the entire room. “You idiot! You really thought you could get anything out of me?!” Her booming laugh continues as I hear a door open, and Robin shouts, “Well, I do keep my word though! Here is Chance, as I promised!”

The rebels holding me down throw me back up to my feet as blood runs down my face. I focus my blurred eyes on the stage, and sure enough, there he is. Standing, but just barely, next to Robin, being supported by two other rebels, with his father handcuffed next to him.

“Lulla-” Chance begins weakly, when I shout, “Chance! Are you alright!?”

Chance doesn’t respond and instead, I hear more of Robin’s laughter as Flip is brought onto stage and released next to her. She turns to him and says something soft and inaudible and I barely hear Flip coldly respond, “You’ve gone too far, Robin.”

Robin’s expression changes to one of shock, then disgust, as she turns back to me and yells, “You’ve put me through enough hassle, bitch. I think it’s time we got this over with.”

Suddenly, a dooming fear pounds inside of me with the realization of my situation.

*I could die.*

*I could die right now.*

“Do either of you have a gun back there?’ Robin yells to the men restraining me.

*These could be my last few moments.*

“Yes, sir!” the one to my left replies.

*No, I can’t let this happen, I can’t die here, I’ve come to far!*

“Ah, well you know what to do!” Robin yells.

*No.*

“Finish her!”

“No!” I scream, as I twist my retrained hand and release, hearing a shattering boom behind me.

I hear the choking, gurgling noises of the rebel at my left, and I turn to see the shattered space right below his torso as it slowly closes up to reveal a huge, gashing wound.

The rebel drops to the floor, bleeding out, and the rebel to my right screams and runs away, releasing me to stand on my own.

Robin, Chance, Anvil and Flip, along with all the one hundred other rebels, are all staring at me in horror.

Nobody says a word and in their silence I decide to speak.

“Robin,” I yell, firm, loud and in anger. “What you have done is unforgivable, and the lies you have told have gone far enough.” I begin to walk forward as I shout, “Anvil Silver was on his way to creating a cure to this horrible disease, and despite the past, he was trying to better the future, one that you are attempting to regress for your own selfish gain.”

Robin’s face begins to come into better view, with the fear in her expression now evident.

“All of you soldiers following Robin’s commands! Anvil was trying to save you all, but instead, you just listened to the words of one ignorant, power crazed human being! If it wasn’t for all the havoc you all wreaked on the scientists, you all might have been saved by now, living life freely again!”

I continue forward, getting dangerously close to the first line of soldiers, who are now beginning to shakily raise their guns.

I stare the front-liners in the eyes, and I calmly state, “Move aside if you want to live, stand in my way if you want to die.”

Shaking, the soldiers panic for a moment but then part the way for me to walk, and Robin yells, “What are you doing!? You all are ordered to protect me!”

A hush of whispers emit from the soldiers and one of the front-liners yell, “Yeah, and what about us!? Your life is no better than any of ours! We want to live too!”

Suddenly, a louder rustle of voices emit in agreement, and my path towards Robin grows wider and wider.

Robin begins to panic, watching as all of her soldiers begin to give away from beneath her. “No,” she chokes, “no, I’m trying to save you all!”

“Saving us by putting us all in danger before yourself!?” a soldier shouts. “Yeah, what about us!?” another screams.

The hushes turn to talking, and the volume grows and grows as I come closer and closer until finally, I reach Robin at the front of the stage.

I stand, staring into her terrified eyes, when suddenly, a female soldier to my left yells to me, “Well I don’t believe in your lies, girl! Robin has been doing her best and you’re going to die here!”

I calmly turn to see her with a gun pointed in my face, and all in an instant, I swat my hand out and she, along with about thirty other rebels behind her barrel out and across the room, skidding and slamming against the metal walls.

Screams and shouts echo through the room, and the lines and rows of rebels disperse into running spread out masses, getting as far away from me as they possibly can.

I turn back to Robin to see her trembling in complete fear.

Chance is watching me wide-eyed, along with Flip and Anvil, and I hear a voice whimper, “Lullaby?”

I look to where it came from to see Chance, and I smile the best I can as I softly reply, “My name isn’t Lullaby, Chance. It’s Analiese.”

I watch as Chance’s expression just cracks and he stands speechlessly staring, when all of a sudden, Robin rips a gun from behind her and points it at me. I turn to her and she shakily screams, “I don’t know what you are or how you are doing this shit, but you can’t be tougher than a bullet!”

“Robin, no!” Flip screams, but all in a moment, those words are followed by a sudden boom and I turned away with the instinctual swat of my hand.

A loud gasp emanates in the room and everything lays still. Slowly, I open my eyes as I hear a choking gasp come from in front of me and I turn back to Robin to see her face, just barely bleeding, grazed from the side.

*The bullet.*

*I deflected the bullet.*

Robin stands and stares, the gun in her hand now lowered limply at her side as the blood drips down her face.

“Robin,” I calmly say, “move aside.”

Slowly and in a daze, Robin stares in shock then limply nods her head, and removes herself as I requested, relocating quietly next to Flip.

Strong and steady, I walk up the stairs to Chance and not a single soul makes a noise. Step by step, I make my way up, but of the corner of my eye, I notice something.

Back from where Robin was standing, when the bullet grazed her face, is a crack.

Carefully, I walk forward to the crack to see that light is illuminating from it and in the center of this crack was the bullet.

“What the-” I whisper to myself as I press the tightly lodged bullet between my two fingers and watch as the light shines brightly from the cracks around it.

“What is she doing?” I hear someone whisper.

Carefully, I twist and pull the bullet from the cracks, and suddenly the whole place shakes, following a loud crash and a blinding light that fills the room.

I squint and blink my eyes as the light fades, and I open them fully to see what has happened.

There, from where I pulled the bullet, was a huge shattered space, one far larger and more vast than any other I have ever made. Through it was the view of the warehouse in my universe, only this time, something is different.

Instinctively, I reach forward, but instead of my hand hitting a barrier, it touches what feels like watery ripples and my hand passes through.

My heart skips a beat and my eyes widen as four words escape my mouth. “I can go home.”

Quickly, I turn to Chance, who is staring beyond me at the giant area of shattered space in complete shock and horror. Staring at it beyond his belief and comprehension, his fragile sea green eyes slowly fall to me, and he stutters, “Wh-who are you?”

My expression softens and I calmly reply, “I am who I have been saying I am from the start. I’m Analiese.”

I turn behind me to see all the rebels in shock, staring on stage to where I am. I then turn to Robin and Flip, who are making the same expression.

“I hope everyone is on the same page now about what needs to be done,” I speak coldly to Robin. I turn back to the rest of the scattered rebels, and I yell, “This is your life. You can spend the rest of it in this hell listening to Robin, or spend it freely in the outside world by listening to Dr. Anvil and Chance! The choice is yours!”

My voice echoes through the room and everyone is still, when suddenly, a terrified, weepy voice breaks the silence.

“Where is Lullaby?” I hear Chance’s shaky and choked up voice whimper, “where- where is my girlfriend?”

I turn back to him, as soft and understanding as I can be and I coo, “I don’t know, Chance. I’m sorry, I wish I did. If I am here though, then she has to be in my world, I’m sure of it.”

He stares at me speechless, not being able to grasp what is happening.

“I’m going to go home now.” I say. “ I’m going back and I’m going to find her for you. I promise.”

Tears drop down his worn face and I watch as he stares into me, mouth agape and silent. I turn back to the shattered space, which is now much smaller and closing up, only about the size of a door.

*I want to say goodbye longer, but I can’t. if I stay any longer I may lose my only opportunity to go home. I need to go.*

I turn to Chance once more and my eyes begin to water. Slowly, I raise my hand and wave to him, smiling the best I can as I take my last look at the boy who saved my life.

Chance just stands there, tears flowing down his face, too overwhelmed to understand that this is our last goodbye.

Tears drop down my cheeks and I call out, “Thank you for everything Chance, I’ll never forget you.” And with those few words, I turn away and back to the portal.

Taking a deep breath, I extend my arm, passing through the severed space with fluid ripples.

I smile, if not a bit scared, and with that I step through.

**Chapter Twenty-Two**

Everything is pitch black, consumed and swallowed by complete and total darkness.

I turn around from where I came to see that the portal I stepped from is now just nothing but empty space.

Standing still, everything is silent and my eyes begin to adjust.

Walls and windows come into view; dirty, dusty, and broken.

My eyes absorb the small amounts of morning light peeking through the shattered windows, and I focus my sights lower to see the door.

Carefully, I walk off the empty stage and make my way to the exit as fast as I can, when I notice something.

*The air.*

*The air, it’s warm!*

Excitement riles up in me and I reach the door, old and dented in, and I turn the rusty knob to be led outside.

Morning sun hits my face with a soft orange tint, and I run. I run as fast as I possibly can, darting across the field towards the town.

*Oh my God, It’s too good to be true!*

*Did I really…?*

*Did I really do it?*

I sprint until my legs give out and my lungs are about to burst as I crash to the ground in the warm dewy grass.

I begin to laugh like crazy when suddenly, I hear something.

I stop laughing and listen carefully, picking up the soft noises as well as I possibly can.

Gravelly, rustling noises. Noises of breaks and motors and gears.

“Cars,” I whisper to myself. “Oh my God, working cars!”

I jump back to my feet and run again, all the way up the hill to the town, and it all comes into view and I see it.

Lights, cars and people, just all waking up to start their day. Moving about, going to work, feeding their kids, and walking their dogs.

“Everyone’s alive!” I shout, as I make a mad dash into town.

I run past the sidewalks and through the streets, hearing the blaring horns of the cars I cut in front of to continue on my path. Smiling insanely, I begin to cry as I dart as fast as my legs can take me.

*Felix!*

*Felix, I’m coming!*

I pass the convenience store and the school and the neighborhood streets until finally, I reach his house, but then...

Something stops me.

There, standing in the warm summer air, I stand like a statue completely unmoving. With the morning light just barely scathing the roof and all of the lights inside turned off, I just stare, as the thought just slowly creeps into my head:

*What if I’m not home.*

I continue my gaze at the house that looks so familiar, yet my mind continues to crawl into this idea.

*What if… What if this is a different universe once again?*

*I mean, I made a portal, yes, there is no doubt about that, but what if it didn’t take me back home?*

*What if it took me into another world, just like last time, only this one isn’t destroyed?*

*And what if…*

*What if he doesn’t… remember me?*

My wide beaming smile now fades to nothing but a limp line across my face, and I stare in the pounding fear that I just brought myself into nothing but another realm that I am not native to.

“Felix,” I whisper under my breath.

*I need to find out.*

Carefully, as if avoiding landmines, I creep to the side of the house to the window that should be his. I ball my hand into a fist and I swallow, gathering all of my courage, faith and hope.

*Please…*

*Please if anyone can hear me up there…*

*Please, let this be Felix.*

*My Felix.*

I lightly tap on his window pane, staring at the pale colored blinds beyond it.

My heart pounds, wishing, racing, wanting it to be him.

Needing it to be him.

Nothing happens and I don’t hear a thing. I rap a little louder, when suddenly, a light comes on.

My heart skips a beat and I shudder, knowing if this isn’t him, my whole world will be ripped away from me once again, and I know I can’t handle that.

I just can’t.

“Please,” I whisper under my breath.

My eyes widen as I stare through the clear glass, when all of a sudden, the blinds rattle as they are slowly moved away and all in a moment I see his wide eyes meet mine.

“Felix?” I quiver.

His eyes adjust, staring at me through the windowpane looking at me with an expression of no other than confusion.

A terrible pang runs through my body that he is staring at a girl he has never met before, when I hear the words escape from his mouth:

“Analiese?”

All at once, my whole body strikes up with adrenaline. “Felix!?” I gasp, as tears begin to fall from my eyes.

“Oh my God, Analiese! Is that you!?” I hear him yell as he shuffles to unlatch the lock. “Oh my God!”

My whole body flusters with warmth as the window flies up and Felix jumps out and into my arms as we tumble to the ground in a crash.

“Analiese!” he screams, his deep voice cracking into choked up tears. “Ana, you’re alive!”

I smile and nod wildly, as the tears stream down my face and I plummet into his arms, crying harder and harder.

“Oh God, Ana!” he cries. “I’m so happy you are alive! Where have you been!?”

I pull away and wipe my eyes, but as I am about to open my mouth to explain, Felix interjects, “And what on earth happened to your face?! Are you alright?!”

I jolt back, touching my teary face, then look back at my hand to see the dried blood from earlier when Robin’s men slammed me into the ground.

“Oh, that? It’s nothing, I’m fine, I don’t hurt. All that matters right now is that I’m back with you. I’m here. I’m home. I’m safe.”

Felix looks surprised, but immediately, he returns to his smile and I plunge back into his arms. Taking in a small gasp, he pulls me in even tighter with tears streaming down his face and he whimpers, “I’m just so glad you’re home. I’m so glad. I love you Analiese.”

Hearing his words, the thought of Chance and all that happened runs through my mind. What we had, what horrors ensued, and the promise I made to him right before I left.

As I lay here in Felix’s arms, being home, safe and sound, I know now that I have all I need, though my journey is far from over. I need to keep my promise. I need to find Lullaby.

Suddenly, Felix embraces me strong and tight and I am brought back to reality.

I know my journey isn’t over, but just for this moment, just for now, it can wait.

With every ounce of meaning and gratitude in my heart, I stare up into his eyes and whisper,

“I love you too, Felix. I love you too.”