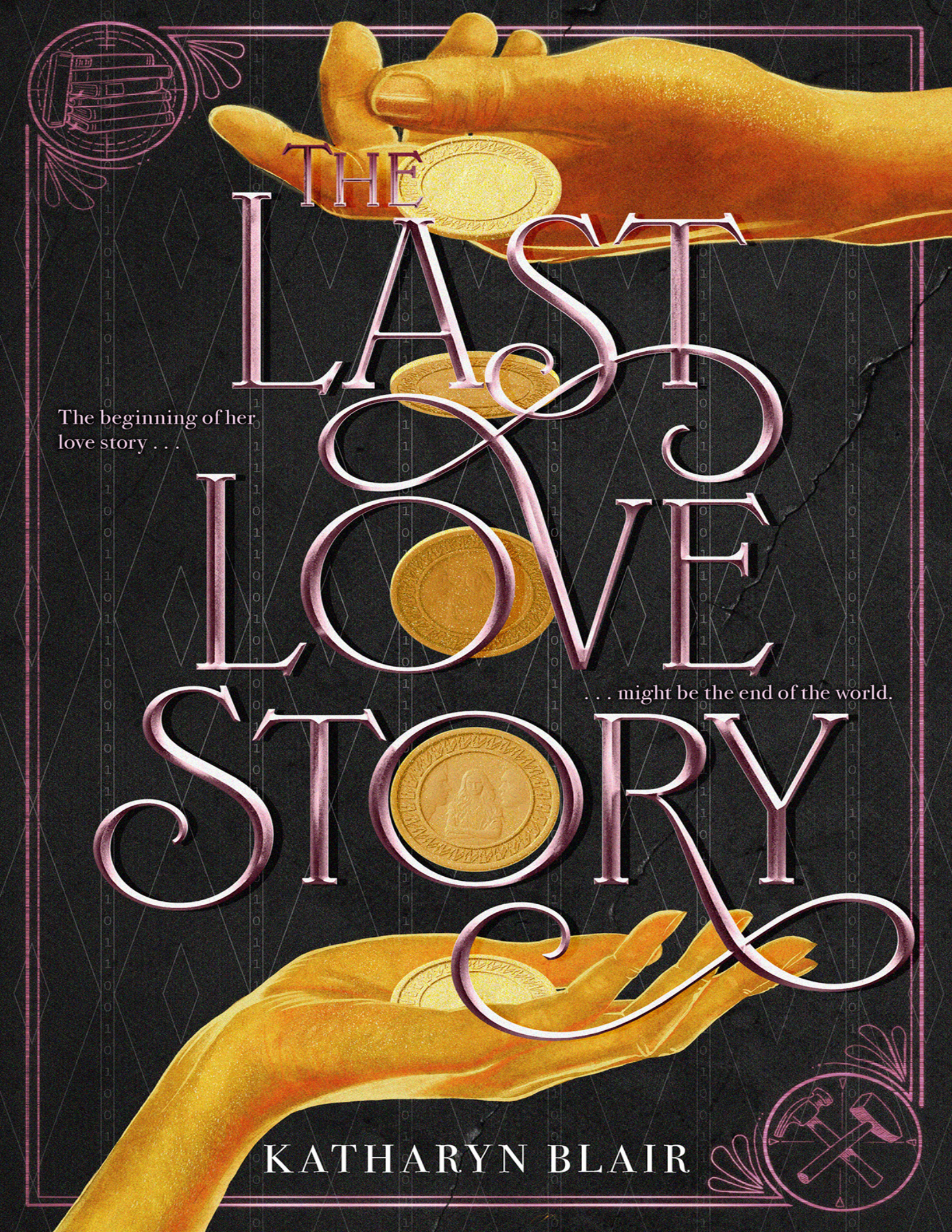
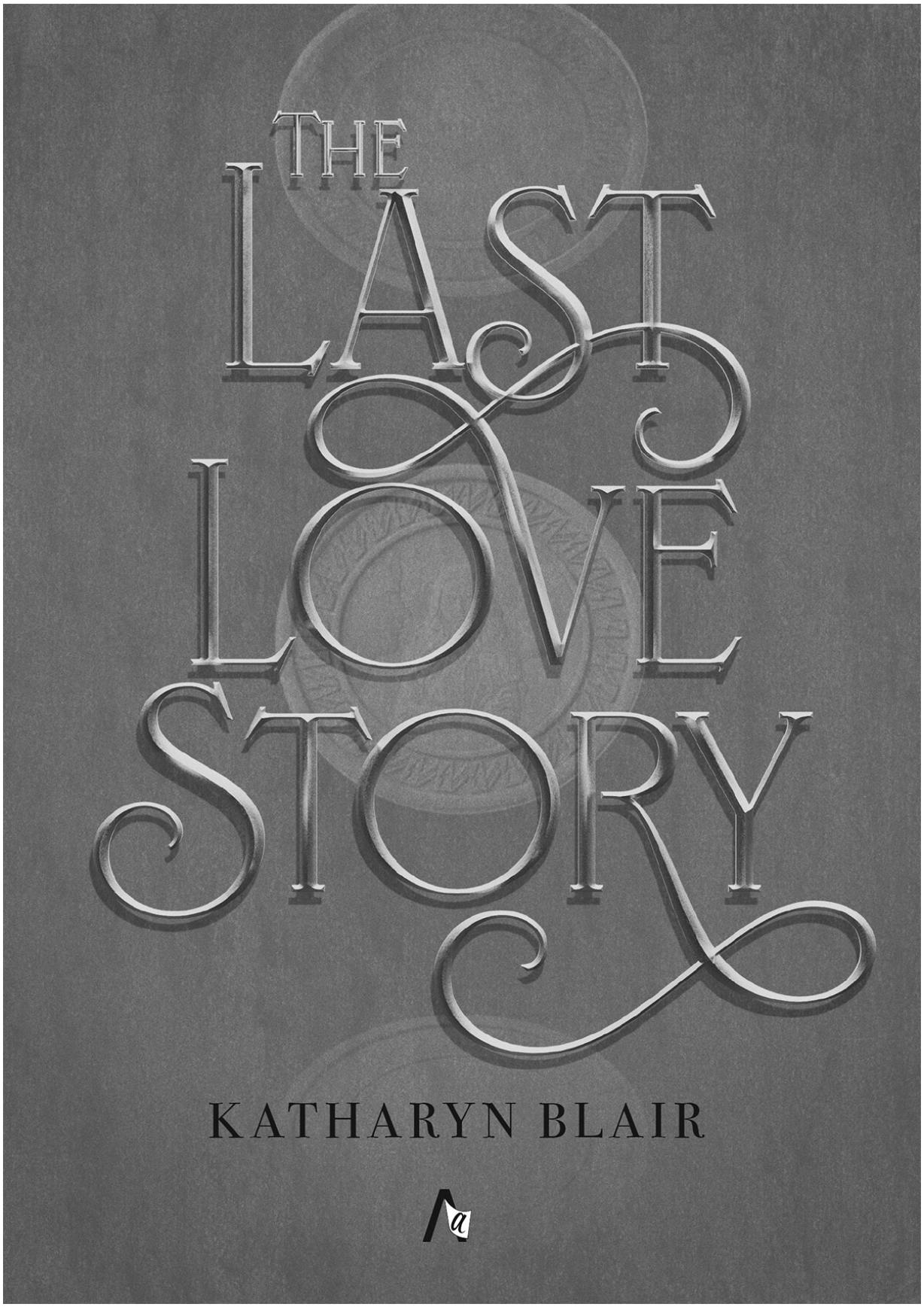

THE
LAST
LOVE
STORY
The beginning of her love story . . .
. . . might be the end of the world.
KATHARYN BLAIR


THE
LAST
LOVE
STORY
KATHARYN BLAIR

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Dedication

*To all the soft-hearted badasses who still believe in happy endings despite *gestures wildly at everything*—this one's for you.*

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Chapter 1

Everyone expected it to be a big thing, but now that I'm living it, I can tell you, the end of the world is slow. My grandmother used to tell me about poems, and things called books. Real paper and cracking spines. The smell—musty and sharp—and pages that used to tell stories about happily ever after and daring adventures and the end of the world: brave heroines, a looming apocalypse, fire and ice, a bang.

I'm not brave. And if this is the end, there's no grand finale. Instead, every day feels more like the slow grind of an engine winding down, and down, and down. It's so gradual that I can't tell if it's stopped moving, or pinpoint the moment. Was it a century ago, when half of California crumbled into the San Andreas Fault, when New York was washed off the map, or when Oklahoma was ripped into the sky? Was it years before I was born, when the Last War started, or eight years ago when my parents lost their jobs, or was it three years ago when my best friend's older brother, the first person sent to fight overseas that I knew personally, was shipped? Was it yesterday, when all the word processing apps disappeared from my tablet—or will it be today?

Cat.

Cat.

CAR.

Cat.

Click. Click. Click. Swipe.

The images on the massive screen in front of me flash and shift as I hit one button with my left hand and another with my right.

It's a cat, perfectly proportioned. Then, a cat with ears a bit too big. Left button on that one—it needs more work. Another picture—a car. This one looks normal. Or, at least I think so. I've seen hovercopters and tanks and raised trucks, but I've never been in a car with wheels. But sometimes my DopaMine channel shows me period pieces from the twenty-first century, and those have cars that look like this one, so I think it's right. Right-click.

Right-click for correct, left for incorrect.

I can't remember when classes changed from actual learning to us teaching an AI learning model. It's like I can feel parts of my mind atrophying while the supercomputers scattered throughout the country hum as they soak up the education I no longer need. History, art, science . . . all absorbed into megamachines that keep the world running. I know I should be grateful they exist. Without them, we wouldn't have food or medicine or transportation or the personalized shows that appear on our tablets every night, with eerily perfect AI actors and that crisp, soft-voweled dialogue that feels stilted and fake until I realize I've started talking like that too. Everyone else would say humanity is getting the better end of the bargain. I spend all day telling a computer what's real so it can turn around and tell me what's not.

A picture of a hot dog. The bun looks a little small, so I stop for a second. Tilt my head.

As I pause, the sound of clicks fills the air. I stifle a yawn and look around the classroom. I think today this counts as a test for our AI Data Cleaning class, although I'm not sure how this is any different from yesterday. I shift forward, looking to the front of the classroom. Our proctor, Ms. Astor, is zoning out as she stares at her own screen. I wonder what her DopaMine channel is showing her today. Does she watch videos of teachers actually getting to teach?

I look back at my screen.

A hot dog in a bun.

I zoom in.

It's weird, sitting here every day practicing feeding all this information to Alba—Artificial Liminality Beta Algorithm, Alba for short—when I don't even know what half of the pictures are. Many of them, like this hot dog, are from before the Streamlining. I know it has many names—frank,

wiener, weenie. I know people used to put mustard or ketchup on them. They were a favorite at baseball games, not like those really exist like they used to, either—unless the team managed to snag funding for an indoor stadium. The air is too bad to play outside anymore.

But I've never had one.

The end of the world doesn't have hot dogs. I doubt the authors who wrote about the end of the world saw that coming. My grandmother would tell me I'm being ungrateful. We don't have hot dogs, but when the Last War started, they were certain it would be just that. The Last War. The end of everything. But humanity survived. And if the worst thing I can complain about is that I have to guess whether or not the hot dog in this picture is real, I should be happy.

I turn slightly, looking over my right shoulder.

A girl with dark hair and narrowed eyes locked on her screen sits catty-corner to me.

Nef and I have been best friends since third year, in the class where we learned about basic coding. The *E* on my keyboard popped off, but she stuck it back on before Mr. Farkas found out and garnished my mom's wages for it. It's not easy to buy anything these days. My entire life they've been telling us the rationing is going to end, but I'll believe it when I see it.

Words rise in my throat—the need to say something, since I realize I haven't spoken since yesterday—but instead I listen to the clicks and swipes as I check the time.

My gaze lands not on the clock but a pair of bright green eyes. I jolt in my seat. Huxley Finn. When's the last time someone looked me in the eye? There's a hint of something bright in them as they flit to the electronic clock on the wall and I know he's thinking the same thing too: *We've got ten minutes.*

Without looking up, Nef shakes her head once. She knows what I am going to do. What I always do.

But, like always, I can pretend I didn't see her disapproval. As I look at the hot dog on the screen, my mind races. I work my jaw back and forth.

Then I click my teeth together as an idea pops in my head. There might be a way to do something more exciting than this "exam."

And if it gets me in trouble? It will get me out of here before Hux. And that might matter more.

On the screen, I click the fine print: More information required.

My computer opens a chat with Alba, and I once again find the tiniest link, which spits me out into the search function. Most of my classmates have probably never tried this. The trick is to make it look like I'm researching hot dogs. With the Streamlining, everything was digitized. What baseball movie might feature hot dogs? What baseball book?

But when I type in *baseball book with hot dog scene*, my screen flashes red and directs me back to the test.

I frown.

"Stop it," Nef whispers, barely moving her lips.

But when have I ever stopped? I try again, but this time I don't even get past *book* before my search is flagged. Surprise makes me gasp aloud.

"What's happening over there?" our proctor barks, shoving herself to her feet.

I had thought I'd be able to get in at least a chapter before I was flagged as inactive. But this is something different. My heart hammers, but it's not fear, as Ms. Astor cuts down our row, weathered skin prowling above my seated classmates, striking dark auburn hair catching the fluorescent lights.

"This test is designed to take five hours." Her voice is raspy—a telltale sign of spending time exposed to the air without a mask.

Her red-rimmed, watery eyes fall on Nef.

"Adeyi?" she snaps.

Nef's eyes widen like a cornered rabbit's. She'll take the blame for things even when she has nothing to do with it. I shove my chair back.

"It was me," I announce, standing.

Ms. Astor doesn't seem surprised at all as she looks me up and down, annoyance clear on her features. "Something wrong, Ms. Hart? This exam doesn't require talking."

Or thinking.

A male voice cuts through the room. "Ms. Hart's allergies have been acting up. I'd be happy to take her to the infirmary for an antihistamine." I don't even need to look to know it's Hux. He's hard to miss as he stands to his full height over his desk, his arms folding over his chest. His gaze bores into mine across the room, and for a moment I think I see a flicker of something like approval in it. Like I need Hux's approval. He's probably just impressed I managed to get flagged in two words.

"I don't think I need your assistance, Mr. Finn," I shoot back. Looking to Ms. Astor, I scramble to come up with an excuse. My eyes fall on the

distorted hot dog on my screen. “I was laughing,” I blurt.

“Laughing?” Ms. Astor straightens, hands on her hips. “Who made you laugh? Conversing during a cleaning exam is prohibited.”

“I was laughing at a photo. The hot dog,” I say, raising my voice.

I look around. The room is full of faces, all these people I’ve known since I was ten. They don’t even seem to recognize me. A few of them haven’t even looked up from their screens.

“And that made you laugh? A hot dog?” Ms. Astor asks, her voice incredulous.

If I’m doing this, I’m doing it. Still, my voice feels small when I reply, “It’s a really big wiener. Ha?”

The silence is deafening. I shoot a look at Hux, who rubs a hand over his face and looks down. I think I see the start of a smile on his lips.

An awkward pall drapes over the room. I bet Ms. Astor is counting the days until my eighteenth birthday.

“Detention,” she growls finally. “Go.”

I fight a smile as I cut through the rows. As I pass Hux, I hold my hand out, low enough to be inconspicuous, and he drops the poker chip into my hand.

Somehow, that’s what makes me lose against the smile pushing across my cheeks. There’s no one in the hallway to see me grinning because I won this round.

The hinges squeak as I slip inside the detention hall. It’s massive. In the world before Streamlining, it was used as a gymnasium—I’ve seen archive footage and the rust stains on the wall where basketball hoops used to hang. Now, the floor is covered in sparring mats. If I squint, I can barely make out a table resting at the base of the bleachers. The chair sits empty, sagging from phantom weight.

I brush my hands over my arms against the onslaught of arctic air as automatic lights ping on slowly with each step I take.

A blue light flares to life as I step into the blue circle painted into the center of the wood, in direct view of the camera, and a voice sounds over the speakers: “Student 1904572, you have been sent to a labor rebooting module. Please approach mat number four and prepare to begin.”

I give a solemn nod as I back up toward the blue mat that has a *4* marked on it in peeling duct tape, knowing the camera is locked in on my movement.

The mat isn’t thick anymore. I can feel the hardwood through it as I rock up on the balls of my feet and wait for instructions, my eyes finding the empty chair. There used to be a proctor in detention: Mr. Avilas. But this year, he’s been replaced by Alba.

I wonder where Mr. Avilas is now. Like there’s an option. He’s too old to be a soldier, must have served his seven years when he was eighteen like everyone else. All that’s left is server maintenance. I don’t want to imagine him at a data farm.

Soldier or cog, both serving the machine of war. I have been looking for a third option my entire life. But I’m not ready to give up yet. I’m hoping the impending deadline will inspire greatness.

“Commence push-ups,” the automated voice intones. “Ready, begin. Down. Up.”

I drop into a plank position and push into the mat as the voice drones. Just as my arms begin to burn, the motion detector lights by the doorway click off. Darkness swallows up the gymnasium behind me. They painted over the windows this summer—either to make the room more energy efficient or to prevent distractions during sparring classes—but never upgraded the pre-Streamlining lights. Detention or a write-up. I may have just found a third option.

I hold myself frozen at the top of a push-up, muscles straining. I don’t dare breathe.

“Continue,” the computer orders. “Down.”

I don’t move.

“Down,” it repeats, as sweat trickles down my forehead. “Student 1904572, no movement detected. Continue labor rebooting module or you will be reported—”

Finally, the lights over me click off too.

In the total blackness, Alba can’t see me.

As long as I don’t move and trigger the ancient motion sensors, I’m free. But I have no intention of wasting my freedom to do a plank for the rest of the day. All I have in my pocket is Hux’s poker chip. Or ours. I’m not sure whose it was first, this little golden disc. But I also have aim from almost eighteen years of being trained as a soldier.

And I have one shot.

I flick the poker chip at the motion sensor, banking that it’ll be too fast for the ancient lights to click on. After the telltale crash of cracked glass, the

plastic returns to my hand in the darkness.

I'm free.

I jump backward, smiling to myself. A small rebellion. A small freedom. I turn around, pulling a cartwheel before giving a mock salute to the empty table. In the darkness, I can imagine that someone is there, watching. For some reason, I imagine a pair of piercing green eyes, a wry but impressed smile.

With that, I take off down the hallways that all look the same before I stop at a nondescript door. With one look to make sure no one is watching, I slip inside.

The server room is like an oven compared to the gym; I peel off my sweatshirt the second I slip into the dark alcove that holds the massive computing system. So much for being a trained killing machine—the hood gets stuck under my chin. I grunt in irritation, flailing against the fabric.

"The future, ladies and gentlemen," a bored voice says, and I yank on the sweatshirt with renewed vigor, my ponytail half falling out from the effort.

As the hood finally falls away, it reveals Hux sitting in the middle seat. My cheeks burn, but his gaze is fixed on the wide expanse of monitors that stretches the length of the entire wall.

"How did you get here so fast?" I bite, making my way to his right hand. He's man-spreading, so I pull the chair away from his foot in order to sit down. Colored lights and blinking monitors dance in front of my vision, and it's almost too much. I blink a couple of times to try and force my eyes to get used to the onslaught of imagery.

"There are ways to leave class without getting detention, Hart," Hux says darkly. I shift in my chair, unsettled by how his eyes rove over the screen like he's searching for something. I wish he'd look at me instead. I watch him for a beat too long before I force myself to follow his gaze, annoyed that he distracted me.

The server room is the place where the raw information comes in for our sector before it's interpreted by Alba. It's our only access to the unedited reality of life. I don't know what the punishment would be if we were caught in here, but anything short of death would be worth it. Livestreams, photodumps, actual footage of real people that hasn't been filtered and processed by AI to be so watered-down and inoffensive that it's bland and unremarkable. All the colors seem brighter, sharper. It's real.

I discovered it in year nine, and, unfortunately, so did Hux. It's a secret we reluctantly share and the source of our uneasy alliance. It's strange, how long we've been this way, something between rivals and allies. It almost makes it easy to forget there was a time before, before he told me we couldn't be friends.

Even though his presence is physically uncomfortable, like an itch on my shoulder blades I can't quite reach, I sit back, taking in the flickering images of our world: footage of active volcanoes, riots, and something that resembles a live feed of a legal proceeding. It will all be distilled into a ten-minute sound bite, scrubbed of any offensive or upsetting imagery, put into orderly sentences where the gray has been reduced into simpler black-and-white. No thinking necessary. Alba will do that for us. All we have to do is open our eyes and absorb.

But here? Here, my brain whirs to make sense of the world. I listen to an older man in a black suit give a speech.

"In our time, we must focus all our effort, everything we have, into the next generation. The Streamlining saved our great country from destruction; now, we have a chance to protect our children from the dangers of unprocessed data. That is why I am happy to report that the courts have upheld our ban on unnecessary reading and writing—"

I look away at that, my chest pinching oddly. My computer wasn't glitching. I got flagged for searching for books because books are now illegal.

Hux makes a noise low in his throat and, unbidden, my eyes follow his to another screen where three women, one of whom is in an all-white linen suit, pose in front of a hovercopter. A man in an orange safety suit hands them tinted goggles. The women laugh as their acrylic nails fumble against the unwieldy plastic, as the straps cut into their perfectly coiffed hair. It takes a moment of concentration to focus on the clip's audio amidst the other noise, but I finally find it.

"Hi chat, Mona here. Quinnie and Nova and I are"—she breaks off to giggle as the goggles slip along her unnaturally perfect button nose —"excited to get hot, hot, hot! There are two super-big tornadoes—"

"And the gas lines!" a sister chimes in gleefully.

"Ew," the third remarks, tightening her eye protection.

"Ugh," Mona enthuses. "We're going to have *such* a view from the air. I mean, I think all of Kansas"—the clip is geotagged *Nebraska*—"or

whatever is on fire! We are going to be the last people to see it before it's gone!"

The girls all squeal like this is some sort of shirtless boy performing on stage in a DopaMine video. Not that my DopaMine feed looks like that.

"Totally fire!" another sister chimes in, and the girls pose with big smiles.

Hux makes that same noise again.

I bite the tip of my tongue as the women step into the copter with the help of two security guards, teetering in too-high heels. Disaster tourism has never made any sense to me, but I'm not rich enough to get it, I guess. I suppose if you don't think the suffering can ever reach you, there can be beauty in anything with enough distance. Maybe to them, it's not real. But even hearing about it makes my stomach roil.

"How much do you think the two Bellaccimi sisters would profit if the third fell out of the helicopter? Accidentally, of course," I say, leaning back in my chair.

In reply, Hux reaches for the remote and turns the volume up on the central monitor—the one playing the footage of a scorched town in Southern England. When this is sanitized for Alba, it'll be a five-second clip, and the AI will blur the bodies. No one else will see what we're seeing now. I know that I should look while I can. Force myself to take it in. Still, I find myself looking away.

Hux doesn't. His face seems to draw tight against his skull.

"How can you watch that?" I can't help but ask.

"How can you look away?" he bites back.

I lock my jaw together as I try and find the right words that will answer him without being too vulnerable. *Because I need to believe that it's not all bad out there.*

Because I'm scared.

I can't say these things to anyone, though, especially not to Hux.

The soldier on the livestream is recounting the particularly gory battle, lives lost, the supply shortages and inaccurate AI intelligence. My mouth goes dry.

"Wow. I'm looking on the bright side and you're just doubling down on the bummer," I mutter, forcing my voice light. "How much do you want to bet—"

"Having access to this information isn't helpful if I can't hear a damn thing," Hux snaps, running a hand through his dark hair as he stands and

comes around the back of his chair, fingers gripping the plastic until they go white.

Suddenly, the screens are the least interesting things in this room. He swallows thickly. Works that strong jaw. Narrows his green eyes. It's like he's trying to sort something out. Eight years we've been sharing this room and Hux has always been a puzzle. But I've learned, if I wait, I can figure him out.

Even if it hurts my neck staring up at him and his completely unfair height.

Finally, he takes a deep breath and casts a sideways glance down at me. His gaze softens just a touch—the closest thing to an apology I'll ever get from him.

"Banks turned eighteen today," he says quietly.

I face forward quickly. I didn't know Banks personally—Hux has mentioned his friend from the eastern sector once or twice. I try and think of something to say, but can't find anything. If Hux's friend had his birthday, he's gone forever. Sent away—maybe even to that particular spot on the center screen, the town that just got blown off the map. "When's your birthday again?" I ask, unable to look at him.

"Three months."

"You've got time," I lie.

"Yours?"

I bite my lip against the sudden sour taste flooding my mouth. "Six."

The silence thrums at my ears as Hux takes his seat again, his knee bouncing up and down. He checks the clock on the wall. "We should get back. I'll head out first. Give it two minutes," he says.

I don't tell him that I know how it works, that we've been doing this for years. Instead, I nod.

He cracks his knuckles and then turns toward me. "I killed my fan. Told Ms. Astor I had to go get another from the supply room."

I smile as I reach into my pocket, pulling out the poker chip. His eyes follow the motion as I flip it between my fingers.

"I don't know. Computer malfunction or insanely brave illegal search engine attempt . . . which was the more creative way to get out of class?"

Hux huffs out a breath. It's half a laugh, which for some reason makes my lungs feel tight. I flip the poker chip in the air, catching it in my palm before holding it out to him.

“You’re right. Keep it.” And then he strides away.

With every step, I wait for him to say something, biting my lip to fight the need to goad him into saying . . . something.

When he reaches the door, he finally turns. “Two minutes, Hart.” The door squeaks open, then closed.

I watch the monitors, but it feels like a DopaMine feed washing over me, because I can’t focus enough to absorb any of it.

Then, I stand, stopping as I feel a vibration from my pocket tablet.

1 New Message—Unknown Number

With a trembling finger, I prod at the touchscreen. Instantly, the words send a shock down my spine, knocking a sharp breath out of me like a punch to the gut.

Happy eighteenth birthday, Ripley.

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Chapter 2

“Welcome to Post Angeles. South District, to the left. North, to the right. Be ready to scan,” a familiar monotone voice crackles over the speakers. Around me, all of Post Angeles springs up—the steel buildings, the steel-colored sky, our steely uniforms. The entire world is gray. In my classroom, I’ve been trained to identify so many things that don’t exist anymore. Cobalt. Azure. Sapphire. A real, blue sky.

Happy eighteenth birthday, Ripley.

A sudden scream builds in my throat and I fight a bizarre instinct to rip the very necessary mask from my face, to take a gasp of the air like it won’t choke me.

Maybe it’s a joke, I decide, as we turn as one to the light-rail station, and the street widens, dipping into a low decline that reveals a cityscape beyond.

People used to work and live in the skyscrapers that jut awkwardly against the horizon, but now they house Alba and its massive power banks.

I climb the stairs to the light-rail platform, raising my wrist and letting my Move ID run over the sensor. *Beep.* For the first time in my life, that noise I’ve heard a million times inspires a thrill of fear in my gut. If someone really is looking for me, I just flagged my location in the system.

I glance around, half waiting for Hammers in their nondescript black uniforms to cut through the crowd. *Ripley Hart! You’re in violation of the Federations’ Streamlining War Conscription Act. Put your hands behind your back.*

And they’d cuff me, put me in a van, and I’d disappear. My parents wouldn’t even know what happened to me. If they were lucky, they’d get a

message on their tablets, a little rectangle breaking up their DopaMine feeds. My mom is probably watching *The Darkest Wife* or *The Smallest, Tiny Thing*. I wonder if she'd even notice the text.

Happy eighteenth birthday, Ripley.

Just a joke, I tell myself. Hux, probably messing with me after our latest standoff. But he seemed so upset about his friend Banks. Who else could it be? And why do they think it's my birthday? I have until September. I have to have until September.

I try to shake off the feeling of dread. Even though the platform is dotted with people, no one speaks. The side of the building across the tracks is one giant screen, and two virtual newscasters talk about stock prices, the weather, and an update about a new dog rescue. It's all positive, smoothed out like their AI-generated faces. When they mention the war raging across the sea, it's medals and smiling faces and parades. When mention of the book ban comes up, they show stock footage of some German book and another with a pentagram on its cover, then cut to footage of the president signing the bill at his desk, finger looping in broad strokes over the tablet.

President Graves. I feel myself jump when he looks up at the camera and offers his trademark stoic stare.

If I do flinch seeing our president, no one notices. No one is even watching the news. Everyone is on their pocket tablets, and some are staring at the small screens on their watches. DopaMine—the personalized channel that attunes to each individual and provides content—unlocks when workers clock out. I look down at my screen as it dings, the typical singsong beep of DopaMine. A sad face appears, accompanied by the words: Looks like you've had a bad day, Ripley! Your streaming has been cut by an hour.

I roll my eyes. Of course—I had forgotten about detention. This day couldn't get any worse.

I wish I could say I don't care, that I am the one special person in this sea of tech drones. But I care a lot. My show, *Broken Harts*, is one safe thing I can always talk about with Nef. Hers has another name of course, but our tastes are so similar that the storylines are pretty much identical. Now we won't be able to talk about it at lunch tomorrow, and it's the only thing we can talk about. It's not much, but it is usually enough to loosen that knot in my chest.

Now I have nothing to look at on my commute home, while everyone else around me is happily sucked into their screens. I check my tablet again,

pure muscle memory, but of course it's still locked. The crash-out brews under my collarbone like one of the tropical storms that batters the coast of Washington. Suddenly, the screen on the side of the building transitions to the footage I saw with Hux: the town in South London. My heart stops.

But instead of showing the burn marks or the bodies, the camera zooms in on a face that every person on this platform knows.

Callum Graves. The president's son.

He perches easily on the director's chair they've set up for him in front of a massive aircraft carrier; his dark blond hair is windswept from a hovercopter departing behind him, glowing golden against his dark green fatigues. A sudden need to straighten that lock of hair has me clenching my hands into fists until my fingernails bite into my palms.

I didn't realize he was serving overseas. But of course he is—no one is exempt, not even the president's son.

"Thanks for sitting down with us," a woman simpers off camera. "I know you're busy, but we have a pressing question about international relations only you can answer: you and Amelie Rockwell. Everyone knows you broke up six months ago. Are you still single?"

Callum's dark blue eyes go tight and cast a glance to the side, to the scorch marks and weapons beside him. When he looks to the woman, it seems like he's going to push back—elegantly back out of the question, refocus back onto the war that is evidenced around him.

But he stops as a soft cheer and *whoop* sounds from somewhere off camera, and a group of soldiers jogs past, whistling in approval at the question. Callum smiles at them, his face relaxing.

"Who wants to know?" he asks. When he hinges forward, he bares perfect teeth in a grin.

A woman next to me drops her tablet. When I glance over at the sound, I notice that a small group has turned their faces up to the screen, hypnotized by the president's son.

"America wants to know," the interviewer continues, and it's not an exaggeration.

"Not you?" Callum teases, and I hear someone next to me make an *awww* noise like he's a naughty puppy. My stomach twists at the sound.

The interviewer giggles, so high-pitched it seems unnatural. "You're too charming, Callum Graves. It would be a waste for you to be single."

Then he winks—something I've never seen anyone do outside of DopaMine. It makes my heart jump. "Who says I'm single?" Suddenly he stands, tugging up his shirt—revealing the contour of a very muscled belly—and yanks at his microphone wire.

I hadn't noticed the figures behind him, rushing toward a copter, but Callum is suddenly serious as he swoops the lock of hair out of his face.

"Callum! Are you dating someone? Callum!" the interviewer begs, but Callum is already focused on the copter. "With your father finishing his second term . . . we're going to miss seeing you on the campaign trail—"

"You'll be seeing me," Callum says into the camera, offering a devastating grin before he rushes toward the copter, leveraging himself onboard so smoothly that it looks like he could do it in his sleep.

As he flips the headset on, sliding shiny sunglasses into place, the camera zooms through the copter's windshield.

You couldn't pay me enough to have a close-up of my face blown up and plastered across three stories. But Callum was made for the big screen. His jaw clenches as he toggles the controls and the blades begin to whirl.

I stare up at the screen until the rusted metal train cuts the space between me and the face that I know far too well.

Happy eighteenth birthday, Ripley.

I hold my breath over the threshold, unsure if I'm expecting to come home to a platoon of armored guards or a birthday cake. Instead, it's only darkness that greets me. I stop at the top of the stairs to knock softly on my parents' door and then slowly open it. The light of the screen illuminates my mom's face as she sits in bed. My dad is in his chair in the corner, also looking at his tablet. They must have hit their quotas at the data farm today and unlocked access to their DopaMine channels. I can faintly hear a documentary about different kinds of algae coming from my dad's speakers. Judging by the studio laughter, my mom must be watching a comedy. Something with a family.

My mother raises her face to me before her eyes reluctantly follow.

"Ripley, sweetie. How was school?" She phrases it as a question, but her eyes dart back to the screen. She didn't even pause her program. I know she doesn't want the truth.

I look to my dad, who's half-asleep already. I want to tell them everything—I want to tell them about the text. I want to ask them if they lied to protect me and if my birthday isn't actually in September. I want to explain to them about what Hux and I saw on the news. I want to admit how it felt to see Callum Graves on a big screen, winking and racing off to save the world.

I want to be like a girl in a DopaMine video and just sit with my mom, have her put her fingers through my hair and give me advice.

But that isn't real.

The AI training we do in class is grueling, but it's nothing compared to the real work that happens in the official data farms. The only outlet for them is their DopaMine channel.

So I say what I've been saying for years: "Great. You?"

She gives a soft half smile. "Awesome. Did you eat?"

We're on script now. "About to. You?"

"We did," she says. I could almost say her lines for her at this point.

"Well. I'll get to bed," I half whisper, lowering my voice to see if she'll respond out of habit.

Her eyes drop back to the screen. "Great idea, hon. Get some rest. Big day tomorrow!"

I close the door and stand in the dark hallway, my hand still gripping the doorknob.

Big day tomorrow.

She's been saying that since I started school. It's never once been true.

But I guess now that someone thinks I've been lying about my age, she might finally be right.

Tomorrow, I could very well be arrested.

I slip my tablet from my pocket:

> What do you want?

I'm barely into my boring gray bedroom before it beeps with a reply.

> We just want to talk.

I stare at the pixelated words. There's a "we" here, then. It's not just some random person wanting my ration card or my train pass. I try to ignore the heartbeat shaking my fingers when I type my reply:

My birthday is in September. Good night.

But I can’t sleep, not now. Not with their message ringing in my head, making it feel like I can’t breathe.

I slip out into the narrow hallway. The faint sound of my parents’ shows floats out of the bedroom and into the dark, a strange soundtrack as I pull the string to the attic ladder. I press a button on my pocket tablet screen, lighting the flashlight app as I climb with one hand.

The lockbox is easy enough to find. I remember it from when we moved, when we uprooted our lives into this strange After; it was one of the things that my mom said was “important.” And back then, my mom didn’t seem to think anything mattered anymore.

I try my birthday—nothing. My mother’s. My father’s. And, heart thudding, I try today’s date: 0–3–0–9. The lock clicks and the lid squeaks open. That should be answer enough, but I don’t want to believe it’s true. My fingers are shaky as I find the yellowing paper. Back when I was born, Alba was new. My mom always told me that, unlike digital files, which are generated from AI and can sometimes be inaccurate, or fully hallucinations, paper has truth to it. Printed things can’t lie.

All I have to do is find my birth certificate. Then I can show whoever is texting me, and whoever else, that I actually have six months left.

The edges of the paper are yellowing and old, and I know the folder I’m looking for. In the Before times, my mom kept these papers in the file cabinet, and I remember her scolding me for spilling blue paint into the open drawer. My mom was able to pat them dry, but the edges were permanently discolored.

My fingers press against the edges of the documents: my mom’s birth certificate. My dad’s. Their marriage license. My fingers still. My birth certificate isn’t in here.

I start from the beginning and run through everthing again, my heart hammering.

Where is my birth certificate?

Beep. I’m growing to hate that sound. I look down and my heart stops. But this time, it’s like the person on the other side of the message is answering my question.

It’s a picture of an old, yellowing piece of paper. My stomach feels hollow and twisty as I peer closer, because I recognize something on it. The

slight blue along the side—this is my original birth certificate.

And there, right on it . . . March 9.

I sit back on my heels, lose my balance, and land on my ass.

They lied to me. I breathe out through my mouth and in through my nose, just like they tell us to during movement hour at school.

I'm eighteen.

Happy eighteenth birthday, Ripley.

A floor below me, my parents are watching their separate shows.

For a moment, I wonder what it would be like if they didn't come home that day all those years ago totally changed. I remember Before, when I was a kid and their days left them exhilarated, cheeks flushed as they talked about their jobs and the real change they could make. When home was on the other coast, in a big marble building at the top of grand stairs. I remember how our neighbors were all fighting for a better country, a better world.

And then, one day, we moved across the country, and my parents went from working in the government to working at the farms. My dad stopped making dumb jokes and my mom stopped speaking up for people in the grocery line when the distribution specialist tried to give the poorer families the wilted cabbage. It used to embarrass the hell out of me back then.

If they were who they used to be, I could march in and demand to know why they did this. Why they lied. I could cry in front of them and ask them what we should do, and they'd know what to do.

But I know I can't do that.

I slip the lockbox back into its place, but it lands with a strangely metallic thump. I reach into the box and draw out an ancient computer designed to be portable—my grandma always called it a laptop. I haven't seen it in years. I stare at it for a moment, then reach down and wrench it open. At first, nothing happens, no matter how many buttons I press, but then I remember it needs power. I feel around in the box until my fingers find the wire I'm looking for.

When I connect it into the wall, it chimes and the screen glows.

There's only one program on the home screen—a little green icon with *IR* on the front. Image Refiner Pro. When we first moved to Post Angeles, my parents thought that if I worked hard enough at school, I might be able to build a life for myself, rise up in the ranks. Get myself a safe military

post, flying drones or managing intel from this side of the ocean. They got me this laptop, back when they still had a little bit of hope left.

I stare at it for a moment. The screen is so old that I can see the ripples of power sliding up and down beneath the surface, almost like a heartbeat. It's waiting for me to do something.

Something I haven't done since the last time I was scared.

As I click, the screen sputters and then turns white. A file folder pops up: *WitS.* I click it, and documents populate, each with a name on them.

Dreams. Lake Swim. Chipped Concrete.

I scroll until I find the one I was thinking of—

Starlight.

I open the file and look at the story I started writing eight years ago.

> He wasn't the kind of boy who would tell you how he felt, and I knew that. It made sense. His whole life, he'd been trained to keep his emotions in check.
>
> Orion looked down at her, his green eyes sparkling with unsaid words.
>
> Saffron knew that he wouldn't tell her what was going through his mind. She would have to read it.
>
> He leaned closer.
>
> All of a sudden, the sound of a grinding engine split the air, and Saffron and Orion jumped apart.
>
> "No," she said, turning and breaking into a dead sprint.
>
> She knew what was happening, and she knew he was close behind her.
>
> They were going to cut down The Tree.
>
> The one in the greenhouse observatory where they'd sit and watch the stars. The tree where they met as kids, became friends, and then became something more.
>
> Saffron sprinted down the metal hallways of the ship, lurching to a horrified stop as she beheld the men in orange work vests revving their chainsaws.
>
> "No!" she screamed, and then Orion was next to her. No, he was passing her.
>
> He was running at the tree. He threw himself against the trunk before scrambling up into the branches.
>
> The men on the ground yelled out their protests, but Orion didn't care. He smiled at her, throwing the words out over his shoulder.
>
> "They'll have to take me down with it," he called.
>
> She knew two things: he meant it, and she loved him for it.

I stare at the words, the boy's voice echoing in my memory. It's so different now—not as pure, and not as hopeful. But it used to be full of life.

They'll have to take me down with it.

I started writing years ago, and I started for a stupid reason that quickly became the only reason that made sense: I had feelings for a boy.

Not just any boy, but the boy who lived next door. Writing it down seemed to be the only way to make sense of it. To make it mine, because he

would never be. It felt brave and magical, like I was grabbing something intangible and holding it in my hands. And now that's all illegal.

I wonder how long it'll take for the new law to erase this file even from this computer. After all, my word processing files have all been erased from my tablet. When I was younger, I uploaded all the files to an anonymous server so I could share with Nef.

I wonder if they're still there.

And then I pick up my tablet and navigate to Spindle, where I used to link things for Nef. I wonder what she'd say if I sent it now. I wonder if she ever even read it back then.

It takes two clicks, but I watch as the story loads on the server.

And then I almost drop my tablet. All of Saffron and Orion's stories are there. And they've been viewed over a million times. Something like a laugh breaks out of me, because this can't be real.

And it will all be for nothing once Spindle is erased and I'm shipped off to war.

Still, a small part of me flares with something like pride. The feelings I had for him didn't do anything to save us, but maybe they can save someone else. Maybe someone can learn from my mistakes, and say how she feels before it's too late.

I don't know how long I sit on the floor of the attic, staring at the numbers on my screen, but finally I draw in a deep breath. I stare at the message that was sent to me today. A mystery. A taunt. A death sentence.

Even though my fingers shake, I type out: What do you want?

The reply is immediate: The Huntington.

One hour.

Or we drop this birth certificate off at the nearest recruitment center.

This time I can't choose to be brave. I guess bravery is one of those things that drags you behind it, ready or not.

I don't even try to be quiet as I slip down from the attic. I could probably even slam the front door behind me, but muscle memory inspires me to head for my bedroom window, inching out onto the eaves as I ford out into the blackness, slipping my mask over my nose and mouth. The streetlights over here go dark at nine o'clock. There's no reason to be out after then, anyway.

No legal reason, anyway.

Which is why it’s interesting to me that as I prepare to sneak off through the bushes, I see a familiar shape walking across the roof across from me: my neighbor, Huxley Finn.

As if sensing my presence, he whips his head in my direction. If he sees me, he doesn’t say anything. I’m frozen up here, perched like a cat, as he grips the gutter and spills seamlessly down to the sidewalk below, smooth as a shadow. He’s done this before, I think. Maybe I imagine the shine of his eyes, a glance over his shoulder, before he disappears into the dark.

Well, well, well.

The Huntington is in the opposite direction. I can’t follow him, not tonight. But where is Hux going at this time of night?

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Chapter 3

It doesn’t take long for me to get there. There are constant cargo trains running up and down the old light-rail tracks late at night and it’s easy enough to jump on the back of one and blend into the shadows.

The Huntington is dark, the entrance covered with dead leaves that crunch under my boots as I walk toward the entrance. An old chain-link fence wraps around the perimeter, but it sags among the weeds and overgrowth almost like an afterthought. There’s nothing to protect inside anymore, anyway.

As quietly as I can, I climb the fence and land on the other side, looking up at the cream-colored façade. The sky beyond is covered in light pollution that traps the orange light of Post Angeles beyond. From this angle, the building looks ancient, and the sky gleams like it’s on fire. It’s almost like I could be standing in Pompeii or something, a spectator at the edge of a world that ended centuries ago.

It’s eerie, and it fits the mood.

I’m closing in on the hour timeline they gave me, so I quickly find a broken window and slip inside.

Debris crunches underfoot against the marble floor as I pass faded spray paint tags, the scrawl unreadable in the low light. A massive staircase curves upward, covered in old vines that have broken in through the windows above. My eyes fall on gleaming white rectangles every few feet: the ghosts of art that used to hang. They were whisked away to private collections soon after all museums and libraries were shut down. This place used to be both. Now it’s just a place where I might catch tetanus.

I look around, tucking my hair behind my ears as my eyes adjust to the dark. They didn't say where they'd be, and this place is massive. I take a careful step, making sure to tiptoe around shattered glass from a bottle near the bottom of the stairs.

"Ripley Hart." A voice cuts through the darkness. "I kind of hoped you were a little smarter than this."

I spin to see Ms. Astor standing in the hallway, the faint glow from outside illuminating half of her face.

I freeze, waiting for sirens or the splash of red-and-blue lights of the Hammers, and my mind spins off in a million different directions. If Ms. Astor is here, then I am screwed. Was this all a trap? A test? Whatever it is, I've failed.

I stare at Ms. Astor. She's not old, but she isn't exactly young, either. I could just make a run for it. That might give me long enough to call my parents and tell them to run—

"Don't even think about it," Ms. Astor says, her voice lilting with irritation as she starts walking toward me. I lurch backward, half expecting her to grab me, but she surprises me as she strolls right past me. I pivot, keeping my eyes on her.

"Don't even think about what?" I press, my voice sounding squeaky and scared even to my own ears.

"Running," Ms. Astor says. Her fingers linger on the door, a spray-painted Ionic column in black stark against the wood. Before I can ask, she yanks the door open, the hinges groaning. Beyond, pitch black, a yawning pit: a staircase down.

"You're the one who messaged me?" I ask foolishly, hating how confused I sound. "What do you want?"

Ms. Astor dusts her hands on her pants like I'm boring her.

None of this makes sense. If she was going to turn me in, she would have done it in front of everyone at school. I am the biggest pain in her ass, and we all know it. Hux is probably a close second, but I know that at least his scores make up for half of his antics. I have nothing to redeem me.

When Ms. Astor still doesn't answer, my ears fill instead with the uneven thump of my own heartbeat. My nervous system has been running on adrenaline for hours—since that first text. The question comes out again, more desperate this time.

"What do you want?" My words echo.

Ms. Astor finally looks at me. There's something in her expression I've never seen before. I've been under her watchful gaze for two years, and she's always blended perfectly into our beige world. Low bun, flat looks, slow movements. But here, her eyes are bright, her mouth upturned a little, enough that a scar on her upper lip seems to appear. She has copper studs in her ears.

Out from under the harsh lighting of the training room, I can see her for real. She's beautiful.

Finally, she clears her throat delicately. "What do I want? I want you to follow me and not ask any more questions until we're somewhere where no patrol drones can hear you."

"You're not turning me in?" I ask, desperate.

She shakes her head. "No."

I try to hide the fact that I'm reeling—it's like I was about to walk the plank and someone just yanked me back to safety. And slowly a smirk slips up the side of my mouth. I rock back on my heels.

"You just lost your leverage, Ms. Astor," I reply, keeping quiet because her point about the patrol drones is totally fair. "You're not going to turn me in, so why would I follow you?"

Ms. Astor purses her lips and nods like she's thinking it over. "Because, Ripley, I've taught you for two years. You want to know what's down here." And then she disappears into the darkness.

I stand alone for a moment, tonguing my cheek as I consider her words.

I should prove her wrong. I should spin around and march myself home. That would show her.

You want to know what's down here.

Not if it's going to get me killed. Not when I've spent the past hour certain I was marching to my death. All I have to do is fly under the radar. Refine data, watch my DopaMine feed, forget about the stories I used to write. Follow every rule. Become beige. I've got a chance to go live.

For another six months.

My heart stutters at the thought, and I'm following her before I can list the thousands of reasons why this is a terrible idea.

It's hard to see in the stairwell, but I keep my eyes fixed on my feet and the strips of gently glowing treads along every step. I rush down the first two flights—we're headed underground now—but can't catch up to Ms. Astor. Only my ragged breathing accompanies me, but there's only one way

to go: down. Finally, the stairs flatten and lead me to an extinguished “Exit” sign near a rusted door.

I must be beyond the grounds of the Huntington by now. My hands push against one and then another metal door. As I take in the sight beyond, my breath catches in my throat.

Low lighting carves out a massive tunnel. My mother used to tell me stories about a half-finished subway system that Los Angeles was building when the earthquake hit. It’s not safe down there, she’d tell me. As I lean on the railing, my hands wrap tightly against the chipped yellow paint as an entire other world seems to open below me. Low light hangs from old work lamps tethered to the high tunnel ceilings, illuminating a stunning sight below: a maze of shelves. Every row is crammed in narrow vertical strips . . . books.

I’ve never seen so many books. They line the tunnel walls. Bookshelves packed with spines. Carts filled to the point of tipping, their wheels balanced on the half-finished tracks. Old wooden crates stuffed to the brim, overflowing. It makes me think of Nef. When we moved, when my parents went silent in the new After and I was alone and scared, she was the first friendly face, sometimes the only friendly face I’d see all day. We’d make up stories on the playground, pretending to be mermaids or witches or aliens. When those stories spilled over, we wrote them down, and she was the first person to read about Saffron and Orion.

She’d love this.

It takes me a moment to realize I’m not alone anymore. There are people working—dozens of people. Some push carts, others load up canvas bags with massive tomes and small brick-sized paperbacks. A couple of them glance up at me curiously.

My feet move on their own and I half stumble down the stairs, my mouth gaping at the sight.

A book is a rare thing now.

My grandmother used to tell me that, when the Last War started, it was a race for resources. Everything had to feed the machine of war. They burned it all—the books with the last of the forests, something called gasoline with other minerals they used to mine—all to power what would become Alba. Thankfully, once Alba was up and running, it was able to save itself, discovering new fuels across the globe, new battlegrounds for us to conquer for resources.

But back then, they burned all the books to try to win the war.

Whenever my grandmother said this, my mother would always tsk and shake her head. She believed, back when she believed in things, that they did it on purpose.

In her childhood, she remembers them coming for the books.

Books, my mom used to say, *are dangerous things.*

They don't seem dangerous now. Only excitement fizzles along my veins. I reach the bottom of the steps and stare up at the massive wooden bookcase. This close, their smell fills my nostrils: musty, but not in a bad way. Along the cracked spines, I make out some of the gold lettering.

The Odyssey. Gone with the Wind. Fahrenheit 451.

My algorithm dictates what I watch. My DopaMine feed is programmed to feature faces I like, problems I struggle with, the happy ending I want. *Mine.* But this is like peering into someone else's soul. These books could make me cry or make me angry; I'd love some of them and hate others. In a moment, I feel like a voyeur. Each is a slice of someone's soul, bared for me.

As I reach out for a book I feel Ms. Astor appear beside me.

I lower my hand quickly—I don't know if I'm allowed to touch them.

"What is this?" I ask quietly, turning to watch the workers move books.

"We call ourselves Lyceum," Ms. Astor answers. "That's the fancy name for it, at least."

"You're librarians." The word sounds ridiculous. I'm surprised I even know it. "Vigilante librarians."

Ms. Astor laughs, and I jump a little, realizing I have never heard that sound before. It's foreign and jarring, etching laugh lines that look at home on her face. Down here, I realize, she's not who she has to be up there.

"Vigilante librarians. I like that."

"This is illegal, right?"

She nods. "Very. Especially after today."

"Why did you bring me here?"

Ms. Astor reaches out and puts her finger on the top of *Fahrenheit 451*, pulling it from the shelf and holding it out to me. I take the book, loving the rough feel under my fingers.

"Walk with me."

Ms. Astor leads me through the tunnels. Everywhere I look seems to be overflowing with books. "I thought all the books were destroyed," I

whisper, half to myself. Ms. Astor lets out a soft huff.

"No librarian was going to let books disappear, Hart. It doesn't matter what excuse they gave. When the Last War started, we started our own war—a war to preserve knowledge." Her face tightens. "And now, more than ever, it really is a war."

"What would President Graves do if he realized this was here?"

She puts her hands on her hips. "Did you see the news today? The bill he signed?"

I nod. "It's supposed to protect kids." Even as I say it, the words feel fake. Rehearsed. Like my own opinion was filtered through Alba before it came out of my mouth.

Ms. Astor snorts. "From what?"

"Books they think are dangerous, I guess." But my mind rings with my mother's warning.

Ms. Astor purses her lips, thinking. "Who, I wonder, gets to decide what books are dangerous?"

It's a rhetorical question. I know the answer. *The people in power.*

Her eyes dip down to where I'm clutching the hardcover. "The book you're holding? It warned us about book burning. But then it was gone, so people didn't know what to look out for when the flames arrived. These stories are important. We have to protect them."

My heart races. "What can we even do?"

"Lyceum has been saving knowledge and disseminating it secretly for years now," she says. "But recently, we've taken a more active role in trying to inform the public about what's going on. Information is easy. Getting people to care is the hard part."

Ms. Astor reaches up on a shelf, pulling down a single piece of folded paper.

There's a hand-drawn rolled-up document on the front, along with writing:

The First Amendment.

"We've been making these," she says. "And trying to sneak them into places where people will find them. We've got to get the word out, somehow, before the election this fall. Most people don't seem to care . . . fine. But if a quarter of them do, we need to find all of that quarter and bring them together to make a difference. We are trying to get books out—get them to people who want them. That, plus the pamphlets . . . people are

posting about them, even if Alba is deleting their videos. If the people can all find their voice again, we can start trying to change the story that's being written without us."

"But how can I help? Why ask me? I'm just . . . Ripley Hart. You know better than most that I'm more likely a liability than an asset."

Ms. Astor pivots, turning to a shelf. She runs her hand along the spines of books until her fingers land on one. She pulls it out.

It's loosely bound, something distinctly handmade about it—no cover, like the hardback I hold in my hands.

"What—" I stop as I see the title, scrawled in black marker on the cover: *Written in the Stars*.

My whole body hums. This is my writing.

"I asked for Ripley Hart," Ms. Astor says, "because we need Saffron."

My cheeks burn. Has she read it?

Suddenly, I feel raw. Exposed. All of the love, the yearning, the loneliness I poured into the words makes the pages feel heavier in my hands.

I wrote to process how I felt about him, the boy who lived next door.

Eating Popsicles on the astroturf in the community center. At Data Refining Day Camp during summer, racing to finish assignments before each other.

And one day, he looked at me as we walked to the train and my stomach flipped in this unfamiliar way. And suddenly I understood what it meant to have a crush.

But what was I supposed to do with it? I didn't know the first thing about boys. I just knew he made me nervous in a good way. I wanted to be near him. His laugh made the air feel safe.

So I started writing it down. All of it. Every look, every joke, every dream I had about him.

It was like I was emptying that buzzing feeling out, sparking it down my arms and letting it charge the paper.

I called him Orion, because I named him after the constellation he longed to see.

There's a whole belt, he'd tell me. We'd seen photos, of course. In training, we'd have to sort the real astronomy photos from the fake ones. But we'd never been able to see it for real.

I changed little details about him, letting my imagination take over, but the rest was all him. Every victory. Every heroic act. Every smile.

And I created another character: Saffron. She was me, but . . . not. She was brave, she could do the splits. She didn't think the hot sauce in the monthly meal allocations was too spicy. She could say everything I was thinking. She could be everything I wasn't.

And Ms. Astor has read it.

All of it.

Did she read the kissing scene with Saffron and Orion on the bridge of the *Celestial Breaker*?

Or the *other* scene I wrote in the kitchen? The one where they're making pancakes?

I swallow hard, blinking rapidly as I take a step back.

"Um. This is, um . . ."

My thoughts spin and tumble, searching for purchase and finding none.

This is my coping mechanism, a fantasy I've written about a boy I used to love but can never have. I also wrote it before I kissed anyone, so it's pure speculation, and please ignore the scene with the syrup because if you bring it up I will die on the spot and you'll have to drag my body back to the surface—

"Ripley," Ms. Astor says sharply, in that proctor voice, and I look up at her. She must see the horror on my face, because she holds her hands out as if to placate me. "Ripley," she says again, "I don't care about what's in this story."

Pancake make-out session, I think. It's all I think. On a loop. *Pancake. Make-out. Session.*

I hold the papers to my chest like I can make them reabsorb into my body. Perhaps I will collapse in on myself, too, and we'll just be a dark shame hole on the ground of this secret library. *Here lies Ripley, a sad, lonely girl who was so hungry when she wrote about the love of her life she covered him in syrup*.

Not the love of my life, I correct. Not anymore. Not now—not After.

"Do you know how many people have read this story?" Ms. Astor asks.

"I just wanted to send it to my friend," I whisper as I close my eyes, but Ms. Astor puts her hands on my shoulders, bringing me back to the moment.

“This story means something to people. We didn’t print it out. Someone else did. It was in a shipment of books that arrived from Wisconsin.”

The words don’t compute. I look up at Ms. Astor, daring to meet her gaze for the first time since she handed me the book. *My* book.

Someone across the country was reading my book for fun. Someone printed my words to keep them safe.

“I didn’t think you’d have to be blackmailed to help us make pamphlets,” Ms. Astor says. “I *did* think you’d need the threat of being sent to the front of an actual war to stop you from sprinting out of here when I showed you the book.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Umm. Fair, actually.” I swallow hard. A moment of fear hits me like lightning. “How did you know it was me? Does anyone else?”

I changed some details, but still. They could figure out who Orion was. I’m pretty sure Nef has.

She shakes her head, and a strand of dark hair falls from her bun into her face. She brushes it aside. “No. No. But you’re lucky. We have a tech team that was scrubbing some of the local IP addresses, looking for possible recruits, and we found that your IP address accessed Spindle years ago. From there, they found your username.”

I open my mouth to ask the next question, but she’s already guessed it.

“We cleared it. No one else knows.”

My shoulders relax. I look down at the pages in my hand. “It was just a story about a lonely girl with a crush.”

“That’s not what I saw,” Ms. Astor says evenly. “I saw your heart, Ripley. We need heart. We need *you*: someone who believes in stories, in hope. Someone who believes this isn’t the end of the world. Someone who can help us write a new beginning.”

I brush the pad of my thumb over the paper, loving the feel of it. “I’ll do it. But I want to do more. I want to make pamphlets. I want to distribute them. I want to be part of this.”

Ms. Astor smiles. She nods. “Let’s get started, then,” she says.

“Can I keep this?” I blurt, lifting *Fahrenheit 451*.

She walks backward, a smirk slipping up her face.

“This is a library, Ms. Hart. You can *borrow* it.”

I can't wait to read the book, holding my tablet's flashlight up to read the pages. As I near my front door, I almost miss the shadow rushing behind me.

Heavy footsteps crash through the brush behind the fence. I duck, falling into a crouch and hugging the book to my chest: someone is there, and they're climbing the tree behind me.

I hold my breath, listening to the sounds of twigs and bark and faint swearing. Two seconds later, there's a crash, and the sound of a familiar voice makes me shoot upright.

"Hux?" I ask, turning to look over the fence.

Sure enough, there he is, outlined by the low orange glow from my neighbor's ancient porch light. At the sound of me calling his name he looks over his shoulder, arms still reaching into the tree branches as though he's preparing to hoist himself up.

"Ripley," he says, his voice smooth and guarded as he drops his arms and turns to lean on the tree, keeping his face mostly shadowed.

I rest my hands on the fence. "You know the Hammers are looking to crack down on curfew breakers."

"Good thing we're both in bed right now," he drawls.

I shouldn't push. Asking him why he's out opens the door to *him* asking why *I'm* out. But I remember today—the way his expression tightened when we were looking at the raw footage on the screen in the utility room and he told me about Banks. This morning feels like six months ago. Another lifetime, really. But the memory of the pain on his face brings me right back to the moment.

"Are you okay?" I ask quietly. He stills. He wasn't expecting that.

Without taking him out of my sight, I reach my foot back to the broken AC unit, yanking up on the fence so that I can sit myself on the edge and look down at him. His head tilts—I can see that much in the dark, and I can only imagine his trademark look of irritation that is flitting over his expression.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asks finally. "I am, after all, currently in my bed, which I've been in for hours. Sleeping like a baby."

I'm tired of being fake. Of being beige and automatic. For once, I say something sincere to Hux: "If Nef turned eighteen, I wouldn't be okay."

I wish I could see his face, see the impact my words have had on him. If they have any impact at all. There's a charge to the air, like the heaviness

before a lightning strike. If we were ever going to say something real to each other—ever going to cross the boundary from peers and colleagues to something else like friends, this is it. I feel vulnerable, and fight the urge to take it back.

"She's my friend, Hux."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you are too."

Finally, he pushes off the tree. In a smooth, practiced motion, he turns and pulls himself up and onto the house's back porch overhang. He stops, then, turning to half look over his shoulder.

"I told you, Hart. We can't be friends."

At the sharpness of his words, anger burns up my throat. I reach in my pocket for something, anything. My hand falls on the poker chip.

Asshole, I think. I muster all the strength I can and hurl the poker chip at him, aiming for his massive, idiotic head.

Clonk.

It strikes true, and Hux's shoulders curl up toward his ears as he ducks.

Despite the hour, and the risk of Hammers and patrol drones, I allow myself a mirthless laugh. *Yeah, I hope that hurt*, I think.

My laugh stops short as Hux turns completely, stepping into a shaft of moonlight.

Blood streaks over his forehead, his mask—is it his? Is it someone else's? I can't decide which would be worse. But it's not the blood that freezes my blood. His eyes are rimmed with red. He's been crying.

As he reaches for the poker chip, his eyes flick down to the book I'm pressing to my chest. "Let me know if you'd like to borrow a match."

His words spark something in me, but then he's gone, and I'm breathing hard.

The book unfurls in my hands, slipping to the first page.

It was a pleasure to burn.

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Chapter 4

I blink several times, trying to stop my eyes from burning as I click through images. Even though I'm back at school, my mind is spinning with the book I stayed up too late reading. The world Ray Bradbury crafted had me enthralled—I couldn't put it down.

I finished the book around three in the morning and then lay awake until about five thinking about it. Only complete and utter exhaustion finally made me give in and sleep for a couple of hours before my alarm went off.

I've chugged so much coffee today I wouldn't be surprised if my blood was made up of a small percentage of pure caffeine. My heart thumps in my chest as I force myself to focus on the monitors.

Cat.

Cat.

Cougar—technically a cat?

Hux is beside me today, and I haven't looked at him once. I didn't spare him much thought after I opened the book, but him sitting next to me brings back the words he spat: *We can't be friends.*

As though I was strange for caring about him, as though feeling anything made me weak. I knew that wasn't true before I read my first book, but I know it even more now.

And I want more.

Ms. Astor sits at her desk, her shoulders back as she clicks away on her keyboard. I haven't looked at her either, really, but that's because I don't trust myself to keep my face relaxed. The words *you're a secret librarian* will probably appear on my forehead or something.

Behind me, Nef keeps sniffling. Her allergies are getting the worst of her, and I fight the urge to lean back and hand her a tissue. I don't want to draw any attention to myself today.

That is the new plan, the one I came up with on the train ride over.

Keep your head down. Don't cause any trouble, don't stick out like a sore thumb. Do the job, go home . . . and read.

But in order to do that, I have to find a way to ask Ms. Astor for another book. I have *Fahrenheit 451* under the false bottom of my gym bag, ready to return. I'm not going home without a new one.

I click faster than usual, nervous energy sending my fingers flying as my knee jostles up and down.

Hux sighs next to me, but I still don't look at him.

"They're going to bring the medics in if you don't calm down." His voice is soft as he tilts just slightly, eyeing Ms. Astor through the space in the monitors in front of us.

I tighten my jaw. It's not like he actually wants an answer.

It's not like he's my *friend.*

"Ripley," he says, his voice low.

And maybe that's it—my first name, for once. I turn to look at him. He's got a dark bruise under his eye. Not that I care, but this morning I heard him telling another student that he got hurt while working out.

And for a moment, I see that boy I met eight years ago, and not the asshole he became.

"What is wrong with you?" he whispers.

"Too much coffee," I say simply. "Couldn't sleep."

Hux presses his lips together as we both look back to our screens, clicks punctuating the silence. My knee bounces of its own accord again as I finish up cats and start another refining portfolio. This one is tiles: bath tiles, roof tiles, all kinds of tiles. Fascinating.

Just a couple of hours ago, I was deep in a world of intrigue and bravery and betrayal. Now, I'm staring at beige grout. I want to scream.

No, I don't want to scream. I purposefully still my knee and click the mouse as I take a deep breath. I don't want to scream. I want to talk to someone about it. I just experienced something singular, something magical. And until I can get Ms. Astor alone to ask for another book, I can't tell anyone.

I cast a low, sideways look at Hux.

Hux whistles low, eyes on his screen—he's sorting images of smiling faces. The grinning girl on his screen has far too many teeth. "Not even forming full sentences." Now a smiling boy with eyelashes that sprout and intersect like insect legs. "Maybe I should call the medics. Exactly how much coffee are we talking?"

"Not enough to put up with your bullshit today, I can tell you that," I shoot back, chancing a glance at him.

His jaw is shaded with just a hint of shadow, and there are dark circles under green eyes that flick to mine briefly. He smirks. It's slight—curling up the side of his mouth briefly—but somehow carries more warmth, more of what it means to *smile* than the inhuman grimace on his screen.

"A full sentence. I'm satisfied," he whispers back.

Something flickers in my chest, and I bounce my knee again as I look away. Too much caffeine. *That* is what sends my heart racing in my chest.

I think this is his way of apologizing. I wouldn't know, really. I've never seen him apologize.

"A whole pot. Blond roast," I whisper finally. If that's his way of apologizing, I guess this is my way of starting to think about *maybe* accepting it.

"Woof," he says back, and I feel myself starting to smile before I can make myself stop.

For a moment—just a moment—I wonder what it would be like to tell Hux everything. What would he do if I told him? If I introduced him to Lyceum? We have been told our whole lives that there were only two possible paths into adulthood, and neither was good. For the first time, I feel hope. We might actually have a future.

An alarm beeps, and Ms. Astor stands and announces that it's time for weapons training.

Everyone files out of the classroom quickly—the first ones to the recreation area get their pick of the grappling gear, and no one wants to get stuck with the shin guards that are kept together by electrical tape.

But I have something else I want more.

Hux takes his time, and I half wonder if he can tell I'm stalling. With one more look over his shoulder, he follows Nef out the door and down the hall.

I wait a beat, pulling my mouse from my monitor and making a beeline for Ms. Astor's desk.

“I think this is broken,” I say loudly, giving us cover for the conversation. Every single one of these computers is outfitted with a camera and microphone, constantly pushing data through Alba. Any red flags go straight to the Hammers.

Ms. Astor makes a face and reaches for my “broken” mouse, and I lower my voice: “I finished it. I finished the book.”

Her eyebrows jump. Here, she’s careful. Measured. But I can see the glimmer of excitement in her eyes at my announcement. Maybe she didn’t think I’d actually read it.

“And?” she whispers back, pretending to inspect the mouse.

“I loved it. I brought it in my gym bag so I can give it back. Can I have another?”

She lowers the mouse and roots around her desk. “Yes.”

My chest fills as I half expect her to pull a book out of her drawer. Instead, she withdraws a wire, cracking the plastic paneling off the mouse and replacing it as she talks.

“But not here.” Her eyes meet mine and fill with warning. “From now on, Ripley, *never* speak about it here. We keep these lives separate, which keeps us safe. Tonight, Pasadena City College.”

I look around as the realization of what I’m asking and *where* I’m asking it dawns on me. A room full of cameras and microphones. Alba always listening. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s okay, Ripley. It’s okay,” Ms. Astor says. She holds out the mouse. “This should work,” she says loudly. As I take the mouse and set it on my desk, Ms. Astor puts an irritated look on her face. “They don’t have all day, Ms. Hart. Please hurry.”

I nod, acting chastened as I hurry into the hallway.

The blue tape stretches against the cracking plastic as I try to pull the shin guards tighter.

“I don’t know why you’re surprised,” Nef says, resecuring her wrist wraps with the crisp bite of Velcro. “Those are always the last pair, and you were so late.”

We’re sitting with the girls on one side of the old gymnasium. Across the way, the boys stretch and warm up. Between us rests a massive black

wrestling mat. The gymnasium feels smaller with everyone packed inside of it, and it smells worse too.

I lean in and sniff the guards on my shin as I stretch, wincing. No, no. It's not the gym. It's the pads. After long hours of refining, the chance to do something active feels good. The fact that we *also* get to beat the shit out of each other is a perk.

"I had to tell her about the mouse. I didn't want to get my DopaMine docked again," I lie.

Nef nods, tangle of curls bouncing in their high bun. From this angle, I can see the slight pock of a scar along the light brown skin of her cheek—I bandaged that cut during the fencing practicum last year, and then volunteered to spar against the guy who gave it to her. I stabbed him in the thigh, and the tip of the foil had mysteriously fallen off.

So weird.

"Prepare for first pairing," Alba says through the speakers, jarring me. I'm still half hoping for Mr. Avilas and his whistle.

The door opens to the right of us, and Hux slips inside, keeping to the wall so he avoids Alba's motion detectors and getting docked for being late. I wonder if he was getting into another fight, or waiting for me outside the classroom door?

But why would he do that? It's not like we're *friends.*

A rush of annoyance under my collarbone ratchets up to rage.

"First, we will have . . ." Alba's voice halts as her system draws a name. "Ripley Hart." The girls clap, and Nef lets out a little *whoop* to cheer me on.

I stand, and the sad, gross shin guard slips down my leg. Great. That bodes well.

"And Huxley Finn."

The guys let out an encouraging cheer, and Hux rolls his shoulders, grinning as he stares across the mat at me.

"Well, shit," I whisper as I walk out. I yank the sad shin guard off one leg, and then the other. They were useless before, and they are especially useless now.

Hux saunters toward me.

He's got thirty pounds of muscle and a foot of height on me, but that doesn't matter when we're training. We learn a mixture of martial arts that are designed to teach us how to get the advantage over *any* opponent, not

just ones with whom we're equally matched. After all, we won't have weight classes in war.

When we meet, he holds his hand up as though measuring my height, and brings his hand to the center of his chest.

"Knives," I say, and Hux cocks an eyebrow.

"Knives it is," he says. I spin on my heel, and he takes several steps back, keeping me in his sight until finally turning to make his way to the rack of weapons that sit just off the edge of the mat.

I grab two small blades, testing their weight in my hands. They'll do.

"Are the contestants ready?" Alba asks, and I make my way back to the center to face Hux.

I answer for us both: "They are."

Hux only stares down at me. In the full light of the gym, I can really see the bruise on his face. It spreads up past his hairline, where a small scab is still healing. Whatever happened, it had to hurt.

But not as much as this will.

"Begin," Alba says.

I spin my blade in my palm and swipe it wide, just missing Hux's chest as he jumps backward, letting out a small laugh at the close call.

My blood boils. He's always laughing at me.

I advance, ducking to try and knock him off his feet with a kick, but he jumps back. With a scowl, he throws the knife down into the thick mat and finally lunges at me. I roll, swiping again at his boot but missing as he flips me, landing hard chest to chest, pinning my hands—and the knives they hold—at my side. He's heavy against me, but I know he's still holding himself up at least a little, because I'm not suffocating.

He's going easy on me.

"Did bad sleep have anything to do with being out past curfew?" he whispers, breath hot in my ear. When he pulls back to look me in the eye, with that same superior smirk, I feel the anger surge through my chest.

I take a breath, letting him think I'm preparing to answer him before bucking my hips up as hard as I can, knocking him off-balance. My motion rolls both of us to the side and I scrabble for the advantage, throwing myself atop him. My knees hit the mat as I straddle him, pressing the points of my hips to hold him down.

When his eyes widen, something in me crows. I reach forward, sinking my blade into the mat right next to his ear. The crowd watching us yells, the

guys trying to coach Hux and the girls cheering me on. Normally, it's distracting. Now, it's good. No one can hear what we're really saying.

I post forward, my lips coming close to his jaw as I pretend to push the blade farther into the mat. "The last time I tried to be nice to you, you bit my head off," I snap. "So where the hell do you get off asking me questions?"

This time, he's the one to surge his hips forward, sending me flying over his head. I direct the momentum into a forward roll, yanking my blade out of the mat as I go. I take my feet, only to find Hux towering over me, leveling that same smirk down at me.

"You want to know where I get off?" he teases, beckoning me forward with a crook of his finger. I straighten, not taking the bait as the crowd gets louder. I cock my hip and cross my arms, irritation flooding my senses.

"You were a dick, Huxley Finn. You think I'm weak? Pathetic? I guess you were right."

"You're admitting I was right?" Hux asks, that same teasing in his voice.

"We aren't friends."

And dammit, I know why. All his jabs, his hard shell, his crushing defeats of me in the classroom and beyond. I'm too soft. Even now, as I stare at him across the mat, the blades sweaty in my palms, tears prick my eyes. I'm embarrassed to admit how excited I was when I saw him standing there last night. How often do I look out my window to see if his is open, wondering if he's just as lonely as I am? Hoping he's looking back?

Hux gives me a weird look, spinning his blades as though to remind me where we are—in front of the whole class, Alba's cameras trained on our movements. I clear my throat and lunge. He tries to lower his center of gravity but fails, and I knock the blades from his hand and trip him so he lands hard on the mat, his breath rushing out of him. I don't think—my body moves. I surge over him, pressing my forearm against his throat until the veins pop out on his forehead. As our hipbones interlace, I bear him down into the mat, expecting him to buck me off again. But instead he taps the ground. The girls cheer as he gives up.

For a moment, we're caught there, our chests going with heavy breaths. And then I roll off. Without so much as a glance and certainly not a hand to help him up, I stalk off toward the locker room for our break.

I freeze in my tracks. The door to my locker hangs just ajar. An unease settles over my shoulders as I slowly step toward it, reaching to nudge open

the metal door while trying to keep an eye on my periphery.

My gym bag sits inside, seemingly untouched.

Then I remember, I'd told Ms. Astor where I was keeping *Fahrenheit 451*. What if someone heard? Everyone rushed off to weapons practice . . . everyone except Hux.

With shaky hands, I quickly rifle through my bag, reaching for the false bottom. I lift it, breathing hard as I check for the book.

I see another book there instead. It's bigger this time, with a soft blue cover. *Pride and Prejudice*, it says. Relief gusts out of me as I open the cover just a little to see a note tucked inside:

Being without a book is a special kind of torture.
I took the other one back to reshelve.

While I'm tempted to start reading, the sound of my other classmates coming toward the locker rooms spurs me on, and I quickly shut the bag and throw it over my shoulder.

Only two more hours before we're done for the day, and for the first time in a long, long time, I'm excited to go home.

I get to read.

For the second half of weapons practice, I don't get called again. I sit with my bag at my feet, watching the matches and trying to act normal. Nef is paired with Adia, and I cheer as she pins her in under two minutes. Hux tries to catch my eye, but I don't meet his. He doesn't want to be friends? Fine.

The last match is called, and we all filter out into the hallway, ready to head back to the refining classroom for one more hour before the end of the day. Nef keeps putting her hair up and taking it down, talking about the latest episode on her DopaMine, and I'm pretending to listen as my hand grips my bag like my life depends on it.

Suddenly, the sound of plastic and glass hitting the floor rips out of the classroom nearest to us. More noise follows: Yelling. Shouting. Boots.

Three Hammers lead Ms. Astor out into the hallway, her hands pulled painfully behind her back.

I freeze, and Nef grabs my hand. All around me, students watch, mouths agape as our proctor is arrested.

Our supervisor, Mr. Kaits, stands in the doorway, his mouth pressed into a line as another Hammer peppers him with questions.

"No, I don't know how it got here, I'm just glad I found it when I did," he says smugly, and my heart drops as one of the masked guards slips *Fahrenheit 451* into a plastic evidence bag.

A wave of nausea sweeps over me. *She was caught because I brought a book to school*.

A book.

My whole body goes cold as I realize I have another book in the bag that is currently resting at my side.

"We need to make sure there aren't any more on the premises," the Hammer says, and I can hear my heartbeat in my ears.

"I have to pee," I mumble at Nef, who isn't listening. She is, like everyone else, watching raptly as the Hammers toss the training room. Computers are unplugged and set on a desk under the window; tables are tipped. Ms. Astor's desk is torn apart.

I walk backward until I'm behind the crowd.

And then I turn and run as fast as I can.

I make it to the server room without anyone seeing me and open the door as quietly as possible.

It's hot and dark inside—the monitors are going but the sound is down low. I know I need to move, but something on the screen catches my attention.

Two small redheaded children smile toothily up at a camera.

I can't hear the audio, but captions pop up on screen:

> The boat belonged to the CEO and founder of ULTRAPure, the lifesaving dialysis machine that has become increasingly expensive in recent years . . .

I blink, coming back to myself. An accident? The live stream pans over the wreckage of a megayacht, the sort that would be larger than the entire school. The Last War has never made it to American soil.

I shiver.

I have to move. I can look this up later.

I yank a chair over to the wall, clambering on top to tuck the book into the ceiling tile. I'm fumbling with the white, pocked surface when the door opens again. I fumble against the edge of the chair, swearing under my breath.

Hux slips inside, too rushed to notice me perched here.

I watch him disappear behind a desk, folding down to his knees briefly.

That's when he sees me and freezes.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, all traces of the previous playfulness gone.

I hop off the chair. The book is hidden, but if he wanted to, he could probably find it. Of course, the same could be said for me and whatever *he* just tucked away.

Mutually assured destruction, I guess.

"Same thing you are, I think," I say, my voice low.

"This is not the time to play around, Hart," he barks. It should be an empty threat, but he closes the space between us in three powerful strides.

"See, you always think I'm giving off playful vibes. What I'm going for is disdain. Not my fault you can't discern between the two. Emotions not being your strong suit and all."

He glares at me, and I glare right back. We're almost chest to chest, and I have to crane my neck up to look at him. This close, I can see a muscle tick at the edge of his throat when he clenches his jaw. For some reason, it makes me grin.

Footsteps echo down the hall, and both our heads whip to the door.

They can't find us in this room. This is all we have. Without it—

"Come on," Hux says roughly. When I hesitate, his hand closes around mine and he pulls me to the door; I try and yank away, but he holds even tighter.

"The only thing worse than them finding this room is them finding us *in* this room, Hux!" I whisper-shout.

He's already working the handle. "They haven't turned down the south corridor. We're hearing the echo through the vent, but we have to go *now*."

The door opens with a blast of cool and somehow he still has my hand, leveraging it to pull us both out into the hallway.

The sound grows louder, closer. I twist to look behind us and the hallway seems to stretch forever. We can't run. We'll never make it to the classroom

in time. At any moment, the Hammers will come around the corner and catch us.

“Great plan, Finn,” I bite out.

His face is tight as he stares down the hallway; that jaw works as he thinks. He lets out a huff as though making a decision, and then looks at me, his nostrils flaring slightly as his eyes find mine.

“Play along,” he says, voice almost a growl.

“With what?” I ask, but we’re out of time. The footsteps get closer, and so does Hux.

With one decisive stride, he’s backed me up against the wall next to the server room door. I don’t even have time to process what is happening before his hand is cupping my jaw. And then Huxley Finn is kissing me.

My brain short-circuits for a moment, the thought refusing to process:

Huxley Finn is kissing me.

I’m kissing Huxley Finn.

I drop my gym bag and grab at a fistful of his shirt, dragging him closer.

He slants into me, mouth opening wider as his tongue meets mine.

This isn’t my first kiss. Refining camp got boring, and there wasn’t much else to do. But now I’m starting to wonder if those were kisses at all.

This? This is different. Hux kisses like this is his only chance. He kisses me like he’s been thinking about it for a while.

I’ve written kisses like this between Orion and Saffron, but living it is something else.

His hand tangles in my hair as the footsteps round the corner, stopping as a firm voice barks out: “Hey, you two! Get to your stations.”

Hux, in the most Hux move ever, takes one more deep pull from the kiss before moving his head back a little, still inches from my mouth as he turns to eye the Hammers staring at us. His eyes roll as a hand comes to his lips, tugging along the flushed skin. Already, I can see the Hammers twitch hands toward their nightsticks. I pull against his shirt lightly, signaling *What are you doing* as best I can. Hux’s hand tightens along the nape of my neck.

Trust me, it seems to say.

I have a million reasons not to, but I have no choice.

“Stations,” a Hammer repeats, fingers already white around the grip of his baton.

Hux speaks lazily, like we have all the time in the world: “We’ve got five more minutes on our break.” Already, he’s turning back to me and running

the tip of his nose along the curve of my jaw before brushing his lips against mine.

I shiver against him, closing my eyes briefly. A sharp noise makes me flinch: One of the Hammers has smashed his nightstick against the wall.

"Hey!" he yells. "We're on a lockdown. Break's over."

This time when Hux pulls his mouth from mine, he straightens, hands on either side of my head, caging and shielding me all at once.

"Is it safe to walk her back to her station?" he asks, a protective note in his voice. Or is it more possessive?

The Hammer thinks for a second before he nods. "Get her there and then get your ass back to yours before I write you up."

Hux holds his hands up as if to say *okay, okay*, and the guards march past us. Holding my breath, I take a small step to the side, blocking their view of the server room door.

They brush past us, the last two chuckling to each other.

"Can't blame him. Gotta get all that in before you turn eighteen," one of them jokes.

Shock and fear war inside me as the Hammers disappear down the hallway. Hux breathes hard next to me, and I can't tell if it's from Hammers or the kiss or both. As I stare, he reaches over, hand out. For a second, I wonder if he's trying to grab mine.

One kiss and we're holding hands?

Before I can thoroughly embarrass myself by trying to lace my fingers through his, he turns his hand upward and uncurls his fist.

The poker chip.

I glance down at it, then up at him. Both eyebrows raise, and I know he means for me to take it.

So I do.

Before Hux can say anything, I'm walking down the hallway, back toward the classroom.

He doesn't follow me. And I don't look back.

Even though I want to.

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Chapter 5

The poker chip dances in between my fingers as the sun sets. From my perch on the roof, I watch the Post Angeles skyline streak with orange and brown.

Flip flip flip flip.

The chip feels heavier, but maybe I'm just imagining it.

I've been alive for eighteen years, and I can count all the really interesting things that have happened to me on one hand. Very rarely has life surprised me, and most of those surprises have not been good.

And then, within one twenty-four-hour period, I read my first book, joined a revolution, realized my writing has actually impacted people, kissed the most annoying boy I've ever met, and watched my proctor get arrested because of something I did.

My thoughts stop on that memory: Ms. Astor getting pulled out into the hallway, hands cuffed behind her back.

Where is she now? At some refinery, maybe. One of the bad ones, the ones that are built on old oil rigs out off the coast of Canada. And that's the best-case scenario, really. If they truly want to make an example of her, there are plenty of other ways they can kill her.

Either way, I know it's unlikely I'll ever see her again. And that is my fault. I press the heels of my hands against my eyes so hard that colors appear, bright spots of white and purple.

A sound scratches at the edge of the roof, and I jump, lowering my hands.

Someone is coming up.

I shove myself to a crouch, ready to run. I didn't consider that Ms. Astor could have given me up. She didn't seem like the kind of person who would

do that, but then again, I really don't know her all that well, do I?

This could be it. Hammers could be climbing up here, ready to—

I stop as a familiar face peers over the edge of the roof, eyes wide.

"Nef?" I ask, letting out a huff that's somewhere between a relieved sigh and a laugh.

She looks around before hoisting herself onto the roof, scrabbling a bit against the rough surface. I jump up to help her. Once she gets her knee on the flat tile, I return, dangling my feet over the edge.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, motioning for her to join me. Technically we have another hour before curfew. But Nef has never visited me before. Why waste your time, when DopaMine unlocks at five?

Nef runs a hand over her curls and squints toward where the last of the sunset paints a rainbow low in the sky. "Wow. It's prettier up here than down in the valley," she says with a sort of forced nonchalance that makes me laugh.

"Your first time visiting me and you're commenting on the view? Want to talk about the weather next?" I tease.

"Do you think Ms. Astor is dead?" she asks bluntly, and I blink several times at the question. I want to tell her no, that's ridiculous, she's fine, but . . . I don't know.

My hesitation says enough, and she nods as she turns back out to look at the darkening skyline. The fiery reds give way to muted purples, somber blues.

"I know that risk isn't really my thing. It never has been," she says, cocking her jaw as she thinks. "I thought the day Uriah was picked up and sent off would be the second-worst day of my life."

"Second?" I ask.

"I was saving the worst . . . for me. My eighteenth birthday. It's in four months." She picks at a piece of the roof and then looks at me. "But I think I was wrong. I think watching people I love leave is worse. Even if I get to stay. And watching Ms. Astor . . ."

She can't finish her sentence, and I reach out and grab her hand, squeezing it.

My heart thunders in my chest. We've never talked like this before, Nef and me. It's always been about the latest episode of our shows or the lunch menu. She's never really let me in. I'm almost scared to move, like I might

accidentally spook her and she'll come to her senses to realize she's on my roof, that I can hear everything she's saying.

"So, anyway. I had those thoughts and was pacing around my room, trying to make them stop, but they wouldn't. So then I realized I needed to talk to a friend. And you're that friend."

"I'm glad you're here, but you know, you could have just FaceChatted. I'll always answer."

Nef smiles as she nods, and then the nod turns into a shake of her head. "It's more than that. I've spent my whole life so afraid of everything, Ripley. So convinced that if I just played by the rules, I'd win. But something about seeing Ms. Astor—the one who taught me those rules—walked out like a criminal today, I don't know. It made me think."

Her eyes are alight as she looks at me, and it's thrilling, like I'm seeing my best friend for the first time in years.

I know what she's thinking, so I finish the sentence: "It made you think that maybe playing by the rules doesn't matter if the game is rigged?"

She huffs out a long sigh. "That's it. We can't win, can we." It's not a question. "So, I don't know." She dusts her knees off as she thinks. "Maybe it's silly, but I needed to know that I still had the ability to do something outside of a screen. Something brave."

A warm wind blows over the rooftop, ripping my hair in wild directions. I pull a strand from my mouth as I follow her gaze out to the city beyond. Because this is brave. Doing something the algorithm hasn't suggested. Doing *anything*.

My heart thuds against my ribs as an idea pops into my head. Really, it was already there. It's been there since I set foot in Lyceum's tunnels and thought Nef would love this. But I didn't want to force her or put her in danger. I think, deep down, I figured that Ms. Astor would know when she was ready, probably more than I would.

But Ms. Astor is gone now. And if anyone is going to tell Nef about Lyceum, it has to be me.

I bite my cheek as I weigh my options. Once I tell her about it, I can't take it back. Even if she decides not to join, she will be in danger just by knowing.

But not telling her is still making a decision for her, isn't it?

She wanted to know she could be brave. I have the perfect test, I guess.

"I have something to tell you," I whisper.

Nef and I keep our hoods low as we make our way inland, catching the backs of trains just like I did before. Above us, hovercopters swoop low, crisscrossing as they dart to different destinations across the valley, and we're sure to stay still and keep out of sight. There are a few patrol drones, too, tiny specks in the distance. I can only hope they don't come any closer.

Ms. Astor had said Lyceum would be meeting at an old college tonight. There are dozens of colleges around here, but there's only one that is connected to the incomplete underground railway system, so Nef and I head there. After all, Lyceum operates in those tunnels.

When the train slows around a bend, Nef and I jump off. The momentum knocks me forward and it's a heady moment, my body rushing, but I catch myself on the ledge of a walkway just in time. Nef rolls perfectly, and I almost want to laugh. She was so worried about breaking rules, but she's undeniably good at it.

"What the hell was that?" I whisper as we race down an empty flood channel that will lead to the college.

"What?" she asks, and I can tell she's smiling even just from her voice.

"That superhero ninja roll. I may be recruiting you to the revolution, but somehow I'm the one over here stubbing my toe jumping off the slowest train in existence."

"I am not joining a revolution. I'm looking at books," Nef says, and I can't tell if she's trying to convince herself or me as the old building looms before us.

"Hate to break it to you," I say, reaching through an empty pane in the window and knocking open the door, "but looking at books is revolutionary now."

Nef hesitates for a moment, and then we both shuffle inside. The door slams behind us; I whirl to shoot a glare at Nef, who seems to shrink into her shoulders. The sound echoes down the dark, empty hallway. I hold a hand up and Nef doesn't move a muscle. The last time I did this, Ms. Astor stepped out of the shadows. But it's entirely possible that no one knows we're coming, now that she's gone.

"Lyceum operates out of the subway tunnels, so we just have to find stairs that lead down," I whisper, and we inch along the hallway until we find that same black symbol: the Ionic column. I understand now what it

stands for—*Lyceum*. When I throw the door open, Nef makes a noise low in her throat.

This time, the stairs don't glow—it must take someone charging the glow-in-the-dark strips, probably with flashlights—so we make slow work of it. Our vision is useless in the pitch black, and we both know that there is a chance that any given stair could give out or just . . . not be there. In the darkness, my mind helpfully conjures images of us tumbling down an endless concrete stairwell. How would we call for help? Could we? It would expose all of Lyceum.

Nef makes a small noise, and I reach out awkwardly for her hand, bonking her in the face instead. "Ow, Ripley," she whines, but there's a smile in her voice.

I grasp at her shoulder—elbow?—instead. "C'mon. Being brave, right?"

And so we inch along, testing our weight on every stair like the very earth might crumble away.

Eventually, we reach the bottom. We feel around for another door, grasping in the dark. I bite back a scream when my hand goes through more than one spiderweb.

Eventually, my fingers find an old crash bar. "Here," I say, and with a squeak, light washes across us.

The sight is familiar: a wide tunnel covered in bookshelves and half-strung lights. But this time, it's just us and the books.

"Where is everyone?" Nef whispers.

I don't hear the footsteps coming up behind me, and neither does Nef.

There's no time to breathe before cold metal is at my throat.

"Move and die," a deep voice says.

I cast a quick glance to my side, where Nef is frozen in the same position—knife at her throat. With the shadows at our backs, we can't even see who's caught us.

"You said the Machs didn't know about this location," the figure behind me snaps at the one holding Nef.

Machs?

"We're looking for Lyceum. Ms. Astor brought me in!" I choke out. It's one thing to have a blade at my throat during training, but this is different.

I don't even know if that was the right thing to say. What if these people just killed everyone in the tunnels? Maybe the administration found out. Did I just reveal everything to the Hammers?

“HEY! LET THEM GO!” someone cries from farther down the tunnel, panic echoing through the space. I crane my neck as far as I can without pressing against the knife but can’t make out who is talking. The person holding me seems to recognize the voice, which apparently holds at least some authority, because I feel the reluctant way in which my captor looses their grip. Hands against my spine shove me forward. I stumble a few steps toward the edge but keep my feet. At my side, Nef does the same.

And then her eyes widen.

I follow her gaze toward our savior. I know he’s older, but I didn’t expect him to look so much older. His shoulders are wider, his hair longer.

“Uri!” Nef sobs. She lets out a strangled noise as she launches herself at her brother, and he catches her, pulling her in.

The two figures behind me lower their masks, and I recognize them. One is a redheaded girl who was two years ahead of me: Lena McDaniels. She had kind eyes, but they seem more wary now.

The other is a boy with dark hair—Jacob Yen. He was three years ahead of me.

Behind them, more figures step out of the shadows, no doubt drawn by the commotion. As they step into the light, I recognize more faces. Nineteen-year-olds, twenty-year-olds. Kids I remember from school who should have “graduated,” ones that I thought had been sent to fight in the war. If the Hammers could find them, they’d do far worse. President Graves likes to make examples of draft dodgers—I’ve seen the footage even on my DopaMine feed. They’re risking far more than I could even imagine.

I thought what I was doing was brave, but looking at them, I realize I still have a lot to learn about what that word means.

Uri lets Nef go and then turns to the curious faces watching them. “It’s okay. She’s my sister. And . . .”

“My best friend, Ripley,” Nef supplies, and I feel myself smile despite the circumstances. I’m glad to know I’m still her best friend even though I almost got us both killed. Then she turns back to her brother, voice taking on a frantic edge. “What the hell are you doing here?” She seems torn between being elated and being really, really pissed. I get it—I’d feel the same way. He’s avoided the war overseas by marking himself for death at home.

“I’ll explain in a minute,” Uri says.

He doesn’t take his arm off Nef’s shoulders when he turns to look at me. “We’re Lyceum. You said Ms. Astor sent you. She was supposed to be back tonight, but never showed. Is she with you?”

My stomach drops, and I swallow hard. I didn’t think I’d be the one having to tell them about this. I’m not sure I know how.

“The Hammers did a raid on the training ground classrooms,” I say, my throat suddenly dry. I swallow hard, not wanting my voice to crack.

“They found a book on her,” Nef adds.

Uri looks stricken as the words hit him; behind me, someone gasps.

“A book?” Uri asks.

“But Ms. Astor was so careful,” someone else says.

Tell the truth, a little voice inside me prompts. “It was my book,” I say quickly. “She’d lent it to me, and I brought it back. It’s my fault.”

No one refutes my claim, and even though bile rises in my throat, I force myself to meet as many eyes as I can. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I am so, so sorry.”

Uri shakes his head, finally stepping away from Nef.

“It’s not your fault,” he says, his voice tinged with a strange mixture of sadness and resignation. “We all know the risks when we join. Ms. Astor most of all. Come on. We’ve got work to do. She wouldn’t want us to waste time. The election is coming up faster than we think.”

“She’ll be back soon,” someone says hopefully. “Like with Mark—his sentence at the farms was barely a year.”

Doubt pricks my mind. They’ve been eager to replace proctors with Alba, so I’m not sure she’ll be back.

Still, the terror in my chest lessens as I look around. They aren’t going to kill us. A couple of kids toward the back of the crowd peel off, heading back to their duties, seemingly satisfied that we’re not a threat.

“Who are the Machs?” I ask, watching their retreating backs.

Uri glances after the other kids, something dark in his expression. “Not Lyceum,” he says finally.

Uri and Lena lead Nef and me through a network of massive tunnels. I gape when the shadows give way to the Edison bulbs that spill light around us.

Nef stays close to Uri behind us, and I stick by Lena in an effort to give Nef and Uri some privacy. They have a lot to talk about, I’m sure.

“You said something when you first grabbed me. You thought we were . . .”

“Machs,” Lena says, keeping her eyes dead ahead.

“Machs. Who are they?”

We leave a circle of light and dip back into shadow, and she’s silent.

“It’s a nod to Machiavelli,” she answers eventually. “Which, in reality, is just a sad attempt to slap an intellectual title on what they really are: terrorists.”

“You thought we were terrorists?” I ask, shivering as the cold seems to seep down to my bones. “Did you not hear both of us lose our minds when we had to put our hands through spiderwebs?”

“With the size of the black widows out here, I don’t blame you,” Lena throws back, half kidding. “But the Machs are recruiting harder these days. We both know the election is going to be a big one.”

“Why have I not heard of them?” I ask, and Lena pulls a flashlight from her belt, handing it to me as we head to a section of tunnel that doesn’t have any lights.

“You haven’t heard their name, maybe,” she replies. “But you’ve heard of them. Their . . . *handiwork*. I’m sure you’ve seen it. That yacht that sank off the northern coast? That was them. The fire that blew through that strip of new beach house development in South Texas? Machs. Turn that on,” she says, pointing to the flashlight.

I hadn’t realized I’d stopped moving. I follow the suggestion, letting the light hit the back of Lena’s boots as she forges ahead.

I thought those were accidents. Catastrophic natural disasters are the norm, and it makes sense that a yacht or a line of seafront mansions would be collateral damage the news would showcase. And maybe part of me had hoped one of the countries we’re fighting was responsible.

“Why haven’t I heard of them until now?” I ask, trying to keep the accusation from my voice. After all, I’ve just met this girl, and she had a knife to my throat two minutes ago.

Lena snorts. “Right. Terrorists want people to be scared. Talking about them gives them power. You think President Graves is the type of guy to willingly give away any of his power?”

“Why not work with the Machs?” I ask, feeling like the question is obvious. “You both want to take Graves down. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend,’ right?”

Lena stops short, and I almost trip in an effort not to run straight into her back. She whips around, grabbing my flashlight and shining it up under her face, which highlights her tight expression. “Are you kidding?”

“Whoa. What is this?” Uri asks, half teasing as he and Nef catch up to us.

“She sounds just like one of them,” Lena practically spits, lowering the light and clicking it off. “She just asked why we don’t join forces with the Machs.”

A wave of defensiveness kicks up in my gut. “I’m not suggesting Lyceum blow things up. I’m actually saying that if anyone can convince the Machs that there is a better way to stop Graves, it would be you.”

Lena lets out a humorless laugh. “Right. Uri, did you hear that? We should just talk to them. Use our words and our feelings. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“I was just asking a question,” I shoot back.

Lena thinks about this, looking to Uri for a second before rolling her shoulders. “You’re new. I shouldn’t take three years of frustration out on you. I just . . . the question is so simple. And the answer seems simple too. But it’s not. Every attack the Machs pull off gives President Graves justification to crack down harder on what freedoms we do have left. And we can track the way his policies creep toward dictatorship. The Machs are almost always the catalyst.”

I nod. “I get it. The enemy of your enemy . . .”

“Is a big pain in our ass. That’s it,” Lena finishes, nodding back. Then she looks over my shoulder to Uri. “We’ve gotta get to the prep room if we’re going to get the pamphlets out.”

For a second, I worry I’ve blown it, that they aren’t going to let me join. Hopefully Nef can stay. She has Uri to vouch for her. I hope they don’t send her away just because she came with me—

“—Hart. Let’s go.” Lena’s voice pulls me back to the present, where Lena, Uri, and Nef all wait for me to catch up.

We walk for another ten minutes before reaching a large metal door, so wreathed in shadow I would have completely missed it. Lena knocks twice, and then twice more. A code. After a long pause, the door squeaks open, hinges groaning against the weight.

It looks like this place used to be a closet. A large closet, of course, but still a closet. Now, tables line the space from wall to wall, all covered with

stamps, pens, and rolls of paper. Dozens of kids I thought were long gone look up as Nef and I stand in the doorway.

"Nef and Ripley. New recruits. They'll be on print," Lena says brusquely.

A girl with dark braids raises her hand. "Over here." She motions for Nef and me to join her at the end of a table.

Uri squeezes Nef's shoulder before urging her on, and I follow.

I stare down at the pamphlets as the girl, Mo, explains where to write the list we're printing in all of the pamphlets:

Twenty Questions President Graves Needs to Answer Before the Union Conference Next Week

My eyes run over the questions, which cover topics from human rights he's been violating to environmental laws he's nullified. The last one is bolded, and it catches my attention, just as I suppose it's meant to:

Will you support a peaceful transfer of power when your second term is over in two months?

I open my mouth to say it's an absurd question. Of course he will—every other president has, since this country was founded almost four hundred years ago.

But something slinks through my gut. Lyceum has been pushing to get the vote out.

What if that doesn't matter at all? What if, like all other games, this one has been rigged?

All around us, the soft chatter of conversation fills the room with a pleasant hum. It's so different from the training room, where computer fans whir and mice click like a percussion track. This is different. This feels like community, and I can tell Nef feels it too. She smiles softly at me as Mo finishes explaining how we can help. On the back wall, three people stand next to a giant machine that thrums as they move levers with ink-stained hands.

A printing press. Completely offline, untrackable. My heart swells at the sight.

"Just do as many as you can," Mo says, moving a cup of pens closer to us. "Even one pamphlet makes a difference. Every vote counts."

“Will do,” I say, nodding. Mo smiles warmly before going to help two girls who are struggling to cut a giant piece of paper down to size.

“Uri told me,” Nef says, lowering her voice as her hand moves evenly across the page.

“Told you what?” I ask, leaning my face closer to the paper so I can make sure I’m getting the spacing of the letters just right.

“That other people found your stories,” Nef says plainly.

I stop, lifting the tip of the pen from the paper and looking around to make sure no one else heard. Which is pointless. If Uri told Nef, then everyone here already knows about *Written in the Stars*. Still, my face burns hot at the idea that anyone here has read my silly little fantasies.

“I didn’t mean for them to,” I reply, looking back to the paper just so I can look anywhere but my best friend’s face. “I only created the link for you. I was a kid. I didn’t think through that posting them meant other people could find them too.”

“I always loved hearing your stories, Ripley. And now, you’re, like . . . an author.” Nef’s voice pitches up with excitement. I give her a death glare.

“I am not an author,” I clarify, keeping my voice as low as possible. “I just . . . I wrote to process how I was feeling. It helped me make sense of things. It’s humiliating to think that anyone else read it.”

Nef tongues her cheek as she writes more. “At least I’m the only person to know that they’re about . . .”

I practically choke on my spit. “Nef!” I bark out. The idea of her saying that name here makes me feel like someone dumped a bucket of ants over my head.

The conversations around us stop for a heartbeat or two as everyone turns to look at us.

“I’m good.” I wave as Nef covers her mouth with her hand, trying and failing to hide her laughter. “All good. We’re fine over here,” I singsong before shooting Nef a wide-eyed glare.

She can’t hide her laughter anymore, and sits back in her chair.

I realize, then, that I’ve never seen Nef laugh like this. Her laugh isn’t polite, like the ones she’d give proctors who were trying too hard to crack a relatable joke. Her nose scrunches up, and she has a dimple in her left cheek.

My best friend has a great laugh. The thought makes me smile, even though I’m trying to keep my glare going.

“I still have the link,” Nef adds, smiling as she turns back to the paper. “Maybe I should read it again.”

“Please no,” I say, my cheeks burning.

Nef giggles, and makes fun of how red my cheeks are, and we slip into companionable silence as we work. It’s funny how my fingers remember how to write, even if it feels like my heart forgot.

Eventually, Nef shakes her hand. “Ow, ow, ow,” she laugh-cries. “I’m dying,” she whimpers, and I roll my eyes as I press my fingers into the tendons near her knuckles. “You are not. Your hand is cramping up.”

I rub her hand, and she sighs. I let it go, and she moves her fingers.

“Regretting popping onto my roof?” I joke, and Nef shakes her head.

“No.” Her voice sounds stronger than I’ve ever heard it. When she looks up at me, her eyes are bright. “My brother is alive. I wouldn’t have known that if I’d played it safe like I usually do.”

Tears line her bottom lashes, but she blinks them away before they can spill over. “No. Popping up on your roof tonight was the best decision I ever made. And . . .”

I look at her expectantly.

“It reminded me that my best friend is an author with a massive crush on __”

“Shh!” I interrupt, even as a memory pops into my mind, and I press my lips together. “Besides,” I add with fake nonchalance, “I don’t have to live in fantasies anymore, considering that four hours ago, someone pushed me up against a wall and kissed the shit out of me.”

Nef lets out a squeak, dropping the pen cup. “Ripley Hart, tell me everything,” she orders.

And I do.

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Chapter 6

Nef and I stay with Lyceum to finish another batch of pamphlets. We then sign up to take a route with Lena to drop them off—the dangerous part of the job. Uri and I both tell Nef that she doesn't have to go, but she's set on it.

So we stuff some satchels full of pamphlets and make our way to the weed-covered parking lot.

The only people out past curfew are the delivery drivers and law enforcement. We can't pretend to be Hammers, but we're dropping things off, so we just lean into that, hoods pulled low, packages in front of our bodies. And no one stops us. Since the trains don't run into the city center, we grabbed some solar-powered electric bikes from the parking lot outside the emergency exit—hidden behind pieces of molding cardboard by the last Lyceum shift—and take off toward Beverly Hills.

Rodeo Drive used to be the crème de la crème of fancy shit. I've seen the pictures, and I've seen footage of the re-creation they built in Washington, D.C. Rodeo Two, it's called. They built it after one of the bigger earthquakes, when the rich left this one to crumble.

Rodeo One is now stacked with housing, families packed close together in buildings that alternate between fire-charred and earthquake-scarred.

My tires roll to a stop in the middle of the weed-covered asphalt. The buildings that used to be pure white are streaked with ash and graffiti. All the glass windows are long gone, replaced by sheet metal or plywood thrown up by cheap landlords. Music blares from an open window, bass vibrating the street beneath us.

Even though curfew is fully in effect, a few people wander the streets: a man with a gray beard braided and tucked into his stained T-shirt; a woman with a baby wrapped to her chest. But neither of them stop to ask us any questions. They don't even look at us.

Lena snaps her fingers at me, then jabs a finger across the street. Nef and I work together. A couple of the front doors require a code to get inside, but most of them creak open without any resistance. The stores inside have long since been converted into housing, drywall thrown up haphazardly, leaving a barely straight hallway down the middle. Nef and I inch along, hearing everything through the thin walls—babies crying, arguments raging, screens blaring—as we quickly slip the pamphlets under apartment doors. For the first few, I half wonder if anyone will notice the sound, the paper appearing in their doorway. But if anyone notices, they don't open the door.

Once our satchels are much lighter, we meet Lena back at the bikes and silently race off, hitting two other neighborhoods before returning the bikes.

Nef says goodbye—Uri offers to walk her home, but I don't feel the need for an escort. I take my time, slipping the oxygen mask from my nose to cautiously breathe a few lungfuls of the night air. It's just me and the crickets as I consider the fact that I am officially part of Lyceum. I've created and distributed anti-Graves material. I'm a rebel. I even have a pamphlet on me, in my own handwriting. If the administration finds out, they will make me pay.

I wait for the panic to set in as I turn onto my street, but it doesn't. I broke the law. In a big way. And I brought Nef into it! What would my parents think? What am I doing?

That should suffice to brew up a good ol' anxiety attack, and I actually stop walking, going still as though to give my body a moment to deliver.

But it doesn't come.

I heard my best friend's real laugh for the first time tonight, a sound I haven't heard since we were kids on the playground, making up stories and talking about cute boys. Tonight had been like that again, except we aren't playing pretend anymore. We talked about what we'd do, at eighteen, at nineteen, and it didn't involve dying or killing. We talked about our hopes. I told her about a boy I had kissed, even though it was fake. And it felt good to talk about it—and hear someone else's take on it. Even if that meant listening to Nef discuss Hux's tongue in great detail and ask if that was just for show too.

I'm blushing, thinking about Hux's tongue, when it—and the rest of Hux—swings into my vision. He's a familiar figure, a shadow against the easing night sky, on the roof again. As I stare, he drops into the yard below in that move that's almost a dance.

Then Hux is on another roof, dropping into a different yard.

Before I know it, I'm running. I can't lose sight of him, not this time.

He goes over the wall, and I jump the fence and sprint across the yard, following closely, making sure to steer clear of the ancient pool that is now caked with algae and God knows what else.

I jump that fence, too, and manage to catch sight of Hux just before he turns down a narrow alley behind another row of houses to the south.

Another thought bubbles to the front of my brain, hand in hand with the memory of his breath on my face and the feel of his nose bumping against mine: Hux turns eighteen in two months. Maybe then *he* can join Lyceum. Maybe Banks joined Lyceum too. Maybe there's hope for us all. We'll spend nights writing to inspire people to vote, and we'll race the night to deliver hope before the sun rises, side by side. Maybe we can't be friends. But we don't have to be enemies. We can go back to something else, something like allies.

Which is why I'm chasing him now, as the first fingers of dawn tickle the sickly sky.

He's *fast.* Within minutes, we're at the end of the windy road that leads up to the houses, which spills out into a three-way intersection. Hux doesn't even hesitate as he crosses the street, slowing his pace down just a little to look more nonchalant. He tucks his hands in his pockets and saunters like he has all the time in the world.

I linger across the street, holding a stitch in my side. Why couldn't he have *sauntered* all the way here?

Just opposite where I'm standing, there's the shell of a burned-out gas station. And looming above it are the raised, bridge-like tracks of the concrete overpass, its sharp angle the last of the roadway before the hovercars cut into the sky above downtown Post Angeles. Fluorescent lights are mounted along the bottom, casting the whole area in a weird bluish-white glow.

Hux looks both ways when he gets to the gas station—but not before crossing the street; how is this boy still alive—and then continues on. Realization dawns, a pit in my stomach.

“Huxley Finn, no fucking way,” I gasp.

But with one leap, he’s up on the leg of the overpass, managing to grab the bottom of a maintenance ladder with one hand. He yanks it down, tuns his face up toward the bridge above him, and then climbs. Overhead, the superhighway whizzes with light and sound, rush hour coming with the day. Hovercars rocket into the sky, engines roaring with the extra effort.

I press my lips together, looking over my shoulder. I know it’s now or never—if I’m going to follow him, I have to move.

After checking both ways—because I, unlike some people, have survival instincts—I sprint across the intersection, muttering insults under my breath the whole time.

By the time I reach the ladder, I’ve run out of curse words. I crane my neck upward. It’s so much higher than it looks from across the street. I make myself stare forward as I climb, wincing once I leave the blue light and enter the shadowed side. Up here, hovercars blow my hair back, the scent of exhaust managing to slip past my mask. At the top, the ladder bends, ending in two handles and one step that leads directly to the roadway. A roadway that cuts off abruptly in a few yards, disappearing into air. Along the seam of that drop-off, I barely catch Hux’s figure.

I could yell after him. What would I say? Tell him to stop, tell him not to —

But he’s running toward the edge.

“Huxley!” His name rips out of me in surprise, because I blink and he’s gone, the hovercars around him taking off into the sky. The roar of engines steals my cry, but I scan the street frantically until I spot him, in the sky, clinging to a self-driving delivery hovercar, positioned expertly between the rear and side cameras. They zoom off toward downtown, a blur of fiberglass and the boy I just kissed.

I don’t have a second to stop and think this through. If I did, I’d probably decide against what I do next, which is take off in a sprint.

I speed up, sprinting as hard as I can toward the end of the road.

Ten feet.

Seven.

I have no idea how to time this. The automated hovercars whip around the corner, speeding up as they near the ramp. I have to run faster, something tells me. My lungs scream in protest as I fight like hell to close the gap—

Five feet.

Three. Two.

It's now or never.

I jump. My arms pinwheel wildly, and I kick my feet. I land hard on the back bumper, letting out a very unladylike groan as my face hits the black matte finish.

I freeze, hoping that my landing wasn't jarring enough to raise any red flags. This is a delivery vehicle, so there's no one to hear me, but these have cameras and sensors, right?

I get my answer as the hovercar rockets on and up, leaving me scrambling to find my grip as we take off into the night sky.

Clinging painfully by my fingers to the seam of the fender, I pull myself up. A handful of cars ahead, Hux is perched on his ride, the wind lifting his hair as he holds on to a bar mounted on the side of the vehicle.

I peer around on mine, finding that same bar but keeping my body toward the back, just in case Hux decides to look over his shoulder.

My breath catches as we lurch upward, the air getting colder the higher we go. Our cars soar into the sky, threading on invisible roads half a mile above the city. I've never been in a hovercar—in the Before times, my parents preferred an earthbound self-driving car, and in the After we can't even afford the electricity it would take. But now? Now I'm literally *on* one. My teeth chatter as my fingers go numb, but I forget all of that as I turn to look down.

The lights from the city spill across the valley like diamonds tipped out of a bag and spilled across a dark carpet. Fog from the ocean has rolled over the farthest western edge of the city, purple smoke snaking across the sky and blurring the individual pinpricks of light into one warm glow as day begins to creep in.

It's beautiful. I smile for two seconds before the frigid air slams painfully into my teeth and I clamp my mouth shut. The hovercraft pitches left, and I look ahead at the skyscrapers jutting against the night sky.

Why is Hux going there? Barely anyone lives in downtown Post Angeles. These buildings are nothing but husks for Alba, power banks and server rooms. Who could he be visiting?

Suddenly, a feeling of fear hollows out my stomach, and my thoughts finally catch up to me.

I don’t know what I thought Hux was doing—maybe moving flavored OxyVapes for extra cash, or meeting with a girl. And I suddenly feel really stupid as I watch the rapidly approaching buildings. Whatever he’s into, it’s bigger than that. Hux is smart—the smartest in our class. Whatever he’s lending that brilliance to, it’s big. And big, in this world, is never good.

Ahead, his hovercar slows as it weaves between two skyscrapers, and I watch him drop off like a spider onto a balcony as mine pulls me down to the rooftop across the way for its first delivery stop. With wobbly legs, I topple from the black face of the car as a sheet-glass door winches open on an elderly woman.

“Hello?” she croaks out. “Are they sending girls with the groceries these days?”

“Yes,” I say as cheerfully as I can manage. “I’m here to help you unpack. How do you organize your fridge? Eggs on the door, I assume?”

My fingers are still numb as I head down from the apartment and hurry to the neighboring one, hoping it’s the one that Hux went to. Blowing on my hands does little; I stick one in my pocket, trying to restore any feeling I can. The numb tip of my thumb bumps against something hard, and I almost roll my eyes as I realize that it’s the poker chip.

I think he takes it, this time, I think sarcastically.

And then I stop. There are two types of buildings in the city: apartments and servers. This one isn’t an apartment. Hux isn’t visiting anyone, after all. With a wary glance at the elevators—they’ll have cameras hooked up to Alba, for security purposes—I duck into the stairwell, consider the snaking concrete, and start climbing.

It feels like a hundred floors before a sound wafts into the echoey space. With legs that don’t feel like they have any bones left, I turn and follow the noise, stepping into warmth and light.

The voices are low, but I could recognize Hux’s anywhere. I peek through the open door into a massive room, with pillars of dark metal stacked in rows stretching the entire length. Heat rolls out the door like, my grandma used to say, opening an oven—the sheer amount of energy used by these mainframes heats the room like a furnace.

On the very edge of the room, Hux is a silhouette against a series of monitors—not unlike the ones in the server room. On the screen, there’s a

giant map of what looks like the coast of New Florida. Two other men flank him. An older one stands tall, his arms crossed in front of him. The other is blond, and he's leaning on the desk, entranced by whatever Hux is doing.

Their focus on Hux makes it easy to slip inside the room; I quickly duck behind a massive hard drive and then creep closer, using the loud hum of the machines to cover the noise of my footsteps. The warmth unfreezes my fingers, and I grip the poker chip so tightly I know I'll have the pattern etched into my skin. I don't know what will happen if they catch me here, but I have to get closer to hear what they're saying.

"You were the one who got the intel about his position," the blond man says, his voice tinny and sharp. He's looking at the older man, who seems both unimpressed and unbothered by the accusatory tone.

"I gave the coordinates, Baker. If your people weren't ready with the charges at the right time, that is a personnel problem, not an intel one."

The younger man is incensed, but Hux cuts the argument off. "This is not the time to point fingers. It's the time to make sure to figure out where Henderson is going to be this next week, so we don't make this mistake again."

The name rings a bell in the back of my mind, but I can't figure out why —

"I didn't recruit you so that I could be lectured by a teenager," the blond man snaps.

Hux turns slowly to the blond, his eyes last to leave the screen. "You recruited this teenager," he drawls, "because you need me."

"Just find the target," the blond snaps. "Whatever it takes."

My mind is struggling to keep up, but then it clicks, and I have to cover my mouth with my free hand to hold back the noise.

Henderson. The CEO whose yacht was attacked. I remember, with a wave of nausea, the photo of the redheaded children.

The Machs were responsible for that.

I watch, horrified, as Hux navigates through a series of maps, crisscrossed with the loops of flight paths, scrolling numbers of itineraries and passenger logs. *A target*, the man had said. Because they've recruited Hux as a Mach. Hux hurts people. Hux kills people.

I back up, forgetting that I'm caged by a maze of hard drives. The metal sears against the bare skin of my upper arm and I flinch away instinctively, losing my grip on the poker chip.

It clatters to the ground, rolling down the aisle before tilting and spinning along its inner edges.

“What was that?” the blond asks. He looks toward the door, and the older man does the same.

But Hux follows the sound. His eyes land on the poker chip. *Our* poker chip.

I swallow another swear as I press myself into the shadows. Still, I can’t help but peer around the corner of machinery to watch. Hux’s face is unreadable as he saunters forward.

I back up as far as I can, but I can’t move any more without the other two seeing me.

Hux leans down and grabs the chip, eyes fixed on the ground. Like he knows if he looks up, he’ll see me. For a moment, he turns the plastic over in his fingers, memorizing the grooves. A half smile plays along the edge of his lips, and the hand by my own mouth presses firm. Then he pockets the chip.

“Loose bolt on the outer rim of the mounts,” he calls over his shoulder. “What were you saying about running a tight ship?”

“We’ll get maintenance in here,” the older man says. He jerks his head at the blond. I hold my breath, wondering if they’re about to call right now. But Hux only returns to his station with an exaggerated sigh.

“You just love to watch me, don’t you, Baker.”

“Just get the coordinates.”

“Watch this, then,” Hux says, and maybe he’s showing off, or maybe he’s stalling. I don’t care. All that I need to know is that all three of them are fixed on an image of a family, as Hux pulls metadata from the file. While the letters and numbers scroll, I turn and sprint, not caring if I make a sound.

All the while, my heart pounds in my ears, and it sounds like *Hux is a Mach*.

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Chapter 7

Turns out I don’t need coffee as much as I thought I did. The sheer adrenaline of knowing that Hux is behind me is like having a jumper cable on my nervous system.

He’s a Mach.

I kissed a Mach.

My hand shakes as I fumble for the computer mouse. A feeling like a fishhook below my belly button fights to drag my gaze to where Hux is seated across the room. In my periphery, I can see him shooting dark glances my direction. I bite my lip and square my shoulders, focusing on my screen and only my screen. If only I could actually see the images; they blur in front of me as I click senselessly.

“You okay?” Nef whispers, pretending to stretch her neck while she looks to make sure the coast is clear. Ms. Astor has been replaced by a Hammer, but he seems to be more interested in whatever is streaming on his DopaMine feed than keeping an eye on us. Still, we have to be careful. There are two outside the door, and they patrol the hallways now.

“I’m fine,” I whisper back. I haven’t told Nef what happened. She thinks I just went home. “Just tired.” That’s not a lie. I am exhausted. Still, my entire body is on fire with electricity, a live wire.

When the bell sounds for our break, I jump about ten feet in the air. Shaking limbs to try to dispel some of the energy, I follow Nef to the door. I know there are at least a couple of people between me and Hux, can almost feel it, but I am not going to look back to check.

“Hart,” he calls from behind me as soon as we step into the hallway, and my stomach swoops.

I don’t stop, but Nef elbows me in the ribs.

“Hart, I know you heard me,” Hux says, his voice closer now, lower, just for me.

The crowd slows as everyone bottlenecks toward the mess hall, and I shut my eyes in frustration. There’s nowhere to run. When I force my eyes open and look over my shoulder, Hux is cutting through the throngs of people, gaze fixed on me.

“Ripley. You can’t avoid him forever,” Nef says, her tone low and playful.

Of course. She just knows about the kiss. She doesn’t know about the whole “he’s a terrorist” part of this equation.

“Ripley,” Hux says, and this time, he’s right behind me. I can feel the vibration of his voice in my chest. The crowd ahead of us thins, and for a second I consider ignoring him and disappearing into the cafeteria. It’s not like we could have that conversation in front of people. And his only other option would be what—throwing me over his shoulder and marching us out into the hallway?

My blood races at the thought. Actually, I wouldn’t put it past him.

Nef smirks. “I’ll give you two some privacy,” she says, walking backward for a couple of steps in order to throw me a mock salute.

“Come on,” Hux says, and I sigh, letting my shoulders drop in resignation as he motions to an empty utility closet on our left. Unlike a classroom, it at least isn’t packed to the gills with cameras and microphones. After checking to make sure that no one else is inside, he gives me an *after you* motion and then follows, closing the door and crossing his arms across his broad chest.

“Nef knows where we are,” I say defensively, and Hux’s expression creases with confusion for a beat before he understands what I’m saying. His face slackens as he rolls his eyes.

“You know,” I add, “if I’m a *target*.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Also, you dropped this,” he deadpans, flipping something in the air.

I catch it with one hand, opening my palm to the poker chip.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Ripley,” he says, voice low. As chatter filters in from the hallway, he steps away from the door. Closer to me.

I take a giant step back, tucking the chip in my pocket.

“That’s what Machs do. They blew up a boat, Hux. A boat with kids on it.”

Huxley stops. “I didn’t know about the kids. And they didn’t end up being on the boat, I swear. No one died.”

I drop my arms to my sides as I let out a humorless laugh. “That’s only because your little plan failed. You missed the target.”

Hux surges closer. This time, I don’t back up. I’m angry. More than that, I’m right.

“Don’t pretend you understand,” he shoots at me. “I don’t know how long you were eavesdropping, but no matter what you think you heard, you’re wrong.”

“Oh, so you were just pretending to be terrorists?” I volley back. “It was all a game of charades, a little improv, where you discuss human beings, children, as *targets*?”

This time, his next step forces his body into my personal space, his foot slipping between mine. “A conversation, by the way, that you weren’t supposed to hear. You followed me, and that was stupid and dangerous. You have no idea how badly that could have gone.”

“Oh, because if they had seen me, you’d have to kill me?”

Hux reels back as if I’ve slapped him, the motion so sudden that his elbow careens into the wire shelf. As the cleaning supplies rattle, he winces and rubs at his arm, and I feel a sick warmth of vindication.

“Or,” I continue, “*try* to kill me. Since clearly you aren’t even very good at being a terrorist.”

Hux grimaces. “Do you know what Henderson was doing out there, on the water? Do you know what that little yacht vacation was actually for?”

The clever retort dies on my lips. I didn’t know there was a reason for billionaires to go on a yacht. I didn’t think yachts had utilitarian purposes, really. Yachts seem like a “just for vibes” kind of boat. But I don’t say that. Hux already thinks I’m silly and emotional, not even smart enough to be his friend.

Hux can read the answer on my face, and he leans closer, eyes searching me. “He was scouting for a suitable dumping ground for toxic waste.” Hux nods at whatever he finds in my expression. “Yeah. They’ve been looking for a way to covertly get rid of seven million tons of dangerous shit, Ripley. You know the cost of keeping Alba running? Battery acid, mercury, lead. Graves signed a bill. Gave them the legal loopholes. If they are able to

dump the waste in the water where he was vacationing—as the company calls it—it will destroy the wildlife for a thousand square miles. Another part of the earth will be turned to poison. Forever."

The words sink in, and while I try to keep my face neutral, I can tell that Hux knows he's hit his mark. Another part of the earth. An ending of the world, if only a portion.

"So yeah, Ripley. I want them scared. I want them all scared to try something like that."

Me too. My mind fills with images of blue water turning black, lifeless sea creatures bobbing on the surface.

But another thought cuts through the horrific picture he's painted: two kids, ages seven and five.

"What he wants to do is wrong. But what you almost did is also wrong, Hux. You put innocent people in danger, and if the administration could prove any legal wrongdoing, they'd stop him. If you don't like the law, you have to change the law. If we can just get enough people to vote—"

"You cannot be this naïve, Ripley!" Hux cries, cutting me off. As I stare, he lets out a huff and spins around, throwing his arms out. "You? I mean, you're actually one of the only people in this training center that I thought would get it."

What does *that* mean?

But Hux isn't done. "We can't just sit back and wait for a happy ending. This isn't a DopaMine channel. We have to fight for a new beginning in the real world. No matter the cost."

"Even if that cost is *people's lives*?" I bite out, fighting to keep my voice low. If the Hammers barge in and Hux tries to kiss me as cover again, I'm punching him square in the mouth.

"I don't want to kill people," he says evenly. "And, for what it's worth, I haven't killed anyone."

The *yet* is silent. It hangs in the air, like a sword over both our necks. Still, my heart steadies at his words. He can still get out of this.

"There are other ways to make changes," I say, though I hesitate to say more. It was one thing to tell Nef about Lyceum. It's another to tell Hux, especially when Uri and Lena made it clear that Lyceum and the Machs are not on good terms.

Hux eases closer, and I meet his eyes. "From the day we met, I knew you had a soft heart, Ripley. I knew that I could—" He cuts himself off and

swallows, his throat going. “That’s rare, now. It’s not a bad thing. But leading with that soft heart instead of your head . . . that’s dangerous. Some people are just bad. And bad people in power are dangerous.”

“So they deserve to die?” I whisper.

Hux considers this for a moment, gaze darting between my eyes. “If they don’t, others will.”

I shake my head. “That’s not how it works—not how democracy works. We all have power. No one has to die, if we get people to vote—”

“You think President Graves will listen to a vote?”

Stop talking, I think, but I can’t. My mouth is moving two beats before my reasoning. “Of course,” I whisper, to hide how my voice is trembling. “He isn’t a monster. He’s just a person. A father. A neighbor.” A soft smile, big hands opening a packet of chalk. A warm voice asking if I liked cheese pizza or pepperoni. The memories flash behind my eyes, unbidden. I hate that it makes me want to cry. “You don’t know him.”

Hux makes a face. “And you do?”

“Yes,” I say, hating that there are tears in my eyes now. “I did. He was my neighbor, Hux. And he . . . he’ll do the right thing. It doesn’t have to end like this.”

Hux freezes. When he does move, it’s a sharp tilt of his head. “What did you say?”

A tear escapes, and I brush it back roughly with the back of my hand.

“I grew up next to the Graves family. Before we moved here, before my parents were . . . lost their jobs. Our families were friends. My parents were close with Graves. And I was close with . . .” I can’t say his name. “The family,” I finish pathetically. “I mean, I didn’t keep in touch, when I moved here. I wanted to write letters, but instead I wrote . . .”

I trail off, biting my lip. There’s absolutely no way I’m telling Hux about *Written in the Stars*. How much I missed the boy I loved, how I wrote down our best memories from Before in the strange new After, because it felt like the only way of holding on to him after he was gone.

Hux goes quiet, blinking several times as he looks to the side. It’s like he’s trying to piece something together, but I don’t know what.

“He was your neighbor?” Hux repeats, his voice empty. “Just like I am now?”

“It’s not the same,” I say, my voice bitter. “Not at all. So no, Huxley Finn. I don’t think killing people is the answer. Because they’re human.

And no one is past saving. Past reason. In eight months, when people go to vote, we will get our new beginning.”

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn’t. For a long moment, those green eyes search my face, and then his lips set in a thin line, and he beelines for the door and disappears, leaving me standing alone.

I hold myself against the supply shelves, not daring to move until I’ve dried every tear.

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Chapter 8

When I get home, I rush to my bedroom for the last pamphlet. Maybe Hux is a lost cause, but talking about President Graves reminds me that my parents used to care, Before. After a couple hours of sleep, when I head to Lyceum headquarters, I leave the pamphlet on the kitchen table.

Energy thrums in my veins, because it all feels real now. *This* is how we make a difference. Hux is wrong. People matter, words matter, the vote is going to matter. We just have to remind people—people like my parents—of that.

I find a corner of the prep room and write quietly, letting the hours slip by in a peaceful blur. Someone has left an outline, and the text of the pamphlet flows out of me. I can't stop writing.

I only look up as Nef and Uri come in, followed by two other members whose names I don't know. One is a tall, gangly girl with long dark hair, and the other is a blond girl with wide blue eyes that are so light they're almost white. Uri introduces them as Meg and Candice. Nef sits next to me and waggles her eyebrows.

"So? Hux. What did he want? Besides you, of course," she whispers.

Uri's brow furrows as he clocks Hux's name on his sister's lips, but he doesn't look up or ask questions. For a moment, I consider telling the truth—telling Nef who Huxley really is. It could be something Lyceum could use. Maybe we can write about it and expose their location.

But Hux would be arrested. And he wouldn't be shipped off—he'd be killed. While it's important to stop the Machs, that cost is just too high. That's what makes us different. We don't trade lives.

"He just wanted to make sure I was okay," I lie.

Nef thinks, then wrinkles her nose. “Boring,” she intones, reaching for a pen.

“I’ve been drafting a new pamphlet,” I say, to change the topic. “It’s a great idea, to get people excited about a new candidate. I think if we start with the positives . . .”

Suddenly I’m aware of the silence, that everyone in this room is listening to our conversation.

I bite my lip and bend back to my writing. Candice stalks over and borrows my first page; she and Meg confer for a moment, voices low, but before I can ask if there’s a problem with my draft, they all set to copying and printing, and I join, until the basket of new pamphlets is full. Uri volunteers to take the basket to the loading dock and Nef joins him.

That leaves me alone with Meg and Candice. Which isn’t weird until I look up from writing and see them both staring at me with unreadable expressions.

“Um,” I try hesitantly, “is everything okay?”

I’m not imagining how flustered they look, how Candice turns and tries to write with a capped pen or how Meg twirls a strand of hair in an innocent act.

“Yeah,” Candice says coolly.

“I really appreciate how welcoming everyone has been,” I offer, hoping to break a little bit of the solid wall of three-foot-thick ice that seems to have suddenly appeared between us.

Meg lets out a snort. “Well. Everyone has heard of Ripley Hart.”

The way she says it, it doesn’t sound like a good thing. My gut churns, feeling sour. “What do you mean?”

Has she read *Written in the Stars*? Saffron was an invention of a lonely kid. I’m not her. Maybe she thinks I’m that desperate for affection, or that annoying—

“Everyone here had to start with paper pressing and pen sorting. Must be nice not to have to earn your spot.”

I keep my head tilted down toward the page, but my eyes drift up on their own. The vitriol is not even hidden a little bit now.

“I didn’t know there was a lower level,” I say as lightly as I can, but there’s an edge to it I can’t hide. “I would have started wherever Ms. Astor put me.”

“Well, Ms. Astor isn’t here, is she?” Meg spits, her lower jaw jutting forward.

I sit back. Enough is enough. “I’m really sorry about what happened with her. But she wanted me to join. You need people who can write,” I say, stopping when I see her eyebrow arch. I shrug. “I can’t do a lot, but . . . I can write.”

Candice narrows her icy eyes at me, a smirk curling up the side of her mouth.

Self-consciousness blooms hot under my skin, and I swallow against the lump in my throat, warring with irritation.

“People like my writing,” I insist, refusing to minimize myself. Time to be brave. Bold. “I mean, millions have read *Written in the Stars.* If I can use that power to connect with people . . .”

I trail off. Their expressions make me uneasy, especially when Candice turns to roll her eyes at Meg. It’s like I walked out of the bathroom with the seat protector stuck in my pants and they’re waiting for the right moment to tell me.

“Right. It’s your love *of writing* that brought you here,” Candice coos, laughing as she grabs more paper and gets to work.

“Candice.” A sharp voice bites through the room. Uri and Nef stand at the door, and my face flushes as I wonder how much of that they heard. From the thunderous look on Uri’s face, probably enough.

“We need bodies on bikes. Both of you,” Uri orders. The smirks fall from their faces as they stand, but Meg still shoots me a smug look before pushing her chair in and following Candice into the hallway.

“Ignore them, Ripley,” Uri says softly.

He and Nef join me again, and the sound of pens scratching on paper fills the room.

But it does nothing to soothe the doubt that Meg’s cruel smile kicked up in my mind. The feeling grows roots, settling low in my belly. And it only gets worse when I get home and find the pamphlet I left for my parents shredded into a fine confetti that settles in an even layer across the trash like snow.

I slip up to my room and boot up Spindle.

I access *Written in the Stars* and click through until I find the chapter I’m looking for—the one where Orion cuts his hand on a lava rock as he’s

climbing to bring backup to Saffron and her crew on Mars. Together, they stare down the invading Hammers as they seek to decimate a village below.

"We're outnumbered," Saffron says, her back pressed to Orion's. Lasers fly around them, the sound of metal screeching against dirt fills the air.

Orion turns, then, pressing his body against Saffron's. It's the heat of battle, but they don't care.

"You and me. We're together. The two of us together. That's the only number that matters," Orion says, wrapping his hand around the back of Saffron's neck.

They kiss, and Saffron's hand finds the holster of her light spear as his lips still on hers, his breath hot against her mouth.

She remembers, as he presses his forehead to hers, what she's fighting for. She remembers that she can be scared and still move. Being scared is what makes you brave, after all. Everyone knows this.

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Chapter 9

It's both harder and easier to get into the server room now. As I feared, Ms. Astor has been replaced by a wide-angle lens and a speaker that sits atop the desk. So it's extremely easy to slip out of the classroom. However, the halls are still filled with Hammers, who seem to enjoy projecting their obvious misery on everyone else.

One of them—a shorter, stockier one with a surprisingly deep voice—stops me and asks, "Where do you think you're going?" Thankfully, all it takes is me putting my hand lightly on my stomach and saying something about monthly issues to get him to hold his arms up and back away like I've showed him that I'm holding my guts in my palm.

Big bad fascists are scared of periods. Noted.

Now, I sit in front of the screens, my boots up on the panel as I rip at an old piece of licorice with my teeth. One screen is dominated by raw footage of a draft dodger being dragged out to the data mines, eyes wide and almost animal in their fear, blood trickling from a wound in their mouth.

I look away quickly. The display in front of me is swallowed by Callum Graves's face and my heart jumps into my throat. I can't hear the sparkly music, but they've added hearts and slow-motion effects to his war footage. He runs, brushes a hand through his perfect golden hair. His lips pull into a smile, with animated glitter appearing over his perfect teeth. The clips transition to slow-motion struts in a perfectly cut suit. And then—my heart stops—blurry beach footage, where he tugs a shirt off and jogs along the sand.

I cover my mouth at the ridiculousness of it, even as another thought bubbles in the back of my mind.

Callum is stateside? It must be a furlough—maybe for political reasons? His father can't run again, so it's not like he's here for the campaign, but maybe he's endorsing that senator from South Texas? I'm not sure why it makes me smile, to know he's not on the front lines anymore.

A flash in the upper right corner of the screen catches my eye. Orange flames engulf a yacht, the heat of the fire distorting the air.

I don't even notice that my boots have fallen to the floor, or that I've slowly pushed myself up to my feet as I rake my eyes over the footage of the wreckage. The yacht is ripped open, lolling to one side as the ocean slowly reclaims it in real time. Smoke billows upward, roiling and spinning up into the sky.

In the ocean, divers bob. Coast guard vessels. They only send those for search and rescue.

I hate that I lean closer, my eyes scanning the choppy waters as though I will be able to find a survivor out of sheer will. Instead, the camera zooms in on the New Florida coastline.

My gut pitches. Hux pulled metadata from a file that looked just like this.

Battery acid, mercury, lead. Seven million tons, Hux said.

And two children.

A stillness fills me as I watch the yacht dip lower and lower in the water.

I hate that I feel a tug of conflict, like there are little metal hooks on my ribs and reason yanks on one side while empathy pulls on the other.

The news will show this destruction, but I know full well that it would gloss over the massive damage these men do. If the accusations are true and they were looking to dump poison into the Gulf of America, it would never reach anyone's DopaMine channels. I wonder if—when—they find the bodies, if they'll call it an accident, or use it to demonize the rebellions even more, to enact more laws that chip away at what world we have left.

Suddenly, I am overwhelmed by the need to find him. Hux. If we could talk—if I could explain, show him what Lyceum is doing—I could get him to see that. He said himself he hasn't killed anyone, and he doesn't want to.

Once I'm sure the coast is clear, I slip out into the hallway and march back toward the classroom. It's about time for weapons practice, so it should be easy enough to grab Hux.

I make a left just as two Hammers turn down the opposite end of the hallway. They walk in step, eyes set forward. The one on the left is the one I

saw before—the one who is terrified of menstruation. But as I clear the corner, their eyes snap to me, and it feels like I've missed a step.

"I have a pass, if you need to see it," I lie, hoping that they just take my word for it and keep walking. But they're marching toward me.

"Ripley Hart?" the smirking one says, and I'm caught. Animal terror seizes me.

They don't wait for confirmation before they put their hands on me, one grabbing each arm.

"What the hell is going on?" I start, trying to keep the panic out of my voice—and failing.

"You're coming with us," the stocky one says.

I know resisting doesn't matter. I know that.

But there's something instinctual that happens when they dig their fingers into the flesh of my upper arm. I struggle, but my flailing only makes them grip harder as they haul me down the hallway. Before I can say another word, I'm outside, the bright light hitting me with a wallop.

I shut my eyes hard against the pain, an overload of sensation and panic that almost feels loud.

Thwacka thwacka thwacka—

I squint, chancing a look around. Ahead of me, a giant hovercopter sits perched on the dead grass outside the training ground. It looks out of place, a jet-black beast of war sitting where a playground once stood. Where I met Nef, where I first told her stories about my life Before, a blend of fact and fantasy, about saving the world and falling in love with a boy.

"What is this?" I yell, but they don't answer.

Because there is no good reason why they'd be putting me on a hovercopter. In fact, there's no bad reason, either. It's worse than that. If they know about the server room or my involvement with Lyceum or my birthday, they would just put me in a shuttle that would take me to an airport so I could be shipped off to Europe to fight with the next batch of army recruits.

If I'm worth all this trouble, something even worse is happening. I'm going to be an example. I'm going to be the cautionary tale beamed into everyone's DopaMine feeds.

The sound is deafening as they half drag me to the door, wind whipping around me, pulling strands out of my loose braid. Two more masked guards pull me up into the craft.

One makes a buckling motion with his hands, and I understand. There's no point in fighting, but my body hasn't gotten the message. It practically vibrates with my heartbeat as I sit back, fingers fumbling to secure the seatbelt across my chest. I've barely clipped it in when the copter shoots off the ground.

The sound is so deafening it hurts, and I clap hands over both ears as the ground below us seems to yank away. I shut my eyes tight. This is much faster and higher than the hovercar, and turbulence buffers us until my stomach roils.

Something taps my knee, and I open my eyes to see the masked guard holding out a pair of earmuffs. I take them, tentatively, and then put them on.

The sounds around me muffle into a low hum, and I swallow as I try to steady my breathing.

I can't see the faces of the guards around me. They all have headsets on their helmets, and I can see their lips moving. They're talking to each other, and to the pilot. But I can't hear what they're saying, and I can't ask questions.

Like always, I'm with people, but completely alone.

I look out of the window. We're headed east, but I know nothing more than that.

I press my forearms hard into my chest, like the outside pressure can slow my thundering heart, as I wonder if I'll ever see the smoggy West Coast sunset again.

I wonder if I'll ever see any sunset again.

I don't mean to fall asleep, but the sensory deprivation and sheer amount of panic adrenaline my body has endured over the past seventy-two hours have left me with no choice.

We land with a lurch that wakes me. Lights from high surrounding buildings blink like stars against the darkness, but there is no distinguishing landmark that I can see, even though I'm still not sure I'm fully awake. Someone rips the earmuffs off my head as another person opens the door. I check my chin for drool as I half fall out of the hovercopter.

Find a way to run, my mind tells me, and I blink against the hurricane of the copter blades as the engine dies down. We're high up, I can tell that. But

short of jumping and hoping for the best, I can't think of an escape plan.

I focus on not tripping over my own feet as I make my way to the edge of the hoverpad, where a small group of people have assembled as if they're waiting for me. One woman in a red pantsuit leans into a man in a soft gray sweater, lips moving ceaselessly. When we approach, she snaps a sharp gaze up.

"You're late," she barks at the guards behind me. Before anyone can reply, she motions crisply. A nightstick taps into my back and then we're walking.

"You couldn't have given her a helmet or something?" the man in the sweats gripes. I'm too slow to flinch away as he reaches for the matted blond mess above my left ear. His fingers, at least, are gentle. "It's going to take ages to figure out this hair and we needed her camera-ready an hour ago."

And then I'm awake again, suddenly, another rush of adrenaline to make me hyperaware. *Camera-ready.* What are they going to do to me? I stumble down a set of stairs—the Hammers helpfully grip at my arms past the point of pain, so I barely need to hold up my own weight—into a hallway with white speckled linoleum and fluorescent lights. Massive racks of clothes line the right side, and a woman with a headset and a clipboard steps back to let us pass her.

"Seriously?" Red Pantsuit asks the Hammers, jutting a manicured fingernail to where they hold me. "If she bruises, I'm making *you* put on the body makeup."

Thankfully, the mention of makeup is enough to disperse the guards. In their place, plainclothes people rush in, the room transforming into a hive of activity.

"What's happening?" I ask, trying to remember how to breathe.

"A more casual look, I think. We don't have time for red-carpet glam," the man in gray says, talking over me like I'm not here.

"I think that's part of her charm. I mean, those cheeks? I should take a photo for my injector," the woman replies, reaching out to pinch my face.

I duck away, slamming my head into someone's elbow. "What are you talking about?" I raise my voice even more as the group moves to the right and then turns down another hallway, whisking me away like a small fish caught in a riptide.

“Plus, that tested well,” the woman in red says, checking her phone screen as she walks. “Very girl next door.”

“Literally,” the man snarks, and she cuts him a glare as the whole entourage comes to a sudden, terrifying stop next to a door at the end of the hallway.

“What’s going on?” I finally ask, my voice rising enough to get their attention. The woman stops and looks at me like I’m a doll that just moved on its own.

“Did no one brief her?” she asks, her sharp eyebrows rising on her forehead. It’s the closest she’s come to actually speaking to me.

But then she puts a finger to her earpiece, and I know she’s listening to something.

“Seriously?” the man asks, fighting a laugh.

“That’s his decision,” the woman says, shaking her head. “No one else tell her,” she says, raising her voice to our coterie. “He’s going to do it himself.”

“Who’s going to tell me *what*?” I demand, but the door is open and I’m being shoved inside. Six people jump to attention, and I’m guided into a chair. I resist sitting, but Red Pantsuit appears in front of me again.

“Hi,” she says. “I’m Debra.”

“And I’m not cooperating,” I say. “Until someone gives me some answers.”

“Well, I only have questions,” Debra replies, holding up her tablet. On it, I see a livestream of the training room. Nef sits at her computer, looking worried as she casts glances to my empty seat. It’s one thing to know all the screens have built-in cameras. It’s quite another to see their feeds. “Question one: That’s your friend, right?”

I swallow hard, fear gripping my windpipe. “Yes,” I say. There’s no point in lying. They already know or they wouldn’t have pulled up her feed.

Debra nods as she lowers the screen. “Okay, then, question two: Do you have any other questions for me?”

I look around the room. It’s medium-sized, with racks of clothes covering every wall. Three women with aprons full of brushes and sprays stand anxiously at Debra’s elbow. Gray Sweater squints like I’m a science experiment.

On the other side of him, a man sifts through clothes on the rack, while two others prepare what looks like a torture device but I know from

DopaMine is actually a really expensive curling iron.

"Hart. Do you?" Debra barks, making me jump.

"No," I say, my voice small. "No more questions."

"Good," she says.

The crowd surges around me until all I can see are bright eyes and hands raised to grab me. I try not to look scared, but I know I'm failing.

"Someone get her feed up," another voice says, with an annoyed finger click, and a screen intrudes among the faces with the familiar AI-generated faces of my DopaMine feed. *Broken Harts.*

I shove it away. While whatever they're preparing me for isn't something I can elude, I don't have to accept it lying down. Whatever is about to happen . . . it's public. And I'm going to make sure I'm wide awake, angry, and ready to go down swinging.

"I've never seen someone with dry and oily skin at the same time," one of the girls breathes, choosing a brush from her apron.

"Thanks. It's a mixture of stress and malnutrition," I say. I have no idea where I am. I have no idea why I'm here. But I'm still me. I'm still alive, and that counts for something.

I expect another chastising for speaking, but I'm shocked as the girl snorts out a humorless laugh. "She's funny," she says. "Kaleb, turn the feed off."

My hands relax just slightly on the chair. Kaleb—Gray Sweater—picks up a bottle of tan liquid and spins it in his hand like I would twirl a knife before sparring. "Okay, Ripley Hart. Time to make you a main character."

They tug, they pull, they scrape.

They pluck, they dust, they paint.

At first, I can't help but flinch away, because it *hurts*, and they're doing things to my eyes that probably constitute torture, but most of the hands are gentle and I remember that footage of Nef. I hold myself as still as possible.

After almost an hour, Kaleb finally steps back, huffing out a breath of appreciation for his own genius.

In the DopaMine videos I've seen, there's a big reveal. I search for a mirror, for a sense of what they've done to me. Have they painted bruises and blood down my face so I look like I've been tortured? Have they styled

me like a country bumpkin, with pigtails and rosy apple cheeks? I don't get to see, though, because a voice barks over the walkie-talkie: *Two minutes.*

Two minutes.

Whatever is going to happen to me, it's one hundred and twenty seconds away.

The chair is pulled out from under me and I stumble forward. The girls shove me behind a modesty screen where they pull my clothes off and yank a soft pink dress over my head, careful to avoid my hair, which is apparently now very big. They strap on a pair of cream-colored heels before ushering me out through the door.

I'm being herded again, with Debra in the lead. My feet click under me with every step, the world lurching and off-balance. I've never worn heels before, so it's everything I can do to not fall over, but I manage.

Down one hall, then another. Before I know it, we're at a massive set of double doors.

Above it, a red light glows—a warning. We all stop and stare up, and I know we're waiting on something.

"Can I ask—?" I whisper, and Debra silences me with a *shhhh* and a sharp look, pointing to the red light like I'm the world's biggest fool.

Then, the light goes green. Debra opens the door. But instead of stepping into the darkness beyond, she just holds the door open for me.

I hesitate, but Kaleb makes a move to fix my hair and so I take my out—I step forward into the darkness.

Wherever I am, it's massive. My heels echo.

I stop when I feel something just in front of my face—fabric. A curtain?

Where am I?

Someone appears next to me, and a deep voice fills the darkness.

"Take my hand," the stranger says. "I've got you."

There's a lilt to it, a softness that pricks the edge of my memory. But it's too low—why do I think his voice sounds too low? He's a figure in the dark, but for some reason I feel safer with him next to me.

So, I take his hand. Instantly, his fingers twine in mine, finding a place palm against palm, a slash of roughness tickling my skin, and my heartbeat slows. His thumb strums along my skin, and I stare up at him, like I can grow night vision through sheer force of will.

Just as I'm about to ask this stranger what the hell is going on, everything happens at once. The curtain draws back, a huge swath of light hitting both

of us. I blink hard as a cheery, sharp voice cuts over a speaker above us: “Ladies and gentlemen . . . the fiancée!”

Is that the guy’s name? Kinda weird, but okay. Must be French.

And then, with gentle pressure on our interlaced hands, we’re walking.

My eyes adjust to the light, revealing a crowd staring up at me. I’m on a stage. Not just any stage—a colossal stage. The crowd seems to go on forever, rows of cheering people disappearing into shadow as I look upward. A stadium, then—I can see the telltale orange glow of the night sky above us, safely cut off by a massive glass bubble. We’re on a raised platform in the middle of a football stadium. There are only three of these left in the country.

The hand in mine squeezes softly, and I turn to look at him. My stranger.

Then, my heart really stops.

It’s not a stranger at all.

Callum Graves is holding my hand.

The boy I haven’t seen since I moved years ago. The boy I was madly in love with.

Orion.

I turn, my eyes fixing straight ahead, the deer-in-the-headlights look frozen on my face.

Callum leans in. Despite my terror and confusion, the smell of him is still a comfort: citrus and cedar with a hint of night air. I take in a sharp breath, the air unlocking something in me. There, in front of thousands of people, I feel my racing pulse slow.

“I’ll explain everything,” he murmurs, his voice a rush. “But for now, play along, okay?”

I twist to gaze up at him. In the eight years we’ve been apart, he’s grown up into the president’s son. He’s taller, his jaw broader, his voice lower. His shoulders strain at the formal jacket, his throat bobbing with a nervous swallow, his other hand worrying a golden pin on his lapel. But those eyes. Why did I change their color in my story? Green seemed more romantic than dark blue, and some part of my preteen mind imagined it would preserve the secret of his identity—but I’m struck by the need to write entire paragraphs about the real color of his eyes. Even in hundreds of thousands of words, I didn’t do him justice.

His fingers press against mine, sudden coolness along my fourth finger. I glance down. He wasn’t just holding my hand earlier. He was slipping

something onto it—a ring with a hulking diamond.

As the crowd continues to cheer, he lifts my knuckles to his mouth. The gem glitters.

“Let’s hear it for the lovebirds!” the announcer yells, and I didn’t think it was possible for the crowd to get louder. I was wrong.

That’s when I realize . . .

Callum isn’t the fiancée the announcer was talking about.

I am.

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Chapter 10

A whirlwind, that's what it is. I can't see a thing, blinking so much against the constant camera flashes that seem to explode in my face.

The announcer steps up onto the stage, drawing raucous cheers from the crowd. He talks about Callum's new philanthropic endeavor, Legacy Outreach, which, from what I can gather in my strange, disassociated state, seeks to give aid to victims of the climate crisis and is the reason for his furlough. Callum's hand is tight around mine, squeezing intermittently as though to tell me he's still there, even when he's answering the announcer, whose name is something like Gary. Or Larry. Knowing who he is is the least of my worries, honestly.

My parents, I think, trying to keep my face as neutral as possible as my mind spirals.

I don't know what the hell is happening, but I know that they are going to be worried.

Nef.

Lyceum.

". . . and that's my goal, really. Well. *Our* goal," Callum says, lifting our interlaced hands to his chest.

The crowd lets out a soft sigh of approval, and I try to coach my face into something like a smile in his direction. If the expression stutters, I can only hope they read it as infatuation. What had they called me? *The Girl Next Door.*

There are more questions, more lights, and then we're backstage. The dress comes off in a flurry of hands and the whisk of zippers. I want my clothes back—my worn-in training pants and black top—but Kaleb just

makes a noise like a computer error that tells me that's not going to happen. Instead, they slip me into a powder-blue dress with floofy sleeves that cut into my biceps. At least the fabric is softer—maybe this is what passes for casual here.

"And to finish off the look," one of the girls says, holding out a pair of pearl-drop earrings and sand-colored wedges. I miss my boots.

"Sure. The look," I answer back. I've never worn anything but silver studs, so this will be interesting.

Though it is not the strangest bit of new jewelry I'm sporting. I look down at the ring that sparkles on my left hand. I wouldn't know a fake diamond from a real one, but this thing is heavy. I clench my fist, afraid that it will slip off. I can't imagine how much it costs. If they made me pay for a replacement, how many extra hours would my parents have to log? How many mindless images would they have to sort through?

Before I have a chance to even comprehend the strange girl in the mirror, the gentle waves in her hair and the petal smudge of her lips, they're shuffling me out of the room again, taking me down another nondescript hallway and into a sort of parking garage.

"Wait here," one of the guards says, seeming to open a section of the hall. The handleless door nearly hits me in the face.

I don't have a choice, so I step inside, coming to such an abrupt halt that I fear for my ankles in these shoes. Because I'm not alone.

Callum stands as I enter, his hands coming up to absentmindedly button his jacket out of habit.

I blink, my breath coming faster as I look at him.

He's beautiful. In the stage lights, he seemed like an alien creature, something made for the DopaMine screens. And he is, still. But here, I can see that eleven-year-old kid if I look closely enough, in the straight edge of his nose, in his ice-blue gaze. Those eyes ping between mine, like he's begging me to say something. I want to say something, but I don't know if I can speak.

Where are we? Where are my parents? Are they safe? Did I expose Lyceum? A thousand questions split off in my synapses at once, and I don't know which one to chase, as the strange weight on my hand draws my gaze to the gigantic rock there, and one question pulls me.

We're engaged.

We're engaged?

Tears spring up in my eyes, unbidden, and I let out a soft breath. One thing isn't a question: He's here, in front of me. Callum. *My Callum.*

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," I whisper.

The sight of me almost crying seems to catch him off guard. The media-ready mask seems to shatter, his brows peaking and mouth turning strangely soft. He crosses the room in two strong strides and pulls me into a hug, crushing me to his chest.

He's warm. His chest holds me firm, and against my cheek his heart beats, a slow, steady thrum. Sometime since the taping he's discarded his jacket and repinned that golden button to his chest; it cuts against my face. The weight on the crown of my head must be his cheek.

My body goes taut and for a moment he freezes, every muscle locking, as I feel him question his decision to touch me. The pressure on my head lifts.

And I wrap my arms around him, almost on instinct, melting into his frame. He sighs, pulling me closer still.

"Ripley Hart," he murmurs, and it's like he can't believe he's saying my name.

"Um," I mutter, my cheek still flattened to his chest. "Callum. Why does everyone think we're engaged?"

He clears his throat, and it almost sounds like a laugh. When he pulls back, keeping hold of my arms like he can't quite let me go, his eyes are bright, full of an emotion I try to place.

"I wish I had more time to explain. But here—we can't—not yet. They're just getting the car to take us to the plane. From there, we'll be headed to New Washington."

"We?" I repeat.

He clenches his jaw as he shoots a look at the door. I know we don't have too much time, and I have to make decisions here. "Are my parents safe?" I ask first.

He nods. "Yes. And they will continue to be. Can't have my future in-laws in harm's way, right?"

I nod, trying not to laugh at the casual way he says that.

I want to ask about Nef. I want to ask about everyone else in Lyceum. But doubt slithers into my mind.

I knew Callum years ago.

I knew him when we were kids. We shared chalk and secrets and Popsicles. He was the first person I wanted to talk to when I woke up and

the last person I wanted to see before I went to bed.

It broke me to lose him, especially since it was all out of my control. His dad getting a new job. My parents losing theirs. And, scared to send him letters that would be read by the New Washington Hammers, I instead wrote about everything I wanted to write to him.

But this Callum—the older, beautiful Callum who smiles easily in front of the cameras he used to hate—I don't know him. He's the son of the president, and as much as he's smiling at me right now, I still know I can't bring up anything related to the rebellion trying to get his father out of power.

I swallow and back up, aware of the weight of his hands, still resting on me. Heavy and solid, but not so forceful I couldn't pull away if I wanted to.

"Why does the world think I'm your fiancée, Callum?" I whisper, knowing he'll tell me the truth. The world was always simple for us. Right and wrong. Black and white. Trees to save and bullies to stop. Punishment to share, but also credit. *That was Ripley's idea, Dad. She's the smartest. The coolest. The bravest.*

Maybe he can make things simple again.

He inhales as he looks at our joined hands, although I'm unsure how we've ended up here. "My dad is going to make a big announcement at the Union Conference next week. It's . . . major."

"Is he endorsing that senator?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

When I open my mouth to ask all the questions bubbling up, he steps close to me, putting a thumb under my chin. I shiver at the touch, my breath catching in my throat. I haven't seen him in years, but it's like no time has passed at all. The hug, his smile—those are all familiar. But this touch is new. We were kids before. He has never touched me like this. Like he . . .

Is he going to kiss me? My heartbeat kicks up into a dead sprint, and I force myself to look up into his eyes. I've dreamed about this. I wrote about this. I've—

Before I can do anything else, he presses a gentle thumb under the right side of my jaw and pushes ever so slightly toward the direction he keeps looking at.

Is someone watching us? I follow his lead, pulling him closer in another hug, pressing my head to his chest. I use the moment to look back toward the door, expecting to see a figure in the frame.

Instead, above it, a red light blinks beside a round, black eye. A camera.

The world needs to think we're engaged, for some reason, or my parents, Nef, they could all be in danger. I hate that I feel a small shard of disappointment in my chest. It was all for show. Of course it was.

"There are cameras everywhere," Callum whispers, his voice barely audible against my hair.

I tilt my head up, and he lowers his lips to the shell of my ear, hiding his face from the camera.

"But he's going to need all the support he can get. And . . . I'm the only one who can help with that."

My heart hurts, and I don't have to remember we're being watched. I pull him closer out of instinct. "He's using you?"

"He's using *us*. A wedding—my wedding—is something people want. My dad had names, daughters of senators and congressmen. We beta tested different DopaMine content, but people aren't gravitating toward political marriages and American royalty. They don't want alliances. They want someone real. The Girl Next Door. Someone who has worked in the data farms, who is just like them. And maybe I'm selfish, but when I heard that *you* had applied for my dad's postgraduate internship—"

I go very still, aware that I'm playing chess here. But half of the pieces are liable to explode if I touch them and the board is on fire.

I sure as hell didn't apply for an internship with the administration. Someone did on my behalf. And I don't know who did it or why, but now I'm Callum's fiancée. It's a precarious safety. My parents can't be hurt. Nef can't be hurt. But now the entire world will put me under a microscope.

A third option, at least for now. Until I can figure things out.

I don't say anything, opting instead to just hold him tighter.

"—I asked if they'd consider letting me call you. To talk to you. To *ask* you about this." He pulls back, and covers the motion by brushing a curl behind my ear. *Fake*, I remind myself, even as my heart shifts into a higher gear. "Believe me, Ripley. I didn't know they were going to be pulling something like *that*. I found out right when you did—on that stage."

My mind spins, but the earnestness in his voice is like an anchor. And he's that same boy who told his father that *he* was the one who broke the tire swing. The same boy who saw right and wrong as clear as black and white. The same boy who saw me as someone worth looking at twice.

"But Cal—" I start, as footsteps in the hallway make the words dry up in my throat.

Callum’s eyes turn serious, a heavy blue that feels at odds with the way he gently runs his fingers up my arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps. “We’ll go to New Washington on different flights. They’re making me do another press stop before coming home. I’ll only be a couple of hours behind you.”

He smiles down at me, his eyes roving over my face like he’s trying to memorize this new version of me. I’m doing the same to him, and I can tell that he knows that as a smile stretches across his face.

“I know this is so strange, Rip,” he says. “But you’re my best friend. At least we’re not alone in this, right?”

I glance up at him. “Promise?”

Now it’s a grin. “Promise.” His eyes dip down to my mouth. “I can’t believe I have to do this with anyone, but I’m glad it’s you.”

And maybe it’s just for the camera, but he leans in. I’ll never know if he was going for my lips or my cheek, though, because the door crashes open, and someone barks something about the transport being ready.

We walk out together, and Callum laces his fingers, lips pulling in a bemused smile, as we return to the chaos: security guards, the flash of cameras, the thunder of engines. I focus on the heat of Callum’s hand against mine, the steadiness of his grip. When he’s ushered to his hoverplane and me to mine, he holds my arm long, stretching so we bridge the distance between both vehicles. Maybe I imagine it, but the flashes seem to pick up at that.

But when he leans forward and brushes his lips against my knuckles, the look in his eyes feels like it’s only for me.

The hoverplane we leave in is much nicer than the hovercopter we came in. The first felt military, with a migraine-inducing roar of blades. In this one, I don’t even have to wear earmuffs. They pipe quiet pop—with personalized lyrics that I recognize from my DopaMine channel—through a plush velvet interior. In a few hours, I’ve gone from potential prisoner to royalty, and all because of this ring on my finger.

I know I shouldn’t push it, but I chance it when I see one of the guards holding my bag. He’s not the same one who took it from me, I’m pretty sure, even though, like all the Hammers, he has a mask over the lower half of his face and tinted glass over his eyes. He doesn’t say a word as I approach, but redoubles his grip on the strap on my bag.

I hold my hand out and clear my throat. “May I?”

He tilts his head, as though he doesn’t understand.

“My bag?” I ask, irritated.

He makes a show of looking down at the bag as if surprised to find it at the end of his own arm. Seriously?

“*Please*,” I bite out. I scan him from head to toe. Is this how the Hammers will treat me, now that I’m practically Mrs. The President’s Son? Before, they had treated me like a threat. Are they going to toy with me now, assume my head is filled with fluff now that my dress hides the muscles I’ve spent a lifetime building?

After further deliberation, he thrusts the bag out to me. Lightning-fast, I snatch it and sling it over my shoulder, immediate comfort releasing my shoulders down from my ears at the weight of it.

A flight attendant in bright red greets me with a warm hand towel and cool water, which has a surprising bite to it—at my expression, she explains that it’s sparkling, although I’d rather describe it as spicy. Not willing to take another sip, I hold one item in each hand awkwardly as she motions to follow her to the back of the roomy cabin. No one grabs me and forces me forward. No nightsticks on my back or shackles on my wrists.

The flight attendant ushers me into a private room with a bed, a couch, and a private bathroom. She must see the confusion on my face, because she smiles. “You’ll need to rest up. Lots waiting for you in New Washington!”

I must still look like I’m not catching on, because she grins as she holds her hand out.

“Why don’t I take the towel,” she offers kindly, “and you just relax?”

“In here?” I ask foolishly.

She nods.

“Alone?” I double-check, looking over her shoulder once more to make sure I’m not getting a death glare from a guard.

“Alone,” she answers with a smile.

I sit on the bed as the engine rumbles underneath me, pressure under my feet, and suddenly we’re airborne.

She winks as she closes the door. “There are slippers under the bed.”

> Orion wasn’t the kind of boy who would tell you how he felt, and I knew that. It made sense. His whole life, he’d been trained to keep his emotions in check. But beneath the surface of his emerald-green eyes, I knew emotions flared bright and deep. Injustice, at

> the wrong. Drive, to make things better. And when he looked at me like that, something slippery seemed to answer in me. Desire, he felt deeply too. And I was starting to realize, I did too.

I'm surprised Spindle hasn't been wiped, and it's probably foolish to access it from a presidential aircraft, but right now, I need to read those words.

This is something that would happen to Saffron, not me. Saffron could navigate these geopolitical waters. She'd be smart and cunning and charming and find a way to save not just herself, but her relationship *and* her people.

The aircraft wobbles slightly, and I grab the arm of my seat, letting my fingers dig into the soft leather as I squeeze my eyes shut.

I need to be more like Saffron now. Which is hard, since I don't really know who she is. When I stopped writing *Written in the Stars* with the maturity and shame that came with fourteen, I didn't kill off Saffron, but I locked her in cryosleep, because that's how my life felt in the After. I felt like I was sleepwalking.

But I need to wake up.

For the next two hours, I read the words that I'd written. The ones that, to my surprise, people seem to love.

As much as I thought I remembered, it shocks me how much I'd forgotten. How much Callum had faded into the recesses of my mind.

I forgot how we shared everything, in that way you do when you're young and with the same person all the time. Our parents both worked long hours together. My mom used to work with an education department, and my dad handled cybersecurity. Whenever my parents had to stay late, I'd go to the Graveses'.

It takes a village, his mom used to say to mine.

Some weeks, I'd spend more time at his house than my own. There was a place for me at their dinner table.

I flip through the files, remembering the inspiration for each entry, the way his smile had lit me up.

Saffron and Orion stared down a brewing war, knowing something dangerous was happening. Because that's when we both noticed that his dad was changing.

Arthur Graves announced he was running for president. That's when the trees in our neighborhood came down.

None were spared, not even the one in between our houses; the one I loved.

And Callum tried to stop it.

They'll have to take me down with it. I joined him, and to our credit, we lasted until he fell, cutting his hand open. Seeing all that blood, I didn't think—I just jumped down to help him. Eight stitches, but the tree was down before we had even pulled away in the ambulance.

Two months after that, when Callum's dad was endorsed by the administration, the campaign videos in my DopaMine featured videos of my neighborhood and the "technological advancements." The empty streets, no longer tree-lined. The jumbo screens erected and cables laid to beam Alba into every home.

Return to the Streamlining. He was elected on a promise to bring us into the next and last phase of the war, but it sounded like he was talking about the next and last phase of the world.

When the trucks came to move the Graveses to the White House, Callum climbed onto my roof to say goodbye. A thousand things ran through my mind, but all I could do was hug him. He grabbed my hand, and I looked at the scar on his palm.

Eight stitches.

I knew what Saffron would do. I was too young to think about kisses, but I knew I loved him. I knew he was my person. And Saffron would have told him.

But as Callum looked at me, his gaze desperately searching mine, all I could find was an *I'll miss you.*

Because I wasn't Saffron.

> Saffron was taken to a base in the Quadra system. She was cut off from Orion.
>
> Every letter to Saffron was intercepted. She didn't know if Orion was alive or dead. But she knew that if he was gone forever, she'd feel it in her bones, right? She'd know. So he had to be fine.

I wrote down all the adventures we'd had and every adventure we'd never had, as my parents turned into shells of themselves and I adjusted to my beige life in Post Angeles. I needed to recapture some of that color.

And as the years passed, I realized that I couldn't keep living in a fantasy. Even writing lost its color, so I put Saffron into cryosleep, freezing her and my memories of Callum.

But I’ve never needed Saffron more than I do now. To my own surprise, I feel my fingers flying across the screen. Even if it would be far too dangerous to upload it, I can’t help it. I need to write.

> Deep in the cryo pod bay, the hiss of the pressure-release cut through the dark.
> And as the cloud of icy air cleared, Saffron opened her eyes.

Two knocks rap against the door, and the flight attendant sticks her head into my small room. “We’re preparing for landing,” she says quietly, and I nod, keeping my tablet tucked inconspicuously against my dress. As she ducks out, I consider the fresh words on the page. Today, it finally feels like my eyes are open again. I saw Callum. *My Callum*. And he introduced me to the world as his fiancée.

To think, a few days ago, I was underground, fighting for the rebellion. I was training to be sent off to fight in an unending war. I was pressed up against the wall by Hux, his lips against mine—

Hux.

I wonder if he’ll see the footage from today. If they’re using this as some sort of pro-Graves propaganda, something to support the administration, I imagine it’ll be beamed to every DopaMine feed, carefully curated to appeal to the viewer. Will they send him a close-up of my face, I wonder? Does the algorithm know how he feels about me?

Do I? Does he?

The door whisks open again.

“Forget something?” I ask her without looking up.

But it’s not the flight attendant. The guard lurks in the doorway, little more than a twilight-colored camo uniform, a black helmet.

As my stomach lurches, I shove myself up to my feet. Whatever he’s doing in here, it can’t be something good. Did they find out about Lyceum? About *Written in the Stars*? About *Hux*?

My eyes flit around the room, looking for something to hit him with. I’m about to lunge for a lamp when a familiar voice cuts through the cabin.

“For the love of God, Hart. If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead three times over already.”

The guard lifts his visor and pulls the mask down, and my chest tightens. Green eyes, a slash of brows, lips that I recognize by sight as much as I’d recognize by feel.

Hux.

My mouth opens and closes as my hands fumble with the lamp.

I yank, but it doesn't budge.

Of course. It's bolted down for safety.

"Hmm, perhaps four times," Hux amends in a low voice, shucking the black gloves off his hands. My heart beats in my ears as I try to put this together.

"How are you here?" I whisper.

"I saw them take you," he answers plainly, but he can't seem to look at me when he says it. There's something in the expression he fixes on that lamp—something tight—but I can't quite place it.

"This is part of the presidential fleet, Hux."

He shrugs. "A copter plane? It's just a computer." And that's his sideways look, the one he'd give me in class when we'd compete to see who could get Mr. Avilas more worked up, or earn a worse glare from Ms. Astor. It's the look that says, *Give me a challenge, Hart.*

A chill runs down my spine.

"*Why* are you here?" I whisper-shout, stepping closer to him.

Hux mirrors me, and the distance between us shrinks dangerously. Any closer, and he'll be able to feel my thundering heart. "You think I'm that type of person? To stand by and let bad things happen to people that I . . ." He fumbles for a second. "To anyone?"

He's a Mach, that voice in my head reminds me. His idea of action is murder.

"I'm here to help," he says.

"Who says I need help?" I retort. "Who says I haven't gotten it handled?"

At the word—and the way I brandish my fist—Hux's eyes fall on my left hand. His smile turns wry as he gestures to my ring. "I saw that. Congratulations, by the way."

My stomach swoops, and too late I realize the feeling tugging at me is the plane as it banks again. I stumble forward, knocking Hux with me. As one, we crash into the door, the plane's movements pinning me to him. I hate the way my heart beats faster at the press of his body against mine.

The memory of our kiss flashes in my mind, unbidden, and I physically shake my head to clear it.

"If they catch you in here—" I start, but Hux cuts me off.

"—they'll assume I'm doing a sweep, which is what I told them I was doing when I came in here." He leans closer, his lips inches from my ear. I

shiver, my eyes closing of their own volition. "*I* know what I'm doing, Ripley."

My eyes fly open at that, and my anger is *right there.* Easy to grab.

It's a subtle movement, so I can move my knee up, and catch him right in the groin before that supercilious smile even has a chance to drip from his face. The huffed groan as he doubles over and steps back makes my veins sing with victory.

"So do I. And I know what kind of 'help' you offer. I am going to handle this myself."

Hux fumbles against my shoulder for a handhold to pull himself back to standing.

"You and *Callum*, you mean," he grits out, his eyes narrowing.

I step closer. "Yes. Callum and me. While you're too busy blowing things up," I lower my voice to a soft whisper at those words, like they're a dangerous thing themselves, "I've been learning about democracy and watching people work to change hearts and minds without violence. I have no idea how I wound up in this position, but I know that I'm going to make the best of it."

The aircraft jumps with the wind; we're getting closer to the ground. Running out of time. Soon, the flight attendants and the Hammers will be back to whisk me off who knows where. I can't make out the look on Hux's face, or discern the reason his gaze is locked on mine like he's figuring something out. "You have no idea how you wound up here? Really?" he asks finally.

"Someone knew about our history." A thought occurs to me, and I grit my teeth. "Another one of your incredible plans?"

Something shutters in Hux's face, eyes unreadable as he takes a slow breath, as if counting out the seconds. Then he shakes his head. "No, Ripley. I didn't tell anyone that you had a . . . personal connection to the Graves family."

My breath whooshes out of me, as relief and dread war in me. I haven't had time to give it much thought, but it made sense that Hux said something to someone. But he didn't. Which begs the question: If he didn't, who did?

Hux presses his lips together and then nods to himself. "When we land, follow me. It'll be tricky, but—"

I shake my head and take a step back. "What? No. I can't *leave*. Not after the whole world just watched my engagement announcement."

We dip even closer to the ground.

“Yes, you can,” he growls.

“No, I can’t. I won’t do that to Callum.”

“Do that to *Callum*. You have no idea what you’re about to step into, Ripley.”

He doesn’t know Callum. And he doesn’t know me, not if he thinks I can’t do this. Huxley Finn, always underestimating me. I’m not good enough—not good enough to be his rival in the classroom, the weapons room. Not even good enough to be his friend. “Maybe I don’t know as much as you do about what’s waiting for me on the ground,” I fire back, “but I do know that whatever I’m going to do, I can do it without spilling a drop of blood. Can you say the same?”

Outside the windows, tall buildings clip by, seeming to jump behind us. Moments, then, to finish this conversation.

When I turn back to him, I reach into my pocket for the one thing I was able to sneak from my old life, and fling it at him. The poker chip flips end over end. Hux snatches it from the air without even taking his eyes off of me.

“Keep it,” I say. “I’m done playing this little game with you.”

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Chapter 11

When we land at dusk, the press is already there, their cameras popping off like sparklers.

I keep my eyes down on the tarmac, refusing to let myself play the shell game as Hux disappears into a mass of Hammers. But still, the second I look up, I can tell he is already gone, immediately certain none of the identical black-clad figures are him. He must have slipped away when everyone was exiting.

I hate that I don't feel as relieved as I hoped I would.

A crowd has gathered, a sea of people who scream and cheer when I step off the plane.

I've seen the capital on news streams, but it's so much bigger than a tablet screen. It's one of the only original cities that has survived the Streamlining. *Historical significance*, the administration said. No one said the same thing when Miami and New York disappeared into the sea. Metal buildings are fortified with chrome bracing, reinforcing where the foundation has given way because of the acid rain. The fake-looking blue water must be so chemical-ridden that I'm pretty sure anyone who drank it would drop dead within minutes. The Washington Monument towers above it all, shiny rose-gold plating embossed with a profile of President Graves's face.

In the crowd, I recognize faces from my DopaMine, the pretty people who tell us everything from how to wear our hair to how the war is going overseas. Nerves rush through me. They're capturing me, frozen here on the tarmac, and these images will fill other people's feeds.

Through the cold white light, a slim form races across the blacktop to me.

“Ettie?” I ask, half laughing. The last time I saw her, she was six, interrupting me and Callum. She pestered me to paint her nails in this swimming-pool pattern she had seen on her feed. Callum pretended to be annoyed, but he’d helped her pick a color from my desk and reminded her not to move while I worked.

Now she’s a teenager. Her face has lost all traces of the round, baby-like smile I remember, leaving high cheekbones and a small, turned-up nose that wrinkles as she grins. Her soft pink dress flutters behind her with her soft blond hair, and for a moment it looks like she has wings. Ettie has become a princess from a fairy tale.

I wonder if I look as strange to her, in this dress they’ve put me in. Did they pick her clothes, too, or is that only reserved for fake fiancées?

“I am so excited,” she says as we hug, and it feels as natural as breathing. “I didn’t know you and Callum were still talking! I was so *pissed* that he didn’t tell me!”

My heart sinks as I realize the lie I have to tell. Of course. We can’t announce that this whole fiancée arrangement was a planned PR stunt. I just didn’t realize we’d be lying to everyone.

Unsure what to say, I let Ettie squeeze me and breathe in her familiar smell, peony and laundry detergent.

“Come on,” she whispers as she draws back. “I’m supposed to show you around.”

On reflex, I reach for my mask, but they took it with the rest of my things.

“They’ll give your tablet back—”

“No,” I say quickly. “My mask?”

Ettie shakes her head. “You don’t need that here.”

I gape, looking up.

The sky is darkening—we only have about an hour of daylight left. But I can see the actual *blue*. A dark blue, tinged with orange and purple at the edges where it curves into the earth.

“Wow,” I whisper. “I can’t remember the last time I saw the sky.”

The moment is shattered by a wave of laughter. I had forgotten our audience—the dozens here, and the millions watching at home. My cheeks color. Every moment here—every first, with and without Callum—will be cataloged and shared with an entire nation hungry for a distraction after a

shift at the data mines or a long day cataloging data. And I'm gawping up at the sky like a simpleton.

But they wanted a real girl, didn't they? *The girl next door,* Callum had said.

Well, none of my neighbors have ever been able to see the sky.

"You've been on the West Coast too long," Ettie says with a social laugh. "My dad has been cleaning up the air. It's a different world, here in New Washington." I accept her elbow, and she leads me through the crowd, which parts for us to pass, revealing a streetscape bright with holoscreens and a massive metallic dome. She gives me a look and says, "Good."

"Good what?" I breathe.

"You actually look impressed. They'll love it."

I don't know how to say I *am* impressed.

"Keep that up when you see your *new home*," she says. "I mean, Dad's been trying for eight years to get the stains off the stone, but it still sort of looks like shit."

I flinch. The swear feels unnatural coming out of her rosy lips. A laugh bubbles up in my throat and in reply she pinches my arm.

"What?" she presses. As we cut down the mall, the invisible bubble around us seems to extend. People walking, zipping on escooters, racing on hoverboards; they all move away, maintaining a football field's distance. It takes a few moments to notice the Hammers, holding a perfect periphery. Of course. Ettie is the president's daughter and I'm the soon-to-be daughter-in-law.

I shake my head. "Ettie, you're not a baby anymore. It's freaking me out."

She snorts. "Tell that to my dad. And Callum. They don't let me do anything. Callum is worried I'll get hurt. But I think Dad would be more upset that the press will get a bad photo."

I can hear the slight tinge of bitterness in her voice, and I understand. At least Callum got to be a kid before he was thrust into the public eye. She grew up like this.

"Look at you," I say instead. "You couldn't take a bad photo if your life depended on it. You're beautiful, Ettie." A swell of emotion builds in my lungs, and I kind of want to cry. I missed Callum, but I also missed Ettie. Little Ettie, who always made me feel like the coolest person alive.

I'm so busy smiling at her that I don't realize we've reached our destination until we step into a massive shadow that pulls my attention upward. The building isn't as white as the name implies; decades of ash have shadowed the paint, and the roof seems to sag. Still, a chill runs down my spine.

I'm going to have to meet the president. Suddenly that much is clear. I'll be face-to-face with the man who outlawed reading and writing, who sent my friends to war and arrested my proctor. Will he see through me? I try to shove the thought way as Ettie leans closer.

"So I'm supposed to be telling you all about the architecture, blah blah blah, but that's boring so we'll just pretend. Tell me everything. How's your mom? How's your dad?"

Aware of the cameras at our backs, I let Ettie gesture at the grand façade of my new house and I tell her about life—the AI training, life in Post Angeles. I lie, of course, when it comes to how much Callum and I were talking. When she asks about our "late-night phone calls," I play along, saying that my mom would pop her head in and I'd pretend to be asleep.

That's another thing I lie about: that my mom would still check on me in the middle of the night. For some reason, I can't bear to have Ettie lose the image of my mom that she had. To her, Mrs. Hart was the cool mom who made Halloween snacks every night for the whole month of October.

So, for Ettie, my mom is the way she was Before. And maybe, if I play my cards right, the way she'll be again.

Eventually, as my feet are aching in these impractical shoes, we make another turn and head back toward the rose-gold obelisk, the eerily blue pool. Below us, the ground dips into a stairwell. The Metro, Ettie explains, and I freeze, leaving her to lurch to a stop next to me, as our arms are still linked.

There—right in front. It's so faint I would have missed it if it was any darker: an Ionic column, spray-painted just over the *M*. With all the other tags and faded posters, it could be anything.

But I know what it is: the mark of Lyceum.

My heart stutters. I thought I was alone here, with no safe way of contacting anyone, with my tablet ripped away, unable to even post a new chapter of *Written in the Stars*. I knew Lyceum was something that stretched across the nation, but didn't know how to find it.

But now, it seems that Lyceum found me.

“Oh my gosh, are you okay?” Ettie laughs, and I come back to the moment. I’d forgotten she was next to me.

My mind races. “Ummm. Do you think I could use the bathroom?” I whisper conspiratorially, looking over our shoulders at the security detail behind us and the influencers just behind them.

“In the Metro? It’s been years since it worked. Plus, it’s the *Metro.*” She wrinkles her nose. “We’re, like, a few blocks from home—”

“I just need a few minutes to myself,” I whisper.

Ettie purses her lips, turning as we pretend to keep walking slowly. “They aren’t going to let you out of their sight. You’re basically part of the first family now.”

I make a face. “No more privacy, then.” My heart races as my mind whirls, trying to think of an escape route. Aloud, I find myself confessing a little bit of the truth: “This has just been really, really intense. I don’t know how you live like this—all the cameras, eyes on you all the time . . .”

Ettie pauses at the real emotion in my voice. “Okay. So this is against the rules,” she starts, and I already like the sound of it. “But just . . . play along.”

Without further warning, she wheels around.

“My necklace!!” she gasps, throwing a hand up to her neck. The security detail stops; one puts a hand to the blade on their belt before he can fully realize what Ettie is shrieking about. She marches over to the group of security guards, her eyes on the ground. “It fell off! Oh my gosh, my dad is going to *kill* me! It was a gift from the English prime minister! He’s coming to the Union Conference and if I’m not wearing it we’re talking *an international incident*!”

The guards’ faces go from confused to worried at her declaration, and all their eyes drop to the ground. Behind them, Ettie’s words seem to echo through others’ mouths, as the camera-wielding crowd hooks into the drama of the unfolding story.

Ettie glances up and winks, keeping her arm at her side even as she motions with her fingers to *go go go!*

Before I can think any better, I race to the stairs and down until I reach a door. A dim line of light leaks from underneath. I yank at the handle, spilling awkwardly into the room beyond. I’m opening my mouth to call out that I’m a member of Lyceum and come in peace or whatever, but then my eyes adjust to the dimness.

Empty.

The whole place is empty.

But not because I got it wrong. This *was* one of Lyceum's strongholds. I'm in a railway corridor, and there are bookcases lining the walls, but they are all empty.

Single pages flutter over the rails and concrete, and I step over them as I make my way deeper into the tunnel. Tears prick against the back of my eyes.

No.

This was my shot. My chance to stay connected to the thing that made me feel less alone. I need that even more now.

"Hello?" I call. My voice echoes sadly, the only reply I'm going to get, as I stumble over something on the ground. Books. Just a few, and nearly destroyed, their pages ripped out, vomiting forth between cracked covers.

With shaking hands, I wrap my fingers around what's left.

Beloved.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring.

1984.

I let out a small sound—almost a cry, I guess, as I gather the books up gently and unzip my bag. I know I can't have books in my bag. *I know.*

But I can't leave them here. Not when they might be the last books I get a chance to read.

I'm finished zipping up my bag when a noise sounds above me. I step back instinctively from the shaft of dusty light that unfurls with a metal-on-metal shriek. A dark shape cuts through the light, the black fatigues of a Hammer descending from street level on a rope.

I freeze as the slight figure dips smoothly down to the tracks, my heart thudding as I wait for thousands more to swarm me, to unholster their nightsticks, to figure out what I am.

Instead, this one removes their helmet, loosing a French braid down their back. "Ripley Hart," she says. "He wasn't wrong. You really are just a *giant* pain in the ass."

I blink at her, not daring to breathe. "Who are you?"

"Becka. Banks."

I swing my bag onto my shoulder, praying it doesn't look as heavy as it feels.

“Banks,” I repeat, confused. I’ve heard the name before—in the server room. With Hux. “I thought you were in Europe. Hux was . . . he was broken when you left.”

“And if he could see me now.” She grins. “Thankfully, Pretty Boy is safely back in Post Angeles. And I’m still on American soil.” Her smile falters as I race to keep up with the lies. Why would she lie? Hux is here. Does she not know?

“I didn’t pass the screening,” she adds. Suddenly she finds her nails very interesting. “Or I guess, I passed a little *too* well.”

I stop, the horror of what she’s saying sinking in. *The screening.* With the declining birth rate, President Graves instituted mandatory fertility screening for all eighteen-year-olds before sending them off to die. Because there is a third option, between fighting and data mining. It’s just one that I hadn’t even considered.

Becka clears her throat, like the unspoken words lodged in her chest.

“Anyway. The guards called for backup. And imagine my shock when I roll up, ready to find a necklace, and realize that the president’s *daughter-in-law* is missing. Then, I saw the dumbass Lyceum marking on this building. And I knew where the Lyceum dumbass probably went.”

I can’t move. *How does she know?* My mind races.

She works for the administration. Lie.

“I just needed some time alone,” I explain, and Becka lets out a harsh laugh. It echoes even farther than my *hello* had.

“Right. We don’t have time for this, because those guards up there are going to realize that Ettie was never even wearing a necklace to start with, and then you’re going to have to answer some very uncomfortable questions. So let’s cut to the chase. I’m a Mach. Just like Hux.”

I bristle but fight to keep my expression calm. “Why would you tell me that?”

Becka sighs, irritated. “Because I’m trying to get you to trust me. And I don’t have time to slowly build this slow-blooming *girl power* friendship. So I’m throwing the truth out there. I’m a Mach. And I know you’re with Lyceum. Or were. Because clearly you bet on the wrong horse.” She motions to the empty bookshelves. “And with your little boyfriend? You’re in the big leagues now. The Machs sent me to recruit you. We can protect you, protect your parents, and get President Graves out of office. Whatever it takes.”

All they have to do is wait nine months. Nine months, and he'll be gone. They don't need to *kill* him. "I am not a terrorist," I say.

Becka rolls her eyes. "This is a war, Hart. You either fight the administration or you sit out—and you end up fighting *for* them. Maybe you haven't realized that. They'll take your life; they'll take your body. That ring on your finger is just a shiny collar. They own you."

She's close now, and I can see the fear in her eyes. It breaks my heart, and my voice cracks. "The administration is using you, and that's evil. But the Machs are using you too. They're killing people, Becka. Innocent people. Kids. I won't be a part of either of those. There has to be another way. A third option. I won't let anyone use me."

Becka's face contorts, mouth dropping open with confusion, and then shock. And then, slowly, her lips stretch, unmasked glee spreading across her face. She wipes a hand over her mouth as if to hide the smile, but it's too late.

"You don't know," she breathes. "Shit. You don't."

"What don't I know?" I bite out.

Becka lets out a laugh as she bends at the waist. "Girl, Lyceum sold you out. They are the reason you're here."

My blood goes icy.

"You don't know what you're talking about," I say, but my voice shakes.

Becka steps closer. We're almost nose to nose. "I do. You think they took you in because your writing *inspired people*?" She twists her face and raises her voice at the last words, mocking me. "No, boo. They figured out who *Orion* was. And who you were to him. It was easy to fake an application for the administration's internship. His daddy needed a pretty face next to his pretty son to distract the country from everything ugly he wants to do. How *perfect*, the actual Girl Next Door. Who cares what his son thinks about you. The president *loves you.* You're going to win him a third term."

What? Dizziness rushes through me, a wave nearly knocking me to the ground. The whole tunnel seems to expand around me until I'm just a pinprick, just a girl, beneath a city, beneath a nation at war, beneath a world on the brink of its true ending. "You're lying," I whisper. It's illegal. He's been president for eight years. It may be late, but he's going to endorse a successor. Any day now.

"Oh, I wish I was," Becka says with a short laugh. "But I'm not, and I think you know that."

I saw your heart, Ripley, Ms. Astor said. *We need heart. We need* you*: someone who believes this isn't the end of the world. Someone who can help us write a new beginning.* Then, my brain spits out the memory of Meg and Candice, their lips curled in derision. *Right. It's your love of writing that brought you here.*

"Oh, don't do that," Becka says.

"Do what?" I ask, my voice still quavering.

Becka scoffs at me. "Whatever this is." She flaps a hand at me and whatever heartbroken face I'm making. "Get angry, Ripley. Now isn't the time to feel sorry for yourself and play undercover librarian. You could be the most powerful soldier, behind enemy lines. You could change the fate of the war—of the world." Becka's watch beeps; she glances down at her wrist and swears under her breath. "Well, time's up. We go upstairs, and we pretend we were up there the whole time, looking for that necklace. Got it?"

I don't say anything, in part because I'm trying not to throw up.

"Hart," she snaps.

"Got it," I force myself to say. Because I can't think of anything else.

She slips her helmet back on and reaches for my arm to guide me. I stumble back up the stairs in a daze. We filter back into the group just as Ettie laughs and declares she wasn't even wearing a necklace. On her dazzling smile, the Hammers redirect us—toward the White House. My new home.

"Before we get there," Becka hisses, "think about whose side you want to be on."

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Chapter 12

“Five minutes,” Becka announces the second we step inside. I’m not sure if she’s speaking to me or to the group of Hammers who can’t seem to step more than two yards away from me. I guess I will now be living in a bubble of black body armor and twilight fatigues, of clicking nightsticks and shiny boots.

By the time we make it to the second floor, my neck is sore from craning to look around—up at the cavernous ceiling, behind us, down winding staircases, sideways at the judgmental faces of previous presidents. It’s the first time I’ve seen an actual oil painting, and the walls are practically papered in them.

“You’re perfectly safe here,” Becka says. “It may look old-fashioned, but the whole building has been Streamlined. Any of these screens”—she jabs a finger at the glowing surfaces sprinkled every few yards—“are security checkpoints, and we’ll be monitoring you on the feeds.”

“I’m being recorded?” I squeak out.

The dome of Becka’s helmet bends in a nod and I wish I could see her face. “The cameras and microphones in each room filter through our own internal Alba. You see a mouse? We’ll flag your heart rate spike and pupil dilation before you even stop screaming. You’re in good hands.”

It might sound like a brag, but I know it’s meant as a warning to me: There are cameras and microphones everywhere.

“Speaking of, from earlier today,” Becka says, and she thrusts a tablet to me. On the screen, my parents smile and wave, crammed too close together on a love seat to fit into frame. I startle and nearly drop it, but Becka seems

ready for this, scooping it from me just as smoothly. “They’re safe. As your head of security, I get hourly updates from their security team.”

“Can I talk to them?”

Her helmet tilts, as if to say, *Do you want to?*

Right. Each word will be recorded.

Still.

I set my jaw, hoping my stubbornness is clear there.

“We’ll put through the request,” Becka says. She snaps at a soldier. “Faulkner, by twenty-one hundred hours.” Then she turns to me and stops abruptly, throwing open a door. “Your room.”

There’s a lofted ceiling, crown molding, even a chandelier, but all I can see is the *bed*.

“We’ve got it from here,” comes a voice.

Becka nods at the two new women—civilians, by their clothes. Even though I can’t see her face, I’m certain that she doesn’t want to leave my side. To protect me, or to recruit me?

“This is Sarah”—Becka gestures at the brunette with olive skin and surprisingly sharp eyeliner—“and Mac.” Mac gets a wave, encompassing her lanky figure, pencil skirt, and legs that go on for days.

“At ease, soldier,” Sarah says in a teasing tone, but we all know it’s a dismissal. Two Hammers post themselves by the doorway as Sarah and Mac herd me inside. For a long moment, Becka lingers there like she can’t cross the threshold, then squares her shoulders and marches away. I’m not sure if I should be worried or relieved.

I collapse onto the bed with something that definitely isn’t a moan.

“Glam squad arrives in fifteen,” Sarah says, giving me a disheartened once-over that I’ve grown used to in the last twelve hours.

“No,” I murmur into the ten million throw pillows, closing my eyes. “It’s bedtime.”

Mac chuckles, her deep voice rasping in her chest. “Oh, honey. It’s only seven o’clock.”

I want to cry. I’m so tired I can barely stand up straight.

Sarah sets a large white box gently on the comforter.

“You didn’t think you’d have your first night in the White House be *relaxing*, did you?” Her words are soft.

I smile humorlessly. “Of course not.”

The White House is shimmering. I want to think this place is ugly, because such ugliness comes from it. But the dining room is covered in candles and mirrors. I've never seen a candle before—they're considered a waste of resources and, in Post Angeles, a fire hazard. But here they seem to glitter from every surface. Plush rugs and deep velvet couches fill every room. All around me, staff members mill about, setting the table like a choreographed dance.

Even though they've dressed me for dinner, for press and introductions to powerful people, I can't help but let myself get pulled to the floor-to-ceiling windows, helping myself to a tall glass of something golden that glitters like the sparkling water. Below, a fountain bubbles between two massive oak trees.

A tree. *Two* trees.

A low voice pulls me from my reverie.

"You look beautiful, Ripley." Callum appears beside me and I splutter on my drink, the carbonation burning up my nose as I struggle to breathe. I'd chalk it up to exhaustion, which has worn away my social graces, but in reality, it's because I didn't think Callum could look more beautiful than he did when I first saw him today. I was wrong.

"You okay?" he asks with a wry smile. As if made self-conscious by my gawping, he rakes a hand through his blond coif. He doesn't look real, not in a tuxedo, not when his eyes crinkle in the corners with a smile. That same golden button on his chest is the only color breaking up his black-and-white uniform, and it makes his eyes look even brighter.

"Can we pretend that didn't happen?" I whisper, tucking a strand of perfectly curled hair behind my ear. My fingers snag on the giant diamond earrings dangling from my lobes.

Callum leans in, his warm hand touching the exposed small of my back. Because of course Kaleb and his team put me in a cream-colored, satin, *backless* dress.

"No, we cannot," he murmurs. "Because then I can't tell you that I basically did the same thing when I walked in here and saw you, and I wasn't even drinking anything."

My heart stops, and I pray he can't see the flush rising up my chest. Because of course this dress is low cut, as well.

Dammit, Kaleb, I think.

Unsure of what to say, I take another sip, and the bubbles scratch along my raw throat, and suddenly I can't stop coughing.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I was trying to be smooth and now you're going to die," he says, and I shake my head, swallowing hard. That hand on my back guides me half a step toward an end table—thankfully laid out with water. He hands me a cup and watches as I regain the ability to breathe.

"We can tell the press that you stole my breath," I croak out, once I can talk again.

He raises an eyebrow. "I don't want to steal anything from you, Ripley."

I gulp a little at his earnestness and turn back to the window. Around us, the dinner grows into a party, voices rising and falling. A few times, Callum glances over his shoulder like he's checking for someone, and I'm reminded of being nine, stealing sweets from his parents' parties to sneak into our treehouse.

I sigh, looking at those oaks. Perhaps not that much has changed.

"That's the first thing I was going to show you," Callum says finally. I must look confused, because he motions to the tree with his chin. "When you came to visit. The first thing I wanted to show you was the tree. I knew you'd love it."

I don't know what to say, so I down the rest of the fruity drink with one deep swallow. What if the lie was real, and we'd been talking this whole time? What if we'd never lost touch? I'm trying to figure out how to put that into words when the room goes quiet behind us. Callum and I turn just in time to see President Graves step into the room. He's followed by a small group: his cabinet members, I remember from the reports on my DopaMine.

President Graves looks smaller in real life than he does on the screen. And he's shorter than I remember, but it does startle me how unchanged he looks, overall. I realize part of me wanted to see him utterly transformed by the last few years, like he couldn't have done what he's done without rotting from the inside out.

But you'd think he was handsome, if you saw him walking down the street. He's got the same strong jaw as Callum, high cheekbones, and a narrow nose that's been broken a few times, if the stories he likes to tell about college rugby are true. He has an easy smile and striking amber eyes; the russet hair I remember so vividly is streaked with gray.

I barely notice as Mrs. Graves comes in after, her white-blond hair and pale skin making her look more like a ghost than a first lady. Her lipstick is

bright (too bright, Kaleb would probably say), and she rushes to the table, fiddling with the placement of the cutlery and how each flower falls in the massive centerpieces, as if an entire staff didn't just arrange everything perfectly. I suppose, to the first lady, there's something better than perfect.

I tense, waiting for them to approach, to greet their son and me, their future daughter-in-law, but they instead beeline for a suited couple by the far end of the table. I glance at Callum just in time to watch the smile drip off his face, the disappointment apparent before he quickly affixes a new grin, as brittle and fake as a mask.

"Hey," I murmur. "Do you—?"

He cuts me off by sliding a hand into mine and squeezing gently. "Thanks," he replies, his voice just as low. "The show must go on, right?"

My stomach falters. He wasn't reaching for me for comfort. It's all for show.

I'm not sure I want it to be.

The questions in my mind are cut short as the president looks directly at me, hawk-like eyes piercing. They widen at the sight of me as if in surprise. But isn't the whole point of this dinner to welcome me?

As he strides over, he doesn't drop his gaze, and I'm too terrified to move, even as his smile widens, wolfish.

"Ripley Hart. So good to see you again," he says. All eyes in the room swing to me. Panic grips me.

Oh, shit. Do I curtsy? Shake his hand?

He must realize that I don't know what to do, as I'm just *the girl next door* after all. So he holds his arms out to signal that the right answer is a hug.

Callum's grip tightens on mine, almost like a reassurance.

I force a smile of my own and lean into his embrace with my free arm. He smells good, but it's an unnatural kind of good. Like it was tested with a focus group and carefully selected. *We'll make it woodsy to imply that he's grounded . . . a hardworking man. And then a hint of citrus to signal wealth.*

And then my heart stops because I'm hugging President Graves. The man who sent my friends to war. The man who banned reading. The man who, according to Becka, wants to end democracy as we know it.

When he pulls back, he shifts both hands to my shoulders. "It is lovely to see you after all these years. Although I'm not sure if I can forgive my son for keeping you secret this long."

His gaze bores into mine, and I realize I'm in a game with him now. I'm only eighteen, but I need to spar at his level.

"It's been too long," I reply. It seems safe. Noncommittal.

"And we do regret that your parents couldn't be here. I hope three months will be long enough for your mother to recover? I'd hate for them to miss your wedding." He leans in, with the excuse of fixing my hair, and murmurs, just for me, "Think of the optics."

I go very still at this, trying to read between the lines without giving away the alarm bells ripping through my mind. *What happened to my mom?*

And another siren starts somewhere near the base of my skull. *Three months.*

"The optics," I repeat weakly, not trusting myself to say anything more.

"Ripley," a female voice singsongs, and then Mrs. Graves is pulling me into a similar hug. I eye Callum over her shoulder. Those blue eyes are stormy and locked on his father, who is now walking to the head of the table.

"Come, let's eat!" President Graves calls out. Mrs. Graves scuttles away, and Callum comes up behind me. His hands slot naturally over my shoulders, guiding me, steadying me. Holding me just as his father did.

Since President Graves has essentially introduced me to the entire room by virtue of greeting me, dozens of eyes fix on me. I try a shy smile and fold back into Callum, nuzzling into him in a way that seemed romantic when computer-generated characters did it on my DopaMine but probably looks super awkward when I do it.

Still, it brings my lips close enough to his ear to whisper without fear of being heard. "What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know," he answers. "But I will find out."

"Are my parents okay?" I ask, my voice quavering slightly. I can't cry, not here. I need to keep it together. Who knows which of these guests have tablets. There are cameras everywhere. Becka could be watching. My parents could be watching.

Hux could be watching.

"I'm sure they're fine," Callum replies. "My father lies. A lot."

When my breath only hitches in reply, he wraps his arms around my belly, pulling me closer. To the other guests, we probably look like a couple deeply in love. And this close, I can almost feel it too. I can feel his

heartbeat against my back, the rumble of his voice through my spine. As the guests take their seats, we steal another moment, almost alone.

"Believe me, Ripley. My dad is weaving a story, and they are a part of it. Even if you don't trust him, trust that. And trust me. Do you think I'd ever hurt you or your parents?"

The words chill and soothe me at the same time. "A story," I say, my eyes fluttering as I blink too many times. Callum nods.

"It's a story. They're writing it. We just have to follow the script. Can you help me with that?"

I hate how my heart crumples slightly at the words. He's playing a part—and so am I. Even as his hand ghosts to brush a lock of hair behind my ear.

I shiver. "Right. For how long, though?"

Callum's hand stills just under my jaw. "What do you mean?"

Finally, I turn to look at him, grateful to have my back to the rest of the room. "Are we actually going to get married?"

Before he can reply, a *clink clink clink* sounds on a glass.

"Dinner is served," someone calls.

Callum's hand drifts from my jaw to my lower lip. As I stare up at him, a camera flash captures the two of us in our embrace. I hadn't even noticed the curious influencer to our left. "Later," he murmurs.

Reluctantly, I nod, and Callum's face relaxes into a handsome smile. His mask.

We take our seats, and President Graves goes through the motions of introducing everyone while I try to hide my panic and look even remotely interested.

Across from me is Sallie Zanders, his new chair of Private Endeavors. She looks like a hawk, with sharp eyes and her light hair slicked back in a severe bun. *Private Endeavors*, I realize, is just a way for President Graves to explain that Sallie is the liaison to the billionaires who fund the administration.

All the other names blur together: an offshore fracking consultant; the head of an environmental protection fund. They seem strangely friendly, considering their jobs. Perhaps I misheard. I can't seem to focus on anything.

Plates seem to appear on the table. The salad looks delicious, impossibly colorful, but I find myself pushing it around with my fork.

Are we actually going to get married? The words echo around in my skull as the panic tightens in my chest.

Maybe I should have listened to Hux. I'm so glad to see Callum again—he's my best friend. But it just reminds me that there isn't a *plan* here. They're using me to make things worse, and I'm here on the hope that, what, I'd be able to convince Callum to talk to his dad, get my parents their jobs back, let me and my friends escape the war? If Lyceum put me here, where's *their* plan?

What do they think I'm going to do, write the president a pamphlet?

My neck burns with a flush, so I brush my hands against the condensation on my water glass and then affix freezing fingertips to my throat, trying to calm myself down.

I probably should have listened to Hux. I should have taken his help and escaped off that hoverplane with him when I had the chance. He'd laugh at me now, wouldn't he? Huxley Finn would think it was hilarious that I was sitting here in this ridiculous dress, trying to pretend to be interested in what some energy executive and the first lady are discussing.

"Are you okay?" Callum asks, and his hand gently snakes across my chair until it rests in my lap, palm open. An invitation.

I stare at that hand, the scar across the palm. It's a hand that belongs to the son of the most powerful man in the world.

I shouldn't be here. I'm out of my depth.

I definitely should have listened to Hux.

Hux would—

"Excuse me," Hux says.

My brain short-circuits, eyes snapping up on a figure in the doorway dressed in head-to-toe black. As if summoned by my thoughts, Hux strides into the dining room, ducking smoothly around a waiter. I clutch at the armrests of my chair, readying myself to jump up. *Intruder. Terrorist.*

What is he doing here?

"Ripley?" Callum murmurs, and I fix my gaze down to my lap and his open palm here. In reply, I press my own against his and he interlaces our fingers.

"I've got you," Callum whispers without moving his lips. "I-I didn't think my dad was going to pull you into this so fast. I thought I'd get a chance to talk to you before they—"

“Kidnapped me off the lawn of the training facility?” Hux cuts in, striding up behind us with his cold, cocky grin.

“Shit. They didn’t,” Callum breathes, closing his eyes.

I keep my eyes on Hux even as I answer Callum: “They did.”

But even as I squeeze his hand, I realize: *I have to get Callum out of here*.

Hux pivots as he walks straight toward President Graves, that same confident ease in every line of his body. He knows I’m watching him.

My breath comes faster as he reaches the head of the table. Then, Hux looks up, eyes meeting mine as he steps up to the president’s right side.

I don’t like Graves. But I can’t just sit here and—

Hux hinges down, bending to whisper in the president’s ear. In reply, the president tilts his head toward Hux. As Hux folds further, I catch a glimpse of the earpiece in his ear.

Confusion fills me, and I fight to keep my expression neutral.

And then, barely a breath later, Hux straightens, and President Graves nods as he whispers something back. The whole time, Hux’s eyes don’t leave mine. Is this just another game to him?

After another nod, Hux motions to two other Hammers to follow him.

“Ripley?” Callum asks. His hand finds my back, fingers lightly brushing my neck. It’s gentle and reassuring, coaxing me back to him and the expression of pure concern on his perfect face.

“Who is that?” I ask, motioning to Hux. I don’t care how desperate I sound.

Callum watches as Hux holds the door for the two Hammers, then stalks after them.

“Security,” Callum says simply. “Why?”

“He just . . . he looked familiar, for a second. But I probably just saw him on the news,” I say quickly, picking up my fork and stabbing my salad.

Across the room, Hux is caught in the doorway, eyes fixed on the nape of my neck, where Callum’s hand rests. My stomach lurches. Callum murmurs something reassuring I can’t quite catch, and his fingers trace swirls along my skin. My mouth tips open, a question forming, as Hux’s eyes darken with something unreadable, and he gently shakes his head before pulling the door closed behind him.

Dinner rushes by in a blur. Exhaustion creeps in, a haze around everything, my eyelids drooping, until I can only focus on Callum's hand in mine, his smile, the way he gently swipes a thumb along the bare skin of my shoulder. I can barely stand by the time I get back into my room, stumbling into the bathroom. In all the gold and glass and crystal, a thousand versions of me are trapped and reflected back.

Three months. I'm supposed to be married in three months.

There's too much spinning in my head to make any sense of it; I feel like my skin is crackling with the effort of keeping all my thoughts inside. I splash water on my face, letting the mascara run down my cheeks as I pull the earrings off and set them on the white marble counter.

If Becka is right and Lyceum did put me here, why didn't they just tell me? Why didn't they *ask* me?

I splash my face again. And then again. Over and over.

And Callum. My Callum.

I've been dreaming of this moment for eight years. The chance to tell him how I felt, to apologize for never trying to write to him. For instead writing a story about him.

We're telling a story, he'd said.

I open my eyes and stare at myself in the mirror. Most of the mascara is gone, but there's still a stubborn ring of black around my lashes.

Whatever. It'll be fine.

I unzip my dress and let it pool to the ground. I have no idea how expensive this thing is, but I know it's more than my parents make in a year. Even though I want to hate it, smash the mirrors, destroy everything that belongs to this administration, I find myself lifting it and hanging it on the hook on the back of the bathroom door. Yawning, I feel around for the bundle of folded pajamas on the end of my bed that someone must have left when I was at dinner. They're softer than anything I've ever felt, and I can't help but shiver as I button up the striped shirt and step into the matching pants. They're so comfortable that I can get past the fact that they're navy and cream, the presidential colors.

A squeak in the corner of the room makes me jump, and I cover my mouth to stop myself from screaming as a figure slips in through an open French door I hadn't even noticed. I am about to sprint for the door to the hallway when the figure looks up. Blue eyes, blond hair falling from its coif: Callum.

My hands drop to my chest. “You scared me!”

Callum closes the French doors that lead to the courtyard, taking one second to peek out once more to make sure the coast is clear. He holds his hands up in apology. “I’m sorry.” He’s in gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt, and it’s very different from the tux, a thin fabric that clings to his body, strains against the broadness of his shoulders, the bulge of his arms. My breath catches in my throat at the sight of him. He’s in my bedroom. We’ve been alone a million times as kids, but somehow this feels different.

I reach over and flick off the bathroom light so that no one will be able to see us through the windows, but he’s cast in the warm glow of the holoscreens outside. A sinking feeling roils in my gut as I realize that he can see *me*, too: my smeared mascara, hair in a topknot, my striped pajamas. I cross my arms over my chest, and Callum looks up at the ceiling. Suddenly, the weight of today comes crashing down. Words seem to rush out of me.

“You’re in my bedroom” is all I can think of.

His gaze remains fixed on the ceiling. “I didn’t think you’d be in your pajamas yet.” And I’m not imagining the faint redness creeping up his neck.

“Pajamas make you blush but you want to walk down the aisle with me in three months?”

I step closer to him. Callum squints up as though there’s something really interesting up there. “You’re tired. I just wanted to say thank you. And—and it was good to see you. We can talk tomorrow.”

“No, we can’t. You know we can’t. That’s why you snuck in here.” I remember Becka’s warning. At least here, we only have to worry about the Hammers hearing us. There’s no risk of it getting out to the press. “Outside of this room, we have to smile and kiss for the camera.” He flinches at that. “So whatever you’re going to say . . . say it, okay?”

He sighs, eyes still pitched upward.

“Callum. Look at me. We used to have sleepovers.” I fight to keep my voice even against the thrill. “You’ve seen me in pajamas.”

Slowly, he lowers his gaze until his eyes are locked on mine. “We were six.”

“You were awkward then, too,” I joke, perching on the edge of the bed. I jut my chin out, a wordless offer. He sits. Once again, our eyes find the window, the trees stretching across the glass.

“This is my fault,” he says finally. “I picked you. I didn’t know that they were going to do it like *this*, Ripley. Believe me. I thought that they’d give

me a chance to *ask* you if you wanted to do this. But I should have known better. My dad does what he wants, when he wants. And I'm so sorry, Ripley. I should have known that it would be awful to ask this of you. Especially when your parents fought hard against getting him elected in the first place. And here I am, asking you to lie to make him look better to the public."

I blink back tears as I smile, though there isn't any real reason to.

If Lyceum put me here, I don't know what they want me to do. Do they really believe that people will read pamphlets about democracy and term limits when their DopaMines are brimming with footage of the "royal wedding"?

"I'm not here for your dad, Callum." He glances up at that, and for a moment he looks so much like that kid I fell in love with. "I'm here for *you*. I've missed you every single day since you left. Seeing you is . . ." My heart beats faster. The truth is right there on my tongue, but I swallow it back. "It's amazing. But I don't want to help your father. I *can't* help him."

Callum hangs his head. "Why not?"

I bite my lip. How honest can I be? "What would happen if I tried to leave?"

He winces again at that, and I reach out to steady him with a hand that falls loosely on his knee. "I mean, I know I can't. Wouldn't he just send me to the front in Europe? The data mines in Oklahoma? I mean, it could be bad, but I don't care about that as much as I care about what he could do to my parents. And you *know* he could do something bad."

Callum's face is even more stark in the shadow, and he takes a deep breath as he absorbs my words. His eyes dart around; I can see the glow of dozens of screens reflecting in them as he searches for an answer in the dark.

Part of me wants him to tell me that his father wouldn't hurt my parents. Wouldn't hurt *me*. But he doesn't deny it. Even as nausea rises in my throat at the idea, there's something steadying. He won't lie to me, not even when it's clear I need him to.

Finally, Callum clears his throat. "I'm going to get you out of this, okay?" he says. "I don't know how. But I'm going to get you out of this."

He reaches over and holds his hand out, palm up.

In the low light, I can see the scar from the tree. Eight stitches.

They'll have to go through me.

I reach over and rest my hand on top of his, interlacing our fingers. My body hums with the awareness of his warmth.

Callum is here, and he's still good. He's still my Callum.

He presses his palm against mine. "But play along for now, please? We'll pretend. Smile for the cameras, pretend that we're madly in love. We'll keep my dad happy until I can figure something out."

I nod. I can do that, can't I? It won't be hard. It feels natural to slip back into Callum's life, into his touch.

The hard part, a little voice in my head tells me, will be remembering that it's not real.

I look at our intertwined hands, and then move my gaze up to his.

His eyes gutter, pupils so wide that they're more black than blue. I'm probably projecting. I *know* I'm projecting. I've written things like this. I've written this moment.

But it feels real. His eyes drop to my lips, and everything goes still.

The sound of the lock on my door twisting cuts through the moment like a knife, and in less than a second, we're both standing.

A figure all in black cracks the bedroom door, and a familiar voice calls inside. "Ms. Hart, are you decent?" it asks.

That voice. I wish it were anyone else, but it's him. Hux.

I panic, eyes wide as I turn to Callum, who moves quietly to the French doors. He tries to open them, but the hinges squeak loudly. He stops and swears, silently.

"No, nope. Not decent at all," I call back, rushing over to slam the door in Hux's face. I wave at Callum, motioning for him to *go*, but he tries the door again—and it sticks.

I put my hands over my face. This can't be happening.

"Well," Hux continues in his fake professional voice, inching the door back open until it hits my heel, "we've had word of a credible threat. I need to clear the room."

"Just a moment!" I shut the door again.

Callum's wide eyes meet mine, and we both pantomime terribly, trying to figure out what to do, as Hux once again squeaks the door open.

Eventually, I point under the bed.

Callum presses his lips together and cocks his head like *Seriously?*

"Ripley," Hux says, and the way he says it—like he knows me—draws Callum's attention.

I don’t know what I’m more scared of: Hux finding Callum and trying to hurt him, or Callum seeing Hux and being hurt by him. I rush over, yanking at the door to the courtyard until my hands burn.

“Ms. Hart, this is really time-sensitive,” Hux says. He’s teasing me, like he would in class. Playing with me, like he’s been doing this whole time.

“Just—a—moment!” I eke out, huffing as I tug.

Finally, the door creaks open. Callum and I both wince, but Callum sneaks through the small opening.

“These gosh darn pajamas,” I say, to keep up my ruse, unsure if I’m lying to protect Callum or Hux.

Callum surprises me by sticking his head back in quickly. For a second, I assume he forgot something. But then he does something that sends my heart skittering in every direction—he kisses me on the cheek.

“Good night,” he breathes.

I shoot him a shocked look, and he smiles like I haven’t seen him smile since we were ten. And then he disappears into the darkness of the courtyard.

I can’t help the goofy look on my face as Hux kicks the bedroom door all the way open, unwilling to wait any longer. As he strides in, he brushes his sleeves to his elbows, revealing dark tattoos that snake up his forearms.

As I stare, he pulls a knife from his belt with one hand while using the other to pull back the door, as if someone could be hiding behind it the way he booted it open.

I hazard a glance into the hall to make sure we’re alone before I punch him in the shoulder as hard as I can. Which, with all my training, is really hard.

He grunts and then looks down at me, annoyed but not as injured as I was hoping. “Don’t do that.”

I hit him again, and this time he doesn’t even flinch.

“That hurts you more than it hurts me, and we both know it,” he says, stepping past me and heading deeper into the room. I whip around, closing the door. Aware of the microphones, I click on the wall of screens, so a pleasant hum of my DopaMine feed fills the room, covering our words.

“What the *hell* are you doing here, Hux?” I hiss as he makes a show of looking around the room. He toes open the bathroom, fingers tracing along my dress where it hangs as if it could be hiding a masked assailant.

“Told you. There was a threat,” he says, pacing over and tilting to look under the bed.

“You know what I mean. You’re an eighteen-year-old”—I mouth the word I’m afraid to say out loud—“*terrorist*. How are you now in the president’s security detail?”

Hux looks up from over the bed, a grin spreading over his face. “One upside of paranoia? High turnover. You think it was hard for me to fake a good résumé?” He stands. “Although I’m not sure if I’m as good at faking as you are.”

“What do you want, Hux?” I whisper. He makes a show of patting down my bed as he holds my gaze, fingers tracing along the coverlet. His dark hair falls into his eyes, and he pushes it back as he stands up.

“I saw your face,” he says, stopping his search to put his hands on his hips. There’s a moment of silence as the playfulness falls away from him. “I know you’re scared. It’s one thing to *think* about doing all this. It’s another to sit at the table with a monster. I figured once that happened, you’d want out. So I’m here. Consider me your getaway car.”

I don’t want to tell him he’s right.

But he’s right.

Or, he *was* before I talked to Callum. Callum, who refuses to lie to me. Callum, who I trust more than anyone.

Hux, on the other hand, I don’t trust at all.

“I call bullshit,” I say. Hux dips back into the bathroom, peering into the shower.

“Bullshit, you say?” he asks, the playful mask back up.

“Bullshit. Becka—who is *here*, by the way—”

Hux nods, and I feel a flare of fury. Of course he knew. He’s always one step ahead.

I continue, “Well. She already told me you guys were trying to recruit me. Or *she* was. Which makes me wonder: Do the Machs even know that you’re here?”

Hux kneels in front of the sink and opens the cabinet, still making a show of searching for the cameras.

“I outrank her. She doesn’t know my comings and goings.” He pulls out a tube of lotion.

“Cut the shit, Hux. You’re not here to protect me. What I can’t figure out is why you don’t just kill him yourself. You’re here. In the White House.”

Hux pops the lid of the lotion and takes a sniff as he stands. After a few moments of consideration, he pulls a *not bad* face. “And make him a martyr? No way. Until we can clearly expose him as a villain, he has to live.”

When he compresses the tube, the smell of cedar and rose fills the bathroom.

“I’m not joining you,” I say finally.

“Right. Because blowing up boats is wrong, but becoming a propaganda princess for a tyrant is totally fine.”

I snatch the lotion out of his slippery hands. “I am *not* a propaganda princess. Callum has a plan.” Or will have a plan. He promised he would.

Hux seems to sense the half-truth. “Oh, a plan? And what might that be?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Because you don’t know it. Because his plan is probably no better than Lyceum’s plan, which . . . do you know that yet, either? Are they going to send you a message by carrier pigeon? Chisel their secret plans onto a clay tablet in cuneiform?”

I toss the lotion aside, not breaking eye contact. “I could out you, you know. Tell President Graves who you are. We’ve all seen what they do to terrorists like you.”

Hux reaches up then, grabbing my wrist and holding it against his hard chest. I pull, but he only uses it to reel me in. “You don’t have it in you, Hart. We already know that.”

I pull once more, but his grip is like a vise. “And maybe that’s a good thing.”

He keeps me against his chest, his pine-colored eyes boring into mine. I hate that my nerve endings spark at his touch. I hope he can’t feel my heart, which is beating so hard that it feels like it’s shaking my ribs.

“Leave with me now, Ripley. The Machs are going to make their move soon. Whatever is planned is already in motion. I can’t stop it. And if you don’t come with me, I can’t protect *you*.”

My eyes bounce between his and his nostrils flare as he senses I’m close to figuring something out.

They can’t kill the president. But they could hurt people who make the president look good—people like his beloved son, or me. If I’m with Callum, I’m in danger from the Machs.

“You can’t protect me? Or you won’t?” I whisper.

He tongues his cheek. “I won’t,” he says finally.

This time, when I yank my hand back, he lets me go.

“Are you going to hurt Callum?” I blurt. My voice breaks at the utter helplessness I feel.

Hux walks back to the door, stopping when his hand reaches the handle.

“No,” he says. And for a second, I wonder if I’m imagining the weariness in his voice. “We’re not going to kill Callum, Ripley.” He twists the knob. “Speaking of, tell your idiot to grease that hinge before he tries to sneak in here again.” As he goes, he flicks something at me. I know what it is even before it finishes its midair arc, but I can’t help but catch it anyway.

The poker chip.

I snatch the pillow off the bed and hurl it at Hux, instead catching the door as he closes it. It flops harmlessly against the wood and then bounces to the floor.

Something catches my eye as I turn back to the bed—

A book. Not just any book—the one I pulled from the archives earlier. Before Becka caught me.

The Lord of the Rings. Better than a carrier pigeon, I suppose. Maybe Lyceum isn’t as dead in New Washington as I thought. As Becka and Hux think.

I lift the book, spine cracking. A note falls out:

Saffron changed Orion’s mind.

Because once Orion joined Saffron at the library, everything changed.

This is their plan, then. They expect me to recruit Callum to Lyceum. The president’s son. To the rebellion.

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Chapter 13

This fabric is perfect for cold, Kaleb said. That was the only indication of where we were going.

Callum met me on the tarmac, giving me a brief kiss on the cheek for a wall of camera flashes. When I glanced up questioningly, though, he looked away. He won't lie to me—but he won't tell me everything, I guess.

They handed us ear-protection headsets with microphones, since we're traveling by hovercopter this time, but Callum didn't say anything, didn't even look at me as I slipped mine on. Still, he held my hand as the copter lurched into the air. When I squeezed his hand, he squeezed back, but neither of us said anything.

The land below stretches on and on, blurring from the neon and silver of the city into long stretches of dun, until the color seeps out into gray, into white. Snowflakes grow along the window. A shiver of anticipation sneaks along my spine.

In reply, and without dropping my hand, Callum reaches over to my leather seat and depresses a button. In a moment, heat soaks along my spine and seat, even though I'm warm in the fleece-lined boots and leggings. It's like my chair has its own personal heater. Who knew that was possible.

I could ignore it, the cold outside. We're thousands of feet away from the sprawling snowy tundra. With Callum's hand in mine, I could pretend the window was just a screen. I could avoid every discomfort and fall into this script. Last night, I read until the words blurred under my eyes and then tucked the tome under my pillow for safekeeping. Not the most creative hiding spot, but that's where Lyceum left it for me and who would think to

investigate the president's family? I left the Fellowship on their summit of Caradhras, shivering in the snow.

I turn off the seat warmer.

Finally, Callum turns to me, his eyes wary. "You look beautiful, by the way. I don't think I've told you yet today."

I try to smile back, but I can't help but wonder if he's just saying this for the benefit of the guards, the pilot, or the microphone at his lips. *It's just a computer*, Hux had said. Computers can be hacked. The way my stomach dips has nothing to do with the altitude we're losing in preparation for landing. We really can never talk. There are microphones and cameras everywhere.

Can't talk to Callum. Can't talk to Nef, or my parents. Can only get orders from Hux to run and half-formed plans from Lyceum, scribbled on books.

Blinking against the way my eyes suddenly burn with frustration, I force my gaze to follow Callum's, out the window. We've veered off land. An endless sheet of blue-gray with white-capped waves stretches. There's something hypnotic about it, the endless battering of an ever-rising sea. It's a beautiful thing that is slowly reclaiming the earth. Another end of the world, I guess, at least for so many coastal cities over the years.

When I glance at Callum for a hint, his eyes have fixed on the horizon, and I follow them to a ship in the distance, at first little more than a speck of white against the slate gray of an endless horizon. The hovercopter's engine kicks into a lower gear, and Callum's hand tightens on mine as we descend. He only releases my hand to slip into his winter jacket, moving his ever-present plain golden campaign button from his shirt to the outside of his coat, and then, as we swoop down, he threads his fingers back with mine.

"It's around here somewhere," the captain says. Even though I missed much of his introduction over the roaring of the copter blades, I instantly recognize him from his well-fitted red wool turtleneck and knit cap. Dressed like that, he *has* to be the captain.

"Aha!" he crows, after digging around under the controls for a bit. He smiles as he offers me a pair of binoculars.

“What am I looking for?” I ask, holding them up and scanning the grayness through the massive windows. Inside here on the bridge, I’m actually starting to sweat in my warm clothing, but I keep it on for the benefit of the dozen or so camera-wielders grouped off to the side. I must look ridiculous: fuzzy clothing, puffy coat, binoculars up. When I pull them down, the captain grins and jerks his head at Callum, as if to say, *You tell her the good news*.

Except Callum doesn’t answer. My own smile stutters as I try to be a good sport, lifting the binoculars once more.

“Here,” Callum murmurs, and I jolt at the sudden closeness of his body, the warmth that I seem to feel even through all these layers of clothing. The roughness of his palm is butterfly-light as it guides my knuckles and the binoculars until I see a small white shape, a different texture along the unforgiving bleakness. Fuzzy, fluffy. A black button nose and dark, glittering eyes.

I gasp. “No,” I whisper.

“They’re calling her Marcy,” Callum replies, and when I lower the binoculars, he’s almost smiling despite whatever mood has gripped him all day. When I gape up at him, he even chuckles a bit.

“She’s beautiful,” I breathe, choked up despite myself. “I thought they were extinct.”

“She’s the last,” Callum says, sighing. His warm breath settles along the nape of my neck. “It’s kind of . . .” He trails off, hunting for the word. “Depressing.”

“Amazing,” I say at the same time. We trade a confused look, Callum’s lips twitching into a nervous smile, as if he’s unsure if he’s allowed to laugh. “I mean,” I continue, “she did it. She’s surviving. It’s not over yet.”

“She’s alone.”

There’s a sharp feeling under my ribs as I look out at her.

Alone.

I watch her as her dark eyes rove, searching for something.

“She’s not alone,” I say quietly. I don’t know if I’m saying it for her, or for me. I don’t even know if I believe it.

Callum’s arms snake around me, and he squeezes tight, a gesture that’s more friendly than romantic, but the warm strength of it blocks out the refrain that’s humming under my skin*: Alone, alone*. I lean into him.

“I’m so glad it’s you,” he whispers. What he said to me as he slipped the ring onto my finger.

I surprise him—and myself—by turning and planting a kiss on his cheek, close enough to his lips that the photographers, from their angle, might not see the difference. “Thank you for sharing this with me,” I reply.

For the first time all day, Callum smiles. For real.

Our “kiss” will be played on a hundred million screens, and Callum’s answering grin. I wonder, with a twist of guilt in my gut, what environmental disaster or war casualty our news story will be superseding. *Propaganda princess*, Hux had called me.

The door on the other side of the bridge slams open, all the cameras turning with a sudden gust of whispers. I turn just in time to see Rodrigo Courtesand—the president’s environmental liaison—step inside, followed by two black-suited guards. And right after them, Hux walks in, a dark cap pulled low on his head.

I turn back to look out the window.

“Want to go outside?” Callum asks, and I nod.

It’s freezing, but I barely notice, either due to my warm clothing or the hot blush of shame burning through me. Callum stays close as we walk to the upper deck, settling against the railing. The photographers elect to stay warm inside. Even though their zoom lenses probably follow us, we can at least speak freely.

“I can’t believe we found her,” I whisper.

“I’m not convinced she’s real,” Callum replies, voice just as low. I glance up at that. “I wouldn’t put it past my father.”

“You think it’s one of the Hammers in a fuzzy suit?” I joke, and Callum wrinkles his nose as he moves his head from side to side, like he’s weighing the likelihood. “I can think of a few who would volunteer.”

I bump Callum’s shoulder. “I know your dad wants us to have a nice first date, but I don’t think he cares *that* much.”

Callum goes quiet for a second, like he’s making a decision. “My dad wants to repeal the Peary Act.”

I rack my mind for why that sounds familiar.

“It protects dumping in the Arctic Circle,” Callum explains. “But not really in practice. We’ve already been doing it, for years. And when that news comes out, he wants it to be legal—like changing the rules in the present makes it like they never existed in the first place.”

My hands tighten on the railing, and I remember Hux's words. *Another part of the world will end*, he'd said. He was right.

I watch Marcy, my stomach roiling with Callum's words.

"He hopes that finding Marcy will prove that everything is fine out here."

Anger bites up the back of my throat, and I close my eyes. "She's alone. She's the last one. Of course things aren't *fine*."

I open my eyes to watch as Callum nods slowly. "Why are you playing along?"

He sighs. "He's doing a lot wrong, Rip. I know that." He leans his elbows on the railing, looking down. "But he's got a plan. He wants to fix things. Things like *this*."

"How will repealing the Peary Act *fix* this?" I ask, trying and failing to hide the anger in my voice.

"If we repeal the Peary Act, the administration was promised a huge donation from MayTech," he explains, naming Alba's parent company. "It's a compromise. Do you know what we could do with that money? How much research, preservation I could do? That's politics. It's give and take, Ripley. It's imperfect, but . . . he wants to fix things. You know my father, Ripley. He's not a bad person. He just . . ." he starts, and then shivers, like he's trying to shake something off. "I don't want to lie to you, Ripley," he says, turning his gaze to mine.

"Then don't," I whisper.

His gaze widens, and I can see him trying to figure something out. "Once it comes out that he's been allowing dumping here for years, his opposition will use it as fuel to tear him down."

"So let them. What would you do if you could be free? Just . . . leave this place? Leave the spotlight?" I let myself dream for a moment. Callum and I, running away together.

Callum sighs. "I can't just walk away, Ripley."

He motions to Marcy. "Can you?"

My heart swells. That's my Callum.

"But days like this," he sighs. "It just feels . . . hopeless. Or . . . it did," he says, looking down at me, his expression soft.

"What is it?"

I realize I'm grinning. "You're still you," I say. "Still good."

He shrugs one shoulder. "You thought I wasn't?"

“Not many people would be after eight years of fan edits and fawning,” I joke.

Callum makes a face. “Fan edits. Do you watch those fan edits?” he jokes, and I give him a playful shove. “I hope I’m good,” he continues. “That’s the story I tell myself, at least.” Even though he glances down, it can’t hide the pink spreading across his cheeks. And it’s not from the cold.

“Do you like stories?”

He shrugs. “I don’t watch my DopaMine much. It’s weird to see my face, y’know?”

I don’t. “No,” I say, my heart hammering. Is this the moment that I can do it, recruit him to Lyceum? “I mean, like books.”

His mouth quirks up. “Books? You reading books, Ripley Hart?”

I nod. This is a risk. And I’m taking it. “I am.”

He looks back out at the water. “Well. We’re going to be here for a bit,” he says, turning and leaning back against the metal. “So tell me a story.”

The sun streaks across the sky as Callum and I walk the upper deck, and he listens while I tell him about *The Lord of the Rings*. Just as the hobbits are reaching Rivendell, I stop and look up, feeling eyes on me.

Hux sits in a crow’s nest, one arm slung over a knee as he stares down at me.

I glare up as I link my arm in Callum’s, and we keep walking.

“So, they think Frodo is beyond saving, because the poison is seeping toward his heart—”

“She’s coming over!” someone cries, the press spilling outside in their excitement.

I tighten my grip on Callum’s arm.

“Marcy?” I ask sadly. Part of me expects to see a person in a suit, marching along to orders from an earpiece. I don’t want to have the illusion shattered. Right now, I can choose to believe.

“We don’t have to go look,” Callum says, but I shake my head.

“I want to. I have to,” I answer.

Callum and I slowly head to the starboard side, where reporters, guards, and crew all lean against the railing.

Just beyond, not even one hundred feet out, sits Marcy. And she’s definitely not some guy in a suit.

She’s on an iceberg no bigger than a car, her feet tucked under her as she rests, mouth open, panting. The massive ship sends a wake slamming into the iceberg, and she tries to steady herself. Bright crimson, so red it can’t be real, stains her flank.

I don’t need the binoculars to see how skinny she is. Her stunning white fur is matted in some places, the white faded to a dull yellow. Tears bite at the back of my throat, and I shake my head.

Callum puts a hand around my shoulders.

She sits up, and it’s a struggle. I can’t imagine how weak she is.

No one speaks as she tilts her head up toward us.

Her eyes are tired and milky. If she’s scared of us, she’s too exhausted to do anything about it.

Finally, she lowers herself and slips into the water, diving into the waves and out of sight.

Around us, the crowd disperses, voices already muttering about what filters they’ll use; one even asks Alba aloud to swap out Marcy for a stock photo they had prepared. Already, the truth is being rewritten. Callum keeps his arm around me, and I am faintly aware of the camera flashes behind us. Along the waves, a small dinghy returns to the ship, packed with soldiers in white camo. They all hold long nightsticks. The end of one is tinged with blood.

It’s no mystery why Marcy positioned herself for a photo op.

One of the guards appears at Callum’s side. “Copter is ten minutes out,” he says, and Callum nods.

We saw what we came to see, I guess.

Callum and I both look at the water where Marcy dove. I was naïve to think there was hope. Marcy is, really and truly, alone.

Callum’s voice breaks the silence. “A week. That’s how much longer we have to . . . lie for him.”

“What happens in a week?” I ask as my pulse kicks up. Does Callum finally have a plan? I fight the urge to seek out Hux in the crow’s nest. I wonder if he’s listening to us right now. Of course he is.

“The Union Conference.”

“Where he’s supposed to endorse a successor?”

“Yes. Because he’s not going to.” His voice is quiet, gaze set dead ahead.

I’m probably imagining it, but the sky seems to have gotten a little darker. It was one thing to hear Becka guess at it. But Callum knows. Still I

have to say it: “He’s seeking a third term.”

He looks out at the water with me. “No,” he answers. “He’s extending his current term.”

“For another four years?”

“For life.”

I tighten my hands on the railing, and we’re quiet for a moment. “What do you think about it?” I ask.

“I hate being the son of the president,” he admits quietly.

Hope blooms in my chest. “What if you told him that? Like you said, he’s a good guy. He’ll listen to his son.”

Callum stares at the water and then drags his eyes to me. “Exactly, Ripley. He’s a good guy. Not perfect, but . . . better than others. If it’s not him, it will be someone worse. It’s the right thing for him to be our leader . . . for his whole life.”

“For life?” I echo. “Callum, that’s not democracy.”

Callum nods. “I know. I *know*, Ripley. But we’re not dealing with ideals here. The billionaires at the dinner? They pull the strings. They’d let the world end if it meant more dollars in their pockets and clicks on their videos. *The will of the people* died a long time ago.”

I process his words, forcing myself to be still. He continues gently, “This is just like what we’re doing here, with the Peary Act. Working in the system, compromising. Once we get past this vote, they can’t stop us. We just have to wait for the right time, and then we can do the right thing.”

I listen. I can’t tell how much of this Callum really believes and how much he’s saying because he can’t say the alternative: that his father is going to become a dictator.

“What does it mean for *you*, Callum? If he’s like some sort of king, what does that make you? A prince? A king, one day?”

He looks up at me, his expression broken and sad but strangely hopeful. “That’s not what I want. That’s the last thing I want.” He breathes, looking at his hands on the railing. “But damn, the things I would do. The rights I would wrong.”

Graves abolishing the term limit is wrong, but it can always get worse. But with me and with Callum? Maybe this is a third option. An option where he—*we*—could make our own rules. And we could do it right.

I shake my head. “Why did you tell me?”

“Because I’m scared, and you always had a way of making me feel brave. Helping me sort out things that felt impossible,” Callum says softly. The honesty shocks me, and I feel myself tear up. I blink fast.

“And when you were talking about the bad guy in the story?” he asks. “What was that phrase you used?”

The sun breaks through the clouds, weak, anemic, and he squints as he looks at me.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” I reply.

He nods. “That.” He’s looking back at the water. “That.”

When the hovercopter lands on the circular pad that dominates the gallery deck, Callum helps me up and we ride back to New Washington in silence, not letting go of the other’s hand, even when we disembark and approach the motorcade. Callum moves to open the door of the last dark hovercar, a hulking vehicle that should seat at least eight, but one of the guards tells him to hold on. I don’t know if they’re doing a safety sweep or, equally as likely, they’ve been ordered to leave time for the eagerly waiting press to snap more photos. But as I stand on the blacktop with Callum, even though it’s been minutes since we were in the hovercopter, all I can hear in my ears is that buzzing.

The vote is next week.

Callum rests his shoulder against mine as we stand in silence. One week, and it’s all going to end all over again. The end of democracy. Maybe the end of the world.

Seven days to make my decision. I could bail. Escape. Find a way to make sure my parents are safe—maybe joining the Machs would make that happen—and leave. I don’t know if a salacious PR dip will do enough damage to foil the vote at the Union Conference, but at least I’ll know I’m not helping get him elected.

Callum brushes a hand along my bicep and my escape fantasy vanishes in a puff of smoke. Because another copter touches down and the press pours out, heads bent down into their tablets as they excitedly manipulate their images. The Hammers are working a perimeter as the driver steps away. No eyes on us. For once, this isn’t for show.

He knows I’m in my thoughts. He knows *me*, and he’s trying to ground me.

I don’t know what I think. I know Graves is wrong. I know he can’t be president for life. That cannot happen. But about a couple of things? Callum is right. Running away from power doesn’t fix anything. And I can do more here, with Callum—trying to convince him—than I could if I ran.

I can’t just look away, let myself get swept into the fantasy. I have to do something.

Maybe I can save the galaxy like this, just like Saffron did.

Maybe the right thing to do is also the thing that feels like coming home. I can feel his eyes on me, like he’s thinking the exact same thing.

He leans in, so his words are for me and me alone. “You didn’t finish your story,” he breathes, tickling the small hairs against my neck.

I flush, brushing away the tingles with a hand that plucks along my collarbone. “You want to know how our story ends?” I rasp back. My voice doesn’t sound familiar.

His lips quirk as he drapes my hand over the nape of his neck, and even underneath my glove, I can feel the heat of his skin. “Or at least this chapter.”

“What do you think happens next?” I ask.

“That depends,” he says. “What do you want to happen next?” And then he’s ducking his head, just a little, so the distance between us—between our lips—shrinks.

“You can get in now,” comes a voice, and Callum jerks back, his cheeks pinking, and not from the cold. As the black-suited figure stomps by, I turn to him and he offers me a wry smile.

My heart squeezes again. We may be fake fiancés, but maybe not everything about it is fake.

“Ladies first?” He extends a palm to help me into the raised vehicle.

I step up, just as something clonks against my knee. I watch in horror as my poker chip goes bouncing from my pocket—when did I put it in my pocket?—down the tarmac, rolling away.

“You dropped something,” Callum says. It’s foolish, but I can’t leave it here, on some airfield a few miles outside New Washington. Even though I can’t explain to Callum what it means. He doesn’t require explanation, though. We both race after it.

It’s then that the hovercar explodes behind us.

Red and blue lights.

Red and blue lights.

Red and purple lights—no, that's wrong. Submit Issue. Alba needs to correct it.

Oxygen mask.

Red and blue lights.

I blink as the world returns from pixels, my eyes burning as the ball of flame devours the place where Callum and I were just standing, touching, and—I think—almost kissing. The firefighting drones descend, jets of water streaming from their bellies. If I let my vision blur, they look like moths crowding a bonfire.

What's real? The press descended, also drawn to the fire, and maybe they were closer than I thought. Maybe they saw the almost-kiss. Maybe Callum knew—

We almost died. If I hadn't gone after that stupid poker chip . . . and now it's gone. Probably forever. I blink three times fast, trying to stop the buzzing in my ears. My ears are ringing, and they have been since the blast.

Ripley, his voice says. It sounds like we're underwater.

I turn to look at Callum. He has a blanket over his shoulders, eyes dark with worry. Ash is smeared on his cheekbones, perfectly highlighting his bone structure like painted-on contour from a glam squad. Even now, he's so beautiful it hurts.

You're in shock, the still-working part of my brain says.

A paramedic pulls at my face and puts some sort of cream on my eyebrow. It stings. Slowly, the chaos around me comes into focus. Security bustles while other Hammers keep the crowd far enough away from the flames, but they can't stop the zoom of their cameras.

Callum sits next to me, and when his hand finds mine, it's the most natural feeling in the world.

We both sit on the back of that ambulance as fire devours the hovercar into a matte black exoskeleton curled in on itself.

Across the way, they're talking into their cameras about malfunctions in the wiring and overheating engines—but there's a hitch in the words. The car wasn't even on. Engines don't explode when they're turned off. I'm no engineer, but even I know what happened.

So does Callum.

Someone just tried to kill us.

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Chapter 14

By the time we're cleared to leave, it's late. They don't let me ride back with Callum—he's hustled away first into a sleek jet. They let me wait for another hovercar, which should scare me. But I can't find the energy to do anything but follow the hands pressing me on board, pushing my head down between my legs. They taught us this position during bomb drills at school. Brace.

When I finally stumble in the door to my new bedroom, all I want to do is fall into my bed, but a feeling of wrongness jolts through me. I turn the light on, trying to place the feeling, knowing that someone has been in my room, someone has done *something*.

It's only as I approach the bed that I notice the cream-colored duvet has been curled up in one corner, revealing the white belly of silken sheets.

The book.

My heart sinks as my hand shoots out and flips my pillow over. *The Lord of the Rings* is gone.

Someone found it. The best-case scenario is that they know I have contraband. The worst-case scenario is that they know about Lyceum.

A knock sounds at my door, and I yank it open without taking my eyes off the bed, like I can get answers from it if I stare long enough.

Becka leans on the doorframe, her eyes glittering with something I can't place.

"We need to go," she says, looking over my shoulder like she needs to confirm I'm alone.

"Go where?"

She pushes off the doorframe and cocks her head as she strides off down the hallway. “Cute that you think I’m going to tell you.” When I don’t follow right away, she cuts me a glare over her shoulder. “Now, Hart.”

The bed beckons. Safety, security.

But I was almost killed today. I want answers. So I follow Becka to the end of the hall, down a set of unfamiliar looping steps, and into the back of a black hovercar waiting in the shadows behind the White House.

“Don’t worry about your little boyfriend,” Becka says.

“But if he stops by—”

She raises a brow. “For a sleepover?” When my cheeks burn, she laughs, low. “He’s been in briefings ever since your little stunt.” She says it like we wanted to be almost blown up. “He’ll be with the president until dawn. You won’t be missed.”

It’s not exactly a comforting thought as we dart through the streets of New Washington.

I should be following the turns, but my head feels like it’s been crammed with cotton. Finally, we come to a rocking stop and Becka leads me out into a pitch-black stretch of road. *You won’t be missed.* My toe impacts metal and I almost fall, tripping over the loose manhole cover. Becka glares as she latches me into some sort of belaying getup and shoves me into the darkness.

I should be scared, but my body seems to have run out of adrenaline. It’s a slow descent into blackness, and then Becka lands behind me, light on her feet like a cat, as lights click on, bathing the tunnel in a warm glow.

“Well, well. Out of my sight for a few days and you’re getting married and blown up.”

I look up, feeling my face crumpling as I recognize the voice.

Nef.

She rushes to me as I hold out my arms. Her hug feels like home. A lump rises in my throat.

“I’m so sorry,” Nef whispers. “Uri said I couldn’t say anything about it. I didn’t know they were just going to *take* you.”

Nef knew.

I wish I could control how my body reacts to the words, but I stiffen automatically. This whole time, I assumed Nef was as much in the dark as I was. We’re best friends, after all. I thought we told each other everything.

“Ripley?” Nef asks, her arms rigid around me in response.

“I get it,” I lie. I don’t. I don’t get it at all, but that’s a hurt to examine later.

She squeezes back, gusting out a sigh. “You ready for this?”

“Ready for what?”

When we pull back, light races down the tunnel as safety lamps illuminate above. How had I not heard them before? The tunnel is packed with teenagers, all of them shouting and talking over each other. There’s a break in the crowd down the middle where the third rail would be, and Becka motions for Nef and me to follow her. We walk a rickety ladder onto a makeshift scaffold that raises us above the crowd.

A hush falls over the crowd as I step out onto the wooden plank, keeping my eyes locked on my feet. The scaffold is about five feet wide and seven feet up; the ground seems to swim. On one side, Uri and Lena each stand with their arms across their chest. Uri has the decency to look embarrassed, as he should. Lena is expressionless, and it stings. I didn’t think we were *friends*, but I thought we were allies, at least. Members of the same cause. And they sold me out without a second thought.

On the other side, closer to where the end of the scaffold stretches up into three more levels—sits Hux, lounging against the V of the metal. The sight of him, so relaxed, so at ease, sends my blood pumping. At my glare, he shoves himself to his feet, and I can see every muscle tense under the all-black uniform I’ve come to recognize as his, like a cat ready to spring. His expression is thunderous. And locked on me.

I have to look away.

Even the crowd, so many faces blurring together, is a respite from that hatred. I see familiar faces, faces from home, faces from when this used to be home. I see many, many unfamiliar faces. But through it all, the crowd parts into distinct sides.

Some are Lyceum, others Machs. I turn to Becka and Nef, waiting for someone to say something.

Becka looks to the crowd. “We’re here to do something unusual,” she says, raising her voice so that it echoes down the tunnel. “I know we don’t always see eye to eye—”

“—you’re *terrorists*!” someone from the Lyceum side shouts.

Uriah steps up to the edge of the scaffolding and holds up a hand. “Next person to interrupt this meeting with an outburst like that is done in Lyceum. We are sitting ducks down here, but there is no other way to figure

this out, so we're risking it. Shut up and speak when necessary." When the crowd falls silent, Uriah motions for Becka to continue.

"But," Becka says with a new bite in her voice, "we have to come together now. We have unconfirmed reports that there is going to be a vote happening at the Union Conference. We can't confirm *what kind* of vote, but we know that it is important enough to warrant the presence of every member of the House and the Senate. Something that big is probably not good."

Becka turns to Uriah, who steps closer to the edge.

"That, along with the recent assassination attempt on one of Lyceum's own." Uriah gestures to me, but I bite the inside of my cheek. Is that what I am? They need me, but they didn't *ask* me about any of this.

I'm not a member. I'm a tool.

Uriah steps off the platform, stepping into the crowd as he tries to reach them with his words. "That warrants an emergency meeting. Not just with our own allies, but with the enemies of our enemies." He's throwing the Machs a bone, using their own philosophy. The crowd titters and I feel my brows draw together. "We have to figure out what the vote is and how to stop it, in addition to figuring out who is trying to take out Callum Graves and Ripley Hart."

I clench my teeth. My back burns with the memory of that flash of fire.

"Ordinarily, we would make assumptions about who bombed that motorcade," Lena chimes in.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Hux murmurs. He's leaning against the metal arm of the scaffolding, his arms tightly crossed over his chest. He doesn't raise his voice, because he doesn't have to, but the implicit violence in his tone is so obvious that it sends a shiver down my spine. "But Machs didn't do this."

My head whips over to him.

"You didn't?" I press. I know we're speaking in front of a crowd of hundreds, but I don't care.

Hux goes rigid, straightening from his lounging. His arms even snap to his sides; a scowl twists his face. "No." The word lands like an anvil.

"You're sure?" I shoot back, turning to face him full on.

"Ripley," comes Uriah's ever-patient voice. "Huxley Finn is one of the generals in the Machs. If he says they didn't do it . . . they didn't do it."

My eyes must reveal my shock, because a small smirk appears on Hux's face. I want to slap it off.

A general?

"There is a target on Callum's back that wasn't put there by any of us," Hux says, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Which is why I've decided that Ripley Hart should be removed from her assignment until we figure out what other players we're dealing with."

I open my mouth, but Uriah speaks up before I can: "Ripley's post is not your decision."

I bristle, searching for words as Hux grabs hold of the pole above his perch and gently vaults down, his inertia taking him easily across the subway rail and up into Uriah's face before I can even suck in a surprised breath.

"Ripley's *post* is more complicated than you librarians seem to understand," Hux croons, and I see Uriah's spine straighten.

I jump down, landing with much less grace, and step between them.

"Enough," I call. They're not listening. Nef grabs Uriah's arm as Becka comes up alongside Hux, trying to convince him to step back.

Around us, the crowd murmurs, anger simmering.

"Funny how Callum Graves wasn't in any danger until the head of the Machs broke his own council's orders and infiltrated Graves's personal security detail," Lena bites out, and Hux's grin turns feral.

I stop, my mind reeling. Hux wasn't ordered to come to the White House? Why was he there, then?

This time when Hux surges toward the members of Lyceum, my hand presses against his hard chest. His heartbeat thunders under my palm, but I don't dare look up and meet his eyes.

"We shouldn't fight," Uriah says evenly.

"Oh," Hux says with a humorless laugh, "what were you going to do, quote the Dewey Decimal system at me until I fell asleep?" And then the fake grin falls from his face and his green eyes sear into Uriah's even stare.

"Ripley is done."

"She's *not*," Uriah pushes back.

That's it. Something inside of me snaps, and it's a long time coming.

I am done, but not in the way that either of them think.

"ENOUGH," I scream, pushing Hux back as my hands come to fists at my sides. The cry is so loud that it hurts my throat, but it does the trick. For

once, the tunnel—all of Lyceum, all of the Machs—go silent. And look at me.

"*She* is her own person," I cry, the rage I've been holding on to for days finally spilling over as I whip to glare at Uriah.

"You lied to me. All of Lyceum. I thought I found my people—my *family.*" I hate how my voice catches, and I stop to make sure I can continue without crying. Nef looks down, ashamed, and Uriah has the decency to look embarrassed as well.

I lower my voice, speaking only to Uriah and Lena: "You didn't ask. You didn't trust me. You used my writing—my heart—against me. But you don't own me. I'm not Lyceum's to claim."

With that, I whip my head to the other side, pinning a smug-looking Hux with the same ferocious glare. "And *you*. You want to stop a tyrant? Funny, because you seem so ready to become one. You don't tell me when I'm done. I decide that. No one else."

I take a step forward, using the moment to catch my breath, surprised that still the silence stretches. People are listening to me. To my words.

"You need me. I can make a difference. And I will. Because I know what the vote is for, and I'm going to stop it."

Hundreds of eyes stare at me as I gingerly hoist myself back onto the scaffolding. I make sure my voice is steady, loud enough that not a single word will be missed: "In a week, the Senate will be voting on extending President Graves's term. They're going to make him dictator. For life."

Below me, Hux jolts back. Uriah swears under his breath. I look to both of them.

"And someone came into my room and took the books I had there," I add. "Someone in the White House probably knows that I'm with Lyceum. That same person could be the one who rigged the bomb. It's entirely possible that Callum wasn't the target—I was."

Hux's jaw twitches as he looks to Lena. When he finds my gaze, his green eyes are on fire. "We have to kill President Graves."

"What?" I hiss, scrambling off my makeshift stage and rushing over to him. "No. No, Huxley."

"There's no other way," he answers, voice raised, and the Machs murmur in agreement.

I step closer to him. "You're the one who said killing him would only make him a martyr," I counter. "Give me a chance. We have a week. I can

stop this. I know I can get him to help."

Hux's eyes narrow, and somehow they're more murderous than when he was suggesting an actual assassination, so I turn back to the crowd, standing among them. "Callum Graves is a good person," I call. "A friend. And he doesn't want this, either. If Callum comes out publicly against the vote, I know we can stop it."

Hux's hand comes to my elbow, a grip so light I can feel his fingers shaking with anger. "And if you're wrong," he bites out, lips by my ear, "when you can't convince him, when President Graves outmaneuvers you, uses you in his videos and sound bites, you'll have ended democracy in America. You'll be more than a propaganda princess—you'll be America's first actual princess. The nation, the world as we know it, will end. And there'll be nothing we can do to stop it."

"You don't get to kill people because you don't believe they can change!" I yell. My scream echoes off the tunnel walls, emotion soaking every syllable.

Hux narrows his eyes. Everyone's watching, but it might as well be just us.

"And *you* don't get to wager the future of the planet on a boy just because you think he's a character in your pathetic love stories," Hux taunts. "You're a good kisser, Ripley. But not *that* good."

My hand whips out before I can think about it, backhanding across his cheek. The slap burns my knuckles as his head twists, absorbing the blow with a wince.

A collective gasp sounds from the entire tunnel, followed by a sickening, deafening silence.

I've slapped Huxley Finn hundreds of times—in jest, in practice, in annoyance. We've sparred and traded words and blows and I've never even come close to hurting him. But this time, I forgot. I forgot about the ring.

A sharp gash cuts right over his lip, drawing blood.

The tip of his tongue darts out, licking the trickling red drop as he slowly turns back to look at me, his expression flat, even as the skin pinks with my force. The rest of his face goes sickly pale.

My chest heaves with rage, hurt, and—though I don't want to admit it—fear.

He's right. If I can't convince Callum, our democracy is dead. What if I don't mean as much to him as I think? As I hope?

How much of how I feel about him is based on memory? On the story I wove out of desperation? If he doesn't feel about me the way I feel about him, we could all die.

"Three days," Hux says finally. "The Machs will give you three days to convince Callum to defect. Or we kill President Graves and anyone else who gets in our way."

Hux doesn't move his face, but bounces his eyes to Uriah, who I feel behind me.

"Lyceum agrees to the terms," Uriah booms. There is a murmur of agreement and the sound of boots and shuffling on concrete—the meeting is adjourned. But neither Hux nor I move.

"Anyone?" I whisper through clenched teeth.

Hux's eyes flicker, but he blinks the emotion away. "Anyone," he answers finally, and I understand what he means.

Even me.

My room feels even more empty without my books, but I can't be alone with my thoughts, so I finally give in and turn on the screens. There's no way to turn on just one, and I'm not going to call for help. With my luck, they would send Hux.

I look down at my hand, the one that slapped him. As I stretch and flex my fingers, the diamond glitters obscenely.

I can't get the sight of Hux's angry expression out of my mind. The way he shoved himself to his feet when I stepped onto the creaking scaffold, like he was stopping himself from rushing toward me and checking to see if I was okay.

Maybe I'm imagining it. Maybe I'm trying to balance out the *good kisser* comment by pretending he cares in ways he doesn't. Maybe that's been our relationship, these past eight years. Me finding hints and clues that he cares about me, and him telling me, time and time again, that he doesn't even want to be my friend.

I shut my eyes and make myself breathe.

"At the top of the hour," comes the AI broadcaster's voice, "our main story is the attack on Callum Graves and his fiancée, Ripley Hart, as they surveyed the ravaged Alaskan coastline in search of the last wild polar bear on the planet, Marcy."

There are shots of us, and I watch myself lean against him. My hair gets in my face, and I push it away. This was the moment I was telling him about *The Lord of the Rings.* I was so self-conscious about talking too much that I didn't really look at Callum. But now I can see him, eyes dancing as he watches me ramble.

I step closer to the screen, entranced by him. By how he looks at me.

He reaches up, pushing my hair behind my ear. I didn't even realize he did that—I must have been talking about Weathertop or something and was too lost in the story to notice.

But the way he looks at me—how did I not notice?

"The two lovebirds were seen holding each other as they watched the hopeful scene of our beautiful and brave Marcy, no doubt talking about how future policy changes could save our wildlife. With President Graves expected to announce massive environmental initiatives at the Union Conference next week, there's no doubt much for the couple to discuss—"

The camera zooms in on my face, just as Callum and I nearly kissed, and from this angle it looks like our lips are meeting, and on screen my eyes are fluttering closed as if in ecstasy. If Callum looks lovesick, I look terminal.

I hit the button on the table next to the bed, letting the screen go dark.

Propaganda princess, Hux's voice echoes in my ear.

I fall into the bed and stare at the ceiling and try to ignore how my fingers keep flexing, trying to rid themselves of the electric-like buzzing that's been humming under my skin since my skin touched his.

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Chapter 15

I don’t know if there’s a good time to find out you’re claustrophobic, but there’s definitely a bad time. And it’s right now, as I’m about to be loaded into a submarine in front of a wall of cameras.

We were up before dawn again. I thought maybe the PR team would give us a breather after our literal assassination attempt, but it seems that the Union Conference waits for no one. Kaleb and his team primped and prodded me while I was still blinking sleep from my eyes, chugging down a coffee that was shoved into my hands by an unknown force. Then we were in a hovercopter, dropping down onto the cement face of a helipad that rests on top of a research rig off the coast of Vermont.

It’s not until I’m leaning against the rusted orange metal bars, frigid air whipping against my navy windbreaker, that I fully realize what we’re doing. Below us, riggers and engineers prep a giant metal tube, its back just barely cresting the blue-gray water.

A submarine.

“I’ve actually never seen Manhattan,” Callum says from behind me, and I jump, startled. He laughs, holding his hands up, both of which hold more coffee. “Sorry,” he murmurs.

My whole body relaxes once my brain realizes that it’s him. My Callum, in yet another perfect outfit, his shiny golden button on his chest. Even though there are dark circles under his eyes, a puffiness even his own glam team can’t entirely hide, there’s an openness to his smile that could never be anything less than breathtaking.

“You scared me,” I say as he joins me at the metal railing. Engines hum and the ocean crashes; I feel a strange safety in knowing that no

microphone is going to be able to hear us.

“Why are you jumpy, Ripley? Something happen?” Callum jokes, holding the coffee out to me. The hot cardboard feels good on my frozen fingers, and I sigh out a humorless laugh as I look up at him.

“Did you sleep at all?”

I tell myself the cameras might be watching as I reach up and brush his hair off his forehead, but I know I don’t really care about that.

Callum closes his eyes and leans into my touch, a low hum on his lips. I trace my fingers down his cheekbone, and he grabs my hand with his and presses my palm over his mouth.

I shiver at the kiss.

Three days. I should use this time to talk to him—who knows how much uninterrupted time I’m going to have. But there’s something so peaceful and real about the way his eyelids flutter as he pulls my hand back. It’s like there’s a spell on us, and I’m selfish enough to not want to break it.

“Not really. You didn’t either, I know,” he murmurs, releasing my hand and thrusting his chin at the coffee, motioning for me to drink.

I take a sip to stall. He can’t possibly know about my meeting last night, right? The drink is hot and sweet, and I’m hoping the caffeine and sugar will perk me up as I shift gears to his previous comment. “Wait. Manhattan?”

It all comes together as I look down.

Manhattan has been underwater for fifty years. The only way to access it is—

“So that’s our submarine,” I say out loud.

“Yup,” Callum says, letting the *p* pop on the word.

“We almost died yesterday,” I laugh, half joking. He smiles, and it slowly gives way to a chuckle. I’m feeling exhausted and a bit manic, so I lean closer to him. “They think the best thing to do for our PTSD is to shove us into an oceanic death tube?”

Callum snorts deliriously as he swigs his coffee. “Now, now, Ripley. PTSD can only be diagnosed after six months. We don’t have PTSD. We still have what is clinically referred to as *shock*.”

The wind changes direction, and it’s so sharp I almost lose my coffee over the railing. I redouble my grip as Callum launches his hand out to help me. His concern and his touch warm me more than a drink ever could. That can’t be faked. It’s an instinct—no thought, just feelings.

He *has* to feel the same way about me. The entire world depends on it.

"You're a doctor now?" I mumble out.

"No, but I heard about it on my DopaMine feed this morning."

I stop, reality slipping over my shoulders like a sopping wet blanket. "They were talking about *us* on your DopaMine feed this morning," I correct.

Callum gives a curt nod. Below us, the submarine crew flutters around to prep for our journey, small as ants. In my peripheral vision, I can see Callum watching me.

Finally, he sighs. "If you don't want to do this, I'll tell them no."

I stare down at the frothing water. I've heard stories of Manhattan. There are still some pictures of it when Alba shows results of "cityscape" and "skyscraper."

Just a couple of days ago, I was excited at the thought of getting a glimpse of the sky. No matter how I wound up in this situation . . . I will never get the chance to see Manhattan again.

"'It's a dangerous business,'" I murmur nervously. "'Going out of your door.'"

Behind us, one of the handlers calls to Callum. It's time to go.

"Did you read that in one of your books?"

I kill the rest of my coffee, and Callum does the same. "I must have."

I toss my cup in the trash and offer Callum a thin smile. "Time to be brave."

"Bravery is bullshit," I whisper, and Callum tightens his grip on my hand.

We've been underwater for fifteen minutes, and every creak and groan of the hull fills me with adrenaline. Whenever I think we're deep enough, surely, we dip even farther down. The light above grows dim, and it feels like a door closing over my head. I step closer to the glass and look down. There's nothing but blackness.

On the metaphoric bright side, the submarine is much bigger than I thought, and much fancier than I ever expected. There's a massive viewing portal on both sides—a half circle of glass twenty feet in diameter, with a blue velvet sofa situated around the base. There are even bedrooms and conference rooms along the edge of the hull. A full crew works the controls from the starboard side, moving levers and pushing buttons situated on a

chrome baseboard. They keep up a running chatter, voices low, but it's like another language to me.

In addition to the crew, four camera-wielding online personalities were permitted to join us, as well as a full security detail.

Which, unfortunately, includes Hux. I would have recognized him from the tension in his black-clad body alone, but there's also the huge scab on his face that's a dead giveaway.

I can feel his gaze boring into the back of my head as I stand in front of the glass with Callum, sending my heart fluttering like a hummingbird. Perhaps the coffee was a mistake.

I step closer to our private window as the press loiters on the other end of the sub. Callum interlaces our fingers and drapes them on my hip, holding me close. In a moment, he's steadied my heart rate.

"How was the meeting with your father?" I ask quietly.

Callum shakes his head. "How are you?" he asks, thumb strumming along the back of my hand. His finger brushes my hip, and I flinch away from the fireworks against my skin. As our eyes meet, his thumb moves to my ring, spinning it gently against my knuckle.

"You saved my life," he breathes into my hair. "You saved both of us."

Outside, I see the first hint of what we're looking for: a crumbling highway. It's cracked in half, draped in seaweed and barnacles. Above, I recognize the shape and scrawl of an exit sign, but the white lettering is too rusted out to parse.

"Surely your dad is rethinking things, right?" I whisper back. "Now that his son was almost killed?"

Callum sighs. "The opposite, actually. He's more determined not to let the terrorists win. *We must be onto something if they're resorting to this kind of violence*." Callum does such a good impression of his father that it makes my skin itchy.

I glance over my shoulder. Hux tosses something in the air as he sits on a stool alongside the other guards, and I curse under my breath as I recognize the poker chip.

He's screwing with me.

But I don't have time to screw around. I've got three days. Biting my lip, I focus on keeping my voice light and convincing, barely pleading: "People are scared, Callum. Your father has been pushing the limits of his presidency for a while. Signing laws without Congressional approval?

Dismissing the Supreme Court? Gerrymandering the Senate race? He's making people feel powerless, so they're taking power where they can. If they're reacting this way based on what he has done, what are they going to do when he announces that he's taking away their vote, forever?"

Callum tightens his grip on my hand. "Nothing is going to happen to you, Ripley. I won't let it."

I pull on his arm, pivoting him to face me. "I don't care about me," I say, shocked by how true the words are. "I don't want you to be in danger. And, truthfully, I don't want the country to have a dictator. It's wrong, Callum."

It's a risk whispering this to him out here, but I have to try. Suddenly it all feels so flimsy. I can't believe I thought that I could fix this with my words.

As I look up at his face—I realize he's the third option. Not Lyceum, who lied to me, or the Machs, who want to kill me. Callum is the only person who hasn't lied to me. The one person I can trust to follow his moral compass, who wants to fight for what's good but in a way that's good, that's right, that's legal. And he's the one person I believe can actually do it.

I blink hard, hoping I can hide the rising tears in my eyes, but it's no use. Callum's expression collapses at the sight. A hand wraps around my shoulders, pulling me into his broad chest and sheltering me as he glances behind us. There are two cameras pointed at us and three in selfie mode, using us as the backdrop.

Callum narrows his eyes, then seems to make a decision.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

I nod, too choked up to risk talking. He nods, sharply, and in a moment I see all the power and resoluteness of his father. Before I can react, he grabs my hand again, this time pulling me to one of the doors that lead to the private rooms.

"I've got a plan, okay?" he murmurs. As I follow, the entirety of our security detail snaps to attention. Hux leaps off the stool, nearly dropping the poker chip. He narrows his eyes at me as he fumbles it into a pocket.

Of course we walk over to him. Of course he's the one who has to open the door for us. I keep my expression cool as Hux ushers me inside a bedroom, complete with a wide king bed covered in a blue silk comforter. The entire wall to the outside is glass, a full panorama into the floodlights of our submarine, and suddenly I can breathe again.

I suck in air, grateful for the way my lungs seem to unzip, and roll my head back to dissipate the tension. Immediately, I freeze in shock. The ceiling is made of glass. From here, I can just make out the surface far above our heads, a rippling, foaming sky that reaches down to us with light fingers.

The cameras edge forward, sensing a development, but Hux positions himself in the open doorway and holds his hands up.

“Ripley needs a minute,” Callum says.

Hux shuts the door against the onslaught of camera flashes. “What’s going on?” he asks me. Only me.

Callum looks at Hux. I can’t see Callum’s expression, but I know him well enough to know it’s probably a winning smile, meant to disarm any concern. “Just a little claustrophobia, that’s all. She needs to be off camera for a minute,” Callum says coolly.

Of course Hux doesn’t believe that for a second. Despite telling myself that I’m glad about what I did to his face, I flinch at the way he twists, glaring at me over Callum’s shoulder. His eyes slowly slip over every inch of me, from toes to crown, like he’s checking me for injuries. This silent assessment complete, he turns back to Callum, working his jaw as he turns his piercing green eyes on my . . . my fiancé. Callum’s tall—easily over six feet—but he’s evenly matched with Hux.

“As head of security,” Hux says, his voice low like a threat, “I would like to have a moment to examine Ms. Hart.”

Callum shifts, and I can see a tension gathering in his shoulders. “That’s not going to happen,” Callum says, the levity going from his voice as he drops to a serious monotone. Before, he sounded like an AI character on DopaMine. Now he sounds like his father.

For a moment, I wonder if I’m going to have to break them up and inch forward, dreading it, but I stop as Hux casts one more look over Callum’s shoulder. Instead, I let myself fall back onto the bed. It’s softer than I thought and bounces under me.

Again, Hux’s eyes seem to miss nothing, not the twist in my lips as I nervously gnaw at the inside of my cheek; not the way I have my hands up to my collarbones, self-soothing.

“You can have five minutes,” Hux snaps. “But after that, I’ll be running a full diagnostic on her. Ms. Hart is my responsibility.”

The idea of Hux hooking me up to a tablet for a medical scan is so laughable and completely out of line that I fight the urge to flip him a very un-princess-like gesture.

But at least Callum steps back, not breaking eye contact before slamming the door in Hux's face. It shuts with a loud clang.

In a moment, though, all the fight goes out of him as he stalks over to the bed and kneels in front of me, his blue eyes reflecting the light of the ocean around us. I've imagined that look in his eyes, written it a thousand times, but somehow it makes my throat tighten with emotion to see him here, now, protecting me. My Callum.

"What is it?" he asks. "I mean, besides the obvious. There are no cameras in here. No mics. We're safe. Tell me what's wrong."

"You mean aside from the assassination attempt?" I try to joke. Unbidden, a tear sneaks out over my bottom lash line and streaks down my face. Callum catches it with his thumb, smoothing the dampness away across my cheek.

"Sure. That, but there's something else going on. I know it."

"Everything is so messed up," I whisper. An entire ocean around us—skyscrapers are clipping by the windows, sharks looping around lightning poles—but I'm lost in his eyes. "When did it all get messed up?"

Callum stares up at me, shaking his head. "You don't know?"

I narrow my eyes at him, confused, and Callum moves to sit next to me on the bed. "I know the date. November twenty-third. Eight years ago. The day I saw you last. That's when it got messed up."

My heart seems to stop in my chest.

> And Saffron searched the sky every night, hoping to see the telltale flicker of Orion's ship on the horizon. But nothing but blackness ever greeted her.

"I knew that was my answer, but I didn't know it was yours," I whisper. It's too real. I'm getting too real now. I need to stay on mission. Three days to convince Callum to turn on his father. Three days to prove to everyone that there is still something worth redeeming in the Graves family. Three days to stop the world from ending.

But somehow, this feels more important.

Callum pivots on the bed, and the mattress dips. I fall closer to him. It feels as natural as gravity.

“I haven’t had one moment where I feel like myself since I left you,” he says. “I have felt so alone since that night.” A green torch seems to jump by outside the window as we pass the Statue of Liberty, but I can’t pull my eyes away from his face. His eyes glitter, and my own face dampens with a wave of fresh tears.

“Me too. But Callum . . . it will only get worse if your father wins this vote. If the Senate extends his term. And I’m not talking about it being dangerous for you, or for me. It will be worse for everyone.”

Callum puts his hands on my cheeks. “Maybe not, Ripley. Listen. He was different last night, okay? I’ve never seen him like that. I almost died, and it shook him. He was softer, somehow. He listened to me. I even brought up the idea of restarting libraries—”

My gaze shoots up at the mention of libraries. He doesn’t know. He can’t know, I remind myself.

“—and he agreed that it’s worth talking about. He’s made some terrible decisions. But we all make mistakes. And if I can sway him to do good? With that kind of power . . . we could change things.”

Flashes of the old Arthur Graves run through my mind. Tightening a screw on my skateboard in the indoor rink. Singing in the kitchen while folding enchiladas.

But I shake my head. I can believe in Callum, but I can’t believe in his father. No one made him institute fertility testing on teenagers. No one made him ban books. No one made him destroy my parents’ lives.

“Every tyrant has used this same argument,” I whisper. “Even if he promises that he has a plan to end the war and save the planet . . . we can’t give him unlimited power. We just can’t.”

Callum looks down. “You think all this talk about repairing things is for show? I hope it’s not. But if he wins, and it is . . . I’ll leave.”

I look up, shocked. “Leave? To where, Callum?”

Callum shrugs, his eyes glistening. “Anywhere.”

“You’d leave all this?” I ask, gesturing around. We’re arcing around the end of the island, poised against art deco facades, as a stately bridge looms ahead, suspension cables reflecting the submarine’s lights.

And Callum is a fixed point, even more enduring than a bridge or a skyscraper. He rests his palms on the sides of my face. “Yes,” he says earnestly. “We’ll leave. You and me. I promised I’d keep you safe. I’d do the right thing, Ripley. I always do.”

“Your dad—he’d never stop hunting us. We’d never be safe.”

Callum shrugs, a wild look in his eyes. His hand drops over his father’s campaign pin on his chest, covering it like his dad can hear us through the metal dome. “I’d keep you safe. I can run faster than my father could find us. And then we’d be alone, for real.” But he stops, like another thought has pulled his attention. “I believe in my father, Ripley. But when I said I’d protect you, I meant it. Even from him. I’d do anything.”

It feels like a dangerous thing to say. A dangerous thing to think. For half a second, I wonder if Callum knows about the Machs. About their plan—the figurative knife to my throat.

“What are you talking about?”

Callum runs his teeth over his bottom lip, like he’s taking a second to see if he can trust me. “There are people who are trying to expose . . . things,” he whispers carefully.

“People. Things,” I whisper hollowly, because he must know how vague it sounds.

Callum sighs. “You don’t get to this level of politics without getting your hands dirty, Ripley. That goes for anyone.”

Hux’s words echo in my mind: *We can’t kill him. Not until we can expose him. Otherwise, he’s a martyr.*

Callum looks down, and I know the feeling, the fear. Of living a life alone, feeling like you can’t tell anyone the truth, and then regretting the moment you let someone in. My heart aches anew, because that’s been me, until I found him. I open my mouth, trying to find words. But Callum shakes his head and looks up at me again.

“I want to do something good. I don’t know how, but that’s all I want. But I don’t want to do it without you, okay? We’re endgame, Ripley. However our story started, I know how it has to end. It’s always been you. It has to be you.”

I’m clutching at his shirt before I realize it, fighting to swallow, because my heart feels like it might jump out of my chest and explode. An entire sunken city whisks by. The submarine must have deployed drones, because the heart of the city burns with light; outside, I can hear the press oohing and ahhing. It’s like a firework show underwater, but I’m caught in the sparks of my own chest. All I’ve ever wanted is this feeling. I’m not alone. Callum’s sea-blue eyes are locked on my face, and I know, for the first time in my life, that someone really sees me.

Then, his hands move from the sides of my face to the back of my neck. His fingers tangle in the hair at my nape as Callum pulls me in and presses his lips to mine.

His mouth slants, opening, and I close my eyes and give myself to the kiss.

I've been waiting eight years for this kiss. His tongue moves over mine, and I push myself up on my knees to deepen the kiss. He laughs into my mouth, and I swallow the sound. His arms snake around me, holding me to his chest, and I'm glad, because otherwise I might disappear, might fizzle out into nothing but ash and sparks.

Finally, he gasps us apart, holding my jaw to stare down at me, and it's that same look, the one that they said on the DopaMine was the look of a boy in love. But this time, there's no camera. It's just for me.

I've spent half my lifetime writing an ending to our story, but I forgot that Callum was across the country. That he was real. He isn't a character in my head or a daydream to sustain me through long, boring days at school.

He loves me. And it has to be enough, to save the world.

"Ripley," he breathes. "Look."

My arms are still around his neck, my legs on either side of his, as I crane my neck up to see.

The submarine dips, threading between skyscrapers at what used to be street level. The buildings stretch up above us, a residual haunting of what used to be. What may have been silver and mirrored windows have transformed, the sleekness of the city turned into rock and rust and colored glass. Schools of brightly colored fish dart though the hollowed-out skeletons of old cabs, their taxi lights cracked and covered in barnacles.

"Wow," Callum says, flopping back on the bed. I fall with him, and we both turn on our backs and watch the city stretch above us. His fingers intertwine in mine, and I feel a deep peace that I've never felt before in my life.

I don't need to be where I don't fit, where I'm not wanted. Lyceum, home, even Nef. I was too much, too loud, too everything.

Hux mocked me for my emotions, but I cried and Callum held me, and kissed me, and now he's tracing gentle lines, white-hot, up and down my arms until I shiver.

I don't need anything else.

I just need to be here. With him.

This is how the story was supposed to go. I couldn’t have written it better myself.

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Chapter 16

The White House is beautiful at night, and I never thought I would think that. Everything glistens in the early spring heat; crickets and bubbling fountains fill the silence as Callum walks me back to my room.

We haven't broken the interlace of our fingers since we kissed. How was I content to walk around as one person? There's a calming completeness about his hand holding mine; I feel delirious at the feel of his thumb rubbing against my knuckle, spinning the massive diamond as we cut through the courtyard.

And for now, it's just us. The press secretary has captured the attention of the cameras and now that we're back on White House grounds, the security team seems satisfied that we're safe. Even Hux couldn't argue with that, even though I could tell he wanted to.

So we're alone, the two of us, with a sort of secret hope that we'll never be alone ever again.

Callum walks me to my door, pulling my arms around his waist as he leans in to kiss the top of my head. I clasp my hands against his lower back as lift my head, loving how he runs his fingers through my hair. How he bites at his lower lip like he's remembering our kiss. How he stares down at me like I'm the most precious thing he's ever seen.

"So. Today was better," he murmurs, and I nod.

"Today was amazing," I reply. Maybe when I wrote this scene, I would have written a pithy retort, let myself be a little silly or snarky. But in real life, there's no room for that. I am glitter in a snow globe; I'm a shimmering pink cloud of happy.

“Get some sleep. Tomorrow we have another outing,” he says, pulling back to look at me properly as he brushes the hair from my face, like he’s memorizing it.

“What is it?”

His expression tightens a bit, and I stand up straighter. “Hurricane Zelda,” he says. “They’re downgrading it, and the press thinks it’ll be a smart photo opportunity, kind of like your debut into society. I don’t love it. It’s dangerous, and this time it’s not just us. We’ll be on the *Demeter*.”

The name rings a bell. “Isn’t that one of the—”

“—weather-hunter superyachts owned by the Bellaccimi sisters? Yeah. They call them hurricane parties.”

My stomach twists at the title. “Do you think the levees are going to hold?”

Callum looks away.

“And did they finish evacuating? I heard that it’s been hard with the fuel shortages—”

“Where did you hear that?” Callum asks. There’s no violence in it, only curiosity.

I flush. “My DopaMine algorithm must skew toward social justice,” I lie. I’m not ready to tell him about the server room. Not yet. Just like Callum said, we have to wait until the right time to do the right thing.

Right?

Callum sighs. “You’re so perfect. Have I told you that today?” He leans in for a kiss but I gently rebuff him, holding him at arm’s length with a light palm on his chest.

“Still,” I push, worrying my lip, “I don’t see how hanging out at a party like that will be good for the Girl Next Door angle. Disaster tourism isn’t exactly relatable.”

Callum nods. “I know. I know. But it’s the only vessel that’s been tested and cleared to get that close to an active hurricane. If we want to show the world what’s happening, we have to see it. The Bellaccimi sisters are letting us do that.”

I feel my hackles lower, just a little. He’s right. We have to use what we can to show the world the devastation that the administration would hide from the country otherwise. It’s too easy to pretend this stuff isn’t happening, especially with handpicked feel-good stories and DopaMine streams offering a way *out* of the depressing reality we’re in.

“Okay,” I whisper, going up on my tiptoes. Callum grins as he leans down, knowing what I’m after. He lifts me, and my legs wrap around his waist as he deepens the kiss.

We’re endgame.

He spins me around, and I squeal as I pull myself tighter to him.

After a few moments, he eases back and lowers me to my feet. I grab the handle of my French doors with one hand, and Callum lifts the other to his lips, kissing me just over the band of my engagement ring. Our engagement ring.

“Good night, Ripley,” he whispers against my skin.

I bite my lip, watching him leave. He walks backward, like he can’t bear to lose sight of me. When he reaches the corner, he blows me a kiss, offers me a dazzling smile, and, with a little spin, jogs down the path.

I sigh, pulling open my door and stepping into the dark quiet of my room.

“So,” comes a voice, and I jump. “How’s the ‘saving the world by the power of rhetoric and truth’ going?”

The light next to my bed clicks on, revealing Hux lounging on my bed, boots kicked up and ankles interlocked on the cream coverlet. “Your hair is a little . . .” He makes a motion for *messy*, and I know he’s making fun of the kiss he just witnessed through the windows that peer out onto the courtyard. “Don’t worry,” he adds. “I killed the cameras.”

He says it like it’s so easy. Because I suppose everything is easy to him. I fold my arms over my chest and cross the room, keeping my eyes on him. “Better than your *kill everyone* plan, I promise you that,” I spit, dropping my bag into the chair. He lifts something, and it takes me a second to realize it’s a book.

I lunge at him, reaching to snatch it. *Dracula.*

“Where did you find this?” I hiss.

“Oh, this?” he asks innocently, peering at the cover. Then he drops the smug act, tossing the tome at me. “It was in a shipment that arrived today. Hidden in a box of ridiculously sugary cereal, which I guess everyone in Lyceum knows is something only you would eat.”

I hold the book to my chest. “Count Chocula? Where is it??”

Hux gives me a flat stare. “Craving a late-night sweet treat?” He rolls his eyes. “That was a stupid thing to do, Ripley, given that the other books were taken, and we still don’t know who did it.”

“So you threw the cereal out is what you’re telling me.”

When Hux doesn’t rise to the bait, I look down at the book, gripping the edges like a lifeline. I’m still pissed at Lyceum, but I can’t deny that they know what I need right now. “This is all stupid. Everything we’re doing is risky.” I lift the book. “They know we need to remember what matters.”

“Vampires?” Hux asks flatly.

“You know what *Dracula* is about?”

Hux crosses his feet and clasps his hands behind his head. “You aren’t the only one who reads, Ripley. I just think that there are things more important than books.”

“I’m not saying that. But I am saying that stories . . .” I stop, wondering why I’m still talking. He doesn’t care. He’ll probably make fun of me. I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Stories what?” he asks, and I look at him, wondering if he’s being cruel, accumulating ammo to throw back in my face during our next argument. But there’s no teasing to his voice.

“Stories have kept me alive,” I admit. “They make me brave when I’m scared and help me remember how good humanity can be. That I’m not . . . alone. Even if this is about vampires, it’s not really about vampires. It’s about life and right and wrong and people making mistakes and, sometimes, happy endings. I need that, especially when it’s easy to only see the bad stuff we can do.”

I tuck the book away and walk to the vanity, already wishing I could take it back. Oversharing makes me feel like I’m covered in ants, and I hitch up my shoulders, waiting for him to make fun of me for getting all emotional over *vampires*.

Instead, Hux is silent. As I go about my nighttime routine, removing earrings, kicking off my shoes, even trying to smooth my hair back, Hux only watches, slowly sitting up, his feet reaching the ground.

Part of me wonders if he’ll stay there all night, and to test it, I reach for the strap of my dress, knocking it from my shoulder.

He clears his throat and I freeze.

“What happened on the sub?” he asks quietly, and I shoot him a look as I unclasp my necklace instead. We’re back to where we’re comfortable, not friends, not enemies, but something like allies.

“None of your business.”

Hux stands, then. “You have two days before I order the death of the president and basically start a civil war. It’s my business.”

When I ignore him, turning to the mirror, he makes his way to stand behind me, meeting my eyes in the mirror. I glare at him as I lower my necklace, letting it clatter softly on the vanity.

"Ripley," he says, and I feel myself tense at that. I prepare myself for the barbs, for the restatement of our deadline. "Are you okay?" he asks gently.

And I feel myself still. I didn't prepare myself for *soft*. It doesn't sound right coming from him. My eyes fly up to meet his in the glass, and I take in the tight expression on his face. His jaw ticks as he looks at me, and I can't help but feel like he's being sincere. I wait a second like I'm expecting a punchline. With Hux, it feels like I'm always waiting for the punchline.

How am I? I press a hand to my chest, like I can still feel the lightness there buoying me from my day with Callum. The way he unlocked something in me. I've never felt this free and open and—myself. Even pretending to be his fiancée, for the first time I can be honest, real Ripley. I'm not alone.

"Yeah," I murmur. "I'm . . . better than I have been in a long time, really."

That seems to be the answer he needed. He steps back, walking toward the hallway door. I don't owe him anything. I know that. We're not *friends.* But I know, deep down, he's scared. He built a life where he couldn't trust anyone, where the entire world is on his shoulders.

He's wrong. He's not alone.

"It's going to be okay," I say out loud. I can see him go still across the room as I stare into the glass.

"Did Callum agree to renounce his father? Is he going to come out and expose what the Union Conference is really about? Because you're down to"—he consults his watch—"fifty hours."

A small panic bites up the back of my throat. Fifty hours, and the Machs take over. I don't want President Graves to be elected for life. But I also don't want him dead.

I turn, leaning back against the vanity as I stare Hux down. "No, he didn't agree to that. But there's more at play here than you think."

Hux eyes me, his eyebrow lifting. "Like what?"

Maybe telling him what Callum told me will buy us time. "He hinted that there are things that might come out. Bad things."

Hux takes a measured step closer. "What kind of bad things?"

“I didn’t find out. But give me a chance to. Like you said: A ruined Graves is more useful than a dead one, right?”

Hux makes a show of looking down at his watch. From this angle, I can clearly see the mark on his face where I hit him—a purplish bruise blooms angrily under the scruff on his jaw. “Yes. Incriminating evidence? Great. And if you can figure it out . . . I’ll pivot. But in the meantime, the agreement still stands. Fifty hours.”

I push off the desk and move closer to him. “I’m working on it. And I’m close. I just told you—why are you being such a pain in the ass? Where’s the *Thank you, Ripley. This lead sounds so much better for the world, for democracy, and the state of my rapidly deteriorating soul.*”

His eyes narrow as he cocks his head, a smile pulling at the corner of his lips. I hate when he does this—when it’s like my anger amuses him.

I know I regretted the last time I slapped him. But it’s hard to remember why in moments like this.

“Should I make a list?” he retorts. “Once he’s elected, dirt won’t matter. So *I’m* not being a pain in the ass, the rapidly approaching death of the democracy is. I just told you. You seem to have Callum wrapped around your finger. So . . . bat your eyelashes at him and find out what he has.”

“*Bat my eyelashes?*” I start, the rant ready on my tongue, but the breath catches in my throat when Hux closes the gap between us, leveling his chin at me in challenge as we stand toe-to-toe. The slight tang of his sweat mixes with the pop of mint gum he was chewing earlier, and it sparks a magnetic pull, dragging me farther toward him.

What is wrong with me? I can still feel Callum’s lips on my knuckles. I shouldn’t be shivering at the thought of touching Hux again.

At the thought of kissing him again.

At the memory of him shoving me against a wall, his body flush with mine.

He’s going to kill someone, I remind myself. *He’s going to kill Callum’s father. Snap out of it.*

“Did you forget the rest of your list?” I ask, embarrassed at how breathless I sound.

“Second,” he snaps, his voice barely a growl. “That soul you mention?” Now he lowers his face to mine, trying to catch the gaze I’ve fixed stubbornly on his collarbone. “It’s low on the list of priorities.”

Don’t look up at him. Don’t look up.

But sometimes, you just have to do it for the plot. Although, at this point, I'm fairly certain I've lost that.

Because I look up.

The green in his eyes seems darker in this light.

His eyes bounce between mine, and I know it's my turn to say something. Anything.

"What if *I* care about your soul?" I ask, and the words catch in my throat, so sharp they burn.

But Hux only chuckles, his tongue slipping out to run over his bottom lip.

The air between us turns charged. I think if I took a step, it'd shock me. I'm scared to move.

As he stares at me, though, that smirk fades into an expression I can't quite place, his eyes searching mine frantically. His hand flexes at his side, and I wonder if it's because he's stopping himself from touching me.

Then the mask slips back into place. It's so subtle I'd miss it if I blinked, but I'd know that shit-eating grin anywhere, that flintiness to his eyes. The promise that he doesn't care, and nothing can hurt him, even me. Although the split in his lip says otherwise.

"Don't worry about my soul, Ripley Hart. I'd hate to see you disappointed."

Before I can say another word, his wrist beeps. He looks at the watch, his face freezing and then darkening. All hints of playfulness are gone as he reaches for the remote on the end of the bed and clicks on the wall of screens.

"What are you doing? I need to get ready for bed—"

Hux rapidly scrolls my DopaMine—apparently our feeds are different, or whoever's feeding him intel is deep into the raw footage—because we pass a few snippets of *Broken Harts*, my cheeks burning at the green-eyed protagonist; a video of a puppy gamboling on a trampoline that is definitely AI-generated; and then finally—

Callum and I kiss in slow motion as the Brooklyn Bridge in all its watery glory plays out behind us, drone lights exploding like fireworks.

My stomach drops deeper than the bottom of the ocean as Hux makes a retching noise in the back of his throat. I reach out, leaning on the vanity. My knees are as good as jelly.

The kiss.

There were cameras?

But it’s not a question, because Hux and I are watching the proof in 4K.

Panic races up my back as the next thought barrels into me. *Did they hear what we talked about?* If so, I’m about to be arrested for treason.

Hux must read the look on my face, because he lifts the remote and clicks *mute*. The feed continues to play—not looping, but an unnaturally long video of my make-out session with the president’s son.

“It was a visual-only feed,” he says, as if reading my thoughts. “They didn’t hear anything. You wouldn’t be here if they had.”

I blink, my mind spinning. “He said there were no cameras.” I grasp for answers. Foolish. Hadn’t Becka warned me, and Callum himself told me? There are *always* cameras. The angle suggests it was built into the wall above the bed. I suddenly feel so violated that I don’t know if I want to scream or throw up.

“Was this you?” I bite out.

“Me?” he asks, deathly still.

“Did you put a camera in the room?” I swallow against the burn in my throat. “You opened the door, so don’t lie to me. Did you lead us into that particular room because you had set up cameras and you wanted this footage—”

“I didn’t, Ripley,” he answers plainly. There’s no hint of teasing as he stares darkly at the screen. “I wouldn’t.”

“Then why show me this?” I bark out, hating how frantic I sound. “To humiliate me?”

Hux raises his eyebrows. “Becka alerted me to it. The president is ordering a security sweep. This is a breach. I thought . . .” He stops, searching for the right words. “I thought you’d want to know. I thought you deserved to know.”

I look back to the screen and watch as Callum’s hands drag down my back. Someone, using the green screen features, appears over the footage, fanning themselves, jaw dropped open dramatically. I’m mortified. I slip down onto the end of the bed.

I thought the worst thing that would happen in this fake-dating scenario would be helping a bad man become president for life. And that still might be the worst. But this *feels* worse.

I’m glad I know. Hux is right. The only worse thing would be being surprised by this as we head to the yacht tomorrow morning.

Frantically, I swipe up in my feed. But since I've spent so long on this video, the algorithm thinks it's hooked me. Callum and I make out with a filter so it looks like it's raining hearts. Callum and I make out as someone green-screens themselves in as a third. Callum and I make out as someone uses AI to remove my shirt—

Hux fumbles for the remote, swearing, but it only turns on the volume as I land on a video of one of the influencers I recognize.

"Okay, chat, I'm opening a poll. Because that was way too hot. How many months do you think we'll have to wait before this Girl Next Door has a bun in her oven?"

I blanch, my hand flying to my abdomen. "What the *hell*?"

Finally, Hux finds the right button and the TV goes dark, filling the room with shadow and an eerie quiet. I press a hand over my mouth, unsure if I'm holding in angry words, angry tears, or vomit. "Get out, Hux," I whisper.

He's still frozen with the remote aimed at the screens, so I walk over and bodily shove him toward the door.

Hux catches himself on the jamb. "Stop, Ripley. Let me check and make sure there aren't more cameras in here. I made sure that nothing was transmitting, but that was true on the sub."

I stop pushing him, new panic seizing me. The idea of being filmed without knowing makes me feel like tearing off my own skin.

At Hux's panicked expression, though, a cold laugh sneaks out of me. "Oh, I see. I'm already too far gone. But you? Are you worried about your secret identity, Huxley Finn? Your reputation as the perfect little general? Because if you were the one to out the Machs—"

"I NEVER WANTED YOU IN THIS!" Hux yells, his face wild, and I startle backward. He's not being careful. Anyone could hear him. "I wanted you out of this," he continues, his voice a growl. "I *tried* to get you out of this. You've been a pain in *my* ass since you got dragged into this and inserted yourself into Prince Charming's life. My goal was simple. My target was clear. And now? It's not. Now? I'm dealing with a deep-sea make-out scandal when there are people *dying* on the eastern front. So let me be clear: I want to check for cameras in this room because, believe it or not, if anyone filmed you in this bedroom without your consent, I'd kill them with my bare hands and not for one precious second worry about my soul."

His body vibrates with rage as he gets closer to me, but I don't step back.

“Get out, Hux,” I find myself repeating. “I’ll check myself.” It’s foolhardy—I don’t even know what I’d be looking for. But I know I can’t have him here anymore.

He’s halfway gone, after all. I just have to get him across the doorway. I thrust a hand into his chest, but he grabs it before I make contact. I use the other, and he snares that one too. Rage rushes through me. Stupid, emotional, powerless Ripley. The president’s propaganda princess. The nation’s breeding vessel. An object of lust to be undressed on a million screens. Always someone else’s, never her own.

Hux can hold me as tight as he wants, but I won’t stop fighting. I pivot, using a move I know well from training to leverage his own weight against him. He goes down like a stone, but he’s quick—he uses his momentum, rolling and taking me with him. We fall to the floor in a tangle of limbs, a tumble of curses, unsure who’s screaming what. I shift, pulling myself on top of him, straddling him and using my hips to thrust him into the carpet.

He tries to shove himself up, fumbling against my thigh for a handhold, but I slip the knife from his holster and spin it expertly in one hand. There’s a moment, where the dread catches in his eyes, before I’m pressing it to his throat. With that, Hux goes still. And then he bares his neck, leaning back on his elbows, his eyes burning into mine.

“One question,” he says, swallowing. The motion of his throat juts the knife up, and I hear it nick against his scruff.

“I don’t think you’re in the position to be asking questions.”

“I was just wondering . . . for the fans at home . . . do you recommend this brand of blade for a new bride to use on her nemesis?” he asks, his voice careful.

I let out a huff, the tension still thick but lessened slightly at the joke. At least Hux gets it; he gives me a thin smile, splayed out under me, and I find myself withdrawing the blade.

“Any ol’ knife will do,” I retort as he massages his throat. “All that matters is the nemesis is completely at that new bride’s mercy.”

Hux moves so fast I don’t see his hands, only feel them on my shoulders as he leverages me around. In his hands, despite the years of training and the pounds of muscle, I feel like a rag doll. When the world settles, I’m caught against the doorframe, Hux’s knee between my legs, pinning me up in the air as his hands press my spine into the wood.

“Looks like our princess needs more training,” he coos.

But with his hands busy holding me up, I still have the knife. With a grunt, I press down. A thin line of blood pools against his neck.

Why am I looking at his lips now? Why do I watch, with my heart in my throat, as his tongue darts out to moisten his mouth?

I drop the knife, and Hux loosens his grip until I slide down to the floor with a cough.

Then, I remember myself. I scramble into the bathroom, slamming the door. For good measure, I throw the lock and lean against it.

My whole body is buzzing.

Why would he do that? It would make sense that he's trying to undercut my relationship with Callum. Or throw me off my footing. Or . . .

I turn around, fingers grasping for the door handle. I yank the bathroom door open, the yellow light slicing across the blackness and illuminating where I'd left him.

But the room is empty.

I open *Dracula*, ready to disappear into another world. And from between the pages, something buttery yellow falls out into my lap.

The poker chip.

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Chapter 17

The sky is black, the horizon something beyond black. My stomach churns, and not just from the waves, as the speedboat nears the yacht, a stark spot of white and glowing lights in the swath of smokelike ocean. Callum squeezes my hand at the sharp intake of breath I can't hold back. To our left is the remnant of a town. It barely survived the last hurricane, Yelene, that pummeled this area less than a month ago. Remnants of houses stick out of the ground like zombies half emerging from the grave, doors and windows blank and open like broken jaws and wide, terrified eyes. Every coastal city expects a certain level of storm, but Yelene surpassed everyone's expectations. And Zelda makes landfall in less than an hour.

Callum looks at the city, and he must be thinking the same thing I am, because his hand finds my waist.

He was at my door in the morning, arms wrapping around me. *I'm so sorry. That was all my fault. I should have been more careful*, he'd said. He'd been up almost all night in a cabinet meeting about the security breach. His eyes were, and still are, ringed with purple and red. And although it was clear we'd both had shitty nights, for the first time since I'd said good night to him, I felt my muscles relax.

Now I look back at him. The speed of the boat pushes his golden hair off his forehead. He looks up at me—it's too loud to even try to talk—and kisses my hand.

The yacht only seems to grow as we approach, from a speck to a mammoth mass that could be its own island. I knew it would be big—I'd seen the unedited footage in the server room—but it still knocks the wind out of me. Five stories of fiberglass and chrome loom up at us out of the

blackness, lit up like a Christmas tree. It makes me want to vomit. I'm the first to board, after climbing an impossibly small ladder built into the belly. As I reach the top, I hear a squeal and look up. Mona Bellaccimi flaps her hands as she teeters toward me, high heels clacking on the teakwood deck.

"Princess Ripley in the flesh oh my gaaaaah!" she caws, and I can't say anything before she's on me, her perfume enveloping my senses like a noxious cloud of rosewater and baby powder.

"Oh, just Ripley is fine," I say as she pulls back and scans my face. "I'm not a princess. This is a democracy, after all."

"Of course," she says conspiratorially, winking at me like we're in on a private joke together. Her false lashes make it look like a real workout, but like the rest of her makeup, they almost look real, like she was born with gigantic spiders on her eyes. Her dark hair is pulled back into a low bun, and she wears a sport vest that barely zips over her ample chest.

She had seemed younger on my tablet screen, or maybe that was all the forced giggling and her constant coterie.

As if summoned, her sisters, Nova and Quinnie, approach. Quinnie has a glass of champagne permanently affixed to her mouth, her diamond rings glittering even in the gloomy light. Nova is the youngest, her blond bob tucked behind her ears. She's dressed most sensibly in jeans and a sweatshirt, though I can tell the small wear and tear on the cuffs over her hands was built into the design.

"Welcome," Nova says, soft pink lips turning up as she holds her arms out, "to the *Demeter*."

"Definitely worth the climb," Callum huffs as he reaches the top of the ladder. I turn to give him a wry smile, but he's beaming at the sisters. "Ladies. Always a pleasure."

Before I can question his sudden warmth, he's pulled into a similar suffocating hug by Mona, and when I hazard a glance back he fakes suffocation, sticking out his tongue, and I have to disguise a laugh as a cough.

Security follows after, and then the camera-wielding B-listers, appearing on the deck in an endless line that nonetheless never seems to crowd the deck. Mona laces her arm in mine, and Quinnie grabs Callum with her free hand, and we're off on a tour before anyone can say a word.

The *Demeter* is less of a yacht and more of a floating city. There's a ballroom, a tennis court, and a pool. But the main feature of the yacht is the

“disaster tourism” part: a glass dome that can encapsulate the entire ship and a rotating axis at the core that always keeps the ship upright, regardless of the external weather.

“Only takes fifteen minutes to secure the dome. And then we could be in a Category Seven and you wouldn’t even spill your espresso,” Mona brags.

Callum’s eyes widen as they find mine. “Seven is child’s play,” Callum says, continuing the full-charm offensive. “Considering you three ladies are tens across the board.”

The sisters titter, pinching at Callum like a flock of crows descending. He offers me a shrug and a smile as they squawk about his perfect suit, pull at the gold button on his lapel, fuss with the tuck of his shirt, even run fingers through his hair.

I chance a look over his shoulder. Becka leads the security detail, looking distinctly bored as she surveys the scene. Behind her, trailing at the back, is Hux. He is wearing the same black beanie he wore in Alaska, and his scruff seems to have grown in more overnight. I do a double take, because he wasn’t on the flight out this morning. How did he get here?

“And here we are!” Mona gushes, motioning out ahead.

I gawk as we pass the third fountain and enter the ballroom, which is full of people. I’ve seen their faces on my tablet before: the CEO of a tech company and his wife; two senators who look like twins but are actually rivals; and a whole gaggle of visitors from a startup company in Switzerland that sells athleisure backpacks of breathable air.

Suddenly Callum goes pale and returns to my side, grabbing my hand and leaning down to whisper, “My father’s here.” I look up and scan the crowd, confused, just as Mona clinks clawlike nails on the edge of her glass. Why is the president at a party in the middle of a hurricane?

“Y’all,” Mona calls, “welcome to the twenty-sixth hurricane bash of the year!”

The full ballroom erupts in applause and cheers, with the odd whoop sounding across the glass dome. I stare up at the grossly high ceiling, the swaying chandelier. It’s a room designed for splendor, to amplify laughter, and it drips with cut glass and gold. Outside, a storm is making landfall, and someone paid to put a chandelier in a weatherproof yacht all so rich people could dance as the poor people die.

“We’ve seen it all this year, *A* through *Z*!” Mona is saying. “And while there are things I know we’d rather not remember—”

The first of the rainbands is battering the outside of the boat, and not even a single cut crystal of the chandelier dances. But outside the broad windows, destruction is descending on our neighbors. The yacht chugs past all of it, dragging us along so that it looks like a stretch of old film rolling in the background.

"—lookin' at you, Babs!" Mona says, to much laughter. "Who could forget her canapé faux pas during Hurricane Celeste?"

Acid burns my throat. I've seen Mona on a tablet screen, so zoomed in that her eye took up every pixel, but this close, it's oppressive. I can smell her, the heat coming off her body, the spittle as she makes another joke while people die outside.

As I step away, Mona pauses, her eyes tracking me. Too late, I wonder if I was staged like a prize cow. Did they guarantee a certain amount of airtime? Proximity to the propaganda princess? Callum, hands resolutely in his pockets, watches me go, but he's distracted by his father's presence, so I can slip to the back of the crowd until I reach the far window. I put a hand to the glass. Just fifteen feet away, the top half of a basketball hoop bobs in the brown water, a pink plastic tricycle's wheel stuck in the rusted metal.

"No other weather-chasing club has ever had the pleasure of completing an entire hurricane season!" Mona enthuses, still excited about their run through the alphabet. "So, as a little treat, we have a friend here to congratulate us: President Graves himself!"

I look up just in time to see President Graves walk down a staircase on the other side of the ballroom. The whole place erupts in applause as he gives them a wave and returns the gesture with big, exaggerated claps, like he is pantomiming praise.

That's how Hux is here. He must have taken the boat with the president.

I don't realize Callum is right behind me until his voice vibrates through my chest. "You okay?" he asks, putting his hands on my hips from behind. I lean back against him. In case anyone's watching, but also to ground myself. As always, Callum is warm and steady. My Callum.

I shake my head in reply. *Not here.* Callum seems to get it, humming and planting a kiss on my hair just as a flash of lightning splits the sky. Like it's just a show, several guests let out appreciative applause; one woman gives a light shriek.

"Shall we go to the observation deck?" Mona suggests, clapping her hands.

Callum meets my gaze with a question, jerking his head, and I nod grimly.

The observation deck is a giant shelflike structure that protrudes from the side of the third deck, and I stop before I step out onto it—it's all glass. Every inch.

"It's safe," Callum says, holding my hand and stepping out in front of me as if to demonstrate its structural integrity. "It's a polymer. They made the newest space station out of it."

I follow, looking down as I put my full weight on the clear surface. It holds, and the fear quiets in the back of my mind, even as the ocean churns below, a gunmetal gray with tips of white foam. The ruined, half-floating coast is even easier to see from here, and I'm transfixed by it enough that I don't even clock that I'm walking farther out onto the deck.

"This is . . ." I start.

Callum squeezes my hand. "I know," he says, his voice low, as we reach the far edge of the deck.

I feel like I need to see it. It's like a beacon, calling to me. *How can you look away?* Hux had asked me in the server room. And now I understand it. I can't thrust my head into the sand and pretend this isn't happening. All around us, the rest of the guests breeze onto the deck, having done this dozens of times before.

"Are we going to get past this garbage anytime soon?" A woman's tinny voice sounds from my left. "It's depressing."

I look at her, wondering if my expression is half as raw as I feel.

When she catches me staring at her, at her fake-looking red hair, at her gaudy necklace that matches her bulbous eyes, she lowers her champagne glass and turns her head. "What?"

"People lived there," I say, my voice sounding strange. "And people are dying there. Maybe right now."

She lets out a guffaw, like she's half amused by me. "I know."

Callum squeezes my hand in his a little tighter. Whatever he's trying to tell me, I ignore it.

"Do you? Do you know that?" I press.

The woman gives me a fake, sweet smile. "Do you know who I am?" she croons.

Callum steps up. "Ms. Beighlor. The owner of MayTech," he says for my benefit, stepping forward and holding his hand out. "I know my father has

been very appreciative of your donations."

The woman shakes Callum's hand, locking her eyes on mine as she does it.

"Ripley and I specifically asked that we see the destruction from the last hurricane. So, if you're put off by our route"—Callum puts a hand on his chest—"you can blame me."

I clench my teeth, looking down at the ocean through the floor. I know Callum is being smart. I know that ripping this woman to shreds with angry words is not the smart move. She has money, which means she has power, and we can use that power. And honestly? It won't change anything. It won't change her mind. It won't bring people back.

But the words I want to say sit in my throat like magma. It hurts to keep them locked up.

I force myself to offer her a smile, however close I can get, but my eyes focus on a dark figure over her shoulder. Hux, standing at the doorway of the observation deck, his hands clasped behind his back. His face is unreadable, but his eyes are fixed on me.

"Apology accepted," Ms. Beighlor says, a saccharine grin spreading over her face as she takes in the sight of Callum. He knows what he's doing. He knows his charm will smooth this over.

Maybe I don't want it smoothed over.

And in that moment, it's almost like Hux can read my mind. A smirk kicks up the side of his lips. I cough, turning to look back out over the scenery as Callum expertly extricates himself from Ms. Beighlor, somehow also managing to get her to commit to another donation before she rejoins Mona on the far side of the deck.

"I'm sorry," Callum says to me as he leads me away, a hand at the base of my spine. "I really hate these people, but they're a necessary evil. I promise you, every dollar she gives us, I'll use to fix this. We can do that. And soon. Just a little bit longer. She thinks I agreed with her? Fine. I'll take her money anyway."

The storm is almost here. I can feel the thunder in my bones, rumbling with discontent.

Somehow, this feels strangely close to lying. And my Callum? He doesn't lie.

The lightning cracks again—closer this time. This round of applause is punctuated with more playful screams.

Nova steps up this time. “Ladies and gentlemen! We’re getting word that the storm has been upgraded. We’re going to need to move to the inner ballroom and prepare for enclosure. When the captain gives the word, we’ll be ready! Mr. President, would you like to lead the way?”

Nova gives President Graves a performative bow, which he playfully returns. It’s strange to see him in this world, in this role. President Graves plays it. Callum plays it. I guess I’m playing it, too, just by being here.

I’ve found myself surprised by how Callum reminds me of his father. For the first time, I’m seeing the president remind me of his son. It’s the same mask.

Just then, a piece of driftwood as big as a car slams into the glass, bouncing off of it with a loud crack. People jump back; one woman drops her glass with a crash.

Something shifts then. Everyone seems to realize that safety, like so many other things, is theater, and the wrath of an angry planet is larger than polymers and even megayachts. Fear roils in my gut as Callum pulls me closer to him.

“Callum,” I whisper. “Are you sure this is safe?”

His eyes scan the deck, the green storm-glow of the clouds. “I’d say we should go, but I don’t know if there’s a quick, safe way off this ship,” Callum whispers into my ear. “We’ll have to stay. Hunker down.”

I nod, and Callum runs his hands on the sides of my head, smoothing my hair back before clasping his hands around the back of my neck. “It’ll have to go through me, yeah?”

I nod, forcing a smile, hearing those familiar words from him again. Callum leans in and brushes his lips against mine. “We’re almost there, Ripley. I can feel it.” He puts his lips to my ear and I shiver, unsure if it’s from the way he makes me feel, or the fear his words spark. “I talked to my father about the vote last night. About how it would be bad. How it might be fine for him to lead, but what precedent does it set? What comes next? And Ripley . . . I think he agreed. I think he’s *listening*.”

I bristle. Listening isn’t enough, not when the Machs’ deadline is tomorrow night. I can feel Hux’s stare boring into me like laser sights.

“What about the other thing?” I whisper back. “The information that could maybe stop all of it?”

Callum pulls back, his expression darkening. “Please, Ripley. There are cameras everywhere.”

I glance up, surprised to find that the observation deck has emptied. I'm alone with Callum by the rail, and Hux's shadow hulks in the doorway like a bad dream.

"Mr. Graves. Ms. Hart," he calls, all business. "You should get inside." A siren wrenches through the air. "That's the dome."

Callum and I start walking, and I throw one more look over my shoulder as the dome begins to rise, a bubble forming over our heads. I freeze when something on the coastline catches my eye—

A person.

I pull my hand from Callum's and pivot, cupping my hand against the glass to get a better look.

"Callum," I breathe.

A woman climbs out of one of the ruined houses, scrambling to get on top of the roof. Behind her, a boy follows. They're both thin, their clothes filthy and soaking.

"Shit," I mutter, shoving off the glass and turning to run back inside. Someone has to help—*we* have to help.

"Ripley?" Callum yells after me, confused. But I'm already gone.

As I pass Hux, I call out, "There are people out there." He doesn't say a word as I race by him, but mutters something into his earpiece.

I don't know exactly where I'm going—this place is massive—but I run. To my surprise, Hux pulls on my elbow, yanking me down a hall. When I glance behind, Callum has followed too.

We spill out into the ballroom. My eyes rove for Mona, and I make a beeline for her, not bothering to apologize as I push my way through the crowd.

"We have to stop the boat," I breathe, startling Mona out of a conversation she's having with a tall, handsome man I recognize from DopaMine.

"What?" She looks around like she's waiting for the punchline.

Frustration roars within me. "There are people out there. Alive. They survived Yelene, but they won't survive Zelda. We're their only hope."

Mona's mouth opens and closes, and she searches the crowd for—

President Graves. The crowd parts for him as he makes his way to us.

"What's all this?" he asks with a twinkle in his eye, like he's waiting to be let in on the joke.

"Some people weren't able to evacuate," Callum says.

Mona winces. “She doesn’t know what she saw,” she says apologetically to President Graves, like the rest of us aren’t even here. “We’re closing the dome. For our safety. It’ll be sealed in another ten minutes.”

“Then we’re wasting time talking about it,” I bite out. I’ll go to the captain myself, convince him to stop, to turn around. “We have to do something.”

President Graves rests a gentle hand on my arm, and I come to a shuddering stop. For a moment, I can almost see pity in his eyes. Maybe even regret. And then he blinks, and his mask is back. After all, we have an audience.

“I cannot endanger all the people aboard this vessel on the off chance that you *might* have seen one person. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” His eyes dart to Hux. “You would be wise to learn that.” He starts to walk away.

My body is alight with rage, sparking with helplessness. “What about *the optics*?”

President Graves motions for the party to continue as he makes his way back to Callum and me. I expect angry words, but instead he claps his hand on my back, the pressure of his palm anything but gentle as he steers us to the edge of the ballroom. Callum follows, eyes downcast, as does Hux.

When we reach the glass, I fight the urge to jab a finger at the proof. But all I can see is the rain, whipped sideways into the glass.

“She has a point,” Callum mumbles into his shoes, and President Graves forces a fake smile.

“The optics, Callum? What are the optics of a president partaking in—what do they call it, ‘disaster tourism’? Or the optics of revealing that I’m accepting donations for a campaign I can’t legally be running? Shall we tell them about the Senate vote that’s happening next week?” The president scoffs. “Callum, think, with your brain, for once. Some problems can’t just be smiled away.”

“And that’s what you have me for,” Callum mutters.

The president’s own smile goes thin. “A cost-benefit analysis I’ve found myself running daily.”

I don’t care. I can’t believe they’re talking about this while with every second, the waves grow higher, the winds stronger, as the storm barrels toward the coast.

I’m done.

We arrived by boat. It’s still tethered to the port side. I take off at a sprint. The sky above is an angry dark swirl; rain that had before only pattered down on the glass overhang is now a roar, too loud for me to hear my thoughts. But I’m done thinking. I need to act.

Overhead, the dome is encroaching; it passes directly overhead, sweeping like the hands of a clock, every minute ticking closer and closer to closed. I can make it. I have to make it. For insurance, and a pathway back since I can’t trust my eyes, I grab on to loose rigging, knotting it around my waist, and clamber down the ladder.

At first, I wonder if the speedboat is even still here, but then it slams into my shin and I curse, fumbling for the slick face of it. I fight to uncouple it from the yacht but I barely have time to celebrate my victory or even gasp a last lungful of air before the world is swallowed up by water. I didn’t see the wave that pushed me overboard, but now I’m a part of it. It rips at my hair, at my limbs, painfully jerking me down, around—and then up.

Up. Up. Up.

I break through the surface and gasp in a breath as Callum and Hux yank me back up onto deck by the rope, their arms flexing with the exertion, as the dome clatters closed just behind me.

Callum gathers me up into his arms, our soaking bodies pressed together, his hands in my hair. “You almost died, jumping in like that!”

I nod. He’s not wrong. As he pulls me into a hug, a whole crowd presses against the glass of the ballroom windows, staring at me in confusion and horror. So much for being a propaganda princess. I’m more of a drowned frog.

“But what about . . .” I try weakly as the storm batters the closed dome overhead.

“Callum!” a voice calls. The president, standing in the doorway, and his eyes are stormier than the skies.

Callum looks at me, torn. “I’m fine,” I say through teeth that are suddenly chattering. “Just go—”

I try a step toward the warmth of the ballroom, but the rope stops me, and I swear when it tows me back, my slick feet going out from under me. Before I can faceplant, Hux yanks the rope around my middle, towing me close to him by my hips and staring me down.

“What the hell was that?” he bites, pulling his blade from his holster and flipping it open. For a moment, I wonder if we’re going to continue where

we left off last night. Instead, he saws at the rope.

I wait for anger, but I don't see any. His eyes flash as he looks me up and down. "You aren't a strong swimmer," he says in a low voice. I don't argue with him. We've done all the same training. He's seen my abysmal freestyle.

Before I can object, Hux folds to my shin. I hadn't even realized I was bleeding, but he starts probing it gently with his fingers.

"I had to try," I say, my voice small.

He stills at that, something softening in his shoulders. "I don't think it's broken," he says finally. "But, Ripley." He looks up at me, green eyes a beacon in the storm. "Don't you dare pull something like that. Ever again."

This completed, he leads me back to the ballroom, where I drop, sopping and exhausted, into an upholstered chair that I'll probably stain with seawater. Music pipes gently into the space, and couples swirl up into dancing. Callum offers his hand, but when I decline, he dances with each of the sisters, then works his way through the crowd, never resting. Whatever his father said to him, he's on his best behavior, mask in place. I'm too drained to even fake a smile. Instead, I stare up at the chandelier as we race through the hurricane wall. Perversely, it remains fixed, frozen, not even swaying with the motion of the boat.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a voice says, and President Graves eases himself down into a chair next to me. My full-body flinch nearly sends me careening off my seat. "You're all right, right?"

"I'm fine—"

"I mean," he continues, voice flinty, "my son told me he had you handled. Is that true?"

I bite my tongue.

He sighs. "There was something, something I was hoping would never get out. All of this"—he sweeps a hand at me—"it was insurance, let's call it. And part of me, well, I'd hoped I'd never need to use . . . all of this."

My heart races. Does this mean Lyceum succeeded? Did they find the dirt they needed? Did Callum give it to them?

With a groan, he pushes up. "Oof. I'm not as young as I used to be," the president says. "But I've still got a few tricks." His sharp eyes find mine. "When we get service again, I hope you remember what my son promised me. That you're *handled*. Because you're not useful if you forget that. After all, think of the optics."

I’m frozen with horror, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I scan the ballroom for Hux, hoping to catch his eye, to ask to borrow his tablet, but he’s nowhere to be found.

It turns out I don’t have to wait that long.

I notice the stares first, the way that Quinnie looks at me, clapping a hand over her mouth. Ms. Beighlor laughs cruelly and points so sharply it feels like I’m being stabbed.

Panic pushes me to my feet and I stride over to Mona, air already slipping along my lungs. I’m nearly hyperventilating when I reach her tablet.

There’s an image of me in my bedroom in Post Angeles in my pajamas, sprawled across my bed. The strap of my top falls, exposing my shoulder.

I remember those pajamas. I threw them out when I spilled nail polish on them. When I was sixteen.

“So romantic,” someone is saying.

And it’s my face, my body, my bedroom splashed all over their screens.

“Star-crossed lovers,” someone else says.

Mona turns to me with a smile. “You know,” she says, “I can ask the chef to whip up some pancakes. I’m sure we’ve got plenty of syrup.”

My stomach drops.

Mona’s eyes find Callum as he cuts over to us. “For both of you,” she adds.

“Callum?” I squeak out. “What are they talking about?”

His expression falls. “Ripley,” he says, “I can explain.”

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Chapter 18

Callum leads me to the far end of the ballroom, behind a piano. We're pressed up against a wall, except that entire wall is glass—a framed portrait of the destruction outside—while I feel like I'm being destroyed inside.

"Explain," I beg, my voice shaking.

Callum looks up, his eyes wild and scared. "Listen. I missed you, okay? The second we left for the White House, I missed you. I think I was in love with you even then, Ripley.

"And it's fucked up. It's not okay, but I wanted to check on you. I knew my dad had ruined your parents' lives. I knew he had threatened you in order to keep them in line. I needed to make sure you were safe."

A new bubble of anger rises. I didn't know that. But it makes sense. My heart aches for my parents. For what they lost, and what they lived in fear of losing.

Callum continues. "I swear I was only going to do it once."

Everything in me goes glacial. "Do *what*?"

Callum scrubs his hands down his face. "I just wanted to send you a message. My dad wouldn't let me write you, and I knew your parents wouldn't be okay with letters going to the White House. But it was too easy. I mean, I barely know anything about hacking. But your training computer—the firewalls—the webcam. And then . . . I saw you."

"You *saw* me?" Nausea swims through my chest and I fight to stay on my feet. It's like the whole world is dropping out from under me.

"I didn't mean to. But the training computer has a monitoring system built in. You know, how they track your eye movements?"

“Of course it does,” I say, spinning around and covering my mouth in horror.

“And when I tapped into it . . . it started streaming. And . . . it was like seeing you again. I know it was wrong, watching you in your bedroom. But you said it yourself: We’d had sleepovers. I wasn’t seeing anything you wouldn’t have let me see. So I watched. And I saw you writing. You were so intent on it . . . and once you uploaded it, I read it.” Callum sighs, his eyes softening. “You’re an amazing writer, Ripley. And I knew what you were writing about. Who. I knew you were missing me too.”

My mouth drops open as I listen. I can’t even try to keep the shock off my face.

He read *Written in the Stars*. He knew it was about him.

Callum looks down in shame. “It’s not okay. I know it’s not. But seeing you . . . I couldn’t lose you again. When you got a new computer, I figured out how to hack that one too. And your tablet, and . . . it wasn’t okay.”

“No, it’s not,” I bite out, my entire body buzzing with humiliation. Shame. Rage.

I think of all the things I did in my bedroom. Private things.

“Did you watch me change?” I demand, swallowing hard.

Callum looks up, his expression fierce. “No. Never.” He steps closer to me and tries to take my hand, but I pull back like he’s on fire.

“Never. I just . . . I watched you write, Ripley. I watched you look out your window. And I read your stories. I needed to read your stories. They made me want to be better.”

I push him away, needing to walk away, but there’s nowhere to go to burn off this energy buzzing inside me. We’re trapped in the middle of a hurricane on a boat with the worst people in the world, who are all laughing at me.

He follows. “Don’t you get it? Your stories made me better. I asked what Orion would do, and I did that.”

I whip around, lifting a finger to his face. “Orion would *never* violate Saffron’s privacy, Callum!”

He holds his hands up in surrender, and I pace, thinking.

“Why does your dad know?” I ask, looking up. “There’s no way he would have been okay with it.”

Callum grits his teeth. “He found out a few months ago. Someone was poking around in your story, on your devices, and they found my code. It

set off a million alarm bells, someone trying to hack the White House without realizing it. And then our security team traced my code. After that, it didn't take them long to figure out who I was . . . who you were, to me. We all decided the best thing was to bring you here. Because once it got out that I'd been spying on you . . . we had to have a story ready. A love story. And yes, it was wrong of me to do it without you knowing. But what if we . . . pretended . . . that you did? That we were long-distance and you wanted, invited me to watch you?

"It wasn't so hard for me to pretend, because I'd read your stories. And part of me believed—or hoped—that you felt the same.

"And I wanted to tell you, Ripley, I swear. I was going to. The second I could."

I bite down, hard. Lyceum. They were searching for the origin of *Written in the Stars*. They didn't know they were tripping the White House cybersecurity unit by doing so. All of this is because of them.

"And I guess someone told my dad about your story. How popular it was. He didn't understand—he barely reads—but he understands popularity. He was . . . thrilled. For the first time in my life, he actually was excited about something I had done, because I had found you. And you had written this . . . book."

I blink, trying to will my mind to keep up. "Why? He banned books, Callum."

I want to cry, I want to laugh, loud and unladylike. I settle for a little bit of both as my back finds the window and I sink down. Callum keeps his distance but crouches down across from me.

"He thought he could use you, use us, rebrand a book as a viral sensation. But he's always thought too small. I saw the truth."

His voice chills me, and I slowly lift my face to meet his. "And what is that?"

"People want the story, Ripley. You told me that yourself. Stories keep us alive. And we can *write that story*, Ripley. That's real power. We can write our own ending. We control the DopaMine feeds and the press. We tell them what story to tell."

My head spins.

Another wave of sickness spreads through me. "Did you leak the tape? Of the kiss?"

Callum swallows. “No. The camera was mine, but the footage was never supposed to go out. I warned you, Ripley. There are cameras everywhere. It keeps us safe. That’s why I always wear this one.” He points to the button camera on his chest. The same pin. I had assumed it was a campaign pin, half the size of my palm. But the glittering gold face has been a camera this whole time.

I lower my face to my hands.

“I wasn’t trying to get the kiss,” he says quickly, covering his camera pin with his hand. “These don’t transmit anywhere, I swear. I was just trying to figure out who had bombed the motorcade. I didn’t trust anyone. I just wanted to keep you safe.”

It makes sense, but it doesn’t. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to keep the shattered pieces of my chest from spilling out around me. I can’t break down in front of him. He’s not safe.

“I messed up,” Callum says. “But it was to protect you. I did it wrong, but . . . I couldn’t lose you again.”

Tears blur my vision.

“Because you love me,” he breathes.

My hands shake, and twin tears stream down my cheeks. “I did.”

He rocks back, naked devastation on his face. “No, Ripley. You don’t mean that.”

I shoot to my feet, and he surges forward, placing a hand over my lips. “Please, please don’t say anything now. You’ll regret it. I know how you feel about me.”

And I rush away, through the ballroom, stumbling drunkenly through couples dancing and crashing into Hux in the doorway as I go.

For once, he doesn’t follow.

I don’t notice the ocean stilling; I don’t even notice the sun breaking through the clouds. We arrive at a calm spot in the ocean, where the captain decides it’s safe to lower the dome. We had been planning to dock at South Texas, but with the storm intensifying, we’ll be traveling by hovercopter.

The presidential copters touch down first, their black carapaces shiny in the sunlight. Someone behind me even whines about forgetting their sunglasses.

I don’t remember how I ended up standing here. Ever since Callum told me how he read my story, how he spied on me, the entire world has seemed like a bad dream.

“Are you okay?” someone asks, his voice low, a hand on my waist. I jerk away, not realizing it’s Hux until too late.

I look up, expecting an expression of hurt, but his green eyes are only careful.

“The president offered you the first takeoff,” he says, and I almost laugh at that. Of course, Graves wants me out of the public eye. I’m not playing his game. Think of *the optics*.

Still, Callum is waiting for me by the door, hand out to help me up. My heart stills as I notice Hux pulling himself into the cockpit.

“Ripley,” Callum says, and I remember the president’s words. He was warning me. If I don’t play my part now, my parents, my friends, maybe even the entire rebellion could be destroyed. I swallow and step forward, accepting his hand.

Above us, the copter blades whir on, pulling at my air-dried hair. Callum squints in annoyance; they aren’t supposed to power up until we’re safely inside, but with the storm encroaching, Hux must be hurrying.

Or President Graves told him to get my sulky expression off this boat of camera-toting influencers as soon as possible.

“Did you think about what I said?” Callum says, leaning in toward me. I’m caught halfway into the copter, just barely stepping up.

“I—” What am I going to say? That part of me wishes we had never met again, that he ruined my memory of him? That he lied to me?

Because that’s the scariest part. My Callum didn’t lie. This Callum, he’s not mine.

Maybe he never was.

I’ve been his since I slipped this ring on my finger. But it doesn’t work both ways. He owns me, as surely as if he—and his father—put a blade to the throat of everyone I love.

I glance up at the copter, hoping for an escape, expecting to see Hux watching me from the pilot seat.

But there’s no one inside.

Where did he go? Who’s powering it up?

“Ripley,” Callum tries again.

But I’m saved from answering by the grinding of gears as the copter under my left foot lurches, a rug pulled out from under me.

With a horrifying whir, the copter blades dip, and cut, as the entire aircraft bends, tilting, racing toward Callum’s head.

I don’t think. I just dive, pushing Callum to the deck beside me.

The Hammers move with surprising efficiency. And once again, Callum is lugged off into a bigger, better, safer copter while I’m left behind.

His forehead is bandaged from where the blades sliced an even line along the skin, but his eyes are brighter.

“You saved me,” he says.

And I realize I did.

“I knew it,” he calls as the Hammers rush him into their backup aircraft. Our original ride is still smoking, copter blades piercing through the deck, body sideways. Flames are barely licking the shape; a window shatters with the heat.

“I love you, too, Ripley Hart,” Callum says, and the assembled crowd *aww*s like this is some sort of grand gesture.

But he’s whisked away, and I’m left standing in the center of the crowd.

Somehow, I find President Graves’s eyes across the deck. He nods at me once, slowly, barely a dip of his brow.

Once again, I’m reminded that this is a game of chess, and I’m always six moves behind. And I don’t even know what side I’m on anymore.

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Chapter 19

When we get back to New Washington, I request Becka to be my personal security on a walk. The second we step off White House grounds, I take off sprinting. Apparently even she knows better than to follow me.

The subway entrance where Ettie pretended to lose her necklace just a few days ago lets me into the same abandoned subway track and for once the darkness isn't scary or oppressive. It means prying eyes can't see me.

Callum lied to me. He used me.

I love you, *too*, he'd said.

Can I believe anything he's said or done? Or has it all been an act, him pretending to be Orion?

I shake my head. It's absurd. Orion is him. He can't pretend to be a character based on him.

Or can he?

"You're not supposed to walk on that," a warm voice calls from behind me.

I turn, keeping my face in the shadows. Hux stands in the middle of the tracks, his hands in his pockets. He motions to my leg, which does throb. When I glance down, I see that it's bleeding through the gauze, a trickle of red. Somewhere between nearly being sliced to bits by a hovercopter and making it back to the White House, I finally got some first aid for my daring rescue attempt.

I don't look away. I don't have to pretend I want to. "How'd you find me?" I ask.

"Seriously?" Hux asks. "There are—"

“Cameras everywhere,” I finish. The streets must be crammed with them. I purse my lips and nod. “I’m not very good at this cloak-and-dagger stuff, am I.”

I face him dead on, and his expression tightens at the sight of my tears. With three assured strides, he’s in front of me. A hand presses my jaw up to force me to meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally.

“Thanks, but this one actually isn’t your fault.”

“Except.” He works his jaw. “Except it is. After I saw you sneaking out that night, I . . . checked in on you. I saw you’d been getting messages from Lyceum, but there was something else. Your home network had been compromised. I’m a hacker, Ripley. I needed to know who it was. I thought I could stop them. And I thought I *did* stop them. But then two days later . . . you were brought here.”

“But Lyceum had sold me out. And the Machs—”

“The Machs didn’t do shit. I told them they couldn’t. I told them if they did, I’d leave—”

“You threatened to leave the Machs?” I ask. “For me?”

He grits the word out: “Yes.”

“Why?”

He lowers his hands and turns, pacing a few steps before turning back to me. The low light throws his jawline into sharper relief, and his eyes almost glow.

“It’s not logical. You’re just one person. If you could stop President Graves—if handing you over could give us a fighting chance . . . it shouldn’t have fazed me. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it, Ripley.”

The tears dry on my cheeks as I stare at him. Huxley Finn. The boy I couldn’t stand. The man I thought was a heartless monster. My heart thunders in my chest as I try and piece things together.

“You’ve had your mission, this whole time. You’ve been trying to complete it.”

I expect him to cower, to lie, but instead his eyes blaze, shoulders square, and he towers over me, every bit the Mach general. “And I wanted to. I would have. That mission was clear-cut. But then I saw you.”

My breath catches as Hux steps closer, and slips his hand into my pocket. My body alights at the brush of his fingers through the thin fabric, and he withdraws with the poker chip. Our poker chip.

“I don’t usually work with robotics,” he says, his voice detached. “But it’s just coding. And I’m very good at coding.” He flips it around, and I watch in surprise as little pincers and legs seem to sprout from the smooth surface.

A wave of understanding rushes through me. Huxley Finn, the boy who swore to kill the president, jeopardized the entire operation to get me clear. He made the poker chip jump from my pocket, knowing that I’d run after it.

“That explains the car,” I say slowly. “But the copter . . . that almost killed me, Hux. Almost killed Callum. And you did nothing to stop it.”

His eyes go tight. “I guess,” he says slowly, “I’m not very good at being a Mach. Because I can’t believe that one life is worth sacrificing to save millions. Not if that life is yours.” He slaps the poker chip back into my palm. “I guess you win, Ripley Hart.”

I laugh sadly, a million emotions warring within me. “You think I win? I was supposed to pretend to be the Girl Next Door, make myself into this perfect fiancée, smile and simper like a brainless propaganda princess, and I couldn’t pull that off. Jumping off boats and falling for another guy—”

I freeze, closing my eyes tight like that will take back the words.

Maybe he didn’t hear that. Maybe he didn’t hear that.

But with my eyes closed, the silence is only thicker, a presence that seems to press into my ears.

I feel him step closer, his boots sounding softly on the concrete below us.

“Ripley,” he murmurs.

I shake my head. “Ripley’s not here right now, and you didn’t hear that.”

He growls, something between a chuckle and a groan. “Oh, I heard it.”

“I was talking about someone else?” I try, my voice pitching up in a quiet, pathetic, desperate attempt at joking.

“Open your eyes, Ripley,” Hux demands. He’s closer now. I can feel the heat of his breath.

I squint one eye open, and then the other, like I’m staring at the sun. He looms over me, his chest heaving as he stares down at me with a fiery expression. My heart stutters in my chest.

“You going to tell me to play along?” I whisper, and Hux gives me a lopsided grin as he wraps a massive hand around the back of my neck.

“Oh, Ripley, I’m not playing about this anymore,” he whispers back, pulling me flush to him. And this time, when he crashes his mouth to mine, I realize what it’s like to actually kiss Hux. For real.

My hands fly to his waist, gripping his dark shirt in my fists and pulling him as close as I can. It's still not close enough. He opens his mouth, and I tilt my head, deepening the kiss as our tongues tangle, breath mixing as he groans against me and I let out a half laugh, half gasp.

I'm kissing Hux. I'm kissing Hux for real, I think, my mind spinning. He straightens as he tightens his arm against my back, lifting me. I wrap my legs around his waist on instinct, and he spins, pinning me to the wall.

We devour each other, my breath coming in short gasps when he pulls back just to get enough air to kiss me again. I run my fingers through his hair and over his jaw, loving the feel of his scruff and how the muscles of his jaw tighten as he moves his mouth over mine.

It could be moments—it could be years. The moment my brain boots back up, I pull back, as thought becomes marginally possible. "Wait. Wait," I say, and Hux pulls back immediately, setting me down on the ground. He lifts his hands, bracing them over my head as he stares down at me, his chest still heaving in tandem with mine.

"But the copter. Who's trying to kill us?"

Hux groans. "Can't we just go back to kissing?"

I shake my head.

"Fuck," Hux breathes. "I hate you."

"You don't, though," I tease, feeling a smile pull at my lips.

He runs a finger along my cheekbone, like he's memorizing every contour of me. "I hated you for ruining my mission. And I hated you because it was easier than admitting that I was falling in love with you."

I reach up on tippy-toes and plant my lips on his, and Hux kisses me back softly. Sweetly.

He pulls away too soon, and he puts his forehead to mine. "I thought we weren't kissing," he says, that same smugness in his words.

"Then figure it out, Huxley Finn," I press. "The faster you figure it out, the faster we can get back to"—I trace a finger along his lips—"other things."

His eyes go black. "You're a demon."

"I'm *motivational*," I press. "Tell me."

He sighs. "The car was us. I just got you clear in time. For the copter, well, yes, I'd rigged it. But what you saw me doing, I was trying to stop it. When I saw that someone had remoted in, I was trying to find and stop

them—when they set it off. I thought I had more time. We had hours on that damn boat. But—something else came up."

"Something else?"

Hux breathes through his nose, almost like he's trying to calm himself down. "The Machs have known that someone was trying to access our servers. I was on that boat to figure out who it was and Trojan horse my way back into their system. And I did. Because I'm very good. But I wasn't prepared for what I found."

"Which was?"

Hux pauses. "Um. Pictures of you. Footage of you."

I close my eyes. "It was Callum's server."

"I'd hoped not," Hux says. "But I knew I had to delete the files. It was taking too long—and the White House cybersecurity locked on to me. I knew I should pull out, give up. But I stayed. Deleted all those photos. Unfortunately, the White House security was able to send a virus our way. It wiped our servers."

"The Machs' servers are wiped?" I ask.

Hux winces. "Yeah."

I think. "Wasn't the whole fail-safe plan to kill Graves on that server?"

Hux takes a second, and then nods. "Yes."

My stomach twists. I still don't want Graves dead. But we also can't let him take over our country.

"I don't understand," I say slowly. "You were on the yacht to hack Callum. You did that, and you found all his files . . . on me. How did it get out to the press?"

Hux sighs. "I needed you to know. You deserved to know. I-I tried to delete all the files, send just a few so that you would know what he did. I thought it would be safe to upload them the one place you'd find them—Spindle. I didn't account for just how quickly someone else would find them. I was rushing, with the encryption. Your story . . . it has a lot of fans. Who've been waiting for the next chapter."

"Hux," I breathe. Spindle isn't designed to take video uploads like that. And it isn't secure, not anymore.

"You deserved to know," he repeats. "Even if it meant losing the Machs. Even if it meant losing our chance to finally kill Graves. And I tried to scrub the entire mission, undo the bug on Graves's copter. I just couldn't do it in time. You were more important."

Right. Because the president switched with us, right before takeoff.

My head spins.

"You can't forgive him," Hux says. "And you also can't forgive me."

"You tried to help me," I say.

Hux shakes his head. "When we were eleven. When we first met. I thought you were . . . a force, Ripley. You remember those recesses, on the playground? You and Nef, running around and telling stories. Well, I overheard one. About a boy with forest-green eyes and the bravery to save a galaxy.

"I thought you were talking about me, Rip, and it terrified me. You knew exactly who you were, but you got it all wrong about me. I wasn't brave or selfless or larger than life like the boy in your stories.

"So I told you that we couldn't be friends. Because I knew I'd only disappoint you. And I also knew that it would disappoint me, to be friends with you."

My breath catches. "Why?"

"I don't want to be friends with you, Ripley Hart."

"I think," I say slowly, "I'd like to get back to kissing now."

When Hux feels my body sag against him, he laughs and shows me a secret door. It's a bedroom, which should be glorious on its own, but then I see around the corner. A bathroom. With a *shower.*

My mouth drops open. "What is this?"

Hux holds his arms out. "You weren't in Lyceum long enough to get *any* of the perks. All their safe houses have rooms like this. Librarians are notoriously sleepy people."

I walk over to the bed, pressing down on the soft comforter with a filthy hand. It gives just enough. It's perfect.

I look at Hux. "I could kiss you," I say.

"Could you?" he jokes, and I grab his shirt and yank him close, following through on my promise. When my attempt to climb him like a tree has me stumbling into the bed—mostly from exhaustion—he laughs and rights me before heading to the bathroom, where he turns on the water and it sputters to life. As I stare, he tests the temperature, then shakes his hand dry. When he looks back at me, a smirk curls up the side of his mouth.

“Shower, Hart. You smell like righteous indignation and jet fuel,” he jokes, brushing past me. He takes off his shirt, and I blush hard before realizing he’s wearing something under it.

He thrusts the shirt to me. “Here. Sleep in this.”

I bring it to my nose, inhaling Hux’s smell and grinning like a fool.

I watch him leave, and then strip down and jump in the shower. I scrub the day away—the ocean, the crash, the *I love you, too* that turned rancid.

I get out and brush my teeth, slipping into Hux’s shirt and hitting the light before opening the door.

Hux is on the bed, his boots still on. He’s asleep, one arm splayed out while the other rests on his chest. My gut twists at the sight of him. The boy who I got totally wrong, but who sees me for who I really am.

I tiptoe to the bed and crawl beside him, snuggling up to his side.

His eyes flutter open, and he moves to sit up. “Sorry. Long day.”

I put a hand on his chest and push him back down. “Don’t. I don’t want to be alone,” I whisper. “I haven’t slept well in . . . I don’t know how long. I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. But I know I can rest if . . . if you’re here with me.”

Hux swallows, nodding as he pushes up to give me a soft kiss before lying down. I grab a folded blanket at our feet and pull it up over us. He wraps his arms around me, and I wrap mine around him.

And I sleep, safe in the arms of the boy who is not my friend, never my friend. Because he’s something more.

Hux and I sneak back into the White House early in the morning. He uses his key card, which is a risk—we don’t know if Becka has outed him to the rest of the Machs, who might have kicked him out. Not to mention what would happen if she had outed him to President Graves. But if that was the case, we probably would have been arrested the second we reached street level.

We walk far apart as we enter the main courtyard. At first glance, it will look like a Hammer is walking the president’s future daughter-in-law to her room. Thankfully, no one is looking too closely. Hux snuck off and found me some clothes from Lyceum’s storeroom; I’m swimming in a massive flannel shirt and black sweatpants.

I sneak open the French doors—remembering the squeaky hinge—and slip inside with Hux. The second we're alone, his eyes go dark and playful, my only warning before he sneaks a kiss as I switch on the light. At which point, I scream.

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Chapter 20

Ettie screams, too, jumping back from her crouched position on the other side of the bed.

"Ettie? What are you *doing*?" I whisper, watching her wide eyes dip from me back to Hux. In the time it's taken her to look at us, he has pulled his knife out, his other arm snaking protectively around my waist to pull me behind him.

"I-I . . . was. . . ." she stutters, and Hux steps closer.

"Answer the question," he growls.

Ettie holds her hands up, relenting. "I was looking for more books!"

Hux and I both freeze in surprise.

"Books?" I ask.

Ettie looks sheepish, and a little scared. "I was in here a couple of nights ago, snooping because I was bored. I flopped on your bed and felt something under the pillow. *The Lord of the Rings*."

A disbelieving laugh bubbles up inside of me. "*You* were the one who broke in here?"

Ettie slaps her hands over her face. "I'm sorry. It's just . . . you know my dad. I can't risk asking for books around him. I'd get a lecture, and . . ."

I sit on the bed across from Ettie. I reach into my bag—the one that has miraculously survived everything with barely a scratch—and pull out my copy of *Dracula*.

"Here," I say, sliding it over to her. Her eyes light up as she grabs it. "But don't sneak in here again, okay?"

Ettie nods, slinking to the door.

“I won’t tell, by the way,” she says, her eyes nervously darting over her shoulder.

“Tell what?” I ask, trying to keep my voice light and failing miserably.

Ettie rolls her eyes. “*Tell what*. Nice pants, Ripley.”

She opens the door, stopping short.

Ettie jumps, putting her book behind her back. From my perspective, I can see her expertly slide it into her waistband, so smoothly that I almost miss it. Perhaps Ettie missed her calling due to being the president’s daughter. She could have been a professional thief.

Only once she’s gone can I see who stands in the doorway.

“Callum,” I say. His eyes are ringed purple with exhaustion. Next to me, Hux tenses, and Callum’s eyes lock on him immediately.

“What are you doing here?” Hux asks.

Callum curls his lip at Hux, apparently wanting to ask him the same thing. “I heard a shriek,” he says.

This looks bad. I know that. Probably because it *is* bad.

When Callum steps into the room, the door clicks shut behind us. Just the three of us: Callum, Hux, and me.

“What is this?” Callum asks, motioning between Hux and me.

I go to answer, but Hux starts for me. “This is me bringing Ripley back to her room to get her things,” Hux says breezily. A little too breezily, almost like he’s enjoying the way Callum’s expression tightens at the familiar tone Hux is using.

“You mean you were bringing my *fiancée home*?” Callum corrects, and I step forward, putting myself between them at the foot of the bed.

“Is she your fiancée?” Hux bites out, and I close my eyes tight before opening them and flashing Hux a *chill out* look.

Callum crosses his arms and widens his stance. “Whether or not she still wants to marry me is Ripley’s decision. I won’t make that for her. Even though I’d kill anyone who made a move on the girl I love without her consent. But I know she sure as hell doesn’t need anyone else to speak for her.”

Callum has a point, as much as I hate to admit it. Hux seems to agree, because he steps back.

“So,” Callum says. “Do you? Still want to marry me?”

I don’t chance a glance at Hux, because I don’t know what his face will betray. I don’t know what mine will betray.

“Ripley,” he says, his voice low.

Unbidden, my eyes shoot up, and a handful of emotions flit across his face as he waits for me to answer. And I don’t. I can’t.

Whatever he sees there, though, seems to be an answer. He nods, smiling humorlessly as he looks down, tonguing his cheek. “So that’s it. You’re done?”

“I’m hurt,” I answer truthfully.

I swallow hard as I look at Callum. I’m trying to be measured. Be smart. I don’t want to lie to him. But there is so much more at stake here than our relationship.

“Look. My father just left for the Senate. They’re moving the vote up. To today. I just found out, and was on my way to wake you and tell you when I heard Ettie scream.”

My mind races, and this time I do look to Hux. His face tightens, and I know he’s thinking the same thing: We have to stop it. Callum is still talking, thankfully, and hasn’t realized how Hux and I are sharing a look of panic and doom.

“. . . about that, by the way. She’s kind of a total snoop. I should have warned you,” he says, and my heart aches at his ramblings. How it reminds me of the boy I used to know. I hate how easy it is to feel at ease around him. My Callum.

My Callum, who was never really real. Who was built on lies, pretending to believe in a truth that never actually existed.

I force myself to focus on what actually matters. “The Senate vote is today?” I ask.

Callum nods. “At ten. The explosion . . . the copter, my dad thinks it’s proof someone is trying to kill him. Which makes him think that he must have the votes. And no one argued when he assembled the Senate last minute.”

An idea sparks in the back of my mind. I don’t have time to run it by Hux, so I hope he goes with it.

“I can’t lie anymore, Hux,” I say. Hux doesn’t move, but his eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. I take a deep breath. Here it goes. “Callum, Hux is a Mach.”

Hux goes stock-still as Callum steps closer to me, moving like he’s going to pull me to safety behind him.

“A Mach?” Callum asks, real fear in his voice. “Like . . . a terrorist?”

I twist, threading myself between Callum and Hux. With one hand, I caress Callum's chest, worrying his gold camera button that he wears like a lucky talisman. With the other, I hold up what could be its twin behind my back.

When I feel Hux's fingers brush mine, and he takes what I was holding, I know he's understood, or at least is playing along. Because I've handed him the poker chip.

"He was," I say darkly. "But he's turned on them, Callum. That's why he's here. He's defected. He's not with them anymore. I . . . convinced him, last night. He's seen the error of his ways. He'll do anything for me. He told me that." I swallow thickly. "And I'll do anything for you, Callum. This was all for you."

Callum's eyes dart from my face to Hux's. He's a liar. Can he believe that I'm a liar, too? Maybe it's broken him, these eight years in the White House.

Because he takes the bait.

"Hux," I say, laying it on thick. "Tell him what you told me. Right after we kissed."

"You're selling me out?" Hux asks, his voice raw, and I can't turn, because if I see the hurt on his face, I might ruin this whole thing.

Callum's face goes tight with a cold sort of victory. He almost grins. "The Machs won't take you back now. You're burned. You might as well tell us, and hope that it's enough to save your neck."

Hux takes a breath, like he's steeling himself for the next sentence. "There's an attack planned on the vote today. On your father."

I pivot, backing up closer to Callum. I look at Hux, widening my eyes slightly.

Play along.

Callum pulls me beside him, and I see Hux's fists clench at his side. "So you're not in love with her?" Callum presses.

"No," I say easily just as Hux replies, "Oh, no. I am."

My eyes widen even more as I stand next to Callum, who has his hand wrapped around mine. Hux cocks his jaw as Callum tilts his head, rage mounting in his expression.

"What was that?" he seethes.

Hux doesn't back down. "I'm done with lying. I'm in love with her. I did turn to your side—but only for her. Because I'd do anything for her." His

teeth grit. “Even this.”

Callum huffs out a cough that masks his building anger.

What are you doing? I mouth.

Hux gives a wry grin. “But,” he adds, “now I know she clearly doesn’t return those feelings. She chose you.”

Callum relaxes, snaking an arm protectively around my waist. I’m crushed to his side as he presses a rough kiss to my lips. When we draw back, he laughs and turns to Hux.

“And if we don’t act, my father will die?” Callum asks.

I reach up, brushing a cornsilk curl from his forehead. “Cal,” I say, “think of how grateful your father will be. When you save him. He’ll owe you his life.” Something sparks in his blue eyes.

“They’ll try and kill him at the vote?” Callum asks. “The Senate?”

Hux nods darkly.

“Then we have to move the location,” Callum says. “Tell the team now.”

Hux nods, moving toward us and then past us, going for the door. Callum puts a hand on Hux’s chest, stopping him. Callum turns his head, his voice low and deadly.

“You might be saving my father. And you protected her. But if I see you near her again, I’ll kill you myself. Do you understand?”

Hux nods tightly, pretending to be chastened. But he winks at me behind Callum’s back before disappearing out the door.

I bite my lip. I have no idea what the plan is now, but I’ve got—I check my watch—an hour to figure one out.

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Chapter 21

Somehow, even when trying to prevent a presidential assassination, I can't escape my glam squad.

The vote was moved from the Capitol building to the National Theater. Any other day, I'd marvel at the beauty of this place, but I'm a bundle of terror and nerves as Kaleb tries to bat my nose just one more time with a powder puff. I gently shake him off and push through the crowd, trying to keep an eye out for Hux. What the hell does he have planned? But even in a sea of black-clad guards, I know he's not there. A worried part of me imagines that Callum changed his mind and that Hux is in a prison cell. If he's even still alive.

President Graves thinks the Capitol building was rigged by the Machs—which maybe it would have been, if Hux hadn't compromised the Machs' computers and lost all their plans—so he was all too happy to move here. But what advantage do we have now? If anything, it makes the vote feel better. More special. Blue and purple house lights fill the stage, casting an unreal, fantasy glow to the situation. It's picture-perfect, built for a DopaMine feed. It's a play. We just gave him the perfect stage. And if we've learned anything, it's that people love a story.

People are already filling up the seats, a murmur of excitement rippling through the whole theater. I recognize senators and their spouses and America's richest, familiar faces from my one and only yacht trip. The voters and the people who bought the votes.

We have our audience.

I slip backstage, pacing nervously, when I catch my reflection.

Make her look presidential, President Graves had ordered from the hallway, since I'm going to be sitting behind him. Kaleb picked a simple black dress and white pearls, something you'd wear to a funeral. Which, I guess, is also fitting. I worry the strand of pearls, catching movement in the vanity mirror.

Becka appears at the doorway. She hasn't said a word to me since I saved Callum. It's like she wanted me to let him die.

"Security threat. We have to go," she says curtly, not really looking at me.

"What? Where's Hux?" I ask, unsure if this is a threat that should delight or worry me. Becka's face doesn't move.

"We have to go, *Ms. Hart*," Becka says. My stomach sinks, and I follow her backstage.

President Graves is at a fork in the hallways, his immaculate suit pressed and wrinkle-free. Callum stands next to him, but he crosses the small concrete area to pull me next to him.

"Thank God," he says into my hair, and I grip his jacket out of habit, hating the part of me that felt instant relief that he was safe. The gold camera pin there winks back at me.

I love Hux. I know that like I know my own name. And I've loved him for longer than I've known it.

But I guess it's not as easy to stop loving someone. Because part of me still loves Callum, especially when he holds me like this, looks down with pure adoration in his eyes. When I was alone, I had Callum, and he's always been mine. In my mind, in my stories, and now, because I have his ring on my finger. I trace the scar along his palm. My Callum, always trying to do the right thing. Maybe he was misguided. But with my guidance, and his power? We could have changed the world. Saved it, even.

"I'm so glad you're safe," he murmurs into my hair, pressing a kiss to my part.

"Security threat?" I question. "Isn't that why we moved it to the theater in the first place?"

President Graves shoots me a tired look, his face drawn and angry. "This is a different one. A snake in our midst."

Callum's hand tightens on my waist, and I know he won't dare look at me. Not with his father looking at us like he's waiting for us to break and admit something.

Becka moves past us, but President Graves doesn't even blink as she steps around him to open a side door. "Stay here until we clear the house. We'll do a sweep, and then the vote will be back on," she orders.

"After you." President Graves mock bows.

We crowd into some sort of antechamber, all black-painted brick and a single overhead light.

President Graves steps carefully behind me, and I clock his movements as he makes his way around me, shiny shoes clicking against the black floor.

"Are we waiting on anyone else?" Callum asks nervously at his father's pacing.

And then the door slams open, and a fourth figure topples into the black room. I grip at Callum, who is suddenly the only thing keeping me upright.

Hux.

"No," I breathe, the same time Callum steps in front of me.

"Father. Stop this."

I'm surprised I can even recognize Hux, after what they've done to his face. When he smiles, blood gushes and he spits red onto the floor. His arms are bound behind his back. I want to run to him, but I feel Callum grip my arm, squeezing tight.

Callum's right. I can't let anyone see how much this upsets me. They'll only hurt him more.

President Graves sniffs in disapproval. "My team was alerted this morning to a breach in our system. A hacker. We were able to stop him before he found anything, but we traced it back. To *him*."

Callum keeps his face neutral. "Well. Our security team does good work. That's a win for us, right?"

President Graves smiles, but it looks like he's baring his teeth. "It's not. Because he got close. He was on *my security detail*, Callum. This is a wake-up call. We need to do better. Do you think all this will stop once the vote is secured? We have to make sure there are no other *rats* on our ship."

His eyes shift to me, and Callum takes a decisive step forward.

"Ripley is above suspicion," he says, his tone even.

President Graves purses his lips. "There's your mistake. No one is above suspicion." His eyes seek mine as he lunges, grabbing Hux hard by the hair.

I make a noise—something like terror that races up the back of my throat. The sound makes President Graves pause, looking at me expectantly.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart? Friend of yours?”

At the look on my face, President Graves pulls a knife from his jacket and presses it to Hux’s throat.

“Don’t touch him!” I scream, my voice strangled and desperate.

“Father, enough,” Callum yells. “Ripley isn’t a traitor. But she also isn’t strong like you or me. You know she’s delicate. This is upsetting her.”

President Graves tilts his head, smirking. “Anything you’d like to share, Ripley?”

“She saved my life,” Callum reminds his father.

“Well, he planned to kill me,” President Graves says. He leans closer to Hux. “He pretended to protect me. Gained my trust. All the while, he was a Mach. Who’s to say your little fiancée didn’t do the same? She could be working for them too. The only way for her to prove it?”

He flips the dagger at me and, despite my years of training, I almost drop it.

“Kill him,” the president orders.

“Father—”

“Shut up, Callum,” the president snaps. “Perhaps this is my fault. I coddled you. Well, it’s time for you to see what it takes to clean up your own messes.”

I step forward, sweat dripping down the back of my satin dress.

“So,” the president continues, “what will it be, Ms. Hart?”

“I know what it’s like to be betrayed,” I say truthfully. I feel Callum flinch, but I press on. “But love is stronger. I wish I didn’t love Callum anymore, but I do. I could never hurt him.” The dagger drops from my hands. “But I’m also not a killer.”

President Graves listens, cocking his head. “That’s where you’re wrong, Ripley Hart. In the right situation? When your back is up against the wall and the enemy is closing in? Anyone can be a killer. I learned that eight years ago.”

My stomach sinks. “When you instituted the draft?”

The president grins, a cold, twisted expression. “No, Ripley. When your parents stabbed me in the back.” His eyes glitter. “Or tried to, at least. And then I realized I would have killed you, to stop them. I might have even enjoyed it. After such a long time, regardless of what my insipid son thinks of you, don’t believe for a minute that has changed.”

Becka sticks her head in. “Mr. President. We’re clear.”

She glances briefly at Hux, who winks at her, sprawled on the floor with blood gushing between his teeth. She shows no emotion, but we both know that he could out her too. She could be right there on the ground next to him. But she's not.

"I think I know what my first act will be," President Graves says, with a light whistle. "You know public executions are always fantastic for morale."

I don't know which one of us he's talking about. Maybe he'll kill us all.

And then he winds up his foot, kicking Hux squarely in the cheek. I rush forward, ignoring Callum's hurt look, and cradle his head, stopping it from cracking against the pavement.

"Hux," I breathe, and he just shushes me. He can't say what he wants to say, and neither can I. Not with our audience. Even Becka's lip curls.

"Hux," I whisper as quietly as I dare. What if this is the last time I see him? *I love you. Thank you. I love you.*

All the things I need to say dance on my tongue, but I can't utter one of them.

"I think I win, Hart," he whispers. "But you should have something to remember me by." He uncurls one of the hands bound behind his back, where gold glitters.

The poker chip.

The fucking poker chip. I want to slap him. How could that help now? He may have given it little pincers—what am I supposed to do, pinch the president to death?

"Keep it close, yeah?" Hux whispers as I stare, unbelieving. "Get out there, Hart. Don't let them see you sweat."

Becka beckons me onward, and I glance back once, at the shutting door, to see Callum bending down to Hux, holding him up by his hair.

"Let's go," Becka urges, opening a door and thrusting me out into the wings. Because the president is waiting for me at the edge of the stage. With a smirk, he holds his arm out to me. I shudder at the thought of touching him, but I know what I have to do. I take his arm, and we walk out onto the stage, up the stairs to the dais.

I tuck Hux's poker chip in my bra as I climb the stairs.

President Graves paces to the front of the raised platform, staring pensively at the powder-blue curtain. I inch closer to him, trying to see what

he sees. The future? America, in the palm of his hand? The end of the world?

"Do you remember Evan Nabler?" Graves asks.

I just see a moth-bitten curtain. "No."

I didn't think I could hate him more. It doesn't matter that he threatened me. But the thought of losing Hux hollows me out completely, and it's everything I can do to stand upright.

"He was a local bully when you kids were little. Pushed you down and stole your lunch one day. Ring a bell?"

It does, and I give a curt nod. I was no older than five, so the memory is fuzzy.

"You came home crying. Your parents were at work. You walked over to our house. Nina got you a Popsicle. Do you remember what I told you?"

I blink through tears as the memory plays in the back of my mind. It hurts to remember now. "You told me I was strong and capable. That I had the whole world ahead of me, and people like Evan wouldn't get far. You told me," I swallow hard, taking a beat so I won't cry. "You told me I could be anything I wanted to be."

We both look straight ahead, and President Graves nods.

Then he leans closer to me. "Now, you're going to be what I tell you to be. You made yourself a hero by saving my son? Now you're *my* hero. You're going to forget that boy down there and how you feel about him. Because I know you feel something for him. You're going to marry Callum, you're going to smile when I say. Or I will do what I should have done years ago. Understand?"

I don't move. I don't know what to say. Everything has fallen apart.

Callum appears behind me then, a hand light on my spine. When I turn to stare, he captures my hand and kisses me as he always does: over the ring he gave me. Reassuring himself that I belong to him. Suddenly, it makes my skin crawl. "Father," he says, without taking his eyes off me, "we're almost ready."

I can't breathe. I don't know what Hux and Callum talked about, but Callum seems different. I want to meet his eyes, but he won't meet mine.

President Graves nods, stepping up and to the middle. Callum stands opposite me. "Alba is tallying the ballots. But it's just a formality. When the curtains open, you'll be . . ."

Dictator for life, I almost whisper.

“Yes,” President Graves jokes, as if intentionally misreading my expression. “It’s very theatrical, isn’t it.”

Outside the curtain, the voices seem to ebb. The lights hum.

“But real quick, Dad,” Callum starts. *Dad*. He never calls him dad. Callum hasn’t said that since Graves became president. “Why did you try to have Ripley and me killed in the motorcade explosion? Didn’t have the balls to do it yourself?”

I whip my head to Callum. *What?* I clutch at his chest to stay upright.

President Graves rounds on Callum, his eyes wide, and rips me from him, so there’s nothing between him and his son. “Is that what that traitor told you?” He laughs hollowly. “You’re believing a terrorist?”

Callum slips his pocket tablet out and thrusts the display under his father’s nose. “No. I’m not believing anyone but myself. Turns out, that security breach that exposed Hux as a Mach also exposed . . . you.” Callum’s tone is icy, his shoulders back. I’ve never seen this version of him.

This is what Hux was working on. He may have exposed all of the Machs, he may have lost all their servers. But he erased all the footage of me, and he found the one piece of evidence we needed. Hux may have set the bomb, but the president detonated it.

Callum’s dad.

His own dad tried to kill him. And me.

President Graves is still for half a second before stepping forward, reaching out, and snatching the golden button from Callum’s shirt—the camera that he always wears. He grinds it under his heel as he steps forward. His shocked façade falls away as his composure melts.

He’s pure rage, and little else.

“You want to know why I tried to kill you and this little bitch?” He points to me, and I don’t even flinch. Instead, I stay very still.

“I’ll tell you why. You want to save the world? There’s no world to save. Not anymore. There’s no turning this ship around, you pathetic child. It has sailed. And we only have room for the people at the top. We will tell these people what to think. How to live. And they’ll thank us for it because they are *sheep*.” He steps closer to Callum, who, despite his best efforts, does look a little rattled at the sight of his father unhinging right before his eyes.

“And that includes you, you ungrateful little shit. I saved you. *You too*,” Graves hisses, pointing at me. “But you think you’re too good for it. Just

like your parents. Just like every other idiotic citizen in this country of fat, stupid, lazy, worthless creatures."

President Graves stands back, breathing hard through clenched teeth. "I could have made you a princess, Ripley. And instead you decided to actually *care* about them. And that's when I knew you both had to be eliminated."

Callum tries to stop his chin from trembling, but it does. For a second, just half a second, I feel sorry for him. He was the boy who loved his father. I just watched his heart break in real time.

"I can't believe I thought you'd be a good leader," Callum whispers.

President Graves makes a fake sad face. "And what are you going to do about it? I know you're a little freak who loves to record everything." He shows the crushed golden fragments on the ground. "You got nothing."

"Hm. I wouldn't say nothing." A sly voice cuts through the theater.

And there, stage left, is Hux.

He's alive.

Becka saunters over and stands next to Hux.

My heart skips a beat at the sight of him—of *them*—standing there before an empty theater.

President Graves rolls his eyes. "Is this supposed to be a thing? Your big move? Three people heard me. Wow."

Hux cocks his head at me, and I can't help but grin as his bloody lips stretch in a knowing grin. "Ripley?"

I uncurl my fingers. Because inside of my hand is the golden button.

The president didn't rip it from Callum's chest, because I'd already switched it. With the poker chip. The stomping probably crushed the little pincers that held it to Callum's chest, but they held, as long as they needed to.

Hux lifts a phone, hitting Play.

Fat stupid lazy worthless creatures—

Fat, stupid, lazy, worthless,

Only have room for people at the top.

Sheep.

It blasts out at full volume into the theater, for the entire assembly of senators and wealthy elite. Becka holds up her phone.

"Oh," she says sweetly. "They've autotuned it." *Sheep*, the president's garbled voice comes out. *Sheep. Sheep.* "Catchy."

As Becka bops her head, President Graves seems to turn to a statue. His eyes find mine, and I can feel the sheer hatred rolling off of him in waves.

"You," President Graves says. I lift my chin as I stare at him. *Me*. And he's not wrong. Pride swells in my lungs. Damn right, *me*.

"Like you said, President Graves," I say. "You should have thought of *the optics*."

With a quick movement, faster than seems possible, he reaches in his coat and pulls out a blade. With one powerful lunge, he comes at me, the dagger poised above his head, catching the red, white, and blue stage lights.

"Ripley!" Hux shouts, his voice cracking with fear. His eyes are feral as he lunges forward.

I stumble back, as Graves freezes, knife still raised high. His chest shudders with a gasp as his eyes widen in shock. He stumbles, and I jump back as he falls forward to his knees, and then crashes down, rolling off the dais and landing on the stage below.

And then his chest doesn't move again.

"Hux?" I whisper. "What did you do?"

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Chapter 22

The president is dead, blood pooling across the presidential seal. Callum drops the blade from his hand. The same blade held to Hux's throat, the one I dropped on the floor just minutes ago.

"You?" I breathe. He looks up, his hands shaking as he swallows hard.

"I-I couldn't let him," he says, staring down at his father's body.

Suddenly, lights overhead burst into life, and the curtain gives a resolute jerk.

The vote. They're opening the curtain to reveal the "results" of the vote.

"What do we do?" Callum whispers, looking to me, and then to Hux and Becka.

Outside, cheers break out, even as the puddle of blood seeps closer to the edge of the curtain.

"We tell the truth," I say slowly, motioning to Hux, who nods before taking his place at my side. Becka moves to the other side of Callum. The curtains sweep back, and someone screams. A sea of faces, anonymous as the stage lights burn into my eyes, but the fear comes off of them in waves. They thought they would see America's future, and instead they're staring at four teens and a dead man.

Blood drips off the edge of the stage down onto the front row.

Okay, so we're probably going to prison.

But maybe—maybe not. After all, I can write the ending of this story.

I reach for Hux's hand, and he locks his fingers in mine as we stare down at the crowd, lights blinding us. But, perhaps without realizing what's happening with my right hand, Callum reaches for my left, for the hand

with that ring, and once again presses a kiss to my knuckles. To the ring that I still choose to wear.

From the back of the theater, a catchy tune plays:

There's no turning this ship around, you pathetic child. It has sailed. And we only have room for the people at the top.

"Excuse me?" I call, shielding my eyes. "Can we get these lights? I can't —I can't see—"

The house lights creep on, as if just as nervous about this as I am, and as the bright white in my face fades, I can make out each and every horrified expression.

Finally, a senator stands up. She walks to the front of the theater, her blue dress swishing softly as she moves. She clears her throat and turns to face the crowd.

"The vote has passed. Graves is president for life. Long live the president."

My stomach churns, and my eyes find the body at the edge of the stage.

But the senator holds up a gloved finger. "And upon the death of the life president"—she turns to look up at Callum—"the president's heir shall become president."

Everything around us falls silent as the crowd considers.

I turn to Callum, his bloody hand pressed to mine. I can feel the redness seeping into my very fingerprints. His eyes find mine in the bright light.

"Ripley," he whispers, uncertain.

My mind is racing.

Callum, president for life.

"Callum must accept," another senator calls out.

"What should I do?" Callum whispers out the side of his mouth.

The vote has passed. If he doesn't take the presidency, someone else will. Someone who doesn't ever have to give it up. We can't take that back.

"The devil we know," I whisper, looking to Hux.

"Hart," Hux warns, but I shoot him a look.

"Got a better idea?"

Hux's mouth opens and closes—

Callum looks at me, and then to Hux. Something settles over him, then. A decision.

"I accept," he says.

"What? Louder, boy!" the senator gripes.

“I accept,” Callum bellows. He looks at me, a question burning in his eyes. He just became the most powerful man in the world, but he looks helpless as he stares at me.

And holds out his hand—a question.

“Then we have it!” the senator yells. “All hail President Callum!”

I drop Hux’s hand, a realization seeping into my bones. I don’t look back at Hux as I pull Callum in for a kiss. The crowd gasps, then breaks into titters. No respect for the dead man. This is all a show to them. And I’ll give them a hell of an ending.

I let Callum kiss me as blood seeps across the floor and echoes ring out around us.

“All hail First Lady Ripley!”

“Does this mean you forgive me?” Callum whispers as he draws me into a hug.

Over his shoulder, I meet Hux’s eyes. “I love you. Love doesn’t just go away,” I whisper back. I hate that part of that is true. I can’t just carve him out of me completely—either of them.

Callum hums into my hair, and Hux’s eyes darken. He nods. It’s shallow, but I see it. “We can fix the world,” Callum is murmuring, his voice high and fast, like it used to be when we were kids. The hand cradling the back of my head is damp with his father’s blood. “And one day, I’ll fix us.”

I keep my eyes on Hux as he disappears into the wings, where I imagine him waiting in the shadows, even as Callum and I kiss again for the crowd. With a dramatic flurry, the curtain closes, velvet tassels sweeping the blood of the dead president across the stage, but I’ve heard that’s easy enough to remove with the right filter.

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Epilogue

One Month Later

It's icy on America's first-ever Coronation Day, but with the wall of fuel-burning heaters, we could be on the beach in July. Still, I grip my stole around my shoulders, the real fur soft against my throat. It's white. I can't be sure where it's from, but Callum has taken to calling it *Marcy*.

He smiles at me, even as he addresses the crowd, puffs of steam slipping from his lips. In front of the Washington Monument, now recapped in blue—to better match Callum's eyes, and to literally cover over his father's legacy—he looks at home. Callum has always looked larger than life, a statue or a god. He seems like he was made to be America's first forever president.

"With courage and conviction, we will continue to try and fix the world we broke," he says.

I keep my face stoic as I look out over the crowd. My mother and father sit in the front row, hands clasped as they stare up at me. It turns out that they weren't *fine* with me being essentially kidnapped and betrothed without their knowledge. The second they realized I didn't come home, they fought to make their way to New Washington. They were arrested at the border to South Texas and kept in holding until Graves's assassination.

They aren't thrilled with what I'm doing now, of course.

". . . funding for public libraries and initiatives for literacy," Callum continues.

Nef sits with Uriah and the rest of Lyceum—which now includes Ettie. They are now technically a new branch of government and have been instrumental in helping formulate Callum's educational plan. Nef adjusts her fluffy earmuffs and gives me a little thumbs-up. We haven't been the same since everything went down, and I miss her terribly. But ever since she moved to New Washington, we've been able to set up weekly coffee dates. I don't know if the first lady is allowed best friends, but I think we'll get there.

Callum continues his speech, and I find my body angling to Hux, who stands on the other side of the stage. He has his earpiece in, blade strapped to his belt. Callum made him head of the Hammers after everything, and Hux cleaned house. He brought in all new guards, and I'm starting to believe they are all former Machs. Lyceum controls the government. The Machs control the military. And somehow, I'm the link between the two of them.

Callum looks at me from the podium. "Thanks to my fiancée and your first lady, Ripley Hart, we will get started on all these changes right away."

I smile back at him, and nod encouragingly. He turns back to the speech I wrote, eager, as always, to follow where I steer. Because Callum might be president for life, but I'm going to be his wife. "And together, we'll build something. We'll build hope. We'll build trust. The one I love most in this world once told me a story about bravery, about conviction, about how the end of the world can become a new beginning. And together, we're going to write an amazing beginning."

Callum looks at me, and I don't have to fake the small smile that pulls on my lips. I do love him. If only I could trust him.

I walk over stiffly, pretending to be cold, and press a chaste kiss to his lips.

The crowd erupts in applause. We step forward for some photos, holding hands and waving. Then, security ushers us off the stage. Callum goes first, and I follow. Hux is close behind me as we make our way to the motorcade that will take us to our next destination: the Presidential Ball.

"Your car is ready, Ms. Hart," Hux says, his voice a rumble from behind me.

Callum is far ahead of us, disappearing into the crowd.

With one quick movement, I step back into the shadow of the stage with Hux, who doesn't waste a moment before pressing his lips to mine. I kiss

him feverishly, hungrily, like I don't know when I'll get the chance to again. Because Callum doesn't know. He can never know.

We give ourselves thirty seconds. No more than that. It's torture, and every time it feels like it goes far too fast, but it will have to be enough.

"You ready?" he asks. His hand snakes up to my lip, fixing my lipstick, and I playfully bite on the pad of his thumb. "Alba, set a timer for thirty seconds."

"Don't you dare," I tease, and then Hux is following me to the car, the heat between us like an electrical current.

We could both leave. I know that. Callum isn't keeping us prisoner. If we wanted to, we could disappear into the night.

But we both know we can't leave—not until democracy is restored. That's the part Callum doesn't know yet. We are going to find a way to put *everything* right. Including our country.

Hux holds his hand out, helping me slip into the waiting car.

When he pulls back, he winks. I feel something in my palm, and I smirk up at him as he closes my door.

Callum wanted me to tell our story. To craft us a fairy tale. I flip the poker chip, the scars silvery where Hux mended it. It settles in my palm as Callum comes into the car from the other side.

"Ready?" he asks, smiling softly at me.

I smile back and nod, tucking the poker chip into my glove as we glide away from the curb. "Of course."

I might be a princess now, but as long as I'm writing this story, it isn't a fairy tale.

And it sure as hell isn't over. I'm just getting started.

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Acknowledgments

This book would never have been without the brilliant Sara Schonfeld: my fearless editor. Thank you for the guidance, the pep talks, and the reaction gifs. You are the heart of this book, and I'm honored to share it with you.

Thank you to the whole team at Avon a/ HarperCollins—Amanda Maciel and our fabulous copy editors Christina MacDonald and Kathryn Silsand and proofreader Vivian Kirklin. You're gems for covering up the fact that sometimes I don't know things every thirty-seven-year-old adult human should absolutely know. Thank you to Joel Tippie for the cover of my dreams, and to everyone who worked behind the scenes to make this book: Shona McCarthy, Mary Magrisso, Melissa Cicchitelli, and Annabelle Sinoff. I'm especially grateful to Rachel Horowitz, Shannon Cox, and Anna Ravenelle for championing this book to the world!

As always, I want to shout out my whole team at UTA—Gwen, Orly, and Echo—for always being in my corner and keeping my dreams alive.

I am a mother of four young kids, so nothing gets done without my village. Thank you to my husband, Ross, for the quesadillas and lattes you left quietly on my desk before backing out of my office slowly while I was in flow state. Thank you to my parents for letting my kids invade your house while I do this weird job. Mom, I couldn't be a writer without you. Dad, I wouldn't have been a reader without you. Thank you.

Thank you for my Story Crew. You know who you are.

And to Sue Lisman, the best mother-in-law in the world: thank you for flying out to help me meet this deadline because you saw I was stressed.

Thank you for the omelets and babysitting and just being the best. You're a blessing and a light.

This book is about a future I hope we never see, even though it feels like we're inching closer with every terrible headline. So I'm thankful for the people who still fight every day. To the underfunded scientists, tireless librarians and teachers, thankless public servants; to the writers and readers and bookish people who refuse to accept the status quo and to any soft-hearted person who stays soft in a time designed to cut . . . thank you. We need you. To quote yet another book, because C. S. Lewis always says it best: "Courage, Dear Heart." We can't give up. We won't.

And, as always, thank you to the God who makes every story. Thank you for the chance to write this one.

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Cover © 2026 by HarperCollins Publishers
Cover art and design by Joel Tippie

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026934021

Digital Edition AUGUST 2026 ISBN: 978-0-06-348401-6
Print Edition ISBN: 978-0-06-348400-9

FIRST EDITION

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