

I sprint across the yard, my eyes streaming, my heart pounding in my chest.

The noise of the gunfire is still deafening, and I hear—I actually hear—bullets whizzing past me, their low whines like the speeded-up buzz of insects, but I don't slow down, and I don't change course. The Chapel is burning out of control, its roof engulfed by roaring fire and sending up a huge black plume of smoke, and the amplified voice of the Government booms across the compound, repeating its demand over and over again.

*“Put down your weapons and come forward slowly with your hands in the air!”*

Nobody is listening. Not the other Governments, and definitely not any of my Brothers and Sisters.

In the distance, back near the Front Gate, the tank rumbles

forward, crushing the flimsy wire fence and churning the desert floor. Somewhere, over the engines and the endless rattle of gunfire, I can hear screams of pain and pleading shouts for help, but I force myself to ignore them and keep going: my gaze is fixed on the wooden cabins at the western edge of the Base.

I trip over something.

My feet tangle, and I go sprawling onto the cracked blacktop of the yard. Pain crunches through me as my shoulder hits the ground, but I grit my teeth and get back on my feet and look to see what I fell over.

Alice is lying on her back, her hands clutching her stomach.

Her shirt has turned red, and she's lying in a pool of blood that seems too big to have all come out of one person. She's still alive though. Her eyes are dim, but they find mine, and she looks at me with an expression I can't describe. There's pain there, a lot of pain, and shock, and fear, and something that looks like confusion, like she wants to know how things ever came to this.

I hold her gaze. I want to stay with her, to tell her it's all right and that she's going to be okay, but it isn't all right, nothing is, and I don't know very much about bullet wounds, but I don't think she is going to be okay.

I'm pretty sure she's going to die.

I stare at her, wasting seconds that the still-functional bit of my brain screams at me for wasting, then run toward the west barracks. Alice's eyes widen as I start to turn away, but I don't see anger in them. I think she understands what I have to do.

That's what I tell myself, at least.

A figure emerges from the swirling smoke, and I skid to a halt, my hands raised. But it isn't one of the Governments, with their black helmets and goggles and guns. It's Amos, his eyes red and puffy, one arm limp at his side, a pistol trembling in his good hand.

“Where’s Father John?” he asks, his voice hoarse and torn. “Have you seen him?”

I shake my head and try to circle around him, but he grabs my arm and pulls me close.

“Where is he? Where is The Prophet?” he rasps.

“I don’t know!” I scream, because the tank has reached the yard, and the gunfire is heavier than ever, and the fire is leaping from building to building faster than I can follow.

I push Amos as hard as I can, and he stumbles backward. He swings the pistol at me, but I’m already moving. I hear shots behind me, but none of them find their target before I plunge into the smoke.

It’s instantly hard to breathe. I clamp one of my hands over my mouth and nose, but the thick, bitter smoke slips between my fingers, and I start to cough. I see my fallen Brothers and Sisters all around me as I run, dark shapes I stagger left and right to avoid. A few are moving, dragging themselves across the ground or twitching and spasming like they’re having a fit, but most of them aren’t.

Most of them are still.

The west barracks appear in front of me, their walls and flat roofs wreathed in acrid smoke. The gunfire is constant behind me, and with so many bullets flying through the air, it feels like a matter of time until the inevitable happens. As long as I unlock the cabins first, I don’t care.

I really don’t.

I stumble out of the worst of the smoke and toward the nearest cabin, fumbling the skeleton key out of my pocket. I grab the padlock hanging from the door, and there’s a sizzling sound. I don’t understand what has happened—until pain explodes through me, and I wrench my hand away. Most of my palm stays stuck to the metal lock. I fall to my knees, clutching my ruined left hand against

my stomach, and a scream that doesn't sound human bursts out of my mouth.

It's overwhelming. The pain.

It feels like someone has pushed my hand into a jar of acid and is holding it there, and as my brain tries to process the agony, everything else fades away: the smell of the smoke, the heat of the fire, the noise of the guns. Gray creeps in from all sides, like the volume of my senses is being turned down. Then something shoves me from behind, and everything comes hurtling back as I tumble to the ground.

A Government is standing over me, its face hidden behind its mask, the gaping muzzle of its gun pointing between my eyes.

"Hands where I can see them!" It's a man's voice. "Show me your hands!"

They tremble as I hold them up. "Please," I say, my voice a raw croak. "Children. There are children in these cabins. Please."

"Shut up!" he yells. "Not another word!"

"Please," I repeat. "In the cabins. You have to help them."

The Government glances at the buildings. My head is spinning, and my stomach is churning, and I feel like I'm going to pass out from the pain screaming in my hand, but I force my eyes to stay open, force my reeling mind to focus on the dark figure above me.

"Padlocks," I whisper, and hold out the skeleton key. "Please..."

My strength fails me. The Government looks at the cabin. Looks down at me. Looks at the cabin.

"Shit!" he shouts, then grabs the key from my hand and spins toward the door. I watch him grip the padlock with his gloved hand and slide the key into the lock, and I wonder for an awful moment whether this is all going to have been a waste of time, whether there are some locks that even a skeleton key can't open. Then the

cylinder turns, and the padlock springs loose. The Government hauls the door open, and my coughing, spluttering Brothers and Sisters come flooding out, their eyes red and streaming with tears.

“Go to the Front Gate,” I manage to croak. “Stay together. Put your hands up...”

At the back of the crowd, I see Honey, and I feel something in my chest that overwhelms the pain in my hand. Her eyes are swollen and puffy, and her skin is pale, but her mouth and jaw are set in familiar lines of determination. She’s breathing, if nothing else.

I wasn’t sure she would be.

She helps the last few crying, panicking children out of the cabin and leads them south, toward the Front Gate. The Government races to the next cabin, shouting into his radio for backup. Something breaks loose inside me, a surge of relief so powerful it’s almost physical. It breathes new life into my exhausted muscles, and I drag myself into a sitting position.

The children make their way across the yard, their little hands raised in surrender, until a rush of Governments come sprinting out of the smoke and scoop up my Brothers and Sisters and carry them out through the gaping holes in the fence. I can hear them crying and shrieking for their parents, and my heart breaks for them, but they’re alive, they’re still alive, and that’s all that matters, that’s the only thing that matters as the world burns.

I hear a scream, loud and high-pitched enough to cut through the gunfire and the roar of the inferno, and I turn my head toward it. Near the blazing ruins of the Chapel, two of the Governments have caught hold of Luke and lifted him off the ground by his arms and legs. He’s thrashing in their grip, howling and bellowing for them to put him down, to let him go with the others, to let him Ascend.

His voice, full of fury and fervor and desperate, frantic panic, is the last thing I hear before everything goes dark.



A  
F  
T  
E  
R

...I drift...

...my hand feels like it's wrapped in fire. My eyes open and everything is white and there's a beeping noise and something that has no face looms over me and I try to scream but nothing happens. I'm so scared I can't even think. My eyes roll back and...

...a man looks down at me, and his face is just eyes above a white mask. He shows me a huge needle, and I just stare at it because I'm too scared to move, and when he pushes it into my arm I don't even feel it because the pain in my hand is still so huge that it blocks everything else out. I know what doctors are from when I

was little and TV was still allowed, but I've never seen one in real life until now. The Prophet is screaming in my head that doctors are agents of *THE GOVERNMENT*, that every one of them is a *SERVANT OF THE SERPENT*, and his voice rattles and shakes my brain, and my stomach churns, and I'm so scared I can't even breathe while the doctor tapes the needle that's inside my arm to my skin and connects it to a tube that leads to a bag of milky white liquid. He says something I don't understand, and then the liquid starts to flow. I watch it creep down the tube toward my arm. I can't move a single muscle, but I manage to form a thought over the noise of Father John howling in my head: I wonder what is going to happen when the white liquid goes inside me, and I wonder if I'm still going to be me the next time I wake up...

...the lights above me are blinding, but the pain is much less, and the plastic bag at the end of the tube is empty. I can just about raise my head far enough to see the big mitten of bandages that has been wrapped around my left hand. Sometimes a doctor stands next to my bed and stares at me and sometimes I hear raised voices in the distance and sometimes I start crying and can't stop. I'm too hot and too cold and everything is wrong and I really want to go home, because even that was better than this. A man wearing a hat and a uniform asks me my name, but Father John roars in my head, so I don't answer. He asks again, and I don't answer again, and he rolls his eyes and walks away...

...a woman in a uniform tells someone to sit me up. Hands reach underneath me, and fingers press into my skin and drag me along the bed until I'm propped against a pillow. The woman in the uniform says, "That's better," and I almost laugh because nothing

is better, nothing is even *remotely close* to better. “Can you tell me who started the fire?” she asks, and I shake my head. “Who handed out the guns?” I shake my head. “Did you see John Parson after the shooting started?” I shake my head. “What happened inside the main house? What did you do in there?” I shake my head. She stares at me, and when she speaks again, her voice is cold. “People are dead, girl,” she says. “A lot of people. You need to start talking.” She leans over me. I don’t know what’s she’s going to do, so I turn my head away. I see a gold badge on her belt stamped with the words Layton County Sheriff’s Department, and my heart stops dead in my chest and then I hear myself screaming, and the woman in the uniform jumps back, her eyes wide with shock. I hear running footsteps, and my heart starts back up. I thrash on the bed and scream and scream. I feel hands pin my arms and legs, and a doctor lowers another needle toward me, and...

...the faces of my Brothers and Sisters swarm out of the darkness, people I’ve known my whole life, their hair on fire, their skin melting off their skulls, and they’re screaming two words over and over and over again: *Your fault your fault your fault your fault YOUR FAULT*. I turn away from them and try to run, but the ground turns to quicksand beneath my feet. I sink to my ankles as fingertips brush my shoulders and the back of my neck and I’m terrified, but I can’t scream because my mouth won’t open. All I can do is wade through inky blackness, dragging myself forward, trying to find the way back...

...a man wearing a dark suit stands beside my bed. I’m soaked with sweat, and my hand really hurts, like it’s covered with biting insects, and I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired. My body feels

like it is made of lead and concrete, and my eyelids are the heaviest things in the whole world. The man tells me I'm being moved and I try to ask where, but all that comes out—as Father John bellows in my head *Never talk to Outsiders, not under any circumstances*—is a rasping whisper. The man says he doesn't know, and I summon every last bit of strength I have left and ask him who made it out of the fire. He grimaces and walks away...

...there's a paintbrush in my hand, and it's dripping with cornflower blue. I know I'm dreaming, but I don't care because I don't want to wake up. I paint the wooden wall in front of me, and I hear the distant crash of waves at the base of the cliff, and I smell smoke as it rises from the chimney, and I know that if I look down, I'll see green grass beneath my feet, but I don't look down. I paint the wooden board in front of me and the one next to it and the one next to that...

...a different man in an identical dark suit reads a list of names from a piece of paper. I hear Honey and Rainbow and Lucy and Jeremiah, and I burst into tears of relief. The man gives me the first smile I've seen since I've been lying on this bed, and he carries on reading names, but not for long. My relief gives way to grief, and my tears keep coming because the list is so very, very short...

...the ceiling slides by as two doctors wheel my bed along a corridor and into an empty metal box that shudders and rattles and makes my stomach spin. I try to reach out for the walls to steady myself, but one of the doctors pushes my arms back onto the bed, and my left hand howls with pain, and I cry out. The doctor says,

“Sorry,” but his eyes are cold, and his mouth is hidden behind his mask. There’s a beep and a jolt and a rush of cool air, and then I’m moving again. I see a sliver of sky, as blue as the wall in my dream, before I’m lifted and rolled into another metal box, although this one has shelves full of boxes and bottles and machines I don’t recognize. There’s a rumble beneath me as an engine starts up somewhere close by, and it sounds a bit like the red pickup that Amos used to drive, but it’s much louder, and it sounds angry...

...a woman with a kind face wearing a white uniform helps me up from the bed I’ve been lying on ever since I woke up and gently lowers me onto a different one in a square white room with a window set high up in one wall. She tells me to press the orange button next to the door if I need anything, and a lump fills my throat. I ask her not to leave me, and she hugs me, and I start crying again. The voice in the back of my head gets really angry because I haven’t cried this much since I was a little girl, but I can’t help it. The woman with the kind face shushes me and strokes my hair and tells me it’s okay, everything is going to be okay, she’ll be right there if I need her, then gently slides out of my arms and gives me a smile before she walks out of the room, closing the door behind her. I lie down on the bed and I hear a heavy metallic thud as a lock slides into place...

...I drift...

A  
F  
T  
E  
R

I'm sat on a dark red sofa. My legs won't stop shaking, and my hand really hurts. I'm trying not to be scared, but I can't help it because I don't know what's going to happen to me.

I don't even know where I am.

The room I'm sitting in is bigger than my room at the Base, but it's still pretty small. The walls are pale gray, and the floor is dark gray carpet, and it contains the dark red sofa and a wide table with two chairs tucked under the far side, facing toward me. Everything is smooth and clean, and there's a machine sitting on the table and a camera above the door. The woman in the white uniform with the kind face—*Nurse Harrow*, whispers the voice in the back of my head, *she told you her name was Nurse Harrow*—brought me here five minutes ago, and I saw the words Interview Room 1 printed on the door as she pushed it open.

She asked me if I wanted anything before she left. I didn't have any idea how to answer her.

I hear a lock turn, and I hold my breath. The door opens, and a man walks into the room. He's small, with a thick beard and thinning hair and deep lines on either side of a pair of friendly eyes. He's wearing a white shirt and a tie, and he has a leather bag over his shoulder. He pulls out one of the chairs and sits down, then takes a stack of notebooks and pens out of his bag and arranges them carefully on the table in front of him. When everything is laid out how he wants it, he presses a button on the machine, waits until a small green light appears, then smiles at me.

"Hello," he says.

I don't say anything.

I know I asked the man in the suit a question, before, when I was lying on the bed with my mind drifting. But I'm thinking more clearly now, and some things are so deeply rooted in the fabric of who I am that I can't remember a time they weren't there, and it's hard to reason my way around them, even after everything that happened.

*You never talk to Outsiders. Never.*

"My name is Doctor Robert Hernandez," he continues. "I'm the director of psychiatry at the University of Texas Children's Hospital at Austin. Do you know what that means?"

I don't respond.

"It means I specialize in the well-being of children," he says. "Particularly children who have experienced traumatic events. I listen to them, and I try to help them."

In my head, Father John screams that Outsiders only want to hurt me, want to torture and kill me.

"I understand this must be an extremely frightening situation," says Doctor Hernandez. "You've been through a terrible

ordeal, and I know you're in a lot of pain. But I'm not your enemy, no matter what you may have been told, and I promise that I mean you no harm. I want to help you. But for that to happen, you're going to have to trust me. Just a little bit, to start with. Do you think you can do that?"

I stare at him. It's clear from the expectant look in his eyes that he doesn't have the slightest idea what he's asking.

"How about we start with something simple? Why don't you tell me your name?"

I don't respond. My eyes stay locked on his.

"That's okay," he says. "That's absolutely fine. How about this? I'll ask you a question, and you just nod or shake your head. You don't have to say a word."

I don't move a muscle. I try not to even blink.

Doctor Hernandez's smile fades, ever so slightly. "No? You don't want to give that a try?"

I blink, because my eyes are starting to hurt, but that's all. He nods and scribbles something in one of his notebooks.

I watch the pen scratch across the paper, and I want to know what he's writing about me, but I can't ask.

"Okay." He sets the pen down. "The last thing I want to do is make you feel pressured in any way. I can only imagine how overwhelming this must be, so I think the best thing at this point is for you to go back to your room, and we'll try this again tomorrow. You don't have to talk to me, and I guarantee that nobody, least of all me, is going to force you to. But if I didn't honestly believe it would be helpful for you to do so, I wouldn't be here."

I resist the urge to nod as Father John screams in my head, calling me a Heretic and telling me that he always knew I was False.

Doctor Hernandez nods again, gives me a big smile, and starts putting the notebooks and pens back into the leather bag. "All right then," he says. "Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

Nurse Harrow escorts me back to my room. I don't say anything as we walk along the gray corridors, but she still gives me a smile as she closes my door and locks it.

I take a look around the room that I assume is now my home. It's far from big, but it isn't tiny either; there were lots of smaller rooms at the Base, and this one has a sink and a toilet and a desk and a chair.

The door locks from the outside, so I guess that's the same.

I found a pile of clothes next to a thick stack of paper and boxes of pencils, pens, and crayons on the desk after Nurse Harrow brought me in here last night. Gray pants, underwear and socks, T-shirts and sweaters, sneakers. Most still wrapped in plastic, all still with their price tags on. I'm wearing some of them now.

I'm pretty sure they're the first new clothes I've ever worn.

There's a digital clock on the wall above the door; the glowing numbers read 10:17. Nurse Harrow told me she would bring me breakfast every day at 9:00 and lunch at 12:30, but I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with the time in between.

I lie down on my bed and stare at the ceiling for a while, then get up and walk back and forth until the muscles in my legs start to ache and my hand starts to burn beneath the bandages. I sit at the desk.

Apart from the Bible, there were no books allowed inside the Base after the Purge, and almost no paper or pencils, but I had a plain sketch pad that Father Patrick gave me when I was a little girl. The Centurions must have known about it, because I didn't hide it, but they never took it away. I had drawn on every page dozens of times, until the paper was deeply grooved by pencil lines that had been erased and redrawn and erased again. It was in my room when the fire started, so I guess it burned.

I take a sheet of paper from the stack and run my fingers over its surface. It's smooth because it's never been used.

It has no history.

I stare at the white wall in front of me until my mind empties, then take a pencil out of the plastic jar and start to draw.

For a long time now, what I draw has seemed beyond my control. I can start out meaning to draw a dog or a spaceship or a desert island, but it always turns into the same thing in the end. It's as though the pencil comes alive in my fingers, like it knows my true intentions better than I do. I sort of understand what a psychiatrist is from back when we were still allowed to watch TV and read books, even though I didn't tell Doctor Hernandez that. He would likely say that the drawings are my subconscious asserting itself. He would probably be right, but I'm never going to show them to him so it doesn't really matter.

I sketch the first lines and—almost instantly—the familiar image starts to work its way out of my head and onto the page. I trade pencils for colored pens and let myself drift into the monotony of repetition, my hand working on autopilot while jumbled, fractured memories float through my head...

...my dad, even though I know it's not really him. It's a version of him that my brain has animated from an old photo. He's smiling at me, and I wonder if he really looked like that when he smiled; people look different when they're moving rather than frozen inside a frame...

...fire exploding through the windows of the Chapel and racing across the desert floor like a wild animal pursuing its prey, crackling with savage delight...

...Honey's face as she said no to Father John, as she looked him in the eye and knowingly spoke Heresy...

...my mom, the last time I saw her. Sitting in the back of the red pickup, her eyes locked on mine as she clutched her possessions in a single plastic bag...

...Nate looming over me in the darkness, his eyes wide, his voice full of worry, his hands full of forbidden things...

...the locked door in the basement of the Big House...

...Father John, after his prophecies had finally come true and the Servants of the Serpent were at our gates. I search the memory of his face for the certainty that sustained the Legion, that convinced my Brothers and Sisters—convinced *me*, for the longest time—that The Lord would keep them safe and bring them Glory, and find nothing...

...Alice, her insides spilling out...

...the tank as it rolled forward...

...blood...

...empty bullet casings...

...so much blood...

...my entire world, in the final moments before it ended...

I shiver as a chill runs up my spine, then look down at the piece of paper and see the same picture as always.

Water fills most of the page, pale blue flecked with white. I don't know exactly what it is—a lake, an ocean, a river—because the largest body of water I've ever seen with my eyes is the fountain in the Layfield town square. Whatever *this* is, I'm not drawing it from memory.

Jagged brown cliffs rise from the water's edge to a flat headland of lush green grass, so different to the baked orange dust of the desert. Set back from the edge of the cliff is a small house, with pale blue walls and a white roof and a chimney with a delicate plume of gray smoke spiraling up into a sky that is almost the same color as the water.

Standing next to the house are two tiny figures. They're barely more than stick people, but I know exactly who they are.

One is me.

The other is my mom.

A  
F  
T  
E  
R

I wake up in sheets soaked with sweat, a scream rising in my throat.

Bad dreams. The fire and Luke and Father John. I look at the clock above the door.

8:57.

I haven't slept this late in as long as I can remember. Probably the only times I ever have are when I've been ill. There are three minutes until Nurse Harrow will arrive with my breakfast, if what she told me yesterday was the truth.

*Of course it wasn't!* bellows Father John, his vast, booming voice echoing through my head. *She's an Outsider! They lie! They only ever lie!*

Goose bumps break out along my arms. The power in The Prophet's voice still terrifies me, even after everything: the absolute certainty, the blazing authority that tolerated no argument

of any kind. I squeeze my eyes shut, and I concentrate really hard on the water and the cliffs and the blue house, and eventually the voice fades away, although I know I'll never truly be rid of it.

I open my eyes and sit up on the edge of my bed. My hand hurts worse than ever. Horizon used to tell me that wounds are most painful when they're getting better, and I really hope he was right because it feels like someone is pressing a flame against my fingers and when I scratch them through the thick layers of bandages it feels like the end of the world.

I don't know what time I eventually fell asleep yesterday. After I finished drawing, I cried for a while until Nurse Harrow brought me a plastic tray with a plate of hot dogs and hash browns. She had that kind look on her face, so I cried a bit more when she left, the tears rolling down my cheeks as I ate my lunch.

I don't know when, but at some point after I finished eating, I lay down and closed my eyes. I do the math in my head. I must have slept, on and off, for almost eighteen hours. I don't feel rested though. I feel worn out and used up, like I've been stretched too thin and there isn't enough of what's left to go around.

I feel empty.

A key turns in the lock, and there's a knock before the door swings open. It seems a little pointless, because I'm pretty sure I couldn't stop whoever it is from coming in, but I guess it's polite.

Nurse Harrow appears with another tray in her hands. This one contains a steaming plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, fried potatoes, a fruit cup, and a plastic beaker of orange juice. My first thought—so quick to rise into my mind, so very quick—is that there's no way I can eat it, because even though the fruit is in a little bowl, it's clearly part of the same meal as the potatoes, and fruit and vegetables in the same meal are *absolutely* not allowed. The rules of the Legion, delivered via Father John directly from the mouth of The Lord, are carved into my brain.

I try not to squirm as my stomach rumbles, and I even manage a tiny smile as Nurse Harrow puts the tray down on the desk. She glances at the drawing I did yesterday, and my heart accelerates in my chest because I don't want her to look. It feels like she's seeing me naked.

"This is very good," she says, her smile widening. "Where is this house?"

"Don't touch it." It's the first thing I've said since I was brought here, wherever here is, and my voice is barely a croak. In my head, Father John tells me I'm *stupid and useless and weak*. "Please don't."

Nurse Harrow nods and steps back from the desk. "I won't," she says. "I'll be back in twenty minutes. I want to change your bandages before you go to Doctor Hernandez. Is that all right with you?"

I nod. She gives me another smile, then disappears through the door and locks it behind her. I wait until I'm sure she's really gone, then I grab the drawing and fold it in half and clutch it tightly against my chest as I look around the room for somewhere to hide it.

There isn't anywhere.

Of course there isn't. Rooms with heavy doors that lock and windows you can't reach don't have hiding places. I think about the loose board under my bed at the Base, about the dark space beneath it, but the floor I'm standing on now is made of smooth plastic tiles, and the walls around me are flat and featureless.

The easiest thing would be to destroy the sheet of paper. But I don't want to. I just *don't*. It's the only thing in this room that is really mine.

Instead, I untuck my pillowcase and shove the folded drawing inside, and turn the pillow over so the obvious rectangular shape is pressed against my mattress. It's pretty much the worst hiding place ever. Even though I don't think there are any cameras in my room—I can't *see* any, at least—it will take Nurse Harrow or

anybody else about five seconds to find the drawing if they decide to look.

But it's the best I can do.

"I'm going to suggest something," says Doctor Hernandez. "If that's okay with you?"

I'm sitting on the sofa in Interview Room 1 again. The psychiatrist is behind the desk, his notebooks and pens neatly arranged in front of him, the green light glowing on the machine beside him. He asked how I'm feeling this morning as soon as he walked through the door. I didn't answer the question, even though I actually do feel a little better—physically, at least—after Nurse Harrow changed my dressing and smeared greasy white cream all over the burned skin on my hand.

I don't answer this one either.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," he says. "My suggestion is that we trade. You ask a question, and I answer it. Then I ask, and you answer. How does that sound?"

In my head, Father John warns me not to fall for such an obvious trick, not to be stupid and gullible and False. I do my best to ignore his voice, but it's really hard. It booms and growls and roars, and for years and years, it was the only voice that mattered, the only source of truth in a world full of lies. Still, I try, because although I'm scared to talk to Doctor Hernandez—or anybody else for that matter—and I really don't want to answer any questions, there are two things I need to know. Two things I don't think I can go much longer *without* knowing.

*Be brave*, whispers the voice in the back of my head. This one isn't Father John's; it sounds a lot like me, except it says things I would never dare to.

"Okay," I say. Doctor Hernandez smiles. I wonder if he had

started to think I was never going to speak again. “But only if I can go first.”

“Of course. Ask away. Anything you like.”

I take a deep breath. “Where’s my mom?”

His smile fades at the edges, and I see pity on his face. I hate that he feels sorry for me, but I can’t tell him that because his expression has made me so scared about what he’s going to say that my chest has seized tight, trapping my breath inside me.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m afraid I don’t have any information on your mother.”

My chest relaxes. His answer—or *nonanswer*, to be accurate—is pretty much what I was expecting, even though it still hurts to hear the words out loud.

*It could be worse*, whispers the voice in the back of my head. *He could have told you she’s dead.*

It’s true. That would have been worse. But I’m not sure by how much. Not knowing is awful, even after all this time.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats.

“She isn’t here?” My voice is still a croak, low and small.

“No,” he says. “She isn’t here.”

“Is she still alive?”

“I don’t know.”

I stare at him. “You don’t know?”

“I’m afraid not,” he says. “I wish I could give you the answer you want or tell you a lie that would make you feel better, but I believe honesty is the most important element of this process. In time, when you’re ready, there are other people who would like to talk to you, and it’s possible they may have more information on the subject than I do.”

*The subject. You’re talking about my mother, you asshole.*

I blush at the bad word, even though I’m the only one who heard it. Doctor Hernandez frowns.

“Are you okay?”

“When?” I ask.

“I’m sorry?”

“When would these other people like to talk to me?”

“When it’s appropriate,” he says.

“When will that be?”

“When you’re ready.”

“Who decides that?”

“I do,” he says, “in consultation with my colleagues. I can’t give you an exact schedule, not at this early stage, but for now, I’ll make you a promise. After we conclude this session, I’ll ask the other agencies involved in this case for any information they have on your mother and bring you their reply. Does that sound fair?”

I shrug. I know he wants me to say yes, but I’m not going to. Doctor Hernandez looks at me for a long moment, then writes a note in one of his books. There are four of them, all different sizes, as well as three loose pads of paper. I don’t understand how he can possibly need them all.

“All right.” He puts down his pen and smiles at me. “My turn to ask a question. If that’s still okay?”

*Fair’s fair*, whispers the voice in the back of my head. I shrug again.

“Okay,” he says. “Great. What’s your name?”

“Moonbeam,” I say.

His smile widens. “That’s a beautiful name.”

I say nothing.

“Do you have any others?” he asks.

“Other what?”

“Names.”

“No.”

“Most people have at least two.”

I shrug. “Some of my Brothers and Sisters had six or seven. I only have one.”

“Fine,” he says. “That’s fine.”

I stare at him. He clearly wants me to say something more, but I don’t have the slightest idea what.

“If you’re telling me you only have one name, I believe you,” he says.

*You don’t. Clearly you don’t. Although I don’t know why you think I would lie about my name.*

“Okay,” I say.

“What about John Parson? What did he call you?”

“Father John called me Moonbeam.”

“Did he—”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

“No problem.” He raises his open hands in a *stay calm* gesture that makes me want to slam his head against the desk. “No problem at all. We don’t need to talk about him or about anything else that makes you uncomfortable—until you’re ready. Okay?”

I give him the tiniest of nods.

He looks relieved. “Great,” he says. “Your turn.”

“What have you done with my letter?” I ask.

He frowns. “I’m sorry?”

“I had a letter in my pocket,” I say. “During the fire. Where is it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. Was it important?”

*The most important thing in the world.*

I study his face, hoping to catch him lying. I’ve always been pretty good at reading people, especially after what happened to my mom, but all I see on Doctor Hernandez’s face is concern, so I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter.”

He nods, although he doesn’t seem at all convinced. “Okay. Why don’t you ask me something else? That one didn’t really count.”

“I don’t have any more questions.”

“None at all?”

*You didn’t answer the one I had.* “No.”

“Why don’t I give you a little information about what’s happening then? You might want to ask me about some of it, and it might make you feel more comfortable with your new surroundings.”

I doubt that very much, but I shrug. “Okay.”

“Great.” I’m starting to notice he says that a *lot*. “So this place, this building we’re sitting in, is called the George W. Bush Municipal Center. It’s in Odessa, about fifty miles from where you used to live. Do you know who George W. Bush is?”

I shake my head.

“He was president of the United States,” says Doctor Hernandez. “Do you know what that means?”

“He was the head of the Government.”

“That’s exactly right,” he says. “George W. Bush was president for eight years, until 2009, and this building was named for him when he left office. This section of the center, where we are now, is part of something called a secure unit. It’s a place where people can be looked after, where they can be safe. Do you know where you were before you were brought here?”

“Hospital.”

“Right again. You were in Mercy Memorial Hospital, six miles west of here. You were there for four days.”

My head swims.

*Four days? Is that really all it was? Can that be right?*

“I know someone talked to you while you were there,” continues Doctor Hernandez. “I know they asked you questions when you were in no fit state to answer them, and I’m very sorry they did. That shouldn’t have happened. From now on, nobody will ask you anything unless I’m there to make sure you’re okay with it. I promise.”

I nod, for about the hundredth time. It feels like nodding isn't enough, like he must be expecting more of a response, but I don't know what else to do. I guess I could try to smile, but I don't think it would be very convincing.

"You're not a prisoner here," he says, "and it's important that you don't see yourself as one. I understand there are locks on the doors and that you're being told what to do and where to go, and it's perfectly natural for you to find your situation frustrating. But you have to believe me when I tell you that everything is being done with your safety and well-being as the first priority. You're not in any trouble."

I very nearly laugh out loud.

*You have no idea*, I think. *Absolutely no idea at all.*

"So I can leave?" I ask.

"There you go," he says, his smile returning. "You *did* have another question."

I stare at him.

"The answer is yes," he says, when he realizes I'm not going to respond to what I'm pretty sure was a joke. "The entire purpose of my being here is to help you get on with your life as quickly as possible."

"But I can't leave now?"

He frowns. "Well, no. Not right this minute."

"So how am I not a prisoner?"

He appears to consider this for a second or two. "It's more about how you perceive your situation," he says eventually. "Look at this as a process that you and I are going to work through together and accept that we need certain boundaries in place for that to happen. We need to work in a space where you feel safe, where we can explore some of the things you've been through and take positive action to address them. When that process is complete, and I'm satisfied that you're safe and well and ready, you'll be free to go."

I don't believe that, not for a second. But I see no point in saying so out loud.

"When will that be?" I ask.

"The sooner we get started, the sooner we'll be done."

"Okay."

"Great," says Doctor Hernandez. He opens one of his notebooks. "How old are you, Moonbeam?"

*Fair's fair.*

"Seventeen."

"When's your birthday?"

"I'll be eighteen in November. On the twenty-first."

"I'll send you a card," he says.

Another joke. I stare at him again.

He looks down and scribbles something. I wait. Eventually his gaze returns to mine. "Is there anything you would like to talk about in this session?" he asks. "It can be anything, absolutely anything at all."

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not a liar," I lie.

"Of course you aren't," he says, and makes the *stay calm* gesture with his hands again. This time I want to snap his wrists, because I think I'm being *incredibly* calm, given the circumstances. "In which case, why don't you tell me something? It doesn't matter what, it doesn't have to be anything important. Just something about your life."

"Like what?" I ask.

"Completely up to you," he says. "Whatever comes into your head."

I consider this. I know what he *wants* me to talk about—the same thing the woman in the uniform in the hospital asked me about. But I'm not going to, not with him or anybody else. Not

ever. Because I don't want to spend the rest of my life in a cell if I can possibly help it.

I'm not stupid. Maybe he thinks I am, but I'm not.

I know he'll never let me out of here unless I tell him *something*.

*You need to look at this as a process*, whispers the voice in the back of my head.

I take a deep breath and start to talk.