

People Like Us

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I can't believe this is happening. Vicissitude Maddox, rule follower, the girl voted most respected and admired by her graduating class is now all alone, heading toward the border for a chance at survival. Authority is right on my tail, ready to arrest me—or worse. They say you learn a lot about yourself during your senior year. I learned a lifetime's worth about myself in less than six months. I just hope I live long enough to talk about it and use what I learned to save more people like me.

“We will never have true civilization until we have learned to recognize the rights of others.”

(Will Rogers)

Prologue

Long ago, in the time **B**efore, society was beaten, battered and broken after a plague contaminated the world. All countries suffered. All people were impacted. Nobody was safe. Worse yet, nobody had the answers to save the individuals from this catastrophe. Those who tried were ridiculed and ignored. Those who didn't try either suffered and died from the plague or annexed off to follow their own belief system. Quickly, the fear and anger spread worse than the contagious plague that threatened innocent lives. Divisive and hostile, the **C**razies and the **L**oonies fought for control, fought to be the guiding authority in a world ripped apart. The battle continued while animosities skyrocketed. Soon, nobody could be trusted, and the states that were cohesive crumbled. But the Authority united and created a world—a world in which the fighting ended and peace was finally restored—a world that is **N**ow in the country of **E**ka.

Chapter One

"If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, and work together, in the same world, at peace."

(Franklin D. Roosevelt)

Vicissitude

My moms were right. My green eyes match my emerald dress perfectly. They're typically always right. They're smart women who know what's up. And I'm extremely thankful they're mine. Most girls my age don't value their relationships with their mothers, but I do. And I'm not afraid to admit it

"Oh Cissy, you're stunning. My gracious, every girl at that dance is going to be green with envy when they lay eyes on you." Mama compliments, tucking one of her long braids back behind her ear.

"That's all they better lay on you, Vicissitude. Those girls only want one thing." Mom says.

"Will you stop? She only has eyes for Marjorie. Haven't you seen how she looks at that girl? They'll be together forever; I just know it." Mama sings.

I roll my eyes at them in the mirror. "Will you both stop? This isn't a big deal. Since when is it a big deal for a bunch of ladies to be in one room dancing and acting a fool? It's what we do literally every single time we're together."

My moms have been co-mingled for almost 25 years. It took a long time for them to get permission to have me. They filled out an application every year for seven years before Authority granted them permission for insemination. But when Mama finally got approval, and she was inseminated, my moms were nearly 35 years old. They were running out of time. Authority doesn't allow anyone over the age of 37 to carry a child.

When Mama got pregnant with me, they got quite the surprise. She was pregnant with twins. They were thrilled. Finally, they were getting the family they'd always wanted in one fell swoop. That was right up until the twins they were having ended up being one girl and one boy. Mama was devastated. Poor Mama was never permitted to hold, snuggle, or smell Cleave before they handed him over to his dads. And she laments about it every chance she can.

"Are you picking up Marjorie or is she driving—?"

I sigh, closing my eyes for a beat, "For the hundredth time, she is coming here." Just as I finish my sentence and slip my foot into my shoe, the doorbell rings. "Speak of the villain." I take one last look in the mirror and feel pretty good with what I see. Taking a deep breath, I spin one last time for my moms and grab my handbag to leave.

"I feel like you're bored or something," Marjorie whispers in my ear as she traces a finger down my bare back. I hate when she tries to tickle me like that.

“Not bored at all. Just slow dancing with my girlfriend,” I say, pulling back to look her in the eyes. Marjorie has entirely too much makeup on tonight. I know it’s our final dance, and we’re supposed to go all out, but I bet she used every bit of makeup she owns tonight. It’s caked on. I’m tempted to use my long, painted nail and see if her face scrapes off. I don’t though. She’d lose it if I ever criticized her in any way. Her moms do that enough.

Her long blonde hair is piled beautifully on top of her head with some loose curls cascading down and framing her face. She really is gorgeous—and she knows it too. We are definitely the power couple at Case Academy. Every girl here vies for our attention, and the girls never even try to hide the fact that they’d do anything to take Marjorie from me. They want her. These girls are like dogs in heat when she’s around.

“Have I told you tonight how sexy you look?” I ask, twirling a strand of her curls around my finger.

“Actually, you haven’t,” she admits. “I was beginning to think that I shouldn’t have gone with hot pink. Blonde hair and hot pink seem so cliché.”

“Ummm, since when?”

“Don’t you remember those girls’ toys from Before?” Marjorie says with her eyes wide.

“Uhhh no, and neither do you. Those are urban legends,” I groan, pulling her against me. “I tell you that all the time. No way people would make toys that look like that, so girls all over the world would try to look the same. That’s not a thing.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know. My moms swear they were real,” she says. “Sometimes, you’re too trusting and accepting. For real Cissy, you need to start asking some questions and thinking every now and then.”

I stop. Pushing away from her to look her right in the eyes, I ask, “Excuse me? I’m sorry I just don’t believe all the crap your moms come up with. How would they even know? They weren’t around for it, and these are the same moms who tell you daily that your beauty is all that you have?” I watch her face fall while her eyes glisten. My shoulders slack, knowing that I shouldn’t have fought back. Marjorie is so sensitive. I know better than to pick a fight with her.

Marjorie’s moms are the worst. I couldn’t live in her house. Everything is pristine and white. You’re legit not allowed to sit on her couches. What are couches for if you can’t sit on them? All they ever talk about is how pretty or how thin someone is. It’s ridiculous. They notice if Marjorie or her sister gains one pound—and they tell them about it. Look them right in the face and comment on their weight gain. These girls are the thinnest students at Case Academy.

I wonder what Marjorie’s moms think of me. I’m not built like Marjorie or her sister, Mallory. They’re all muscles and bones. Marjorie’s ribs are prominent, and her abs are clearly defined. I’m sure I have abs somewhere under my curves and fleshy parts, but I’m not about to eat less or exercise more than I have to. Exercise is not my jam. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not overweight; nobody is. It’s not allowed. Well, men are given a little more leeway than women. They’re allowed to be more robust than females are. I’ve actually never seen an overweight woman before. I heard about them though.

Julia Parsons was gaining weight once; we all noticed. But one day, she was no longer at school. Two months later, she came back with her weight fixed. I don’t know what happened to her or what they did to her, but it clearly worked. I like that we are granted a doable weight range that we can be. I think it would be strange if all of us were the exact same size with the same body type. Some of us are curvier and

fluffier than others, but nobody takes it to the extreme. I like that. I would hate it if anyone I knew were unhealthy just because she ate too much. I can't even imagine that. Why would anyone eat beyond being full? I think it's another one of those urban legends we always hear about.

"I don't know why you hate them so much," she frowns.

"I can't figure out why you love them so much," I counter.

"They're my moms. Of course, I love them. They only want what's best for me and want me to be the best. Why is that so wrong?"

"How can you think that forcing you to not eat, to exercise beyond our requirements, and to belittle you for not looking hot is what's best for you?" This is our typical fight. We have it all the time. It's exhausting and old. Noticing the tears in her eyes, I'm wrought with guilt. I always do this to her. "Listen, I want to have fun tonight and not fight."

"Oh, can we leave and make up? I love our make up sessions," Marjorie winks.

I'm starving. There's no way I can forgo dinner. Not tonight. "I'm definitely down to play later, but I have to eat first. Let's go to Gino's and get some pizza." I watch her face and add, "or just some salads." Her eyes brighten.

I'm not just getting a salad. According to my digital readout, I still have 900 calories to consume, and woman, I plan to devour each and every one of them. Tonight, I won't even care if my alarm goes off in the restaurant, and people hear me nearing my 1500-calorie limit. It's a special night. I deserve it.

Chapter Two

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse in any country. If it were, the laws would lose their effect, because it can always be pretended." (Thomas Jefferson)

Riot

"Nice work, gentlemen! We're going to destroy Woodruff Prep this weekend," Coach Cox yells, his whistle signaling the end of practice.

Just as the whistle blows, the electronic readout on my wrist reveals that I'm at goal for exercise and calories burned. It's lower than yesterday's. Thank Authority that coach went easier on us today.

I take off my helmet, dropping my lacrosse stick on my bag. I hate sports. But even worse than that, I hate being good at sports. If I would've known those evaluations I had when I was eight years old would mean I'd have to play a sport year-round, I would've pretended like I couldn't run, jump, throw, or catch. Now, I'm stuck in an endless cycle of running, jumping, throwing, and catching. Lacrosse is my favorite of the four sports they make me play though. I like hitting people and knocking them around. My best friend thinks I have anger issues. Maybe I do.

I guess playing sports is better than the alternative. I'd hate to spend four hours after school solving math equations or building things. One class of math a day is definitely enough for me. The last time I tried to build something, I hammered a nail right through my finger. My dads freaked.

"Riot, wait up!" Nigel yells, grabbing his bag. "We going to Gino's? I'm starving."

Nigel and I eat after every practice. We're supposed to. It's part of the rules. Good thing too, because I'm always ready to eat my helmet by the time practice ends. My dads don't really cook. They're always at work. Nigel's dad does, but Nigel usually eats twice. Something with me and then something when he gets home. He's a goalie, so he has approval to eat more than I can. Goalies need to be bigger and more hearty.

"We always go there. Can't we hit somewhere else?" His frown tells me that we're going to Gino's no matter how much I don't want to go there again. He's nutting bad for one of the servers there. If he doesn't make a move soon and ask him out, then I might make a move on him just to piss Nigel off. Now, that would be fun.

"Hey Riot, I heard McCarthy McCorum is dying to get in your pants," Nigel says, getting into my car. His red hair is slick with sweat, hanging in his eyes. He shakes his head, swinging his hair to the side to see. His freckles are the exact color of his hair.

"Yep, heard that too. Not interested," I say, starting the car.

"Dude, you can have any guy at Lakeward. What are you doing—and I know what you *aren't* doing." Nigel says, pushing the buttons of the radio.

"No chance. My car. My podcast," I say, pulling out of the parking lot. "Just because some guy is interested in me doesn't mean I have to screw him."

"I get it. You know me; I'm a one man guy," Nigel says, checking out his reflection in the mirror.

"Yeah right, a guy you've never gotten up enough nerve to even order one refill from," I joke, turning up the audio.

"Hey, are we rolling through Male Monument Center on our way?"

I groan, turning my blinker on, indicating we aren't going near Male Monument Center today.

"Don't you want to see that dude?" Nigel asks, pointing in the other direction.

"Not even a little bit," I admit.

"You're no fun," Nigel complains, reclining in my car seat and placing his sunglasses over his eyes.

"Yeah, sorry dude, I just have no desire to gawk at Authority's latest execution," I explain. "And it's disturbing that you always want to go see their most recent victims."

"Criminals, not victims," Nigel corrects.

"Says Authority," I argue. "What'd this one do anyway?"

"They found animal carcasses in his freezer. They think he hunted small animals and ate them," Nigel crinkles his nose in disgust.

"They think?" I ask, needing clarification.

"Well, he denied it."

"And let me guess; Authority Selects came in and killed him anyway."

"I can't believe your dads didn't tell you all about him," Nigel sounds surprised.

"Oh come on!" I exclaim, "You know they don't tell me anything."

Nigel and I have been friends since we were nine years old. When we were 12, we tried hooking up. It was weird. Felt like I was kissing my brother. Not that I have any brothers, but it was just odd. He agreed, so it didn't mess with our friendship. We decided that we were better as friends and that was it. The guys around here are so dramatic, starting and ending relationships faster than I can score a goal. I decided a few years ago that I just wanted to finish high school before I really got into anything with anyone. The guys here are all too predictable and clingy. Not interested. I'm just going to kick ass on the Lacrosse field and study hard.

My dads are all about me following in their footsteps. My dads own a law firm, *Logan and Logan Associates*. My sperm father, or active father, Luther, is all about the law to an extreme. He doesn't let us break any laws. Dude doesn't even go one mile per hour over the speed limit. At the top of his law class, he knows the law inside and out and never budes on it. He'll be a judge someday, I bet. His broad shoulders, piercing blue eyes, and bald head make him an ominous opponent in court. If you saw my dad in a dark alley, you'd fear for your life. When other lawyers realize that they're facing off against Luther

Logan, they shake in their shoes. Admittedly, I shake in my shoes when my father admonishes me. He's a scary dude.

My sperm father caught me drawing in a notebook once and immediately burned it. I was five-years-old. I'd never cried harder. I was only trying to stay awake until my other dad got home. I started doodling without even thinking about it. Man, my father blew up. He's never seen me do anything like that again. I hate disappointing him.

My passive dad, Atticus, is a public defender, so he's always on the defensive for me. He sticks up for me—even when I'm wrong. He once tried to fight the school, because I wanted to take a season off of sports. He tried to set up a meeting and fight the good fight for me, but that didn't fly. Dads aren't allowed to make rules or try to run the school or athletics—unless they actually work for the school. Nobody would even listen to one word my father said. He tried though, and that meant a lot to me.

Everyone wants Atticus Logan on his side. The man's a giant teddy bear of love and devotion. He often pushes the limit on his size. Twice now, Authority has put him on caloric deficit when he started rounding out a bit. To me though, I like him soft and cuddly—it suits him well. My dad and I both push the limits on the length of our hair. Men in Eka can't have hair that touches their ears or middle of their foreheads. My dad taught me how to use a little hair product to make my hair styled in a way in which it appears shorter than it is. My dad even cut his hair pretty short when he tried to set up a meeting at the school. He was ready to prove how professional and persuasive he could be. However, he got nowhere. The school and Authority shut him down before he could get any facts or research to them.

I've heard that parents used to have a big say in what went on in schools. Supposedly, they used to have clubs that parents and teachers were a part of together. That's just wild. It's probably just a myth. No way would parents try to say what a teacher does. How would they even know? You can't just walk into a teacher's classroom and automatically know how to do the job better than he can.

"Just ask him out," I grumble, grabbing my card out of my wallet.

"What? I can't just say, 'hey let's go out sometime.' He'll laugh me right out of here." Nigel shifts in his seat, glancing quickly behind him. Our server, Decarion Rattler, graduated from Lakeward two years ago. Nigel's been drooling over him since we were in middle school. "And let's not forget. I'm a damn ginger. I'm no Riot Logan with those piercing and brooding blue eyes or that mop of sexy black hair," Nigel jokes, mussing my hair.

"Dude, don't make me break that hand," I threaten. "Listen, have you ever paid for French fries here?" I ask. He shakes his head. "Do you always get a large milkshake for the price of the small?" He nods. "And last but definitely not least, did Decarion leave you his number last freaking year?" Nigel's head drops onto the back of the booth as his eyes flutter closed.

"You don't get it, man. I can't," he says, his head pounding against the booth. "What if we go out and he hates me—or I hate him? Or worse. What if it's perfect?"

"I never know what the hell you're talking about," I say, slurping the last of my caramel chocolate shake as I stand. "Why would it be worse if it's perfect? That makes no sense."

"Says the guy who's never had his heart broken. It sucks," Nigel groans.

Nigel doesn't know anything about my heart or the shards of heart I have scattered all over this place. "Listen, you and Curtis broke up two years ago. Yeah, it was messy, gruesome actually, but screw him." I say, whispering down into his ear. "You can't let him win by never trying again. Curtis was a prick. Everyone knew it, but you. You couldn't see anything beyond his perfect hair and chiseled body."

I don't blame Nigel. Curtis destroyed him. Nigel was in love, and Curtis just played him—used him whenever he could. I thump Nigel on the back, trying to pump him up, "Now, take Decarion for a test drive. You might like it."

Nigel glances at his wrist, checking the time on his secured tracker. "It's almost time for the women to get here, and the females to take over the shift. I'll catch him next time," Nigel says, grabbing his backpack.

"We have plenty of time before we have to clear out for the females. Go ask him—" The blare of the alarm cuts me off.

"Attention all males in Gino's. You have 20 minutes to finish your meals and exit the premises. Gentlemen, please pay your outstanding balances before departing the establishment."

"Twenty minutes? That's it?" Nigel says, looking around. "I can't be rushed if I'm going to do this."

"Hey Nigel, those shoes are lit," a voice booms from behind him. Nigel's eyes widen as he turns around. Decarion is within arm's reach from him, holding his jacket, ready to leave. We're his only table that hasn't cashed out yet.

"These? These old things—" Nigel stammers, pointing at the brand new shoes he's been bragging about for the past four days.

Decarion takes a breath, his eyes darting to the ceiling. "Listen, I've been waiting for over a year for you to ask me out, dropping hints nonstop. I'm not waiting anymore." Decarion states firmly. "You guys play Woodruff on Friday, right?" Nigel nods like a bobble head on a dashboard. "Why don't we come back here after close, and I make you one of my specialty pizzas? It's an early night for the females, so we can have the place to ourselves. Gino won't care."

"Sounds...sounds—" Nigel stutters.

"Sounds great. He'll meet you outside of the locker room after the game, Decarion," I confirm, shoving my shoulder against Nigel, hoping to jolt him out of his stupidity. No such luck. Nigel just nods, wide-eyed and terrified. The dude's all talk.

Walking out of the restaurant, Nigel is floating on cloud nine. I haven't seen him this happy since Curtis bought him a ferret. Why anyone would want a ferret or buy another human being a ferret is beyond me, but it sure made Nigel happy. I like seeing him like this. And if he's this giddy, then maybe, just maybe, he'll get off my back about dating someone.

As we leave the restaurant, I notice the females are barricaded on the other side of the partition. I can clearly hear them giggling and chatting. They sound excited. I heard through the grapevine that their big dance was tonight. Supposedly, girls love a good reason to get all fancy, show off their clothes, and dance. Thank Authority that I don't have to do that—ever. Can't even imagine it.

I know I'm in the minority, but I wouldn't care at all if the females ate with us or around us. We're just people. I'm not sure why we have to separate out like this. My dads said the authorities of Before found this to be the best way for us to exist. Supposedly, men and women can't coexist together, because men are the superior beings, and women just hold them back. And Authority knows, my sperm father would never let us break one of the Laws of Life and Liberty.

Chapter Three

"Sometimes the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws."
(Barbara Kingsolver)

Vicissitude

"This salad is everything," Marjorie moans. "I was starving, but needed to make sure my dress zipped today."

"Let me get this straight, your pile of spinach and kale, covered in lemon juice is everything you've ever dreamed of," I ask, sauce dripping down my chin as I stuff yet another bite of pizza into my mouth. I love pizza, but I really wish the sauce wasn't so messy. It's basically just bread with tomato sauce. They say that Before, pizza was so much better. Covered in cheese. No way that could be good. I'd never eat anything that came out of an animal. The thought's repulsive. We do have many forms of cheese now, but nobody puts it on a pizza. Mainly, our cheese is made from birthing mother's breast milk. Yeah, not eating that either.

"Don't even start," she says, reaching over to dab at the sauce on my face.

I bolt backward, "Nice try, Mom, but I can wipe my own face. Shall I ask you to wipe my ass when I go to the bathroom too?"

"Oh, I love when you talk dirty," she laughs, before taking a drink of her water. She runs a stockinged foot up my leg, but I scoot my legs away from her. "Boo, you're no fun," she flirts.

"I'm fun. I'm lots of fun—just not in the middle of Gino's with half of our class sitting here," I explain. Marjorie rolls her eyes and takes another nibble of her scrumptious pile of grass.

"Hey Cissy, how's your mom?" Celeste Peltzer asks, grinning from ear to ear. I give her a "thumbs up," indicating that she's just great. "Tell Ruth, I miss working with her." I nod as my lips dip down, and my eyes narrow. Ever since Celeste volunteered on my mom's floor at the hospital, she's been obsessed with my mom. I catch a mumbled "MILF" as she walks away.

"I'm so jealous of that," Marjorie whines. "Nobody likes my moms."

"Are you seriously jealous of the fact that our friends want to hook up with my mom?" Marjorie and I are like hamsters on wheels. We just have the same conversations—or fights—over and over again.

My egg-release mom, Ruth, is the charge nurse on the cardiology floor at Female General in town. She busted her butt to be Integral Nurse, which is the closest thing a woman can be to being a doctor, but she failed the final evaluations. Now, Mama just runs the entire floor and oversees all the other nurses

and volunteers. She really wanted to perform surgeries, but only Integral Nurses can do that. My mom can do everything else, but operate. It drives her crazy.

Once, when one of our neighbors' appendix burst, my mom had everything she needed at our house, so she just took it out. The woman was fine, the scar minimal. My mom was still charged with "Activity Unbecoming of a Woman," and had to donate her next three paychecks to Male General. She was livid. It makes her absolutely bonkers when women do not receive the same health care and health choices that men do. Women aren't the preferred gender of Eka, so oftentimes, our health and longevity of life are jeopardized. Ekian Authority will do everything in their power to save a man, but a woman doesn't receive the same. As a child, I struggled with this notion, but as I get older, it does make sense to me. Men run Eka; we just live here. It seems fair to me that they prioritize men over us. They are the stronger and smarter sex. But, we should all be granted equal health care.

My passive mom, Gloria, is a teacher at Female United Elementary. She absolutely loves her job. It doesn't even bother her that she has to work seven days a week, ten-hour days. She loves it. She doesn't care at all. Teachers are the only professionals that aren't permitted to take time off of work. Mom loves kids, though, so she doesn't mind.

It's sad that Mom couldn't be impregnated, due to being a teacher, because she'd need time off to recover from birth. So, Mama carried Cleave and me. It does make sense to me; not all students can attend school every day. Schools need teachers there for whenever students can attend. Sometimes, kids get sick or have other plans, and when they do, they need to make it up. It's up to the teachers to be at the school whenever students need to come and make up that time and education.

I heard the male teachers do not have to do that. As long as a male teacher coaches a sport, he is permitted to take the weekends off as well as any other days that he may need to get his athletes in shape. Mama agrees with that completely, because she wants to make sure the athletes don't get hurt. She's always worried about everyone's safety and well-being.

I worry about Mom's safety and well-being. I think they should figure out a way to give teachers a break. Even when we are on break from school and have weeks off, Mom has to go in to the building to make her lesson plans, get them approved through the Authority, study and research more, and help students who are struggling. I am so glad I've never had problems in school. Assigned academics during breaks would kill me; I just know it.

Marjorie's eyes widen. "Babe, Celeste Peltzer thinks your mom is hot."

"We just establish—"

"That means, she thinks **you're** hot. I'm doomed. You're definitely going to leave me for her." Marjorie pounds her head on the table just centimeters from her rabbit food.

"First of all, Celeste Peltzer is not my type," I explain. "Secondly, I'm not going anywhere. And third, how did you even come up with that?"

"You look just like Mama. You have the same green eyes, gorgeous mocha skin, and perfectly sectioned and braided hair. You're twins almost!" she screeches, and then immediately covers her mouth. "Sorry," she mumbles.

"It's fine. I am a twin. It's no secret," I say, shrugging.

"I know, Cissy, but you hate talking about him in public. You always end up—" I wipe the corners of my eyes and shake my head. "Crying," she finishes.

Marjorie slides out of the booth and slides in next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

"I'm fine," I say, taking a deep breath to compose myself. "It is what it is."

"Oh, it is not. You hate that phrase. It's right up there with 'sorry, not sorry,' so I know you're not okay," she pushes against me in a playful nudge.

"I do hate those sayings," I laugh, closing my eyes as I refuse to let more tears flow. "I just hate—hate—"

"Hate that you can't see Cleave whenever you want," Marjorie finishes my sentence. "It's dumb. I totally agree with you. But look on the bright side; you do get to see him once a month. At least Authority passed that law a few years ago."

"Oh yeah, so lucky about that. Gotta love our 30-minute supervised visitations," I say, as my eyes roll to the ceiling. "It makes no sense. And it's even worse that Mama is never allowed to see him. So stupid."

Marjorie shrugs, "Those are the rules. We can't do anything about it." She glides the wand of her lip gloss across her lips and then puckers them.

"What happened to the Marjorie who just told me to start asking questions?"

"You know what I mean. We can't change the laws, but you can at least start to wonder about life Before," she says. She takes one of my braids in her fingers, "Ready to get out of here?" she asks, winking at me.

"Ummm, yeah, sure," I say, taking a final bite of my pizza just as my tracker screeches a warning bell, signifying that I have ten more calories left for the day.

I'm a rule follower. It's what I do—what I've been taught to do. But for the life of me, I cannot understand why I can't spend more time with Cleave. I also cannot understand why that time has to be supervised either. What are we going to do? Cleave is the only male I've ever spoken to.

Once, I was walking into Gino's and a guy came out of the restaurant late, because he was in the bathroom. He was rushing so fast to get out of there. My guess is he didn't want to pay the fine for being in there past male occupancy—or he needed to get to another bathroom after eating something expired at Gino's. He was so oblivious to anyone around him that he crashed into me throwing me backwards against the wall. He mumbled a pathetic "Sorry," and that was the extent of me speaking to a man. Thrilling. Now, they ensure that the entire building is cleared out before the employees are even permitted inside.

There was a huge march years ago at Authority Central demanding that men and women be permitted to congregate in the same areas, but that backfired. They only tightened the reigns more. We were just recently granted permission for siblings to interact with strict supervision from a male Authority officer.

Cleave is fascinating. I love talking to him. His dads seem so much fun. They're older. They'd both tried to donate their sperm for years, but something stopped them from being productive. They got lucky when Mama had him. They had to sign an airtight contract that they'd never attempt production again if they were given a baby. His dads agreed immediately. So many people think that they need to be genetically connected to be considered family. That's not even remotely true. Family is created with love, commitment, time, and respect. Even I know that.

When I first met Cleave, I was so nervous. It was the only time in my life I understood what it meant to feel butterflies in my stomach. Actually, they felt like hornets trying to sting their way right out of my belly. I'd never been around a male before, let alone one I was supposed to talk to face-to-face, one-on-one with. I was terrified

Needless to say, my fears were heightened and on edge the moment we met on Authority grounds. Cleave took one look at me and said, "Thank Authority, I got the good looks. You must have the brains." His smile spanned from ear to ear, the same smile that I'd seen daily in the mirror. His mocha skin is the same shade of mine, his hair more unruly than mine, but his eyes have more of a mischievous sparkle than I could ever dream of. He's the male version of me. And, I'm not afraid of myself, so why would I be afraid of him? His dig was just the icebreaker we both needed. Our friendship, our sibling bond, was solidified right in the moment.

"Are you even with me right now?" Marjorie asks, waving her hand in front of my face. We're tangled in the sheets of her bed, legs intertwined, dresses askew on the floor.

"Of course," I say, kissing the end of her nose. "Where else would I be?"

"You seem a million miles away right now. Are you thinking about Celeste Peltzer?" she laughs, rolling on top of me, pinning my arms above my head. "Because I think I can take her. Have you seen my muscles?" Marjorie flexes. Although she is petite, her biceps look like grapefruits bulging right out of her upper arms.

"Oh yeah, you got me. Celeste's everything I've ever wanted in a woman. I'm thinking about asking Mama if we can share her," I take a stab at humor. Jokes and humor aren't my things.

"That's just disgusting," Marjorie grimaces. "But seriously, what were you thinking about?"

"I'm not sure if the truth is any better," I admit.

"Try me."

"Cleave," I answer, knowing that she hates when I get sentimental about my brother.

"Ewww, your lips were on me, and you were thinking about a boy? That is worse," she says, sliding back off of me. She pretends to gag, choking back fake vomit.

"Not like that," I say, rolling my eyes. "I just wish there was a way that we could spend more time together, do things together, and just, you know, be."

"Well, there isn't, so just get over it, and get back on me," she says, tugging at me.

“It’s not that easy,” I say rolling out of her reach. “What if you couldn’t see Mallory anymore? What if one day someone told you that you and your sister could no longer hang out, eat meals together, or sit up all night and talk?”

“Would I get to keep all of her clothes and makeup?” she asks.

Chapter Four

"A man's mind stretched by new ideas may never return to its original dimensions."
(Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.)

Riot

"Why are we talking about this now?" I ask, sick of the cycle of this conversation. "I don't want to be a lawyer. Never have. Never will."

"Your resume is abysmal, Riot. You have to start thinking about your future," my father says, rubbing his bald head in frustration.

"Why? You think about it enough for both of us," I quip. The fire in my father's eyes prove that I've gone too far. Yet, again.

"Luther, come on. Riot's fine. He doesn't need to know what he wants just yet." My passive dad is always coming to my rescue. His light eyes glisten. Even his eyes are kind. I'm so thankful my dad does most of the parenting, and my father does most of the grumbling and complaining. The nights that my dad and I are alone are my favorite nights. We bond and make memories like best friends. People say you shouldn't be friends with your parents, but I challenge anyone to meet my dad, Atticus, and not immediately want him as a confidante.

"College starts in five months. He needs a plan," my father argues.

"He has a plan. He's going to college. That's enough for now. He's only seventeen. Why does he have to have his entire life mapped out already?" my dad reasons.

"Because Atticus, he has no motivation, no drive. He's going to end up living with us for the rest of his life," my father yells, pounding on the table. The vein in his forehead is bulging right out of his head.

My dad and I both jump as my pasta bowl dances on the table from the force of his fist.

My dad looks at me and asks, "Are you sure there isn't anything that really interests you, something that you can see yourself doing for the rest of your life?"

There is. There definitely is, but I would never tell either one of them. The law is their life. Authority knows; they'd never let me do one thing to break that law.

"I mean, maybe I could teach—or coach lacrosse," I shrug.

"Coach? You hate lacrosse," my dad states firmly, knowing the truth about that at least.

"You wanted an answer. I gave you an answer," I grab my backpack and head out of the house.

"Riot! Get back here!" my father yells as I slam the door behind me.

How do I look my two law-abiding fathers in the eyes and tell them that what I want to do is illegal? That would go over real well. My dads fight for laws and rights, but I don't think they fight for what's *actually* right. Things they taught me that I certainly didn't learn in school are to think and to ask questions. Things I can't even do at school, at home, or anywhere, really. My dads know information about Before, but they never share them with me—no matter how much I ask and beg. It's against Authority to discuss the past. None of what goes on makes sense to me. Why do they teach me to think and ask questions if they never tell me anything? I wish I had access to real knowledge. I'd love to read and know more about Before. I have little to no access to books. They've been completely restricted—or totally destroyed. And technology (where the real answers are) is illegal to anyone under the age of 25. Apparently, the human brain isn't fully developed until 25. I think that's bullshit. But even then, Authority is monitoring every single thing on technology, so I bet that isn't even all that accessible.

I park at a local car charging station, plug my car in, and pay for a four-hour charge. Grabbing my backpack, I head down the road toward the forest—vigilant of any cars that pass me. Not many pass today, which helps even out my nerves.

As I walk into the woods, I look around, making sure nobody is watching. I'm not allowed in the forest today. It's an even numbered day, so only females can take hikes, climb trees, or have picnics. But the place I go to is so secluded that nobody notices me when I'm there. It is deep in the woods on the other side of the mountain that separates our community with the female community. The females have the modest, and if we're being honest, the poor part of town. It's in an area that if men were permitted to go to, they wouldn't step foot in. The Female Faction is desolate and drab.

Now, the Male Faction is luxurious with beautiful homes, lavish swimming pools, and upscale architecture. Men live large in Eka. Women live with bare essentials, but they make it work. I've never heard of any female complaining or even trying to change their living environments. Women are just happy spending time and chatting with other women. They don't need money or extravagant things to be fulfilled. They're just always pleased with whatever they have.

Nearly tripping over a root and off the ledge, I grab a jagged piece of a boulder on the mountain to maintain my balance. It's quite a trek to get to this area, and there are some dangerous edges to the walk. Once you get past the swimming hole, picnic area, and easy-to-hike trail, the route gets a little more treacherous, so I'm typically the only person who ventures out past the public domain. Back where I go, nobody is ever there. It's quite the hike and not easy for people to navigate. I've been coming out here for ages, so it's a breeze for me—unless I'm not paying attention, and I stumble like I just did.

Occasionally, I see this one girl, but she's never seen me. I've watched her from time to time. All she ever does is lie on her back and look up at the sky. She always looks deep in thought, but from what I've heard, very few girls have original thoughts.

I make my way to my favorite spot, a tree canopied area, plush with vegetation near a small cave on the mountainside. I go deep into the briars, getting pricked half a dozen times before reaching my hand in the little cave and pulling out my concealed wooden box. Just the sight of the mahogany rectangle relieves all of my tension and anxiety. The cedar box has a pungent woody scent that with just one whiff releases the tightness in my shoulders. As I open the box, I marvel at all the vibrant colors. The law that men cannot paint, draw, or create any form of art is absurd. I wish my dads would battle Authority to allow me to do what I love—and what I'm the best at. But they don't know my secret. It's one of the many things that I cannot share with them. My only—and I mean only—joy is creating beauty from nothing or creating fear and pain from scratch. I can do anything with my hands.

I take out a scroll of paper and a piece of charcoal, knowing exactly what I'm going to draw today. Color is out. Darkness and doom are in. Beginning to scrawl all over the paper, I thank Authority for Jase Johnson, a teammate on my lacrosse team. He can get anything—for a price. I have no idea how he secures our forbidden items, but without him, I'd have no outlet for my pent up feelings and cravings to create. We have a solid agreement. He gets me what I need. I pay him exorbitantly. And neither one of us ever rats the other out. We'd both get fined and charged with "Activity Unbecoming of a Man." My dad would have my ass.

I love drawing her. Her features are still so clear in my head. I know eventually my memories will fade. I'll forget the vibrancy of her hair, the curve of her jawline, or the gleam in her eye when she came up with a mischievous plan. But for now, I relish in the memories and draw the perfect portrait.

Just as I finish my masterpiece, a booming voice echoes in my ears. "What the actual--?" The tree-gazing girl. Her voice is shrill and terrified. Fuck. Not again. I'm done. Screwed. It's all over.

I jump up, stuffing all of my materials into the box. I can't put it all back in the briars without her seeing it. "It's cool. I'm leaving." I scramble around trying to get away as fast as I can.

"Don't come near me!" she screams, backing away, grabbing a stick. Her eyes are wide, riddled with fear.

I'm nowhere near her. I'm moving backwards, not breaking eye contact with her. "I'm not. I'm outta here." Stuffing the box into my backpack, I know how truly dangerous that choice is. This box cannot come home with me. I turn to leave.

"Did you kill her?" Her question stops me dead in my tracks. "Don't lie! I saw whose face that was on that picture."

It's a punch to the gut, a pain I've felt for months, the worst months of my life. The loneliest six months of my life. "Kill her?" I ask, turning around to face the accusation. I feel the bile rising in my stomach, the burning sensation familiar and welcome. "Yeah, I guess I did," I admit right before I vomit.

Chapter Five

“Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.” (Abraham Lincoln)

Vicissitude

I totally hated dance class. All females are required to take dance classes from the age of three until they are nine-years-old. I was downright terrible. No rhythm. No grace. No coordination. Nothing. Supposedly, dance makes us strong, lithe, flexible, graceful, coordinated, and as always...thin. My dance teachers loved my look, my exotic features and long, thick braids. So, when I started dance, I was front and center with this beautiful, fiery, redheaded little girl. We became instant friends. However, little by little, I found myself in the back left corner of every dance routine we did. At some of the shows, they had me so far to the left that my moms couldn't see me behind the curtain. I'm pretty sure it was intentional to tuck me way back there. Yeah, I was really bad.

Lizzie Griffin stayed front and center. Not only was she beautiful, she was an incredible dancer. Her feet legit looked like they never even touched the floor. This girl glided through air—even as a toddler. She was a natural. We all noticed it even before we acknowledged that we couldn't compete with her. Moving in the back of the line of competent dancers ended up forcing a wedge between us. Her moms treated me like my ogre-like abilities were contagious, and she might catch my lack of rhythm. It wasn't long before our friendship fizzled out. However, I always liked Lizzie, and she always liked me. Our circles just didn't cross anymore.

Last year, everyone noticed how happy and full of life she became. Lizzie was always sweet and kind, but she was pretty reserved, very serious about dance. Then suddenly at school, she was different. The quiet and serious Lizzie morphed into a lively, fun, and upbeat teen girl. There was a positivity to her that none of us had ever witnessed before. Woman, her bliss was infectious.

Then, the unthinkable happened. Lizzie was dead. We were devastated and confused. When the news hit, it shook our entire community. Suicide. Lizzie Griffin hanged herself in the woods—in the same spot I go every chance I can to stare up at the vastness of the sky. Her moms were immediately arrested.

Parents are held accountable if their children end their lives. It's imperative that parents check in on the well-being and mental health of their children on a regular basis. Females are required to attend at least a one-hour therapy session each month, starting at ten-years-old. Lizzie's moms should've been cued in on her depressed state. It's a privilege and honor to be permitted to parent. If parents fail to raise their children with love, understanding, and forgiveness, then the child's failure is on them. Mrs. and Mrs. Griffin will serve five years in our Women's Confinery—separated from one another. The Authority dissolved their partnership the moment Lizzie's body was removed from the tree.

My moms and I felt terribly for them. Sure, they were elitist when it came to dance and treated me like a filthy pariah, but woman, did they love Lizzie. She was their entire world. There's no part of me that believes they're to blame for Lizzie's death. But to be honest, I never believed she completed suicide either. Marjorie and I could never wrap our heads around the fact that the happiest, giddiest girl we knew would end her life, knowing her moms would be separated and confined for five years, and Lizzie wouldn't receive any sort of burial or end of life ceremony. The Lizzie I knew wouldn't do that. Whether she was focused and reserved or gleeful and giddy, Lizzie would never do such a thing to her parents.

“Get away from me!” I scream. “Murderer! Help!” I start running for the opening in the brush when I’m yanked back by my jacket, catching a branch. I fly back and thud hard against the chest of the very murderer I’m running from.

I open my mouth ready to bellow as loudly as I can, when his hand covers my mouth. “Shhh, please,” he whispers in my ear, his breath hot on my neck. I squirm, trying to escape his grip and my imminent doom. “I want to let you go, pretend like none of this happened. Can I trust you?”

I nod, my body quaking with fear. He loosens his grip, and I break from his clutches, whipping around and clocking him right on the side of the head. His lack of pain and shocked expression spurns me into overdrive as my shoe connects powerfully with his groin. The muffled yelp as he doubles over gives me the courage to plow my knee right into his nose. He crumples to the ground. Just as I’m about to kick him again, I notice it. A gold locket escapes the collar of his shirt. A gold locket I’ve seen many times in my life as she danced around the stage, the locket glittering in the spotlight.

Lizzie’s locket.

“You stole her fucking necklace too,” I scream, hysterically as I kick him again right in the head.

Seconds before my foot meets his skull, he muffles a painful, “I loved her.”

I never realized how long people lay there, corpse-like, when they’re knocked out. But jeez, this male is out. He’s breathing, so I’m off the hook there. A woman would lose her life if she injured a male in any way. Lizzie was probably the one getting him those forbidden art supplies. No wonder he loved her. Or thought he loved her. You’d have to love the person breaking the Laws of Life and Liberty for you and risking her life, so you can be a criminal. Disgusted, I want to kick him again. How dare he use her like that? Loved her? Yeah right.

Men do not love women in these parts of the world. I heard that they do in other countries, but definitely not in this one. Once we united and became Eka, many restrictions were put into place. Technology was the first to go. Second was the integration of men and women. And the third one was travel. I would love to travel. I’ve heard so many stories about these other communities, but I never know what to believe. If a teacher tells me, then I tend to believe it. But when Marjorie or Cleave tell me things, I just basically feel like they’re just trying to make themselves sound smart and worldly.

Supposedly though, there are places that have snow, white fluffy, cold fuzz that falls from the sky. And it’s right here in Eka, but much further north. I would love to see that. But, we’re only permitted to live where we’re born. There are, however, a few exceptions to that. Authority can reposition people to other places if they are needed somewhere else. It’s very rare. My moms know people who have been relocated for their careers, but I’ve never known anyone who left or who showed up where we are. After travel was banned, people stopped being curious about other places and other lives. People just worry about themselves now and their own environments. They couldn’t change the covenants anyway, so why bother? However, that didn’t stop Authority for making all sorts of new guidelines and rules. Every fifth grade student, male or female, has to memorize the Laws of Life and Liberty:

1. No person under the age of 25 shall be permitted to use, activate, control, or view any form of technology. Individuals over the age of 25 will have controlled access to technology based upon his/her occupation, mental health, and necessity.
2. Males and females are prohibited from congregating, conversing, cohabitating, or comingling. All individuals must remain their birth gender. All individuals must adorn their bodies in gender-appropriate clothing.

3. A person's geographical status may never change after his/her birth.
4. Every person from the age of 10 and up will be required to learn the proper techniques in handling and using firearms. All individuals are permitted and encouraged to carry a firearm at all times.
5. Occupations will be based upon a series of evaluations, competencies, and familial status. No person will obtain a career that does not fall into his/her gender at birth.
6. No male will earn a living less than any female in Eka. Only females will be required to pay taxes on items and properties.
7. Animals will remain as pets or free to roam their own habitat. Animals will never be used as clothing, food, or entertainment.
8. Any form of alcohol or mind-altering substance is prohibited for all females and controlled for all males.
9. No individual is permitted to worship any false idols. Authority is the only guiding leadership of Eka.
10. Authority may add, omit, or amend any governing Law of Liberty at any given time for any given reason without approval of the people of Eka.

Those were the first ten. Since I was in fifth grade, they added sixteen more of them. I'm required to know them by heart, but there is no test for me to recite the laws in front of an evaluation board. I feel sad for the fifth graders now, because there are just so many—and they even added subcategories under the main laws. Authority added our trackers and our weight control six years ago. I cannot even fathom a world without trackers. How would anyone ever find another person?

We are permitted to leave our trackers off each week for a total of 12 hours for charging and maintenance. I never take mine off though. My moms would freak if they couldn't locate me any second they so desired. And so would Marjorie.

I'm totally fine with the Laws of Liberty. I mean; I'd love to spend more time with Cleave and see this snow I've heard rumors about, but other than that, the laws all seem fair to me. Why would my moms need more money than they have? We're fine. I know Authority has our best interest in mind. They're the entire country's parents in a sense. They know what's best for us.

"Fuck," he grumbles, applying pressure to his head. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?" I jump up, holding his backpack firmly against my chest.

"Start talking, dick stick," I grit through my teeth. "What happened to Lizzie Griffin?" He rolls over onto his side, spitting blood out of his mouth. Whoa. Blood? I'm pretty badass.

"You know what happened. Everyone knows. She killed herself," he coughs, pushing up onto his hands and knees.

"Then how'd you get her locket? Did you just happen to rip it off her cold, dead body?" I ask, my voice shrill. "Did you kill her for it?"

He sits back on his knees, his hands gripping his face and head. "Lizzie gave it to me."

"Fuck off, I'm taking this to Authority," I say, shrugging his backpack onto my back. I'm so pissed. I'm always carrying my firearm. Today, I just wanted a peaceful day in the woods—alone. I didn't want to carry my backpack. And of course, the day I need it is the day it's on my nightstand. Now, if he comes after me, I'm dead.

“Cissy, stop!” he screams, “Please, you can’t. I’ll tell you everything.”

Chapter Six

“Life beats down and crushes the soul and art reminds you that you have one.” (Stella Adler)

Riot

The first time Jase secured some paint supplies for me, I was terrified. I kept them hidden inside my mattress for weeks. Then one day, I just decided to put them in my backpack and head out into the woods. I’d always liked going out here, but it wasn’t the norm for me. I figured I could tell anyone who saw me that I uncovered the supplies in the forest, shrugging it off as if they were some girl’s who left them. It was a perfect alibi.

I was painting a picture of my lacrosse team’s logo, when Lizzie Griffin walked right up to me, and said, “That’s pretty boring—and flat. It needs dimension.” Lizzie plopped right down next to me as if it were perfectly normal for a man and woman to talk to one another. “If you’re going to break the Laws of Liberty, then you need to put your whole heart and soul into your craft. I’m an art 4 student. I can help you.” My jaw hung as my eyes widened.

A girl.

A girl in the forest.

A girl in the forest was talking to me.

A girl in the forest was talking to me, and she wasn’t afraid about it one bit.

I was mesmerized by her audacity, courage, and honesty. And her eye for art. I could use her help, because I had no idea what it meant for my painting to be flat.

And what the hell was “dimension?”

Truthfully, I’d been waiting my entire life, well my entire teenage life, for someone to challenge me, for something to catapult my feelings of complacency in this humdrum existence of Eka. And there I was, face-to-face with the very catalyst that was going to ignite all of my pent up frustrations, questions, and anxiety about this community that we all blindly succumbed to like sheep following their shepherd.

Our friendship was immediate. Lizzie was a powerhouse. She was smart, articulate, brave, and unbelievably talented. She’d dance for me with her long red curls swirling about her as she glided through the forest, light and graceful on her toes. I could watch her for hours. And I did. She’d dance, and I’d draw or paint. Time didn’t exist when we were together. I never cared about what time I needed to be home, if I had homework, if I needed to be at lacrosse, or anything. All that mattered was spending time with her, being with her.

I didn't understand it. Nigel and I have fun together. The joking and jibes never stop. He's my man, my ride or die. But being with Lizzie was everything. I could be myself—never had to try with her. There were times when we couldn't stop talking, telling, or recapping stories. Every word would just flow right into the next one. There was never a moment of uncomfortable silence or awkward pauses. Other times, it was silent and serene, comfortable and familiar. She'd dance. I'd create. No words were spoken, but yet, everything was understood. I couldn't wrap my head around this type of friendship, this comfort and fulfillment. I'd never experienced it before. Neither had Lizzie.

Her death destroyed me. And I couldn't talk about it ever—to anyone. Not Nigel. Not my dads. Nobody. Our friendship was forbidden, so my emotions were taboo. I couldn't cry. I couldn't feel. I couldn't do anything, but go out into the woods and pour my feelings and thoughts into whatever creative outlet I'd chosen for the day. And now, I'm screwed. This crazy as shit girl is threatening Authority on me. It's truth and die or grovel and lie.

"How in Authority's sake do you know my name?" Cissy asks, bringing me back from my reverie, her eyes narrowed to minute jade slivers.

"You sucked at dance," I say, my shoulders lifting slightly, hoping she catches the nonchalance in my voice and backs off a bit. "By the way, I'm Riot."

I didn't think her eyes could get any smaller. "First of all, I didn't ask, nor do I care. And how would you even know that?" she asks, her words gravelly and precise.

"We talked about everything—and anything. That's what friends do; that's what we did," I say, my head falling back onto the tree behind me. We even talked about you."

"Why me?"

"Because you were here, looking up at the damn sky like you always do," I say as my eyes close, remembering Lizzie's words. "You were her first friend and the first friend her moms drove off, because 'you weren't good enough for Lizzie.' Apparently, you were the first of many," I explain, finally looking directly into her eyes.

The green eyes staring back at me are wide, full of surprise. "Lizzie Griffin was friends with a boy? No way! She'd never break the Laws of Liberty like that."

"'Fraid so," I click my tongue, running my hand through my hair. My shirt sticks to my body, damp with sweat. It's not even hot. My body always betrays me like this when my nerves are in overdrive.

"No way!" she says again, her head shaking back and forth emphatically. "How? How can that possibly be? We aren't supposed to talk to boys at all."

"Do you follow every Law of Liberty?" I ask, surprised.

"Ummm, yes!" she says, puffing her chest in pride. "And so should you." My laugh escapes me before I even have a chance to stop it. "You think that's funny? Are you trying to end up in the Male Confinery?"

"There's no doubt in my mind I'll end up there someday," I say, standing as Cissy's features blur. I grab the tree to stabilize my wobbles. "Whoa, you've got quite the strength in those legs. Ever consider soccer?" I don't know how I'm going to explain a concussion to my dads or my coach.

“Very funny. You know girls can’t play sports,” she says, backing away from me.

“You sure could,” I walk toward her. “Now, may I please have my bag, so I can get home?”

She looks at my backpack as if she forgot she was holding it. She tosses it at my feet. “Here, but you really should get rid of those paints and charcoal.”

“No chance,” I say, unzipping the pack and securing the wooden box into the hidden compartment of my backpack.

“Hey,” she asks, twisting her fingers around each other.

Lizzie was right about her. This Cissy girl does have soft, kind eyes—even when she’s throwing punches and low blows to the groin. Her features are strong; her dark skin looks soft and smooth. The long braids give her an attractive edge, bordering on threatening. I’d like to paint this girl and highlight the beauty that she probably can’t see with her own eyes.

I stop, raising an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Do you know why she did it?”

“That’s not my story to tell,” I admit, dropping my head and retracing my steps out of the woods.

“Tell me everything,” Nigel says, getting into my car. “Oh my Authority, don’t leave anything out.”

“Dude, there’s nothing to tell. I got a mushroom sub to go. Decarion asked me if I wanted a drink. I said, ‘no’. He threw in a bag of chips, and I left.”

“That’s it? Did he say anything about me at all?”

“Not one word.”

“Did it seem like he was looking for me? Like over your shoulder? Expecting me to be there?”

“Nope.”

Nigel is losing it. He hasn’t heard from Decarion since their date Friday. Granted, Nigel hasn’t tried to contact him or anything. It’s been the most annoying 48 hours of my existence. Nigel wants so much out of life, but he does nothing to go get it. He just sits and waits for everything to happen to him or for him. Makes me crazy.

Nigel just bangs his head on the dashboard, mumbling “Crap. Crap. Crap,” over and over again.

“Oh wait, I forgot,” I say, turning to look at him. “I told him that you had a blast the other night. And he said that he did too. He may have also said that he’s dying for you to show up at work tonight when he gets off to hang out at his house later.”

“You’re a total ass, you know that right?” Nigel’s smile is infectious.

“Oh, I’m an ass? The one who scored you date number one **and** two is an ass? Let’s not forget how you’ve been just waiting around for him when all you had to do was stop into Gino’s and get what you wanted.”

There’s so much life to live; yet so many people just walk the straight and narrow and never take any risks. It blows my mind. I want so much out of life. I’m not just going to sit around and wait. “And Nigel, please don’t screw this up. Decarion is great.”

“I know that,” he says. “It’s just scary. You don’t get it, man. You’ve never been in love, never hurt like I did after Curtis. It sucks.”

I was sitting in Statistics and Probability when my instructor announced that there’d been a completed suicide. The murmurs in the class drowned out his words. I heard “female,” but nothing else. They wouldn’t release the minor’s name. It was four days later that I learned that it was Lizzie. And Nigel thinks I don’t understand pain. How about pain that you can’t even talk about or express?

Chapter Seven

*"I learned to question everything. But I feel like everything is so divisive now. Going against the grain would be to **not** be divisive and be inclusive. That's the disruptive way to go about it."*

(Mike Dirnt)

Vicissitude

"Moms, can I talk to you?" I sit down on their bed.

Mama puts her word puzzle away, while Mom barely looks up from her grading. Mama leaves the hospital at the hospital. I love that she doesn't have to bring her work home with her. Poor Mom is always grading papers, doing her lesson plans, making bulletin boards, or changing her classroom all around. Mom would be beautiful if she had time to be. Sadly, she always looks so frazzled, worn out, and overwhelmed. Her blonde hair is always a mess—either in a ratty bun or hanging down and scraggly. In the last few years, she's really aged. Her eyes are sunken; she's so tiny—nearly emaciated. Teaching does her in. Truthfully, I've never even seen a beautiful or well-put-together teacher. They all looked burned out like Mom does.

I have to ask them about men and women. Can they be friends? I cannot imagine a world where men and women interact cordially and fondly. That's not reality here—literally unfathomable. And yet, I haven't stopped thinking about that Riot guy since the day I knocked him out. If he is telling the truth, then my heart aches for him and his loss. Lizzie was a loss for everyone.

"Of course honey, what's up?" Mama asks looking at me over her glasses as they slip down her nose.

"Have you ever—have either of you ever had a male friend before?"

Mom tucks her light hair behind her ears and releases a long, huffy breath. "We have," she clears her throat. "Well, Mama has."

"I have," she admits shifting in the bed. "Don't look so surprised, Cissy." I feel like I can pick my jaw up off of my lap. I figured they'd probably talked to men a time or two for one reason or another, but to formulate a friendship with one is absolutely unheard of. "We're in our late 40s, of course we've done and seen things that you know nothing about."

"And things that we'll never tell our daughter," Mom adds in.

"Listen Cissy, you don't spend over 40 years on this earth without stepping outside of the rules, without trying new things every now and then. We can't live here our entire lives without meeting all walks of life no matter how hard Authority tries," Mama says.

"Ruth, I don't think now is the ti—"

"Gloria, how long are we going to protect her from the truth? She's about to graduate from high school for Authority's sake. It's time she knew," Mama says, patting the bed next to her. "I'm going to make this as painless as possible."

“What do you mean ‘painless’—?”

“She means for her,” Mom says, reaching for Mama’s hand. “Are you sure, Ruth?”

“I’m sure. It’s time, Gloria. Long overdue,” Mama says, pulling a breath in, closing her eyes, resting her head against the headboard, and finally releasing a slow, slow breath. “I had a sister.”

Mama’s sister, Portia, was five years older than she was. Portia treated Mama like she was her baby, always taking care of her, coddling her, doing everything for Mama to the point that Granny Meredith would often remind Portia who the mother was.

After Portia’s first year of college, she got a job as a server in a restaurant. Granny Meredith didn’t want her working during her time off, but Portia insisted that she needed her own money, her freedom, and her chance at growing up on her own. One night, during the shift change, a fire broke out in the restaurant, all hands were needed on deck to save the restaurant. There was a little girl stuck in the bathroom. Her mother couldn’t get the bathroom door open, and the flames were spreading fiercely and furiously.

The sirens for the fire were being drowned out by the alarms for the gender shift change. Women needed to evacuate, and the men were due to enter. The door to the bathroom wouldn’t budge. The flames were breathing down Portia and the mother’s back. Portia was screaming for someone—anyone—to help them. The men stood at the barrier, refusing to break the Laws of Life and Liberty.

Until one man did.

Alex Jackson grabbed a chair, charging the door and crushing against it as mightily as he could. The door jam splintered, and Alex was able to kick the door the rest of the way in, freeing the little girl from the bathroom. He threw the little girl over his shoulder and bolted for the door just as Portia’s arm was engulfed in flames. Portia screamed. Alex nearly tossed the girl to her mother, grabbed a coat, threw it on Portia, and tackled her to the ground. Once the flames were extinguished, he cradled Portia in his arms and brought her outside. The gasps from the onlookers were deafening. A woman was in the arms of a man.

Portia couldn’t resist the feeling that overcame her. Immediately, she knew that she’d never feel for a woman the way she felt about Alex Jackson. In his arms, Portia felt secure—and for the first time ever in her life—complete. She knew by the way his eyes penetrated her entire being that the feeling was mutual. Portia and Alex hid their feelings, telling nobody. But every night when she got off of work, he was waiting to go in. Alex was biding his time, trying to figure out a way to talk to her yet again, to hold her as he’d dreamed about for months. Meanwhile, Portia couldn’t stop thinking about the man who saved her.

After four full months, Alex simply left a note on her car that read “If you’re ready for an adventure, meet me at 2423 Delilah Ave tonight at midnight.” It was signed “Your Fire Extinguisher.” Portia was more than ready.

That night, she snuck out. She had no idea where Delilah Ave was, so she stopped at a charging station store and bought a map, a map she had no idea how to read. She was determined to figure it out on her own. It was time she used her wits and stopped relying on everyone else to navigate the paths of her future.

An hour later than she was supposed to arrive, Portia knocked on the dilapidated door of 2423. A man with a long, gray beard and kind eyes asked, "Can I help you, Little Missy?"

Terrified, Portia spun on her heels, ready to flee. Wait!" the voice she'd heard in her dreams for months stopped her in her tracks. Alex had waited for her. And now they were together. Again.

"The Delilah," it turned out was an underground sanctuary for men and women to be together. Nightly, there were over ten brave couples who couldn't resist their desires to be together.

For nearly a year, Alex and Portia worked the system and searched for ways to be together when society so fiercely had forbidden their love. Sadly, the unthinkable happened. Authority uncovered the truth about "The Delilah" and demolished the entire building. There were no protests to save "The Delilah," because nobody would admit that they knew of its existence.

Alex and Portia concocted a plan to head north and leave Eka for once and for all. They'd heard that north of Eka was a country where men and women could love one another openly and safely without the threat of punishment or death. Just a few miles before the northern border, Alex and Portia were caught and detained. Both were placed in Confinery. But Authority needed to make a statement, a statement loud enough for the entire country to hear. Heterosexuality would not be tolerated in Eka. Alex and Portia were publicly executed, and both sets of their parents had to serve seven years in Confinery for not raising their children to adhere to and respect The Laws of Life and Liberty.

"Mama! Why'd you never tell me this? I'm so sorry," I wrap my arms around her, tucking my head under her chin.

"Baby, I've always wanted to tell you about Portia, but it's hard to talk about—and illegal to speak of the past," she runs her hand along my head, comforting me. "I loved her so much. And I didn't want you to ever think badly of me—or my family. Portia made some very bad decisions. But to know about Portia, you have to know her whole story."

"Heterosexuality is forbidden in this country, Cissy," Mom says, "but that doesn't mean that people don't have those feelings. It may be wrong in the eyes of Authority, but to those who feel that deeply for another person, it only feels right to them. Does that make sense?"

"Don't you think being linear is gross?" I ask.

"It's not our place to decide that. Portia and Alex loved each other just as much as your mom and I do. What if people thought we shouldn't love each other like we do?" Mama says, gripping Mom's hand harder. "Love is love, baby."

"Yeah but—"

"No buts, it's true. I just wish Portia and Alex could've made it out alive. I'd love to know they were living up north with a family of their own."

"Right, like anyone would allow a man and a woman to raise a baby together," I say, rolling my eyes. "They'd never grant Portia permission to be inseminated."

Mama and Mom look at one another. Mama bites her lip just as Mom lets out a giant laugh. "That's a story for another day, Cissy." Mom says, rubbing her eyes and shaking her head.

“Or for now,” Mama says, “she’s about to graduate, you know? She’s way too young to be this naïve.”

“Authority help me,” Mom groans, resting her head on the headboard, “it’s going to be one long night.”

Chapter Eight

"Honesty is often very hard. The truth is often painful. But the freedom it can bring is worth the trying." (Fred Rogers)

Riot

"Riot! Get your head out of your ass!" Coach Cox bellows, banging his knee against his clipboard.

"Dude, what's up?" Nigel asks, shoulder bumping me. "Get in the game, would ya?"

I brought my lacrosse stick to the woods once with me. Lizzie wanted to know more about the sport and how to play. She was enthralled by the stick, but she couldn't catch or throw the ball at all. I guess Authority is right; women belong nowhere near a sports field or court.

Once, she swung so hard to catch the ball that she spun around and fell to the ground. I ran toward her and stumbled over the same stump that tripped her up. Landing next to her with our faces just inches apart, I knew that I would find a way to be with her every day. Being with her was the only thing in my life that ever mattered to me. Don't get me wrong; I love my dads. They're really great men. But my time with Lizzie gave me reason to get up in the morning. The days that I knew I was going to see her breathed life into me that I'd never felt before. And then, out of nowhere, that breath, the life force, that oxygen was cut off. No warning. No goodbye. Nothing.

Now, things that shouldn't even remotely remind me of Lizzie remind me of her. Like lacrosse. I can't get my head in this dumb game, because I'm thinking about how terrible she was at it. My head won't stop reminding me of how she used the lacrosse stick for everything—other than catching and throwing a lacrosse ball. It creatively became her make-believe air guitar, a microphone, a rifle, and even a squirrel catcher. Thankfully, that squirrel was way too fast for Lizzie.

I miss another shot. Braxton Anderson grabs my helmet, pulls me close, and grits through his teeth, "What the fuck Logan? What're you, some linear plugger?" He shoves my head back. "Stop playing like a girl, you plugger."

That's it. That's all I can take. I dive at Braxton, ripping his helmet off, and plowing my fist directly into his jaw. He flies backward, and I pounce on him, letting all of my anger, sadness, and frustration loose. Every punch more powerful and deliberate than the next. I want to kill him, end his fucking life. He doesn't know me—doesn't know one thing about me.

Suddenly, all I feel is pain, a shooting, excruciating pain that shakes me to the core. Unable to move or react, my body shakes and stiffens as it tumbles to the ground. Teachers and coaches use tasers on the regular, but I'd never been tased before. Until now.

Just as I'm getting my bearings back, I hear Braxton say, "Now Coach?"

"Yeah, get it over with Anderson," Coach Cox says.

I brace myself, knowing what's coming now. Braxton kicks me hard in the ribs. I groan, bringing my knees to my chest in fetal position, thinking that's the worst of it. But then, Braxton's fist collides with

my nose. I hear the crack and feel the warm liquid explode from my nose. Another punch lands on the side of my head. I hear “asshole” right before everything goes black.

“Luther, come here. He’s waking up.”

“He’s going to wish he was still out cold,” I hear my father growl. I don’t want to open my eyes and face this.

“Gentlemen, you need to stand back, so I can take his vitals,” an unfamiliar voice says. I feel a cold object on my chest. “If you can hear me Riot, take a deep breath.” I inhale and groan with pain, choking the air back out. “Okay, okay, looks like we missed something.” My shirt is lifted and the hospitalist presses on my sides.

“Oh no, Luther, look at that. Our poor boy,” My dad says, his voice shrill and full of fear.

“A few broken ribs never killed anyone. But me, I’m going to kill him,” My father says.

“Mr. Logan, that behavior and those comments aren’t helping your son,” the hospitalist scolds. He injects something into my IV. “This should help with the pain.”

“And what’re you doing? I’ll sue this whole damn place. You said you missed it. Those bruises and marks don’t look too hard to see if you ask—.”

“Luther, why don’t you go get us some coffee? I’ll stay here with Riot and speak with the doctors and hospitalists.” My other dad says. I hear my father’s voice getting further away as they speak. I love when my dad interjects and calms my father down. He’s like the father whisperer—and he’s usually whispering thoughts that make it, so my father doesn’t kill me.

I open my eyes and look at the hospitalist staring back at me. By all normal standards, this guy is gorgeous. Everyone would fall over for this man. His muscles are nearly popping out of his tight t-shirt. The stethoscope he wears around his neck can’t even hang properly due to how big his pectoral muscles are. The hospitalists are the nice ones; they take your vitals, cleanse you, give you pain medicine, and just make sure you are comfortable and well cared for. It’s the doctors who are always all businesslike and stoic—with very little empathy or compassion. If my dads weren’t lawyers, my sperm father could’ve been a doctor, whereas my passive dad could’ve been a hospitalist. I can’t see my sperm father being anything but a cold, judgmental, unwavering dick.

“Mr. Logan,” Dr. Davis walks in looking at my chart. “Seems to me that you shouldn’t be picking fights on the lacrosse field.”

“I didn’t—”

“According to the results from your CT scan, looks like you just scored a concussion on top of a previous concussion.”

My dad walks back into the room alone, “Dr. Davis, Riot hasn’t had a concussion ever in his life.”

“Not according to these tests,” Dr. Davis looks over my chart. “With the latest technology, we can see everything. This shows that not only does he have a pretty severe concussion right now from today’s brawl, but also suffered a minor concussion a few days ago.”

“Riot, what’s he talking about?”

“I have no idea,” I lie.

Dr. Davis raises his brow, like he knows I’m lying. “Well, I’m not about to get in the middle of a family blowout. But Riot, I would highly suggest no lacrosse the rest of this season. “

“But it’s his last year; he’s a senior,” my dad says, trying to persuade the doctor into letting me play.

“Listen, it’s against my better judgment to have him in any more games this year. But, you’re his dad. You ultimately get the final call. Today’s concussion was pretty significant.” He looks back over my results. “I don’t advise that he plays again this year.” My dad slumps down in the chair, putting his head in his hand. “But, I also understand the importance of competitive sports, so you both can decide. Just to be safe, we are going to keep him overnight for observation.”

Dr. Davis walks out of the room, and my dad stares at me, eyes narrowing. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Man Dad, I don’t tell you a lot. This could take a while,” I say, faking a smile and wincing at the pain “Well there was the time Nigel and I tried your whisky.”

“This isn’t funny, Riot,” my dad pulls his chair closer to my bed. He props his elbows on the mattress and leans in. “Start talking.”

“Immunity?” I ask.

“Partial, depending on what you’re about to say.”

“Anderson called me a ‘linear plugger,’ because I was playing like shit,” I admit.

“Crap.”

“Sorry, I was playing like crap,” I correct. “I don’t know, Dad. Something came over me, and I just snapped.”

Calling someone a “linear plugger” is the ultimate insult in Eka. It’s unacceptable and unheard of for a man to want physical intimacy with a woman. Heterosexuality is so shunned and repulsive here that to have desires so repugnant is grounds for public ridicule—and sometimes torture.

“Since when do we let what other people say provoke us like that?” my dad questions. “That’s not really like you, Riot. What’s really going on?”

I want to be honest with him. I want to tell him everything. Lizzie was so important to me and if he knew, then maybe, he could help me get out of this funk. He’s good like that.

“You know son,” he starts, “graduation is a scary time, especially for someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” I ask, trying to find a comfortable position on the bed.

“You know, ‘big man on campus,’ ‘king of the world.’ When you go to college, and you *are* going to college, you have to start all over again. Prove yourself again. Show everyone that you’re smart, athletic, and a born leader. You go back to the bottom of the totem pole.”

“What’s a totem pole?” I ask, never hearing the phrase before.

“Oh, ummm,” my dad stutters. “Nothing, just something of the past.”

“The past? Like Before?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, standing up. “I get why you’re nervous and acting up. You’ll be leaving us soon and going out to prove yourself all over again. It’s a lot. But you’ve got to keep it together for a bit longer, Riot.”

“No dad, that’s not it—”

“And Riot, we can tell your father that Dr. Davis said no lacrosse whatsoever if you want out of the rest of the year,” he says, patting my leg over the blanket. “I just think you should try to finish out the season. Remember, you’ll never get to play again for the rest of your life.”

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll do whatever you want,” I say, dropping my throbbing head back down onto my pillow. The medicine is kicking in. The weight of my eyelids is too cumbersome to bear any longer. My eyes fall closed.

I hear him walking toward the door, probably to meet my father downstairs. “I just loved her so much,” I say, feeling myself fall deeply into a medically-induced euphoria.

“Take it easy, Riot. You’re off school and the field for the rest of the week.” My active father says, putting a cup of water on my bedroom nightstand. “I talked to Cox. You’re starting next weekend, so make sure you rest up.”

“Luther,” my dad groans. “Don’t you think he should take a few games off? He hasn’t even been home from the hospital a week yet.”

“No way! It’s the championship. Lakeward can’t beat Crane Hill without him. You know that as well as I do.” My father turns to leave and adds, “And don’t think this is over. Once you’re feeling better, we’ll discuss the punishment for going off on Braxton at practice like some barbarian who doesn’t know any better.” He looks at my dad and asks, “Ready? We have to get out of here.”

“Babe, I already told you. I’ll meet you at the office. I’ve got an appointment uptown with a potential client.”

“That’s right. Damn it. I was going to have you drive while I looked over a brief. Alright then, be careful.” He kisses my dad and rushes off without even a glance back at me.

Once we hear my father’s car start, my dad looks at me, narrowing his eyes. “Start talking, buddy.”

I look around the room, confused. “Huh?”

My dad sits on my bed and leans closer to me. “Right before you went to LaLa Land, you said, and I quote ‘I just loved her so much.’ What in Authority does that even mean, Riot?”

“Huh? Dad, I have no idea—”

“Riot James Logan, you are the worst—I mean worst—liar I’ve ever met. Start talking.”

With a sigh and a fear unlike any I’ve ever experienced before, I ask “Dad, have you ever known any women or been friends with one?”

“No Riot, I have not,” he admits, shaking his head as his lips turn down.

I’m so disappointed, but not surprised. I don’t know how else to broach this topic and really talk to him about it.

“But I know many men who have,” he says, shifting on the bed. “I’ve even known men who’ve loved and been intimate with women before.”

My eyes widen. “You have?”

“Of course. I’ve lived over half a century. I’ve seen and heard a lot of things you know nothing about.”

“Because you guys never tell me anything.” I groan, closing my eyes and shaking my head.

“Riot, our job is to keep you safe and make sure you’re a law-abiding citizen and a productive member of society. We’re not going to go around and put all kinds of thoughts into your head that may tempt you to do things that negate the Laws of Liberty.”

“I just feel like I’m trapped in a world that doesn’t let me do anything, know anything, or feel anything.”

“Go on.”

“I just want more.”

“More what, Riot?”

“Ummm freedom, I guess,” I say, “They’re called the Laws of Life and Liberty, but they’ve taken all of our freedom. Liberty literally means freedom, and yet, we have none.”

“I’ve done this long enough with you—and with clients—I know when someone is stalling and not telling me everything. Who is the ‘her’ in your drug-induced confession?”

I end up spilling my guts to my dad about Lizzie being my friend who completed suicide—omitting all the details about my art. My dad thinks I was in the forest on a female day on a dare from a lacrosse buddy.

“You say you ‘loved’ her,” he says. “Loved her like how?”

“We were friends, best friends. I could tell her anything.”

My dad sighs, relief washing over his face. “Oh thank Authority. I was afraid you were going to say you loved her like I love your father. I can handle a lot of things, but I’m not sure I could’ve handled that.”

I laughed, uncomfortably and a bit unnaturally. “Nah, not like that. Like I love Nigel, I guess.”

“Oh son, I’m so sorry you had to deal with her death all alone. That had to be awful for you. But don’t you see now why Authority put this rule into place? Men and women can’t be together, not even as allies. The pressure of your friendship drove that poor girl to end her life.”

“Dad, I don’t think that’s why—”

“Of course it is. Breaking the Laws of Liberty bring about more pain and suffering than you’ll ever understand.” He stands up, adjusting his tie in the mirror. “I hate to say this Riot, but it’s probably for the best. Now, you can focus on school and your future. And maybe even lacrosse.”

My shock must be evident, because he adds, “I know you’re hurting now, but it’ll get easier with time. People like us can handle anything.” My dad pulls my blanket up and actually tucks me in like I’m a child. “Let me know if you need anything.” He starts to leave. “And Riot, let’s not tell your father about any of this. He’ll lose his mind just knowing you went into the woods on a forbidden day.”

When the front door slams and I know he’s gone, I grab my pillow, cover my face, and just scream. I have nobody. I’m in this alone.

Chapter Nine

“Having siblings is like making music, some high notes, some low notes, but it is always a beautiful song.”
(Jesse Joseph)

Vicissitude

“Thank you Colonel Sumter,” I nod, keeping my politically-correct gender distance, as I walk over to the picnic table that Cleave and I are permitted to sit at while we have our supervised meetings.

Colonel Sumter always stays at least ten feet away from me. He dons a helmet and a full-body suit at every meeting. He looks like he’s going to war in a forest green one-piece zip-up suit. It’s quite atrocious. His suit proves he’s a low-level Authority officer. If he were mid-level, he’d be all in white and silver, head to toe. The white suit officers aren’t too ominous when you look at them, but they’re lethal. Supposedly, their motto is “Shoot now—ask questions later.” But the worst are the Authority Selects. The top of the top, the Authority Selects, get all black suits that are terrifying on sight. The Selects are unforgiving and ruthless.

Colonel Sumter probably wants to be a Select, but I can’t imagine that. He does nothing. I’ve never seen his face or even the color of his eyes. I’m certain he’s male, but I’d truly have no other proof.

“Colonel, my ass,” Cleave scoffs, rolling his eyes. “That dude’s never served Eka or anything other than a plate of fries to someone.” I throw my head back and laugh. I swear whatever Cleave says makes me lose it. I don’t know what it is about him, but his personality and jokes always seem like the perfect medicine for me.

“Why do you look so good?” I ask, checking out his hair and fit. “New shoes, new jeans, and your hair is on point. Spill it.”

“Date,” he grins.

“Oh my Authority, are you finally going out with Nicholas Lavery?” I squeal.

“Nah, it ain’t like that. That’s old news.”

“What in the world? Last month you were going on and on about ‘making babies with Nick Lavery.’ I wanted to rip out your tongue if we’re being honest.”

“Well, I’m being honest now, and Nick said that there was no way, and I quote, that he’d ever go out with a dickbag like me.”

“Whoa. Harsh,” I say, getting snacks out of my bag and offering him a chip.

“Yeah, it was harsh. So, I’m biting the bullet and going out with Carson Gables,” he shrugs, taking more than a handful of chips out of the bag. As we watch, more chips fall to the grimy picnic table than into his hand, he adds, “I heard he’s wanted me for years. It’s about time someone wanted me for a change and not the other way around.”

“Cleveland Shaw, don’t you dare tell me that you’re settling. You are way too goo—”

“Hold up, I’m not settling. I mean Nick’s a wet dream—don’t get me wrong. But, Carson’s a good guy. Abs for days. And his calves. Holy Authority, I’ve got ideas for those legs tonight,” he shakes his head and sighs dreamily.

“Alright, that’s pretty convincing—and disgusting. So, what’s the plan for tonight?”

“Tonight is just low key. We’re just hanging out at his house. Nothing major. A little get to know each other time.” Cleave smiles and winks at me. I fake gag. “But Friday, we’re going to the lacrosse game. Let the world see us together. It sucks though. Riot Logan’s on the DL, so Crane Hill might actually beat us. There are some rumors flying around that Riot may play. But I’m not sure. Man, I hope so. We need a W.”

“Did you say Riot?”

“Yeah, he’s the Lakeward golden boy. Every guy either wants him or wants to be him. Lacrosse doesn’t even exist without him, really. He’s a stud on field. Has a mean temper, but uses it wisely.”

“Oh I’m sure he does,” I say, feeling my lunch stirring in my stomach.

“Nah really, he’s a good guy. The silent, brooding type. I’d do him in a heartbeat. He wouldn’t give me the time of day, but he’s never been an ass or anything to me.” Cleave takes another handful of chips and catches them in his mouth before more fall to the picnic table. “Why do you care anyway? You don’t know him, do you?”

“Of course not. How would I possibly know him?”

I cannot believe Cleave just said that Riot was a good guy. He can’t be. Can he? That day in the forest, he seemed so distraught and worried that I was going to turn him into Authority for painting when I was straight up accusing him of murder. If what he said was true about being friends with Lizzie, then how horrifying for someone to think he killed her. That someone is me.

Cleave shrugs, “Crazier things have happened.”

“Like what?” I ask, feeling my cheeks pinking.

“I don’t know. Caterpillars turn into butterflies. That’s crazy.” Cleave laughs and bits of chips come flying out of his mouth.

Are all males gross like this and lack any form of depth? Is it always just sports and sex with them? I don’t understand how an entire gender can be obsessed with just two things like that. I mean, they can’t all be this way, right? I just want to have a profound conversation with Cleave sometimes, but our talks are always just so superficial and really rather ridiculous.

“Don’t you wish you could come to the house and see Mama?” I ask, like I always do.

“For what? She get a new hairstyle or something?” And there it is. He always says something stupid like that. The guy lacks all compassion and emotion.

“Well, Mom and Mama are having their 5th Recommitment Party next week. It would be great if Authority would permit you to go and celebrate them with us.”

“Come on Cissy, like that would happen,” Cleave says, shoving a stick through the wooden slat of the picnic table. “It’s kind of dope though that they made it 25 years together.”

“I know,” I agree. “I know so many moms of girls at my school who don’t even sign up again after the first five years.”

“You chicks are lucky; you get the recommitment every five years. We have to go seven before we re-up our marital contracts.” He shoves the stick the rest of the way through the slot, and it disappears under the table. “Women are way luckier than men.”

“Oh my Authority, you’ve got to be kidding me?” I say, shaking my head and narrowing my eyes at my brother. “We have two years less than you, and you think that’s good news?”

“Well of course it is. We have those final two years. That’s where that ‘seven-year-itch’ comes from. Those last two years are supposedly tortuous, Cissy. Imagine spending an extra 730 days with someone you don’t want to be with any more. 730 days. That’s outrageous.”

“Did you do that math on your own, smart guy?” I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

Cleave laughs so loud that I jump. “Nah, a bunch of us were just talking about it at school the other day, so I remembered the number. We all agree though that you ladies have it better than we do.”

“Imagine if we lived Before,” I respond. “How’d you like to spend ‘until death do you part’ with someone you didn’t like or want?”

“Authority, don’t get me started,” Cleave says, shaking his head and snorting. “What idiot made that up in the first place? I can’t believe it’s even true. The happiest day of your life, and they said crap like poor, death, sickness, and faithfulness. Why would they bring the whole celebration down by talking about stuff like that?”

“Look at you, getting all worked up and even getting a little serious. I like this side of you,” I admit, smacking his hand.

Immediately, the whistle blares.

“Infraction,” Colonel Sumter shouts, walking over to us. “Ms. Maddox and Mr. Shaw, both of your parents will get demerits for this physical infraction. Ms. Maddox, your mothers will be required to pay a two hundred dollar fine. This is your second time reaching for Mr. Shaw. If it happens again, that will be the last time you two will be permitted to collaborate.”

“Yes sir,” we nod, in unison.

Not being able to be a real sister to my brother drives me crazy. I should be able to reach out and touch him, feel him, and really get to know him. The fact that I cannot hug him like I hug my moms is ludicrous. Affection is so important. Who cares if he’s male and I’m not? We should be afforded the luxury of human touch. They say that after a global pandemic of some sort that personal touch and affection fizzled out. People were reportedly forced to stand at least six feet away from each other—even from their spouses and children. That is just bonkers. If I couldn’t touch my moms, due to some deadly plague, I’d hug them and love on them anyway. Nobody is going to tell me that I can’t be around my moms. I guess three of us would just all go down together. Truthfully though, I think it’s another one of

those legends of Before. That cannot possibly be true. Who would willingly not want to caress the arm or back of her loved one?

“Listen Cleave, I have an idea,” I whisper, leaning in to emphasize the gravity of my proposal.

Cleave’s eyebrows shoot up, excitedly conspiratorial. “Oh yeah, whatcha got for me?”

“What if we figured out a way to sneak you into the Recommitment Party as a surprise to Mama on her special day?” I can feel my lips spread in anticipated excitement as I deliver my mischievous idea.

“Ummm for what?”

“As a surprise! To get you and Mama together in the same room!”

“Listen Cissy, I love our visits. They’re a nice break from Testosterone Town and all. But, I’ve got no desire to go to a women’s brunch party. Men don’t ‘brunch.’ Brunch is a woman’s thing and not really something I want to try,” Cleave says, scowling, looking as if he just ate the most sour-tasting food ever.

“Cleave, she’s your mom!”

“Is she though?” he asks, side-eyeing me. “She’s no more than the incubators at the Birthing Center. Literally, any person with a uterus can hold a baby for nine months. It’s not like it’s a big deal.” Cleave stands up. “I’d rather just hang with Carson and eat breakfast and then later some lunch—not cram them together in one silly meal.” He throws his left leg over the bench and then the right, extricating himself from the confines of the picnic table. “Give your moms my best. Take care Cissy!”

With that, he walks away. I’m sitting there like he punched me in the gut and left me choking back the pain of his delivery. How do you share a womb with someone and end up miles apart?

Chapter Ten

"Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." (Anais Nin)

Riot

"Riot, over here!" Nigel waves me over to the far side of the field. Decarion is sitting on the bench, wearing sunglasses, sport shorts, and nothing else. He's definitely taking advantage of this beautiful day—and flaunting it all for Nigel's benefit. I like it. Decarion definitely has a body worth worshipping, and Nigel clearly does. They're happy together and that in turn makes me happy. Nigel deserves this.

"Hey guys, what's up?" I ask, dropping my lacrosse bag and setting my water bottle down on the bench.

"I'm just getting pumped for our game Friday. This is going to be epic," Nigel exclaims, bouncing on his toes like a kid waiting for the ice cream truck to meander down his road at a snail's pace. "Still can't believe the Logan dads are letting you play, Riot." Nigel runs his hands through Decarion's hair.

"I'm just getting pumped watching my man get all sweaty and hot," Decarion says, pulling his sunglasses down, eyeing Nigel from head to toe.

Nigel grins and swats at him, "Stop, you're making me blush."

"Guys, save it. We've got a lot to do before the game this week. Nigel, things have been getting by you left and right. You've got to get your head in the game."

"Weren't you playing like shit a few weeks ago, and I said the same thing to you? And so did Braxton. Maybe you don't remember, because you hit that lug of a head too many times." Nigel counters.

"Touché!" I turn and look at Decarion. "Isn't there some incentive you can offer him to keep him focused?"

"Oh, I do like this," Nigel says, turning back to Decarion. "What will you do for me—or give me—if I don't let anyone score on me Friday night?" Decarion's eyes narrow as he starts to think. Then, his face lights up as he motions Nigel over. When he whispers into Nigel's ear, Nigel's face reddens while his eyes widen with excitement.

"I do not want to know," I say, tightening my shoelace before grabbing my stick. "Alright loverboy, let's see what you've got." We head over to the goal.

"Do your thing Riot, because ain't nothing getting by me—"

"That's one for me," I shout, scoring on Nigel while he's trumpeting his athleticism. "And none for you—or you, Decarion." I laugh, scooping another ball into my stick's pocket. "Stop thinking about Decarion's shaft and more on your stick's shaft, man. We've got a championship to win."

"Boo!" Decarion yells. "Come on Nigel. I'm counting on you."

"I got you! That's the last time he's scoring on—fuck man," he yells as a ball whizzes by his head.

"Are they really giving us all of this for free?" I ask Decarion as the server at Gino's puts a smorgasbord of food down in front of us.

"When male workers come in on their days off, we eat for free. Whatever we want," he says, biting into a garlic knot.

"And the women?" I ask, curious of the ins and outs of male vs. female employment.

"Nah, they get 40% off their meals," he says, shrugging. "Seems fair though. They don't need as much money as we do."

"How do you figure?" I ask, twirling my pasta around my fork. "Don't they have to pay for the same things in life that we do?"

"Well, I guess, but nobody cares if they're poor or not. Men are judged by how big their wallets are. Women aren't."

"And that wallet in your pocket is bulging in all the right spots," Nigel says, staring at Decarion's crotch.

"Enough," I say, rolling my eyes and chuckling. "I'm starving and don't want to ruin my appetite."

Decarion clears his throat. "Speaking of appetite Riot, where is yours? Where's your thirst, if you know what I mean?"

"No Decarion, I don't know what you mean," I say, downing my entire glass of water.

"You're never with anyone. And we just have to know why. You're too hot to be alone." And before Nigel can say anything, he adds, "Not my type though. I like my men bigger and broader with a little ginger spice." Nigel smiles and snuggles into Decarion's side.

"Should I vomit now or wait until after I eat?" I ask, faking gagging at their blatant display of affection. "I can feel it coming up right now."

"Oh I feel it coming up too," Nigel laughs, winking at me.

"Do you ever stop?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

"Do you ever start? Seriously Riot, we have got to get you laid."

"I'm fine; thank you. I don't need any help."

"I guess with your hands readily available and consenting at all times that you really must not need anyone," Nigel shoots back.

“Listen, that’s the first thing you’ve gotten right all day. I don’t need anyone Nige. I’m fine. I actually like being alone and not worrying about making someone else happy all the time.” I stab my tofu ball and dip it in more sauce before shoving the entire ball into my mouth.

“Hey guys! Sorry, I’m late. My car wouldn’t start, and of course my dads insisted that they fix it right then and there. And they know nothing about cars, so that was fun,” McCarthy McCorum says, sliding into the booth right next to me. “Finally, I just left in my dad’s car. They’ll figure out I’m gone once they come out from underneath my car.”

“Umm, no problem, McCarthy,” I say, narrowing my eyes at Nigel and Decarion.

“McCarthy, it’s awesome that you could meet up with us,” Nigel says. “This is Decarion. He graduated a few years before—”

“Oh, I know Decarion,” McCarthy says. “Basketball legend.” He opens a menu and looks straight at Decarion. “That championship was off the chain. You drained ten three-pointers in the second half alone, breaking records all over Eka. Man, nobody could guard you that game.”

“Yeah, look where it got me,” Decarion rolls his eyes, arms splayed out wide. “A server at Gino’s while I go to school to be a damn coach. Dare to dream.”

“Or, it got you right here with me,” Nigel says, wrapping his arm around Decarion’s shoulder.

“I’m just saying all the training and crap that they put us through to make us these basketball machines for their entertainment is just ridiculous. Back in the day—”

“You mean Before?” Nigel asks.

“Yeah, people played for fun. And now, we’re just a bunch of show ponies for Authority’s entertainment, hoping to make bank.” Decarion takes a long swig of his drink. “I trained my life away—literally. And now, I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

Nigel pulls him in closer and places a light kiss on his temple.

“It sucks that athletes as talented as you have one shot for college or pro ball and that’s it,” McCarthy says. “Can’t believe you blew out your knee during that Elite Evaluation.” McCarthy turns toward me. “What about you, Riot? You going to the Elites for Lacrosse?”

Nigel barks out a laugh. “Dude can’t quit LAX fast enough. After Friday’s championship, he’s probably going to burn his stick in celebration.”

“Seriously?” McCarthy looks back and forth between Nigel and me.

“Yeah, I’m ready to be done. Thirteen years of nonstop sports is enough for me,” I say, throwing my napkin onto the table.

“McCarthy, are you going to the game Friday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he says, glancing up at the expectant server. “I’ll just have a medium pizza and some cranberry juice.”

“We’re thinking about all going up to the lake after the game. You in?” Decarion asks.

“For sure,” McCarthy says, “as long as my car is fixed.”

“No worries. Riot’s driving up. You can ride with us. Right, Riot?”

“Huh?” I ask, looking around at them.

“After the game,” Nigel nods in McCarthy’s direction, “you’d be more than happy to drive him up to the lake. Right?”

Nigel eyes me carefully. McCarthy inches a little closer to me. Decarion is smiling from ear to ear.

Unbelievable.

How am I this dense? This is a set up. I thought maybe it was just a coincidence, but now I know for sure. I will kill them. I expect this crap from Nigel. All he ever does is butt in to things that are none of his business. But Decarion is much more civil than Nigel is. I wouldn’t expect this from him.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you guys. Dads aren’t letting me go. After the concussion and my little hospital stay, they want me home after the game, so they can keep an eye on me.”

“What? But we have my uncle’s cabin. It’s going to be epic.” Nigel whines.

“It’s gonna have to be epic without me,” I say. “Listen, it’s good to see you McCarthy. But, I gotta get going.” I slide closer to him, bumping his hip against mine, hoping he gets the hint and lets me out of the booth. I’m suddenly feeling trapped and ready to suffocate.

“Will I see you again?” McCarthy asks, staring right into my eyes.

“I’m sure I’ll see you around,” I say, shooting my deadliest glare at Nigel. The disappointment on McCarthy’s face is evident. I feel like shit, but this is so far from being my fault. This is all on Nigel and Decarion. Don’t get me wrong. McCarthy is extremely good looking. He’s fun. He’s smart. He’s a powerhouse on the soccer field. He’s a great catch for any guy—just not me.

The forest is the only place that feels like home to me. Even my own house doesn’t feel all that welcoming—or forgiving. The struggle is real. I haven’t any idea how people really confide in their parents. It’s like they’re these judgmental assholes that are just waiting around for you to screw up. And when you do. BAM! They’re ready to pounce—even on the most minuscule mistake. I know my dads love me. I also know that it isn’t all that unconditional as they say. There are definitely conditions. Every time I screw up, I think the love lessens. The conditions are there though: do homework, get good grades, get into college, dominate on the lacrosse field, keep the bedroom clean, clean up after myself, come in before curfew, and a long list of other expectations they have for me.

Today, the woods are perfect. The sun is hot and unyielding, which is a bit early for it to be this hot. Most people love the glaring, blazing sun. I prefer the cooler months. Living here, I get very few cooler days. They say that up north, it’s much more tolerable. It even snows. I’d love to see that, but with

the travel ban, it's just a pipedream. My best chance would be if my dads needed to try a case up north or got transferred up. A long shot. Ain't going to happen.

I extract my mahogany box from the canopy of trees. Thankful that I was able to get it out of my backpack and house and back into its hiding spot without getting caught. My dads would go ballistic if they saw all of these illegal items in their home.

I don't know what I'm creating today. Haven't even thought about it yet. I was worried that Tree Gazer was going to be lying out on the ground, deep in thought when I got here. Not sure why I'd think that, considering it's a male day and that girl wouldn't break a Law of Liberty if her life depended upon it—and it sort of does.

Visually, there are so many similarities and differences between Lizzie and Tree Gazer that I want to create a portrait of the two of them melding together as one--a Venn Diagram of two people becoming one. I want to accentuate their differences and flow their similarities together.

Sometimes, I feel like all the girls I've ever seen rather look alike. Sure, Lizzie's milky white, porcelain, freckled skin looks nothing like Cissy's light mocha skin. But the few times when Cissy's hair was unbraided and long as she was sprawled out on the blanket staring at the sky reminds me of the soft, spiral swirls of Lizzie's fiery red hair.

As I begin to surrender into my art, I get lost in the details of Lizzie, remembering every curve of her body, every angle of her face, and every feel of her touch. Recreating her never does the true Lizzie justice. Lizzie couldn't be captured and locked in on a two-dimensional picture. She was vibrant, full of life, energy, and presence.

Suddenly, I notice the details of the portrait. I've portrayed Lizzie in all black and white, a fuzzy, faded picture of the past. I didn't even blend the hues of red and orange to accentuate her hair. But, what I've done with Cissy is indescribable. Cissy is full of vibrant color, details, and clarity—almost likes she's sitting right next to me. How does art do that? Why would I even draw her at all? I don't even know this girl. I know nothing about her. And I certainly will never get to know her.

No way.

Not a chance.

Not again.

I grab the matches out of my backpack, because this portrait, this picture, this creation will receive the same fate as all of my others. I strike the match, take one last look of the two girls, one who changed everything for me and one who silently waits in the periphery, and slowly ignite the forbidden females in the flames that will destroy them.

Like I always do. Like it always does to my heart.

Chapter Eleven

"We cannot really love anyone with whom we never laugh." (Agnes Repplier)

Vicissitude

The first time I met Marjorie, I was like every single girl at our school. I was mesmerized, even as an eight-year-old little girl. It was the first day of school. My moms never bought into that whole "First Day of School" pictures and new clothes business. I looked just like I looked every day. We didn't go all out. We didn't feel the need to chronicle the entire day with pictures, signs, and banners. School was school, and I was just a normal student starting school.

We were in our first-ever cooking and sewing class, and I noticed her immediately. She was so put together, but at the age of eight, I didn't quite know what I was looking at or thinking. I just knew that she had perfect hair and great clothes and that my shirt had my morning orange juice on it, and my hair was in desperate need of a rebraiding. Then, I noticed that she had long, glittery pink nails, and my nails were caked with the dirt from our garden. Three days earlier, I'd helped Mom plant basil and mint. I'd been lying about taking a shower, so I knew how long that dirt had been under my nails. Self-consciously, I'd begun to dig the grime out from under my nails with my teeth, while raising my hand to ask if I could use the washroom before making the muffins we were about to mix. Simultaneously, I was angry with my moms for not insisting that I put forth some "first impression" effort into my clothes, hair, and hygiene.

As soon as I got into the bathroom, I splashed water on my face and washed the syrupy crust from my breakfast pancakes off my chin. When I opened my eyes, Marjorie was staring at me. "You need to do your hair." I nodded, frantically agreeing with her. "Once you do your hair, you can be my friend." She turned on her heel and walked right out of the bathroom.

That weekend, Mama took me to get rebraided, and she let me get my ears pierced as well. Walking into school on Monday, I felt so confident and full of pride, showing off my new beaded and braided hair—as well as my new fake diamond earrings. I was the talk of Gabriella-Grace Elementary. Marjorie found me at lunch and sat right down next to me. She gave me one long look and said, "Now, you look like someone who could be my friend."

I should have been offended. I should've told her that my looks shouldn't determine if I was worthy enough to be her friend. But at 8-years-old, I was flattered and so excited to be Marjorie Allen's friend. As time went on, our friendship bloomed. I went from being Marjorie's friend to being her best friend. It just made sense that we blossomed into more than friends.

Throughout middle school and the start of high school, we ebbed and flowed. Sometimes, she was dating someone. Sometimes, I was. But we were always friends—as close as close could be. Then, at the end of our tenth grade year, Marjorie broke up with Cali Deeds at a weekend dance party. Cali was devastated and left the party. Marjorie hadn't thought twice about her actions or whom she just destroyed. Instead, she was on the dance floor having the time of her life, moving to the music without a care in the world. I wanted to be her in that moment. I wanted all the weight of the world that I carried on my shoulders to vanish, so I could feel the lightness Marjorie was portraying. It didn't seem strange or odd to walk over to her and just begin to move with her to the music—to hear it and feel it from her vantage point. We were best friends, after all.

Marjorie beamed at me, wrapping her arms around my neck with a natural and confident ease. She pulled me closer, and with no hesitation whatsoever, she kissed me. And I was right, in that moment, I did feel lighter, more confident, and invincible. That kiss sealed our promise to one another. We both pretty much knew in that moment that it was the two of us from then on out.

“Are you even listening to me?” Marjorie asks, taking a sip of her drink.

We’re on my back patio, sunning ourselves and decompressing from a week of midterms and projects. When spring hits, teachers go wild with tests and at-home group projects. It’s just awful. I’ve asked Mom about it before, and she just says that teachers need breaks too. She’s always said that if it’s a hard week for students, then it’s an easy week for teachers. And the opposite is also true. If it’s one of those weeks filled with parties and activities, then it’s overly hard for the teachers.

“Of course, I’m always listening to you.” I say, sitting up in my chair and looking over at her. For the record, I was actually zoning out. I’m not sure what she said at all.

“Do you think your moms would let us stay alone in a cabin for a long weekend after graduation?” she asks, leaning in conspiratorially. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful, just the two of us for three long days alone in the wilderness with nobody nagging at us and all we have is just you and me?”

“Ummm, yeah, sure. That would be pretty great,” I lie. I truthfully cannot imagine all that alone time with Marjorie. I’m fairly certain we’d kill one another. “I don’t know though. They’re pretty set on me just focusing on higher learning right now.”

“Right, but once you get your acceptances, they’ll lay off, and we’ll spend all weekend with one another,” she says, smiling. Then she adds, “Clothing optional, of course.”

“Listen Marjorie, I don’t know that they’re going to let me do that,” I say.

“Dummy, you don’t tell them we’re going to be naked all weekend,” she laughs, putting her sunglasses back over her eyes and lounging back on the chair.

“No, I mean, they’re never going to let me go to the lake cabin for an entire weekend—especially if we’re unsupervised.”

Marjorie sighs and sits up. She looks strange to me—not angry, not sad. Just blank. She slips her feet back into her sandals. “I’m out.”

“What? Why?” I ask, following her to the front yard.

“Listen Cissy, you know I love you,” she looks around and sighs deeply. “It’s just, you haven’t touched me in weeks.”

“That’s not true,” I counter, shaking my head in disagreement. “We literally held hands the entire walk to Needlepoint and Crochet today. Then, we kissed before going to our seats.”

“I grabbed *your* hand. I kissed *your* lips. You never, like ever, reach for me,” she says, taking off her sunglasses and wiping away tears that spilled from her eyes. “Quite frankly, I’m sick of being the one who always has to initiate everything. It’s exhausting.”

“Marj, I’m so—”

“I’m legit beating Celeste off with a bat on the regular, because she wants me so badly. But my own girlfriend won’t touch me with a ten-foot pole.”

“Uhhh what? What’re you talking about? Celeste’s been hitting on you?” I ask, shocked and suddenly, feeling very territorial and possessive.

“Don’t look so surprised. My Authority, don’t you realize that there are girls who want me, girls who want to DO things to me? Things that you haven’t done in ages. My gracious Cissy, it’s like we’re back to being best friends and not in a relationship anymore. Can’t you see that?”

The first time Marjorie and I hooked up was in her moms’ room when they were at their friends’ recommitment party. It was fun, but it wasn’t passionate and pleasurable. We were mainly just curious and wanted to know what all the fuss was about. don’t think either of us really enjoyed the whole thing. But after that first time, we got the hang of it and knew what each other liked or wanted.

But she’s right. We haven’t been intimate in a while. I’m not sure why either. We just haven’t. I don’t know if she hasn’t been into it or if I wasn’t. I just know we haven’t done much lately.

“Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry. I haven’t been affectionate lately. I promise, I’ll be more touchy-feely—”

“Don’t you get it? I don’t want to remind you to want me. I just want you to want me. Is that so hard?” she asks, turning around and getting into her car. I stand there confused, not knowing what to do or say. Her window comes down. “I just think we need a break or something. You need to decide what you really want. Because right now, I don’t think it’s me.”

Marjorie starts her car and drives off, leaving me alone in my driveway, watching her grow smaller in the distance. I’m stricken with guilt. She’s right. I haven’t been in this relationship in a while. I’ve just been going through the motions. It’s strange how that can happen. One minute, you’re all in and feeling all the love and joy. Then suddenly, all the romance, butterflies, and excitement diminish, and you’re left with a feeling of empty numbness, wondering if you’ll ever find that bliss again.

Standing in my driveway, I realize I only want to do one thing right now. I run back into my house and straight into my bedroom. Rummaging through my old tote, I find everything I need. cram it all into my backpack and head out. Then, I remember my tracker and put it on the charger, leaving a note for my moms.

I write:

Ran to the school for a study group. Be home for dinner. Tracker is charging.

Walking into the woods on a “Male Day” feels strange, ominous almost. I’ve never broken a rule like this before. Granted, I’ve touched Cleave during our visits, but I’ve never deliberately done something like this in my life. It feels like I’m someone else, living a life that isn’t really mine. But, I’m not going to lie. It’s exhilarating to be out here, walking the trails in the forest, without permission from anyone to be here.

But the real question is: what in the world am I doing here? There is no reasonable explanation for why in Authority's power that I would risk my life or my moms' lives breaking a Law of Liberty for this. I can't even wrap my head around it. Yet, here I am doing just that—and for what?

I smell the smoke before I see the flames. Finally, the fire is in full view, maintained and safe, but burning nonetheless. Then, I make out Riot's eyes through the smoky air. There are tears puddling in the corners of his eyes. I'm not sure how to approach this situation. From what I've heard, men do not like to talk, to share, or to even feel. So, I doubt I can just walk over and ask him why he's crying. That's probably not a thing in the male world. I need another strategy.

I make my way through the covered brush, stomping my feet a little louder than I normally would, ensuring that he hears me before he sees me. "Jeez Riot, you trying to burn down the entire forest?" I ask, taking my water bottle out of my backpack. I pour the entire contents of my jug onto his small bonfire.

"Cissy! What're you doing here on a Male Day?" he asks, jumping to his feet abruptly, wiping his hands on his pants. "Didn't figure you for the rebellious type." We stare together at the remnants of the fire, watching the embers fizzle out.

"Apparently, I'm saving the world from a wildfire that may kill us all."

"I had it under control."

"Said no man ever," I laugh, kicking some dirt onto the remaining embers.

"How would you know?" he asks, grinning, definitely coming out of his funk.

"You were legit sitting in front of a giant fire watching it as it prepared to destroy our entire wilderness."

"I wouldn't really call it 'giant.' I wouldn't have let it get that bad," he says, sitting back down. "So what're you doing here anyway?"

"I have an apology gift for you," I say, reaching into my bag. Riot is staring at me. "Stop looking so apprehensive."

"Sorry, I'm not thrilled to see you. Last time we were face-to-face, you plowed your shoe right into my nads," he says, hinging at his waist and blocking his groin from me. I'm not sure if I should be reaching for my glock or running for the hills."

"Very funny," I say, pulling everything out of my bag. "I realize that I wasn't all that kind the last time I saw you, so I came with a peace offering." I hand him a bag with all of my markers, colored pencils, crayons, and paints. "I thought you might want these. I can get more super easy, so I figured you could use what I have."

"Uhhh thank you?" He eyes me wearily without saying any more. His gratitude is more of a question than appreciation.

"Stop being so suspicious. Can't a girl do something nice for a man?"

"Not in Eka they can't," he says looking around, "unless we somehow teleported back in time or something."

“Was that supposed to be a joke, because it definitely needs some work,” I jab, clearing the leaves on the ground with my foot.

“You could sit if you want,” he says, eyeing the spot I just cleared.

“Nah, I can’t stay. Just finished some cleaning of my room and thought I’d donate some supplies to the less fortunate. You know, good deed and all.”

“Oh okay, so now I’m the ‘less fortunate,’ some needy guy who can’t get by without the help of some woman—”

“No, I was just tea—”

“Joking with you, Cissy. Calm down. Take a seat,” he says, motioning to my now-cleared spot. “There’s plenty of room.” He starts rummaging through all the materials I gave him. His eyes widen with more excitement every time he pulls something new out of the bag. “These look cool. What’re these?”

“For real? You don’t know what a colored pencil is?” I ask in utter disbelief. We live in a society that a nearly grown man has no idea what a colored pencil is, and I’ve used, broken, and rebought over a thousand colored pencils in my seventeen years of life. That’s just insanity.

“I made sure my name and address was on them—and on the bag. That way, if anyone catches you with them, you could just say you found the whole bag here,” I offer, finally sitting down across from him with the fire’s smolder between.

I pick up a stick and start breaking pieces off of it and toss them into his pile of ash. “So what did you burn, anyway?”

“My art,” he says, shrugging, staring at the ash.

“Holy Authority, if you’re that good, then why do you have to burn your art?” I would be so mad if I created something that gorgeous and watched it go up in flames. If I’m going to make something, then I’d want it known, appreciated, and maybe even celebrated.

He looks at me like I’m some strange entity that he cannot quite figure out. “That’s a pretty dumb question. The same reason that you thought to write your name on everything. Nobody ever gets to see my art.”

“Thanks for calling me dumb,” I say, rolling my eyes and shaking my head. “I’m far from dumb, thank you very much. I just meant why can’t you just bring it home and hang it in your bedroom? It’s not like Authority hangs out in there. Right? Or do they?”

“Actually, it’s worse than that,” he admits. “My dads are lawyers. Their whole lives revolve around upholding the law and seeing to it that their son is the most law-abiding citizen in Eka.”

I vividly remember a time a few years ago that I wanted to see what would happen if I overate my caloric intake. My tracker went off, blared like a fire truck siren nearing a traffic intersection. The sound was piercing. I ignored the screech and kept eating. My moms came running in. Mama looked horrified, but simply said, “If you’re going to overeat, then just charge your tracker while you’re eating the extra food.” She shook her head and walked out of the room.

Mom walked over to me, unlatched my watch, and brought it to my room to charge. I looked at the food, took one more bite with my stomach aching from the gluttony, and scraped the rest of the food into the trashcan. The whole thing was rather anticlimactic. I thought it was going to be exhilarating eating all of that food and breaking a Law of Liberty. Turned out, it wasn't so exciting.

"Are you sure they'd freak out? They're your dads. I'm sure they'd love to see just how talented you—."

"All they care about is how gifted I am on the lacrosse field. That's it. They just want me out, out of the house and out of their lives. They're counting down the days until I go to college."

"I'd bet all of my art supplies that you're selling them short. They love you and want you to be happy."

"Listen Miss Sunshine & Roses," he says, running his hands through his hair. "You really don't know anything—about me or my dads. Not everyone has an easy and perfect little life."

"Excuse me? At what point did I say or ever insinuate that I had a perfect life?"

Are all men like this? Do they really think they know everything? So far, Cleave and Riot are both really... really... I don't even know the word for it. Is there a word for men thinking that women are just these fragile, silly beings with no brain, and they're these big, bad, superior intellectuals?

"I didn't say that you were—"

"I came here to be nice, to give you something that I know you can't get easily. I also felt a bit guilty for beating the crap out of you—"

"You didn't—"

"I'm speaking right now, and I'd appreciate it greatly if you didn't interrupt me while I say my speak."

Riot clamps his mouth shut quickly while his eyes widen in surprise. Clearly nobody—or no woman—has ever spoken to him as such.

"I know you've spent a lot of time with Lizzie, but Lizzie isn't every female. We're not all these talented powerhouses with moms who'd move mountains for their daughters." I stand up and brush off my pants. "Some of us just have normal, everyday parents. I'm sorry if it annoys you that I've never had any major hardships or that I get along with my moms."

I start to walk back toward the path. But before I disappear deeper into the woods. I turn around and add, "Ya know Riot? I don't break laws. I follow my moms' rules, because truthfully, rules are put into place for a reason. I'd like to believe that Authority understands what's best for us. But ya know what? Authority doesn't know everything. I saw a flaw, recognized it for what it was, and decided to break a law. I broke a pretty big law for you Riot, a guy I don't even know. But I felt it was worth it. With your talent and your passion, you should be celebrated. I'm sorry if something in your life messed you up so badly that you can't even see kindness when it kicks you in the balls."

Riot scrambles to get up, nearly falling back down as he does so. I start down the path. I don't need to listen to any man explain to me how I'm wrong, or how I don't understand. The last thing I need is some guy telling me anything. I'm not sure what propelled me to come here, but it was probably the poorest choice I've ever made. Things were spiraling out of control with Cleave and with Marjorie; I just wanted to do something different, be a part of something that wasn't the same old thing, day in and day out. This was clearly not the answer.

"Cissy, wait!" Riot says, coming up behind me. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I keep walking, ignoring his pleas. Suddenly, he grabs my arm. I turn around ready to strike him yet again when I notice his eyes. They're glistening again. "Are you crying?"

With the back of his sleeve, Riot wipes his eyes. "Men don't cry."

"Authority help me!" I mumble, rolling my eyes. "What is wrong with your gender? You guys are just delusional, overhyped heathens."

"Fair," he says, smirking.

What in the charming world was that? Whoa, that crooked, one dimpled smirk has power. Where did my anger go? That cannot be a thing. What in the world? A man just smiled at me and all of my anger and frustration dissipated. That is thoroughly ridiculous.

"And you're wrong," Riot says, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly.

And it all comes flooding back—the anger and the frustration—but now, it's coupled with disbelief.

"Are you kidding me right now?"

Riot shakes his head. "Not like that. You're right about everything you said—except about you and Lizzie. Lizzie was a talented powerhouse. But Cissy, from my vantage point, you are too. One, you legit kicked the shit out of me. Two, you absconded here on a Male Day, breaking a whole load of laws. And three, you just put me in my place like some tenacious lawyer determined to win her case. My dads would love you."

There's that smirk again. I don't understand this dynamic. He smiles, and my fury vanishes. That's weird. He's male and totally barbaric and bombastic. Even Cleave said that he has a temper. Yet, I'm not afraid of him at all. He seems harmless, but tightly wound. I don't really want to be around when he snaps.

"I'm kind of impressed by you, Cissy," Riot continues. "You think you're this law-abiding citizen, but you're badass." He picks a leaf off the tree and starts ripping it into tiny pieces. "Not many people—females especially—would risk their freedom for some dude they didn't know."

"It's just silly that you can't draw a picture. What kind of law is that?"

"I guess they think that art is too 'girlie' for a man," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

"That's just stupid. How can a hobby be male or female? If you like coloring pictures, then you should be allowed to color—"

“I wouldn’t call it ‘coloring’ exactly,” Riot corrects, “It’s more than just coloring. When I have a paintbrush in my hand or charcoals, the whole world just falls away. I don’t have any worries, problems, or pain. It all just disappears.”

“I wish I had something like that.” I admit. “Nothing does that for me.”

“What do you worry about, Cissy?” He looks at me and his eyes are quizzical like he cannot figure me out.

“Everything.”

“Tell me. I’m a rather good listener,” he says, plopping down on a tree stump.

“What? You a therapist now?” I laugh, straddling a low tree branch.

“I’d totally be if men—”

“If men could be therapists.” We say in unison.

“Feelings are for females,” I add. “How dare a man care about his heart and his feelings?”

“Exactly,” Riot agrees, rolling his eyes. “So tell me, what worries you?”

“Alright, I’ll play. I worry about my Moms when I leave for higher learning. Mom works so hard at the school, and Mama still struggles with having to give Cleave up.”

“Cleave?” he says, his eyes lighting up. “As in Cleave Shaw?”

“Yeah, my brother, my twin.”

“Dude, that guy’s a trip. He’s totally the comic relief of Lakeward.”

“I guess he got the humor genes, because I have none of that personality.”

“Nature vs. Nurture,” Riot says, nodding.

“What? What does that even mean?” I ask.

“It’s a scientific study in how or what people’s traits and personalities are based on if they were born that way or developed them over time, due to who raised them.”

“Nature versus nurture? Hmm, I’m not sure that has anything to do with his sense of humor,” I say, speculatively. “Cleave and I are nothing alike—except that we’re twins.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that he gets a relationship with your father and you don’t?”

“A relationship with my father?” Oh my Authority, I’ve spent so much time berating Cleave for not wanting to develop a stronger bond with our mom, and I have not once thought about my father. “Riot, I’ve never considered one of Cleave’s dads as my father. Never even asked about which one was the active father.”

“Okay, so—”

“So? I have a father. A man who made me.”

“Yeah, and I have a mom.” He looks confused.

“That’s just crazy that I never took the time to think about him or care about him. I have to ease up on Cleave. I’m no better than he is.”

“Ahhh, but you are. You just realized it yourself that our country is screwed up and that the powers-that-be pick and choose crazy stuff to keep us safe.” Riot lifts his sweatshirt up over his head. “It’s so freaking hot out.”

“But this morning it was freezing,” I agree. “It’s definitely layering season.”

“Layering season?”

“Uhhh yes, wake up and put on sweaters and sweatshirts with summer clothes underneath, but by midafternoon, we’re all in tank tops and shorts.”

“Tell me this; if you, your mom, and Cleave want to see one another, why don’t you just make plans to do so? It’s not like you don’t know where that can happen,” he says, motioning all around. “These trees are the perfect covert for lawbreakers.”

“Cleave isn’t interested in Mama at all. And Mama would never break a Law of Liberty,” I say matter-of-factly, shrugging my shoulders.

“Ahhh, so you’re the only criminal in your family,” he laughs.

“Hardly, this is the most daring thing I’ve ever done,” I admit. “I’m a pretty ‘by the book’ kind of girl.”

“Yet, here you are in the woods breaking our country’s biggest and most punishable law,” he says raising one eyebrow. “Not so ‘by the book’ if you ask me.”

“It’s terrifying being here,” I say, “and pretty exhilarating.”

Riot smirks again. “Are you saying being with me is exhilarating, Tree Gazer?”

I mirror his smirk with my own. “I’m not saying anything.” I feel my cheeks burn.

“I think you need to be careful. I used to be where you are, and it’s a slippery slope. You’re going to start questioning everything now. And it sucks, because we never get any answers.”

“The older I get, the more I realize I know nothing.” My life has been protected and sheltered. Lately, I just feel so oblivious and curious. Why is it so wrong to want answers to the life I’m living?

“Sadly, there is so much we can learn and know, but nobody is letting us.” Riot’s smirk fades and is replaced with a defeated frown as his brows furrow. “Be careful out there, Cissy. I’d hate it if something happened to you.”

