

Chapter 1: Reid

He's young. That's the first thing I notice. The lines around his mouth and the gray detailing of his hair try to tell me differently. He has young eyes though, hopeful eyes. I keep to the edge of the crowd that has gathered around him, not wanting to get myself stuck in the middle of so many people. That's what Lana would tell me to do: stay safe, don't risk it. Of course, I haven't survived this long by being stupid. I took risks, sure, and I have gained a reputation for it. But no one can call me stupid.

He struggles to get up, to move, even to speak. They won't let him. He is stuck there, awaiting his punishment. No one says a word. They're all being herded into the circle. The Controllers need us to watch. It's a reminder. We are under their protection, and under their governance.

The crowd shifts toward me, and the space in-between the crown of people and the man in the middle becomes wider. His eyes are red with the strain. A vein in his temple threatens to burst. I back up with the crowd but they move faster. One person is behind me, then three or four. Before I have the chance to reposition I am part of the crowd, an audience to his punishment. I strain my eyes to check for cameras on my right and left. There aren't any that I can see. Still I turn my head downward.

On the opposite side of the circle people start to talk. Men and women give their insights into what is happening. The talking grows louder as people are given their voices. Behind me, I feel bodies relax from their rigid posture. Someone taps me on the shoulder. I don't turn to face them.

"Hey dude, what's going on?"

I shrug, and then the question is repeated to someone else. I look over and shake my head. A young woman stands beside me. If I had to guess, I would put her at fifteen. Her head reaches to my chin, and her hands are balled into fists on either side. She too ignores the man's question. He asks someone else, and I want to tell him to wait it out. I decide to address her instead.

"You can leave now," I tell her. She looks up at me. She's been crying. A strand of coppery red hair is stuck to her cheek. Her eyes are a pale grey, and I imagine that once they had been a brilliant blue, like Lana's, but then something had stolen all the blue away. I understand why she's here. There's something important about the man before us, but still I tell her to leave. "You don't have to watch this."

She turns from me. Where the hair has been brushed away from her face it has exposed the pale flesh of her neck. It is unscarred. She isn't under the control of Deviance yet. It is her choice to be here.

My fingers brush over the rigid metal on my own neck. When my implant was given to me, it didn't quite heal as it should've. The ridges of the metal protrude, and at the edges the skin has barely grown over. I am here by choice, too, because mine doesn't work. It is my right, I guess, as is hers, but I am only here to blend in. She doesn't have that responsibility.

I try reaching out to her again, but she eludes me. I follow her path through the crowd, but my concentration is broken by movement at the center. The crowd parts for a woman in a red coat. Her movements are elegant, poised, and though her steps are slow and steady it feels like her version of a dance. People talk louder, and the clatter of voices threatens to drown out anything she might say. She stops them with one short sweep of her arm. Everyone goes silent.

The bodies around me return to their former rigidity. I hold myself steady, every muscle threatening to quiver and give me away. She releases her control and everyone relaxes.

“Citizens,” the woman says. I try to find the path that the girl took. She couldn’t have made it far. Everyone is silent, save for the murmurs between a couple, or a mother and child. I try to push forward, excusing myself as I do. An older woman gives me a knowing smile and steps backward, allowing me through.

The woman in the red coat takes her time. She lets the word settle over the crowd like a warm blanket, soothing them into undivided attention. I can see others in the crowd moving as I do. They try to get a better view, and people let them pass. I keep an eye out for the girl with the red hair.

I freeze as the circle grows even wider. The woman in the red coat is focused on a young man who is pushing people out of his way. I try to blend back into the crowd. If she notices me, I will be the next one in the middle. I hold my breath, but he is the one who has earned her attention.

The crowd is spread apart much wider now. The circle consists of a few hundred people spread as thin as five rows of bodies. At the back of the crowd a man hoists his daughter to his shoulders and points. She giggles, and the bell on her pink hat wobbles, letting out a happy ring.

From the corner of my eye I finally find her. Her red hair teases me from the gap between the bodies of a younger couple. Their fingers are twined together, and her blond hair falls over his shoulder and down his back.

The crowd parts easily now, everyone separating themselves and allowing people to find their places in the front. I tap the man on the shoulder and ask him to move. The woman's curtain of hair slips from his shoulder as she turns to look at me.

"We were here first," she says.

"Please, I just need to get to the front." My chest quivers and my stomach weakens. This is exactly the opposite of where I want to be. Lana would be furious, telling me that I should be at the back where it is safest. It would be harder for me to be seen, and I would be less likely to be caught. But surely she would understand when a young girl was at risk, in fact she may even tell me to help her. It strengthens my resolve.

I urge the couple. "She is my niece," I say as I point to the girl standing right in front of them. I make the lie sound as authentic as I can. The girl doesn't hear me say it. They believe me.

Their hands unclasp to let me through. When I am just behind the girl I hear them talking. "Maybe he should just learn to control her then," the man says. I ignore the remark.

"You really don't want to see this." I rest one hand on the girl's shoulder. I keep the other one ready in case I need to move. She brushes my hand away, but I hope the meaning has come through. I am not here to hurt her.

The moments tick by. The woman in the red coat flexes her fingers before caressing the man's face. Her fingers travel down his skin. They look too long to be on a human hand. When the tips of her fingers reach the implant on his neck, the surrounding flesh still red and swollen, she raps the metal with her nails. The crowd is so silent that I can hear the metallic clink. A shiver passes through the crowd. Her fingers finally rest on his shoulder, and it is then that I can

see that her fingers are bent in four places instead of three. Her index finger nail is shaped to a point.

“Citizens,” she repeats. She now has the attention of everyone, including me. Her eyes sweep across the crowd. They are a lightless green. They would be pretty if they were in any other sockets but hers. Her eyes meet mine and the muscles in my neck tauten. Her gaze passes over me. I relax; I am unrecognized. “Before all of you is a man who has sacrificed his rights in an attempt to gain what was not deserved.” She pulls a parcel from the inside of her coat. Her fingers peel away white paper to reveal a large red piece of meat, as well as a few scraps. She displays it to everyone. Heads peek up from the crowd to gain a better look. She rewraps it and puts it away. “Such a crime is not tolerated. Theft is not tolerated.” She emphasizes her words by running her fingers through his hair. The girl in front of me takes a small step forward. I pull her back to remind her that she is not safe. Her shoulders are bunched upward and her hands are white-knuckle fists. I don’t dare speak.

I rock my weight onto my toes to get the blood into my legs. I don’t know if she will be stupid enough to try to break away. Whoever this man is, she is upset over him.

“We must rely on each other in order to survive. Weakness, crime, deliberate attacks on your fellow citizens. These are all not tolerated.” Her hands ball the man’s hair into fists. She pulls his head backward to reveal his throat. I fear she might execute him like this right here. But she doesn’t. She releases him. A tuft of hair falls from her hands and rests on the breast of his shirt. She brushes it away.

I draw my attention from her to him. Our eyes meet. For a moment I assure myself that he is looking at the girl in front of me, or at the couple over my shoulder. I break my eyes away, look at the woman in the red coat, and then back at him. He is staring into my eyes.

“Help,” I mouth to him while pointing at her, making sure no one else is looking at me. He blinks. He understands my intentions.

“When weakness manages to infect a member of a society such as ours.” Her hand sweeps outward at the circle, all but her index finger slightly curled. “It needs to be dealt with.” A roar of approval erupts from the crowd. She waits, basking in the thrill of it. “Under other circumstances we could intervene, of course.” A man falls to his face at the opposite side of the crowd, just behind her. She doesn’t turn to look. She knows. I watch as he raises himself from the ground, brushing himself off. He’s the same one who got her attention earlier as he pushed his way to the front. He face reddens but he is smiling, happy to be an example of her absolute control. “We intervene in order to ensure that such acts do not repeat themselves, become history, our history. We do not need history to know what is wrong.” She pauses again. I think for a moment that I hear them echo, but her words are being voiced throughout the area instead. Speakers mimic her, repeating her words so that everyone can enjoy her brilliant speech.

I tell myself that if ever, now would be the time to run. It isn’t safe to stay for this. Delicate, cold fingers remind me what I came to the front for. I look down to see the girl’s eyes locked into mine. I look back to the man. He is blinking. The only speech he has left.

“In times like these we must intervene in other ways. Exercise our power. Do what is right.” The woman’s hands rest again on his shoulders. I know what is coming. I brace myself.

The man manages to push one leg underneath himself, raising from his knees. His words are a growl. “Run, Lily,” he yells. The woman’s hands press down on him, putting him back into place. Then she removes them, raising them in the air. His eyes no longer look at us. He falls over, and I know he is dead.

Lily shoves past me and squeezes her way back through the crowd. I shove the stunned passerby aside, intent on not losing track of her. At first there is a murmur in the crowd sparking confusion. I ignore it as it swells louder. Two bodies push back against me, resisting me as I try to break through. I feel a hand snatch out at me, catching the fabric of my shirt for a moment, but not holding.

Lily runs faster than I expected her to. She aims straight for the alley across from us. My feet slam pavement, drowning out the crowd behind me. I hear the blood rushing in my ears, and the feels like it is scraping my throat. I focus on my pursuit, forgetting the crowd as much as possible, until the woman at the center calls out. “Get the Radical!” her words echo along the walls of the alleyway, accompanied by the sound of my breathing and Lily’s stuttering sobs. “Get Reid!”

The tip of my shoe catches pavement. My world goes sideways. The rough ground bites into the flat side of my arm. Bits of white flesh stick as I pull my arm away and examine the blood swelling in the depressions left behind. My breathing is labored, I falter as I get to my feet, but the alley erupts with the sound of the crowd behind me and I am forced to push myself harder.

When I catch up to Lily she is torn between two alleyways. She looks left and right, and I see her hesitate each time.

“Left,” I yell at her. I don’t know if she will listen to me. She doesn’t seem to be sure either. She spots me, and the recognition makes her hesitate for a moment longer. It gives me just enough time to get within distance of her. “I’m not trying to hurt you.”

She doesn’t seem certain, but she nods and goes left. I follow after her with our pursuers not far behind.

I try to remember the last time I was in this part of the City. It was too long ago. The buildings look rundown and faded. Windows are cracked or broken. Garbage bags sit forgotten against the brickwork. A checkpoint out here would likely be neglected.

I consider taking a wide turn in the other direction, heading for a part of the City that I know better, but then I spot a partially worn red mark of paint placed just at the edge of the next intersection. I match stride with Lily. When we approach the intersection I tell her which way to turn. She still seems uncertain, but she follows me as I guide us through the alleys.

Not far from us I hear a mass of voices. They are seeking us out. Dividing the many alleys into manageable groups. The checkpoint can’t be far. Whoever put those marks had to know that there is only so much time to escape. I push myself harder in fear that I am wrong. They are old after all, painted in place from a time where this corner of the City belonged to us, before the Radicals were sought out and removed.

At the next turn I find what I am looking for. Two spots are painted over a small mound of black plastic trash bags. I stop before them and take a moment to catch my breath. My sides ache and I can feel the blood caking to my arms. I know that bags are concealing something though. I get down on my knees and, with hesitation, stick my unhurt arm into the grimy interior. Decayed food and stagnant rainwater seep from the mound. I push my arm deeper, and then I

feel it. A lever lifts out of place with little effort. I push the panel that the lever is mounted on and it swings inward. The bags remain in place.

“Climb through it, headfirst, quickly,” I tell Lily. She looks at me like I am insane. I shake my head, pushing my body between the bags and into a short tunnel which drops into an unlit room. Even from inside I can hear the voices closing in on us. She doesn’t have long.

I push myself back up into the tunnel, through the bags. Grime trickles down my spine. I suppress a gag. Lily is standing there in front of the bags, both knees quivering like a lost child. I extend an arm, grabbing the hand closest to me, and pull her through. She protests but I use all of my weight to pull her in, through the bags and the tunnel and into the room. I drop her to the floor and close the small panel which I had opened. Then I am silent, waiting for the voices to go away.

Chapter 2: Lily

He stands still, watching the opening where we came through. His arm is covered in blood I hold my breath. He waits like a predator, and I worry that it may just be me he is waiting for, but when the voices outside fade away he comes back to life.

“We should be good for now,” he says. His voice is calm. I don’t know how he is staying calm. He fumbles his way around the room with his hands outstretched. They pat down the wall, and he is inches from the switch he is looking for, but I don’t tell him. I like it better this way, but he doesn’t. He turns the light on, and it is dim enough to keep the room cozy, but seems to satisfy him as well. He opens small cabinets and pulls out different bags and bottles. He inspects each of them but none seem to earn his favor.

He fills it with a few bottles of water, and a square of folded paper. He puts it over his shoulder. He then uses a bottle of water to wash his arm off. The scrape doesn’t look too bad. He inspects it for a moment and then leaves it alone.

I try to imagine where he might be taking me, but the only way out of the room is a rough wooden door. The planks are crooked and scrape against the frame. I am unsure how it is even holding in place.

Father would call it a waste. “Doors are meant to keep people out, or in,” he would say. It always came with a sad smirk, like he was trying to smile but couldn’t remember quite how to, “Mostly out.”

He spent his time when working on one for a neighbor, especially if they had done something for us. He chastised me when I mentioned it, but he didn’t tell me I was wrong. The doors for our neighbors never broke down, and their families were never taken apart.

“Are you okay?” The man asks me. He squats down in front of me. The wooden door is open and the hallway beyond it continues out of sight. I nod. I am not sure where he is taking me, but it seems to be my only option. I decide to follow him. I can escape later if I need to.

Chapter 3: Reid

She has me concerned, but I am not sure there is anything I can do for her. By the time I have all the supplies together she is sniffing and seems to have forgotten I am in the room. It feels like I shouldn't be witnessing it, like I should leave her in the comfort of her own privacy and return when she has had some time to process everything. We don't have that kind of time though.

When I ask if she is okay she returns to awareness, like waking from a trance. She nods. There is something else there though, like a stony resolve to prove herself right. Her eyebrows hang pull downward. She straightens up and waits for my lead.

“Just do as I say, and we can make it through this. I have someone special for you to meet.” I smile, and she returns a short smile of her own, before it flits away as if it hadn't been there. *It's fine*, I remind myself. I was there once too. “My name is Reid, by the way.” I extend my hand, not expecting her to take it. “I assume you're Lily,” I say when she doesn't extend her own hand. Her eyes widen, as if somehow I had robbed her of her identity. “Your friend. At the circle. He told you to run.”

She doesn't speak. She turns her head down, and won't look at me. I hadn't meant to upset her.

We continue in silence for a while, the rough rock walls giving us only enough room to pass through in single file. I worry about her, but I want to keep moving and don't have the time to stop and make sure she is okay. I listen to her for any signs that she needs my attention. After some time her breathing steadies, and finally she speaks.

“He was my father.”

The information falls into place, and I wish I had made the connection sooner. I want to apologize, but it's too late. As the hallway curves, a metal doorway appears. A large window dominates the top portion of the door, but the other side is hidden from view by a metallic sheen. As we approach, the hallway becomes wider, until it's almost a small room. Lily looks confused. I don't blame her. I have no idea what to expect, but the nagging feeling returns, reminding me that it has to be someone I know.

"What is it?" Lily asks.

"A checkpoint," I say without thinking. She has no idea what I am talking about. One look confirms it. "It's here to provide us a safe place to stay for a while, and to give us a way forward."

"What's forward?" she asks.

"A safe place to stay for a long time. You'll see."

I knock once on the door. There is no immediate response, and I feel foolish for expecting there to be someone on the other side. Instead I reach for the handle and try to open it. It doesn't budge. I knock again, louder this time. Lily steps up next to me. Her curious eyes inspect the shiny metallic surface of the only barrier between us and a safe haven.

I hear something on the other side. I raise a finger to my lips. I wait, expecting the door to open. Instead two bulging eyes appear in the window. I am stunned. Before I can address them the window is obscured once again.

Chapter 4: Marcus

I check the panel in the door for the third time. I thought I heard something. I know I did. No one is there. I sit back in my seat in front of the three monitors. They dominate the room, and their whitish hue illuminates the majority of the rectangular space. At the far edges, where the light doesn't reach, I often imagine Jensen watching me just out of sight. I pore over the displays and on the middle screen a crowd of people has gathered in a nearby alley. Something has them stirred up, which means I will soon have a visitor.

I get out of my chair, brushing its wooden seat to remove any crumbs. Then I check the desk. I pull a hair from the edge and bring it to the trash. No need for visitors to be in a dirty room. I wipe the surface clean with a rag and then throw the rag away. I return to my seat. Then I get up again. I scrub the inside of two of the three cups. The third I am sure isn't dirty. It hasn't been used. Then I clean it anyway. All three are put back in place.

Before I can check my rations I stop. I can hear Jensen's voice in my head. He thinks I am stupid for waiting here. Sometimes I believe him when he says no one will be visiting me. I pretend like I don't care. I don't have to stay here. I want to. If someone came, I could help them.

There's a noise at the door. I check it again. Still an empty hallway. Jensen must be playing tricks. I sit in my seat, pulling it closer to the monitors. There has to be something I am missing. I know I have a visitor coming.

The crowd of people are talking. I can't tell which camera I am looking through, but I am sure they are close to my checkpoint. Two of the people wander off, and a man in the crowd calls after them. I can't see their faces.

I pull the folding table from the closet. I remove a collapsible chair and put it on one side of the table. It is old, and doesn't open easily. I put my seat on the other side of the table, facing the door. I take one last look around the room to make sure everything is in place. It looks fine to me. Something feels wrong. Jensen reminds me that no one is coming. I decide that I should turn the light on. Visitors wouldn't like to sit in the dark like this.

In the light the room looks much filthier than I thought. There are two red stains near the door; Jensen had told me I needed to punish myself. A piece of plastic wrapping sits near the trashcan. How hadn't I seen it?

I scurry to clean the room better, but this time I am sure; there is a knock at the door. A voice. Not low and mean like Jensen's voice. A kinder voice. Then another voice, I think.

I check the panel on the door. Two people stand there. A taller man, and a younger girl. I'm not ready yet. I can't tell them that. Then they'll know that I didn't clean as I should've. I check the stain on the floor. I have no time to clean it. Surely they won't notice.

I reach for the doorknob. My fingers are slick with sweat. I wipe them on my pants, and then dry the doorknob. I pull the door open, keeping my head down, focused on the stain. I slide my foot over it, but it puts me in their way. I slide my foot back. I look up. The man looks at me directly. There is recognition in his eyes. He knows. I prepare to apologize, to chastise myself for not keeping things as clean as I should've, but instead he reaches out his hand.

"Hello, Marcus," he says.

I look in his eyes. He looks kind, not like Jensen. More like Father, before Father got mad. I reach out my own hand, clasping my grasp with his. He shakes it.

“It’s been a while. How have you been?”

I don’t know how to answer him. I don’t know how he even knows my name. Something tells me he is familiar, safe, but I can’t recall it.

“My name is Reid,” he says. “It’s okay if you don’t remember me.”

Chapter 5: Reid

It's been a while since I've seen Marcus, but he hasn't changed much. His skin is a whitish pallor, and his eyes threaten to bulge from their sockets. His hair is ragged, as if he had cut it himself. After I introduce myself, he steps out of the way quickly

“Please, come in.”

He directs me to a chair at the table. I pull it out for Lily and let her sit instead. She looks tired. Her eyelids droop and she no longer looks focused. If I had a choice I wouldn't be resting here. There would be a better place along the way, or I would just wait until the end. I contemplate letting her nap for just a little bit, but I don't want to stay here long.

“This is Lily,” I say, gesturing toward her.

Her body sags a little. She looks at me when I say her name. Marcus nods, but doesn't focus on her for long. He instead focuses his attention on the other chair. He grows agitated. I step closer to Lily, ready to intervene if necessary. Marcus makes no move for her. Instead he opens a closet and pulls out another chair. He moves past me, opening it and placing it next to Lily.

“Sorry,” he says, “I should've prepared better.”

“It's okay,” I tell him.

He smiles. The expression makes his face look less vulgar. I sit in the chair. Lily is motionless, and her breathing is quiet and steady. Marcus sits across from us, and clasps his hands in front of him. He focuses his gaze on me, but it costs him a great effort. Lana had said something about him once, long ago.

“He’s a good person, with a kind heart,” she had said. Her soft hands enclosed mine. She looked at me with such compassion, like I was one of her flowers waiting to bloom but struggling with the idea of coming to life.

“But he’s dangerous,” I said.

Her face grew stern. “As are you.” The tone of her voice was akin to what she would use if she were chastising a child. “As am I. But that doesn’t make us bad. You can’t judge him by his circumstance.” Her hands drop mine. I missed their warmth, their comfort. Her gaze was no longer compassionate, now resorted to pity instead.

“Can’t I?” I asked her.

She didn’t bother responding. The conversation was over.

I try to relax, but I can’t help but feel like our pursuers are already figuring out where we went, and how to get to us now. One glance at the monitor over Marcus’s shoulder, allays my fears. They are still there, but only a few of them, and they look utterly confused. Marcus catches my gaze, and checks the screen as well.

“You should be good for a while,” he says. “At least long enough to get some rest.” His speech becomes more confident, as if the presence of other humans is teaching him how to behave. He lets himself look at Lily for a moment before looking back at me.

“She’s tired,” Marcus says.

“She’s had a rough day.” I gesture towards the middle monitor. “They took her father. Caught him stealing. Made an example.” I shake my head. “It wasn’t right.”

“How does that involve her?”

“She would’ve gotten herself killed. I sympathized. Took her out of there,” I say.

Marcus nods. His behavior is almost normal now, save for a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth every so often. “You know,” Marcus says, changing the topic, “I have a cot that I can set up for her. Make her more comfortable. She should sleep”

Marcus gets out of his chair, not waiting for me to respond before setting up a cot against the far wall. Lily looks at me, more alert. She jerks her head while Marcus’s back is turned. I clench my jaw. I don’t want her to sleep either, but Marcus isn’t seeming to give us a choice. He guides us toward the cot. He doesn’t place a hand on Lily, but he hesitates as if he could if I weren’t in his way.

Lily slides herself onto the cot. Her body is rigid, and she is quick to wipe a tear from her eye. I put a finger to my lips. Marcus returns himself to the table.

When I sit across from Marcus again, Lily watches me. Both of her eyes are open wide. I look away from her so that Marcus doesn’t become suspicious.

Marcus looks over his shoulder at Lily. By the time his head is turned her eyes are closed and she appears to be fast asleep. It satisfies him, and when he turns back to me Lily’s eyes don’t open.

I try not to focus too much of my attention on Marcus. The longer I look at him, the more he fidgets and squirms as if something about my gaze were making him uncomfortable. Instead I survey the room. It is very rough compared to the other checkpoints I’ve been through. Instead of flat cast concrete walls, this room is made mostly of carved stone. The ceiling is lower than most, and the wiring is visibly mounted to the stone surfaces. Nothing of this space tells of the advancements that have been made. Yet this space feels more homely. It is clean, well

maintained, and there isn't a visible sign that anyone has been living here, save for the small amount of trash in the trashcan.

"You've maintained this place well," I tell him.

He nods, smiling wider than before, and his body rocks a little as if he were using the compliment to comfort himself. Something about his movements remind me that he was once dangerous, if not now. I can't recall exactly why though.

"I try."

"What have you been up to since I last saw you?" I ask him.

"I don't know. I don't remember." His face sags. His eyes grow wistful, and he looks at something over my shoulder. "I can't remember how long it's been."

"That's okay. What have you been doing lately?"

"This." He points around the room.

I nod. I check on Lily. Her eyes are wide open again. Her cheek is wet with tears.

"We should get going," I tell Marcus, "Lily, time to get up."

When Marcus turns this time Lily pretends to rub the sleep from her eyes. She slides her feet from the cot and acts groggy. When I look at Marcus he appears to be confused, and somewhat upset. He shakes it off, and smiles at us.

"Right, well then. Thank you." Marcus stands from his seat and folds the cot away. I guide Lily towards the door where we came in. We can't wait here much longer, the thought that

the real threat for us right now isn't the crowd pursuing us but somehow Marcus instead. He appears to be kind enough, but his words and movements aren't right.

"Different doesn't make him dangerous," Lana would say. She would be right, given different circumstances.

I want to assure Lily that everything will be okay. Her fingers dig into my arm as she holds onto me. I can't risk Marcus overhearing me though. That would only make things worse.

He gives me an opportunity when he disappears into another room. I stoop down to Lily.

"Listen, I know it's tough, but I know a wonderful person who will help you through this. It will get better," I whisper. She nods.

Lana would know what to do. If I gave her the situation as it is, she would be able to fix it immediately. Part of me longs for her, expecting that without question she will welcome us in when we get there. The other part of me, the unspoken fear that I try to push aside, reminds me that the last time we spoke she told me to not bother coming back. Surely she couldn't have meant it. The few weeks spent apart must've healed the wounds that were made. Still I worry. If I get there with nowhere to go, I will be lost.

"I think it's about time we get going," I say when Marcus returns to the room. I hope Marcus doesn't pick up on the strain in my voice. By the way Lily looks at me, she definitely has.

"Oh, but it's been a while since I've had visitors. Do you have time for at least a cup of hot chocolate?" Marcus comes back over to us, the steaming cup of hot chocolate already in his hand.

“I don’t know,” I say, but Lily reaches for it. I don’t stop her. I can’t see any harm in it. Marcus smiles, glad to have our company for a few moments longer. Lily takes her time, raising the cup to her lips every so often. She savors every mouthful. Marcus watches her. I keep myself ready, sure that Marcus wouldn’t do anything, but unsure of my own judgment. To the left of Marcus, something moves and catches my eye.

On the middle monitor a crowd has now reformed outside of the entrance where we came in. On the other two monitors, multiple City issued vehicles stream through the alleys, snaking their way to the entrance. I point it out to Marcus. It breaks him from his trance. He shudders, and his right hand uncontrollably grasps at his hair, forming it into bunches between his fingers.

“Time to go,” he says, pulling the cup from Lily and spilling some of the hot chocolate on the floor. He freezes, focused on the spill.

“I’ll take care of it.” I search for a rag, finding one next to the sink. I use it to clean the spill, wiping the same spot repeatedly until Marcus no longer switches his attention between the screens and the table. Lily watches me, not knowing what to do.

“We need to leave,” I tell her.

“Over there,” Marcus says. He points to the right side of the room. A small depression in the wall outlines the vague shape of a doorway. “You go through there.”

“Stupid,” Marcus says. His fingers claw at his face. A spot of blood forms under his eye. “Should’ve known. So stupid.”

“No.” I pull his hand away from his face. He resists, and he nearly overpowers me. He looks like he is in pain, though not from the scratches on his face. “Just help us get out of here, then get yourself out too.”

“Okay.” He collects himself. He walks over to Lily. He reaches past her, no longer bothered by her presence, instead pulling a lever on the wall that I had not seen. A door behind her opens. “Go quickly. I’ll shut it behind you.”

I thank him, and follow Lily through it. As I pass through, I feel his hand clamp down on my shoulder, turning me around.

“Thank you, Reid,” he says.

I nod. He disappears. The door shuts behind us, leaving us in total darkness. I hesitate, not sure how to proceed. Lights flicker on overhead. In the brief pause between total darkness and complete illumination, Lily looks completely at ease.

Chapter 6: Reid

“How do you know where you’re going?” Lily asks me.

“I just do,” I say.

The walls of this tunnel system are finished in the way I’m used to. Smooth concrete lines both sides of us, as well as the floor. The ceiling is made of more concrete as well as steel beams. Lights hang from the beams, leaving not so much as a shadow. These tunnels feel comfortable. It isn’t long before I work myself into a brisk walk, eager to make it to Lana.

“But have you been here before?” Lily asks.

“Tunnels like this one.”

“But not this one.”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Then how do you know?” she asks again. She is persistent. Her company borders on being unwelcome, but I understand her curiosity, so I give her the best answer I can come up with.

“They are all made the same, with the same patterns. They all lead to more checkpoints. If I don’t make my way there now, I will after the next checkpoint, or the one after that. So I know where I am going because no matter where I end up, I will find my way to the next place I need to be.”

“Oh,” she says.

We continue in silence for a while. I feel the tension of more unanswered questions in the way she looks at me. A few times she opens her mouth to speak when I look over. She thinks better of it, and decides not to ask.

“Sorry,” I tell her, “I don’t mean to sound rude. I don’t know how better to explain it.”

“It’s fine.”

“Do you have something you want to ask?”

“No,” she says. She remains silent for a few minutes, and then says, “Well, yeah. One. Where are we going?”

“I told you.”

“No I mean where are we going in the end?”

“Well,” I tell her. In my mind I see Lana, graceful Lana, willing to take in anyone who needs a home. A sprawling house, many rooms, a safe place to be for all who are welcome. I don’t know how to explain that to someone who has only ever seen the ugly side of the City. “Let’s just say I have a really good friend who has made it her point to provide a place for people like us to live.”

“Us?”

“Well, myself, Marcus, and others who are Radicals. You don’t have the implant. You could be safe on the outside. If the City let you back.”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t want to be part of that. Even if I could.”

“A safe place for us, including you,” I say.

She smiles. The warmth of it makes me feel a little bit better. I refrain from telling her that I don't know if Lana will let me back.

It isn't too long before we come to an intersection. All three hallways extend out of sight. The one to our left looks the most promising, with muddy footprints and some trash. It has been used recently. Lily appears to think the same thing, and without asking me she starts to follow it. I grab her and pull her back.

"No," I say. "Not that way."

"Why not? People used it. It must be the right way."

"It doesn't feel right," I say. I continue along the same direction as before. Lily doesn't like my decision.

"It looks perfectly fine. We've been walking forever. Why not take it?"

"It's just not right," I say. I try to determine what bothers me about it. It could be the trash. No one makes a mess in the tunnels, and it's just not polite. It could be the number of footprints, like a herd of people had gone through. I walk faster.

I hear something ahead of us. I stop, holding Lily in place. I can't see far enough ahead to determine the source of the sound, but I haven't heard it before. I creep forward, keeping Lily behind me. For a while I see nothing, until something moves on my right. I look over, ready to fight to get Lily out of here. Where there was solid concrete before is now a gaping hole in the wall. Lily steps forward, as if to go into it. I stop her.

"We don't know what, or who, is in there."

"It could be our way out of here."

“I’ve never seen it. I doubt that.”

Despite my warning, I too can’t help but wonder where the opening came from. It’s new to my knowledge, and there would be no need for this kind of thing, but when I step closer I can see the channels in the wall where a chunk must have slid out of place. It’s definitely meant to be here.

I listen for any sign that someone else is here. All I hear is Lily’s breathing, and the sound of my own heartbeat as the blood rushes in my ears. I have no sense of depth, so I keep one hand out in front of me, making sure I don’t trip over anything that might be there. I hear the grating sound again. I look behind us and the entrance is gone. The room doesn’t grow any darker.

“Lily,” I say, “Are you okay?”

No answer. I turn around, facing where I remember the door being. I reach out for her. I can’t find her. I stoop down, feeling across the floor, dreading the worst. I don’t know if I’ll even be able to help her if she had somehow fallen and hurt herself. I don’t know where we are, or how to get out. I should’ve stayed on the main path, kept going the same way I was supposed to be going.

Something moves in the darkness. I can feel the presence of another person in the room. It is imposing, nothing like Lily’s.

“Who are you?” I ask.

They don’t respond. There’s more movement, shallow, raspy breathing, maybe even a cough. I spin in place, trying to get a bearing on my surroundings. “Who are you?” I ask again.

“Yeah, it’s him alright,” someone says.

The voice is familiar. Lyle? I think.

“Let’s just get it over with.”

Definitely Lyle.

“Bag him up and let’s move,” Rock says, his voice gruff and unwavering. Someone moves in the darkness.

“Sorry, buddy,” Manny says. “It’s kind of a secret, and you weren’t as smart as the girl. She kind of just figured it out on her own.” His breath is warm in my ear. Then his hands pull something over my face. The cloth is rough, like burlap, and it smells musty.

“Where is she?” I ask him. They wouldn’t hurt her, but they wouldn’t feel obliged to act kindly toward her either.

“She kind of, well, I haven’t seen it before, but she just made her way into the tunnel that this room leads into. Met us there. She said you were coming. It’s kind of funny actually.”

“Why is it funny?” I say.

Manny’s hands push me forward, guiding me into a new space. Artificial light filters through holes in the cloth.

“Because that room is dark. I mean *dark*.” Manny chuckles. “Rock was pissed about it too. He was all like ‘How did she make it through that?’ Man you picked up something funky.”

“Bag her too?” Lyle asks. His voice isn’t far off.

“Is there a point? She already figured it out.”

Manny wasn't kidding. Rock sounds angry, and I can only imagine the measures he's considering.

"Well, we bagged Reid," Lyle says.

I don't understand the intent.

"Reid is a different story. He looked like a beaten dog in there," Rock says. They all start laughing.

"Shut up," I say. It doesn't stop them.

"So take 'em as is?" Manny says. They continue talking as if I can't hear them.

"Guess so, don't have an option. She's expecting us soon." Rock's voice is all business now. I hear him approach me. "Told us if we didn't get you here 'pronto' she'd never have us in the house again."

"She wants me back?" I ask him. For the first time I feel certain that she will accept us in, which means Lily will be safe for sure.

"Of course she wants you back." His voice grows distant. "I mean why is she even with this guy? He's duller than my boot-knife."

"It's in the bottom of a pond," Lyle says.

"Oh," Lily says. I hear her laugh a little. It upsets me, but it's good to hear her laugh.

"Move out," Rock says.

Manny guides me forward, but lets me walk at my own pace. "Don't mind him," Manny says. His voice is barely a whisper. "He's been in a knot lately."

“About what?” I ask.

“Lana kind of has us working overtime. Some new thing she set up. Let’s us intervene before Radicals get caught.”

“That’s a good thing though, right?”

“Yeah, sure. Good n’ all for the people watching from home. For him it’s been tough, though. He hasn’t forced us to go when we need a break, so he just kind of does it himself.”

“Why not just wait and rest?”

“He’s not the only one who has been on edge, if you catch my meaning. You’ll see for yourself. Just be wary.”

“Enough whispering ladies,” Lyle calls to us. “It’s about time to take that bag off. Let’s get this reunion thing over with. I’m hungry.”

Manny makes me stop in place. “Try to make this as peaceful for him as you can. Okay?”

I’m not sure what he means, but I nod.

“Good.”

The bag lifts from my head. The house looks as beautiful from the outside as when I left it. It dominates my vision, entire wings extending into obscurity behind trees and bushes. To our right the fountain burbles blissfully, water running over two hands splayed out from each other with palms raised upward. Some features look new, entire sections of the garden furnished with benches and fish ponds. A few children come down from the steps in front of the house and point at us.

“Go with them,” Lyle says, urging Lily forward. She looks at me tentatively.

“Its fine,” I say, “You’re safe now.”

She nods. Her steps are slow, and she makes no hurry to reach them.

“What are you waiting for?” Rock asks me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he says, his hands grab my head and aim my vision at one of the windows, “she’s waiting for you. Go on now.”

In one of the windows I catch a glimpse of her. She recognizes me, I think, because she disappears from the window almost immediately. My feet feel too heavy as I move forward, my legs no longer cooperating as they should.

“Coward,” Rock says, walking past me. Lyle and Manny follow him. Manny turns to me and shrugs.

“Can’t wait forever,” he says.

I force myself to keep walking, wanting to see her again, to apologize for how I left things. I imagine her doing the same, waiting inside her room, not wanting to see me right away. It feels immature. I tell myself I am being stupid, but I can’t shake the fear. The fear is what pulls me back, tells me I can’t make it, but I don’t have the option.

I move a little faster, eventually making it to the foyer. I wait at the bottom of the wide curving staircase. A young boy’s face watches me from in-between the supports of the banister.

Lana comes into view. Her hair is pulled back, exposing her face. Her lips are thin pink lines and her eyes glide over me, not examining any part of me for too long. Her shirt is loose, powder blue with a stain at the fringe, but the shape of the shirt somehow enhances her figure. Our

eyes meet, and I don't dare pull my gaze away. She takes the stairs slowly. People disperse around us, giving us privacy. The only witness is the face under the banister.

"Reid," she says, her voice as soft as a whisper.

"Lana." We are face to face. I want to reach out, to give her a hug, and express how much I have missed her. I don't dare move.

"I'm glad you're back," she says.

"Me too," I say. She nods, and without so much as a comforting hand on the shoulder, she moves past me. I am left alone.

Chapter 7: Marcus

I shut the door behind Reid and turn to examine the room. I don't have much time. I grab the bag from the closet, the one I am supposed to use in case of emergencies, and set it on the floor. I spread it open and start disconnecting the monitors. I set them on the floor, and then disconnect the computer. I pull the drives from the back as I was taught to do, and then slip them into the bag. I grab a shirt from the closet and wrap them up so that they will be safe.

I collapse the table next, and then the chairs. I set them in the closet as neat as I can. There is a banging on the door behind me. I turn to the door and reach for the handle, but then I remember. Jensen tells me to open it. I know I shouldn't. There is a pounding again.

I check the sink to make sure the mugs have been cleaned. I clean them again, just in case, and put them in the cabinet. I empty the trash next, dumping it into the chute by the closet that I was told to use. The glow at the bottom of the chute grows brighter and then fades again. I close the hatch and check the room again. There is another pounding on the door. I reach for it.

My hand hesitates inches from the handle. Jensen fights me, telling me I need to open it for the people on the other side. I ignore him. Instead I slide the panel on the door open, revealing two bulging white orbs.

"Open the door." The voice is commanding, strong. I want to obey him, but I resist the urge. I want to tell him no, but Jensen tells me that is rude. I need to open the door for him. I am supposed to let people through. "Either open it, or we will come through anyways. It won't work out for you either way."

I close the panel and turn back to the room. Everything is in its own place. The bag on the floor is ready. Nothing else needs to come with me. I scour the room one last time for anything I

left behind. There is nothing, all the trash is gone, the important items removed, everything put away.

Jensen makes me check the room again. He is right. I should look. I should make sure. The floor is clean, the trash has been thrown away, and the blood stains will not come off the floor. He says they are fine for now. I let him convince me.

The pounding on the door will not stop. I open the panel again. He is angry. I will not let him through. I close the panel. I need to go now, or I will not have enough time. I don't have enough time already. I need to go. Jensen tells me to open the door.

I fight the urge to open it. He is wrong. I need to go. Jensen fights me, but then he finally agrees. He is right. We need to go. If we do not go, we will not make it. We need to make sure everything is safe.

I press the button on the wall that Jensen tells me to. A new doorway appears next to it, one that I did not know was there before. It is like a gaping maw leading into nothing. I am not sure if I should go into it, but Jensen tells me it is the only way. I grab the bag from the floor. It is heavy, despite having very little in it. I don't know why it is so heavy, but I bring it with me anyway.

The first few steps into the tunnel are easy. The light from the room illuminates the beginning of my journey. I step into darkness, one foot at a time. Jensen tells me to put my hand flat against the wall. I do. It helps. The stone is gritty, as if poured in place for this reason and this reason alone. There is a thin film covering it, and as I trace my hand along with every step I feel it piling against my fingertips and then falling away. I shudder. It is filthy, but Jensen tells me to ignore it and so I do.

My fingers run over a switch. Jensen tells me to flip it. I do as he says. The little light provided by the room behind me disappears. I am lost in darkness. I need to move quicker. Jensen tells me I am still in danger.

I count every step. I think it helps. It tells me how far I have come. I lose count when there is rumble behind us. Vibrations echo down the tunnel and hit me in the back. My entire body shudders with it and I am forced forward. Stale earth fills my mouth. I feel chips of stone rain overhead. They sting, and I feel something trickle down the side of my neck. Jensen tells me to get up, keep going, I am safer now.

I can't see anything in front of me. I want to raise my hand to see how dark it really is, but Jensen tells me I will get lost if I do. I trust him; he wouldn't lead me the wrong way. The strap of the bag cuts into my shoulder. I leave it there, not wanting to raise my hand from the wall. Jensen reminds me I can't drop it. If I did, then I would let Lana down, and that isn't an option. Still I want to, knowing it would make the trip easier.

My fingers run over a crack in the wall. I hesitate. It was so smooth before. I worry that I am heading too far away, but Jensen reminds me this is the only option. My fingers probe the crack in the wall. It crumbles and falls away. My fingertips feel moist. I keep moving, and as I travel further away the wall becomes rougher underneath my fingers. Another crack appears, this one damp against my skin. Then there is another.

In the distance I hear something like dripping water. It grows louder until it stops, and I feel something cold run over my scalp and down my shoulder. It feels nice, so I stand under it and let it drip over me. Jensen gets angry but I ignore him for a moment longer. I can't resist him though. He is right: if I don't keep moving I will never be safe.

I take my time making the next step, and then the sound resumes. This time it is behind me, and it fades as I take every step. I long for it, begging Jensen to allow me to return to it, to take comfort in it. He tells me I am stupid. I can't deny him. He is right. I am being stupid.

Chapter 8: Lily

Manny guides me away from Reid and towards a door set in the wall. I turn to face him, angry that he would think that I would be okay with being pushed around. He smiles down at me though, and shrugs.

“They need a moment. Give them that.” He nods towards the door and lets me open it. It leads into a shallow hallway with a winding staircase. A vibrant red carpet covers the stairs. A railing curls up the wall and around the bend. “We need to get you to a room. Trust me, third floor has the best view.”

We climb the stairs until they end, my legs aching from all the running I’ve done. We stand in front of another doorway. He gestures me forward and I open it. The hallway is much wider, and I can see the beams of the roof above us. I step into the hallway and nearly collide with a young boy running down the hall. He doesn’t hesitate as he passes me, too intent on the girl who passed me just the moment before. She is just about his height. He corners her quickly, taps her with his hand, and runs away laughing. I hear Manny laugh for the first time.

“The youngest ones can be the most fun. They make you forget what it is like out there, and let you pretend that this could be it. Rock would tell you to ignore it.” He stops and steps forward, into the path of the little boy. When he is within arm’s reach Manny scoops him into the air and lets his feet dangle in the air. The girl taps his shoe giddy with laughter and then opens the door behind me. The little boy laughs even louder and chases after her once Manny lets him down. “I think it’s best to be aware of the things that you might find distracting.”

He makes the children sound so sinister, but for some reason I understand what he means. He reminds me of Father who always told me to be aware, even of the things that I thought wouldn't hurt me. It makes me trust Manny less. He is familiar, and I don't like it.

Manny opens one of the doors and beckons me inside. The room is much larger than I had expected. There is a bed set into the nook of one wall and a dresser with a mirror across from it. I go to the mirror first; there were only a handful of them in the village, and even then they weren't brought out very often.

"I'll leave you to it." Manny steps out of the room. "Oh, and don't forget that there will be dinner downstairs when the sun starts to go down. It's hard to keep people set to clocks, so how bright it is outside is usually a good indicator."

The thought of a meal makes me reach for the doorknob, but then I look outside and notice that it is still very light outside. It's the first time that I remember how hungry I am, but a meal in a few hours is better than no meal at all.

I press my hand into the bed. It is much softer than the one in the village. The sheets fill in the gaps between my fingers; the stitches in the fabric pucker it together in places. It is made up of multi-colored patches of fabric that make the shape of a star. It makes the room feel much brighter, and for the time I let myself relax.

It is when I finally sit on the bed that I notice the painting hanging on the wall. It is a star. Reds and oranges clash against bright greens and yellows, and bright blue pulls the colors to the center. Three words line the bottom right edge of the painting. I get up to examine them. "You are home." I want to believe it but this is too safe, too friendly and happy and warm. This is nothing like the village. This is nothing like home.

Underneath the painting is a wooden dresser. The surface is bruised and worn, and it reminds me of the one my father used to have before he burnt our house down. I tug on the gold ring on the front of the first drawer and it reveals bright colored shirts folded neat and piled together. The next drawer has different kinds of pants. I don't bother searching the rest, not wanting to know how prepared Lana truly had been for me to come here. It feels wrong, but it also feels nice to not have to worry about tearing a hole in my knee from running too fast and not looking where I am going. This was the kind of home where Mother wouldn't have to patch it, I could just get a new pair. I won't have to fight to survive anymore and that makes me sad.

I pull a pair of faded blue jeans from the drawer and pull off the ones I'm wearing. It isn't until I am no longer wearing them that I realize how dirty they have become. My thigh is smeared with something brown, and the odor of my pants reminds me of the pile of garbage that Reid made me us climb through. I pull the new pair on, having to tug extra where they cling to the slimy patches on my skin. In the mirror I can see a doorway to what I assume is a bathroom but I don't care enough to bathe right now. The light outside is dimmer now, a simulated twilight. I fasten the jeans around my waist.

After digging to the bottom of the pile, I choose the closest thing to a black shirt I can find. It is a muted grey with a speckling of white, as if Lana couldn't have allowed something so dull to make it into the pile unless it had something special added to it. I pull it over my head and I am surprised by how well it fits. A knot forms in my stomach. I would feel more comfortable if the clothes were baggy and not my size. It would make me feel less like she knew I was coming and more like I was just another traveler passing through.

I want to trust her, and Reid as well, but Father taught me better than that. “No one in this world is truly good,” he once told me, “Not me, not your Mother, not even you. It’s against our nature to be truly good.”

I pull the hair away from my eyes and tuck it behind my ear. I ignore the brush on the dresser, instead opting for Mother’s techniques. I lick the tip of my two fingers, ignoring the sour taste, and use it to wet my hair enough that it stays in place for now. Mother would consider the hairbrush a luxury. She would consider all of this a luxury. Right now all I need is food, and then I can rest and pretend like things are going to change.

The light outside is dim enough that the lamps in the room turn on. At first I look for the switch that I must’ve accidentally bumped into, but then I remember that nothing in this house is done by mistake. Of course lights would turn themselves on, and they would probably turn off when it was time for bed too. I leave my room and shut the door behind me. I don’t want anyone taking my dirty clothes so I hide them underneath the mattress first.

At first I forget where the door we came through is, but then I remember the way the girl had run past me, intent on escaping from the terror of the boy. I can’t help but smile a little. Manny was right: it was best to be aware of the distractions, but I don’t know if Father would excuse it. Games in the village were more straightforward. There was always a reason why we were playing. If it meant we were learning how to hide better, to run away faster, or to sneak up on someone without being detected then it was worth it. If it was simply for fun then we were wasting time. There was always a reason, even if Father didn’t tell us right away.

Chapter 9: Reid

The stillness in the wake of her passing is disconcerting. I try to collect myself, knowing that this is what I had expected. Rock clamps a hand down on my shoulder. I don't know where he came from.

"Let's get you back to your room." He gestures with his free arm towards the stairwell. The kindness is unlike him.

"Yeah." I shake his hand from my shoulder. "Sure. I know where to go."

I climb the stairs to the first floor and take a right at the top. I don't give him the benefit of guiding me. I instead find my way down the hallway to the very end, where my door is propped open just enough to see that the light inside has been turned on.

Rock catches up to me in a matter of a few strides. "Listen, Reid, you knew this was coming."

I ignore him.

"Don't be like this. She'll warm up. She always does."

I slip into my room and close the door behind me. Rock pounds against the door before sighing and leaving me alone. I know I am being foolish, but I expected at least something more. Something other than a halfhearted greeting.

I drop onto the bed, but my muscles are too tense to relax. Instead I run it over in my head, analyzing the moment. She shied away from me. I think that is what hurt the most. She didn't even hide that she was uncomfortable with me being back. She had been hopeful too. There was something in her eyes that had given me a false hope. Or maybe it was just me,

reading into signs that weren't there. She had been hopeful, though, or she wouldn't have come down in the first place.

I lift myself from the bed and step over to the far wall. I examine my face in the mirror hanging there. Maybe she had seen something in my face; maybe that was what did her in. There was something else there, something I was missing.

I run my fingers through my hair in frustration, and it is only then that I realize exactly how long it has been since I have cleaned up. My fingers come away with a thin film of oil. The hair on my cheeks tickles my wrist as I pull it away.

I peel my shirt away from my skin. It sticks underneath my arms and across my shoulder blades. I throw it to the floor and open the door to the bathroom. A new pair of pants and a new shirt sit on the seat of the toilet. Above it a new painting hangs on the wall.

It is a complement to the painting that had been there not long before. The old one had depicted a muddy landscape of dark blues and greens. I had never really understood Lana's affinity to the darker colors. It didn't matter. She did what she wanted with them anyways.

I lift the painting off of the wall to find a note scrawled on the back. "For Reid. Come home again." I don't get it. She wants me until I actually return. I put it back on the wall and don't bother to straighten it. If I know her, one of the children will be in to make sure everything is tidy, including the decorations.

I turn the water for the shower on and peel the last of my clothing away. I pile it in the corner next to the laundry bin. I hesitate between the shower and the clothes, knowing that blatantly leaving the clothing there will only upset her. At this point I am not sure why I care. I

pick my clothes up and throw them in the laundry bin anyways. It will be one less thing to disagree about.

The water helps with the soreness in my shoulders and arms. A large purple bruise has formed at the ridge of my shoulder where I had carried Lily. She must have been heavier than I had thought. I can't imagine how she must be feeling right now.

I realize then that I've forgotten about her. I'd promised her father I would keep her safe and yet I abandoned her the moment we came inside. She will be safe, of course. A group of children roughly her age will adopt her as one of their own and then she'll fit right in. Something tells me it won't work like that though. She is different. She's more determined.

I don't bother stepping out of the shower to find her though. It would do no good now. The damage would be done and she would either hate me or trust me. I've given her no real reason for either, so it would be up to her.

I grab the bar of soap from the edge of the tub and lather my face and hair. It reminds me of the garden, though I am not sure why. Lana did say she had her favorite sections. I would often find her wandering through the areas behind the house that have started to fade. The vines wither and break off in pieces, leaving glimpses of forbidden sections. The canopy litters the stones with brittle leaves that turn to dust underneath her feet. In those moments I would watch her without alerting her to my presence. She would run her fingers through the decaying fabric of what once was the most vibrant section of her garden. When finally she would notice me, it would take a moment for the cloud over her demeanor to fade, and then she would recover as if she was never lost at all. In these moments I often worried that she had finally given up and was

waiting for her body to catch up with her spirit. If I ever asked her after the fact, she would pretend she knew nothing of what I meant, and that would be that.

I wash the last of the soap away and run my fingers through my hair again. They comb through it unhindered, my hair as soft as if I washed it every day. I step out of the shower and dry off quickly. If I take too long to get downstairs, someone will assume something's happened, or they will think I was sleeping. It had become a sort of an expectation that the time spent away from the house had taken no toll on me at all. In a sense they were right. With every time I had to make my escape, I would find my way back with an easier time than the run before it. This time was different, though. From the moment I had woven my way closer to the center of the crowd, I knew there was something off. I was losing my edge. If Rock noticed it then it would spell bad news for me.

I pull the fresh clothes on. They smell even more vibrant than the soap, bringing back memories of when the garden was only a few hedges and a pond. How it had grown so much in so few years I had no clue. Lana had a way with it that I never understood.

I open my door, checking behind me to make sure I had left nothing important behind. Not like I had much to bring down with me anyways. By the time I look up Lana's door is closing and a tingle runs across my back. She had seen me for just a moment while I was caught off guard. I hesitate between my room and the open hallway, unsure if she would peek her head out if I pretended to close my door. The thought is foolish, but I can't shake the curiosity. I pull the door shut behind me and freeze in place. My breath catches in my chest. I count the seconds, hoping she will just open her door a little, but she doesn't. I knew I was being foolish.

I descend the stairs two at a time, certain that there must be dinner by now and also anticipating the group that has gathered to welcome me home. When I get to the bottom of the stairs, there isn't anyone there except Rock, who leans against the door with his arms crossed over his chest. His jaw bulges as he tenses and relaxes; his eyes pin me down with every step I take.

Rock raises an eyebrow. "What?"

"Where is everyone?" I ask.

"Things changed around here. You didn't get the memo, but they changed regardless." He shrugs. "You pissed her off for the last time. The days of 'Big Hero Reid' are over."

"I mean where is everyone?" I refrain from lashing out at him. I do my best to play down the bitterness. "Is food ready?"

"Yeah." He rocks his weight forward and drops his arms to his side. "Yeah, everyone is in there. Even Lily managed to find her way down before you did."

Chapter 10: Lily

The dining hall is dominated by one large table with many branches extending outward into the room. Different patterns are carved into the surface of the table, which gives it a natural appearance. Children group together so that some of the offshoots of the table are crowded, while others are empty. I pull a chair away from the table to sit alone, but Manny comes up behind me and pulls out the chair next to it.

“It’s your first day here, don’t start it out on a bad note.” He bumps into me in a light gesture that I assume is meant to make me more comfortable. I remind myself that I can’t trust him.

In the dimming light of the dining room, Manny looks approachable, even without his warm smile making him less threatening.

“Food will be here soon. Lana just has to take her place at the table first.” He nods his head towards the end of the table where two branches curve back inward, as if they were reaching for the head seat. The majority of the children are gathered on these branches. They fight each other for seats each trying to get a better view. “Reid should be here soon too. He sits over there.” He points to the other end of the table, where the branches are arranged in the same pattern. A smaller gathering of children waits there. There is enough space between them that they don’t have to fight. I feel a pang of jealousy, and I want to move my seat to join them, to be closer to Reid for just a little while. I couldn’t trust him yet, but he did bring me here. He did at least try.

“She isn’t down yet?” Lyle sits down across from me and Manny and doesn’t even bother glancing in my direction.

“You know how she is. She’ll be here soon.”

“And Rock?”

“He’s waiting for Reid. Says he has something to tell him. The two of them need to have a good fight and get it over with.” Manny shakes his head, and then realizes I am sitting next to him. He turns to me and flashes a kind smile. “Nothing serious. They just don’t get along well. Trust me, it would do him more good than harm.”

I look away from him, and focus my attention on the patterns in the table instead. I don’t want him to think I am offended, but I also wish I could get up and leave. I had heard of men brawling with each other for no reason. Father had called them “small nothings” back in the village. It was common practice for someone to stake a fight with one of the leaders in order to get a position of leadership of his own. Father had called them brutes, but admitted that it worked. I decide that if Father were here, he would think Manny was a brute too.

There is a commotion on Reid’s end of the table and I look over to see him take a seat. He doesn’t see me. He looks different, as if he has been worn down and replaced with an older version of him. He is nothing like the person who risked his life to save me. He is instead the kind of broken man Mother once told me Father would become.

Rock comes in next, and it starts to make sense why Lyle thinks him and Reid should brawl it out. Reid’s shoulders drop as Rock walks behind him, and Rock makes every effort to avoid contact with Reid or the children crowded around him. The children withdraw into themselves when Rock passes as well. They sit straight and stop talking. In Rock’s shadow they cease to be children.

Once Rock finds his seat next to Lyle the children return to themselves again. I watch as Reid becomes more comfortable, and greets each of them. I can’t hear his words from where I sit,

but I know they are comforting and gentle. We make eye contact and he smiles at me. Not the reassuring “It will all be okay” smile he gave me before we got here. It is different, forced, like something isn’t okay but he isn’t willing to admit it.

“Did you have to?” Manny asks Rock.

“Yes, do you think I didn’t? He deserved to know.” Rock glances at me, and then turns back to Manny. “We will discuss this later.”

“It doesn’t make a difference if she hears this or not. Reid knows, so who is she going to tell? I’d just prefer if you made the time that we spend here a little less difficult and a little friendlier. Whatever is wrong between the two of you, sort it out.”

“It isn’t your decision. If you want to question me we can take this to the Pit. Otherwise stand down.” Rock stands and knocks his chair over. The room goes silent save for Manny’s heavy breathing. I feel his arms quiver, and I know he is ready to challenge Rock in the same way I had seen men challenge Father, but he doesn’t. He turns his gaze to the table and apologizes.

“Any news on the herd?” Rock asks Lyle, who pretends like he hadn’t witnessed anything.

“Still wandering around in there like they have finally figured it out.”

“The herd?” I ask.

“A group of morons managed to find a way into the tunnel and we have let them pretend like they can map it out. They don’t have a clue.” Lyle smirks. “One of them even brought a map with him. Rock likes that part the best.”

“What if they do map it out?” I ask.

“It’s impossible.” Manny lifts his head. “Lyle’s design. It is really smart. If someone managed to map something like that they deserve to find us.”

“Why?”

“Because there is no out unless we make one.” Lyle shrugs. He bears no sign of being grateful after the compliment on the design. “The door you and Reid came through was only open because we opened it.”

“That reminds me.” Rock leans forward over the table until his face is in front of mine. “How did you make your way through that room?”

I want to tell him I don’t know what he means. The room was easy enough to walk through, and save for the switches on the wall it was empty. There was nothing to stop me, but I don’t have the chance to reply. The children erupt with yelling, and I turn to them to see Lana come in from a hidden panel at her end of the room.

Two braids frame either side of her face and keep the hair out of her eyes. She wears combs on either side of her head that keep the braids pinned into place. Her skin is lightly tanned, but her face appears soft. She catches me watching her. Her eyes are cold, but nurturing. They remind me of the mother I used to have.

She lifts her gaze from me and lets it settle on the children before her. She sits in her seat and doesn’t bother lifting her eyes from them. It is as if the rest of the world no longer exists to her. The children surrounding her each get a hug and a moment of her time. When she lifts her eyes to the rest of the room she greets everyone in turn, including me.

“Welcome, Lily, it is good to have you here. Did you find that the clothes fit well?” She nods at my shirt. “I figured you would choose that one. I picked it especially for you.” She smiles, and I understand why the children are enthralled with her. The world melts away when her attention is on me. “It matches your eyes very well.”

She turns her attention to Manny next, and then continues around the room. My stomach tightens and reminds me that I came here for food, but I figure there is a purpose behind the custom. When I hear Reid’s name, I watch his reaction. He has the same pretend smile again, but there is something else there too. I want to ask Manny what the story is between them, but I have the feeling that such questions would be considered rude.

“It’s good to have you home again, Reid. We missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Reid says. His voice is the firm, steady, reassuring voice he had used when he had saved me. I tell myself I am making things up that aren’t there. Reid is back to his normal comfortable self. I should be comfortable too, but for some reason I can’t be. Father wouldn’t want me to be. He would tell me to be alert, to keep my senses about me. I could be surrounded by enemies and not be ready to protect myself if I got comfortable.

“Let’s eat, shall we?” Lana says. Her eyes are focused on Reid at the other end. No one mores. The room is silent. I look over to Reid. For the first time he seems tired, exhausted even. His eyes are locked on hers though.

The silence breaks, and the room bursts into commotion. No one seems to notice that whatever just happened, Lana won.

Chapter 11: Marcus

Jensen tells me to go into the darkness. I don't want to. The air is warm and dry, and the wind howls in front of me. I press my back into the wall of the tunnel and let the bag drop to the floor. I don't know how long I have been walking. I am tired.

I sit on the ground with my back against the rough stone. The ground shifts underneath me. It is soft, like a pillow. I press my hand into it. It feels like flour from when mother used to make us fresh bread. She said it was cheaper. We liked it because it tasted better.

Something cries out in the distance. It is hard to make it out over the sound of the wind but it sounds like another person. When I look outside I can't see anything. I put my hands underneath my thighs and rock back and forward. It comforts me, but it isn't enough. Jensen tells me I should be afraid.

Jensen used to tell me of monsters outside the Wall. We would be sitting on Mother's porch. He would sit in Father's chair while I would sit in the rocking chair that Mother would read in. We weren't allowed to go inside because Mother had to clean and boys only got in the way. Jensen would twirl his fingers in the gray cigar ash that Father left on the granite table. He told us that it added character, but Mother called him a slob when he wasn't listening.

Jensen's stories changed every time he told them. He always said that he had heard them from Father, though, and that Father would know because he gets to go outside.

I try to clear the stories from my head. He had told me them to scare me, and it had worked. I had to go out there now though, I didn't have a choice. I decide that I will wait until it is morning again so that at least I can see. Jensen tells me to go now, but I ignore him.

I don't manage to sleep for long. I wake up when I hear something in the tunnel. I think it is a dream at first, but Jensen tells me it is real. He urges me to leave and I can tell he is not lying. He isn't telling stories anymore. He wants me to leave. I raise myself from the ground and put the bag on my shoulder. The noise grows louder. There is someone in the tunnel with me.

When I step out of the tunnel, my foot sinks into the ground. It is difficult to walk, but I take another step. It takes a few steps before I am able to walk without tipping over. The ground is unsteady, but once I am able to find my footing it is easy to push forward. The sky is a slate gray, and I am able to see far enough ahead of me to know I am alone for now.

Father used to tell us that people lived outside the Wall. I thought that they were just stories at first, but other kids had fathers who went outside the Wall as well. Father never told me how he found these people, but I am hoping Jensen might know.

I force myself to walk faster, away from the tunnel. When I look behind me I see something moving. Jensen thinks it's something bad.

The strap of the bag digs into my shoulder as I walk. It stings and I have to put my thumb between my shoulder and the strap to relieve the pain. There is enough light to see that the landscape is charred and burnt. I think the dust that covers the landscape is ash because it tastes like soot and makes my mouth dry.

I tear a part of my shirt away and use it to cover most of my face. It helps a bit, but it is still difficult to see.

Jensen doesn't bother me for a while as we travel. My legs grow weary but I don't want to slow down. When the sky grows dark again Jensen tells me I should rest. I find a small

depression in the ash and use it as a shelter. The wind blows the ash over my head, keeping it out of my face.

I manage to sleep for a while this time. The wind soothes me to sleep, and I imagine that the ash is a blanket. When I wake up the lower half of my body is coated with it. For a moment I can pretend that I belong here.

I pull the water I brought from the bag and take a sip to remove the taste of ash from my mouth. Jensen tells me I didn't bring enough water but I try to ignore him. The bag is lighter without the water in it, which makes it a bit easier to walk.

When night falls again I think I see something in the distance. There is a small orange spot that radiates light around it. Jensen tells me I should rest but I ignore him. It is like the places Father used to tell us about.

The ash around me starts to dissipate. Less of it spills into my shoes and the ground becomes even beneath my feet. As I approach the light, it is easier to see that there are more of them planted in a row. They line the top of a wall, a much smaller one but a wall nonetheless. I keep my distance at first. There are men on top of the wall that look in my direction. At first I think that one sees me, and I remember that some people are dangerous out here. The man turns away, though, and doesn't look at me again.

I watch as three figures approach the wall. I cannot tell if they are like me, or if they belong there. When they approach the wall, the men on top of it open the gate and let them inside.

I move closer and this time someone sees me for certain. He points at me and beckons to someone else. I freeze. I could run and pretend I was never there, but I have nowhere to run to.

Instead I approach the wall and untie the fabric from my face. Someone comes out to meet me. He carries something in his hand. He lets me get close enough that we are both bathed in the light of the torches.

“What are you doing out here?” he asks. The torches make his face look gaunt and weathered. His hair is trimmed short and uneven. He gestures towards the bag, and I turn it away from him.

“I need someplace to go,” I say. I am afraid he will ask me why, but he doesn’t.

He nods as if it is a reasonable answer. “Any weapons?” he asks me. I shake my head. “What do you plan on doing if we let you in?”

“I don’t know. I just need a place to stay.” It is hard to speak. My mouth is dry.

“You can come in, but you will need to work if you plan to eat. Come with me.” He holds a hand out. When I get close to him, he takes the bag from me before I can stop him. “I need to check it,” he says. I follow him, watching the bag as he searches it briefly and then gives it back to me. “You carry some weird stuff.”

Inside the wall there are houses of assorted shapes and sizes. Each of them has a wooden door with metal strips along the front. We pass through what I think is a marketplace, where multiple stalls are lined up with their displays covered over. He catches me eyeing them.

“During the day that’s where we will set you up to earn some food,” he says. “Can’t say that I would regret a second hand to help out.”

He motions to a house on our left where the door is crisscrossed with metal strips. The windows have bars set over them and the fence is jagged. He doesn't bother noting that his house looks like a fortress. He opens the door and beckons me inside.

"Helena," he calls. "We have an Outsider."

Chapter 12: Reid

Lana blocks my path to the garden. She stands in front of the door and watches me like a predator as the door opens behind her and the wind ruffles her skirt. A little boy peeks around her, and then closes the door with a click. He runs off, not daring to look me in the eye. I lift my hands as if to ask “what?” but Lana remains still.

“Come with me,” she says and turns away.

I follow her into the garden. It takes my eyes a minute to adjust to the bright light, compared to the cozy lighting from the hallway. She waits.

I watch her feet as we walk. They are graceful compared to the rough stone walkway of the garden. I realize, after stepping on a ridge in one of the stones, that my own feet are bare. I wish I had time to prepare, to get things right before being confronted by her. That’s not how things work with Lana, though.

The flowers emanate their different fragrances as we work our way deeper into the garden. Each mingles with the other and lulls me into a false sense of comfort. She plucks one of the flowers from a hedge and inspects it, before setting it back into its place.

We pass a wooden bench that looks familiar. It reminds me of the one that was in Lana’s backyard when we were children.

“Is that?” I ask. She turns and knows what I am thinking before I can explain.

“Do you think I am stupid?” She shakes her head and runs her fingers along the arm of the bench.

She continues walking. This isn't going to be an easy conversation. When we were children, she never made it easy to talk to her. Privacy was important, and until privacy could be had she wouldn't say a word.

She turns into an alcove on our right and disappears like a ghost. When I turn into the alcove myself I cannot find her. I turn in a circle but even the entrance has disappeared. Lana always played tricks when we were children, and her garden had turned into a perfection of that art.

"I missed you," she whispers. Her voice comes from behind me. I tense, not sure if I will find her if I turn. "You left me, and I missed you."

I dig my toes into the earth, taking comfort in the familiar memory of the time we spent barefoot together when we were young. I remember how the light brown mud would cake to the bottoms of our feet, and how it would tingle when we would wash off the mud in the nearby stream.

Her hand rests on my shoulder. It isn't comforting. She walks around me until we are face to face. Her breath is hot on my nose. She smells sweet. I want to close the distance between us. I want to take comfort in her. I know that it would only anger her.

She backs away and I follow her. The wet grass brushes the soles of my feet. She leads me into another area of the alcove where there is a granite bench, a pond, and a small wooden shack. The sides of the shack are painted ivy green and the roof is made of vines and grass.

She sits on the bench and crosses her legs. She leaves enough room beside herself but doesn't invite me over.

The sun shines off of the pond and casts half of her face into shadow. She squints one eye. We don't breach the silence. She lets it be uncomfortable for me, as if I know what she is thinking.

"What is wrong with you?" she finally says. It isn't the lighthearted question that she sometimes asked when we were children. It is pointed and bitter. She purses her lips as she waits for my answer. I don't know what she means. She raises an eyebrow. "Answer me. What is wrong with you, Reid?"

"I'm not sure." I shake my head and turn from her. I examine the hedges, blooming with flowers, and take a breath. When I turn to her she is crying. The tears roll down to her chin and drip onto her blouse.

"Why would you do this to me?" She points at me.

"Do what?"

"Run off when things get difficult. Every time. You make it worse, and then you run away." Her face is distorted when she cries. It is difficult to imagine it is her, the Lana who walks with such confidence that it is impossible to ignore her. Instead, now, she looks like one of the children that she takes care of.

"Lana." I step toward her. She scowls at me. "I am not sure what you are talking about."

"You left me."

"I saved Lily." I gesture back toward the house like I could point her out. "Doesn't that count for something?"

“You only saved her because you thought it would make me feel better. I didn’t ask you to save her. I asked you to help me and you didn’t.”

“You said that you wanted to help the children. Doesn’t that mean I should help too?”

She removes her shoes, and then walks away from the bench. She pulls the white fabric of her skirt into her fists until it is at her knees. She wades into the pond and stands there facing away from me.

“Do you remember when we were children? We thought that we had a chance. I remember when we would go outside in the rain, even though our parents told us not to. We would run around together with our clothes soaked with rain and mud. We were happy then. What happened to us?”

“Are you not happy?” I wade into the pond next to her, not bothering to lift my pants away from the water.

“Of course not.” She turns to me. She is no longer crying. There is no evidence in her face that she ever was. “I haven’t been happy for a long time.”

“Then what would make you happy?” I ask her. I reach for her hand but she pulls away from me.

“It’s too late to ask me that.” She folds her arms across her chest.

“I thought things would be different between us, you know. I thought that even though our parents said it wouldn’t work that we would end up together. Maybe I was foolish, but I thought that we both wanted to end up together.”

“We did.”

“Then what happened, Lana? Where did I go wrong?”

“What is going on with you and Rock?”

“We just rub each other the wrong way.”

“That doesn’t explain why you are both at each other’s throats. I need you to get along with him.”

“I’m trying.”

“Not hard enough. When I let you back into my home it came on the unspoken condition that you would behave. You aren’t going to force me to put you out.”

“Why is it my fault if he is upset by me being around?”

“I need him and his team around. They’ve managed to do a lot since you left. New tunnels, better systems. They even got me access to the city-wide network. They’re valuable.”

I move to stand in front of her. She doesn’t bother stepping away.

“Are you saying I am not valuable enough to keep around if I don’t keep your puppy entertained?”

“What I am saying is you are dangerous. He is an asset. If it comes down to one of you, then I can’t risk losing his muscle.”

“Are you kidding me?” I walk away from her. She snatches me by the elbow and pulls me to face her. For a moment we say nothing. The silence between us renews.

“I’m not asking you to leave. I am asking you to behave.” She returns to her bench. I sit beside her. “When you left I made a decision. I told myself that I was tired of wasting my time

waiting for you to return, hoping that you would come back safe. Rock knew what I needed and so he gave me a way to watch you, to watch everyone.”

“You’ve been spying on me?”

“I have been spying on the City. When you are out there, yes, I guess I am spying on you. I watched you when you followed Lily to the center of the crowd. You’re good.” She bumps into me. It is a friendly gesture. I reach for her hand again but still she pulls it away. “Just because I am impressed doesn’t make things better. I don’t forget, Reid. I just don’t.”

“What do you want from me, Lana?”

“I want to forgive you. I need you to earn my forgiveness, but it isn’t working and you aren’t making this any easier.” She puts her hand on mine. Her skin is soft and cool. My breath catches. “Reid, I want us to be together, too, but I can’t when you treat me like this.” She takes my hand in hers. “I need you to promise me that you aren’t going to just disappear again. Please, promise me.”

“What does it matter if you can watch where I am going?”

“That’s not the point. I need you, and I need to know that you are going to be here when I need you. Don’t pretend like going out there isn’t dangerous. It is and you know it.”

“I haven’t been caught, have I?”

“Of course you haven’t, but that doesn’t mean you won’t be.” She starts crying again. “Do you remember when we first got away and we thought we were invincible? You would run into crowds and claim that you were too good to be caught.”

“And I learned.”

“You learned, but not because you got yourself caught. You learned because you put me in danger.”

I hang my head, not sure what to say.

“Just because I survived doesn’t mean they didn’t hurt me. You never get it.” Spit foams at the corners of her mouth. “I don’t want you to get hurt too.”

“Fine.”

“Fine what?”

“I’ll play it safe. Okay? I won’t run off again.”

“Okay,” she says. “I trust you.”

Something rustles in the hedge. Rock appears, as if he had been melded with the bush just moments before. We both stand up.

“Reid.” He nods. “I need to speak with Lana in private.”

“You can say it in front of me.” I say. He scowls and Lana pinches my elbow. “Never mind, I should check on Lily.”

I walk past him, resisting the urge to knock into him. He stares at me as I walk. On the other side of the hedge, Manny waits for me. He doesn’t say anything, but corrects my path when I take a wrong turn. When I reach the house he leaves me alone, and heads back in the direction of Rock and Lana.

Chapter 13: Lily

I watch them from my window. Reid and Lana sit together, and despite them being close I can tell something is wrong. My mom would chastise me for spying on people, but I want to know what the fuss is about.

My breath fogs the window and so I have to wipe it occasionally to renew my vision of them. The glass is cool to my touch, but I heard someone say that it was warm outside. I wanted to join them; I wanted to see what it was that they did when they went off on their own. They didn't invite me, though, and I didn't want to intrude.

A door slams down the hallway. A girl giggles. The hallways are always filled with laughter, but I can't imagine why. They are all tucked away from the world in this one house with the one garden and no place to go. At least we had each other in the village. We had families. Sure, sometimes those families were broken apart, destroyed, or went missing and no one knew where they went. Sure, things happened. But Father said that's just how it is.

Lana takes Reid's hand. Whatever is broken between them is gone. People can't be right about them. If they are this close together, then there must be something there. She isn't happy, though, and it isn't just the look on her face that betrays her.

A shadow falls on the walkway between the hedges, then Rock appears. He seems to know exactly where he is going, as if he can tell that they are on just the other side of the hedge. He stops and listens. He is worse than I am. At least I cannot tell what they are saying.

I hear footsteps running down the hallway. I get up to look outside my door. Someone knocks into me, driving both of us to the floor. I prop myself up a look over. It's a boy, not much younger than me.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention." He says when he sees me. A girl wearing a loose fitting T-Shirt and a ponytail helps him up, then offers her hand to me.

"We are going to go outside to play. You want to come?" she says. She is smiling, her white teeth flashing in the lamplight. "A few others are meeting us down there. You're welcome to join>"

I shake my head and climb to my feet, ignoring her outstretched hand.

"Sorry, I have something to do."

"That's okay. We'll see you around."

They both smile, and the boy waves, before they run off again, at the same reckless pace as before.

I return to my room, wanting to see if Reid and Lana are still there, but when I scan the area it is empty. I wish I had just stayed put. My dad would tell me it doesn't matter now.

"What is done is done."

I stand in front of the mirror and run my fingers through my hair. It is knotted together, though not as bad as it used to be. I try to pretend that my mom is brushing my hair. She used to do it when I was nervous or upset. Oftentimes, when night time would come and everyone would go to bed, she would sit with me in front of the stove and brush my hair. She would keep the

stove polished clean so I could admire myself. When my mom would finish, she would let me do hers if I wanted.

It was easy to remember that my dad was away when she brushed my hair. If I asked where he had gone, she would ignore the question. He told me that sometimes he had to go out at night. He didn't say where, but he always brought his gun. The boy next door said his father sometimes went away too. All of them did, but no one would tell us why.

Someone knocks on my door, and I hesitate. I try to speak, but my throat is dry and the words come out choked. The person knocks again.

"Hello?" I ask.

"Lily, it's me."

When I open the door, Reid is standing there. At first, by the look on his face, I think that he knew I was spying on him. He doesn't mention it, though. He just looks around the room.

"Are you comfortable?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Have you made any friends?"

"I haven't tried. They play games on their own." When I say it the words sound foolish.

Reid smiles. "Don't worry. In time you will adjust."

I want to ask him what he was talking about with Lana, even though the question would be rude. The look on his face tells me it wasn't anything good. He nods, and backs away as if to give me my space. I stop him.

“Can I come with you?” I ask.

“Of course.”

I follow him down the stairs. He brings me out into the front garden where there are only ponds and sculptures, no mazes.

“What brought you guys here?” I ask him. He seems unsure and says as much.

“There was just something about it that reminded us of where we came from. It made it feel like home.”

“Then why not just go home?” I ask.

“It’s not that simple for people like me, Lily.” His hands tremble. He balls them into fists and puts them into his pockets.

We sit next to the same pond that Manny had brought us to. I dip my feet into the water like Lyle had. “You spending some time with Rock and his crew?” he asks.

Heat flushes my cheeks. I pull my feet from the water but Reid stops me.

“It’s okay. Figures you would make friends with the un-friendliest people here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask him.

“Nothing. You’re just unique. Don’t take it the wrong way.” He lays back and runs his fingers through the grass.

“Like you?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“They called you a Radical. Doesn’t that mean that you’re unique too?”

“It means I’m different. It doesn’t make me special.”

“Then not trusting people doesn’t make me special either,” I say.

He grins. “Why were you out there anyway?”

“It’s personal.”

“Is that why you and Lana were fighting in the garden,” I ask. The words slip out of my mouth before I realize I am saying them. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re young and curious. Yeah, I guess you could say that was part of the fight. You shouldn’t worry yourself about it, though. It isn’t your problem.”

“Okay.”

One of the fish in the pond tries to nibble at my foot. It looks like it is flying in the water with its orange fins flapping. It opens its mouth and closes it multiple times against my skin before swimming away.

“How did you get inside the Wall anyways?” Reid asks. When I look at him his forehead is wrinkled and one corner of his mouth is raised. He is propped up on his arms with his elbows locked. A strand of grass hangs from his hair.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you weren’t born here, so where did you come from and how did you get in?”

When I was young my dad would tell me myths about a city where people lived without having to worry about being attacked or hunted. He called them fairytales, and if it was a night

that he was home, he would tell me these stories before we went to bed. He said it was a much safer place where people didn't hurt other people. They just weren't allowed to. We hadn't imagined we would ever see it.

“I don't know. Just somewhere out there. We called it home.”

“Then what brought you here?”

“Someone lied.”

He looks confused, but I don't want to have to explain. He seems to understand and changes the topic. “Do you think it is bad what I did?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean taking you out of there. Do you resent me for it?”

The questions takes me by surprise. I am not sure how to answer. “Part of me does,” I say, certain that it is the truth. “But this place is nice, too, and you didn't mean to take me from my dad.”

“Lily, you do know—”

“I knew he would die eventually. You don't have to apologize. I just didn't imagine he would die once were inside the Wall.”

His eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“Where I come from people die. It's just how things worked.”

He shakes his head.

“Why do you ask?” I say.

“I have to stop,” he says.

I am not sure what he means. I look at him, waiting.

“I have to stop going out into the City.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s too dangerous.” He looks defeated, and I feel like the conversation between him and Lana had something to do with him saving me. Reid seems to shake it off. He leads me back to the house and shows me around. Lana comes in when he is showing me the greenhouse.

“Reid,” Lana says, nodding at him. “Lily, how are you?” she asks me.

“I’m good,” I say.

“That’s good to hear,” she smiles and stoops down to me. She holds a white flower between her thumb and forefinger. “Do you know what this is?” she asks me.

“No.”

“It’s a lily, just like you. Do you mind if I put it in your hair for you?” Lana asks.

I am confused, but Reid answers for me.

“I think maybe it would be better if she kept it for her room instead.”

“Good idea,” Lana says without skipping a beat. She turns to the table next to her. It is littered with dirt and flower stems. From the mess, she pulls a small jar and pours some water into it. She puts the flower in the water and hands it to me.

“Make sure you put it by the window so it can get a good view of the sun.” She smiles, and a chill runs down my neck.

Chapter 14: Lily

I set the jar in my windowsill. The petals of the lily cling to the edge of the jar. The sun glints off the glass, making a rainbow on the inside. I am certain that she knew I was watching them, but I just don't know how she would know.

I hear Manny's voice in the hallway. Then he knocks on my door. When I open it, he is the only one on the other side.

"Hey, wanted to check in. How are you holding up?" he asks.

"I'm good," I say.

"Have you been outside? It's nice out today. I can take you into the garden, if you'd like."

"Okay, I guess."

I follow him into the garden. The hedges tower over me on either side. I try to imagine who might be lurking on the other side, but when I was in my room no one else was in the garden. I can't imagine why.

Manny sighs and stretches his arms. He looks more relaxed out here than he did when we were inside.

"Who built this?" I ask him.

"Lana did, of course." He acts like the question is a foolish one to ask. He motions to the hedges surrounding us. "I mean, to be fair, Rock, Lyle and I helped her put some of this stuff in, but she designed all of it."

“Why?”

“You’d have to ask her that. Rock keeps it as a kind of escape hatch if all of Lana’s plans go to shit. It makes sense, but I think he worries a little too much. Lyle likes figuring out the entire thing. He even makes maps of the maze, and then destroys them so that he can rewrite them from memory. I just use it for walks. I guess it is for each of us in a different way.”

He plucks a flower from the hedge and twirls the stem between his fingers, then tears one of the petals off. He examines the petal before putting it in his mouth. He spits it out a moment later and wipes his tongue with his sleeve.

“Why try to eat something if it doesn’t taste good?” I ask.

“What you’ll learn about Lana is she is full of more puzzles and mysteries than you could imagine. Some of these flowers taste good, others taste really bad. It’s all about figuring her out.”

“Have you figured her out yet?”

“No, and I won’t, but I am still going to try.” Manny smirks. He pulls another flower from the hedge, but this time he just examines it as we walk. He doesn’t bother putting it in his mouth.

The hedges of the garden make me feel safe in a way. I can see how Manny would use them to relax. The sun hangs in the sky directly above us. My skin feels like it is about to burn.

“You’re not like the others,” Manny says.

He surprises me with the statement, but when I look at him I feel as if he is examining me for my reaction, trying to figure me out like he figures out the flowers. “Reid said the same thing.”

“Well, Reid can be a smart man sometimes,” Manny says. He smirks and shakes his head. “Then again, other times he picks fights with the wrong people for the wrong reasons, you know?”

I don’t answer his question. I know he is referring to Rock, but I am not sure I want to know why they are fighting. I don’t want to have a reason to not trust Reid. I want Father to be wrong. At the same time Manny seems genuine, like he would know if Reid was the cause of the issue or if it wasn’t his fault. I’m not sure what to say.

“Sorry, over your head. Listen, he’s a good guy. Just keep that in mind.” He pats me on the shoulder and gives me a smile.

He removes the petals from the flower one at a time and lets them float to the ground. They litter the pathway behind us, random spots of white on an otherwise brown and grey surface. I pluck a flower from one of the hedges myself. The petals are soft, like a blanket, between my fingers. Three orange stems sprout from the center. When I rub them, orange dust clings to my fingertips. This place is nothing like home, and I don’t like it.

My mom used to have a garden of her own. She would churn the soil by hand, and mix in any scraps from dinner that we didn’t finish. She said it helped the plants grow, but I thought it just made the backyard stink. She worked in the garden whenever she had the chance, and my dad would often pick up an extra chore to give her more time to do so.

I would sit at the table as he would cook our evening meal, pretending not to notice that mother wasn’t coming inside as the sun was setting. He told me it was what you did when you wanted someone else to be happy. Her pursuit of happiness only made things worse.

“How have the other kids been treating you?” Manny asks. He cocks an eyebrow and looks down at me. When I don’t answer right away he smiles. “Don’t worry, we all do it out here. It’s the flowers. I’m convinced of it. They make you dream of a better place.”

“I haven’t really met any of them. Reid told me I should try to play a game with them. I’m not sure if I want to.”

“I understand. They’re strangers to you.”

After a while we reach a part of the garden where the leaves have started turning brown and they fall into piles on the walkway. Manny seems less at ease here, but he doesn’t turn us around. As we walk I am able to catch glimpses between the branches. Behind one hedge there is a dried up pond. Behind another there is a short statue with the top portion broken away.

“What’s wrong with this place?” I ask him. I look behind me but I can’t see the house. The hedges form a tall wall that seems to enclose us.

“It’s the oldest part of the garden. Don’t mind it. She pretends it isn’t here.” The sense of ease that Manny had before is lost. He keeps his hands in his pockets, and I do the same. I want to turn around, but he seems to know where he is going and I don’t know my way back.

We reach a section of the garden where all of the branches are bare. The leaves on the ground are brown and slimy. I reach out to touch one of the branches. When my fingers touch them they start to burn. I pull them away to find short spines sticking out of them. Manny looks over at me and realizes what happened.

“Shouldn’t have done that.” He grabs my hand and inspects my fingertips. “This part of the garden isn’t like the rest of it. Just don’t touch anything and you’ll be okay.” With my hand

still clamped in his, he slides a knife from his belt. I try to pull away but he is too strong. “Stop moving.” He pinches my fingertip and uses the knife to pull the spines out. He takes care not to hurt me by using the edge of the blade just to pull at the spine without cutting my skin.

His grasp is tender as he works. His eyes focus on my finger. I watch him as he works. His eyes never lift from my hand. “There.” He says. He lets my hand fall to my side.

We stand in place. He bites his lower lip and his eyes are distant, like he is remembering something. Then he turns and walks away.

He starts walking quicker and guides me away from the spiny hedges. It isn't long before the hedges have green leaves and flowers again, and then soon after I can see the house over the top of the hedges.

“Sorry about that,” he says. He stops and turns to me. His eyebrows are knit together. “I didn't think you would touch it and it was the best route back. Don't go back there, okay?” He seems concerned.

I nod.

“Good, thank you,” he says.

Chapter 14: Reid

I can't remember the last time Lana let me be this close to her. She lies down next to me on the bed, and shifts to her side. It feels too normal to be real, and I wait for her to tell me the bad news. She wouldn't bring me in here for just anything.

She doesn't acknowledge that she wants something deeper though. She watches me as if I am one of her paintings and she is trying to find the one flaw throwing everything off. Her fingers trace the seams of the sheets as her eyes examine me. She looks at my arm for a moment, but doesn't give me enough time to reach it out to her. She doesn't ask how I got the injury.

Her perfume is distinctly of flowers. I am sure she knows what kinds, though I have no clue.

"Are you comfortable?" she asks. The words are innocent but I still fear the follow up to the question. She wants something from me.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Good." She rolls onto her back and stretches her arms out above her head. Her breasts press against the fabric of her shirt. I don't look at them for long.

"I can't remember the last time we got to just lie down and rest," she says. "Things have been so busy."

"I can't remember either. Maybe when we were fifteen?"

She laughs. "I am sure it was after then, but maybe." She closes her eyes and rests one forearm over them, protecting her eyelids from the overhead lights. "Things were so different then. Not better, but different."

“Not better?” I ask, surprised by the comment.

“Well of course not. We didn’t have the same means back then.”

I sense her purpose coming out, like a beast crawling from its slumber. Slow at first, until it realizes how long it has been, how long it has waited.

“What do you mean?” I ask. I drop the casual tone.

“Well you know. Things have gotten better. I mean, look at Lily. We would’ve never dreamed of managing something like that.”

I roll onto my own back and assume her pose. The pressure of the muscle in my arm feels good against my eyelids.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” she asks. I don’t bother answering. “You know, Rock and I have been working on something.” His name is like a pang of guilt, but not guilt exactly, it has something more to it. I am suddenly aware of my own heart beating in my chest. The dry taste in my mouth. It makes me angry that she would mention him in this moment, while we are alone. “Something to help us in the future.”

“And what’s that?” I hide the fact that I don’t want her doing whatever it is with Rock. Not with him. She should have waited for me. The thought is stupid though. I am the one who left.

“The cameras I used to watch you. You know, to make sure you were safe.” Her tone rises a bit and she talks faster. “Rock figured out how to track Radicals.”

“Track them,” I say, not sure what she means.

“Well it was Lyle’s idea really. He’s good with that kind of thing. But yeah. I want to show it to you tomorrow.”

“Show me how you have been watching me?”

“No, of course not. We can save them without you having to go out there anymore. I thought you would be excited.” She rolls back onto her side the bed shifts with her weight. I peek from under my forearm. She is propped up on one arm. She looks hurt, like a chastised animal.

“When we find them. Then what? We can’t point them out. We can’t do anything for them. It will be like knowing they are about to die, but doing nothing about it.” I sit up in the bed and face her.

“Reid that’s not the point—”

“I can’t save them just because we know where they are.”

“Reid,” she says, her voice growing stern, “you promised me.”

“I know I did,” I say. “That’s my point. I can’t save them.”

“I wanted to tell you because I thought you would be glad that we can do something about it without you putting your life on the line. I thought you would be happy.” She climbs out of the bed. Her feet pound along the floor as she approaches the door.

“I don’t want to be powerless, Lana.” I stand to stop her. She has her fingers wrapped around the doorknob already.

“Who said you had to be?”

“You did.” I didn’t realize I had raised my voice, but the words echo throughout the room. She is stunned into silence, and we face each other for a moment, before she speaks again. She draws out her words.

“I asked you to stay with me. I didn’t say there was nothing we can do about it.”

“If I can’t leave, I can’t do anything.” I keep my tone hushed now.

“That’s what Rock and his team are for.”

“Of course.”

“What?” She throws her hands in the air and cocks an eyebrow. Her mouth hangs open and she steps toward me, her head turned at an angle. “Tell me. What do you mean?”

“It comes back to him. Even after he comes after me in the hallway, you favor him. What is going on?”

“We need him. I told you that.”

“Then do it without me.” I approach her. She steps backward until I reach for the doorknob. She puts her hand on mine, stopping me. I wrench the door open and slam it behind me.

I hear Lana’s muted calls but I ignore them. Manny leans against the banister and looks over at me. He gives me a nod and returns his attention to a block of wood and the knife in his hand, a pile of wood shavings forming at his feet.

“Fighting again?” he asks.

I brush past him, ignoring the comment. I see my door at the end of the hall. I walk faster.

“Go ahead, just run away again, Reid. I need your help. Focus on the greater good instead of being so selfish.”

I reach for the doorknob. My shoulders ache and I want to escape and rest, but it would only prove her point. The knob is cold in my hand, and I can't make myself turn it.

I give up and face her.

“Why can't you be happy that we can change things?” she asks.

“When did I say I wasn't happy?”

“You made it clear when you stormed off like a child.” She shakes her head and rubs her temple with her forefinger and thumb. “Just tell me that you will help us. The cameras will help look out for Radicals, but you know how to see them. That's where we need you.”

I reach for the doorknob behind me. I see someone peek their head out from a bedroom, but duck away again when I spot them.

“I don't know.” I open the door. “Just give me time to think about it.”

Chapter 15: Marcus

Helena sits me down at a table and then turns away. She lights a candle and uses it to light the stove. I watch her as she cooks. She does it with a smile on her face the entire time. The cooking is effortless for her, and when she finishes she puts a large plate in front of me. It looks like brown mush with flecks of color mixed in. If I wasn't hungry, I wouldn't touch it.

"We don't have much," she says, sympathizing. "But I suggest at least trying it."

She hands me a wooden spoon. It is light in my hand, and the handle is thin. I use it to scoop a small amount of the brown meal and put it in my mouth. It is much better than I expected it to be. I don't recognize the flavors, but it has a slight spice to it. She gives me an approving nod and walks away as I eat.

When the man who brought me here comes back into the room, he looks at the plate and then to me. He is looking for something, but I am not sure what it is. He bites his cheek.

"How is it?"

"It's great," I say.

"Good." He turns to Helena and hands her something. I am not sure what it is. She examines it and takes it out of the room.

"So, while you settle in, we do have a room upstairs for guests. I can show you it once you are ready. Do as I say and you can stay here." He bites his cheek again as if he is forgetting something. Helena comes up behind him and puts her hand on his shoulder. She smiles at both of us. "What am I forgetting?"

"Were you courteous enough to ask him his name?" Helena asks him.

“Marcus,” I say. “My name is Marcus.”

“Of course.” He hits himself on the forehead. “My apologies. Tom. Nice to meet you, Marcus.” He extends a hand. I shake it. “Oh and you have met Helena, of course. She’s my wife. Julie is my daughter. She’s probably in bed but you can meet her in the morning.” He pauses. “That should be it.”

“It’s nice to meet both of you,” I say.

Tom raises himself from his chair and beckons me to do the same. “I need to show you your room before I have to go.” He guides me from the kitchen and up a staircase. At the top he opens a door into a room that is bare save for a cot in the corner. On one wall there are four small windows set at eye height. Unlike the windows on the ground floor, they don’t have bars. “You can stay in here. You can keep your bag as well.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“You’re welcome. In the morning I will show you where we work.” He smiles. “Oh and make sure you lock the door behind me.” His expression grows grim. “Just in case.” He leaves the room without explaining. I do as he says. He seems eccentric, but I assume he has his reasons.

I hear Tom downstairs. He says something to Helena, but I can’t make out the words. I watch from the window as he goes outside and meets a few other men on the street. They walk out of view.

I lay down on the cot. It is stiff underneath me. It is hard to get comfortable, but I fall asleep quickly.

Chapter 16: Marcus

I wake to the sound of someone knocking on my door. I roll off the cot and look out the window. The sun has barely risen, but there are already men in the street. The torches on the wall are still lit, and already the cloths covering the stalls are being pulled away.

Someone knocks again. I shuffle over to the door, the dry skin on my feet catching on the rough wooden planks. A floorboard creaks beneath me. When I open the door, Tom smiles and jabs a finger over his shoulder.

“Time for work,” he says. “Only so much time.”

I get my shoes from underneath my cot and follow him out into the street. He directs me to the stall that is set opposite from his house. It is cobbled together with splitting wooden planks and rusting metal nails. Small grains are stuck in the corners of the stall and Tom shows me why.

“In the morning, we get the bags from the storeroom and fill the stall. In the evening, we empty it. They’re heavy, but I think you can handle it.” He smiles.

I follow him to the storeroom. It is roughly the size of two of their houses and appears to be made of stone. The walls seem tougher than the walls surrounding the town, and there are ridges in the stone where metal crisscrosses the surface. The doors look like a metal cage and are built into the stone.

Grain is spilt at the entrance. A man with a makeshift broom steps aside as we approach, and returns to sweeping it once we are past him. The ceiling is a metal sheet bolted down at the edges. To the right of the entrance there is a small room with a chair and a gun leaning against the wall. It is the only weapon I have seen inside the walls.

“Our stuff is over here.” He guides me to the back left corner of the room. There is a small pile of sacks that Tom has me carry back to the stall. Once we carry out all of the sacks from our stall, he finds someone else who needs a hand. All of the men on the street work together to empty the storehouse.

Tom helps me empty the sacks into the tubs of the stall. They are filled with various grains, all a different shade of brown. He then covers the tub with the cloth.

“You can go back to the house for now.”

He follows me inside and then disappears upstairs again. Helena readies another meal that looks familiar to the first one. When Tom returns, his daughter is with him. I can’t look at her, but I don’t want to be rude. Tom doesn’t seem to notice. Jensen returns, and he sounds angry.

“Marcus, this is Julie.” Tom places his hands on both of her shoulders. She looks so small in comparison to him. Her slight frame fits comfortably within his shadow. Her brown hair cascades over her face in a shower of curls. She blushes and turns her head downward. She makes me uncomfortable.

She sits across from me at the table and eyes me, as if I am some sort of specimen. She spoons the food into her mouth and takes small bites, nibbling at it. I force myself not to watch her. Jensen says I shouldn’t. I want to though. I peek a little.

I try to eat as quickly as I can. When both Tom and I finish we go back outside. Tom fills a few smaller sacks with grain from the stall. He loads them into my arm. He then brings a large sack with him.

As we go down the line of stalls Tom hands each of the men a smaller sack. They give him items in return. Some of the items I recognize: wood, tools, even clay bowls and plates. Tom balances all of these in my arms while trading the grain away.

When we reach the last stall there is a group of men gathered. They are all arguing. Tom shoves them aside and hands the large sack of grain to the man at the center. He nods. "I'll have it delivered."

Tom thanks him.

He leads me back to the house and inside. He instructs me to put everything on the table.

"What was all of that about?"

"Limited resources. As I said before, you earn your keep." He hangs his head. "Go upstairs, I'll take care of things. Just make sure you lock the door behind you."

I am not sure what is going on, but I do as he says. I watch them through the window. The wood from the wall catches on my shirt and pricks my skin. I hear Julie crying down the hall. I try to ignore it, but it is hard to pretend she isn't there.

Below me, I watch as Tom starts refilling the sacks, undoing the work we had done together just this morning. When he is finished he takes all of the sacks except for one back to the storehouse. This time he doesn't stop to help the other men. No one helps their neighbor. Now they are each focused on their own work. When they finish they turn to the men nearest them and say something, and then disappear. The behavior is strange, but Jensen reminds me that people outside the City wouldn't behave normal.

Tom approaches the house, but I do not hear him enter. I cannot see what he is doing from my window.

I go to my door and press my ear against the wood. I can only hear Julie crying. I unlock my door, the metal bolt clicking in its slot, and creep down the hallway. I hear Tom doing something outside. I descend the stairs and open the door. At first Tom looks confused. He holds a thick strip of metal in one hand and a hammer in the other.

“I said to do what I tell you to do. Go back upstairs and lock the door.” He pulls the door shut in front of me. I listen as he hammers something into the door with a pause every now and then. I go back up the stairs, resisting the urge to stop at Julie’s door, and close my door behind me. I lock the door and wait.

Chapter 17: Marcus

The last of the men in the street disappears. Each of the stalls has something next to it with nothing left in the stall itself. The storehouse is now cast in shadow, but I am certain that it too has its doors locked.

I hear someone on the stairs. I assume it is Tom, and I am sure of it when I hear him knock on Julie's door.

"Got it locked?" he asks. I can't hear her response. "Good girl. Remember, try to keep quiet." I listen as he approaches my door and then pull away when he knocks. "Sorry for getting gruff with you before. Got it locked now?"

"Yeah. It's okay."

"Good." He tries the doorknob. "Good, make sure it stays that way."

"What is going on?"

"Try to get some sleep. It makes it easier." He walks away from me and I want to open the door to confront him, but Jensen tells me to do what he says. For the first time I think Jensen is scared.

I lay down on the cot and rest my forearms over my eyes. The light outside my windows is bright enough to make it difficult to sleep. Julie's cries have died away, and I wonder if she is sleeping.

I drag my cot away from the window. On the other side of the room less light filters through. It still doesn't help. I hear something outside, and I try to ignore it. Tom seemed concerned. He didn't want me to know what was going on.

Jensen urges me to look outside the window, but I don't want to. It's too difficult to resist him, though, so I give in and look outside. Out in the street, a lone man stands with a long knife at his waist.

I don't remember seeing him this morning. He wears a scarf around his neck that he uses to wipe his face. He examines the different stalls and inspects the materials left behind. He moves them all into the center of the street in front of the house and then waits once he has them gathered together.

I pull away from the window when he looks up. I listen as the noise increases in the street. I am afraid to look in case he is still looking up at me, but I am too curious to not see what is going on. When I look outside again there are multiple men taking the bags and loading them into something that looks like a stripped down car from the city. It has large wheels with a flat rectangular bed on the back. They tie a net down over the supplies once they are all loaded and then talk between themselves. One of them counts everything as if something is missing.

One of them leaves for a moment and returns with what looks like an axe in his hand. He approaches the door across the street and strikes the door with it. The axe head glances off the wood, and he grows frustrated and gives up. He goes to the house next door and this time the axe bites in without any trouble. The door splits in two. He enters the house with the axe in hand, and I can't force myself to watch any longer.

I return to my cot and try to pretend that I am back inside the City where people weren't allowed to break doors down. I wish I could go back to the City, but Jensen doesn't want me to consider the option.

The sound of Julie's renewed crying lulls me to sleep.

Chapter 18: Reid

I lay in my bed and stare at the ceiling. The house comes to life as the children rouse each other from sleep and prepare themselves for the day. One of them comes in to check on me, but leaves when he sees that I am awake. He apologizes for bothering me, but doesn't give me enough time to respond.

The sound of water rushing to the different parts of the house reminds me that I can't ignore her forever. It was easier when we were children and all I had to do was run away and hide in my room. She would stand outside my window and call to me. I would pretend like I couldn't hear her, or like I didn't know why she was upset. It was easy back then.

As we grew older, she would call me on my lies. She would tell me when she knew I was lying, or back me into a corner if I tried to flee. I had to work harder at getting away from her to sort things out. She didn't understand why I needed the time away.

I imagine her on the other side of my door. Maybe she would have an ear pressed against the wood, checking if I was still breathing. She would determine whether or not I was awake, whether I was avoiding her or simply still getting ready. Her fingers would hesitate, wrapped around the doorknob. Her breath would be ragged with anticipation. I imagine her turning the knob, not bothering to knock, and finding me lying here. I wouldn't be able to avoid her then. She would have me cornered, and I would be forced to tell her that I can't keep my promise.

She doesn't open the door, though, and I wait in silence, counting the moments until she does. I strain to hear even the slightest twitch of the doorknob, or her labored breathing on the other side of the door. Each second makes me feel more foolish than the one before it. I chastise myself silently. I don't want to admit my faults out loud, which would only make me feel more

foolish and would be like admitting I had done something wrong. At the same time, I know that I am behaving exactly as Lana had said I was: childish.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, taking solace in the solid floor beneath my feet. It's difficult to adjust to being back in my own bed where I don't need to worry if someone is going to rouse me. It's always difficult to come back after being in the City for more than a few days, but it's good.

The tension in my shoulders hasn't faded, and I can't shake the feeling that I am not alone, despite the fact there is no one else in the room. Knowing that Lana had been able to watch me while I was on my own doesn't make me feel any better either. Nothing would really stand in the way of her watching me within my own room as well.

I rub my eyes and force myself to get ready. If Lana is downstairs, so be it. I can't sit in my room forever. I get ready slowly, and by the time I leave my room I am certain the entire house has already been woken up.

I retrieve my breakfast from the dining hall and carry it out into the hallway. I hope no one is in the library this early. They probably wouldn't be. Most of the children liked to take their breakfast outside. Still, I try to decide between bringing it back to my room, or finding a place to eat somewhere else.

I don't notice Lily until she says my name. I turn around and she is standing there. I swear I hadn't seen her. She looks worried when I don't respond right away. I notice the bags beneath her eyes first. She drags her feet as she walks towards me, and her eyelids droop.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask her, assuming that she had a night like my own.

“I couldn’t. It’s too weird.”

I nod. I understand the feeling, but I don’t want to simply say that she will get used to it. It would only make her feel less comfortable, more like she was doing something wrong. Instead I ask her if she has had breakfast yet. She says she hasn’t.

“Do you know where it is?” I ask, pointing down the hallway. She nods her head and says she just isn’t hungry, but she eyes the food in my hand. I offer it to her and she takes it with some coaxing, but eats it without complaint. “You can ask for things. Don’t feel like you aren’t welcome to.” I smile.

“I know,” she says, but she only sounds half convinced. “I just didn’t want to.”

I lead her to the library. She marvels at the large wooden doors with the bone handles. When we step inside she seems to be unsure of the books. I put my plate on a desk and grab one from the shelf. I open its pages and hand it to her.

“Do you know what this is?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says. She takes it from me and seems to scan the pages before putting it back where I pulled it from. “I just haven’t seen so many before.”

She traces the lettering on the binding, ignorant of the fact that I am there. I watch her, curious to know what she is thinking about, but not daring to intrude on her thoughts. I feel like I am observing a private moment that I shouldn’t be privy to.

I hear Lana’s voice, which rouses me and puts me on alert. I know I have to talk with her, but still I can’t convince myself that I need to do it right now. It can wait. She waited this long. Her voice grows closer. Lily examines me with a sense of expectation. I have the feeling that she

has been waiting for this moment, wanting to know exactly what the other children were talking about. I know they talk about me, they always do, but I don't want to have to explain myself to Lily. I hear the doors open behind us.

“Reid, there you are.” She looks at the plate I have placed on the desk, but doesn't say anything. “Have you had a chance to think it over?”

Lily watches me and I look between the two of them, frozen with indecision. I can't bear to tell Lana that I need to be able to escape to the City, to find solace in the one place I shouldn't go, but I also can't have Lily think that she wasn't worth the risk. Lana seems to read my thoughts. She pulls up a chair and places it next to me.

“Did you have breakfast?” she asks Lily, settling herself into the chair. I am about to answer but I notice her watching Lily. She has the same kind of curiosity in her eyes that the children have when they find a new part of the garden that they hadn't discovered before. Lily tenses beside me. “It's okay, I don't bite.” Lana says. It doesn't help Lily relax.

“No, but I'm not hungry.” Lily says. It seems to have Lana satisfied.

“Anything big planned for the day?” I ask Lana. I know what she will say, but the tension is making me anxious.

“I'll show you the things we discussed and we will go from there.” Her tone is short. She is still upset with me.

“I can leave,” Lily says.

“No, you can come too,” Lana says. She takes me by surprise. “Don't be silly. You'll like it, I think.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll see.”

“When?” Lily seems excited. I don’t want to disappoint her.

“We could go now, if you like. It’s up to Reid, though. He needs to come too.” She nods at my plate. “We should let him finish eating too.”

Lily watches me expectantly. I shrug like I don’t care even though my heart drums in my chest and my body tells me I am not ready. I wanted to deal with it, but I am not ready to actually do it. Lana doesn’t waste the opportunity.

Lana leads us into the back part of the garden, where she had brought me yesterday. The air seems colder back here, and I feel the hairs along my arms raise. One of the hedges moves. I wait for Rock to come out of it, but it is a small boy instead. Lana stops to confront him and makes him go home.

“You know you can’t be back here,” she says, with her hands on her knees. He pouts but she doesn’t give in. “It’s dangerous. You could get lost.”

We watch him run back to the house, and Lana makes us wait for an extra few minutes to make sure he doesn’t come back outside. When she is satisfied, she continues leading us through the garden. The paths that we take look familiar. I have the sense that I know where we are going. When we reach the area where we had sat before, it confirms my suspicion. The green building stands before us.

“I wanted to show you yesterday, but Rock interrupted. It was better that he did, because he was still working on this, but here it is. Here is the place.” She holds her arms out to either

side. I am unimpressed. I don't understand what I am supposed to be looking for. Lily is blunt enough to voice as much.

“What is it?”

“This is where it is. Rock put it in there so that if by chance someone came across it they wouldn't know what they had found.” She points to the green building. “Lily, I said I would let you come but I need you to promise that this will be our secret. You can't tell the other children that this is out here. I can't trust them to not come searching for it and that's just a mess.”

Lily nods. Lana leads us into the building and at first it is difficult to see. There is only enough light from the outside to brighten the opening of the building, and there are no windows to illuminate the rest. Lana fumbles in the darkness and flicks the lights on.

She leads us down a staircase into a lower portion of the building. I wouldn't have known it was there if Lana hadn't pointed it out to me. When we enter the second room, I understand what she had been talking about.

There are three monitors in the room, and each of them displays a different view of the City. As they scroll through different screens, I recognize some places that I had been, and others that seem completely foreign. There is a fourth monitor in the corner where Lyle is already perched. He doesn't look up at us when we come in.

Lana shows me how the cameras work, and Lyle illustrates her points by scrolling through views that she asks him to. She freezes it on the place where Lily's father was killed. Lily turns away but doesn't cry.

“How is this going to help?” I ask Lana. She seems incredulous that I would even ask, but still she answers.

“It gives us a new way of seeing the City. We get to see it as they do.

“I thought you said we can track Radicals.”

“That’s a work in progress,” Lyle says. He gets up from his chair and points to one of the screens where a yellow box hovers above someone in a crowd of people. “I am still working on it, but currently I have it looking for weird body movements, anything that might suggest someone might be behaving differently.” As I watch the screen I notice what Lyle means. Most of the crowd moves in the same direction. Some of them carry on conversations or just look straight ahead. The man that the box focuses on seems upset, and looks over his shoulder more than once.

“But you can’t confirm it.”

“Of course not. I don’t have actual control of the City. That would be insane.”

“What did you bother bringing me here for then?” I turn to Lana. Her jaw is set, and I wait for her to get upset. She doesn’t, though.

“Are you going to help us?” she asks.

I want to say no, but Lily turns around and looks me in the eye. I can’t disappoint her too.