Prologue

From the small alcove she sat huddled in, the slender girl watched her village be destroyed by the mountain that has protected it for decades in the remote Greece countryside, now known as Region Eight. The ultimate irony she thought to herself through the panic filled haze that settled over her mind. She winced at each thunderous boom and watched the rocks fall from the sky and beat the ground with a helpless horror. Massive stone pillars facing each of the four directions to hold the mountain back, now groaned under the strenuous shaking, threatening to break and allow a disastrous collapse on the inner complex.

Screams resonated with the echoing boulders. Tears stung the girl’s eyes, and the feeling of uselessness rendered her limbs motionless. Out of desperate desire she prayed to the gods of the Ancients, hoping that they existed and heard her pleas. The shaking continued without mercy. Groans sounded above her head, and she looked up only to wish that she hadn’t. A wave of dread swept through her. Large cracks travelled the length of the solid rock and unable look away, the girl watched wide-eyed as they grew larger causing pebbles to fall dusting her with dirt and grime.

Crying out she burrowed her head between her knees covering the back of her neck with her hands. The tears she has fought hard to hold trail down her cheeks in burning trails. There is nothing she can do, her mind wailed. She can either go out and more than likely get crushed by the boulders that continually fall, or she could stay curled up in this small hole and hope that it doesn’t collapse on her, and if it does pray that it falls just right and snaps her neck.

Squeezing her eyes shut tight, she braced herself for the fall of rocks. The seconds dragged by one after another for what felt like years, and nothing happened. And nothing happened! The girl lifted her head and looked out of her little alcove. The walls of the mountain no longer shook with the fine tremors of the earthquake, and only the faint groans of the people below in the village sounded in the hollow mountain. It’s over, the girls mind screamed. She climbed to her feet and jumped out of the alcove five feet up in the air, the landing jostling her joints. How she got up there in the first place she wasn’t exactly sure.

The girl raced to the nearest person, trapped under several large rocks, her hands digging at the rocks fruitlessly until her finger tips turned bloody. The boulders seem to grow heavier as if to mock the girl’s small frame. She turns her face away from all the people trapped, away from their faces twisted in agony and begging for help, only to face more limbs sticking out and pleading eyes. The tears that raced town her face turn into hitching sobs as she races through her destroyed home.

He name moaned out by a voice that sends shock waves up her spine was the only thing that stopped her from fleeing the ruined village. The voice so familiar it could only be one person. She whirls and found her mother half crushed by one of the largest rocks the girl has seen so far. She raced to the older woman and held her head in her hands, burrowing her face into the thick jet black hair streaked with grey strands. Sobbing the girl stroked the woman’s hair crying out for help repeatedly. People are scattered about the streets, pulling their own loved ones out of the rubble, but none paid attention to the girl crying over the dying woman, they all knew it was helpless; the city just didn’t have the technology to save those caught in the worst of the debris. She begged her mother to hang on, and kept telling her that help would come. Her throat started to crack from all the yelling.

The woman grabs her daughter’s hands and held them in a grip stronger than her scattered pulse should have allowed. She croaked out her final wish to her daughter, the wish no parent should ask of her child. It’s clear in the woman’s eyes that she knew this was the end, and released her hands. No longer a true daughter, the girl stood, pulling her shoulders back and straightening her spine. She cupped her mother’s face in her calloused hands and rubbed her cheeks with a gentle movement. The woman’s eyes fluttered open and a soft smile touched her face while she watched her daughter. The girl meets her mother’s eyes unable to return the expression. Gripping her face harder, sharp cries racketed through her body. With a final yell muffled by sobs, the girl jerked her hands, forcing the woman’s head to an unnatural angle feeling the bones snapping beneath her fingers. Hot tears rolled down her face, and she stared at her mother’s soft smile still on her lips, but the spark of a soul no longer in her eyes. Shaking violently she shut the woman’s eyes with trembling fingers, and then turned and ran making a silent vow to herself, that if she ever has to kill again, she will learn to smile.

Chapter One: June, 2111

Another object slams into the door, rattling the fake wood in its hinges. I stare at the floor between my legs. I pretend that the once white bathroom tiles is the world’s finest treasure, and that the echoing screams and the glass that just shattered comes from the neighbors below us on the ground floor of the apartment buildings. The muscles in my back start to complain, quivering along my spine urging me to relax and move. My response is to curl up in a tighter ball, desperate to hide from the world. With no clock to determine the time, I guess I have been curled up in the small cubicle of a bathroom for the better part of an hour.

“Raven!” my name being shouted by someone other than my arguing parents sends pin pricks up my neck and the hairs on my arms to stand on end.

Swiveling my head up, I scan the moldy grey walls that reveal nothing. What the hell? Convincing myself that I dreamed my name being called, I rest my head on my crossed arms wrapped around my legs and blink back the sting of forming tears.

“Raven come on,” I hear the voice again followed by a sharp tap on the small window on the wall behind the toilet several feet up. The window I failed to remember before.

The shock of someone outside the second story window jerks my limbs up. Stumbling over to the toilet, ignoring the stiff pain in my back and cursing my shortness, I climb to the top part of the less than shiny toilet bowl. Leaning forward, I press my face against the cold glass. Blinking several times to adjust my eyes to the darkness outside, I look for the source of the sound. That’s when a face swings, upside down, at me and the glass from the gnarled tree outside.

I fling myself backwards, my arms doing a circling motion, and the only thing stopping my fall is my nails digging into the small frame work around the window. A small scream vibrates my throat, bouncing off the tile floors and filling the room with its sound.

I kill it in its track and cast a glance at the door to make sure my parents failed to notice the disturbance. That’s the last thing anybody needed when those two snarl. Satisfied that they didn’t notice my scream, their steadily growing louder screams are perfect reassurance, I focus on the boy dangling by just the crook of his knees around a branch of the tree.

Familiar shaggy dirty blonde hair falls away from his face for a change, revealing spring green eyes and a swatch of freckles across a sculptured nose. My eyes scan the rest of his body once and a heat creeps up my cheeks when I realize he is shirtless. His toned chest muscles ripple while he sways slightly from the branch, as if teasing me to watch. My eyes snap back to his face and the smirk playing with his lips shatters the shock induced silence.

“Eric Wispak, you stupid moth- what are you doing here! Can’t you hear them screaming? And what if the Securities find you breaking curfew!” I throw my hand in the direction of the door, his eyes following idly. I throw the window open the wooden frame banging against the side of the building. I wince at the sound and curse myself for stupidity, but I stick my head out the window so I can continue lecturing him some more. The Government workers would love the chance to teach Eric a lesson, especially after last month when he lit the head honcho’s pants on fire with one of his firecrackers. My mind wanders to the Government and the Final War, but I force it back to the matter at hand.

When he looks at me again his smirk grows into a full blown grin, teeth and all, and his shoulders shake slightly. “Yea I can hear them. The whole stinking neighborhood can. And don’t worry about the Enforces; the Government does a piss poor job at assigning people that can actually pay attention to the slums.” The light tone in his voice, and that natural warmth in it, washes away the tension between us just as fast as it appeared.

Returning his smirk, I tuck a strand of my inky black hair behind my ear. “So what are you doing here?”

The playfulness drops from his face and a grim line settles across his mouth. “I came to get you. Everybody is wondering how you are. Thalia in particular, but of course Riley and I do too.”

I turn my face away and wipe at the sudden tear running down my cheek. “Hey, hey now! Don’t cry Rave. We all understand why you haven’t shown up. To lose your bro during a raid, that’s rough man. They all just sent me to tell you that you still have a home at the Shack.”

My eyes move back to his. The image of the dingy brown walls of the Shack the five of us, I mean four, hang out at fills my head and I can practically smell the dust that used to permanently scent my clothes.

“I know the Shack will always be my home. But my parents won’t let me out.” I look down at the ground, the brown grass an unappealing sight. A longing to hug all three of my friends together rushes through me. The muggy summer air filled with the cricket’s summer song is carried on a breeze and it licks at my face lifting a few strands of hair.

“Well that’s a given, they wouldn’t want to lose you to,” he reaches out a hand and I feel his warm fingers trace my cheek following the damp path left by the tears. Jerking his hand back, as if my skin shocked him, he says, “That’s why I’m here to bust you out.”

I look at him now, “How the hell am I supposed to get down? We’re on the second story and in case you haven’t noticed my parents are still in a screaming match to the death. ” I take a deep breath and push myself backwards breathing the stagnant air of the apartment I have lived in my whole life once again. “It’s not like they’ll just let me walk out the door.”

“Oh come on, it’s not like you haven’t snuck out before. And besides your nineteen now Raven, they can’t hold you hear against your will.” Eric bends at the waist his abdomen muscles tensing with the movement of the upside down sit-up. Pulling himself up the rest of the way, he flips himself so he sits on the branch he was just hanging on.

“When I snuck out before, Seth was still alive and my parents were too busy working to notice. Now they scream all the time and rarely let me out of their sight.” My voice holds a sharper edge to it then I intend and my heart clenches. “Eric, I’m sorry. It’s just been rough sense the raid.”

“Yea, I know, and we’re all allowed to get pissy Rave, you can’t be stoic all the time.” A soft grunt comes from the trees and I cock my eyebrows wondering what he’s up to.

“Ha, me stoic? Did you find a stash of Hikio somewhere?” I bark out a sharp laugh, and grin up at him in the tree. There is no way he could have gotten his hands on the extremely illegal drug from Region fifteen. “I’m like the most emotionally unstable person I know.”

Eric’s face peeks out from the limbs long enough to say, “No you’re not, and you hide your emotions better than a rock.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, I listen to his soft grunts coming from above for a while and then ask, “What are you doing up there anyways?”

Eric laughs down at me, “Trying to figure out how to get you out of there. None of these branches have the right angle for me to help you down. And I won’t let you try getting out by yourself.”

At his words the wooden frame of the window digging into my ribs becomes more noticeable and there is no way I can climb out of this window. Not only is it crazy to climb out without anything to grab on the other side. My five foot two inch height makes it impossible to lift my legs over the ledge to even try to climb out.

“Even if I wanted to I couldn’t. I’m too short.” The words come out in a groan and I realize how much I really did want to go with him back to the Shack, that I am ready to face my friends after my brother’s murder.

I can feel Eric’s eyes on my face through the branches as he climbs down to the branch slightly above my window, his soft laughter sounding yet again. “You’re like a ‘lil elf you are, what with your black hair and delicate features.” Eric’s soft chuckle turns into a full blown belly laugh on the last two words, rattling him and the branch he is on. The sound of it rolls with the muggy heat waves pouring off of the ground.

Rolling my eyes, “I do not look like a…” I stop midsentence turning my head to the side. “What’s an elf?”

Eric materializes on the branch above the bathroom window and smiles, “I’ll tell you about it on the way to the Shack, but for now we need to figure out how to get you down.” He looks down at the ground and then down the side of the building my family and several others live in and back at me. “Whose window is that?” He points in the general area of where he is talking about since his eyes are locked onto mine.

Without any thought as to where he was pointing I blurt out, “Mine. Why? What do you got in mind?” my heart does a miniature flip in my chest when his eyes light up with a glint. “Eric…”

“I’ll tell you when you get there.” He climbs to the lowest branch while saying this and swings down, hanging from the branch with his finger tips. The branch had to be at least seven feet up off the ground, but his shoes dangle only a mere foot from the ground.

Barely losing a moment’s worth of time, he drops to the dirt and jogs to the front of the other window, waving an arm at me. A soft groan slips out and I slowly climb down from the toilet, making sure to shut the window. One of Eric’s brilliant spur of the moment schemes does not sound fun to me at the moment. But in the end, like always, I find myself doing what he wants. I step into the hallway that connects the rooms to the other main part of the apartment building, which consists of a family room and an open area kitchen shorting one side of the hall’s walls.

The entrance to the family room seems to loom larger as I edge my way towards my room. A back appears in the frame, and my heart leaps into my throat. My mother’s words, no longer muffled by the door and walls, ring sharp in my ears. “He would still be alive if it weren’t for you filling his head with lies about striking back out.”

I freeze at her words, my body refusing to move. Was she talking about Seth? She must be, only one other person I know of was killed for talking about a revolt. But he lived on the edge Region twenty three, over a hundred miles away. And it was years ago.

“Oh come on Robin, you know that’s not true. The boy would have gone down the same path either way.” My father barks back. While he may not have shouted these words, this time, his unnaturally loud voice fills the apartment.

She whirls around then and her chocolate brown eyes, so like my own, meet mine with fire sparking in them. “What are you doing out here?” her voice is nothing but a growl and I cringe backwards into the wall attempting to make myself as small as I can. “Well! Get out of here; go to your fucking room.” She storms towards me and into the bathroom I just left.

I do not hesitate to follow her command. My feet fly and I enter the room Seth and I once shared. Like every other time I have entered it, my back goes ridged at the sight of the emptiness on the left side of the room. The side that was once filled with posters of the Government issued maps and plans scribbled out on paper. Taking a shaky breath, I force my legs to move towards the window, where Eric’s soft bird whistles come in through the glass. Even a month later, the change in everybody’s personality still shocks me. Pushing the latch down and pushing the window down so it hangs down the side of the building like I did in the bathroom, I stick my head back out the window.

“So what’s your master plan?” I whisper down to him.

Eric looks up at me, extending his arms out in an open cradle. “Jump”

I jerk my head back hitting my head on the frame, feeling a hard knot already starting to form. Rubbing the back of my head, I hiss out the window not sticking my head out again, “Are you crazy. You’ll drop me and I’ll break my leg or something.”

“Just jump Rave. I’ll catch you, and then we’ll go the Shack.”I hear the heat dried grass crinkle under his feet.

My heart thumps and I stick my head back out, making sure I hold it as far away from the seal as I can. The ground seems to surge up and roll, reminding me of the waves I saw the one time my father took me and Seth to the ocean. I got so sick that day on the small boat we rented we had to go home five hours before the return time. “No way, it’s a fifteen some foot drop.”

“You were willing to climb through that bathroom window. And don’t you want to go see everybody else?” there is a note to his voice that surprises me and I study his face closely.

His eyes meet mine and a smoldering intensity surges between us. The hairs stand on my arm stands on end again, but the feeling is different. “Please Rave.” Eric whispers, his voice notably huskier. “I won’t drop you, promise. Just jump.”

I shift in front of the window, the desperate edge to his voice uprooting my nerves. “If you drop me, I swear I’ll tie you to a tree and let either the Securities or the wolves find you.” My words have the desired affect and he cringes mockingly, the familiar joking light returning to his eyes.

Nodding he shakes his arms emphasizing their emptiness. “I can’t drop you if you don’t jump. And then there will be some disappointed Enforcers out and about.”

Swallowing the sudden clump in my throat, I clench my fists and swing a leg over the empty window seal, straddling it. Eric shifts again underneath me, hopefully positioning himself into a better place suitable for catching a person. My arms tremble, fine shakes traveling along my muscles. I lean slightly back towards my room, allowing myself to move my other leg outside. Every single breath comes out in quivering bursts. I can feel sweat starting to bead on the palms of my hand making it difficult to hold onto the edge as firmly. I sit on the edge of my window, looking out over my home city, R424. The forth town, formed by the Government, in the twenty fourth Region.

“Almost there, steady…”Eric mutters encouraging words up at me. I can practically feel his eyes following every twitch of my body.

Debating on which was to jump, I finally decide on the backwards approach. I position myself so my head and half my chest are still inside my room, my hands gripping the edge with biting force. My legs, hanging outside the window, serve no other purpose than to be dead weight, sway uselessly in the slight breeze.

“If you’re going to do it that way, make sure to push yourself away from the edge. You don’t want to get caught on the latch of the window.” Eric whispers up his voice sounding stronger now that everything is falling into place.

I respond by letting out a terrified breath of air. Swallowing hard I try to get rid of the lump in my throat. Swelling my arm muscles I prepare to jump backwards. I’m about to push myself backwards when my hands slip from their sweaty grip sending me falling through the air. My throat muscles work to produce a scream, but all that comes out of my mouth is a breathy squeal. Air rushes around me for what feels like eternity.

My eyes are squinted tight and I thrash through the air, my hands searching for something to hold. I slam into something hard. The pained groan doesn’t come from me either. Then the night air is filled with soft laughter. “You should see your face!”

I snap my eyes open and glare up into the smiling face hovering over mine. Opening my mouth to let loose the verbal lashing building inside, “-I promised I’d catch you. And it’s not my fault that you slipped so don’t try and kill me with your eyes.”

The boyish look on his face and the fact that I am still alive sends me into a burst of giggles. “Fine, you live to see another day.” I laugh again and then a stray thought flashes. “Hey, what’s an elf?”

“What? Oh! They’re little magical people that can do stuff with trees and stuff like that.” I cock my eyebrows at him.

“And how does that make me look like an elf? Just because I’m short...” I trail off, I become increasingly aware of the fact that he hasn’t set me down yet. His warm arms are wrapped gently around my body.

The last person to hold me this close was Viktor. My heart squeezes. It’s been a year since he was taken away because of the Draft. A year since I ruffled his unnaturally red hair, and kissed his…

I stuff the painful thoughts away. The Government has taken a lot from me but I won’t let it ruin me.

“Oh, they’re not just short. The guy who wrote the book said-“

“You found more books?” I can’t help but squirm and bounce, the previous thoughts shoved out of my head, forcing him to put me down. Once my feet are on the solid ground I bounce even harder.

“Yup, I finally deciphered that clue the Librarian left in the book by George Orwell. There was a whole stack of books behind that old marble statue. A tiny hidey hole. Who would’ve guessed?”

The librarian guy was a guy before the Book Confiscation. After the Final War, or what the elders of our town call world war three, the Government took away all of the old books, the ones published before the year two thousand and fifty.

All the books were taken to secret compounds around the world, where only high ranking Enforcers can get in. They said that the old books tainted our thoughts, produced violence filled thoughts. Of course there are more books now. The art of literature just as powerful as it was in the past, but the new books are extremely boring, not a single thought provoking concept in any single one of them.

We discovered the first stash of old books when the four of us, plus Viktor at the time broke into the closed up library. Viktor fell through a rotten floor board, stumbling onto a pile of books. His ankle was twisted and he wasn’t able to walk for a week. But he said he didn’t mind since he got to read them. He became particularly attached to the novel, *1984*. Claimed it was just like the society we lived in, just written over a century ago.

None of us expected the letter hidden in that book, a letter from the Librarian as he liked to call himself. He told us of things, of all the books in the world, and how it pained him to see them ripped from the public’s hands. So he hid, not himself, but the books. A dozen of them hidden under the feet of the searching Enforcer’s.

“So how many did you find this time?” I whisper.

We both whisper, and step lightly. The apartment building I live in is the close to the middle of town. Crumbling buildings line either side of the roads, their dull brown or grayish tan color representing the depressed air they give off. Several streets lead off in either direction. Before the war, and even now the city sprawls in either direction. But its dead silent on the streets. Security Enforcers strict about the curfew rule. Nobody out of their homes after eleven. I can hear the familiar hum of the Hover Cars zooming above our heads however, several hundreds of feet up in the air. I know even farther up are the Hover Planes are zooming back and forth, ten times faster than that of the its lower counter parts.

“At least ten good ones, the others look like mice or some moths got to them.”

We reach the alley that leads us to other walk ways similar to this one and start down it. Every so often we would have to cross a street crossing. We would stop and stick our heads out on either side checking to see if it was all clear. I think about the books Eric found. What could be inside them? I haven’t ever even heard of books written about elves.

I turn to ask Eric another question, and come face to face with his chest, with him slamming me against the wall behind us. I try to squirm out from his iron grip muttering angry curses into his hand covering my mouth. With as much force as I can, I slam my heel into his toes, smiling smugly at the pained groan. Eric presses me harder against the wall, crushing me between the two.

“Shut up and stop fighting, Enforcers are coming.”

Chapter Two

Eric heard the voices first. With my mind focused on the books I failed to process what was happening until Eric had me slammed against a wall, hand pressed over my still moving mouth.

“Enforcers…” I go stiff in his arms, and they tighten around me instinctively.

The voices I can hear now come closer, bouncing off the street walls. How could I not notice them? They’re so loud. Eric, clearly the one with the brains between us, drags us backwards into a doorway indent in the alley wall. A curse softer than a hiss brushes my ear. My heart beats loudly, filling my ears with a rushing sound. Of course the night I choose to sneak out on the Enforcers decide to run proper patrol.

Two men walk onto the part of the street up ahead that I can see from my new angle. Silver pins glint on their shoulders. They are too far away, but I know engraved on the metal is a phoenix raising up from a shattered world. The Governments personal insignia. The silver pins are just identification that these men are Securities.

With the men in eyes sight, their conversation reaches my ears, instead of just snatches of individual words.

“I haven’t seen the Evagline girl around town lately,” the larger of the two men says, rubbing at the stubble on his chin.

I stiffen. Why would he be talking about me? Eric stiffens to, his arms wrapped around my waist and arms going rigid. There is only one family with the last name Evagline, and I know my mom never leaves the apartment complex unless it is to go to the small gardens area in the back of the building.

The other man shakes his head, throwing it backwards. A rumbling laugh leaves his mouth, “her parents are probably being smart. Keeping her locked up I bet. Probably because of what happened to their son. But that’s not why I am calling them smart.” The tone to his voice causes bile to rise in my throat. I’ve heard rumors of the Enforcers taking women for sex, but this is just proof screaming in my ear.

Eric’s arms tighten even more, fingers digging painfully into my side. I squirm slightly, telling him to loosen up. Leaning forward slightly I strain my ears to hear more of the conversation, despite the growing horror.

“Shut up,” the other man growls, he slaps the other Enforcer over the back of his head. “That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m wondering where she went. Her brother came to damn close to starting a revolt.”

Thoughts start to churn in my head. What does my brother protesting the Government have to do with me? “Don’t you think that after living with him after all that time…nothings rubbed off on her? I’m willing to bet you that the apple didn’t fall to far from *that* particular tree.”

Then all the pieces click in my head. They think I’m like Seth, think I’m a potential threat breaking the Codes. Nobody breaks the Etiquette Codes, the rules stating how the Citizens of the World should act. I swallow hard. Nobody wants to be called a threat.

If I was sent to Region Court, the first court in the judging process ruled by the Region Enforcer and his Securities, and found to be a threat. A shudder races down my spine and I feel Eric shift behind me, his mind probably figuring out the same things as mine.

A person found guilty, is sent to World Court. The place where nobody deemed a threat comes back out. I swallow hard, as kids we used to swap the horror stories of the execution process. But there are those who are unlucky. The ones, unlucky enough to avoid that fate come out bound in chains and sent to the jail zones, a place maps in our old books call Hawaii.

Being sent to World Court means you have to face the Chief Enforcer, and all twenty nine Region Enforcers. They are the people who rule the world, keep it divided into twenty nine parts. The Chief Enforcer rules it all. He leads the Regions to be a unified force, while each individual Region *Enforcer* leads his own branch Security Enforces, who watch over the people.

One of the Enforcers moves towards the mouth of the alley. My breath hitches, and I silently scream at him to go away. I see him lean forward, twisting his head side to side. His eyes slide over to where we stand and I swear my heart will beat out of my throat and slap onto the pavement.

I slump backwards when he makes the all clear sign with his hand, turning back towards his partner. They continue to talk, though no longer about me to my relief, as they walk away. When their voices fade completely, I jerk myself from Eric’s arms and stumble over to the opposite wall.

“They think I’m like Seth. Why would they think I’m like Seth?”

Eric follows me out of the hidden cubby in the wall, pacing back and forth in front of me. His fists clench and unclench, “I don’t know. But don’t you worry; I won’t let them touch you.” I nod, and walk over to him offering him my hand.

He twines his fingers through mine, squeezing gently. I lean towards him and whisper in a soft voice, “We both know you can’t stop them if they really wanted to.”

Eric grunts and pulls me back down the alley way. He moves us to the lesser known alley ways. The ones only the stray cats go down and are familiar with. We reach the back end of the city after ten minutes of fast paced walking. Large trees surge up several feet behind the last buildings. Another thing the Government changed when it came to power. One of the better things.

After the war, the world was damaged to the point of being broken. When the Government rose up, after the first two years, they started the Rebuild program. They made it so the world was repaired to the point it was better than it was originally. Cities were destroyed, and some were rebuilt. The whole program took years to organize, but the end result was massive. The rule stated that around each city had to be a ring of the lands natural habitat at least 50 miles thick, and each city has to be fifty square miles. Perfectly uniform they called it, but people were wary of it at first. Concerns of the ability to travel grew, but with the development of Hover Technology, travel became a worry of the past.

Eric leads us through the trees. Darkness swarms up around us while the dim street light fades. Forms start to take shape gradually in the eerie white light created by the full moon and stars. I study the forest, watching the way the leaves shimmer in the blue haze only moonlight can create. Glancing up ahead I spot the trees start to change in appearance, they appear almost normal in the pale light.

The Shack appears after a few more minutes of walking. The building in itself is a sight to behold. Built among the trees, painted to look invisible, it blends in magically with the forest. Seth designed it years ago, and recruited me and my friends to build it with him. In more ways than one, that one room shack has served as our home.

The light streaming out into the trees comes from the single window Thalia and I insisted on cutting in just last year, despite Seth’s protests. Eric walks up to the door and grabs the worn wooden door knob, pushing open, revealing a familiar sight.

I smile walking into the room; the mismatched carpet sewed together remains the same and so does everything else. A memory flashes across my mind, the one time I asked Seth, while building the Shack, why we couldn’t have matching carpet. He promptly told me, his tone mocking, that if I wanted to go to town and smuggle out a whole roll of carpet without getting caught, I was more than welcome to. That settled that and the Shack floor was covered in multi patterned carpet that ranged from sickly green shag in one corner, to a rough Berber in another. The description can match the rest of the room to. Mismatched.

A book shelf that was carried out here in pieces stands tall beside the door. Its shelves are littered with the twenty two books we found and other objects to valuable or sentimental for the Enforcers to find. Next to the bookshelf is a tall lamp designed, once again, by my brother. Its bottom is round with a flat edge so it can stand straight, with a tall, skinny pipe line rail going up until it flares into a curtain head. My brother tried to explain to me once how he got it to work, but even now it causes my head to groan when I try to think about it. Something about a marble spinning in a bunch of smoothed gears whenever you pull the string, and somehow that creates small electric sparks which travel up the small tube lighting up the end.

My eyes dart to the pile of cushions in the back corner of the room and the individual projects scattered around them and then to the two people sitting on the obnoxious yellow and blue plaid love seat stuffed into a corner.

Thalia and Riley sit side by side on it, both of them watching me. Riley glances down when my eyes scan his face, his dark chocolate curls covering his eyes, and his finger idly strokes the large stain of something unknown on the left arm of the couch. I glance at Thalia and she smiles at me, her brilliant teeth showing, while she tucks a strand of naturally curled hair that looks like honey when the light catches it just right behind her ear. I return her smile and look back at Riley.

His face looks ashen and large bags are under his eyes such a dark blue they are almost indigo. Is he having family troubles again? I resist the urge to sigh; Riley’s parents aren’t the sanest of people, especially his father. A surge of heat runs through me in the form of sparking hate. If it wasn’t for Karl Alderson my brother would still be alive. Before those thoughts can fully form and take flight I stuff them back into the closet along with the rest of my grief. Seth choose his fate, Riley’s father had nothing to do with his murder.

I want to ask him what’s wrong, and I open my mouth to ask pushing aside the residue feeling towards him that his father created. But Thalia leaping from the couch to tackle me in a hug knocks the air out of me. She bounces up and down laughing and chirping words out to fast for me to understand. Eric remains behind us his laughter rolling around the room. Nobody notices the tension between Rile and me. Deciding to brush it off as well, I smile wider and return the hug, bouncing with her until she decides it’s time to let me go.

She pulls back abruptly, easily looking over my head to mock glare at Eric, “it took you long enough to get her here.” Her voice doesn’t hold any malice to it and it sounds like its usual summer breeze.

I can feel the coiling tension behind me and I can hear Eric walk up closer behind me, “Yea well we hit a few snags on our way here.” He moves over to the cushion pile plopping down ungracefully on top of it. “First off, our little Rave here wouldn’t jump out the window. Didn’t think I would catch her,” he winks at me on the last sentence, but the gesture isn’t even half hearted. “And second off, we almost got caught by Enforcers. They’re starting to run patrol again.”

Riley stands at this, his large muscles bulging. Even though he stands only five inches taller than me, his anger fills the room making him appear larger. He opens his mouth to say something but Eric cuts him off, “And to add to that, both of the Enforcers we almost ran into want Raven for…various reasons.”

Thalia gasps and I glare at Eric. What a nice way to start the reunion, I grumble in my head. Grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at her again, Thalia’s eyes shine bright, that rarely seen extreme intelligence shining through. Thalia’s smart, she just prefers to take her victims by surprise, so she lets them think of her as stupid. “Is that true? What’s the other ‘various reason’? It’s obvious what the first one wants.”

Riley snorts, walking closer to us his arms flexing as he crosses them over his chest. “Enforcers are all the same, they take what they want and don’t give a damn about the ants that they crush.”

My muscles lock to place and Thalia tenses beside me as well. Both of us have relationships with Enforcers. Or in my case, had. Her expression mirrors mine: eyes wide, eyebrows raised and mouth hanging open slightly. Where the hell did that outburst come from? So much for a warm welcoming.

“What? Don’t look at me like that; you know I’m right deep down. I bet even Viktor has been brain washed to be an ant crusher.”

All three of us gasp. I narrow my eyes and hiss out a string of curses that would make any Enforcer blush. That’s saying something.

Thalia leaps in before I can start screaming at him, “You’re insane, Vik was drafted. He didn’t want to join. You know the story; the Enforcers were low on the set amount of recruits and had to do the Draft in this Region.” Her voice sounds just as hurt as I felt on the inside.

Riley opens his mouth again to snap back, but Eric jumps in, “Come on man, I know the Government messed your dad up, but that doesn’t mean Viktor is one of the bad guys. What about Thalia’s Bradley, he got her and her mom out of Blood Ville,” Thalia and I both wince at the mention of the part of town where the crime rate is higher than the stars.

“Ha, you think it’s because he *cares*?” He was glaring at Eric, but he whirls around his wild eyes focusing on Thalia who cringes back. “Tell them what you told me before they got here,” Riley demands his voice filling the whole room.

She shakes her head, dropping her chin down to her chest; I think I make out the words, “I was going to…”

I whirl on him on Riley, my tongue loaded with daggers but he freezes me with his next words. “She’s pregnant! With his baby, he doesn’t even know about it yet. You all think he cares about her? That scum bag Enforcer just wants in her pants.”

Thalia’s head raises and her eyes shine with tears. I look between them both, my mouth snapping open and close. Riley smirks and questions form on my tongue. That single tear rolling down her cheek stops me in my tracks, turning me around in my thought process. I step right up to him slamming my finger into his chest forcing him a step backwards.

“Who do you think you are Riley?” I demand poking him again, “Better yet, who the hell pissed in your cornflakes cause I know you better than this.” I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the red sparking in the corners of my eyes. “I know it sucks what the Government does to us, but that doesn’t mean you can kick your own friends after it chews on them.”

Riley takes a shocked step back, his face looking like I just slapped him. He looks at all three of us and the expressions of shock and hurt. His hands slap to his face, and his whole body is raked with silent sobs.

“I’m sorry, so sorry,” he croaks, his voice cracking.

He stumbles backwards, collapsing on the couch, the thin cushions letting out a feeble poof of dust and air. The red fades from my vision just as fast as it appeared, and instead of seeing a man spewing words of venom, I see my friend collapsed and hurting. Walking over to the couch, feeling the carpet change in texture under my feet, I place my hand on his trembling shoulder. Both Thalia and Eric are silent.

“What happened?” I ask my voice soft and soothing as I try to mimic the voice my mother used when either Seth or I had a nightmare.

Riley looks up at me, his eyes wet and shining with a bright red nose completing the picture. “Enforcers, six of them, attacked my dad. He went out of town with a buddy of his to protest and promote his revolt. When he got back they showed up.” He takes a quivering breath and looks at Thalia now curled up in the crook of Eric’s arm on the cushion pile, “I’m sorry” is all that he says.

She smiles at him, the twist of her lips genuine but the kicked puppy look in her eyes remains. “It’s fine,” she responds. “They were going to find out anyways, now go ahead and finish your story.”

Riley nods, his face going sharp edges and angles, “Dad got home from the protest and the Enforcers showed up. They started to beat on him, telling him to shut his fucking mouth or worse things will happen…and not just to him.”

I gasp raising my free hand to my mouth. There is no such thing as an idle threat with an Enforcer, and Riley’s dad will never give up his quest for starting another Reform. “You got to be careful Riley; if your dad keeps this up they’ll hurt you next.”

He laughs at my concern and my face darkens. “Don’t worry about me; I tried to stop them when they started the beating. Of course they didn’t like that much, but it took three of them just to stop me from bashing in their leader’s head.” A smug look flashes across his face and my eyes narrow.

“Must it always be me to play the role of mother around here? Hard enough to keep Eric from lighting the town on fire every other day with his fireworks, but now I have to worry about you getting yourself killed by Enforcer’s” I snap looking at all three of them.

“Ah come on Rave, you’ve been gone for about a month and never once did you hear about a fire in a news report, and don’t worry about Riley, all the damage they got to do to him was a black eye. This all happened like three weeks ago, and just a few days ago did the bruise fade one hundred percent.” A chin splitting smile appears on his face.

“Yea, a week after Seth died,” I mutter.

Letting go of Riley’s shoulder I walk over to the book shelf, holding my elbows in my hands. I hear Eric stand behind me, but I wave him off. My eyes scan the twenty two books we have found over the years, one title leaping out at me. I grab *1984* it off the shelf and idly flip through the pages turning back in the direction of my friends.

Riley clears his throat, “Raven?” his voice is quiet and I find it easy to ignore. “Raven?” He asks again.

Looking up from the book, I meet his eyes, “Yea?”

“Do you blame dad for Seth’s death?” Riley’s voice is thick with something I don’t recognize.

My eyes harden for a second, “Of course not.” I say this automatically. Looking back down at the book I feel a soft smile play with my lips. Viktor’s past tangents about this book about the similarities between our world and this book’s world play through my mind.

The smile on his face is forced, “Don’t lie to me; I can see it in your eyes.”

Both Thalia and Eric nod. Great it’s tag teamed now. Breathing in heavily through my nose, I go over to Riley and sit beside him on the couch, leaning against him when he wraps his arm around me. He tucks my head under his chin as he listens to me.

“No, well…I guess I kind of do. He is the one who started Seth down that path. Both of them wanted a revolt and to fix the world.” Something unfurls in my chest. I realize that the words I spoke are the truth; I just needed to say them. “It breaks my heart to say this, but his murder was his own fault and if your dad isn’t careful it will be his fate to.” Something shifts then, the anger I felt, the darkness swirling in my chest, it all starts to change. I feel the beginning of healing in my bones and it sends small hum through me that has me wanting to curl my toes.

Riley nuzzles his nose into my hair. We both know his dad won’t back down, and he is lucky to have lasted as long as he has. The Government is extremely through with getting rid of protesters. They have a whole special branch of Securities to search for Threats, and when they find them they send in the grunts to do the heavy lifting.

Silence wraps around us, the crickets and frogs croaking in a nearby lake are the only break in it. I hear Thalia shift and clear her throat. Everybody looks at her, even Riley who was staring off into space turns and looks at her. We meet each other’s eyes and I raise my eyebrows. She smiles at me, the expression coy.

“I’m pregnant,” she bursts out, the small smile blooming wider.

We all burst out laughing. I see Eric’s arms tighten around her, rubbing her arm. “It’s a bit late for that” he roars, his words swallowed by the laughter. “Riley here beat you to it.”

I feel Riley stiffen behind me, and I turn to face him. His eyes are hooded and his mouth is a grim line. “What’s wrong?” I whisper, letting the two behind us laugh and chat away.

“I didn’t mean to say those things,” he whispers back. “I have to blame somebody you know that right?”

I nod, “Of course I get that. But Thalia seems to be fairly happy about the baby, so let’s support her.” I smile at him and he returns it.

Thalia is still smiling from ear to ear when our eyes meet again. “So you’re really pregnant?”

She bounces her head, “Yup, I went to that free clinic place the other day and had them test me.” She leans forward, up and over the arm of the couch, cupping her mouth with her hand. I lean forward too until my ear touches her hand. “My monthly was late and I was starting to crave that strawberry chocolate chunk ice cream they have down at that really expensive store down town.”

We both pull back and laugh. Eric stands up, pulling Thalia up with him. She looks puzzled until he starts throwing the cushions into the middle of the room, creating a lumpy bed type thing. We all smile and pile onto it like when we were younger, kicking off all our shoes, and become a giant pile of arms and legs twisting into comfortable positions.

Eric ends up beside me with his left arm over my waist, holding me in a loose grip and his right arm ending up as both of our pillow. I feel Riley’s head plop down on my stomach and he smirks up at me when I let out a fake grunt of pain. Thalia lays down on her side, Riley’s stomach in turn her resting spot, and curls her legs up underneath her.

“So what are you going to do then?” I ask Thalia, my fingers trailing through Riley’s hair.

Thalia chews her lower lip, smoke practically bellowing from her ears as she thinks about her future. Riley mutters something about she should keep it and twists suddenly, grabbing a book on the floor a little ways from the edge of the bed. It amazes me that he did all this without jostling Thalia. I watch him read for a while but I never catch the title of the book, and it doesn’t look familiar, probably just one of the new ones.

“I think I want to keep it,” Thalia says at last. “Besides, it’s not like I would kill it.” Her voice wobbles on the last words and I reach over with a single hand and pat her arm awkwardly. Not easy to do with a one hundred and eighty some pound man on my lap. “It’s my baby after all.”

I smile, “And you’ll have me to help you out.”

“And me,” Eric and Riley say at the same time.

“Thanks guys,” Thalia’s voice is soft, the edge of worry no longer in it. I glance out the window watching the leaves of the trees sway in the white moonlight. She twists her head to the side and lets out a huff of air, her hands trailing almost on instinct over her stomach until she meets Riley’s head and her fingers start to mimic mine with his dark strands.

Something settles in my stomach. It’s tangible warmth that hasn’t been felt for too long. It feels nice to not have to listen to screaming, and to not worry about if Enforcers will force their way into the apartment, my thoughts purr. Then again, that’s the beauty of the Shack. It’s a sanctuary.

With a quick snap Riley shuts his book and tosses it to the side. The sound of paper on paper fills the shack. He sits up and Thalia does to with no other choice, though she’s none too happy about it by the looks she throws at him. Stretching her legs out for balance, she twists at the waist to barrel Riley flat with a final stare that holds many questions. I roll onto my side and look at Riley too, his back the only thing I can see.

“What’s up?” Eric asks, shifting so he can prop himself up on his elbow and see over me.

Riley turns to look at Eric, his face an impenetrable marble made up of sharp lines. His eyes flicker to mine and I feel a shudder race down my spine. His eyes hold no emotion in them besides a slight darkness swirling in his irises. Combine that, plus the shadow casted along his face, his eyes look like they are made entirely up of his pupils.

“I don’t know why,” Riley draws out, his words just one slur into the next. Before speaking again he makes sure to look each of us in the eye. The darkness in his expression spreads from his eyes to affect the rest of his features. I cock my eyebrow at him when he meets my gaze and he stares into my eyes for what feels like eternity. My lips part to ask him what he is trying to say, but something tells me not to break the silence.

Then with the abruptness it came, the marble shield over his face cracks, all the hardness leaving to be replaced with a devious smile across his lips. “I don’t know why,” he repeats, speaking faster this time, “but the people in the past seem to think that the people in the future need to dress weird.”

The coil winding its way through my stomach snaps and I burst out laughing. Eric chuckles too, and Riley throws his head back roaring with laughter. The only one not laughing is Thalia. She sits, still twisted at the waist, with her brows furrowed and lips twisted.

Riley slumps forward and wipes at the tears starting to form in his eyes with the back of his hand. “You guys should’ve seen your face. It was priceless, so serious.” He stutters, random bursts of chuckles distorting his words.

Thalia opens her mouth and we all look at her, trying to subdue our chuckles. “Well it’s not like we don’t do the same thing. Mom still has a picture I drew in the Care Center stuck to the fridge.” My mind leaps to the picture she just mentioned of a wobbly stick figure in an obnoxious neon orange and pink dress with the words ‘year 2212’ scrawled across the top.

“To be honest it’s not like jeans and converse will go out of style.” I say plucking at the edge of my cutoffs. “Though, do you remember that fashion show we watched at your house one time?”

“Yes,” she twists all the way around and lies on her stomach, “and there was this one lady with a dress made up of feathers.”

“That’s not even the one I am talking about.” I say rolling so I am flat on my back, and make crossing motions across down my body. “What about the one with that gauzy ribbon thing that wrapped around her body and the only thing that kept her from being naked was the overwhelming amount of sequins attached to it?”

We both burst out laughing, and Riley shakes his head, “girls…”

“Oh come on now, you can’t say girls at this situation. You’re the one who brought up fashion in the first place.” Eric says grinning.

“Well, they always think they need to take rhetorical questions and turn it into an actual debate.” Riley shakes his head again and turns and winks at me.

“It’s not like we’re that into fashion,” I fire back, reaching up to swat the back of Riley’s head.

He feigns a pained look, and laughs. “Sure you’re not,” is all that he says.

“We’re not!” Thalia says, watching Riley lay back down, resting his head on my stomach. She rolls again and is curled up by his side. His arm snakes around her and she rests her head on his shoulder.

Our thoughts guide our words, leading us to a debate about the weirdest outfit we have seen. After what was probably fifteen minutes of relentless debate, Thalia and I agree on the dress made up entirely of peacock feathers. The slender tips circling her body and flaring out in a airy skirt made up of the colorful plumage.

Riley’s soft snores startle me and I look down to see his eyes closed, dark lashes splayed across his pale cheeks, and his face void of any expression. A smile blooms across my face and I gesture for Eric to turn off the lamp. He gets up and I lift my head waiting for him to slide back into place. The lamp dims as the marble slows to a stop, plunging the room in darkness.

Thalia’s voice grows soft and sleepy, the edge of worry no longer in it, and soon she joins Riley in the land of the sleeping. I glance out the window watching the leaves of the trees sway in the white moonlight. She twists her head to the side and lets out a huff of air.

My eyes flutter shut, but I snap them open. I roll my head and look at Eric, his features washed white in the moonlight pouring in. “I should probably go home, mom and dad will wonder...” My words stumble over the other and lose their lucidity.

Eric smirks, “Nah, don’t worry about it. You heard them screaming,” His arm not serving as our pillow wraps around, “they won’t notice you’re gone until tomorrow.”

“But I…” the last word doesn’t even leave my mouth, and darkness swoops in around me in the form of sleep.

Chapter Three

I bolt straight up, eyes wide open but still unseeing. My mind protested the abrupt ending of the best sleep it’s had for the past few weeks. It churns, getting rid of the cotton balls inside my thoughts. Sunlight pours in through the window, forcing me to squint. While it’s still dim enough not to be mid day, it’s bright enough to hurt my unprepared eyes. How the heck did I let myself fall asleep?

Eric grunts beside me, his arms jerked from my waist. He sits up beside me, running a hand through his already messed up hair leaving it sticking up in several places. “Rave, what’s going on?” He asks glancing at me, his green eyes having that slightly misted over look to them.

“I fell asleep and now hell is ready to collect my soul,” I mutter watching him squint out the window too.

Birds are singing outside, and their voices seem to be to chipper with the impending storm I know is about to happen. Mom can make even one of those rare hurricanes on the coast look tame when she is in the middle of one of her tempers.

“So what are you going to do,” Eric asks while I stand up, watching where I step so I don’t crush any fingers or other various body parts.

“I am going to run home and hope to God my parents are still passed out.” I say stepping off of the make shift bed.

I can almost hear Eric’s head chewing over what I just said while I work on pulling my neon green zebra stripped converse shoes. “So when will we get to see you again?”

I turn and look at him, bent over tying up the laces. “Don’t worry I won’t disappear for another month,” I whisper offering a slight smile, but I don’t feel it meet my eyes. My mind is too focused on the wrath of my parents.

Eric meets my eyes with furrowed brows and hooded eyes, but the expression lightens and he smiles, “Alright, be ready to jump out that window again tonight sometime after ten.”

“But that’s after curfew, and you know that they are starting to run patrol again,” I protest.

I spot the book I left on the couch last night and trace my fingers over the numbered title. The urge to take it with me is strong, but I regretfully push it back, the painful thoughts small daggers to my heart. If I was caught with an old book I would not only get myself in trouble but also my friends to the point we would get sent to World Court.

“What about these two,” Eric asks drawing my attention back, his eyes flickering to the two sleeping bodies curled around each other, “What do I tell them?”

I smile softly watching them both sleep, Thalia’s nose twitching as she sleeps, and meet Eric’s eyes. “Tell them that I will see them tonight,” I pause for a second mulling over what I just said, “But you better come get me before eleven so we have enough time to get to the trees before the bell.”

Eric nods; he understands the dangers of getting caught out after curfew. We all do. I stretch my legs pulling the taunt muscles so that they loosen. It’s at least a mile to get back to the apartment buildings, and the last thing I needed is cramp to develop from sprinting without warming my body up.

“I’ll see you tonight,” I whisper finally finishing the familiar stretches, everything humming with energy. My body loves to run; it’s the one sport I participated in while we all went to school.

Eric watches me move to the door and I am finding it harder to look at him. What is it with him lately, it’s like he like he likes likes me. Which is impossible, we’ve been like brother and sister since we were forced to be playground buddies in the care center when our parents had to work.

I open the door and turn around and wave, the movement just a flick of my wrist and fingers. Eric nods back at me his eyes brighter as the sleepy haze completely dies for him. After shutting the door, careful so the hinges wouldn’t squeak and wake the others up, I turned around and faced the trees. Taking in five deep breaths, I get ready to run. I tense my body up and take off.

Despite the circumstances, my body revels in the chance to run, every fiber screaming with the energy being burned. When Seth died, my parents refused to let me go out and run every day ruining my daily ritual. Not that it mattered. The scholarship I was offered for the Region University was revoked when Seth was deemed a Threat. But now I push myself freely, darting and dancing through the tree branches, dodging most of the whipping blows from the limbs.

Much too fast for my liking the dingy buildings of our home city come into view. I don’t let the break in trees slow me down. Leaping over a knocked over trash can, I continue to fly down the alley ways. Building’s blur past and I only slow down when the roof top of my apartment building comes into view. Its unusual rusted blue tin roof shines in the morning sun and the brilliantly colored genetically altered flowers the owner’s wife planted to liven up the place shimmered with dew yet to be burnt away by the muggy heat yet to be present.

I walk up the cracked side walk to the large door with glass filling the middle allowing me to see the inside. While it’s falling apart it’s kept tidy and neat, stained, light brown carpet swept every other day, and the dark wood shelves and furniture in the lobby room dusted at least once a week. It drives both Bick and Kyra Gilder insane to have their building falling apart, but they don’t have the money to fix it up. Nobody has money to fix anything up around here, cause if they had the money they wouldn’t be living here.

I step inside, feeling the cooler air wash over my hot body. I look around and smile, the clock says its six thirty in the morning, and since it’s Tuesday, everybody is either getting ready for work, or already gone. Moving with slightly more confidence, I head to the stairs behind the door where the two side wings meet. From the air our apartments look like a giant W, with three branches of apartments joining to form the lobby area. I go up to the small keyboard that requires a code for a person to enter the stair room and freeze. What is the stupid code? I want to slam my fist into the flimsy looking metal and see if I can break it, but instead I try a random code of numbers to see if it works.

The keyboard blasts a shrill pitched whining sound at me and I grind my teeth. Footsteps sound behind me and I resist a groan. Just great, get caught outside the stair room, in the same clothes from yesterday, and have someone tell my mother. If I am not already in trouble that is. I cross my fingers hoping that it’s not one of the old McGregor sisters who act like purist snobs and aren’t afraid to snitch a person out.

“Lookie at we got here folks, its little Miss. Raven Evagline,” a voice behind me sneers.

I feel my back tense and I try another code combination, only to have it beep at me again causing a shudder to race down my spine. That voice can belong to only one person, and that one person always manages to grate against my inner chalk board.

“Somebody had a wild night didn’t they?” the voice taunts, its razor edge sliding across my skin.

Plastering a fake smile on my face I turn to face Tory Gilder, Bick and Kyra’s only son. His usually straight mousy brown hair is disheveled; white button down shirt is offset by several buttons, and I note a flush to his cheeks. My stomach jerks around, an imaginary fist grabbing hold of it and keeping it in a choke hold.

“What do you want Tory?” my voice is all overly sweet bubble gum and sunshine, and the smug smirk on his face tells me he picked up on it to. The fakeness in my tone.

“Glad to see you to,” he laughs stuffing his hands in his tan pants pockets.

“Apparently I wasn’t the only one excited to see you,” the false tone drops from my voice and it turns darker, nastier, a tone it almost never takes on.

“Oh yea,” He runs a hand through his hair, “that was just a mornings worth of fun. Veronica couldn’t make her rent and I, ah, took care of it for her.’” I can’t hold back the snort I’ve been building at these words. What a freaking slime ball.

Tory walks closer to me, backing me into a wall. His arms go on either side of my body and he leans forward. To close are the words scattered along my thoughts. My stomach heaves at the nauseous scent caused by the Fire Whiskey carried on his breath.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind knocking down your family’s rent,” He looks down at me and winks. “And from the looks of you walking in here after a night on the town I would guess you don’t mind having a little fun yourself.”

The heaves stop and red hot pulsating waves take their place. How dare he assume that I am some cheap one night stand? “I wouldn’t even think of it if I were you.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing, and I’ll be right here waiting for you to change your mind.” His hand moves and I shift when it comes dangerously close to my butt. A laugh ripples around me as he amuses himself with my discomfort. He types in the code series and the keyboard makes a noticeably happier chirping sound.

“There you are, now you owe me one.” Ugly and dark, a blinding emotion rolls through me.

“I owe you nothing Tory,” I say. My voice is lower than normal and it vibrates with a dangerous edge. It takes me aback but I roll with it. If I can scare him off that’s one less prick to worry about. “If I owe you anything it’s a swift kick in the balls for sexually harassing one of your father’s customers and several others.”

He looks at me with his mouth hanging open. Shoving his arms out of my way I open the door and storm up the stairs. By the time I hear his muffled voice I am already at the next door typing in the different code of the dual system. Moving swiftly down the hall way, I don’t even have to look at the door markers, my feet knowing where to carry me. I stop in front of my apartment door, standing on tip toes to reach the slender key taped to the top corner edge of the door frame that is sticking out.

Taking a deep breath I put the key into the lock and turn slowly, the clicks coming from the ancient lock making me wince. With a final click the door becomes unlocked and I place the key back into its original spot. I feel like I should be preparing for battle as I slip the door open a crack. I can peer into the living room and I seek out the red chair my mother always sits in. Its faded cushions remain empty and I sigh. She must be asleep, I keep telling myself opening the door wider and stepping inside. Closing the door behind me, I stand on my tip toes, stepping lightly on the floor. I try to avoid all the spots that produce the squeaking sound.

A masculine cough sounds down the hall way freezing me in place with my foot hanging uselessly inches above the floor. My head snaps up and I stare down the hall way and spot a dim light barely shining through the seams of the door. The cough is unmistakably my dad’s and this sends everything thing spinning. He is never up this early if he can help it.

I scramble for an idea, my mind screaming come on, come on, come on! Snapping my head side to side, I scour the small apartment for anything to help prevent the storm I might miraculously be able to avoid. Only if I can find some excuse of why I am up my mind screams when a hacking spit followed by the toilet flushing sounds down the hall again.

I hear the water rush in the bathroom, my ears prickling and picking up each sound. Letting out a sharp snort of air, I fight the urge to groan. Nothing in this apartment offers any help to my case. It’s not like I can flop on the couch and claim I fell asleep, either of my parents would see through that lie. My eyes and brain continue their frantic search, the process halted slightly by the sound of the lock popping open becoming booming drums inside my ears. My eyes settle on the fridge and finally an idea sparks. A slow the-cat- caught-the-mouse- smile spreads across my face momentarily before I bolt to the fridge careful to step lightly.

My luck continues and I reach it just in time. The bathroom door creaks open, its rusty hinges screaming in protest. I jerk open the fridge door and the glass bottles on the door rattle. I glance at them and feel my stomach sour; of course they are bottles of some form of alcohol. Any inkling of the idea of actually eating wilts like the flowers slowly cooking outside under the sun. Shuffling footsteps reach my ears, and when they stop I pull my head out of the fridge long enough to look at my dad and produce a quick smile that feels fake on my lips.

“What are you doing up Raven?” He asks voice hoarse and scratchy, not its usual smooth velvet sound.

Knowing I have to keep the act rolling, I grab a somewhat decent looking apple off the bottom shelf and clamp my teeth into it. Closing the door, I turn to face dad in his usual baggy boxers and bare chest. I pull the apple from my mouth and swirl my tongue around the bite sized chunk remaining behind lining it up with my back teeth. A thin trail of its sweet juice trickles down my chin and my tongue darts down after it before I answer.

“I got hungry so I came out looking for food,” I say taking another bite. The first bite hit my stomach with an angry hiss, every cell inside me rebelling against it, and the second one goes down no better.

Dad looks me up and down with an eyebrow raised. I take another bite of the apple and chew slowly while I wait for his response. My wait isn’t long either. “Got all dressed to do it to?” I glance down and cringe inwardly. Always one Achilles heel to each plan, and this time it just happens to be the same outfit from the day before. I do feel some form of gratefulness, however, because if it was mom who caught me like this she would see right through my game.

I look up and meet dad’s eyes with my gaze unwavering. Offering the best sheepish smile I can produce, I shrug, “I fell asleep without changing into pajamas.” It’s a standard response but it should work.

“Shoes and all?”

Instead of biting my bottom lip in frustration I clamp down on the apple again. While I saved myself a few seconds I still need an answer to that one. Seth’s words come back to me mid chew, “*The best lie is the one mixed with a little bit of truth.”*

“Alright,” I hold my hands up in mock surrender. “You caught me. I was planning on going for a run around the building before you guys woke up.”

Those eyebrows already raised shoot up even higher into his receding hair line. Neither of my parents look their true age. Dad, the age of forty two and three years Mom’s senior, looks and acts as if he is sixty. Both aged a decade in the past year, the weight of protecting Seth just to lose him in the end a heavy toll on their shoulders. A soft humming sound vibrates dad’s throat and his head is cocked to the side, eyes clouded over in thought. I can practically see the steam pouring from his poor overheated gears.

“What, no explosion?” I ask. I know I am pushing my luck, but with dad that is a possibility. If it was mom on the hand…watch out, because each step you take could lead you to a land mine.

“I would watch it missy, I might have just been debating on letting you out.”

My eyebrows rise in a mirror expression of his. The reaction to his statement sends Dad into a soft fit of chuckles. When I realize his response was serious something shoots through my stomach that causes my toes to curl in my socks.

“Wait, you mean you didn’t agree with Mom about placing me under building arrest?” my voice influxes at the end, disbelief the emotion of choice.

“Oh heavens no. I don’t agree with half the things your mother wants. If I had my way, I would let you out ten times more and give you the chance to find your own way to cope.” Dad’s voice is firm but the softness in his voice when he mentions mom is undeniable.

I take another bite of the apple slowly working my stomach into a frenzy. I walk over to the kitchen counter leaning my hip against the cabinet door since my height doesn’t allow me to rest on the cool counter. “So you’re saying you’ll let me out? Won’t mom freak out?”

Dad scoffs the sound raspy in the back of his throat. “What? You don’t think I can handle your mother.” His eyes meet mine and they have a shimmer of the luster they once had. “And besides,” he says with a shrug breaking the eye contact, “you need to find your own way to channel the emotions. Robin can’t make you do it her way. Not in this case.”

“And how do you channel the emotions?” I ask.

The room plunges into silence, the only sound the hum of the old battered refrigerator in the corner. Dad’s eyes flicker to the floor, then the fridge and finally to my eyes again, a dark mask of a deadly emotion over his eyes. He looks away the moment I do, and I feel my cheeks flame. In that instant I realized the stupidity of both the question and my asking it.

With a simple cough to clear his throat, dad is the first one to break the silence. “Ok, I am giving you a day of freedom. I suggest you leave before your mother wakes up, and the only rule is be back before five tonight.”

A warm sensation uncoils in my stomach, its silky tendrils travelling all the way down my spine to make my toes curl into my socks. Freedom. The word tastes sweet on my subconscious tongue, and I roll it around savoring the feel, the way each letter falls.

Pushing myself from the cabinet with a speed reserved for when I run, I grab the home phone, afraid dad might change his mind, and race to my bedroom. A trembling breath leaves my chest and I finally allow myself to think about how close of a call that had been. How close of a call that had been and the unexpected results that, in this case, are most welcome.

I move across my room and to the closet only a mere two steps away from my bed. A neat line of shirts hang on the clothes rack, and pants lay stacked up on a card board box, and my shoes lay in a small pile in the opposite corner of my pants. I grab them hem of my white tank top I ran around in all day yesterday, and pull it over my head. I grab a loose bright pink shirt off its hanger that says, “Warning I bite” across the chest, and slip that over my head. It falls past the midpoint of my thighs and I sigh. So much for wearing cut offs that I already have. None of them go past my thigh, and if I wore them with my shirt I would look like a weirdo. So I snatch the top pair of jeans I see off of my pile of pants, along with the pair of scissors I have in my night stand.

Kicking off my shoes, I slip the jeans on. They glide like water over my skin, and hug every curve I happen to have on my lower half. With a knowing precision I cut the fabric around my knees with the scissors. They leave jagged edges, but that doesn’t really matter to me, all of my shorts have them.

After five minutes of cutting and slipping my shoes back on, I finally pick up the phone I tossed on my bed. Its sleek build warms under my fingers as I type in Eric’s number. He picks it up instantly, barely giving me time to raise the device to my ear.

“What’s up Rave? Something wrong?” Eric’s familiar voice washes over my ear, the distance and speakers warping it only slightly.

“Why must everything be the end of the world with you?” I tease.

“Oh it’s quite the opposite my dear friend. It seems the end of the world insists on following you around,” he matches my tease with one of his own.

“I suppose you’re right, but that’s not why I am calling-“

“You’re pregnant?” Eric blurts out, “That’s the only other surprise I can think of.” I can practically see his infamous woman seducing eyebrow wiggle through the phone.

“No! Gosh, you sick minded pervert.” I shake my head and start over for my reason on calling. “My dad is letting me out for the day. Says I need to find a way to ‘channel’ my emotions.”

“No way…that’s awesome. What’s going to be your coping method of choice?” Eric’s voice reminds me of a child’s on a holiday.

“Well, I figured we could hang out. Meet out at The Shack and all that.” I lay out the plan and Eric lets out various mhm’s and oks.

“Okey dokey, I’ll be there in a half hour.”

Smiling a wicked grin I say, “Don’t be late,” and hang up.

I look around the room in search of my over the shoulder bag, and spot it on the floor in a neat little pile beside my lamp by my makeshift writing desk. Grabbing it I sling it over my body, stuffing it with a spare note book and pen along with some other odds and ends I might need. I walk out my room, snagging a pair of dark round sunglasses of the desk, and make my through the family room to the door. Only when I am about to step through the now open doorway does dad call out from his perch in the kitchen, “don’t forget Rave, five-o-clock sharp.”

“I know dad,” is what I fire over my shoulder, taking brisk steps out of the actual apartment, towards the stairs for the second time in a half hour. Only this time my footsteps aren’t rushed, and they fall with a light grace.

I type in the code, and force myself to remember the code for downstairs. How I forgot it in the first place remains a mystery, and a panic filled mind is so not an excuse. The lobby area is still somewhat deserted, only a few milling around. I spot Tory over in the corner, talking to his mother. Her lips are pinched into a tight line and I look down not wanting to draw her attention. Who knows what lies he is filling her head with, but I don’t want to be at the brunt of the angry waves clearly radiating off her. A heavy feeling settles over me as I near the main entrance. Resigning myself for a scolding, I look up and meet Kyra’s eyes. They are soft, and don’t hold any anger in them. She offers me a small wave and a wink, and a current of relief surges through me. At least I won’t be subjected to a lecture for mistreating the owners’ son.

The doors slide open and the already stronger rays of sunlight beat down on me. Summer’s usual sweltering heat not waiting a second longer than it has to before sweeping over the town. I place the sunglasses on the bridge of my nose and instantly the glaring morning rays don’t hurt my eyes as much. I walk down the side walk listening to the birds singing their happy tunes. It only takes me a minute to get to my secret alley way, the one that starts in between two abandoned buildings, and start down it. There’s only two rules surrounding the Shack. Well technically one since they go hand in hand. One: make sure you are never followed. And two: under no circumstances are we to betray its location without a full group vote.

A loud bang sounds in front of me, causing me to flinch backwards, an effective way to pull me from the day dreams starting to take over my brain. A large cat wider around than it is long takes lazy strides towards me. I laugh softly. Scared by a big old cat, how lame. It moves towards me letting out soft little meows. Bending at my waist when it reaches me, curling its overly large body around my legs, I run my fingers through its soft hair. A deep purr rumbles through its feline chest and I smile.

“You’re not so scary now are you?” I try to pick him up, but he spits and hisses clawing at my arms. With a speed amazing for something that large and stubby, he waddles away hair raised along his back. “Fine, didn’t want to pet you anyways” I grumble.

I continue to make my way down the alley, careful to avoid over flowing trash cans, and heaps of stuff I have no intentions of finding out what it actually is. When I look up over the horizon line of buildings I can see the large trees penetrating the sky. I think about the birth of the forests that only happened in the past twenty years. Even when I was six the trees were nowhere near as big as they are now. Then again everybody thought the Government was crazy when it started the reconstruction plan, but the scientists defied all doubts when they created some kind of fertilize that made anything grow like mad. How they made enough to spread it over the world I have no clue. But only certain parts were badly damaged from the war. The rest was destruction by design, easily fixed.

The area behind me is clear when I look over my shoulder before entering the tree line I finally reached. My leg muscles are shooting happy little tremors through my muscles; they missed all the activity they are used to. A fine film of sweat coats my forehead. Sweeping the back of my hand across my skin, I listen to the birds chirp to one another the only sign where they are is the flap of their wings. Their canopy offers some shade from the relentless sun.

With smooth movement I move through the branches, avoiding all of the grabbing twigs. I pass a cluster of cedar trees and the back side of the Shack comes into view. The skill of which it was painted with still impresses me. It looks exactly like a replica of the trees around it, a photo of sorts, down to the last needle on a cedar tree branch. Seth spent hours laboring over it, putting minute detail in every brush stroke. He got to the point if a person didn’t know what he was looking for he would walk right on by it without a second glace. Except during the winter, when the building stood out like a sore thumb with its never changing scenery. That’s why we always dread the winter months, the time the shack lays abandoned for safety reasons.

There is no sign of Eric yet, so I walk to the entrance with grass crunching footsteps. Opening the door, I walk into the deathly quiet room. Total silence except for the rapid staccato of the birds wraps around me and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Rolling my shoulders, I brush the senseless childish unease away. I move over to the book shelf again, running my finger over the smooth binds of the novels we have collected. A small smile spreads across my lips as my finger stops for a second over *1984*, but the newer books were what called for my attention. The slender book with elegant script saying its title is *Utopia* practically sings to me and I pull it from the shelf.

“I haven’t looked at the one yet,” a voice says behind me.

With an entire body flinch I whirl around the poor book flying from my hand, sliding across the floor a few inches, only to stare at a smiling Eric leaning in through the window. I swear if my eyes had the ability to shoot daggers at this point they would be. Eric tries to hide his laughter but fails miserably, its warm sound filling the room. “Shut up, it’s not funny,” I snap picking up the book.

Something white falls from the yellowed pages as I bend back up. Freezing with my back still bent I watch it float to the ground, whatever it is. Snatching it once it lands on the carpet I lift it up studying it in the light. Eric lets something out underneath his breath and then I hear a grunt followed by a thump. I flicker a glance his way and see him clambering back to his feet off the carpet and then I go back to studying the paper between my fingers. Fine black marks swirl across the page in an elegant script I have seen only one other place, on another piece of paper. This means it can only be one thing…

“What is it?” Eric asks his voice hushed as if we will be overhead by something other than the birds.

“I think you know.” Is all I say in return.

This can be none other than another letter by the Librarian himself.