

LONG LIVE HUMANS

THE FIRST
THREE CHAPTERS

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Author Photo : Albert Luison

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Chapter 1

Edney

6 Missed Calls · 12:31 a.m.
Birdie

My heart tightened every time I saw this notification light up on my screen. I hated how easily I let her calls slip away, as if she were a stranger to me. Just below it, another notification: **1 Voice Message.**

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” the passenger called.

I snapped my phone away, stuffing it back into my pocket.

A man scurried toward the wrought-iron gate, dressed in a white shirt and black trousers. The metal squeaked as he opened the rich material.

“I slipped my wallet under my damn pillow.” He chuckled, rummaging inside his wallet.

“Ah, it’s totally fine.”

“Here,” he said, handing me \$200 instead of the actual charge of \$23.65, “just keep the change.”

No one would say no to a jackpot. “Thank you very much, sir,” I said as I accepted it.

“You’re welcome.” He went back toward the gate. “Hey, take care, alright? Thanks for listening to my problems. I really appreciate it,” he said before heading back into his big house.

For a quick ride, two \$100 bills in my hand were a steal. I should be happy, but it didn’t ease the weight in my chest. Not after I ignored my daughter’s calls—

"Hi, Dad. It's me, Jules. How's the job going? I hope your day is going as well as you expected. Sorry for bothering to call. I know you're busy and—I know you have little time to talk with me but...can you come home early tonight? I wanna talk with you like...really talk.

Actually...I've been wanting this for a long time. Don't get me wrong, Dad. I don't expect you to get me something. I don't want anything, except you—person to person, talking to each other like we used to be in the past. It won't be long, Dad. Probably, it'd take an hour or two. Then, I'll go to sleep...right when the day shifted to be my birthday. So...yeah. May God bless you and keep you safe on your travels around the city. Love you, Dad."

The road was quiet. No harsh brake lights glared into my eyes, just a vast dark beyond and another vehicle on the opposite side of the road, going who knew where. A beam of headlights from the oncoming car widened as it whooshed past mine.

I tilted my left hand while keeping the other hand on the steer.

01.29 A.M.

Jules should be asleep by now.

Every night was the same night. I had to travel all the way to the airport back-to-back to get some passengers. I called it the midnight grind. I was lucky to get one though; tough competition and all that.

There was one day when I just sat in the driver's seat crying the entire night because I didn't get any passengers. Life was getting scarier and scarier as the day changed because all the expenses I had to pay at the end of the month and hearing my daughter's voice on the phone only added more concern in my mind.

Last year, she wanted a hedgehog doll. It was some kind of superhero cartoon she watched on TV. Not that I could afford it though. Even if we could just eat for one day, we should be so grateful.

I teetered on the brink of financial ruin—one misstep, and we would be finished. Jules would have to drop out of school, we would go hungry, and worst of all, we'd end up like those people in the South Bronx, sleeping on the streets. Man, I couldn't watch my daughter live like that; my tears would turn into blood.

Just remembering the day when I had only ten dollars and six cents still broke my heart. That was when I spent it all to get food just for Jules, then I had to walk around the block, to the back alley of McDonald's,

hoping to find some leftovers for myself. I couldn't imagine skipping just one day of driving.

If only I could land a better job that paid more and offered me a stable wage—that'd be great without having to compete with hundreds of other applicants with fancy degrees, then followed by layers of assessments and interviews. That's if I were even lucky enough to get my resume scanned by HR, and in the end, they only picked ten people. That's some warehouse worker with a 42k salary. Probably the best job I could do aside from driving.

Or maybe I could do auto mechanics—54k a year, with whatever requirements they could throw at; high school diploma, 2+ years of experience, training certifications—I mean... Yeah, that'd be great for an entry level job, even for someone with no proper education.

The good thing was I could get to New York, thirty minutes away from my home in Whitestone, Queens. That city was a major source of income. It's the busiest place around. I could get at least ten passengers a day, but ever since more drivers started flooding in and with the interest rates increased, my earnings have slowed down. And I couldn't afford a life under \$3000 per month.

A heavy weight pressed down on the back of my neck, forcing me to rest my head against the driver's window. With the end of the month approaching, I didn't know how I would cover all the upcoming expenses. I might have to sell my wedding ring just to reduce the debt.

EXIT 17

WHITESONE

1 MILE

I glanced back at the road. A couple of ambulances bolted toward me, vibrant blue and red lights piercing through the windshield, growing brighter as they drew closer. I didn't blink once. Maybe my eyes had grown used to the red glow flooding the traffic.

I finally turn into my driveway. The door squeaked, swinging open. The house had always been warm, even though it's cold outside. It's peaceful compared to the streets; no honks, no crowds, not even those sirens that

had been blaring lately. Just the steady ticking of the clock mounted on the wall, across from a cozy single couch—the sweet spot where I used to park my ass every time I got home. Got some cracks and peels on it, but that couch has written too many of my life stories. Making out with my wife—that’s one of them.

She’d always come over, bringing coffee to the table next to the couch, and then lean in to give me the sweetest kiss with those soft lips of hers. She would whisper in my ear, asking about my day at work, and I’d always say it was great, even when it wasn’t. That couch was part of the reason I became a driver and why my back would start stinging after just thirty minutes of standing.

I wouldn’t let my butt land on that couch because my stomach had been growling since this afternoon, so I headed toward the kitchen ahead. Probably grabbing some eggs would be nice if it didn’t hurt the food bank’s creds.

Every time I stomped on this hardwood floor, there was an earthquake inside my head. My head grew heavier with each step. My feet went numb from flooring the brakes relentlessly in that endless traffic jam. This afternoon, I watched workers lift concrete blocks the size of a microwave onto their shoulders and still breathe. Meanwhile, I just sat in the driver’s seat the whole time, yet still grumbled about being tired. What a shame.

Shaking my head, knocking myself out of a trance, I stood still in the kitchen doorway. I wasn’t alone. My gaze shifted to my daughter, Jules. Her head lay heavy on her arms at the table; her short brown ponytail covered half of her face. The soft rise and fall of her breath became a gentle rhythm in the quiet room.

In front of her sat a whole pizza on the plate, leaving me puzzled about where she’d gotten the money to buy it. Her school ran a National School Lunch Program that provided meals for free. I always refrained from giving her extra cash, since the school had her daily nutritional needs covered.

I bet the pizza had been sitting there for a long time. She must’ve been waiting for me the entire night. *Poor little girl. If only Dad didn’t have to think about bills and money all the time, I’d be at home 24/7 and buy you anything without having to think about what to eat tomorrow.*

Seeing her sleeping brought me back to the old times when I used to read stories until her tiny head nestled against my chest. That felt like just yesterday. I couldn’t believe she’s twelve now. She’s still precious, just like the first time I carried her as a baby. How fortunate I was to have a little angel when I was having a hard time. Sometimes, a whisper in my mind told me I didn’t deserve to have her at all.

I guessed the whisper turned out to be true. It's been two hours already since the day had changed. And in a few hours, I would have to head out again, to the airport to hunt some paperwork, meaning she would spend her birthday...all alone again.

The plate clattered as she hissed, shrugging my hand off her shoulder.

She glanced up with those wide, dark brown eyes. "Oh, fudge. I thought someone was breaking in. You almost gave me a heart attack," she said, turning away while rubbing her eyes.

"I was about to carry you back to your room."

She yawned. "How's the job?"

"Like usual."

"Uh, you always said that. What is usual to you, Dad?"

There was nothing to be explained or to be proud of about my job. "You need help to light up your candle?"

"Oh, yeah! Shoot! I forgot," she said, setting up the candles on the pizza. "I thought you'd come at least an hour past 12. So..."

Yeah, I could notice that.

"How'd you afford a pizza?" I asked while helping her set them up.

She looked at me with wide eyes. "I'm selling gigs. Three dollars for each piece of homework."

"I thought that was illegal."

"As long as there's a number in the line, nothing is illegal," she said, lighting a match. "Besides, we still have leftover ingredients, and I made the pizza myself...with love." The flame danced on the candle's wick, illuminating the pizza with a radiant golden hue. The surface boasted a thick layer of rich tomato sauce and melted white cheese, arranged in a pattern like a cow's spots. A few sausage slices scattered across the pizza, half-submerged in the sauce.

"Here," she said as she shifted the pizza close to me, "it's for you."

Wasn't this supposed to be your birthday?

"What is this?" I said, gazing at her. "It's your birthday, not mine."

"... You left the school's letter on your desk, and I found out that you haven't paid my tuition for three months. And you've seemed stressed lately, and I kept catching you staring at the wall every morning, looking so worried."

I did?

"I wish I could help you more with paying my tuition, but at least this is what I can do for you to make you feel better."

Time always caught me on the edge, leaving me overwhelmed and distracted until I forgot to lock everything inside. The room grew still.

The air thickened as if we were in the void of space. Either I was happy or sad, grateful or ashamed that she had made this pizza for me—

“Have a taste. I know you’re hungry,” she said. “Oh, hold on.” She pulled the pizza closer to her.

She closed her eyes, mumbling in her prayer as if she got manifested by some demons. Her supernatural father must’ve raised one of his eyebrows, struggling to catch all those words. “Amen!” she said, blowing the candles off and hurrying to put a slice on the plate. “Here’s a slice,” she said, shifting the plate to me.

I joined her at the table; my gaze locked on her vibrant smile. The smile I rarely saw these days. I wondered how she could lift that corner of her soft lips after knowing the situation we were going through. It must’ve been heavy. I couldn’t help but chuckle and shifted my attention to the pizza.

My tongue tingled just by looking at how thick and tangy the tomato sauce was. I was afraid its bold flavor might overshadow the delicate taste of the sausage and the milky cheese.

“It’s my first time, so go easy on me.”

I scoffed, looking at how nervous she was. “Alright, moment of truth,” I said, taking a big bite. The tomato sauce burst forth, its sweet acidity dancing on my tongue. I didn’t get the flavor of the cheese or the sausage though; the tomato overpowered everything, but the tenderness of the sausage shone through, offering a satisfying texture on each bite. It was right after all: the tomato sauce was the key to pizza greatness. Imagine if this just came straight out of the oven.

Wrinkles formed on her forehead, demanding my judgment. “How is it?”

I took another bite just in case I had missed the cheese. And yeah, I wasn’t mistaken. As soon as I got the touch of that milky taste, the sauce knocks it over, coating my tongue with its sweet tangy tomato. It was fine I guessed. I didn’t like cheese that much anyway, so it didn’t matter.

Jules raised her eyebrows, seeming to be amazed that her pizza was a tremendous success. Well, I couldn’t let my judgement to be left hanging with only positivity. So, she had a reason to keep improving.

“So?” Jules asked, shrugging her shoulder.

“It’s good, not bad overall, but I tell you what—it’d be better if you added some eggs on top,” I said, since from the start I entered this house, I wanted to get myself an omelet.

She chuckled. “What? Pizza don’t go with eggs.”

“Oh, you’ve never tried it, so you don’t know. I used to serve it with eggs back when I was in my twenties. It was popular. Everybody’s dying for it,” I said. “It’s creamy, silky—”

“That sounds gross.” She grimaced.

“Gross because it’s a bestseller?”

“Hmm.” She rolled her eyes. “Yeeeeaaa ookayy, you people had some weird palettes, you know that?” Her face scrunched up in mock disgust. “But alright, I’ll make another one with eggs next time.”

“You should,” I replied, savoring the last bite of my pizza. I reached for another slice right away. Damn, my stomach groaned like a crybaby.

“Hey, Dad.” I gazed at her. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything, Birdie. As long as I could afford it,” I said. “What is it?”

“Do you have any plans to take the day off today?”

I paused, staring at her. Really simple question, but it’d stab her heart if I said no. “I know you have to work to get some money to pay off my tuition, but the fact is...I don’t enjoy school anymore,” she said.

Oh no, you didn’t say that, Jules—

“I mean, like...being in the class, working on exams, homework... I feel like everything is pointless, and the crazy thing is I don’t know what I’m going to do after finishing school.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. I send you to school because I want you to become somebody. Remember, you said you wanted to become an astronaut? You’ve gotta study hard, Birdie. You’re in the top three of the school, ain’t that a sign that you will become one?”

“I don’t want it anymore. Anyway, if I quit, you don’t have to pay my tuition, and maybe I can help you get some money. I can bake and sell cookies or maybe charge Mrs. Evelyn for dog walking—”

No, not this again.

“Hey, actually, I don’t want to spoil this but—” I said, bringing my face closer to her. “I got a special job as an exclusive driver for someone. I’ve seen his mansion, and it’s huge, and guess what? He pays a lot of money. I promised—”

“Dad, I know you’re lying,” she said. “You had promised to take Sunday off, but all I got was just a leftover message on the fridge saying you got a call from a special customer. Same thing like Christmas, you said you would come home earlier, but you came home late. And—I felt... I felt like we’re just looping in the same situation. Money...tuition...bills.”

A slap to my face forced me to zip my mouth.

“I’ve been hoping that we could spend time together. I miss having breakfast together, playing football at Francis Lewis Park, watching NFL at night—” she said, her gaze vacant at the table. “I wish you could stay

with me on my birthday,” she added, her eyes sparkling as she looked at me.

I lowered my head, eyes closed—couldn’t bear to look into hers as my heart had to say no.

This is devastating...

I’ve been hoping the same, Jules. I dream of a never-ending day of pure joy and laughter with you. I can’t even remember the last time we watched football together. I miss us shouting at the TV, cheering for the Baltimore Ravens to win the Super Bowl while eating popcorn, drinking Coke, and wearing the jerseys of our favorite players. You were number 5. Mine was 20.

I missed those days more than anything. If only we lived in a world where money wasn’t something we had to chase.

“Just for a day, Dad.”

Sharp, unspoken truths and realities swirled like thorns grazing the inside of my mouth. I hate to get it out, but I have to.

“We have a lot of incoming debt I have to pay at the end of the month. So...I have to keep grinding.”

She broke her stare, her eyebrows knitted together.

I didn’t mean to.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Her face sunk.

Shit. It scratched at my heart.

“Just keep focusing on school, Birdie. Don’t let my sacrifice be for nothing, alright?”

She nodded in resignation. “Okay,” she murmured. “It’s the last day of the week. I got words for Mom,” she added, handing me a letter. Her head remained sunk, but I caught the glimmer in her eyes as she lifted her gaze just a fraction when I picked the rolled paper.

My brain shut down and couldn’t think of any words.

“I’m going to clean the dishes.” She sniffed, leaving the kitchen silent. The weight of her words hung in the air. And in that fleeting moment, my appetite vanished. Guilt twisted in my gut, preventing me from enjoying the delicate pizza she had crafted with her innocent hands.

The boulevard was bathed in a soft orange as vehicles streamed past like a flowing river. I sat on the bench for probably like an hour, scribbling

all the payouts on a piece of paper while enjoying my regular cheap sandwich.

Bills \$407 ✓

Groceries \$692 ✓

Tuition \$944/2 months ✓

Credit Card Debt \$1253.68 □

Health insurance \$309 □

Car insurance \$167 □

Gas \$125 ✓

If I didn't have to replace that shitty fridge and call a plumber to stop the leaky pipe in the wall, I wouldn't have this much debt on my credit card. The good news, my house wasn't being raided by a debt collector...yet. At least not for today, tomorrow, and a week later. It'd better be that way because I didn't want to put more pressure on my daughter.

That charge to the insurance had made me act like a donkey for paying over \$450 for nothing. Insurance was more like taking a bet at a casino about whether you're facing a tragic accident in the future or not. I guess I was too paranoid thinking about car accidents or having a heart attack. I could probably start arranging a meeting with my agent tomorrow to cancel the insurance.

"Dad! It's an ice cream truck!" a kid's voice pierced through the air. I glanced up, seeing a boy pointing at the truck across the street.

His father approached him. "You guessed it right. Alright, you won. What do you want?"

"Bubblem!" the boy replied with a broad smile.

Sunday should be a day to spend time with family. That leap of joy from the boy as the vendor handed the ice cream forced my lips to smile. When was the last time I saw Jules that excited? Their laughter clawed at my heart, igniting a pang of jealousy that I couldn't shake.

Glancing down, a letter lying next to me—a letter Jules had given me last night for her mother. I wasn't sure if I was ready to read it, but I had to, so I could understand everything she wanted to say and be prepared for the questions she might throw at me about it.

Hi, Mom. How's work going out there? I heard the West Coast is snowing right now. I hope you're doing as well as Dad and I are here. Guess what? I'm about to turn twelve, and I feel like this year is going to be different. I

think I have a plan to convince Dad to take a day off. And I'm pretty sure he will fall for it. I'll let you know if it really works next week.

I jsdadawwwwwww urrrrr... I don't know what to write, Mom. Maybe because I don't have anything left to share besides my birthday and my boring daily routine. School...homework...stupid friends. But I think you have a lot of things to share since I haven't heard anything from you. I just noticed that every letter I send you is getting shorter and shorter. So, please help me T_T

Oh yeah, anyway... Thanks for helping Dad with the bills. His face seems to get more wrinkled every day. He told me he's really grateful to still have you by his side, and I hope your love never changes too, Mom—just like ours for you. I know you're as gorgeous as your daughter. So, if there's any man trying to get you, tell him to back the fuck off. Xoxo.

I miss you, Mom. Please call me—

I crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it into the bin next to the bench.

Why did the air here feel so hard to breathe?

Close your eyes. Clear your mind. Feel the gust.

Okay...forget it.

My gaze fell upon my wedding ring, shiny as ever in silver. Every moment of happiness, laughter, and nervousness lived within this ring. It reflected a radiant flare as I turned my finger around. I'd been wrestling with this decision for a long time, between the urge to sell it or hold on to the memories it represented.

By selling it, I could get something for Jules. Something that could cheer her up to go to school. Perhaps I could spark some fire within her that would make her smile again and...I could stop worrying about money for once, then take her to Lewis Park next week to play catch. I wondered what my daughter was doing at home right now, on her birthday alone.

A bone-chilling wail pierced the air from the left, growing louder, closer as they sped past me. Dozens of special forces trucks raced on the main road, followed by the ambulances and fire trucks. More followed with SWATs clinging to the sides of the trucks while gripping flamethrowers in their other hands. Every vehicle shifted aside, bowing out of the way to let the emergency convoy blaze through.

That'd be the third time I'd seen them darting around today. To involve forces like SWAT and unusual weapons like flamethrowers...

Is it actually happening?

The government claimed the situation was under control and urged us to remain calm until further notice from the World Health Organi-

zation. But if so, why did it feel like we were on the edge of something catastrophic?

I glanced over at the newsstand—

**THE MANHATTAN POST
CASES OF UNIDENTIFIED DISEASE SOAR ACROSS STATES
CLOSE TO 2000
FDA: IT MAY LINK TO THE MASS COMPLAINTS OVER FILL &
GRILL DINER**

A vibration buzzed in the side pocket of my pants.

I reached out, grabbing my phone as James' name lit up the screen.

Shit.

I sighed heavily through my nose, leaving no oxygen inside me before sweeping the green call icon.

"Hey, James. Listen—"

"What the fuck are you doing to keep me waiting, Ed?!"

"I need more time, James," I said calmly.

"I ain't going to wait! I need my money now, Ed! Where the fuck is it?!"

"Alright-alright. Look. I guarantee you I can pay you next week, alright? James, I need this money to—"

"I'm standing right in front of your house, Ed. And you're not going to like it if I take one step closer!"

"Alright-alright, hang on. Lower your voice. I don't want my daughter to get involved in this."

"Then, get my money. Goddamn it!"

"Okay. I'll send you the money now."

"Thirty minutes or I'll bash in your house. Make it quick."

He hung up the phone right before I could get a single word in.

I set the phone down and let my eyes fall on my wedding ring one last time.

Jules

A vibration rumbled beneath my bed, accompanied by the sharp rattling of the lamp on the desk beside me. My heavy eyes resisted the urge to open. The world was still spinning around me, still blurred, but the relentless honking swept away the last bits of unconsciousness.

I glanced toward the window. The sky was still dark. A relentless barking of dogs and screams blared from outside my house. One person even shrieked until their throat exploded.

Jesus Christ. I've gotta wake up at five for school. Jeez... The street used to be so calm, especially at night—

A muffled blast.

The walls trembled. And the bed vibrated beneath me.

Whoa. What the hell?

I raised my body up off the bed.

And then another blast erupted—a relentless one. My shoulders flinched. The wall quaked, sending rapid vibrations through the structure. Dust swirled from the ceiling. I clenched my fist against my chest, hoping it wouldn't collapse onto me. In the right corner, books toppled from the shelves, pages flapping like wounded birds, thudding sharply as they slammed onto the floor.

Those blasts weren't a joke at all.

What the hell was going on?!

Are we in a war or something?

A wail of a siren echoed from far away. The sound pierced through the chaos, heightening the sense of dread that settled in my chest. The air thickened, pressing down on me. I knew I had to move before I froze in place, so I swung my feet onto the cold carpet.

My heart pounded like a war drum as I walked toward the window, each step heavy with uncertainty as I prepared to face whatever nightmare awaited outside.

Did I just say the sky was dark?

No, I was wrong.

The night sky was painted in gradient orange as I peered through the window. Across the river, a raging, luminous tongue of hellfire swallowed the entire city of Bronx, its reflection rippling through the dark water. My feet froze in place, and my thoughts scattered around, considering how massive and bright that flame was.

A thunderous boom reverberated through the air as jets flew past. Two fireballs erupted, blasting the city with blinding light. The river surged

and churned violently. My window rattled against the frame. A wave of raw, desperate screams reverberated in the air.

Jesus Christ. What were they doing to those people?

A sharp rumble.

The skyscraper teetered for a moment before crumbling like a toppled Jenga tower, sending a massive cloud of dust billowing into the sky.

“Oh, God!”

The distant screams across the city echoed even louder, each cry etching a fresh layer of horror. “What in the world is happening right now?”

The door burst open behind me. I glimpsed as Dad slammed it shut and hurriedly latched the lock before leaning against it. Blood trickled down from a gash on his temple.

“Dad?” I called as he freaked me out.

“Jules!” he said, his voice trembling. “Don’t come any closer!”

Chapter 2

Jules

“Just stay there!” Dad said. A sky blue backpack clung to his back, smashed against the wood where he was leaning against the door. Dry blood cascaded down from the gash on his forehead, staining his blue long-sleeved shirt. Was it caused by the riot rumbling outside?

“Dad, what happened to your head?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Shit.” He sank his head. He looked like someone who’d just witnessed the Grim Reaper in the last moment before his death. I’d never seen him like that before—wide-eyed, his breath rasping through his throat like every inhale was a struggle.

“Dad, what’s happening?” I asked again.

“We can’t stay; we’ve gotta get out of here,” he said.

He answered me absurdly. Seriously, the room cooled down because of his nonsense. “Dad, what’s really happening outside?”

The door banged. Dad jolted away from the door. Shrieks from the other side.

“Shit. Stay back, Jules. Stay back.” He stretched his hand at me.

I backed off once I saw the wood groaning under the relentless assault.

“Dad, what’s wrong with those people? Are we being invaded?”

Each blow against the door landed like a hammer on my chest. My heartbeat matched their rhythm—fast and heavy with every strike.

Dad whirled around. “Come here,” he said, pulling my hand toward the window, and sliding it aside. The wind rushed in, and the sounds of people’s screams and blaring alarms grew distinct.

“We’ve gotta be quick,” he said while bringing my blanket and tossing part of it out the window. “Alright, listen to me. I’m gonna hold this blanket and you climb down, okay?”

“W-wait. What about you?”

A sharp crack from the door made us both freeze. We glanced over. "Ain't got time for that. Quick!" he said.

Putting my feet onto the stool and turning around, I held onto the thick fabric to support myself to get out of the window. The sharp crack of splintering wood intensified. "C'mon, birdie. C'mon," he said, shifting his glance at me then back to the door.

The wind tousled my hair. I looked down. Why did the ground seem impossibly far away? Was I hallucinating? The house had never seemed this tall before. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

The wood exploded.

Two people broke in.

I glanced over. They stumbled on the ground on top of each other, convulsing like writhing worms.

One of them rose, tilted his head at us with a twitch—eyes bulging red, blood smeared around his mouth. He let out a snarl and charged.

"Go!" Dad's voice shattered the ice around my feet.

The blanket tightened as I clung, my grip slipping with every frantic movement as I dangled. The scream grew louder—

"Shit!" Dad dropped the blanket.

My heart lurched as I plunged. Wind rushed past me before I hit the grass, sending jolts through my butt.

"Aww." Pain stung on every nerve as I tried to push myself up.

Dad's grunt echoed through the air. I glanced back at the window, catching him holding off the man who tried to shove him through. The man's eyes glared wild, blood dripping from his mouth like a rabid dog. I crawled away as the fight intensified.

"Dad?!" I said, fear gripping my voice as he was teetering on the edge.

"Just wait there!" he said as he punched the man and shoved him further into the room, leaving only their grunts.

"Oh, what is happening?" I murmured.

The air chilled, sending shivers down my spine. I wrapped my arms around my body and glanced behind, finding nothing but a dark silhouette of a wooden fence against the raging orange gradient of the night sky. A great scenario of something massive crashing through the fence and yanking me into the river. The backyard would not be this pitch-black if Dad had fixed the light.

Glancing forward at the narrow passageway on the left, a stretch of orange light flickered ominously on the grass, casting long shadows that danced in the night.

Something's burning...

The acrid smell of burning wood, stinging my throat. People were crying out on the street. Were they being attacked by the same people who broke into the house? What was happening to them? What was with all the blood on their faces?

These questions would never stop popping until I found it myself. I took a hesitant step toward the passage. The temperature grew warmer and hotter with every step until I stopped at the edge of a stretched beam of light glowing beneath me to get a clear look of a monstrous raging fire, devouring Mr. Hoffman's house from across the street.

"Oh, my—"

The fire stretched upward, clawing at the sky in a desperate to rule the neighborhood.

How could this happen?

A loud thud vibrated through my bare feet as two people stumbled at the end of the passageway. A man and a woman—who were shrieking for help, but nobody cared.

The man pinned the woman and held her head from the back. Straightaway, he bit the back of the woman's neck. She wailed, holding the man's hair desperately. The man yanked, tearing her skin off—ragged pieces dangling from his mouth.

My hands snapped to my mouth to stifle a scream.

The woman gasped, a choking gurgle as blood gushed forth, staining the concrete in deep crimson. The man launched his face back down, snuffing out her voice. A faint, wet crunching echoed through the air.

Why...why did he eat her?

I inched backward, barely breathing, praying he wouldn't turn his gaze toward me.

Plates shattered inside the house.

I jolted at the sight of the empty wall, followed by the loud bang and Dad's scream.

Rolling my eyes back to the street—the man's eyes locked onto mine. Posed. Still.

My legs froze in place. My heart pounded in my ears, whispering to my mind to remain still. He straightened, rising tall; blood dripped from his mouth. His eyes glared, just stood there.

Keep it calm, Jules.

His shoulders rose and fell with each slow, guttural breath.

"No, no, no." I slowly receded, inch by inch, my movements deliberate and calm.

He strolled forward leisurely, then—charged.

"Crap!" I bolted back to the backyard.

The man breathed raggedly—a feral gasp rising with every step. My heart raced. His footsteps faster. His rasp intensified behind my ears.

“Crap-crap-crap!”

A fence up ahead.

I’ve gotta jump over it—

A small, rough rock jammed into my foot, sending a shockwave of pain up through my whole body, forcing me to collapse. Whirling around—

The man grasped my shoulder. I writhed violently. The rush of his breath sent a warm, metallic odor onto my face.

“No!” I shot up on one knee and slammed my hands against his shoulders, holding his body to keep his face from closing in. His power overcame, pressing forward. I shrieked at the top of my lungs to hold him off. My throat dried. My hands and legs ached, trembling against the pressure.

His head inched closer and closer, the heat of his breath washing over my side-neck. The chilling realization of being torn apart crashed over me. I let out a loud croak, summoning the last reserves of energy I had left.

A light slashed through the shadows. Dad grunted as he pulled the man’s hair and threw him to the side. A hammer glinted in his hand, and he swung it down onto the man’s head relentlessly.

I backed away, leaning against the fence. My shoulders flinched with each crack. And the man’s face morphed into a grotesque mess, with chunks of flesh splattering everywhere. The same image of that poor woman he ate.

A flashlight shone into my eyes. My gaze remained still, staring at the dark pool spreading across the grass. “Jules, look at me. Jules!” Someone grasped my shoulder. “Jules!” I shifted my gaze as he shook me. “Look at me! Keep yourself together.”

“Dad, wh-what is really happening?”

“Jules, listen to me,” Dad said, still making nonsense to me.

“They’re eating p-people on the street.”

“Jules, we have to leave this city.”

I couldn’t keep that image out of my head. “Dad, I don’t want to get eaten—” My jaw stuttered.

“No, you’re not,” he said, gripping my shoulder. “I will not let other people get near you. Just stick close to me, alright? I’m gonna get you out of here. I promise, okay? Do you trust me?”

His eyes were sharp, filled with unwavering conviction. I nodded, trying to steady my shaking breath. “Yeah,” I said.

"C'mon, Birdie. Let's go." He held my hand, and we moved out of the backyard, leaving our house onto the main street filled with dead bodies scattered everywhere.

"Stick close to me, baby," he said, tightening his grip.

"Yeah!" I replied, looking around to stay away from the crowd.

Up ahead, a fallen pole lay on the road, tangled in wires. That seemed to be Dad's car right behind it because it had my sticker on the windshield. The front twisted like crumpled paper. Blood streaked across the hood and the windshield in a chaotic spray, speckled with clotted bits of slimy flesh.

The air was thick as we walked past it, choking my throat with the stench of burnt rubber and something far worse that could twist my stomach. Then the smell gave way to suffocating smoke emitting from the burning buildings along the road. No place to hide. Flames roared on every side. Was this what hell would look like? People running and running as if they were trapped in an eternal circle of flame?

"Dad, where are we going?!"

"Somewhere safe," he said, rasping.

I doubted him as I looked around, seeing nothing but fire.

"I don't think we can get out of this place."

"We'll make a run for it. I promise. Just stick close to me."

Gunfire up ahead. "Die! You son of a bitch!"

Dad released my hand. "Wait here," he said, striding toward a hefty man who was relentlessly firing bullets into the sick person's body. From behind, Dad swung clean at the back of the man's head. The hammer lodged in.

"Oh God!" I closed my mouth to stop myself from screaming.

He held the man's head and yanked the hammer off. Blood cascaded out like water from a busted pipe. The man limped, his knee hitting the ground first, followed by the rest of his body. Dad took his gun, checking the load.

"C'mon, let's go!" His grip tightened around my hand, pulling me into a sprint. I couldn't help but glance at the man's blood pooling beneath his head as we walked past.

"Dad, why'd you kill him?"

"Just keep moving."

"He didn't seem like one of them."

"He got blood all over him."

"What's wrong with his blood?"

"Just keep moving, alright?" he said.

His voice carried a finality that he had had enough talking. But what did it have to do with that poor man's blood?

Down another street, where the temperature felt more forgiving, Dad pulled me toward the car parked on the side of the road. The car beeped twice along with the hazard lights. A man in a white shirt emerged from a house, supporting a limping woman by the shoulder as they made their way to the vehicle. He opened the car for the woman. With a swift motion—

"Get away from the car." Dad lunged, pointing his gun toward them as the woman was about to get inside. The man froze, gently raising his hands, followed by the woman—pale white, veins bulging beneath her skin, eyes damp and unfocused; her shallow breaths shuddered out in quick puffs.

"Step the fuck away." Dad walked around the hood while I tailed him from behind.

"Sir, she's sick. I have to escort her," the man said, backing away from the car.

"Follow my instructions if you don't want anything bad to happen. You've gotta step back."

"Sir, don't do this to us," the woman said, her voice croaked and weak.

This car had four seats. Why didn't Dad just let them in? We could just escape together.

"Jules, get in the car," Dad said.

"But Dad, we could just—"

"I said get inside!"

When his voice dropped like that—it meant no arguing. I hopped in, and Dad slammed my door shut. Through the window, Dad's body blocked the view of the people, leaving me with only the cacophony of their conversations. He insisted on a key, but the man offered to share a room—that's the point of their talking.

A heavy weight settled in my chest. It felt so wrong to just steal their car and leave the woman to suffer like that. They got no blood or scars on them whatsoever. Why Dad didn't let them in?

A loud bang muffled from outside. "Throw me the fucking key!" Dad said.

"Okay, okay," he said.

"Jesus Christ, Dad. What's the matter with you?"

"No sudden moves!" Dad said.

"Here," he said, with a clatter echoing.

Dad's other hand over his head to catch the key.

A loud pop rang out.

Dad got shoved against my door, and the man's head slammed hard on the window. Blood gushed out of his mouth, staining the window with dark red.

"Oh, my—" I closed my mouth.

His eyes rolled, a silent demand for an explanation of the evil we represented. Dad pushed him away, dropping him before the woman's eyes. She sobbed, calling out his name and collapsing in grief over the lifeless soul.

"Dad, what's wrong with you?"

"Shit," Dad said, bolting around the hood.

A thud on the other side of the car.

"Shit, shit!" He hopped in, tossing the handgun onto the dashboard as he fumbled for the bigger key. His fingers scrambled like crazy, almost dropping it as he tried to jam it into the ignition. I turned back to the woman as she cried out, reaching out her hand to us.

The car hummed.

"Dad, we can't leave her," I said, but he acted as if I were invisible. He turned the wheel and floored the gas. "Dad!"

"Will you shut the hell up?" Dad said, his voice croaked. "I'm trying to get us out of here."

"Why did you shoot him? We still have room for them!"

"Jules, you don't understand what's happening around here," he said.

"Which part I don't understand? You just killed two people for no reason."

"You don't understand when you find a person with a teeth mark somewhere on their body."

"But they seem fine—"

"You zip your mouth when I'm talking, kid. They could hide it under his sleeve, and you'd never know it. The man I just shot—he had it up his sleeve. You didn't see it. *I saw it!*" he said, pointing his finger at himself, his eyes glaring into me. "I'm sure you saw that woman's face too."

He could see underneath the man's shirt? He was wearing white. I didn't see any part of his clothes ripped or blood soaking through.

"What about the other man you bashed with a hammer? Was he sick too?"

"Everybody's sick, Jules. Don't trust anybody." He stared at me for a moment, then he turned his gaze forward.

Just say you wanted to steal his gun.

"Please help! Hey, stop! Stoooooop!" A man's voice cut through the chaos as he waved frantically from the sidewalk, his shout rising into a high-pitched shriek as we drove past. But looking outside, seeing how

exposed and defenseless those people were, made me think twice about how secure we were after we stole the gun and the vehicle. Some of them were already lying on the ground, burned and shot. The rest still ran on the road.

Dad's been turning the wheel from street to another street to avoid the traffic. Every street looked the same as the previous one.

Dad hit the brakes and crept the car through the crowd. "C'mon, c'mon! Move!" Dad smacked the steer.

"Help! Help!" A man burst out from an alley, with two others chasing close behind.

One of them leapt, catching the man on the ground. Then, a shriek—

I snapped away, then another one—a woman, screaming.

"Shit!" Dad floored the gas, honking.

I snapped forward.

I clutched my chest as the car wove through the crowd, bumping people aside. One of them got run over, the tires bumping over them.

"C'mon!" Dad slammed the wheel.

The screams never stopped. They echoed—wild and endless. Stiffening my lips, I closed my eyes and ears, blocking any trace of sympathy I felt for them. However, I couldn't stop replaying that tape of a woman who got her neck destroyed back at my house. The way her veins snapped off—

"Hey," Dad said, his voice soft, arm around my shoulder, "come here." He pulled me to the side of his chest. It's warm, with a calm heartbeat inside. My vision blurred as I opened my eyes; the moisture trickled down onto my face. The world turned soft white. The panicked cries of the crowd faded into the distance, leaving just a soft rumbling machine. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice muffled inside.

I swallowed hard, my body shuddering as I tried to hold back more tears, not wanting to soak his clothes further. My gaze drifted to the pedals he was flooring while wondering how he could have such a calm heartbeat in all this chaos. It eased the throbs inside my head.

"We're safe now, Birdie... We're on the highway now, okay? We're getting out of here," he said, his words wrapping around me like a promise. A whisper that it was okay to close my eyes.

Edney

I thought that getting out of the neighborhood would be the end of our nightmare. Not until the highway lit up with an endless stream of red brake lights. And my car hadn't moved even an inch in a fucking hour.

Chapter 3

Edney

People bolted out of their cars, crowding against the guardrails to see what lay ahead on the rest of the highway. We just had to sweep around the banked curve, merge onto the main road, and cross the suspension bridge that would lead us to Staten Island. After that, we'd be free—leaving New York for good. But I guessed things would never be as simple as they looked when everybody had the same damn idea.

Jules still fell asleep on my thigh, her breathing steady even as the blaring horns echoed around us. She must have been completely worn out from the chaos we'd been through. Maybe it was best to wake her, to be ready in case we had to abandon the car and join the crowd running on foot toward the bridge.

"Jules, Jules—" I shook her body. She opened her eyes, raising up. Her eyes fluttered. "Hey, Birdie."

"Where are we?" She rubbed her eyes, looking around.

"Listen, I want you to wait here while I'm going to check what's happening up ahead, and I want you to keep the door locked, alright?"

"Wh-what's happening? We're not out of the city yet?"

"We will be, but first I need you to wait here, okay? I'll be back in a minute." I burst out of the car.

"D-dad, wait!"

"Lock the door, Birdie." I shut it behind me.

Shit. My heart sank at leaving her alone, scared like that.

Racing past the crowds and slipping through between vehicles, I halted behind the concrete guardrail to get a clear look. Hundreds of cars lined the road all the way to the bridge, where people were piling up over there. A cacophony of their voices pierced through the air as if they were

marching. A bunch of choppers flew around there too, sweeping their spotlights over the scene.

Did the forces put a blockade on the bridge or something? That place was packed with a fucking swarm of either healthy or sick people. How the hell were we supposed to get through that crowd?

People here seemed to take their relatives out of their cars, abandoning their vehicles to get to that bridge on foot.

A thunderous blast—at 3 o'clock.

Shit. That's New York.

A burst of wind bore down on me as jets roared overhead, racing toward the chaos.

Fireballs.

A violent shockwave followed, tearing through the air. Buildings crumbled, shuddering into clouds of dust, along with the screams echoed from across.

"They're gonna kill us all! They're gonna fucking kill us all!" a man in the crowd said.

My heart lurched as I hurried back toward the car, desperate to get to Jules before we became the next Final Destination.

Behind the windshield, Jules crawled over to the driver's seat and opened the door for me. "Dad, are they going to blow us up too?"

"Not if we cross the bridge first," I said. "C'mon, we gotta move."

"Wh-what? I thought we're going with the car."

"We can't because there's a roadblock on the bridge—" My eyes darted at Jules' forearm. Dirt and flakes of grass clung to a red, inflamed mark coated in blood.

I took her hand to get a clear look—

Just scratches.

"When did you get this wound?"

Her eyes widened. "Probably back in...back in the backyard."

"Did he bite you? Scratch you or anything?"

"Nnn—not I remember. Why? What's going to happen to me?" her voice trembled. I placed my hand gently on her forehead, then down to her cheek, feeling the coolness of her skin. Her temperature hadn't risen, or she might not have shown any symptoms yet. But a nagging fear gripped me—what if that man had spat on her wound? The thought sent a chill through me as I struggled to keep my worry from showing.

"Dad, what are they gonna do to me?"

"Nothing." I stared her in the eye. Glancing down, I ripped my shirt, and I wrapped her wound with it.

"Am I going to become like one of them?"

Yes.

I shook my head. “No. No, of course not.”

“Are they going to shoot me?”

“Nobody’s going to shoot you. Listen, I’m gonna protect you. No matter what happens. I’ll always be there for you, and you have to trust me. Will you trust me?” I brought my face closer.

She paused, grimaced, and looking me in the eye, she nodded, “Y-yeah.”

“Alright, we better get going. C’mon,” I said, getting Jules out and taking the blue-sky backpack.

Shit. Where’d you get that wound, Jules?

Fuck.

Okay, stay calm, Ed.

Just keep the wound hidden, and she would be fine. I would keep her safe, even if it cost me my life. If we both died, then so be it.

Attention...

All citizens are required to pass through the designated scanning area before proceeding across the bridge. Please queue in line to reach the scanning zone. Surveillance units have been deployed along the riverside. Any attempt to enter the checkpoint by force will result in execution. I repeat, any attempt to enter the checkpoint by force will result in execution—

Spotlights blazed from every angle along the bridge, casting a stark, blinding light like some passage to eternity. High fence at the end, soldiers lining up on the scaffolding with their firearms ready. Their shadows looming against a massive cloth draped over the railing, a word written across it: **CHECKPOINT.**

People raised their fists in the air, marching for the fence to be moved away. Arguments broke out, fists flying as some fought for their place in line. I clutched Jules’ hand as tightly as I could, so she wouldn’t get caught up in the stream. Sweat trickled down my cheek—whether from the heat or the anxiety of standing in the crowd where I couldn’t tell which one of them might turn into a madness demon.

“Hey, what the hell is that look? Is he sick?!” one in the crowd said, pointing toward a young boy huddled over to a woman nearby. All attention shifted to him shivering beneath his oversized jacket, veins branching across his face.

“No, he’s fine. It’s just a common fever like every kid gets when the weather shifts—” the woman said.

“What do you mean he’s fine? Just look at his face! I’ve seen someone like him before, and they’re fucking insane.”

"He's okay. I promise. He didn't bleed or get injured. I swear he's fine!"

The crowds didn't buy it, arguing back at the woman.

"Throw him off the bridge!" the crowds chanted.

A man stormed over—massive and muscular. "Get the fuck out of here." He yanked the boy from the woman's grasp and dragged him out of the line, into another row of the crowd toward the side of the bridge.

"Mom!" the boy said, limping.

"Honey!" she cried out, chasing after him. "No! Wait!"

"Dad," Jules said.

"Keep your eyes forward."

The woman screamed, begging for help to stop the man, but no one dared to touch the giant. The boy shrieked.

"Hands off the kid!" the army said from above the platform.

A barrage of bullets shot into the air.

Jules screamed. Her shoulder flinched as she clamped her hands over her ears.

"Hands off the kid! Get back in line!" the army said.

Right. Everyone expected somebody to turn rabid in the middle of the crowd, but not for those jets screaming overhead, ready to sweep us all with missiles. Once all hell broke loose, they wouldn't care who was sick and who wasn't. We'd crumble along with this bridge.

A loud thud. I glanced over to see a woman crumpled on the street.

"Whoa, wait, wait," a man said. "Baby? Beck? Hey!"

"What the fuck, Carl?! She's infected!" one of his friends said.

"No, wait a minute. No, she's not."

"Shit. Look at her face, man! She's gonna turn like Bryan. Didn't you see his face when he lost his fucking mind?!"

"Jules, come here. Get to the other side," I said, pulling her hand. We walked past the collapsed woman and stole her friend's place in line.

"Glenn's right. I-I hate to say it, but Carl, we've gotta tell the army before she turns."

"What? You crazy? She isn't sick like Bryan. Did you see her get bitten like Bryan?! Did you see any shits?! Any marks whatsoever—don't fucking touch her!"

"Carl, c'mon. Knock it off!"

"Dad?" Jules called me.

"Just keep walking, Birdie. Follow the line," I said.

"Dad," Jules called.

"Not now, Birdie."

"Are we sick?"

“No, of course not.”

A reminder flashed in my mind—Jules had wounds on her forearm. She only had a scratch, but like I said...if that man spat on her wound, then Jules could be—

Fuck.

Think positive for once.

“But he said she didn’t get bit,” Jules still replied to this nonsense overthinking.

“That’s what he said. We didn’t know if she got bitten somewhere under her sleeve. Try not to think about it.”

A crack of thunder reverberated from behind.

“Dad?!” Jules tightened her grip.

“Don’t look, Birdie,” I said. “Just keep going.”

“You give me no choice, Carl! I have to do it.”

“You’re dead! I swear to God I’ll stomp on your fucking head!” his voice croaked.

“Carl, stop!”

A couple of soldiers walked past us, checking on them.

“Dad, I’m scared,” she said, pulling closer to me.

“You’re gonna be alright, Birdie. I promise. Just keep walking and don’t look back. We’re almost there.”

A truck loomed behind the bar gate wall with barbed wire coiled around on the top. Soldiers standing in line in front of the gate, sticking a Lightbox to people’s faces.

“Clear!” the soldier said. “Next! C’mon, get moving!” He flicked his hand to the next person to be scanned.

On the second row of the scanning zone from the right, a woman shoved the soldier away. A couple of soldiers rushed in, restraining the woman from bolting past the gate. “I’m not infected! I’m not infected!” she said, twisting her shoulders and slapping the soldier’s mask. The soldiers shifted their faces away while the other yanked her back away from the gate.

Another approached with a syringe in hand. “Let me go!” She kicked him hard in the groin, sending him stumbling back. The one behind her slammed her onto the ground, pinning her back. She writhed, her legs the only part of her still free. “I’m not sick! Get off me!” She shrieked, thrashing wildly.

A loud bang tore through the air.

The crowd erupted—screams and gasps colliding in a rising cacophony.

A gush of blood swamped her head, a grim reminder of the horror unfolding. What was even scarier—they shot the woman right before my daughter's eyes.

"Take her to the lower level," the soldier said, the one with no helmet and mask, which I believed was the commander. The army took her away, leaving a trail of blood stroking on the road.

"Dad, I want to go back." Jules pulled my clothes; her gaze remained fixed on the lifeless body being dragged downstairs.

There was no other way to get out of this city other than this bridge. I guessed this would be the moment. My daughter didn't have to feel how terrific the pain was. Just one clear shot and she felt nothing, so I didn't have to hear her blaring in screams, being burned alive in the air or being ripped off by those insane—

"Dad!" Jules pulled my hand.

I blinked.

"C'mon! Get over here fast!" a soldier called to me with his hand.

I strolled forward—

"Dad, don't." Jules yanked my hand. Wrinkles formed on her forehead.

You don't have to feel a thing.

"I'll be alright, just wait here," I said, gently releasing her hands and walking toward the soldier.

This place somehow turned cold and lacked oxygen. Remember what she said: Close your eyes. Clear your mind. Feel the gust.

The other soldier stepped forward, unarmed. "Where'd you get this from?" he asked, pointing at his forehead.

"Car accident."

"What's inside there?"

"It's empty."

He turned to his comrade, gesturing with his head. The other took the backpack off my shoulder to check what's inside.

The scanner gestured for me to stand in a T-pose, and I obeyed. He patted me down, his hands moving over my body until he reached into my side pocket and pulled my gun away.

"Alright, proceed," the other soldier said, turning my hands down, and I stepped forward.

"Close your eyes," the scanner said as he stuck the lightbox to my face. "Keep your face straight inside the box."

Warm and dark.

A muffled air inside as I exhaled.

Heartbeats echoed in my ears.

The powerful buzz of the scanner reverberated and the pitch-black darkness shifted into a soft pink.

What if...it's the air? The air around here was contaminated, so anyone who got scratches or didn't have a strong immune system on them would get sick? This whole thing could come from a leak of some gas. I guess that's why some people who didn't seem to have blood on them got sick. Maybe? But there was no news about gas leaks these past few weeks...or no... the news did mention some restaurants—

The light turned back into pitch black. A refreshment washed over my face as he took the scanner away. "Clear," the scanner said.

"Get a move on," his companion said, giving me back the empty backpack and escorting me toward the gate.

I turned behind, looking at Jules glancing down, her fist trembling against her chest.

"Let's go, kid!" the soldier said.

"C'mon, Birdie. It's alright," I said, watching her behind the chain-link gate guarded by the soldiers.

She stepped forward, but she brought her feet back to a recent position. "C'mon, Jules. C'mon."

"C'mon, girl. Be quick!" the soldier said.

She glanced at me, and I nodded from a distance. Bit by bit, she took a step forward. "Alright, Birdie. Nice. Nice. Good job. Stay calm, Birdie," I murmured.

The soldier executed the same procedure. Jules followed as instructed. Her eyes squeezed shut, her lips pressed together. They fitted the scanning device over her face.

What were the odds of she got sick from the food she ate yesterday? Saturday, wasn't it? She used to order her food through DoorRush on the weekends. But what if it's her wound? It could be contaminated.

Shifting my gaze to the left, my eyes locked on the assault rifle of one soldier near the entrance—the closest one within reach and maybe, just maybe, my best chance to snatch it from. They got every side covered, though. I didn't even know where to start shooting.

"Dad!"

My heart jolted as I glanced at her. The icy wind dried my mouth, yet a flicker of joy sparked within as I watched her run toward the gate.

"Close the gate!" the soldier said.

The gate slid shut.

What the hell?

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing?! Let her pass!" I lunged toward the entrance to stop a soldier from chaining the gate. Someone yanked me from behind, slamming me to the ground.

The crowd broke out.

Gunfire erupted.

"Dad?!" Jules called.

"Don't move!" He pointed his assault rifle at me. "Don't you fucking move!"

All the flashlights shone at me from every direction. I raised my hands.

"She is my daughter! Let her through!"

"Dad!" Jules called me. I glanced at her sobbing on the other side.

"What's going on here?" the commander said.

"Report in, Lieutenant!" one of them saluted. "He refuses to board the truck."

"Please let my daughter pass. I'm begging you," I said, and the commander glanced at Jules, crying out from the other side.

"How many people are on the truck?"

"Beyond the suggested limitations, sir," he said, "if we add more personnel, it will create a greater potential for overload."

"What's the ETA for another rescue?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Just take my daughter," I said. "I'll wait for another truck. Just take my daughter!"

The commander glanced at me, then shifted his attention to Jules.

"C'mon, kid. Get in," the soldier said, sliding the gate open.

Jules froze in place, locking her eyes with mine. And once again, for many times, I sunk my head, unable to bear her gaze. I walked out, letting Jules take my place.

"No," Jules said.

"C'mon, kid." The soldier pulled Jules by the arm.

"No, no, no. Wait!"

The gate slammed shut, locked.

"Dad!" Jules held onto the bars.

I guessed, for all the efforts I poured in to get her to be on my side—

"C'mon, kid. Let's get to the truck." The soldier grasped her arm, but Jules resisted, begging the soldier to unlock the gate.

The next truck will arrive in 30 minutes. All citizens. Please remain calm until the next truck arrives.

The crowd turned into a riot, throwing anything they had in their hands. Soldiers lined up, forming a line of shields. Firearms aimed at the masses.

“Marco! Help me on the lower level!” the commander said.

“What about the kid?”

“That rookie will take care of her! Now be quick!”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldier left Jules alone.

“Dad, tell me what to do to unlock this gate,” she said fast, her eyes widened, all puffy.

“I’ll be alright, Jules.”

“I thought I had to stick with you.”

You were the only one who mattered to me in this world.

“Jules, listen to me.”

“Wait.” She pulled away, experimenting with the chains.

“Jules—”

“There’s gotta be a way, right?”

“No, Jules—”

“Hold on, let me ask them to open this gate—” she said, storming off.

I grasped her arm, and I shook my head. Her eyes glistened. “I’ll be alright.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I—”

“Shhh,” I said. “Come here.” I drew her closer to me.

“Listen,” I said, wiping those tears. “You don’t have to worry about me. Just look around. Look at these soldiers. You think they were not capable? Once the truck is coming, they’ll take me to your place, and we will meet there anyway. It only takes thirty minutes, not a year.”

“But you’re always lying,” she said. “You said you would come back, and—” Her eyes closed, quivering lips and chin.

Reaching my hand to the side of my pocket, “Here.” I handed my phone to her. “I’ll call you once I get there. I’ll find you even if you are at the edge of the earth. Ask someone if you need a charger, alright? Ask politely.”

She just stared at me with those sorrowful eyes.

“And hey—” I slipped the backpack off my right shoulder. “Happy Birthday, Birdie.” I slipped it through the bar, handing it out to her with all pride.

She just stared at me, shaking her head, lips parted like she wanted to say something—

“C’mere.” I gripped her hands and slipped that misty blue backpack around her shoulder. “You said you wanted to be an astronaut, right?” Her eyes locked on me with tears smeared on her cheek. “Like I said, don’t let my sacrifice go to waste.”

“Dad, I-I don’t want to leave without you,” she said, her breath breaking into a sob.

“I know.” My arms encircled her through the bars. I hugged her as tight as I could while the surrounding air muffled as if we owned the world for just the two of us. My fingers slid gently through her hair, feeling the shape of her tiny body under my touch. The last grasp to physically hold her. The last tears she shed on my shoulder. And with every choked-back echo in the air, my lungs grew heavier. It made it even harder to let her go. But I told myself it was worth it.

“I’ll find you. I promise.”

“Alright, kid. It’s time to go!” the soldier said, yanking Jules away from me. She screamed as the soldier carried her, shouting at me, but the suffocating air in my chest had muffled my ears within.

A thunder of gunshots shattered in the air.

The alarm blared and I glanced behind, watching the bridge flash in rhythmic muzzles while those sick people poured in to take over the place.

Progression

You're at 9% into the entire story.

Dear Readers

I hope you have a great time reading the first three chapters of this book. Regardless of what you think of these opening chapters, I'd love to hear your thoughts about your experience reading them. You can hit me up on instagram at @dickyrowdyhertanto or reach out to me by email at dickyrowdyhertanto@gmail.com.

And...if you're hungry for one more chapter, you can check out my website at www.dickyhertanto.com. Chapter 4 is set ten years after the pandemic took over the United States, and Edney will have to navigate this new world while trying to uncover the mystery of how his daughter went missing.

Thank you for taking your time to read this book.

Long Live,

Dicky Hertanto