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# Dolus'S Doctrine

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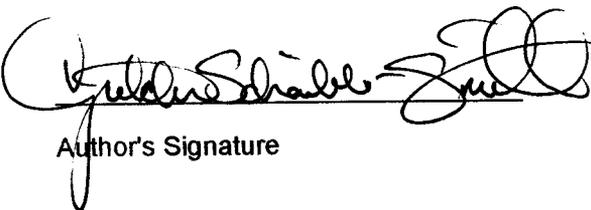
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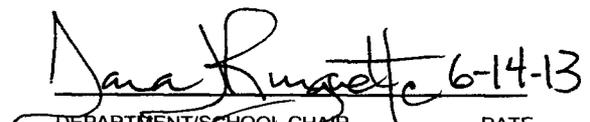
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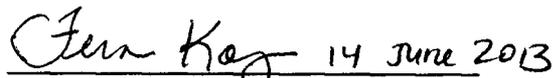
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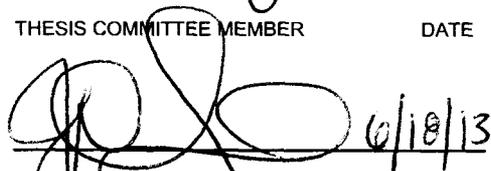
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### Abstract

Marta Hoyle has lived her entire life in the safety and security of the New Republic where she tries to live a life that is in accordance with *The Book of Law and Faith*. Her Radical parents put her under the government's constant scrutiny, and even though she's resided with her pious Aunt Grace for over five years, she finds herself in danger of being tried and eliminated as a Radical.

When Marta receives a warning from a soldier of the danger in store, she decides to risk a visit to a Radical meeting in hopes of finding safety and protection there. Marta's journey brings her to question the government and church in which she so firmly believes and to decide if she will accept or reject its teachings.

This is a dystopic text targeted at young-adults, which depicts a new government, religion, and society created from the remnants of the former United States of America after its collapse from nuclear war. The government uses its fictitious religion to control the populous and ensure order, but even though things may appear under control on the surface, there are pockets of resistors labeled "Radicals." They could be anyone.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. David Carpenter for working with me in both my undergraduate and graduate degrees and for helping me become a better writer. With his help I've improved in the creative and mechanical aspects of writing. His continual comments on my thesis have truly made "Dolus's Doctrine" a better story.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Lania Knight for reading and commenting on my work during the 2013 spring semester. Her additional comments inspired me to keep pushing forward.

### Critical Essay

My love of dystopian young-adult literature began when I was in high school after reading Scott Westerfeld's Uglies, which includes *Uglies*, *Pretties*, and *Specials*. At the time, I did not know what dystopian literature was. All I knew was that I liked the futuristic otherworld Westerfeld created in which several teens reject the surgical modifications which ensure that no one is ugly, fat, or thin and everyone is beautiful in exchange for a life (with an "ugly" face and body) in the wild. I was intrigued by the new society, which had risen from the ashes of the one we are familiar with today, and the radically different way of life Westerfeld's characters were content to lead. As I progressed through my undergraduate studies, I learned more about the dystopian genre in Dr. Moore's Children's Literature class and even more in my graduate studies in Dr. Ames's Post-9/11 Narratives class and Dr. Kory's Young-Adult Literature class.

The more dystopian texts I read, the more I fell in love with the genre. April Spisak's article "What Makes a Good YA Dystopian Novel?" notes that the popularity of the dystopian novel in recent years has grown as a result of Collins's *The Hunger Games*, even though the genre existed long before the best-selling trilogy arrived (55). Spisak also acknowledges that the characters in dystopic texts live in a "messed-up society where freedoms are curtailed" (55). These tragedies, Spisak notes, could stem from nuclear devastation, zombie attacks, or even alien invasions, but I think what makes dystopian literature widely popular for readers today are the constant Doomsday prophecies, global warming theories, devastating storms, and the threat of nuclear war (55). But writing a dystopian story was nothing like

reading one. While writing my thesis “Dolus’s Doctrine,” I discovered just how difficult it is to create a futuristic society as well as the characters and problems that go with it. The main challenge I faced was knowing whether or not I was bogging my text down with exposition instead of letting my readers figure out my character’s world. I was concerned that my story was progressing at a painfully slow pace.

Before beginning my thesis, I read numerous adult and young-adult texts in the dystopian genre to better understand what other authors have already done. From these texts, I understood what I wanted to do in my own work because of the effects other authors’ texts had on me. I enjoyed the use of present tense in Suzanne Collins’s and Annika Thor’s novels *The Hunger Games* and *A Faraway Island*, respectively. Though Thor’s novel is a work of historical fiction, I found what she says about choosing present tense relevant for what I wanted to accomplish in writing my thesis. Thor explains that by using present tense, she makes her characters’ struggles relevant for her readers “in the here and now” (Thor 247). Similarly, Collins’s work allows readers to experience Katniss’s trials in the Hunger Games as she experiences them.

Diedre Baker, author of “Present Tensions, or It’s All Happening Now,” addresses the increasingly common use of present tense in young-adult literature. She notes present tense in young-adult literature is “all about being in the adolescent’s head” and understanding that “now” is the only thing there is (Baker). This allows readers to connect with the protagonist in a way that past tense often fails to do. Baker addresses how past tense reveals the narrator and sometimes the

author to the reader, making a story written in past tense a “product of looking back and seeing the threads of cause-and-effect” (Baker). Present tense, Baker claims, is “reportage or live drama” and, unlike past tense, we don’t have “the assurance that the narrator has made sense of what’s happening” (Baker). For example, in my own work *Marta* is—in her point of view—being attacked when she sneaks out of the house and breaks curfew. *Marta* gives us the play-by-play of what she is thinking during her attack:

I want to scream. I want the patrolling soldiers to come back. I *want* to be found. As if sensing the growing panic that’s building inside me, the hand presses even harder against my face, driving the back of my skull into the soft earth. (64)

Had this section been written in past tense, readers would know that whatever happened was already over, and although there still would have been a fair amount of tension, readers would know that whatever happened didn’t ultimately lead to *Marta*’s demise.

Although past tense is most commonly used, present tense allows for authors of both historic and futuristic fiction to help readers connect with the characters and the differences in setting. Because I want my readers to experience *Marta*’s struggle as if it were happening now, I chose to write my thesis in present tense. “*Dolus’s Doctrine*” is the first text that I have written in present tense, and at first doing so was a challenge. I favor past tense and forcing myself to be aware of the tense was sometimes a struggle. Since I had to pay extra attention to tense while writing, the writing process seemed a bit slower than it had been while writing other pieces of

fiction. However, it was not solely the tense that made the task of writing seem slow; the task of revealing necessary information about Marta's family and society without bogging down the text with exposition was a time-consuming one.

One of the best decisions I feel I made in giving my readers information about Marta's society was to use epigraphs. Though I would love to claim this idea as one of my own invention, it was one I discovered in Lauren Oliver's *Delirium*. In Oliver's society, love is considered a disease and when people turn eighteen they become eligible for a cure. Oliver gives her readers information about Love and how the society sees it by using epigraphs from government handouts, *The Book of Shh*, and the *Safety, Health and Happiness Handbook*, nursery rhymes, and religious documents. Though Oliver allows her protagonist Lena to explain certain aspects of this society, she leaves most of the details about its creation in each chapter's epigraph.

When I first read Oliver's text, I was surprised and intrigued by her use of epigraphs—which added detail on the society's view on love to the work in a few short lines. The thought of using epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter to paint a clearer picture of her dystopic society was brilliant and would solve part of the problem I faced explaining some of Marta's society. I decided to incorporate epigraphs that shared with my readers some of the expectations, laws, rules, and history of Marta's society. I think that this was a good decision because I was able to give my readers more societal information without overwhelming them with exposition.

Although I think my text balances exposition and dialogue, during the writing process I struggled with the feeling that my story was progressing at a sluggish tempo. The main reason I struggled with pace was that I felt, at different points in the story, I was giving my readers too much back-story or not enough, especially in the first few chapters. It seemed to me that I was spending too much time introducing Marta and her society, family, and situation. Because I knew everything I wanted to happen, as well as the history and inner-workings of this society, balancing how much I revealed was a challenge. Now that I've written my text, I understand the difficulties other dystopian authors face. Because dystopian authors are the only ones who know what has brought the society in question to a dystopic state and how that new society works, it is their responsibility to inform the readers about the new society without giving too little detail or overwhelming them with too much.

Although there were several things that I found challenging, some of my choices were deliberate and easy to make. Choosing Marta's family members was an easy choice. Because the strict religious society in "Dolus's Doctrine" does not encourage genders to mingle, making Marta's sibling and caregiver women was an easy choice. Later, when Marta goes to the Radicals' meeting after curfew, she is very distrustful of her male companion Brody, who saves her from the nightly patrol. Her deep distrust stems from everything she's been lead to believe while growing up with her aunt Grace. Had I made either of the two females in her life males, her perceptions of men would have been different (more trusting) if she would have had contact with one on a daily basis.

Marta's missing parents—and lack of uncle—also help to make this a young-adult text. Young-adult literature has missing parents or other family members taking over the caregiving role in a very passive way. Though this occurs in all types of young-adult literature, it is also very common in dystopic texts including, but not limited to, *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, *City of Ember*, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, and *Article 5*.

One of the reasons I decided to create a dystopic society that uses religion to control people was because of the lack of religion as a controlling mechanism in other dystopic texts. Though religion is present in some of the texts I read, it does not play a predominant role. Young-adult dystopian texts mention religion very rarely. Lauren Oliver includes religion in *Delirium*, but it has been altered to fit the society's anti-Love agenda. Similarly, Patrick Ness's *The Knife of Never Letting Go* references a preacher and his church and the protagonist Todd Hewitt, who prays for help from an unnamed deity as a last-ditch effort to be saved from those pursuing him. In Kristen Simmons's *Article 5* and Oliver's *Delirium*, religion has been institutionalized to meet the society/government's needs. However, the religious aspects in these stories do not play a major part in them, but simply show how the societies have altered religion in their attempt to control the masses.

Unlike Simmons and Oliver's texts in which religion serves very little, the presence of religion in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* greatly influences the text. Religious zealots run Atwood's Republic of Gilead—the former United States—and everything that happens to women (who have lost their rights and must submit to their masters) is in accordance with the religious rules dictated by

those in power. I wanted to incorporate the same thematic effect from Atwood's text in my own work in regard to religion to show how different Marta's society is from ours when an overwhelming religious faction takes control.

There were also several aspects from George Orwell's *1984* that I wanted to adapt for my own work. One of the elements I found very interesting in Orwell's text was the two minutes of hate—in which citizens watched a video each day to fuel their hatred for the state's enemies. I also found the use of television and music in *1984* to be an excellent method of manifesting and reinforcing the government's agenda. Because the citizens in Orwell's text must attend the two minutes of hate and only have access to literature and music provided by the government, its citizens do not have access to opposing ideas, only those approved by the government, and are therefore subject to everything the government wants them to know.

From Orwell's text, I incorporated my own version of the two minutes of hate as well as the use of music. Instead of having a daily video, Marta's society attends a weekly church service, or Celebration Service, at which Brother Jacob (the face of the church) gives a sermon that is intended to manipulate the viewers' emotions and reaffirm their belief in their religion. Preceding the service—and on the radio at home—Marta hears medleys of religious and patriotic songs. Because the strict dystopic force controls the radio, government propaganda in the form of both sermons and music is accessible to all citizens at any time and is their only source of musical entertainment. Marta's information about the world she lives in has been

given to her by her teachers, aunt, the Brothers at her church, as well as what she hears on the government-run radio and reads in its papers.

I intended for “Dolus’s Doctrine” to serve as a text for young adults to consider the effects an over-controlling government can have, especially when it comes to using religion as a tool for dominating society. I also intended for my thesis to serve as an example of how religion can be manipulated by different people to serve their own agenda. When young adults are aware of these different forms of control and manipulation, they can be better prepared for how to react if they have seen—even if only in a piece of literature—the overbearing hand of a dominating power. Steven Wolk, author of “Reading for a Better World: Teaching Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature,” addresses how young-adult literature can make people aware of issues with power and propaganda in today’s society. He notes that we have a social responsibility not only to inform readers of an abuse in power, but to instill in young adults an “ethical commitment to stop [this abuse]” (Wolk 668).

Although my target audience is young-adult readers, it has been my goal that this text be enjoyable for adult readers. Because of the phenomenon of crossover literature in recent years, young-adult texts are being read by adults. Michael Cart notes that the meaning of “young adult” has seemed to change due to recent economic hardships, which has brought twenty-somethings back home to live with their parents and delay commitments to relationships and work until their thirties (Cart 119). Cart argues that the delay stems from three things: the poor economy, an increased life expectancy, and the age at which Americans reach adulthood (now

believed to be twenty-six instead of twelve) (Cart 119-20). Since “older” folks are reading young-adult literature, publishers and bookstores have looked for new ways to market their products so that they appeal (and sell) to a wider audience.

Writing “Dolus’s Doctrine” has proven a challenging yet rewarding task. Creating a dystopic text was significantly more difficult than I had expected. I think that my subsequent creative works will be better than if I had elected not to write a creative thesis because of the extra time I spent reading and writing in the genre I wanted to write.

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## Chapter One

### Celebration Day

“After the plague of the first born son, the Lord told Moses another plague would spread throughout the world, killing all those filled with unbelief.”

—From “Origins” in *The Book of Law and Faith*

I would rather lie in bed than go to today’s Celebration Service.

Immediately regretting the desire, I slip out of the nightgown and into my gray wool dress I’m required to wear even in summer. I know I will benefit from going to the service, but as I make my bed I feel hot and cramped as I do at church. Breathing deeply, I try and push the feelings aside, but the air still feels hot and sticky in my room. My feet feel moist against the hardwood floor and even though I swept the night before, I feel grit and dust under my bare feet. I imagine it clinging to me, turning my soles black as I leave my small, white-walled room to go and wake Lissa. I walk softly down the hall, avoiding the creaky board in the middle of the floor.

The flat morning-gospel songs make their way up the stairs and I know today isn’t going to be easy. Lissa is still asleep when I make it to her room, which seems bigger than mine, even though it isn’t. I pull the thin door shut as I enter, not wanting Aunt Grace to hear us. Lowering myself gently onto the edge of the bed, I admire Lissa’s round face. She seems to glow; the light splashing off the yellow walls illuminates her face. I wish my walls were colorful, but I don’t dare draw

attention to Lissa's bright ones, that way Aunt Grace doesn't have them painted white. I gently rub Lissa's back and whisper to her, trying to rouse her.

She won't know why today is different, and even if Aunt Grace says something, and she surely will, it won't mean the same thing for Lissa as it does for me.

"Lissa," I coo. "It's time to wake up."

She grunts softly and rolls away from me, burrowing further underneath the covers. As she twists, her pudgy foot pops out of the bottom of the blankets. I gently run my fingertip down the arch of her foot and the blankets seem to suck her leg back inside.

"Lissa," I say, this time more playfully. "It's time to wake up." I tickle her and she tries to squirm away. She laughs and finally sits up, giving up the ruse of acting like she's still asleep.

"Good morning," I say, forcing a smile to my face.

"Good morning, Marta," she says as she stretches her little arms.

"You need to get dressed or we're going to be late," I say. Lissa knows the consequences of crossing Aunt Grace and quickly tumbles out of bed. As she puts on her dress, which is identical to mine, except that hers is white, I make her bed. We finish at the same time and I brush her hair before pulling it into a bun at the base of her skull.

We greatly resemble each other, aside from the nine years that separate us. Our green eyes and dark brown hair match our mother's, and the small nose and

golden skin matches our father's. Lissa doesn't remember them though, so I have to tell her about them—the good parts, at least.

Once she's ready, we head downstairs and find Aunt Grace, like she is every morning, pouring over the daily updates and assigned scripture readings for adults. Her hair is pulled back in a severe bun at the top of her head, which makes her features seem sharp. I've only seen Aunt Grace with her hair down a couple of times and she was beautiful, her drawn back features relaxed, making her eyes seem more gentle. She doesn't acknowledge us as we enter the kitchen and we move about as quietly as possible. I hand Lissa two cups and the water pitcher and she busies herself filling them at the table. She holds the pitcher carefully, making sure not to let a single drop spill onto the table.

Two weeks ago, Lissa was pouring milk into our glasses. She was being careful, but as she filled the second glass she bumped the first, spilling the precious contents onto the table. Milk is a special treat, and Aunt Grace—who doesn't even drink milk—was furious. The cold, white liquid covered her morning paper before she had finished reading it. Lissa immediately began to cry and I tried to clean the mess up before Aunt Grace got too upset. My efforts were futile.

Aunt Grace immediately rose from her seat and pulled Lissa off of the chair. She ordered Lissa to lay her hands flat on the countertop and pulled a wooden spoon out of the drawer. I was sure she was going to spank Lissa's bottom, as she'd done to both of us several times before, but this time the wooden spoon slapped across the tops of Lissa's small hands.

*As the spoon smacked her hands again and again, Lissa cried harder. I* watched from the corner of my eye as I wiped up the milk mess. It was no use for me to try and stop Aunt Grace. If I did, she could punish me just the same, if not worse. As our legal guardian, she had been given the right to punish us as she saw fit.

When she finally finished slapping Lissa's hands, we had only a few minutes left before we had to go to school. I walked with Lissa to the bathroom, not daring to carry her since Aunt Grace had forbidden it. I turned on the cold water and plugged the sink.

"Put your hands in," I'd told her.

She did and I knew that even the cold water wasn't going to help keep the swelling down. Her hands were big and puffy, her knuckles bright red, and purple bruises were already forming on her fingers. The medicine cabinet was locked, and only Aunt Grace had the key, so I couldn't give Lissa a painkiller. We walked to school in relative silence that day; the only sound we made was the crunching of leaves underfoot and Lissa's soft whimpering as we made our way the half mile to school.

The toast pops out of the toaster, waking me from the memory, and I put one slice on each of the small white plates. Lissa puts the pitcher back on the counter and we sit down together. We bow our heads and I see Aunt Grace do the same.

"Thank you for our many blessings and for Aunt Grace who takes care of us. Amen," I say.

Aunt Grace raises her head and continues reading her paper. Lissa and I eat dry toast and empty our cups of water. Aunt Grace doesn't let us have more. One morning at the beginning of my sixteenth year she decided we could only have one piece of toast instead of the two and fruit or cheese we'd had before.

"An empty stomach will make you thankful for what you get and will keep you focused on the Lord. *The Book of Law and Faith* says we are to hunger for His instruction and His ways. From now on, only one piece of toast for breakfast," she'd said.

Both Lissa and I wanted to protest but didn't, knowing it would have resulted in a punishment. On the way to school that first morning Aunt Grace changed our breakfast diet, Lissa complained that she was hungry.

"It will be good for us to focus on God more," I'd said.

Lissa just frowned in response.

That same night, I was allowed to read Aunt Grace's *Daily Paper* for the first time. She encouraged me to begin reading the adult papers. In this particular paper, Brother Jacob, the head of the church, had written an article that encouraged fasting. Brother Jacob was a clean-cut, handsome man in his mid-fifties and had been the head of the church for as long as I could remember. Aunt Grace was a firm believer in everything Brother Jacob said.

When he'd said it was against *The Book of Law and Faith* for women to be outside after dark, Aunt Grace quit her job for one that would guarantee her return home before the sun went down, even though she could have requested a pass from the church. Aunt Grace said that only firm believers were real believers.

One of the things the teachers stress at school is complete obedience to their own rules and especially those from the Lord. After we eat, I wash our dishes and hand them to Lissa to be dried. I put the clean dishes into the cupboard and Lissa and I make our way to the back door. We slip into our identical black shoes and silently wait for Aunt Grace to come and lead us out the door. She marches past us without saying a word.

Lissa and I usually whisper on our walks, but with Aunt Grace around we keep silent. Her brown heels click along as we march down the sidewalk, but the shoes that Lissa and I wear land silently on the gray pavement. Abiding by Aunt Grace's rules, we follow her in a single-file line. We walk for three blocks, passing the square, cream-colored houses that are identical to ours.

With only one block before we make it to the church, we walk through our sector's park. I admire the orange, yellow, and red leaves that cling to the trees. Even though autumn is here, the days still have the heat of summer, but the nights are cool. I feel a thin layer of perspiration on my brow and under my arms and enjoy the relief of a small breeze. The path we follow runs beside the fence that protects us from outside dangers. I thank the Lord for the fence and its protection and once we pass the park, we arrive at the church. There are dozens of other people making their way onto the church's neatly manicured lawn and we patiently wait for our turn to enter the small brick building.

We climb the stairs and enter the church. I'm immediately relieved to be out of the smoldering sun and I quickly wipe the sweat from my forehead. A Brother greets Aunt Grace before he takes her arm and escorts us to a pew with only enough

space for two. At first I think Aunt Grace will sit behind us where the Brother offers her a seat, but she refuses, assuring him we can all fit in the small space meant for Lissa and me. Aunt Grace takes her seat and before the Brother goes back to lead another group of people to an available pew, she gives him our identification cards. He scans them quickly without comparing our pictures to our faces using a small machine that hides in the folds of his robe. When the light flashes blue, he gives Aunt Grace the cards and leaves us to squish into the pew.

“On your lap,” Aunt Grace hisses through clenched teeth.

I sit next to Aunt Grace and hoist Lissa onto my lap. The church, which felt so cool before, feels stifling now, and I know it will only get worse. The building is small. Even though the three of us are silent, the rest of the congregation members chatter to their neighbors. As more and more people enter the building, the sound, heat, and stench of body odor worsen. Every Celebration Day and holiday the Brothers manage to get more people in than they should. Aunt Grace tells us we should praise God for the building he has given us instead of complaining about it.

When everyone is seated, the four Brothers who serve at our church make their way to the front of the building where they stand and lead us in an opening prayer. Their voices rise and fall in unison and when they finish we say “amen” together. It’s the same prayer we say every time we come to church, and once it is finished the Brothers lower a screen and turn on a projector.

For many minutes, all we see is the bright yellow flag of the New Republic. Medleys of patriotic tunes and church hymns crackle through the speakers until a metallic pop ends the music. The flag disappears from the screen and we see the

face of Brother Jacob. Although he is looking into a camera, it feels as if he is looking directly at me, no matter where the Brothers seat us in the church.

“Happy Celebration Day!” Brother Jacob’s voice booms from the speakers and he pauses for us to respond. When we do, our voices echo off of the white brick walls. Before the residual “Happy Celebration Days” die out, Brother Jacob begins his sermon. Lissa grows heavier on my lap with each second and my dress itches against my skin. I want to scratch, but Aunt Grace would disapprove, so I try and ignore the dress’s unpleasant texture. The increasing warmth is uncomfortable and I can feel the sweat roll down my back and my chest.

“As you all know, today is a very important day for the church and the New Republic!” He pauses and a series of amens and approving words ripple through the congregation.

“We come together to celebrate, as we do every week at this time, the prophet’s sacrifice and our Savior’s return. Although this is a time of sadness, we are filled with even greater joy knowing that we are the chosen people.” Several in the congregation quietly voice their approvals and agreement.

Brother Jacob smiles as if he can hear them and then goes on. “The Savior has told us that all those prophecies in *The Book of Law and Faith* are true and His arrival confirms them. Just as Moses delivered the slaves from the Egyptians, so too did our Savior deliver us from the evils of the Old World.”

As Brother Jacob speaks, his voice rises, building energy and excitement. His words are like electricity and I can feel a swell of passion. I know others are experiencing the same thing when their hands reach toward Brother Jacob and

heads roll back and forth as their owners are consumed with Brother Jacob's words. He pauses and after a moment he raises his hands in such a way that quiets his congregation.

"Dear Brothers and Sisters," he continues, "the peace we enjoy today is not all that it may seem. We live with a constant threat from the Radicals as well as the weak faith of others here with us today. These problems are not lessening and will soon impact our friends, family, and the very structure of our society." At his words, a hiss comes from the congregation and some of the women cry out in disbelief and fear. I feel a knot of tension twist in the pit of my stomach. What does Brother Jacob mean?

"Don't be afraid. The Savior has assured us that as long as we continue to follow the teachings, we will be safe." Sighs of relief fill the room, and I too feel better with this news.

"However, not all of you are true followers." Brother Jacob's face changes from gentle and passionate to condemning and stern. "You must each search your souls and pray to understand the will of the Savior. You must also be on your guard against those who will try to lead you away from the teachings. They will tell you countless lies and blasphemies to try and trick you." Some of the women pull their children closer—which seems impossible since we're already so crowded—as if they can physically protect them from the Radicals. Aunt Grace doesn't even glance at us as she listens to Brother Jacob. She appears unstirred by Brother Jacob's words, but I know she is hanging on every sound he utters. When his sermons play

on the radio, Lissa and I are forced to remain quiet, even if it means leaving the dirty dishes in the sink for the next day.

“After the slaves were freed from Pharaoh’s clutches, the Lord told Moses that He would send one last plague to wipe out the unbelievers. Our Savior’s arrival is just the beginning of the promises the Lord has given us. We know that soon a plague will come and it will take those who doubt the church, the Savior, and the New Republic. We should not grieve these losses to our community, for those who are taken will only bring trouble and pain to the Savior’s real followers. From now on, you will need to mind your thoughts and your hearts. Guard yourselves against those you suspect of being weaker in the faith.”

Brother Jacob continues speaking, but I bow my head and begin to pray, asking the Lord to help me believe even more than I already do. I ask for forgiveness for all the negative thoughts I have about Aunt Grace, realizing that her strict rules are intended to benefit Lissa and me.

I’m still deep in prayer when something Brother Jacob says pulls my focus back into the church. I peek a glance at the screen and realize the face of Brother Jacob is gone. In its place are the standard government identification photos of my mother and father. The fading mark of a stamp covers half of their faces and reads “Radicals: Highly Dangerous.”

## Chapter Two

### Observed

“It is the holy and lawful duty of each citizen to report suspicious behavior associated with Radicals to Brothers of the church or military personnel. Failure to do so violates articles 6.4, 17.8, 121.0, and 138.9 and warrants arrest and trial as a Radical sympathizer.”

—From “Understanding the Laws of the New Republic”

My first memory is of looking at a fish in a pet store. I remember thinking the dogs and cats were cute, but I wanted a goldfish. I stood with my face and hands pressed against the tank and watched as hundreds of tiny fish swam through the water.

My mother told me it was time to go and I begged her for a fish.

“Just one!” I’d pleaded, but her answer was final. We weren’t getting a fish. I couldn’t have been more than three or four, and in my anger at not getting a fish I stomped my feet all the way out the door.

As we began to cross the street, a car appeared and my mother yanked me back to the safety of the sidewalk. Even though she saved my life, I ended up with a scraped and bloodied knee. I remember how bad it felt, but maybe it was just the sight of the bright red liquid oozing down my leg.

All the way home she tried to comfort me and silence my crying. When we got back home, my tears worsened when my father poured peroxide on my knee. The bubbles dripped off my leg and into the sink, turning the white basin pink. The

burning I felt in my leg was much worse than actually scraping my knee and the phenomena of the bubbles sickened me.

With the majority of the congregation looking at me now, I feel that same way as I did when my father poured the peroxide on my open wound. I feel like a kid with no way to escape the pain and the sickening feeling I get when so many eyes send burning looks my way. I wish I could disappear in the pew, but when Lissa says, “Momma?” we get even more attention.

I sneak a sidelong glance at Aunt Grace, hoping to see her staring defiantly back into the eyes of our onlookers, but she is scowling at Lissa and me just like everyone else. No, not like everyone else. I don’t have to wonder why her face resembles the others; she told us on the very first day Lissa and I arrived. “I am only taking you in because it is my duty. I plan to kill the devil inside of you and to bring you up according to the ways of the Lord.” Aunt Grace’s voice had been full of hostility and annoyance. Anytime she could manage it, she would make some kind of jab at our parents.

“Serves them right for throwing their lot in with the Radicals,” she’d say.

Or, “You two had better turn out better than that worthless sister and her scum-of-the-earth husband.”

“Coming to live here is the best thing that will ever happen for you two,” she insisted.

Aunt Grace’s glare is full of all the things she’s ever said or thought about my parents. Lissa realizes everyone is looking at us and begins to squirm in my lap.

Finally, Brother Jacob reappears on the screen and the images of my parents shrink and join several other photos as they scroll across the bottom of the screen.

“These Radicals were plotting to bring down our government by filling the minds of the weak with false teachings. They ultimately planned to assassinate the Savior.”

The congregation roars and some of the men stand up and begin to swing their arms angrily. I still feel sick, but I am glad that the focus has shifted back to Brother Jacob. I feel ashamed of my parents’ actions and wish they hadn’t been Radicals. I don’t like how the Radicals are threatening to destroy our country.

Brother Jacob begins speaking again, but the words are drowned out by the noises the men are making. Their anger is fueled and directed at the Radicals. The four Brothers try to silence the disruptive men, and when they finally do Brother Jacob is almost done with his sermon. I hear a hiss of anger at missing Brother Jacob’s words from Aunt Grace, and I know she will be unhappy for the rest of the week.

“Remember the Lord’s promise to Moses and reexamine your hearts and guard yourselves against the Radicals. I pray that you all have a blessed Celebration Day.” Brother Jacob’s face fades away and the flag of the New Republic returns. Though the sermon is over, the Brothers will lead us in worship songs and prayer before escorting us out of the building. The stench of body odor fills the church like an offering of incense.

During the songs I sing as loudly and beautifully as I can, hoping that the Lord will be pleased with my offering of song. Because we sit wherever the Brothers can

squeeze us in, people surround me who I've never seen before. The hateful glares I received during Brother Jacob's sermon are transformed to small smiles and warm looks as people crane their necks to find who is singing. Their looks of approval fill me with a sense of pride and I try to squash the feelings away.

"Dear Lord," I pray during the final prayer, "please show mercy on my parents when their time of judgment comes." Everything I've read from school or the daily papers says that when we die we all wait until we can be judged at the same time. I like to believe that if I pray enough on my parents' behalf the Lord will save their souls, but Aunt Grace has assured me this is not the way it works.

After the prayer, the church buzzes with conversation and the Brothers try to quickly usher everyone out of the building. They wear more layers than I do and I can see their deep red robes darkening with sweat. Once we are out of the building, they are able to remove the Celebration Day attire and change into the everyday burgundy outfits the church has given them.

Finally, the Brothers make it to our side of the church, and when they usher us toward the door I fight the urge to push past Aunt Grace and into the fresh air. My dress is completely drenched in sweat and clings to my figure. It makes me feel exposed, but people are hurrying to get home and have lunch so they aren't looking at us and the clinging dress doesn't make me feel so exposed.

We start to make our way back down the block and to Aunt Grace's house when something—someone rather—catches my attention. On the opposite corner of the street stands a girl in my grade. Her name is Rebecca, I think, and she too is wearing a gray wool dress. Her hair is pulled back in a low bun, but something

about her seems different. She's giving me a quizzical look and I'm not sure if it is because of what happened during the Celebration Day service or because of something else.

Since Aunt Grace keeps a brisk pace, I'm not able to get a better look at Rebecca's face. My sweat-soaked dress and flushed cheeks, along with what happened in church, are enough for her to give me odd looks. Since I can't look back and see her face anymore, I put it out of my mind and begin to steel myself for the afternoon at home with Aunt Grace.

### Chapter 3

#### Family History

“Privacy is part of the Old World. Transparency and honesty are key elements for the survival of the New Republic.”

—From *The Daily Papers*, March 7, 2022

Sometimes I dream about my parents. I wonder what things would be like if we were still together. I like to have conversations with Lissa about the things we would do with them and she likes to pretend that she remembers them.

They were taken away when she was only two, and there isn't a thing she knows about them that I haven't told her. I keep some memories for myself, though.

For my tenth birthday, my parents got me a camera. It was before the memory cards and batteries were too expensive to buy in the stores and I spent the weeks following my birthday taking pictures of everything—both the ordinary and the extraordinary.

The more pictures I took, the better I became at using the camera. The pictures were no longer blurry or exceptionally dark. By the time Lissa and I moved into Aunt Grace's house, it was too expensive to take pictures anymore and even more costly to develop them. Aunt Grace—upon learning that I owned a camera—dug through her orderly stack of daily papers and found the ones that addressed cameras and photography. She made me read them all and asked me to—as Brother Jacob suggested in one of the papers—throw out the “diabolic contraption,” as well as all of the photos I'd saved.

chapter on heathen music, art, and literature in *The Book of Law and Faith*. Aunt Grace only turns it off at night or when we have company over—which is hardly ever. If it weren't for the church-run radio stations, I'm sure radios would be considered "diabolical contraptions."

In recent years, the government has directed us to get rid of more and more of our electronic appliances. At first, people held on to them out of nostalgia, but once it became clear that the failed satellites wouldn't be repaired, old phones and GPSs were given to the government to be recycled and made into new devices for finding and eradicating the Radicals. Computers, televisions, and cameras have been modified to monitor the sectors and scan the areas between them for Radicals.

According to *The Daily Papers* and Brother Jacob, there are still thousands of Radicals who haven't been found. Aside from my parents, I haven't met a Radical, not that I know of anyway. Even though I spent all my time with them and we all went to church where the Brothers showed us Brother Jacob's sermons, I never suspected them of being Radicals. I remember all the evidence the soldiers found in our own home that was taken after they were killed. They had papers that outlined plans to destroy the church and several of the other government buildings in our sector. The government officials also found maps and illegal correspondences that proved their involvement.

I can feel Aunt Grace's eyes boring into me and I make a real effort to push the thoughts of my parents out of my mind. I finish my reading and begin my chores. As I sweep the floor I feel relieved that the day has passed without any

drama, aside from what happened at church, and I say a quick prayer of thanksgiving.

My thankfulness is premature, though. When Aunt Grace calls us to dinner, she says a quick prayer and then we eat in silence for a few minutes until she clears her throat.

“Lissa, do you know what makes today special?” she asks, her voice sickly sweet.

Lissa stops trying to scoop her peas onto her spoon and thinks before answering. “It’s Celebration Day.”

I will Aunt Grace to let the conversation go, but she doesn’t. “And we had Celebration Day last week. Why is today different from all of the other Celebration Days during the year?”

Lissa thinks again, trying to figure out the date, but nothing stands out to her. Nothing would. She finally confesses her ignorance and Aunt Grace shifts her hawk-like eyes to me. Her tone loses all sweetness and becomes sharp. “Do you know, Marta?”

“I do,” I say, my voice sounding even and emotionless in my own ears. I give the answers she wants as if I were telling her the date or another piece of trivial information. “Today is the day that marks the fifth anniversary of the elimination of two of the chief Radicals from our sector, Cynthia Todd and Daniel Hoyle.”

Aunt Grace makes a face that is supposed to be a smile. “Very good. Do you remember now?” she asks Lissa.

Lissa, whether she really remembers or not, gives a small nod and I can see her trying to commit the details to memory.

“Do you remember them?”

“No.”

“Your sister does. Don’t you?”

I nod my head and roll the peas around on my plate, trying to look as if the topic doesn’t mean anything to me. I pray for a knock on the door or an urgent news bulletin to blare over the radio. Neither stops the conversation.

“What do you remember?” Lissa asks, completely intrigued that I remember these Radicals.

“They were planning to blow up the church and kill all of the Brothers and government workers. They were going to do it on a Celebration Day, and then they were going to leave the sector and try to kill the Savior and Brother Jacob. They also had maps and targets where they planned to drop nuclear bombs that would wipe out most of the New Republic.”

“Mmmm,” Aunt Grace confirms as she sips on the water from her glass.

“What else?”

“They were our parents.” My voice is flat and, as if it doesn’t really bother me to tell Lissa about this side of our parents, I take a bite of chicken and manage to swallow.

Lissa gasps in surprise. “Our parents were going to kill Brother Jacob and the Savior?”

“They were going to kill all of us,” Aunt Grace pipes up before I can answer.

Lissa's eyes well with tears and when she speaks her voice sounds thick. "They were going to kill us?" Her spoonful of peas slides out of her hand and the small vegetables scatter back onto the plate.

"Yes. They were going to kill us." As I say the words, I feel as if a cold wave has washed over me. I feel resentment swell up inside of me like bile, angry with my parents for making me have this conversation with Lissa. If they hadn't been Radicals then they wouldn't have been killed for it and we wouldn't have to live with Aunt Grace and have conversations like these. "You were almost two when they were eliminated for our protection." I use the same phrase that is used in school and at church when referring to dead Radicals.

Lissa doesn't ask any more questions and I can feel the resentment rising up within me. I want to yell or hit something, but I can't. Instead, I finish my meal, grinding the chicken and peas with more force than necessary. Sometimes I think Aunt Grace tries to use my parents to hurt me. When we all finish eating, Aunt Grace watches as Lissa and I do the dishes. Once the small white kitchen is back in order, she sends Lissa to get ready for bed and I am given today's paper.

"When you finish you may go to bed," Aunt Grace says.

"Thank you," I say as I skim the page. The entire publication is only one sheet of paper, printed on the front and back, and takes only a few minutes to read. Out of habit, I read it twice. I decided, when Aunt Grace first allowed me to read the papers, that if she could read them over ten times by the end of the day, I should be able to read them at least twice.

Once I finish, I place the paper on the top of this month's stack, making sure the edges of each page line up nicely. At the end of the month, all the papers are collected and recycled to make new papers. New papers are delivered early in the morning to each home by some of the paper-mill workers.

At school, it is rumored that the paper-mill workers aren't actually humans at all. No one knows of a single person who works at the paper mill, but almost everyone has caught a glimpse of the paper deliverers.

I saw a worker one night almost a year ago. There was an early morning thunderstorm that woke me up. I sat on the edge of my bed, watching the lightening dance across the sky. The rain drummed on the roof and flowed down the glass, blurring my vision, but I definitely saw one.

Something caught my eye and I squinted to make it out. When the light flashed again I saw a silhouetted figure moving across our yard. The figure was hunched over and moved awkwardly. With the next bolt of lightening I saw the unidentifiable figure bend down and place something on our doorstep. I tried to get a better look, but when the lightening lit up the yard no more than five seconds later, the figure was gone.

When Aunt Grace found the soggy remnants of the paper on the step the next morning she immediately called the paper mill and asked for a new paper. A new one was delivered by one of the Brothers and I wondered why a Brother brought it when Aunt Grace hadn't called them.

When the subject of the paper deliverers was brought up again, I shared my story with my classmates. They felt my story confirmed the suspicions and each of

my friends took turns sharing stories about when they saw a deliverer or someone they knew did, but we eventually outgrew the awe of the mysterious deliverers.

I tell Aunt Grace goodnight and make my way to Lissa's room. We say our nightly prayers together, and as I'm about to leave the room I hear her small voice call out. "Did they love us?"

At first, I don't know how to respond. They acted like they loved us, so maybe, but they were also willing to kill us, so maybe not. "I don't know," I finally say, because in truth I don't.

As I fall asleep, thoughts of my parents and paper deliverers and Radicals blend in my mind. Something wakes me in the middle of the night. I listen for any unusual noises, but I don't hear anything. With the memory of paper deliverers fresh in my mind, I look out the window. I'm about to settle back down and go to sleep when I see a figure standing next to the shrubs in our front yard. After a minute, I finally realize it's Rebecca staring back at me.

## Chapter Four

## Rebecca

“For those who live in accordance with the laws of the church, enormous riches are set aside for them in heaven.”

—From “Religious Rewards” in *The Book of Law and Faith*

I blink my eyes and rub them quickly, like the cartoons I watched as a child. I am not dreaming; Rebecca really is in our yard. Her face is angled toward my window, but I’m not sure she actually sees me. I scoot away from the window just in case the light of the moon or street lamps can reach my face.

The more I watch her standing there, the less convinced I am she’s looking at my window. Her face seems to be taking in the entire house.

“What is she doing?” I whisper to myself. I consider going out and confronting her, but I don’t want to get caught opening the door without permission, especially after curfew.

My mind races to think of an explanation, but everything I can think of I quickly dismiss. I consider sleepwalking, paper delivering, and insanity, but none of those things seem plausible.

I’m not sure what time it is and I reach for the watch on my nightstand. I position it in the available light so I can read the face and see that it’s just after three. I look out the window, trying to think of a reason she might be here, but I can’t think of any.

I glance out the window again and I see her starting to leave the yard and head back up the hill toward her house. Stepping into the light, I consider knocking on the window to let her know I saw her, but stop myself, realizing that doing so will probably wake Aunt Grace.

When her figure disappears, I sit back down on my bed. All of a sudden, I feel cranky and am irritated that I am awake. I slide back under the covers and relish the lingering warmth. I force my eyes to close. Even though I am tired, my mind is racing and I can tell sleep will evade me if I don't try to force my mind and body to sleep.

After nearly ten minutes of trying to fall asleep, I let my mind wander, hoping a different approach will bring sleep. I realize that I never figured out what woke me up and I rack my brain, trying to recall those first few moments of sleep-hazed awareness, but nothing out of the ordinary comes to mind.

I consider what I will say to Rebecca if I see her at school tomorrow. We aren't in the same class and we seldom cross paths, but I'm sure I could find her during our lunch break. In the morning, I dress quickly, eager to get to school and confront her. I'm dying to get out of the house, but struggle to act normal. Aunt Grace finally opens the door and lets us go like she does every morning.

"Hurry up," I urge Lissa who wants to dawdle this morning. She swings her worn cloth bag that holds her lunch and books and I tell her to stop.

"Why?"

"I have to talk to someone before class," I say. She speeds up a little, but her small steps are still too slow for the pace I want to keep.

“Who?”

I ignore the question and give a slight tug on Lissa’s arm, pulling her along. The school isn’t far from Aunt Grace’s house and we only arrive a minute or two earlier than usual. Since I don’t really know Rebecca, I’m not sure where she is before classes begin so I leave Lissa with her friends and speed through the halls. Several of the teachers give me sharp looks and I slow momentarily as I pass them.

The warning bell rings and I give up my search. I join the line of girls standing outside of my classroom, and when the final bell rings our teacher ushers us inside. I’m half-distracted from the lectures, and when the teacher calls on me I have to ask her to repeat the question. She looks around the room, as if something on the pale green walls could have distracted me. My face burns and I want to melt into the floor.

Making a mark in her grade book she repeats her question. “When did the founders of the New Republic first meet?”

“The twenty-sixth day of September in two thousand twenty,” I say, relieved that it wasn’t something I couldn’t remember. Miss Park purses her lips as if unhappy I answered correctly and gives me a slight nod. She reaches for the teacher’s pin on her left breast and makes sure it is still straight.

I focus all of my attention on the rest of the lesson until the bell rings, freeing us for lunch. I grab the bag with my lunch from my desk and bolt into the hallway. I rush through the hall and keep my eyes peeled for Rebecca. The halls fill with girls and I’d never realized how exactly the same we all look in our gray and white dresses and pulled-back hair.

All of the girls under ten wear white dresses, so they are easy enough to look over, but everyone else wears the same gray wool I do. There are only two sixteen-year-old classes, but they are positioned on the opposite sides of the building. When I reach the other classroom, girls are pouring out of the room and I don't see Rebecca anywhere.

"Where is Rebecca?" I ask a girl who sat near me at church yesterday.

"She isn't here today," the girl says and then takes a bite from her sandwich.

The thrill and anticipation I felt while looking for her vanishes and is replaced with a sense of disappointment as I make my way to the bench where I usually eat my lunch. There are a couple of girls in my usual place and I take a seat next to them. Their conversation doesn't alter in the least and, even though I try not to, I listen in.

"Her parents were Radicals. I bet she's one too," says the blue-eyed girl to my immediate left. At first I think I'm their topic of conversation, but before I can defend myself, the other responds.

"That's probably why they took her."

"They've never taken a child for being a Radical, have they?"

"I don't think so. Maybe she was caught with a boy."

"No. Mary was caught with a boy and she just had to go to training for an extra month," says blue eyes.

The other gasps. "Mary? Really? What about the boy?"

"Well, Katie said nothing happened to him."

"Why not? Wait, how does Katie know anything?"

“It’s her cousin. She said he was going to training the next week and he decided to enlist afterwards,” blue-eyes says with a shrug.

Their conversation is intriguing but not surprising. Boys and girls don’t go to school together, which is why all the girls from my sector fit in this building. The boys’ school is on the other side of the sector so the paths between us seldom cross. The church strongly encourages us not to mingle until after we’ve matured and have all finished our required training. The Brothers and teachers have taught us that mingling with the opposite sex often leads people to break several of the religious laws and can ultimately lead us away from the church. I am glad that our sector has separate schools for boys and girls.

The majority of citizens have been to some kind of training. In the first few years after the New Republic was established, most of the adults went to a month-long course, Aunt Grace and my parents included. The courses informed them on how the New Republic would work as a faith-based government. For those who wanted to have jobs as government employees or officials, an extra eighteen months of training was required.

When I turn eighteen I will go, like all the boys and girls in the country, to a three-month course where we’ll be given even more extensive training in our religion and the understanding of the government. We also learn some of the basic military procedures and are given the option to enlist. Those who decide to enlist after the required training either become soldiers or Brothers or other government workers.

I haven't given much thought to what I want to do after I finish my training and I don't have much time to figure it out. I've thought about serving as a Sister or a teacher, but living a life of solitude doesn't appeal to me. I imagine myself ending up like Aunt Grace and I shudder. Although she isn't a Sister or a teacher, she lives as if she were, aside from having two children to care for.

Space at the adult courses was limited in the first several years and when Aunt Grace went, she'd already decided to take the additional training and serve as a Sister. She reminds us that she was only a few weeks away from completing her training when our parents died. As our only living relative, she was required to take us, but if she had finished her training before their deaths, Lissa and I would have become wards of the church. Living with Aunt Grace is the better option.

The Brothers who care for the orphan children are only given a small percentage of the funds collected on Celebration Day mornings, regardless of how many children they care for. Most of the Brothers' charges are incredibly thin and usually sick. Their clothes are either too large or too small, depending on what is available. Regardless of the sizes, they are always stained and worn thin.

When the final bell rings at the end of the day, I find Lissa in our usual meeting place and we walk home. Near the school we remain silent, but as soon as we turn the corner and the brown brick building disappears, Lissa gushes to tell me the details of her day. She speaks in low tones, as is proper for women.

"Today, Julie didn't bring her homework to school, and when Miss Adams asked for everyone to turn it in she started to cry, and then Miss Adams spanked her with the ruler. After that we did math, and when Miss Adams called on me...." Lissa

keeps talking, and as she does my mind wanders back to the conversation I heard between the two girls during my lunch period. My thoughts are interrupted when Lissa lets out a startled yelp.

I look up and see a woman—no, not a woman, a girl—standing directly in front of us. I've been watching the cracked, gray sidewalk, and I hadn't noticed her presence in my periphery. When I examine her more closely, I realize why.

Her hair is loose and long strands drape around her shoulders. Leaves and twigs jut out of the tangled mess. The bushes next to us tremble and I realize that is where she was hiding, most likely waiting for us to pass.

"You have to leave," Rebecca hisses, grabbing my elbow. Her fingers are icy even in the heat of the day.

"Let go of me," I say, trying to pull my arm free from her grasp. Her fingers dig deeper into my skin and I can feel her nails as they cut into my flesh.

"You have to leave," she repeats. "Before they take you."

"You're hurting me. Let go." Her eyes are wild, and when she looks down at my arm she seems to realize what she is doing. She loosens her grasp and I pull my arm out of her reach. I quickly inspect the crescent-moon marks in my skin and am relieved that they aren't bleeding.

Lissa backs away from Rebecca and presses herself into me. Her hand clamps around my skirt and I feel her tug. "Let's go," she says.

I reach for Lissa's hand. I try to lead her around Rebecca, but instead of letting us pass, Rebecca blocks our way.

"They're coming for you. They're coming for all of us. You have to get out."

“What are you talking about?”

She quickly glances around to see if anyone can hear. We are the only ones around, but her paranoia makes me double check too. She lowers her voice so I have to lean in to hear. “Radicals,” she breathes.

I pull away; her word lands like a hot coal in my ear. “Let’s go. Now.” This time, as Rebecca tries to stop us from leaving, I push her aside, guiding Lissa away. “Hurry,” I mutter, low enough that only she can hear. We move quickly down the sidewalk, hurrying home and away from Rebecca.

“Listen,” she urges as she keeps pace beside me. Her dress is filthy and I wonder what she has been doing all day. “I know you aren’t a Radical. Your parents weren’t either. That’s what they think you are, though. Anyone who might be a threat is considered a Radical, whether you want to take down the New Republic or not. Because your parents were considered Radicals, they’re watching you too. You have to leave before they take or kill you.” Her words make me reconsider the possibility that she is insane.

We finally arrive in front of Aunt Grace’s house. I know she won’t be home from work yet and I don’t want Rebecca milling around when she arrives. I gently push Lissa toward the house and turn to confront Rebecca.

“Listen. I will pray for you, but you have to leave before Aunt Grace gets home.” I cross my arms over my chest and stand in what I hope is a defiant and authoritative posture. She doesn’t move.

“Leave.”

“No.”

“They’re going to take you. You have to leave.”

“Let’s say I did decide to leave. Where would I go?”

She grabs my right arm, pulling it away from my chest. One of her hands forces mine open and the other lays a piece of paper on my upturned palm. She forces my hand back closed, squeezing mine with both of hers. The pressure makes my hand ache and I wonder if she’s trying to make my skin absorb the paper. She releases me and this time I look around to see if anyone saw. I see no one.

“Don’t let anyone else see it. Read it. Memorize it. Destroy it.” The grave tone in her voice suddenly makes me wonder if she isn’t crazy.

A patrol vehicle turns onto the road and slowly makes its way down the street. Rebecca pulls away from me and a panicked look fills her eyes.

“I have to go.”

Before I can respond, she dashes away, speeding down the sidewalk. As I move to the door, I watch as she runs. I can hear her black shoes smacking against the pavement, the sound fading the further away she gets.

Her running figure attracts the soldier’s attention and I see the passenger point at Rebecca. The vehicle accelerates, closing the distance between them before stopping suddenly. My hand rests on the doorknob and I don’t move as I watch the passenger—a young, muscular soldier—get out of the vehicle and run after Rebecca. Her blonde hair ripples behind her as she runs. The soldier is much faster than Rebecca and quickly closes the short distance between them.

Still running, the soldier reaches to his side and I see him raise a gun. He stops, aims, and fires.

## Chapter Five

### Blood

“In the old days, when our country was called the United States of America, the society was coveted by peoples of all nations. America was once a great fighting nation, winning wars fought throughout the world. With time, each country developed nuclear arms. In 2019, many of the countries that still held grudges for their lost wars fired nuclear missiles at the United States, successfully eliminating over 90% of its government officials and destroying the East and most of the Western seaboard.”

—An excerpt from *An Old History* by Dr. Thomas Walters

All I see is blood as I fall to the ground. It spreads across the earth and slowly rolls toward me. I’m pressed flat against the earth, the smell of dirt and blood mixing in my nose. I am all too aware of the hot air my lungs pull in and out too quickly. I try to keep quiet. I try not to panic.

I wriggle myself under the bushes, trying to hide, but also trying to see. I need to know what is happening. I focus on my breathing and try to settle into a more normal rhythm. I feel like my entire body is under a blanket and the cool, oxygen-filled air quickly grows hot as I continue breathing.

I think about the cold dirt and the merciful shade of the bushes. I think about getting caught.

I feel tears slide down my cheeks and land on my clenched fists. They hang on to the bottom of my chin and I’m thankful that I can at least cry in silence.

The soldier with the gun moves away from the bloody mess on the ground. Closer to where I lay. The sun suddenly feels hot on my left foot and I jerk the rest of my body under the bush. He doesn't notice the trembling plant behind him.

The other soldier squats down and moves her hair away. I can see his fingers search for a pulse. He gives the gun-bearing soldier a quick headshake. They don't speak.

The second soldier comes and stands next to the bush. I don't move, and I try not to breathe. I look through their legs and see my father. His arms are tied behind him and he is on his knees. Though he makes no sound, rivers of salty tears pour from his eyes. His lower lip is busted open and a thin stream of blood merges with the tears.

I feel two hands grasp onto me, one securing my arm while the other touches my back. I try to scream, but the air passes out of me, leaving the sound stuck somewhere inside of me.

I see Lissa's face. I realize something isn't right; she shouldn't be here. She wears a strange expression, but before I can ask about it she gives me a warning nod and then slowly pulls me off the ground. I look over the bushes and see the two soldiers in the middle of the street, Rebecca's body hanging limply in their arms. They toss her unceremoniously into the back of the vehicle and slam the door shut. I don't see any blood, aside from a few small scrapes on her arms and knees.

Lissa is gently pulling me inside Aunt Grace's house and I realize how much danger we could be in if the soldiers turn around and notice us. With danger so

near, I feel as if Rebecca's note has become an angry bee in my hand. I want to fling the paper away and run from the poisonous words and ideas it surely carries.

Instead, I hold the paper tightly in my fist and, once Lissa shuts the door behind us, I take it to my room. Afraid Aunt Grace will see it, I slip it under my blanket and then pull the heavy material tight once again. I'll have to look at the note later, when I'm alone.

I glance out the window and see the soldiers scouring the streets for others who might be with Rebecca. I'm glad I was so near the house when they caught her and that Lissa was able to pull me to safety before the burly men saw me. Finally, they get in the truck and the vehicle resumes its slow patrol down the road. I stare at the place where I'm sure Rebecca fell, but I see nothing. I see Aunt Grace appear seemingly out of nowhere. She's moving at her normal brisk pace, but in my state of shock she seems to be flying over the pavement.

My brain slowly makes the connection with what I see and what I know. Aunt Grace is about to enter the house and I'm gawking out my bedroom window, not downstairs working on my homework where I should be.

I move away from the window as the vehicle turns down a new street and out of view. I hurry as best I can down the stairs and land in my chair just as Aunt Grace enters the house. Lissa has mercifully opened my books and set my pencil and papers beside it. I snatch up the pencil and stare at my open book, trying to appear deep in study. I'm being deceitful and I know it.

Aunt Grace enters the kitchen and glances down her nose at us. Her olive-green dress is covered with dust and I know that she must have spent the afternoon

working in our sector's garden. She doesn't say anything, just looks at us before leaving to read today's paper in the living room. When she disappears, Lissa shoots me a questioning look and I shake my head while mouthing a thank you. She nods, her face bearing a warning mixed with a hint of suspicion.

I realize that even though she is small and I've always thought of her as a little kid, she's really quite perceptive and more mature than I give her credit for. The rest of the night I think about Lissa's saving actions and the note that has the power to condemn me.

After supper I read through the *Daily Paper* an extra time in an attempt to absorb anything it says. My mind is already preoccupied with the note. My eyes slip over the words on the page, hanging on to only a few every other line. Sighing, I place the paper on the top of the stack of other papers.

I'm not sure what to do with the note. I could throw it away without reading it, but if I do that I'll always wonder what it says. But if I read it, the words may stay tangled up in my mind forever.

I reach for my glass on the counter and fill it with water. I drain the glass and fill it again. I drink more slowly this time, hoping the water will clear my head. When the glass is empty again, I return it to its place and head into the living room.

Aunt Grace is knitting something, most likely a blanket, to give away to someone who needs it. She works near the window, taking advantage of the fading light. She doesn't look up from her flying needles, but I know she can knit an entire blanket flawlessly without even looking at it.

"I don't feel well. I think I'll go to bed." I wait for her to say something or at least acknowledge my presence. She doesn't. I turn away and climb the stairs. As I climb, the knot in my stomach tightens.

I slip into the bathroom and let my hair down. I run a comb through it and brush my teeth before wetting a washcloth to clean my face. I feel like the dirt is still there, even though it isn't. I want to take a bath to try and wash off the blood and dirt I imagine is there, but I'm not allowed until tomorrow.

Since our water supply is somewhat limited, we are forced to ration what we have. Our water allowance would allow us to take baths every day, but Aunt Grace wants us to save all that we can. I don't mind during the cooler months, but I feel sticky and smell during the warm ones.

As I slip out of the bathroom, I pass Lissa's room. She's already asleep and I wish I could escape as quickly into unconsciousness as she does. In my room, I quickly shimmy out of my dress and into my nightgown. I pull back the covers slowly so I can grab the note before losing it in the half-dark.

I crawl into my bed, the note crinkled in my hand. I wrap the cool sheets around me and try to relax. Aunt Grace turns the radio off, silencing the evening's music before coming upstairs, and the quiet feels deafening. I hear her make her way up the stairs and I jam my hand with the note under the pillow. I release the note and pull my arm out, laying it in a more natural position. I force my features into what I hope is a believable sleeping pose.

I can hear Aunt Grace's even breathing as she stands outside my room. I can feel—or I'm convinced I can—her eyes burning through me. I don't move and force my breathing to remain even. I hear her footsteps carry her into her room.

I wait for what seems like hours before I even roll over. The lights from the passing patrol vehicles spill onto the wall when it passes every fifteen minutes, and I count the number of times the lights appear. Two so far.

I decide to wait to read the note. If I'm still awake after the patrol lights flash across my wall four more times, I'll read it. If I'm asleep, I'll figure out what to do tomorrow.

I shut my eyes and pray. I pray for sleep, for wisdom, for Lissa, for Rebecca, for my parents, and for Aunt Grace. I pray for the Savior and the Brothers. Sleep doesn't come. The darkness behind my eyelids is lightened as the patrol passes.

After I finish praying, I begin to count. I count slowly, visualizing the shapes of the digits, the curves of the threes and eights and the harsh angles of sevens and fours. Two more patrols pass before I give up counting.

I slowly begin to unroll the paper. Once Rebecca's note is flattened on the mattress, I cover it with my hand. The fourth patrol passes and I pick the paper up, sitting up at the same time. I turn it over in my hand and lean toward the window to take advantage of the half-moon's light.

I read Rebecca's quickly scrawled letters, "Cherry Lane 6712—11:15 tomorrow night."

## Chapter Six

## Half Past Late

“And the Savior appeared to the people. He brought hope for the future and showed the people that they had lived in sin for far too long. Many of the people didn’t know or recognize Him, as He had been forgotten in the chaotic ebb and flow of everyday life. He worked with the leaders of the people to reestablish a new government that focused on the teachings of the church.”

—From “Introduction” in *Understanding Dolus’s Doctrine* by Sister Annette P. Jones

I did like Rebecca told me to. I threw away the note. Now all I can think about is if I memorized and understood it correctly. She’d written a time and a place, but I wasn’t sure if it meant I was supposed to go or stay away from it. During lunch I wanted to look for her to see if she’d been released, but after watching the soldiers shoot and take her away yesterday, I couldn’t bring myself to even go near her side of the building.

I stay in the hallway that leads to my classroom and sit quietly on a bench and eat my lunch. Two of my friends, Barbara and Rita, join me near the end of our break. Even though I try to act engaged in their conversation, I can tell they are irritated that I’m distracted by their huffs and rolling eyes when I ask them to repeat what they’ve said.

It’s okay, though. I’ve never really been one of the popular girls, especially with Radical parents. Even though I’ve been accepted—or maybe just tolerated—I haven’t made a strong connection with any of my friends. When my parents died,

my closest friends completely turned away from me. I knew they were afraid of me and my association with the Radicals. I'm sure their parents didn't discourage the fear at home.

Based on how Aunt Grace treats us, I'm sure others think that Radicalism runs in the blood. Aunt Grace certainly seems to believe that, with enough teaching and church, the tendency for Radicalism can be reduced if not completely eliminated. If I'm being completely honest, I think Aunt Grace's strict rules have made me a better person. I certainly don't want to upset the government or the church, and since we moved in with Aunt Grace, Lissa and I have both developed a better relationship with the Lord.

I say a quick prayer, asking for a clear mind and try to listen to Barbara and Rita. They are discussing the Old World from what we've heard at church, in school, and word of mouth.

"It must have been awful. Think about it. All those fake religions and the technology," Rita says.

"My Papa said he read books about people who had technology *inside* their arms and brains, and who knows where else!" Barbara adds.

"Really. No wonder there were so many diseases."

"And all that violence!"

"I'm so glad we didn't live through those times," Rita sighs.

"I think the Strike was a blessing," I say. Both Rita and Barbara look at me as if they forgot I was there. "Without it, we might have had those diseases or the technology, and we probably wouldn't be saved."

“You’re right,” Rita says while Barbara mutters, “Praise the Savior!”

We’re quiet for a moment, each of us—I’m sure—thanking the Lord for the Strike and everything that happened because of it.

“Did you read the paper last night?” Barbara asks, breaking the silence.

“I couldn’t believe it!” Rita says.

My mind whirls as I try and recall anything that I read last night. The only thing that comes is Rebecca’s note. I mentally chide myself for letting her note distract me from the papers.

“What did it say?” I ask.

Rita is quick to answer. “There’s a plague spreading throughout the sectors. No one’s sure where it’s coming from, and it’s already killed hundreds of people. It’s moving quickly.”

“Who wrote the article?”

“Brother Jacob,” Barbara says. “He says we just need to pray for our fellow citizens and trust in the Lord. It’s the first major disease since the Strike.”

“Do you think it’s from the—,” Rita looks around to see who else is near. She leans in and breathes in a soft voice, “Radicals?”

Periodically, the Radicals stage attacks on the church and the government. They usually kill or capture only a couple of people every time. Mostly their attacks lead to their capture and elimination. The government hasn’t searched in earnest for the enemy’s camp for a number of reasons. It costs the government too much money to try and find the Radicals when they will, eventually, get captured during an attack.

We wonder if the Radicals created the virus, but it seems unlikely that they could develop any kind of disease on purpose. The year we turn ten and graduate from the white dress to the gray, we are taken on a trip outside of the sector to see the remains of the Old World.

All of my classmates were packed onto a bus, along with several teachers, Soldiers, Sisters, and Brothers, and were driven outside the gates that protect our city. We drove for maybe half an hour, passing through fields that were overgrown with prairie grasses and over the bridge that stretches across what a sign has marked as the Mississippi River. The bus driver drove us on a cleared route through a town, showing us all the decaying buildings and the mess left by the town's previous inhabitants.

Most of the roads had cars abandoned on them, doors and windows left open, evidence of the fear and chaos that took place during the attacks. There was one road that wasn't as completely cleared of cars as the others. For the most part, cars were moved into yards or onto other roads so the tour could take place, but there was one time when the bus had to crawl between two cars. We could see that the cars were littered with trash and covered in dirt. Plants were growing inside them and the seats were torn open from wild animals, most likely. One girl—I can't remember who now—swore she saw the bleached white bones of an infant in the back of one of the cars, but by the time we looked back to see we were too far away to confirm her claim.

At one point, we were allowed to get off the bus and enter one of the houses. It, like the cars, was a complete mess. There was trash everywhere and clothes were

strewn across the floors. The living room had carpet with a water stain arching from the window half way across the room.

Empty boxes and cans littered the floor. Most all of the kitchen cabinets were open and the fridge was ajar with its contents spilled on the floor. As we made our way through the house I realized that scavengers, humans and animals alike, had made the mess. One of the cans of soup had been bitten into and the mattress in one of the upstairs bedrooms was shredded open and it looked like it had once been used as a nest. Our teachers told us that the Radicals survive by ransacking empty homes.

I imagine the Radicals rummaging through houses so many years after the sectors were created and the homes vacated. I think about them competing with the animals for what remains there were. There's no way that they could have developed a disease on purpose. They aren't smart enough to develop anything. If they did, it would have been an accident and would kill all of them.

"I don't know," I say. "It could be the plague Brother Jacob mentioned on Celebration Day. He said it would be coming and would fulfill the prophecy."

"I bet that's it," says Barbara.

Just then the bell rings and we hop off the bench and get into our class's line. When we are all present, our teacher, Miss Park, opens the door and we file in quietly. We take our seats and she begins her lecture.

Half way through her lecture on modesty and the proper attire for women, a knock sounds on the door. No one ever interrupts during class. Miss Park's face turns sour and she makes her way to the door. Before opening it, she smoothes the

wrinkles of her skirt down and checks the teacher's pin on her chest to make sure it's parallel to the ground.

She opens the door and we lean forward to see who has dared to disturb our class. Miss Park speaks through the half-opened door for a moment. I strain my ears to hear who it could be, but when I finally realize the voice I'm hearing is coming from a man, I see two soldiers enter the room. Everyone sits up a little straighter and I do, too. The urge to slouch into my seat and disappear under my desk is strong, but I square my shoulders and fold my hands on top of my desk.

"Girls," Miss Park says, "these soldiers are here to ask you a few questions. Please give them your full attention and, remember, honesty is essential for the survival of our society."

"Thank you, ma'am," says one soldier. He has dark brown hair cut short and clear blue eyes. His companion is smaller and looks less intimidating. "We're here to ask you a few questions about Rebecca Anderson, a sixteen-year-old from the other class. Her parents were discovered to be Radicals and were captured two nights ago, but Rebecca escaped. She was found yesterday afternoon and has been taken in for questioning. We need to know if Miss Anderson said anything to any of you that might help us in our investigation. Anything we learn will help to shorten her interrogation, and will help us find and eliminate more Radicals."

Both the soldiers and Miss Park stare us down. I can feel them reading us for information, trying to decide if any of us know anything.

“Please, girls. If you know anything, it is your duty to tell these soldiers,” Miss Park says. She looks at the soldiers as she continues hesitantly. “You won’t be in trouble if you do have something to share.”

“That’s right,” the second soldier says, but his response sounds like an obligatory response and I suspect that he’s just trying to put us at ease to get information from us.

Sitting in the third row of the classroom, I can see how the girls in front of me are responding. Some have furrowed brows, as if they are trying to remember anything—most likely who Rebecca Anderson actually is. Others just stare blankly at the soldiers. I try to keep my face from showing my internal dilemma. If I tell the soldiers what I know, maybe Rebecca will be in less trouble and will get to come back to school soon. If I say anything, Aunt Grace will surely find out and I will probably be in huge, *huge* trouble. With my Radical parents, maybe I’ll be considered one too.

“Yes? Tell us what you know,” Miss Park says. My heart is pounding in my ears and I try to swallow, but a lump in my throat stops me from doing so. Miss Park and the soldiers are looking right at me. Did she somehow read it on my face?

I’m about to open my mouth and confess about the note and Rebecca’s crazy ramblings from yesterday, when Judith Evans speaks behind me. “Well, she lives across the street from me and I saw her walking around outside every now and then after curfew. I think she was planning something near the church. That’s the direction she always went.”

“Was she alone?” the smaller soldier asks.

"I think so," Judith answers.

"How long ago did this happen?"

"A couple of weeks ago, I think."

"Thank you," the soldier says, jotting her responses down on a pad of paper he'd taken out of one of his pockets.

I feel a surge of gratitude towards Judith and her own confession. I decide not to say anything at all and just try to forget what happened yesterday. I plaster on what I hope is a both shocked and innocent expression.

"Does anyone else know anything?" the first soldier asks.

Three pair of eyes scan our faces once again. When no one else offers any information, the first soldier nods to the second. He puts his notepad away and reaches into another pocket. In his hand is a small card. He passes it to Miss Park and says, "If you could put this somewhere everyone can have access to it, we'd like to hear from anyone with information. There's a number that you can call if you remember anything. I apologize for interrupting your class. Have a nice day."

The only phones we have access to are public phones, set up by the government throughout the sector. Since the Strike killed so many people, there aren't many people calling others in the different sectors. The phones are very expensive to use so most people don't use them even if they do have someone to call. Since the soldiers are giving out the number in hopes of getting more information about Rebecca, I assume making a call would be free, but to activate the phone I'd have to use my identification card. Doing so would give the soldiers more information at their fingertips than I want them to have. At least if I had said

something in class they wouldn't have known everything about me. I decide that I will definitely not be calling later.

The two soldiers leave and Miss Park escorts them out the door. She attaches the card on the corkboard at the front of the room and returns to her usual lecture spot.

"Now, where were we?"

"Proper dress," someone in the front row offers.

"Yes, thank you. Now as you know, at different stages of life you graduate to different styles or colors of dresses," Miss Park goes on, explaining what the different colors mean and when we'll change from these gray dresses into black ones—after our training. Once we choose a job, we'll be given a new uniform, which we will wear until we are too old to work. She quotes from *The Book of Law and Faith* and the daily papers, explaining that "because our role is to serve God, we must do so in any way that we can. By eliminating the importance of fashion, we can focus our attention on holy and righteous things."

Miss Park briefly covers men's clothing, different attire for different professions, which most of us are familiar with. She assigns a reading on clothing and modesty, along with a writing assignment on the history of clothing in our society.

A few people groan when she gives us the assignment, but I don't really mind. Having read so many daily papers and heard all sorts of Celebration Day sermons and radio teachings, I have plenty of information about how things used to be in

regards to clothing. Since I've been alive, there have been two changes in how we dress.

The first thing was the biggest, but I don't remember it very much. The government implemented the dress code when I was four. We took all our old colorful clothes to be recycled or burned and were given our new outfits which distinguished our roles in society. The second was a change for the Brothers and Sisters, about seven years ago. At first, they wore yellow service uniforms, but it became difficult to distinguish them from other service workers, and since their roles in society are so important they were given burgundy-red robes and dresses so we could know who our spiritual leaders are by sight alone.

As I'm finishing the outline for my essay, the final bell rings, releasing us from school. I make my way through the rush of students and find Lissa. We walk home today in silence. My mind feels too bogged down with things to think about: Lissa, school, Rebecca, Radicals, homework, and plagues.

When we make it home, instead of starting on my homework right away, I find yesterday's *Daily Paper* and read it. Barbara and Rita were right; there is a plague breaking out in five of the six western sectors. Brother Jacob doesn't give much information in his article, except to tell us that the cause is unknown, but he suspects it is the prophesied plague and that we must pray for our fellow believers. I return the paper to its place and settle in at the table with Lissa. We work in silence, aside from the radio, which whispers soft melodies from the counter behind us.

Aunt Grace comes home and the evening progresses as usual. We eat dinner. I read the daily paper, paying close attention for anything about the plague. Aunt Grace goes to the living room to knit and Lissa and I go to bed. I say good night to Lissa and pray with her before she goes to sleep, even though we aren't required to say anymore prayers.

"Thank you for my sister, Marta, and my teacher and my friends and the flowers. Please help me be a good girl. Amen." Lissa's prayers strike me as sweet and I wish I didn't have so much to be concerned with in my own.

"Amen," I echo. "Now go to sleep. I love you."

"I love you, too," Lissa says. She snuggles into her blankets and gives me a small smile as I leave the room.

"Sweet dreams," I whisper as I turn off the light. I pull her door halfway closed behind me and go to my own room. I'm exhausted from all the drama of the past few days and from last night's lack of sleep. I change into my gown and slip into bed. I say a quick prayer and just before I fall asleep I see the flash of a patrol light and remember Rebecca's note, but I'm too tired to care that it was for tonight.

Later, I wake up, confused from sleep. I hear pounding coming from downstairs and I can see a stopped patrol vehicle in front of our house. I realize the light and radio are still on downstairs and know I haven't been asleep for very long. I can hear—under Brother Jacob's sermon—Aunt Grace moving toward the door and I feel the swell of panic rise inside of me. *They're here for me.*

## Chapter Seven

## The Note

“Evil has many faces. Do not be persuaded by its beauty or its common-placeness.”

—From “The Dangers of Evil,” an official government handout

I don’t know what to do. I debate feigning sleep or getting dressed again. Through the wall, I hear Lissa stirring and hope she doesn’t get up. I try to hear what’s going on downstairs, but my ears are filled with the sound of my pumping heart, Lissa’s stirring, and the radio.

“Girls,” I hear Aunt Grace call. “Come down here immediately.”

Like a flash I’m out of bed and in Lissa’s room before she’s emerged from under her sheets. “What’s going on?” she asks, dazed with sleep.

“I don’t know.” At this point, I think being honest is the best thing I can do. “Come on. Put these on.” I hold open a pair of socks while she slides her feet into them. On our way down the stairs I run my fingers through her hair and tie a rubber band around her mess of brown hair. I tie mine back just as we turn the corner into the kitchen where two soldiers are facing Aunt Grace. They are holding our identity cards in their hands and scanning them into the same scanners the Brothers have at church.

“Alright. Is this everyone in the house?” the soldier with the scanner asks.

“Yes.”

“We’re going to need to do a walk-through, just to be sure,” says the other soldier. I recognize him as the note-taking soldier from class today.

“Please. By all means.” Aunt Grace is a completely different person around these men. She’s polite and sweet and almost awestruck. I’m not sure if it’s because they are men or because of their role in our society. Aunt Grace has made it clear on more than one occasion that soldiers, Brothers, and Sisters are better than everyone else because of their willingness to forgo the benefits of a conventional life in exchange for a life of service to God and others.

The soldier with the scanner is scanning the last card. Since they haven’t taken us away or started questioning us, I’m thinking this is just a routine accountability check.

The checks don’t happen all that often and they can occur any time of the day. I can’t really remember the last time we had one, but a few accountability checks ago there was a house that had half a dozen or so Radicals hiding in one of the upstairs rooms.

The Radicals were taken into custody, returned to their sectors of origin for accountability and questioning, and the family responsible for hiding them was questioned and then eliminated. They lived in one of the older sections of the sector—an area with houses built from before the Strike. The neighborhood where the Radicals were discovered has become associated with Radicals and Radical sympathizers. It seems like most of the Radicals found in our sector come from that neighborhood, so accountability checks happen more often there.

The machine takes longer than usual—or maybe just longer than I remember. I can hear the other soldier’s boots as they thump around upstairs. I realize they stop in my room for a minute and I replay the memory of shredding

Rebecca's note and dropping it in the toilet, trying to reassure myself it really happened. I hold my breath until he moves on to Lissa's room. I look at Lissa and see that she is fighting back a yawn. Her shoulders are slightly slouched and her eyes are glazed as she stares into nothing. Aunt Grace, on the other hand, is making polite conversation with the soldier, asking about the weather and praising all of them for keeping our sector so well protected. The machine finally beeps and the soldier hands the cards back to Aunt Grace.

"It's clear," the other soldier says as he comes down the stairs.

"Well, you ladies have a good night. Sorry for the disturbance," the first soldier says. His tone, now that we've been cleared in the system and our house free of Radicals, is kind.

"Oh, no. It's no problem at all," Aunt Grace gushes. Her voice is dripping with sincerity. "We will pray for your safety tonight. May God let you find those dangerous Radicals hiding among us."

"Thank you, ma'am. We appreciate it," he says.

Aunt Grace walks them to the door, bids them a goodnight once again, and locks it.

"Let us pray," she says when she gets back to the kitchen. Aunt Grace gets on her knees and we follow suit. We seldom pray on our knees, but when Aunt Grace feels moved, she has us kneel. "We thank you, Lord, for the safety you've given us here. We thank you for the soldiers who have sacrificed their lives to serve and protect us against the Radicals and other threats of this world. We pray that You

watch over the soldiers tonight as they search the community. Keep them safe and help them to find those who wish to prey on our weaknesses. Amen.”

While Aunt Grace prays, I can't help but give my own prayer of thanksgiving. I'm thankful that the soldiers didn't come for me and that I'm still safe at home. I'm thankful that we aren't holding hands while we pray, otherwise my trembling would make Aunt Grace suspicious of me. I'm thankful that I didn't go where Rebecca's note would have sent me. I ask for forgiveness for my curiosity and my weak faith.

Aunt Grace sends us back to bed after we pray and I tuck Lissa in again before going back to my own bed. I look out the window and see the soldiers moving on to the next house. I hear Aunt Grace turn the radio off for the evening as I wrap the blankets around me, trying to warm my cold limbs and stop the shaking that comes from relief and fear. Eventually, my body stops trembling and I succumb to sleep.

When I wake, the sun has just begun its ascent over the horizon, and as I lay in bed I realize something on my dresser is out of place. My copy of *The Book of Law and Faith* has been moved and the lid on my small wooden box of childhood memories is turned, leaving the box open.

I lift off the lid and look through the box. There are the shells my mother gave me that she'd taken from the beach as a child. A small lock of Lissa's hair next to my own. A pink ribbon my father gave to me on my first day of school, and folded notes and papers I wanted to keep. I replace the lid, and as I slide my book back to its spot I see a small piece of pale green paper protruding from the center.

As I pull it out, I realize that it's from the soldier's notepad. My fingers begin to shake as I open the paper. I read the soldier's neat block letters, "Tuesday night. Same time and place. You are on the list."

## Chapter Eight

### Midnight Stroll

“And it was promised that our Savior would come to earth, disguised in human flesh. He would be perfect in all ways and would lead the world out of darkness. And it was said that He would help us transform our world into one that would please Him. The Savior has finally arrived and is leading us away from the destruction of the past and into a world of hope and peace. Glory to our Savior, Dolus!”

—From the *Daily Papers*, October 8, 2020

I used to have nightmares that Radicals were coming to take me away. I dreamt they wanted to hurt me. Now, with the soldier’s note in the forefront of my mind at all the wrong times, I worry that they will come for me, not the Radicals. I consider the note’s meaning anytime I see a passing patrol and at the Celebration service. When Miss Park gives a lecture on the dangers the Radicals pose to our society, I can’t help but think about the soldier’s note and why our government—which is supposed to protect us from Radicals—suspects me of being one.

I spend the next few days being exceptionally careful and well behaved. I do my homework, read the daily paper, say extra prayers, and do anything that is requested of me. At first, I think about turning in the Radicals’ meeting information, but since it was a soldier—a soldier of all people! —who left me the note, I’m not sure if giving them the information would do anything. The more I consider my

dilemma, the clearer it becomes that what I really need is to get my name off the Radical list. I realize Aunt Grace may be my only hope.

“Aunt Grace?” I hold the soldier’s note in my hand behind my back, in case my first plan fails.

“What is it?” She doesn’t look up from her knitting.

“Would you adopt Lissa and me?” The words taste like vinegar and I wish I could take them back.

Her knitting needles stop mid-stitch and she looks at me. “Whatever for?”

“Because you’re a much better parent than our parents were, and if you adopted us we’d be a real family,” I say.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve finally realized it, but there really is no need.

According to the government, you belong to me, so to go through the paperwork would simply be a waste of time.” Her voice is gentle and I can tell she was touched by the request. She goes back to knitting and I try to figure out how to tell her about the note. I realize now—a few days too late—it might have been easier to tell her about the note as soon as I found it.

I clear my throat. Aunt Grace forcefully drops her knitting to her lap. “What is it?” The gentleness from before is replaced with irritability.

“I had a question about—,” my voice trails off as I bring my hands in front of me.

“Have you finished reading the paper?”

“No. I was about to. I just had a question—.”

“Marta, I don’t want to hear another word from you tonight,” she interrupts.  
“Go read the paper and then you may go to bed.”

I almost protest, but the look in her mud-brown eyes tells me it would be best if I just obeyed. “Yes, ma’am,” I say as I make my way back into the kitchen. Before I reach for the *Daily Paper*, I shred the green note over the trashcan and watch as the pieces flutter to the bottom. I put one hand in and shift the trash around so the green pieces don’t lie on top for Aunt Grace to see.

I think about Rebecca and wonder if maybe she was right. If Aunt Grace won’t adopt me and the government is watching me, I might not be safe here anymore. I think about leaving the sector, but know that the world outside the sector is horrifying.

I shudder as I imagine what dangers the world beyond the safety of the patrolled fence has. If I leave, I’ll have to look out for animals, Radicals, and soldiers. If I leave, nothing will be safe and I will have no one I can trust.

As I walk home from school with Lissa the next day, I think about the days since I got the note and the plans I’ve come up with about how to get to the meeting place. Since I received the soldier’s warning and Aunt Grace insisted she wouldn’t adopt me, I decided going to the meeting might be my only opportunity to save myself. Even though I’ve decided to go, I wonder if actually going would be even more dangerous for me than simply staying home, but it is a risk I’m willing to take.

My only other problem with attending the meeting—aside from my worries about getting caught while breaking Aunt Grace’s rules and the government’s laws—is that I’m not really sure where the meeting is. I’ve memorized the address,

but I have no idea where Cherry Lane is and I can't exactly ask someone. I would look equally suspicious studying a map. I decide I'll have to look at the map we have at home before Aunt Grace gets back from work.

"Don't you feel bad for them?" I hear Lissa ask. I look down at her with a quizzical look. I'd been so consumed in my own thoughts I hadn't even realized she was talking.

"What's that?"

"Don't you feel bad? For all those people in the other sectors?"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess. But remember what Brother Jacob said yesterday? Anyone who gets the plague doesn't have much faith," I say. The plague has been mentioned in every daily paper since Barbara and Rita mentioned it and Brother Jacob even preached about it at church yesterday. Although it hasn't been confirmed, I think the plague has reached our sector. There was quite a bit more room in church and several of those in attendance were coughing and hacking the entire time. Since we haven't been told what the side effects are, I assured Lissa it was just a virus and that she shouldn't worry. I don't think she believed me though.

"But I still feel bad for them," Lissa says. Lissa complains how unfair she thinks it is that just because their faith isn't that strong they have to die. "They could do more to believe."

I nod absent-mindedly, not sure if I agree with her, and then I realize that Lissa might have some insight as to what I should do about the note.

Without turning my head, I glance around to make sure no one is nearby. “Lissa,” I whisper. She doesn’t look at me or even respond and I think that maybe she couldn’t hear me, but then a soft, “What?” floats to my ears.

“I think I’m in trouble,” I begin. I don’t want to give too much away, just in case something goes wrong tonight. “I—well. What would you do if you thought you were going to be in trouble for something you didn’t do?”

“I would pray about it and do anything I could to make it right,” Lissa says.

“Anything?”

“Yes. Then maybe you won’t be in so much trouble.” I realize that Lissa probably thinks I forgot to bring my homework home or to do one of my chores last night; she doesn’t even consider my life could be in danger. I feel absurdly disappointed that my seven-year-old sister didn’t have a better idea and try not to show my annoyance at my own naiveté.

When we get home, I find the map of the sector in the one of the kitchen drawers and locate Cherry Lane. I stare at the map, trying to memorize the route I plan to take. When I hear the door open I hurriedly fold the map back into its even rectangular sections and jam it down the front of my dress while I slide the drawer shut.

“What are you doing?” Aunt Grace demands. She stands in the doorway to the kitchen, glaring at me. Her hard features seem even more angular than normal.

“I—I.” My brain has suddenly become incapable of forming a clear thought.

“You what?” Her words are short and clipped.

"I was getting a drink," I say, surprising even myself with a blatant lie, the words sounding even and honest. I can tell Aunt Grace doesn't believe me though, and she's searching me for the truth. I wonder if she can see the map protruding under my dress. Her brown eyes widen slightly when she looks at my hand. I look down too and realize I'm holding my glass; I don't even remember picking it up.

She stares me down for another minute and I try not to look guilty or defiant. I realize that I really do want a drink of water and say a quick prayer, thanking the Lord for making my body act when my mind could not.

"Fine," she finally says, ending our standoff.

I fill the glass and join Lissa at the table. Instead of reading the paper or knitting in the living room, Aunt Grace sits at the table and watches us for any improper behavior. I make sure I keep my attention on my homework and do my best to ignore Aunt Grace. The corners of the map jab against my skin and I want to scratch at it and take the map out.

When I'm about to finish my homework, I see Aunt Grace's arm shoot across the table in my periphery. She smacks Lissa across the face. The force of it almost knocks Lissa out of her chair.

"Stop slouching" is all Aunt Grace says before getting up to make supper.

Lissa cries and I know it isn't just from the shock. Already a blazing red handprint is rising on her face. Through dinner she sniffles and I can't help but feel like it was my fault. Aunt Grace wasn't able to punish me for not being at the table studying when she got home, so she waited until she could find some way to punish either of us.

I eat my dinner of fried egg and rice, and even though it's my favorite meal it tastes bland and I don't feel like finishing. After supper Aunt Grace has us sweep the floors and dust before we can go to bed.

As I lie in the darkness, I try to figure out how I'll make it out of the house without Aunt Grace finding out. I imagine her lying in her bed, fast asleep until she hears the creak of a stair or the soft puff the house makes when the front door opens. She's going to catch me for sure.

At nine o'clock the patrols begin and I count the passing lights until 10:30. Aunt Grace went to bed just before the patrols began so I'm sure she's asleep. I ease out of bed and change into my gray dress. I try to bunch the covers up so it looks like I'm still in bed, but there aren't enough there to seem believable.

I reassure myself that Aunt Grace won't get up and check on us like she did when we first moved in. I had thought she was doing it to be kind, but as I grew older it dawned on me that she was making sure we hadn't run off.

I slowly make my way down the stairs, gently shifting my weight from one foot to the other. When I reach the bottom I can't help but feel elated at having moved so quietly. I continue my slow pilgrimage toward the door and see the flash of another patrol. Fifteen minutes have passed already and I'm not even out of the house. The note said to be at 6712 Cherry Lane at 11:15. I only have thirty minutes left.

I slip my shoes on, dig my identification card out of Aunt Grace's bag, and gently open the door. I pray that the hinges don't squeak and am grateful they don't.

I step into the cool night air and pull the door shut. I can feel the adrenaline pumping and want to run.

Instead, I walk at a brisk pace, keeping to the shadows whenever possible. There aren't many street lamps, but tonight I feel like they are all pointed—like spotlights—in my direction. I walk toward the church and down Ash Street, but when I make it to Bank Drive, I can't remember if I go left or right. I pull out the map and crouch down beside a bush, hiding from the light. The darkness makes reading the map difficult and I struggle to find the names associated with the roads as the lines spread like a spider web on the map before me. I decide to go left—away from Aunt Grace's house—and think I'm back on track. When I near a streetlamp, I study the map quickly to make sure I'm headed in the right direction.

I turn off of Bank Drive and as soon as I do I notice the approaching light of a patrol. I whip back around into the darkness and pray the soldiers didn't see me. I look for a place to hide, but the road that I've travelled looks open and I see no object for me to hide behind. The bushes where I read the map before are too far away, even if I ran, but I try anyway.

When I've taken no more than three steps, two strong hands reach out and grab me. The light from the patrol flashes around the corner and I feel as if I'm covered in the light. I'm sure I'll be tried and eliminated on grounds of being a Radical.

The hands don't keep me in the light though. They pull me into the dark space between two houses. One hand clamps over my mouth and I feel an arm wrap around my waist and force me to the ground. The body attached to the arms lies

down on top of me. The patrol vehicle passes by without even slowing, and as the lights reflect off the sides of the houses, I see the large figure of a man on top of me.

## Chapter Nine

## Meeting

“Here we shall praise Dolus for saving our lives, our country, and most importantly, our souls.”

—From a Church Building Inscription

I want to scream. I want the patrolling soldiers to come back. I *want* to be found. As if sensing the growing panic that’s building inside me, the hand presses even harder against my face, driving the back of my skull into the soft earth.

I try to take in a deep breath so I can scream, but the heavy body on top of me prevents me from sucking in much air. What I manage to inhale through thick fingers smells of onion and garlic. I try to scream, but I can tell that the noise doesn’t travel far. I try to squirm out from under him, but he doesn’t let me have that much room. My right arm is pinched underneath me so I use my left to try and smack him away.

“Be quiet.” His breath is hot in my ear and his voice raspy. “I’m not going to hurt you. You have to be quiet,” he repeats.

I can’t trust him. I know I can’t. He’s out past curfew. Hiding in the shadows. Lying on top of me. The horror stories the teachers tell us from the old days flash into my mind. Girls taken away by men, raped or sold as sex slaves, beaten and starved until they were useless and eventually killed. I fight harder.

The man shifts on top of me and, for a second, I think I might escape, but he simply repositions his weight, pinning my legs to the ground with his.

“Stop fighting,” he grunts. “I’m not gonna hurt you.” He swings his elbow around, his hand still locked over my mouth, and secures my arm against his torso.

I’m going to die. This man is going to kill me or rape me—which would be worse. People who break curfew are up to no good. He’s lying.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he repeats, this time enunciating so each syllable sinks in. I stop moving, hoping if I don’t fight back he won’t hurt me. “I’m going to let you go now.” He waits for a moment before he lifts his body off of mine. I scramble to get out from under him.

I glance around the building and see the empty street. Just as I’m about to run home, the man grabs me by the wrist, but this time his touch is gentle. “You’re going to the meeting?” he asks, eyes on the crumpled map in my hand. I open my mouth to lie, but before I can he continues speaking: “I can take you the rest of the way,” he says, letting his arm fall back to his side.

I look him over, trying to decide whether or not I can trust him. He’s over a foot taller than I am and has a huge frame. I’m surprised he isn’t a soldier with such a muscular body. I see his dark hair is a bit shaggy and in need of a cut.

“Okay,” I finally say. I’m hesitant to be alone with this stranger, but—since he did just keep me from being caught by the soldiers—I decide he might not be the bad guy I’d first imagined. A small voice inside warns me away and tells me I should leave while I can, but I ignore it.

“I’m Brody,” he says.

“Marta. May Dolus’s hand protect you,” I say, giving the standard greeting we give to strangers. Brody huffs and moves around me to look into the street.

“Come on,” he says.

I keep to the darkest shadows as I follow his figure. I am baffled at his ability to stroll down the street like we aren’t breaking any laws by being out after curfew.

“It’s your first time, huh?” he asks over his shoulder, not trying to lower his voice.

I glance around, checking the windows of the houses, praying no one is watching. “Yes,” I whisper.

“Figures.” He chuckles. “We’re almost there.”

I don’t respond and we continue the rest of the way in silence. Following our progress on the map, I see that we are less than a block away from our destination.

Brody turns into an empty lot and I follow. At first I think he’s mistaken the address and I glance back to the house we just passed and see the numbers 6710 painted carefully above the doorframe. We walk on a sidewalk through a thick cluster of trees and I peer through them, searching for a house but see none.

When the sidewalk disappears from beneath our feet, Brody moves more quickly through the lot and all at once we seem to be swallowed up by the trees. We reach a clearing and when I look back I can’t even find the road. I move closer to Brody, afraid to get lost in the thicket. Even though we are inside the sector, I imagine the yellow eyes of predators hiding in the bushes, waiting to spring out and tear my flesh with their sharp, unforgiving teeth. This small patch of overgrowth is nothing like the neatly trimmed park we walk through each Celebration Day on our way to church.

I don't realize Brody has stopped until I bump into him. A small yelp escapes me and I cover my mouth quickly. Brody just chuckles and says, "Step down."

I realize that he is standing on a step below me and I carefully follow as he descends into complete darkness. I move slowly, feeling for the end of one step and the beginning of the next with my feet. When I'm half below ground, I put my hand against the wall, steadying myself. I'd expected the smooth, damp feel of earth but am surprised to feel the grainy, rough texture of cement.

"It's a basement," I say, realizing that this must have been one of the old houses from before the Strike. "Why haven't they turned this into a housing unit?"

"Too much work," Brody says, his voice echoing back behind him. "Filling in this hole, and clearing out the lot, would be too much trouble."

Once I'm completely underground I keep one hand on the wall and reach the other out in front of me. It lands on Brody's back, and just as I'm about to pull away he tells me it's okay to let him guide me. I retract it though, not wanting to be any closer to him than I have to be. I still feel uneasy as I follow him and I use the sound of his footfalls to guide me. We move slowly through the dark and I wonder how he knows his way around. I sense, rather than see or feel, the walls narrowing. We turn twice and I begin to wonder if he really knows where we are going when I see a light ahead.

There is a faint glow on the floor that seeps under a door. Brody opens it, and instead of other people there is a table with several flashlights and nothing else.

"This is it? Are we early?" I ask.



I follow Brody into the throng of onlookers. I look into the faces, trying to see if I recognize anyone. I recognize a teacher from my school, the grocer from the shop nearest to my house, and several other faces that I decide must be familiar from church. I know they must recognize me and I wonder how my presence will be tolerated. I am surprised that the looks they give me are kind and warm.

Brody is now several paces ahead of me and I hurry to catch up, afraid to lose him among all these strangers. He doesn't stop, and as I'm about to call to him I hear someone say my own name.

"Marta!" I turn to my left and see a girl in a gray dress that matches mine. When my eyes reach her face, I realize I am facing Judith Evans. "I'm so glad you came!"

I can hardly believe that Judith is here, but then again I can hardly believe I'm here. She runs up to me and gives me a hug. I feel overwhelmed with the number of people here and just how at ease everyone seems to be, even though getting caught would surely get them—us—killed.

"Sorry," she says when she releases me and sees the confusion on my face. "Guess you didn't expect me here." She smiles at me as if we've been friends all our lives. In reality, we've hardly shared more than simple "hello's" and "how are you's."

"Not really," I say. "What exactly is this?"

"Our meeting," she says, her voice bubbly and bright. "We meet every few weeks. Rebecca used to come, but I guess you know what happened."

“But you ratted her out to the soldiers,” I say. I look for Brody, not sure if I trust Judith, but he is gone. Several of the people nearby are watching us, their conversations abandoned as they listen to ours.

“Yeah. I did.” She doesn’t even sound guilty or remorseful. “It’s the best thing we can do. If they think they have enough evidence, they’ll stop the torturing sooner rather than later, and it will also help us appear innocent.”

I have no clue what to think or say. Judith is—and clearly all of these people are too—crazy. Part of me wants to scream at them. They betray each other the first chance they get and then they meet and act like the best of friends. I try to keep my emotions from showing on my face, but I think Judith can see my struggle.

“I know it’s a lot, but you’re safe here. Come on. Let me introduce you to some of my friends.” She leads me out of the center of the group of people to her friends, three of which are boys. She introduces me to the group and I can see that Judith and I are the youngest. They chat and tease each other casually, touching each other on the arms or giving small hugs. I’ve never seen this kind of interaction in public, except at a wedding ceremony, but even the physical contact there is minimal. I’m shocked and don’t say much as I watch them interact, but none of them even seems to care that we are of different genders.

“Do you remember me?” one of the boys asks after a while. They’ve tried to include me in their conversations, and even though I try to give good answers they’ve all come out short and monosyllabic.

“No.”

“Really? We used to play together at the meetings,” he says. He has sandy blonde hair and dark brown eyes that look almost black. There is a white mark on his left cheek where he has no pigment in his skin, but even with the mark, he is still good looking. His face is unfamiliar to me.

“This is my first meeting,” I say.

“I guess it was a long time ago, but you used to come with your parents. Our meetings were in that old abandoned house on Miller Road,” he said.

“The one with the purple shutters?” the other girl asks.

“That’s it,” Judith confirms.

I don’t remember ever going to any kind of meeting. I know what house they are talking about, but I’ve never been inside. I’m about to insist that he has me confused with someone else, but an elderly man calls the group to order.

“Let’s go,” Judith says, linking her elbow with mine. She leads me to a set of wooden benches I hadn’t noticed before. I sit among her friends and I see Brody several rows in front of me.

“That’s Abraham,” Judith whispers as the man begins to speak. He gives a large smile to the crowd, which reaches his brown eyes, causing the fine wrinkles to bunch into soft folds. His teeth are slightly yellowed and when he smiles I can see that he is missing one of his molars.

Judith tells me all about the cave—the people present, the songs they usually sing, and how the man who found the cave thought he would die there until he found his way back out. Tonight there isn’t any singing. Abraham’s voice carries

over the hushed crowd, and even though I want to hear what he is saying it is Judith's voice that captures my attention.

"Rebecca always said you were one of us, but I didn't think so," Judith whispers in my ear. "I wish you would have come sooner. It's such a downer that you're leaving after your first meeting."

"Leaving?"

"Yeah. That's why we're meeting. It's a goodbye gathering." She keeps blabbering on and on. I catch some snippets of Abraham's speech, something about moving on and finding a better place—words we usually hear at funerals. While Abraham and Judith speak, I survey the listeners. There are several men in service uniforms, a man and a woman in lavender cook's uniforms that match Brody's, four green outfitted women who work in some branch of the health-and-sanitation department, and several other colorful outfits. The younger children—dressed in white—are still playing on the rocks, oblivious to the meeting below. I can hear the children chanting some kind of song about cavalry and infantry.

Judith just keeps talking and finally I interrupt her. "So you guys are a bunch of Radicals?"

This catches Judith by surprise. Something flashes in her eyes, but it's gone before I can identify it. "Not like what you think. We aren't plotting to kill anyone. We just don't believe everything government says or does. We—"

"Let us pray," Abraham says, silencing Judith. She bows her head reverently and I do the same. "Dear Lord, we thank You for the safety and health You've given us. Please be with those who can't make it tonight. We ask that You protect those

who will be leaving our community. Bless them and those who are risking their lives for You. It's in Your son's name we pray. Amen."

A murmur of amens ripples through the group. I'm shocked that the group prays. I didn't think Radicals prayed. Then something occurs to me.

I nudge Judith's arm and she leans back in. "Dolus doesn't have a son," I say. Judith gives a slightly exasperated huff. As she opens her mouth to explain, Abraham's voice calls out my name.

"Marta Hoyle," I hear Abraham repeat. I realize there are a couple other people making their way to the front. Those seated in front of me have turned to watch me make my way forward.

"Go," Judith says, nudging me off the bench. I make my way to join the group in front and hear soft whispers as I pass. I feel completely exposed with how everyone is watching me. I wonder if my hair is in order and it try to be discreet as I pull at my dress to make the wrinkles go away. I wonder if they can see my trembling legs.

Some people smile as I pass, but I notice that most crane their necks to get a good look as I pass. I wonder if I'll have to say something and desperately wish I had asked Judith to be quiet so I could have paid attention. Abraham calls a few more people and they line up beside me. An old man stands to my immediate left and, while Abraham calls others up, he trembles and hacks into a handkerchief. I try to ignore his wet, thick coughs, but out of the corner of my eye I notice the white material in his hand turns dark crimson. When there are seven of us in front of the

seated audience, Abraham says, "These are our brothers and sisters who will be leaving us."

I have no idea what he means when he says I'll be leaving and I'm not sure why he calls me a sister. It is clear that I am not a Sister, and even if he means it as a familiar term I do not want these people to think I'm part of their Radical group. As I'm about to protest, Abraham offers up another prayer and I only half listen to his words. When he finishes I plan to ask what he means when he says I'll be leaving. For a brief moment, Abraham pauses in his prayer and I hear the shuffling feet from the passage where we entered. I crack open my eyes just in time to see an armed soldier making his way into the cavern.

## Chapter Ten

## Backup Plan

“It is our shared responsibility to care for those who have less than we do. Helping our fellow brothers and sisters will make our society stronger and will earn us eternal rewards.”

—From “Good Conduct for the Devout Follower,” a government pamphlet

I run. I don’t even know where I’m going or how to get out of here, but all I know is that there is a soldier, with a huge gun, who has discovered us. I disappear into one of the dark openings. I try not to think about how much noise I’m making or falling into a black pit that I cannot see. I hear a commotion behind me—the sounds of people moving about and Abraham shouting something. My ears are filled with my thumping heartbeat and heavy breathing and I imagine I hear someone following me.

I turn back and see that no one seems to be following and I’m sure this means I’ve chosen a dead end as my escape route. My arms are extended in front of me as I try and guide myself through the dark, but the farther I go the more difficult it becomes to see and eventually I can’t even see my hands. I bump against rocks and my legs kick stalagmites. I slow to a painfully slow pace until I notice the flash of light behind me.

“Marta.” It’s Brody. He’s come after me. “It’s alright,” he says.

*Alright? Maybe now that I have a flashlight.*

“He’s one of us,” Brody says. “We’re safe.”

I don't move toward Brody. I knew better than to trust a stranger—a man—out after curfew. He's working with the soldiers and he's trying to lead my back to my death. The only reason he didn't turn me in before was so he could catch all of us. He flashes the light over my face and he stops. I'm sure he's seen my distrust of him covering my face like the precious jelly we used to spread on our toast.

"We're safe," he repeats. Neither of us moves and I listen to the sounds that echo from the cavern and realize only the sound of chatter—even laughter—floats our way. I don't hear screams or gunshots.

"Are you sure?" I ask, still hesitant.

"I'm sure. Come on," he says and turns to go back.

"Marta?" Judith calls. I can't see her, but her voice travels well along the rocky walls. "It's alright."

Since there really is no way for me to get out on my own, I decide to trust them and follow Brody as he leads me back toward the cavern.

"There she is," Abraham says, his voice full of amusement. I hear several people chuckle and then I spot the soldier. He is in the midst of the crowd making his way towards me. His gun is gone, as well as his helmet and his supply belt.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he says when he reaches us.

I stand as close as I can to Brody, hoping he'll protect me if he was wrong. Judith joins us and greets the soldier warmly.

"I just forgot to take my stuff off outside of the cavern. I wasn't even sure you'd come," he says to me.

"You know each other?" Judith asks.

"No," I say immediately.

The soldier's brow furrows a bit and he says, "No, but I told her when we'd have our meeting."

I try to remember what the soldier looked like who visited our house last week for the security check, but I can't remember. They all look so similar with their uniforms, short hair, and muscular build.

"My name is Nicholas," he says, extending his hand.

"Marta," I say. I keep my arm firmly pressed against my side.

"I know. I'll be helping you leave," he says.

"Who said I want to leave?" I ask. I hadn't realized that I was bothered by the idea of leaving—well, the idea of being forced to leave—until now. I'd considered it before, but never actually thought it might happen. To think about leaving and what it would be like is one thing, but to have to actually leave—my stomach turns at the thought.

"You have to," he says.

"Why?" I spit the word at him, angry with him for making me believe he was coming to kill us, therefore making me look like an idiot.

"You are being watched. If they have any reason to take you away and have you tried and killed as a Radical they will," he says. I don't like him. He has the same smug air about him that the soldiers do and I wonder why he's working against the government.

"Why does it have to be tomorrow?"

I can see the soldier—Nicholas—is somewhat put out by my questions, but he explains that sneaking people out of the sector is exceptionally dangerous and can only be managed every once in a great while.

“Can Lissa come?” I ask.

“Who?”

“My sister.” I imagine Lissa growing up with Aunt Grace alone and shudder.

Nicholas shifts his weight and looks into the chattering crowd. “I’m afraid not,” he says.

“I can’t leave her,” I say. My voice sounds whiney in my own ears.

“She’s too young to be taken away as Radical, and even if we took both of you, there would be serious problems for your aunt,” he explains.

“I don’t care what happens to her!” I shout. Just as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I wish I hadn’t said them, mainly because it’s an awful thing to say and I’ve drawn even more attention to myself with such an outburst. I feel the color rise in my cheeks and my face feels warm even in the cool air. Judith wraps her arm around my waist, but instead of soothing me, like I think she means it to, it irritates me. I remove her arm and take a half step away from her.

Nicholas looks to Judith for some kind of support, but Judith just shakes her head.

“I can’t leave without Lissa,” I say, gritting my teeth.

“Look. I can’t guarantee that anyone will make it out and an extra person is even riskier. I can’t take her. I’m sorry.”

“Then I’m not going,” I say decidedly.

“But you’ll—,” Brody begins.

“I’m. Not. Going.”

An older woman who was in the front row during Abraham’s speech appears. She seems to have been listening in on our conversation, but I’m not all too sure how loud we were. “Now, dear,” she says, “you mustn’t act irrationally. Think about what will happen to you—what happened to your parents. You have to go.”

“Not without my sister,” I say again.

“Nicholas, can you—.”

“I can’t,” he says. His voice is tight and I can tell that he doesn’t like to be questioned.

“I just want to go home,” I sigh.

The woman gives me a slight frown, as if I’m being childish and irrational, and it annoys me. Part of me thinks maybe I am being childish and irrational, but the other part—the more dominant, angry part—doesn’t care.

“I’ll take her,” Brody says, and then turning to me “Let me say goodbye to the others. You can follow me or you can wait over there.” He nods at the rock ledge and I make my way toward it. Judith follows me and tries to convince me to leave Lissa and that she’ll be safe with Aunt Grace. I don’t say anything to Judith and eventually she stops talking. I just want to be alone.

After a few minutes, Brody comes and clicks on his flashlight. Judith’s friend walks beside him and I realize she’s leaving with us too. Judith tells me goodnight with a gloomy expression and goes back to the group. I see Abraham watching us, but I don’t wave or give any sign of acknowledgment.

I follow Brody and feel much more at ease in the dark than before. The girl and Brody banter as we leave. I follow behind the two. The girl laughs at something Brody says, but I don't pay attention enough to know what he said. Neither of the two acknowledges me and I don't care. It feels like it has taken longer to get out of the cave than it did to get to the meeting place and my legs feel heavy with exhaustion.

Back above ground I sigh in relief as I feel the dry, slightly warmer air. Brody still talks to the girl, and as we make our way toward the street I see them hold hands. Once out of the woods, I scan the quiet roads for patrols.

"We can walk you all the way home, if you like," he says. The map I had before is gone. I don't remember where I had it last and I just pray that Aunt Grace doesn't realize it's missing.

"Okay," I say. The two stroll down the street, oblivious to the fact that it is nighttime, basically illegal to show affection in public, and we're out and about after having been to a very illegal meeting.

I stay several paces behind them so I don't have to hear their conversation and so—if I have to—I can disappear quickly. When we reach the church building I call out to them.

"I know how to get home from here," I say. They turn as if startled by my presence.

"You should really reconsider," the girl says. It's the first things she's said to me and she sounds genuinely concerned.

"I don't think so," I say as I move pass them. "Thanks, though."

I make my way down the block and through the park, hurrying so a patrol doesn't catch me. We didn't encounter any since we made it back outside the cave and I have a feeling one will be coming soon.

When I reach my street, I realize I never told Brody where I live, but I'm too tired to give it much thought. Aunt Grace's house stands dark as ever and I ready myself for the slow trek back up to my room.

Halfway up the stairs a patrol passes and light flashes through the room, illuminating the clock on the wall. I see it's nearly three and once I make it to my room, I almost slide into bed with my dress on. I change as quickly as my heavy limbs will allow before falling into unconsciousness.

I'm surprised to see Lissa waking me up and realize I've overslept. In a matter of minutes Aunt Grace will come to find out what is taking us so long. I throw the covers back and have my dress on in a few seconds, but when I look down I realize I can't wear last night's dress. It's covered in dirt and cockaburs cling to the skirt.

"Make the bed," I hiss as I hear Aunt Grace stir downstairs. Lissa pulls the blankets back and I shimmy into a clean dress. I'll have to figure out how to get the dirty one cleaner before Aunt Grace does the laundry. I use the already soiled dress to wipe the dried dirt off my legs and when Lissa points to a spot on my forehead, I wipe my face too.

"Thanks. Now go," I say. Lissa leaves the room and I smooth out my hair, glad I didn't undo it last night.

Aunt Grace is on the third step and we wish her good morning as we make our way toward her.

"You're late," she says. Her voice sounds full of venom today.

"It was my fault," I say. "I'm sorry."

"Yes. Well, you'll both remember whose fault it is you don't get breakfast this morning." She raises an eyebrow as if daring me to challenge her and in my tired, irritable state, I accept the challenge.

"No. Let Lissa eat. She came and got me up. It's not her fault," I plead.

"Well, if she would have woken up earlier, you could have had breakfast."

I throw a sidelong glance at the clock and see that we're only five minutes late. "But we still have time," I argue.

"I'm afraid you've spent so much time talking about your missed breakfast that you don't have time to make lunch anymore," Aunt Grace sneers.

In this moment, I want more than anything to hit her, but instead I apologize for my outburst, knowing that without doing so I would get in more trouble. With nothing else to do in the house, Lissa and I leave for school. I'm angry and upset that I've lost Lissa her breakfast and lunch.

"Lissa, I'm sorry," I mumble as we near the school.

Her voice sounds cold—similar to Aunt Grace's—when she says, "You should have kept quiet." Lissa doesn't say anything else to me before school and she leaves without looking back.

I seethe all the way to class and my hunger fuels my anger for the entire day. When the school day ends, my stomach aches and Lissa and I make our way home in silence. We begin our homework and Aunt Grace comes home. She seems to take extra time preparing supper and I try not to set the table too quickly so I don't attract her attention.

Finally, the meal is ready and we take our places and pray. As soon as the prayer ends, Lissa reaches for the bread and begins to eat. Normally, Aunt Grace doesn't allow us to eat until we each have food on our plate, but a knock at the door prevents her from scolding Lissa. Aunt Grace leaves the table while Lissa and I fill our plates. I decide to risk Aunt Grace's wrath and fork a few bites of mashed potatoes into my mouth. The fluffy warm spuds feel heavenly on my tongue and I quickly add more to my already full mouth. I'm in mid-swallow when I hear the visitor yell at Aunt Grace.

"We are here to arrest the Radicals Marta Hoyle and Lissa Hoyle."

## Chapter Eleven

### Radicals

“A new virus has taken the lives of several individuals. It is unclear if the virus is contagious or a plague from the Lord. No vaccine is available at this time.”

—From the *Daily Papers*, October 19, 2040

My blood turns to ice. I can't move. I can't swallow. All I can think about is how right the real Radicals were last night. Lissa's face shows her complete shock and horror.

“They aren't Radicals!” Aunt Grace cries. It's the first kind thing she's done on our behalf in a long time, but I don't think it is to protect us; rather, it's to save face.

The soldier doesn't reply and the sounds of shuffling boots come toward the kitchen. Lissa's face shows her confusion and I can see her eyes welling with tears, the wad of bread rolling around in her mouth, and I can't make myself swallow. I will my body to move, but sit frozen in the chair, staring at Lissa's half-chewed bread and hysterical expression. Part of me—a very small part of me—wants to laugh at the situation, but the rest of me wants me to run.

The soldiers enter the kitchen and reach for Lissa who sits closest to the door. As if their presence has released me from my immobile state, I'm around the table, grabbing onto Lissa. The soldier nearest to me swings his arm and I feel his fist make contact with the side of my head. My left ear is ringing and Lissa's cries fill

my right. I look up from the wood floor and see Lissa sobbing, her hands extended obediently for the soldiers to bind.

A surge of anger flares inside of me and I push myself off the ground, ready to attack the advancing soldiers, but when I stand I realize that the room is off balance and I fall into a soldier's arms. He smells of sweat and ruthlessness. I try to pull away but realize I'm being handcuffed before I can stop the soldier.

Three other soldiers enter the kitchen. Two flank Lissa's sides and gently push her out the door. I see one soldier grab the loaf of bread that remains on the table and watch as he tucks it possessively under his arm. The other two soldiers prod me forward and I struggle to remain upright. One of the soldiers grabs my arm and digs his fingers deep into my flesh. I try to pull away, but his grip is strong.

Ahead of me I watch as the soldiers carry Lissa past Aunt Grace, who stands shocked near the open door, and toward a patrol vehicle. Aunt Grace doesn't say anything. She opens and closes her mouth repeatedly as if to say something, but nothing comes out. I can see the conflict in her eyes as she watches us go while trying to obey the soldiers.

Outside I see the street is lined with patrol vehicles. Although my feet still struggle to keep myself upright against the warm pavement, I fight against the soldiers on either side of me. I don't seem to slow them down in the least bit. When we make it outside I see several other soldiers gathered on nearby lawns, their guns held ominously in front of them.

The shades of the nearby houses are pulled shut and I know that everyone is trying to ignore what is happening. We will disappear into the back of these trucks

and will never come back. Our neighbors and classmates will whisper about us until they learn of our imminent deaths.

I will not die—not as an innocent person. “Help us!” I scream. “We’re innocent!”

Nothing happens. No soldiers lower their heavy weapons. The pulled curtains remain as motionless as ever. When I am no more than ten feet away from the truck, the soldiers throw Lissa unceremoniously into the back. I see that she lands awkwardly; her bound hands couldn’t help her break the fall. Her head hangs out of the back of the truck and I see a dark cloth emerge from one of the soldiers’ pockets. He pulls it over her face and ties it shut. The same soldier pulls out a second bag and slides it over my head. He cinches it tight—too tight—and I am tossed into the truck and the door is slammed shut behind us.

I wriggle myself near Lissa. She doesn’t try to stop herself from crying or making sound. I want to hug her and promise her we will be okay, that the soldiers are somehow confusing us with someone else, but I can’t. The tie around my neck cuts into my skin. The bag quickly grows hot. It smells of sweat and blood and I wonder if we just saw the last sunshine we will ever see again.

The ride is bumpy and I fight back the hysteria that builds with every turn. We don’t seem to be moving quickly and I can hear the soldiers in the front of the vehicle laughing. I wonder where we’re going and how long it will take us to get there.

“M—M—Marta,” Lissa cries. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” I say. She leans into me and I can feel her body quiver.

We spend at least thirty minutes in the dark truck, and just as Lissa's crying lessens the truck stops and we can hear the guards trying to open the back door. Lissa wails as the doors swing open and I can see light filter through the small holes in the bag. I try to shield Lissa's body with my own, but when the soldier's hands pull me out of the truck, I can do nothing to fight him.

I lose my balance and fall, scraping my knees. The guard who pulled us out laughs and jerks me up, using the handcuffs. I cry out in discomfort.

"Cooperation will make this easier," the guard says. It sounds like a line from *The Book of Law and Faith*. He pushes me forward and I try to step lightly over the gravel path.

Lissa's wails let me know that she is just a few steps ahead of me. A voice calls out next to me and I hear another pair of soldiers call back from not far ahead. They banter back and forth as if we aren't even there.

One laughs and says, "That one wet herself." I know they refer to Lissa and I feel ashamed for her. The other soldiers laugh and I begin to slow, unsure of how much farther we have to go. The soldiers behind me prod me forward with batons.

I hear the hiss of an electronic door as it opens. A burst of cool air washes over us and I wonder where in the sector we are. Inside I hear the voices of more soldiers as they call out to our escorts. As we make our way down the hall the soldier behind us calls in a sarcastic voice, "Welcome, Radicals Marta and Lissa Hoyle!"

The soldiers in the hall jeer and some spit on us as we pass. Lissa continues to wail and sometimes I think she's trying to call my name. We stop for a moment

and I hear the soldiers ahead fumble as they open a locked door. We are guided into a different hallway and I can feel how different this one is compared to the last.

Although the first was cool, this one is cold. The floor beneath my bare feet feels wet and I'm glad that I can't see what the liquid is. A stench fills the air and I fight the urge to throw up my only bite of potatoes.

The soldiers finally stop. While one removes my handcuffs, another opens a door. Just before they push me forward, they remove the bag on my head. I stumble into a dark room, and even though they shut the heavy metal door behind them I'm relieved they've put Lissa and me in the same room. Lissa is crying again, but now that my arms are free I wrap them around her and try to soothe her.

"It's okay. We're together. See?" I rub her back while she continues to cry. We sit near the door since under it is our only source of light. Every so often we can hear a guard walk down the hall. There is no way for us to know what time it is or how long we've been here.

My hunger returns and I wish I wouldn't have cost us our breakfast and lunch. The mouthful of potatoes seems like a luxury from a lifetime ago. I wonder how long we'll be kept here. I wonder if we'll be tortured for information or publicly executed.

Lissa's sobs have stopped and I think she might be asleep. I'm about to fall asleep as well when I hear the lock being pulled back on our door.

One soldier holds the door open and I see two women standing beside him, both wearing olive-green dresses.

"That's the one," one of them says, glancing down at her clipboard.

The soldier enters the room. Lissa begins to cry again and I tighten my arms around her.

“No,” I grunt as the soldier pries her from my arms. He holds Lissa in one arm and turns to leave, but before I can get up to try and pull her back the soldier swings around and his baton slams into my ribs.

The air leaves my body and I fall to the ground. The pain is overwhelming, and even though I want more than anything to get up and pull Lissa back, all I can do is watch as the soldier closes the door.

“Lissa,” I croak. I hear her cries grow softer as she is lead away from me and eventually they are gone. I stay on the floor, trying to take in a full breath of air.

It isn't until later that I realize I'm crying. I lie as still as I can, trying not to move my torso. There is nothing for me to do but wait. I hope that they have taken Lissa back to Aunt Grace.

Thinking of Aunt Grace fills my mind with confusion. The women who came for Lissa wore the same dresses Aunt Grace wears. I never asked Aunt Grace what her new job was, and even though I want the women to take her back to the safety of our house I have a feeling that they have no intention of doing so. I realize that Aunt Grace probably works side-by-side with the soldiers who capture, interrogate, and kill Radicals.

My crying lessens and I feel my head grow heavy with sleep. I rest my head on my arms and lightly doze.

In the morning—or what I think is morning, there isn't really any way to know—I wake to the sound of a baton as it hits the metal door. A muffled voice

informs me we are about to get our showers. I get off the floor quickly and regret the hurried movements when I feel the pain in my side.

I stand near the door, unsure of what to do. I'm relieved that are giving me a shower. I feel grimy from being on the floor and my feet, I can tell, are filthy.

Finally the door opens and I stand eagerly in front of it. I only see one soldier and am surprised there aren't more to escort me to the shower. Before I can look down the hall for more soldiers I'm blasted with water. The water pounds against my body and I scramble to the back of my tiny cell. The water follows me. It stings my arms and legs. It forces the air out of my lungs. The water is ice cold and I cry when it hits my ribs. When I open my mouth to try and breathe, the water shoots against my face and I choke. I turn my back to the pounding spray and after what seems like hours, the water stops and the door of my cell closes. The soldier with the hose laughs maliciously as he goes.

My body trembles and I slide to the ground. I wrap my arms around my legs, trying to get warm. I rub my hands over my arms and legs. I wring out my dress, but it doesn't help much. There is a drain in the center of the room, but it's clogged and the water pools around me. I hear the shudder of a machine and feel cold air blow on me from the vents in the ceiling. I move around, trying to move to a place where the air won't get me, but there is no such place.

I hear a soldier make his way down the hall. My stomach aches from hunger and I try to ignore it. My teeth chatter and hands tremble, mainly from the cold and partly from fear for myself and for Lissa. I pray that the soldiers realize I'm innocent

or that someone else confesses to whatever the soldiers think I've done. "Please let Lissa be alright," I pray over and over again like a mantra.

Although I cannot tell the time, it feels like nighttime again. I doze fitfully and awake when the door to my cell is opened. I scoot to the far corner, fearing the hose or torture. No one enters the room. I wait for a moment and when I'm about to move and see what is going on, two soldiers appear. They throw Lissa's limp body into the cell. She falls, unconscious, on the floor, her body creating waves in the water.

"Lissa," I cry. The door closes as I pull her face out of the water. With the last bit of light from the hall I can see that her body is covered in bruises. Her face is completely swollen and one eyebrow and both lips are busted open. Her hair has been hacked off and is an uneven mess. I pull her onto my lap and out of the water. I rock her gently and whisper soothingly to her.

Hours later someone deposits food through a small opening in the door. I move with Lissa still on my lap and grab the food from the water. I'm unsure what it is, but the little light that shines from under the door lets me see it's covered in mold. I scrape off what I can and eat part of it. Lissa still doesn't wake up so I save the rest of the food for her even though I want to eat it myself. She whimpers and every so often she shifts on my lap. My legs are uncomfortable and my bottom is numb. I try to keep Lissa out of the water. I can tell my fingers and toes are pruned, even though I can't feel them.

Every time the soldiers pass I wonder if they are coming for me. I've lost all sense of time and I doze periodically throughout the day. Lissa screams and startles me awake.

"Lissa! Lissa!" I try to calm her down, but she doesn't seem to see me. "I'm here, Lissa. I've got you."

She struggles against me, but I hold her tight. "I've got you," I repeat until she finally relaxes.

"Marta," she finally says.

"I've got you."

We remain silent except for Lissa's occasional cries of discomfort. I want to ask her what happened, but I don't. I don't want to know what they did to her. What I saw was more than enough.

I wonder if Aunt Grace is somewhere in the building and if she had anything to do with what happened to Lissa. I think about all the cruel things Aunt Grace ever did to us and realize that I hate her.

I think about the soldiers who brought us here, belittled us, and tortured us. I hate them. I feel the anger boiling inside of me and realize that if I ever get out, I will get even, even if it means I die in the process.

My thoughts are interrupted by a flashing red light. After a couple moments, a woman's voice booms overhead and in my ears it sounds like Aunt Grace.

"Attention! Attention! We have a perimeter breach at Gate C. All personnel should report to their stations immediately. Attention! Attention! This is not a drill! We are under attack!" She repeats her message several times.

Eventually, the message ends, but the light continues to flash. The building sounds strangely quiet. I strain my ears, curious to hear some evidence of the attack.

The clunky sound of boots echoes through the hall. I wonder if this is the only soldier left in the building.

The door to our room opens and I'm not sure whether to be afraid or relieved. All I can make out is the silhouette of a soldier.

"Marta?" The soldier doesn't wait for any confirmation. "Let's go," he says.

"Nicholas?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

I'm flooded with relief, but at the same time I'm not sure if I can trust him. He sees my hesitation looks down the hall as if leery of a passing guard. He isn't the only soldier here then.

"You can stay here or come with me. Just decide." I look to Lissa and when I see her swollen face I know that if we stay there won't be anything I can do to keep her safe or myself. If I go with Nicholas, we will at least have a chance. I help Lissa up, but she can barely stand. I hoist her onto my back, even though my ribs protest. I follow Nicholas, who is running ahead of me.

"We're getting out," I whisper to Lissa. She doesn't say anything, but keeps her head buried at the back of my neck. At the end of the hallway Nicholas scans his military badge and a door hisses open. I follow and realize he has led me outside. There is an armored patrol vehicle. The back is open.

"Get in," he says.

"I didn't think you could get Lissa out?" I ask as I wait to climb into the back of the truck.

"Mr. Howard died after the meeting," Nicholas says. "Up you go." I sit Lissa on the tailgate then turn and climb up behind her.

"It's only been a day?"

"Three," he says as he shuts the door behind us.

"We have to stay quiet," a woman's voice says in the darkness. "We're supposed to be a truck full of supplies for the remote patrols." Her voice startles me, but I remember that there were supposed to be seven of us leaving and assume there are four more in the shadows.

We settle down, and even though we bump into each other I don't mind the contact with the strangers. Their warmth feels wonderful against my frozen skin. Lissa cries and I try to hush her. Someone across from me hums softly, but over the rumble of the truck I don't think it can be heard outside. The vehicle comes to a stop, as does the humming. We all seem to hold our breath, listening to Nicholas as he talks to another soldier.

"Papers?"

"Here you go. Remote patrol supplies," Nicholas says.

"Can you open up the back please?" No one breathes. No one moves.

Nicholas chats with the other soldier and I can hear them making their way to the back of the truck.

I hear a terrible rumble and feel the truck shake slightly.

“What in the—,” the soldier outside yells. Even though I can’t see him, I imagine him yelling into his radio. “We’ve got an attack on the holding facility! I need support over here!” There is a crackle over the radio.

“Get out of here. I have to close this gate. You’re the last one out,” the soldier says.

“May Dolus keep you,” Nicholas says. The truck shifts as he gets back into the cab. I sigh and I hear others do the same. The vehicle begins moving again.

“Thank God,” someone says.

The road outside the sector is even bumpier than inside the sector. The others in the truck begin to chatter and I feel relieved to hear their voices. Soon the chatter turns to singing. Their songs are familiar, but I’m not sure where I’ve heard them, definitely not on the radio or at church.

Eventually the truck stops and Nicholas turns off the vehicle. He opens the doors and we climb out. We’re parked in the woods and I can see that through the trees it’s still late.

“Your supplies are here,” Nicholas says, leading us toward a small shack that leans dangerously to the left. I wonder if it will fall over, but Nicholas goes in and starts tossing bags out the door. There are enough for each of us.

There are two trucks, the first I hadn’t noticed, and Nicholas explains he has to go deliver the supplies—which are in the second truck.

Before he goes he comes over to where Lissa and I are rummaging through our bags. “Sorry about her,” he says to me. His voice is low. Even though he’s just saved both of us, I can’t help but resent him for even pretending to be a soldier.

“You should be,” I hiss, keeping my voice down so Lissa doesn’t hear. I can feel someone’s eyes on me, but don’t lift my glare off Nicholas.

“Good luck,” he says to us before getting in the cab.

I watch as his truck disappears into the dark woods, glad he is gone. The others around me are digging through their bags, changing their clothes and munching on food. I search through mine and when I find the pouches labeled “dried beef strips” and “dehydrated fruit,” I share them with Lissa.

We continue to eat while we change out of our dresses into brown pants, which are too big for either of us, and brown jackets.

“We’ll rest here tonight and start our journey tomorrow,” the woman from the truck says. Her eyes watch me the rest of the night and I’m not sure whether I like her either. The others pull sleeping bags out of their bags and I find one in mine and do the same.

I don’t bother to find Lissa’s, telling her we’ll share for the night. My body is still cold and I can see her shivering too. We slide into the soft sack, and before I’ve fallen asleep I can hear the even breathing and soft snores of our companions.

It takes me a while to settle into the sack. Lissa is already asleep, her body pressed against mine. I feel comforted by her presence, but as I gently run my fingers over her face, I feel the familiar burn of hatred for the government and realize that I really will do anything I can to take it down. I finally fall asleep and dream of the sweet and satisfying taste of revenge.