

Chapter 1 of the novella “Daisy’s Last Day”

An eternity of CPR, and Lu’s lips are still blue. No breath tickles my cheek when I lean in close to her mouth. No pulse in her neck either. My arms are rubber. My fingers ache from the cold. I make the awful decision to stop.

I shake our burner phone again. The one Manny stole from Kmart, and Luis got to work somehow. I jam my finger down hard on the power button for the hundredth time. A blip of a charge, that’s all I need. Just enough to call 9-11. But nothing happens. Of course not, the battery’s been dead for three days.

I scream and chuck the useless thing at the sagging wallpaper with the tiny rosebuds. Shards of black plastic burst like a firework as the phone hits the wall.

“Help! Please help!” I shout out a broken window. No one comes.

I slump next to Lu and gather her into my arms. I rock her and kiss her. Wipe away the white bubbles oozing out the corner of her mouth. My tears run into her hair.

“Please, please, pal. Don’t be dead,” I beg in a whisper.

Wait! Did her chest just rise? I squint and watch her middle for signs of life. I swear I see it move again. Maybe it’s not too late? Should I lug her body to the nearest ER?

“Lu?” I bend an ear down to her mouth. No movement of air. I stare at her torso, watching for it to move. She remains still and silent as stone. That’s it. It’s over.

Lu is dead.

“Oh God, Lu! Oh God, no!” I wail, wrapping myself around her lifeless body, I dissolve into sobs.

I wake up with a dark feeling on my shoulders. Did I have a nightmare? I stretch and smack my dry lips together. “Hey, Lu? Any water left? Lu?” I sit up and circle my eyes around. A lump in the corner forces me to remember, and I suddenly weigh five hundred pounds. Tears sting my eyes, but I push them down. Can’t risk dehydration.

It’s not like I didn’t know this could happen. Lu was hooked on smack before I met her. And she’s OD’d twice in the last eighteen months. But I never saw foam come out of her mouth before.

Like me, Lu’s parents are dead. She has no other family that I know of. All of our friends are dead too. We lost them one by one over the last year. The only person, besides me, that will miss her is her dealer.

I'm not sure what to do with Lu's body. I don't want to call the police. I don't want the paramedics to come, and seal my beautiful friend into a cold, black body bag. All those strangers touching her. Lu was shy when she was sober. Lying naked on a steel table while the police snap pictures to identify her? Without a bump of junk to make her brave, Lu would be horrified.

I wander around at the dilapidated Victorian we've been squatting in, swiping at cobwebs in the hall and running my fingers over the chair rail in the dining room. This was once a very elegant place. A well to do family probably lived here in, like, the 1950's or something.

In the kitchen, I picture a loving mom baking cookies while her children color at the table. The kind of mother that tells you to wear a jacket and checks your math homework. The kind of mom I had once, but Lu never did. As I envision the perfect mother and the perfect father in this once perfect house, it hits me. This house is an excellent tomb for my friend. I imagine the ghosts of a happy family adopting her. Lu would like that.

I roll up her body in a threadbare carpet, and somehow manage to get her up into the attic. I block out most of our trip up there, except for busting a stair step on the way up and the splinter I got in my hand on the way down. But I don't need to keep those memories. I don't want to remember "burying" my best friend.

I rifle through Lu's backpack. There isn't much for me to take. A first aid kit, a comb, a bottle of water. I bury my nose in her sweatshirt and inhale the perfume she always sampled in the pharmacies on Market Street. There's baby wipes and shampoo, but I leave those. I can get more of that kind of stuff at the shelter. I dump the rest of the contents out, and fold her backpack up as small as I can to put it into mine. Always good to have a spare backpack.

I tuck a photo of her and her brother into the back pocket of my jeans. It was taken when she was seven and he was four in the last foster home they shared. She hadn't seen him in nine years.

I shimmy out the back window and walk east up Anza Street, and hang a right on 8th Avenue toward the park. I want to walk through the Japanese Tea Garden. It was Lu's favorite place in the park. It's free on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays as long as you enter before 10 a.m.

I arrive at ten after nine according to the guard at the gate. The cherry blossoms aren't in bloom this time of year, but the ponds are nice. The orange and white koi swish through the water in hypnotic patterns, lulling me into numbness. If I never leave the gardens, and spend the rest of my days watching these elegant animals, can I keep this blank feeling? Nothingness is better than wrestling the in deeps of grief. That awful fight to surface in the ocean of your loss. I should know, I've been there and back again. Many times.

"Hey, hey, hey. There's a pretty face I know!" Banjo Trout, that's his *real* name, slides up and plops

down on the bench next to me.

“Hi Banjo. What’s new?” I say.

He puts a cigarette in his mouth and fishes in his pockets, probably for a lighter. I should have hugged him when I first saw him. I hope he doesn’t get suspicious. Smell the vulnerability on me. I don’t want a guy like him knowing I’m wounded.

“You can’t smoke here,” I say, scooting closer and threading my arm through his so he won’t know today is different. The rot of patchouli oil swims into my nose. My nostrils flare to protest, but I clear my throat and stay put.

“I’ll just get rid of it if they say anything.” He lights the end. It glows red, intensifying as he sucks in. “Want to share?” He offers me a drag on his cancer stick.

I shake my head.

“That’s right. You’re kinda straight-edge, aren’t you?”

“Sort of. Someone’s got to be the designated driver.” My smile hurts my stomach.

“Where’s Lu?”

I gasp. I wasn’t expecting her name to stab me in the heart like it does. I cough to hide the shocked noise I made. He slaps me on the back a few times, and then offers me a bottle of water from the pack he’s carrying. It’s half full, I don’t want to touch anything that Banjo’s laid his lips on, but I need to keep up this rouse. Plus, I’m really thirsty. I accept his offer.

“She went to go see a cousin across the bay,” I say after a couple of swigs. Fortunately, he doesn’t know Lu well enough to know this is a lie.

“So you’re just kicking it alone today?” He takes another drag and blows the smoke away from us.

“Yep. And I might be on my own for a while.” I swallow hard. “I don’t know how long she’s going to stay over there.”

“You want to come back to my place? I’ll make you a grilled cheese.” He tickles my ribs and I force a grin.

Banjo is the only kid I know who has a home. He lives with his mom, in a tiny box apartment over a New Age bookstore. She used to be a stripper at Big Al’s until it closed. Now she’s a priestess for a religion she made up. She actually has seven followers. I’m not sure what they believe in. All I’ve ever seen them do is smoke pot and chant, in what she claims, is ancient Egyptian. She also works at the New Age bookstore on weekends.

“Come on, Daze. You love my grilled cheese.” He draws a circle on the back of my hand with his index finger. The tip of his finger is as slimy as the rest of him. I shouldn’t go with him. Banjo will expect *things* if

I go back to his apartment.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I was going to see what’s shaking at The Wharf.”

“Sounds cool. I’ll go with you.” He flicks his cigarette into the Koi pond. I turn my head and swear under my breath.

“Great.” I grin widely at hippie boy. I could win an Oscar for this performance.

Banjo pays for both of us to ride Muni to Fisherman’s Wharf. Once we’re there, I buy a coffee with the last bit of change I have and dump the contents into the gutter. I wipe the moisture out of the cup with the hem of my shirt and start begging strangers to put money into it.

Banjo leaves for a couple of hours to stroll up and down the Wharf with the tourists. Maybe he’ll find someone else to pester.

The cold weather seems to have put a damper on people’s generosity. Coins jingle in my cup, but no paper money. Thirty-five is the magic number. Thirty-five dollars is the difference between a night in a ratty hotel, and a night with a ratty boy.

A lady, whose face is almost eclipsed by her sunglasses, tosses me her doggie bag instead of money. I swallow the urge to throw it back at her and say, “woof-woof!” Of course, I inhale her half eaten pasta primavera as soon as she’s out of sight. I never turn down free food.

I work hard not to look disappointed when Banjo returns.

“It’s after six,” he says.

“Uh-huh.” Is it possible he smells worse than he did this morning?

“The sky’s getting dark, too. It’s gonna rain.”

“Won’t bother me.” I pull my rain poncho from the side pocket of my backpack to make my point. It’s still sealed in the packaging.

“We should go back to my place,” he says, rubbing the palms of his hands together.

“You can go.” I shrug. “I’m good here.”

It starts to sprinkle. Banjo stiffens his collar and stays right by my side. I collect a five-dollar bill before the sky breaks open and sends down the big drops. The downpour chases everyone off the open street, including me. Banjo and I duck under a canopy in front of Boudin’s Bakery. The scent of baking sourdough circles around our heads. Hunger burns in my stomach, but the feeling turns to nausea when Banjo pulls half of his army jacket around me. *Gah!* He really, really stinks.

I count my take. Thirty-six pennies, four nickels, eight dimes, eleven quarters, and one crisp five-dollar bill, are in my Styrofoam cup. Enough for a burger and a coke, but not a motel room.

“How does that grilled cheese sound now?” He narrows his eyes and licks his bottom lip. “You can

take a shower too.” His smiles like I’m a better treat than the bread we’re smelling.

He wets his lips again, and touches them to my mouth. I don’t move away. Dear God, what price am I willing to pay for a dry place to sleep?

Lu is laughing at me from the sky. She hooked up with Banjo twice. Both times she was too loaded to know what she was doing. If I’d known how bad he reeks, I never would have let her sleep with him.

Am I desperate enough to hook-up with this creature, just to get out of the rain? I’ve had sex with cute guys to score a soft bed and a roof before, but Banjo is revolting. I’m afraid without the protection of clothes, that earthy scent he carries might kill me. Even if Banjo has the body of a male model under his ridiculous outfit, his odor and scuzzy personality snuffs out any trace of a turn on. Even for a casual hook-up.

I let him keep his mouth on mine, and force myself to a pucker. He splits his blobby lips apart, and forces mine open with his sticky tongue. I pull away, pretending to be coy, and swallow the bile burning the back of my throat. He dips in to slobber all over me again. A dead octopus could suck face better, but I return his sloppy kiss because even my hair feels tired. I decide to take Banjo’s greasy sandwich, and his tongue in my mouth, in exchange for a bed and a shower. I want to wash Lu’s death away.

“Is that a ‘yes?’” he asks when he finally comes up for air.

“It’s not a ‘no,’” I say and wink.

He uses the money I begged for all morning to pay for our bus ride to the Haight/Ashbury district where he lives. We get off the bus, and start walking towards his home in the rain. A big digital sign reads 8:07. Wow, it took us a long time to get here.

It’s stopped raining by the time we get to his crap hole apartment. The steep stairs are almost too much for my weary heart. Every cell in my body doesn’t want to do this. I hope he’s quick with me. We get to the landing at the top of the stairs, and his mother drifts past with a joint in her hand. So blazed, she doesn’t even notice us. My eyes follow her into the living room. She plunks down on pillows in front of a big gold Buddha statue. A poster of Ziggy Marley hangs on the wall behind it with a crucifix to one side, and poster of the Hindu god with all the arms on the other. It’s ridiculous, I mean, pick a god lady! Chanting starts. I hear more than just one voice. Terrific. The weirdo witch has company.

A man dances around Banjo’s mom, waving a couple of scarves over his head. A woman convulses on the floor at her feet. My eyes flick to Banjo, but he’s disappeared. His blocky body fills the doorway to his bedroom down the hall. He turns around and beckons me to come to him with one finger.

I’m choked by all the smoke from the weed and incense. My pulse races. My stomach swims. I don’t want to be here. *I really don't want to be here!* No matter what waits for me on the street, I’m not spending

another minute in this disgusting Palace of Strange.

I scramble towards the door, falling down the last four steps of the narrow staircase. The security gate clangs as I bang my knee into it. With shaking hands, I twist the handle and fly onto the street.

It's drizzling again I look left and then right. Which way? I pick right and run, without any idea of where I'm headed. I only stop for red lights. One block, two, three. I don't feel my hair growing damp until it sticks to the sides of my face. After seven blocks, I stop to catch my breath in the alcove of a hair salon. "Real Hair for Real Women," a poster advertises. I sink down and huddle in the corner. I pull my hoodie over my face, but leave a crack where I can keep a lookout. My body buzzes with adrenaline and drifts in an undercurrent of exhaustion at the same time. I battle with my eyelids, and lose.

"Do you need help?"

I jerk awake. An old man stands over me, a black umbrella in his hands. Panic drives me to my feet. I shove him aside and take off.

Several blocks later, my lungs demand a break. I stop under the canopy of a laundromat, and lean against the brick holding the stitch in my side. My breath creates clouds of smoke in the chilly air. The sprinkle transitions to a powerful shower. Something about the drive of the water, pouring from the sky, cleaning the concrete and asphalt, calls to me.

I step away from the building and stand in the middle of the sidewalk, letting the rain wash away my stains. Banjo's slimy kiss, Lu's overdose, the whiskey I drank last night to get warm. The purse I stole two weeks ago to buy Lu some smack. I tilt my face up to the downpour and let it scrub me clean. The cold penetrates down to my blood, but I want more absolution. I want this storm to rid me of every sordid thing I've ever done since setting foot on American soil. Will the rain last long enough to bleach all of it white?

The clouds are empty, and I'm a shaking puddle. Where am I?

The street signs read: Page and Divisadero. I'm surprised at how far I ran. It's a relief to be so far from Banjo's house. Golden Gate Park is just a few blocks away. There's half a dozen places to sleep there, but none of them will be dry tonight. I walk toward the park anyway. I've got nowhere else to go.

An intense longing knifes gut and doubles me over. Home. I want to go home. And not just my little house in the Philippines. I want to go back to my innocence. Return to the arms of my mama and papa. Live with peace in my heart again. Is that even possible? Can I have that feeling of home and family if the people who first gave it to me are dead?

I've got to keep moving to stay warm, so I fold up the ache in my stomach and put it away. I'm at the corner of Page and Lyon now. Page and Lyon...why does that location stick in my head?

Across the street, a blue grey house with white trim is my answer. I know that place...Blackberry

Home? It's something like that. They help street urchins like me. A 24-hour youth crisis center. Huckleberry House! That's its name. How did my feet find their way here? It seems like an impossible coincidence.

But I'll take it, impossible or not.

Lu, and our other friends, were the only reason I've never surrendered myself to a place like this before. They'd never have accepted help getting off the streets, because getting help meant getting clean. And they needed a mama bird to look after them. Keeping them safe was my life and my work. But they're all gone now, and I have nothing else to take care of but myself.

I step off the curb and quicken my steps toward salvation. If it's not good there, I can always leave in the morning.

I ring the doorbell and get the welcome I expect. A nice lady gives me dry clothes, a sandwich, and a cot. No questions asked. She says in the morning I can shower and talk to someone if I want to.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"About one-thirty."

"I'm sorry if I woke you up."

She smiles. "You didn't. I stay awake during my shift. Anything else you need, Daisy?"

When did I tell her my name?

"No. I'm good. Thank you ma'am."

"Sleep well then. Be at peace here."

"Okay." I say.

Lying on a skinny cot, with four other kids snoring around me, I try to soften my bones into peace. But sleep takes me first.

Chapter 2 of the novella "Daisy's Last Day"

The air is warm around my face. I'm cradled by a delicious mattress. A bed? When did I move from the floor? The pillow is like heaven, and a light blanket is keeping me just the right temperature. What happened to the cot and the sleeping bag?

When I open my eyes, everything looks like it's been coated in petroleum jelly. All I can see is brown ceiling. I turn onto my side and there's movement.

"Hello Daisy!"

"Hiya, um, I don't remember your name." I sound drunk but, I don't feel that way.

“We haven’t met yet, I’m Ayelet.”

“You the day shift?” I push myself up and my head swims.

“Not exactly. Can I help you?”

“Sure,” I say.

Her hands adjust the pillows. She’s getting clearer. The room behind her is still a just a smear of brown.

“Are you thirsty?”

“Yeah.”

She molds my fingers around a cup, and I take a drink.

“This tastes weird.” I pull the cup back. “Did you put honey in this water?”

“No. It has nutrients that sweeten the flavor.”

“Like what?” I tap my nails on the side of the cup. It’s made of wood, that’s...unusual. My vision is sharpening. She’s slender, and delicate. Lumps of furniture turn into a dresser, a chair, and a table with a mirror over it...I think.

“Are you hungry?” she asks. Is she changing the subject on purpose?

“What do you got?” I’m not hungry, but I’ll take her meal.

“Broth.” She tilts the slats of the shutter over a window. The sunlight hits her black braid making it shine. I notice emerald barrette in her hair.

“Broth? Am I sick?” I laugh and it makes me dizzy.

“No, Daisy.” She smiles. “But you need to recover.”

Recover? The hairs on the back of my neck rise. My sight is clear enough now to make out wood paneling. Or is it more like logs?

“I don’t want any broth. The lady last night gave me a cheese sandwich. Any more of those around?” I ask.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” She angles another shutter panel to let more light in. The walls are made of logs...very out of place in a San Francisco Victorian. My palms start to sweat, and the cup slips down a half an inch in my hands.

“Where am I?” My heart beats in my throat.

The woman sits on my bed. “You’re safe.”

“Where am I?” I repeat. My chest is so tight I’m not sure I can keep moving air in and out of my lungs.

“You can trust us. We’re your new family.” She grins.

Oh no. Oh no. Not again. NOT AGAIN!

I spit in the woman's face, push her aside, and scramble out of bed. My head is wobbly and my limbs barely cooperate, but I'm able to crawl to the door. I bust through it and almost knock a man down.

"Meir! Catch her!" The woman yells.

He swings his arms out to stop me, but I punch him in the throat like Manny taught me. He doubles over clutching his neck, giving me a chance to get down a set of stairs at the end of the hall. My eyes go in and out of focus. It's hard to walk in a straight line, but I locate the front door and escape.

Trees. Lots of them. No other houses or buildings. Which way do I go?

"Daisy! Come back! It's all right!" that woman who was keeping my prisoner upstairs shouts after me.

My head really hurts but I've got to jam. I've got to get away from here. I need to get back to the city, hide myself in the twisted back alleys and abandoned buildings. They may have paid for me, but I belong to no one. I will never be anyone's property ever again.

Fleeing into the woods, I don't get very far. My legs feel like soggy sponges. I trip and can't keep the ground off my face. Tiny rivers of blood trail from my forehead, the heel of my hand, an ankle. A really sharp stone rips into my elbow as I fall again. A brook stops my fumbling feet. I stare into the glistening flow, trying to make sense of it. How wide is it? How deep? Why can't I judge the size? Or make a decision about attempting to cross? I've lost the ability to reason.

My butt hits a clump of moss. The brook tilts and my chin meets mud when I hit the ground, yet again. Eyelids close halfway. The water sparkles. Where is the sun? I roll onto my back and look up into a cloudy sky. I turn my neck to look back at the brook. Still sparkling. I'm really tripping out.

Have to keep moving. Have to get away. I contract my stomach muscles to sit up, but they rebel and go loose on me. A hot tear bursts out, and my throat tightens. I can't believe I trusted those people at Blackberry Home. They are probably just a front for traffickers. They pretend to help kids, but sell them to the highest bidder. I should have known. I am smarter than my mother was.

I'm too weak to run. It's over. They've got me, for now. I'll have to run away another day. I hope they don't beat me for trying to escape. Another handful of tears. I close my eyes and give up.

Chapter 4 from the novel "Tenderfoot"

A SEA of raven heads tumbles in waves to the front of the Temple. The people of Lutrenia have the coolest hair and they wear it long. Men let it grow to at least their collars, and women let it cascade in dark waterfalls

to their waists. I'm so jealous of their curls. My hair is black too, but straight as a stick and the dry mountain air here doesn't exactly give it a boost. And, of course, I don't have their glimmering emerald highlights either. When I first arrived, I thought they weaved jewels into their locks, but those strands sprout naturally from their heads that way.

I look at my adopted parents, Meir and Ayelet, seated next to me in the pew. It would make them so happy if I called them Mother and Father. And I want to. They deserve it. They've been so kind to me over the past nine months. Taking care of me while I recovered and adjusted to living in Enova. Feeding me, clothing me, loving me like their own daughter. But, I can't bring myself to do it. My Earth parents, my mama and papa, were the best a girl could hope for. I can't replace them. No matter how awesome my new parents are.

When I offered Meir and Ayelet the titles of "Auntie" and "Uncle" instead, they smiled and nodded, but I saw the disappointment in their gold eyes. I explained how those titles show respect in the culture I grew up in. Of course, they hugged me and generously said I could call them whatever I was comfortable with. But I often worry they don't know what they mean to me. And since I'm leaving them for a while, I want show them the special place they hold in my heart.

I do have a special gift planned for them tonight. My new little sisters, the twins Zissla and Gissel, helped me bake a traditional Lutrenian bread that represents love and family. I got the ingredients myself by weeding a neighbor's garden this summer in exchange for flour, yeast, and salt. And the berries and nuts were easily gathered from the forest. It cost me a set of scraped knees and hands when I scaled a tree to collect the last ingredient: sinnthian bark. It has to be taken from the top third of the trunk, otherwise it's bitter. But I had to get it. Gissel said the bread wouldn't taste right without it. The first loaves I made were a disaster. Fortunately, I had enough stuff to make another batch.

I look at the girls, sitting on my left. They are beyond adorable with rosy cheeks and matching fishtail braids wriggling down their backs. They lean to the side and hug me. I wrap my arm around them and squeeze back.

"In a moment, I'll ask Daisy to join me up here and receive our blessings for her journey ahead. But first, many friends would like to share how she has been a blessing to us." Parson Tolkk has just finished his weekly sermon, and my very public sendoff is about to begin.

It looks like everybody in the whole territory is here this morning. All ready to say nice things about me, which is sweet and kind of embarrassing. I hope the Parson doesn't expect me to say anything to the crowd because my tongue feels like it's coated in flour. Public speaking isn't really my thing.

I take Ayelet's hand to calm my nerves and study the grooves in the beams above my head. Why do they

have to make such a fuss? I'm not going that far.

Tomorrow, I travel to the Grand Hall, a set of several buildings that makes up the entire Capital of Enova. It's located in Lutrenia so it won't take me more than an hour to get there on ComTrans.

The other people from Earth World, Tenderfoots as they call us, will have longer trips to the Grand Hall. I'm looking forward to touring the Capital and taking classes there, but what I'm really excited about is meeting the other Earthers. The ones who arrived into Enova about a year ago, like I did. Another girl and two boys.

I love Lutrenians, but it'll be nice to be around people who've opened a Christmas present before, or talk about how much I miss pizza with someone who knows what pizza is. I've been told I can never go back to Earth, which is fine with me, but there are things I miss. And just being with other Earthers sounds . . . comfortable.

The first person in line to talk about me is called to the stage. An old woman shuffles forward at the speed of a snail. When her knotty hand grabs onto the railing of the steps, and I recognize her by the gargantuan opal ring she wears. It's my nearest neighbor, Huddie, a widow who lives a mile from our cabin. She's the one I helped with her vegetables in exchange for the ingredients for the bread. She hasn't said a word about me yet, and my cheeks feel hot already.

This ceremony is really thoughtful of them, but I just want to get through it and move on to the picnic we are supposed to have after. Now, that sounds like fun. Sitting here on a painfully hard bench, listening to them say how great I am? Not so much. And really, what have I've done to earn admiration like this? I crossed through the fabric between our worlds through no effort of my own, arriving here unconscious and needing to be taken care of. Not exactly a big achievement.

I draw my eyes down the row of people waiting in a line to sing my praises and find my friend Raya in the middle. Squinting her gold eyes with excitement, she gives me a double "thumbs up." I chuckle. I taught her that. First time she's done it right too. There's a tug on my heartstrings as I give her a little wave. I'm going to miss that girl! Along with my family, Raya got me through my recovery from the Deep Sleep. She saw me at my worst and loved me anyway. And it got pretty bad there for a while, but she hung in there through my foggy brain and weak muscles. Through the cursing and spitting, the crying and fumbling. Raya was my sunshine.

Something tickles my arm and I look down. Zissla slips a bracelet woven from tiny yellow flowers, onto my wrist. The identical girls wear identical smiles. The grin I give back to them hurts my face. I'm such a lucky girl to be in this family, this territory, and this world.

Crack! Crack! Crack! It sounds like Chinese New Year. The pops are followed by a deafening *boom!*

The building vibrates. People bounce in their seats. Windows shatter and the sanctuary is showered in glass. Dust clouds fill the air. My ears are ringing; my body is buzzing.

What just happened?

Frantic people run around like freaked out animals. Screaming, running, slipping on glass. I'm overwhelmed by noise, and haze, and blood. Where do I look? What do I do?

A creak and groan from overhead snaps my attention upward. A huge beam splits in half and dangles directly above me. I spring to my feet and corral the girls in my arms. We tumble in a pile, barely in time to avoid being flattened. I wobble to a sitting position and Meir hoists me up. Ayelet hovers over the twins, protecting them from the chunks of the ceiling raining down.

Covering my neck, I circle around, looking for a way out. Smoke billows in through the main doors behind us and greedy fingers of red and orange flames lick the frame. The side door is blocked with debris and clogged with people climbing over it, trying to get out. We're trapped!

"Behind the stage!" Meir points. "Back door!"

Ayelet stands, bringing Gissel up with her. Meir and I reach for Zissla, but she doesn't extend her hand back. She clutches the lower part of her leg, her face twisted in agony. Buried under the heavy beam, is her foot. We move in unison and attempt a lift, but the massive hunk of wood won't budge.

"Help! Help us!" Ayelet begs the panicked crowd.

Several hands come from all directions, moving the beam just enough to rescue the foot. Meir scoops up Zissla. Ayelet nabs his coat sleeve and takes my hand. I take hold of Gissel. With Meir in the lead, we weave, dodge, and duck through chaos. My family is spit out the back door of the Temple as the roof caves in, crushing everyone left inside.

We sprint to a huge meadow, a quarter mile down the hill. I've clamped onto Ayelet and Gissel's fingers so hard it aches when I let go. Meir places Zissla on the grass. We cough the smoke from our lungs. I drop and look around, wiping my forehead with a trembling hand.

My send-off party was supposed to be held here today. Crates of food and barrels of drink are stacked on the counter of an outdoor kitchen, built here long ago to host community meals. Has this beautiful place ever seen a gathering like this? Instead of happy and celebrating faces, battered and burned bodies collect at the tables. The dead and nearly dead are being laid out by their loved ones. I spit out the taste of charcoal and iron.

The survivors seem to number in the hundreds, which is encouraging, but how many people did we lose? Whose voices were silenced when the oldest Temple in Enova collapsed? Neighbors and friends, gone forever. Did Raya make it out? I cross my arms over my heart to keep it from bursting.

Zissla cries out. I scoot over and prop her head onto my lap. Her small, metallic eyes are wide with pain.

“How bad does it hurt?” I ask.

“Bad,” she rasps. Tears slide into her black braids.

“Gissel, go see if ice was brought up for the picnic.” Ayelet nods her head toward the kitchen. She picks up Zissla’s hand and hums a lullaby. Meir studies the swollen, purple foot.

“I’m going to get a medic,” he says.

“They have more critically wounded to attend to,” she says, smoothing Zissla’s hair.

“I have to try!” he snaps. Ayelet and I jerk our heads up in surprise. I’ve never heard him speak that way to his wife before.

His angry brow weakens and his cheeks fall into a sad frown. He pleads with his eyes for her to let him go. He has to do something, anything. If he sits down, he’ll be defeated, and that could kill him.

She gives him a gentle nod. “Of course, my Love.”

He bends down on one knee and cups the side of Zissla’s face. “Hold on sweet girl. Be brave.” He lingers for a few seconds before going to find help for his broken daughter.

It’s hard to say who suffers more as time crawls by, Zissla or her mother. Ayelet provides the best comfort she can. With one hand, she holds Zissla’s. With the other she repeatedly strokes the girl’s arm from shoulder to wrist. She’s dedicated to this motion, as if it will draw the pain away from her daughter and onto herself.

Memories of my Earther mama, dead for over three years now, slice through me like a dagger. But I’m quick to bash back thoughts of her. That planet of sadness has to wait for another day.

Gissel returns with ice in a cloth, but it’s useless against such a bad injury. After what seems like hours, Meir finally brings a medic who gives Zissla a shot that takes away the pain. She’s asleep in an instant.

“Gissel? Can you switch places with me?” I ask.

She nods and takes a turn being a pillow. My legs are so asleep they’re practically snoring. I stand and shake the numbness from my limbs. I need to walk around. Where will I go? I see Meir delivering sana and bread to people scattered all over the meadow.

“I’m going to help Uncle if you don’t need me,” I say.

Her shoulders hang forward like a ragdoll. She raises her chin like it weighs a hundred pounds. Soot cakes the crow’s feet around her eyes.

“Sweet Daisy.” She smiles, and touches a hand to her chest. “Yes, you go, we’re fine.” She lowers her face to keep watch over Zissla, even though the girl is knocked out by the drugs and has no idea her mother is there.

All afternoon, I traipse back and forth from the outdoor kitchen to the Lutrenians spread over the meadow. My fingers grow sore pressing the spigot as I fill cup after cup. Blisters develop on both of my heels, and that's nothing compared to the burning in my calves. But I keep going, because I feel sick when I sit down.

The elders take head counts. The parsons pray and hold hands with the dying. The guards from town ask questions, but I don't hear any evidence given for the cause of the blast. How could such a horrible thing happen in such a good place?

My heart breaks repeatedly as I pass out cups to fresh widows and orphans. One man lost his entire family, except for an infant daughter. "Where will I get milk for her?" he asks me, and refuses a drink for himself. Parson Tolkk comes alongside him and gently encourages the man to take some sana by reminding him he has to keep up his strength for that little baby. I press the aching area over my heart as I hand him a cup.

After that, I desensitize myself to the tear-streaked faces. I have to or I'll break. Slipping into zombie-mode, I focus only on delivering sana. I come out from my trance only once, when I find Raya and her family safe. Tears gush from both of us as we hug the life out of each other. Her voice breaks as she whispers the names of two friends we won't ever see again.

Filtered light between the branches of the evergreens makes the meadow look like it's glowing. The day is almost done. I'm not Daisy anymore at this point, just her shadow. I fall onto a bench, and I let my stomach spin. I don't think I can take another step. The bodies and trees turn to blobs. I fantasize about taking a hot bath, and then disappearing under my patchwork quilt to sleep for a week.

A cool hand is placed on my shoulder.

"Time to go home," Ayelet says.

My legs whine as I put weight on them. Lanterns blink on as dusk falls. Weary people wander toward their homes in the village and surrounding areas. The walk to our cabin, a mile outside of town, seems an impossible task on such tired feet.

A medic gives us a stretcher for Zissla. I'm struggling to help carry her. Meir and I have to rest several times due to my insane fatigue. Two guys volunteer to take over for us just before my arms quit for good.

The one who takes my side winks and says, "Not to worry, we got her Daze."

Light from the rising moon shines across the spray of freckles on his nose.

"It's Day-zee," I correct him, but he's too busy managing the stretcher on a steep part of the trail to respond.

We travel single file. My parents are behind me, Gissel in front. The smell of wood smoke follows us. A

bitter reminder of today's losses. My insides feel as dry and charred as the skeletal remains of the Temple. If I wasn't beyond exhausted, I'd be crying. Or screaming. Or both.

The trail widens. The grade isn't as steep now. Lights from the village flicker in the distance, giving me hope. Maybe I can actually make it to our cabin tonight. I link arms with Ayelet and she leans into me. Meir plods along on her other side, but Gissel skips ahead. Where does she get her energy after a day like we've had? I'm only sixteen, but feel like I'm a thousand years old.

"What happened today, Auntie?" I ask.

Ayelet takes a ragged breath and exhales heavily. "We don't know for sure."

"It may have been a virium explosion," Meir says.

"Virium can explode?" I gasp.

Virium is the one and only energy source in Enova. It powers everything from the ComTrans trains to the lights in homes. And it's supposed to be clean, efficient, and safe.

"There've been tragedies like this in other territories. It's rumored to be a failure of the distribution tanks. Many are old. Need repair. The engineers in Zantumay are working to solve the problem, but . . ." Meir seems distracted by the sky.

"Reports of explosions seem more frequent lately, don't they?" Ayelet asks him.

"You may be right," he says.

Zissla starts crying. Ayelet trips in a hurry to get to her. Meir catches her before she falls.

"Easy there. Let me help you." He turns to me. "Will you be all right back here alone?"

"I've got a lantern," I say. He nods and hurries ahead.

I drag my feet along the trail as it turns into a road. Every step begs me, *bed, bath, bed, bath, bed, bath*. But then, a noise breaks into my mantra. A humming and a tickling breeze near my ear. I swipe the side of my head to shoo to bug away. I flash my lantern behind me. No one is there. I must be the last one down the hill. I loosen my shoulders and keep walking.

A sting burns into my neck. I smack my skin to squash whatever just bit me. Two steps later, the lantern lights blur. I stumble sideways and seize a hunk of bark on a tree to steady myself. The branches are dancing. Spasms bunch through my arms and legs. I'm dizzy. Really dizzy. It's probably just dehydration. I start to call to my parents for help, but they need to take care of the girls. I can tough this out.

There's a stump, a few feet away. I'll sit there for a few minutes to get my act together. I step towards it, but my knees buckle and I fall to the ground. I roll over in the grass onto my back, panting and writhing with pain. The moon and stars slide away.

