

Beyond the Gates

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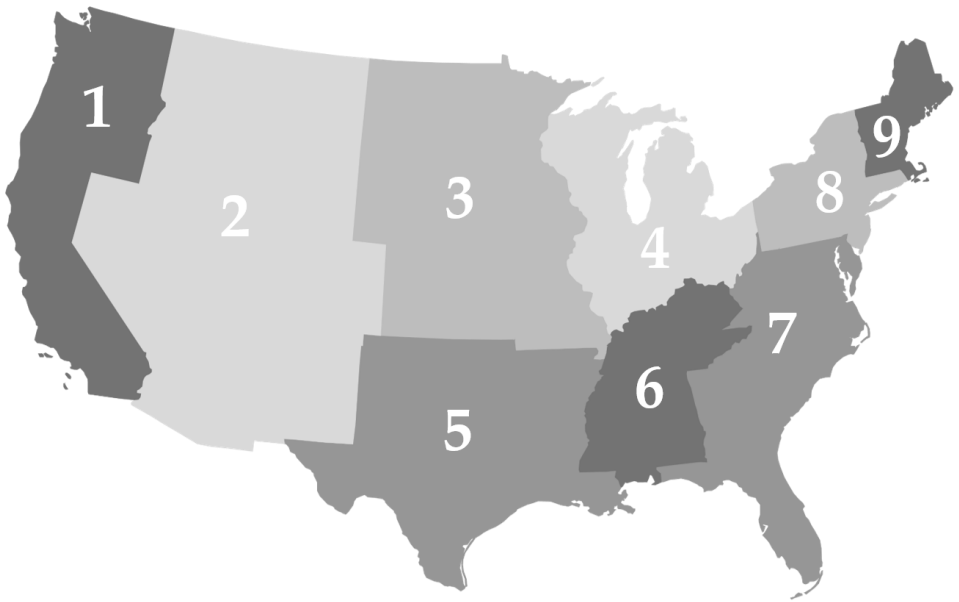
To my mom—
the reason I'm a writer. I love you.

*That is the problem with revenge—you wind up
destroying the innocent as well as the guilty.*

~ Cassandra Clare

THE CONTINENT SYSTEM

Over 100 years ago, the world came together to form The Continent System, where each habitable continent became its own unit. Countries, states, and provinces morphed into regions within their respective continents. The map below outlines the regions for Mid-North America, formerly known as the United States of America.



REGIONS

- (1) Pacific (2) Mountain (3) Northwestern Central
(4) Northeastern Central (5) Southwestern Central (6) Southeastern Central
(7) Southern Atlantic (8) Middle Atlantic (9) New England

CHAPTER ONE

Emma

I'm going to win. There's no doubt about it. He knows it, too, though that doesn't deter him. He fights back like his life is on the line, like his entire future rests on this one moment.

I take him in as we spar. He's scrawny, as most of the kids his age are. He's also inexperienced compared to the three years of training I have on him. I'm faster and smarter. My limbs thrum with familiar energy; I relish in the power I feel behind every strike.

Sweat pours down his face and dampens his hair. His face is flushed a reddish pink and his front teeth dig into his bottom lip, eyes glazed in sharp concentration. His breaths come out labored as he swings at me, rather sloppily, and I block yet again. He's tiring out, which means it's time for me to end this. I bring my leg up and twist around, foot catching the back of his knee, and I apply just enough pressure to knock him to the blue plastic safety mat below. I almost feel bad for the kid. He never stood a chance. Not against me.

"Time!" our instructor calls. Her crisp tone echoes off the concrete walls of the underground training facility. It draws me out of the haze. I was so lost in the fight that it takes me a second to regain composure.

My opponent lies flat on his back, chest rising and falling heavily. I bend down and offer him my hand.

"You did good," I say with a smile. And it's true. Because even though he lost, he'd certainly lasted longer than most who went up against me. *And* he was only in eighth grade. There's no doubt that he has raw talent.

“Thanks,” he grins shyly and pulls at a dark curl of hair. He shifts on his feet, staring at the floor, and opens his mouth like he’s going to say something.

“What?” I prompt and he flushes. I’ve never really understood why the younger kids always seem so intimidated by us. I don’t remember feeling that way about the high schoolers when I was in middle school.

He hesitates, then looks up and says, “Is it true you’re ranked number one in your class?”

I almost laugh. I should’ve known he wanted to talk about my status at the Academy. It’s not exactly a secret, but the look on his face stops me. It’s not entirely one of awe and admiration for having the chance to spar and interact with me. No. It’s the look of someone who sees beyond that, who sees how much work I must’ve put in just to make it this far. There’s nothing laughable about why he’s asking.

“I don’t know, kid. They don’t really tell us for sure until graduation. I’ve got another year to go before my class gets Leveled.”

“Yeah, but you’ve gotta be a Level One, even if you aren’t actually ranked first, right? I mean, you’re *Emmalyn Grant*.”

“Emma,” I correct out of habit.

He grins sheepishly. “Sorry.”

I shrug to assure him it’s no big deal. Most know how much I hate my full name, but sometimes the kids outside my grade forget, since they’re not around me too often.

“So,” I say. “You want to go into the Missions program.”

Another shy grin. “How did you know?”

“You’ve got the drive for it,” I explain. “I’ve been there, right where you are now. I’ve been the kinda clueless kid who gets paired up with someone so much more experienced. But when we were fighting, I saw it on your face. The determination, the need to prove yourself. Yeah, I’ve had more training than you, but we’re not that

different. If being a Level One is truly what you want, then don't let anything stand in your way."

He relaxes at my impromptu speech. I glance around the rest of the room. There are twenty of us altogether. Ten eighth graders paired up with ten juniors. I'm not too familiar with the younger kids, but the ones in my grade? I've known them my whole life.

I watch them, talking and laughing with each other in the few moments before we'll be told to quiet down. They're my friends, my peers, the kids I grew up with. We've been through everything together: the boring schoolwork, the rigorous training, the normal drama during our earlier adolescent years.

We were all together on the first day of kindergarten; on the day our instructors finally let us use weapons; when we started high school and everything we did suddenly became so much more serious than before.

How are we already seventeen and almost seniors?

"Okay, listen up!" the instructor shouts. Silence blankets the room. "As I'm sure you all know with today being the first of September, the senior class has their graduation ceremony tonight. Juniors, you know the drill. The rest of you, this is the first year you get to attend. You are all expected to be in the auditorium no later than five this evening. Additionally, as usual, Monday will mark the first day of the new school year. Juniors will become seniors and eighth graders will become freshman. Be sure to check your message boards for your new schedules. If you have any questions, feel free to stay after or ask one of the older students. Class dismissed."

At that, all twenty of us push and shove towards the only door in the room. Bodies and limbs press together in our eagerness to get out. It's cramped and a little claustrophobic as I squeeze my way out, but once we're up the stairs and out into the sunlight, the crowd disperses.

I gulp in a huge lungful of fresh air. The training rooms always have a lingering scent of stale sweat and body spray. As much as I love fighting, it's nice to be out in the open again.

"Ms. Grant," a voice says from behind.

I turn around and come face to face with my instructor. "Yes?"

She smiles. "I overheard you talking to Jamison after that last round of sparring. I just wanted to let you know that I'm sure what you said was immensely encouraging for him. The younger students look up to people like you."

"Um...thanks?"

Where is she going with this?

Her smile widens. "Have you ever considered being a Mentor after you graduate? I know your heart is set on the Missions program, but I personally think you'd made a great Mentor, as well. And you can always do both. Many students are involved in both routes simultaneously."

I already know this. She *knows* that I already know this.

"I'll think about it," is what I say. I won't though. For me, it's one or the other. I can't do both. No way am I going to put a kid through that kind of heartbreak if something happens to me while I'm out on a Mission. I've worked my entire life in hopes of being a Level One. I'm not about to back down now just because my kind words to Jamie were appreciated.

She disappears back into the training room, probably to straighten up before Monday's classes. I set off down the walkway that stretches across the grassy lawn towards the dorms.

"Emmalyn!" someone else calls from behind me. Irritations bubbles up. This is the second time I've been stopped in less than five minutes. That's not why I'm upset though. The boy who called out rushes up behind me. I'm more lenient with those who don't know me, but I know that voice, and he knows better.

“Cameron,” I turn and fix him with the best scowl I can muster. “How many times do we have to go over this? My name is Emma. Emma.”

He gives me an offended look. “Your best friend of twelve years returns from a dangerous Mission on the outside, and this is how I’m treated? Unbelievable.”

“Dangerous? You were just transporting files from one place to the next. You were gone for like, two days.”

“Hey, that can be dangerous. You don’t know.”

I laugh, roll my eyes, and throw my arm over his shoulders. “Come on.”

We walk together. All around us, students traipse across the grass and sidewalks, happily chattering. A breeze blows through the quad, ruffling the leaves that will soon turn colors and float to the ground.

“So are you going to the ceremony tonight?” I ask.

“Of course I’m going! Aiden’s graduating tonight. Plus, the Ambassador will be announcing the new Level Ones. I gotta scope out the newbies.”

We pass the enormous steel gate, the only entrance and exit in the wall that surrounds the Academy, which has the campus side and the City side. I can’t help but glance in the direction of the gate. Four guards flank the entrance, protecting us from every awful thing outside the walls and preventing any of it from getting in. Only those who are selected as Level Ones get to go outside to run Missions for the government and protect the Academy.

The Academy is exactly what it sounds like: a school. Though it’s more than that. It’s a secret government run program for kids like me. The ones who are...different. Special. Our evolved DNA composition separates us from the humans outside the walls due to a unique genetic strand that only people like us possess. The Academy

has raised, trained, and taken care of us even when our own parents didn't want us.

I'm happy here at the Academy. This place has served as my home and school since birth, and after graduation, I'll move out of the campus-side dorms and into an apartment in the City. But sometimes I can't help but want so much more than this. I can survive on the outside. I know I can.

"Stop worrying about it," Cameron says. He nudges me with his elbow, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I'm not worrying about it."

I so am.

"We've been friends our whole lives, Emma. I can tell what you're thinking."

"Really?" I say, sarcasm weaving into my tone. "Sorry, last I checked you were telekinetic, not telepathic."

He puts his hands up in surrender. "Sorry. Jeez, when did this become such a touchy subject with you?"

I stop and face him. "I've got *one* year, Cameron. *One year* to prove to them that I'm good enough. That I deserve a spot in the top five. I've worked my whole life for this. Being in the Missions program is all I've ever wanted. And if they decide I don't rank any higher than number six? Then all that work was for nothing."

He stares blankly, deep blue eyes boring into me, mouth hung open just slightly. "You don't know how amazing you actually are, do you?"

I roll my eyes. "Being supportive is kind of in the best friend job description."

"God, Emma, I've *seen* you fight. It's incredible. There's nothing else like it. I've watched you conquer everything you've set your mind to. And you can freaking read the future! That has to be a valuable

ability. What can other people do? Run at super speed? Yours is way better. Trust me, they'd be stupid not to pick you."

All of my pent-up energy drains away. Softly, I say, "Thanks, Cam."

"Anytime. Besides, you're better than I am, and they picked me."

I shrug. "Maybe everyone else in your year was just really bad."

He laughs. "No matter what, you'll be okay. I promise."

We reach the high school dorms—two four-story brick buildings. One for the girls, the other for the boys. There's a smaller dining hall building between them. On a normal day, we'd all meet there for dinner. But tonight, dinner will be served in the auditorium after the graduation ceremony.

Cameron and I say our goodbyes for now and part ways.

The lobby of the girls' dorm is warm and cozy, with couches and beanbags scattered around the room. A few freshmen sit around the table in front of the fireplace that blazes in winter. They're working on homework by the looks of it. I've heard that most places outside the Academy's walls have breaks from school. For us, the learning and training never stop.

We exchange quick hello's as I pass by to the staircase in the back. I make my way up to my room on the third floor. Compared to the lobby, the halls are plain. Smooth and cream-colored with no decorations or distinguishing factors. I make up for it in my bedroom, mostly with pictures of my friends and I that are tacked to the walls.

Lacy, my roommate, is sprawled across her pastel pink bedspread when I enter our room. She's tapping away at her phone, no doubt messaging her boyfriend, Aiden.

"Hey," she greets, peering up at me with her deep russet brown eyes.

“You do know we have a ceremony to go to in a few hours, right?” I tease, referring to the tee shirt and cotton shorts she’s wearing. I walk over to our closet, tiptoeing across Lacy’s side of the room like it’s a minefield. My side isn’t perfect, but it’s extremely organized compared to hers, what with her clothes and school supplies strewn about.

I pull out a knee length dark green dress, knowing it will bring out the color in my pale green eyes. I look at myself in the mirror and contemplate what to do with my hair. Maybe curl it? This is pretty much the only day each year we get to dress up, so I often overthink it.

“I’ll change when it gets closer,” Lacy says dismissively. “I didn’t have any physical classes today, so I’m not all sweaty and gross. All I’ll have to do is throw some clothes on.”

“Well I did have physical classes, so I’m gonna go shower.”

The days where my classes consist of sparring, weapons, and ability training are my favorite. It’s the days that are strictly academic subjects like English and math—the kinds of classes the normal humans take, too—that are the bane of my existence.

I grab my shower caddy and a towel and head to the community bathroom at the end of the hall.

Steam curls around me when I open the door. It’s humid inside and all the mirrors are fogged up. Apparently I’m not the only one who decided to clean up before the ceremony.

“Hey, Em.”

I involuntarily tense up at the voice. Laurel, a girl in my grade, stands by the row of sinks. She’s already clean and dressed up.

“Hey,” I force out.

She smiles. “Are you excited to only have one year left? Sounds like you’re pretty much guaranteed a spot in the top five.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard,” I mumble. I wish everyone would just shut up about it. It’s going to be a huge, dramatic thing if I don’t live up to the hype.

“That’s my goal, too,” Laurel continues, oblivious to my discomfort. “To be a Level One and get assigned a Mission.”

“Cool. Well, good luck,” I say and shift on my feet. Out of everyone on this floor to run into, it just had to be Laurel. I don’t dislike the girl, but being alone with her doesn’t exactly ease my mind either.

It’s in that moment my razor that was balanced on the towel in my arms clatters to the floor. The sound echoes off the tile and reverberates in my ears. I bend down to pick it up, but Laurel goes for it too.

Then I make the stupid mistake of flinching when our hands almost touch. It all happens so fast that I don’t have time to think it through.

Laurel grabs the razor and stands. “Really? You know our abilities don’t work on each other. Touching me won’t hurt you.”

“No, I know. I um...” I splutter, trying to come up with a convincing excuse.

Laurel just shrugs. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. It’s not like you’re the first one to ever pull back when I get too close.”

She takes a step towards me and I stand my ground this time and don’t move. She places the razor on top of the towel and clothes in my arms.

“I’ll let you get a shower. See ya.”

With that, Laurel leaves the bathroom. I want to smack myself for being so dumb. As uncomfortable as she makes me, she can’t help her ability. Most of our powers are useful and relatively harmless. But Laurel’s can send a person screaming in agony with a single touch, reduced to nothing but the pain coursing through them until

everything snaps to black as they pass out, or die if she holds on long enough.

They would also have to be human, of course. Fully, one hundred percent human. For whatever reason, our abilities don't work on each other. Even though I know this, *know* that she can never actually hurt me, the thought of it prickles my skin.

I continue to the shower side of the room as my thoughts buzz with the interaction.

I do feel bad for Laurel. The only way we can learn how to control our abilities is to use them. For her, that means hurting people. There are a small number of humans who know enough about us and allow us to use their abilities on them for practice, and because our abilities are like muscles that need to be frequently exercised.

It's easy for some people, like Cameron, who's ability doesn't require physical contact. He just imagines moving something with his mind and it happens. But for people like me and Laurel, another person is necessary to the process.

I step into one of the shower stalls and select my preferences on the glass touch screen panel. Scalding water rains down, easing the tension and aches in my muscles from the strenuous school day. I put my hand under the soap sensor and lavender scented shampoo squirts into my palm.

Once done, I dry off and slip into my dress.

Lacy is dressed and ready to go by the time I return to the room. I've never understood how she always looks so put together with hardly any effort. Her dark hair falls in soft curls and her brown skin practically glows. We leave together and join the crowd headed for the auditorium.

"You know, this is our last time watching this thing," Lacy comments. "We'll be the ones walking the stage a year from now."

I shake my head. "It's weird to even think about that. We're almost adults. That's insane. What Level do you think you'll be in?"

She emits a short burst of a laugh. "Definitely a Three. Only the very top get anything higher. There's no way I'll be selected for the Missions program or the Elite. But honestly, I don't really care. I'll be perfectly happy working a normal job in the City. I've never wanted the adventurous, dangerous lifestyle. That's all you."

It is all me. Out of our friend group, I'm the only one who's killed myself trying to have that life. Even though Cameron *did* become a Level One, he was still fine with doing whatever. But not me. I've put everything I've got into this.

We get to the auditorium and walk inside. The scene before us takes my breath away, as it does every year. The lights are dimmed except for the few above the stage. Rows of chairs sit in the front for the graduating class. Round tables are set up for the rest of us. The room is fancily decorated and gives off a sophisticated vibe. Soft music plays in the background, just barely heard above the chatter of people. The smell of chicken and spices wafts in from the side room where the food is being prepared for after the ceremony.

I scan the nearby tables until my eyes land on Cameron. In the lighting, his eyes glitter and his dark blonde hair looks almost brown. He beams when we make eye contact and waves us over. Next to Cameron is a tall brown-haired boy with forest green eyes and a smattering of light freckles dotted across his nose. He's wearing a suit with an Academy tie, indication that he's a graduate.

"Aiden!" Lacy exclaims and scampers over to him. I shake my head and suppress a laugh. The tables fit up to six people, so it's perfect for our little group. I walk over and claim the chair between Cameron and Lacy.

Not long after, the room dims further.

“Alright, I gotta get to my seat. I’ll see you after.” Aiden kisses Lacy’s cheek, grins at me and Cameron, then walks off to join the others in front of the stage.

A spotlight appears on stage and the chatter instantly ceases. A tall woman with graying blonde hair that hangs to her shoulders walks out to the podium. She is immaculately dressed in her pressed suit. Power and authority radiate off her. She definitely looks like a leader, *our* leader. The Ambassador.

She helped in creating the program. She organizes and takes care of everything necessary for the Academy to work. She took us all in, despite the abilities we possessed. She never cared that we were different. Instead, she helped us, even though she’s been through a lot herself. We’ve all heard the stories. How she used to have an ability like us, until some humans found out and experimented on her.

I don’t know about anyone else, but I definitely admire her. How could I not, when she’s given so much of her life to creating a safe and supportive environment for people like me. To make sure none of us ever go through what she did.

“Welcome,” she announces with a warm smile. “Before we begin, I want to say a few words.” She looks to all the seniors before her. “I remember when we first brought each of you into the program after you had been cast out by the humans for being genetically different than them. You were infants back then, innocent and undeserving of the way they treated you. But I’ve had the privilege of watching all of you grow into the wonderful adults you are today. You are stronger, smarter, better than anyone outside the Academy could ever hope to be. I am so proud of you for all your accomplishments and I wish you the best of luck as you move forward into the next stage of your life. Remember: The Academy is the future!”

“The Academy is the future!” we chant back.

The room erupts in applause.

“Next,” the Ambassador continues. “I’d like to recognize the students who qualified as Level Ones this year.”

She pauses, and the room goes dead silent. This is the moment some of them have waited their entire lives for.

“Congratulations to Aimee Bennet and Tyler Henry! The Missions program is excited to have you.”

The applause is stifled this time. As to be expected, many of the graduates are disappointed. But that isn’t the only shock.

Whispers float through the room like buzzing flies. My heart pounds. Why are there only two names? And is it just for this year, or will there only be two picked next year, too? Will I have to get into the top two instead of five?

Lacy leans over. “Aren’t there usually more than that?”

I nod, numb. “It’s usually five. Sometimes four. But never *two*.”

The Ambassador barrels on as if nothing strange happened. She reads off the list of Level Two students—the Elites—who will work on government affairs from inside the Academy. That list contains ten students, Aiden included.

Anyone not selected for the first two levels is a Three. They hold positions in the City, where we all move to after graduation. It’s still inside the walls that surround us, but students live on the campus side until graduation.

The actual ceremony comes next. Each student walks across the stage and receives their Certificate of Completion.

That’s going to be me next year.

Dinner is served shortly after, and Aiden returns to our table. The room fills with talk and laughter once again.

“I’m so proud of you!” Lacy squeals and hugs her boyfriend. “When do you start training to become a guard?”

Aiden shrugs. “Sometime within the next few weeks. And my other Elite training starts a couple weeks after that.”

We congratulate him and dig into our food.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you earlier, but you’re not going to believe what happened today,” Cameron says, face lighting up.

“What?”

“I got selected to be the trainer for the new Level Ones. They’ll have training for six months, then another three months of small trial Missions. Which means I’m going to be around for most of your senior year! Plus, it’s an amazing opportunity.”

I squeeze his arm. “That’s great, Cam!”

His smile widens. “It’s pretty exciting. And hey, maybe when I get the hang of teaching, I can attempt to teach you how to shoot a gun.”

My eyes narrow as I give him my best death glare. “Don’t even start.”

I can’t remember the last time I lost a hand-to-hand fight, but I’m not perfect. I *am* above average at combat, self-defense, and weapons in general. But for some irritating reason, my aim is absolutely atrocious when it comes to guns. Cameron knows that bringing it up is a great way to push my buttons.

He shoots me a mischievous grin.

A supervisor approaches our table before anyone else gets another word in.

“Emma Grant?” he says. I look up at him. “I need you to come with me.”

“What? Why?”

His gaze shifts to the others at the table before returning to me. “Just come with me. I’ll explain on the way.”

I stand from the table. My friends give me questioning looks, but I shrug in reply. I have no idea what’s going on.

I follow the supervisor into the cool night air. It’s dark now, and the stars hang overhead. Cameron’s told me that in some cities outside

the gates, there's so much light pollution that no one ever sees the stars. It's kind of sad.

Once we're away from the crowd, I ask, "What's going on?"

"The Ambassador has requested a meeting with you," he responds vaguely.

My mind shuts down. Did I hear him right? The Ambassador wants to talk to *me*?

"About what?" I blurt out.

He stays silent.

"I guess you're not authorized to tell me, huh?"

He shakes his head.

"Not even a little bit?" I press. Should I be worried? I've never spoken to the Ambassador one-on-one. Or at all, for that matter. She typically only addresses us in large groups, except for her meetings with the Level Ones and Twos.

"You aren't in trouble, if that's what you're thinking," he assures me. It doesn't help much, because I still don't know what to expect.

Our conversation ends there. He doesn't offer up any more information and I know better than to continue pushing someone who has greater authority than me.

We eventually make it to the building where the Ambassador's office is located. I've never been inside before, but I know all about it. It also contains the conference rooms and offices for the supervisors.

The supervisors are probably the closest to the Ambassador. They assist her with running the program. Most of them stem from the Elites, but a few are humans from the government who have volunteered to help us practice and control our abilities.

I'm led through the building and up to the top floor so quickly that I don't have time to take in my surroundings. My escort knocks when we reach the correct door.

“Come in.”

We walk inside and I make sure to survey the place. Electronic file cabinets and bookshelves line the walls. Several glass monitors sit around the room, keeping track of all the progress and security of the Academy, both the campus and the City. The Ambassador sits behind her desk.

“Thank you for joining me, Ms. Grant. Please take a seat.” She gestures to the chair in front of her. “Thank you for bringing her here, Samuel. You are dismissed.”

Samuel nods, then exits the office, closing the door behind him. It’s just me and the Ambassador now. I can’t believe I’m this close to her.

She leans back in her seat. “So, Emmalyn. I’m sure you are wondering why I called you in here.”

I grit my teeth and resist the urge to correct her on the use of my full name. She probably wouldn’t be as receptive as Jamie or Cameron. I nod in response.

“I have a proposition for you.”

CHAPTER TWO

Jesse

People are stupid.

They are naïve and so unbearably gullible. Every day, they live their lives as if evil doesn't lurk right outside their doors. They put all their trust into each other, into the media, and worst of all, into the government.

In reality, the government doesn't care about us. They only care about their precious Academy kids—the ones with special abilities that make them superior to the rest of us. The ones us normal, lowly humans aren't supposed to know about. I guess I'm not exactly normal, because I know all about the monsters that live at the Academy.

...

Stay calm. Don't move. Don't speak. Don't draw attention.

My heart thuds heavily against my chest as I fight to control myself through the first class period of the day. Fifteen minutes in and I'm already seconds away from losing it.

Ironically, it's a government class.

The teacher drones on about stuff I don't care about. I pretend to read pages from the textbook on my tablet. We have class discussion that I don't participate in. None of it matters. None of them know the truth.

"...which is why we switched to a continent based system over a hundred years ago. Having each continent under one rule instead of separate countries allows us to better work with one another."

I sigh and roll my eyes at the teacher's words. I continue to frown at my tablet, the words bleeding into each other and becoming a jumbled mess.

He pauses, long enough that I look up. He's staring right at me.

"Is there something you'd like to add, Jesse? It seems like you have some thoughts or feelings you want to share."

Snickers spread throughout the classroom.

"No," I mumble and lower my head back to the tablet.

The teacher gets the class back in order, then continues the lecture.

The truth is, I'd share my opinions if I could, but no one would actually listen. They all think the government is so honest, reliable, and trustworthy. They have no *idea* what the government is capable of doing, what they've already done, and what they will do.

The shrill tone of the bell rings through the building, pulling me from my depressing thoughts. One class down, five more to go.

Students flood the school hallways, but I manage to push through the crowd to my locker. I punch in the four-digit code into the glass panel and the door swings open. I exchange my materials, then pause.

All around me, students filter past, talking and laughing and being teenagers. None of them care enough about me to wonder where I might be if I were to just disappear for the rest of the day. It would be so easy to just walk right out of here. I knew when I woke up this morning that it was going to be a bad day. Why push it? Why force myself to be miserable? To endure another pointless six hours of my life?

I glance at the front doors at the end of the hall. Then back at my locker.

With a heavy sigh, I slam the locker shut and head off to second period. As much as I want to, I can't afford to skip class.

So I stick it out, and when the final bell resonates through the halls, I know I made the right decision. What's one more year of hard work in the grand scheme of things if it means a chance at a better life afterwards?

I shove my school supplies in my locker and grab my jacket. The cool air falls over me as I exit the building. Rain mists from the sky, but the clouds above hang dark and gray, threatening a downpour.

The walk home isn't more than ten minutes, but I don't want to go home. Despite the hell I just escaped, home is the last place I want to be. But with a potential storm brewing, I don't have much of a choice. I can't risk getting stranded somewhere and being unable to make it back in time for Charlotte and Oliver.

The rain picks up as I walk down the sidewalk. When I come to an intersection, I have to make a split-second decision. Right or left?

Left is mentally and emotionally easier, but taking a right is half the time. And with the weather, the shortcut is ultimately the smarter option.

With a deep breath, I turn right and head off in the direction of the part of town I usually avoid at all cost. But maybe going past there will help. Maybe it'll ease some of the pain. It's been almost two years since the last time I've walked by.

The stores and shops that line the street quickly give way to houses. I curl my hands into fists, dig my fingers into my palms. My nails are bitten down to the quick, so the pressure doesn't actually leave any mark. Sometimes I wish it did.

I clench my fists tighter and brace myself for the empty lot at the end of the street.

Rain hurtles from the sky, drips into my eyes, plasters my hair to my face. Almost there. Just a little farther and I'll be able to breathe again.

The empty lot doesn't come.

A new house fills the space. The paneling is a cheerful yellow, the grass lush and green, as if nightmares hadn't come true in that very spot almost ten years ago.

My heart stands still, as do I. The rain pelts my skin, but it doesn't bother me anymore. How is this house here? How could someone build a new structure, a new life, and just erase the past?

I swallow the lump in my throat, press down on the pain, and tear myself away. Lesson learned. No more shortcuts.

My chest doesn't loosen until the tiny house I'm forced to call home comes into view. Greg's truck isn't in the driveway. We're safe for a little while, at least. I type in the house code and press my thumb against the glass scanner to unlock the door.

The inside of the house is cramped, definitely not large enough to properly accommodate four people. I trudge to the bedroom in the back that I share with my foster siblings and throw my weight against the door to force it open.

The room consists of two twin beds that have been pushed together. We have an air mattress that someone could sleep on, but Charlotte and Oliver prefer the three of us sleeping beside each other.

I drop my backpack to the floor and go to the closet. The interior wall is made of paneling. The panel in the back easily pops in and out of place, which I've used to my advantage. Behind that panel is a corkboard I've hung on the concrete wall.

My obsession began five years ago, just a few weeks before Charlotte showed up. I had just turned twelve. I didn't know back then that my curiosity would turn into the obsession it has become today, but it did.

I remove the panel and take the corkboard down. It's covered in pictures, news clippings, documents, and a map. Color-coded strings and tacks web everything together. Notecards are pinned

around the edges, displaying my notes. I write most of them in a shorthand that only I understand, in case anyone ever finds it.

Acquiring the information I need and properly storing it has been a challenge. Using technology would have made organization much easier, but my online activities are no doubt being monitored by the government and Academy. The corkboard itself is untraceable and easily concealed.

I lift one of the floorboards in the closet and extract a stack of folders and papers. Charlotte won't be home from school for another forty-five minutes. I plan to use every second of it.

I'm so close to finding the answer to all my problems. I feel it. After years of patience, sneaking around, frustrating dead ends, I'm almost there.

I put pencil to paper and get to work.

...

The squeak of the front door startles me out of my deep concentration. My heart lurches to my throat as I hastily gather the papers that have spread across the bed and floor. Is my time really up already?

I haphazardly replace the fake panel just as Charlotte enters the room. There's no reason to worry though. She throws her backpack onto the bed and flops face down beside it with a huff.

"What's wrong?" I ask and sit beside her. The bedding muffles her response. I nudge her. "Come on, Char. Talk to me."

"I don't want to," she grumbles and flips onto her back. She stares up at me with her defiant gray eyes. It's a look that challenges me to press on. She doesn't want to discuss what's bothering her, yet she does at the same time. I completely understand. That internal debate is the story of my life.

We stare each other down until she finally gives in and mumbles, "I got a bad grade on a test." She tears her eyes from mine.

“And a girl in my class found out and made fun of me for it. I know it’s a stupid thing to get upset over, but it made me think how everything I’m doing in school now is going to affect everything later on.”

“It’s just one grade,” I say gently.

“Yeah, one grade that could determine the rest of my life,” she exclaims dramatically. “I’m gonna be in the same situation as you. I won’t have money to pay for college when the time comes, so I’ll have to completely rely on scholarships if I want to be able to get away from here. I can’t get those if my grades suck.”

Her breath sharpens and tears spring into her eyes.

“Look,” I say quickly. “Colleges don’t even really care about the grades you get in middle school. It’s high school they care about. And even then, it’s okay to mess up once in a while.”

“Really?” She snuffles and wipes her hand across her eyes.

“Have you met me?” I tease. She cracks a smile. “You know I didn’t have the best grades in middle school, but I pulled through and you will, too.”

She sits up and leans against me. I wrap her in my arms, as if that will make everything better. It won’t, but it’s nice to pretend that we live normal lives for a little while.

“So you think you’ll be able to get enough scholarship money to pay for college?” she asks.

“I hope so,” I sigh. “I doubt it’ll be enough, but every little bit will help.”

She smiles for a second, but then her face falls.

“Now what’s wrong?”

She peers at me with tight, worried eyes. She looks so much younger in this moment. I often forget that she’s only twelve.

“What happens?” Her voice is barely audible. “What happens when you turn eighteen and graduate high school? When you go off to college? What’ll happen to me and Oli when you leave us behind?”

Her words jolt me. Honestly, I try not to think about it too much. I live my life one day at a time. I don’t know what will happen. Technically, they’ll still be under Greg’s custody and I can’t exactly smuggle them into college with me. I do have a plan, but it’s not guaranteed. I haven’t told her yet, though, and I won’t until I know for sure. I don’t want to get her hopes up.

“We’ll figure something out,” I assure her. “But trust me when I say that I’ll never leave you behind. No matter what happens or how far apart we end up, I will *always* come back for you.”

Her shoulders relax, then she changes the subject. “So how was your day?”

“Fine,” I say dismissively. It’s hypocritical of me to pressure her about her own problems without sharing mine, but what is there to tell? School was a mix of boredom and downright irritation, and there’s no way I’m telling her that I spent almost an hour sifting through stacks of papers only to be no closer to locating the Academy than I had been before.

“How’s the search going?” she blurts out. My eyes snap up to meet hers. Her expression is innocent, but her eyes scream the truth. She knows.

“What?” Feigning confusion seems like my best bet. She doesn’t buy it for a second.

“You know, the corkboard you keep hidden in the closet.”

Yep, I’m screwed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

It’s at that moment there’s a thump and a crash from inside the closet. The door swings open as the corkboard falls out. I wince. I guess I really did put it back a little too hastily.

Charlotte gives me a pointed look. “Really?”

I close my eyes and sigh. So much for protecting her from all this. "How long have you known?"

She shrugs. "Not long. You didn't put the panel back all the way one time and I found it. Don't worry, though. Most of it doesn't make any sense, except that you're obviously looking for something and you're completely obsessed with finding it."

She eyes me expectantly.

"I can't tell you about it," I say. She opens her mouth to protest, but I cut her off. "I know you're curious and you want to help, but the less you know, the better. What I'm doing isn't exactly safe."

"I'm not a little kid anymore, Jesse. Whatever it is, I can handle it."

She's so determined; it's in her nature to be. We're the same in that way. And maybe she *can* handle it, but I'm not risking it.

"I know, Char. Honestly, you're a lot more mature than most kids your age, but I can't get you involved in this. It has nothing to do with age. I can't have you getting into trouble or getting hurt because of me."

"I get it," she finally backs down. Her eyes have dimmed. "You don't have to explain it to me, I guess, even though I wish you would. Just promise you'll be careful."

I force a smile. "I promise."

CHAPTER THREE

Emma

I have a proposition for you.

The words tumble around in my mind. "What do you mean?"

"You just finished your junior year," she replies cryptically. I should've known better than to expect an actual answer.

"I'm aware," I say slowly, trying to minimize the sarcastic bite in my tone.

"And as of right now, how do you think you are ranked?"

I blink, taken aback. Is this some kind of test? I resist the urge to roll my bottom lip between my teeth while I figure out how best to respond. I don't want her to know how much self-doubt I have, but it'll also be bad if I come across as overly confident.

"I don't know," I shrug, though that's probably not an appropriate reply either. I add, "Everyone says I'm near the top, but I don't know if they're just trying to reassure me or if they honestly believe that."

"I would say you're definitely near the top. In fact, you have been ranked number one in your class for a while now."

I freeze and become very aware of my heart as it slams against my chest. Number one? That can't possibly be right. "Are you sure?"

As if she'd be lying to me.

"Positive. I would even go as far to say that you're one of the best we've ever had." She smiles, but there is an intensity behind it. Whatever comes next is serious. "Which leads me to what I'm about to ask of you. Now before I tell you, I want you to understand that you aren't obligated to do any of this. You don't have to agree to anything

I'm about to say. I don't want you to think you're being put in danger or forced to do something against your will."

I sit up straighter.

"As I am sure you noticed, we only had two graduating members qualify as Level Ones this year. While we still have plenty already in the program, there have been several who have recently retired to a normal job within the City. We don't have enough people out in the field as it is, but I didn't want to send anyone out who didn't meet the requirements."

A small hopeful spark works through me. Surely she isn't implying what it sounds like she is. After years of hard work and patience, surely it won't come a year ahead of time.

"I've looked over your records dating all the way back to your first year of school. You've always excelled. After carefully reviewing your progress, as well as consulting with my colleagues, we have come to the same conclusion. Your progress is so far advanced, you are technically eligible for graduation now. Honestly, you've passed up many of the students who graduated this evening. You also fit the profile we need."

I stare at her with bated breath, my muscles taunt. "So you're saying..."

"I'm offering you a Mission."

Five words. That's all it takes to change my life.

She continues before I have the chance to say anything. "Now, you don't have to accept if you aren't comfortable leaving the Academy as a minor. Though if you do accept, someone will accompany you, as usual, so be thinking about who you might want that to be. And as with all Missions, your housing, transportation, and spending money will be provided." She pauses for a beat. "You can take some time to think about it if you'd like."

Take some time to think about it? I've thought about this moment my entire life.

"I'll do it," I say immediately. "I'd be honored for the position."

The Ambassador's smile widens. "Excellent. I'm pleased to hear that. I'll arrange for another meeting tomorrow so you can receive your assignment."

My assignment. My Mission. This is actually happening.

"You are going to do great, Emmalyn. You've worked so hard for this. I'm proud of you."

My heart liquifies. Those words mean so much coming from her. I have worked hard. I've trained, even on my off days and on the weekends while everyone else was out having fun. I pushed myself, even when all I wanted to do was break. My whole life has led up to this moment, and now it's finally happened.

"Thank you," I manage to say without the words lodging in my throat.

She presses a button on her computer and the door opens as Sam walks back in. I take that as my cue to leave.

"Oh, and Emmalyn?" she says. I glance back at her. "Make sure you don't spread this information around. It would be best if our discussion was kept discreet."

"Of course," I agree. "Thank you again for this opportunity."

We exchange goodbyes and I leave with Sam.

Neither of us speak this time around as he escorts me back. Dinner is still in full swing when I reenter the auditorium. Nothing changed in the twenty minutes I was gone. Not for them, at least.

"What was that about?" Aiden asks when I sit back in my seat. I take a bite of food while I rack my brain for something to say. The food has cooled considerably in my absence, but it still tastes all right.

"I'll tell you later," I finally say. After all, the Ambassador told me to keep it contained, not that I couldn't tell anyone at all.

“Aww, why can’t you tell us now?” Lacy whines.

I shift in my seat. “Because I’m not supposed to openly talk about it. I’ll tell you later when we can’t be overheard.”

“But—” Lacy protests.

I cut her off. “So, what did you all talk about while I was gone?”

Lacy’s face falls and I feel a twinge of regret for maybe being too harsh, but I’ll tell her all about it when we get back to our room.

Cameron picks up the silence and I shoot him a grateful look. “After we stopped debating whether or not you were in trouble, Aiden and Lacy started talking about their plans for after Lacy’s graduation. Be glad you missed it. They were being all mushy and gross.”

Lacy smacks his arm. “We were not. We were just discussing where we want to live when we move to the City. We’ll actually be able to live together.”

I laugh. “Yeah, then you won’t be disappointed every time you get caught trying to sneak him into the dorms.”

Aiden’s face darkens. “Let’s not talk about those days.”

Lacy adds, “Remember when the supervisor grabbed you and literally threw you out?”

“Of course! I never tried to get in after that.”

Our banter continues through the rest of dinner. The conversation I promised them is not forgotten, but we’ve moved on for the time being.

The celebration eventually ends when curfew approaches. Cameron and I get separated from Lacy and Aiden on the way back to the dorms, but I doubt that’s by accident.

When we reach the dorms, I take Cameron’s hand and pull him into the alley between the buildings. He stays silent until we’re far enough away from the opening.

“Okay, so what really happened when you left?” he asks, already on the same page as me.

"I had a meeting with the Ambassador," I admit. "And you're not going to believe what she said." I drop my voice to a whisper. "I'm number one, Cameron. Out of our entire class, I'm at the very top."

His jaw falls open. "Emma! That's amazing! I guess that means you're guaranteed a spot in the Missions program next year, huh?" He shakes his head. "All that worrying and you're ranked first."

"I'm not going next year," I say. "I'm going now."

His face pales. "What?"

I explain everything.

He shifts on his feet when I finish. "Are you sure about this? You'll be going outside the gates for the first time without the usual year of training. Do you know who you're going to be paired with yet? The partner can make all the difference. And Missions are so, so dangerous. I know I bring back stories, but I haven't told you everything. I left out the more dangerous stuff because I didn't want you to worry about me. I don't want to lose you like—"

"I promise I'll be really careful," I cut him off. I can't hear the rest of that sentence. I can't. Even if time has passed, it'll always be too soon. "And I don't have to go with some random partner. She said I get to choose...and I want that person to be you. If you want that, of course."

There's a beat of silence while he eyes me like I'm crazy, and then, "Are you kidding me? Of course I'll go with you." He closes the small distance between us and folds me into a hug. I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face in his shoulder. "I'm so proud of you, Emma," he murmurs into my hair.

"Thanks," I whisper. "I'll feel so much better with you there. I can't imagine going with anyone else, especially with someone older that I don't even know."

"Yeah," he agrees. "I'll feel better being the one with you than some random Level One you don't know. And I wouldn't want your

partner to treat you any differently just because you're younger than them."

The warning bell rings across the grounds, shattering our moment. Two minutes until curfew. With reluctance, I pull from his embrace. We leave the alley and part ways.

Lacy isn't back yet when I get to our room, so I quickly change into pajamas and flop onto my bed. The door swings open a few seconds later.

"You cut it pretty close," I comment.

"I know," Lacy says. "We didn't hear the alarm at first and then I ran all the way here." Despite that, she isn't out of breath. Her ability allows her to run faster than average for an extended period of time without tiring out.

"Did Aiden make it back okay?"

"Yeah. Not that he had anything to worry about. Graduates are exempt from curfew now." She sits beside me. "So are you going to tell me about what happened earlier?"

I recount the story again, this time hesitantly including that I asked Cameron to go with me.

Her face lights up. "That's awesome, Em. I can't believe they're sending you out a year early. Most don't even go at all."

I chew the inside of my cheek. "And you're okay with Cameron going?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

I shrug. "I don't know. We might be gone for a while. That's half the group all at once."

"Emma, this is what you've dreamed of. And it's probably best that Cameron goes with you. They picked him to be a trainer, after all. That means he'll probably do just fine looking out for you and training you while you also actively do the Mission."

I deflate. “Right. The training. If he does go with me, he’ll have to sacrifice the opportunity to train the newer Level Ones. With the way the Ambassador talked, it sounds like we might be gone for a while. I can’t ask him to give that up for me.”

“Seriously?” she exclaims as she slides off my bed and goes to the closet. “He just enthusiastically agreed to go with you. If he really didn’t want to, he would’ve said no. But he said yes. So take him on the Mission, live your dream, and have the best couple of months of your life finally experiencing the outside world. And besides, this is just as much for him as it is for you. I’d kill to live on my own with Aiden.”

She has a point, I guess, but, “Cameron and I aren’t like you and Aiden, though. We can hang out whenever we want now without getting in trouble. I don’t need to live with him to be his best friend.”

Lacy raises an eyebrow and purses her lips, pulling her ‘you’re an idiot’ expression as she changes into her pajamas.

“What?” I ask.

“Girl, come on. Don’t tell me you seriously don’t know.”

“Know what? What are you talking about?”

“He doesn’t want to be your best friend, Emma,” Lacy says. When I still don’t get whatever she’s trying to say, she adds, “He doesn’t want to be just your best friend.”

Then it clicks.

My stomach drops at the weight of the statement, but it’s not true. It can’t be.

“No,” I shake my head. “There’s no way. I’d know if he thought of me like that.”

“Would you?” she challenges.

“Yes! It’s Cameron. We tell each other everything. He would’ve told me if...if he...”

The words die in my throat. Lacy raises her eyebrows, almost sympathetic in a way.

“Does he?” I mumble. “Did he...say something to you?”

She shakes her head. “But I’ve noticed the way he acts around you. I don’t know, maybe I’m wrong. It just seems like he does.”

I rub my hand down my face and sigh. “I hope he doesn’t. I can’t even imagine thinking of him like that. We’ve known each other since we were little kids. We’re best friends.”

“Okay, chill out. Even if he does, maybe he’ll just never bring it up and then you won’t have to worry about it.”

“But now every time I see him, I’m going to wonder if he’s hiding how he really feels about me.”

After changing, she sinks into her bed. “You think too much. Just forget I said anything. I probably just read the situation wrong.”

I know she’s lying—she definitely believes what she said—but I let it go. Tomorrow is going to be a big day and I need to be ready for it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jesse

Greg doesn't come home, which makes tonight one of the good nights. We never know where he goes or what he does all night, but I couldn't care less. Tonight, I don't have to deal with the yelling, the fighting, the fear. I won't have to shield my innocent siblings from harm. They feel it, too. The relief when the digital clock by the beat-up TV indicates that it's well past the time he usually comes home.

Tonight, we're free.

It's not a school night and we have the house to ourselves, so I let them stay up past their usual bedtime. We sit on the ragged couch in the living room and watch TV, an activity we rarely get to do.

I flip through the channels for a while until landing on something we can all watch. I don't actually pay much attention to it, but instead relish in the serenity of relaxing with my siblings.

They get more tired as the night wears on. Oliver is first to go. He's sprawled across the couch with his head in my lap. Charlotte's curled up beside me, still awake, but with heavy eyes.

I reach for the remote and switch the TV off. "Time for bed," I say and sweep Oli into my arms to carry him to the bedroom. He's small for his age, but before long, I won't be able to carry him like this anymore.

"Go change into your pajamas," I tell Charlotte when we enter the bedroom. Oliver's thankfully already in his. "And don't forget to brush your teeth."

"I know, I know," she says dismissively. She grabs her pajamas from her dresser drawer and leaves.

I tuck Oli into bed and throw on a tee shirt and sweatpants while Charlotte is out of the room. She returns in a tank top and shorts. She brushes past me, and I notice something on her upper arm.

I stop her. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"On your arm?" I clarify.

She turns away, clapping a hand over her arm, and mumbles, "Nothing."

My eyes narrow. "It wasn't nothing, Charlotte. What's on your arm?"

I try to pull her hand away, but she won't budge.

"It doesn't matter," she protests. "Just let it go."

Letting it go isn't an option and I'm done playing around. "Charlotte Marie," I say firmly.

She pauses, then slowly turns back around and removes her hand. Heat flares inside me at the sight. The skin on her upper arm is a nasty blue-purple.

"What did he do?" I seethe. Blood pounds in my ears.

She steps back. "Nothing, Jesse. It was an accident."

The edges of my vision go fuzzy. "Don't lie to me, Charlotte. What happened?"

Don't yell at her. It wasn't her fault. She's not the one you're mad at.

"What happened?" I repeat, much gentler this time.

She draws in a shaky breath and fixes her gaze on a spot above my shoulder. "I was in the kitchen this morning and I guess I didn't get out of the way fast enough. I don't know, it all happened so fast. He grabbed me a little too hard and it left a mark. I didn't even know it was bruised until I saw it in the shower."

I explode. "I can't believe him. I can't believe he hurt you!"

Charlotte hesitantly touches my arm. "Jesse, calm down. It's okay. I'm okay."

“No, you’re not!” I shout and she flinches. I sigh, run a hand through my hair, and pace the room. I need to calm down. The last thing I want is to scare her. But the walls spin around me, the temperature rising. My chest constricts. “We’re leaving. We can be out of here by tomorrow morning before he comes home. We’ll never have to deal with him again and you won’t be in danger.” She stares at me, eyebrows raised. “I’m serious, Char. We’re leaving.”

“And where exactly are we gonna go, huh?” she retorts and crosses her arms. “We don’t have any money and even if we do somehow steal the small amount Greg has lying around, it won’t be enough.”

I deflate like a balloon, her rationalism being the pin that pops me. Of course she’s right. Of course we have nowhere to go. If we really ran away, we’d need food, money, and a place to actually run to. I can’t put them through that.

“Fine,” I force out against everything in me that’s screaming to go. “But I’m not leaving you alone in the house anymore, especially if he’s here.”

She nods, her eyes and shoulders drooping, and climbs into bed. I settle between my siblings. Oliver slides closer to me, somehow still asleep despite the argument. Charlotte snuggles into me as well. Even though I’m their friend and big brother of sorts, I’m also their protector and they know that. I’ll always be there to keep them safe.

It’s just not enough. Nothing I do for them will ever come close to the life they deserve.

...

I wake the next morning to the clattering of dishes, which can only mean one thing. Greg is home. Charlotte rustles beside me and slowly wakes up. She peers at me blearily for a moment before her eyes widen and her body stiffens.

My eyes flicker to the bruise on her arm. It's worsened overnight, darker and more painful looking than before. Something bubbles deep inside me, pleading to be set free.

I scramble out of bed and storm out of the room. Charlotte follows closely behind.

"Jesse, no. Yelling at him will only make it worse." She grabs at my hand but I shake her off and burst into the kitchen.

"What is *wrong* with you?" I scream at him. He turns to face me, startled. His cold gray eyes burn into mine.

"Excuse me?"

"You hurt her! She did nothing wrong and you hurt her."

I lunge at him. Charlotte cries out. But I never make it. His hand swings out and cracks across my face with enough force to send me staggering back. My cheek stings. It'll definitely welt and bruise, but I'm not fazed. It's not like this is the first time he's hit me.

"Jesse!" Charlotte runs forward and latches onto my arm, trying to pull me back. She's trembling from head to toe. I shake her off again.

"Go to the room, Char," I hiss through clenched teeth. For once, she doesn't argue.

"I swear if you hurt her or Oli again, I—"

"What?" he interrupts and grabs me by the shoulders. His fingers dig into me as he walks me backwards and slams my back into the wall. "What're you gonna do? Call social services? Need I remind you that I let the three of you live here so you don't get split up and sent to three different foster homes. Is that what you want? I could easily toss you out on the streets and be done with this whole thing."

He releases me and pulls himself up to full height. I shake with the effort to not attack him, digging my fingers into my palms. I hold my tongue, too, because he's right. I *despise* him with every fiber of my being, but there's nothing I can do. We need shelter and food and other

basic necessities. Greg provides that. And if we do turn him in for being the abusive monster he is, then it's almost guaranteed that Charlotte, Oliver, and I will be split up and sent in three different directions. I can't risk that.

"Just leave them alone," I finish lamely and flee to the bedroom. Charlotte and Oliver huddle together on the bed.

Oliver looks up at me with his emerald green puppy dog eyes. He opens his arms for a hug. I sink into the bed and gently wrap my arms around his small, warm body.

"It's okay," I mumble and run a hand through his dark hair. "Everything's okay."

He only whimpers in response.

In the two years I've known him, he hasn't spoken a single word. I don't know why he doesn't talk, if it's related to how he ended up in foster care to begin with, or if he's literally incapable of speech. Not that it matters, though. He's still my brother either way.

"Come on." I pull away from him and stand up. "Let's get out of the house today. How does that sound?"

Oliver nods, but his expression remains grim.

We get dressed and I pull out the emergency packs that are stashed in the bottom dresser drawer for times like this. It includes toothbrushes and paste, a hairbrush, and granola bars.

After getting ready, I walk over to the single window and undo the latch. It used to screech and stick about halfway up, but now when I lift it, it remains silent from the many times we've left this way.

Charlotte goes first. Then I hoist Oli onto the ledge, and he slides out the other side. I follow closely behind and shut the window behind me.

We go to our favorite place: the park.

It's one of the few places left untouched by the advancements in technology. The playground sits on rotted mulch and the nearby rusted swing set sits on top of the wispy grass.

Most would look at this place in disgust, their noses turned up at the decrepit structure. But this is our safe haven.

I push Oli on one of the swings as a warm breeze filters through the air. Charlotte swings next to him. A few other kids run around the playground, a change to the usual emptiness. Their screams and laughter ring out, so full of joy and life.

Oliver distinctively sighs and gazes longingly at the other kids. It's the kind of sigh that says, *why can't I be like normal kids?*

"It'll get better," I assure him. "I promise. One day you'll be so overwhelmed with happiness, you'll barely even remember what your life used to feel like. Sooner or later, something is going to happen that'll change everything. We just have to wait for it to come."

I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince him or myself.

I continue pushing him on the swing as my thoughts roam. They float for a moment before landing on the Academy. It always comes back to the Academy. The special kids. The government.

My blood sparks at just the thought. They're the reason I'm in this mess. Without them, I'd be at home with my family right now. But no. The government took everything from me. They deserve to get what's coming to them.

I'll make sure of it, regardless of the consequences.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emma

I wake to the chime of my message board. The room is dark, quiet, which means it's way too early to be conscious. The rectangular glass screen on the wall above my bed lights up with a new message. The time in the corner reads 6:00am.

I groan and snuggle deeper into the covers. But the screen keeps flashing, so I sit up and tap the message to open it.

Meeting with Ambassador. 6:15. Supervisor waiting in dorm front lobby.

I blink a few times and rub my eyes to clear the grogginess. I force myself out of bed, throw on some clothes, and run a brush through my hair. I swipe my phone from the nightstand and shove it into the back pocket of my jeans before leaving the room.

As promised, someone stands in the lobby. It's a woman this time, looking like she too has been disturbed from sleep. It's Saturday, after all. People usually sleep in.

A shiver crawls down my spine as I follow her out into the brisk morning air. Bringing a jacket probably would've been a good idea, but it's too late now.

The sky is a dark gray that lightens by the second as sunrise approaches. The grounds are silent and empty. It's not until we're almost to the office building that I see someone else.

"Cameron?" I say in disbelief. He's coming from the direction of the City, so it's safe to say he was probably just asleep, too. "What're you doing?"

"I have a meeting with the Ambassador," he grins slyly.

"I have a meeting with the Ambassador."

"Yeah, it's the same meeting, silly," he says and rolls his eyes playfully. The sun's not even up yet. How does he have so much freaking energy? "I told the Ambassador last night how you wanted me on the Mission with you and that I agreed. She approved me to take on the Mission, so we're definitely going together."

Despite my it's-too-early-to-be-conscious state, excitement and relief flood through me with that knowledge. I won't have to do this alone.

The Ambassador is at her desk when we enter her office. *She* doesn't look like she's been abruptly pulled from sleep. She's well put together and already at work. Seriously, how can you not admire this woman? She's constantly working to run the Academy and help all of us.

"Good morning, Emma, Cameron," she says with a warm smile.

"Good morning," Cameron and I say together, though Cameron's greeting is much more chipper. I try to stamp down my exhaustion. She needs to see that I can be alert and ready to go even at this ungodly hour.

“As Cameron has probably already told you, he’ll be accompanying you on this Mission and helping you with whatever you need. However, for the time being, most of the Mission will be your responsibility. I want to see how well you do on this first time out. But if it gets to be too much, Cameron will be there to assist and take on more if needed.”

She unlocks a drawer in her desk and takes out a manila folder. She thumbs through it, then hands it to me.

“We always give out assignments in physical form rather than electronically,” she explains. “Keep it safe and away from the eyes of others. Under no circumstances is anyone allowed to know of its contents except for the two of you. Cameron has access to the conference rooms, so you may use one of those to go over the case together. Emma, you’ll have a meeting with my colleagues and I later today so we can go over some basics and prepare you for life outside the gates.”

I nod, stomach tightening. I’m beyond ecstatic to have been given this opportunity, but she’s right. I *do* need to learn about life outside the gates, about the humans and their world. I know barely anything about it.

“Now,” she continues. “We will be sending you to the small town of Willow Creek in the Northeastern Central Region. This is where your target is located. You will live there and attend the local high school under cover. Blending into their society and culture is vital. Usually our potential Mission program students take human culture and behavioral classes senior year to familiarize themselves. Plus a year of training after being selected. You’ll only have today. But you are a smart girl and you’ll have Cameron, who’s already been through it. I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out quickly enough and if you do ever have questions, all you have to do is call.”

I nod again. As long as I’m not alone, it shouldn’t be too difficult to handle, right?

“You will need to use your ability to obtain a substantial reading on the target’s future and report back immediately. He is a serious threat to the Academy as well as the entire government system. The rest of the information you need is all in the file. Any questions?”

My head spins with the influx of information, but I shake my head.

“Good. I’ll contact you when we are ready for our meeting.”

With that, we’re escorted out of the building. Cameron heads back towards the City, and I’m led back to the dorms.

Lacy is still asleep when I return. I wish I could curl up and doze back off, but there’s absolutely no way that’s happening now. I climb onto my bed with the file folder in hand.

I want to go through it right here and now, but decide to wait until Cameron can be with me. As miraculous as this whole situation has been, the nerves are still there. The Ambassador seems so confident of my capabilities, but what if I don’t live up to her expectations?

I set the folder aside and lay down, trying to fall back asleep, but I'm too wound up. I play around on my phone for a while and try to push the worries out of my mind.

Lacy stirs around 8:00am. "Why are you awake?" she groans and buries her face in her pillow to block the stream of light from the window.

"I had another meeting with the Ambassador this morning," I explain. Lacy opens her mouth, but I cut her off. "And before you ask, I can't tell you anything specific about the case."

"Come on," Lacy whines and props herself up on her elbows. "Not even a little bit?"

"You know it's against the rules. Besides, I haven't actually looked at it yet. I'm waiting to do it with Cameron."

Thankfully she doesn't bring up the conversation from last night. "Promise to keep in touch while you're gone, all right?"

"Lace, you know that's against the rules. We're not supposed to have contact with anyone inside the Academy when we're outside of it."

Even Cameron never contacted me when he was out on Missions.

Her face falls. "Yeah, I know. I just thought maybe it'd be different."

"I mean, I don't know. But I assume all the rules still apply. We'll probably only be gone a month or two at the most, though."

Lacy quickly gets ready, then we head to breakfast. The hallways are bustling with activity now, compared to their eerie emptiness of earlier. Several girls greet us as we walk by. Most are still in pajamas. It's just a normal Saturday for everyone else.

When we get to the dining hall, Lacy leaves to go find Aiden, who agreed to meet her there. I search for Cameron. He doesn't always eat here anymore now that he has his own place in the City, but I have a feeling he'll be here today.

The food lines run the course of the back wall. Long tables and benches stretch in rows across the rest of the room. Sure enough, I find Cameron at a table with a plate of pancakes and bacon.

"Pancakes? Really?" is the first thing I say to him.

He looks up. "You don't have to sit here. Or you can just pretend they don't exist."

I sit across from him with a sigh and swipe a piece of bacon from his plate.

"Hey!" He reaches across the table, but I pull my hand back and ignore the appalled looks he gives me.

"I'm starving and the line is super long. I don't have time for waiting. We have a conference room to get to."

"Yeah, yeah. Let me finish my food and we'll go."

He doesn't protest when I grab another piece of bacon.

...

I already have the file on me, safely concealed in my backpack. So after breakfast, we set off toward the office building. We don't encounter many students along the way.

At this time, most are either at breakfast or still asleep. It's good for us, though. It'd be a little difficult to explain why Cameron was letting me into a building that's off-limits to students.

We settle into a conference room on the ground floor and I pull the file from my bag. Cameron sits beside me at the table, and I open the folder. It's filled with papers that have been clipped together. The first page contains basic information on my target, as well as a photo.

It's the picture that catches my attention. In it is a boy with messy, dark brown hair. It's a school photo or something similar. He's posed and smiling, but it doesn't quite reach his golden-brown eyes. Instead, his eyes are haunted, empty.

I stare at the picture, probably longer than necessary. Cameron clears his throat and I move to the rest of the page.

Name:

Jesse Reynolds

Date of Birth:

12/18/2104

History:

Parents and older brother perished in accident when target was age 8. Target transferred to foster care following the event. Currently a senior at Willow Creek High School in small town of Willow Creek, Northeastern Central (NEC) Region.

Purpose:

Target poses a threat to the security of the Academy and government system.

Task:

Obtain a clear reading of target's future and report directly to Ambassador. Will receive further instruction upon this result, including information on elimination process.

I can't help but scoff. "This is all the information we get? They're practically sending us in blind!"

Cameron just shrugs. "You don't always get a whole lot of background information on a Mission. It depends on how much the government wants to reveal. Sometimes it's detailed, sometimes it's barely anything. A lot of them are on need-to-know bases."

I flip to the second page. This one is all about me. Or the fake me, I guess. The person I'll have to become during my time in the real world.

Name:

Emma Clarke (do not present yourself as Emmalyn. Emma is a much more common name. You will also be using Cameron's last name to further your disguise)

Age:

17

History:

You moved to your current residence from the Mid-Atlantic region. You live with your parents and older brother (Cameron). You have never lived in a small town, so it is expected that you would need an adjustment period. Use this to your advantage when figuring out the human world.

Cameron's page is similar, though he gets to keep his last name. I guess we need the same last name though if we're pretending to be siblings. I can sort of see it, I guess. We both have blonde hair at the very least. It's passable as long as no one looks too far into it.

However, because he's two years older than me, he won't be going to school with me. I shove that thought out of my mind for now, though. I'll deal with it later.

The rest of the packet contains generic information that's probably sent out in every case. Basic do's and don'ts.

Do:

- *work diligently and stay on task*
- *keep phone on you at all times and answer when contacted*
- *alert Ambassador to any emergencies as soon as possible*

Don't:

- *put yourself in a situation where the target might discover your true identity*
- *tell anyone about yourself or the Academy*
- *contact anyone inside the Academy other than the Ambassador*

Once we both finish combing through it, I shove the file back in my bag and stand up.

"It sounds like a good portion of this Mission is going to fall on you," Cameron says. "I hope you know what you're getting yourself into."

"Yeah, me too."

...

The Ambassador scheduled our meeting for that afternoon. We meet in the same conference room Cameron and I had used earlier, except Cameron's not with me this time. The Ambassador and two of her colleagues are already there when I arrive.

"Have a seat," the Ambassador says with a smile. I settle in across from the other three and pull out the file in case I need it. "Before we get started, do you have any questions?"

"Yeah. What will Cameron be doing while I go to school every day? His page wasn't clear."

"Oh, yes," the Ambassador says. "I already discussed it with him, so I didn't put it in the file. Basically, he'll work on compiling any information you gather and will aid you in your Mission from more of a behind the scenes approach. He's done this before, so he'll know what to do."

I nod. "And when are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow, 5:00am sharp. Before anyone else is awake."

I freeze. *Tomorrow?* I have less than a day left at the Academy.

"Don't worry, Emma. We'll prepare you as best as we can. But you must also understand the severity of the situation. This is a high-profile case that needs to be addressed soon before matters are made worse."

High-profile case?

"If the Mission is that serious, why are you sending *me*? Surely there's an actual Level One who would be more qualified for the job."

"Like I said, we're running low on numbers recently. As for why I'm sending you, I have my reasons, but most are too confidential to share at this time. However, your ability to read the future is one of the biggest reasons, as it will no doubt be invaluable to us. But if you really feel that unprepared, we can make arrangements to send someone else."

I come to my senses. What am I doing? Questioning the Ambassador's reasoning for sending me on a Mission, the thing I've dreamed of for years.

"No, no. I'll go. I can do it."

She leans back in her chair. "Excellent, now it is of the utmost importance that you do not stray from the task at hand. Being out there on your own for the first time can be overwhelming and there is no time for distractions. Cameron will be helpful to your adjustment, but he can't be with you twenty-four seven."

She gestures to the other two people in the room, who straighten in their chairs. "My colleagues here will discuss some of the key differences between ourselves and the humans. Hopefully this will diminish most of any confusion you may have. But as I said, most students have a year to learn this stuff and we only have a couple hours. Whatever you encounter, your best bet will be to ask Cameron about it, since he's already been on several Missions."

The other two take over after that. They describe how we are physically better than the humans, as if I wasn't already aware. We're faster, stronger, smarter. Even our vision and hearing are enhanced.

They talk about how scatterbrained humans can sometimes be. Their minds aren't sharp and focused like ours. They can't always shed outlying factors and concentrate on one particular task or problem.

I sit and listen for the next couple of hours while they go over everything they deem necessary. By the time I'm dismissed, my head is swimming and a pain has started between my eyes.

I've never felt so overwhelmed in my life.

When I get back to my dorm room to start packing, Lacy isn't there. I'll see her later though. Tonight at the very least.

I drag a duffel bag out from under my bed and start packing everything I'll need for the trip. I don't know how long I'll be gone, so I just pack anything I can think of. When the bag is so filled that it's nearly busting at the seams, I slide the file right on top and zip it up.

Packing creates a sense of finality. This is it. Tomorrow, I'm really leaving here. At least for a while. It could be anywhere from days to months.

I meet up with my friends for dinner and we all eat one last meal together. The dining hall buzzes in an unusual fashion this evening, with people talking in clumps or passing words down the table. I don't think much of it, though. I have bigger things to think about. Until that night when I get out of the shower.

The bathroom is empty, except for Laurel who stands by the sinks. She leans against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest. Despite the humidity in the room, her dark hair stays in its perfect ringlets.

"Hey," I say cautiously. I still feel bad about the interaction from yesterday, but the way she's just standing there, staring at me, is unnerving to say the least.

She sneers. "You must think you're so special."

I nearly stumble back a step, shocked by her tone. "Excuse me?"

She pushes off the wall and takes a step towards me. "Bet you think you're so great that you get to go out on a Mission a year early. Perfect little Emmalyn Grant. Always gets whatever she wants. Does everything she's told and never slips up, like a good little Academy kid. All of us work so hard, yet you're the one who gets a free ticket out of here. Congratulations," she spits.

Ice floods my veins as her words sink in. "Wha – how do you know about that?"

"You were at dinner," she scoffs. "Didn't you hear everyone whispering about you? Spreading the news that a non-graduate got a Mission when only two actual spots were filled?"

That's what had been different at dinner. Information must have seared through the hall like wildfire. But how did it not get back to me until now? Why didn't anyone confront me about it then? I was sitting *right there* in the midst of it all.

How did it get out in the first place? I didn't tell anyone but Cameron and Lacy, and they'd never turn on me like that.

Does the Ambassador know? Will she be upset that word's gotten out? Pull me from the Mission due to the backlash it's created?

I push past Laurel, unable to deal with the conversation any longer. Lacy is sitting on her bed when I rush into the room. "Have you heard?" she asks.

"I just found out from Laurel of all people," I explain.

Lacy cringes. "I bet she was thrilled. By the way, you have a message."

Sure enough, my message board flashes with a new notification.

A sense of foreboding hangs in the air as I tap into my messages. It's from the Ambassador.

News of your Mission was somehow leaked, as you may or may not already know. Due to this, we have decided to move your departure up. You will be leaving in the next half hour since no one else is permitted to leave the dorms. A supervisor is waiting for you in the lobby to escort you to the front gates.

"You're leaving tonight, aren't you?" Lacy says, a frown on her face.

I nod. I understand why. If we wait until tomorrow morning, the issue of people knowing about our situation could escalate before we're able to actually leave.

Lacy slips off her bed and throws her arms around me. I return the hug, squeezing tight. We've been roommates most of our lives. It'll be weird to go to sleep and wake up without her across the room from me.

"Be safe," she whispers.

"I'll see you soon," I promise.

With a final squeeze, I let go and grab my duffel bag and backpack. I take one last look around the room. My bed is neatly made from this morning. The desk is littered with pencils and homework assignments I won't get the chance to finish. Pictures of my friends and I are pinned along the space above my bed. Lacy stands by her bed, watching me soak it all in.

I thought I'd have one more night here, but I don't have time now to give into that small twinge of sadness. It's finally time to prove myself.

I say goodbye to Lacy, then lug my stuff downstairs, grateful I don't encounter anyone on the way, and follow the supervisor outside. The grounds are dark, chilly. It's too quiet compared to the usual commotion.

I meet up with Cameron along the way and we approach the gates together. The Ambassador waits with another person I don't recognize. A car looms in the darkness, parked right outside the gates.

Two guards relieve us of our luggage and load it into the trunk of the car. The Ambassador turns to me.

"Remember all you have learned today. Remember the rules and abide by them. Always answer your phone when I call you, don't get distracted, and don't reveal yourself to anyone for any reason. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply.

A smile breaks through her serious expression. "You are going to do great, Emma. I'm so proud of you. You've excelled in the Academy. This is the next step." To Cameron, she says, "Look after her."

Cameron nods, then walks through the gates. I step forward, until I'm level with the exit. This is it. It's happening. I'm not dreaming.

I look down at the ground, at my feet, as they take that final step...and then I'm on the outside. Cameron's smiling at me when I look back up. I'm glad he's the one going with me. He completely understands how big of a deal all of this is to me.

The car is parked on a dirt path that presumably connects to an actual road once making it out of the forest that surrounds the Academy's walls. The car is sleek black and has special tinted windows designed so no one can see in, but also so we can't see out. None of the students, not even those who have long since graduated, know the location of the Academy. The government keeps it that way for our own safety and protection.

I climb into the back. The leather seat is smooth against my hands. I've never actually been in one of these before. The City is big, but it's not big enough to justify giving everyone a car. Everything can be reached within a ten to twenty-minute walk at most.

A screen separates the front seat from the back. The car is self-driving, of course, but a supervisor will be accompanying us to ensure everything goes smoothly. Plus, they're the ones who know how to work the fancy controls.

The car door closes and tiny lights in the sides of the door and floorboards switch on. I swivel in my seat and squint out the back windshield. Despite the tinting, I can just barely make out the steel gates and the buildings in the distance. The car moves forward and we gain speed.

We turn a corner and the Academy vanishes from sight.

...

"Emma, wake up. We're here," a soft voice whispers in my ear. I shift and peel my eyes open. I'm in a car. It all comes rushing back a second later. I'm in a car, on my first Mission, and we're here. I lift my head from Cameron's shoulder and look around.

"What time is it?"

"A little after 8:00am," he replies. It took all night to get here. The car comes to a complete stop and the supervisor opens the doors to let us out.

My heart races as I take that step out of the car and into the human world for the very first time. I'm met with bright, early morning sunshine. There's an apartment complex in front of us. My new home for the duration of this Mission. The supervisor brings our luggage up to the front door of a unit on the second floor.

"The code for the apartment has been sent to your phones and your thumb prints have already been set," she explains. Then she pulls two pocketknives and a gun from her bag. I get one of the pocketknives. Cameron gets the other knife and the gun. "These are for emergencies only. Any questions before I leave?"

We shake our heads. If something comes up later that Cameron can't figure out on his own, I'll call the Ambassador.

"Then good luck and expect your first call from the Ambassador tomorrow afternoon."

She leaves and then we're alone.

I take a deep breath. Cameron places his hand on my shoulder. "Are you ready for this?"

I respond by fishing my phone from my pocket and entering the code to unlock the door. Cameron pushes the door open and we step inside.

Right inside is a small living room, complete with couch, recliner chair, and a flat screen TV that's built into the wall. We have television back home, but the channels are highly restrictive. I doubt there will be any limits on this one though. Unless it's already been programmed by the government. That's possible.

The kitchen-dining room area is connected to the living room. Down the hall are two bedrooms and a bathroom. I drag my luggage to the first room.

It's simple. There's a bed, nightstand, dresser, and small closet. All the usual stuff. I set my bags down on the bed and place the pocketknife on the nightstand. I won't be able to take it to school with me, but it still gives me comfort knowing I have *some* kind of weapon.

It's weird that I'm officially on my own now. All responsibilities fall on me and Cameron. It'll take some adjusting, but I can do this. I have to.

Honestly, my stomach churns at the thought of what tomorrow will bring. I'll be at a public school for the first time in my entire life, surrounded by *humans*. I'll have to blend in and attempt to act like every other teenager there, even though I have no idea how human adolescents act. What could possibly go wrong?

I meet Cameron in the living room after setting up my room. I plop beside him on the couch and get comfortable. We're going to be here a while.

"So," he says and angles himself towards me. "Now that we're all settled in, it's probably time we come up with a plan."