

DESERT

INSIDE THE WALL

SPECIAL EDITION

A. TEBBS

DESERT

Book One

INSIDE THE WALL



Questions can be dangerous. . .

Seventeen-year-old Alysse's senior year was stressful enough with exams, a harpy teacher, and a long time crush falling for her best friend Tori.

Then Alysse starts questioning what she's taught about the enemy living right outside the city walls. Alysse soon finds herself dealing with guerillas, a seismic bomb, and a genocidal

plot that could spark a war.

Alysse must decide who to trust as she and her friend Pete ask questions everyone else avoids. Probably because everyone else is afraid of the answers.

And they should be...

“A fun and action-filled dystopian YA novel that packs a punch! If you enjoyed *The Hunger Games* or *The Divergent Series*, you will love this one!” — *Robyn Reads*

“(Desert) is a futuristic picture of a society segregated by stations of wealth and privilege will make you think. In many ways (Alysse’s) world is chillingly familiar.” — Peter H.,

N.Y.

DESERT

Book One

INSIDE THE WALL

*The world she discovers,
is the world they fear.*

Are you ready for the truth?

A. TEBBS

Distribution Enterprises, Inc.

www.desert-books.com

Desert: Inside the Wall

Copyright © 2017 by A.Tebbs

Published by Distribution Enterprises, Inc.

P.O. Box 699 Paris, Arkansas 72855-0699

Production arrangements by

RJ Communications

93 Lake Avenue

Tuckahoe, NY 10707

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Original Paperback Designed by Vince Pannullo

Cover design and illustration: Daniel Kvasznicza

Copyediting: Bethany Brown, Independent Editing

Proofreading: Annie Lima Douglass

First Printing 2017

Printed in the United States of America

by Litho Printers & Bindery.

ISBN: PAPER BACK 978-1-5136-2288-0

HARD COVER: 978-1-5136-2287-3

eISBN: 978-1-5136-2286-6

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 2017952594

[Young Adult Dystopia; Young Adult Action; Young Adult Sci Fi;
Young Adult Romance; Young Adult Humor]



For my wonderful husband Craig,
Desert wouldn't exist
if not for you.

For my amazing children,
who patiently waited
for Desert to “finally be done.”

To Jenna Dicks, thank you for
your feedback
and encouragement.

To Bethany Brown, Annie Lima
Douglass,
and Gwen Serna,
thank you for helping
polish Desert.



Contents

PROLOGUE.....	8
CHAPTER 1.....	15
CHAPTER 2.....	26
CHAPTER 3.....	35
CHAPTER 4.....	48
CHAPTER 5.....	54
CHAPTER 6.....	66
CHAPTER 7.....	74
CHAPTER 8.....	83
CHAPTER 9.....	88
CHAPTER 10.....	102
CHAPTER 11.....	107
CHAPTER 12.....	115
CHAPTER 13.....	120
CHAPTER 14.....	126
CHAPTER 15.....	131
CHAPTER 16.....	140
CHAPTER 17.....	150
CHAPTER 18.....	158
CHAPTER 19.....	162
CHAPTER 20.....	170

CHAPTER 21.....	183
CHAPTER 22.....	191
CHAPTER 23.....	196
CHAPTER 24.....	210
CHAPTER 25.....	218
CHAPTER 26.....	223
CHAPTER 27.....	231
CHAPTER 28.....	239
CHAPTER 29.....	251
CHAPTER 30.....	261
CHAPTER 31.....	264
CHAPTER 32.....	277

DESERT'S ICONS

Dear Reader,

As you read, you will find *
symbols * and  **icons** 
scattered through the text of Desert.
These mark behind-the-scenes
found on our website:

www.desert-books.com/digging

Don't forget to sign up for our
newsletter to hear when a new
scene or POV has been released.

Good luck digging,

The Desert Team

PROLOGUE

Desert Compound, outside the Wall

North of the City of Oasis

Fifteen Years after the Second Civil War

““D EB, what are you doing here?” an Oasian guard said, wearing a bullet proof vest under full body armor.

“Same as always,” replied a plump woman with short, curly hair. Her only protection was the bright orange shirt labeled “VOLUNTEER,” a logo of hands clasped in friendship on her back.

Deb leaned closer to a nearby

wall as she examined some elaborate graffiti, the only source of color among the brown apartments and littered dirt streets. “How do they make something like this using only spray cans?”

The guard scanned the street behind them before glancing at the whole wall, jaw tight. “It wasn’t long ago these apartments were new. The Dissenters trashed this place fast.”

“People do strange things when hope is lost,” Deb replied, stepping back from the building and nodding toward the city in the background. The tops of new buildings glimmered in the rising sun, surrounded by a tall city wall. “They want to live back inside

Oasis.”

“Then they shouldn’t have started a war. I haven’t forgotten what the Dissenters did.” The guard’s jaw went tense. “Don’t let these people fool you—they’re looking for blood.”

Deb squeezed his forearm, smiling. “I only have one more thing to do, then we’ll be out of here.”

The guard checked his semi-auto and scanned the quiet street, eyes searching the windows and doors for any movement. “Whatever it is, make it fast.” He continued on with his patrol.

Deb abandoned the graffiti and hurried back to the donation tables, eyes searching the crowd there.

Their eyes scarcely looked up at each other, let alone her. A few were even worse off, like the short man who walked past her, bone thin and jabbering constantly to some invisible foe.

Deb exhaled in relief as she spotted a tall, skinny man among them. She approached him with a welcoming smile, which faltered only slightly as his odor reaches her nose. “Long time, no see.”

The man stood unchanged, his eyes glazed and unfocused. Deb touched his arm and repeated the greeting. He slowly turned his head, squinting at her. Dark circles under his eyes stood out against his pale skin. She noticed he lost another tooth since last she saw

him.

“Jake, are you okay?” she asked.

As his eyes drew in, they lit up with recognition. “Do you really want me to answer that?” He ran a shaky hand through oily hair.

“No,” she replied humbly. “Of course you’re not okay. I know that. Have you eaten lately?”

“Eaten what?” he mocked. “That stuff they give us can hardly be classified as food.”

Deb handed over her lunch without hesitation, wishing she had more to give. Jake opened the bag, savoring the smell of the sandwich and salad. “I don’t suppose you brought cheesecake.”

She chuckled. “Sorry, I already ate it.”

He laughed awkwardly, as if unaccustomed to the process. A glance from a guard sank him back into soberness. He reached for Deb's arm, hand trembling. His fingers felt like ice, despite the heat. "Are you getting close? I can't take much more of this!"

"Hang in there, Jake. Think of your wife and daughter—they need you." She eyed a drone flying overhead. "Do you have the list?"

Jake nodded and waited for the nearest guard to look the other way before passing her a microdrive. 

Deb pocketed it quickly. "I'll contact you as soon as I have answers. Tell the volunteers at the third table I said to give you a

bottle of pain killer.”

“Thanks.” He nodded appreciatively, hands still shaking.

Back at the tables, a man with leathery skin and cracked lips fixated on a small pair of shoes. He picked them up and examined them tenderly. The lines on his face deepened as anger crept into his eyes.

Deb walked over, smiling until she noticed his strange expression. When she spotted the shoes, alarm spread over her face. “How did those get in there? I’m terribly sorry.”

The wiry man turned from the shoes to her. “You ever get stabbed in the back, only to have someone start twisting the knife?”

“It was an innocent mistake.” She took the shoes from him, stepped backward, and yanked on another volunteer’s arm. “Tyler, would you help me here?”

“What can I do for you, Deb?” The off-duty police officer’s face turned sober as he took in the scene. He leaned toward her, his tone hushed. “Load everyone up into the van.”

Deb turned to comply, but the angry man blocked her way. “No harm was meant,” she said sincerely, her heart racing.

“Seemed thought-out to me,” he said slowly and meticulously. He shoved the table, sending most of its contents onto the ground. Several other angry Dissenters

joined him.

“Everyone, calm down.” Tyler’s voice resonated with authority and firmness, confirmed by his intimidating frame.

An older volunteer, John, whose frame still held some of its former military strength and agility, joined him. “Everyone just return to your lines and someone will help you with what you need.”

One group didn’t return to their lines. Instead, they kicked over the remaining tables while the first man raised a fist in the air. “You want to give us what we need?” he yelled, livid. “Then give us back ___”

“Everyone freeze!” From the top of a roof, a guard pointed a gun

down at the crowd.

Most of the crowd scattered, but a few dozen stayed, determined to get justice. The first man grabbed Deb. Spinning her around, he locked her in a chokehold and pressed a knife to her throat.

“John, get the others out of here!” Deb gasped.

John nodded to Tyler while staying by Deb’s side.

“Volunteers, move!” Tyler grabbed the nearest volunteers and herded them toward the van, practically shoving them inside.

As he loaded the last one, angry hands grabbed at him, trying to get past him into the vehicle. He fought against them, kicking the van door shut with one free leg. “Lock it!”

he yelled as the mob overpowers him.

Volunteers with shaking hands forced down the locks while a young woman hopped into the driver's seat, frantically searching. "Where are the keys?"

"We can't leave the others behind! We have to do something," her friend yelled back.

"We can give a lot more help in a moving van!"

"Deb has the keys!" another volunteer replied.

A loud whack came from behind them. Wide-eyed, they looked past the new crack and saw a mob of angry Dissenters armed with bricks.

Jake walked over to Deb's captor, his hands in the air. "I know you're

angry. I'm angry, too, but none of this is her fault. She's here to help us."

"Just let her go." John inched closer. "She's innocent."

"No, John," Deb protested weakly, unaware that Tyler was struggling against captors of his own nearby. "Get out of here. Think of your family."

"I think I'm gonna stay right here," John replied in a deep voice as he moved in closer.

"Back off or I'll kill her!" the man yelled. Deb tensed as his knife pressed harder against her throat. John and Jake paused, hands raised in front to show they meant no harm.

Up above them, a city guard

threw down smoking canisters. Screams erupted, and most of the rioters fled, leaving only eight. “Let’s go!” the leader yelled to the others, dragging Deb with him.

John and Tyler followed Deb with their hands above their heads. Jake watched motionless in the stinging smoke, as his only hope was pulled into a storage room in a nearby building.

“Barricade the door,” the leader yelled, finally releasing Deb who fell down to the floor. Several men rolled heavy barrels over to block the entrance.

“Please just let us go,” Deb pleaded. “If you hurry, you can leave before the guards get here.”

The leader's jaw clenched. "They have our IDs locked in by now."

"Everything happened so fast," Tyler put in. "If you just go . . ."

"It's too late!" Thick saliva collected on his cracked lips. He turned to another captor. "Open a barrel!"

"Do you know the punishment for opening guard stock?" the guy responded.

The leader laughed. "We just took hostages and you're worried about guard stock?"

Realization dawned on the man. He hurried to open a barrel, his cheeks flushed. The captors dipped their hands in, gulping water down as fast as they could.

John and Tyler made eye contact.

John nodded, and Tyler started inching toward Deb. The leader whipped his head around. “Don’t even think about it!” He yanked Deb closer.

“I’m sure there’s a way we can work this out.” Her cheeks were wet with tears. “Why not just surrender?”

“They’ll shoot anyone who leaves! You wanna die? Be my guest!” He jerked Deb around, twisting her arm at an unnatural angle. She cringed.

“Let her go. You’re hurting her.” Tyler inched closer.

“Hurting her?” The leader shoved Deb away, pulled out a gun, and pointed it right at Tyler. With each word, his rage increased. “You

don't know what pain is!” 

CHAPTER 1

FIRSTS

Alysse Simms

Inside Oasis

Same Morning

HONK!
“Tori’s here,” my mom calls, handing off the lunch I packed last night as I run past her. “Work hard, keep your scholarship, and don’t forget Alysse, no matter what people see on the outside . . .”

“Stay true to what’s on the inside,” I call over my shoulder as I

skip down the stairs. “Got it, Mom.”

I heave up my bulging backpack and slip out the front door. An expensive convertible sits on our cracked driveway. Inside waits my BF Victoria Clement with her gorgeous blond hair, flawless skin, and perfect figure. She’s the only girl I know who turns down cake and pizza, even when no one’s watching.

“Hey, senior!” she greets me with high octane. “Ready for the first day of our best year?”

“Absolutely.” I fall into my seat, this car sitting lower to the ground

than her last one.

She starts to reverse, but pauses to take in the massive city wall towering behind my pitifully small house. “I still can’t get over how close to the Wall you are. Do you ever worry you’ll be attacked?”

I shrug. “The Wall is too tall for anyone to climb.”

She twists her head to peer at the top, gauging the wall’s height. “Dissenters could still launch a bomb over.”

A disbelieving laugh escapes my lips. “Thanks for that thought. It’ll come in handy, like tonight, when I’m trying to sleep.”

She switches her foot back to the accelerator. “Forget I said anything.”

I watch the Wall shrink in size as we drive east, sobered as I think about the Dissenters.

More than twenty years ago, the Dissenters tried to take over the entire government. When our people resisted, they switched to dirty tactics, killing the innocent with everything from germ warfare to bombs. So started our Second Civil War.

With superior technology on our side, we cut off their communication and cornered them

in a small region beyond the desert, isolating them from the rest of us. My city, Oasis, sits right on the border of that desert. If that isn't enough to keep war on our minds, outside our Wall is a group of Oasian traitors who joined the Dissenters during the war. Once identified, we kicked them out of the city and into a compound, where they've lived ever since.

I turn my back to the Wall and refocus on my spotless surroundings. “Oh no, Tori! Is this for real?” I exclaim, examining the parallel lines on her immaculately clean carpet.

She peeks down at the floor in a panic. “What’s wrong?”

“Who gets up early on the first day of school to vacuum their car?” I shake my head mournfully. “As your friend, I recommend immediate counseling.”

She rolls her eyes. “I thought you were going to recommend a good cleaner.”

“To do what? A white glove test?” I slide a finger along the dashboard, not finding one speck of dust. Instead, I find a brand new handheld device sitting in her dock, its pearl finish glimmering in the sunlight, its screen blank and

inviting. “Is that a JS 900?” I gasp.

“New e-binder for a new school year,” she confirms, sounding like an advertisement. “You can try it despite your comment about my needing a shrink.”

I gently pick up the light but strong device, its chrome jacket perfectly smooth and scratch-free.

“Try the full color Holo App,” she encourages.

“Full color on a hand held?” I gaze in amazement as a perfect miniature holographic dog chases its tail on my lap, so cute and so real I have to resist the urge to pick it up. “That’s it. I’m asking your

parents to adopt me!”

“You can have them, and you can use my JS 800, too,” Tori offers wryly. “It’s in the glove box.”

“Thanks!” I set her 900 down and retrieve the 800. “So, your parents still haven’t chilled out?”

Her face switches from humor to annoyance. “Last week alone, my mother hired a fashion consultant to inspect my wardrobe while my father hired a new tutor to drill me on foreign languages.”

“I thought you were fluent in three.”

“He wants five,” she says dryly, raising one of her perfectly shaped

eye brows.

“Senior year is already so intense, why won’t they relax?”

She shrugs. “It’s their last year to sculpt me.”

We drive down, the streets increasingly more manicured and exotic, until finally we reach the Oasis Academy of Leadership and Training. The prep school reminds me of a life-sized miniature golf course. Our manicured lawns would be perfect for teeing off, and our buildings are replicas of significant historical places. For example, we study art in a mock Louvre and learn history in a

Pantheon. 

The insides of the buildings are just as cool, like the flamethrower exhibit in the lobby of the science building. Guys line up year-round for a chance to torch our rival's mascot with twenty-foot flames.

A campus guard at the entrance gate scans our Ids. "Your parking pass."

Tori taps her JS with her French manicured nail, and a holo card appears for him to scan. He opens the gate for us. "Welcome to your senior year."

We drive underground into the coveted senior parking garage.

Other students are already leaning against their luxury vehicles, laughing and posing.

Tori and I grab our stuff and make our way to the pyramid for political science. This year, we finally have class on the top floor.

At the pyramid's entrance, we join other students in a long line that moves quickly as a guard verifies IDs.

Tori walks up, passing her shimmery watch under the scanner. The guard gives her an approving smile. "Welcome, Miss Clement."

I gaze at her watch with envy. The only mandatory ID I can afford

is the injectable chip. They tell you it's painless, but it's not. I swipe my scarred wrist over the scanner and it flashes red. The guard reads the screen and then looks over in annoyance. "You are not assigned to this building."

I pull up my schedule on the JS and sure enough, my first hour no longer shows poli-sci. "But I was signed up," I protest. The guard doesn't even flinch; he just folds his arms and stands in my way.

"It's probably just a glitch." Tori smiles at the guard, running a hand through her hair. "You know, it is the first day after all. I'm sure no

one would fault you for allowing her to talk with the professor.”

He looks both ways, considering the proposal before turning back to her with a grin. “You’re probably right.” His smile fades as he turns to me and yanks a thumb over his shoulder. “Go ahead.”

As we climb the stairs inside, Tori twists her long, golden hair into a bun, sliding a pen in to hold it. I spent thirty minutes on my hair, and hers looks better. *How does she do that?*

“Hey, about track,” Tori asks. “Are you in?”

“I don’t know.” I cringe. “I’m not

really a big fan of pain.” We walk into class, choosing seats at the front to comply with her father’s rules.

“Running helps relieve stress,” she encourages in singsong voice.

“While humiliating myself in public creates it,” I singsong back.

“Is that Peter Mansfield?” a girl whispers behind me. “That arrogant jerk is even fatter than last year.” Pretty harsh of her, considering the rumor that she had lipo done over the summer.

I turn and watch students make room for Pete, who’s winded from the climb. I’ve been worried about

him. He's tipped the scale in the wrong direction these last three years, not that I'm judging. I'm starting to have the same problem, although on a smaller scale.

Pete started packing it on about the same time he started globetrotting with his dad, a jovial and big-bellied man who's always on the go. With nearly every country in the world involved in at least one war, the Mansfield defense weapons and surveillance company has no shortage of business.

In fact, Pete's grandfather designed the weapon that kept our

nation from Dissenter takeover during the Second Civil War. That patent is a never-ending goldmine, making his family's fortune one of the largest in the world. And who's the only heir? Pete.

No pressure there.

I smile and wave at Pete, but Tori stiffens, turning her back and focusing on her JS with determination.

“Hey, Alysse,” Pete greets me, ignoring Tori's ignoring him.

“You wanna sit up front for a change?” I ask.

“Yeah, right.” He glances at the empty seat with revulsion. “How

long have we known each other?”

I squint. “Um, about eight years?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Have I ever sat up front?”

“No.” I arch an eyebrow back. “Have I ever not invited you?”

“Have fun, sweetheart.” He winks at me and then works his way to the backrow.

Tori leans over, whispering. “I forgot—why are you friends with him?”

“What’s wrong with Pete?”

“I really can’t say.” She shrugs, a mischievous look on her face. “The words I need to describe him are all

restricted on campus.”

“You should give him a chance. He’s cool once you get to know him.”

She turns around to glance at Pete, who’s leaning back in his seat, his feet propped up on his neighbor’s desk as he plays games on his JS. “Well, *that’s* not going to happen.”

I’m just opening my mouth to persuade her otherwise when Aaron Tallin walks in, robbing me of the ability to speak.

His summer tan is a work of perfection, making his green eyes all the more noticeable. I drop my

eyes down to my desk, acutely aware of him as he walks past me. He's the son of Statesman Tallin, the highest official in the city. As if that wasn't enough, Aaron's also captain of the rugby team, a good student, and super friendly. I peek over at him talking with his friends, and bite my lip to keep from smiling. Looks like poli-sci is my new favorite subject.

That is, until Mishell Ludd walks in, which I should have anticipated. As president of the I Love Aaron Club, a.k.a. ILAC, Mishell changes her schedule every year to match his. "Hey, Tori!" She

flips back her blonde hair with visible dark roots, her makeup creasing on her round face as she smiles.

“Oh, hi, Mishell.” Tori looks up and smiles politely before turning back to her JS.

Mishell’s smile falters. She half-glares at Tori as she looks for a seat. Then she spots me and a new smile surfaces, predatory in nature. She leans over my desk and whispers, “My father is Head of Oasis Internal Security. Tori’s father is chairman of a Multinational Pharmaceutical. Then there’s your father, CEO of

Sewage, which makes you the princess of—” She freezes as the teacher enters the room.

“Quiet down!” A slim woman wearing a fashionable blazer and suit pants sits at the front desk. Her hair is wound into such a tight bun, it has to be cutting off circulation.

Mishell resumes her search for a seat with the perfect view of Aaron, while I approach the teacher’s desk. “Professor Harden?”

She looks up, her eyes narrow. “Dr. Harden.”

“Dr. Harden,” I correct myself with a smile. “My name is Alysse

Simms. I'm scheduled to take this class but my name doesn't seem to be on the list."

"Some would have taken that as a hint." Her voice is icy.

My jaw drops. *Did she just say that?*

Tori joins us at the front, all smiles. "Dr. Harden, I'm thrilled to finally meet you." She shakes hands with the professor.

The frown on Dr. Harden's face switches to adoration. "Victoria. How is your mother?"

"Super excited I finally get to take your course," Tori gushes. "We've all heard how vigorous you

keep the curriculum.”

“How else will you be ready for the challenges that await you?” Dr. Harden holds her chin high.

“Very true.” Tori leans close, lowering her voice. “May I ask a personal favor? I know your class is in high demand, but I was hoping you could squeeze Alysse into your roster. She’s my study partner.”

“Is that so?” Dr. Harden pauses, clearly weighing which option is less revolting, losing favor with her new favorite student or allowing the displeasing shadow of a nobody into her class. “Very well, I will add her. Take your seats.”

Dr. Harden looks up from her JS and faces the class dramatically as the bell rings. “Attention! I just received word Oasis is on yellow alert.”

Audible groans erupt. Yellow alerts result in school lock-down. Red alerts are even worse—all citizens are basically placed under house arrest.

“Does that mean we’re stuck on campus again?” moans Chris beside me. He’s a light-framed winger on the rugby team and one of Aaron’s friends.

Dr. Harden turns and stares at him, her face an emotionless mask.

He squirms, face flushing as the silence lengthens. Other students shift in their seats, waiting.

“Here, at the Academy of Leadership and Training, students do not speak unless called upon,” Dr. Harden says at last. “They also sit up straight.”

Chris immediately fixes his posture as Dr. Harden turns back to the class. “Dissenters have attacked yet again. This time the compound took Oasian hostages—two men and a woman. If not for our workers’ program, we could seal the gates once and for all.” Her eyes center on a new student whose

hand is raised. “Yes, Alma?”

“Zere are Dissenters here? I sought zey all moved to zee Lost Territory,” the slender girl says, her short dark hair flaring out in organized chaos.

Dr. Harden looks around the room, her smile broadening with pride as her gaze settles on the Statesman’s son. “Aaron, would you explain our precarious relationship with the compound to our foreign exchange student?”

I spin around, finally free to stare at Aaron’s perfect frame and dimpled smile.

“During the War, we discovered

and moved all local Dissenters into a compound outside the Wall where they live to this day. After the war, we were left with the dilemma of what to do with those traitors. My father instituted an education program and a workers' program to help them support themselves." Aaron sits back down.

"And you can see the gratitude they show us," Dr. Harden adds. "This morning's attack is further proof that the Wall is insufficient protection—" Dr. Harden pauses, visibly annoyed. "Peter?"

"Clarification, please." There is a mischievous look in Pete's eyes. "I

thought the attack occurred *outside* the Wall.”

“That is correct.” She eyes him suspiciously.

“Then surely the problem is with our going out there, rather than with the Wall itself.” Pete grins in response to a few appreciative chuckles, including Aaron’s.

“The point is, *Peter*, something has to be done with the compound.” The teacher narrows her eyes as the class snaps back to attentive silence. “Several pending bills regarding the desert compound are pending. For the remainder of class, you will each write a five-

page essay on what you consider to be the best solution.”

Another essay about the compound? I had to write five of those last year alone. I flex my brain, searching for some new angle.

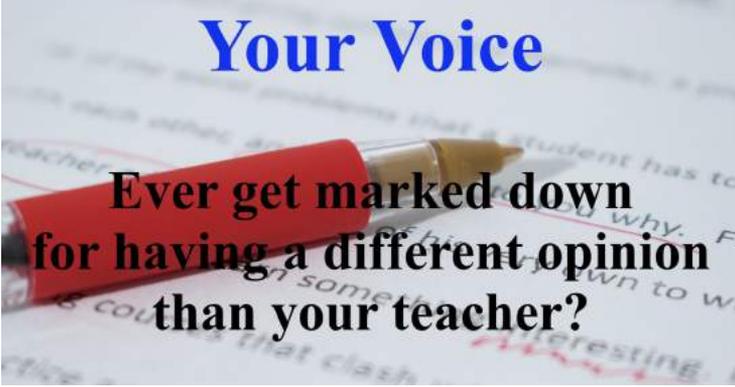
Five minutes later, Tori glances over at my blank screen. “What are you doing? Start writing,” she mouths.

“I can’t,” I whisper.

She knows why.

Though I could never admit it at this school, I have friends who are Dissenters.

Your Voice



**Ever get marked down
for having a different opinion
than your teacher?**

**[Join the Discussion on
Facebook](#)**

CHAPTER 2

BEING TRUE

THE compound isn't as simple an issue as Dr. Harden makes it out to be. Yes, there are sectors you'd have to be crazy to visit, where gang members would likely kill you just for being Oasian.

But there are other sectors, like the place where my family and I used to volunteer, back when things were relatively peaceful. I remember handing out water bottles to families waiting in line

under a hot summer sun back when I was ten.

I met many others my age, none of whom were the violent anarchists I had been taught about in school. They were nice and, well, normal. I almost asked Jessica, my best friend out there, why her family had joined the Dissenters, but with political discussions banned, I didn't dare.

Then two years ago, my dad put a stop to my family volunteering. He said it wasn't safe anymore. For a while, Jessica and I sent letters back and forth through the remaining volunteers.

Four months later, I get a letter from her saying something awful had happened, and that things were falling apart. That was the last I ever heard from her.

I stare at my empty screen. I can imagine the grade Dr. Harden would give me if I suggested we let some Dissenters live back in Oasis.

“Just write what Dr. Harden wants to hear,” Tori silently mouths. “Seal the gates.”

And leave my friends out there to fry? I bite my tongue, not daring to voice the thought. School is hard enough as it is. I hate to think what would happen if others thought I

was a Dissenter Sympathizer.

“Ninety percent of our city’s blue collar workforce comes from the compound,” I whisper instead. “Close the gates and then what will we do?”

“And what will you do with no diploma because you failed poli-sci?” Tori breathes back.

“Feel good about myself,” I whisper.

Chris glances over at us, his face hard to read, before turning back to his essay. I make a mental note to keep my thoughts to myself in class.

I draw lots of swirls on Tori’s JS

800 as she resumes writing. I'm having a hard time deciding which is worse: an "A" you feel guilty for or an "F" with a clear conscience. I sigh and compromise on a likely "C," where neither the teacher nor I are thrilled with the answer.

Several seats behind me, Dr. Harden approaches Pete, who's still leaning back, feet propped up as he plays on his JS. "You should be writing your essay," Dr. Harden whispers harshly.

"I already did. I knew you'd want one when I saw the news." Pete waves his JS in front of her receiver. Her grip tightens as his

essay appears on her screen.

Just then my phone starts vibrating. I scramble to switch it off.

“Alice!” Dr. Harden barks from behind.

“My name is pronounced Uh-leese,” I correct tentatively as she approaches.

“Who cares?” Mishell whispers loudly. A few others snicker.

“You are aware of our rules concerning electronic devices, are you not?” Dr. Harden holds out her hand. I deflate, giving her my phone.

“That’s an electronic device?”

Mishell mocks as Dr. Harden holds it up like a dirty sock.

Harden sneers. “You may have this *thing* back after you turn in a five-page essay on why electronic communication can never be used in class, *Alice*.”

The bell finally rings and Tori leans toward me. “I can’t believe she called you Alice again.”

I’m still fuming as I glance up at Dr. Harden sitting smugly at her desk. “I can.”

By lunchtime, my goal of sleeping tonight is looking pretty dismal, with my English professor

adding a twenty-page research paper, and my French teacher assigning an intense translation.

I sigh as I walk past the cafeteria, eating my lunch on the way to the library. Inside, I sit down and start on an outline for Harden's penalty essay, determined to get my phone back today.

I hear footsteps approach from behind. "I was wondering where you went. Tell me you're not studying."

"It's your fault," I fire back as Pete circles around me and takes a seat.

"My fault? What did I do?" he

grins, holding up his hands in innocence.

I narrow my eyes and fold my arms. “You provoked Dr. Harden.”

“Come on, *Alice*, you can hardly pin that on me.” He leans forward, teasing. “It’s clear she forgot her morning meds.”

“All the more reason not to provoke her. You should be writing the essay, not me.” I turn my attention back toward Tori’s JS.

“There’s no need.” He grins and sets my phone on the table.

I blink in disbelief. “Tell me you didn’t steal it.”

“Didn’t need to,” he raises his

chin arrogantly. “I smoothed everything over.”

“How?”

“I have my ways. Why do you even want this thing?” Pete picks it back up, examining the electrical tape that keeps the back from falling off. “It’s slower than Mishell’s IQ.” He slides it across the table to me.

“Shhh, it might hear you. We’ve been through a lot together.” I cradle it in my arms and then check my messages. “Pete!”

“What?” he replies with false innocence.

“You’re the one who messaged

me?” I demand, right as the bell rings.

“I’m also the one who bailed you out.” He grins and runs off.

Unbelievable.

By the time school ends, I’m desperate to go home and veg out.

“Ready for track?” Tori beams as she joins me at my locker, way too cheerful about postponing freedom for an unnecessary hour of work and pain.

“I don’t know,” I stall. “We have so much homework—”

Tori grins playfully, biting her bottom lip. “Aaron switched rugby

practice to the field inside the track.”

I pause briefly, weighing the situation. “You know, we’ll study so much better if we exercise first.” I hook arms with her and head toward the locker room.

Which is how I get tricked into sweating in the least attractive pose possible out on the track field. My attempts to keep up with Coach’s drills, most of which are inspired by his past glory days in boot camp, are failing miserably.

I’m in the middle of burpees, whose name alone is a reason to avoid them, when I spot Aaron

pumping up his team with a pep talk. He turns his head and looks our way, causing me to mix my left foot with my right, which is probably why I trip.

“What poise and grace,” Tori teases as I stand back up, sweat pouring off my bright red face.

“Why did I agree to this?”

“Heel clicks,” Coach yells out. I stare in disbelief as Tori jumps into them as though she’s got liquid energy running through her veins. She’s one of the few. Most of the team is groaning and slowing down.

“Where did all these slackers

come from?” Coach barks, causing several of us to jump. “What did you do all summer? Sip sodas in front of your holos? Show me some vertical. Like you mean it!”

I grind through several more exercises, risking a glance at Aaron during a batch of high knees. He’s running hard with his team, determined to stay in front. The only one who manages to pass him is Chris.

A shape in the background draws my attention. There’s a gardener trimming hedges. His eyes are focused on Tori and me as he blindly clips away. Something in his

look makes me shiver despite the strong sun overhead.

“Alysse! Care to join us?” Coach yells.

I drop down, realizing the others have moved on to caterpillars. My arms shake as I lower myself for another push up. “Why did I let you talk me into this?”

Tori grins despite the strain. “You realize this is all just warm up . . . right?”

I twist my head to take another look at the gardener, except he’s gone.

Forty-five torturous minutes

later, Coach yells, “That’s it for today. Go home and throw out your junk food. Our first meet is next weekend, and most of you aren’t ready for a 5K! Team dismissed!”

Runners around us clear the field fast. I’m wondering why, when Coach calls out, “Victoria, hold up.”

“Yes, Coach?” Tori responds brightly, turning to face him while my survival instinct tells me to blend in with our surroundings.

“With the team this ill prepared, I need you on several events. Would you be willing to do my supercharge diet next week?”

“Sure, Coach,” she agrees without even a flinch. I breathe a sigh of relief as we walk away.

“One more thing,” Coach calls from behind. “Get your friend Simms there on a level two.”

“A level two?” I panic, grabbing her arm as we walk away. “What’s that?”

She laughs, looking me over. “Don’t sweat it. It just means lots of salads, lean protein, and simple carb reduction.”

I breathe a sigh of relief as I stretch muscles that are already turning sore. “If boot camp was so horrible, why does Coach want to

re-live it?”

“Because this time we suffer, not him.” With a knowing smile, she pulls out a green juice from her bag. “Hang in there. It’ll be worth it.”

The moment I get home, I let my backpack fall from my shoulders and make a beeline for the kitchen, in desperate need of pizza and chocolate ice cream.

“Hey, Mom, is there any—?” I grind to a stop in the doorway as her quiet sobs reach my ears. My mom sits slumped at the table, her eyes swollen and puffy. “What’s

wrong?” I almost whisper.

She looks at me, almost like she doesn't dare answer. “I assume you heard about the hostage situation in the compound?” She sniffs, tossing a tissue into the garbage.

I nod, waiting.

“Your dad knew things were unraveling. It's why we stopped volunteering a year ago,” she says, bracing herself. “Deb's in the hospital and Tyler's gone.”

“Gone? As in dead?” I gasp. She just looks at me miserably, not even able to say it out loud. “What did the Dissenters do to them?”

She reaches for another tissue.

“We don’t know at this point, only that Deb had to have her arm amputated and that Tyler was shot in the chest.”

Deb’s the one who introduced us to Lifting Hands eight years ago. She’s a lamb, totally incapable of inflicting harm, even in self-defense. Then there’s Tyler. Hands down, he is the coolest police officer I’ve ever known and his wife just gave birth to twins. 

I sit down, scarcely aware of the chair beneath me. “How do people become so . . . sub-human?”

My mom sniffs one last time before gathering herself and

heading to the kitchen determined. “I’m taking Tyler’s family dinner and several freezer meals, and your father is arranging a fundraiser for the Wilson family.”

I jump to my feet. “I’ll help.”

Several hours later, I’m lying on my bed e-surfing when I hear a soft knock at my door. “Your mom was telling me about the help you gave,” my dad says approvingly as my parents both come in. “We’re really pleased with how you give your time—” He freezes, eyes fixed on Tori’s JS. “Where did you get that?”

“Tori gave it to me.” I hold it close to my chest protectively, a sense of foreboding taking hold.

“Alysse.” My mom stares at me, shocked, as if I were holding some illegal drug. “Even if we had the money, we wouldn’t get you one.”

“No JSs,” my father insists, his face set like stone.

“Everyone at school has a JS, literally,” I reply. It takes all my self-control to keep my tone respectful. “You should see the looks teachers give me when I hand in paper assignments.”

“This is *not* negotiable.” My dad enunciates the words slowly. “Give

the JS back in the morning.”

After they leave, I do one final search on Tori’s JS: How to get anti-tech parents to join the current century. Even the last century would be a step up.



[Take a Turn on the Soap Box](#)

UNWANTED ATTENTION

“THIS really isn’t necessary. Tori is happy to pick me up,” I argue as I pass over my favorite breakfast—crescent cheese danish. Instead, I take a bite of tasteless-steel cut oats, topped with apple chunks. I choke on the sugarless, mushy glue, all to keep Coach happy.

“It’s been a long time since we got to talk,” my dad says, finishing the last of his toasted bagel, the cream cheese melting into the crisp

crust.

I turn my back, the temptation more than I can handle. “Okay, how about we discuss why it’s fine for me to use a phone but not a JS?” I keep my eyes on the boring salad I’m packing for lunch.

“Phones are for communication and interaction only. JSs, on the other hand, have countless programs, detracting from your ability to focus, reason, and interact with real people in real time,” he says.

“In other words, Dad doesn’t want you turning zombie,” taunts my brother Ethan as he walks into

the kitchen. He rents a room at home while attending Oasis Community College. My parents don't charge him much—just enough to keep him real.

“Wait, you're coming, too? Let me guess—your car broke down again. It hangs out more at Kevin's garage than here,” I tease.

“Maybe we can take your car,” he mocks, grabbing three bagels and two danishes. “Oh wait, that's right. You don't have a car.” He takes a bite in front of me, savoring the taste while I fold my arms and glare.

“Let's go.” My dad ushers us out

the front door to our rusting car.

As I climb in, I break off a piece of peeling paint from the car door, flicking it to the ground. “Dad, do you think maybe it’s time for a new car?”

“A new car?” He pumps the gas, hits the dashboard, and turns the key. “There’s a few good years left in this one.”

Come on, car, I think wistfully. Don’t start, don’t start. The treasonous engine putters to life, ready to deliver me to the guillotine. My eyes squeeze shut. *No!*

“How is your new year going?”

my dad asks.

“About to take a turn for the worse,” I mutter, miserable.

He clears his throat. “How are your teachers?”

“Annoyed I don’t use a JS like everyone else,” I jab as we pull up to a stoplight.

He cranks his torso and head around to look at me. “You’re not going to cooperate, are you?”

I scoot further to the left, out of his line of sight.

“Hey, Dad,” Ethan jumps in, happy to take my place. “My chem professor says he knows you from college . . .”

Fifteen minutes later, we arrive at the main gate of campus. Two guards jump to their feet, visibly alarmed, as we pull up to the check point. They circle us, carefully scanning every inch of our car.

Behind us, cars start lining up. The first one bears an Oasis flag on its license plate—the Statesman’s car. I grimace and slink down further in the back seat, hoping Aaron doesn’t see me.

“Find anything?” one troubled guard asks another.

“Nothing.”

The first guard squints, rubbing

his chin as he considers our mismatched car. “Check again.”

I suppress an anguished groan.

The longest sixty seconds of my pitiful life later, the guards grudgingly give up and wave us through.

“They don’t stop anyone else,” I complain as my dad pulls forward.

“They’re duty-bound to investigate anything out of the ordinary.” My dad wedges our puttering, pathetic old car in between two limos as if he’s trying to humiliate me on purpose.

I climb out and bolt, wanting to separate myself from the artifact as

fast as I can.

“Hey, wait!” my dad calls after me, punching the horn. To my horror, the horn gets stuck. Everyone within a hundred feet stops talking and stares at us. I quickly distance myself from the mortifying scene as he hits the steering wheel several more times. He finally wins round one and the horn goes quiet. “Alysse!” he calls through his open window.

Only the fear of another horn tap compels me to respond. “What?” I yell, exasperated.

“Have a good day.” He waves big.

I give a sarcastic thumbs-up and whimper, “Thanks.”

In the distance, Tori stands in the middle of ILAC, waving me over with a look of sympathy. Next to her, Mishell wears a look of diabolical enjoyment. I brace myself and join them. “Hey.”

“What was that thing?” Mishell jerks her head in the direction of our departing car. “Is it even legal to operate?”

“You mean that mobile junkyard was hers?” An ILAC member laughs.

“Fitting, don’t you think?” Mishell sneers, applying another

thick layer of bright red lipstick.

“Mishell,” Tori warns in a low voice.

“What? I’m just pointing out—”

“AARON ISN’T COMING TODAY!” yells a sophomore in sheer panic, running toward us. “Another family trip!”

“What?” Mishell spins to face her, full of despair. “Then what’s the point of even coming to school?”

Tori nudges me with a teasing smile. “At least this way Aaron didn’t see you get dropped off.”

“I’m not sure about that. There was an Oasis limo behind me this

morning.” I glance around, worried.

Tori smirks. “My money’s on ILAC; they know his schedule better than he does.”

Just then Raezer saunters up and wraps his arms around two girls who giggle. His hair is styled so bizarrely, it’s hard not to stare. “Hel-lo, ladies! Who has their homework from calculus?” He looks at Tori, who raises an offended eyebrow. He dims ever so slightly as he moves to the next person. “Mishell?”

“Like I take calculus,” Mishell reminds him with her usual air of

superiority. She stares admiringly at her reflection in a nearby window as she realigns a stray hair.

“What about you, *Alice*?” Raezer mocks. I ignore him, stepping closer to Tori.

Raezer’s smirk diminishes slightly. He looks around and spots a thin girl named Kess. “Hey B, I need last night’s homework.”

She shrugs her slumped shoulders. “I’m not in calculus.”

“Then find somebody who is, B. Make it snappy!”

Kess hurries off.

I open my mouth to say something, but Tori shakes her

head no. “Let’s go,” she says, hooking arms with me.

I twist my head around, feeling sick for not standing up to Raezer. “He has no right to talk to Kess like that.”

“Kess likes being used,” Tori says. “And she’s a notorious backstabber.”

“I still don’t like it, any more than I like doing this.” I hand over her JS, my fingers finding it difficult to let go. “My parents are refusing to leave the Stone Age.”

She takes it back in complete disbelief. “Compared to your parents, mine seem almost

rational.”

Just then, both JSs emit a bright, cheerful ding. She reads the incoming note on our class board and utters a triumphant, “Yes!”

“Yes, what?” I stare at her, expectantly.

“Dr. Harden wants us to go to the library and start on our research assignment. Check out the topic choices.” A holo list appears above her JS, with one topic highlighted. “I already wrote a paper on international drug regulations for my dad this summer.”

I eye her, enviously. “And to think, I used to feel sorry for you

when your dad gave you homework over the summer.”

We pass numerous partially filled tables until Tori finds an empty one tucked away at the back. While she settles in her seat, pulling up her report and making minute changes, I hurry among the shelves, pulling out several thick volumes. I catch glimpse of an article at the media station. By the time I have everything I need, I can barely see over the top of the stack as I carry them back to our table.

Suddenly, Aaron appears at my side. “Could I see that one?” He

points to the book at the bottom of my heavy stack.

“Sure.” I smile, recovering from the shock of his sudden appearance. *So much for ILAC’s credibility.* I awkwardly shift, contorting as I attempt to turn the stack without dropping it.

“This morning was hilarious,” he says with a dimpled smile. “Does your horn get stuck a lot?”

“I don’t know.” My face grows hot. “We don’t normally use it.”

He scans the barcode, downloading the entire volume into his JS with ease. “Probably a good idea until you get it fixed. Thanks

for the code.” He smiles and winks before heading back to his table.

“Anytime,” I call after him, precariously re-balancing the pile. Just as I reach my seat, Ryan, a rugby player who could double as a brick wall, slides into it.

I maneuver quickly to keep my pile from cascading onto his thick, clueless head. He stares avidly at Tori, not flinching as I drop my books at the other end of the table with an intentional thud. “What are you writing about?” he asks her, entranced and still clueless as I fetch a new chair.

“The Green Revolution.” Tori’s

eyes stay on her JS.

“I wanted to write about vaccine discoveries.” He leans eagerly toward Tori. “Do you think you could help me?”

“You want my father, not me.” She doesn’t bother to look up.

I watch in disbelief. If I talked to guys that way, I’d be ostracized. Tori only gets more attention.

“Want to go to a movie on Saturday?” Ryan asks next.

Case in point.

“Sorry, I’m meeting with some ambassadors.”

He leans closer. “What about next Saturday?”

She looks up, her face pleasant but reserved. “This semester is super busy. Thanks anyway.”

Ryan walks away a few inches shorter. I put down my pen, turning my attention back to Tori. “What?” she asks, glancing at me over the top of her JS.

“The ambassador thing is in the morning, not all day,” I remind her.

“What am I supposed to say? ‘You’re not my type?’” she challenges coyly. Her eyebrows draw in as she looks over my shoulder. “I’ve got to go. See you later,” she excuses, jumping up from her seat almost like it was on

fire.

I spin in my chair to see Oasis' number-one heir headed our way.

“Princess Vicky in a hurry?” He sits down in her now empty seat.

“She prefers Tori.” I open a book and start copying.

“Right,” he says. “What do you see in that plutocrat?”

I put my pen down and stare at him. “Pluto what?”

“Plu-to-crat,” he enunciates slowly, enjoying himself. “The wealthy, ruling class who looks down on us mere mortals.”

I almost snort as I gesture at his leather jacket and his JS 990. “And

you aren't one?"

"We *earned* our money." He scans several of the volumes in my pile with his JS. "Besides, Mansfields aren't interested in ruling."

"Well, Mr. Not-Interested, you don't know Tori." I lean forward and whisper surreptitiously. "She's *awake*."

"Huh." Pete lifts a doubting eyebrow. "What makes you so sure?"

"We have *real* conversations off campus."

"Something I'll never witness." He smirks. "Seeing as how she

won't even talk to me.”

“She probably doesn't want her phone taken away.” I burn through ink as I copy info at mach speed while he compiles data for his report with a few taps.

As I wait for chemistry to begin later that day, I notice everyone has gone zombie over their JSs, even the professor. I stretch my neck to watch the latest holo video. Hopefully the hostages are being released.

A mini holo Deb stands petrified while a Dissenter shoves a table over in a total rage. My throat and

stomach tighten as the Dissenter turns on John.

“Nut jobs, every last one of them,” Pete vents as he sits next to me, placing his JS between us.

“Not all of them,” I say with less conviction than normal as I keep watching the video on his screen.

“Oh, no,” Pete groans. “Not the unfailing optimist again.”

“Sometimes all you need is a catalyst, and everything changes for the better,” I whisper, viewing the holo closely. “I missed the beginning. What set this guy off?”

“Some donation he found on the table.” He shrugs. “He handed it to

that lady, and it just exploded from there.”

I squint, trying to figure out what’s in her hands, but it’s too small and blurry to tell. “Why would he blow up over something that’s free?”

My heart aches as Deb, Tyler, and John get dragged to a storage room. One of the Dissenters pulls out a gun, pointing it right at Tyler, yelling that Tyler doesn’t know what pain is. My legs tense, wanting Tyler to make a run for it even though I know he’s already dead.

Tyler tries to persuade the guy to

put the gun down while one of the Dissenters warns the man that they are being watched. The guy looks up at the camera, aims his gun . . .

The screen goes blank.

“Did you catch that?” Pete asks urgently as he replays the holo.

“Which part?”

“The audio. Someone messed around with it.” He rewinds the holo to where the Dissenter accuses Tyler of not knowing what pain is. “Check their lips and listen again,” Pete instructs, zooming in as Tyler tells the guy to put his gun down.

A hollow feeling forms in my stomach as I catch what Pete

means. The audio doesn't match the movement of Tyler's lips. "Who would change it, and why?"

Before Pete can respond, the bell rings.

"Shall we begin?" Professor Titan announces from the front. "Be sure to follow the directions carefully. The last kid who ignored my instructions melted his face."

"Are you serious?" a girl in front of us asks in alarm.

"Absolutely," he says with relish as he steps behind Pete. "The guy's name was Mansfield or something." Titan's mouth twitches, almost revealing a smile.

“Oh, I thought you were going to tell them about that professor who blew up an entire lab,” Pete jabs back playfully.

“Kishbob,” Professor Titan sputters. “It was only half a lab. Tell that father of yours to stop making up stories.” Titan winks before walking on.

“Dissenters have totally abused our generosity,” Pete says once we’re dismissed from chemistry. △ His voice carries down the nearly empty hall, and a janitor stops cleaning a window, glaring at us with open hostility.

Pete catches the look. “And then Dissenters wonder why Oasians want the gates closed permanently,” Pete announces loudly.

I consider the bitter worker, thinking he looks an awful lot like the creepy gardener. Before I can take a closer look, the bell rings and students flood into the hallway, creating a tidal wave that blocks my view.

A group of ruggers talk loudly as they pass by. “Why hasn’t your father called in the Domestics yet?” Ryan asks Aaron.

“He’s waiting for the senate to get on board.” Aaron says as if he,

too, is fed up with the Dissenters.

I lean toward Pete, curious as we open our lockers. “What are Domestics?”

“Domestic Guards from the Global Union, a.k.a. Domes,” Pete clarifies as I start the transfer of textbooks from my locker to my backpack. “But my dad calls them morons.”

My face scrunches. “Are they that bad?”

“Morons, as in oxymorons. They come from any country but your own, so they’re hardly domestic, and their lack of weapons makes them more like witnesses than

guards.” 

“Then they can’t help us with the Dissenters.” Suddenly, my textbooks are the only things weighing me down.

Pete doesn’t notice. He’s too distracted by an approaching gang of nervous ninth graders, each nudging the others forward. “Not again,” he mutters, thoroughly irritated.

 A skinny kid finally musters up enough courage to approach. “Peter Mansfield?” The kid holds out his hand. His skin is so pale, it’s likely his only exposure to light comes from a JS. “I just wanted to

say what an honor it is to meet you,” he says in a nasally, squeaky voice.

Pete brushes by the kid without even a nod. As we continue down the hall, I glance back at the disappointment evident in the kid’s eyes. Pete glances at me and mutters, “Just say it.”

“That response won’t win many friends,” I suggest.

He laughs mockingly. “Like I want to be friends with users.”

Another ecstatic student blocks our way. “Peter Mansfield?”

“Did you say Peter Mansfield?”
A girl whips her head around to get

a look. “I’m a *big* admirer. I’ve been waiting forever to meet you!” She smiles, looking him up and down.

Pete turns to me, *I-told-you-so* written all over his face.

“Okay, so you have a point,” I concede. “Still, it doesn’t hurt to be polite.”

“Is that so?” Pete says with this dangerous look. I groan as he spins around and backtracks through the group of bright-eyed freshmen to the first kid. He smiles and extends a hand. “What’s your name?”

The kid’s face lights up as he accepts Pete’s hand and shakes it

enthusiastically. “Nick Tavernil.”

“Well, Nick, Alysse here thinks I was rude. What do you think?” Pete asks, watching me as much as Nick.

“You weren’t rude at all.” The kid is still looking at him in awe.

“Uh, huh.” Pete sends me a smug look. “Say, could you do me a favor, now that we’re friends?”

Nick’s eyes grow with excitement on his nearly transparent face. “Sure!”

“Just tell all your buddies—” Pete whispers.

Nick eagerly leans closer, straining to hear.

“— TO LEAVE ME ALONE!”
Pete’s words echo down the hall.

They all jerk back and scatter, with Nick nearly tripping as he scampers away. Older students laugh wildly, already aware that Pete likes his space.

Pete turns to me with a smirk.
“Any better?”

“Oh, yes.” I take a step back myself. “There’s no way he’ll ever forget this moment.”

CHAPTER 4

CAUGHT OFF GUARD

SATURDAY, instead of hanging out and having fun like my peers, I clean houses. I hope to save up enough for college. The clock moves faster than my hands, and I find myself behind schedule. That's why I take a short-cut, walking past one of the worker stations.

Blocking the sidewalk is a group of workers who look like they just stepped out of a maximum-security

prison. One where weight lifting is the only activity.

“You think things gonna change around here? Oasians don’t care ‘bout you,” a solid-looking young man says to a large group of workers, all of whom appear younger than twenty-five.

I start to tiptoe back, retracing my steps when one of the workers spots me and grunts. Within seconds, the group spreads out to block my way.

I look around for a guard or cop. Simultaneously, I slide my hand into my pocket, discreetly dialing Oasis’ emergency number.

I'm debating making a run for it when I recognize one of the biggest workers. "Max, long time no see," I greet him like a long, lost relative. "How's your mom doing?"

He eyes the others, obviously not pleased with my greeting. "What do you care?"

"I was just concerned about your mom's headaches. Does she still get them?" I smile, ignoring the group's toxic hatred.

Max shifts his weight, some vulnerability sneaking into his eyes. "The migraines have gotten worse," he mutters, looking at the others more than me.

“I have something that might help.” I try hard to sound casual and unafraid, aware the group is searching for a reason to attack me. At this point, any excuse would do.

I dig in my pocket for the headache formula Tori gave me the first week of poli-sci. Max grunts more than speaks as I force the small bottle into his hand. I use it as an opportunity to cut through the group before they have time to stop me.

“Just have her follow the instructions on the bottle. Let me know how it works!” I keep my voice casual as I cross the street,

watching them from the corner of my eye.

“Didn’t know you was a deserter, all for yur mother,” I hear one of the group mocking him.

“You talkin’ ‘bout my mother?” Max grabs the guy by the shirt, dragging him around as if he were a mannequin. The others quickly drop the issue.

I’m halfway down the block before I dare lift my phone to my ear. “CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?” an exasperated dispatcher yells on the other end. “This better not be a prank, because that’s a serious offense, and a patrol is already on

its way—”

“I’m here!” I interrupt. “There’s a group of workers looking for trouble.” I glance over my shoulder, making sure they’re not following me. “I wasn’t attacked, but the next person won’t be so lucky.”

That evening, I approach my brother’s warzone, the place he fondly refers to as his room. “Hey, Ethan?” I peek inside. There’s some sort of muffled response amid the piles of junk. Finally I detect a lump of clothes moving on his bed. “Are you alive?”

“No,” he mutters irritably into his pillow.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Despite being dead, will you let me borrow your car on Saturday mornings?” I plead.

“Can’t,” he mumbles.

“Can’t or won’t?” I fold my arms.

He lifts his head just long enough to grumble, “Both.” His head falls back down before I hear a groan. He lifts his face again. “It’s not that I don’t want to help, but my schedule constantly changes. I can’t agree to something like that. Why don’t you ask Mom for the family

car?”

“Most Saturdays Dad has overtime.” I lean against his door. “I wouldn’t even ask, except I had a close call today.”

My brother slowly sits up, as if he were eighty instead of twenty. “Close call?” He listens carefully, asking many questions as I tell him about the workers.

“Guys like that aren’t supposed to have work permits,” he says when I’m done. He runs a hand through his hair and exhales loudly. “I wish I could let you borrow my car, but most Saturday mornings I need it.”

I sigh, leaning against his door, discouraged. I'm about to shut the door when another solution comes to mind. "You know, there is a safer route, but it's super long. Could I borrow your bike?"

"Sorry, sold it to buy parts to fix my car."

I scrape my brain for another solution. "Would you give me a ride to Urbane after dinner, so I can buy one myself?"

"Now you're talking." He lies back down. "Just let me know when dinner's ready."

"Sure." I close his door and head to my room, hearing his snores

within five steps.

Later that evening, a door chime rings as I enter the bike shop. A sixteen-year-old with the name ‘MARC’ embroidered on his shirt perks up.

I can see why. While full of bikes, the store is empty of customers. I gulp as Marc rushes over for what I suspect is his only chance at a bonus.

“What can I get for you?” He rubs his hands together.

I lean back, glancing at the exit. “I’m here for a bike.”

“Excellent.” He walks to the

display wall and lifts off a bike whose price would empty my whole year's savings.

He gives a toothy grin. "This is just the bike for you. GPS, anti-theft, perfect ride, diamond grid tires, surround sound, and multi-color settings."

The bike frame begins shifting through colors of the rainbow, ending on leopard pink. Loud dance music breaks out from the handle bars. "This bike is the safest and most tasteful ride available for a beautiful Oasian gem," he yells.

"Except this gem has a budget," I yell back. I shut off the music with

a strained smile. “Do you have any used bikes?”

He gasps, grabbing onto the handle bars for support. “Used?”

I exhale, exasperated. “Okay, obviously not. Where are your more economical bikes?”

“You don’t want leopard pink?” He scrolls through more color options. “What about tiger purple? Now that’s one for today’s aggressive women.”

I scrunch my face up. “How about I just take a look around?” I leave him stuttering protests as I walk toward the back where several basic bikes are crammed in close

together. After significant maneuvering, I extract a simple, white bike, pleased to see this one won't bankrupt me.

“But the tiger print.” Marc holds up a purple tiger-striped helmet and matching gloves.

“I'll have to sacrifice and pass them up.” I also pass on a JS mount, new paint job (he really thinks a girl like me should go for a more vibrant color), holo-map, and an inflatable life vest that attaches underneath the seat, just in case I somehow ride off the dock into Oasis Lake.

“At least buy a helmet!” he

insists, almost reduced to tears.

“I’d like that one.” I point to the cheapest and most inconspicuous helmet on the rack.

He doesn’t even argue, but places the helmet in a bag, dejected. “Anything else?” he asks, more from duty than hope, his ambition to reach Employee of the Month now crushed.

Over his shoulder, I notice a small black canister with bright orange flames. “Yes, I’d like that pepper spray, too.”

He just shrugs, grabbing me a can before scanning my ID, subtracting the total purchase from

my account. I slip the pepper spray into my purse, glad to be more prepared.

That evening as I pull out my pajamas, my dad comes to my bedroom door. “You’re finally home.” I smile.

“Your mother told me what happened. You handled it well,” he says. “Before you ride around town cleaning any more houses, I want to do some training with that pepper spray you just bought.” ⓘ

“Now?” I ask, pajamas still in hand, as he walks out.

“Yes, now,” he calls from down

the hall.

Two hours later, I hardly recognize him. He spent an hour drilling me on spraying from different positions before moving on to escaping choke holds and hand holds.

“Try again,” my dad instructs. “Remember, break my grip at the weakest point.”

I wipe at my forehead with my free hand, my other wrist locked in his vice-grip. I strike his hand while twisting my arm, finally breaking free of his hold.

He grabs me again, this time

tighter. “Faster than that.”

I do it again, but he regrabbs me too quick for me to get away.

“Again, Alysse!” he yells.

I bring my fist down on his hand and twist my wrist out, stepping back before he can grab me again. He smiles. “Better, much better. That’s enough for tonight. We’ll do more tomorrow.”

NEW ALLIANCE

““**M**Y uncle wants me to tour his *alma mater*,” Tori says a week later on the way to school. “I tried to tell him I’m not going to I.R.U.—” Her voice trails off as she slows the car to a stop. “That’s different.”

Blocking the Academy’s security gate are three Oasian city guards in full armor carrying weapons at their sides. One approaches Tori’s window.

“Is there a problem?” Tori asks

confidently.

“All occupants are to be searched before entering school grounds,” the guard barks. “Out of the vehicle.”

Tori smiles, holding out her watch. “You’ll find letters signed by city officials certifying I am an outstanding citizen, free of suspicion. As such, I am exempt from searches.”

The guard scans her and nods. “You are cleared, Miss Clement.”

Another guard gruffly approaches my window. “Out!”

“Yes, sir.” I comply, having no such letters.

“Ma’am!” she yells.

“Yes, ma’am.” I cringe, glancing at Tori before climbing out.

“Arms and legs apart,” the guard barks, her foot tapping impatiently as she waits for me to comply. She pats me down roughly and quickly, her face set like stone behind her sunglasses. The other guard circles me with a scanner, careful to cover even my shoes. They step back, and the woman nods in response to a questioning look from the man.

“Proceed,” he orders.

I hop back into Tori’s car, shuddering as we drive away.

“What was that all about?”

“That was super unnecessary,” she agrees, glancing into the rear view mirror. “You know, it wouldn’t be that hard to get you certified. All we have to do is find a city official at level two or higher to vouch for you.”

“You neglected to mention the giant fee,” I remind her.

“I could help you with the fee,” Tori offers as we climb out.

“Absolutely not.” I shut the door firmly behind me. “It’s bad enough you give me rides all the time.”

“Hey, Mason,” Tori greets one of the Timpson cousins as he steps out of the car next to us. “Your hair is

getting a little long for dress code, isn't it?"

A little long? The guy could pose for the cover of a surfer magazine with his long sun-bleached hair and tall, tan frame.

He smiles in an easygoing manner. "Like code matters?"

His cousin Jason climbs out the other side, his phone glued to an ear. He looks a lot like Mason, except with shorter hair, via orders of his dad, a judge. "Come on, it would be the dream job!" he begs with fervor. "But . . . yes, sir." He puts his phone away and looks at Mason. "I'm afraid my father lacks

vision.”

“Something wrong?” Tori’s eyes crease with concern.

“We wanted to drop out of school to become city guards,” Mason informs her.

“Only my dad won’t let me,” Jason says. “What’s the point of studying when we could be paid to frisk girls?”

Tori and I roll our eyes. Tori recovers first, a mischievous grin forming on her face. “Don’t worry, Jason. I can think of a career that would suit you even better. The only down side is you’d have to perm your hair and dye it red.”

They look at her and then each other, mouths open. “Huh?”

“Clowns,” I mouth, as Tori hooks arms with me and starts walking away.

Jason nudges his cousin, following us. “Did you see that? Tori actually made a joke. The vixen has a sense of humor after all.”

Tori’s eyes narrow as she lifts her chin. “We’re going to be late,” she snaps, walking faster.

As we hurry along, I see Pete a ways off. I almost wave for him to come join us when I remember Tori’s stubborn aversion to him.

They'd be great friends, if only I could get them to sit down and talk. What if . . .

“Tori, are we still studying at your house today?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Great,” I say enthusiastically. “I'll meet you there.”

She looks at me in surprise. “You don't need a ride?”

I hide a grin. “Not today. I have to take care of something first.”

After school, I walk out to the senior parking garage with Pete. He discusses our chemistry experiment as we approach a vehicle so exotic,

I can't tell where the doors begin or end. "What an amazing car!"

"Calling this work of art a 'car' is insulting," Pete says.

"Oh." I grin sheepishly. "Well, I love the color of your 'work of art'. Yellow is so cheerful."

"That's exactly what we told the salesman. 'Find us a car and make sure it's yellow,'" he teases as we come within range. "Open."

The edges of the door appear as it splits in the middle, opening horizontally. The bottom forms a step while the top flips up.

A few guys nearby nod appreciatively as we climb into

Pete's exquisite masterpiece. Pete nods back as the doors automatically close behind us. He drops his JS into a compartment between our seats, clearing his throat as his eyes drift to my phone.

I pause in my message to Tori and drop my phone in as well. "Are you ever going to explain this weird ritual? I thought you liked electronics."

"Not all the time," he replies, driving us out of campus grounds.

I realize we're in the wrong lane. "Wait! Head left at the light."

"Toward the Hill?" The wheels pivot ninety degrees, and the car

drives sideways. We switch to the inside lane that leads to where the wealthiest in Oasis reside. Living on the Hill is another reason he and Tori should be friends. They're practically neighbors.

"I'm confused," Pete says. "Your home is the other way."

"I'm studying at Tori's," I reply as casually as I can.

"Oh, the Clements." He scrunches his face,  as if he just caught a whiff of today's chemistry experiment.

"You should come, too." I smile, as if the idea just occurred to me.

"You know Tori doesn't even like

me—not that I care,” he adds quickly, eyes trained on me to make sure I believe him.

“Of course she likes you, about as much as you like her,” I tease. “Please come. We could use a brain like yours.”

“Mmmhmm,” Pete responds with the excitement of a slug.

“Please,” I beg with big eyes and a pouty lip. “I need help. I’m stuck in calculus.”

His eye twitches as we climb the Hill.

“Besides, her chef makes these amazing croissants wrapped around mini sausages,” I add when we

reach her mansion.

“Fine,” he turns the wheel, and we pull up on her driveway. “But I’m not staying long.”

Without hesitation, Tori’s guard opens the gate, something he’s never done for me, even though Tori and I are best friends. By the time we reach the front door, her family’s attendant Stan appears in the threshold as an impromptu butler. “Welcome, Mr. Mansfield and Miss Simms. I assume you are here to see Miss Victoria.”

“Yes, we have a study session,” I reply, smothering a laugh.

“Please follow me.” He leads us

to an elaborate room I've never seen before. Carved panels with painted calligraphic borders accent the walls, giving the room a bright glowing ambiance. "Please wait here while I inform Miss Victoria you have arrived." Stan dismisses himself.

The sofas are so white, I hesitate to sit on them. Pete, however, seems more at home, leaning back and looking around the room with a smirk. "You're right. Tori's no princess."

Within two minutes, Staci, Mrs. Clement's assistant enters the room, filling in as hostess. She

strains under the weight of a heavy tray. “Our chef prepared a few hors d’oeuvres in case you are hungry.” She places the silver platter on the coffee table and curtsies before she leaves.

“I should bring you more often.” I elbow Pete, switching to a formal, official tone. “Peter Mansfield, what a pleasure it is for you to grace our front steps. Would you be so kind as to permit me to tie your shoes?”

“Would you stop it already?” He fights off a huge grin.

Just then, Tori appears in the doorway and comes to an abrupt

halt. Her eyes seek out mine and her head jerks slightly as she silently mouths, “What!?”

I just savor an hors d’oeuvre, as if I have no idea what she means.

She puts on a stiff hostess smile and walks in, sitting down next to me. “Joining our study group, Peter?”

“Peter is my dad,” he responds curtly. “It’s just Pete, and I don’t study.”

“No need to rub it in,” I jump in lightly, making as if Pete were being funny instead of rude. “Tori, consider Pete a consultant.” I pull out my textbooks.

Tori reaches for a celery stick, not amused.

“Big fan of rabbit food?” Pete notes.

“I’m careful about what I eat,” she says, her posture perfect. “I assume you aren’t.”

“Are you kidding? Just look at me.” He winks, grabbing a second croissant-wrapped frankfurter, enjoying every bite in front of us.

A laugh escapes her lips as the ice finally breaks. “Aside from heart attack food, what else do you like?”

“Electronics,” I pipe up. “He’s revived my family’s computer more

than once.”

She considers Pete with gauging eyes. “Really? You know, my console was running slow last night. You up for a challenge?” She raises an eyebrow.

Pete rubs his hands together. “Lead the way.”

We follow Tori into the home office where three consoles wait: one large, sleek, and black; another medium and pink; the last small and dark purple.

“Oh look, papa bear, mama bear, and baby bear,” Pete teases.

Tori folds her arms. “Are you going to mock or fix?”

Pete sits, placing his JS on the purple console. A holo desktop instantly appears. I can't help but quietly grin at the shocked look on Tori's face as Pete bypasses her retinal and ID chip scan.

Pete opens and closes files and programs with incredible speed. "You have the hardware. Your software isn't what I would've chosen, but it's okay." He laughs. "Wow, I don't think I've seen this much spyware except at school."

"But I have an anti-spyware program." Tori motions to an icon on the interactive panel.

Pete smirks. "That government-

commissioned garbage *is* spyware. It monitors your entire system, slowing everything down to a crawl.” He downloads several new programs while extracting the old. Within minutes, her console is running perfectly.

I smile at Tori, vindicated.

“Okay, so you’re good with technology,” she admits.

Pete spins in her chair and leans back with a cocky grin, motioning to her dad's console. “Wanna take a look?”

“You're kidding,” Tori gasps, eyeing the hall.

“Not a good idea, Pete,” I warn

quietly.

He keeps his eyes on Tori.

“Well?”

“For real?”

Taking that as his answer, he slides over to her dad's console and places his JS on top. A vivid holo desktop appears. Pete bypasses three security tests before he gets in.

“What's this?” Tori points to one of many programs he opens.

“Warns me when someone is accessing remotely,” he says, moving fast. “Can't let baby bear get caught, now can we?”

“And this?” Tori asks, pointing to

another.

“Covers our tracks. Can't let Papa Bear know we were here.” A spreadsheet of videos appears on the holo screen. Pete smirks as he taps one. “Tori, did you know about this?”

A view of Tori's front seat enlarges, filling the entire screen. “He has a camera in my car!” Tori whispers, outraged.

“More than just your car. This particular video could cause some turbulence if not corrected.” He taps the screen and we see ourselves huddled around her father's desk.

Tori turns to spot the camera up high behind us while I watch Pete reset the feed until the video shows us back at Tori's station. Tori turns back to the screen as Pete starts exploring programs and files.

“What is this?” she asks, pointing to an icon labeled Scorpion.

“No.”

“Too hard to crack?” Tori taunts.

Pete's face looks pale. “Some things shouldn't be touched.”

“Then you do know what it is.”

“No time.” Pete starts closing programs fast.

That's when I notice his alarm program flashing. Soon that one is

closed, too. Pete grabs his JS and we discretely slide back to Tori's station.

“He's on,” Pete says. The holo desktop disappears.

“On? It looks off,” I point out.

“Can you hear the hum? That console is working,” Pete responds.

After our close call, we go back to the other room and dive into calculus. Pete and Tori spend an hour taking turns explaining problems until finally my brain can't absorb any more information.

“Oh, Alysse, my father said he'd be happy to vouch for your family if you decide to get certified,” Tori

says as I gather up my stuff. “And my mother seriously wouldn’t mind covering the fee.”

“No, thank you,” I say firmly.

“Which certification?” Pete asks, grabbing another hors d’oeuvres.

“Search exemption.” I zip my bag a little too hard, misaligning the sides. “Why are the city guards even at the Academy? I didn’t think they were allowed to search students.”

“Didn’t you hear?” Pete looks back and forth between us. “The Academy received multiple bomb threats last week. Apparently, the Dissenters are now trying to get

revenge on city officials through their children.”

“Why didn’t the guards tell us?”
Tori asks.

“Since when do they tell us anything?” Pete mocks. “Truth is a gem buried beneath layers of propaganda. You have to dig to find out anything.” He leans back, eyeing Tori with skepticism, wiping his hands with a napkin. “I’m confused, Alysse. You said Tori isn’t a zombie.”

Tori narrows her eyes, insulted. “I’m not brain-dead. I think for myself.”

“We’ll see about that.” A

mocking smile forms on his lips. He glances up at the closest camera before leaning close and whispering. “Pop quiz: who started the Second Civil War?”

“According to us, the Dissenters. According to the Dissenters, us,” Tori responds quietly.

“And according to you?” Pete challenges.

Tori lifts her chin. “Both. We have corrupt laws, and they have violent protests.”

“Your turn, Pete-not-Peter. Who owns the Testra Territory?” Tori challenges.

“You mean our national park, the

one big enough to be its own time zone?” I question in a whisper.

“National park?” Pete eyes me. “Haven’t you ever wondered why we aren’t allowed inside it?”

“The big eared bats are in danger,” I auto-reply.

“In danger of what? Having their pictures taken?” Pete snorts, shaking his head. “We’re not allowed in because the whole region belongs to the Dissenters. We lost it during the war.”

I freeze, staring at him. “Wait—that *whole* area is theirs? How did we lose three state’s worth of land when we won the war?”

Pete raises an eyebrow. “Who says we won?”

“We won, but barely,” Tori asserts in a hushed tone.

“We didn’t win,” Pete argues. “They got what they wanted: *separation.*”

“Agree to disagree?” Tori offers as we start to leave.

“You’re welcome to your own wrong opinion anytime.” Pete shrugs, undisturbed. “Nice finally *meeting* you, Tori.”

Tori raises an eyebrow as we reach the front door. “Are you insinuating that I’m fake just because I don’t spill everything I

know among people who wouldn't appreciate it anyway?"

Pete hovers by the door, a new level of respect entering his eyes. "I see your point."

"All right!" I jump in like a talk show host, wanting this session to end on a good note. "Next time, I'm giving the pop quiz. Thanks for a fun time, Tori!" I wave as we leave.

"So, Tori's a plutocrat, huh?" I ask smugly as Pete and I pull out of the driveway.

"Okay, she's cool even if she is a little **P.C.**" ■ Pete shrugs. "She's

still a princess. How many servants did we meet before she came in?” A pained look crosses his face. “And her dad’s console . . .”

“Are you in love?” I tease. “If you like Dr. Clement’s console so much, why don’t you just buy one?”

“I have my reasons.” Pete usual smirk is missing.

UNSEEN

TWO weeks later, I head towards Deb's house with a basket full of treats for both her and her cats. I climb several flights of stairs, not entirely trusting the elevator. Deb lives in one of the older, if not the oldest, apartment building in Oasis.

I go to knock on Deb's door, but it immediately gives way. "Deb? I have a basket from my mom." I wait, but there's no response. I peek my head in, concerned. Usually,

she has at least four locks and a chain engaged, especially after what happened in the compound.

Her cats rub against my legs as they walk tight figure eights around my feet. “Deb?” I call again, trying to not trip as the cats meow desperate cries for help. I place the basket on the counter.

I search Deb’s apartment while the cats examine the basket. All I find are a few dirty dishes in the sink and a half read novel on Deb’s nightstand.

My stomach twists as I pull out my phone, dialing home. “Mom, I think something has happened to

Deb.”

An hour later, my parents talk in the living room while I chase down the last and most resistant feline.

“John says he and his wife are leaving tonight,” my dad says.

“Leaving? As in, leaving Oasis?” my mom asks.

“Not only is he the only other survivor from the hostage situation, but he just found out another volunteer has disappeared, too. He doesn’t dare stay.”

I glance around the normally cheerful apartment, nine meowing boxed stacked nearby. Bands tighten around my heart. I can’t

blame John for wanting to leave.

A few days later, I think about Deb as I wait for political science to begin. Despite my mom calling Deb's other friends and family, we still have no idea what has happened to Deb.

There are rumors she moved in with family, but I can't imagine her leaving without saying goodbye, and there's no way she'd leave her cats behind.

As Chris sits next to me, I notice Dr. Harden's profile outside the door. I gasp and dive into my backpack, retrieving my

assignment. I dash up front and carefully place my essay on the corner of her desk.

“What was that about?” Chris asks as I sit back in my seat.

“If I don’t have my essays on Dr. Harden’s desk before class begins, she counts them as late and docks me twenty points,” I explain.

Dr. Harden walks in, giving me a scowl before turning her attention back to her JS.

“Why does she hate you so much?” Chris asks, catching her look. “You’re one of the nicest people I know.”

“I think she’s more interested in

social strata than amiability,” I whisper, my cheeks pink from Chris’s compliment.

Dr. Harden clears her throat as she puts down her JS, turning to me. “Alice, I never received your assignment.”

“I left my essay on your desk before the bell.”

“Where?” Dr. Harden asks, an icy smile forming.

“Right on the corner . . .” I examine her desk, but the packet is nowhere in sight. My fists ball up. “I put it on your desk!”

“Why don’t you send me a new copy?” she asks in the same tone

she would use to recommend a restaurant to a tourist. “Oh, that’s right. You’re too poor for a JS. Very well, you receive a zero.”

“All you have to do is check the security video!” I protest, standing up.

“Any more outbursts, and I’m red flagging you.” She waits, eager for me to take the bait. I bite my tongue as I sit back down, Mishell smirking triumphantly at me.

Chris raises his hand, frowning. “I watched Alysse put the essay on your desk,” he asserts.

Her features stretch thin. “What good does that do? I can’t give

credit on an essay I never received.”

Tori raises her hand. Dr. Harden closes her eyes ever so briefly before turning to Tori, forcing a pleasant smile. “Yes, Victoria.”

“Considering there was a witness, could she be granted an extension on the assignment?” Tori asks brightly.

Harden deflates, like a child who just had candy yanked from her hands. “I suppose, but just this once,” she snaps, and launches into her lecture.

At lunchtime, Pete glances at

Tori, amused, as she looks up at the dark gray sky yet again. We're the only ones out on the green. Everyone else doesn't want to risk getting caught in the rain that only comes once or twice a year.

“Want any?” Pete opens his pizza box.

Tori leans back, revolted. “No, thanks. Real food?” She holds out a container of cut up veggies. Pete shakes his head, equally revolted. Meanwhile, I grab some celery and a pizza.

“Any luck getting a hold of Deb?” Tori asks.

“No. We've called and messaged

her phone to no avail. We'd call her relatives, but no one has any names, let alone numbers." I sigh, putting down my pizza. "It doesn't make sense. Why would she just up and leave like that?"

"Maybe she didn't," Pete says, sober. "Maybe Dissenters got a hold of her to finish what they started."

I flinch, unable to bear that thought.

"I hope not," Tori says in a near whisper. She sighs impatiently. "Why are Dissenters even still here? Why didn't they join other Dissenters in the Lost Territory

after the war?”

“It’s complicated,” Pete replies. “They lost their citizenship during the war, which means they can’t get travel permits. Without permits, they can’t go anywhere in the Global Union, let alone some place off limits like the Lost Territory.”

“Why didn’t the Dissenters from the Lost Territory come for them?” I ask.

“With tensions high, any attempt to recover them would be viewed as an act of aggression,” Tori interjects, removing her light sweater. “Maybe an act of war.”

“Couldn’t some other country

take them in?” I press.

“What country would dare?” Pete wipes his greasy hands with a napkin. “The prominent GU nations refuse to trade with any nation who intervenes on behalf of the Dissenters.”

“Then there’s no way out?” I think of Jessica and her family.

“Dissenters have two options: one, find a certified sponsor and pay a hefty fee for re-citizenship; or two, walk hundreds of miles through uninhabited desert with the hope that other Dissenters won’t shoot them on sight—” He freezes, his eyes narrowing.

I turn around and spot Aaron walking toward us. I notice something different about him. He's . . . alone. No ILAC, no rugby team—just him. That's a first.

Pete's agitation grows with each step Aaron takes, while Tori appears guarded. As for me, I've forgotten how to breathe.

“Hey, you guys.” A dimple appears on one cheek as Aaron smiles at us.

My mind freezes. *How do you say 'hi' again?*

Tori rolls her eyes and covers for me. “Hey, Aaron.”

Peter openly glares at him.

“What do you want?”

“Ah, Peter. Always direct.” He smiles politely and turns to face Tori. “My parents are having a social this Saturday. It’s a regular who’s who in the GU and I’d be honored if you would join me. I’ll pick you up at 7 p.m.” He hands her a rose with a card attached.

Her mouth falls open in shock as Aaron walks away fast. He’s a full twenty feet away from us before Tori recovers. “Wait a second—”

He spins around fast. “You’d love to come? That’s great. We’ll have a blast.” He continues walking away.

Tori stares after him. “I didn’t

say—”

“That you’re ecstatic. I know, so am I! I’ll see you Saturday!” He waves, turns a corner, and is gone from sight.

Pete whips his head back to Tori. “Was that a drive-by?”

Tori stuffs her lunch in her bag, her lips so tight they’re beyond white—more like iridescent.

“Where are you going?” I ask, my eyes on the rose given to her, not me.

“To tell him off,” Tori says as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “He can have his rose back. I’m not going.”

I shake out of my trance. “Tori, it’s not your fault he isn’t interested in me. If you want to go, then you should go.”

“Even if you weren’t obsessed with him, there’s no way I’d go with that arrogant jerk!”

Pete stands up, face flushed.

“Where are you going?” I ask him, baffled.

“Lost my appetite.” He grabs his lunch and dumps it in the nearest trash can before walking away, not even looking back.

I turn back to Tori, completely lost. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Oh, Alysse, do you really not

know?” she says impatiently. “Why do you even like Aaron? He’s a politician.”

“He cares about people,” I argue. “On my first day at school, some kids had me cornered in the hallway—” **1**

Tori interrupts in perfect monotone, “Aaron was walking by, saw what was going on and told them to cool it.”

My mouth clamps shut as I square my shoulders. “You may think Aaron has no heart, but if that’s true, why would he stick out his neck for a stranger?”

“Stick out his neck? He’s the

Statesman's son. People jump to please him," Tori interrupts, more annoyed than I've ever seen her. "Don't you see what just happened? Aaron throws me a rose, tells me I'm going on a date, and walks away. Do you really think that's what I want?"

"He didn't actually throw the rose," slips out of my mouth automatically.

Tori glares at me and then spins on her heel and walks away.

I grimace. I guess defending Aaron has become a habit. I sit alone, feeling baffled by Pete's behavior, jealous of Tori, and guilty

that I even care when Deb is still missing.

A few minutes later, the sky opens and rain pours down in a storm that seems to belong more in a jungle than here. I scramble to gather my stuff, rain pelting me as I sprint for the nearest building.

By the time I reach the gym, I find an enraged Tori has cornered one of Aaron's friends. "What do you mean he's not here?" she demands.

"He's at a leadership seminar." Ryan recoils despite the fact that Tori is a head shorter and weighs half of what he does. "I'm telling

you, I haven't even seen him today!"

"He was here a few minutes ago." Tori waves the rose in his face like a loaded weapon.

Hydee, an anorexic ILAC girl behind me, shrieks like a Siren. "Is that Aaron's rose? He came all the way back from the airport to give you that?"

Tori lowers the rose, stepping away from Ryan. "Airport?"

"He was between flights. He won't be back until the big social." Hydee sighs wistfully.

Disgusted, Tori tosses her the rose while Hydee squeals, clinging

with delight to the flower once owned by Aaron.

Pete never shows up during P.E. nor do I see him the rest of the day. My list of frustrations grows all day, especially during chemistry. I covert something incorrectly, resulting in a new compound that'd be great for anyone who wants all their hair to fall out.

After school, I ditch track and head straight home for a party of my own where I'll invite my close friends: ice cream, fudge, and cookie crumbs. By the time I reach my street, I'm convinced pizza and chips must attend as well.

PERFECT TIMING

I stall as I reach my house. My dad, who's never home this early, is kneeling in the front of what could be called a yard, except it's more like a clay slab, completely void of anything useful like grass or palm trees.

“Hey, Alysse,” he greets me. “I was just getting these weeds under control.” His smile fades as he takes a closer look at me. “What’s wrong?”

So inconvenient that my dad is

good at reading people. “I’d rather not talk about it,” I reply.

“Okay,” he says, unabashed. “I need help with these weeds.”

“Now?”

“Definitely now.” He returns to his weeds.

“Dad, I have tons of homework.”

“Alysse,” he warns in *that* voice.

“Fine.” I run inside to change. When I come back, I start tearing up weeds as fast as I can, ice cream still on my mind.

“Don’t forget the roots,” he reminds.

“Why can’t we just spray them like everyone else?” I yank on a

root that's suctioned deep into the damp clay.

“Because we're not like everyone else,” my dad replies lightly. “Are you going to tell me what's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Hmmm. What are the possibilities?” he considers as he carefully removes another weed. “Homework? Fight with a friend? Boy trouble?”

I stab the next weed.

He smiles slightly. “Guess I'll go with boy trouble.”

I yank on the weed impatiently. “If you really have to know, Aaron

asked Tori on a date today.”

“Aaron?” he asks, eyes squinting as he stares off in the distance. “Isn’t that the guy you like?”

“He’s the guy everyone likes, except Tori. So, who does he ask? And she’s going to tell him no!” I stab another weed.

He scratches his head. “Are you mad that she got asked, or that Aaron asked her, or that she’s saying no?”

“All three!” I yank the weed from the ground so fast, specks of dirt fling all over.

“Maybe someday you’ll be glad Aaron didn’t ask you.” My dad

brushes the dirt off his shirt.

“Thanks, dad. I feel soooo much better.” I shake the dirt off from the offensive weed and toss it to the side.

“I’m serious. If this young man can’t see how amazing you are, why would you want to be with him?” He smiles, holding out a small, gorgeously wrapped present.

My anger temporarily yields to curiosity as I take it. “What’s this?”

“At age five, you knew how to find out,” he teases.

I toss my gloves aside and carefully unwrap the beautiful wrapping paper, discovering an

expensive jewelry box. I open the box, and discover . . .

A fake ring with an oversized plastic diamond. “Uh, Dad. I don’t play dress-up anymore. I grew out of that, oh, ten years ago?”

“What? You don’t want to play pretend?” he says brightly. I groan. “Hmm. Well, I do have this other gift.” He extracts a crinkled brown paper bag from his pocket. “Here. Only the best for my daughter!” He holds out the mess, beaming with excitement.

I take the crumpled bag, one eyebrow lifted in skepticism. “Uh, thanks . . . I think.” I reach inside

and pull out a heavy heart-shaped watch, made from what appears to be platinum. The heart is framed with small brilliant diamonds that glitter even under a cloudy sky. “Dad, this feels real!”

He nods proudly. “It’s an early graduation present. Looks like I couldn’t have timed it better, forgive the pun.” He gives me a lopsided grin.

He takes the plastic ring, holding it up. “We live in a day of fantasy. With one tap on a JS, people can pretend to be someone else, or with someone else. Only, it’s fake. There’s no lasting value, and no

real relationship will form.

He leans in, looking at me closely. “What about you? Are you willing to pay the price for the real deal?” He takes the watch and clasps it around my wrist.

“Real relationships take sacrifice and hard work, but they are worth it.” He squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t settle for fantasy. Be the most attractive and amazing person you can be, and then find someone who *appreciates* what you’ve become and be sure to return the favor.” He smiles at me, and I can’t help but smile back.

“Oh, and this watch is imbedded

with your new ID chip, so—”

“No more injections! Thanks, Dad!” I hug him.

He squeezes my shoulders again as he looks me in the eyes. “You’re worth this and much more, don’t ever forget it.”

“Robert.” My mother steps out of the front door. “You have a call on the home phone.”

Something about the way she says it, and the way he perks up tells me there’s something I don’t know. My dad hops up, taking time to give my mom a kiss before going into the house.

My mother comes up, offering

me an apple and some cheese. “Did your father tell you?”

“Tell me what?” I accept the snack with eagerness.

“He lost his job today.”

My mouth hangs open, the apple forgotten in my hand. “What?”

“It’ll be all right. With his talents and intelligence, he’ll find something new in no time.”

I look back at my expensive watch. My dad could easily have returned it, and I never would have known. I want a guy who loves me just as much as that or more. Aaron barely knows my name. It’s time to get over him.

As I go back to weeding, I think about Tori, and feel sheepish for not seeing her point. By the time I finish the last weed, I'm ready to be honest. I message her: *You were right. Aaron should've asked.*

Tori drives up almost as soon as I hit send. "Of course he should have," Tori says through her open window, a smug look on her face. "Missed you at track."

I cringe guiltily. "Yeah. I just wasn't up for it today."

"Well, how about homework at my house? You up for that?" she teases.

"Sure. I'll be right back." I head

inside and wash my hands, focusing hard on my watch instead of the ice cream calling me from the freezer. I can get over Aaron without it.

“How was practice?” I ask Tori as we drive to her house.

“Brutal,” she brags, as if pain were an accomplishment, worthy of pursuit. “Coach gave us six Xs.”

Each X requires running a mile before doing some punishing exercise. One’s bad enough, but six? My eyes grow big. “How did you get here so fast?”

“I was still mad at Aaron,” she

laughs. “I tried messaging the arrogant jerk but it kept coming back undeliverable.”

“Sounds like he won’t let you say no.” I bite my tongue to keep from challenging the “arrogant jerk” comment.

“If he shows up on my doorstep Saturday, that’s his problem, not mine.” Tori sets her chin high.

Once we get to her house, Tori reaches for the door handle. The front door yanks open, and we jump back, startled.

Her mother stands there, checking her JS, her brown hair not

straight and platinum blond.

“Victoria, what took you so long!”

“What’s wrong?” Tori asks, recovering from her shock.

“Leave your backpack here.” Her mother’s tone is urgent. “We have to go, now!”

“Where?” Tori asks, both alarmed and confused as she lowers her bag to the floor.

“I went through your closet. You have nothing of the caliber you need. We barely have time for a custom-made.” Her mother wrings her hands. “Did you know you are the *only* person in Oasis to receive an invitation to the Statesman’s

Social?” She claps her hands like a giddy young schoolgirl.

Tori’s face goes stone cold. “Who says I’m invited?” she asks in monotone.

“Jill told me this morning that Aaron was asking you!” Her mom is ecstatic. “They are catering to some really powerful international leaders this weekend—”

“Mother,” Tori interjects. “Aaron didn’t ask me.”

“Even the Global—” Her mother freezes. “What?”

“Aaron didn’t ask me. He ordered me.” Her jaw is set. She yanks up her backpack. “I’m *not*

going!”

“But Victoria, this is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for.”

“No Mother, it’s the opportunity *you’ve* been waiting for.” Tori stares fiercely, her eyes afire.

I stare back and forth between the two of them as the silence lengthens and the tension builds. “Um, Tori, why don’t I take your backpack upstairs for you?”

“No need,” she snaps, starting up the stairs.

“Did you know he came over to ask my permission first?” her father calls calmly from the hall as he

walks out of his office. Tori freezes on the stairs, her back still turned.

“He seems respectful and upbeat,” he continues. “I’m surprised you are insulted by his interest in you.”

She slowly turns to face her father, her eyes narrowing slightly. I hold out a hand for her bag, which she absently relinquishes. I tiptoe up the stairs and down the hall, knowing I shouldn’t listen, but . . .

“I’m supposed to be pleased he asked you not me?” Tori says.

“Does that really surprise you?” Her father is still calm. “Your mother and I have heard about all

the rejections you've been dishing out. Granted, you're too young to get serious, but you aren't dating at all. What are you waiting for, Victoria?"

It's quiet for a moment. "I'll consider it," she says quietly.

When she walks into her room, I have to ask. "Tori, what *are* you waiting for?"

She stands by her window, staring out at the manicured lawn, searching for her answer. "Something real," she finally says, still facing the window. "You complain about everything in your neighborhood being fake—fake

jewelry, fake wood floors, fake grass.”

She turns and faces me, unusually serious. “In my neighborhood, we have mahogany furniture, marble flooring, and fine jewelry. Everything but the marriages.” Her anger fades away, and she reveals a curious, vulnerable look. “Your parents really love each other, don’t they?”

Her question throws me off. I think about it for a moment and nod in agreement.

She plays with her curtain, smoothing out the wrinkles. “And they love you, too. They don’t treat

you like some project. If you get a good grade, they are excited for *you*. If a guy asks you out, it's because he wants to date you, not access the family fortune."

"Yeah, we have no fortune." I shrug. "In fact, as of today, my dad is jobless."

Tori spins around. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I can't see it being his fault. He's smart and has an awesome work ethic."

"Probably someone with connections has a nephew who needed a job," she suggests cynically. Her eyebrows knit with

concern. “Sorry, Lysse.”

I shrug my shoulders, wanting to return to the original topic. “So, you can’t decide if Aaron is for real or not?”

She shoves the curtain away forcefully. “Why are we even discussing this? I’m not dating the only guy you like.”

“Tori, you are the best,” I say, giving her a hug. “But Aaron doesn’t even see me. I’m done with him.”

Tori smiles approvingly. “It’s about time.”

“Clearly Aaron’s not right for me, but what if he’s right for you?”

She scoffs. “He’s probably another user. I get hit up all the time.”

“User? World leaders are coming to his home this weekend, his mansion is bigger than yours, and the ILAC girls follow him everywhere. What does he need you for?”

“If he doesn’t need me, then what does he want?”

“Um, here’s an idea,” I say, unable to restrain the sarcasm. “Maybe, he actually *likes* you.”

Her hands rest on her hips. “Then why didn’t he *ask* me?”

“Because you would have said

no!” I can’t help cringing as I say the words. Defending Aaron is *not* helping me get over him. “Look, it’s just a date. It’s not like you have to marry him or anything.”

There’s a knock at the door. “Have you decided?”

“I’ll go,” Tori shouts. She grimaces and whispers. “She probably listened to the whole thing.”

“Hurry!” Her mother’s voice echoes from further down the hall.

“You know, Alysse, Aaron does have a downside,” Tori says, grabbing her purse. “He’s not very smart.”

I roll over and stare at her, my mouth forming an O. “What are you talking about? He’s in lead for valedictorian.”

“Still,” she says, sitting down on the bed. “If he had any brains, he would’ve asked you.”

NOT PLANNED

THE next Saturday afternoon, I pause in my sweeping of the Lifting Hands warehouse to peek out the blinds. Our car sits alone in the lot. “That’s so strange.” I drop the blinds and search for a dustpan. “No one else came.”

“They were probably too busy.” My mom’s face is unusually tense as she finishes packing the last box.

I sweep up my pile, knowing Tori is getting ready for Aaron’s big social right now. I shove the

thought aside, reminding myself I'm not interested in Aaron.

“What are we supposed to do with the leftover donations?” I ask, the Lifting Hands van now full of boxes.

“I'm doing one final drop-off to the compound,” she says casually, as if talking about a shopping list.

“What?” I drop the broom with a loud crack. “Have you forgotten what happened to Deb?”

“Deb didn't have an armed escort.” She examines the contents of the last box.

“An escort didn't keep her from disappearing,” I snap. “This is

insane! Did Dad agree to this?”

“We’ve . . . discussed it,” she says, her neck flushing.

“In other words, NO.” I yank up the broom. “That explains why no one showed up. The other volunteers value their life and limbs. Why don’t you?”

My mom snaps the lid of a box shut and gives me a forced smile. “Would you put these two boxes in our car? We’re not allowed to donate food to the compound anymore.”

I load the canned goods into our car, glancing back at my mom as she climbs into the driver’s seat.

She's determined to do what normally takes six volunteers, and that's without transferring everything from the van to a guard truck.

I climb into the passenger seat. "I don't condone your decision, but I'll help you load the boxes *only*. I am not going out there."

"You couldn't go anyway." Her eyes are sad. "Minors aren't allowed in the compound anymore."

Despite my aggravation, it's hard not to admire the beauty of Urbane as we drive through the business

district of Oasis. The glimmering buildings sparkle in the sunlight, especially the View.

It is a twisting tower that reaches higher than the rest of the buildings in downtown Oasis. Its top is shaped like a diamond to remind us only certifieds are allowed inside. From what I've heard, the top floors are even more restricted, saved for global leaders.

We pass the View and approach the North Gate, where compound residents enter. The entry zone used to be like an airport, with fast-moving lines and scanners. Now, it's like a war zone, with heavily

armed guards wearing thick armor, searching workers in fully enclosed cages.

“Your permit, list of cargo, and statement of purpose,” a solemn guard demands as my mom pulls up. His eyes are more on the workers than us. My mom holds out the Lifting Hands’ JS. He lifts an eyebrow as he scans it. “A donation run. They approved this?”

“This will be the final run,” my mom replies softly. “The program is shuttering.”

He bristles, pointing a thumb at the gate. “Lady, maybe you haven’t heard, but we’re just shy of a full-

scale war out there.”

“He has a point,” I whisper.

She ignores me, eyes on the guard. “I understand. Do you need anything else?”

He pauses and his expression darkens. “Open the back!”

We climb out and unload each box, placing it onto the inspection table. One by one, he dumps their contents out, checking each item with the donation list before allowing us to repack.

“You didn’t list this hat,” he says harshly.

“I can add it to the list right now,” my mom offers.

“You’d need a Modified List form.”

“Could I just leave the hat behind?” my mom tries.

“Then you need an Item Removal Form.” He folds his arms, his jaw set hard like iron.

I lean toward my mom. “Why don’t I go grab us something to eat?”

She nods, her face strained but undeterred. “That would be a big help.”

I go off to hunt down some overpriced tourist food. When I return half an hour later, my mother looks like a pro, calmly absorbing

every curve ball the guard can throw at her.

“Approved,” he snarls at last. “Leave all electronic devices here.” He slides a small container toward her.

“I need my phone in case my husband calls,” she insists.

He smirks with way too much enjoyment. “It stays or you do. I don’t care which.”

She hands over her phone with clenched teeth. “You, too,” he says, pointing directly at me.

“I’m not going into the compound, I’m only helping transfer the load.”

He looks down at me with a gaze even more intense than Coach's. "No unauthorized devices in the entry zone."

"Yes, sir." I hand over my phone.

The loading dock is even more intense. Instead of military trucks, they now drive tanks on wheels. One tank slows as my mom approaches the vehicle. "I have a delivery permit," she announces.

The driver scans and reads the permit, his face darkening. "No room!" he snaps, and hits the gas. My mom hops out of the way just in time to save her toes.

She repeats the process two more times before walking over to me, her fists in tight balls. I place a hand on her shoulder, looking her in the eyes. “Mom, this isn’t worth it.”

As she stares into my eyes, tension eases out of her body and her expression takes on fresh determination. “Grab a box and get ready,” she instructs as a new transport approaches. 

She grabs a box of her own and marches straight to the center of the road, eyes blazing as if she meant to melt the truck instead of stop it. “Thanks for waiting for us,” she

calls boldly as the transport slows to a stop. “I need you to open the back.”

“What are you talking about, lady?” the driver yells back.

She sets her box on the hood of the transport, blocking the driver’s view as he yells out more protests.

“Alysse, the back!” my mom calls.

I hop up and bang on the back door loudly several times before it opens.

“Hey, don’t let her in,” the driver yells from the front.

“It’s all right; I have my permit,” my mom yells. She passes her wrist

under the truck's scanner which flashes green. We go back and forth, loading boxes fast. The guards inside watch, visibly annoyed as we fill what little space is available.

One guard shifts and knocks four boxes over. "Oops." The other guards smirk as I hop inside to re-stack the mess. Just as I pick up the last box, the whole transport lurches forward. I have to grab a rail to keep from falling like the boxes I just stacked.

"Wait!" I yell, panicking as I work my way to the back.

"STOP!" my mom yells, clinging

to a rail at the back door, almost falling out. “She has to get off.”

“This ain’t a bus, lady.” Another guard shuts the back door behind her as she climbs in.

“My daughter was just helping load!” my mom explains. “She can’t go out there!”

“Ma’am, look out the back!” Another guard points behind her. “See that? It’s the Wall and it’s behind us. Right now, this is the safest place she can be.”

CHAPTER 9

WAKING UP

I stare out a small glass window, about the width of my hand. the compound is so unrecognizable from what I remember, I'm doubting myself. I can't even compare it to third-world slums. It's more like an occupied junkyard. Boarded-up windows and broken doors line the street, trash and graffiti their only decor. And that's just the buildings. The people

look even worse, their skin ragged, their teeth yellow or missing.

“Look lady, I don’t care what your authorization form says! I’m telling you, this ain’t a safe stop no more,” barks a thin but strong guard nearby. His badge reads *Mitch*, but I’m not about to ask whether it’s his first name or last. He just finished his shift, and from the looks of it, he had a very long one.

“I appreciate the warning, but I’m moving forward with this scheduled stop,” my mom says, stepping around him.

Mitch’s mouth drops, his eyes

full of disgust. A bigger, bulkier guard steps in her way, his red hair so light it's almost blond. His badge reads *Johnson*. "The last volunteer who ignored warnings lost an arm and cost a good man his life," he says soberly.

"This is where Deb and Tyler were taken?" I stand up and grab my mom's arm.

She turns to me, unlacing my fingers and giving them a squeeze. "Stay here." Her voice is determined, her eyes blazing, and her teeth gritted. I watch in horror as she climbs out.

"Better not get any of my friends

killed,” Mitch calls after her as two guards rotate out.

A new guard climbs in with a confused look on his face, slamming the door shut behind him. Beneath a fine layer of dust, the guy’s uniform is crisp and unfaded, his badge easy to read: *Trieman*. He looks like he can’t be much older than me.

“What’s with the volunteer outside?” he asks Mitch.

“You mean the do-gooder freak show?” Mitch smirks. “She wants to hand out gifts to our classy friends.”

“She’s not a freak show,” I

correct. Trieman looks over, surprised as he sees me.

“And that’s the daughter,” Mitch says.

“What mom would bring her daughter out here?” Trieman asks.

“She didn’t bring me. It was an accident—” I start to explain. I sigh. “It’s a long story.”

I let the other guards explain while I stand back by my “window,” peering outside, wondering what has possessed my mother.

A man passes by, looking like a walking skeleton, his empty eyes narrowing into tiny slits as he spots

me. I take a step back, tripping over a box.

“Don’t worry about Mitch,” Trieman says as he catches my arm. His short dark hair is mashed down from the helmet he was wearing. “We’re not going to let anyone hurt your mom, even if she doesn’t belong here.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly as I right myself. I attempt to smile before resuming my post, trying to catch even a glimpse of her. Several minutes later, there’s some clanking at the back door, and I nearly give myself whiplash to watch it open.

A guard of medium height and solid build climbs in, his uniform dusty and faded, his name badge unreadable. While the guard isn't as old as my dad, he's not as young as the other guards either.

“How's it look out there, Captain?” one of the fresh guards asks him.

“Entire shift was way too quiet. They're up to something.” The captain loosens his chest plate and looks down at me in surprise. “Another one?”

“She's the daughter of the freak —” Mitch pauses, catching my glare, “the *lady* outside putting us

all at risk.”

“Speaking of, why is a pretty girl like you trying to get herself killed?” asks Johnson, who’s not much older than Trieman.

“Watch it, Johnson,” the captain warns, amused. He scans my ID with the eye piece attached to his helmet, gaining immediate information about me. “This one is under-age.”

“You’re a minor?” Trieman grimaces, scooting away. The captain removes his helmet and bends down to my level. He looks me hard in the eyes like my dad did when I broke a window at age

eight. “How’d you sneak out?”

I square my shoulders. “I didn’t sneak. I was only helping transfer boxes in the loading zone when your driver took off without warning.”

“Their permit covered up to six volunteers and they were making us late for rotation,” Mitch jumps in defensively. “We didn’t know the girl was a minor.”

The captain sighs, wearing the same look my brother used to get anytime he had to babysit me. I go back to staring out the makeshift window while the guards hold a quiet discussion behind me.

Eventually my mom climbs back in, and the transport takes off again. We do two more stops, my mom delivering several boxes while fresh guards rotate out and tired ones climb in. They all want to know why I'm here, triggering a repeat of the earlier conversation.

The transport grows stuffier the later it gets despite the A/C. "Tell me we're almost done," I beg my mom, not sure how much more I can take.

"This is the last stop and the safest part of the compound," my mom reassures me. She steps out of the transport and then pokes her

head back in. “Captain Price, I could use a hand, and my daughter could use some fresh air.”

He watches me, his jaw working as he decides. “She stays within a hundred feet of the transport.”

“Of course, Captain,” she replies. I quickly grab the last two boxes and step out, inhaling a breath of fresher air. I know immediately why my mom chose this sector for me to help in: the buildings are mostly undamaged and the streets clean.

Skittish Dissenters cautiously approach us, frequently checking to see where the guards are. As I place

a couple of boxes on a nearby table, a woman carrying several ration packets walks by.

“Tell me you brought food,” she demands, glancing into the boxes.

I shrug. “We would’ve, but we weren’t allowed.”

Her face falls, bitter. “I’m sick of eating this garbage.”

She looks so thin and pitiful, I dig in my purse for some contraband. It’s a good thing Coach can’t see me as I hold out a candy bar. “We could trade,” I offer, curious to try a ration.

“We’re not allowed to trade packets.” She takes a step back,

wide-eyed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.” I lower my hand.

She scarcely hears me, her eyes are drawn to the bar like a magnet. “If you can’t trade, then consider this a gift.” I offer it to her. She snatches it and runs off without a thank you.

I step back, nearly colliding with a young woman holding a book. “Sorry.”

She just mutters something incoherent and keeps walking. Something about her face reminds me of a girl I once hung out with, only it’s hard to know for sure. It’s

been years since we last met and her clothes are the wrong style and size. “Jessica?”

She turns and looks at me, staring for a moment before recognition lights up her eyes. “Alysse?” Her mouth spasms as if wanting to smile but unable to remember how. “It’s been forever.”

“It’s been too dangerous to come out,” I explain as we hug.

Her attempted smile fades, and she nods. “It’s not safe for anyone anymore.” She hugs her book close as she looks around and shivers. “My family never did belong here.”

The despair in her voice tugs at

my heart. I wish there was something I could do. “What’s this?” I say to distract her, motioning at her clutched literature.

“My favorite book.” She glances at the guards, waiting for the moment they look away before shoving the worn-out book into my hands. The title has been scraped off. “Here, something to remember me by. I’ve got it memorized anyway.”

“I’ll treasure it.” I slide the small book into my purse to examine later, wishing now that I hadn’t given that ungrateful lady the candy bar. I scramble to find

something to Jessice in return. “I don’t have any books, but I do have some clothes. Hold on.”

I quickly rummage through a box, looking for some cute outfits I saw earlier while my mom and I were packing. Thankfully, I have the right box and pull out some clothes just her size, including a dress.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve worn anything like this.” She almost smiles as she holds the pretty dress against her thin frame.

“I wish I had some boys’ clothes for your brother, but all we had were adult sizes. . .” I put the box

down and reach into my other pocket. “You know, I do have some gum.” I pull out a half-filled packet and try to hand it to her. She just stares at it like it’s going to explode, the blood draining from her face.

“What’s wrong?” I examine the gum more closely. It looks undamaged, but maybe it’s not enough. “I wish I had something better, but I didn’t know I was coming today,” I try to explain.

She looks from side to side, her lips tight as her face flushes crimson. Then she just shakes her head and starts to walk away.

I step toward her. “Wait! I know it’s not much, but won’t you take it?”

She spins to face me again, her eyebrows furrowed in disgust. She shoves the gum away and throws the clothes to the ground before running off.

“Jessica?” I call after her. She disappears around a corner without looking back.

I pick up the rejected gifts, wondering why gum would be offensive. I leave them on a nearby table, in case she changes her mind.

As I walk back to the transport, the first woman passes by again.

“Consider it a gift,” she whispers, sliding something into my hand. She hurries away.

I look down at a pouch as she hurries away. It reminds me of an instant camping meal where you add hot water. I pocket the dessert packet in amazement, both eyebrows up. *Who can keep up with mood swings like these?*

“Alysse, you ready?” calls my mom from near the transport.

“More than ready.”

“See anyone you recognized?” she asks as I join her.

“I thought I did.” I sigh, staring at the Wall in the distance. I wish I

was on the other side like Tori, getting picked up by Aaron for a date.

The sun dips behind the city wall, casting a shadow over the entire compound. It becomes eerily quiet as people disappear from the street, leaving only the occasional whir of a drone passing overhead. “Do they have a curfew?” I ask Trieman.

“In another fifteen minutes.” He looks unsettled, holding his weapon ready.

We’re almost back to the North Gate when the transport slows to a stop. “Eyes and ears. We’ve got a cement blockade in sector 5-D,” the

driver announces through the speakers. Mitch opens a hatch on the ceiling, climbing up to the crow's nest, while the other guards position themselves at separate panels, eyes on their sights as they point their barrels through the slits.

“Man down, five o'clock,” shouts one of the guards. “It's Will.”

Three guards quickly jump out of the transport, while two other guards stand by the door, guns ready. When the others come back, Johnson is carrying a groaning Will, his helmet missing and his hair matted with blood.

The guard next to my mom immediately gives up his seat so Johnson can set Will there. They secure the harness around him while my mom cradles his head. Another guard opens the first aid kit and hands it to her before returning to his station, gun ready.

My mom starts checking Will for the extent of his injuries as if she were a seasoned ER doctor, not a homemaker. “Fractured rib, slight concussion”

I watch, disturbed, until Trieman yells, “Here they come.” I stare out my slit, my ribs tightening as Dissenters pour into the street like

ants spilling out of a nest. Their intent is clear as they approach, many wielding heavy pipes.

“Clear the road!” the driver yells through his riot speaker. The crowd yells back, and bricks and glass bottles start bombarding the transport.

“Put ‘em to sleep, boys!” the dusty guard commands even as a glass bottle shatters next to his barrel.

Trieman squeezes his trigger, and there’s a popping sound. One of the rioters wielding a pipe drops to the ground, a dart protruding from his neck.

The guards pop away, dropping dozens of rioters, but more take their places. Johnson checks his ammo. “Running low!”

Captain Price twists his head slightly, speaking into his mic. “Top Gunner, give them a warning.”

The crow’s nest on the roof of the transport starts whirring and spinning. I crouch, covering my ears as several explosive shots fire into the air above us, vibrating the whole transport. The silence after the warning doesn’t last long. Rioters start chanting, advancing on the transport again.

Just then, there's a bright flash, and I find myself in something like a dream, except it's more real than reality:

The colors and detail are clearer and brighter than anything I've ever seen. Outside the mob is still yelling, their voices easy to isolate from one another. I hear several deep voices yell, "Coming through!"

The crowd splits apart, allowing a large team of Dissenters to run at us with

incredible speed, carrying some sort of steel beam with handles welded on. The beam hits the transport nearly hard enough to pierce the wall.

There's another flash, and suddenly everything is back as it was, the guards still defending against the assault. "I think they're going to ram us," I call out. I can't help myself; that flash felt too real.

"Won't do 'em any good," Johnson replies. "This baby weighs twelve tons with matrix reinforced walls."

"Switch to live rounds," Captain

Price shouts from behind us. “Make ‘em dance.”

I cover my ears as the ground in front of the crowd starts exploding, dirt spraying wildly. The crowd backs up, but only briefly. Then they break into a run toward us.

The crowd parts to reveal forty men carrying what looks like a beam from a building. They run straight for us as fast as they can.

“Brace yourselves!” shouts Trieman. When the beam hits, it’s nothing short of a car crash, knocking me from my seat and causing the wall to bubble inward.

The top gun opens fire, the spray

of bullets compelling the men to drop the beam and dive for cover. The crowd watches, and I notice a man toward the back who's so muscular, he must be eating three times the normal ration.

His eyes narrow, assessing the situation instead of panicking like the rest. Just then, another scene opens before my eyes:

The big guy breaks into a fast run, almost a blur. He jumps high in the air, landing on the roof of the transport.

“Mitch is in danger,” I shout

before the flash even ends, this time trusting what I see.

Captain Price considers me a moment before calling into his mic. “Get down here, gunner. Now!”

I hear the hatch above open as the big dissenter tears through the crowd, dodging people and streams of bullets.

Just as Mitch drops back inside, we hear the sound of something heavy land on top of the transport. Mitch has barely locked the hatch when someone above tugs at it hard. The hatch groans, followed by a loud snapping clang.

“No way!” A guard who watched

from the back freaks out, adding a few colorful adjectives. “What is that thing?”

“You mean what *was* that thing,” Mitch replies as control panels drop down from the roof, allowing him to operate the crow’s nest from inside. I hear a fast whirr and thud as the guy is knocked clear off the roof, landing a ways away.

The ever-growing crowd converges on us again. “Driver, get us out of here,” Price barks. He yanks me away from the slit and down into my seat. “Buckle up!”

I’m working on making sense of the harness straps when a strange

cylinder drops in from a window slit, landing in my lap.

While Trieman and I freeze, unable to believe what we see, Captain Price lunges for it. Throwing it back out, he ducks and yells, “Seismic! Get us out—”

A shock wave hits us like a moving semi. The whole transport spins, tips, and balances at an angle before slamming back down.

Now both walls are dented, the second badly enough that I’m amazed it’s still attached, just like my throbbing head. My ears keep ringing, muffling anything the guards yell while smoke pours in

from the windows, stinging our eyes and throats.

The transport reverses and veers to the right into a narrow alleyway—too narrow. The stucco walls to the sides of us crumble, filling the transport with choking dust as we plow through, running over everything in our path. I cling to my harness while covering my nose and mouth with my shirt.

“Faster,” Johnson yells in his mic. “Some are gaining on us.” The driver responds, and we get tossed like ice cubes in a blender as the transport picks up speed.

Two endless minutes later, we hit

road again. I sigh in relief when the driver announces over the intercom, “We’re inside the Wall.”

A small fleet of armed helicopters fly overhead, straight toward the riot scene, their bright searchlights sweeping the ground.

“How’d Dissenters get their hands on a seismic?” Trieman yells.

“Forget the seismic.” Johnson unfolds a stretcher for Will. “Did you see that man jump on top of the transport as if he was wearing boosters?”

“That was no man,” Mitch corrects harshly. “That was a guerrilla.”

“Not in front of the civilians!” Captain Price snaps. Then he turns and points harshly at Trieman. “You, over here.”

The young guard flinches at the disappointment radiating from the seasoned captain’s eyes. It surprises me when the captain whispers instead of yells as they step aside. “You have some of the fastest reflexes I’ve ever seen in hand-to-hand, and you’re one of the deadliest shots. I don’t *ever* want to see you freeze over a bomb again.” The young guard looks down in shame. “When something unexpected happens, you act.

Never hesitate. You got that?”

Trieman squares his shoulders and looks him in the eye, saluting him. “Yes, sir!”

“You,” Price says, turning and snapping his fingers at me. “Over here.”

My eyes grow wide as I unbuckle my harness straps with nervous hands, not entirely sure my legs will support me as I walk over. Captain Price scans my watch, checking my identity again.

His eyes narrow, burrowing into mine. “How’d you know about the ram and Mitch being in harm’s way?”

I gulp, knowing I look like a Sympathizer who got cold feet. How else would I have known what was coming? But if I explain about the flashes, I'll end up in a psychiatric ward for observation.

“I got a glimpse of the ram beforehand,” I stammer, “and I had a feeling Mitch would be next. I guess you could call it intuition.”

Captain Price eyes me skeptically, and Mitch chimes in, “Is she with them?”

Captain Price considers me. “Not likely. After all, she saved your hide.” He turns and yells at the rest of the group. “Everyone gets a

mandatory medic check!” He points a finger at me and then my mom. “Especially you two.”

My limbs feel disconnected from my body as we climb out the back. Mitch slams the door shut, and a potted plant slides off the roof. He catches it and hands it to me with a scowl. “How’d you like their thank you?”

We hope you enjoyed this sample of

Desert 1: Outside the Wall

[Purchase Desert](#)

Check out [Behind-the-Scenes](#)

[Sign up for our Newsletter](#)