

A SINGLE LIGHT

A NOVEL

TOSCA LEE

HOWARD BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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First Howard Books hardcover edition September 2019

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Interior design by Jaime Putorti

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lee, Tosca Moon, author. Title: A single light / by Tosca Lee. Description: New York : Howard Books, [2019] Identifiers: LCCN 2018056282 (print) | LCCN 2018056943 (ebook) | ISBN 9781476798660 (eBook) | ISBN 9781476798646 (hardcover) Subjects: | GSAFD: Suspense fiction. Classification: LCC PS3612.E3487 (ebook) | LCC PS3612.E3487 S56 2019 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

ISBN 978-1-4767-9864-6

ISBN 978-1-4767-9866-0 (ebook)

**A
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DAY 14

I miss ice cream. The way it melts into a soupy mess if you draw out the enjoyment of eating it too long. That it has to be savored in a rush.

I miss the Internet, my cell phone, and Netflix. I was halfway through the first season of *Stranger Things* when the lights went out.

I miss the sky. The feel of wind—even when it carries the perfume of a neighboring pasture. The smell of coming rain.

But even fresh air is a small price to pay to be sane and alive. To be with the people you love.

The ones who are left, anyway. My five-year-old niece, Truly. My mom's former best friend, Julie, and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Lauren. And Chase—my (what? boyfriend?)—who has made it his mission to keep me safe since we met three weeks ago.

We're five of the lucky sixty-three who have taken shelter from the flu-borne pandemic in an underground silo west of Gurley, Nebraska.

I used to hate that word—*lucky*. But there's no better way to describe the fortune of food and water. Amenities like heat, clothing, and a bed. Not to mention an infirmary, gymnasium, library,

hydroponic garden, laying hens, and the company of uninfected others. All safe and living in relative comfort due to the foresight of a “doomsday prepper” named Noah, who thought of everything—including the pixelated walls and ceiling of the upper lounge aglow with a virtual meadowscape of billowing grasses and lazy bees beneath an artificial sky.

We spent the first four days confined to two of the silo’s dorm levels with the rest of the last-minute arrivals, waiting to confirm the rapid tests administered upon our arrival. Mourning the loss of Julie’s husband and Lauren’s father, Ken, and my sister, Jaelyn—Truly’s mother. Stiffening at any hint of a cough across the communal bunkroom, fully aware that there is no fleeing whatever we may have brought with us; the silo door is on a time lock, sealed for six months.

By which time the grid will be back up and the disease causing fatal madness in its patients should have died out with the flu season . . .

Along with most of its victims.

Luckily (there’s that word again), the tests held true and we emerged from quarantine to find our places in this new community.

That was nine days ago. Nine days of meeting and learning about the others, of feeding chickens on the garden level, starting a formal children’s school, and assuming new responsibilities on the kitchen, laundry, and cleaning crews.

Of speculating about what’s happening in the world above as we watch the electric sunset after dinner.

That first week I helped the children make calendars to hang by their beds so they could color in a square each night until Open Day—which is how I realized the scene in the atrium lounge is always attuned to the same sunny month: June.

If we had come here in June, would we be looking out on a snowscape more closely resembling the December weather above?

Yesterday was Christmas—the first one I’ve observed in fifteen years. I caught Julie crying and knew she was thinking of Ken, and wished, for the thousandth time, that Jaclyn was with us as Truly and I decorated a construction paper Christmas tree.

She asks questions at night. About why I took her away from the compound we grew up in. Why her daddy couldn’t come. Questions I answer with lies.

I TAKE A seat on the floor near the end of the L-shaped sofa in the atrium, one of the last to arrive. It’s become regular practice for the community to gather on the upper level beneath the pixelated stars after the children are asleep. To sing songs everyone but me knows the words to as Preston, who used to run a bait and tackle shop, plays the guitar.

But mostly to share what we know about the disease. To mine hearsay for information in the absence of any real news, which is a scarce commodity.

Especially down here.

The chatter is lively tonight. I gaze up at the constellations I had no names for (I’d been taught it was a sin to see anything in the heavens but God) until the night Chase and I brought a sky map up from the library below and spent an hour lying on the floor, tracing their shapes in the air.

I rarely speak at these gatherings. My story of growing up in a religious commune, while apparently fascinating, has little to offer these discussions.

Julie, however, is the widow of the former field epidemiologist who caught the disease traveling with the CDC team that linked its spread to the flu. As such, she’s routinely peppered with questions.

“Do they have any idea of the virus’s origin?” Rima, our resident nurse and one of the first people here, asks. Her adult son, Karam,

told me yesterday she used to be a doctor when they lived in Syria. “Is it a bird flu, or swine?”

“Forget the origin,” Nelise, a retired rancher who oversees the hydroponic garden with an obsessive fixation that could give even my OCD a run for its money, says. “What about a cure?”

She’s asked the same question every night since we were cleared to leave quarantine.

“Too long for anyone sick,” Julie says. She’s changed in the three weeks since I left her in Naperville. The woman who suffered no idiots is gone. She’s thinner, her complexion ashen as the lusterless gray taking over her once-blond roots.

But I know there is no cure. That the best anyone can hope for is a vaccine. That the fatal disease eroding the sanity of North America emerged with a caribou carcass from the melting Alaskan permafrost to infect a herd of pigs and mutated when an infected slaughterhouse worker also became ill with the flu.

I know this, because I carried the index case samples myself to the man who is, at this moment, involved in the creation of a vaccine.

Truly’s father.

“Winnie?” Piper, our resident fitness instructor, says, startling me. It’s what Truly calls me, the name I gave on our arrival—the closest I dare get to my real name, which I will never speak again.

Piper is the thirty-something wife of Jax Lacey (also known as Jax Daniels for the cases of whiskey he brought with him), who preps meat in the kitchen—including a few hundred pounds of frozen game he shot himself. It’s apparently delicious, not that I would know; meat wasn’t allowed in the compound I grew up in.

And these days I’m glad to be vegetarian.

I glance at Piper and then follow her gaze across the room,

where Chase has just emerged from the tunnel connecting the subterranean atrium to the silo itself. The short crop of his hair has grown an inch in the three weeks since we met and he hasn't shaved for days. I like the rogue scruff even if it does obscure his dimples, but the tight line of his mouth worries me.

"How did you two meet?" Piper asks as I slide over to make room for Chase on the floor.

She thinks we're married. That my last name isn't Roth, but Miller.

"Oh, it's a long story."

I can't say that it was while fleeing with the stolen index case samples.

Or that I'm wanted for murder.

I wouldn't have even revealed my history with the cult I grew up in except I couldn't risk Truly, whom I took from there just fifteen days ago, contradicting my story. At least the only people who've seen my picture on the news were those who had generators—and then only as long as stations managed to stay on air.

For now, I'm banking on the hope that by the time the lock opens and we emerge from the earth like fat cicadas, the hunt for me will be forgotten as the fugitive Wynter Roth becomes just one of thousands—possibly tens of thousands—missing in the aftermath of the disease. We have time to plan the rest.

169 days, to be exact.

In the meantime, I like to tease Chase that he's stuck with me, which is more fact than joke. But at least he seems okay with that.

"What'd I miss?" Chase says.

"Piper wants to know how we met," I say. I note the way she's looking at him, taking in his fighter's physique and olive skin. The mixture of ethnicities and striking blue eyes that would snag anyone's gaze for a second, appreciative glance.

Chase chuckles. “The short version is Winnie’s car broke down while she was learning to drive—”

“After getting kicked out of that cult, right?” she says.

“After she had gone to live with Julie’s family, yes,” Chase says, stretching his legs out before him. “So there she was, stranded on the highway without a valid driver’s license. In Julie’s stolen Lexus.”

I roll my eyes. “It wasn’t stolen.”

It kind of was.

He leaves out the fact that it happened the morning after the grid went down as panic dawned with the day. That I barreled my way into his car—and his life—out of desperation to get the samples to Truly’s father at Colorado State.

“Ooh, so you’re an outlaw,” Piper purrs, glancing at me.

More than she knows.

I’m relieved when Nelise starts back in about the time she caught a cattle thief on his way to the auction house with two of her cows.

It always goes like this at night: speculation about the disease, and then stories from before. Some meant to impress. Some to reminisce. Others to entertain.

All of them pointless.

We will never be those people again. Julie, the Naperville socialite, whose money can’t buy her a single meal or gallon of fuel. Chase Miller, the former MMA fighter and Marine, unable to combat the killer running rampant within our borders. Lauren, the popular high school junior who may never see her friends alive again.

Me, just starting over in the outside world, only to retreat from it more radically than before.

Today a hospice center janitor is our chief engineer. An insurance broker heads up laundry. Julie runs a cleaning crew. Reverend Richel preaches on Sundays and is the only one Nelise trusts near the tomatoes. Chase works maintenance and teaches jujitsu.

Delaney, who ran a food bank in South Dakota, plans our menus; and Braden, who flipped burgers at Wendy's, oversees the cooking.

I teach, as I did the last five years of my life inside the Enclave, and rotate between kitchen and cleaning shifts. I look after Truly. I am her caretaker now.

Micah, the computer programmer whose son has become Truly's new best friend, glances at his watch. At the simple gesture, conversations fade to expectant silence.

At eleven thirty-five exactly, the scene on the curved wall before us breaks, a shooting star frozen in midflight. And then the night sky vanishes, replaced by lines of static before the screen goes dark. A moment later it glows back to life, pixels reconfiguring into the form of a face.

It's larger than life, the top of his head extending onto the curved ceiling. I've grown fond of the gray whiskers on his dark-skinned cheeks, the gaps between his front teeth. Even the rogue white hairs in his otherwise black brows that I wanted to pluck the first time I met him.

They are as endearing to me now as the man himself.

Noah.

He's a man resolved to save his own soul by saving the lives of others and the only other person here who knows my real name. This is his ark.

But he is not with us. The time lock meant to keep intruders, chemical weapons, or nuclear fallout at bay requires someone from both the inside and outside to set it.

Noah sits in an office chair, plaid shirt peeking through the neck of a tan fleece jacket. The clock in the round wooden frame on the wall behind him shows just past five thirty. The usual time he records these briefings.

“Greetings, Denizens,” he says, with the calm assurance that is as much a part of him as the creases around his aging eyes.

“Hello, Noah!” Jax calls as similar greetings echo throughout the room.

“If you can hear this, knock twice,” Noah says with a grin. Chuckles issue around me. Last night it was “if you can see me, blink twice.” It’s a running joke; the atrium is three stories belowground and video communication is strictly one-way. Our messages to the top have consisted of nothing more than a digital “all is well” and “thank you” once a week since Day 1.

“What news we have is sobering,” Noah says. “Our ham radio operator reports dire circumstances in cities. Shortages of water, sanitary conditions, medicines, food, and fuel have led to more riots, fires, and the kinds of acts good men resort to when desperate. The death toll of those dependent on life-support machines will climb steeply in days and weeks to come as those devices shut down, I’m sorry to say.”

Preston, sitting across from me, rubs his brows as though his head hurts, and Julie sits with a fist to her mouth. I know she’s thinking about her grown sons in New Mexico and Ohio. About her mother, already sick by the time she and Lauren fled the city for her house. Who turned them away without opening her door.

I think of Kestral, who first told me about this place. Whose return to the religious compound I grew up in must have induced a few coronaries given that our spiritual leader told everyone she was dead in order to marry my sister. I hope Kestral’s safe. That even Ara, my friend and enemy, is, too.

“The greatest shortage after food, water, and fuel, of course, is reliable information,” Noah continues. “We are in the Middle Ages once more, operating on hearsay and what radio operators report. What I can tell you is that the attack on the substation in California

three weeks ago appears to be the act of terrorists working in conjunction with the cyberassault on the grid in order to prolong the blackout. The consensus is Russia, though there are those celebrating in pockets of the Middle East and Pakistan and groups claiming unlikely credit.”

“What about the attack on the CDC?” Nelise says.

“It’s got to be them,” Preston says.

“How is it possible we’ve harbored Russian terrorists in our country and not even—”

“Shh!” several others hiss as Noah continues.

“The president has not been heard from since his radio address last week. Foreign borders remain closed to Americans, and our neighbors to the north and south have sworn to vigorously defend their borders in an effort to stem the tide of Americans attempting to enter Canada and Mexico illegally. They don’t want us there, folks.” He hesitates a moment, and then says, as though against his better judgment: “There are reports that an Alaskan cruise ship full of Americans was deliberately sunk when it wandered into Russian waters.”

Piper glances from person to person with a wide-eyed stare. Chase sits unmoving on my other side, jaw tight. There was news of a missile strike in Hawaii hours before we entered the silo. But that turned out to be only a rumor.

“There’s talk of aid from our neighbors and allies in the form of food, fuel, generators, relief workers, and engineers. How much and how quickly remain to be seen. I imagine sharing information toward the creation of a vaccine in exchange for help manufacturing it will be a part of that discussion. Our knowledge of the disease will be the best bargaining chip we have,” he says, gazing meaningfully at the camera with a slight nod.

“What knowledge?” Nelise says, too loudly. She’s unaware that not only does Noah know about the samples being used in the pro-

duction of a vaccine but two of his crew helped us get them over state lines in the middle of a manhunt. His pause is a silent acknowledgment of Chase and me.

“Meanwhile, we hear it may be March before the first power grids come back online. By which time we hope to have not only vaccinations but your favorite television shows waiting when you all reemerge. I will, of course, keep you apprised as we learn more. Hey, Mel—” he calls, leaning out in his chair. “Remind me to get a television, will you?”

Quiet laughter around me.

Noah looks back into the camera and smiles.

“We are well up here. You may be interested to know we’ve acquired our first acupuncturist, as well as a zookeeper specializing in reptiles. We are fifty-three in number. As you might guess, the bunkhouse is full, as is the main house. Packed to the gills. There’s a long line for the showers—those of us who grew up in houses with only one bathroom never knew we had it so good.”

He chuckles, and then says, more somberly, “I’m sorry to report that we have had to close our gates. I hope the day does not come that we have to defend them. And so our number stands at one hundred and sixteen souls above- and belowground. Too few, at the risk of being too many.”

He pauses, and I hate the disappointment that’s etched into his features. That causes his lip to tremble as he looks away.

Gazes drop to hands and laps around me. Julie swipes at her eyes.

A few seconds later, Noah continues: “Five of our number have assembled a country band. Which leads me to say that I hope you’re making good use of the keyboard and guitar in the library. Perhaps this summer we’ll enjoy an old-fashioned summer jam—” His attention goes to something below the edge of the screen. “We have

someone who wants to say hello.” He turns away in his chair and reaches down.

When he straightens, there’s a dog in his arms—a brown and white mix of churning feet and floppy ears panting happily at the screen.

“Buddy!” I shout happily at sight of the puppy Chase rescued during our journey west. A round of “aww” circles the chamber. I wish Truly was awake to see him. It’d been difficult to leave him topside, but in the end, practicality won out over the comfort of his presence.

Chase laughs and glances at me. “Can you believe how big he is?”

“You won’t believe how big this fella has gotten,” Noah says, and Chase points at the screen as Noah steals his words. “Artemis the cat, on the other hand, has become strangely thin despite the fact that I fill her bowl repeatedly throughout the day.” Chuckles issue around me as Noah lifts one of Buddy’s paws and waves.

“We’re signing off for now. I wish you a good night’s rest, a happy Boxing Day, as it were. A holiday I’m fond of for its—”

The screen freezes, Noah’s face separated into two disjointed planes by a line of static.

We wait, collective breath held, for the video to buffer and finish.

The screen goes blank instead.

DAY 15

We stare at the empty wall and then at one another as though someone will interpret its meaning. Waiting for something to happen. I catch a glimpse of Micah's watch, the arms barely separated on its face. Just past midnight.

No one moves.

"What happened?" someone finally says. The question is directed at Micah.

He frowns. "My guess is the message was too big and cut off. Or just froze the system."

"It was longer than the others," Nelise says, looking around. "It was, wasn't it? Longer."

"But what's wrong with the screen?" Jax says, as Nelise launches into a discussion about how this is normally the time she turns in for the night and she hasn't even brushed her teeth yet.

Micah shakes his head. "I don't know. Maybe the dog was trying to get down and hit the keyboard."

"But it isn't live!" Preston says.

"I don't know!" Micah says. "It could be a dozen things from a

cable going bad to his laptop's battery dying. Or the computer itself freezing up."

"From the cold?" Jax says, with a weird look.

Micah closes his eyes and takes a breath on reopening them. "Hasn't your cable box ever glitched up and just needed to be re—" The wall flickers and darkens. "Look! There. It's back."

The stars return in sectors, the night sky rebooting itself by constellation: the Little Dipper. Boötes. Ursa Major. Hercules. Draco.

The North Star, last of all.

We loiter another half hour, waiting—I'm not sure for what. A follow-up message of "oops," and "all is well?" To check the stars' carousel journey across the sky?

For it to go offline again?

But it doesn't.

"Come on," I say, fingers twining with Chase's.

"**I SHOULD BE** up there," he murmurs that night, arm beneath both our heads. I start to say everyone's gone to bed by now, and then realize he's not talking about the atrium, but about topside. And though I know why he's saying it, it's hard not to take it as some kind of rejection. After all, I'm down here.

"You will be," I say. "There'll be plenty of work to do by summer. Think of it as the second shift."

"Feel so frickin' useless down here," he says.

"Sorry."

I say it, but I'm not. I'm *glad* Noah insisted Chase come below. Because unlike Truly and me, who had the benefit of an early dose of antibodies her father created to protect the two of us when we thought Chase was dead, Chase—like Julie, Lauren, and everyone else in this silo—has no such immunity. It's the reason I situated

myself like a human wall between them and the rest of the last-minute arrivals those first days of quarantine. If anyone should be above, it's me.

Except I have Truly to take care of now.

"I need you," I say. "If it's any consolation."

When he doesn't respond, I roll away until his arm tightens around me.

THE NEXT EVENING we gather early beneath the waxing moon. For once, there is no discussion about the disease. Just Preston playing the guitar as everyone but me sings "Stand by Me" and "American Pie," and then the "Sweet Caroline" (bah bah bah!) that stayed with me for two days the last time they sang it. (So good! So good!)

There's a forced levity to it tonight, determined and hopeful as Preston pumps his fist in the air during the chorus.

We've done our best to get through the day, going through the motions of chores while simultaneously seeking and shunning the clock. Willing its arms to move faster. Anxious for Noah's appearance and the reassurance that everything's okay.

At 11:34, Preston puts down the guitar and we lift our gazes to the wall and wait for Noah's appearance. For laugh lines to crinkle his eyes as he tells the story of Buddy tangling in a computer cord when he scampered after the cat. Or the system lagging after his long-windedness as he vows to keep tonight's message brief.

We won't complain.

Someone shifts on the squeaky leather of the L-shaped sofa.

At 11:36, Micah checks his watch.

Rima, sitting on the floor in front of me, glances over her shoulder, the LED moon shining above her head.

"What time do you have?" Preston says, leaning over to compare with Micah.

“Same,” Micah says.

I glance at Chase, who frowns. Across the room, another group begins to murmur.

Finally, Nelise blurts, “Well, he wouldn’t just forget us!”

“Of course not,” Preston says.

“Maybe something happened,” Piper says. “He said they had to close the gate. Maybe people were trying to get in and they had to fight them off. Maybe they still are.”

Chase lifts a palm. “Let’s not get dramatic. The most boring answer is usually the accurate one.”

“I’m not being dramatic,” Piper snaps. “You heard what he said about what’s going on. Anything could be happening!”

“He also said all is well,” Chase says.

Nelise swivels, turning on Chase. “Noah’s messages are like clockwork. Have been since Day One, when you were still in quarantine.”

“Noah knows how to take care of himself—and anyone else with him,” Micah says. “I’m sure everything’s fine.”

“Maybe something happened that he had to tend to,” Delaney says. “Something broke down. Personality differences that had to be mediated. He’s only one man, for crying out loud.”

Nelise shakes her head. “He’s got plenty of men to—”

“Did he actually *say* he’d be sending a video every night?” Julie asks.

“No,” Rima says from across the room. “He said he would send word that all was well after the door closed. None of us knew how until the door shut and the screen came on.”

“He did say in the last message he’d keep us apprised,” Preston says.

Micah shrugs. “If the system’s down from whatever caused the problem last night, he could still be working on it.”

“Then what do we do?” Nelise demands.

“There’s nothing we can do.” He gets to his feet.

“Where are you going?” she says.

“To bed.”

Nelise gives an incredulous chuff as Delaney and a few others rise from the sofa around her.

“Wait,” Reverend Richel, whom several of the others call Carolyn, says. “What if a message comes and we’re not here?”

Preston lifts a hand. “I’ll stay up, just in case.”

Jax volunteers to take over at 3 a.m. Delaney says she’ll come up after she’s made the oatmeal we eat twice a week for breakfast. It sits in a big pot on the stove next to a bowl of reconstituted blueberries, nuts, and stevia, and everyone just helps themselves.

Finally, we follow the others into the silo and down the spiral stairs through the library, Nelise still asking questions of anyone who will listen.

“What do you think happened?” I whisper when we’re alone in our quarters after checking on Truly, curled up with Lauren in the older girl’s bed.

“Probably some technical issue, like Micah said,” Chase says, yawning. “Or maybe there was some minor crisis. You pen a bunch of strangers in together and all kinds of issues can break out. We’re probably missing some really good fights.”

But I’ve lived the vast majority of my life penned in community with others in the name of safety from the outside world, and fights were unthinkable.

No, the damage we inflicted on one another was far more insidious.

THAT NIGHT, I dream of Noah, his kindly face on the titan screen. But as he talks, his skin begins to lighten. His hair, gray and tightly

cropped, lengthens in dark curls. The crow's feet disappear as his brows lower until he's glaring at me from the wall.

It's coming, he says. His eyes glitter with unnatural light. With laughter.

Magnus. My sister's husband and leader of New Earth. The Interpreter of God who preached the coming apocalypse as he tried to seduce and then rape me. Who shattered my faith, and my peace along with it.

The man I killed.

DAY 16

I sit up in the darkness.

My heart is racing, thumping in my ears.

I glance toward the frosted partition of our small, private quarter, but the lamp that emulates sunrise in the main dorm outside is still dark.

Careful not to jostle Chase, I slide from bed, pad out to check on Truly, Lauren, and Julie.

“Can’t sleep?” Julie whispers, startling me. I shake my head.

She gets up, throws a shawl over her pajamas, and follows me up the twelve flights of back-and-forth cold metal stairs to the atrium.

Jax sits on the sofa in animated conversation with Delaney, a bottle of Jack Daniel’s on the table between them. At our arrival, she shakes her head.

“Nothin’ yet,” Jax says, his words slightly slurred.

I prepare for the school day. Wake Truly at seven thirty.

“Morning, sugar booger,” I say, nuzzling her as she wraps her arms around me. But the fringe of panic is there. The old familiar sensation like the bass of a car in the lane beside you at a stoplight: thrumming up your spine, taking over the rhythm of your heart. The

same heart that believed when the disease broke out that the cataclysm was here. That despite all the ways Magnus proved himself a fraud, he managed to be right all along.

And now you're going to Hell.

I help Truly dress and wash her face before taking her upstairs for breakfast. All the while reminding myself that the dread clawing at my gut is only the PTSD and my special talent for obsession. That I expected this after running out of meds before we got here and declining a substitute from the silo's limited pharmacy, which Rima warned could make my symptoms worse or take up to six weeks to work—if it worked for me at all.

The world is not ending. I know this, because I delivered the samples being used even now to create the vaccine.

Magnus wasn't just wrong. He's dead today by his own hand.

I only supplied the weapon.

I smile during school. Make Lauren, the oldest student by six years, retake the precalculus test I wrote for her that she failed yesterday despite her argument that she'll never need to use it.

"No other kids are in school right now," she says, shoving it away.

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. They're too busy trying to find food and water and wondering if their friends or parents are alive!"

Seth, Truly, and the others look between us in the silence, pencils poised over their homemade worksheets, eyes far too somber.

"My mommy's dead," Truly says, going back to work matching uppercase and lowercase letters. She looks so much like Jackie sometimes it makes my soul ache.

"Mine is, too," Seth says.

"Mine, too," I say softly.

Lauren studies the table between us. A minute later, she slides the test closer and bends over it.

* * *

THERE ARE NO songs that night as we crowd around the sofa. Just Piper reaching for Nelise's hand as Reverend Carolyn lays an arm around Rima's shoulders, all of us focused on the artificial night sky. It's cloudy tonight, haze obscuring Ursa Major, diffusing the glow of the moon.

The video never comes.

DAY 29

It's been two weeks since we last heard from Noah.
Yesterday, Micah sent another message to the surface. It said only: "Is all well?"
No response.

DAY 37

By now we have no expectation that the moon emerging from the clouds over Preston's head will transform into Noah's likeness.

We steal glances at it anyway.

"I understand there've been concerns," Preston says, trying to regain the control over this discussion that he lost in the first five minutes. I'm having a hard time concentrating on him; there's a square of dark pixels that doesn't match the sparkling wash of Milky Way around it.

Chase whistles, the sound piercing and shrill. A few of those closest to him—including me—grimace.

"Please!" Preston says. "We can't decide a course of action if we can't have an orderly conver—"

"Did we get any response to our message yesterday?" Nelise shouts.

Micah shakes his head. "No. At this point, we have to assume there's been a mechanical failure."

Rima's son, Karam, raises his hand. "What if something happened like an attack on the compound? What if Noah needs us? We

owe it to him if he does. Whatever might be happening, there's more of us here than up there—" he says, pointing.

"You have to subtract eight children," I say. He glances at me, and then concedes the point with a slight nod.

"Noah's a contingency planner and he knows how to handle himself," Chase says. "The man's a Vietnam vet. Give him some credit. I guarantee you he's knocked some heads in his day."

But even as he says it, I know he's worried, too.

"The key phrase being 'in his day,'" Jax says.

"Guys," Piper says. "We're saying this like we can just decide to leave. Hello? We can't."

"There's got to be a failsafe," Braden says. "Noah was too smart to just 'set it and forget it.'"

"Then why doesn't anyone know about it?" someone else asks.

But as the conversation careens toward chaos, I'm thinking about the New Earth religious commune where I grew up. How my own sister kept to a Penitence cell once she realized she'd gotten sick to keep the disease from spreading like fire behind those walls and killing her own daughter in the process.

There is no failsafe.

Nelise stands up and shouts: "We need to find out what's going on!"

"Do we?" Micah says from the edge of the room.

Nelise blinks. "Well, I want to know!" She turns to Rudy, who used to own the largest insurance office in Alliance, Nebraska. I know this, because he made sure to tell us—several times—as he presented each of us with "Rudy Bryant, CLU" pens our first night out of quarantine. "Don't you?"

"It sure would be nice," Rudy says, crossing his arms. His jowls get larger when he sits like that. "And I'd be frankly surprised if Noah didn't plan for circumstances like this."

“I think he did,” Micah says.

Rudy arches a brow. “Then you *do* know how to fix this?”

“No,” Micah says.

“Son, you just said—”

Micah points to the stairwell leading to the locked entrance above. “That door isn’t going to open for 146 more days no matter what. And that’s exactly the way Noah wanted it—for our safety. And, worst case, for the survival of our kind. Which is why we all came down here: to be sealed off from the virus wreaking havoc on the surface until the danger passed and a vaccine became available. It was part of the deal. And we took it.”

“But the video feed malfunctioned,” Rudy says angrily. “Something’s clearly not working!”

“The feed isn’t vital,” Micah says. “I’m not even sure it’s helpful.”

“How can you say that?” Piper says.

“Is it helpful to know how many are dying?” Micah asks, looking around. “Does it encourage or lift your spirits? No. It only adds to the anxiety that’s going to deplete your immune system before you walk out of here in just over five months.”

“But it’s the truth!” Nelise says, looking at him like he’s out of his mind.

“It won’t prepare you any better than focusing on your health and staying strong will,” Micah says. “We should all be putting in regular hours on the gym level. Spending less time on idle speculation and more on the maintenance of our life-sustaining equipment, garden, and bodies.”

“Walking out into nuclear winter ain’t gonna help our immune systems none, either,” Jax says.

“Wait, what?” Braden says.

“He’s joking,” Chase says.

“Am I?” Jax says. He isn’t smiling.

“If we walk out into nuclear winter nothing’s going to matter anyway,” Micah says.

“**WELL THAT WAS** uplifting,” Julie mutters as we convene in Chase’s and my private quarters late that night. “You okay?” she says, studying me.

But I don’t want to talk about the anxiety gnawing at the pit of my stomach.

“Please. I’ve lived with imminent doom before.”

Julie glances at Chase. “You don’t really think—”

“Jax is an idiot,” Chase says under his breath. “That’s what I think.”

Despite Jax apologizing for his comment at the end of the conversation, the procession downstairs to the living levels had been somber.

“Micah didn’t help,” I say. Though he did manage to steer the conversation away from trying to get out.

“No, he didn’t,” Julie says. “Does that man *ever* smile?”

“Only around Seth,” I say, remembering the way Micah grinned the first time Chase and I met him when we stopped over on our way to Colorado. He’s changed since the doors closed.

We all have.

Julie turns to Chase. “So is it possible, what they were saying?”

Chase shakes his head. “What would be the point? We’re already down. No one’s going to risk retaliation from an ally when our economy, infrastructure, agriculture—everything—is already obliterated. We’re a third world country right now.”

“That’s what I was thinking, but the world is a crazy place filled with crazier people than before,” Julie says.

I exhale slowly. Draw a stabilizing breath.

“Unless you’re seeing something I don’t, Noah’s comm going out doesn’t change anything,” Chase says.

“No,” I say. “We stick to the plan.”

DAY 44

It takes a lot of work to survive. We perform maintenance on the silo's generators, commodes, air filters, pumps. Test the water and air purity. Scrub the showers so prone to mold. Inventory supplies.

Act cheerful around the children.

I create a hopscotch grid with some masking tape and teach Truly and her friends to play. Read from *Charlotte's Web* at night.

It looks like normal daily life, but it's not. Though after fifteen years in a walled compound, two and a half months trying to adjust to life on the outside, and four days as a fugitive, I don't know what normal is.

In a way, nothing's changed. I can tomatoes—a job I used to despise at New Earth. But I'm the only one other than Nelise who knows how and she's too busy midwifing green beans, spinach, cucumbers, and bigger organic strawberries than we ever produced in the compound.

In another way, everything's changed.

The recycled air feels brittle. The silence of this place, one of its most calming features our first days here, tinged with the tension of

resolute survival . . . and the aimless wait for something that never comes.

Or can't come fast enough.

I steal time with Chase—as much as two people who live with sixty-one others can. In addition to jujitsu, he now teaches fighting technique and self-defense two hours every day.

Because when the door opens, we might need it.

THE PLAN IS simple: once the silo opens, we get to Wyoming. Maybe by June the world will have forgotten me, but it's a chance I can't afford to take. I have Truly to protect, and that means obscurity. Nestled away in a cabin belonging to a buddy of Chase's—the place he was headed when I barged into his Jeep and his life.

Noah has said he'll have a vehicle and supplies waiting for us. When those doors open, if I can find a way to thank him unseen, I will. I hope I can.

But if not, we'll separate only as long as it takes for Chase, Julie, and Lauren to visit the nearest vaccination center and receive immunizations.

And then make our way west.

DAY 51

I repeat myself sometimes. Have to ask Julie to tell me when I do it. Meanwhile, my day-to-day is one long series of repetitions that begin at the table: oatmeal for breakfast one day. Malt O'Meal the next—chocolate. I never had that growing up, and the novelty of eating anything chocolate for breakfast would normally strike me as slightly rebellious. Today, it's just one more vacuum-packed reminder of Noah's forethought that makes me wonder why we don't have a periscope on the world above.

When I say as much to Chase, he shakes his head. "I think he saw a lot of things he wished he never had. Maybe he didn't want that for anyone else."

Which isn't reassuring.

The children ask what it'll be like when we leave. If they'll have to go back to regular school again. How big Buddy will be when we emerge. If there will be presents waiting since they didn't get any at Christmas.

I give answers I have no way of knowing. Yes. Forty pounds. And if they're very good.

It's different than the picture the five of us paint in hushed

brushstrokes, alone: chasing Buddy. Digging for worms. Fishing the Green River gorge for wriggly rainbow trout.

Which makes Truly giggle.

She doesn't realize she'll have to learn to eat fish. That it may make her sick at first, or even horrify her. That she'll do it in order to survive.

Only in private do I ask what we'll do if the cabin is filled with squatters. How we'll find food beyond fish and wild game. There's a book of edible plants in the library. We pore over pictures of wild asparagus, raspberries, and dandelion greens, memorize preparations for thistle root and daylilies, the characteristics of safe and unsafe mushrooms.

I've suggested, in moments alone with Truly, that it might be fun for us to make up new Wyoming names.

"I like the name Charlotte," Truly said yesterday, coloring a picture I drew of a cabin on a lake surrounded by wildflowers. A fresh beginning for our makeshift family filled with sunshine and hope.

Until night comes and the conjecture begins. About what's happening above us. If the first batches of vaccine are ready. How many pharmaceutical companies around the world have dedicated themselves to its nonstop production.

"It's too soon," Julie says. "It'll take months, even with the aid of the UK, maybe Switzerland or France."

Jax starts in on his regular rant about all the countries that owe the United States favors, how there better be foreign troops defending our ports and asses for once by the time we get top-side. He's drunk; his wife, Piper, pretending to protest as he shows Chase—and by extension, me—pictures she sent him from her junior year abroad in the Philippines six years ago, which mostly

consist of her on the beach. I look on with interest, not because I'm fascinated by her in a string bikini, but because I dream of seeing ocean like that.

"Even our allies," he says, jabbing a finger at his phone's screen. "You don't see refugee camps for Americans there. Ever. Do you, Karam?" he says, unable to resist poking his favorite bear.

"Gosh, it's late," Chase says, ready to stave off another argument; last night he had to drag Jax off to the showers to cool down.

CHASE IS QUIET that night. And I know he's worried about his family, whose names I've only recently learned, and friends he's known far longer than he's known me.

I ask him to tell me about growing up in Ohio. Why he enlisted in the Marines. The girls he dated—including Jessica, whom he was with for two years.

He grimaces and rolls away when I mention her name. "I really don't like talking about her," he says. "Can we just chalk that one up as an expensive lesson?"

"Expensive?"

"She never gave me back the ring," he says, sliding a hand beneath his head.

I blink in the darkness.

"I told you we were engaged," he says. And then: "Didn't I?"

"No," I say slowly.

"Oh. Well, does it matter?"

"No. It doesn't matter." But as I say it, I feel tipped slightly off-axis. And even though it's true that none of us are who we were before, I'll still obsess about it through the night and spend tomorrow biting back questions, by which time he'll have forgotten we even had this conversation.

Things are different between us than they were during that frantic trip to Colorado, the memory of which is like so much white noise to me now. When we knew every conversation might be our last. When we were all each other had.

I lie awake long after his breath evens with sleep, unsettled. Certain that he means to go with us to Wyoming. Realizing I have no idea how long he plans to stay.

Jax howls and shoves past me. Falls down to gather his wife in his arms as Chase kicks the knife from her hand.

“Oh, my God,” Micah says, hands going to his head as he turns away.

I throw the cue away from me onto the felt green of the pool table. There’s a fresh, red smudge on the thick end.

A pneumatic gurgle issues from the floor.

“Sweet Jesus,” Preston says as I grab the throw blanket off the sofa. There’s blood everywhere behind the pool table, soaking between panels of the laminate wood floor.

“Get the doctor!” Chase says, whipping off his shirt and dropping to a knee to press it against Braden’s neck.

“Yes. I’ll—I’m going,” Preston stutters as voices issue from the tunnel. I throw the blanket over Braden and then stiffen, recognizing Lauren’s laughter.

“Don’t let them in here!” I shout.

A rush of movement—Preston, hurrying toward the tunnel. “Get Rima! Don’t come in. Just get her!” With a curse, he shoves past them as Micah shouts at him to hurry.

“He’s bleeding out,” Chase mutters.

Piper groans as Jax sits back on the floor, rocking her.

“Baby,” he cries. “What did you do?”

By the time Rima rushes into the room, it’s too late.

We are no longer sixty-three, but sixty-two.