

LIFE

The word "LIFE" is rendered in a bold, black, serif font with a distressed, textured appearance. It is centered on a white background. Behind the word is a large, light gray shadow. The word is embellished with delicate, golden-brown flourishes: a swirl on the left side of the 'L', a swirl on the right side of the 'E', and a small leaf-like flourish on the top of the 'I'.

Also by Rebecca Belliston



Sadie

Augustina

LIFE

CITIZENS OF LOGAN POND

BOOK 1

REBECCA BELLISTON



GATED PUBLISHING

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

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For Mom

Who sang “You are My Sunshine” to me as a child
Who instilled a love of life, music, family, and faith
Who taught me that dreams are worth chasing
Who thought better of me than I thought of myself

You will always be *my* sunshine

Lynn S. Lund (1942-2014)

*Government ought to be exercised for
the benefit of the people; which consists
in the enjoyment of life and liberty,
with the right of acquiring and using
property, and generally of pursuing and
obtaining happiness and safety.*

James Madison

Father of the US Constitution

prologue

The air was still. Quiet. Not a bird could be heard, not a single puff of air rustled the streets of Illinois as if the entire world was perched on tiptoes, waiting.

Carrie Ashworth huddled with her father in the newly-erected Aurora Municipality Hall, sharing one interest with the other hundred people. The television. The large screen wasn't nearly large enough to make out the face of the President of the United States.

"...After the collapse of Ameribank, First Citizens Bank, and countless others," President Rigsby said from his standard podium and blue curtain backdrop, "I assure you we have not forgotten you. Congress is working with the Chairman of the Federal Reserve and the FDIC. I have personally met with the Secretary of the Treasury, my Council of Economic Advisers, and the CEOs and CFOs of the above-mentioned banks to discuss the potential fallout. I am here to tell you that we are on the brink of solving this systemic banking crisis."

"On the *brink*?" Carrie's father repeated.

Twenty people shushed him.

Sufficiently grave, the President continued over them. "I have spent long hours with Presidents Borzakov, Huang, and Maalouf. I have met with Prime Ministers Toure, Abbassi and many other leaders of the nations of the earth. They have pledged their help and assistance. However..." The President said, staring into the camera, "it will be some time before they're able to assist. Our country is not the only one suffering from this economic disaster. As such, we've instituted a state of

emergency which will expedite our ability to help you, our citizens. It is imperative, however, that you remain calm and patient.”

Carrie’s father grunted. He didn’t sound calm or patient.

No one did.

“As for the banks...” President Rigsby gripped the podium, “I am confident the temporary suspension on withdrawals will be lifted soon.”

The crowd erupted, protesting this new information. A woman yelled in Carrie’s ear, making Carrie flinch. Carrie raised her voice, too, so she could be heard.

“I don’t understand, Dad,” she said. “Lifting the suspension on the banks sounds like a good thing.”

“It would be,” he said, “but that’s what he promised four weeks ago. Which means no money. Still.”

Carrie’s stomach twisted with emptiness.

“At that time,” President Rigsby continued, voice rising as if he could hear the protests himself, “I urge you, my fellow citizens, to use prudence, wisdom, and patience. Another run on the banks will set our country back two years, possibly more. Prudence...” he let the word hang, “will save this great country.

“Until then, your local governments will be passing out blue cards. These cards will be distributed through your local municipalities and will replace the former coupons. I’m confident this new system will streamline our ability to distribute goods. Therefore, starting Monday, October first, said blue cards will become your only access to food, clothing, and shelter. Each family is required to send one representative to the designated posts.”

The man behind Carrie swore at the screen. Another raised an angry fist, nearly knocking her over. Shouts and booing drowned out the broadcast as the crowd began to riot. People pressed toward the screen, yelling at the two-dimensional image of the president, shoving Carrie right along with them.

Panicked, Carrie pushed back. Her feet struggled to keep her upright. At seventeen, she was not only short and shy but suddenly claustrophobic. Her heart pounded. She thrust out her elbows. Someone shoved back, pushing her further away. In another minute, she’d be trampled.

Someone grabbed her arm and she screamed. Then she saw it was her dad.

“Let’s go!” he shouted.

If there hadn't been a woman between them, she would have flung herself at him. Instead, she clutched his hand and followed as he pushed his way through the mob. They caught the tail end of President Rigsby's speech.

"Many of you are hungry," the president boomed, using the same dramatic voice that won him the election. "Many have been evicted from your homes, but I am here to assure you that the government has not forgotten you, the nations of the world have not forgotten you, nor have I. Goodnight, and may—"

Carrie and her father broke out into a brisk September evening. She stopped and bent in half to gather deep breaths of people-less air. The cold evening cooled her skin and calmed her pulse, and she was glad her two siblings had stayed at the apartment. Unlike her, they were too young to understand the magnitude of tonight—of the last six months.

At least, she thought she understood.

"What does this mean, Dad?"

He stared at the municipality hall with a grave, aged look. "It means the government's done helping us. This is it. This is our life now."

"But I thought you said—"

"I was wrong!" He ran a hand over his thinning hair. "We all were."

A lump formed in her throat. Her dad wasn't a shouter—or he didn't use to be. Not that she blamed him. An hour ago, she traced the protruding lines of Zach's eight-year-old ribs before tucking him into his bedroll. With a kiss on the forehead, she promised they were heading to the municipality for good news. The government would have a solution to this financial crisis.

"*You mean we can go home?*" Zach had asked.

Silly her. She said yes.

Carrie thought about the cold, dark apartment that had become their temporary shelter since they were evicted from their home in Shelton. Surely the government couldn't expect them to stay in that apartment forever, crammed into a brown, smelly place with three other families, fifteen strangers sharing one kitchen and one bathroom. Carrie's family had their own bedroom. That was something at least. Which meant the Ashworths had one nine-by-ten foot room to call their own, the last place on earth. The conditions were tolerable when she thought they were temporary, just until the banks were up and running and they could get their savings back. But now...

This is it.

Her father's words rang in her ears, sinking her. Her chin dropped and her eyes started to burn.

He pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry, pumpkin. It's just...I don't know what to do anymore. I thought they'd have a solution by now, but I should have known."

She looked up. His hair had turned gray overnight, his blue eyes looked even grayer than his hair, and his mouth that used to wear a perpetual smile, now wore a perpetual grimace. Seeing him so forlorn was more painful than the emptiness in her stomach, more painful than never seeing their sprawling, two-story home again. Painful enough she forced herself to smile.

"We'll be okay, Dad. The banks will give us our money back, and then...and then..." She shrugged. "We'll be okay."

He stroked her cold cheek. "I love my little girl. You keep that pretty smile on your face, and *I'll* be okay. Now," he glanced over his shoulder, "let's get back to Mom before there's trouble."

They took off, their feet whispers in the night. They raced down the long street, through a dark alley, and up the black steps to their third-floor apartment.

As requested, Carrie tried to smile when they walked through the door, but her mom stood next to the others with desperate hope in her eyes, bringing tears to Carrie's. They weren't going home. She couldn't bear to break the news, nor could she bear to hear it. She rushed past them into the last bedroom. Stepping over Amber and Zach's sleeping forms, she unrolled her thin blanket and laid down, jeans, jacket, and all.

Sleep didn't come easily. The furnace hadn't kicked on—if there were even furnaces in the hastily-erected apartments—and she scrunched into a ball to keep warm. Knowing there were colder nights ahead made it worse. So when her parents stumbled into the pitch-black room an hour later, they were unaware Carrie lay wide awake a few feet away.

"I think Ron's right," her mom whispered. "We should leave before they mandate those blue cards. Otherwise, they'll have the blockades up."

"We can't go back, babe," her dad said, equally quiet and urgent. "We have nowhere to go. They repossessed our home. They're losing control of the country, and we can't risk it while they get it back."

“Then we take up May and CJ’s offer,” she said. “They’ll take us in. You know they will.”

“With how many others?” he whispered. “Fifteen? Twenty? Shoved in their house like sardines until who knows when?”

“Which is so much worse than here?” her mom shot back.

Carrie held her breath to catch every word.

She saw her dad’s dark form unroll his blankets. “At least we have food here. You can’t expect May and CJ to feed that many people. CJ’s lost all his retirement money and—”

“We don’t have food here! They didn’t deliver anything tonight, Tom. Not a single scrap of moldy bread.”

“Nothing?” he said at the same time Carrie mouthed it. “Not even the water?”

“No.”

The only sound in the room was the Jepson’s baby down the hallway, protesting the emptiness in her tiny belly. Carrie grabbed her own hollow stomach, praying for a swift end to this nightmare. It would be at least a day before the next delivery of food—if there was a next delivery.

“If we go back to Shelton,” her dad whispered, “we’ll starve and freeze.”

“If we stay, we’ll starve and freeze,” her mom hissed.

“Yes, but at least I can find work here. Or maybe I’ll head to Chicago.”

“No, Tom. No! Not with the riots. You promised we’d stay together, for better or worse. You promised,” her mom whispered, losing control of her voice. “I just want to go home.”

Carrie shut her eyes, feeling the same way. She didn’t know May and CJ Trenton past the fact that they were old, retired, and had lived three houses down from Carrie’s family for as long as Carrie could remember. The Trentons were among the lucky few who owned their home free and clear before the financial crash, which meant they hadn’t foreclosed. They still had a home.

Carrie envisioned her tree-lined street and their view of Logan Pond. Even if they had to squish into Trenton’s with twenty other neighbors, her family belonged in Shelton, not in a nine-by-ten, smelly apartment in Aurora’s Third Municipality—or whatever they called it now.

Her dad sighed. “Just give me time to find work, babe. Long enough the government—”

“—will be digging mass graves instead of individual ones,” her mom cut in. “There are nine hundred applicants for every position. I’m not waiting.”

“Come on.” A smile crept into his voice. “With these ruggedly handsome, God-given looks, people will line up to hire me.”

Carrie waited for her mom to break, to giggle, or give some quick-witted retort. That was how their marriage worked. But her mom didn’t laugh. Not a bit. And that frightened Carrie more than anything she’d heard all night.

“One family got food tonight,” her mom whispered.

“What? Who?”

“The Gorskis. A patrolman sneaked in a bundle after everyone left for the broadcast.”

Carrie knew the Gorskis because they were staying in an apartment below them and had a seventeen-year-old girl like her. Like Carrie, Rachel Gorski was the oldest child. And like Carrie, Rachel Gorski was petrified of the future.

“Why them?” her dad asked. “Why no one else?”

“You’ve seen their daughter, Rachel. Can’t you guess?”

Carrie couldn’t. Her stomach hurt so bad it didn’t feel like hunger anymore. Her clothes hung on her body. Same with her family’s. There wasn’t a single reason which justified a patrolman giving food to one family while passing fifty others.

The sudden sound of sniffing brought Carrie’s head off her pillow. Her mom was crying? She’d seen her mom cry twice in her life, both times at funerals. Whose funeral was this?

When her mom spoke again, her voice was strained with emotion. “What kind of world is it, when your choice is to sell your children or watch them starve? We can’t stay. For Carrie’s sake as much as the others.”

Carrie jerked up. *My sake?* Amber and Zach were the helpless kids. Not her. She could fend for herself just fine. She almost challenged her mom, but then her dad said the words she’d been waiting to hear all night.

“You’re right. We’ll leave for Shelton first thing.”

And suddenly Carrie didn’t care why they were leaving, only that they were.

Home.

She snuggled in, forgetting all thoughts of empty stomachs or damp bedrolls. They were going home—or to the Trentons. Close enough. Her eyes closed in pure joy.

Three months later, on a colder, darker evening, Carrie wondered how she ever fell asleep that night. She wondered how she ever deluded herself into thinking life would be better in Shelton. If she'd only known then what it would cost her to leave Aurora's Third Municipality, she would have begged her parents to stay. Because before the first snows hit the fields of Shelton, Illinois, both of her parents were lying in cold, dark graves.

one

Greg Pierce yanked off his New York Yankees cap and wiped his brow. He sweated profusely in contrast to the freezing weather. It wasn't snowing, but it might as well have been. The soft drizzle chilled him to the bone, yet his body continued to deplete itself of excess moisture he didn't have.

Replacing his baseball hat, he glanced sideways. His mom didn't look as nervous as he felt. She never did. The two stayed low behind a row of thorn-covered bushes as they waited for the patrol car to pass. The second Greg heard the engine he knew they were in trouble. The only cars on roads anymore were patrol cars, but usually patrolmen avoided deserted dirt roads like the one they were on. Not today, apparently.

The closer the car came, the more Greg despised everything: the never-ending northern winter, the lack of shelter from another storm, having to move to Illinois in the first place, and the poverty which prevented him from changing any of it. But mostly he despised life itself. Even five years after the Collapse, he still couldn't accept how things had turned out for him—for them.

As the patrol car neared the last bend, Greg's stomach growled, shattering the profound silence. He shoved a fist in his gut. After all the miles they'd walked, after all the weeks and months of hiding and starving, it would be just his luck to have an empty stomach blow their cover now.

His mom heard his stomach and smiled. She actually smiled.

He glared at her. *You think this is funny?* he wanted to shout. *You think this is some kinda joke?* They were two minutes away from

spending the rest of their lives in some government prison camp, and she had the gall to smile?

She rolled her eyes and spoke full voice. “Those patrolmen can’t hear us *or* your poor stomach. They’re about gone and we’re about there, so relax, would you?”

He would have, but the patrol car stopped. It was ahead of them by a hundred yards, but it pulled to a complete stop.

Greg shoved his mom into the snowy bush. She yelped as thorns scratched her cheek, but he didn’t have time to care. The car door opened and three police dogs shot out, snarling and growling in the freezing rain.

Greg didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. He didn’t even wipe the slushy rain from his eyes as he watched those patrol dogs, calculating.

Go the other way. Go the other way.

It only took a second to know he and his mom weren’t the targets. The dogs were on a dead run for an old, fallen barn down the snowy hill. The wet pile of rubble was such that Greg hadn’t considered it a safe place to escape the storm. The rest of the area looked like uninhabited farmland, the reason he chose this route in the first place, but he had the sinking suspicion he was about to be proven wrong.

Two patrolmen dressed in green emerged behind the dogs at a leisurely, arrogant pace. Their guns stayed low, content to let the howling beasts do the work for them.

At first it seemed like a lost cause. The dogs circled the collapsed barn in search of a way in. Then the lead dog gained courage and charged.

A loud shout erupted. In an instant, it was pure pandemonium. What seconds ago had been a lifeless pile of rotting wood suddenly became a swarm of people.

The patrolmen ran forward, guns pointed, as two dozen squatters flew out of the wooden heap. Grown men. Women. Children. The people scattered like frightened chickens, but they didn’t have a chance. The dogs were trained to kill. So were the patrolmen.

“I can’t watch this,” Greg’s mom whispered.

She tugged on his coat to make a run for it, but he yanked her down and pressed a finger to his lips. He pointed down the hill. Her face turned white as another patrol car came around the bend, and she backed further into the thorn bush.

The second patrol car stopped, and more patrolmen emerged. The dogs kept busy rounding up the squatters like scattered sheep. An older

man, two girls, and a young mother holding a wailing baby were herded into a small, frightened circle. Greg watched their dirty faces sink as they saw their already-pitiful lives slip through their fingers.

One of the patrolmen whistled, bringing the barking dogs to a halt. Even from a distance, he looked smug.

“Cards!” he demanded loud enough to carry up the hill.

From their bone-thin bodies, weathered clothes, and shattered expressions, Greg figured the squatters’ pockets were as empty as his.

An older man stepped forward, hands up, pleading with the officer. But it was a younger man—a boy really—that caught Greg’s eye. He looked restless and fidgety against the old barn. He was ready for a fight. Greg couldn’t help but wonder what he’d do in that teen’s shoes. For all he knew, he and his mom were two minutes away from such a scenario. Arrest. Life in prison. Work camps. Death. Their only crime: homelessness.

The officer closest to the boy noticed the same movement and shouted, “Wait! We don’t want to harm you. For your own sakes, we advise you to not resist arrest.”

The teen took two defiant steps forward. The rage in him caused Greg to shiver.

A man, possibly a father, put a hand on the boy’s shoulders. Chin dropping, the boy stepped back in obedient surrender. Greg was relieved and disappointed at the same time. The boy would live, but what kind of life?

For a moment, it looked like it would be a peaceful arrest. The patrolmen kept shouting orders, and the small clan lined up. Greg perched on the balls of his feet and gave his mom the signal. In a second, they’d make a run for the woods behind them. She looked white as a sheet but nodded.

Then it happened. One of the patrolmen, haughty and unfeeling, reached for the screaming baby.

“No,” Greg’s mom breathed, echoing the cry of the baby’s mother. Yet the mother had no choice. She was trespassing on government property, squatting on land designated for true American citizens. She had no legal papers to protect her, no government-issued citizenship card. She was on a fast track to some work farm, which meant her baby was a ward of the state—as was her little girl being shepherded into the furthest patrol car. The mother was a mother no longer.

That's all it took.

The teen charged forward, head down, fists balled, swinging for the nearest patrolman. Caught off guard, the officer stumbled backward and landed on the slushy ground. The boy didn't stop. He plowed on and headed for the next patrolman, the one with the baby.

A third patrolman raised his gun and, in one deafening shot, ended the dispute.

The boy dropped. Dead.

Greg's mom screamed a loud, piercing scream. Greg whirled, too stunned to do anything but stare at her. The only thing that saved them from her outburst was the simultaneous yelling and barking that erupted below. The patrolmen were too preoccupied with the frantic squatters to notice two more illegals up the hill.

Greg didn't take the chance.

He grabbed his mom and their bags. They hunched low as they ran over the deserted field. One hundred feet. Two. They flew as fast as their awkwardly-hunched bodies could.

Muscles burning, Greg risked a glance over his shoulder. The patrol dogs weren't pursuing them, but he didn't stop. Even when his mom wheezed and gasped for air, he forced her on until they could reach a place where there would be no more running.



The early March wind whipped through the empty field. With no crops growing, it was free to bluster and swirl on top of the frozen soil. Carrie Ashworth stood in the middle of the field, head tipped back, eyes closed, and arms stretched out as far as they would go.

A laugh escaped her.

Spring was coming. Of all the people in the Logan Pond Clan, she was the only one who felt that way. The rest predicted a long, hard winter followed by a cold, wet spring. But they were wrong. Winter was losing its grasp in Northern Illinois, and soon the forsythias would bloom, the spireas would explode in brilliant fuchsia, and the magnificent flowers of the Midwest would make their show.

Even after the rain started, Carrie kept her face parallel to the sky, letting each cold drop find a spot on her pale skin. It felt wonderful. Rain. Not snow. Then the moment had to end. She dashed across the soon-to-be-garden toward home. Her home was only three houses down

from May and CJ's, but she sprinted anyway. If her clothes got wet, there would be no drying them for a week. Dancing in the rain would have to wait for a summer day.

"It's raining!" she announced as she entered her two-story brick home.

Amber and Zach cuddled under a patchwork quilt on the couch, noses in a book. Carrie was pleased to see them reading after getting on them earlier for neglecting their studies. Sometimes it was hard being sister and parent, even after five years.

She shook the moisture from her coat. "It's raining," she said again.

"Grand," Zach muttered without looking up. "Mud."

"You should be happy," she said. "You don't have to do the chickens in the snow."

He rolled his eyes and went back to his book.

Carrie squeezed on the couch to share the warmth of the blanket. Both siblings moved to give her plenty of space. Too much space. She wanted to snuggle while they read. Sadly, some traditions couldn't last.

She was tempted to ruffle Zach's hair to get his attention. The color matched her own—something in between blond, brown, and red, and yet none of the three. It was shaggy, though. He could barely see the pages through his mop. Time to ask Jenna Kovach for a haircut. Carrie groaned. Though Jenna cut everyone's hair in the clan, she made sure they knew how much she hated it.

Carrie checked Amber's hair, but it looked beautiful as usual. Of the three Ashworth kids, Amber looked the most like their mom: flowing auburn hair, straight petite nose, and full pink lips. If she'd ever look up, stunning dark eyes would peek up under a shelf of thick lashes. At sixteen, Amber was ten times the beauty Carrie was at twenty-two. The two of them barely resembled sisters, but Carrie didn't mind. She loved having a living picture of her mom to stare at every day.

Amber lowered her book. "Problem?"

"Sorry," Carrie said. "Did Oliver stop by yet?"

"No. Wow. Something went right today."

Carrie frowned. "Be nice. Without Oliver, we'd be—"

"Speaking of annoying people," Amber cut in, "your other best friend was just here. I swear you love torturing me, leaving me alone with those two all the time. Oliver won't talk, and May won't shut up."

“May stopped by? Why didn’t she check the field? I was right out her back door.”

“Hello. It’s raining,” Amber said. “She forgets how weird you are.”

“What did she want?” Carrie asked, ignoring the dig.

“She brought us their leftover goat cheese.”

Carrie smiled. May and CJ Trenton had kept a close eye on the three orphans over the last five years, becoming the grandparents they didn’t have. Carrie and May had grown especially close, playing two or three-man Canasta every week depending on whether CJ would put up with May’s skewed rules. It was amazing CJ and May didn’t starve when they kept giving away their food.

Amber went back to her book, but the storm darkened the room, making it impossible to read. She knew better than to ask for a candle in the middle of the day. Instead, she stared gloomily out the window. Zach stopped reading as well.

“Do I have to do the chickens today?” Zach whined. “My ankle hurts.”

“Yes,” Carrie said, “but you can wait until the storm passes.”

“Good. Then I’m going to sit on the porch.”

Carrie smiled as Zach jumped up and headed outside. She wasn’t the only one who loved a good storm.

She stood. “Are you coming, Amber?”

Based on the look Amber shot her, Carrie didn’t wait for a response.

The second Carrie stepped outside, she forgot about the rain. She squinted through the downpour and saw May’s front porch light on. Of the thirty-eight homes in the Logan Pond subdivision, the Trentons were the only ones who owned their home, the only people who weren’t living illegally on government property. As such, they were the only ones with coveted citizenship cards and even-more-coveted electricity. Even then, May and CJ only used electricity a couple of times a year and only for absolute necessities. Not for something as useless as a front porch light. And during the day, too?

“Stay here,” Carrie told Zach. Then she made another mad dash through the rain.

By the time she reached May’s door, her curiosity was fully piqued. She heard several voices inside the Trentons even though there wasn’t a scheduled clan meeting. She knocked the clan signal—two fast, one slow, three fast.

May opened the door and threw her arms around her. “Carrie! Oh, Carrie! You’ll never believe it.” Then little, old May Trenton, so frail and seemingly breakable, bounced up and down on her toes. “She came. She came!”

“Who came?” Carrie asked. Their clan never had visitors. Ever.

May answered by tugging her inside.

Carrie gasped. Not only was the front porch light on, but all the lights inside. It had been five years since Carrie had seen a house fully illuminated. It took her breath away. But she didn’t have time to ponder the joys of electricity as May pulled her through a dozen clansmen into the bright kitchen.

A woman stood by the kitchen table, the center of attention. She was mid-fifties with brown, wet hair that hung in her face. She looked worn down and exhausted and yet smiled at all the commotion.

Carrie’s eyes widened in recognition. “Mariah?”

Mariah turned, surprised to have been called by name when she couldn’t do the same.

May Trenton took Carrie in one arm and her only daughter in the other. “She came!” May sang again. “She came!”

two

News spread fast.

Within minutes, the Trenton home filled with all thirty-four members of the clan. Apparently it wasn't just May's daughter who had come north, but her grandson as well. Carrie hadn't seen Greg yet, nor was she in any hurry to. She hung back on the edge of the crowd, staying in May's kitchen out of sight.

The lights were off again in the house, but in a way everyone was more comfortable like that. The clansmen were hushed, listening to Mariah speak. Even the little children felt the importance of having two new faces around—the only people they'd ever seen outside of the clan besides Oliver. They sat in quiet amazement as Mariah explained how she and Greg had traveled on foot from North Carolina to Illinois.

As Mariah spoke, Carrie glanced up at the Trenton's family picture behind her. May and CJ were surrounded by their two children and five grandchildren. Mariah looked older now by twenty years—they all did—but she still had the same lovely face and CJ's kind, green eyes. Mariah's two children sat beneath her: Kendra, an adorable toddler—who for some reason wasn't in the front room—and Greg, a five-year-old blond up front.

Carrie couldn't count how many times May had dragged her to that family picture to play the *What if?* game.

"What if they didn't live so far away?" May would say. *"What if you could meet my Gregory? He's a wonderful boy. You shouldn't be single, Carrie. Times are hard. This isn't the time for a woman to be alone. You need a man to take care of you. A man like Gregory."*

Carrie didn't agree with the statements but rarely corrected her dear friend. Without computers, phones, or even simple mail service, contact

between Illinois and North Carolina was impossible. So it seemed harmless to play May's games. Just a way to pass the long winter days. But now that Greg and his mother defied all odds crossing the country—on foot no less—and everyone but Greg knew his grandma was about to play matchmaker, Carrie wanted nothing more than to disappear. She backed further into the kitchen.

A movement caught her eye. Amber emerged from the crowd. "He's *waaayy* cute," Amber whispered. "And have you heard him talk yet? He has the best accent."

Carrie's cheeks flamed hot. If there was ever a time to be a fly on the wall...

"What's North Carolina like?" a kid asked in the other room. One of the Dixon twins.

"Oh, it's real lovely," Mariah answered wistfully. "There's miles and miles of pines and rolling hills that stretch as far as the eye can see. I'm gonna miss it."

Amber shot Carrie a look. "They're staying?"

Carrie closed her eyes. Her small, secluded clan suddenly felt much smaller and more secluded.

Please, May. For once in your life, keep your big mouth shut.

"Did you see any cars on the roads?" another kid asked.

"Not many. Most of the roads are still empty. But y'all wanna know somethin'?" Mariah added excitedly. "We saw a train in Tennessee."

There were a few gasps from the little kids.

"Was it moving?" Zach asked.

Zach's voice snapped Carrie back to reality. She was missing her chance to watch the children get a small glimpse outside their confined world. Cars and places like North Carolina were things most of them only heard about, things they only had books to prove for their existence. And she was missing it for what? Some silly speculations of a lonely grandma?

Carrie left her giddy sister and stepped around the people in the front room. She found a spot behind shaggy-haired Zach and wiggled in. Little Jeffrey Kovach immediately climbed onto her lap. His dark eyes were as big as Ping-Pong balls.

"Look, look!" he whispered, pointing at Mariah.

Carrie hugged him. "I see."

Mariah noticed and smiled, although she kept the narration flowing.

CJ kept one arm around Mariah, and May clutched her hand. Their happy, radiant faces said it all. Their long-lost daughter was home at last.

As Carrie listened, she wondered if Mariah was toning things down a bit. In the five years since Carrie's family left that tiny Aurora apartment, she hadn't ventured far. She'd barely left the neighborhood, but she'd heard the stories. The financial and societal collapse of America hadn't been pretty: homelessness by the millions, starvation, and more deaths than anyone—including the government—could count. Yet as Mariah talked about her and Greg's trek north, she offered their little clan a cheerful tale.

Mariah's lips were cracked and weathered, her shoulders hunched with weariness, and she had several fresh scratches on her cheek. Yet her green eyes were vibrant as she spoke, and her mouth curved up in a continual smile. Coupled with her slight southern drawl, she had the whole group captivated. Even Little Jeffrey stayed quiet on Carrie's lap.

As for Greg, Carrie wasn't ready to look yet. He stood against the side wall, and she kept her gaze locked straight forward.

"They divided Nashville into two dozen municipalities," Mariah went on. "I couldn't believe it. There's fences everywhere. Fences, but few people. We walked and walked, but rarely saw anybody. 'Course, we were avoiding most everybody as best we could, sticking to the back roads and deep woods. We coulda passed thousands of clans and never known it."

Zach straightened next to Carrie. "How long did it take to walk here?" Mariah smiled down at him. "Guess."

"Two years?" Zach tried.

"Nope." Mariah motioned for others to try.

"Three weeks?" someone called.

"Forty hundred months?" a Dixon twin asked.

While Mariah waited for the right answer, Carrie's eyes betrayed her. She glanced sideways.

Greg leaned against the side wall, arms folded. Like she remembered from his pictures, he had a great face with steady eyes and a strong jaw. The fact she could see his jaw was strange. All the men in their clan wore beards, having given up the tedious shaving ritual long ago. Oliver shaved, as did most patrolmen, but then again, patrolmen lived differently than the rest of the world anyway.

Greg was average height and thin, much thinner than his pictures. He wore a faded, light blue UNC shirt which looked like it had been stretched in the wash. His jeans were ripped and faded, more than those in the clan. Even then, he was better looking than she remembered from May's photo albums. Of course, after five years of the same thirty-four people, he could be part horse and she would think he looked amazing. His hair wasn't bleached blond anymore like the younger version of himself but had deepened to a chestnut brown, close to Mariah's shade. It was short, though, like a buzz cut. Another curious thing since most the men in the clan had hair at or past their shoulders. From what May said, Greg was a few years older than Carrie, making him twenty-four or five, which also surprised her. From the lines etched in his forehead, he looked closer to thirty.

It took her that long to notice Greg's expression, and then she couldn't see anything else. Where his grandparents' eyes were full of light and excitement, his were dull and irritated. Where his mom smiled endlessly, he seemed stuck in a scowl.

Carrie faced front before people read more into her curiosity than what was there. So what that she was single and Greg was single and no one else within a decade inside her confined society was.

People kept guessing until Jeff Kovach called out, "Eight months?"

"That's it!" Mariah said with a clap of her hands. "Eight months to the day. Can y'all believe it? I never thought it'd take half that long to walk here. Greg figured it'd take us six months, but I guess I slowed him down a bit."

"How did you escape the Raleigh municipality?" Dylan Green asked.

Carrie's eyes widened. *Escaped?* The last letter May and CJ received, Mariah, Greg, and Kendra were living in a small illegal clan outside Raleigh. Not in a government-run municipality. Of course, that was four and a half years ago.

"Well, it cost me all my jewelry, a gold tooth, and a night spent under two feet of garbage." Mariah's nose wrinkled. "Let's just say, my boy made some interesting friends in the time we were there."

Carrie's curiosity won out again. Her gaze flickered to Greg, still leaned against the wall, arms folded. Sneaking past electric fences or guards couldn't have been as easy or lighthearted as it sounded, but Greg's blank expression didn't change. Nor did it as Mariah went back to her story—their treacherous walk through the Smokies, being chased by

a pack of wild dogs in Kentucky, and spending six weeks snowed in a barn in Decatur. His mom never glanced at him for confirmation or addition to the story, as if she expected his silence. Other than a few mentions of him hunting down “lil’ critters” for dinner, he was hardly even part of her tale.

Then again, neither was Kendra.

Carrie looked outside, wondering where Greg’s little sister was. Since the Collapse, most families clung together to survive. It only seemed natural Kendra would come north with them since they wouldn’t be returning. Having another single female around sounded heavenly to Carrie. Kendra was a year younger than her, and if only half of what May said was true, Carrie could get along with her easily. A friend. But Carrie didn’t want to interrupt Mariah to ask where she was.

Finally, Mariah gave a little yawn. “Listen to me goin’ on. Sorry, folks. It’s just been a real long time since we’ve seen anybody. I can’t tell you how nice it is to finally be here.”

CJ squeezed her shoulders. “And we can’t tell you how good it is to...” He stopped to clear his throat in an act Carrie knew he used to cover his emotions. “...to have my little girl home again,” he finished gruffly.

Carrie smiled. While she and May were close, there was a special place in her heart for CJ Trenton. He was quiet and unassuming—May’s exact opposite—yet well respected in the clan. He’d taken in and sheltered all thirty-four people in that room, keeping them fed and hidden until they could feed and hide themselves. Because of that, no one disputed his role as unelected leader.

CJ stood. “I would like to ask all of you to allow two more people into our clan, bringing our number up to thirty-six. I know this breaks from our rules, but I hope you’ll make an exception. Mariah can provide much-needed handiwork, and it sounds like Greg is quite the huntsman. Not to mention, we can always use two more people to help with the endless work around here. So, I motion for a vote. All in favor say ‘Aye.’”

A chorus of ‘Ayes’ erupted in the room.

“Any opposed?” CJ asked.

Three hands shot up. Carrie shouldn’t have been surprised to see whose. Richard O’Brien and Jeff and Jenna Kovach. As soon as Little

Jeffrey saw his parents, he raised his hand, too. Carrie gave him a little squeeze and pushed his hand back down.

May glowered at the three adults, but CJ nodded evenly. "Objections noted," CJ said. "How do you suggest we move forward?"

Richard O'Brien spoke first. "My apologies to Mariah and Greg. I'm not suggesting you shouldn't be allowed to join our clan, but the last time we let someone in, they ended up walking off with a substantial portion of our supplies. Perhaps we could do a trial period?"

"I second that," Jeff Kovach called out.

"No!" May cried. "They're family!"

Mariah patted her arm. "It's fine, Ma. People wanna get to know us first. You can understand that."

"No, I can *not*!" May said. "Your father and I are the only legal citizens here. We should be able to say who can come or go."

CJ frowned at her. "Now, May, that's not how it works around here, and you know it. Richard and Jeff have as much say as you or I."

"Can I say somethin'?" All eyes moved to Greg, surprised to hear from him after a half an hour of his silence. He stepped through the masses to stand next to his grandfather. "I think it's only fair for..."

"Richard O'Brien," Richard supplied.

Greg nodded. "It's only fair for Mr. O'Brien here to ask for a trial period. We'd also like time to evaluate your clan before we commit to bein' members of it."

Carrie was surprised, but Mariah smiled, seemingly content to let Greg lead out in her behalf.

"Alright," CJ said. "Jeff and Jenna? Richard? How about a month?"

"Agreed," Richard said.

Jeff and Jenna nodded as well.

"Good," CJ said. "Then exactly one month from today we'll meet again. Until then, let me say welcome to Mariah and Greg from all of us." His voice became gruff again. "We're anxious to not only have you in the Trenton family, but the entire family we call the Logan Pond Clan."

three

“Here?” Mariah said with wide eyes. “They’re all comin’ back here? Now?”

Carrie smiled. “Not until dinner.”

“Wow,” Mariah said. “How are we supposed to feed that many people?”

May pushed her long, wispy white hair from her face. “We have this down to a science. All the women are gathering what food they have from home, the older children are out back starting a large cooking fire in the pit—or at least, they better be. With the men hunting, we should have plenty of meat for this spontaneous meal. Grab me the large bowl, would you, Carrie?”

Carrie went on tiptoes to grab the mixing bowl from the upper shelf. She only agreed to stay behind after she heard Greg left with the men to hunt. She barely escaped May’s attempt at an introduction earlier with a quick mention of claustrophobia, saving her an embarrassing public introduction—or at least postponing it. She sent Amber home to grab their vegetables so she, May, and Mariah could start the main portion of the meal.

Carrie handed May the flour as well. “If you think thirty-six is bad, Mariah,” Carrie said, “you should have seen us that first winter. There were forty of us living here at May’s around the clock.” Longest six months of Carrie’s life.

“It was worse than sardines,” May said. “By the end, we all wanted to kill each other.”

“So you decided to move on back to your old homes?” Mariah said. “Seems awful dangerous.”

“People were desperate for space,” May said. “They spent more time in their old houses until they started sleeping there at night, too. Carrie and her siblings were the last to venture home. You can understand how hard it was for them to spend time in their house without their parents.”

Carrie blushed with May’s bluntness, but she took over the explanation. “When we heard other clans were posting guards to watch for patrolmen, we gave it a try. Then Oliver came along, and now he keeps an eye on us. Everyone lives in their old homes all the time. Dinner is easy in comparison.”

“I guess so.” Mariah wiped her hands on a towel. “Alrighty then. You two put me to work.”

“We’re doing the biscuits,” May said. “Carrie will do the venison.”

That was news to Carrie, but she didn’t mind. May probably wanted time alone with her daughter.

Carrie slipped out the back door, scanned the distant tree line—the men were still gone—and headed toward the freezer. They were down to their last venison roast, and it wasn’t a very big one either. Normally, March was a lean time of year with last year’s crops stretched thin and the next year’s crops still months away. But lately deer had been scarce during hunts. Jeff Kovach, the ex-lawyer and conspiracy theorist in the clan, was convinced the government was killing deer off to drive illegal clans like theirs into the municipalities for food. Carrie figured there was a deer shortage because clans like theirs were trying not to starve.

Cold water splashed her arms. She looked up. The clouds were still gray but no longer raining. Then she spotted the culprit. Zach and his friend, Tucker, were flinging well water at each other.

“Zach,” she called. “Stop goofing off and fill those water pots.”

Zach shook his wet hands in Tucker’s face. “Okay.”

Boys.

Carrie opened the freezer door and jumped back. A puddle of water spilled out of the bottom, and three large ice chunks dripped through the slotted shelves. Without electricity, they used ice from Logan Pond to keep the freezer cold. When they stacked the ice right, the freezer’s insulation kept things frozen until June—sometimes longer if they moved the freezer to the basement once the weather turned warm. But the ice chunks were already melting. The freezer was barely cold enough to pass for a fridge. And it was only March.

Spring really was coming early.

Carrie reached up and felt the venison roast. The outer edges were still cold and the insides thankfully rock hard. “When you guys finish,” she called, “mop up the water in the freezer.”

“Sure,” Zach said, struggling to get Tucker in a head lock.

She hefted down the roast, checked the tree line once more, and headed inside.

“May,” she said, “the freezer is...” She trailed off. May sat on a kitchen chair, floured hands covering her face, sobbing. Mariah knelt in front of her, stroking her long, white hair. Neither heard Carrie.

“I told Dad earlier, but I just...” Mariah’s shoulders hung. “I’m sorry, Mama.”

May’s crying picked up to a tortured wail. Carrie wanted to rush over and ask what happened. May wasn’t the type to cry. Not unless someone...

Carrie’s stomach dropped.

Kendra.

Except Kendra was too young, too close to Carrie’s age. But everything told Carrie otherwise. Mariah’s daughter. May’s only granddaughter.

Kendra was dead.

“No, no, no,” May continued to cry. Her reddened eyes lifted to Mariah’s. “When? Where? How?”

“She got real sick with the flu last year,” Mariah said softly. “Her asthma made it so she could hardly breathe. So we snuck into the municipality. Greg started work in the government factory, and I prayed real hard the doctors could help her. But...” Soft tears ran down Mariah’s scratched, weather-beaten cheeks. “I’m sorry, Mama. She’s gone.”

Suddenly Carrie realized she was trespassing on a private family moment. Regardless of how many Kendra stories May told her, she wasn’t family. She crept downstairs to find some spices. But at the bottom of the stairs, her thoughts unexpectedly whirled from Pierces to Ashworths. The memories slammed into her. Her mom. Her dad. The day she begged them to return to Aurora.

She sunk to the cement floor as she pictured her mom groaning, cold and clammy, and vomiting nothing but rancid air in her quarantined room here at May’s. Carrie had seen the end barreling down on her mom and pulled her dad into a dark corner.

“Please, Dad. I don’t know what else to do for Mom. She needs a doctor. You have to take her back. They’ll have medicines or IVs or something! Just please.”

He stared blankly at the wall. *“We left. We’re on the black list. If we go back, they won’t give us blue cards. They’ll throw us in prison. If I take her back, she’ll never leave again. None of us will.”*

“But if you don’t...” Carrie’s throat had clogged with tears, and once they started, she couldn’t make them stop. She’d never been so hysterical in her life.

She nearly convinced her dad to go back, but then her mom woke up. Carrie’s sobbing had woken her.

Through lips so pale it made Carrie wince in memory, Linda Ashworth looked at Carrie and then her husband. *“You promised, Tom,”* she whispered. *“We can’t go back. For Carrie’s sake, you promised.”*

Carrie understood now why they’d left, and it shamed her. She hugged her knees to find warmth in May’s cold basement. She couldn’t push away the fear that if she’d been bolder and pushier that day, she could have saved her mom—and her dad who died a few weeks later. Losing parents to seemingly simple diseases was not only painful, it was cruel.

But what had the municipality doctors done for Kendra? Absolutely nothing. She clung to that knowledge to lessen the pain, but only for a moment because it wasn’t fair to Mariah and May to find solace in their loss. Or CJ’s. Or Greg’s.

Greg.

She glanced up at the nearest block window. The thought of him finding her huddled in the basement got her on her feet. Taking a few deep breaths, she decided it was time to get that roast cooking over the fire and head home.

As she turned to finish, another memory assaulted her, this one less painful. Spices. Most of the spices in May’s basement had been grown and dried by Carrie and her mom. It was a blessing her mom passed on not only the joy of gardening but also the knowledge of how to spot edible plants in the wild. Even now, her mom was helping their clan.

Carrie wandered the long rows of upside-down spices, wondering how much time to give May and Mariah. She had known of her mom’s death for five years. May had known about Kendra’s for five minutes.

After a moment, her ears perked up. May said Carrie's name loudly upstairs. May was hard of hearing and didn't always realize what others could hear. In consequence, it sounded like she was having a one-sided conversation upstairs, one in which she was describing Carrie and all of her "divine qualities."

"She's just the sweetest thing you'll ever meet," May was saying. "That poor girl has been through so much since her parents passed, taking care of her brother and sister all on her own. And yet, you'll never hear her complain. She's such a sweet, little thing."

As Mariah mumbled something in return, Carrie ran over to the darkest corner and grabbed a handful of onions.

"True," May said. "If only she had a man to take care of her, she would—"

Carrie flew up the stairs. "I found some spices. Thyme, sage, and..." Breathless, she looked down. "Onions. Is that okay?"

Though red-eyed, May smiled. "Whatever you think, dear. You cook as well as I do. You're just in time, too. I was telling Mariah all about you, but now you can take over. Go ahead. Tell her all about yourself."

"I, uh..." Carrie's cheeks warmed.

Mariah smiled knowingly.

"It's a shame Gregory isn't back yet," May added, mixing the dough by hand. "I'm sure he would love to hear about you as well. Although I suppose there will be plenty of time for that later." May winked at Carrie.

Carrie picked up the nearest onion and chopped it with fervor.

Mariah joined her by the sink and whispered, "Don't mind my mama. She's just teasin'."

Only May wasn't teasing. Not at all.

Mariah plunged her hands in the water bucket to clean off the crusted dough. "Sounds like you've had a hard life, Carrie. I'm sorry to hear about your folks."

Grateful for the change of subject, yet not thrilled to revisit the past again, she nodded. "Seems like everyone has lost someone or another since the Collapse. I'm so sorry about Kendra. So, so sorry." Mariah's eyes glistened, making Carrie feel bad for bringing up *her* past again, but she finished anyway. "No parent should have to bury a child."

Mariah looked over her shoulder at her mother rolling out the dough unaware. Sniffing, Mariah asked, "How'd your folks pass?"

“A lot of people were sick that first year,” Carrie said. “After the city shut off the water, we were desperate. We started pulling water from the pond. We boiled it and everything, but we must not have been careful enough. By the time we figured out it was the water, four people had died.”

Mariah stopped. “Four?”

Carrie winced in memory. “It was awful. But I still wonder if something else made my mom sick. She’s always loved plants, but without the internet—or even a library—she started experimenting, eating wild plants she’d never seen to keep us from starving. At first it seemed like the stomach flu, but then...” A sickly image popped into Carrie’s mind—the smells, the sounds—and she shuddered. “The vomiting wouldn’t stop.”

Mariah’s laid a hand on her arm. “I’m real sorry.”

Carrie’s eyes burned from the onions. She pushed them aside to snap off bits of thyme. “My dad got sick, too, but it was different. Honestly, I think he died from a broken heart. After my mom passed, he just couldn’t let go. He died three weeks later.”

“How awful!”

Carrie forced herself to smile. “Only for us left behind. Isn’t it every couple’s dream to go at the same time? I’m sure they’re happy now together, wherever they are.”

“I’m sure,” May interjected, coming up from behind, “that neither would have willingly left you three kids to fend for yourselves.”

Carrie hadn’t realized her surrogate grandma was still following the conversation. She gave May’s stooped shoulders a hug. “It hardly feels like we’ve been alone with you and everyone watching out for us. It won’t take you long to see the generosity in this clan, Mariah. The people here are so kind and—”

The back door swung open. CJ walked in with his grandson, the latter of the two carrying a few large game birds by their feet.

Carrie’s stomach did a flip.

Greg.

four

Carrie couldn't find a comfortable spot for her eyes. It took Greg half a second to spot her in the kitchen next to his mom and grandma, and then he hadn't looked away.

"Y'all are back already?" Mariah asked.

CJ clapped Greg on the shoulder. "This boy has a good eye. You should see him shoot his slingshot. He had half of us laughing when he took down that bigger bird there."

Greg didn't respond. He kept Carrie pinned against the counter with his deep stare.

Normally, Carrie was a self-satisfied person. Not that she considered herself anything special, personality, looks, or otherwise. She was simply content with who she was and who she wasn't. Yet having a single man look at her so intently—a guy that attractive—all she could think was, *When was the last time I brushed my hair?* A bath was worse unless she counted her mad dash through the rain. Then she had mud and dirt to worry about as well.

She rinsed tried to remember the last single man she'd talked to. There was Oliver, but he didn't count. Too old. Same with Richard O'Brien, only older. Which meant it was right after her senior year of high school around the time of the second stock market crash. Five years and she couldn't remember how to act or what to say. Already she felt like a fool, and she hadn't done anything. But Greg wouldn't quit staring.

"Oh, believe me," Mariah said, "Greg kept us alive with that little contraption of his." She went over to admire the large birds Greg held. "What'd y'all get?"

"Ring-neck pheasants," CJ said. "They're beauties, aren't they?"

May looked up and realized there was a conversation happening without her. A grin the size of Texas split her wrinkled face. “Look, Carrie. Gregory is here at last,” she said loud enough for all of Texas to hear. “Wonderful! You’ve wanted to meet him all these years. We were just talking about him, and now he’s here!”

Greg’s dark brows shot up high. Carrie’s cheeks flamed. Leave it to May to pull off an introduction like that. Unfortunately, May wasn’t done.

“Don’t be shy, dear.” She tugged on Carrie’s arm. “You two are going to hit it off, I just know it.”

Carrie wanted to crawl under a hole, but it was too late. She let May drag her forward.

Greg didn’t budge. Not an inch. Even the dead birds in his hand refused to sway. The closer Carrie got, the more she realized his steady gaze was actually a steady glare. His frigid response stunned her momentarily. She shook it off and stuck out an oniony hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Greg. I’m Carrie.”

His gaze flickered from her still-flushed face to her hand, and then back again. That was it. Her hand remained untouched, his eyes maintained their icy stare, and the room dropped a few degrees.

Stunned, Carrie couldn’t move.

Thankfully, CJ didn’t see the same importance of the meeting as his wife. “What do you say we get these birds cleaned and cooking over the fire, Greg?”

Carrie didn’t watch the men head outside, nor did she look into May’s expectant eyes. Instead, she turned to Mariah. “I better go check on my sister. It was nice talking to you, Mariah.”

“You’re leaving?” May cried. “Now? What about helping Gregory clean the birds? I’m sure he’d love a cute little thing like you to show him how it’s done.”

There was no way Greg was far enough away to miss that one.

“See you in a bit,” Carrie said. She yanked off her apron and dashed out before May could make any more attempts to throw her in Greg’s path.



Amber dropped the potato on the counter the second Carrie walked in. If Amber got her way, she wouldn't scrub another stupid potato for the rest of her life.

"Finally," Amber said. "Thanks a lot. I can't feel my fingers. It's your turn."

Carrie left on her ugly brown coat as she came in the kitchen and picked up scrubbing where Amber left off. Amber blew hot air on her pink, pruned fingers. Another reason to hate scrubbing potatoes. But one thought about their new visitor and a smile broke through.

"So what did you think of Greg?" Amber asked.

Carrie barely looked up. "Why don't you tell me what you thought? I'm sure it'll be more exciting. No doubt you and your friends have already planned our upcoming marriage."

"No way!" Amber cried. "We want Greg to ourselves. I mean, did you see his biceps? And what about that face?" Amber sighed. "I haven't seen a guy shave in forever—although if the guys in our clan had a face like that, maybe they would. I love the short hair thing, too. I didn't even think I liked guys with short hair. Greg makes all the other guys look like cavemen." Amber thought about the whole Greg package and her smile grew. "Yeah, there's no way we're sharing him with you. Sorry."

Carrie rolled her eyes like she usually did when Amber talked about guys. "I guess the younger kids aren't the only ones excited to see new faces. What does Braden think of you making eyes at May's grandson?"

Amber's hands flew to her mouth. "You don't think Braden saw me, do you?" She'd been so careful to check out Greg when Braden was distracted.

Carrie grabbed another potato and plunged it in the freezing bucket. "Does this mean you're ready to admit you and Braden are dating?"

"I hardly call cleaning up the field dating," Amber drawled, "but sure, if your imagination wants to go there."

"Braden's a little old, don't you think?"

Amber picked at her nails. "He's only eighteen. I'm almost seventeen."

"Almost? Braden turns nineteen in August. You won't be seventeen until October. He's too old."

Amber grunted. Leave it to Carrie to spoil her mood. "It's not like anything's going on between us anyway. Besides, we were talking about Greg."

“Well, if Braden’s too old for you,” Carrie said, “Greg’s definitely out of the running.”

“Carrie!” Amber said, stomping her foot. “You haven’t told me what you think of Greg yet.”

Carrie dropped the potato and her lips twitched in her usual annoying way. “I don’t know. I wasn’t really given a chance to talk to him.”

“Who said anything about talking? I’m talking about looking.”

Carrie laughed. “So that’s what this is about? You’re shameless, Amber.”

“Greg’s a million times better looking than Oliver. You don’t have to be shameless to know that.”

Carrie whirled around. “What does Oliver have to do with anything?”

“Nothing. Never mind.” Carrie was clueless.

Amber swatted her hand before she could grab the next potato. “Would you stop washing those? We’re almost out. I’d rather not starve this spring, if you don’t mind.”

Carrie examined the stack with a frown. Amber couldn’t tell if she was frowning because of the lack of potatoes or because of Oliver. Or maybe Greg. Then again, she might have been frowning for herself since she wasn’t looking too hot.

Amber tried to picture Carrie through Greg’s eyes. Carrie had potential. Depending on the light, her hair was the color of dark honey and waved down a little past her shoulders. When it was clean. Right now, it looked dull and limp. Her skin was too fair and too freckled. Nothing they could do about that. Not to mention her yellow work shirt clashed with her light skin. Carrie had seen better days, and that just wouldn’t do. Not with a hot, new guy around.

Carrie looked up. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re not wearing that, are you?” Not that Carrie had many choices—none of them did. But Amber wouldn’t be caught dead in that dingy, yellow shirt, and that was her. Sadly, Carrie only had two shirts right now, which meant she had to choose between kind of ugly and really ugly. Amber just had to convince her to go for her non-work shirt. “You know you have to wear mom’s blouse, right?”

“And add fuel to the fire? No thanks. Everyone knows my clothes down to my socks. If I show up in that blue blouse, they’ll think I’m trying to impress Greg.”

“Which you are,” Amber said. “First impressions are everything.”

“It’s a little too late for that,” Carrie muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” Carrie leaned against the counter. “What makes you think Greg cares about what I wear?”

Amber smiled. Her sister was cute. Totally clueless, but cute. “He’s a guy. Believe me, he’ll care. But if it makes you feel better, I’m wearing my pink shirt, and Lindsey’s wearing her sweater. And if you want,” Amber added because she was feeling generous, “I’ll even do your hair.”

five

Greg watched the people file back into his grandparents' home, calculating. This clan was unlike any he'd seen. One guy chopped wood, one kept the houses in working order, another two or three hunted full-time, and another traded on the black market for supplies. With goats for milk and school for the kids, he felt like he stepped five years back in time—or more accurately, two hundred years since they still didn't have access to modern technology. Not that Greg was complaining. He'd used a real toilet with flushing water. His grandma's only condition was that he fill up the tank with water from the well afterward, a small price to pay after five years of digging outhouses. Pooling so many resources made Logan Pond into a thriving society, and his business-minded brain churned with the possibilities.

The aromas from the kitchen brought him back to the room: warm rolls, carrots bathed in butter, and a venison roast he envisioned dripping with juices. Each new scent floated in the air, taunting him. It had been eight months since he'd eaten a decent meal, and it drove his deprived stomach crazy with anticipation.

He watched his mom help with the last of the preparations. Greg wondered if she thought it was as strange to be at his grandparents' without Kendra as he did. Probably not. She looked happy. Skinny, but happy. It would be good for her to eat real food again, too.

Stomach growling, Greg twisted around in his chair to figure out what was taking so long. Half the clan stood around chatting, in no hurry whatsoever. The last of the stragglers came in the front door. His eyes stopped on one in particular.

“Hello, Carrie,” his grandpa said. “Don’t you look nice. You can set your things on the table.”

Carrie looked up and spotted Greg at that same kitchen table. Greg’s eyes narrowed in warning. He’d been in Shelton all of six hours, and his grandma already planned out the rest of his pitiful life for him, future wife and all. Carrie would not be sitting at their table tonight. Or ever.

She turned back. “Actually, CJ, I thought I’d sit by Amber and Zach tonight.”

“May insists,” CJ said, patting her hand, “and you know better than to fight her. Here, I’ll take the potatoes.”

So his grandpa was in on it, too. Greg folded his arms, daring Carrie to take up his offer. Wisely, she made a wide circle around the table and joined the others in the kitchen finishing the preparations.

Even more annoyed, Greg sat back. Every minute he had to inhale those delectable scents felt like a year. Seriously, how hard was it to put a roast on a plate?

Finally with a rap of a wooden spoon, his grandma announced it was time to eat. Greg jumped up, plate in hand, but his grandpa grabbed his arm.

“We feed the children first,” his grandpa said.

“You can’t be serious.” Greg didn’t mean to let the thought slip out of his mouth, but that same mouth was on the verge of starting a violent revolution if it wasn’t pacified soon. Dejected, he sat back and counted the small heads. Sixteen kids in this clan. *Sixteen!* With the way pimply teenage boys ate, it might as well be thirty.

Adding to Greg’s dislike of her, Carrie followed behind a few kids and piled more on their plates than they could ever eat. He couldn’t decide what bothered him most about her: her thin figure—though there weren’t many women with curves anymore—or the smile which was too large for her face. She plopped a huge glob of potatoes on a toddler’s plate, deepening his opinion of her. No toddler in the world could eat that much.

“You’ll get used to how we do things up here,” his grandpa said. “Just give it time.”

“Yes, sir,” Greg muttered, which he meant to mean, *Yeah, right.*

He still wasn’t used to his grandpa with a beard either. And not just any beard. All the hair he’d lost on top had gathered and multiplied on his face, creating a bushy white beard that could pass for Santa’s if Santa

was as skinny as a twig. His grandpa had dropped fifty pounds—at least—but he still wore the same clothes. A cream, button-down shirt hung loosely on his hunched frame, and his tan Dockers were five sizes too big, cinched tight at the waist with a frayed belt that could snap any moment.

Even scarier, Greg's grandma had grown out her white hair. It hung past her shoulders but was too thin to be elegant. She wore thick round glasses which sat halfway down her nose. Both grandparents were missing teeth, which solidified Greg's opinion that while the Collapse hadn't been kind to anybody, it was especially cruel to the aged.

Speaking of which...

His mom pulled out the chair next to him. She still wore a smile even though she looked exhausted and had to have been as famished as he was. Maybe she hadn't seen how many kids were in this clan.

Gritting his teeth, Greg tried to calm his irritation. It was the exhaustion talking. The fear of the future. The starvation and hope of a better life he wished to quell in case it was unwarranted. Things here couldn't be as good as they appeared.

He focused on the men again. All were lean and trim which was good. He had no tolerance for freeloaders. A few men were on the younger side, but even then, they were in their early thirties. Fine by Greg. In spite of what his mom thought, he didn't need any friends. And in spite of what his grandma thought, he didn't need—or want—a girl. All he wanted was some stinking food!

Finally his grandma called out, "Alright. The children are done, so the adults can—"

Greg was to the food before she finished. He piled his plate high with buttered carrots, herbed potatoes, and several slices of venison and pheasant. His plate wasn't big enough, but he was more than willing to go back for seconds or thirds.

Or fourths.

Being the first to the food meant he was the first back to the table. Unfortunately, he wasn't alone.

"Hi, Greg," Carrie said.

She looked different up close. Better—kind of. Five years ago, he would have considered her plain with her light brown hair and freckled skin. Now she looked typical. No makeup. No frills. Except her blue blouse which didn't belong in the harsh clan environment. They made

her large, blue eyes stand out, her only decent feature. Nobody else dressed up for dinner. Or did their hair.

Can she be any more obvious?

Ignoring her, he started on the mashed potatoes, practically shoving them in his mouth. As the buttery taste hit his tongue, a groan escaped him. He couldn't help it. Hunching over his plate, he moved to the carrots with the same result.

"Looks like you were hungry," Carrie said.

Man, she's bright. Refusing to respond to such a stupid comment, he focused on shrinking the pile in front of him. Carrie finally took the hint and left. Hopefully for good.

The others returned slowly, first his mom, followed by his grandparents. All had plates half as full as his. His mom shot him a dark look which he ignored as he continued to clean his plate of every last scrap of food.

Halfway through the venison, his grandma looked up. "Where do you think you're going, young lady? I thought you were sitting by my Gregory. CJ, didn't you tell Carrie to sit by Gregory?" His grandma motioned to the chair next to him. "You sit right there, Carrie."

Greg shot to his feet. Time for seconds.

When he reached the counter, he let out a growl. The venison was gone. Carrots, too. Thankfully there were plenty of potatoes. He stacked his plate with several scoops in spite of the glare a frizzy-haired lady gave him.

By the time Greg sat again, Carrie was in the chair next to his, talking animatedly to his grandpa. Greg scooted closer to his mom and busied himself with the next round of food. His stomach started to protest, having been empty far too long. He didn't care. The way he figured, vomiting would only make room for more.

"What do you think, Greg?" his grandpa asked. "Carrie's predicting an early spring."

"Not likely," Greg said. "It's freezin' out there, and it's a week into March."

Carrie, who hadn't touched her food yet, smiled her large smile at him. "I've been tracking the weather for the last few years, and so far this year's temperatures are ahead of the others."

"Maybe you shoulda spent the last month in knee-deep snow," he said. "Then see if you figure it's gonna be an early spring."

“Carrie keeps a weather journal,” his grandma said, quick to jump on the Carrie bandwagon. “She’s never missed a day in the last five years. Not one. We don’t even have a thermometer, but she tracks the temperature based on how it feels on her skin.”

Greg turned. “Your skin, huh? That sounds scientific.”

Carrie’s chin dropped, hiding behind her thick, wavy hair. “I have a scale for how it feels. Ten is blistering hot, one is freezing, and seven is perfect. Today would be a four, which is pleasantly cool.”

“Since when is seven half of ten?” Greg snapped. “And you think today is pleasantly cool?” The chick got more annoying by the second. “You obviously haven’t been outside ‘cause if you had, you’d know there’s nothin’ pleasant about—”

His mom elbowed him. Hard. “I hope you’re right, Carrie,” she said, smiling amidst her violence. “I’m more than ready for spring. Greg and I headed west to avoid winter as long as we could. But once we started north, I tired of the cold real fast. We spent weeks on end waitin’ for the weather to let up, all the while Greg hollering on about how I made him leave the South.”

With Carrie on one side of Greg and his mom on the other, Carrie had to lean forward to see around him. “I can’t imagine what that was like, Mariah.”

Greg had the sudden urge to scoot closer to his food—blocking her view.

That time his mom kicked him full-on. He winced, but it worked. Carrie turned her attention back across the table where it belonged.

“Anyway, CJ,” Carrie said, “if we plant our early crops next week, we might be able to get in an extra round of peas before summer. Plus we’re low on onions. I’m anxious to get those started, too.”

“Next week?” Greg muttered. “I wouldn’t start crops next week if I was in North Carolina. Heck, I wouldn’t start crops if I lived in Mexico. You shouldn’t plant for at least five weeks, more like six or seven.”

“Greg’s right,” his grandpa said. “It’s still a little early. We could have snow for several weeks yet.”

“No,” Carrie said, “this year is warmer. It’s ahead of the curve.”

Greg’s grandpa gave her a patronizing smile. “I’m sure it is. We still better plant mid to late April.”

Greg was happy to know the old man still had some sense left in him. It was even better to see that, once defeated, Carrie shut up and picked at her meager amount of food. That left Greg to enjoy his dinner in peace.

His mom took over talking, reliving their trek north, only this time she spared the cutesy lies and told it straight. Propaganda in the municipalities, police brutality, and the emergency laws which showed no sign of repeal.

“The day before we left,” she said, “I watched a group of kids get clubbed down for starting a non-loyalist demonstration. They were just messin’ around—they were just kids for cryin’ out loud!—but the patrolmen didn’t even give them a chance.” Her voice dropped in volume. “Like the boy outside the barn, right?”

Greg’s pile of potatoes was shrinking, his stomach doing the opposite. He took a swig of water. The well water up north tasted metallic but not intolerable. Still, his stomach churned. There was no way he was letting the food come up. He picked up his fork to shove it down with more.

“Right, Greg?” his mom said.

He looked up and saw her waiting for his response. He thought about the boy at the barn and had none.

“We’re a broken nation,” his mom said, watching him with a sad, long look. “If you can even call us that anymore.”

“But don’t you think things will turn around?” Carrie asked.

“Honestly?” His mom sighed. “Not anymore. Before we spent a few weeks in that Raleigh municipality, maybe. But the things we’ve seen, Carrie...”

“I know it’s bad right now,” Carrie said, “but President Rigsby is working on it. It’s only been five years. It has to get better, I know it will. America is a resilient land filled with resilient people. We’ve always come through hard times a better and stronger nation. I’m sure we’ll pull through this depression even more—”

Greg slammed down his fork. “Depression? It takes an economy to have a depression. The dollar’s worth nothin’, and the only jobs are for people willing to align themselves with the new regime—the same regime which obliterated the free-market system to rid itself of any competition. Exactly what part of that is a depression?”

Carrie’s cheeks colored. “Um...”

“There’s not a single Fortune 500 company left,” Greg plowed on. “They were either wiped out or went overseas. The government coulda

saved things if they'd just set reasonable risk-based and minimum capital standards. But did they? No. Depression, my foot!"

"Greg was working on a business degree when the market crashed," his mom said.

He shot her a dark glare. He wasn't talking about himself. He was talking about the economy.

His mom went on anyway. "His dream was to be a big finance guy at one of those—"

"Ma," he cut in.

"—big businesses on Wall Street. But I'm afraid there's no big businesses anymore. Small ones either."

He grunted. "You done?"

His mom flashed him a smile. "Maybe."

Carrie pushed the carrots around her plate. "My dad was in finance, too. He was a Senior Analyst at a bank in Chicago."

"Yeah?" Greg quipped. "And how's that workin' out for him? Did he predict his bank would go belly up, or was he the cause of it? Or was he smart enough to know what was comin' and jumped ship? Did he cash out in time and bury his fortune in your backyard, 'cause if so, where is he?" He looked around in jest. "I'd love to meet him, 'cause only the best of the best go into finance at a time like this, right?"

Carrie blinked rapidly but said nothing. Neither did anybody else.

Smug, Greg nodded. "I didn't think so."

It was silent a long, awkward moment before his mom leaned close.

"Carrie's father passed away after the Collapse," she whispered. "Same with her mom. You wanna rethink what you just said, son?"

Greg stopped mid-chew. He glanced around. His grandma's expression could have killed him a couple times over. Same with everybody else's—everybody's except Carrie, who had her head down, hiding behind her honey-colored waves again.

Still in a violent mood, his mom smacked him under the table.

"Sorry," Greg blurted.

"That's okay." Carrie took a quick breath and looked up, although her eyes didn't quite reach Greg's again. "Actually, my dad believed the answer to America's problem wasn't in big business anyway. He said America was built on ma and pa shops, little burger joints and farmers markets. Maybe it will be again. Our clan alone could produce a few

small shops. Like the little flower shop on the corner of Main Street. Do you remember it, May?"

Greg's grandma went Jekyll and Hyde on him. In an instant, she was grinning wide enough to show her missing molars. "Buds and Roses? Oh, I loved that place. They had the most exquisite orchids."

Carrie smiled. "I know. Mom and I used to go there all the time. Now it's boarded up and has weeds growing out of every corner, but I'd love to fix it up someday. I know it seems crazy, but I haven't given up on my dreams." Her blue eyes flickered sideways. "Neither should you, Greg. You never know what the future holds."

"The future, huh?" he said. "So let me get this straight. You figure sometime you're gonna find a job—which doesn't exist—earn a boatload of money—which even the most corrupt officials don't have—and somehow get enough money to buy your house and citizenship back from the crooked government that robbed you of every last dime in the first place? Then you'll fix up some shop to sell"—he waved a hand in the air—"whatever to people who don't own a cent. Is that about right?"

Carrie's shoulders lowered. "I don't know. I guess. Maybe all it takes is for town after town to produce small shops which grow into bigger shops until the banks can reopen and America can get back to what it was. Right, CJ?"

Greg's grandpa stroked his bushy white beard. "I don't think so, Carrie. I'm afraid we're not recovering from this one. We're in too deep this time."

She couldn't have looked more shocked if he'd slapped her. "No. I can't believe that. America is better than this. I know it is."

"Not anymore," Greg and his grandpa said at the same time.

With that cheery thought, they all settled into a quiet rhythm of eating and wanting to kill themselves—or the person next to them.

After a minute, Greg's grandma reached a bony hand across to him. "Gregory dear, Carrie should show you around the neighborhood. No one knows it better than her. There's a beautiful little spot down by the pond where the two of you might wander. Don't worry about hurrying back." She finished by attempting to wink inconspicuously at Carrie.

Oh, you gotta be kiddin' me.

Greg glared at Carrie again. She just couldn't take a hint.

Carrie's ears turned bright red. "I think Zach's too close to the fire," she said softly. "Excuse me." With that, she was up and out the back door.

Greg almost grabbed her full plate, but his stomach rolled in protest. He was getting weak in his old age. Without refrigeration, though, he figured all the leftovers were a waste anyway. Better his waist than the goats' out back.

As he reached for it, his mom elbowed him.

"What?" he snapped.

She motioned to the back door.

Did she honestly expect him to follow Carrie? From the three anxious faces around the table, he guessed that's exactly what he was supposed to do.

He threw down his napkin. *Fine. If that's what they want.*

"I'll be back in a sec," he said. "Don't clear that plate."

6

Greg waited inside the back door while Carrie chastised the pre-teens standing too close to the fire. When she finished, she wandered over to admire the oversized empty garden. *Waiting for her escort*, he seethed.

He burst through the door and stormed across the lawn. It only took two steps for the freezing air to penetrate his thin t-shirt.

“You call this ‘pleasantly cool?’” he said.

Carrie jumped a foot and whirled around. She laid a hand over her heart. Without meaning to, he’d startled her, giving him a wicked sort of thrill. She recovered quickly and unwrapped her skinny arms.

“Once you get used to our weather up here, Greg, you’ll find it perfect.” She took in a deep breath, an unwise thing considering the proximity of the smelly milk goats. “Definitely pleasantly cool.”

His eyes narrowed. “Look, I don’t know what kinda ideas you got in that head of yours, or what you’ve schemed up with my grandma about the two of us, but let me be perfectly clear: I’m not interested.”

She blinked a few times. “Excuse me?”

“I plan on makin’ this my home, so you and my grandma need to leave me alone.”

She blushed right through her freckles. “Oh, I didn’t—”

He spun on his heel and marched back inside.



Carrie didn’t move until the wet grass seeped through the tear in her left shoe and her toes started to freeze. She was tempted to go home, but that would only draw more attention. But neither would she go back to that table. Ever again.

So she headed to the well, filled up two buckets, and found the darkest corner of the kitchen to start the massive dinner cleanup. It wasn't long before Mariah and several others were helping. Even the older kids were expected to clear tables and dry dishes after a clan dinner, although for once Carrie wished everyone wasn't so efficient.

She took her time wiping down the last of the counters, shining them to perfection. Sadly, even that job couldn't last, leaving her nothing to do but socialize like everyone else, the thing she was desperate to avoid.

Usually she would have pulled out a deck of cards and played Canasta with May, but May was busy talking to her daughter next to a pair of murderous eyes. Amber and Zach disappeared downstairs with the other teens, which didn't leave Carrie many options. She made her way into the living room where the younger married women huddled around Jenna Kovach's newest patch quilt.

The four women looked up, surprised she'd joined them, but they were civil enough to allow Carrie into the conversation. Jenna was explaining the intricacies of quilting, including the new pattern she started. It was supposedly a block pattern, although to Carrie it looked more like stars.

"Vanessa thinks this pattern is too small," Jenna said. "As if she's the expert. She told me the three inch would have looked better."

"That's just like her," Sasha Green said. "Nitpicking everything. She drives me crazy."

"I know. Now all I'm going to hear is, '*You should have used the three inch, Jenna. The three inch!*'"

The women laughed supportively. Carrie glanced over her shoulder. Vanessa Green was Sasha's next door neighbor—and incidentally also her mother-in-law. Vanessa was visiting with Mariah within earshot, but if she heard her name being slandered, she gave no notice.

"I think the blanket looks nice, Jenna," Carrie offered.

"It's a quilt," Jenna said. "But thanks, Carrie. Maybe you should tell that to Vanessa. Or you can, Sasha, since I know how much you love Dylan's mom."

Another round of laughs.

Sighing, Carrie focused on the quilt itself. It wasn't the prettiest one Jenna had made, patched together with red and orange scraps from the clan. But come winter, it would be warm and whichever family was

slotted to get it wouldn't care about anything else, including the size of the pattern.

Jenna leaned forward. "What do you ladies think of our newest clan member? All I can say is *yum-my*. You know you have to share, right Carrie?"

Carrie's eyes widened. "What?"

"Oh, don't pretend you didn't notice. You were the only one smart enough to dress up," Jenna added with a laugh.

Then Jenna and the three married women launched into a conversation unfit for married women, discussing Greg's physique head to toe. They paused once to ask Carrie's opinion. She had none, leaving them to giggle and goggle in a way that would have made even Amber blush.

It had been awhile since Carrie had been that miserable. She was about ready to hang out with Butterscotch and Chocolate, the two milk goats, when Mariah made her way over to the small group, stopping the Greg talk dead in its tracks and turning it safely back to quilts.

Three loud knocks on the front door interrupted them. The room went quiet. Three loud knocks was Oliver's signal. In all the commotion, Carrie had forgotten it was Thursday.

"It's just Oliver, our local patrolman," Carrie said to Mariah.

Mariah's green eyes bulged. "Who?"

"Oh. It's not like that," Carrie said. "Oliver helps our clan. I know it's strange, but he's actually a good friend. He's not like other patrolmen."

CJ maneuvered through the people and opened the door. Carrie couldn't see Oliver from where she sat, but she heard his soft voice greet CJ, a voice that seemed to echo in the now-silent house.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Trenton," Oliver said. "Carrie wasn't home, so I wondered if she might be here." Oliver took a step forward, placing him in view. He wore his typical green uniform and beige tie, accentuating his tall, lanky body. His face, also long and rectangular, showed small eyes darting around the room nervously. "Looks like everyone's here today."

"Yes," CJ said. "They are. Can I give Carrie a message for you?"

Carrie was struck by the edge in CJ's manner. Normally he would have invited Oliver in for dinner, but CJ was nearly blocking the door. Then Oliver spotted Mariah in the crowd, and Carrie understood why. He tensed and scanned the room, finding Greg as well.

"Who are they?" Oliver said.

CJ sighed. “My daughter and grandson have just arrived from North Carolina, Officer Simmons. We’re having a dinner to celebrate.”

Oliver stiffened. “Cards.”

Mariah grabbed Carrie’s arm. “Greg and I don’t have any cards,” she whispered.

“That’s okay. Neither do we,” Carrie assured her.

“Please, Oliver,” CJ pleaded. “They’re family.”

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said. “I need to see their identification cards and travel permits. Otherwise...”

His threat hung in the air.

Stunned, Carrie stared at him. The government required everyone to carry cards these days—required, and yet only three people in the clan actually did: May and CJ, who as fortunate homeowners were granted a yellow citizenship card; and Terrell, who kept his blue card current to sneak in and out of the municipality fences for supplies. That was it. The other thirty-one had nothing. All of them had been deemed illegal citizens of the United States. Which Oliver knew.

So what’s two more?

Then it started.

Jeff Kovach stood, a man built like a bear with a personality to match, followed by others. Greg stood as well, feet planted, arms folded, with a cold, unbending expression, making his stance clear. There would be no arrests today.

Through disbelieving eyes Carrie watched Oliver—quiet, shy Oliver, now outnumbered thirty to one—calmly square his shoulders, lay a hand on the gun she forgot he wore around the clock, and demand once more, “Cards!”

END OF SAMPLE

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