

I want to ask my mother what it was like for her when she fell in love, how she knew that she loved my father so deeply that she gave up her own dreams for his. I want to ask her if I'm crazy for giving up a great opportunity, attending the university in Sector Two, something that I've worked for all my academic years. I want her to tell me that she needs me and that she's happy that I'll be here and not miles away. But there's no time for any of these questions, there's no time for anything at all. As the buzzer goes off indicating that our food is ready, another sound breaks through the air. A loud siren, echoing off the houses and penetrating through my skull like a hammer. My mom's eyes are wide with fear as she shoves me to the front door. I swing it open and see a bright ball of fire in the distance, red, like the sun has begun to hurl itself through the sky. Red like my flaming red hair, bobbing along the tree-lined path by the lake where I jog with Aiden. Red-hot, like the pain I know Aiden will feel when I tell him that I cannot commit to him, not yet. It's not the sun, no way. It can't be! Without warning, without an explanation, without any time to react or plan, it's here. It is the most unreal moment of my life and, unfortunately, I can't move.

*Oh my God, Oh my God!* I stand awestruck as the blazing ball of light penetrates the sky, lighting it up like the whole world is on fire, expanding out like a golden umbrella. I'm panicking, I can feel it. The shaking begins deep down and works its way to the surface. The drills come back to me in an instant: leave all your belongings, head directly to the shelters deep underground or to the cryobanks, run as fast as you can. My instinct is to run but Aiden pops into my head, his golden hair and those chocolate brown eyes. Where is he? Will he be okay? Will he make it to his cryotank? I dash away from the open door just as my mom runs through it and I get to the halo screen and punch in his name, Aiden Veka.

“Damn it!” I stumble over the keypad until I get it right on the third try. I can hear the halo screen trying to connect and then I see his face and I take a deep breath.

“Wren!” he exclaims. “Go to the cryobank. I sent a car. It should be right outside!”

“Aiden,” I say, staring into his eyes that look as afraid as I feel. His mouth is a straight line, his brows are furrowed and there is a hint of stubble covering his chin. I see him glance behind and hear the chaos outside that must mirror my own. He is panicking too, but not for himself. Of course, in the worst possible moment, when our lives are hanging by a thin thread, Aiden thinks of me first.

“Go!” he yells, sharply. I push back from the halo screen but then turn back, grasping for the edge of it.

“Tell me you’re going, Aiden. Don’t do anything heroic. Promise me.” He nods, frantically. He leans in closer until his face fills the screen.

“I love you, Wren, I’ve always loved you and I’m sorry,” he says. I hesitate, knowing what I should say but unable to say it, and in that moment of hesitation the screen goes blank. I don’t waste another second and hurl myself out of my front door. Where is my mother? My eyes scan the scene quickly, searching for her. The light is blinding and the sudden heat oppressive. I cup my hands around my eyes, and I see her in the crowded street in front of our house. Everyone is panicked and running for their lives. The constant siren adds another layer to the terror while my once-civil neighbors push and shove their way through the street, running to the rail trains or to the underground. I can just make out random shouts through the noise.

“They did it! They sent their nukes!”

“This is it! I hope we gave them more of the same!”

It's everyone for themselves, all our nation's ideas of systematic conformity out the window. All the peaceful care that our citizens are encouraged to show for others and the idea that, at least here in our nation, we take care of our own, are all trampled over like ants on the sidewalk. Everyone runs except my mother who has stopped to help an elderly woman who has fallen and is in clear danger of being stomped on. I recognize the gray-haired bun perched on top of Mrs. Connor's head, the widow who lives next door. My mother pulls her to her feet and whispers something in her ear, calming words, I'm sure, words that will do absolutely no good here. Useless words. The light is blinding, and I can see small fires beginning to catch. A tree, a fence, a house, all begin to smoke and burn. My skin feels the prickle of heat, it's hot and the intensity is growing by the second. Luckily, the electric car that Aiden ordered pulls in and blocks the street. The mass of crazed people notices it too. A man points to the car and shouts to the rest of those surrounding him. There's no way I'm letting them take my ride to safety. I won't make it to the cryotanks on foot, not with this mob.

"Mom!" I call. "You have to come now!" I run to the car before someone can hijack it and place my palm on the lock pad. The door snaps open and I throw myself inside. My finger hovers above the closing switch as I scan the street once again for my mother. There she is, only feet away, her arm around Mrs. Connor, pulling her gently toward the car. My mother's eyes are wide with fear and shock as she drags the old woman faster. Her hair, like mine, is a flame mixing with the world around us, wild, untamed. It strikes me at this moment how much we are mirror images of each other. Her deep green eyes, like moss, beg me to be safe, her full bottom lip quivers as I'm sure mine does, and her small willowy frame and delicate hands struggle to keep Mrs. Connor upright.

Suddenly, a man bursts from the crowd, heading toward the car. His face is twisted with rage, his thick arms bulging with taut muscles, ready to mow down anyone in his path. He plows into my mother, causing her to lose her step and fall. She brings down Mrs. Connor who looks like she might not recover from the impact. I let out a cry as the man locks eyes with me and I know in an instant what his intentions are. It's either me or him and, without another thought, I jam my finger onto the closing switch and the car door snaps shut, leaving my mother abandoned along with the man. I press my face against the back window as the car begins to lurch forward, screaming for my mother to run. Our eyes lock one last time and I see her nod and release Mrs. Connor who does not move. *She'll make it*, I think. She has to. She will make it to the underground and find her way to the cryobank. I'll meet her there.

As the car weaves through my neighborhood, heading to my cryobank located a few miles to the north, the streets are packed. More running people, the sky ripped with explosions as gold and white-hot chunks of something burst out like fireworks, hitting the ground with sizzling force. Just as I decide to lock myself into the safety harness, there is an even bigger explosion of glass and metal. Two rail trains have collided, and I watch as they fall from the track, landing ten stories below in a mass of debris. There are other electric cars like mine speeding their way to wherever they have been programmed to go. I worry that, with all the foot traffic, mine may hit someone. It jostles back and forth using avoidance technology, making me nauseous. The continuous siren is joined by a symphony of shouts and screams and cries from my community in panic. If I could fly up into space, I wonder if this is what I would see covering the entire planet: a messy end-of-the-world movie scene. But this is not a movie and my gut clenches with the pain of it. All I can do is press my forehead against the window and watch in horror, trying to control my rapid breathing and my limbs that won't stop shaking.

Aiden has programmed the car controls to take me directly to the cryobank where both of our families own tanks. After decades of advancements, the science of Cryogenics has advanced. My body will be suspended, frozen in time to be revived in the future, perhaps at a time when the world has replenished itself, when this nightmare is all over. There are banks located all over the country, gathered around the bigger cities and spreading out into the farming communities. The tanks are expensive, though, and very few can afford them. What will happen to those people now, those whose only chance are the underground bunkers? I continue to watch out of the windows as my car hurls me forward, quicker than I've ever traveled. The hideous ball of light is spreading, getting closer. The thing is so bright that I can't look into it. The clear reality hits me hard that this is the end of everything. This is it! And what is even worse is that no visions of my life flash before my eyes, no memories that I'm thankful for, only complete and utter terror as my mind and body race for self-preservation.