

What Little Remains
By Gabriella Wise

The Fallout Trilogy:
Book 1

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To my brother,
you know why.

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EPILOGUE

April 1

Chapter 1

"They aren't back yet," I say, pacing in front of the gate that leads out into the world. The gate doesn't look like much, but it is made up of thick, six-inch planks of wood with metal backing on either side. Different pieces of sheet metal were welded together and then bolted down into the wood.

The sun is starting to set, casting a hazy glow on the world. They should be back by now.

"They always run late, and you always freak out," Daren responds, looking bored. No one else would notice the tension in his mouth and eyes. He has a good poker face, which comes in handy as second-in-command.

With tattoos covering his dark brown arms, chest, and upper back, he looks like the kind of guy who has a criminal record. That is the attitude that he likes to give off, but I know the truth. He's actually very intelligent.

"Charlie, you're making me nervous," he says, leaning back against the wall.

"We should be nervous," I say, resting against the wall across from him. "Ricky is always back before dark."

"He'll be here," Daren promises.

It's hard to believe him. I know how dangerous the outside world is. Six months ago, a series of natural disasters took out much of the world we knew. We have no idea how many people survived "the storms". Only two people walked out of Appleheart, my small town of two thousand: Ricky McQueen and me.

Ricky and I grew up together, and he is the reason that I am still alive.

Before the storms happened, I was a daughter and a sister, and my biggest worries were college applications and finding a date to prom. Over a period of two months, the storms killed almost everyone, including my parents and my little brother, Danny. I thought I would live and die in Appleheart. There are days I wish I did.

No one was safe from Mother Nature. She brought down building after building, town after town, life after life. There was no place to hide, and only a few lucky people survived. We were forced to find a place to regroup after the storms claimed the lives of everyone we knew. People, like Ricky and me, headed to Fort Lee because we thought we would be safe there.

When we arrived here, right after the storms swept through, there were very few survivors, and the military base was destroyed. The only thing that was left was an underground bunker where a few survivors waited out the storms. Most of the survivors from Fort Lee weren't much older than me and I am only eighteen. Everything that I see has been built over the last seven months.

No one was prepared for a natural disaster of this scale. People who came to Fort Lee were looking for security, but the soldiers that survived were looking for a leader. That's when Ricky stepped up and eventually took charge of our community.

Outside of the compound, surrounded by its own wall, is farmland. We grow what we can, including tomatoes, carrots, and broccoli. Mostly, we rely on whatever meat the hunters can bring back. We don't have the space to keep many farm animals, but we do manage to keep a chick coup with nine hens and one rooster.

"What if—," I start, but Daren stops me.

"Don't go there. You know Ricky. He loves to make a dramatic entrance," he says.

I bite my lip, unconvinced. Without a government to keep people in order, some people have decided to live a more dangerous life, taking things from others. We call these people scavengers. I have never seen one, but several people who Ricky has brought back tell stories of their encounters with them. Each group leaves a signature mark after they raid an area.

Some burn down everything. Others hang the bodies of those they kill from trees or buildings. One twisted group cuts people they capture into pieces, scattering the pieces for animal scavengers to feed on. A circle-of-life type thing.

This is a world I never imagined living in. A world without my parents, without a government, and without all the modern conveniences that I took for granted. Knowing what I know about the world and the people that are in it, it is hard for me not to fear the worst when Ricky leaves.

"I see someone coming," one of the guards shouts to Daren. "I think I see Jack, but I can only make out five people."

My heart sinks and my vision blurs. Six people left four days ago.

"Which way?" I ask the guard.

He points, and I look at Daren. His poker face is on, but I can tell he's startled. Ricky has never lost someone before.

"Get everyone away from this gate," he orders, pushing off of the wall. "Keep people away. No panic."

The guard nods and grabs another guard to help him. A lot of the younger men here joined the guard to protect people. They go through extensive training lead by the survivors of the military base to prepare for the job. Very few men are skilled at using more than one weapon, but Daren and Ricky are both exceptional in hand-to-hand combat and with a knife. Ricky prefers a gun, though. There is more control when using a gun.

I see the look on Daren's face. He wants me to leave.

"I need to know," I say, crossing my arms. I mean it as a sign of defiance, but it hides my shaking hands.

The guards behind me are calling everyone to dinner at the bonfire, on other side of the camp. This is the first time Ricky has lost someone, so it has to be handled carefully. People can't be given the opportunity to panic.

"Here they come," Daren says, walking through the gate.

I follow, just a step behind him, anxious to see who's back. Jack is leading the group. It's hard to tell from this distance, but I think he's limping. He's been part of this group since the beginning, having been one of the surviving military guys. His dark face hides any emotions, and his black hair is plastered to his forehead. Alec, his blond hair coated with dirt, follows with two other soldiers. My heart starts beating a little faster until his face finally appears. Relief washes over me. I take off towards him, blowing past Daren who doesn't bother trying to stop me.

Ricky drops what he is carrying and opens his arms. I nearly knock him over as his arms wrap tightly around me, lifting me off the ground. Dirt and blood mask his usual musty smell.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he mumbles into my hair.

I pull back to get a better look at him.

Slight bruising dusts his cheek, and an open cut runs down his left arm, a slanted thick line from his elbow to an inch above his wrist. There is blood on his uniform, but I don't see any open wounds other than the cut on his arm. Other than the dark circles that are always under his green eyes, he looks okay. His dark brown hair falls just above his eyes, the back of his head dripping with sweat. His strong jaw sits under a stubborn-set mouth that is tight with emotion.

Chapter 2

I let him lead me back to the camp, his arm tight around me. He's leaning on me just enough to let me know how tired he is.

"How have things been on your end?" Ricky asks, surveying the area as we walk through the gate.

I shrug, suppressing my own curiosity. "Quiet, except for Daren. He wouldn't stop pestering me the whole time you were gone."

Ricky smiles as we progress back to our cabin. Daren follows behind the others to the medical cabin to see John, who is one of the original soldiers who was here when we arrived. To call him a doctor would be pushing it, but he's the closest thing we have to one. Ricky and the medic disagree a lot, but I like him.

Ricky closes the door behind him, and we sit at our kitchen table. None of the furniture in our cabin matches, but ours is one of the few cabins that has furniture. The kitchen table is stained and dented, but sturdy. Four chairs surround the square table with two extras against the wall that Ricky uses for bigger meetings.

Ricky sits, and I get a rag out of a cabinet for the cut on his left arm. Over time, I learned it is easier to just keep basic first-aid materials in the cabin. It makes it harder for him to refuse medical treatment. I sit next to him, handing him the rag and a water bottle.

"We were ambushed last night," he starts, wincing as he presses the rag against the cut. "Fifteen to six. We barely managed to get away, taking out at least seven of their men. I think they were part of a larger group."

That catches my attention. Normally, scavenger parties aren't large. The largest Ricky had ever run across was twenty. If that fifteen was a search party for a larger group, it means trouble. A group that big might be able to ambush a compound like ours.

"Who didn't make it back?" I ask.

"Brian. He surrendered," Ricky says, closing his eyes. "He got shot in the leg. I tried to carry him, but he refused. He laid down his gun and surrendered. I don't know what happened to him. We had to run."

"What about supplies?" I ask.

"They stole everything that we found. We were lucky to get away with our lives," Ricky says. "I need to talk with Daren, but I'm pretty sure that the search party was part of Razor's group."

Cold chills go down my spine. Razor has a reputation here. Several people we have taken in have barely survived him. He's a scavenger who has claimed most of the state of Virginia. He takes over compounds, using up all of their supplies before moving on to the next place. He and his men kill almost

all of the people that they come across, and the few who do get away have permanent reminders of the encounter.

"So you will have to leave again soon?"

"Probably," Ricky agrees. "Let's worry about that tomorrow."

Every time they go out for supplies, they look for gas, weapons, and any food they can find. The gas is for the generator that powers the bunker and the medical cabin. There is a lot of farmland within one hundred miles of here. Even though they are mostly unattended, some crops are still growing. To make sure that the food lasts, everything is closely monitored.

Another necessity they search for is scrap metal to make bullets, arrowheads, and knives.

In the beginning, when there were around sixty people settled here, the trips happened every two or three weeks. Now that the population is over one hundred, they go once a week. They would be gone an average of three days; two for shorter trips and four for the longer ones. Eventually, there won't be any more gas to bring back, so Ricky monitors its use closely.

As the leader, Ricky is careful about everything that happens on either side of these walls.

"Hey, don't look so serious. Everything is okay. I'm okay." Ricky says.

I take a deep breath. "I know."

His eyes meet mine. "Did you miss me?"

"Hmm," I say, standing up and walking around the table. "Not really. I didn't even notice that you were gone."

"Really?" he asks, raising his eyebrows and leaning back in his chair. His hair is starting to dry and is sticking up in the back. A cocky grin fills the corners of his lips. "Have a good time without me?"

I shrug, grinning. "Maybe. I'd tell you about it, but you need to see John. And I know that Daren wants to talk to you. And I have chores to do."

"You're going to leave? I just got back," he says, leaning forward.

I kiss his forehead; the bitter taste of sweat meets my lips. "If you'd been on time, we would've had over an hour together. Nicole got someone to cover for me in the kitchen and in exchange, I offered to clean the dishes so that I could see you when you got back."

He captures my hands, keeping me close. "Why don't you stay? Someone else can do it."

"I already promised Nic that I would help," I say, swinging our hands between us.

Ricky rolls his eyes. He doesn't like Nicole. She has a tendency to push his rules. She is constantly questioning every choice he makes, which drives him crazy. They don't agree on anything; Ricky reminds me of this on a daily basis.

She came here two months ago. She helps me in the kitchen and in the gardens. She is one of the only women here who will talk to me. I think it's because my dating Ricky intimidates the others, or

they're jealous. As great as Ricky and his friends are, I need girl time. Nicole challenges me, always pushing me to be better.

She's also helping me to realize how much I center my life on Ricky. Before, when he left, I wouldn't leave the cabin. I was paralyzed by fear he would never come back. I would let my fear and anxiety rule my life to the point where I was barely functioning. I wasn't living, just existing. She changed that. Something she said really changed my perspective.

"People live and they die. It's what makes us human. How you live your life, that's what matters."

So I'm working on a life outside of Ricky, pushing myself to do more to help out around the community. It made me happier and helped me to have fewer and fewer dark days. Occasionally the darkness creeps back, but I'm stronger now.

Ricky squeezes my hand, and I wrinkle my nose, coming back from my thoughts.

"I'm sorry. Listen, I know you and she don't get along," I say. "She is one of the only people who helps me around here. Besides, it's good for you that someone questions what you do. It'll keep you honest."

I look up at him and smirk. He shakes his head, his mouth set.

"I have you to do that for me. I don't need anyone else."

"Ricky, if I thought she was a threat, I'd be the first to let you know. I spend the most time with her. She pulls more than her fair share around here. So what if she's a little rough around the edges? Who here isn't? Besides, you can't throw her out. It isn't safe."

"I know, I know," he says.

Ricky stands, pulling my hands behind his back. He smiles as he leans down towards me. I close my eyes as he kisses my forehead and then my nose. Behind his back, he clasps my hands together before wrapping his arms around me. I go up on my tiptoes as he presses his lips against mine.

I smile against his mouth, and he backs me towards my bedroom, one of the few areas off-limits without an invitation from me. Having my own separate bedroom was the only reason that I agreed to move in with him. There are only two rooms in the cabin, this main area and mine. Ricky sleeps on a mattress in this main area so that I can have the privacy that comes with a room.

My back hits the door, and I laugh as he fumbles for the knob. That irritating, rational part of my brain remembers that I have a job to do, and that he needs to go see John. But when I'm with Ricky, rational thoughts get pushed to the side.

The door behind me swings open with a bang against the wall. His hands leave me for a moment and his bulletproof vest drops to the floor. I sit on the bed, watching him move. His movements are graceful and precise. He takes off the assortment of guns and knives, putting them on the ground.

"Where were we?" he asks, breathless. He puts his arms on either side of me. He presses his lips against mine.

I wind my fingers through his hair, not caring that his dirt is getting all over my clean bed. He scoots me back, lying on top of me. Running my hands over his back, my fingers grazing the raised, rough scars. Most of them are from scavengers. Around the campfire, he tells stories to the kids about fighting. His stories are outlandish and exaggerated, but the kids love it. The boys take what he says to heart; he is their role model. The little girls have huge crushes on him and giggle whenever he walks by. Most of the men roll their eyes at his stories, but no one challenges him.

Ricky pushes his hand under my shirt, resting it at my waist. His kisses me from my jaw to my neck, and trails his way back to my mouth. Someone knocks on the door. Ricky shakes his head before planting his mouth against mine to keep me from protesting.

"They'll go away," he mutters against my lips, shifting me further back on the bed so that we are both completely on it.

The knocking continues in a rhythm. I know who it is, and Ricky won't be happy about it.

A deep growl rumbles from his chest as he pulls his face away from mine. "Everything better be burning to the ground," he grumbles, and I bite my lip to keep from laughing. Then he shouts to whoever is banging. "What do you want?"

"Charlie," a muffled voice calls back.

"You don't have to go," Ricky says to me, closing his eyes, his frustration clear. "Let them handle it by themselves."

I kiss him on the lips, and then push out from underneath him; he falls off with a sigh and flops on the other side of the bed. "I'm coming," I holler to Nicole.

He stands with me, clearly not happy. I touch his face and give him a mock pouty face. "I'm sorry, babe, but you have your duties, and I have mine."

"I don't like having to share you," he mutters, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me close to him. "I want you all to myself."

I kiss his forehead. "I have responsibilities. That is part of life. And life doesn't care what anyone wants." I wiggle out of his arms and open the door to the large room, straightening my shirt as I walk. I glance back at Ricky, who is leaning against the doorframe with an unreadable look on his face.

Looking at him, my insides tingle like a million little fireflies are fluttering in my stomach. I've been with him for seven months, and he still makes me nervous. The look in his eyes is what concerns me. He wants something I'm just not ready to give.

"Go see John. Have him look at the cut," I order him, pointing a finger at him.

He raises his eyebrows, smiling. I hope he listens to me. He is horrible about asking for help and even worse when he has to ask for it from John.

Chapter 3

I open the door to Nicole's smug face. Her ruby red hair is pulled back into a messy bun. She's wearing a black tank top and dark jean shorts. She's five-foot-ten, and her skin is dusted with light freckles. Her green eyes always have a wicked gleam in them, and today is no exception.

"Hope I didn't interrupt anything good," Nic says, her eyes look behind me at a shirtless Ricky before I manage to close the door.

She might not like Ricky, but she doesn't discriminate when it comes to beautiful things.

"Even if you did, I wouldn't tell you."

When Nicole smiles, it is easy to see why she'd cause trouble. Nicole is the type of beautiful that should be on the cover of a fashion magazine. She knows it. She doesn't talk about her past, but from what I can guess, she used to be a model.

"Charlie," a voice calls from behind us as we get close to the bunker. "Nicole. Fancy seeing you all here."

Jogging up from behind me, Alec catches up and slows down to my pace. Having just come back from the mission, I didn't expect to see him out and about. I'm about to ask if John or Daren needs me when I realize he isn't even looking at me. The determination in the look he is giving Nicole makes it clear that he didn't come here for me.

Alec arrived at Fort Lee a little after Ricky and I did. He's tall, well over six feet, but lean. He is built like a runner. His friendly blue eyes that go well with his platinum blond hair, and they sit very nicely on a round, but handsome face. He is the one who found Nicole and carried her all the way here.

"Hey," I say, elbowing Nicole in the side. I don't keep a running list of her admirers, but she normally tells me about all of them. The look on Alec's face tells me that she forgot to mention one.

"You ladies going to clean up the mess in the kitchen?" Alec asks.

"Of course; someone has to do it," I say.

"I'll help carry dishes," he offers, flashing Nicole a lazy smile.

"Aren't you supposed to be on duty?" Nicole asks, raising her eyebrows.

"Ricky gave us the night off," Alec says, grinning at her. "But if you don't want my help..."

"We'll take it," I say, smiling at Nicole as she glowers at me.

"Lead the way," Alec says, mocking her with a bow.

"Actually, I already had someone put the dishes by the river for us," she says, smiling sweetly.

"But thanks for the offer."

Alec nods his head like he was expecting that. To my surprise he doesn't push. "You know where I am if you need me."

He saunters away like he knows we are watching him. I wait until he's out of earshot before smacking Nic's arm.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask, as we start walking out towards the north gate.

"Tell you what?" Nic asks coyly.

"That there was something going on between you two. Don't bother lying to me. It's obvious."

The guards on duty watch us as we pass, not saying anything. Normally, people aren't supposed to leave the compound this late. That rule is relaxed with me, especially when I'm doing these nighttime chores. My relationship with Ricky is public, allowing me a few special privileges. Unless he tells the guards that there is something I can't do, they don't question me. Nicole is a different story. She still gets her way, but she does it by flirting, intimidating, or by playing dumb.

"I thought we might've had something, but I was wrong," she says. "I don't care."

"He doesn't seem like he's going to back out that easily," I say, grinning.

Nicole has fiercely protected her heart since she arrived. I'm the only person that she let in. She never lets herself go beyond flirting or first base. I don't press her to talk about her past, but something bad must have happened to her.

It only takes ten minutes to walk to where we clean the dishes. There are two rivers that run on either side of the camp. The cleaner one, the one where we wash clothing, dishes, and ourselves, is out of the north gate. The other river is outside of the south wall and is where our basic little sewer system drains.

I sit on the dirt, next to the water, pulling out a rag. Now, the real fun begins.

"Whatever," she says, pushing her hair out of her face before settling next to me. She took her time responding to me. "I didn't like him. I was just having fun."

"I'm not judging," I say. "You know I don't. As long as you're happy, I'm happy for you. I'm just thinking about how awkward it'll be after you date the entire military force."

"Hey now," Nicole says, splashing water at me. "I have standards."

I laugh harder, splashing water back at her. "Yeah, male and breathing."

She scoops water up in a bowl she's cleaning and tosses it at me. It soaks through my shirt, seeping into my bra. I laugh even harder, splashing her even harder.

"Come on, we need to finish here," I laugh.

We continue scrubbing, giggling whenever we look at each other.

"So I noticed Ricky didn't come back with supplies," she says, trying to sound casual. "And they were one short."

I hesitate, looking around. "They were ambushed. Brian didn't make it back."

Nicole drops the plate with a splash.

"Wow," she says, leaning back on her heels. "Everyone else okay?"

I nod my head. "A little banged up, but somehow they managed to get away. They're going to go back out soon."

"Interesting," she says.

"What?" I ask.

That tone of voice is usually followed by her suggesting trouble and sometimes ends with me getting dragged into doing something that I don't want to do.

"Nothing. I was just thinking about having some fun," she says.

That look coming into her eyes worries me. I don't ask; she'll tell me her evil plans when she is ready to.

Eventually we finish scrubbing the dishes. I don't complain, but my hands are sore. I fill the jugs that we brought with clean river water. We treat the water back in the kitchens to kill the germs so that people have drinking water in the morning. Having a few boy scouts around is handy when the entire world comes crashing down.

"You just want to carry this?" I ask her.

"I don't care," she says, her shirt sticking to her skin.

We each grab a crate of dishes and two jugs of water. The plates are a mix of plastic and Pyrex. Both are light, easy to stack, and clean.

When I first got here, cooking was one of the only things that allowed me time to think. I was the only one who wanted to, and I could cook well. There was only a short period of time where I stopped cooking. It was after Ricky told me he found my little brother Danny's body.

It was the worst day of my life. It happened five months ago. He had just come back from a trip. Daren, Jack, and Ricky went back to Appleheart to see what they could find. He went looking for other survivors and supplies. We couldn't stay to look for Danny after the storms because I was badly injured. I needed medical attention beyond what Ricky could offer. A piece of wood sliced the upper part of my thigh. I barely held on until we made it to Fort Lee. We had to leave, but Ricky left a message in Appleheart in case there were survivors we didn't know about telling them that we would be at Fort Lee.

I was helping with the kids, occupying them while their parents were working. They had been building cabins and constructing the wall that surrounds the camp. I saw Ricky walk in and ask one of the other women to watch the kids while I talked to him.

"Charlie," he says, not meeting my eyes. "Can you talk?"

"Yes."

I follow him out of the main barracks, and he leads me back to his house. Our house. I just moved in so that someone else could use the cabin I was staying in.

He shut the door and turns to face me. That's when I noticed that his eyes are red-rimmed, and his face has no color in it. "Charlie, I . . . I found him."

There is no need for clarification. I know exactly who he is talking about. The one person in my life whose whereabouts are unknown. "Oh my God! Where is he? How is he?" I ask excitedly.

Ricky holds his hands up, his eyes turning glassy. "We found his body."

"No," I gasp, backing away from him. All of the hope that I had been holding onto, that I still had some family in this world, is gone. I gasp again, my lungs struggling to find air to breathe. My sight goes blurry, and I can't focus on anything.

"There was nothing we could do. He was gone—."

"NO," I scream, crumbling forward. "NO! DANNY! God NO!"

"I'm so sorry. It's going to be okay," Ricky says, his arms going around me, pulling me against his body.

"I want to see him. I need to see him," I say, grasping at Ricky's t-shirt trying to push myself out of his arms. "How do you know that it really is him?"

He pulls out a baseball hat from his pocket, one from the science center that Danny has worn since he was six.

"This was with—with the body," Ricky says, holding it out to me.

I take it in my hands, stepping away from Ricky. "I have to see him."

"You aren't going to do that to yourself. You need to remember him as he was, not what he looks like now."

That moment haunts me every day. Danny is always on my mind. Some days are easier than others. Some days I can put the sadness behind me. Other days, it's harder. The pain and the guilt are so overwhelming that it swallows me. We left Appleheart because I was injured. There is no way of knowing when Danny died, but I can't help but blame myself. If we had stayed and just looked, maybe we could have found him. Maybe he wouldn't be dead.

Nicole's laughter brings me back to the present. She's drawn the attention of the guards, and I see them nudge each other, their eyes on us as we walk in. Nicole demands attention, while I'm happy just passing through not drawing any attention.

We make our way down to the bunker. It isn't much. There are five rooms. Two small rooms on either side of the hallway and a larger one at the end of that we use as a kitchen. The other two are used for fuel and food storage. There are ten steps leading down into the fluorescently-lit hallway and the crates start to strain my arms as I get to the kitchen. I put them on the table and she does the same.

Stretching out my arms, I let out a big yawn. I have trouble sleeping when Ricky isn't here. Last night was no exception. Part of me believes that as long as I am up worrying about him, he will come home to me.

"Charlie, go home," she says, smiling. "I can clean up here."

"No," I say, fighting another yawn. "You cooked so I could wait for Ricky. I don't mind helping."

"It's okay. Really," she says, pulling out a couple pots and pouring the water into them. "All I have to do now is boil the water for tomorrow."

"Are you sure?"

"Seriously," she says, glancing up at me. "If you don't leave now, I'll take back the offer."

"Okay," I say, getting up before she can change her mind. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She smiles and starts to pour the water into the pots. I head out slowly. I don't want to go home, but I'm exhausted. I hesitate at the top of the stairs, taking in a deep breath of the night air. I can't be this selfish. I promised her that I would help with this. I can't just bail because I am tired.

I go back down the stairs. Ten feet from the kitchen I stop, realizing that Nic is not alone. She is propped up on the table where I eat. Her legs are wrapped around Alec's bare torso. I'm not sure where he came from, but it would definitely seem that Nicole is completely okay with the fact that I left. I back away slowly, seeing more of them than I ever wanted to see. They don't waste any time, and, before I can turn around, another piece of clothing hits the floor.

I head back up the stairs, shaking my head. I make my way back to the cabin.

Opening the door, I see that Ricky and Daren are talking quietly. Four empty glasses are on the table. The aroma of alcohol is in the air.

Ricky's dad drank to cope with the loss of his wife. Ricky never talks about it, but when his dad got drunk, he'd hit him. He wouldn't give it up, despite seeing the man that it made his father. It still bothers me, but I've all but given up arguing with him about it anymore.

I'm soaked and don't want to hear this conversation. They have to be planning their next outing, and I hate that Ricky is always leaving. Though I don't hate it as much as I hate his drinking.

"Night, Daren," I say, and he gives me a smile.

I ignore Ricky and go right to my room. Closing the door behind me, I tug off my wet clothing and pull on my nightshirt. I lay my wet clothing out on the crates I call my nightstand to dry.

I grab the matches off of my nightstand and light one, using it to light the few candles I have in my room. I would light the lantern, but I don't want to mess with it because I plan on going to bed soon. No point in wasting the gas.

I hear Daren laugh from the other side of the door. There was a time when we really didn't get along too well. While I might have known Ricky since we were children, Daren and Ricky have a really tight relationship. It has been in these last two months that Daren and I have really started to get along. He doesn't talk about his past, but I know his family died during the storms. Ricky told me that Daren was with his girlfriend when the tornado hit. He realized what was happening and tried to get her to safety but flying debris killed her. He loved her, and I don't think he is ready to move on from her yet. Not that I blame him.

The front door opens and then closes with some mumbling. A few moments later Ricky opens my door and closes it behind him. I run my brush through my wet hair, yanking out the tangles. My blond hair has gotten long, now coming halfway down my back. I've thought about cutting it, but I like it long.

I never liked long hair before the storms. My mom wanted me to grow it out for my senior year. I agreed, planning to chop it off right before college. Now I can't bring myself to cut it. I have my dad's round face with a small nose. I hold onto the parts of them that I can see in the mirror. It is the only thing I have left of them.

"Take a bath?" he asks, cautiously drumming his thumbs on the wood door. "I wasn't going to say anything, but it's about time. People were starting to complain."

"I'm surprised you can smell anything over the stench of whatever you are drinking."

"We were just planning the next outing. We have to get supplies to make up what we lost," Ricky says.

It is amazing how coherent he can sound even when he is hammered.

"Come on, Charlie," he says, walking towards me. "Don't start a fight. I just got home."

I close my eyes, letting my anger evaporate. I can't stay mad at him. Not after everything that he's been through today.

"I don't want to fight," I say.

"Neither do I," he says, uncrossing my arms and wrapping them behind his back.

He presses his lips against mine, gently like he used to. It only lasts for a second before it becomes the intense desire that I felt just a couple hours before.

His hand is hungry against my skin, his lips hot against mine. He pushes me back on the bed and slides on top of me. His hand moves under my back, and he lays me further back on the bed. I gasp at the roughness, but he doesn't stop. His stubble is like sandpaper against my skin, but the familiarity of it excites me.

My hand rubs up and down his back, and he takes it as encouragement. His hand trails under my shirt, resting on my bare skin above my shorts. I managed to get my hands between us and push him away. He doesn't go far.

"Ricky," I say, giving him another push. He always gets pushy when he drinks.

He leans back, a frustrated look on his face, but he takes a deep breath, and the frustration fades. "Okay, okay," he sighs.

I sit up, putting my pillow as a barrier between us. I love him. But the more he pushes me, the more uncomfortable it makes me. It wasn't always like this.

In the beginning, it was never this physical. We stole kisses whenever we could find a moment to squeeze them in. We would just sit, with me on his lap, and he'd whisper stories in my ear. Stories about our past and our future.

Then those stolen moments got fewer and farther in between. Instead, it became a public display. I thought it was sweet at first, but then it stopped feeling sweet. The way he was kissing me felt like he wanted everyone to see us together. Like he was trying to prove something to everyone watching. To prove that I was his, someone that no one else could ever have. I catch myself, every now and then, wondering if something is wrong with me for being annoyed. I keep pushing away the only person in this place that loves me. A lot of people have no one.

There is this place in my gut where something doesn't feel right. When Ricky is around and when he tries to push me, that place nudges me. I know that I am missing something. I just don't know what it is. Maybe I'm broken after losing my family. Maybe I will never love someone properly again.

Knowing he is frustrated with me but isn't going to push me any further, I change the subject. I move next to him, curling up against him.

"Why don't you tell me when you are leaving?" I ask, resting my head on his chest. I can hear the steady beat of his heart, so I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

"Three days," he says, his hand resting on my upper back.

"So not tomorrow, or the day after that, but that next tomorrow?" I clarify.

"Correct."

"You are always leaving me," I say, opening my eyes.

"I have to," he says, kissing the top of my head. "Believe me, I don't want to. I'd much rather be with you."

"Then how come when you are with me, you waste your time drinking?" I open my eyes, not sure where that came from. I didn't mean to say that.

"It's like you are trying to start a fight," Ricky says, pulling away from me.

I sit up, twisting to look at him. "I'm not trying to start anything. You just aren't the same when you drink."

He runs his hand through his hair. "I think I'm just going to go to bed."

"Hey," I say, tugging on his arm. "Please don't leave mad. I wasn't trying to start anything."

"You're right. I'm drunk. We should just talk later," he says, pulling out of my grip. "Night."

"Goodnight," I whisper as he walks out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

I roll on my side, putting my arm under my pillow. Guilt eats at my stomach. I didn't think that I was being too pushy, but I guess I was. I huff, rolling onto my back.

I should be happy. He admitted that I was right, which is a rarity. It doesn't feel like a victory. It feels like he's trying to placate me. That makes things even worse. He won't change until he feels that there is a serious problem, and he doesn't see his drinking as a problem. I don't even tell Nicole the brunt of it.

He doesn't realize that alcohol brings out the worst in him. These last couple of months, the drinking has gotten worse. When he gets drunk, completely wasted, he turns into his father. He has never hit me, but he yells, accuses me of cheating on him, and then ends up crying himself to sleep. Most of the time when he gets that drunk, Daren deals with him. No one outside of Daren and me know about Ricky's drinking problem. If they did, they would lose respect for him, and his leadership is one of the only consistencies people have here.

I think he started drinking to deal with the lives he had taken. Being orphaned in such a dramatic way affected Ricky, but when he started to have to kill people to survive, the drinking and controlling everything went to a whole new level. He drinks to stop feeling guilty. However, the drinking intensifies the guilt, so he continues drinking and never seems to realize how far he has fallen.

I get it though. I get using alcohol to ease the guilt. I've thought about it.

My own guilt is enough to drown me alive. I went to the soccer fields that day, to get in an extra practice. My parents came to get me, leaving Danny at home. When we were driving back, a tree fell in front of the car. We got out to run the rest of the way home. I got ahead of them, just a block ahead. They were running past the gas station and it blew. They died instantly and the force of the explosion buried me in rubble. I woke up; I didn't know how much time had passed. There was too much rubble on top of me for me to move. I thought I was going to die until I heard Ricky's voice.

My parents wouldn't have died if it weren't for me. And then I let them down again with Danny. I should have protected him. It is my fault that he's dead. He died scared and alone because of me. I live with that every day. Three people are dead because of my actions.

Their deaths took a big piece out of me. Something that I can never get back. I'm learning how to live with it.

April 2

Chapter 4

"Let me out!" I scream at the top of my lungs, banging my hands against the wall, but glass is breaking all around me. Something flashes off to the side, and I see my brother standing there, his hands covered in blood.

"Help me, Charlie! Please help me! I'm trapped!" Danny screams at me, banging his hands on a window, leaving red marks where his hands hit, the blood dripping down the glass.

I try to yell back at him, but nothing is coming out. I stand, and I try to run towards my brother, but the wind keeps blowing my hair in my face, and I can't see him. My legs won't carry me fast enough. He is slipping further and further away from me.

I find my voice. "NOOOOOO! NO come back! Don't leave me!" I start screaming, seeing the walls around me beginning to collapse.

"Charlie! Charlie, wake up! You need to wake up!" Ricky yells as he shakes me awake.

I sit up, almost knocking heads with him. Covered in a thick layer of sweat, my clothing is sticking to my body. Tears stream down my face, and Ricky's hands on my shoulders feel like ice.

"Charlie, what the hell were you dreaming about?" he asks, sitting back and letting his hands fall from my shoulders.

"Nothing . . . nothing . . . it was just a bad dream . . . just a dream," I tell him. My heart is pounding as I wipe away tears with the back of my hand.

Ricky studies me for a moment, knowing only a few things could upset me. "It was about Danny again, wasn't it?" he asks.

"Yes." The blood dripping down the windows.

Ricky closes his eyes. "I thought you stopped having those nightmares."

"I thought I had," I say, my heart starting to slow. As the adrenaline fades, the pain of losing Danny burns its way through my chest. These nightmares are like losing Danny all over again.

Ricky pulls me close, and I let him. He rubs his hand up and down my back, but the gesture doesn't bring me as much comfort as it should. It tears another hole in my heart. It reminds me of my mother comforting me when I was younger.

"You doing okay now?" he asks, his voice soft and gentle.

"Yeah," I tell him, my hand on his chest feeling the familiar beat of his heart under my palm.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Ricky asks.

"No," I mumble, looking at the wall. "It's time for me to start getting ready anyways."

He pulls back, pushing the hair out of my face. "Are you sure that you want to work today? Why don't you take the day off? We can pick up where I left off last night before I acted like a jerk."

"I need to work today," I cut him off before he can tempt me to skip my duties and stay with him all day.

“Okay, Charlie. You do whatever you think is best for you. I’m sorry about last night,” he says, reaching out and cupping my face. He runs his thumb over my lips before leaning in to kiss me. “I was being a jerk, and I’m sorry. You’re going through a lot. You don’t need me adding to it.”

I’m glad that he apologized first. “I shouldn’t have pushed. Yesterday was stressful for you. I didn’t mean to make it worse.”

“You didn’t,” he says, kissing me again. “I’ll let you get ready.”

He leaves, and I sit in bed for a minute before sliding my legs out. I stretch out my arms, my body sore from not getting enough sleep. I stand, pulling off Ricky’s shirt that I slept in. I put on clean attire; a raggedy button-up long-sleeve faded blue jean shirt and old basketball shorts. I consider shoes. I prefer my bare feet, but it’s not safe. There’s no way of knowing what I would step on. I slide them on, keeping the laces loose.

I open my door and see Ricky sitting at the kitchen table; his head in his hands, his shoulders slumped. I thought he had already left.

I hesitate before walking over to him. I run my hand up his back, resting at his shoulder blades, the muscles tight under my hand.

“I regret a lot of the things that I have done over these last few months,” he says as he lifts his head and stares at the wall. “I can’t even begin to list all of the things that I regret.”

“Babe,” I say, sliding into the chair next to him and putting my hand on his, “I’m always here for you to talk to, you know that right?”

He looks at me, and recognition passes over his face before it closes off, leaving no trace of emotion.

“You should probably go,” he says, standing up and slinging his vest on but not zipping it up. He walks over to the door opening it. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“O-kay,” I say, not even able to utter the whole word before the door slams shut behind him. “Love you too.” I murmur.

Chapter 5

Cooking and cleaning up after dinner isn't my only job here. When I can, I also make time to help teach the kids who are alone like me. As a kid, I hated going to school. I'd much rather have played soccer all day long. These kids look forward to school. They all have a choice to come or work. And for the most part, they all come.

I help Megan for about four hours. Kids take to her, and she is amazing with them. With the older kids, we go over math and English. There is no way we can teach them everything that we learned in school, but we want to make sure they can do basic math. With English, we just want to make sure they continue to expand their knowledge and vocabulary. We teach the young kids the alphabet and numbers. All of them are learning about world history and the United States, as much of it as we could piece together from the few textbooks we have found and our memories from our schooling.

I also help out at the medical cabin. John has a hard time keeping everything organized, though the medical center is half the size of the barracks, with eight beds in there for medical use only. All of the medication is kept under lock and key; a key with only two copies, one with John and one with Ricky. Most of the drugs have expired, though we use some past the expiration in hopes it will still have some effectiveness. Finding usable medication is getting harder.

John has his own generator. He has a "greenhouse" where he grows his own herbs. He somehow managed to find an aloe vera plant that has taken over a lot of the garden. There is thyme, oregano, rosemary, and basil. I steal most of it for cooking, since most people don't want to take it.

The pain medication won't last too much longer. We can make our own alcohol, if we had to use it as a pain medication. Nothing numbs pain quite like alcohol. I guess nothing causes so much pain either.

John lives in a back room of the medical building. It isn't a very large bedroom, but big enough for him to live comfortably.

I rap on the door as I stroll in. John is sprawled in the middle of the floor surrounded by books, his tangled brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. He's developed serious facial hair over the last several months. He hasn't needed much help in the last couple of weeks, so I have spent more time with Megan and the kids. Daren told me that John needed me to take inventory of the medication, so I stopped by. I'm glad that I did. It doesn't look like John's left the cabin in a while.

"Did you lose your razor?" I ask, touching my face in a motion that imitates his beard.

"Funny," John says, not looking up from his medical books.

"I'm here to help with the inventory," I say.

John looks up from his book. "Thanks for coming. I always appreciate the help."

I nod my head, knowing that he hates doing the inventory. He'd rather keep his nose in the medical books. That's honestly what I'd rather him being doing as well. He has a lot to learn about as far

as medicine goes. He pulls the leather necklace over his head and hands it to me. I head to the back of the cabin to the file cabinet that holds the medicine.

After scrubbing my hands in the sink, I go through the pill bottles. I count out each pill and write the total number of pills by each drug's name.

"I heard Ricky is going out again," John says, closing his books after about thirty minutes passed. He sounds exhausted.

"Yep, he has to," I mumble.

So far, the inventory is adding up, which means no one is stealing. It has never been an issue, but, with so many people, it is something that we have to track.

"I guess I'm going to babysit you," he says, smirking. "Oh wait, that's Daren's job."

"Do you remember, you know, that time when you were actually funny?" I ask, continuing my work.

"Okay, touchy subject, I can read between the lines," he says, the smug grin still on his face.

"Why do you and Ricky argue about these trips?" I ask, switching the spotlight onto him.

"Did you know that Megan and I have started seeing each other?" John asks, standing up. He picks up the books that he was looking over, returning them to the shelves.

"Nice subject change," I note. Every time I try to talk about Ricky to him, he shuts me down. And vice versa. Ricky starts kissing me when I talk about John. John will talk about medicine or something that will bore me until I give up and leave. They won't tell me what they disagree about.

"Has Megan said anything about me to you?" he asks, not meeting my curious gaze.

He might have changed the subject to avoid answering my question, but I can tell he wants to talk about this with me. He must really like Megan.

"Nope," I say. "Even if she did: girl code."

"Excuse me?" he asks.

"Girl code. I can't tell you if she said anything because that would break girl code. Besides, you're a guy. You'll figure it out," I tell him, counting out the last bottle. "I'm finished. Don't forget to eat today."

I leave John to ponder the mysteries of the girl code and I head to the kitchen. Nic joins me halfway through seasoning the mystery meat that Jack brought for me. He brings back whatever he can find and skins or plucks it for me.

Jack keeps the fur, which we use for blankets. We use the bones for knives, the heads of arrows, or needles to help with sewing. I don't ask what he brings me. Thumper or Bambi, I don't want to know.

"You're quiet today," I say after about a half hour of silence.

Nicole hesitates, and I wait for her to speak. "After you left last night Alec came to see me."

"I know," I say, smiling. "I'll never look at that table the same way."

She rolls her eyes at me but continues. "You know I don't like getting serious with guys. Especially the drones that roam around here. But—"

"But you like him."

"I don't know," she says, throwing her hands up in the air. She slumps down into a chair and lets her head thump on the table. "It just feels different with him. Maybe I'm crazy. I have to be crazy."

"You're allowed to fall in love. Do whatever you want. Do whatever makes you happy," I say smiling.

I would continue, but people start coming in and grabbing plates. People here eat up gossip faster than they can breathe. I don't want Nic to become the center of someone's dinner conversation.

"Grab it while it's hot," I shout as I walk out of the kitchen, winking at Nicole before I go.

I meet Megan in the hallway. She asked me earlier to help her with the kids during dinner since her regular couldn't do it today. It is quite a chore and one that requires at least two people to make sure that the kids don't fight in the line or drop their food. I manage to get them their plates and out to the bonfire without anyone losing food.

I settle down next to Megan, relaxing with Isaac on my lap. He has very recently started to open up and be affectionate with people. He was orphaned and, like a few of the kids here, hasn't been claimed by one of the couples. Instead, everyone here looks out for him.

"So you and John, huh?" I ask, helping Isaac eat.

"What?" she asks, turning towards me. A rose color warms her cheeks. "He told you."

"Of course," I say, laughing at her expression. "I honestly can't believe that I didn't notice that something was going on."

"Umm, we've been seeing each other, if that's what you want to call it, for almost a month now," she says as she reaches over and wipes off Moses' mouth with a rag.

"He likes you," I say, glancing at John to see him looking at us. I give him a wave, and he gives me a stern look, which I understand. He's warning me not to embarrass him in front of Megan. I give him an evil smile.

"How can you tell?" she asks, glancing at him, looking away as soon their eyes meet, a flush creeping up her cheeks.

"Because he just told me about you guys," I answer, resting my head on the top of Isaacs, his curly hair a cushion for my chin.

"What—isn't that a bad thing? If he just told you?" she asks.

"No, it means he's taking you seriously," I explain. I take a bite before adding, "Believe me, it's a good thing."

"What's a good thing?" Ricky asks from behind me.

He slides down next to me, sliding his arm around my waist. A nagging feeling remnant of this morning pulls at my stomach, but I push it away.

"Girl talk," I answer before Megan can. People can't lie to Ricky on the spot, but it's none of his business. "We girls like to have our privacy. It makes us seem mysterious, which keeps men interested." I lean up and kiss him, which brings up a round of "eeewws" from the little kids and giggles from a few of the girls.

"She has cooties," one of the little boys says, looking at Ricky with big brown eyes and a dumbfounded expression.

Ricky laughs and shakes his head. "Cooties aren't always a bad thing," he says to the boy.

"But it's icky," a little girl says, her nose wrinkled.

"I agree," says Daren from across the bonfire. "I don't like to see stuff like that while I eat my dinner."

Ricky shakes his head and rolls his eyes. "People are teaming up against us," he whispers.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. "You know what this dinner needs?" I ask.

"What?" Ricky asks, leaning in.

"A story," I say, and a round of squealing and clapping greets my response.

"A story," says Ricky, massaging his jaw. "Who here would know a good story?"

"YOU," squealed the little kids, some laughter rising from the group.

"You all want me to tell a story?" Ricky asks, and a round of clapping and enthusiastic giggles confirms it.

"Well, I have one story, but I don't think you all would be interested, would you?" Ricky asks. After a few minutes of begging, he concedes. "Well, the last time I went out was a dangerous one." Now that he's talking, all of the other chatter has stopped. Everyone's eyes are on Ricky, waiting to hear this story. Even the adults, who know that the story is fiction, listen. I meet Daren's eyes across the fire, and he smirks at me. I know we are both thinking the same thing: Ricky is enjoying this more than anyone else here.

As he finishes the story, his face has a glow to it. Everyone claps, the kids more enthusiastically than anyone.

"Another story," yell a few little boys.

"How about something else instead?" Daren offers before Ricky can start another story.

We all follow his nod to the men and women who have brought instruments out. Someone has a violin, another person a flute, then a banjo, a harmonica, and a guitar. They settle themselves before they start to play.

I don't recognize what they are playing, but several people do, and they hop up and start dancing. The little kids follow suit, some dancing, others just chasing each other around. Isaac hops off my lap and joins the chaos.

"You wanna?" Ricky asks, nodding his head towards the dancing couples.

"Of course," I say, holding my hand out.

He pulls me off the ground and leads me to the dance floor. The tempo is slow as he pulls me in close, wrapping his arms around my waist. I put my arms around his neck, resting my head on his chest. Behind my back, he intertwines his fingers and rests his chin on the top of my head.

It's weird to think that later this month we would have had our senior prom. I don't know whom I would have gone with, but I'm confident it wouldn't be the guy holding me. We aren't the same people we were the summer before our senior year.

I haven't decided yet if that's a good thing or not.

"This is nice," I mutter into his chest. "I miss not fighting with you."

"I miss it too," he says softly. "But I have to say, you're hot when you're pissed off."

I roll my eyes though he can't see me. "Yeah, and you must be familiar with that."

"What can I say?" he says, shrugging, his shoulders moving my arms. "I bring out the best in people."

I smile and close my eyes as I relax into him. He keeps up swaying back and forth to no particular rhythm.

Someone taps me on the shoulder, and I open my eyes to see Daren standing there, a stern look on his face. He's holding a squirming Isaac in his arms. Isaac follows him around, completely taken with the second-in-command. Since Daren lost his family, he doesn't mind having a tail, especially when he can use Isaac to his advantage.

"Leave room for the Holy Spirit," he says, and he puts Isaac in my arms.

"Daren," I say, shifting Isaac onto my hip.

Daren reaches over and covers Isaac's ears. "This is a reminder about what'll happen if the space between you all gets any smaller," he says, looking at Ricky.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing at Ricky's furious expression. While Daren doesn't understand why I don't give in to Ricky, he does have a certain respect for me. He helps keep Ricky at bay.

Ricky pushes Daren backwards so I can't hear what he says, but based on Daren's smirk, I'm guessing it was just the reaction he was hoping for.

I dance around with Isaac, holding his little hand in mine. He giggles with delight every time I dip him.

"What did you think about dinner?" I ask Isaac, glancing over at Daren and Ricky. Now John has joined the group. It looks like Ricky and John are getting into it again.

Isaac gives the dinner an approving nod, resting his head on my neck. I sway with him for a few minutes before looking at Megan. She nods when she notices me looking. I look at Ricky, catch his eye, and nod my head to the barracks where the kids sleep. He nods back at me and gives me a smile before continuing his argument with John.

I put Isaac to bed easily. He rolls over as I cover him with a blanket. His expression is so relaxed as he sleeps. He is too young to be haunted by what happened. He sleeps peacefully, no nightmares creeping into his head and stealing his sleep. I can't help but be envious. But I am also extremely grateful. The children shouldn't have to live with that kind of pain.

I walk out, quietly closing the door behind me. Nicole is walking towards me, a smile on her face.

"Come," she says holding out her hands to me. "We must dance."

I let her drag me back to the fire pit where couples are dancing. The band is playing something upbeat that I don't recognize. She drags me out on the dance floor and starts dancing.

"So I have the answer to my problem," she whispers to me.

"What problem?" I whisper back, amused by her enthusiasm.

"To get my mind off of Alec. To figure out what is going on in my head. I need a vacation," she whispers, her eyes alive with enthusiasm.

"Vacation?"

"Yes, like a little trip. A girl's day. Away from here."

I laugh nervously and glance at Ricky, who is watching. "There's no way Ricky will let you go on a vacation."

"Who says he has to know?" she whispers, her eyes twinkling.

I'm not sure what to think. Part of me can't believe that I hadn't thought of it sooner. The other part is screaming that this is a horrible idea. It is an idea that would cause Ricky to get extremely angry with me. On the other hand, I would love the opportunity to get out of here and see the new world.

"How exactly do you plan on doing this?" I ask, keeping Ricky in my sight. This is the last conversation that I want him to overhear.

"Oh, I have a plan," she says, laughing as the song goes off. "But I'll share that tomorrow. We leave just a little after he leaves."

"When did this become a 'we'?" I ask, raising my eyebrows. "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Are you worried Mr. Cranky Pants will find out and put you in time out?" Nicole asks, raising her eyebrows. "Because if you are too chicken to go..."

"I hate you," I say, rolling my eyes. "I don't know why we're friends."

"Listen, you need to get away from him. I know you two love each other and that nauseating nonsense, but come on. You need a life away from him. I'm giving you a chance to do that," she says, watching my face.

She makes sense, and she must read my agreement in my face because she smiles. "You know you want to go."

"Maybe," I say, but I'm starting to like the idea.

"We plan tomorrow," she whispers dancing away from me. Alec takes the opportunity to start dancing with her.

The scavengers are still out there, and we don't know how many. They are going to be looking for us. Scavengers aren't an extremely loyal group, but they don't take too well to the killing of their own.

Nicole's excitement has gotten to me. The idea that I'd get to see something outside of these walls is unnerving but exhilarating. Listening to Ricky talk about how beautiful this new world is has made me want to see it even more.

I want to experience something without Ricky. I want him to be a part of my life, but I don't want him to be my whole life. This would be something incredible to experience.

It's not that I think it'll be dangerous. It won't be. Plus, Nicole and I can more than take care of ourselves. If Ricky finds out, my life will be hell. He probably wouldn't let me leave the cabin ever again. Or he might kick Nicole out. It would be the final straw for him.

At the same time, I'm so sick of these walls surrounding me. Seeing them every day, knowing that I can't get away from them, is driving me crazy. I don't remember ever feeling so confined. There is this box around me physically and mentally. I can't ever be too angry or too sad because someone is always watching. I can't be too happy or enjoy myself because seven months ago millions of people died. My parents died. My brother died.

Some days it is easy to go back into that hole, to give in to the darkness that is with me every day. It's easy to not allow myself to feel anything but the grief of losing my family. It's easy to wish that I was dead so that I wouldn't have to live this life of never knowing what the next day will hold, if Ricky will come back alive, or if the world will end for good.

I wonder sometimes if October 1 was supposed to be the end of the world. Our planet wiped out all the people so that it could start over. I wonder if, when the natural disasters were killing all of those people, we were just overlooked. Then one day the world will be like "Oops, you all should have died." Then another round of disasters will take the rest of us.

Those are the bad days though, and they are becoming fewer and farther in between. Most days are good days where I remember those who have died, but I can be happy that I am still living my life. Even though they aren't here anymore, I know my parents would never want me to give up. They wouldn't want me to be sad for the rest of my life.

I am alive for a reason.

I just want to know what that reason is.

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