

**Astrid**

**Outdoors**

**Patrick Devon**



**District Crescent**  
**Dream Big. Shine Bright.**

**District Crescent, the home of the working middle class. Everyone here feels connected to each other. We are a typical, but still quite wonderful suburban styled area. Most of our world might be lost but District Crescent is a pleasant reminder of the lives we used to have. So dream big and shine bright. For you are the last of the average people, and without you there is no more hope.**

# Chapter I

## The Red Letter

\*\*\*\*\*

**There's a picture near my** bedside that sits on the nightstand. Tucked away under a lamp, its beaming light makes the metal frame shine, exposing all the little pieces of naked dust. It's a picture of my parents. They're standing in front of a house. It's our house, the one we live in now, except here it looks much different. It was the day they first bought the place. My mother's hand rests on her quite protruding stomach that was carrying me at the time. She wore a large tan colored sun hat that casted a large shadow over her face. But, if you look carefully, you can see a smile and a pair of sunglasses that cover her eyes. She didn't need to wear them though; the hat did enough. Maybe she wore it to try and stay as tall as my dad, who blew past her in height by a few inches. He had one arm around my mother and his other hand lay at his side. He wore a navy green baseball hat and like my mother, a pair of sunglasses covered his eyes. On his face was a faint smile that showed some signs of life from a man who never seemed truly happy with this life. At least until I was born. Man did my dad love me. He always used to tell me, "Astrid, you're my angel." God, he told me that so much it became an annoyance to hear him say it. I think he knew that though. Still, that never stopped him. He's been dead for 15 years now and I still can hear those words leave his mouth.

I run my fingers down the side of the frame, clearing off the dust and letting the specks stick to the tips of my fingers. Already the photo is beginning to look a little brighter. I've always wondered why I keep that picture of them in my room. I'm not with them, not physically anyway, and Sage wasn't even a thought at the time. The truth is that there are no pictures of us as a happy little family. I'm not saying that we weren't, or are currently, not happy. It's just that I've never had the off chance of getting lucky and finding a rare family photo. Which is why I finally decided to ask Mom to let me go through her old albums. She said "if you want to drag your butt all the way up to the attic and get them, you can keep them." I agreed, and then made my big strong handsome buddy Amin carry them down for me. Mom's face was priceless. I always had a bit of a devilish side and that one simple act of defiance, or really more just laziness, was definitely one of my proudest moments. Mom is lucky Sage is the opposite of me. We would be too hard to handle otherwise. But the point is that Mom's old albums are now in my possession.

So now I'm sitting in my room, early in the morning, wrapped in a blanket because it gets quite cold. Two glutted boxes of photos lay in front of me. I put the picture of them at the house back on my nightstand, rubbing a bit more dust off of Dad's face. I think I keep that photo of them in

my room because my mom doesn't want to look at it. And I don't blame her. For one it makes her miss him. But more importantly, I think it reminds her of the good old days. Before the outbreak. Before the quarantine. Before my home, Sacramentum, became the nightmarish leftover of a social construct that it is today. I've been alive for 20 years and I have yet to see what the world really looks like. Which is why I want to look through these boxes. They aren't just photos. They're memories of a forgotten time.

I look down at the box, using both hands to carefully take off the very bedraggled top. Then I gently place it next to me on the floor. I close my eyes and stick my hand into the box; a bevy of remembrance all waiting to be touched again. They all scream like schoolchildren, raising their hands in hopes of getting called on next. But all these photos feel the same. The textures are analogous, the only difference between them all is their size. Some are big. Some are small. Some have really pointy corners that could practically cut your finger if you weren't too careful. Some of them are bent. I scuffle my hand across a few of the photos, until I finally use two fingers to grab one and pull it out of the pile. I open my eyes and chuckle immediately. It's a picture of mom slobbering down a slice of pizza. The cheese is stretching out from her mouth and she appears to be laughing. She's much younger, probably a few years older than me at this point. Her hair is in a ponytail, and god...all I see is me. I feel like I have stumbled upon a picture of myself. Her smile is bright and peppy, her hair is far less gray, and she has my face. Or I guess, I have her face. I take out another one now, this one being Dad and Mom sticking their heads into a wall that makes them appear like flowers. Dad has the dumbest smile on his face. Mom is too busy laughing to even pose for the photo. I miss her laughter. It's been so long since I've heard it. They just look so happy. So playful and innocent. It makes me think of my own youth, and how I really didn't get to experience most of it. That's what it likes for anyone my age and younger. We were born into this society, or in my case, were born too young to really remember anything else. Luckily, now I have these pictures to fill in the gaps on that part of my mind.

Look! Here's another one. It's Dad standing in front of an old ice cream shop. The one that was next to the train station. The strawberry is dripping down the side of his arm, but by the smile on his face, you could tell it didn't bother him in the slightest. They say that a picture can tell a thousand words. I believe this to be true. I've only looked at a handful of photographs, and I already can see how much things were different back then. Back then, before our world slowly fell apart.

Apparently there's this virus out there that's wiped out most of our people. No one seems to know where it came from, but Sacramentum had an outbreak and soon our entire country was put on lockdown. Everything was shut down. Schools, stores, restaurants, gyms. Everything. First they only did it for two weeks. Then it became four weeks. Then eight weeks. Then ten. Then, before we knew it we were all just forced to stay in our houses permanently. Eventually our government stepped in and provided food and supplies. Those who were wealthy were able

to pay the government to feed and supply them. But for the poorer classes, the government had to create a program as a way to feed the poorer classes who couldn't afford it. It was limited to enough supplies to make one meal every day, and enough water to last about a week if rationed. And it's been that way for about 13 years.

13 years might not seem like a long time. But it is. 13 years of sitting around wondering what the world is like. Or what it used to be like. But sadly, things are the way they are and I seriously need to chill out and be grateful for the things I do have. Like sleep. It's 8 am and I already feel so exhausted. I've been up for at least an hour now, looking at all these sad time capsules of joy. It's killing my mood, so I gently place the lid back on, and then stack the boxes on top of one another. I wrap my blanket around me even tighter and lay back on my bed only to find that the walls are mocking me. Here they are, laughing right at my face. They know they are ugly and are mocking me for picking such an ugly color for my room. I don't know what I was thinking when I made my room as blue as I could be. Ugh! Who even does blue anymore? I wish there was a color like my name. Astrid. It sounds so much like a cool color. It's like one of those off puts that's a slightly different shade of an already existing common color. Suffice to say, I might have to make sure this name never dies and name all my children after me.

I can see now that the window is still wide open, which would perfectly explain why it's so cold in here. I lazily reach up and close it as a gentle but cool breeze hits my wrist, rattling the shades, as if they were being disturbed from a thousand year old slumber. I can hear the sound of footsteps, alerting me that someone is waiting outside my bedroom door. It must be Sage. She always liked to be the first one to greet me on a special day like today. I see the door creak open just a smidge, and see Sage's devious eyes peeking through. She may be 17 but sometimes, I swear she acts like she's 10 or 11. I don't mind it though. It keeps things interesting and she keeps me on my toes.

"I can see you, you know," I say to her. She remains silent, like a predator stalking its prey. I sit up on my bed and I can see clearer that her eyes are no longer looking in. "Ok," I begin to say, "now you're just hiding behind the door." Rather than open the door wide and yell surprise like she usually does, Sage just busts the door open with a sigh of disappointment, realizing that after over a decade of birthdays together, I know her patterns too well. She walks over all slouched and disappointed, and then sticks her arms out to her sides as she jumps and lands on the bed, laying down on her back.

"Happy birthday" she says, adjusting her eyes to look directly at me.

"Eh. Thanks."

"What?" She asks with concern. "What's wrong?"

“You know me and birthdays.” I retort. I lay back down on my head and lay on my side, my birthday depression hitting me like a freight train. I know the idea of your birthday is that you're supposed to be “happy” but to be honest I haven't been the type to celebrate anything in a very, very long time. My birthday just serves as another reminder that I'm getting older, but not any wiser. A depressing realization of me living through another year alone, another year without my dad, another year stuck in this world I long to desperately get out of. No amount of cake and confetti could ever make me feel any different. But I suck it up and put on a smile for them, because Mom and Sage always go all out for birthdays and it's not right to just stick it to them after doing that.

“I'm sorry.” Sage laments.

“You don't have to say sorry, Sage.”

“I know, but you seem like you're hurting and I wish I could help”

I turn my body and look at her. “A hug would mean the world to me right now.”

Without any hesitation, my sister leaps into my arms as if she hasn't seen me in years. Sage is definitely the best hug giver in the entire world. To describe her hugs would be to say that they feel like a warm melted marshmallow tugging away at your deepest darkest demons, hushing them away to let light and amenity inside instead. Once the embrace ends she lays next to me on the bed, and starts fiddling with my hair.

“You look so pretty.”

“Gosh, do I?” I say, rubbing my cheek with my hand in disbelief. “I was thinking I needed a makeover.”

Sage's eyes light up wide and a huge smile cracks on her face. “Did you say makeover?”

“I might've slipped that word out, yes.”

“Tell me you didn't just imply you're gonna let me give you a makeover?”

“Hmmm. I don't know Sage. It's too bad we don't have a way to rewind the tape and look.”

“Astrid stop playing!” She says, sitting up straight now, her face now about a foot from mine. “I'm serious.”

“So am I.”

“It won't feel serious until you actually say the words, ‘Sage I want you to give me a makeover.’ Actually no, I *need* you to give me a makeover.”

I sigh and look down at the bedding as I pretend to be contemplating life or death. “Sage Summers,” I begin to say, grabbing her hands and squeezing them tight. “I want you to give me a makeover.” Sage coughs to remind me that she isn’t satisfied with my reply. “Want, no, I *need* you to give me a makeover. Will you give me a makeover?” I close one eye and wait to see what she does next.

“You didn’t say it.”

“Didn’t say what. What do you mean? I corrected myself and said ‘need’ not ‘want.’”

“I know, I know. But you forgot the most important word of all.”

“Ugh!!!!” I sigh. “Fine! Sage Summers, will you PLEASE give me a makeover!”

Sage begins to laugh. “Ok, your birthday torment is over. I am now at your fingertips.” she harps, moving her fingers like she’s typing the air. She grabs my arms and pulls me in for a squeeze. “I love you sis. Happy birthday.”

“I love you too.” I reply. “But you drive me crazy.”

“Yep. I know.” she replies, “But what would you do without me?”

She has a good point. I don’t really know what I’d do without her. Sage has a good heart. I’m sure she got that from Dad. The day she was born, I cried because I thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She’s one of my only friends in life, so I’m so grateful we get along so well. Life would be pretty damn lonely without her. I can feel her tussling my hair around, grabbing it and moving it in chunks, pulling it to the side to see how far it reaches out in length.

“Oh Astrid, what are we gonna do with this mess?”

“I don’t know sis.” I say, as Sage drops my hair and lets it go back to its original position. She wraps her arms around my neck and puts her head upon mine, as we both giggle uncontrollably. I always feel like such a child when I’m hanging out with Sage. She does manage to bring out the playful side of me every time. Our giggle turns into full on laughter and next thing I know I’m on the floor, the two of us laughing like hyenas.

“Girls!?” I can hear our mom yell from downstairs. “Come on down please.” Sage and I quickly try to get up. She stands up first and I stick out my hands, as she grabs them and pulls me up as well.

“Figure it out later?” says Sage, grabbing her hair and putting it into a ponytail. She looks just like Mom in that one photo. I can’t help but chuckle quietly to myself.

“Of course,” I reply giving her a smile. “Come on, let’s go.” Sage leads me out of my bedroom and opens the door, letting me pass in front of her. I walk down our hallway and can hear our mother making some sort of commotion in the kitchen. I drudge down the steps and turn to my left and peek at my mother taking a cake out of the oven. She’s got a green oven mitt on. She coughs as she puts it on the counter. Once her green eyes see me come into the kitchen, she quickly stops what she’s doing and rubs her hands together, before then adjusting her greasy hair that seems to be losing its color. After one quick sigh she brushes over to me squeezing me as tight as she can.

“Happy birthday, my sweet, sweet baby girl,” she cries, still holding me tight. I pat her on the back as she lets me go and grabs my shoulder.

“20 years and I’m still your baby girl.” I joke, as my mother smiles.

“Of course.” She replies, rubbing my shoulders and smiling. “You always will be.” Sage, I’m assuming out of jealousy, butts into our hug and giggles. My mom just laughs and grabs her as well, kissing both of us on the forehead. “My girls. I love you both.”

“I love you too, Mom.” I say softly, giving her a kiss on the cheek as the three of us still stay wrapped together. As we stay like that, I start thinking about how much I wish Dad was still here with us. Finally, Mom lets us go and we can’t help but still giggle. I can smell the cake, an intoxicating chocolate aura sneakily filling the kitchen. It’s always been a tradition in the Summers house. Baking the cake first thing in the morning, having breakfast while it cools down, and then icing the cake. Dad started the whole thing, so of course we had to keep it going after he passed. I breathe in as that enticing chocolate goes right up my nose, making me sigh of relief. But then I peek my head towards the living room and see something that makes my heart sink. Sticking out like a sore thumb, in the bottom of our daily mail, is a red envelope. Oh god, not a red envelope. First off, red was Dad’s favorite color. So of course it had to be the same color that our government chose for the letters they sent us in the mail. Second, red mail on a random day like today isn’t normally a good sign, since red envelopes are always on top of the mail so folks don’t miss them, that means Mom must’ve tucked it away so I wouldn’t see it. Unfortunately she failed, because it’s all I can help but look at now.

“Hey Ash,” yells Sage, noticing me distancing off, “do you want eggs for breakfast?”

“Yea....yea I’ll be right there.” I say, slowly trying to make my way towards the pile of mail. I know Mom’s gonna try and stop me but it will ruin my day if I don’t at least attempt to read it. I make my way over to the coffee table where the mail lies, and I cautiously slide the envelope out from the bottom of the pile of the mail. I carefully open it, sensing someone behind me.

“Astrid, what are you doing?” asks the quiet and concerned voice of my mother.



I slowly pivot my body towards her direction, not moving any other part of my body at all except my feet. She looks down and sees the red envelope in my hands. "Oh goodness. I didn't see that there." She says, looking down at the floor.

"Mom. I'm 20 years old now. You can't fool me. You moved the envelope." Her eyes now adjust to look at me. Her face looks swollen, and wrinkled, and she's holding back tears. She nods at me, her throat unable to find the words to say anything.

"Astrid. Please don't open it right now." she croaks "I beg you."

"Why Mom?" I say, now getting more stern with my tone. She continues to stare at me as I feel around the letter to see if she's already opened it. To my surprise she hasn't. But then the realization comes to me. "Mom....you already know what it's going to say.... don't you?" She nods again, as Sage slowly creeps her way out of the kitchen.

"Mom?" I say. "Answer me, Mom."

"I...I do know. But I don't want to deal with it right now. Please, Astrid. Not today."

I see the terror in her eyes. I know what she means. I get where she's coming from. I want to be able to put it behind me for now. But I can't. I know this is most likely news we should've heard weeks ago, and she has simply just avoided talking about it for obvious reasons. I might be in the wrong, yes, but the outcome is still gonna be the same. If I don't know, I'm gonna zone in on it for the rest of the day, thus ruining what seemed like another normal fine day. And if the envelope holds bad news- which believe me there's no other kind of news anymore- then that will also ruin the day. So it's a lose-lose situation no matter what.

"Mom," I say. "I love you. You know I always will. But I promised...." I say, beginning to choke up on my words, tears running down my face. "I promised *him*.... that I'd take care of you guys. I promised Dad. And so whatever this says. Whatever bad news this letter presents to us, I'm opening it."

My mom crosses her arms, looks down at the floor, but then slowly turns her head in my direction. Sage is behind her, looking like a deer in headlights. Her hand covers her mouth in total surprise. Mom looks at me with a single tear running down her face, and silently nods in approval. I take a deep sigh and stare at the red envelope. I slowly open it, letting the crumbles of paper fall to the floor. I close my eyes, take a breath and open it, turning over the letter and silently reading it. Tears fall from my eyes as I drop the letter onto the floor.

"Breakfast anyone?" I ask, rubbing my eyes and walking into the kitchen, pretending the last few minutes had just ceased to exist.

\*\*\*\*\*

# Chapter II

## Promises You Just Can't Keep

\*\*\*\*\*

We live in a small, but practical gated community just outside of New Tempest, the largest city in all of Sacramentum. When the government rallied to protect who was left, they gathered up all the survivors and set them up in different “districts.” My district, District Crescent, is one of seven. There’s nothing too special about it. It’s a suburb, an average middle class group of people. Although there are a few outlying wealthy upper class families that live here too. My house, and the houses around it, were already pretty perfect for what President Roda had in mind when setting up the seven districts. So he simply put walls around our town and put a big crescent moon on the gates, and that's how the seven districts were born. When the outbreak first hit, everyone who lived in my area had the choice of moving to a new district if they wanted, but Mom and Dad were seemingly content with the house they raised their family in, and thus we never moved, and we’ve been in Crescent ever since. “Dream Big. Shine Bright.” That’s the motto of District Crescent. It’s really banal and pathetically ironic, considering it’s hard to dream big when you can’t go very far without heading into a gate that blocks you out from the rest of the world.

Look, I don’t really have anything against my community. I guess it’s partially my own fault because I don’t talk to many people, mostly because the only person who’s around my age is Amin, and sometimes he can be quite stubborn. He lives a few houses down, and even though he’s a year older than me, sometimes I swear I’m way more mature than he’ll ever be. But he’s still the only real friend outside of my own family that I have in this dump, and I’m grateful for his friendship.

Yesterday was...interesting, I guess. I mean I definitely ruined my own birthday, which doesn't surprise me in the slightest. I have a huge tendency to fudge things up. I think the mistake was not addressing the giant elephant in the room- the red letter. I tried so hard to put it behind me that I didn’t realize it would affect Mom and Sage as well.

*This Is President Otis Roda,*

*I unfortunately must write you this with only the heaviest of hearts. My administration has only wanted nothing more but to help its citizens during these trying times. Which is why I personally oversaw the creation of the Sacramentum Help Program nearly two decades ago. And throughout the last decade and a half, the SHP has been helping struggling families by sending them supplies each*

***month to help them get by. I've read so many letters over the years talking about how wonderful the program has been and how helpful it has been for so many people. This is why it absolutely crushes my soul to have to tell you a terrible truth- The SHP is shutting down effectively by the end of this month.***

So just like that, life has taken a turn for the worst. The one thing keeping my entire family afloat right now, just gone. With no warning. How could I have not seen this coming? What the hell are we going to do now?

These are the things I'm thinking about as I lay in my hammock. It's my nice little thinking corner. It's in a perfect shady spot under a tree. Sometimes I like to read. But most of the time I just sway and contemplate everything going on in life. I open my eyes, after resting them for a minute or so, and see the leaves rustle in the tree above me. The birds are still chirping, sounding like a song. It's soothing. Calming, even. I close my eyes as the hammock begins to move very slowly, until it eventually comes to a stop. I reach my arm down, feeling the grass, and then give myself a push, thrusting the hammock back into motion. I feel a gentle breeze come by, rustling the leaves once more. Up ahead, over the fence, I can see our neighbors house. Theirs is a nice deep shade of blue, which contrasts the bright yellow of ours, and while they don't have a hammock in their yard like we do, they do have a tire swing and a trampoline. The windows are in a lot better shape. Everything looks cleaner, more organized. But I think part of the charm of my house is that it isn't perfect. I like ours like this.

It's early, which would explain why it's so quiet. I was the first one awake, and quietly made myself some tea. I couldn't sleep that well last night. I guess I was a little restless over everything. I can't help but think that both Sage and Mom are upset with me, and to be honest they probably have a right to be. Sage is very sensitive, which is probably why Mom never wanted to say anything- it would only just make Sage upset. Mom knows that I'm aware of everything going on and probably assumed, rightly so, that I would figure it out at some point. So she then made the decision to not tell us, at least not until after my birthday. But there I went, going full ballistic and caused a scene and ruined the mood.

After I finished reading the letter and threw it on the floor, Sage hesitantly stared at it for a while, before picking it up and reading it herself. Surprisingly, she took it pretty well. Better than I expected. I think I don't give her strength enough credit. Sage put on a brave face and iced the cake with me. Mother was silent the entire time. I remember her picking up the letter, crumbling it up and throwing it away, not even giving it a second look to make sure the news was in fact different than what she assumed. Actually, it's alarming to me just how good she is at knowing what the red letters are going to say without even opening them.

After we had cake, we tried to find a spark of hope, a glimmer of happiness, a slice of a good life. We played cards for a while. Sage and I worked on a puzzle. She finally got to do my hair. That was it. Not a single breath was wasted on the red letter and the contents it contained, all of us coming to the conclusion that we'd rather just not talk about it until the next day.

I want to go in the house, but I'm too afraid. I just want to lie here in this hammock all day and hope that everything can just remain alright. But I'm a fool. It was never gonna actually be like that. This entire district has been hit with the biggest wave of let down ever known to man. It may be wrong for me to say this, but knowing that it's not just us who have to deal with this makes me feel a little bit better about it. Besides a few exceptions of moderately wealthy families- Amin's being one of them- the rest of our district is in the same boat. We're all gonna have to deal with this. What we're going to do next, however, is the real question.

I get distracted by the sound of the back door swinging open. I don't even wanna look at who it is. I'm hoping it's Sage. She'll be my eyes and ears and tell me how Mom is holding up without me having to find out myself. Selfish? Yes. But I can't talk to her. Not right now at least. I just need a little more time.

I tilt my head up ever so slightly to avoid detection, and I can see it's Sage. Her hair is down today, and the sunlight gives her brown hair this beautiful golden hue. I can see her coming over to me, her lime green pj's sticking out like a sore thumb. She doesn't make any eye contact with me, just continuously stares at the ground until she's just a few feet away from the hammock.

"Hey" I say casually, once again pretending all is well with the world. I move my legs over a bit so she can lay next to me.

"Hey," she says, noticing the gesture and slowly getting into the hammock, now laying on the left side of me.

"How ah...how you holding up?" I ask, holding my breath in anxiety as I stare at her for reassurance.

"Well..." she begins, "I guess I'm ok." She sighs and pats my hand, grabbing it and squeezing it before letting it go.

"Look, about yesterday, I just wanted to-

"It's ok sis, I'm not mad at you. Neither is Mom."

"How do you know?"

She leans herself up and looks at me dead in the eyes. "Because she told me."

I bite my lip and start to shift my eyes so I don't look at her directly. "She told you this?"

She nods and lays back down, putting her head just below my shoulder. "When you went to Amin's, she and I talked. I don't really want to say everything she said....I would just go and talk to her."

I look at her with visible confusion. “How do you know where I went?”

Sage rolls her eyes at me and sighs. “Astrid, EVERYONE knows that you always go to his house to hook up.”

I burst out into laughter. “Ok, yep! You got me! I went to his house to “hook up!” Even though we’ve since broken up and have both agreed to keep things between us strictly on a friendship level!”

She looks at me again with disbelief. “Sis, come on. Admit it, why else would you not want anyone to know about it then?”

She’s got me in a corner here. But she’s my sister and she’s my confidant, so I guess I should just come clean. But If she tells mom, I’ll hurt her.

“Fine! I went there to take shots and hang out, ok? We don’t actually take more than one, maybe two shots at most. Just enough to feel something, but not enough to be completely drunk. Happy!?”

She laughs and shrugs her shoulders. “Whatever you say, but I still think you’re hiding your lust for him underneath.”

“Lust? No no no no, Sage, *you’re* the one with the lust. You get so tangled up when he comes over.”

“Because he’s HOT, Ash!” she says, gently hitting my arm. “and besides, he’s a good guy.”

I look to my right, eyes on the house. “Yea, yea he is.”

“So why did you dump him anyway?”

I turn away, avoiding direct eye contact. She’ll see the guilt all over my face if I don’t. “We don’t like talking about it.”

“But Ash....it’s me, and it’s been some time. You guys dated for almost 3 years!”

“Sage!” I holler.

She looks at me the way she would look at Mom when getting yelled at. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. I just.....I just don’t like talking about, ok? It’s hard to explain and it’s a bad memory and I’d rather just forget about it. Please?

She just nods silently and I grab her hand and squeeze it. I look at her once again, this time raising my eyebrows. “Your espionage of baiting me into admitting I still love Amin is not gonna

work. It never has.” I say, moving my head inches away from her face. “It never will.” I whisper. Sage bursts into laughter, as I begin to grab her and shake her.

“Ok fine! I’ll stop.” she screams, laughing as the hammock begins to tilt, both of us falling off and landing underneath. I crash on top of her, both of us hurdling in laughter.

“Oh my god! Sage, are you ok?” I say, still not being able to control my giggling.

“Yep. I’m good.”

We both find ourselves and sit up straight on the grass. I dust off my pants and Sage fixes her hair.

“Do you.....” She begins to say. “Do you remember anything about what the world was like?”

I stop and think. She’s never asked me this question before.

“Gosh...” I begin “you know I always knew you’d ask me this question. The truth is that I don’t really remember much at all. I...I do have one memory. It was the three of us. Me, Mom, and Dad. We went into the city. The first and only time I’d ever been. I was probably maybe 6 or 7. But I don’t really remember anything else about it. I just remember being amazed by all the skyscrapers. I remember seeing all the different theaters and saying ‘wow!’ I think Dad spilled a chili dog on himself. But that’s about it.”

“It was mustard.” Says the voice of my mother, who slowly made her way outside and eavesdropped on our conversation. “Your father spilled mustard on his shirt. He had just bought it and was very particular that day about not getting it dirty. Which of course he did anyway. I warned him not to put mustard on that hot dog, but he didn’t listen to me” She tells, chuckling to herself as she walks, stopping when she reaches the hammock.

She now looks over at us, still on the ground, and smiles. “You don’t remember the clown?” She asks me. I shake my head. She then walks under the hammock until she is now on our side of it and then plumps down onto the hammock, still having her feet planted on the grass.

“There was this clown in The Square. He was waving and playing with all the children, giving them balloons. I remember you going up to him when his back was turned. The bright colors, big shoes and crazy hair were enough to make you wanna go see. But then he turned around. You got one look at his face, and ran away screaming.” She starts to laugh. “We had to leave after that cause you were so scared.”

I turn my head and see Sage giggling to herself. I can’t help but laugh as well. “I don’t remember that at all.”

Mom smiles at me and I can already tell what she's telling me in her head. She's saying 'I'm not mad at you Astrid. I love you.' I jump up and hug her. Sage gets up and gives me a silent nod, leaving and heading back into the house so that now I'm alone with Mom.

"Astrid, before you say anything," she says, rubbing my back. "I'm not mad at you, or upset with you. I'm more upset with myself actually. I should've known that my baby girls weren't kids anymore, and I should've been honest and told you all from the beginning, and I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, Mom." I say, putting my hand on her shoulder. "I understand why. You just wanted to have a couple of good days before everything turned bad." Mom nods at me and tussles my hair.

"I'm proud of you, baby. You're such a grown up now. Your father would be so proud of the resilient and extraordinary young women you've become. You've taken such good care of your sister and I, even though I'm supposed to be the one caring for you." She kisses my forehead and stands up. "I love you."

"I love you more." I say, standing up and grabbing my mom's arm as we walk back into the house together.

I've never wanted my mother to feel like she was a burden on me. I think she knows that. I think she also knows that I got a lot of Dad's genes, which explains why I can't help wanting to feel a sense of leadership and caring for others. That's how he was. He always put his girls before himself, no matter what it was. That's how I feel about them too. I just want them to be happy.

I'm feeling a lot better about everything now. Sage was right all along.

\*\*\*

District Crescent looks the same as it always does. The light purple house with the rose garden still sticks out like a sore thumb. The white and green house is still covered in dirt and mud that its owners are too lazy to wash off. Lonely driveways can be seen all around, with no cars to keep them accompanied. The houses all seem to be grinning, content with their mediocrity and ignoring their pitiful complacency. Those that live inside the houses, are a different story. These people. I can see them, looking at me with their broken sadness. Everyone here exudes happiness. We put on a smile. We go about our day, playing softball with our kids, grilling meat on the grill while the radio plays. We make everything look so fine and dandy. But I can see their eyes. Everyone has that same look. The look of fear and loneliness. Even the happiest of people, have that same look. It's a broken society. And it needs to be fixed.

Amin just looks at me now, startled and a bit worried after hearing all of this come out of my mouth. He puts down his cup and sighs, putting his head on his hands and then letting his hands run through his black hair, sitting on his bed. His room is pretty small. The wall is a deep blue

and there's a few comic book posters on the wall. He's got a desk and a little black roly chair, which is where I'm sitting. Amin is across from me.

He's always been a handsome fellow. He's got dark black hair that's always never properly groomed. His eyebrows are thin, and he's got beautiful blue eyes. They look back at me with serious intent.

"I don't know Ash," he mutters, now covering his face. "I understand what you're saying," his voice is muffled from it being covered. "But I don't really think there's anything you can do. We're all in the same boat. We're all confined to this, and we've all had to adapt."

I snicker at him. "Pfft. You're one to talk."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He slouches himself over, staring at the floor.

"What do I mean? You're one of the privileged few, Amin. You and your family have nothing to worry about, do they? You guys can just sit pretty while Roda feeds you guys and lets the poor people starve! Real sweet."

"Ok! Astrid, that is *not* fair! You think we enjoy being privileged? No! We hate it. We hate the way the people snicker and sneer at us because they think we enjoy sitting on the high life. Look, Ash, I'm sorry for everything you guys have to endure. I truly am. But you have no right to turn it around on me!"

He's right. I don't know what I was thinking. God I make such a mess of everything. I have no control, no filter. Amin rushes to my side as tears begin streaming down my face. I feel his warmth and bury my head into his chest as I sob. He gently strokes my hair.

"I just don't know what to do!"

"I know, I know." He says, hugging me and gently planting a kiss on the top of my head. I pull my head back and wipe my nose.

"You better not let Sage catch you doing that." I joke, "She'll be all over that and will start labeling us again."

Amin laughs. "I'm sorry....I always forget,"

"No, t's ok actually. You know you're the only friend I've got."

He nods and then leans back on his bed, giving out a big sigh and throwing a rubber ball in the air and then catching it. "Do you ever wanna go beyond the border? Ever wonder....what it's really like out there?"



I stare out his window to the left of me, and goosebumps go down my spine. From across the street, a man is fixing his child's bike on the sidewalk. I touch the back of my neck and sigh. "I don't know. I guess sometimes I do." Amin keeps throwing the ball and catching it.

"Would you believe me if I told you I have?"

I can't help but laugh. "You can't be serious." Amin doesn't even flinch at my disbelief, just continues to throw and catch the ball.

"Why is it so hard to believe? I'm resourceful enough and have been taking care of my own for years. Why do you doubt me?" he asks, laughing a little bit as he finishes his sentence.

"Ok...." I begin to say. "I'll bite. I can believe you're resourceful enough to go past the border." I say. "But why would you have any reason to?"

Amin laughs, grabs the ball and sits up straight. "You would never believe me if I told you."

I look at him, eyes rolled. "Amin..I was crazy enough to go out with you at one point. I really have no reason to doubt you anymore."

He looks at me, sighs, his eyes staring back at me as he twitches his neck. "Well.....I go out and get supplies for people. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. There's a lot left out there that's good and usable, as hard as it may be to believe. Sometimes I hunt wild animals and bring them back for food. Whatever you need, I will try to find. And I'm not the only one. There's a group of us. We call ourselves Sprints. We come from all across the 7 districts.

I'm stunned. I mean, I always suspected Amin was capable of doing something like this, but to this extent....I don't know what to say.

"You're serious?"

"Yea. Ash, I wouldn't lie about this."

"Amin, do you understand how insane that is! Are you crazy?!!" I stick my arm out as far as I can and hit the side of his shoulder. He barely reacts.

"Hey! See? This is why I never told you. I knew you'd freak out."

I put my head in my hands and then slide them down my face, before shaking my head in disapproval.

"Amin Beckett, you are OUT of your mind. Out of your mind!! You know that?" Amin just nods quietly, as if he was upset. I give it a few seconds of shameful silence before I continue.

“But.....tell me..... what’s it like out there?” I add, trying to stir the conversation pot. “Is the virus real?”

Amin leans back and sighs. He turns his head left and right, thinking about what to say. I look and see him nod ever so slightly. “The things I’ve seen, Ash. You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve seen out there.”

I stand up and walk next to him, putting my hand on his shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

Amin snuffles his nose and looks down at the floor. “Because I love you....and I know you. I know that if I told you, you’d want to go see it for yourself, and I don’t want you to. It’s dangerous.”

I put my hand down and cross my arms. “You don’t think I’m strong enough?”

“I never said that!” He says defensively. “I’m just saying that I know that your curiosity always tends to get the best of you and I just know you’d go out there looking for answers and get yourself hurt....or even killed. Ash., I ....I can’t have that on my mind, ok?...Just promise me....promise me you won’t go out there.” His face gets a bit flush and I can tell he’s in pain from revealing this to me. I put my head against his head and put my hand on his shoulder once again.

“Ok, Amin. I promise.” We share a tender moment before his mother comes knocking on the door.

“Amin!? Dinner’s just about ready, love. Is Astrid joining us tonight?” He looks at me and grabs both my arms, tilting his head towards the door. I pull away from him.

“I..I should probably get home, actually.”

Amin nods and yells back to his mother. “No Ma, she’s leaving!” I hug Amin and open the door, quickly giving my regards to his folks, before walking out and leaving his house.

As I walk home, I think about everything he told me. I wish he didn’t. This news has only further made me question the world outside and what’s going on. I merrily stroll my way back home. The world looks like it’s at a standstill. The street is enervated, looking as though it has exasperated all its energy. Street lights pop up every couple of yards, but their arms appear to have stopped mid motion. Their lively dance of light has all but ended. A basketball lays at the edge of a driveway, covered in dirt, as if it was trying to disguise itself from the children who play with it. All the houses look the same, but the stories that lie beneath the walls of each one are vastly different. District Crescent is like a book of poetry. The town is trussed together, bundled under one underlying theme. But as you go and pick out each individual aspect, like

reading one poem from the book and centralizing it, it becomes more clear that there is more going on than you realize if you really look at it.

After I walk down the main drag, I make an impromptu turn and head towards the edge of the grounds, staring at the gate separating my life from the world beyond. How the hell did Amin even get past this wall? How does anybody ever get past this wall? I stare at the fence and see a giant sign plastered on the top of it.

**Warning! This fence is electrified. Do not attempt to open.**

Well, I should've expected that. But it's been almost two decades of this. Surely there has gotta be some flaw that Amin and the others figured out. I grab a stick from my feet and grasp it tightly in my hands. I give it a good throw at the fence. The stick smacks the center of the fence, and not a single spark shoots out of it. I pick up the stick and feel the side of it that impacted the fence, and I feel absolutely nothing.

"This fence isn't even working." I say aloud. "That's.....ironic."

Maybe this fence was never even electrified to begin with. It was so persuasive that all they had to do was put a big fat warning sign on the fence, talk about the terrors that await beyond the wall, and boom- everyone stayed clear without anyone ever taking a second guess.

I'm fed up with this crap. I dart my eyes at the fence again, this time panning the entire thing. I look towards my right, and that's when I see it. A small, but noticeable opening. Part of the fence is ripped, facing outwards, creating a small hole.

"I'm sorry Amin," I say to myself, as if he could hear me. "I'm the worst." I check behind me to make sure no one else can see me, before I duck myself into the hole and escape into the daylight.

\*\*\*\*\*