



# THE CIRCLE

ASHLYN DAUBE

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE CIRCLE

By Ashlyn Daube

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

Two teenagers share a hidden kiss inside a photo booth, away from prying eyes.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*These two boys' story needs to be told. They are sneaking away to see each other and using one of those quarter photo machines to capture a few stolen moments together.*

*My only request is that it fit normal YA guidelines—all else I leave up to you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lissa*

## Story Info

**Genre:** young adult

**Tags:** science fiction, post-apocalyptic, bittersweet, enemies to lovers, no sex

**Content warnings:** possible future HFN

**Word count:** 14,232

### *Acknowledgements*

A million thanks to Jessa for helping shape this story. She sees my first round of mistakes and still sticks around. To Averin for her second look to make it even better, and to everyone involved in this event for making my dream come true of writing stories from my crazy head and having people actually read them.

# THE CIRCLE

By Ashlyn Daube

## CHAPTER 01

Today, I decided to do something very stupid.

And when I decided to do this, it was for two reasons.

First, I wanted something to change. To fill my monotonous life with something other than what I was raised for. When you feel the desperate compulsion of rebellion when you are old enough to feel the need, but too young to have control of your life. The second was because of him. Because he made me smile without trying to. Because for months he has invaded my dreams, and because he made me believe life could be different.

If you saw my life through a looking glass, you would say I was lucky. I was born in a harsh world after all. Harsh for most except the lucky few, and I was in that very small pot of lucky. It's been almost seven hundred years since the War of Division. Not much information is left on what happened back then. We do not really learn about it in class except that there was a war, that millions died, and that our nation, Gorus, was once part of a bigger nation with our neighbor, Nusa, until something happened to break them apart. Now there is a giant wall dividing the two countries. A wall I've only seen pictures of, reaching high into the sky so nothing can be seen from either side.

I do not know what Nusa looks like, all I know is that it is a rundown country, and The Wall exists to protect us. Every time we hear about it in history, I wonder, *how bad could it really be?* And how much worse was it from Gorus?

People die in this country. Hundreds every day. From crime, from disaster, from disease. But there is nothing unusual about that; that happens everywhere else around the world too. The world by nature is a harsh place, and you get no say in which corner of it you will come to life.



I did a last check around to make sure my father was still out. His office was empty. I made my way to the foyer. It was a very big three-story house. Too big in my opinion, but it wasn't like I had a say about it. There was a full body mirror near the door.

I ran my fingers through my dark hair, making sure it didn't need a quick cut. Satisfied, I put on my light-gray jacket with blue ringlets around the wrists, the one I bought with my own money and not with the allowance from my father. I could hear as the lines of cloth clung to my form and felt it cooling me down. The display by the door read 82°.

The last thing I put on was my glasses. I often forgot to wear them at home, but they were a necessity if I was going to drive. I could have had an operation to repair my myopia years ago, but there was something always holding me back. Perhaps a little fear, perhaps hesitation, or maybe because in all the pictures I have of my mother, she was wearing a pair. Wearing them simply made me feel more like a part of her was still here.

I pressed the code on the security pad by the front door and saw my image reflected on the device.

“Father. I am going to the campus to work on my project. I will be back after dark.”

Short. Simple. To the point. And half the truth.

\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER 02

I didn't own a car. I had a bike. It sounds more dangerous than it actually is. After the Secure Bike Law that was passed thirty years ago, bike companies had to construct bikes that did not lose balance regardless of speed or driver error. So even if I tried, I wasn't going to crash.

The sun was still high outside, so I wasn't running late. The neighborhood I lived in was small, private, and extremely exclusive. Only four families resided here, all political families. The world called it The Circle, and it was just my draw in the accidental lottery of birth.

My bike did not roar or flare as I turned it on; it just hummed and aligned itself automatically to the ground. "School," I said out loud, and instantly got the screen updated with road conditions, weather and travel time. The campus was not far from The Circle so I didn't bother to look at any of it.

I sped through my exclusive neighborhood. The houses rested on a large cul-de-sac at the end of a long, curved road surrounded by a forest. My home was the first on the right as you entered.

The bike swerved perfectly on the sharp turns of the road dividing the houses from the access gate. I could ride it with my eyes closed. The first bump to my day was when I stopped at the gate and pressed my palm against the ID pad. It logged my time of exit and recorded my image.

There was barely any traffic, but then again it was Saturday, and it wasn't like anyone could afford a vehicle. It made for a quick commute. I passed one of the large public buses down the road, full of weary passengers with eyes that couldn't help staring my way as I drove past. It used to bother me, but not anymore.

The campus of Aurora High was a beautiful structure by architectural standards. Four rectangular buildings connected together by a circular library. Each of the rectangular buildings was considered a minicampus, the North, South, East, and West Halls. This version of Aurora High was just nine years old, and its upgrade had to do with me, my family, and the three other families that lived on The Circle.

The government of Gorus consisted of four political parties—each headed by a single family—battling it out every two years to see who would make the rules. When a party won an election, the head of that family would be the president. This duty, this distinction, was passed down from the parents to their children. A mockery of monarchy. It had been like this ever since the war.

I am the only child of one of those families. One day I will get the chance to run this country.

My bike parked itself on the first empty spot in North Hall after two more checks of my ID. One at the campus main gate, another at the North Hall gate.

Nine years ago, they decided to move all the families together in the same neighborhood so we could pretend we got along with one another. The school was also updated around the same time so that the children from each family got their own hall. Mine was North. I never shared classes with the children of my father's political rivals, never saw them as long as I stayed in North Hall. There was only one place I could possibly see my neighbors on campus—the central library, better known as the CL.

I made sure my bike was logged off before pulling my backpack from the seat compartment and making my way to the CL. A machine scanned my hand for the fourth time, and I made my way to the second floor of the library. History and Politics. I thought it would look less suspicious than fourth floor fiction.

The beating of my heart was not its usual calm self as I slowly made my way up the stairs, and I scanned my hand a fifth time to get access to the floor. I walked to one of the many rows of ancient books, pretending to look for a specific title. I usually enjoyed going to the library, any library. It made me forget that everywhere I went there was a digital stamp with my name and picture on it saying where I was, when, and for how long.

I enjoyed the simple pleasure of running my fingers across the edges of the books, feeling the different materials they were made from. Books made from

paper were not made anymore. They could only be found in a library like this, and only a few of them had relevant collections.

I waited five minutes, and then grabbed whatever book my fingers were touching and pulled it out, barely glancing at the title or cover because it didn't matter. I wasn't there for a book or to study. I sat in the east section of the library and opened my borrowed book. I read a few lines, but none of it stuck to my memory. It was a boring political opinion piece and I had zero interest of one man's assumptions about me.

I heard someone sitting a few tables across from me and looked up.

It was a boy my age, with messy brown bangs and eyes darker than his hair. His name was Maxwell Torres; he studied in West Hall and was looking at a book that appeared to be three times bigger than mine and definitely more relevant.

I remembered the first time I saw Maxwell. Nine years ago. I was six and struggling in elementary because my father was too busy to help me with homework. Back then we lived in a nice large neighborhood with plenty of homes and plenty of kids my age. Our neighbor, Ms. Tolken, took me in whenever my father had to work late and I would get to play with her son, Danny, until my father came home to pick me up. I was happy with the routine, but it ended the night my father dressed me up in my very first formal suit. I remember his serious face as he fixed my tie. I had gone to his parties before, but never dressed like him. It was very exciting until he told me that we were moving. To this day, I'm not entirely sure why my father told me about the move before the party and nothing else but that. Maybe he thought I was too young to understand. But I understood enough. I understood that I wasn't going to live next to Danny anymore, and that I would have no one to play with while my father worked.

The party was a sea of frown-faced adults. I remember looking up and seeing so many serious people. No one smiled, no one laughed.

"Did someone die, Father?" I remember pulling my father's hand when I asked, but he just pried my fingers away and dropped my hand.

“No,” he said. “Now stay here and behave, do not talk to anybody. I need to converse with some of these people.”

I pressed my back against one of the walls of the room and obeyed, picking the loose strings from the rugged wall. I stood there for a long time waiting for my father to come get me or call to me. This had to be another Meeting People Party, as I called them. I usually just waited in a corner or next to him until he thought it was appropriate to introduce me. I never had a problem waiting, no matter how boring it was. I was used to it.

And then I had to pee.

I had not gone to the bathroom before leaving the house, even after my father reminded me, because I wasn't sure if I could put my fancy shirt back inside my pants. I wasn't exactly coordinated at six; a suit was just such a grown-up thing. I didn't want my father to be mad. So I pretended to go, flushed the toilet and everything, but now I had to go for real.

At six, I thought I was a pretty smart kid. Even back then I was planning ways to avoid my father's judgment. My mission was to go the bathroom without my father noticing, and return with a well-tucked-in shirt.

The exit was easy to find. The bathroom, too. The shirt was the problem. It did not look the same as when my father had tucked it in no matter how I tried.

“Don't make it too tight.” I still remember those words. The first time I met Maxwell we were the same height, and he looked as out of place as me in a child-sized suit.

“Like this!” Maxwell said, and stepped next to me as he pulled out his perfectly tucked in shirt. He took the hem of his shirt and started tucking it all the way around, reaching with difficulty to his back. “The back is hard, but it doesn't matter because your jacket will hide it.” I imitated what he did and slowly tucked in my shirt, pulling on the hem as much as I could. “When you finish, just pull a little on the shirt so it doesn't look too tight, that way no one will see that the shirt's a little ruffled.”

“Thank you.” My shirt wasn't as perfect as before, but it wasn't noticeably different either. I was happy.

Maxwell was all smiles. He looked like he had been as bored as I had been at the party. “What’s your name?” he asked.

I hesitated. I wasn’t allowed to tell people who I was; my father always introduced me. “Andy.”

“I’m Maxwell!” We shook hands just like the grown-ups and I thought maybe I wouldn’t miss my friend Danny so much.

I don’t remember what we talked about after that. Kid stuff. I do remember that we left the bathroom, walked around the hallway next to the room where the party was being held, and that’s when a man with light hair approached us. The man was a photographer for the event. He took a picture of Maxwell and I without asking. I was instantly terrified. Pictures were not a good thing. My father had warned me against picture taking. Fear is never a good feeling, much less when you are a child. So I reacted like any small child would—I burst into tears and caused a commotion. People came. A woman with dark hair and a frightened look on her face shoved her way through the crowd, and when she spotted us that frightened look morphed into something grittier. She grabbed Maxwell’s hand and took off with him right before my father made his way through the crowd and took me away. As I held tight to my father’s hand, I saw men talking with the photographer. He didn’t look happy. I was lucky that my father’s anger concentrated on the photographer instead of me. He didn’t even care when I told him I had gone to the bathroom.

This blurry memory was the first interaction. When I was still in the dark.

The truth of what happened that night became clear to me just a week later, when my father had men put all my things in boxes and we left the house I had lived in since the day I was born.

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## CHAPTER 03

As I sat in the library, I actually managed to read a chapter of the book I had grabbed from the shelves. It was worse than I imagined, but I could at least add a quote or two for a paper I had due next week. I made a note on my calendar to remind myself to finish the research, and then put my pad to sleep. I raised my head and noticed Maxwell was still invested in his large, old book. Maybe he could feel my eyes on him, because he stopped and for a moment raised his eyes until they spotted me.

A week after the party, my father and I moved to The Circle. I was roaming around the front yard, waiting for the movers to bring all the boxes inside the house and unpack them. I carried my Senty with me, but the games I had were not as entertaining as watching my father scream at the movers.

One hour after the show started, another large moving truck, followed by an expensive car, drove into the cul-de-sac and stopped in front of the third house. A man stepped out of the driver's side, followed by a woman with a bun of dark hair. The man didn't waste any time taking charge of the movers, pointing and commanding. The woman stood next to the car seemingly waiting. She looked familiar, but she was too far away for me to tell why.

I thought it was amusing how the adults carried on, happily giving orders instead of actually helping. It looked more fun to carry the boxes than give orders, but I was still too small to help and I was certain my father would disapprove. I wandered farther and farther from the house, first stepping into the yard of the second house on the cul-de-sac, right between the two moving trucks. I waited to see if anyone would notice. Father was yelling at one of the movers. Nope.

Each step was like a challenge, to see how far I could go before my father noticed. I pretended to play with my Senty, in case he caught me, so I could say I didn't notice that I was so far away. I felt a surge of pride when I crossed an entire stretch of grass, stepped on the concrete driveway of the empty house and stood right in the middle between my house and the other one. The woman had finally noticed me; her face wasn't clear from this far, but I could tell she

had seen me. She was still waiting next to the car when the back door opened and a boy stepped out.

The second time I saw Maxwell, I was holding my Senty in the middle of a driveway while he asked his mother something. I felt instant happiness when I saw him. He wasn't just a random face in an unknown place. I was going to have a new friend for my neighbor. Maxwell's mother must have said something about me, because Maxwell turned around and smiled when he saw me. I didn't run to Maxwell's house. I wanted to, but I didn't. Maxwell's father was still walking around and he looked scary. My own father wasn't even in the front yard anymore. He must have gone inside the house.

I put my Senty back in my pocket, but didn't move. I was already halfway between the two houses and didn't dare go any farther. I didn't have to. Maxwell ran to me.

"Is that the new Senty?" Maxwell asked excitedly, pointing at my pocket. It felt like we were already friends.

I nodded, pulling the system from my pocket and showing it to him. "I'm playing Truders."

We talked about the little tactical game for a while. Not very long. I let Maxwell play with my Senty and he died twice. It was fun. We were sitting in the middle of the driveway next to each other, our heads bumping as we both looked at the screen. Our own little world.

Then a man yelled.

Maxwell and I both raised our heads. Maxwell to the direction of his house—me towards mine. My father was back in the front yard; I hadn't noticed. He had not been the man that yelled, because he was also looking towards Maxwell's house. Maxwell's father was heading towards us, pointing and yelling Maxwell's name. It only brought us to the attention of my father who started heading our way too.

Maxwell and I sat there, frozen. Too afraid to move. The yelling became a noise I could not make sense of. Maxwell must have been more frightened than me because his small hand wrapped around mine, but there was nothing I



could do to protect him. When Maxwell's father reached us, we both looked up, and without hesitation he grabbed Maxwell by the right shoulder and hoisted him up. Our hands disconnected. I didn't stay on the ground for very long because my father was there, grabbing my arm and hoisting me off the concrete as well.

They didn't say anything at first, just held us back in a strange mix of protectiveness and disapproval. Both parents stared at each other with distaste, and I stared at the ground the entire time, except for a brief second when I glanced at Maxwell just to see his head completely down.

My father was the first to speak. "I think we can both agree that this cannot happen again."

"Yes," Maxwell's father replied through gritted teeth. Later I would be told his name was Benjamin Torres, and my first impression of him was that he was a man much like my father.

I heard a sniffle and saw Maxwell crying. It was low enough that the adults didn't notice. I still wasn't sure what was going on. Maybe we were not supposed to play in front of a house that didn't belong to us. Maybe Maxwell's dad didn't like video games, which would explain why Maxwell didn't have his own Senty. I tried to pull my arm free from my father's hold, but he held on tighter and it hurt.

"I'll make sure my son understands," my father said. "Make sure yours does too."

There was no reply, just a nod, then Benjamin pulled Maxwell away and they headed back to their house. My father started to pull me the opposite way, but I didn't want to go. I still hadn't asked Maxwell if we could play after school. "Just walk, Andrew. I'll explain it to you in the house."

Explain what?

I tried to pull my arm free again and looked back. Maxwell was still close enough to hear me. "Maxwell! You can borrow my Senty if you want!"

My father stopped abruptly and slapped me. My eyes watered instantly from the sting. “Don’t you dare cry,” he ordered, and dragged me the rest of the way to our new house. Once the door was shut, I let my tears flow freely. I cried. I bawled. I wanted to throw myself on the floor and die, just so my father would blame himself. When I eventually stopped, my father was there, standing tall above me.

“You are not allowed to talk to that boy.”

“Why?” I knew my father didn’t need a reason to order me to do things, and he could have lied to me, he could have said *because I say so*, but he didn’t. He sat me down and explained to me why I could not be friends with the boy across the street.

I always knew that my father was an important man to our country. That many important decisions depended on him. I also knew that I would inherit that responsibility when I was old enough. But until that day, I hadn’t known that we were not the only family that lived like this, with responsibilities passed down from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters. An enemy was a foreign concept to a six-year-old child. Hate even more so. All I knew was that Maxwell was nice, we liked the same games, and I wanted him to be my friend.

Hate.

It didn’t make sense when my father told me that was the feeling I was required to have about Maxwell. I had no reasons to hate him. The only reason I had to feel that hate was because my arm hurt from where my father had grabbed me, and my face burned from his slap.

My father told me I had to hate every one of our neighbors. To never speak to them. That I had to live with the people my father hated as a sign of solidarity to the country. That was why we moved—why Maxwell’s family moved—why there were only four houses in that cul-de-sac surrounded by trees.

It was why Maxwell and I could not be friends.

Pretend solidarity, my father once said. The families still hated each other. They had been on opposite sides of the spectrum for too many generations, and the simple act of living in close proximity did not change that.

If anything, it made it worse.

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## CHAPTER 04

I quickly learned to live with my new reality of having neighbors my father hated and that I should hate too. With time I forgot the feeling of having friends, and slowly became the son my father wanted.

I went to school. I learned. I got older. Whatever the goal was in having the four families live close together, it was not achieved. From my experience, families lived in their own worlds created within the walls of their homes. They rarely got involved with the humans living next door, and that was in a normal neighborhood. In *The Circle*, everyone pretended everyone else was invisible, so I spent most of my childhood with video games, schoolwork, and a window.

I learned a lot about my neighbors and rivals, watching through my third-floor-window. Silly things. Like when the Mason family moved in next door, the movers dropped a box and a mass of books fell on the floor. If that had happened to our movers, my father would have been very mad. But Ms. Clare Mason, who at first I thought came out of a fairy tale because her hair looked like fire, did not scream like I had seen my father and Maxwell's father do. When she noticed the mess and the men hastily putting the books back in the box, she went over and helped them.

The Lambert family was the last to move in. The mother, Krista, was so busy with crying twin newborns that her daughter, Dianet, had to help her. Dianet didn't seem too happy, but none of the families moving in had come with smiles on their faces, so it wasn't surprising.

I saw Maxwell's older sister, Chloe, arriving a week after the rest of the family. I thought she resembled their father because she looked just as angry as he did, but remembering Dianet's sullen face, maybe it was a girl thing.

I wondered if the families noticed how similar they all were or if they only saw the differences. They all had children; they all ran like crazy in the mornings, and too often the parents got home late at night. Too late to spend time with their kids as their children got taken care of by strangers.

An old lady moved in with the Mason family two weeks after we had settled in. I never saw her leave the large house, but I could see her cooking in the kitchen almost every day. The smell of cookies drifted all the way to my house. More than once I wandered to the edge of our property just so I could smell the cookies. Danny's mom would sometimes make cookies, and I associated the smell with fun and home. My house never smelled like cookies.

There were no fences between the houses, but I knew where the properties separated. I couldn't even look at Maxwell's house without being obvious, but I could pretend to play in my yard. I thought of the property line as an invisible high rope I had to walk while smelling the cookies from the Mason house. I did this for days because our new house still felt unfamiliar to me. It was a simple game that helped me pass the time and forget that Maxwell was in the house after this one.

I was happy with the yummy scent until the day the back door opened and the old lady walked out with a plate of cookies. My first thought was to run back to my house, but she didn't yell at me or look angry, so I stayed put. Slowly, she made her way to the border between our homes and simply hovered the plate of cookies in front of me. I didn't even think twice before snatching one up and taking a bite. Chocolate chip.

She never said a word, just smiled, and took the plate back into her home. I waited on the same spot the next day and the day after. Both days the old lady waited until there was nobody around to see her give me a cookie. On the third day, I thought Maxwell should have a cookie as well.

"There's also a boy in that other house," I pointed to Maxwell's house. "Maybe he wants a cookie too."

"Are you friends?" Her voice was gentle. I wondered if all grandmothers sounded like her, because I never had one.

I shook my head. "I'm not allowed."

"You are not allowed to have friends?"

I shook my head again. "I can have friends. I just can't be friends with Maxwell."

She smiled again, but it wasn't a happy smile. "That's a shame. If my grandson were your age, I'd let you be his friend."

"How old is he?"

"He's ten now, almost eleven."

"That's too old. I'm only six." I finished my chocolate chip cookie and licked my fingers. "Can you take a cookie to Maxwell?"

The old lady broke the invisible border and reached out to me. I stiffened when she did, but relaxed when her fragile fingers patted my head. "I'll try," she said.

She walked away. It was the last time I saw her. The next day an ambulance showed up at the Mason house and took her away. I never knew if Maxwell ever got a cookie.

This and many other memories filled my life of growing up in The Circle. I have no doubt that this would have been the rest of my life there: a rigorous routine of individuality with hints of our shared lives. A routine that wouldn't have changed if the bombings had never happened.

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## CHAPTER 05

Five years after we moved, on a chilly spring night when I was eleven, my father woke me at two in the morning and made me put a jacket on top of my pajamas. When I asked him why, he didn't say a word, just picked me up in his arms, and ran down from the third floor all the way to the foyer. My father grabbed the first pair of shoes from the entrance closet and ran out of the house. Before I could ask again what was going on, I noticed that the other families were running out of their homes as well, carrying sleeping children and pulling grumpy teenagers.

My father's breathing was fast-paced and restless. He ran to the center of the cul-de-sac, to the empty grassy lot in the middle. He held me tight for another second, then put me down as he handed me the pair of shoes he had grabbed from the closet. "Put these on," he said, catching his breath. "It's cold." I sat on the grass and did what I was told as the other families stopped close to where we were. It seemed the silent consensus was that this spot was safe.

I saw Maxwell holding his big sister's hand. His hair was messy from sleep and he looked frightened. His pajamas were blue. I was wondering if I could say hi to him when my father said something.

"Maybe it was a prank call."

"Maybe." Clare Mason and her son, Noah, didn't look as tired as the rest of the group.

"I'm not going back until the police say it is safe." Krista Lambert was holding one of her twins, and Dianet was holding the other.

I had finished tying my shoelaces and was standing next to my father when the first bomb exploded. One of the women screamed loudly, and my father quickly picked me up from the ground and made a shield around me with his arms.

I looked up and saw the back of my new house on fire.

Shane Lambert and Benjamin Torres were both calling the police. They were screaming into their mobiles. Clare Mason was holding her son's hand,

who suddenly looked much younger than fifteen. The twins had woken up and were both screaming. Everyone was unharmed.

The adrenaline had just settled in the group when another bomb went off. This time from the Mason house. Benjamin Torres must have decided it wasn't safe anymore, because I heard him tell his wife to hide with the children in the forest just down the road. She didn't even hesitate, and with Maxwell and Chloe in hand, Sophia Torres ran to where her husband pointed.

This act was not lost on Krista Lambert, who placed her crying five-year-old, Owen, on the ground and told her daughter to take both kids and run, too. Dianet struggled with the two five-year-olds, carrying Enian with one hand and pulling Owen with the other. She was about to drop Enian when Noah Mason offered to help her. He picked Owen up from the ground and carried him securely while he told Dianet to follow him. It was the second act of solidarity between the families I witnessed. The first being when Grandma Mason gave me cookies.

My father put me down on the ground and told me to go with them. I didn't go at first, but he pushed me. "Hurry, you'll be safe there." I ran as a third bomb went off. I quickly passed Noah, Dianet, and the twins and made it to the edge of the tree line. Sophia and Chloe stood there on the edge with tears in their eyes. I was too scared to cry.

Police and fire vehicles rushed up the road to The Circle and stopped just as the fourth bomb went off. All four houses were now in flames. Sophia held tight to her daughter's hand, but she let go and went back to where the other adults conversed. Chloe was left behind crying.

A small hand reached out from the brush, grabbed mine, and pulled me inside the line of trees.

"It's me," Maxwell said. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head and looked back at the fire. Noah and Dianet finally made it to the tree line. "My dad woke me up."

"Mine too. He said someone called him and told him there was a bomb in the house."



That explained why my father had been so rattled when he woke me up. He must have gotten a call too.

I could see my breath in the air and pulled the jacket tighter around me. It had been five years since Maxwell and I had sat on the Mason driveway playing with my Senty. I didn't even know where it was anymore.

"I'm taller than you now." Maxwell smiled and I found it reassuring that even in the midst of chaos we could still create our own little world. Maxwell must have been thinking the same thing, his smile told me so. I felt happy. Even after such a long time, Maxwell was still my friend.

"Here," he said, and pressed my palm against his. "My hand is bigger." He seemed so proud. I felt disappointed that I hadn't grown as much in the past five years.

It felt strange, talking so nonchalantly when so much chaos was happening around us. Another explosion roared through the night and Maxwell ran back to where his sister was. I followed, slowly making my way through the trees. When I reached the tree line where everyone was waiting, Maxwell was standing in front of his sister and she had wrapped her arms around him protectively. I stood next to them with Dianet, Noah, and the twins on the other side. The seven of us watched as adults ran around, putting out the fires in our homes. There were so many people running around I couldn't tell who was who.

I heard Chloe crying as she held Maxwell tighter, and when I turned my head Maxwell was looking at me. For that moment I didn't hear anything around me. Not the noise. Not the cries. Not the voices that rose high in the night. The world was just me, the wind hitting my skin and Maxwell offering me his hand. I took it, because I didn't want to feel alone in all this, and because five more years might pass before I had another chance to talk to him again.

After all, I was not allowed.

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## CHAPTER 06

I returned the horrible book and grabbed three more that looked more promising. Working on my research gave me a distraction, an outlet for my thoughts, and I could stop worrying about the next twenty minutes.

I decided I was going to do something very stupid in twenty minutes.

There was no unity between the families after the bombings. Just opportunities for them to act like they got along. Sometimes Sophia Torres would share a recipe with Krista Lambert. Dianet invited Noah and Chloe to her sweet sixteen two years ago, and everyone had to attend Clare Mason's wedding when she married Thomas Fleck.

I had hoped to see Maxwell when I finally went to high school, but of course, that beautiful building had been designed to keep us apart as well. Every class, every after-school activity, all took place in North Hall, my family's hall. Maxwell was in West, and the only space we shared in that building was the CL. I spent weeks avoiding it—even though I wanted to see him, I was afraid I'd discover we no longer had anything in common. We were not children anymore. We did not carry handheld video games in our pockets, and there were no bombs to scare us. Our first year of high school we were fourteen years old and we had spent most of those years living as strangers. Would we even have things we could say to each other, or had we been twisted enough by our parents' enmity that we'd allow their hate to cloud our thoughts? But above all, why after so much time, did I feel the need to connect with him in some way?

I started the cycle when I finally worked up the courage to go the CL to see if Maxwell was there. When I spotted him hanging out with some friends, I just stood there stupefied, debating if I should talk to him or not. After a few minutes Maxwell noticed me, but he just kept talking to his friends as if nothing had happened.

This was followed by a series of coincidences where I would find him sitting a few tables away from me, or I would sit a few tables away from him. Our little cycle of coincidences, where neither of us dared to do more.

This went on for weeks. Maxwell was the one who broke the cycle. I remember that day and how the sun shone bright through the windows. I spotted Maxwell as soon as I walked into the library. He was lounging on one of the corner chairs, antique headphones over his ears while he jotted down notes on his pad. For a second I thought about sitting in the empty chair next to him, but instead I sat at the closest table, facing him. I pulled out my pad, but only pretended to look at it. I was still too afraid of what could be. Afraid of what would happen if I closed that final gap. Why did I feel like the worst thing would happen if we just talked?

Perhaps because every time I did, someone told me it was wrong.

The chair across from me scraped as it was pulled out and Maxwell sat on it, putting down his headphones.

“I’m tired of just watching.”

It took a lot out of me not to look up.

“Andrew.”

“Please,” I begged, because I didn’t know what else to do. Catching glances of him had been hard enough. I remembered every single time we walked past each other. But hearing his voice? Hearing my name? Our little game of coincidences had more of an effect on me than I thought.

“I’m going to start talking to you, and if something happens, then it will happen.”

I glanced up. Maxwell was looking at a paper magazine.

“I want to, but—”

“We’ve always been afraid of our fathers. I’m not letting mine do that anymore, but if you tell me that you don’t want to talk to me—that all the times I spotted you looking at me were figments of my imagination—then I will walk away and never talk to you again.”

“No.” I said the word so fast even I was surprised. “My father—”

Maxwell wasn't looking at his magazine anymore. "What will they do? Pull us apart again like when we were children? Hit us? They've already done that."

It was an uncomfortable silence. Everything he had said was true. All my life I had done nothing but what my father told me to do. I lived by his vision of right and wrong. Happiness was something fleeting for me. Because when I met Maxwell, I discovered what happiness felt like. The strongest memories of my life, the one's burned into my core, were the ones I had with Maxwell.

"Andy."

I was so tired of being my father's son.

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

That was the beginning.

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## CHAPTER 07

The CL quickly became my favorite place in the world.

It no longer was a place of just books and things to know. It was a place of books, things to know, and something I never thought I would have.

When I was a child, friendship was synonymous with happiness. It equaled not being alone. Since it was the one thing forbidden to me after moving to The Circle, I naturally craved it more than anything. I tried making friends in school, but no matter how nice they were, I could always feel that their friendship came because of my position. They didn't want to be friends with me. They wanted to be friends with an heir to this country.

Maybe that's why I yearned for Maxwell, because his friendship came with no conditions.

Yet friendship was barely a word I could use to describe my feelings. Maybe at first, but that had come and gone long ago.

At first we just sat at the same table, each with our own things—books, pads, notetakers. We talked quietly to each other while pretending to do something else. Little by little, the gap of chairs between us got smaller and smaller, until every time I sat at a table, Maxwell was right next to me. I expected the world to implode. For a teacher, librarian, or supervisor to tell us we were wrong, or for someone to rat on me to my father. But days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and by the end of the semester, after we had both turned fifteen, there wasn't a project, paper or assignment I didn't complete in the CL with Maxwell by my side.

The other students didn't even gawk at us anymore.

When it got busy, and every table was taken by students desperate to pass, we could disappear among them. We would find a bookshelf aisle in the back, sit next to each other, and talk. We talked about our families, about the memories we could have shared if we had spent our childhoods together. And we talked about our fathers, who expected the world from us, yet never asked us if we wanted it in the first place.

Maxwell was luckier than me when it came to this. He wasn't the firstborn. He wasn't expected to inherit his father's responsibility. Chloe was. Maxwell dreamt of studying law, becoming a lawyer or maybe a judge. "I want to help people individually," he told me. It was the little desires, the little secrets that closed the gaps of our friendship, and with that we did what generations of our families had sworn to never do. We didn't hate each other.

We were so busy talking, we barely noticed that the CL was buzzing. It was close to finals and it was prime freak-out time. Maxwell and I sat in the far end of our favorite aisle by the fiction section. Our shoulders brushed and there was nothing but silence until it was broken by Maxwell's voice.

"Sometimes I think we should just take my car and run away."

I imagined us driving down empty roads, the wind on our faces. "We could drive to the edge of Gorus. No man's land. Maybe even The Wall."

I saw the corner of Maxwell's mouth raise up with a smile. "That would be different. The unknown."

Maxwell's fingers inched towards mine until his pinkie looped around my own.

I could no longer call what we had a friendship. We had been falling in love all this time. Every smile, every brush, every word was just another form for me to sink deeper in.

I was so in love with him. I was in love with the only person I could never be with.

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## CHAPTER 08

Maxwell closed his book. That was the signal.

I read a few more lines of one of the books I had, counting the seconds in my head. Forty-five. Time to go. I put the books back, keeping count in my head as I made my way out of the CL. Maxwell was already gone.

Instead of heading towards the door that would take me back to North Hall, I turned left towards the main entrance of the CL. I never hesitated, walking with sure steady steps.

I could see past the clear windows of the building. It was January. The windless chill outside made the trees look fake. The information staff and security barely gave me a second glance as I walked past them towards the clear double doors. I quickly pressed my hand to the scanner and let out my breath. The second I pushed the door open, a beautiful metallic-grey, ridiculously expensive car pulled up to the curve.

I took in a gasp of air and stepped out the door. For the first few steps I held my breath, but then realized that was stupid. Cameras didn't care if I breathed or not. It took everything I had not to run to that car. It was the most terrifying eight seconds of my life. I only relaxed once I was sitting down next to Maxwell, and the door was shut behind me.

I tried to breathe calmly again. Maxwell was already messing with the shift and stepping on the accelerator. He drove like we were being chased, but when I looked behind us, there was nobody there. I tried to relax, but it was impossible. I couldn't relax, at least not until I knew we were safe—when we were out of the city and into the older derelict districts. Somewhere where cameras were scarce, and there were no gates to take our fingerprints.

Once we got on the highway, I heard the click that signaled the car had aligned with the road. Maxwell pushed the Auto button and let go of the wheel. His hand reached out and grabbed mine. The fire flared through my fingertips.

It was madness, this detour of ours, an impossibility—and still I was willing to risk it all to spend one day with the person I loved.

Back in December, when Maxwell had told me we should run away, I played along, because it was just pretending. Then two days ago he begged me to run away with him for real.

But just for a day.

One afternoon outside the city, where no one would know who we were. I tried to stop it, because if we got caught, we would lose what little time we did have. But then I thought of the day we would graduate. The day the CL would no longer be our haven, and I thought of how the only memories I would have of us would be hiding in the dark.

I pressed a button until the roof of the car pulled all the way back and disappeared. The wind was an insanity at this speed, and it was the closest I had come to feeling free.

The beauty of Aurora became a dot in the distance and it hit me. This was the first time I had ever left its boundaries. The modern highway ended and became something abused by time. Maxwell took back the wheel, slowed down, and closed the roof.

I saw an old, bent, muddy sign by the side of the road.

### **Welcome to Orth**

“We’re in Orth?” I asked, still dumfounded. This was an ancient, mostly abandoned city that had been destroyed during the war. I’d seen pictures of its skeletal buildings, but nothing else.

If I was expecting to see broken reminders of the war, I had to deal with disappointment, because Maxwell drove into an area where people actually walked around, and I saw shops and restaurants.

“I came here three months ago with my father,” Maxwell explained. “He knows some people that are trying to develop this area. This is their first push.”



Maxwell drove past the busy street and parked the car in a private garage. I waited while he talked to the garage employee, watching a few people walk past. The air here smelled different, or at least I thought so. Maxwell bumped his shoulder against mine, I smiled, then turned towards the street with the shops and restaurants.

Maxwell stopped me. “No. This way.” He nodded towards the opposite direction. It was darker down there, emptier. Maxwell pulled my hand and I followed blindly.

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## CHAPTER 09

I quickly discovered why Maxwell went towards the quieter side of the street. It was empty—just us and the world. The majority of the buildings showed clear signs of being in the middle of repairs, but had not yet opened except for a couple of shops. We ate sandwiches at a tiny shop where a woman carefully prepared everything to perfection. She spoke soft words in another language that I didn't understand, and Maxwell replied in the same voice.

“What did she say?” I asked after we had left.

“Thank you, in Spanish.”

“I didn't know you spoke Spanish.”

Maxwell shook his head. “I don't speak it. I just remember a few phrases that my grandmother taught me. Thank you. You're welcome. Hello. Good-bye. I love you.”

“Teach me,” I asked. Maxwell repeated the five phrases and I failed miserably at pronouncing all five of them. I gave up pretty quickly, and while I was laughing at my failure, Maxwell closed his hand over mine and held it firm. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

We wandered far enough that I thought we should turn back. It started to feel unsafe.

“Look at that.” Maxwell pointed to a lit-up machine, oddly placed outside a store that appeared to be full of trinkets, toys, and things you could touch. Maxwell tried to open the door to the store, but it was locked. Our attention turned to the machine.

“What is it?”

“I'm not sure.” Maxwell read the instructions and his eyes lit-up. “It takes old pictures. *Paper* pictures. Looks like it was altered to take mobiles.” Maxwell pressed the screen of his mobile against the small pad and it beeped once, confirming the purchase. Maxwell pulled the curtain aside and tugged on my hand, forcing me to follow him into the narrow closet space where we sat uncomfortably on a small bench.

I looked in front of us and saw a clear window with something on it. Next to it was a button that read START. Maxwell rested his head against my shoulder and pressed it. We waited until I heard the click and saw the flash. It startled me, but just for a second. I laughed, now knowing what to expect. I held Maxwell's hand and bumped my head against his as another flash went off.

Maxwell squeezed my hand, raised it to his mouth and pressed his lips against it. Another flash.

I could feel our hearts beating through our fingertips, and for the life of me I could not think clearly. Everything was that touch, wanting more. I heard the camera click again. We turned our heads at the same time and I felt the brush of Maxwell's fingertips against my cheek before we closed the gap between us and kissed... I had no idea what I was doing, and even if Maxwell pretended to, he didn't know either. We were clumsy and hesitant, and there was absolutely no doubt in my heart that I wanted him to keep kissing me. I heard another click and opened my eyes. Maxwell was right there, staring at me, and from the look in his eyes it was obvious he was just as sure as I was.

My first kiss was with the boy everyone told me was my enemy. The boy that lived across the street and I never saw. The boy who held my hand and kissed me even as a camera created the evidence that we could never allow the world to see.

I caught my breath as Maxwell held on to me, as if holding on would make the time stop. But time was an unstoppable thing, and we could not stay here forever, holding each other and pretending the rest of the world did not exist.

Sooner or later we had to go back.

"The pictures are outside," Maxwell said against my lips and I nodded. Yes, they were. "This is a good memory, isn't it?"

What an odd thing to say, I thought, but it was true. It was an unforgettable memory.

I grabbed the pictures and looked at them carefully. The one with his head against my shoulder, smiling nonchalantly like we had no worries in the world.

My head against his. Trusting. Kissing my hand. The look in my eyes said everything. And then the kisses. There were more than one. And each one wasn't just a kiss. It was a reflection of everything we felt and how much we just wanted to forget our reality. It made me wish to be someone else, anyone else, as long as it gave me Maxwell.

Sometimes it sucked being able to dream.

I held the small evidence of our affection, not sure what to do with them. If I kept them it was a risk. If I threw them away—*No*—As soon as the thought of destroying the pictures crossed my mind, I knew I couldn't do it, no matter the risk. If this was the only night Maxwell and I could share, then I wanted a reminder of it for as long as I lived.

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## CHAPTER 10

I slid back in the house with ease and closed the door noiselessly.

“Young master.”

I turned around rapidly to see Douglas, my butler. He preferred to be called personal assistant, handpicked by my father to be there at my beck and call. He had been by my side since the bombing. I guess my father had gotten tired of the countless nannies and finally decided to hire someone that would always be present.

I remember when I first met him. We were staying at a lavish hotel while the house was being repaired and my father introduced me to a sour-looking seventeen-year-old. I don't know the story of how a seventeen-year-old Douglas ended up in my father's debt. Because why else would a teenager with a black eye and a cut on his cheek ever tell a child that he was at his beck and call, that his life no longer belonged to himself, but to me?

I remember hating him at first. He was always there, never left me alone, but through the years I learned to lose him and get rid of him when I wanted.

No, I did not hate Douglas, but I didn't harbor any familial feelings for him either. I didn't trust him, even if I should. Too many times he promised me he would keep my secrets, just to turn around and tell my father. Now he had caught me coming in late. *Great.*

I ignored Douglas and went to my room, two stairs at a time. I wasn't going to let him ruin what had been the best day of my life. I wanted to change my shirt, which still smelled of Maxwell. I put on one of my shirts that had a picture of an eagle. The symbol of my father's party. When I turned, I saw Douglas, waiting by the door with his hands behind his back.

“Young master,” he said again, and I wished he'd just go away. “Your father requests your presence in his study.”

I cursed and bolted out of my room. Who knows when my father had actually called me, and Douglas just stood there without telling me. The fact that I was running to my father's study said a lot about our relationship. Fear is

a powerful motivator, but what did I really fear? Getting caught breaking curfew. My father's disappointment that I didn't present myself when called. Or him finding out what I had done today. It was combination of all of them. The fear was ingrained in my brain so hard I didn't even think—just reacted. Almost like a survival instinct that right then was solely focused on being in front of my father as fast as I could.

I took a second to catch my breath before knocking on the door to my father's study. I counted to five like I always did, then simply opened the door.

"I'm here, Father." I announced my presence and waited for him to acknowledge me. This little ritual hadn't changed the slightest since I was a child, from the time I was old enough to understand that this was the way it was done. Only once did I break the ritual—when I was five and I fell and scraped my knee. My father was the only one in the house, so I burst into his office that time without knocking, hoping to claim his attention from his papers to my scraped knee. Sometimes I can still feel my knee burning from when he grabbed it, and still hear his voice yelling that it was just a scratch and calling me a weak child. I learned more than just knocking on the door that day.

My father was not an old man—he had just turned forty-five—but you wouldn't know it from looking at him. Half the tabloids rumored that he lied about his age to appease a younger demographic. His hair was graying early around the edges, and his face already carried the sunken look of an old man. But mostly it was his behavior. He didn't act like a man that, more than likely, still had another forty or more years of life ahead of him. Life had hardened my father. The life of being the head of a political party, of succeeding my grandfather when he was so young, and of losing my mother after I was born.

My father easily looked ten years older. His eyes were the only thing that retained some of his true age. His brow furrowed as he looked at me, then quickly returned to the stack of papers on his desk.

"You should not take so long to take a bath, Andrew. You kept me waiting."

I hid my surprise well. I didn't even flinch when he spoke. So Douglas had lied and covered for me. It was something to keep in mind.

"I am sorry, Father. Douglas neglected to tell me it was urgent." I didn't feel an inch of guilt in blaming Douglas for my lateness.

"You need to take responsibility for yourself, Andrew. You know I dislike when you place blame on others."

It was really hard not to scowl. "Yes, Father. Why did you need to see me?" I was ready to get this done so I could go back to my room.

My father's hand went to the display on top of his desk, his fingers moving nimbly across the surface until the television screen on the far wall turned on, his fingers continued tapping until the screen displayed the channel he wanted. They were talking about him.

"Latest polls have us five points ahead, but I have better news." He was talking to me, even though his eyes never left the screen.

"What could be better, Father?" I asked predictably. I didn't care about any of this. Heck, deep down I wanted him to lose; our party hadn't won since my mother died. Maybe if he kept losing he'd realize this was a waste of time. That our party was a dead horse and there was no use beating it. It would make it easier for me to leave. Because deep down that's what I wanted. To leave. To get in a car and never look back. Even if I was scared when Maxwell drove us to Orth, I secretly wished he would have kept driving down that decrepit highway and taken me so far away we could never go back. Run away to a life where I wouldn't know what the next day brought. An unscripted life.

"I got good word that Torres will drop out from the race."

My daydream vanished. I tried as best as I could to not show my reaction, but my body language changed and it was hard to keep my voice uncaring and monotone. "Why would he do that?" I knew immediately that wasn't the right thing to say, but if it bothered my father he didn't let me know.

"To avoid scandal, of course."

That was a long list. Pretty much anything in our society was considered scandalous. Even the fact that Clare Mason remarried was scandalous.

I wasn't really listening to the next words my father said, because all I could imagine was Maxwell having to move out of The Circle and into the unruly city. It was one thing to escape for a one-night escapade where the danger was brief, but to reside in its midst?

My father must have asked me something because he was looking at me as if waiting for an answer. I said the safest thing that popped in my head. "When will we know if it is official?" When in doubt, ask a question.

Father was about to answer when there was a knock on the door. The man that opened it did not wait the five seconds like I had to. His name was Kane Reeves, a fair-skinned man with blue eyes and light hair. He had also come into my life after the bombings, even if he should have been in it long before. He was the face the public saw whenever my father was unable or unwilling to make an appearance, and one reason why the party had had a surge of popularity recently. The other reason was me.

The political update ended on the screen and the show switched to another segment, this one presented by a bubbly girl that looked too young to be on a reputable show. My picture popped up on the screen. Kane turned it off immediately.

I knew my father trusted him implicitly, but he was a douche as far as I was concerned. He also hated me—he had told me as much for most of my life.

"I got an update on the Torres scandal—" he said before he noticed I was in the room and shut his mouth. He glowered at me briefly before ignoring my presence, and stepped next to my father. He whispered whatever information he had discovered and I couldn't hear what he said, but I heard my father's reply and it shook me.

"The son?" my father asked, not following Kane's need to whisper.

I stood still, hoping they'd continue the conversation, because otherwise I might never know. My head was swimming with possible dreadful scenarios,



but one haunted me more. Maxwell's father had discovered he was gay and was leaving his political career because of it. Once the possibility entered my mind, I had no doubt that was the case. This explained Maxwell's behavior—it explained why when he told me he would see me tomorrow, it sounded like a lie.

Kane continued whispering the update to my father and I took the chance to excuse myself from the room, citing overdue schoolwork as the reason. My father paid little heed as I left the study. It took sheer willpower for me to not run back to my room, and when I finally got there, I wasted no time in running to the window and opening it.

I realized I was doing something incredibly stupid for the second time that day. But my need to know was so intense, I couldn't help it. *What if Maxwell left tonight? What if today had been the last time his hand touched mine?*

I rationalized my actions for an entire three seconds before I swung my leg over the windowsill and grabbed the edge of the wall for balance. I knew in theory what I had to do to safely climb down the window, but suave climbing maneuvers were not really my priority. The third floor seemed higher than it actually was from the ground—a rule of the universe, I guess. I could see myself running across the street that divided the two houses, climbing the side of the Torres residence all the way up to Maxwell's second floor bedroom, and knocking on the window. Maxwell would open and get a pleasant surprise. He would invite me in, and I would hug him as hard as I could, kiss his lips until we both needed air, and tell him that I would go anywhere he went. That I was willing to tell my father that I was in love with a boy and that I no longer wanted the future he saw for me. It all played perfectly inside my head in the short seconds it took me to climb down halfway to the second floor.

The sad thing about a perfect scenario in your mind is that it is just that. A figment of your imagination. As I slowly lowered myself another foot, I heard the sound of a vehicle driving around the cul-de-sac. I turned my head and saw Maxwell's car. I suddenly felt the need to rush, for my feet to touch the ground *now*. I ignored every warning bell in my head that told me to slow down and miscalculated the distance left between my feet and the small ledge that

divided the second and third floors. Instead of telling Maxwell that I loved him and wanted to stay with him no matter what—I slipped—and fell down the rest of the way before my back crashed to the ground.

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## CHAPTER 11

There was an annoying beeping sound when I woke up, and I squinted my eyes to see a slick-looking machine next to me. I recognized my room once my vision settled, and the feeling of my bed was familiar on my back. The little machine was placed on my bedside table and there was a very small tube running from it and disappearing under the skin of my left arm. I remembered seeing a similar tube on the only picture I had with my mother; she was sitting in a hospital bed with me in her arms, her golden hair messy and looking drained but happy. A picture taken just days before she died.

I didn't feel scared. I didn't really feel much of anything. I realized there were other people in the room with me. Closest to me was Dr. Peters, my personal physician, a man in his early thirties with unmoving brown hair and dark eyes. The fact that he was at my bedside was not only expected, but required. Contracted by my father as soon as he finished med school at the top of his class, and offered such a ridiculous salary that no one would have been able to resist. When I was younger I noticed that Dr. Peters was plenty happy with this arrangement. He had an easygoing job that paid well, he could enjoy his youth flushed with that wealth—and had. One time there was an emergency and he appeared wearing a wet suit. But in the past few years something in his eyes had changed, and he didn't tend to me with the excitement he once did—he did it because it was his job and he couldn't leave.

“Are you feeling any pain in your back?” he asked me with a smile. I could tell he cared about my well-being. He cared about me specifically, but his heart wasn't in his craft anymore.

I just shook my head; my lips and mouth were dry when I tried to talk. Dr. Peters raised a cup of water to my lips. No matter how much the medicines kept me hydrated there was nothing like a real cup of water.

There were two other people in the room—Kane and someone behind him. I really had no idea why Kane would even bother to be at my bedside except to report to my father immediately, or because I was seriously ill. I didn't feel like I was about to die, so it had to be option one, but why?

Kane moved, revealing the person behind him and my question was answered. Maxwell was leaning against the wall, trying to look bored. I knew immediately why Kane was there. To see my reaction. That meant only one thing, he knew I loved Maxwell or at least suspected it. And if he knew—my father knew.

There are many things you can do to hide your true reaction to something. Laugh it off, shrug it off, pretend to be clueless. I've had lots of years of practice in hiding my real feelings. How else would I have survived the scrutiny that is my life? It is not that hard to hide your true feelings. People lie all the time. But then there are the moments when you hold so much affection for someone, that no matter how practiced you are, the shock of the moment sneaks up on you, and you can't hide that affection for a brief second.

A second was all that Kane needed to know my true feelings. His plastic visage grew a little catty with a slight raised of his brow, a slight upward twitch of his lips.

Maxwell noticed.

It was too late, but I still pretended to be shocked and appalled that Maxwell was in my bedroom. "Why is he here?" I asked, trying to make my voice sound like venom.

Dr. Peters was the only one apparently clueless as to what was really going on. "He found you after you fell. Somehow the press got wind of it, and well—"

Kane continued the explanation. "The press has taken this little incident as a rare moment of union between the opposing parties. It's become quite popular. This fictional *friendship* between the sons of men on opposite sides of the coin." He spat the word *friendship* with such contempt it made me feel wrong inside. "All the readers are waiting breathlessly to see how Mr. Lee reacts to Mr. Torres' show of *friendship*." He spat the word again.

"I'm fine," I said, not knowing what else to do. "I feel grateful for his help." Maybe that would be enough to make Kane go away. It wasn't. He

wanted this over, here and now. He wasn't going to report anything different to my father.

I felt immense sorrow at how my life had fallen apart around me in the last few hours. From feeling such joy as the wind brushed my face and Maxwell's hand encircled my own while we rode down the road, to the shock of knowing he was going away. Planning to run away with him. Imagining a pretend life together.

Maxwell was looking at me nonchalantly, but his eyes told me something else entirely.

"I'm grateful," I repeated, "but nothing more. It was just an accident. Accidents happen. I would feel equally grateful if any other person had come to my aid and—"

"That's enough." Dr. Peters interrupted me and pushed a button on the machine next to me. He stood up and started repositioning my body on the bed. "Mr. Reeves, I'm sure you need no reminder that young Master Lee is still recovering from breaking his back, and that thanks to young Master Torres finding him so quickly, Master Lee will have a full recovery. Another minute or two and the re-gen would not have worked as swiftly. He might have been paralyzed or worse.

I wanted to hug Dr. Peters right then.

"I don't need a reminder, doctor. It's the only reason Mr. Torres is here in the first place, but I'm sure there will be no more need for Mr. Torres to hang around anymore." He looked at me. "Right, Andrew?"

I barely moved. "Yes, Uncle."

"I'll give the press a call." He exited without saying anything else, and left Maxwell in the room with me. It was as if he let us be in the room together on purpose.

Dr. Peters finished rearranging my position and I felt much more comfortable. "I need to get some things from my car. I'll be back in five minutes."

Was this really happening? Were they really giving us permission to be alone? It made me happy to realize this. Exhilarated, but the feeling vanished quickly, because they weren't letting us be alone. They were letting us say good-bye.

Maxwell walked towards me. And unlike the childlike steps in my memory from the day I discovered we were not allowed to be anything, these steps were not the ones of a child, they were not hesitant nor innocent.

I raised my hand for him to stop. I still held fear from being seen. I knew there was a camera in my room, right above the door. Maxwell stood still just a few feet from me, waiting for me to decide. I decided I didn't care.

Maxwell sat carefully next to me, so as to not jostle the bed. "I feel fine," I said. "I feel normal."

He squeezed my hand then smacked it once. "Why did you try that?" he asked, but I knew he didn't blame me. "I was just getting home when I heard this horrible noise. You should have seen that man's face when he opened the door and I was standing there asking for help."

I laughed when I imagined Kane's face.

Maxwell pulled his glass pad from his pocket and turned it on. "Here," he said, and handed it to me. I scrolled through the pictures displayed on it. They were the headlines from the accident. One of them even had a picture of me surrounded by Kane and my father while Maxwell stood in the background. The headings were all over the place. From simple "Torres saves Lee" to exaggerated, "Torres risks life to save enemy."

None of them were the truth.

Maxwell sighed and his hand touched mine. "I am going to miss you."

So it was true. He was leaving. I gave him back his glass pad and swallowed the lump in my throat. "Did your father find out? How? When are you moving?" I asked. I knew the answer. They had to have found out about us. Maybe someone told what we had been doing in the CL every day.

What else could it be?

Maxwell let go of my hand and stood up. “I am not moving.” He shook his head and I saw the struggle in his eyes. What could be worse than him leaving? “Chloe has decided to cede her position as heir.”

It took me a moment to really understand that. I’ve never really given much thought to the real meaning of my position in this world. That my father’s mantle would be given to me. That I was his only child. His firstborn.

Maxwell was the second child. He wasn’t heir. Chloe was. She *was*.

Because she was female, she had the option to let go. Maxwell had no such luxury. That little line that divided us and our situation had been broken. Now we were both heirs, and what we had been doing was the worst thing we could have possibly done.

A dozen situations crossed through my head. None were a happy ending. Not like I ever believed we could have one, but the fact that Maxwell wasn’t heir made those dreams just remotely believable. That dream was dead now, and only truth remained. “In a few years, we will run against each other.” My voice sounded alien, even to me.

“Yes.”

I saw it. Our future. I had lived through enough of my father’s campaigns to know how they were run. How all the effort, money, and voice were used to demean and darken your opponent. I saw myself sitting behind a desk while men told me what to do. What to say. My father just behind me, whispering in my ear. All telling me to say the most horrible things about the person I loved.

I squeezed the bed sheet tightly. Maxwell stood between me and the door, waiting for me to say something. I was so powerless.

I couldn’t let it end here. This couldn’t be the last memory of us. Me in a bed watching him leave.

I sat up, turned off the machine, and pulled out the needle from my arm. No alarms rang. I started to get out of bed.

“Hey.” Maxwell was quickly by my side.

“I’m fine,” I reassured him. “Help me up.”

I thought I would be weak, or that my feet would wobble, but they didn't. I stood steady. I felt fine. I grabbed Maxwell's hand and headed towards my closet. I didn't care if they taped or recorded us in my room. Knowing my father, he would hide the evidence. But not caring didn't mean I was going to give them a free show.

I stared at the little camera above the door then flipped it off.

I pulled Maxwell with me inside the closet and pressed my lips against his. If we were going to end then I would create our last memory. That way, every time someone told me a lie about him, every time someone made me sign something that would hurt him, we both would know what the reality was.

I winced when Maxwell ran his hand up my back, but I bore it, replacing the pain with the memory of his lips. The memory of his touch. We said the things we carried in our hearts, made promises we knew we couldn't keep. And when he finally left, I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see him go.

I remained there even after he had gone. Afraid to move.

"Let's get you back to bed, Andrew." Dr. Peters held my arm. I didn't remember him coming in.

I didn't sleep well that night. Or the next.

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## EPILOGUE

Noah Mason was frowning with his arms crossed while his mother and stepfather watched silently.

Our quiet street had been overpowered by news vans and reporters. All of them dying to get the story of the hour. That Chloe Torres had declined a position many would die for. That Gorus had a new heir.

Confined to my room, I sat on the windowsill watching the spectacle, trying very hard not to cry.

I had a lot to think about since Maxwell told me he was becoming heir, and I had made a decision. I wasn't going to wait for fate to intervene in my love. I was going to do something about it. I never wanted my father's position. It was handed to me like a wrapped gift, with no effort on my part. I never wanted it until now. Because that position meant power. Power to get almost anything you wanted in life. I'd seen my father doing that most of his life. I never wanted anything. Never needed that power.

Until now.

I was going to change this country. I was going to shape it to get what I wanted.

And unlike my father, I wasn't going to be a puppet whose strings were pulled by every greedy man that came knocking on the door.

Maxwell was standing in his front yard with his father as he spoke to the reporters. I turned on the television.

"According to the latest polls, it looks like Lee will win the next election. Are you concerned that naming your second born as heir may lose you votes?" a reporter asked.

"Why should I be?" Benjamin smiled for the cameras, confident as ever. "He may win this round, but just wait two years. My son will surely take this party to a new era."

Yes.

I was ready to claim my place as heir.

But first?

I had to grow up.

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Ashlyn is a long time fan of all things geeky. Admittedly addicted to reading manga, love stories, and anything that makes her cry. She dreams of one day seeing something she wrote at a library and keeps a notebook just to write story ideas, because you never know.*

## **Contact Info**

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