

Chapter 1 – Reinstating

Nala is a five foot and nine-inch-tall white woman that will soon turn twenty-one, dressed in flowery cotton robe with her golden blond hair in a thick, loose braid to the middle of her back. She never takes off her silver cross pendent that is on a necklace her sister made her. Her dark blue eyes are heavy with fatigue. The candle lit room is relatively bare except the few candles on the night stand and the hand-woven throw rug that is laid at the end of the bed. She untucks the covers of her bed and blows out the vanilla scented candles and nestles in for the night. The warmth of the big brown fleece blanket feels good against her winter-chilled skin. Within moments she was fast asleep, only to be haunted by the image of her sister, Lela, being in a war zone fighting off alien creatures in a snow-filled city.

Lela is surrounded by thousands of hostile invaders that are all grabbing at her but she is rolling out of the way trying to avoid them the best that she can. They look like some bizarre mixed-up creature with one arm being a tentacle that looks and acts like a python and the other arm has been replaced by a scythe. One grabs her arm with its long tentacle and she takes the jagged curved knife from her belt and stabs it, within seconds the creature swollen up and burst, leaving pieces of alien matter on the streets and painting the snow a dark red color. Another one was trying to slice her with its claw. She teleports in a flash out of its path leaving white particles that float around and then dissipate. She starts to grow weak with every struggle to survive. She flashes to the roof tops to catch her breath. Falling to her knees and blade scraping the concrete, she looks over the city and sees her sister, Nala, in the middle the streets. None of the aliens are attacking her. Suddenly Lela feels a tentacle grab her up in the waist and lifted into the air while Nala just stands and watches. The blade falls from Lela's hand and sticks into the frozen ground with a metallic clank. Lela reaches out for her sister's aid but nothing happens. Nala, unable to move as if bound by a spell, just watches as the tentacle like arm squeezes Lela like a python until she bursts into a bloody rain over the city's area. Nala feeling freed now moves her hands to her face shaking. She runs her hands over her cheeks smudging the blood all over her face. She looks at her blood covered hands and then lets out a sound piercing scream.

Quickly sitting up in bed breathing heavy, she feels her face to ensure that it wasn't real, nothing but a palm full of sweat. Slightly comforted by the early morning dawn sunrise, but still shaken by the realistic and terrifying dream, she goes to the adjacent room to ensure herself that her sister was still safe in bed. Opening the door, she gets a waft of the citrus fragrance that Lela always wears. Once she saw her sister sleeping happily underneath her covers, she was greatly relieved. Her room was usually more of a mess than Nala's with a couple of gun magazines on the office desk that she keeps by the window. Her closet is left open with most of her clothes hung up, but not in any particular order. The pair of denim shorts and the brown button up plaid shirt she wore the day before is lying on the floor. On her bulletin board is an anime picture of the family that Lela drew awhile back. The new soft white carpet and citrusy smell gives the room a fresh new feel even with all of the clutter. There is the faint sound of some battle music coming from her TV. She carefully shuts the door so she doesn't make any noise.

She goes back to her room and changes her clothes to a yellow shirt and Capri jeans with sandals. Then she goes downstairs and immediately to the left into the kitchen. There is a new stainless-steel

refrigerator with a few reminder notes attached with magnets and a large matching sink. The cabinets are stained cherry with a glossy varnish finish. There is a flat surface stove with a garnet counter in the center with overhanging pans. The pantry opens below the stairs where Nala takes a loaf of bread out. She begins to cook breakfast, popping open the refrigerator to get some eggs and bacon. She lays the eggs and bacon on the counter and gets a frying pan from the overhead hanging rack. After dripping a little olive oil in the pan and turning on the stove she turns around to find Lela standing at the door way of the kitchen with bed head in her long bright red hair holding a folder full of papers. She is a four foot eight inches, thin, nineteen-year-old white woman. She has a child-like body with pale looking skin wearing a long banana yellow night shirt with bright red hair that goes down to her torso. She is wearing short purple shorts. Her green eyes, almost lime in color, are only half way open. Nala isn't surprised to see her there; she could smell the fresh citrus.

"What is that for?" Nala asks her half-asleep sister who was walking to the office room. The office room was straight across from the kitchen, but had a diagonal wall that faced into the living room. Inside there is a black desktop computer, a black printer, a black office chair, a nice walnut office desk, a black filing cabinet, and a set-in shelf full of business type books. She slaps the folder onto the desk and adjusts the chair to her height and begins flipping through the papers.

"It's my application papers." She mutters in a slur to where it was barely understandable. "Would you like some coffee sis?" Nala responds not knowing half of what was said.

"Sure." She says with a yawn and the flop of the folder. Nala places the bacon in the hot oil and there is the familiar sizzle that breaks the silence that often fills the house now. Ever since Lela lost Ryan in a fire fight in Brit when a hostile opened fire, she has become rather quiet. Nala thinks in her head, "I know what happened there very well as if I were there myself, that's how many times she has told me..."

"Alright, I'm going to need a couple of you to stay back here and cover our backs." Ryan says wearing a combat-ready desert digital camouflage uniform, also called a digi. Ryan is a tough five-foot three-inch guy, short compared to his teammates. He is armed with an assault rifle and a large rugged machete across the back. The humid air is making a rather miserable day for any outside missions. Ahead of him and his team of ten is the city of Brit where the mission is to take place. The city is rather small with about 20 buildings most of them made out of adobe bricks. The streets are made out of old wore out asphalt that is half buried in the dirt and sand. Behind him there is a field that is mostly barren except the few sparse patches of tall dried out grasses. Everyone looks at each other, nobody wants to be out of the action, but at the same time everyone knows that it is important to have your teammate's back the same way you would want him to have yours. Ryan wipes the sweat from his brow and puts on his helmet. "I'll do it." one young man says.

"Are you sure you got this; I don't want anybody getting behind me. Is that understood?" "Yes sergeant." He pipes up. "Don't forget your buddy."

He taps one of the troops and the two walk out of the crowd and begin discussing cover points. Lela looks back to them and sees one of them pointing at one of the buildings and drawing lines in the air with his finger while his buddy is crouched down and drawing in the dirt.

"Null and I will go up the middle and try to draw them out, I want two to run up ahead and scout and return back to us, whoever that is will be in charge of the movement of the whole team, then I want a buddy team on each side of the street, those on the sides will be looking at these little shops and whatnots. Who wants what?"

"I'll lead." Said one of the older men.

"Remember I get the last call, now get going." Ryan says and the volunteer taps a guy and runs off into the small city. "You two take the right." Ryan says waving his finger at two young men. "The other two can take the left." "Yes sergeant." And they all run to their positions and wait for the next command.

"They are waiting for your orders commander." Lela says wearing a black digi uniform with little combat gear, a durable looking jagged knife, a pistol and ammunition for it. She doesn't have a helmet but her hair is rolled up into a tight bun. "Drink water and your check ammunition." Ryan orders scanning the troops with his eyes.

Lela uses the distraction to talk privately to him, "If we don't make it through this-" She begins looking him in the eye.

"We will so don't" He starts to say looking back into her eyes.

"No regrets, I want you to know that I love you." She says a little hastily, and she leans up to kiss him so he leans down to accept.

"Getta room." One of the other team members said and she relaxes herself back to the ground with a little smile on her face.

"Sergeant Gates?" One of them requests.

"Is it important?" Ryan replies looking over at one of the men.

"Got a light?" He says putting a cigarette in his mouth and Ryan tosses him a lighter. He lights his cigarette and tosses it back.

One of the scouts returns jogging back to Sergeant with his buddy following behind him. Breathing a little heavy he begins, "We saw very few but they all seem to be hiding in and behind buildings. I think they are waiting for the whole team to go through."

"You don't get paid enough to think, but that's likely. You two will stick with us for now and when we get near the enemies you point them out, alright?"

"Yes sergeant." He replies.

Ryan motions for the other troops to start advancing forward. Slowly the team starts moving through the streets of Brit. The right pair fires a shot and everyone looks to see what had happened. An enemy from the left side stabs one of the men in the back while he was distracted with a curved heavily jagged blade. He starts falling but before he could even hit the ground he bursts into small pieces, leaving a bloody mess to finish falling to the ground. His buddy fires a couple of shots into the enemy.

"That's the weapons that we are looking for." Ryan says "Pick that up!" One of the backside soldiers picks up the knife and slings his weapon while the right team moves into a small shop looking for hostile enemies.

One of them come out, "There is a woman."

"Leave her." Ryan orders.

"Yes sergeant." He replies.

"You, over there." Ryan says pointing the two scouts to the left. They move silently across the street and the three of them tactically enter a building on the left. After a few shots an enemy dropped out of the second-floor window. The back two moves up to the second building and hide behind the doorways on either side of the street. Out of nowhere a grenade falls in the middle of the team and the two sides try to run to cover and Lela uses a magical barrier to protect Ryan and her. After the dust settled, they notice that one of the left men are dead. "Leave him for now." Ryan says. They quicken their pace to cover more ground without being such an easy target, but as soon as Ryan ordered the command all hell breaks loose. It felt like a full war not just a hostile fire fight. The first person to be shot down was the volunteer scout; he was standing in the open trying to signal to the rest of the team. The rest of the team squats down lower to the ground. Lela spots his shooter, teleports in front of him and cuts his throat in one swift motion. The enemy quickly grabs his neck and falls to the ground bleeding to death.

"Don't move!" a right-side troop shouts to his buddy but with all of the gunshots not a word was heard. He keeps moving forward and he steps on a small mine killing the pair and destroying part of the building next to it.

"We can't keep losing our men." Ryan shouts to Lela.

"I understand." She says with a bit of disappointment.

"Pull back!" Ryan orders but as he is turning around another shot came from above hitting Ryan right in the chest dropping him to his knees, Lela notices the gunner first. She teleports up to where the gunner is and fires a single shot into his head and then teleports back down next to the on-the-ground Ryan. Everything slows to a halt as she kneels down next to his shoulder, "Take me with you." he whispers as he becomes motionless.

Lela's eyes were filling up with tears as she unclips a spare dogtag from his beaded necklace and she clips it to her Kevlar necklace. Her dogtag is similar to his in the front, but hers is a little thicker with a memory chip embedded in it on the back that keeps all of her profile records on it. Slowly she gets back up and everything starts to go back into motion again. She runs behind the first building and pulls her wireless headset out of her pocket and takes one last glance into the street. She sees one man on the ground dying and another one being shot at. She pulls her head back. The last guy moves next to her. "Switch me places ma'am." he says, "I need a better shot." Lela switches him places so he is on the outside and she puts her headset on. "This is Special Agent Lela Null- Without even realizing that she wasn't listening he starts talking, "I don't remember this many hostiles in the briefing. Come to think of it, a lot of these people look the same."

"And the mission was a failure." Lela finishes and then replies looking over to him and notices he is holding a cross pendent that is fastened to his neck, "It's the heat, just drink some water." She says and

glances at his name, "Private Anders?" she finishes. "Yes ma'am." He quickly responds by drinking from his canteen...

As soon as she was out of that battle, she relieved herself from duty saying that losing him was too much, Nala finishes her little thought,

"So, what made you want to go back?" Nala asks. "I need the work." She replies. "Would you like something to eat?" "Sure." Lela says. "

"It'll be in the living room for you." "Thanks." Lela responds.

I'm going to the café for a while, are you going to be, okay?" "I'll be fine." She says without looking up from her stack of papers.

Nala walks out the door and instantly feels a cool refreshing spring breeze. After looking up she grabs the umbrella that is beside the door. "See you later", she calls back into the house. She closes the door and walks down the freshly paved driveway toward the little cafe on the corner of the street. With all of the money that Lela was bringing in they had built a house on a block of unused land at the edge of town. There is roar of thunder as Nala opens the glass door of the cafe and the familiar sound of the tin cowbell that is tied to the door breaks the obvious silence that was inside. The café is a small old concrete brick building with paint peeling off the outside walls and a few large windows. Inside there is a counter just to the right of the door and behind that there is a wall with a doorway on either side that leads to the back but no door. Beside that there is a small bathroom. On the left there are some old scents with all of the windows looking out to the small street.

"Just a minute." A voice from the back says.

"No hurry, it's just me." Nala says going over to where the voice came from and looking at the menu as if she is about to order something. "What's up?" a five and a half foot seventeen-year-old girl named Taylor Mitts says coming from the back. Taylor is wearing black slacks and a red polo with a white apron covering her front. Her blond hair is put in a sort ponytail and pushed through a black baseball cap. She is a senior in high school.

"I had a strange dream" Nala starts.

"Oh?"

"I'm sure it was nothing." Nala says passively.

"You already brought it up so you might as well tell me."

"I guess you're right." She says with a sigh, "It was snowing in the city and there were some strange creatures and Lela was being attacked by them. I was there but I couldn't help her, and in the end one of them tore her apart." She continues with the thought of losing her sister filling her eyes with tears.

Taylor walks around the counter and puts her arm around her shoulder, "Calm down." she says sitting Nala on a bench. "She wouldn't ever get herself into a situation that she couldn't get herself out of, you know that." Nala looks up at her with tear filled eyes and takes a jagged breath. "She has grown

up a lot since I first met her, I'm sure that she can handle herself." She continues. "You're gonna have to stop being so protective and let her be herself."

How is that supposed to help?" Nala asks.

" "You have kept her under lock and key for the last year. She wants out of the house."

"I'm so sorry, I just want her to be safe." She says as a single tear falls. "You have been there since you were kids, and you will be there after too." Taylor ensures her tears also fill her eyes.

"Yeah." Nala says thinking back...

"Mom, are we there yet?" little nine-year-old Nala asks wearing a white dress that had an attached skirt with little pink flowers. Her golden blond hair is shoulder length and her blue eyes are wide with excitement. "It's just around the corner." Her father, Eric, answers from the driver's seat. He is wearing a business suit and red tie. When they stop her mother turns around to look in the back where Nala is sitting, "I want you to be on your best behavior."

"Okie dokie." Nala says with a smile as the car comes to a halt. Eric and Alice unclasp their seatbelts and pop open their doors to get out while Nala remains fumbling to get out of her seatbelt due to her overflowing excitement. The pavement has faded white line making it difficult to distinguish the different parking spaces. The couple begins to walk slowly to the front door of the building. The building was somewhat large with faded red bricks. Nala pops open the door to the four-door, dually, red truck and carefully but carefully descends down the side step. As any child would, she rushes to catch up with her parents letting the warm summer breeze catch her hair. They reach the glass doors and Eric opens the door and ushers them in. Once inside there seems to be a sudden change of atmosphere. It was very still and quiet except a young man in his mid-twenties, who was fiddling on a computer that was located directly in front of the door. "May I help you?" he asks in a professional voice. "We were thinking about adopting a child, but we would like to actually see the children first, if you don't mind." Alice says. "Of course, follow me." He says moving from behind his desk and walking down the main hall that is to the left of the desk. "Now of course these are just the children that have recently come in."

"I understand" she says.

"Most of the children housed here are between six and ten." He tells them as they take a right and walk down another shorter hallway. "The rest are at our main center." He says as they walk through some double doors on the right. The room looks like a gym for a high school with lots of playground equipment on it. "Mom, can I go play?" Nala asks.

"Yes, just be careful." Alice answers, and watches Nala run off to the slide and climb up the ladder. Alice turns back to the young man, "May we speak with the manager?" "Yes, one moment." He says grabbing a mobile phone. When he spoke, it came over the

intercom, "Jeff to the play house please, Jeff to the play house." Eric looks over to check on Nala and he notices that she is playing with another girl. The other girl has long bright red hair in a ponytail and is wearing overalls with a white shirt. "It looks like she found a new friend." He says nudging Alice's arm.

"How may I help you?" Jeff says. "Go back to the front." He finishes looking at the other man. He is a chubby middle-aged man that's wearing a yellow and white striped button up shirt with a pair of jeans, his gray hair starting to fall out. The young man leaves after a moment. "Have you found any that you like?" Jeff asks. "That will do." She says.

"May we speak with one of the children in a separate room?" Alice asks. "I will have to be with you to ensure that nothing goes wrong." He says.

"Which one do you have in mind?" "The red headed girl over there." Alice says pointing to the one playing with Nala. Jeff walks over to the young girl and leans over to talk to the girl. Then all three of them walk back to Alice. "We're going to be going down the hall." He says walking through the doors.

They walk down the hall toward the entrance and into the room at the corner of the hall and Alice and Eric follow them. The chubby man fumbles to get the key out of his pocket and he ends up dropping them on the floor. When he leans over to pick them up Alice smirks, and then looks at her husband. Jeff unlocks the door and flicks on the lights to reveal a few simple toys and a round table with a few chairs. The two girls run over to the colorful building blocks at the same time and spill them on the thick fluffy rug. Alice moves a chair next to the blocks for Eric to sit in and then sits on the floor herself. "What's your name?" Alice asks getting down to play with the young girl. Eric takes a seat in the chair and starts putting the blocks together quietly while Alice remains interactive with the girl "Lela. Are you here to take me home?" She asks quickly looking at Alice with a glance of hope.

Alice and Eric exchange looks then look at Jeff. "She is very eager to leave this place. Her family died a few months ago in a fire."

Neither Alice nor Eric says anything to him, "How old are you?" Alice asks refixing her attention on Lela.

"I'm eight. Hey, wanna see something?"

"Sure." Alice says curiously.

Lela scoops up a handful of blocks and they start floating aimlessly in the air. They start to assemble on the table with increasing speed into a helicopter. The assembled aircraft's blades begin to rotate, lifting the helicopter. It flies around for a moment until Jeff pulls it out of the air.

"The kid's got quite the imagination." He says. "Indeed, she does." Eric says with open eyes and interest.

"I'm sorry, there's no way I can ask you to pretend like you didn't see that so I'm going to have to ask you to come back another time." Jeff says standing up and motioning to Lela to

follow him. Alice and Eric look at each other for a few moments not believing what they had seen. Then they turn their attention to the two walking out the door. Nala puts her hand on Alice's lap, "Mom is she going to come back?" Eric looks at the chubby man and the little girl. "We'll take her." He says just as the door is about to close.

"Huh?" Jeff says stopping to look back at the couple.

"We'll adopt that girl." Eric repeats.

"Did you hear that? You're going home." Jeff says looking at Lela.

After that there was only a small amount of paper work due to the fact that the adoption center kept a small file on her to get her out quickly so the family of interest didn't change their mind. The rain slowly starts to come down in big heavy drops making popping noises against the ground. "Are you alright?" Taylor says, "You kind of dazed off. "Yeah" she says with a pause, no longer crying, "I guess I will still be supportive." Nala says with a sigh as another customer walks in carrying an umbrella and a hip bag.

"Hi, my name is Taylor. Is there anything I can get for you?" Taylor asks the middle aged, black man. He has a well-trimmed mustache and a little hair on his head. He is wearing a black business suit and blue and grey striped tie. He chooses a table on the opposite side of the cafe and he takes out a laptop from his hip bag. It was obvious that he was here for business because his laptop had a built-in printer on the bottom of it. He extended the feed tray and put a few blank papers in and starts printing some legal looking documents.

"I'm just stopping here for a bit before a meeting, but I could use a bite to eat."

"What would you like?" Taylor asks the man grabbing a menu off the counter and handing it to him.

The man glances at it and responds, "I'll have a sandwich, with ice tea." pointing at the

Taylor writes the order down and goes into the back for a few moments and then into the front with a plate and a glass. She fills the glass halfway with ice and then with tea. Taylor delivers the tea, the man takes a sip and nods in approval, but Taylor doesn't wait to notice. Returning to the plate she puts on some plastic gloves and takes two pieces of wheat bread out to make a sandwich.

"I don't want any mayo on that ma'am." The businessman says.

"Would you like some mustard?" Taylor replies. "Mustard sounds good." The man says.

Taylor puts a squirt of mustard on the bread. Outside the rain has picked up to a heavy, noisy down pour. There is a good amount of flowing water on the streets, a couple of cars drive by flinging water all over the windows. The man looks up to see what the water-on-glass sound was. "Here you go" Taylor says handing the man his meal carefully not to get anything on the scattered paperwork.

"The weatherman says it's supposed to rain heavy like this for about a half an hour and then lighter for the rest of the day." Taylor announces. Nala gets up and walks by Taylor and into the bathroom. Only moments later another person walks in, it is one of girl's friends, Alissa May. She goes by the nickname Pony though, for a few reasons, the every-single-day ponytail that she wears and the fact that she is always tending to the horses on her little ranch that's just behind the café, and finally the silly horse noises she can make to get a good laugh out of someone. She is twenty-two, about five and a half feet tall with a farm tan. She's wearing a red plaid shirt, blue jeans, and leather boots. She is carrying a deep blue umbrella that is dripping onto the floor, and of course her brown hair is in a ponytail. The cool rain-fresh wind follows her in before she can get the door closed. "Hey, hey, it's you." Taylor says in a silly voice. "What's up?" she says returning to her usual voice. "Nun much, the mud just got too deep to keep

working' so I thought I'd come over here and visit for a little bit." She says looking around, "There don't seem to be much business going on with all of this rain."

"Not really, I'm actually thinking about closing up early. Since you're here I would like to ask if you would like to attend the dinner at the church this Sunday night. I will be there of course."

She thinks for a moment and then says, "I don't have anything else planned tomorrow, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Suddenly Lela flashes right in front of them making them jump a little, "Sorry." She says dropping her folder of papers. She fumbles to pick them up and then notices who was in the room. "Oh, hey Pony. I haven't seen you in a while." She says hugging her making everything awkward due to her height.

"Heh heh hey" Pony says sheepishly with a little chuckle patting the little child-like figure on the back.

"Are you this young gal?" the black man in the corner asks holding up an official picture of Lela.

"Yes sir." She says and then she wipes the corner of her mouth with her finger to hint to the man that he has some mustard on his. Nala walks out of the bathroom and walks over to the group that is forming at the front of the café. Unanimously all but Lela decides to sit down and begin chatting. Lela walks over to the other man and hands him the folder of papers while he begins explaining the many forms that she has to sign while she periodically wipes the corner of her mouth using various methods, each more dramatic than the last. He eventually he wipes it off unintentionally with his finger and then grabs one of the signed papers to set it aside. "Uh, would you mind signing that again" he says looking at the mustard stained paper.

"Of course not." She says behind her little smirk "I'm sorry about that." He says printing off another document. He hands it to Lela and she quickly scribbles down her name.

Meanwhile, the other three girls were chatting away happily at their own table. "Hey, Nala, would you mind coming to the church a little early this Sunday? We need somebody to help prepare the food." Taylor asks. "Of course. I was thinking about bringing a little something myself" Nala replies.

"What'd ya gonna make?" Pony asks.

"Well, I was thinking either brownies or cookies." Nala replies

"Definitely chocolate chip cookies." Taylor says without hesitation.

Nala gives out a vibrant smile, "I guess everybody likes them." She says her attention turning to Lela and the official. The man is making gestures with his hands and saying something to her. She refocuses her attention back to Taylor. "Has your brother shown back up?"

"No, not yet. I hope he's okay." She replies.

"What happened to him?" Pony says slightly blushing. Pony has been a little affectionate towards him for some time now, "He said he was going to look for work." Taylor replies with a shrug, "The last I heard he was headed north." Pony's heart sank. Nala takes notice but doesn't say anything.

Lela comes back over, "Hello," she says giving a single wave to the group. "Done already?" Nala asks a bit surprised.

"Yeah, all I had to do was sign a few papers saying that I was given a new policy book and that I received my tags." She says gesturing at the new set of tags. It is the same tags as before.

Chapter 2 – Transfusion

The man that is in the corner had already gathered his things when they look back at him, He gets up and starts towards the door, "You're quite the character." He says looking in Lela's direction. She doesn't say anything. He moves on to the door and looks outside to judge to rain. Now it had slowed to a heavy sprinkle, he makes a little dash to his car that is parked just out of sight.

Taylor takes a glance at her watch, "I think I will close for the day." Taylor announces to them. "Would you like to walk down to my house and visit?"

"Sure, is your grandmother there?" Nala asks.

"Oh, that reminds me!" She exclaims. Then reaches into her pocket and pulls out a shopping list and hands it to Lela. "Could you all help me with this list? My granny wanted me to pick up the groceries on the way back home. While you all get the things on that list I will be going to the post office." They all glance at each other except Lela; she just reaches out her hand.

Taylor takes forty dollars out of her back pocket and hands it to her. "That should cover it." Lela accepts the money. Unraveling one of them she holds it up to the light while walking out the door without looking to see if it was raining or not, fortunately it wasn't.

"Whata ya doin'?" Pony asks Lela following her.

"I'm going to stay here and help Taylor clean up, I will meet you back at her house." Nala tells them. "I hear that there are people making fake money now, how would you be able to tell?"

Lela answers Pony. "Alright, see ya there." Pony responds to Nala as she follows Lela out the door and then she turns to Lela, "Whata ya talkin' about?"

"You know, like counterfeit money." Lela answers her handing her the twenty then walking across the street and up the hill toward her house.

"How would I know?" Pony says walking across the street holding the bill up trying to see through, but unable because of the heavily clouded sky. "Why are we goin' this way?" She asks putting the money in her back pocket and stepping onto Lela's dark black asphalt sidewalk.

"I'm getting our list too."

"Why are we walkin'? Why don't you just phase in and get it?" "I could but I need the exercise."

Pony pauses to huff in frustration and notices something on the ground. She leans down to pick it up and somehow it reminds her of how her ranch was when it was owned by her parents.

Her mother is walking off the front porch dinging a triangle to call all of the animals up to the front of the field to be fed. She is wearing a white sleeveless button on shirt, blue jeans. and her boots. She walks toward the sand-bottom corral to gather a bucket of feed. "Alissa, supper time, com'mon." A fourteen-year-old girl stops brushing a red speckled mare and climbs through the fence. She is wearing a white tee, overhauls, a straw hat, and hiking boots.

Pony is down on her knees and can hear Lela's voice, "Are you alright?" she is saying leaning down.

The summer sun feeling began to wear off as she looks around. A couple of boys in the background are making sexual gestures towards Lela but she doesn't notice. Pony smiles and replies, "Yeah, I'll be fine." Thinking it was just a coincidence. She hands the object to Lela, whom it didn't seem to affect. .

Lela examines it and then looks around and notices the young teens, "It's a glass ring They must have dropped it." The whole band is a simple glass band ring that looks rather fragile.

"Where would they have gotten it?" Pony asks getting to her feet. "I'm not sure." Lela says beginning to walk again. The young men have begun to run off.

Do you think they stole it?"

"Yeah, but where from?" Lela says pushing it into her pocket.

Taylor tears open a letter addressed to her and skims over the handwritten message. "It's from my brother. It says that he is coming back for the summer." "That's great news." Nala exclaims. She never really knew Taylors brother but she loved to be supportive anyway. "It's going to be for just a week though. It says he's found work so he's coming back to get the rest of his things. I guess I should be happy for him." She says with a slight frown.

"Then we will have to make the best of it." Nala says in a positive voice. Taylor doesn't respond, she walks out the door of the small local post office and glances around then starts flipping through the remaining bits of mail.

Nala comes out of the post office with a first-class package that says "HANDLE WITH CARE" across the side. She observes the attached letter, "It's for Lela." She says curiously making Taylor to look over at it too.

"What is it?" Taylor asks leaning over to see the package more clearly. "I'm not sure." Nala says lifting the package to eye level to look at the sides. They start walking out toward the road.

Lela opens the door to her house and motions Pony to come in. She walks around the living room and through the kitchen doorway. She stops for a moment Pony walks in and gently shuts the door behind her. She looks around and her eye is caught by the large flat screen TV. Lela grabs the list off of the refrigerator and walks back into the living room. Pony is still admiring the house; she had never really been inside Lela's house before. She looks up at the upstairs balcony that is over hanging the living room. The stained-glass window across from there has an image of red tulips bleeding red, green, and yellow light through. She follows the wall downward with her eyes and sees Lela standing in front of the door. "Ready to go?" Lela asks casually.

"Yup." She says a little startled having not known that she had even moved. Outside the mid-morning sun is beginning to show high and bright in the sky. The heat hasn't really set in yet, but the humidity has. The two of them walk silently down the hill that is across the driveway where Nala's black jeep is parked. The wet grass dampens their shoes giving them a cool chill. The store is in sight within minutes. The earth has been carved away to make room for the building, making it somewhat ground level from the hill side. Lela takes a few running steps and jumps onto the roof landing on her feet. "What the hell are you doing?" Pony scolds.

"What, it's fun." She replies.

Pony doesn't respond. She walks the rest of the way down the hill until the parking lot is almost level with the ground and then she walks over to where Lela remained waiting.

"It's took you long enough." Lela says as Pony approaches.

"Are we going to do this together or are we going to split up?" Pony asks. "We would get done quicker if we split up." Lela says handing Pony the forty dollars and Taylor's list. They walk in one after another. Lela gets a shopping cart and pushes it towards the clothes while Pony stops at the front and examines the list. Lela starts flicking through packages of underwear until she finds a bundle pack that suits her. She quickly looks over them and tosses them into the cart. She begins to push the cart when she hears a loud crash. Lela rushes to where the crash sound had come from, leaving her cart behind. At the front of the building, she sees a car that had crashed into the building and is now smoking. Bricks from the building flood the area. Lela hears someone cry out in pain. Looking around she sees Pony lying on the ground holding her leg. There is blood smudging the floor where she had been knocked back by the car. "Lela." She said between wincing tears, trying not to scream in pain. Lela grabs a tank top from a nearby shelf and ties it above the wound. After getting Pony to lay flat on her back, she takes Pony's hand and tries to calm her down. Her breaths are ragged through a weak sounding but forceful cry. Then Lela hears Pony's voice in her head pleading, "Heal me."

"I can't." she says out loud.

Several people that were in the store have started to call emergency dispatch.

Nala and Taylor have made it to Taylor's house by now. Nala is sitting on a couch and Taylor is sitting perpendicularly to her on a chair of the same style.

"They should have been here by now." Nala says leaning forward.

"Maybe there was a long line." Taylor suggests.

"She would have called or something by now." Nala says.

"Maybe you should call her." Taylor suggests again.

"I guess that wouldn't hurt." Nala says taking out her phone and slides open and types Lela's name. Then she slides it close and presses dial. She puts it to her ear, listening to the hum of the ringer.

The rest of the store people are trying to check on the other person that is in the car but they seem to be disappointed when they reach the car. "bzzt bzzt" Lela's phone vibrates a couple of times before she can take it out of the belt holster. She looks at the number, slides her finger across the screen and presses answer. "Nala?"

"Where are you?" Nala asks in a concerned voice.

"Well, I'm in a bit of a pickle."

"What do you mean?"

"Pony got hit by a car." Lela says so fast that it almost sounded like one word.

"What?!" Nala exclaims.

"I know this sounds bad," Lela starts to excuse, then she finishes with the truth, "and, well, it actually is."

"I'll be right there as soon as I can." Nala says

"There's no need, there were witnesses." Lela says.

"What do you think will happen to her?" Nala questions.

"It looks like she's going to the hospital." Lela says noticing the ambulance pull up and into the parking lot. The paramedics make haste to the vehicle in the wall and frown, and then

run inside through to hole in the wall. One of them kneels down on the other side of Pony and looks at Lela and asks, "Is this your mother?" Lela just stands there mouth wide open in disbelief. Lela hangs up the phone and tucks it away in her pocket.

"Don't worry, your mom will be okay." He finishes as him tying bandages to her leg to stop the bleeding. Then his team eases her onto the stretcher and wheels it into the ambulance. Lela stops in her thought, disturbed by what the paramedic had just told her, she takes out her phone, "Call Nala."

There is a quiet low pitch hum-type of ring come from Nala's pocket. She takes out her phone and looks at the number displayed on the outer screen. She slides open the phone and puts it to her ear. "Is everything okay?"

"Do I look young for my age?" Lela asks ignoring Nala.

"What? Where did that come from?" "The medic thinks Pony is my mother!"

"Well..." not being able to decide whether to tell the truth and possibly hurt her feelings or not, after all, she did look twelve. "...I'm sure he didn't mean it."

There is an uncomfortable pause before Lela responds. "I've got the groceries." I'll be there in a moment." Then there is a beep of Lela hanging up. A few moments Lela flashes into the room. It seems too normal for her to not use the door. She sets the sacks of food on the kitchen counter and walks into the living room where everybody is sitting. "What happened this time?" Taylor starts up. "What do you mean this time?"

"Pony is always getting hurt when you're around." Taylor is interrogating. "So, you think I had something to do with her getting hit by a car?"

"No. I'm just saying-" "WHAT? SAYING WHAT?" Lela urges, becoming upset.

"Maybe there was something more you could have done." Taylor says. As she says that Lela stops suddenly and draws a blank face thinking back to when she was a soldier.

"This is Special Agent Lela Null, we are in need of transport, this is a retreat, team six is in trouble, the mission was a failure." Lela finishes and then replies looking over to him and notices he is holding a cross pendent that is fastened to his neck, "It's the heat, just drink some water." She says and glances at his name, "Private Anders?" she finishes.

"Yes ma'am." He quickly responds by drinking from his canteen. Lela continues to look him as if to say something.

"What is your name?" she asks.

"Chris Dalton Anders ma'am" he says without looking at her. "Where are you from?" Lela asks him trying to calm him down. He leans back against the wall. "Wisconsin." He replies.

"Have you got family up there?" "A wife and a daughter."

"Alright, I want you to stay alive for them. I'm going back in to get Ryan. Can you cover me?"

"What?! Are you nuts?" he exclaims. Lela takes off before he finishes his statement though. She runs the few hundred feet to where Ryan lay and wraps her arms around his waist and begins to drag him back. Suddenly all of the gunfire stops. She looks around and sees a man approaching her. He is old and wearing a dusty trench coat he has thick bushy eyebrows but on other hair on his face or head. His face has a scare from the corner of his mouth reaching a couple of inches towards his ear. "You're better off just leaving him." He says in a low rough voice.

"What do you know? Who are you?" Lela snaps back. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Chris move his head around the corner to see what is happening. The strange man conjures plasma energy and throws it at Chris. The impact hits the wall and breaks off a corner. Chris is lying on the ground with a large portion of his exposed face charred and some blood on his uniform. Lela cries out in frustration and anger. "WHY?"

"He's not what you think. You think he's so sweet to you, so good, but in reality, he's one of us. He led the team to their demise."

"You're lying! Ryan would never..."

"Do you think there is something more? He doesn't love you; he wanted you gone so he could carry out his duties." The man interrupts.

Lela's eyes begin to water as the man's words begin to cut into her emotions. Ryan's eyes open just a little for a moment before closing but Lela doesn't notice. She is too involved in her argument with the strange men to notice that he is still alive. She runs her hand across his face, "Tell me it isn't true." She says in a whimpered whisper. Her hand runs a cross a streak of liquid on his cheek and she stops. It feels like a small voice in her head telling her to leave him. Gently she lays him down and looks at the old man. She steps back and turns and walks over to where Chris is laying. Lela lifts Chris into her lap to see if he is alive.

"There must be something you can do for him." Chris says weakly.

Lela's facial expression goes from blank to a cry as a rush of emotions overcomes her. After thinking back, she begins to wish that she told Ryan how she felt one more time. She breaks down into a deep cry. Taylor stirs a little as Nala moves her purse off the couch to let Lela cry into her shoulder. This happens often when she thinks about Ryan. Nala tries to comfort her by rubbing her hand across her back.

"I'm sorry." Taylor says looking at the floor. Lela nods in approval, still crying, to accept her apology. Lela's phone starts ringing. After a few rings Nala decides to get her phone. She pulls the phone out of Lela's back pocket, "It's the hospital." She slides her finger across the screen and touches answer.

"Is Ms. Null there?" a secretary's voice questions.

"Hold on." Nala taps Lela, "It's the hospital."

Nala switches to speaker phone. "Okay go on, she is here too." "This is the emergency contact number for Alissa May. She has been hit by a car and has suffered a severe injury to the right leg. There has been a sufficient amount of blood loss and she will need a blood transfusion. It also says here that it is Lela's decision to allow us to go through with the procedure if Alissa is unable to respond." Lela sits up after hearing this and she looks at the other two. "Ms. Null, I understand that this is a difficult decision but we need an answer now please."

Lela takes the phone from Nala, "This is Lela Null, I will allow the procedure." "Thank you, Ms. Null, for your time." And the voice on the other end gives orders in the background and then returns, "Do you have any questions?" "Yes, just one. May I see her?" Lela says in a cracked voice.

"You may visit her after we get her stabilized. She has been calling out for you."

"She has?" Lela say in disbelief and shock.

"Is there anything else?"

"No." Lela says quietly.

"Alright, good bye." And the other and hung up; hanging up Lela's end automatically. Lela begins to cry harder than before, "I'm sorry you have to see me like this."

"Everything will be alright sis." Nala comforts her.

"Hey sis?" Lela says with just a jagged breath.

"Yes?"

"You pray a lot, right?" Lela says surprising Nala more so than Taylor. Lela has never really been very religious; it's not that she never believed, it just never interested her so she never talked about it. "Ya, why do you bring it up?"

"Can you pray for Pony and tell Him that I miss Ryan too." Lela says in a low voice. Nala smiles, "I can manage that." She says giving Lela a hug.

"Let's see the x-rays." One doctor was telling a nurse.

"Here," she starts handing him an x-ray, "she seems to have only one compound fracture. With the impact, she could consider herself lucky that she didn't sustain more injuries."

"Lucky indeed." he says walking down the hall to the surgery room. He holds the image up to the lights in the hall to get a little idea of what he will be dealing with. When he gets into the room he flicks on the light board and attaches the x-ray to it. He then moves around the table where Pony lie and he looks at the blood bag that is attached to her and reads it: RYAN S. GATES type O Neg. that being so he doesn't look for her blood type. He moves over to where her leg is open and ready for him to realign the bone. "Clamp." He says reaching out his hand.

"Do you want to go see Pony now?" Nala offers. Lela nods as she sniffles and wipes her eye.

"Oh! Before you go; there's a package there on the counter for Lela." Taylor reminds Nala.

"Oh, that's right." Nala says as Taylor jumps up to retrieve it. Lela sits up to receive the box, "It's my new uniform." She says without much hesitation.

"Huh?" Nala questions.

"See the star?" Lela says showing them a yellow outline of a star stamped to the attached letter. Lela seems mildly cheered up, but Nala looks away with disapproval. Nala never wanted for her to join the first time, but Lela is her sister so was always supportive about the decision. Nala, more than anything, is afraid of losing Lela in some battle. "That's how you can tell." Lela finishes.

"What does it look like on you?" Taylor asks not realizing Nala's expression. "Let's go see Pony." Lela says with a depressed voice. Nala looks at her and watches as she gets up, but doesn't say anything. Instead, she picks up the car keys and walks toward the door. As she approaches the door she begins to hear footsteps on the porch. She opens the door to see who it is. An elderly lady is sitting on the porch swing.

"Nancy!" Nala says with excitement and she walks carefully to her and lightly puts one arm around her as if she may break if she put any weight on her. Nancy is Taylor's grandmother. She is in her early seventies and has wavy cream colored fragile looking hair, but you can tell that she used to be blond. She is wearing an older fashioned shirt with little purple flowers on the shoulder and gray sweat pants that have stripes in pink on the side of the legs. She's wearing a smile on her face as she does on most days.

"Hello my dear." She replies in a gentle sweet voice. She looks and sounds younger than she really is. Lela walks out and stands opposite of Nala.

"Hey! Nancy, how are you?" she asks.

"Oh, I'm doin' alright." She says turning to watch Taylor walk out. "Hey granny, I just put the groceries up." Taylor informs her.

"Did you remember the sugar?" Nancy asks almost being cut off by a car passing by. Taylor waits for the car to pass, "Yes granny, I got the sugar."

"Good, I'm wanting to bake you a cake for your birthday."

"My birthday isn't until next week." Taylor protests.

"I know honey." Nancy tells her.

"Do you think my brother will be there this time?" "It's hard to say my dear. Why don't you call and ask him?"

"That's not a bad idea." Taylor says looking at the others.

dialing "We'll wait for you." Nala says with a single nod. Taylor walks off a bit and starts the number on her pink razor.

"Hey bub, is your sis, I see you still don't answer your phone. I called to see if you want to come to my birthday on Tuesday of next week. I would be great if you could make it." Taylor says happily, "but you've been busy lately so I understand if you don't." she finishes with a bit more disappointment. She hangs up her phone and closes then pushes it back into her pocket.

Turning to Nancy she asks, "Do you think he can make it?" "Oh, there's no telling, but I pray for his safety regardless." Nancy replies and then she goes inside.

"He wouldn't want to let you down." Nala tells her.

"You're right." Taylor says with a little smile.

"Let's go." Lela urges them opening a door in the back of Nala's little cramped 4-door car. Lela doesn't mind the small size though; it fits her nicely. Lela gets in and buckles up. Taylor and Nala watch until she shuts the door and rests her head on the window. The two glances at one another and then Taylor leads them over to the car and they get in.