

# ONE

Now that I was actually on the roof of the skyscraper, I was having second thoughts. Maybe it was the spotlights sweeping the streets below, or the patrol planes flying in pairs along the top of the Titan wall, or maybe it was just my good sense reasserting itself. What we were about to do was not only stupid and dangerous, but also illegal, and in my sixteen years of life I'd made a point of avoiding activities that could be described with even one of those adjectives.

I paused halfway across the roof, letting the boys hurry ahead. "I'm suffocating." I tugged at the scrap of white vinyl — supposedly a vest, more like a corset — that I'd somehow let Anna talk me into wearing tonight. Without a shirt.

"Don't be such a slave to comfort." Anna pulled my hands away from the vest and gave me the once-over. Her short curls bobbed with her nod of approval. "Funny how a tight top can loosen a girl right up."

"I'm not sure loose is a good thing at thirty stories up." *Or ever, for that matter*, I thought.

"Now remember, I want it back, so don't go wild." Her dark eyes narrowed as she took in the rooftop gardens around us. "And no rolling in the dirt."

"Ew."

“Not even if Orlando asks nicely.”

“Ew again. I told you: I am not into Orlando.” Curiosity had propelled me up here, not the desire to roll around with either of the guys we’d come with — guys who were now fighting over the remote control for a toy hovercopter.

“It’s my ’copter.” Camden clutched the toy while warding Orlando off with an elbow.

“My roof.” Orlando latched on to Camden’s wrist. Anyone hearing them would think they were first graders, not seniors.

Music and laughter floated up from the penthouse below, and I wondered what part of tonight would upset Orlando’s parents the most. That their son was having a party while they were out of town, or that he was on top of their building compromising national security? Probably the latter, though having so many people in their apartment — touching things, spreading germs — that would send a chill down any parent’s spine.

Suddenly the boys’ tussling sent them lurching toward the roof’s edge. I gasped and Anna clapped her hand to her mouth. Just as fast, they reversed direction, still grunting and scuffling, completely oblivious to how close they’d come to falling. I exhaled slowly. As much as I loved animals — even the strays — I hated it when boys acted like animals. Out of control. Vying for dominance. Ugh.

“If you’re not into Orlando, why are we up here?” Anna demanded.

“You know why.” I swept a hand toward the wall that loomed like a mountain range, even though it was just across the street. “The Feral Zone.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Yes!” Orlando wrested the remote control from Camden’s grip and lifted his arm in triumph. “Let’s get this baby in the air.”

I split my long ponytail into two sections and yanked them apart, forcing the rubber band tight against my scalp. The tighter my hair was pulled back, the better my brain worked. Anna reluctantly followed me over to the roof’s edge. I’d never been so close to the top of the Titan before and the sheer enormity of it loosened a flutter in my chest. The reparation wall, the quarantine line, the blight — all the names for the wall, even the bitter ones, were said with awe. Because the Titan wasn’t just any wall. At seven hundred feet tall, it towered over downtown Davenport and stretched to infinity in either direction. The guards stationed along the top all had their guns and telescopes pointed east, toward the half of America that was lost to us — now known as the Feral Zone.

That’s what really carbonated my blood: the thought that via toy hovercopter, I might finally get to see what was over there. When the wall went up eighteen years ago, that part of the country became as mysterious to us as Africa was to the rest of the world in the nineteenth century. The Feral Zone was our Dark Continent.

Anna, however, seemed immune to the zone’s allure. She took one look at the gun turrets and scooted back, her dark skin ashen. “This is a very bad, very stupid idea.”

“Worst-case scenario, I’m out a camera,” I said lightly.

“Really?” She propped her fists on her hips. “’Cause I’d say the worst-case scenario is we all get shot for crossing the quarantine line.”

“We’re not crossing. That is.” Orlando pointed at the toy hovercopter in Camden’s hands. “And it can’t catch a virus. So technically, we’re not breaking quarantine.” His blond hair was as rumpled as his shirt. At least he wasn’t in his bathrobe, which was what he usually wore during our virtual classes even though we were supposed to log on every morning at eight, fully dressed.

Camden tipped the mini hovercopter to check the camera that I’d attached to the underside. He gave a nod. “Let’s do this before it gets too dark to see anything.”

We probably wouldn’t see anything anyway. The toy hovercopter had to fly over the wall and across the Mississippi River before it officially reached the Feral Zone. But I would be happy even with a distant shot — one that I could enlarge later.

I lifted my dial, which hung on a delicate chain around my neck. We all wore them. For our parents, the glowing discs were more than just phones. Our dials were their spy cameras. With a push of a button, a dad could see what his daughter was doing (and with whom) through her dial’s screen, even if she didn’t “take” the call — like that was ever an option.

With a tap, I activated the link between my dial and the camera. A second later, Camden’s feet popped up on the dial’s round screen. I pointed at him. “Action.”

Camden lifted the hovercopter over his head. “Let ’er rip.”

Orlando flicked a button on the remote, the rotor blades started whirling and the toy lifted out of Camden’s hands.