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AFTER OCTOBER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

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ABSTRACT

AFTER OCTOBER

BY SOPHIE CRIVIER

After October is a fiction novella that tells the story of four women facing an uncontained fire and their attempts to rebuild their life after everything has been destroyed, exploring themes of corporate harm, queerness, and families of choice along the way. The main character, June is happily living in the mountains of Northern California with her sister Logan, more-than-friend Selena, and mentor Beatrice. One October morning, they are forced to evacuate from a ferocious wildfire, taking them on an adventure through the forest as they try to escape with their lives. Six months later, June is struggling to get by in Los Angeles as she is separated from her friends and everything she knew. However, when she stumbles upon a pollution coverup, she finds her way back to those she loves and makes a new life in the wake of disaster.

After October was written in response to the staggering lack of fiction works that address climate change in the current moment compared to its prevalence in people's lives. While most often climate change is tackled in science fiction or "cli-fi" works, it is very real and has the potential to be incorporated into more contemporary stories. This novella also sheds light on some of the environmental injustices that occur against marginalized communities and points out how certain people can be more vulnerable in natural disasters. Through June's journey, we can understand the impacts of climate disaster and what it means to survive it.

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CHAPTER ONE

October

On the day the world burned down, June Moore was pissed because she'd bled through her tampon. She was pissed about a lot of things, sure. But the tampon really sent her over the edge.

Leaning grumpily on the chest-high countertop that separated the kitchen from the living room with her head resting on her arms, she complained noisily to her companions in the house: Beatrice, who was sitting on the couch behind her reading a magazine; Selena, reaching up to grab a mug from a cabinet in front of June in the kitchen; and Logan, June's sister, who was struggling to bend down to grab something from the bottom shelf of the fridge.

"Mine's been pretty light this month, thank God," said Selena. She was also on her period, June knew, as was obvious from the miniature trash can in the guest bathroom that was overflowing with wads of suspiciously shaped toilet paper. She also knew because they were always on their periods together— they had synced up after living in this house for over a year.

"You should try raspberry leaf— I think there's some drying out on the porch you could brew into tea," Beatrice suggested, eyes still fixed on her magazine. June had never thought she could be jealous about being post-menopausal, but Beatrice seemed so peaceful with her 56-year-old ovaries. She was engrossed in a tabloid about some B-list celebrity's divorce, the kind you find in grocery stores right before checking out at the front that sell for 99 cents and always

boast the best gossip. While Beatrice refused to go on social media, claiming LED screens hurt her eyes and constant misinformation hurt her soul, she bought a new magazine to read each week when they went into town to run errands.

“I know one good way to stop getting a period,” Logan said, closing the fridge door and turning to face June with a jar of pickles in hand. She rested her other arm on her swollen belly, 38 weeks pregnant, and chuckled a little. “Though I’m not sure this is the best solution.”

“That’s not very helpful,” June grumbled and slumped on the couch next to Beatrice. While the tea actually may have helped– Beatrice knew her herbs, and had brewed June many a tea that improved ailments ranging from sickness to anxiety– June wasn’t really looking for a solution, more just looking to complain.

She settled for complaining about trivial things so that her real anger didn’t boil over and burn everyone around her. Earlier that morning, Logan told her about her grand new plan for the future. She had gotten into nursing school at Cal State University, Northridge, and was moving to LA. Normally June would’ve been really excited for her– this seemed like a good plan, and Logan’s ideas had always led the two of them right– but this was a plan that for possibly the first time in their lives didn’t involve June in it.

They had argued, maybe, and maybe Logan reminded her that she was having a baby and needed a steady job and maybe June said some choice words that were not very productive to the goals of feminism and maybe some tears were shed, but Logan had forgiven her because she always did. June’s chest still burned, though.

Beatrice and Selena had definitely heard them from the other side of the house, but they had been dancing around the argument, pretending it didn’t happen, so they didn’t have to get involved.

“It’s just, like, it’s never this heavy. What did I do to deserve this?”

Selena shrugged. “It happens. Do you want to borrow my heating pad?”

“No, thank you, though,” June said.

Selena joined them in the living room, holding two mugs in her hands. “How ‘bout this?” She held out a mug to June: a steaming hot cup of coffee, medium brown with just a hint of milk, just the way June liked it.

“Oh my God, you’re amazing,” June said, grabbing the mug and taking a sip, her anger loosening a little to make way for warm affection. June scooted over to the opposite edge of the couch from Beatrice, leaving a spot for Selena in the middle. She sat down beside her, their thighs just barely touching. June took another sip of coffee to hide the blush in her cheeks.

The living room was small, with only an average-sized stained white couch, a light brown wood coffee table, and a TV on the opposite wall. The walls were white, but were decorated eclectically with colorful stained glass garland hanging to catch the light in the window behind the couch, red and blue paintings made by one of Beatrice’s friends hanging on the wall by the front door, and house plants in various states of liveliness scattered across the room.

There was a wall of polaroid pictures, including some of Beatrice and her friends and family dating back to the 80s, as well as recent ones from the past couple years with Logan, June, and Selena. If anyone ever found it strange that Beatrice took in a trio of 20-something year old girls, no one ever said—and based on the photos from Beatrice’s life, taking in strays for chunks of time was not an uncommon practice in her family. Above the fireplace hung a vintage Ouija Board, wooden and artful, which Beatrice had been given as a gift decades ago, but used as decoration because she believed it to be dangerous and risky. She made June and

Logan swear to never touch it when they first moved in, and it was the one thing in the house that genuinely creeped Logan out.

The house itself was nothing big, and Beatrice preferred to call it a cottage. She had lived in it her entire life, and said it was hand built by her grandparents when they moved to the U.S. in 1939 from Poland. There was the living room, connected to the kitchen, and three bedrooms, one inhabited by Beatrice, one shared by Logan and June, and the last, barely bigger than a closet, where Selena slept. When it had just been the three of them– Beatrice, Logan, and June, there seemed to be the perfect amount of space, but with the addition of Selena, it could feel a little cramped sometimes. Not that June minded.

“Who’s cooking dinner tonight?” Selena asked no one in particular.

“I cooked last night,” Beatrice said without looking up.

“I think it’s my turn,” June said.

Selena groaned.

“What! My mac and cheese last week was good!”

“You make mac and cheese every time! Is there really nothing else you know how to make?”

“Well, I *wanted* to try chicken last time, but Logan said I’d give everyone food poisoning...”

“What’d I do?” Logan came to join them in the living room, took one look at the overcrowded couch, and huffed.

Crossing her hands over her chest, June refused to make eye contact with Logan. “I’m gonna go sit on the porch,” she said. “It’s a nice day.” As she walked past the rest of the family, she pointedly ignored Logan’s sunken expression and Selena and Beatrice’s looks to each other.

June took her coffee with her to the wooden porch, decaying a little from termite bites, and sunk into an Adirondack chair. She took a deep breath of pine and dirt, and watched a hummingbird zoom from one flower to the next.

The outside of the house was the really impressive part of where they lived— anywhere you looked you were surrounded by looming pine trees and distant mountains, and a gurgling stream ran behind the house. Outside the kitchen window was Beatrice's garden, where she grew herbs and vegetables, and beyond that her beloved birdhouses and fountain. Some 30 yards away, closer to the road, was a small guest house that had been refashioned into what Beatrice called her 'spirit room,' the place she took clients for readings, as she was a regionally-renowned psychic. The room had been built right beside a sequoia tree, probably before Beatrice was born, and at some point the sequoia had sprouted a branch that grew right through one window and out another, so the spirit room seemed to be connected to the tree. While June thought its name was apt, as the building had a sort of mystical quality to it that had nothing to do with the hand painted 'PSYCHIC' sign on the front, Logan called the place the 'shack.' Beatrice had lived and worked on these 4 acres of forest in Northern California her entire life, taking over the family business of psychic services after her mother passed away.

It was a gorgeous mid-October day, June mused. Blue skies, a nice breeze. Some might say it was a bit hot, but she preferred warmer weather. They were two weeks from Halloween, and two large not-yet-carved pumpkins greeted guests at the front door, which had been given to Beatrice from her neighbor a mile up the road as an early birthday present.

Beatrice told everyone she knew that Halloween was her birthday, and had claimed this since she was a child. June wasn't 100 percent sure why, though she suspected the answer fell somewhere between the fact that Beatrice was a Halloween aficionado and that being born on

Halloween seemed to give her more credit as a psychic. However, the first time Beatrice told her this, after they'd been living with her for a month, June looked at her strangely, and knew immediately that it wasn't true. "There's no way you're a Scorpio," June said. "If you ask me... I'd say a Taurus."

June didn't even know much about horoscopes beyond the basic dates and traits of each sign that she'd learned from a Wikipedia deep dive at 3 am when she was in high school. She'd even read somewhere that the galaxy had shifted so much since the Ancient Greeks first named the star patterns that people weren't even born under the same stars during the months astrologists claimed they did anymore, so horoscopes couldn't even be real. Still, June had always had a strange natural affinity for reading people, and rarely found that people's astrology signs weren't accurate in some aspect.

It was June's ability to call out Beatrice's lie and guess her real birthday, among some other signs of June's aptitude for reading signs from the universe, that caused Beatrice to eventually ask her if she wanted to be her apprentice. She wanted to teach June how to read tarot and energies so she could even possibly take over the psychic business in the future. Logan thought Beatrice was a crackpot, and on some level June did too, but at the same time she had always been drawn to Beatrice, and if being her apprentice meant she could continue to live with her in this house, here on 143 North Star Road—the only place that'd ever really felt like home—she was willing to try.

Another strong gust of wind blew, shaking the wind chimes that hung from the awning, filling the air with their ringing song. A squirrel had approached the steps up to the porch and wiggled its nose a little while looking at June, nearly dropping the acorn it was holding, before moving on and scrambling into some bush.

The peace was disrupted by a mechanical ringing noise: the phone in the spirit room.

“Bea!” June called through the window into the living room. “You have a call!”

One way that Beatrice made most of her income was by doing readings over the phone. However, she refused to digitize her psychic powers, instead using the same old landline in the spirit room, a light green old-timey rotary phone that Beatrice’s grandparents probably used in the 60s.

Because the phone was inside the spirit room, separated from the house, oftentimes calls would be missed unless it was quiet enough to hear the phone ringing through the walls, or someone was close enough to hear the ringtone and tell Beatrice. Like many aspects of Beatrice’s career, Logan found this profoundly stupid, and once asked why Beatrice didn’t come up with a better system—she was losing so much potential income! But Beatrice simply explained that her powers were guided by the universe, not by money, and if she was meant to be able to take someone’s call, the universe would send her a sign by allowing it to be heard. June could see the logic in that, even if she couldn’t quite make sense of how the universe was guiding Beatrice when returning customers scheduled appointments for their next phone readings.

Beatrice came rushing out the porch door, tripping over the slippers she threw on to go outside. “Come with me!” She pulled June up from her chair and together they scrambled through the pine needles to the spirit room before the call could go to voicemail.

Inside the room, decorated with colorful hanging beads, a patterned throw rug, and candles and crystals, a single wooden table sat in the center, where the old phone was placed. Beatrice sat down stiffly in her usual chair, and June sat beside her, watching attentively like she usually did when she sat in on readings to learn Beatrice’s trade.

“Beatrice Hart, psychic services, how may I help you?” Beatrice answered.

The sound was loud enough that June could hear the voice on the other side of the phone if she leaned in closely.

The reading was pretty standard: a young man named Sebastian had heard of Beatrice from a friend of a friend, and though skeptical, was desperate for any sign from the universe on whether he should marry his fiancé or break up. June was of the opinion that if you are so doubtful of a relationship you’re turning to the mystic arts, that’s probably not the girl for you, but she was interested to see what Beatrice could divine from the universe.

The man wanted a tarot reading, so Beatrice drew cards for him, one representing the problem, one the context, and one the solution. She explained to Sebastian how the reading would work, then pulled from her own deck of tarot cards carefully. As she pulled, she kept her eyes closed, but June could see her eyes moving beneath her eyelids like someone dreaming deep in REM sleep. First card, Nine of Swords. Second, Two of Cups. Third, Ace of Wands.

June was still learning about the meanings of each tarot, and in her practice sessions, usually needed to consult a book about the cards to gloss some meaning from them. There were no major arcana cards in this reading, which June took to mean the message was not very urgent or powerful, but beyond that wasn’t sure what Beatrice would advise from the reading.

In her long years as a psychic, she had memorized each card and understood how they worked together or against each other and the nuances of each situation. It fascinated June.

With a calm but firm voice, Beatrice told the man that the problem in his relationship was probably his ego and need to ‘win’ in every situation with his fiancée. However, this occurs in the context that their souls are tied together, and they are a good match for each other—some

may even call them soulmates. Therefore, the solution to their problem is to take a decisive action.

“Decisive action? So you mean I should break up with her?” Sebastian asked, voice frantic through the phone.

“Not necessarily. Decisive action could mean making direct steps to stop your ego from getting in the way of your relationship. Or it could mean talking to her, and apologizing for mistakes you’ve made. However, only you can decide what action you need to take,” Beatrice said. Her voice was hypnotic, entrancing.

“I think I need to break up with her,” Sebastian said, resigned.

“If that is where the universe guides you,” Beatrice agreed.

“Thank you so much for your help.”

“Can I get a card number and address for billing?” Beatrice asked, honey-sweet.

As soon as they were done, Beatrice put the phone back on the hook, and June laughed a little. “That one was pretty easy, right?”

There was a loud rustling from bushes outside, evidence of an animal scurrying somewhere. A bird cawed shrilly—probably a hawk.

Beatrice didn’t seem to hear June. She was staring in the corner, a faraway look in her eye, brows creased for a moment. Wind whipped through the air, shaking the giant sequoia tree, making the branch that grew through the spirit room rattle the very bones of the building. A cluster of needly leaves fell, landing directly in the palm of Beatrice’s hand.

“Bea?”

Beatrice sat back in her chair, sighing deeply.

“What just happened?”

Beatrice chewed on the inside of her cheek, thinking, before saying, “Have I ever explained to you how my grandma could see the future?”

June scoffed, thinking she was joking for a moment.

But she was dead serious. Her skin was paler than usual, and she had instinctively reached for an amethyst stone to hold for comfort.

“Really?” June leaned closer, studying her expression for a hint of deception. From everything Beatrice had taught her about being psychic, it seemed to focus more on reading signs from the universe and understanding energies, not seeing the future like in the movies.

“That was why she began the psychic business in the first place. It wasn’t perfect, or even very exact or predictable—she called them future-memories, the flashes she would get. Kind of like déjà vu. My mom got them too, and I’ve had them—only a few times. But it’s the same way a memory works—something triggers them, like a reminder, and you can only remember certain things—outcomes, maybe a color, a texture, a feeling. You just know something, and it’s like you’ve always known it. Except you’re sure it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Like—like a vision? Seriously?” June asked. The skeptic side of her wanted to explain it away, but a more earnest, childlike instinct always found excitement in Beatrice’s psychic abilities. She wanted to believe it to be true. “Did you just have one?”

“I’m not sure. I won’t be sure until it happens. But I think so.”

“What was it? What did you see?”

The wrinkles between Beatrice’s eyes deepened. “I’m not sure. I didn’t really *see* anything. It was more like a smell, like fire, like smoke.”

June sniffed instinctively. There was a faint woody smokey smell to the air behind the pine and mud, but that was always there. On large properties like this, it was common for people to have burn piles to get rid of dead leaves and foliage.

“No, not that. It was *strong*, and chemically. Like burning plastic. Sharp, like burning hair.”

June sat back heavily in her chair. That was it? It was hardly anything to write home about. Maybe Beatrice had imagined it. Was 56 years old too early for dementia to set in?

“That’s all I got, really. Just that, and a sense of horrible panic.”

June glanced around the room uneasily. Beatrice’s discomfort was radiating through the walls. “Should we, like, do something about it?”

Beatrice shrugged. “I don’t really know anything for sure. There’s nothing *to* do. Who knows? This may be something far down the line. Maybe it won’t even happen.”

Still, June didn’t like not knowing exactly what *this* was. What was the point of knowing the future, if you weren’t going to take action?

CHAPTER TWO

April

It was cloudy in Los Angeles, which felt like a cruel prank considering it was supposed to always be sunny in SoCal. June glared up at the clouds as she walked to the bus stop, passing small, dilapidated houses with bars on the windows, chain link fences, and lawns now turning brown. Like every morning at rush hour, the streets were congested with cars stuck at stop lights, honking occasionally or blasting music. But while the roads were packed, the sidewalks were empty. The few people June did encounter on the street, she avoided eye contact with and soldiered on to her destination.

She focused on putting one foot in front of the other, on staying aware of her surroundings. Today was one of those days where everything was numb, where nothing felt real. When she first woke up, she spent far too long debating never getting out of bed. She dreamt of drowning under her scratchy old blanket, of being wrapped up tight like a mummy for a thousand years, of lying there until her skin and bones turned to dust.

But she couldn't do that today, not like she had so many other days. Nani, a friend she met at her last job washing dishes for a pub, had been so good to her—letting her sleep on her couch all week, and even talking to her cousin so that June could get this job. She had to make it worth it.

She arrived at the bus stop, then checked her watch. 7:14 am. She hadn't been up this early in ages, but her new job started at 8. She only hoped the bus came on time, and then that traffic didn't throw any more obstacles in her way.

June didn't feel like a very lucky person lately, but maybe her fortune had been turning around, because the orange bus came around the corner 2 minutes early. Small wins.

When she climbed on, the air was musty and plasticky. She tapped her metro card and nodded to the bus driver before choosing a seat in the middle. There were only two other people riding the bus, a balding man wearing all black and a floral-scented woman with a scruffy little dog on her lap. Both were about as sorry-looking as June felt.

June stared out the window as they stopped every few blocks to let people on and off, heading deeper into South LA. At one stop, a young woman walked past the bus looking so much like Selena that June did a double take. She knew Selena was from around here, although for the life of her she couldn't remember the exact neighborhood. The entire 30-minute bus ride, June tortured herself with fantasies of Selena happening to get on the same bus or shopping at the same local grocery store or waiting at the same intersection for the walking signal to flicker on.

Last she had heard, Selena had moved back in with her parents, so she had to be around here somewhere. Of course, that had been over 6 months ago. Those months felt like an ocean that neither boat nor telephone line could conquer. Cold and swirling and impossible to entirely fathom.

June rubbed the sleep out of her eyes harshly, forcing herself to stay in the present. At her stop, June grabbed her bag, thanked the bus driver, and reoriented herself to the right direction.

Only one more block to walk to the oil field management office — and she was on track to be right on time.

She tried to focus, she really did, as she approached the office, met her boss Dave for the first time, and was shown to her desk and assigned tasks. But her thoughts were sluggish, and the world moved like she was underwater. The bland outdated 70s style of the building with moldy smelling air and dim florescent lights wasn't helping anything feel more real.

As June set about to her tasks—setting up her work email, logging into the company files, pulling up spreadsheets on rig worker schedules and oil outputs and whatever the fuck—she distantly yearned for the woods. Her mind always went back to that house on North Star Road where everything was vibrant and alive and so was she. Just the thought of Beatrice's teas, Selena's hugs, and Logan, oh, Logan... she couldn't even approach the memories, they were so intense. Instead, she skirted around them, like a freezing person around a fire, getting as close as possible without being burned. Numbly she only allowed herself to imagine the trees, and the stream, and that old telephone in the spirit room. It was like her soul was still there, and in this office room just a rotting corpse.

June rubbed her hands over her eyes. Focus. Task at hand. Inputting oil rig operator timesheets. So stimulating.

"How's it coming along?" Dave asked, snapping June back to the present.

"Good, uh, good." She spun around in her office chair to face him. He was maybe 40, and bore no resemblance to Nani at all with his thinning blonde hair and large build. Still, he seemed nice. "Almost done with this, then I can start on the data entry."

"Great job," he said. "I'm glad Nani recommended you. It's so much easier to hire people you can trust. And hey, this job may be boring, but its stable, and pays well. I was trying to get

Nani to take it, really, but she didn't want it... I guess managing local oil rigs didn't fit her punk-rock aesthetic."

June smiled awkwardly. It's not like she wanted this either. Out of all the futures she dreamed for herself, this was never one of them. But she needed a job. She needed to save some money and get her own place. She needed stability. Only then could she get Logan back.

Do it for Logan.

"Well, I'll let you get back to it. I have to go visit the site in an hour, then I'll be back. Let me know if you have any questions."

"Thank you."

Hours passed. Spreadsheets, numbers, filing. Then a bus back to a home that wasn't June's. She didn't have a key to get into Nani's apartment building, but someone always propped the emergency exit door open with a rock. Nani left a key under the mat at her door, number 426.

Nani had already left for work—she was a bartender at the pub—so June was free to settle herself back down on the couch and stare at the wall as much as she pleased. In the small apartment living room, all June owned was a backpack of stuff which was propped against the couch and a blanket. She should probably get up and eat something, she thought, but the food in the fridge wasn't even hers and the energy to cook was nonexistent. Instead, she scrolled through social media on her phone even though her eyes burned from exhaustion. She was about to put her phone down when a news article appeared on her feed:

Electric Company Indicted for Involuntary Manslaughter in Northern California Fire

Monday, 12:46 pm—

The lawsuit was filed in response to findings that the El Dorado County fire started from faulty electric equipment and negligence to maintain outdated wiring. The resulting fire spread across 4 towns, killing 74 and burning over 150,000 acres of forest.

While victims of the fire call for settlement money, the company is rumored to be filing bankruptcy due to legal fees from previous fires it caused in 2013, 2016, and 2021.

Some claim the criminal trial could further hinder the company's ability to pay settlement fees to victims, while others express outrage that no one personally could face prison time if company is found guilty...

... feeling nauseous, June tore her eyes away from her phone, shoving it under the covers. She gripped the blanket in a tight fist, clenching her jaw as tears prickled behind her eyes. So full of rage she almost choked on it, she shoved her face in a pillow and let out a strangled sound, every muscle clenched there as the emotions washed over her.

It didn't last long—her flashes of anger never did—and soon the burning cooled into numbing ice again, and June slumped back down, rolling onto her side to face the wall.

Blink. Breathe. Eventually, she let her weary eyes flutter closed.

When she awoke, it was dark outside, but the full moon was bright.

June wondered if Beatrice was still doing the full moon ritual she used to do every month.

When she glanced at the clock, it was 9:29 pm. 9/29, Selena's birthday. It was peculiar synchronicities like this that June used to find meaning in, little things that Beatrice told her were signs from the universe.

June didn't find much meaning in anything these days.

The 8 to 4 grind was brutal, a lifestyle June wasn't sure she was built for. But she dutifully got up every day at 6:30, rode the bus to work, did her stupid little tasks, and rode the bus home. For Logan. Do it to see Logan again. On weekends, she went grocery shopping and did her laundry. Once she even went to the park with Nani for a walk, which in some ways cleared her head, but also made her dreams of the woods that night all the more vivid.

She tapped into a strength she didn't have every morning and forced herself to act like a person, day in and day out. It didn't used to be this hard, she knew, but she could barely remember how she lived when waking up didn't feel like falling into a pit of despair.

The city was somehow so loud and so empty. Every little noise grated on her nerves, and nothing was interesting to her. Sometimes the cloudy mornings burned off into sunny afternoons, but mostly they didn't. Once June tried to look up at the stars, but found there was so much light and pollution that all she could see was the moon and Venus. Even the sky was empty.

A couple of times June went out with Nani and some of her friends to bars, mostly because she had to show face and keep up her friendship if she wanted to keep crashing on the couch. Nani always tried to get June to drink more, to loosen up and enjoy herself a little. June used to think that if she drank enough, she could stop being sad, but all alcohol did was make her sad and drunk. She didn't understand why it worked for so many people and not for her. She would do anything for an escape right about now.

Eventually, Nani kicked her out. Not in as many words, but she made up an excuse for why June couldn't stay at her place anymore, which was fair enough. June got a room at a grimy motel for a few nights, sleeping on top of the covers for fear of bed bugs and lack of AC, until eventually another friend of Nani's agreed to let her stay at their place. Why so many people were being so nice to her, June would never understand, but she didn't know how she would ever repay them. Add it to the list of things to feel miserable about.

Somehow, like an engine dutifully turning over while running on empty, she continued to go to work. She was really getting the hang of it, she thought. After a month, she finally got her first paycheck, paid off her credit card, and got some money in the bank. It wasn't enough yet, not even close to making a down payment for an apartment, but she was one step closer. One month closer to seeing Logan.

CHAPTER THREE

October

June had just finished washing her face in the sink when Logan appeared beside her in the bathroom. The room was just big enough for a sink, toilet, and bathtub, and so for both of them to fit and see themselves in the mirror they stood shoulder to shoulder.

“Hey,” Logan said hesitantly.

June turned around to grab a towel to dry her face off. She then reached for her face lotion and began to apply it.

“Can you hand me the toothpaste?” Logan asked. The girls shared a tube of toothpaste, which sat on the counter in a cup with their matching toothbrushes—Logan’s pink, June’s blue. It had always been that way, their things blue and pink, side by side. Their unofficial assigned colors.

June passed the tube over without looking, refusing to make eye contact with her even through the mirror. Their resemblance was uncanny standing next to each other in this lighting, practically the same height, same brown hair, same soft nose and jaw. Before pregnancy added some roundness to Logan’s cheeks and changed her body shape, sometimes strangers mistook them for twins, although Logan was 26, a year older than June. Their biggest differences were June’s septum piercing, and Logan’s blue eyes.

While Logan brushed her teeth, June combed and braided her hair. It might have been easier to have someone else braid it as she usually did with its ridiculous length, but today June wasn't going to ask for help, even if the braid did come out a little misshapen.

Logan spit and washed out her mouth. June could feel her trying to reach her eyes in the mirror for a moment.

"Seriously, June?" Logan said finally. "You're really not going to talk to me?"

"I'm going to bed," June muttered and turned to leave.

Logan grabbed her wrist, pulling her back. "Wait. Come on."

"It's fine, Lo. You're leaving. Whatever." God, she sounded like she was 14 again.

"I'm not *leaving* you. I'm just moving. Sorry I don't want to live in the middle of the woods forever," Logan said.

June turned the corner into their bedroom and threw some dirty clothes into the hamper. "I know," she muttered. But truth was, she really couldn't fathom why Logan wanted to get out of here so bad. Was this not the happiest they had ever been? The best home they'd ever had? Was there not a magic to this cottage in the woods that made every day feel like a happy ending to a fairy tale?

Distantly, June knew some part of Logan had to be discontented. It's why she spent so many days going into town, had so many one-night stands and random flings. June was stupid to think this could last forever.

She doubted she would be able to sleep tonight with Logan still mad at her, so she relented a little. "Look, you're right," June said. "I'm just tired, and on my period. We can talk about it tomorrow." She pulled back the covers on her twin-sized bed only feet away from Logan's and laid down.

“Okay,” Logan said. “Want me to turn off the lights?” June nodded, and Logan flipped the switch and began shutting the bedroom door. She knew June liked darkness to sleep, and always turned the lights off for her while she stayed up longer getting ready for bed.

“Night. Love you,” June said.

“Love you, too.”

What June really needed was a long, deep sleep to reset her system. She put her phone down at 10:30 pm, ready for the abyss.

Unfortunately, a blaring alarm dragged her back to wakefulness less than an hour later.

“What the fuck?” she groaned, peeling her eyes open. She groped for her phone on the nightstand, silencing the alarm, and rolled back over into sleep. But she could still hear alarms ringing throughout the house.

“June! Are you awake?” Logan shook her, and this time June woke up for good.

“What’s happening?”

“Look at the alert. Get up.” Logan turned the lights on, and everything felt wrong.

“Did you guys see this?” Somehow Selena had appeared in their room, holding up her own blaring cell phone.

June read the matching notification on her own phone:

El Dorado County Emergency Alert System

Evacuation warning: Active Wildfire in your area. Potential threat to life and/or property. Those who require additional time to evacuate, and those with pets and livestock should leave now.

“Evacuate? Evacuate why?” June asked.

“Haven’t you been checking Twitter?” Selena asked.

“No, I’ve been sleeping,” June tried to keep irritation from creeping into her tone.

“I mean all day,” Selena said. “You know how there’s been a wildfire on the other side of the 50?”

“Uh, no?” June said groggily. Beatrice had suggested she stay off social media lately, claiming it hinders the awakening of psychic abilities, and June wasn’t a big news watcher.

“I thought it was just a small one,” Logan said. “Little fires happen all the time. The firefighters were saying everything was under control. And last I checked, it was like 20 miles away.”

“Yeah, but then I saw a bunch of tweets about people saying the fire was getting bigger and bigger. And then the wind picked up. I don’t think it’s under control anymore,” Selena said.

“Wait, so, what? Should we evacuate? I don’t smell any smoke or anything.” June moved into the living room to turn on the local news.

“Where’s Bea? Is she awake?” Selena asked.

“She’s probably still sleeping,” Logan said. “You know she sleeps like the dead.”

On the news, the anchors showed a map of the area. The fire had jumped the highway and was headed towards their town but was still many miles away. It was nighttime, they said, so firefighters were hopeful they could get it under control quickly. Voluntary evacuation orders were in effect, but authorities reassured people there was nothing to panic about yet.

“See? We’ll probably be fine,” June said. “That damn alert woke us up for nothing.”

Logan and Selena shared a wary glance. “I don’t know if it’s *nothing*,” Logan said.

“The alert says only those who need additional time or have animals should evacuate right now. Good thing we never got those chickens like I wanted,” June joked.

Nobody seemed to find that funny. “I guess you’re right,” Selena said, rubbing her left arm with her right hand. She was wearing some baggy pajama pants and a stretched-out tank-top with no bra. Not that June was looking.

“We should get some go-bags ready, just in case. Like that time in high school, remember?” Logan said.

When June was in maybe 10th grade, she and Logan had been living with a foster family for a few years outside of Bakersfield, and there was a really bad fire one summer. It had gotten pretty close to their neighborhood, and the entire night everyone had stayed up watching the news, go bags and emergency supplies ready, in case they needed to evacuate. Luckily, the fire was put out before it could burn any structures. All the panic had been nothing but a waste of time.

“Yeah, I guess just to be safe,” June said.

“I’ll go wake Beatrice up,” Selena said.

Even as June and Logan each filled a backpack with essentials like clothes, snacks, medications, and IDs. June didn’t really expect to have to use it. The initial adrenaline rush of waking up to the alarm had worn off, leaving her sluggish and slightly nauseous. She packed her bag as fast as possible both so she could go back to sleep, and because she had always hated packing. It reminded her too much of being moved from foster home to foster home on a whim, oftentimes with little more than a single backpack or suitcase.

When June entered the kitchen to refill a water bottle, Selena was pacing in the dim lighting. There were supposed to be two working overhead lights in the kitchen, but one lightbulb had gone out months ago and was never changed.

“Hey, you okay?” June asked, putting a hand on her arm to ground her.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I just hate fires,” Selena said, voice thready. “I’m trying to make sure I have everything important.”

June nodded and gave her a comforting side hug. “It’s all gonna be fine. We’re just getting prepared. Worst that happens, we have to drive to some hotel or something. Not the end of the world.”

Selena nodded and took a deep breath. “I know, I know. I can smell smoke, though.”

June inhaled deeply and found that she also could smell some smoke, even indoors. “It just travels through the wind. What, you’ve never had a wildfire in LA?” She joked.

Selena smiled a little, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, there’s been quite a few in surrounding areas. Not my first rodeo. Still, it’s a little different when you’re in the middle of nowhere.”

They both looked out the window, to the darkness. Normally you could see at least through the trees to the stream, but it was a moonless night, and pillows of smoke above the distant mountains made everything darker. It really was eerie, if June thought about it too much.

She suddenly remembered Beatrice’s warning about smoke earlier and thought maybe she should’ve paid more attention to it. Neither of them had brought it up to Logan or Selena earlier, because Logan would’ve just called them crazy, and it would only put Selena on edge. But now June thought maybe Beatrice’s psychic abilities really *were* something to take seriously.

Unless the ‘future memory’ had really just been Beatrice smelling the beginnings of the wildfire carried through the air.

“We’ll reassess tomorrow,” June said. “For now, you should get some sleep.”

“Yeah, you too. Good night.”

“Night,” June said, watching Selena slink back to her room.

June crashed back down in her bed, listening to the hushed arguments of Logan and Beatrice as they tried to decide which of Beatrice’s family heirlooms were actually worth packing, and which could be abandoned. She hoped that by morning it wouldn’t matter, and they’d all be laughing about it.

“Guys, wake up, wake up!” When June awoke again at 3 am to Beatrice and Selena flipping their bedroom lights on, she finally understood that this wasn’t going to be like other wildfires she’d encountered.

A sense of urgency flooded her system, and she jumped out of bed faster than she’d ever been able to for school or a job. “Did we get another alert? Should we go?”

“The fire’s here! Come on!” Beatrice said.

“Here? What do you mean here?” Logan asked.

“Look outside!”

June flung open the curtains to look out the window: Up on the hill, to the right of the house maybe 200 feet away, curtains of fire rippled through grasses and up trees.

“Holy shit! Let’s go!”

June shoved her feet into her tennis shoes, pulling them on without bothering to untie them.

Logan struggled to pull herself out of bed with her huge stomach. “Can you grab my backpack?” She asked Selena, trying and failing to reach down to put on her shoes.

“Here, let me,” June said, and knelt down to shove Logan’s shoes on her feet and tie them. Her fingers were shaking so much from the adrenaline that she couldn’t double knot them. It dawned on June that when the emergency alert said *those who require additional time to evacuate*, it might have been including heavily pregnant women.

The four of them scrambled out to the front door, pajamas on, backpacks in hand. June carried Logan’s stuff for her, as she was holding her back in pain as she waddled to the door.

“Who’s driving? Which car should we take?” Selena asked.

Normally June could expect Logan to drive, but as pregnant as she was, it didn’t seem like a good idea.

“We can take my car,” Beatrice said, “Though I’m not sure how much gas I have...”

“Do you have more than half a tank?” June asked.

“Maybe?”

“That’ll have to do.” June grabbed the car keys and let them out the door, into the hellscape that awaited.

The smoke hit them like a wall, thick and sharp, burning their lungs and stinging their eyes. The wind whipped through the air, bringing waves of heat from the fire with it. The flames’ crackling and roaring were deafening.

“Oh my God, holy shit!” Selena yelled, helpfully.

“Where the fuck is the fire department? Why didn’t we get a warning?” Logan shouted.

The car was parked some 50 feet from the house, up a hill and closer to the road. Selena helped Logan up to the car and June was urging Beatrice along when, suddenly, she stopped.

“Bea, come on!” June said.

“No! Do you hear that?”

June stopped for a moment, and waited. There: she did hear it.

The phone in the spirit room was ringing.

“No, Bea...”

Beatrice took off towards the phone.

June tossed the car keys to Selena, saying “Turn on the car! We’ll be right there!” and ran to Beatrice.

Following her into the room, June said, “Beatrice, we don’t have time for this, let’s go.”

“We heard it because we were *meant* to,” Beatrice said, and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

June tapped her foot impatiently, waiting by the door for Beatrice. If they died because of some stupid telemarketer, June was going to be so pissed. She coughed once, then twice. Wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

“You’re at home? Okay, we’ll come and get you. We’ll be right there. Try to get a bag together. We’ll be there, okay?” Beatrice hung up the phone. “Come on! Let’s go!”

They jogged back to Logan and Selena, who had gotten in the car, a 2006 silver Prius. The fire was only 100 feet away now. “Who was that? What’s happening?” June asked.

“Get in, I’ll explain in the car.”

June climbed into the driver’s seat, buckled her seatbelt, and got the hell out of there. If she’d been in her right mind then to understand that this would be her last time at Beatrice’s cottage before it burned down forever, she might have looked back.

As it was, all she could think about were the three people in the car, her family, as she sped off down the dirt road towards the main highway.

CHAPTER FOUR

May

June was at work because where else would she be? Her eyes were burning ever so slightly as she stared at the computer screen in front of her, and she stifled a yawn so deep it hurt her jaw.

She wondered if there were long-term impacts of overdosing on sleep, because after so many months of wanting to do nothing but sleep, it seemed like the pendulum had started to shift the other way. For the past few weeks, she couldn't for the life of her fall asleep at a decent time, and when she could sleep, she would wake up to every little noise in the middle of the night. It didn't help that the friend she had been subleasing a little room (barely more than a closet) from had a bird and two hamsters, all of which had oddly nocturnal tendencies. He only charged her \$500 for the month though, which June thought was a steal. Bummer he was moving to New York in July.

Unable to focus long enough to get a single task done, June rubbed her eyes harshly and stood up, wandering over to the little kitchen area in the back of the building. It was nothing more than a mini fridge and a sink, but a tea kettle and coffee maker sat on the counter, and June needed a coffee to get through this morning.

She grabbed a paper cup and poured herself some coffee from the still-steaming batch that someone had made earlier. She took a whiff of the liquid—strong and bitter. Yeah, she

couldn't drink this without creamer. June casually looked to her left, then her right, to make sure no one was watching before she opened the fridge. Someone's French vanilla coffee creamer was sitting on the top shelf, just waiting to be used. No one would notice if she took just a little splash, right?

"Hey, wait!" A voice called, disrupting the silence of the workspace. June froze like a racoon caught stealing trash before she realized it wasn't addressed at her.

It was Dave in Sue's cubicle, a few desks away from the kitchen, so June couldn't see them but could hear their conversation. "Did you go over those numbers before you sent them to the CARB?" he asked her.

"Uh, I just copied the sensor's readings directly into the document," Sue said. "But I haven't sent it yet."

"Here, let me see it," Dave said.

Silence, probably as they were pulling up a document, and then: "See, here, for PM two-point-five, just change these numbers to like, eight, and these ones to like, fourteen."

"But the sensors said thirty—"

June could picture Dave waving a hand. "Ah, don't worry about it, you just have to change these so they're below the levels. It doesn't really matter long-term."

They exchanged some more words, but June couldn't understand all of them.

"What about the benzene?" Sue asked.

"Same thing. Just make sure it's in range. Check all the numbers before you send them over," Dave said.

Alarm bells rang in June's head, but she didn't actually know which numbers he was referring to, or what any of the jargon meant.

“Okay, right. Sorry,” Sue said, as if she was in the wrong.

“No worries,” Dave said. “I should’ve told you earlier.”

As June headed back to her cubicle, she ran into Dave in the hallway, who nodded hello. He glanced at the coffee in her hand, then raised his eyebrows good-naturedly. He knew she used his creamer. Damn it.

June got back to her job, sending emails and scheduling a maintenance specialist to come and check on one of the rigs. Still, she couldn’t help but be curious about what Sue had been working on. Something churned in her stomach, not sitting right with her.

It was probably nothing, June thought. Sue was their data analyst; she had a degree and everything, she knew what she was doing. Dave was just letting her know about all the random protocols and glitches places like this have that he’s been dealing with for years. And yet.

June forced herself to get back to work, then scrolled through Instagram for a while to waste some time until her shift was over.

She couldn’t help it. She Googled PM 2.5, a term she had heard Dave say. Just out of curiosity.

Particulate Matter 2.5 refers to particles in the air that are 2.5 micrometers or less in diameter.

PM2.5 can travel deep into the lungs when inhaled, causing inflammation and damage to lung tissue. Inhalation of PM2.5 can cause many adverse health effects...

Now June was really on edge. She worked for an oil drilling company. She knew oil fields weren’t exactly known for their positive impacts on air quality. But was it really possible

that they were faking data? She doubted it. There had to be different organizations fact checking them. Right?

...She had to know what Sue had been working on. Just so she could be sure. She wouldn't be able to focus until she could stop her brain from fixating on what she overheard.

If she stayed a little later after work (something she never did—if anything, she always tried to skirt out a little early) she doubted anyone would be left in the office building. She could go to Sue's computer, and hope that she hadn't logged out before leaving. Then she could look through her previously opened tabs, maybe search through her emails...

God, what a horrible idea. June glanced up to the corners of the room. There were some security cameras, round little black domes on the ceiling. What were the odds anyone ever actually checked them? It's not like she was really doing anything wrong. No one would even see her. She would be quick. It would be fine.

A strange adrenaline rush surged through her as she committed to her plan. She felt more awake than she had all day, tapping her foot anxiously. Maybe the coffee had been a bad idea. Too late now.

As the hours went on and people filed out, June waved goodbye and wished them a good weekend. Soon, the sound of typing and shuffling had disappeared, and the automatic lights in other parts of the building switched off. She was alone.

June stood up from her desk and crept over to Sue's desk. Her computer was still on, thank goodness—she probably had forgot to turn it off before leaving. June hovered over the desk, feeling oddly giddy like a kid trying to steal a few bucks from their parent's wallet.

Open on Sue's desktop was a spreadsheet titled "Monthly Environmental Report—October." On it were columns and columns of numbers from different times, dates, and

locations. There was data for PM2.5, O3, CH4, Benzene, Carbon Tetrachloride, and other chemicals she couldn't pronounce. In the PM2.5 column, all the numbers were below 15, and June suspected Sue had changed them to be that way. She quickly took out her phone and took pictures of the spreadsheet so she could look up what everything meant later.

Then she opened up Sue's work email, and searched for Monthly Environmental Report. Every month, spreadsheets were sent over to the California Air Resources Board, among other environmental agencies. June wondered how much of the data in those files might have been faked, too. Did government agencies only rely on self-reported data? There had to be other people checking these things, right?

Either way, the fact of the matter was that the company was changing the numbers it sent to regulatory boards. That couldn't be ethical.

She heard footsteps on the other side of the building and quickly closed out of the email, moving away from Sue's desk as casually as possible. As she walked out and past the kitchen, however, she ran almost head-on into Sue.

"June, hey!" She said. She was maybe 45, wiry and with patches of grey hairs coming in. She was always nice to June when they interacted, though. Sue checked her watch. "What are you still doing here?"

"Oh, just about to head out. Was just leaving the kitchen," June said, maybe a little too quickly. "How 'bout you?"

"Oh, I just have to fix a couple documents before I leave."

"Ah, well, see you. Have a good weekend," June said, eager to get out of there.

"Thanks, you too."

June turned on her heel, grabbed her bag from her chair at her desk, and left the building with a little more pep in her step than usual.

Slumped on her bed back in her apartment, June did a Wikipedia deep dive on pollution emitted from oil drilling.

She had never thought that oil rigs were good for the environment, but she hadn't put a lot of thought into how they actually affected the communities they were placed in. She looked through the spreadsheet she had taken a picture of, and found that the levels of particulate matter, or pollutants in the air, were far higher than the legal limits. Not to mention a couple of cancer-causing chemicals. The company was changing their data before sending it to regulatory boards, making it appear as if they were cooperating with environmental organizations, when in reality they were lying to avoid getting caught.

It couldn't be that big of a deal, right? This had to be standard procedure. Maybe June was missing something. Either way, it didn't matter. She had a good job, and a consistent paycheck. She couldn't afford to fuck it up by poking her nose in something she knew nothing about.

...Still, she couldn't turn her brain off. She googled the effects of high particulate matter. Heart disease, low birth weight, respiratory disease. This did nothing to help her growing unease.

She read articles on environmental injustice, on the way lower-income communities tended to have higher rates of pollution. She instinctively sent a link to an article to Logan, but the text never delivered. June's chest burned. This was the sort of thing she and Logan might have discussed for hours. Logan was smarter than her. She would've known what to do.

But June couldn't go to Logan now.

As she read more about oil refineries in South LA, June's mind kept flashing to Selena, who had grown up here her entire life. Selena, with her gentle smile and big brown eyes. She always carried an inhaler on her, told June she'd had severe asthma since she was a kid.

Was it possible her asthma wasn't genetic, but actually came from the pollution in her hometown?

Was it possible that there were more kids around the oil fields, currently struggling to breathe because of the carelessness of corporations?

June felt so disturbingly alone. She needed someone to talk through this with. She couldn't tell if she was blowing this out of proportion. Logan used to be her voice of reason. She had no idea how to go about this on her own.

That night, June dreamt that her bedroom was burning around her. It was so vivid that her eyes watered from the smoke. But for some reason, she didn't get up, didn't evacuate or try to put out the fire. Because laying on the bed beside her, calm and peaceful as if everything was right in the world, was Selena. In the dream, June knew she needed to tell her about the fire, but for some reason couldn't. So, she just stared and stared, and Selena stared back, and June woke up just as the fire began to lick at her heels.

When she awoke at 5am, far earlier than she wanted to, it was still dark outside, but she couldn't turn her mind off to go to sleep. Instead, she lay in bed, numbing her thoughts with the alluring blue light of her phone. No matter what social media site she tried to get lost in, her fingers crept towards her text messaging app, as if by their own volition.

June gave in, opening up the app and going back to the place she had been to many times: her texts with Selena. They had been a barren wasteland for the last six months, but if she scrolled up, she could relive the past.

October 15th, 12:43 pm

Selena: im at garys sandwiches rn do you want anything?

June: omg yes my usual pls

Selena: no tomato right?

June: you know me so well

Selena: one day I will make a tomato lover out of you

June: many have tried but all have failed

Simple conversations like these seemed impossible now, like they happened to some other person in some other life. Texts about plans they wanted to make, rants about their days, memes and pictures sent back and forth. A year's worth of love and care, enshrined in short messages.

And then it came to an end, all too abruptly.

October 18th, 6:54 pm

Selena: im at home now, where are you guys staying?

June: at a hotel right now

don't really know what we're gonna do

October 19th, 11:42 am

June: can we meet up somewhere? I want to see you

Selena: things are really tense in my house rn

I don't think im gonna be able to today

October 21st, 1:32 pm

Selena: where are you? You're not with Bea anymore??

October 24th, 10:12 pm

Selena: how are you doing June?

I can't imagine how you must be feeling right now

I hate to think you're all alone

October 25th, 2:07 pm

Selena: I miss you

I hope you know you can text me anytime

I'm here for you

October 29th, 1:32 am

Selena: June please talk to me

I know everything is awful right now but you don't have to
isolate yourself

2:57 am

Selena: I know you're not doing well but honestly I could use
my friend back too
Stop ignoring me, I know you didn't change your number

3:33 am

Selena: goodnight, june

That was how she'd left it. No texts had been sent since; no phone calls had been picked up. Why hadn't she responded? Why couldn't she get her grief addled brain to send one simple text?

As the weeks, then months, passed since October, June found it more and more impossible to text her. Selena must hate her by now, for not responding when they both needed each other most. June could only hope she had made up with her family, that she was happy. She could only hope Selena was doing better than her.

Now, strangely, the motivation to reach out to Selena was stronger than ever. June needed to talk to somebody, and Selena was who she wanted more than anyone.

As she typed up a message, then deleted it, then retyped it again, she chewed on her lip. What would she do if Selena didn't respond? What if she had moved on? Decided she didn't want to deal with June and her fucked up life anymore? Could June stand that rejection?

She doubted she would be able to stand it, but then again, she had endured a lot of things she never thought she'd be able to lately. She had to try. It was time.

June inwardly cringed at her own message, at how fake it sounded even as she sent it, as if she was texting Nani or someone else she didn't have much of a history with. But she had to start somewhere.

April 5th, 6:07 am

June: hey selena! Would you want to meet up sometime?

Sorry to text so early lol

CHAPTER FIVE

October

When June was in high school, there was a dirt road in her hometown that went up to a lookout where teenagers loved to go to watch the sunset, hook up, and exist without adults around for an evening. June's favorite part had always been the drive up; the dirt road was treacherous and exciting, and the bumps felt like being on a roller-coaster.

Right now, she cursed the dirt road they drove on. It was rocky and dusty, and inhibited her from driving more than 50 miles per hour. The smoke in the air made the sky even darker than June thought possible, and all she could see was the ash in front of them, illuminated by the headlights to look like a snowstorm, and distant flames behind them.

In the passenger seat, Beatrice was fiddling with the radio to find a news channel that wasn't staticky. But surrounded by these mountains, the radio never worked until they got closer into town.

"My Twitter's not loading, and Safari keeps crashing on me," Selena narrated, as she struggled to get cell reception out here.

"This is a dead zone," Logan said, "My calls always get dropped on this road."

"How the hell are we supposed to know where to go?" June asked.

Weren't there supposed to be evacuation zones in place? A plan of where to go in an emergency?

“How about away from the fire?” Logan said.

“Wow, why didn’t I think of that!” June retorted.

“First we need to stop up here,” Beatrice said, pointing to a turn off that led to another property down in a valley. “Jerry called on the spirit phone, he said he needs help getting out.”

Jerry was an old, retired man whose house was about a mile from Beatrice, a few properties away. He lived alone after his wife died a few years ago.

“He can’t leave by himself?” June asked. She kept glancing in her rearview mirror, panic untangling a little the further away they got from the tower of flames.

“He just had a hip replacement, so he can’t drive. He just needs us to pick him up and take him to his niece’s house. She lives right off the highway, on the way to town,” Beatrice said.

“Do you think we have time?” Selena craned her neck to look behind her. “Can’t he call the fire department or something?”

“Do you see any firefighters out here?” Beatrice asked.

Silence fell upon the car, undercut only by the static of the radio. Suddenly the vast lack of people around them became oppressive. It appeared to be only them and the smoke.

“He’s on the way anyway,” June said decisively. “Let’s go get him.”

She turned off into his driveway and followed the road until they arrived at his house, an old log cabin with a pontoon boat parked in front.

“You two stay in the car,” Beatrice said, pointing to June and Logan. “We can go get him.”

Beatrice and Selena jumped out, while June kept the car running for a quick getaway. She looked at Logan sitting in the backseat through the rearview mirror.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Logan put a hand on her stomach. “A little cramped. I don’t think Priuses were meant for pregnant people.” She laughed. “Priuses? Pri-i? What’s the plural for Prius?”

“Hell if I know,” June laughed. “Not my car.”

June looked out the window, to where Beatrice and Selena were helping Jerry at the door. Selena was coughing—the smoke was really thick, and she didn’t have very strong lungs to begin with. June hoped she’d packed her inhaler.

Jerry was hobbling forward with a metal walker, assisted by Beatrice, while Selena carried his bag.

“Thanks for driving us, June,” Logan said sincerely.

“Oh, so now you want me to drive,” June joked. It was a long-running argument they’d had their whole lives—Logan claimed June was a bad driver (despite no evidence!) and always insisted on driving when they went anywhere together.

“You’re a good driver,” Logan said.

“Well, you know. Taught by the best,” June smirked.

“Damn right.”

June took a deep breath. The exchange felt like an assurance: they weren’t fighting anymore. They had bigger things to worry about now.

Beatrice opened the passenger seat door, and the wall of smoke hit June’s face with enough strength to bring tears to her eyes. “I’ll have him sit in the front seat,” Beatrice said, helping Jerry slowly get in, one leg at a time. His white skin was speckled and wrinkled from age, his hair white and wispy, and his ears both sported hearing aids. June had always felt bad for him, spending so much time alone in his house in the middle of nowhere, but his kids had long since moved away.

His expression was pained but determined. “Thank you so much for getting me,” he said.

“Of course,” June said. “Just being good neighbors. I’m glad we heard your call.” The realization that if they hadn’t come for him, he could have literally burned to death made June’s stomach do a flip. This all seemed too real.

Selena put Jerry’s walker and bag in the trunk, and then shoved herself in the middle seat between Logan and Beatrice. A psychic, two lesbians, a pregnant woman, and an old man walk into a car. It seemed like the setup of a bizarre joke.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” June said, and put the car in drive.

As they got back on the main road, heading towards the highway, the cost of their quick stop became apparent: trees were burning not 50 meters behind them, and the wind was whipping the flames in their direction.

“Oh shit,” Selena said, looking out the back window. “The fire’s so close. Shit.”

June drove as fast as she dared on the bumpy road. If she hit a rock at a wrong angle, and popped a tire now, it could literally be the end for them. Her palms felt slick on the steering wheel.

“This is apocalyptic,” Logan said, staring out the window in awe and fear.

And it was. Everything was orange—it seemed there were no other colors in the world. The air was dark and hazy, and the fire illuminated the trees so they were like skeletons reaching out to grab them.

“I hate it,” Selena muttered.

“This is like my worst nightmare,” Jerry said. He must have been on some sort of drugs from the surgery—he was quieter, and more dazed than June had ever seen him. Usually he was a quite jovial man.

“How is this even possible?” Beatrice asked.

“Why are there no firefighters? I can’t even hear any helicopters or anything,” June said.

“It happened so fast,” Selena said. “I don’t think anyone expected the fire to reach all the way over here.”

“It shouldn’t be possible,” Beatrice said. “It jumped the creek.”

“Well, the creeks been pretty dry this year,” Jerry said.

“Do you think my house...?” Beatrice let the question hang in the air.

Logan and June made eye contact through the rear-view mirror. They both knew the house, and everything inside of it, was long gone by now. Jerry’s too, probably. But the mood was so tense, it didn’t feel like a good time to talk about it.

The further they drove, the further they got from the fire, and the smoke lessened a little bit. June had become accustomed to the constant acrid smell, and so just being able to breath properly was a relief.

“If you’re a fortune teller, how come you weren’t able to see this coming?” Jerry asked Beatrice.

Logan snorted, but June groaned inwardly.

“That’s not how it works,” June explained, trying not to let annoyance creep into her tone. This was a speech she’d already given multiple times. “She works mostly with tarot cards, which don’t predict specific events, but instead lead people in the right direction. She can read energies, and knows things—”

“Honestly, I think I did see this coming,” Beatrice said quietly. “I don’t know why I didn’t do anything about it. I should’ve trusted my gut.”

Silence fell through the car. Even Logan didn’t have any response to that.

It was around 4 am now, and being awake at this time was wreaking havoc on June's nervous system. While the rush of adrenaline kept her awake, there was a deep tension in her forehead and a general sense of wrongness that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Finally, they reached the highway, just a two-lane paved road surrounded by forest. There were no streetlights, but there were a few other cars on the road, illuminating more of their surroundings and easing June's sense of isolation.

Everyone was driving in the direction away from the fire, leaving the lane to her left wide open. Two fire trucks drove by, along with a bulldozer.

"Yes, firefighters! Thank God," Selena cheered as they passed. June had to admit, just their presence on the road was comforting. But the comfort was short lived.

Watching the firetrucks get smaller through the back windshield, becoming hazier and hazier before disappearing altogether into the orange mass, they seemed to have an impossible task. What could a couple little trucks do against a burning behemoth?

There were more and more cars on the road the further up the highway they got.

"Do you think they've evacuated the whole town?" Selena asked.

"I've never seen this many cars on the road," June said.

"Or this many animals out," Logan added.

June risked taking her eyes off the road to glance to either side, where walls of trees and grass surrounded them. Indeed, there was a family of deer running alongside them to escape the fire, and flocks of birds cawed and flew from the trees in panic. It wasn't just the humans who were evacuating.

They passed a unique rock formation that Logan once stopped to take pictures at. They passed the abandoned barn that June always wanted to go ghost hunting in. They passed the

house with all the life-size wood carvings of popular cartoon characters in front. After so many times driving on this road, these landmarks were familiar sights to June, like breadcrumbs pointing towards home. She could only hope that the fire would be put out, before they were all destroyed.

They hit a section of road at higher elevation with some cell service, which was spotty at best but better than none. Jerry gave Logan the phone number of his sister, Louise, and they were able to call her to let her know they were coming.

“According to Twitter, they’re having people head towards El Dorado Hills. There should be evacuation centers open,” Selena said, tapping on her phone. “Nothing else will really load, though. I’ll try to get more specifics when I get more service.”

They were already headed towards El Dorado Hills, a bigger town where they could get out of the endless woods. Selfishly June couldn’t wait to drop off Jerry—she didn’t want one more thing to have to worry about.

After a few miles they turned off the highway onto another side street that led to Louise’s house, where she was waiting for Jerry to arrive, car already packed up with emergency supplies.

June had never met her before, but she seemed nice with her round features and curly hair.

June got out of the car to stretch her legs and help them take out Jerry’s stuff.

“Thank you so much for bringing him,” Louise said, pulling June into a hug.

“Oh, uh, of course,” June said, awkwardly trying to push out of her arms. “I’m glad he’s okay.”

“Could I possibly use your bathroom?” Logan asked Louise, arching her back with her hand on her hips to stretch.

“Oh my goodness, of course!” Louise said. “How many months along are you?”

“Nine,” Logan said, eyebrows raised.

“Wow, any day now!”

“Hopefully not,” Logan said, gesturing to the thick smokey air. Louise directed her inside the house to the bathroom.

“Where are you guys gonna go?” Beatrice asked. “And what about the horses?”

June glanced around the house and noticed that there was, in fact, a small stable and ring for horses to run around.

“Well, my husband’s loading them up in the trailer for now, and we’ll leave as soon as he’s ready. We have some family in Sacramento to stay with, but we’ll have to figure something out for the horses.” Louise ran a hand through her hair.

“I’m sure it’ll all be okay,” Beatrice said, clasping Louise’s hands.

June wished she could believe those words.

Standing by the car, leaning against the side door, Selena was tapping her foot anxiously. “Logan should really hurry up,” she said.

June approached her and slung an arm around her shoulder. “She’ll be out any minute. Then we can get the hell out of here.”

Selena leaned into her, shoving her face into June’s chest. “I’m so tired,” she said.

As if reminding her to be tired as well, a wave of exhaustion hit June, too. She closed her eyes for a second. “I know. When we get to a hotel or something, I’m sleeping all day.”

“Sounds perfect. Can I join?” Selena said.

June’s brain stuttered for half a moment considering the implications. “You don’t even have to ask,” she managed to respond smoothly.

Selena chuckled, and they both leaned heavily into the car. Her breaths sounded thick, and labored.

“Are you breathing okay?” June asked.

Selena shrugged. “Well, no,” she said. “But I’ve already used my inhaler three times. We just gotta get out of the smoke.”

June could barely breathe herself, so she couldn’t even imagine how Selena’s asthmatic lungs were fairsing. She sat up, alarmed. “What do we do?” she asked.

Selena, amazingly, didn’t seem concerned. “I can still breathe, it’s fine,” she said. “I can go a long time like this. Who needs oxygen to their brain anyways?”

The joke was not comforting, but there wasn’t much June could do about it now. “You brought your other meds too, right? You took your Lamictal last night?”

Selena rolled her eyes playfully. “Yes, *mom*. Still taking my crazy pills.”

June nudged her shoulder in response.

From what she’d been told, Selena had struggled with depression and mania her entire life, which had come to a head about a year ago, when Selena told her parents she was gay, dropped out of UCLA, and ran away from home. It was on this manic road trip when she ended up meeting Beatrice and became their fourth roommate.

“Just want to make sure you’re okay,” June said. She glanced towards the east, where the mountains surrounding them were alight with fire, bright enough to stand out even through the black plumes of smoke.

Selena looked at their surroundings. “This is such a disaster. I feel like my mom is gonna find some way to use this to try to get me to come home.”

Selena's relationship with her parents was rocky. While she had reached out to them a couple of times since moving in on North Star Road, they were unaccepting of Selena's identity, and refused to pay for her college or any aspect of her life until she came home.

Unsure what to say, June hummed sympathetically and leaned into Selena further.

Distantly, she heard the sirens of another fire truck driving by. They had taken too long stopping here. They were wasting time. June chewed the inside of her cheek anxiously.

Logan finally returned from the bathroom, and Beatrice said her goodbyes to Louise and Jerry, leaving them with her signature protective sigil drawn on their hands in eyeliner. She drew one in the dust on the back windshield of the Prius, too, for good measure, and then the four women got back in the car, to return to the highway.

CHAPTER SIX

April

June nearly didn't make it here, to this strip mall coffee shop next-door to the neighborhood Ralph's. The moment she walked out her apartment door she nearly turned around and went back in again, nerves making her avoidant and unmotivated. However, she made a commitment, and June was never the type to cancel on someone last minute, especially someone as important to her as Selena.

According to their text messages, Selena had returned to working at the grocery store she worked at in high school but was free during her lunch break to meet up with June. Both of their texts had been short, clipped, and overly formal, containing none of the closeness and familiarity that they once had, and that made June's chest fill with dread.

But it was June's fault they drifted so far apart, June's grief-filled avoidance that hurt those closest to her until she had no one left. She had the choking feeling that this was her last chance to set everything right.

June sat down at a table in the coffee shop, waiting to order until Selena got there. They had agreed to meet at 2, and it was 2:02 already. June scrolled mindlessly through social media, trying to make it look like she was doing something. What if Selena didn't show up? More than this being a waste of a bus trip, June knew that would mean the end of the bridge she was building.

She cracked her knuckles, fiddled with her septum piercing. It was a cold day outside with dark clouds overhead, the kind of weather that people anywhere else in the US would find tolerable but had Angelenos huddling inside like the world was ending. Finally shaking off the chill from outside, June removed her sweatshirt and balled it up down at her feet.

A song came on through the shop, one that June recognized as Selena's favorite back when they all lived in the woods together. Beatrice would've taken that as a sign that June was in the right place, an assurance that Selena was coming. Logan would have argued that it's just a popular song, and therefore likely to come on amongst other coffee shop pop music.

Finally, finally, 3 minutes later, Selena strolled through the front door. Her hair was longer than it was 6 months ago, and her skin a little less tanned than it used to be. She was wearing a Ralph's t-shirt and jeans and no makeup. Her eyes scanned the room, looking for June, and June drank up the moment to stare at her before she had been seen herself. Then, Selena's brown eyes locked onto June's and a spark flew up June's spine. She smiled hesitantly and waved, and Selena closed the space between them, sitting in the empty chair across from June.

"Hey, how are you!" Selena said as she sat down. It made June cringe inwardly—her tone was all niceties, the kind of tone you use when you run into an acquaintance at the store.

"I'm good, how are you?" June said, voice raised two pitches higher like when she worked in customer service. God, this was horrible.

"Oh, good, good," Selena said. "A bit tired, it's been a long shift, you know," she said, gesturing to her t-shirt, "but not bad." Once they had talked about how much they both hated small talk.

"Oh, that's good," June said.

"Have you ordered yet?" Selena asked.

“Uh, no, I was waiting for you. Wait here, it’s my treat.” June got up and grabbed her purse. “Iced chai, right? Almond milk?”

“Actually, I’ve been doing an americano lately. Iced, just a splash of almond milk.”

June blinked. “Oh, ok. I’ll be right back.”

She waited in line to order at the register wishing she could pull her hair out. Six months of no communication had left them in tatters. And it was all her fault.

She ordered the Americano and a latte for herself and carried the drinks to their table when they were ready.

“Ooh, thank you! How much was it?” Selena asked. “I’ll Venmo you.”

“Nope, it’s on me.”

Selena tapped something on her phone. June immediately got a Venmo notification. “Too late.”

June gave her a look, and Selena laughed.

“So, you’re, uh, back at Ralph’s?” June asked.

“Yep,” Selena said, grimacing. “Just like high school! The same manager and everything. I feel like I’m losing my mind.” She shook her head.

“Ah, man, that sucks.”

“Well, a job’s a job,” Selena said.

“How’s it been living at home again?” June asked.

Selena stared into her coffee. “Oh, you know…”

June wanted to press for more details. Really, she was burning to know anything and everything about how Selena was doing. But they weren’t close enough to be asking invasive questions anymore.

“It’s really nice living with my brother again,” Selena said finally. “I missed him. Even if he does bug the hell out of me.”

June chuckled. “How old is he, again?”

“Senior in high school,” Selena said. “He’s so much taller than me now, it’s insane.”

“Wow, that must be so trippy. I remember when I caught up to Logan’s height, she was so mad,” June laughed. “She made us remeasure three times the day she realized I was one centimeter taller.”

Selena smiled, and then her expression fell. June deflated a little too, an all-too-familiar dark numbness starting in her fingertips flowing into her face. She quickly took a sip of her drink, forcing herself to focus on the present. She had forgotten to ask for sweetener in it. The latte was bland and bitter.

Selena cleared her throat. “Well, uh, how are you?” This time more sincere, less automatic. Selena’s eyes were like a doe’s, large and innocent and full of so much welcoming depth.

“I’m, uh.” How could she explain? Most of the time she didn’t want to *be* at all. “Well, I’m getting back on my feet. It’s been...”

Selena nodded. There was a little wrinkle between her eyebrows where her expression pinched in sympathy. Even when her face relaxed, the mark remained. June wondered just how much she’d been frowning lately.

“What have you been up to? Where are you living?” Selena asked instead.

“Oh, actually not too far from here. I’m currently subletting a room in an apartment with this dude I met at my last job.”

Selena raised an eyebrow. “Some random dude?”

“His name’s Jared. He works the night shift somewhere, so I basically never see him. The apartment’s shit, but the rent is cheap, so.”

Selena snorted. “Interesting.”

June’s face burned. “Yeah. But I have to move by July, so I’m looking for something new soon,” she said, as if that made her life sound any more together.

“Fair enough. Good luck out there, apartment hunting’s a bitch,” Selena said, stirring her drink with her straw. “God knows if rent wasn’t so high in this city, I’d have moved out already.”

June gave her a pinched half-frown. “Are you and your parents...?”

Selena shrugged. “We’re fine now. A little tense, but we hashed it all out when I first came home.”

“And are they okay with—” June waved her hands around, gesturing to Selena’s entire being.

Selena jolted humorless laugh. “Yeah, totally fine, as long as I don’t mention it and don’t look or act queer in anyway.”

“Ah man, I’m sorry.”

“And church every Sunday is non-negotiable. They even practically forced me to go to confession the first Saturday I was back. In case you were wondering where the halo around my head came from, that’s my renewed holiness.”

June snorted just as she was taking a sip of her drink, causing her to choke. She convulsed through some sort of coughing laughter fit that made Selena laugh in turn. It was a good sound.

When she was finally able to get her voice back, June wheezed, “You always make me laugh right when I’m eating or drinking something!”

“You always eat something right when I’m being funny!”

June’s soul felt so right for a second, here in Selena’s company.

“I have a theory that the whole reason Logan got EMT certified was so she could give you the Heimlich whenever you choke,” Selena said jovially, and then shut her mouth quickly.

Just like that, the constant wrongness was back again. June cleared her throat. “Yeah, maybe,” she said.

An awkward pause. Then, “So, uh, you never told me. Where are you working now?”

“Oh, I got this random temp job through a friend of a friend. I’m working as a secretary for an oil rig site manager. Only a few miles from here.”

Selena raised an eyebrow. “You? A secretary? For an oil company?” She sounded disapproving, making June wish she had never said anything at all.

June shrugged. “It’s boring, but it pays really well.”

The thing that had gotten June to reach out to Selena in the first place was the potential pollution coverup that she had found, but now the idea of telling Selena about it sounded stupid. Why would she want to hear about it? Why did June think she would even know what it meant, or what to do about it? Why did June think Selena would even care about her life?

It all just felt so pointless.

An alarm went off on Selena’s phone. “Shit, my breaks almost over. I’ve gotta get back to work.”

It seemed like good enough timing—June had just finished her drink anyway, and she could feel her abilities to socialize dwindling in a way they never used to with Selena before.

Maybe this was the end of their friendship. Maybe outside of the woods, here in the real world, they would never work. Or maybe June had imagined their connection from the beginning. All she knew for sure was that now they were awkward, distant, cold.

“I’ll walk out with you.”

They left the comfort of the coffee shop to the frigid air of the outdoors, where a grimy grey parking lot lay between the shop and Selena’s job.

“Do you feel that?” Selena asked, shouting over the sound of the wind and a car alarm going off.

As they left the safety of an overhead awning, June stuck a hand out, expecting to feel raindrops, and instead felt the soft *tap-tap-tap* of ice hitting her palm. “Is it—?”

“Oh my god, it’s hailing!” Selena said, staring up at the sky and laughing in disbelief. “Isn’t that bizarre?”

June was taken aback. “Hail? But we’re in LA!” The chunks of ice that fell couldn’t be larger than blueberries but seemed to be getting bigger by the moment.

“It’s happened a few times before, it’s not unheard of. Although, I don’t think I’ve ever seen it hail in April.” She grinned up at the sky in amazement.

June opened her mouth to the clouds and caught a couple little ice chucks, which melted almost immediately on her tongue, tasting sour and sharp. “This is so weird,” June said.

“Man, why do I have to work now?” Selena complained.

“Come on, you’re gonna get all wet if we stay out here,” June said, taking Selena’s arm and walking with her across the parking lot. The amount of hail suddenly increased, causing a roaring sound throughout the parking lot. The ice chunks were getting bigger, and June put her arms up to cover her hair from getting pelted.

Selena let out a giddy screech, and even June couldn't help but laugh in astonishment.

"I'm gonna be late!" Selena said, checking her watch. She was running to the grocery store, shoes splashing in freezing puddles, when a golf ball-sized hailstone plummeted from the sky, smacking her viciously beside her left temple. Selena grunted and stopped, taking a pained step back and putting her hand up to where she was hit.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" June asked. A pea-sized ice chunk hit the top of June's head, causing her to flinch away, and more small hailstones continued to fall around them.

Selena took her hand off her head, and it came away red.

"Are you bleeding? Oh—"

There was a deep cut on Selena's head, and her eyes were wide and disoriented.

June pulled Selena the final way to the grocery store so that they stood under the awning while she studied her head. "That's a lot of blood, Selena. Are you okay?"

"I don't—I don't know..." Selena stared down at the blood in her hand—it was pouring out of her head now, dark and thick—and she fainted.

June caught her in her arms and shook her a little. "Selena? Selena?"

She awoke within moments.

"Should I call an ambulance? Oh my God..."

"No! No ambulance, just maybe... maybe take me to the hospital..."

"Shit, okay, okay."

"Take my keys," Selena handed her purse to June.

The drive to the hospital was stressful, with Selena pressing blood-soaked tissues to her head. The hail continued to make loud cracking noises against the windshield, interspersed with

thick rain drops, and everyone drove 20 miles under the speed limit, cautious like they'd never seen rain before.

When June began to freak about brain damage, Selena assured her that her vision and cognition was normal—she fainted from the sight of blood, she had done it before when she was younger.

June began to rattle off facts that Logan had told her—that the skin on the head was thick and full of blood vessels, that head injuries tended to look worse than they were—while Selena mostly stared out the window avoiding looking at the blood covering her hands.

When they made it to the emergency room, they had to wait in the waiting area for 10 minutes, during which Selena's boss called and she had to explain that she was at the hospital. June forced herself to take grounding breaths the entire time; to focus on the present. She hated hospitals.

Finally, they were taken to a trauma room. A nurse put a bandage over the wound, took Selena's vitals and performed a concussion test, promising a doctor would come soon to give Selena stitches before leaving them alone.

"How are you feeling now?" June asked. "Dizzy? Tired? Does it hurt a lot?"

"I'm okay, really," Selena said, smiling. "This actually hurts less than the time I got a concussion from a softball to the face."

"I didn't know you played softball."

"I didn't—not after that," Selena cracked a grin, and June finally laughed, assured that Selena wasn't dying.

"We keep getting in crazy situations," June said, shaking her head. "What did we do to piss off mother earth?"

“You mean you didn’t see the hail coming, miss psychic-in-training?”

June sighed. “You know that’s not how that works. Besides, I haven’t exactly been practicing the mystical arts lately.”

Selena nodded, expression grim. “You and Beatrice both, apparently.”

“You’ve talked to Beatrice?” June asked.

“Yeah, we text all the time. I got dinner with her a couple weeks ago.”

June nearly gaped at her, stunned and hurt. What did she expect, Selena and Bea to stop talking just because she cut them off? Still, she felt inexplicably hurt, like a kid not invited to her best friend’s birthday party. “Oh,” she said.

“She’s been living in Culver City—she moved in with an old *friend* from high school, believe it or not.” She wiggled her eyebrows, tone rushed like someone spilling hot gossip. “He’s super cute, and nice, too. A lawyer, I think, he’s an attorney for some environmental group.”

June sat up. “Really?”

Selena smiled. “Yeah, his name’s Joe—I can’t prove it yet, but I just know that they’re banging.”

“Wait, go back, he’s an environmental lawyer?”

“Yeah, something like that...” Selena narrowed her eyes, grimacing. “Look, June, there’s already people working on what happened with the fire—”

“No, I know, it’s not that.” After so long apart, June wasn’t sure if she should really go into this now—especially here, at the hospital. Not to mention that they’d been together for like, an hour, after not speaking for months. But something felt right, and June needed to get this off her chest. No time like the present. “There’s actually something I’ve been meaning to tell you. I think I found something really bad at my job.”

Selena froze. “The oil company? What did you find?” She asked slowly.

“I think they’ve been lying about pollutants. I mean—I don’t know anything for sure. But I have no clue who to talk to about this.”

“Well, if anyone would know, it would be Joe. You should talk to Bea.”

June looked at her lap. “I don’t know. I haven’t talked to her since, well...”

“We can all hang out together. Like old times.”

The doctor came in, and informed Selena that she needed 3 stitches on her forehead.

Selena informed her parents via text, but declined when they called her.

Selena was pale and quiet as the doctor prepped the needle. Instinctually June grabbed her hand, and Selena never let go, squeezing with a hand-crushing grip as the doctor numbed the area, and then put in the stitches. Selena shut her eyes; they were shining with tears, and her shuddering deep breaths made it clear she didn’t want to see the needle just inches from her eyes. But June watched the entire procedure protectively and focused on Selena’s warm hand in hers.

When they finally left the hospital, something more than Selena’s cut had been healed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

October

June was glad to be back on the highway, excited to put some distance between them and the fire, which was only gaining speed with the constant extreme wind gusts. On the hills behind them, she could clearly see the front line of the fire, where a wall of orange overtook any trees and shrubbery in its path, leaving behind a dark nothingness. The sun should've been coming up soon, but it was impossible to tell with how the smoke muddled the sky.

They'd all been taking turns yawning, the exhaustion setting heavy in their bones.

"Can you turn the radio up? I need something to keep me awake," Selena asked. She had switched seats with Logan to give her more room, so she sat in the back with Beatrice.

Logan fiddled with the dial on the radio, but the only channel that wasn't staticky was all EDM music, and even that kept cutting in and out. "God, this is awful," Logan said.

"Hit the CD button," Beatrice said, "I think I have one in there."

Selena raised her eyebrows. "No way," she laughed.

"I think I forgot CDs existed," June admitted.

"I still don't even understand how they work," Logan said. "Somehow Spotify just makes more sense to me."

"Oh, you kids," Beatrice huffed. "No respect for real music these days."

Logan got the CD playing, and a soulful woman's voice sung out.

“Who is this?” Selena asked.

“It’s Stevie Nicks!” Beatrice said, as if it was obvious. “I knew I still had my *Bella Donna* CD somewhere. One of my favorite albums of all time.”

“Of course you’re a Stevie Nicks fan,” Logan said, shaking her head. “How very on the nose.”

As a few songs played, June decided she liked her voice too, though she had never heard this specific album before.

The mood was lightening a little in the car, with Beatrice and June humming along to the music, but it all came crashing down when they hit a new obstacle: traffic. Both lanes of the highway had been opened up to drive the opposite direction from the fire, but as they joined more and more cars, they were forced to go slower and slower.

Then they hit an absolute stand-still. All June could see was a line of red taillights all the way up the road, trucks and cars of all shapes and sizes. Occasionally a honk rang out through the woods, as if that would help anything.

“Fuck,” June said.

“This is bad,” Selena said, craning to look at the pile of cars lining up behind them and the packed street ahead. “This is bad, right?”

To either side of the highway were thick trees; there was nowhere to go.

Logan was chewing on a fingernail. Beatrice had a hand to her head like she couldn’t believe this was happening.

“What do we do?” June asked.

“There’s nothing to do,” Logan said. “We’ll just have to wait it out. The traffic will keep moving, it’ll just be a while.”

June nodded, and ran a hand through her hair. She tapped her left foot on the ground, impatient. Stevie Nicks' "Edge of Seventeen" was playing, the only song June recognized on the album.

"Good thing I'm wearing a pad," Selena grumbled. "If I had a tampon in, I'd probably get toxic shock syndrome in all this traffic."

June laughed uneasily. "Same here. That's like, my biggest fear."

The wind continued to blow. The smoke was getting thicker. The fire was creeping ever closer: 1000 yards away, 500 yards away, 200 yards. June's heart was racing.

"Fuck!" Logan said. "Why aren't we moving?"

"We need to go, June!" Beatrice said.

"Go? Go where? There's nowhere *to* go, where do you want me to go?" June gestured wildly to the bumper-to-bumper pileup in front of her, voice hitching.

"Guys, the fire's getting closer!" Selena exclaimed.

The smoke was becoming so thick, they couldn't see more than two cars ahead, or two cars behind. "Fuck, dude, what do we do?" June asked. She honked the horn a couple times, with no response.

Panic flooding her system, June put the car in park and took off her seatbelt. "Wait here, I'm gonna go see if I can talk to someone, or figure out what's going on."

A massive gust of wind hit her in the face when she opened the door, but June pushed forward and jogged ahead to the driver's seat of the car ahead of them. It was too dark to see inside, but she tapped on the window. When no one rolled it down, she pressed her face against the window only to find: there was no one inside. The car was abandoned.

A quick jog ahead revealed the same of the four cars in front. No wonder there was so much traffic. People had left their cars to escape on foot. Holy shit.

June ran back to their car. She opened her door and peaked her head in. “Everyone get out, we have to go!”

Logan began unbuckling her seatbelt. “Why? What happened—?”

“Holy shit, guys, look!” Selena pointed to their right, where only 20 feet away a massive sequoia tree was succumbing to flames, crumbling and tipping over at the top.

“We’ve got to go,” Logan said, voice deadly serious. “Now! Everyone get out! We have to run!”

With that, June turned off the car and took the keys out of the ignition. The wall of smoke was suffocating, and she lifted her shirt over her mouth and nose. “Selena, grab my backpack!” June said, as she went around the car to help Logan out.

In this state, Logan couldn’t run—she could barely walk more than a few feet. This was a nightmare. “I’m fine!” Logan claimed. “Help Beatrice.”

Luckily Beatrice was still quite spry and was able to jump out of the car. Everyone grabbed the backpacks they had packed, except for Logan, who couldn’t carry any more weight. Then they scrambled off the road and into the woods, jogging away from the burning bushes and trees.

The smoke was so thick June couldn’t see where any of the other people were heading, if there were more evacuees behind them running on foot, and she was too focused on her own group to care much about other people.

There were no trails, and these were thick woods. They were practically trampling on bushes and over logs, pine needles crunching under sneakers that weren't made for hiking. The heat from the fire was intense—June didn't need any more incentive to keep moving.

June forced herself to slow down. She stayed beside Logan, who was holding her stomach and struggling to step over a boulder lodged between two oak trees. “You're okay, you're okay, come on,” June said encouragingly, though her voice was croaky in this air.

Selena was leading the group, coughing thinly, and Beatrice followed close behind.

“Which direction?” Beatrice called.

Selena had her phone out in front of her. “I'm trying—I'm trying to get a map.” She broke out in coughs. “But my phone has no fucking connection.”

Logan and June checked their phones. The top corner read NO SERVICE. “Same here.”

“Just keep getting away from the fire. Then we'll figure it out,” Logan said.

The wind only continued to blow, and the fire was spreading with a speed June didn't know was possible. It was practically on their heels, swallowing up the dry leaves like a starving child.

They moved along in a strange half-jog-half-walk, tripping over bushes and gopher holes all the while. A thorny bush managed to scratch June even through her pajama pants, but she barely noticed it.

Beatrice and Logan were falling behind, and June tried to stay with them even as all of her instincts told her to run as fast as she could. They kept having to change directions, as gusts of wind brought flames whipping unto trees and brush from behind, then the right, then the left.

The fire was gaining on them, fast. June was looking behind her, urging Logan forward, when a flaming tree right in front of her cracked and topped over her, very nearly crushing her.

June flung out an arm in front of her to stop herself, and her left forearm was just close enough to be singed by the heat. She pulled her arm back fast, before any serious burn could occur, but it still stung.

“Ow! Shit, shit, go back!” June yelled, and they all scrambled back, moving around the tree to escape the glowing mass.

June’s heart was racing, and tears streamed from her eyes from the smoke and panic.

“Come on, just keep moving!” Selena called, and then erupted in a coughing fit.

“Oh, my knee!” Beatrice yelped, holding her right knee with her hand.

Selena ran her side. “What happened?”

“Did it pop? Is it throbbing, or burning?” Logan asked.

“Not the best time for a checkup!” June hissed.

“I’m fine, I’m fine, let’s go!” Beatrice said, waving an arm and limping on.

They broke into an all-out run, June helping Logan with a steadying arm and Beatrice supported by Selena. Her backpack jolted awkwardly as she ran, something inside hitting her shoulder blades painfully. June had never been this terrified in her life. She had never expected to be in a position where she was literally in danger of burning alive. Where did it all go so wrong?

Waves of heat emanated from the flames, bright and blinding behind them, a burst of light surrounded by dark smoke. They jumped across some sort of dried-up river bed, and wove around trees, finally gaining some ground between them and the front line. June had always been cautious out in the wilderness—she was scared of snakes, and poison oak, and bugs. But those were the last things on her mind now, and she expected any creatures she might have encountered had bigger things to worry about, too.

June was focused on Logan and looking behind her to check on Beatrice and Selena when she took a step, only to find no solid ground below her foot.

“Look out!” Beatrice called, but it was too late.

June stumbled and fell, Logan coming down with her, into a strange ditch, about five feet down, landing hard in some scratchy bushes. Her forearm burned as it dragged along course leaves, but it was Logan who was really groaning in pain. She had fallen onto her side, and was slowly getting back up, holding her stomach.

“Logan? Oh my God, are you okay?” She was by her side in a moment, helping Logan get to her feet. Beatrice and Selena were carefully making their way down to them, stepping gingerly on rocks stuck into the wall of the ditch.

“Yeah, yeah,” Logan said, eyebrows scrunched together. Everyone was gasping for breath.

They were far from some flames now, at least, and the wind had subsided a little. They weren’t in any active danger, not for the moment.

“Let’s all just take a second,” June suggested. “We need to get our bearings.” She checked herself over; her arms were full of scratches, and her left arm had an angry red mark from wrist to elbow, but no broken skin. It stung like a sunburn—noticeable, but not unbearable. She was lucky. It could’ve been a lot worse.

“Logan? Is the baby okay?” Selena asked.

Logan shrugged. “I’m definitely not supposed to be running. But I just fell on my hips, not my stomach, so I should be okay? I don’t really know,” she said. “Are you guys okay? Bea, how’s your knee?”

“It’s fine,” Beatrice said. “I twisted it, I think, but that can be a problem for another day.”

“Is your arm alright?” Logan asked, noticing June inspecting it.

“I think so. I just had a close call.”

Logan took June’s arm so she could look at it. “Looks like a first-degree burn. Does it hurt a lot?”

June chewed on her lip. “Yeah,” she said. It didn’t hurt as bad as burns she had gotten from curling irons or cooking, but it was a large spot on her arm, and impossible to ignore. “I’m trying not to think about it.”

Selena frowned and rubbed June’s shoulder affectionately.

“Okay, so, we need to get out of here,” Beatrice said.

“I’m calling 911,” Selena said, putting her phone on speaker. The call didn’t connect.

“There’s literally no service out here,” Logan said. “It’s no use.”

Panic was creeping into June’s chest. Sweat dripped down her back, and her shirt clung to her skin. “We either need to find some firefighters, or get into town,” she said. “Should we go back to the road?”

“Maybe? Unless it’s all been taken over by fire now,” Selena said. Her voice was choked, raspy.

“Guys... which direction is the road?” Logan asked, and they all froze.

To their left: a massive oak tree. To the right: a 5-foot cliff of dirt and rocks, and beyond that, the forest fire. All around: open woods.

June’s blood ran cold, and she took a shuddering breath. “Where even are we?” she whispered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

April

June sat in the passenger seat while Selena drove them to Griffith Park. Selena's stitches had been removed, and now a thin red line surrounded by some discolored skin was healing on her forehead. They hadn't been able to meet up again until now, what with conflicting work schedules and getting in touch with Beatrice. But they were finally able to find a day they were all free, and Beatrice had insisted they picnic in the park. It was chilly outside, but the sun kept peeking out from behind the clouds, so it seemed as good a day as ever for some fresh air. Assuming Beatrice wasn't harboring resentment for June abandoning everyone after the fire, today could almost be like old times. Almost.

There was only one way to find out.

Selena sung along to a Phoebe Bridgers song in the car. June tried not to stare, but God she was beautiful, and her voice was angelic. Just being around Selena put June at ease; she was starting to feel like herself again, a little bit at a time.

"You know, I read somewhere that scientists theorize that if the earth were to ever stop spinning, something with gravity would make the moon get a little bit closer to us, and basically help the earth start spinning again," June said.

Selena stopped singing. "Huh, that's random."

"Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking about it. Not sure if it's true, though."

“Hopefully it never stops spinning,” Selena said.

“Hopefully the moon always stays close,” June said.

They returned to singing, this time to a Hozier song that June also knew. Her voice was nowhere near as good as Selena’s, but now that she thought about it, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d sang. It was fun.

When they arrived at Griffith Park it only took a few minutes to find parking along the street. June followed Selena to some sort of picnic area a little way off the road, tucked away under sycamore trees and between mountains. Around them were hiking trails that led to the Griffith Observatory, and various groups of distance runners, fitness influencers, and boy scout troops walked past them to begin hikes.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been here before,” June mused. “It’s so pretty.”

“Right?” Selena said. “We should go to the zoo one day. And the Observatory. It’s classic LA stuff.”

Selena’s phone started vibrating in her pocket.

“Oh, hang on, it’s Bea,” Selena said. They talked on the phone for a moment until Beatrice was able to figure out where they were. Then she rounded around a tree and made eye contact with them, and a smile lit up her face. June couldn’t help but smile back.

She looked the same as she always did: short and round, face wrinkled, dark brown eyes, curly grey-brown hair. But there was something a little bit off about her, and it took June a moment to realize she had never seen Beatrice wearing such a muted outfit. Back in Northern California, she wore long flowy pants, loose shirts and patterned scarves. She was always in bright colors, with a little too much jewelry and perfectly painted nails. Today, though, she wore

simple blue skinny jeans and a grey sweater. The only pop of color was the red cloth grocery bag she carried.

“Selena, hi!” Beatrice said, going in to hug Selena first, and then turning to June. “Oh, it’s been so long,” she smiled. “Come here.”

“Hi, Beatrice,” June said shyly, before being pulled into a warm hug that she hadn’t realized she’d been missing until now. Beatrice smelt like cinnamon and vanilla, and her arms felt like home. When they pulled away, her hoop earring got caught in June’s hair.

Beatrice took a step back so she could study June. “How are you doing, dear?”

June scratched the back of her head. “Well...”

Beatrice nodded, humming.

“Here, we grabbed this table,” Selena said, pointing to the wooden picnic table they’d placed their stuff on. “You can put your bag down.”

They’d all brought snacks and various items for the picnic; Selena took out a Bluetooth speaker and played some mellow songs in the background. Beatrice presented a bottle of red wine and plastic cups. When they sat down tucked between two large trees, it was like they were the only three people in the world, except for the car alarm sounding off in the distance.

They would have been an interesting trio if anyone walked by: two girls in their twenties hanging out with a 56-year-old. June doubted many other girls her age could say one of their closest friends was a post-menopausal woman, but June had never found it odd until now. June supposed one could think Beatrice was her mom, but June had had enough pseudo-mothers from her time in the foster care system, and Beatrice was never like that. She was something between a mentor and an aunt and a friend, and June had nearly thrown that all away by abandoning her for months. What kind of person does that?

Beatrice got a cell phone when they moved to LA, and had gotten June's phone number from Selena, but June stopped responding to her right around the time she ghosted everyone else. The last voicemail Beatrice left was about a month after the fire, asking June to come with her back to North Star Road to see if there was anything left of the house. She had sounded choked and lifeless in the recording. June deleted it after only listening once. June cringed now as she thought about all the times Beatrice tried to call her, and June had never even saved her number.

June wasn't quite sure how to act around her now. Should she apologize? Pretend nothing happened? They were both different now, it was obvious. The more June studied Beatrice, the more she noticed how her voice fell flat, and her mannerisms were subdued. She seemed to have aged years in the last 6 months, and June couldn't help but feel like she had something to do with that.

"So, Bea, how are things with Joe?" Selena asked, grinning cheekily.

Beatrice blushed and waved a hand. "Things are good. He's my roommate."

"And they were roommates!" Selena quoted, not that Beatrice would understand the reference. "That's not suspicious at all," she giggled.

Beatrice huffed and crossed her arms. June tried not to think about the fact that, at one time, she and Selena had been roommates. Euphemism or not.

"How did you meet Joe, anyway?" June asked.

"We actually go way back," Beatrice said. "I met him in... what, 1999? I was in LA for a psychic conference, and he was in law school. We met at a club, and well, you know," Beatrice raised her eyebrows.

"Ooh!" Selena exclaimed.

"Ew, gross! I don't want to know!" June said, but she was laughing.

“You asked! After that, we kind of dated for a while, but I was living up North, so it didn’t work out. Still, we kept in touch, and met up every once in a while.”

“Wait, that’s so cute,” Selena said. “It’s like *Brokeback Mountain* for straight people.”

“Doesn’t *Brokeback Mountain* end tragically?” June pointed out.

“Well, it wouldn’t have if they were straight people.”

“Fair enough.”

“So, are you guys, like, official now?” Selena asked.

Beatrice shrugged. “We don’t really do labels.”

“But you share a bed?” June asked.

Selena burst out laughing, and Beatrice nodded knowingly.

“He’s a lawyer now, right?” June asked.

“Yep, he works for an environmental organization. They don’t pay for shit, but it’s his passion. He’s working on getting justice in sacrifice zones— lower-income communities more likely to be harmed by pollution and stuff.”

Selena scoffed. “Like my hometown.”

June leaned in, resting her elbows on the table. “If I, say, had information on a potential pollution cover-up... would that help him?”

Beatrice was taken aback. “Yeah, I’m sure it would. How...?”

June explained everything she had found at their new job. She shared the pictures she had of the data, and Beatrice immediately sent them to Joe. It was a relief, June found, to finally get the information to someone who could actually do something about it. Or maybe it was the relief to be with her friends, with people who cared.

The sun was getting closer to the mountains, and the temperature dropped a few degrees, but June didn't mind. They drank their wine and munched on the Takis and popcorn Selena brought.

"I hope we don't attract any animals," Selena said, looking in the bushes around them. Dusk was usually when coyotes liked to make themselves known. A twinge of worry spread through June's stomach.

Beatrice nodded, although she didn't seem particularly scared. "I heard there was a mountain lion that lived here."

June's eyes widened. "What?" She asked, practically standing up out of her seat.

Selena put a hand on her arm, pushing June back down on the bench. "No there's not, don't worry!" She laughed, rubbing June's arm in comfort. "Scientists track the mountain lions around here, and there used to be one called P-22 in Griffith Park. He was kind of an icon in LA. But he died a couple years ago."

Relief washed over June. She hoped she never saw a mountain lion again.

Beatrice frowned. "I heard they're super endangered. What happened to him?"

"I think he was hit by a car or something? They had to euthanize him."

"Poor guy," Beatrice said. It was sad, June thought. As much as mountain lions scared her, they didn't deserve to die. She nodded solemnly.

"Anyways, that reminds me." Beatrice bent over to dig through her bag. "I meant to give you this."

She pulled out a small box and handed it to June. It took only a moment for her to register what it was: her personal deck of Tarot cards, recovered from the house. She knew they were hers because they were water-color style, from a small shop in El Dorado hills.

When June first began learning from Beatrice, it was apparent that she needed her own deck to do Tarot readings, but Beatrice had informed her of a tradition: you don't buy your own cards, but rather have them gifted to you. She had expected Beatrice to buy her the first deck, but was surprised when Logan, a week later, came back from one of her jaunts in town to give the cards to June. As much as Logan was a non-believer, she cared about what June wanted. And that was all that mattered.

June blinked back tears. "Oh my... thank you," she said. "How did they—they didn't burn?"

Beatrice fiddled with a string on her sweater's sleeve. "No, actually. It was the weirdest thing. Everything in the area was destroyed—everyone's houses were nothing but chimneys, and the forest was all black and skeletal. The main part of the house was almost completely gone, all the way to the foundation. But—you won't believe this—the Spirit room was still partly intact. Some things inside survived."

June's jaw dropped. She instinctually turned to tell Logan, to use it as proof that there was a spiritual power out there—but of course Logan wasn't with them.

"Look, I have pictures," Beatrice said. On her phone, she showed a photo of the exterior of the Spirit room: two of the walls were burned and crumbling, and the other two were streaked with black marks, but the inside still popped with color from the surviving items. It gave June the chills.

"That is—that's a miracle. Oh my God," Selena said.

"The universe is mysterious." Beatrice said nonchalantly.

June turned the deck of cards over in her hands. “That’s got to be a sign,” she said. “Have you given your clients your new phone number? Are you planning on setting up a new shop, or going back to NorCal?”

Beatrice sighed, shoulders slumping. “I haven’t done any readings, actually,” she said. “I can’t—I can’t connect to any energies here. I don’t feel anything here.”

“What? But that’s—you’ve always been psychic,” Selena said, brow furrowed.

“I can’t, okay? I’ve tried. There’s no woods here, not really. A single mountain lion couldn’t even exist in this park.” Beatrice gestured to their surroundings, which paled in comparison to the dark, vivacious ecosystem that thrived back in the woods. “Maybe there’s a reason my parents lived in the forest. There’s a sort of magic there. At least, there used to be.”

“But—you have to try!” June said.

“Have you?” Beatrice snapped.

“Well, no, but—”

“It doesn’t matter, okay? It’s all ruined. It’s gone. I don’t care anymore.”

For someone that didn’t care, Beatrice sure was wiping her eyes a lot. June took a shuddering deep breath as tears sprung to her eyes, too.

Selena opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it. The silence was only broken by the sound of a breeze rattling the leaves around them. If June listened closely, she could hear people talking, and cars driving and honking on the freeways beyond the hills. She missed the quiet of their old house. She’d never noticed it until it was gone.

A new song played over the speaker Selena brought, breaking the spell that had fallen over them.

Selena cleared her throat. “Anyway,” she said. “Maybe you should do a reading.” She tapped the Tarot card box in June’s hands. “You could do me.”

June thought about it, biting the inside of her cheek. “I don’t think I can right now. Not without Logan here.”

Selena nodded. “I understand.” Another silence overcame the table as Beatrice poured herself another cup of wine, finishing off the bottle.

“How about... have you been able to see Logan?” Beatrice asked.

June crossed her arms over her chest. “No, they won’t let me. But I’m trying.”

“You are? Really?” Selena said.

June nodded.

“Is there—can we help at all?” Beatrice asked.

“No. This is something I have to do on my own,” June said. “I just need to get a consistent income, and my own place. Then I can get Logan back.”

“It’s okay to lean on us, you know,” Selena said, dark eyes boring deep into June’s soul. It made her want to melt.

“You don’t have to do everything alone anymore,” Beatrice said, reaching a hand across the table to hold June’s.

Selena nodded in agreement and rested her head on June’s shoulder.

Here in the trees, with a nice meal in her stomach and surrounded by friends, June was beginning to think that might be true.

CHAPTER NINE

October

“This is really bad,” Logan said, helpfully. Her expression was grim, and eyes were watering, either from fear or from smoke exposure.

“We need to keep moving,” June said. While they were a decent amount away from the front lines, it was clear that this fire was fast and unpredictable. Her arm burned as a reminder of what would happen if they got too close again.

“Which direction?” Selena asked. She looked to Beatrice. “Can’t you like, chart the moon or stars or something?”

“It’s daytime,” Logan reminded, holding up her phone which read *7:11 am*.

“I can’t even see the sky!” Beatrice said.

Indeed, the smoke hung around them like a scratchy wool blanket over the atmosphere. June hadn’t realized it was day—that’s how dark the sky was.

Selena ran her hands through her hair and began clutching at it harshly. “This is a fucking nightmare. Oh my god,” her panicked breathing sounded only worse from the way her lungs rattled each breath she took.

June approached her and gently took her wrists in each of her hands, guiding them away from her hair. She hoped to calm her down, but she wasn’t sure how effective it was considering June’s hands were shaking, too. “It’s gonna be okay. We’ll figure this out. We can’t be too far

from the road, and there's plenty of houses and cabins tucked away around here. We'll find someone who can help us."

Selena took a deep breath and nodded. June wasn't sure what made them think she had any authority, but a calm determination settled among the entire group.

"Let's just take a second, regroup, and then keep going," Logan said.

They allowed themselves a moment to drink some water they had each packed in their evacuation bags (though not too much—June had no way of knowing how long they could be stuck out here, and figured she should probably ration her water a little). Logan had Selena retie her shoes for her, Beatrice stretched out her leg, still moving her knee a bit gingerly, and Selena used her inhaler again, to very little effect. Then, wordlessly, they all put on determined faces and agreed to walk ahead.

They helped each other climb out of the ditch they had fallen into and wandered in a direction perpendicular from where the fire was coming from.

They came across a large boulder, jagged and maybe 4 feet tall, and Selena climbed on top to look ahead.

"All I see are trees," Selena said.

Logan scoffed. "Nice," she said.

Selena cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hello!" She shouted. "Hello! Help! Can anyone hear us!"

Her voice reverberated through the trees. It set June's nerves alight and increased her heartrate more than it already was.

"Hello! Help! SOS! Help—"

Logan yanked Selena's arm, dragging her down from the rock. "Stop that," she said. "No one is out there. You're stressing out the baby." She placed a hand on her stomach, as if to prove it.

Selena rolled her eyes. "I think the baby is the comfiest one, at the moment."

June let out a half-laugh, then urged everyone along. They needed a distraction, or they would fall into panic again. As they walked, June tried to whistle, and act casual to keep spirits up.

"Have you decided a name for it yet?" Beatrice asked, gesturing to Logan's stomach.

"No, not really," Logan said elusively. "I have some ideas, though."

"You really aren't going to tell us the gender?" Selena asked. "You're due any day now."

"Nope." Logan reached out to the branch of a pine tree as they passed, grabbing a fistful of pine needles to fiddle with as they walked. "I want it to be a surprise. Plus, it annoys June, so."

June rolled her eyes, just as she nearly avoided rolling her ankle on a tree root. She heavily stepped over a bush with waxy green leaves. "Yeah, yeah. I don't even want to know," she said.

"Well, I do. You can at least whisper it to me, you know," Beatrice said.

"Nope. My lips are sealed."

"You're evil," Selena said, ducking under a branch and around a rock. "We're lost in the woods. We need it for morale."

"You're just gonna have to find morale elsewhere."

"All I know is that if the baby's a girl, you're naming her June," June said. "After the coolest, hottest, best sister to ever live."

"Yeah... absolutely not," Logan laughed.

“You are evil,” June echoed.

“You know, I have been thinking though, maybe I’ll name it after myself. Like Lorelai Gilmore.”

“Yeah, but do you really want your kid to turn out like Rory?” Selena asked.

“What’s wrong with Rory?” June asked. “I’ve only seen, like, two episodes.”

Beatrice gasped. “You never watched *Gilmore Girls*?”

June shrugged. “I tried. Too straight for me.”

“Well, I loved it,” Selena said. “Those are my emotional-support straight people. Though Rory really does suck, especially in later seasons.”

As they continued to carve a path through the woods, it became clear that there was a line they were following that had been cut out through the foliage, lined with rocks and pebbles and few bushes in the way. “Guys, look,” June said, as it became more distinct. “I think this is some sort of dried-up creek.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Selena said.

“I read somewhere that if you’re ever lost in the woods, you’re supposed to follow a stream, because it’s likely to lead to civilization,” June continued.

“Yeah, but this doesn’t have any water in it,” Beatrice pointed out.

“That’s not the point. If it had water in it at one point, it’s got to lead to some sort of landmark. Right?”

Beatrice didn’t seem convinced. “Well, it’s better than wandering aimlessly,” she said.

“Let’s just keep going,” Logan said. “The wind has stopped for now, but we have no clue how far we are from the fire.”

“At least we have a plan,” Selena agreed.

They continued to walk through the riverbed; it was easier than tramping through the bushes, too, although they did run the risk of tripping on rocks or slipping on pockets of sand. Eventually the river began to run slightly downhill, which June took as a good sign and made it easier for Logan and Beatrice to walk.

“Isn’t there supposed to be something about moss on trees?” Logan asked. “Like, the moss only grows on the west-facing side?”

“Or was it the east-facing?” June asked. “Does moss like the sun, or not?”

Selena pointed to a pine tree to their left, a huge one, with a trunk maybe 4 feet in diameter. “That one has moss growing on every side.”

“Damn,” Logan said.

They kept up a fast pace as they continued their hike, which was impressive, considering Logan’s condition.

“How are you doing, Lo?” June asked.

“I’m okay. My back and feet hurt, but can’t do much about that.”

June’s feet hurt too, but she figured she didn’t have room to complain. She should’ve worn athletic shoes, rather than the old converse getting dirtier by the minute. Her running shoes were probably burnt to ash, by now.

“Are you okay? How’s your arm?” Logan asked.

“Oh, just peachy,” June grimaced.

“Wait, guys, look,” Beatrice stopped and pointed to an area to their right, where there were solid gaps in the trees and bushes, showing exposed dirt in a neat line. “Does that look like a trail to you?”

June stepped over a thorny bush to reach it. The path was small, only allowing for a single-file line, but it did seem to continue on in front of them and behind. “I think it is!”

She grabbed Logan’s hand and helped her step onto the trail, and Selena and Beatrice also made their way over.

“That’s a good sign, right?” Selena asked. “It has to lead to something?”

Logan shrugged. “I think so. Though, it could be a deer path. Or some random trail that leads to nowhere.”

“Still, it’s better than our current plan,” Beatrice said.

“It’ll be easier to walk on, too,” June said.

It was a relief to at least feel like they were on a trail leading to somewhere. There were all kinds of hiking trails out here, official and unofficial, which gave June some hope that they might run into people or a sign of some sort. Although, there was also the possibility that this was just a trail made by animals, and they were only going deeper and deeper into the wilderness. Still, at least they were a safe distance from the fire—she couldn’t even see it anywhere in the distance, although their view was largely obstructed by trees.

The trail mostly stayed along the path of the riverbed, which June also took as a good sign, but eventually the river seemed to dissipate, until it was just the path surrounded by pine trees and wildlife.

As they walked, Beatrice took out a granola bar she had packed and shared it with Logan. June also had some snacks in her bag, but she wasn’t feeling very hungry in all her anxiety. Selena began to hum a little as she walked, “The Edge of Seventeen” seemingly still stuck in her head from their car ride. She broke out into a coughing fit before she could get to the chorus, but

Beatrice took up the tune herself, breaking up the quiet around them with her raspy melodic voice.

June didn't feel like this was a situation that warranted singing, but it was better than panicking, she supposed.

Everything seemed to be going well, until they hit a fork in the road. The trail split off into a Y, and the trees were too thick to see where each path headed.

"Well, shit," June said.

They all stopped at the fork, catching their breaths and staring at the two choices.

"They both head downhill, and both away from the fire," Logan mused.

"They both seem like solid trails," Selena continued.

"I wish there was a sign, or something," Beatrice said. "Don't you think if this was an official trail, there would be signs?"

They all sat with that, pondering what to do. June ran up ahead on both trails, confirming they split off into different directions, and continued onwards for as far as she could see. The smoke was as thick as ever, and wind rustled the trees aggressively, reminding them that they were on a time limit.

"Well, let's just choose one. There's not really any way to know, unless we go for it," Logan said.

"Eenie-meenie-minnie-moe?" Selena suggested.

"No, wait," Beatrice said. She grabbed June's shoulders, staring at her face to face. "This is a good intuition test, just like we've practiced."

"I really don't think this is a good time for witch lessons—" Logan started. She looked up to a mountain in the distance, which was still aglow with flickering orange.

“This is exactly when you need to trust the universe the most!” Beatrice countered.

June had practiced things like this, many times, as Beatrice’s apprentice. When they drove into town, oftentimes Beatrice told her to choose whether to go right or left at a stop sign; sometimes she had June predict what kind of pants the next person who walked in would be wearing when they sat in a coffee shop. As much as it could be seen as bullshit, Beatrice was surprisingly accurate at predicting things, and oftentimes used intuition to avoid sections of road that had heavy traffic or were blocked by a car crash. She had taught these skills to June, and June was improving, albeit slowly.

June shook out her shoulders and nodded.

“Remember what I told you,” Beatrice said. “Listen to the voice that is calm and sure—not the one trying to overpower that. You know which one is correct. Trust yourself.”

Logan huffed and leaned against a tree, waiting.

“I already know which path my intuition tells me to take. You try, and we’ll see if they align,” Beatrice continued.

June studied the two paths and took a deep breath, clearing her anxieties and worries from her mind. *The right. Go to the right.*

“This way,” June said, pointing to the path on the right. “I’m feeling this one.”

Beatrice broke into a smile and clapped her hands together. “That’s what I got, too! Now, we shall see.”

“Good enough for me,” Selena said. Logan just shook her head in exasperation.

Thus, they continued on their trail to who-knows-where, wheezing from smoke and dragging their feet. Almost immediately, June was overcome with doubt. What if she was

wrong? What if they never found civilization? What if the fire caught up to them? What if she just doomed them all?

The universe seemed to confirm her fears when, amongst some of the thickest foliage they'd been in yet, there was some rustling in a bush to their left. Everyone froze and turned to face the noise.

"What was —"

"Did you guys see that?"

"I think that's —"

"A mountain lion," June confirmed, heart plummeting into her stomach.

CHAPTER TEN

May

It was after work one day, while June was exiting the building to head for the bus stop, when she was approached by a man in a suit.

“June Moore?” The man asked, walking in step with her.

Being approached by any man in the street was usually June’s worst nightmare, not to mention one that knew her full name. Her pulse immediately started racing. “Uh, what?”

“My name is Stephen Clark. I’m a lawyer for your employer,” he said, handing her a business card, as if as proof. His voice and casual demeanor weren’t threatening, but the whole situation was still alarming.

“Oh? I just left, my shift is over, but—”

“I know, I’m just here to talk to you.” He was being purposefully intimidating, June could tell, and the dramatics of it all would have been laughable if this wasn’t really happening, in June’s real life.

“Okay?”

“I know you’ve been working with Joe Kumar, and his organization. They’ve contacted the EPA, and want to do an audit of our emissions data,” Stephen said. They rounded the corner and headed towards the abandoned bus stop.

June's heart did a flip. "Look, I—I'm not doing anything wrong. You can't fire me, that's against the law—" June wished the bus would get here already, so she could run from this situation.

"Woah, woah, I never said anything about firing." He pulled an envelope out of a pocket inside his coat. "I'm just here to hand you this."

June took the letter in her hand. "What is it?"

"Our company is willing to pay you a large sum of money, if you agree to sign a statement that you were wrong, and any incorrect data you found was purely coincidental. No one ever meant to falsify anything—sometimes sensors glitch, or mistakes are made." Stephen said it so calmly, like he did this every day. Maybe he did.

Mistakes? From what June saw, multiple people willingly changed the numbers. "You're trying to pay me off?" She scoffed.

Stephen shrugged. "Just open the envelope. Read everything inside. It's a large amount of money." And with that, he walked away.

June was left there, waiting for the bus, blinking in shock at the envelope in her hands. What an unexpected end to her workday.

She waited until she was on the bus, sitting snug against a window, to open the envelope, read the letter, and see how much money they were offering her.

She knew she shouldn't take it, but... Pretty much all her current problems could be solved with a large sum of money. She could get her own apartment, pay off her debts, get Logan. She could get her life on track.

If the EPA audited the oil field, they would find the real pollution numbers anyway and would force the company to follow the law. So, really, they only needed June to prove that there was purposeful wrongdoing.

But that was wrong. June hated companies that got away with lying, got away with misconduct, simply because they had money to throw around. Was a negligent corporation not the reason their cottage burned down, not the reason so many died? Not the reason Logan wasn't with her today?

...Still, it was a lot of money. With this money, she could get a car, so she wouldn't have to take the bus everywhere. She could finally buy some shoes that didn't have holes in them. She could buy things for Logan, get a room set up, not lose any more time.

June knew what the right thing to do was, but she also wasn't naïve about world. She shoved the letter back in the envelope and put it in her bag. She didn't have to decide right now. She would just take a little time to think about it. That's all.

A week later, June was sitting in Selena's passenger seat, parked outside her house. "Should I flip my septum up? Or keep it down?" June asked, fiddling with her septum piercing in her nose in the rear-view mirror.

The neighborhood around them was old, and a bit run down, though Selena's house was well-kept. It was small, maybe only 2-bedrooms, painted yellow with a non-attached garage in the back and an iron gate in front. All the houses in this neighborhood had bars over their windows.

Selena hummed thoughtfully and grabbed either side of June's face to study it. Their faces were so close, June could feel her warm breath on her cheeks. "Well, my parents once said

I'm not allowed to get a septum because it makes me look like a vaca, so do with that what you will," Selena said.

June snorted. "Up it is," she said, and flipped the U-shaped piercing so it was hidden inside her nose. "I can't believe they invited us over. Don't they hate us for stealing their daughter and turning her into a sinner?" June asked, only half-joking. After Selena had mentioned that Beatrice's boyfriend was trying to open up a lawsuit against June's employers, they had been more willing to meet June and Beatrice. They all had been invited over for dinner, and Selena took this as an opportunity to finally bridge the gap between her life before the fire and her current one.

"Well, yes. But I convinced them to at least meet you. After all, you guys did give me a free home for a year. Plus, they're really interested in the lawsuit. They've been complaining about the oil fields for years, and no one's listened."

"They have?" June asked.

"Oh, yeah," Selena said. "Everyone in this neighborhood knows how bad the air is. My parents think it's why I have such bad asthma. They think we deserve, like, financial compensation or something."

June raised her eyebrows. "Well, Joe said they would need plaintiffs, and stuff, if this thing does go to court. So."

Joe and Beatrice pulled up to the curb to park.

"Oh look, they're here," Selena said. They both climbed out of the car, and June thanked Selena for the ride.

Joe Kumar was a kind looking man, tall and round with brown skin and black hair. He smiled at June and Selena as he got out of the car, wearing a simple button-down shirt. They had

only met once before, but they had a long email thread going as June discreetly sent him more company data from her job and explained what she knew.

Being a whistleblower was scary, she decided. Joe had assured her that she was protected from retaliation for reporting environmental concerns, but June still hadn't told anyone it was her, and no one had asked. However, her boss hadn't assigned her any tasks that had to do with emissions data recently, even though they never had a discussion about it. If the case went to court, June figured she would have to come forward to her coworkers, but until then, it was just the government performing a data audit and site inspection. June really didn't understand how all the legal stuff would play out from there. Hopefully she could find a new job before anything got too crazy.

She wouldn't have to work now, if only she accepted their offer...

She shouldn't worry about that right now.

Beatrice climbed out of the driver's seat of her car, wearing a black cardigan and her hair in a frizzy bun. "Hello!" She greeted warmly. "Looks like we got here right on time. Traffic was a bitch." She covered a hand over her mouth. "Oop! Probably shouldn't say that. I'll be on my best behavior for your parents, don't worry."

Everybody laughed, but Selena's expression was strained, cringing a little. She was worried about this dinner. That made two of them. June had wanted to meet Selena's parents for so long, had dreamed of winning them over with her charm and changing their minds about queer people, but she knew she wasn't her best self these days, even if she was doing a little better lately. Yeah, she was worried.

They approached the door and Selena unlocked it, shouting as she let everyone in, "Hey! We're all here!"

They entered a kitchen-dining room area, where a wooden table was already set with plates, silverware, and napkins. Their table only had four chairs, so two plastic fold-out chairs were added on the corners to accommodate everyone. It reminded June of the Thanksgivings she and Logan used to have with a foster family they stayed with in the Inland Empire for a few years. She shoved the memory aside. She had to focus.

A portly woman with Selena's tanned skin and big eyes entered the room, wiping her hands on her jeans. "Hello, welcome!" she said, with a slight Spanish accent. She wore a magenta button-down blouse and her salt-and-pepper hair in a claw clip. "We're almost done cooking, my husband's outside barbequing."

"Mrs. Alvarado! Nice to meet you," June said, offering her best smile.

"This is June," Selena said, "And that's Beatrice and Joe."

"Nice to meet you," Beatrice said.

"It's so nice of you to have us over," Joe added.

"What's for dinner?" Beatrice asked. "It smells amazing."

"My dad's making carne asada, and my mom has some veggies and rice," Selena said.

"None of you are vegan, or anything, right?"

When they all assured her they weren't, she relaxed. "Okay, good. LA hasn't corrupted your souls too much yet," she joked.

"Cuidado! Hot food, coming through!" In through a back door entered Mr. Alvarado, carrying a tray of sizzling meat, dancing around Mrs. Alvarado working at the counter. The smell of food got June's mouth watering.

The man was tall and square, with dark hair and wrinkles etched into his face. Selena introduced him to everyone, and he was kind to the guests as they all piled food onto their plates

and sat down, but June could tell there was an air of strictness about him, as well as his wife. They were no-nonsense people, practical people. Or maybe June was just projecting her own presumptions onto them, based on what Selena had told her about her stern, unaccepting upbringing.

She felt her assumptions were validated when Mrs. Alvarado insisted they all join hands to ‘say a few words’ before they ate. Selena gave an apologetic smile to the guests, but everyone complied politely, taking each other’s hands and closing their eyes as Mr. Alvarado murmured a pretty non-denominational prayer of thanks. When June impatiently cracked one of her eyes open, she made direct eye contact with Beatrice, whose eyes were wide open.

They finally ate their dinner. It was delicious.

“Is your brother home?” June asked, in between shoveling food into her mouth at the table.

“No, he’s at a soccer tournament in San Diego this weekend,” Selena said.

“He’s the starting forward on his varsity team,” Mrs. Alvarado added, head held high.

“That’s great,” Joe smiled.

“He’s going to college soon, too. He just committed to UC Santa Cruz,” Mr. Alvarado added.

Selena rested her head heavily on hand with her elbow on the table, staring down at her food. “Yeah, he’s such a little star,” she grumbled.

June, sitting beside Selena, knocked her knee with hers under the table, earning a small smile from her.

“Well, I just hope he sticks to his classes,” Mrs. Alvarado said pointedly, looking at Selena. “As long as he studies, and doesn’t waste time going to, say, WeHo, hanging out with the wrong crowd...”

Beatrice shot June a look. Were they the wrong crowd she was referring to?

“Yeah, well, maybe it’ll be easier for him to study since he’s not depressed—” Selena muttered.

“Well, maybe if he gets enough sleep and exercise and stays off his phone, he won’t be,” her mother retorted, tone clipped.

Beatrice laughed uneasily, trying to clear the tension. “Wow, this food is incredible.”

Everyone agreed, nodding. Joe, the poor guy with no stake in this argument, looked a little freaked out. He shoveled more vegetables into his mouth.

“So, what do you guys do for a living?” June asked, feeling a need to change the conversation.

“I do maintenance and repairs for LADWP,” Mr. Alvarado said.

“And I work for an events company, you know, doing weddings, and quinces...” Mrs. Alvarado said, waving a hand as she trailed off.

“Wow, that sounds very cool! I’ve always been impressed by how much work goes into big events like that,” Beatrice said.

“Yes, people don’t always recognize it,” Mrs. Alvarado beamed.

“Selena told us you’re a... fortune teller?” Mr. Alvarado asked, spitting the word as if it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Beatrice straightened her back. “Yes, I come from a long line of psychics,” she said, almost accusatorily. “Although, I’ve stopped practicing since the fire.”

A heaviness hung in the room. “I am sorry to hear you lost your home,” Mrs. Alvarado said.

“Sometimes things like that are signs from God,” Mr. Alvarado said. “Putting you on the right path.” Was that supposed to be comforting?

“Dad!” Selena sputtered. “That’s—people died!”

The food June had been chewing suddenly tasted like ash in her mouth. Her ears started ringing.

“Where’s your restroom?” she murmured numbly, and followed their directions down the hall, so she could stare in the mirror and take a few deep breaths. It was fine. Everything was fine.

When she returned to the table, conversation had resumed. Selena rubbed her knee comfortingly underneath the table.

“How long have you lived in this neighborhood?” Joe asked.

Mr. Alvarado looked to his wife. “How long was it...? Twenty—twenty-three years?”

“Yeah, that sounds right. We moved in a couple years before we had Selena.”

“Wow, so you really have lived here your whole life,” June said.

Selena shrugged. In the doorway to their left, there were lines drawn on the frame, marking the heights Selena and her brother had been each year as they grew up. June wished she could’ve had a childhood like that, staying in one home her entire life. The only thing that had ever been her constant was Logan, and now...

“When did you start to notice the pollution in the air?” Joe asked.

“Well, it’s always been here,” Mrs. Alvarado explained. “When we moved in, we knew that’s why it was so cheap—it’s so close to oil fields, and there used to be even more in the past.

Our neighbors warned us, and so many kids in Selena's elementary school had breathing issues... it's always just been a given. People knew there were high pollution rates, but everyone always told us there was nothing we could do, since they were within legal limits."

"But they're not," Mr. Alvarado snapped, clenching his fist. "That damn company's been lying, poisoning our kids."

Joe nodded gravely. "We don't know yet how long the fraud has been occurring yet, but we've reported them to the government. Hopefully this will force them to regulate their emissions better. We can probably get you guys a hefty settlement fund, too. Do you know more people who'd be willing to join the lawsuit? We'll want as many people as we can get."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Alvarado said. "I can give you a list of names. There's lots of people that will want to get money from this."

Joe nodded. "Good. They deserve it."

"It's a good thing June was able to get the data, huh?" Selena said.

"Yes, good," Mr. Alvarado said. "Though, how you could decide to work for that evil company in the first place..." He shook his head.

June bit her lip. "It was the only job I could get," she admitted. "I'm gonna leave, as soon as I'm able."

After that, dinner went on without too much of a hitch. Selena's parents seemed to like Joe, especially since he was working with them to help their community, but they continued to be cold and awkward to Beatrice and June. Poor Selena was stuck in the middle, trying to keep the conversations civil and everyone in line.

After dinner, everyone went to the living room to sit on the couch and eat strawberry tamales Selena had made for dessert. Instead of joining, June followed Mrs. Alvarado into the

kitchen and helped her wash and dry the dishes. They worked in silence for a little bit, listening to the conversation in the kitchen for a while, until June finally spoke up.

“Look, Mrs. Alvarado,” she said stiffly. “I am sorry about what happened last year. We never meant to keep Selena from coming home, or to get in the way of you and your daughter. We—I care about Selena. She was going through a hard time and needed to get away. We only wanted to help her.”

Mrs. Alvarado continued drying a dish with a towel, refusing to look at June as she mulled over her words. Finally, she sighed and put the dish on the counter. “I—I’m glad Selena found you guys,” she said, although the words sounded pained coming from her mouth. “I could never understand her. Even now. I know she doesn’t like boys, and I know she swings from energetic and productive to tired and depressed with no warning. All I ever wanted was a good life for her. She was going to UCLA, and had such a bright future... I guess I didn’t want to listen to her when she told me she was having problems. That’s on me.”

June stared at her, unsure how to respond. She seemed so tired all of a sudden, so worn out.

“As much as I don’t approve of the way she’s deciding to live her life... You can do something for her that I’ve never been able to do. You make her happy.”

June’s heart was fluttering. “I—Selena’s a good person, and a smart girl. She wants to go back to college. I promise I would never... take her away from that. She still has a bright future.”

Mrs. Alvarado nodded. “You’re more mature than I imagined.”

June had been called a lot of things in her life, but mature had never been one of them. That had always been Logan. Maybe LA had changed her, after all.

“You’re a good person, too,” Mrs. Alvarado said. “I wish you the best.”

June nodded. The dishes were finished, so she rejoined everyone in the living room. She sat beside Selena on the couch, less worried about how close they were. Everything was going to be okay.

June had planned to tell Selena about the money the lawyer had offered her when they were alone again in Selena's car to drive June home. The letter felt like it was burning a hole in her brain, and she needed to talk about it to someone.

Between songs on the stereo, June opened her mouth to confess, but the words died on her tongue. She knew how it would sound: choosing money over justice. Selena would never look at her the same if she knew June was even considering.

June could barely look at herself the same.

No, she couldn't tell anyone about it. Not until she knew for sure what she was going to do about it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

October

June's heart hammered in her chest, and her veins were burning with adrenaline. The mountain lion stared at the four of them from in the trees, tan and feline with muscles rippling with strength beneath its thick coat. June wracked her mind for what she knew about mountain lions.

"What do we do?" Selena asked, voice barely a whisper.

Everyone was frozen, and it seemed even the wind had stopped in fear of the mountain lion.

"We're supposed to—like, get big, right? And yell at it?" Logan responded.

"No!" June said, never taking her eyes off the animal, trying to keep her tone as level as possible. "It's not like a bear. I think—I think we're supposed to make eye contact. We have to intimidate it."

June risked a step forward, then another. The lion's attention was on her—good. "I'm going to distract it." Between Logan's pregnancy, Beatrice's age, and Selena's asthma, none of them were in very good shape if they had to fend off a mountain lion. As much as it made her nauseous to think about, it was up to June. "You guys go on ahead without me. I'll catch up to you."

“What?” Logan hissed, and the mountain lion snorted, turning its attention to her. She whimpered gutturally.

June took another step toward the mountain lion, standing up as straight and defiantly as she could. “It’s gonna be okay. Trust me.”

Glancing to the side, she could tell that no one wanted her to make a move, but everyone was too terrified, too uncertain, to make a sudden movement.

June took a few steps to the side, getting off the trail they were following and back into the tree line. The mountain lion took the bait, shifting its attention to June and away from her companions. “Don’t run—it’ll think you’re prey,” she said, keeping her tone calm. “Just walk away. Get out of its sight.”

“June, no—” Beatrice protested, voice cracking. She took a step in her direction and the mountain lion turned to look at her, baring its teeth. Beatrice turned pale.

“Just go!” The lion’s attention was back on June. She took more steps backwards, away from her friends, and the mountain lion followed her. In the corner of her eyes, she saw her family hesitate, silently arguing with pointed looks, before reluctantly walking forward on the trail. Soon, they were out of sight.

June leveled her gaze on the animal, racking her brain for what to do. She had read about this somewhere, at some point. But she couldn’t decide if throwing things at a mountain lion was a first resort or a last resort. The only thing she could remember about the US Parks Service article she had read was the worst outcome: fighting back tooth and nail.

The mountain lion bared its teeth: yellow, big, and sharp. Its long claws scratched against the ground. It wanted nothing more than to rip her stomach open.

Every muscle in June's body was clenched in fear. She wanted to throw up, but survival instincts kept her from any sudden movements. She took another step backward. The lion followed. She stepped to the side, and it mirrored her again. It refused to give up on hunting her.

Distantly, she wondered if being on her period made her more tantalizing; could it smell her blood? When she was younger, she went to the beach once with friends on her period, and they joked about it the entire time, calling her shark bait. She thought it was funny, then. Not so much now.

She needed to make it scared. She couldn't remember if yelling at it was a good idea or a bad idea, so instead she opted for appearing bigger. She reached her arms out to the side and slowly swept them up above her head. She spread her fingers apart. Hopefully the lion couldn't see how much she was shaking. She coughed a couple times, as if her lungs were reminding her about the smoky wildfire still raging around them. June was fighting a war on all fronts.

The mountain lion's gaze shifted up to her arms, and it narrowed its eyes. She could see it debating its options. Oddly, the longer June stared into the animal's eyes, the more she seemed to understand it. It was just as scared as she was, but it also knew its own power. It was a battle of wills now—if she backed down it would attack her, but it thought the same of her. They were at a standstill.

June's arms were losing feeling above her head. She slowly swept her arms up and down, and the mountain lion turned its head ever so slightly in curiosity.

Maybe if June continued to back away, it would know that she didn't want to hurt it. She took more steps backward, never losing eye contact. She was heading back in the direction they had come from, but the fire was the last thing on her mind now. Every step she took, the mountain lion closed the distance. She kept walking backwards, further and further, but it

followed her the entire way. Her breathing was picking up. This was a disaster. She was going to die here, mauled by a mountain lion. Her mind pictured the worst—her jugular pierced by its strong jaw, her torso ripped open by its claws, her organs falling out into the dirt.

She hoped everyone else was far enough away by now. Think positive. Maybe if the mountain lion ate June, it would be too full to go after the rest of them.

With how loud her heart was hammering, June was sure the animal could hear its every beat. Her blood was roaring through her ears. All she could do was continue to back away. She'd seen a video of this happen to someone on YouTube once, maybe. She'd thought the video had been faked.

Deeper and deeper into the woods she walked, taking it one step at a time. The mountain lion only continued her stalk her.

June stumbled over a tree root, only momentarily, and the mountain lion crouched, looking almost ready to leap at her. June immediately threw her hands up higher and leveled her gaze, trying to radiate fury and intimidation. The lion backed down, ever so slightly. It was not comforting in the slightest.

This was it. She was going to die. She was going to die.

For a large part of her life, June had never really contemplated death, never fully grasped its permanence or wrapped her head around its inevitability. She lived her life like she was invincible. While she and Logan lived their whole lives in foster care, they weren't orphans—June's mom was in prison, and her dad had flown the coop long before she could ever meet him. She wasn't raised to believe in an afterlife, and no one she truly loved had ever died before.

Today she had already faced death multiple times, escaping the clutches of fire only narrowly. Now, standing here having a staring contest with death itself, she realized how close it had always been. She had always been just one misstep away from its clutches.

She didn't want to die. She was scared. She didn't know anyone who would greet her on the other side. She didn't even know if there was another side. Tears prickled at her eyes, and her chest shuddered.

She continued holding her arms out high and taking steady steps backward. Why hadn't the mountain lion attacked by now? Why was it toying with her like this?

Her eyes and throat burned—from fear? No. Distantly, June realized she was breathing in smoke. It was thick, and choking, like it had been earlier. Sweat was dripping down her back, and her entire body felt hot—was it the adrenaline?

The mountain lion's confidence wavered—she could see it in the way its face softened, in the way one of its paws lifted from the ground unsteadily. Its ears twitched, shoulders rolled back.

June forced herself to focus on sounds beyond the blood roaring in her ears. There was another roaring—a whipping of wind, and a distinct, dangerous crackling.

The mountain lion finally, finally, broke eye contact, looking at something behind June, body language becoming alarmed.

June risked a glance behind her to find: bright orange flames, brilliant like the sun, getting closer to her by the second. They swallowed up dry pine needles and bushes and conquered the towering trees like they were nothing. June's breath hitched in her throat.

She turned back to face the mountain lion, also frozen in fear. It shifted uneasily from paw to paw, seemingly trying to decide what to do. There was a certain sadness in its expression,

though that may have just been June anthropomorphizing the animal. This forest was the mountain lion's home, too. These days there were less and less areas for these animals to live, and now this one safe space had become uninhabitable as well.

At least June and her fellow humans could take some responsibility for the unnaturally dry forest, for the conditions that allowed a fire to spread so fast and so unstoppably. This mountain lion, though? It had nothing to do with this. It was nothing but a victim.

The mountain lion took a deep, labored breath. Its muscles contracted and ribs flared for a moment, strong and beautiful. It stared at June, not with menace, but with sympathy.

The fire was right there, now. She was in between a rock and a hard place, or however the saying goes.

The mountain lion huffed, and gave one last threatening snarl, before turning around and sprinting into the woods, disappearing into the trees. June almost collapsed in relief. Then was immediately overtaken by another terror.

Not wasting another moment assessing the fire behind her, June took off running, heading back towards her friends and the trail they were following.

Adrenaline made her senses sharp and her body agile. She leapt over obstacles and weaved through trees, backpack bouncing wildly against her shoulder blades. June was unsure exactly where she was going but was at least generally running away from the raging fire behind her. Without Logan and Beatrice slowing her down, she was fast and gained some distance between her and the immediate flames; she wasn't safe, not with the wind unceasingly blowing towards her, but she wasn't immediately about to be burned.

Finally, she came across the section of dirt that she recognized to be the path they were following. At least, she hoped it was. Doubt crept into the back of her mind, and all the wildlife

looked the same to her. But it was the only trail she had run into, so she had to trust it was the right one. “Beatrice? Logan? Selena?” June shouted, voice cracking and hoarse.

She heard no responses. She jogged lightly on the trail. They had moved in this direction when they initially separated, so they had to be somewhere ahead, right? June tried not to let panic overcome her—she had read that the most dangerous thing to do when lost in the wilderness is to succumb to panic.

“Guys? Hello?” June yelled. They should be here. Where were they?

One part of June hoped they had kept going—maybe they had seen the fire picking up, and decided they had to run away. However, the more selfish part of her hoped they waited for her. She didn’t want to be alone in these woods.

“Hello?” June called. “Anyone?”

“June? June, we’re here!” It was Selena, coming from the right, off the trail.

June let out a strangled sob-gasp. “I’m here!”

They called out back and forth, following each other’s voices, until they met up.

Selena ran up to her, and June collapsed into her arms. “Oh, you’re okay. Thank God. You’re okay,” Selena wheezed.

Logan and Beatrice weren’t far behind her. “You’re alive!” Logan cried.

June smashed into her, hugging her as tightly as her protruding stomach would allow. “I thought I would never see you again,” she said, voice whiny like when they were kids.

“You saved us,” Logan said, heaving hysterically. “I’m so glad you’re okay. Oh, June.”

“I’m sorry about everything,” June confessed, her close encounter with death making her need to get it off her chest, now. “I’m glad you’re going to LA. I’m proud of you for following your dreams. I’m sorry.”

Logan laughed, though tears were still streaming from her eyes. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Maybe moving to civilization is a good idea,” June cried, laughing as well.

“Guys, come on!” Beatrice urged. “We have to keep going!”

“Go where? Why’d you leave the trail?” June asked.

“Come on!” Beatrice beckoned to her. “We heard sirens. We think there might be people this way!”

A glimmer of hope spread through June’s chest. “Really? You’re sure?”

“We don’t know how far, but we definitely heard something!” Logan confirmed, wiping her eyes and putting on a determined expression.

June took one last glance toward the safety of the trail, debating their options. The trail headed directly away from the fire, while Logan pointed somewhere parallel perpendicular to the way the wind was blowing. If they kept heading that way, eventually the fire would catch up to them.

June grit her teeth, then decided. She raced towards them. “Then come on, let’s go! The fire’s not far behind us.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

May

Laying in her bed, June mindlessly scrolled through websites with listings for apartments to rent. It felt hopeless—they were so damn expensive, especially in the areas June would want to live in. When her sublease was up, she was going to have to move. While her current job would allow her to afford some sort of cheap apartment in the area, June didn't like the idea of staying at her workplace much longer, especially with a lawsuit approaching.

She could leave LA—she didn't particularly like the grimy city, with its excessive traffic and \$8 coffees. But Selena and Beatrice were here, and they didn't seem like they were leaving any time soon. They were the only connections June had to anyone, the only people in the entire world who cared if she lived or died. June couldn't leave them, not now, and not again.

Then there was option C—take the hush money. June wished she wasn't so tempted, but... it was a lot of money. Enough to get herself on track with a comfortable lifestyle and some to give away. The lawsuit might not happen, and June could probably even keep her job. Then Logan could live with her, and they could be the happy family that Logan deserved.

God, June was too young to feel this old. Her soul was weary, and there was a constant heaviness in her eyes that she worried would never go away.

A year ago, Beatrice might have made her some herbal tea and given her crystals to keep by her bed while she slept to fortify her strength. She might have taught her a moon ritual to lead

her on the right path or drawn guiding runes into her skin with lotion before rubbing it in. Now, when June complained to Beatrice, she didn't even offer any solutions besides a sympathetic smile. It was like Beatrice had lost her faith altogether.

June turned off her phone and rolled over onto her back so she could stare at the ceiling. The ever-present ache that she could never escape pulsed within her. More than anything, she wished Logan was here. She would know what to do. She would hug June and tell her everything would be okay and they would be together. Tears pricked in June's eyes, and she allowed them to fall, indulged her feelings for just this moment. She had to remind herself that things were getting better—really, they were. But in moments like this, it didn't feel like it.

She should probably open the blinds, June thought. It was 3 pm on her day off, and she hadn't gotten out of bed yet. That probably wasn't good. But instead of motivating her to get up, the thought only made her feel more hopeless—she'd already failed at waking up at a decent time, so what was the point?

She was about to tumble down into another pit of despair when her phone started buzzing—it was a call from Selena. June immediately sat up and scrubbed at the tears on her face. She cleared her throat a little so it wouldn't sound as hoarse as it felt when she said, "Hello?"

"Hey June!" Selena said. There was noise in the background of her call, and June realized she was probably at work. Selena was always the kind of person to call instead of text, something that sometimes annoyed June but was endearing nonetheless. "Sorry, I don't know if you're busy right now, but I just have to tell you—You haven't gone grocery shopping yet, have you? I know you usually go on Saturdays."

“Uh, no, not yet,” June said, embarrassed. She really should have, by now. She also should’ve put her laundry in. And vacuumed. It took everything in her not to spiral again.

“Great! You should come by my store when you do. I’m at work right now, and they just got in a bunch of that summer squash I know you were obsessed with last summer. It’s finally in season again.”

A smile poked at the edge of June’s lips. “Really?”

“Yeah!” There was a loud noise in the background, and Selena seemed to converse with someone before saying, “Sorry, that was random. I just thought I should tell you.”

“No, I’m glad you did,” June said, holding her phone to her ear with her shoulder as she sat up out of bed and moving the covers aside, feeling like a curse lifted. “Just the motivation I need to finally go to the store.”

“Well, good. Hey, also, it’s supposed to be a warm weekend, and I’ve been wanting to go to the beach. Would you want to come?”

The next day, Selena picked June up and drove them to a beach near Playa del Rey to watch the sunset. June had spent the whole day giddy with excitement, trying to figure out what to wear and how to do her hair, thinking it was a date with Selena. She had to hide her disappointment a little when Selena announced that Beatrice would be meeting them there.

“Oh,” June said. “You invited her too?”

Selena made a face. “Well, I didn’t originally, but she had been sending me Instagram reels all day and I was getting the feeling she was lonely. Sorry I didn’t tell you.”

June still wasn’t used to the fact that Selena and Beatrice were so close now. It used to be June that was her apprentice, that spent so much time with her. Now *she* was never the one sent

Instagram reels. “Oh, no, it’s fine.” It took June a moment to realize she didn’t even follow Beatrice. “Wait, Bea has Instagram now? What happened to her whole anti-social media brain rot thing?”

Selena laughed. “Oh, yeah, she’s been fully LA-ified.” She frowned. “I am a bit worried about her though, to be honest.”

June nodded. “I can’t believe she doesn’t practice witchcraft anymore. It feels wrong.”

“I know. She told me she can’t ‘connect to the spirits’ in the city—whatever that means. I just think she hasn’t tried.”

June could understand how it was harder to feel a spiritual power in a city of concrete and pollution, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t one there.

When they arrived at the beach, it was crowded with beachgoers trying to soak in the first bit of sun of the year.

“When I was in high school, me and my friends always went to Dockweiler beach—just a little bit down that way—because it’s the only place around where you can do bonfires on the beach,” Selena explained as they trudged through the sand, huffing a little. “But I figured—well, fires everywhere might not be the most relaxing right now.”

June was glad for her foresight. Their current location was right next to LAX, so planes constantly flew close overhead, but it was still crowded with people enjoying the nice weather. When they finally found a good spot close enough to watch the waves crash onto the shore, they laid blankets out and soaked in the ambiance around them, digging their toes in the sand. It was rejuvenating.

June plopped her tote bag beside her and stretched out onto the blanket, facing the sky. A huge passenger plane whooshed overhead, and she couldn't tear her eyes away. June had never been in a plane before, but they had always fascinated her. No matter how many times she had looked up diagrams of how planes flew, she never could grasp such a massive hunk of metal soaring like a bird. It seemed to her just as magic as Beatrice's tarot readings.

When Beatrice arrived, she kicked off her sandals and ran towards them, smiling with the wind blowing in her grey hair. "Hello! Wow, it's a gorgeous day," she said, and laid out a blanket next to theirs, sitting down slowly as her stiff knees popped.

They exchanged 'hellos' and 'how are you's' and settled in.

"So, Joe told me the EPA officially started investigating the oil field," Beatrice told them. "Selena, your parents should be happy. Once they gather evidence, then they can get plaintiffs together and file a lawsuit."

"Oh, yeah, I haven't seen my mom this excited about anything in a while," Selena said. "Although Joe said it might take a couple years to actually go to trial, no?"

"Yeah, that's what he told me," June said, calmness replaced by a churning in her stomach thinking about the money she'd been offered. She should tell them about it, she knew. But what if they told her not to take it? She still needed time to consider. This money could change her life.

"Still, it will all be worth it. Exposing this fraud would help LA so much and would set a precedent for other oil companies as well."

June wiggled her toes agitatedly in the sand. "Anyways," she hummed. "Beatrice, Selena told me you're on Instagram now?"

Beatrice grimaced, looking ashamed of herself. “I know, I know. It’s such a time-sucker, too. But, well, it is fun, and I don’t really have much to do these days. I don’t really need a job, not with my savings and insurance money from the house...”

“When are you going to start up the family business again?” June pressed.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Beatrice said, noncommittally in that way she did when she fully didn’t intend to do what someone asked. “I guess I’ve been waiting for a sign.”

June resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “But you’ve been doing it your whole life! Your whole family has!” She crossed her arms. “Plus, you never completed my training.” She missed Beatrice’s guidance more than ever lately.

Beatrice sighed. “My house is gone. The woods are gone. Logan—” Beatrice rubbed a hand over her eyebrows. “Look, I just can’t anymore. Okay?”

June slumped onto her elbows, and Beatrice stared above as an airplane flew overhead.

Selena scratched behind her ear awkwardly, and raised her eyebrows at June.

Another jet flew past, small but loud.

“Anyways,” Selena said. “I brought some snacks.” She revealed some chips and crackers out of a bag she brought.

“Oh! Me too,” June said, pulling her tote bag onto her lap. “Look, I cooked some of the squash I got yesterday, and I had a bunch of leftovers.” She took out a plastic Tupperware container and 3 forks.

“Ooh, yum,” Beatrice said.

Then, an object at the bottom of her bag caught June’s eye, causing her heart to stutter a little: her tarot cards, gifted from Logan and recently returned by Beatrice. She hadn’t used them yet—had barely been able to bare looking at them—and she had no recollection of ever putting

them in the bag when packing for the beach. Maybe this was the bag she had brought to Griffith Park, and she had never unpacked them? That didn't seem right either, but her brain had been pretty foggy lately.

She picked up the deck and held them up to her companions, staring at them with pinched eyebrows. "How's this for your sign?" June said.

Suddenly, Selena gasped. "Oh my—look at the time!" She held up her phone with its glowing lock screen: 5:28 pm.

"Logan's birthday," June said numbly.

Beatrice looked from June to the deck of cards, and then nodded slowly, relenting. "Yeah, okay," she said. "That's definitely a sign."

June chewed on her lip, turning the cards over in her hands. With the glowing fires around her and the waves softly crashing, this was the most connected to the universe she'd felt in a while. "Look, guys," June said. "I think I need a reading."

"Now? Like, right now?" Selena said.

"Yeah," June said. "Beatrice, can you please lead it?"

"June, I don't know..."

"Oh, come on, can't you feel it? Please?" June pushed.

Beatrice swallowed, and then nodded. Beatrice took the deck in her hands and took the cards out of their box.

Everyone moved so that they sat in a triangle facing each other with open space on the blanket to place the cards. Selena lay down on her stomach and propped her head up with her elbows, watching intently.

"What kind of spread do you want to do?" Beatrice asked.

“I need help making a decision.”

Beatrice nodded. “We’ll do the two options spread. Here, you shuffle the deck.”

June shuffled the cards, staring out at a fire to their left as she did so. With these cards in her hands, which she had used so many times practicing tarot readings on her friends and sister, she could practically feel Logan’s presence beside her.

“Okay,” June said, then returned the cards to Beatrice.

“For this spread, we’ll do just three cards,” Beatrice said, fanning them out so June could pick from the deck.

One after another, June picked three cards and placed them face-down in a line on the blanket.

“Now, tell the universe what your dilemma is,” Beatrice said.

June looked awkwardly at Selena and then Beatrice, before admitting, “I was offered a huge amount of money by my employers if I do not expose their cover-up. Like, a lot of money.”

“What? Really?” Selena gasped.

Beatrice raised her eyebrows, but didn’t say anything, keeping the cool mask she always used when performing psychic readings.

“So, I need guidance. Do I take the money, so I can get my life on track and get Logan back? Or do I decline the money, and take this lawsuit to trial so everyone can get proper justice?”

Selena frowned, and June felt guilty. It sounded so awful, saying it out loud like that. Any decent person would never have been tempted like June was. Beatrice’s eyes conveyed only sympathy, though, and understanding.

“Okay, then. The card on the left side reveals what could be the outcome if you accept the money. The card on the right reveals the possible outcome of refusing the money. The middle offers you advice for making your decision.”

June nodded. “Okay, I’m ready.” She turned over the card on the left: Knight of Swords. Card on the right: Three of Cups. Card in the middle: The Star.

A wave of emotion overcame June, a certain power she wasn’t sure how to handle. A lump formed in her throat as her vision blurred.

“Okay. You remember what they all mean?” Beatrice asked.

“Yeah. But can you, uh, tell me anyway?” June asked, voice small like a child’s.

“Okay. Here’s the way I interpret it—you may see it differently, and that’s perfectly fine. The Knight of Swords represents ambition, speed, and drive. In this context, I think it means that the choice of taking the money gives in to your ambitions, allowing you to achieve your goals with speed and ferocity, but that usually comes with consequences. This card is saying that if you choose this option, it will lead to a lot of change, very quickly.”

June swallowed thickly. This wasn’t exactly what she was expecting—achieving her goals fast? Isn’t that a good thing?

“The Three of Cups here represents friendship, fun, and celebration,” Beatrice snorted a little, breaking her ‘psychic’ character. “I’m trying to be unbiased here, but that’s literally what the card means. It seems to say that if you choose not to take the money, it can lead to a good event and unification with friends. However, compared to the other choice, it has nothing to do with achieving your goals or being successful.”

June nodded again, looking from Selena to Beatrice. Sitting here like this, they could be their own little Three of Cups card. A united friendship.

“So, what advice do they have for me?” June asked.

“Well, The Star card is a major arcana—you know that already, though.” The sun was beginning to set now, turning the entire beach a rich orange. The wind blew, and with it came a scent that June would recognize anywhere—something like jasmine, mixed with salt and vanilla. It smelt like Logan. In that moment, more than ever before, June could feel her right there, next to her. As if she was the one giving June the Star card.

“The Star represents hope, contentment, and a good future. It means the hardest part is behind you.”

Tears were fully bubbling up the surface for June. They weren’t sad, though, or numb—they were just raw emotion, intense and pure and overwhelming. She laughed and let out a sob. “I get it, I think I get it. She’s telling me it’s gonna be okay. That whatever path I choose, there is hope in my future.”

Selena’s expression crumpled, and so did Beatrice’s, until they were all crying. Selena scrambled into the center of the blanket, flinging sand everywhere, to throw her arms around June, and Beatrice wrapped hers around the both of them. They cried together, in a jumbled heap on top of the cards. It was a mess but it was alright.

June knew what to choose—she had always known, really, what the noble choice had been, but she was scared of choosing the wrong one, of giving up the money and risking never getting Logan back. But she wasn’t scared anymore. She could follow what she knew to be right, and trust that her future would be okay. She had her friends here, and with them, she could figure anything out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

October

June fought against the exhaustion pulling her body down as they sped-walked through the forest. The adrenaline from facing the mountain lion had mostly left her body, and while there was still the terror of the approaching flames—now likely headed right towards them as they were running with the direction of the wind—there was only so much her tired muscles could take. Her lungs and throat ached with smoke inhalation, the burn on her arm never failed to make itself known, and the back of her ankles stung with every step from blisters left by her shoes.

What kept her going was the warm hope bubbling in her chest, knowing that finally they were running towards something. Every once in a while when the roaring wind in her ears died down a little, she could hear the faintest sounds of sirens, and every moment they walked it seemed to get louder.

Still, they were in bad shape. June was in the best condition out of everyone, and that wasn't a good sign. Beatrice's face was pinched with pain as she hobbled through the woods, her grey hair a frizzy mess and sweat dripping down her temples. Selena's wheezing hadn't improved the entire time no matter how much she used her inhaler, and her breaths were obviously labored with her chest overworking each breath in and coughing every breath out. She was struggling to walk, let alone run. Then there was Logan, who was also trailing behind,

holding her lower back and limping through each walk. Logan's due date was supposed to be in 2 weeks, and distantly June wondered how the stress of all this could be harming the baby. Having such a swollen belly, June couldn't imagine what kind of pain she was in, and Logan wasn't one to voice her complaints.

So, it was up to June to encourage everybody to keep going, as much as she wanted to break down and cry. The fire was definitely gaining on them—June could see the luminous tendrils behind them only about 50 yards away. The flames themselves were also deafening—it made loud crackling noises and *whooshes* as it whipped from bush to tree, eating up everything in its path.

“Come on, keep going!” June called, her throat burning. “Just a little further. Come on!”

June turned around to look at her friends, but no one answered, or even seemed to be uplifted by her encouragement. Morale was low.

This was bad. They had to keep going, they had to make it. They had already endured so much today; June couldn't bear the thought of them all dying just as they were so close to safety.

June stopped so that Logan could catch up to her, then put a supporting arm around Logan. “What can I do? How I can I help you?”

Logan flashed her a weary smile. She was sweating all over, and ash and dirt clung to her skin. “I don't know,” she huffed. “We just have to keep going.” She continued marching forward in something like a half-walk, half-jog, though each step looked labored.

“Selena? Are you okay?” June called.

Selena gave a noncommittal thumbs up, and June could tell she was anything but okay.

“We're gonna be fine,” Beatrice said, though her voice was weak and breaths heavy.

“We're almost there.” Even though she limped, she was moving faster than Logan or Selena.

June let them go ahead of her while she hung back with Logan, trying to urge her along even though her instincts screamed at her to run as fast as she could. “Come on, Logan,” June said, desperation creeping into her voice.

Logan turned around and let out a panicked gasp—the fire was closer than ever, maybe 20 yards behind them. A gust of wind blew through them, rattling the leaves and throwing debris into June’s eyes.

Everything around them was orange. June was coughing with every breath. Tears blurred her eyes. It had been a while since they’d heard the sirens, but they kept going in the same direction—there was no other option.

Logan managed to pick up her pace a little, so she was almost running, and by now Selena and Beatrice were some 20 feet ahead of them, shouting at them to go faster.

June didn’t have any breath in her to talk—she just grabbed Logan’s hand and yanked her forward, trying to pick up the pace in whatever way she could. They weaved through trees and stepped over stumps and rocks, trampling over bushes and grasses.

“There’s a—there’s a clearing ahead!” Beatrice called. “Keep going!”

Indeed, through the trees June could make out a thinning of the forest, though she couldn’t see much beyond that with the blinding smoke.

The fire was right on their heels, now, each gust making sparks burst around them like fireworks. The heat was intense, unbearable, and June was sure she would either melt or choke.

“Go on—ahead. Go without me,” Logan coughed, shoving June ahead of her. “It’s okay.”

“No!” June said, but she wasn’t quite sure if the sound made it to her lips or not. She was dizzy, and nothing felt real.

“Hey! Hey, look ahead!” Beatrice called from somewhere beyond—June couldn’t see her, but she could hear her voice. Maybe they’d made it to the clearing by now. “There’s someone over there.”

“Yes!” Selena said, voice hoarse.

“Hey! Hey, help us! Please, help!” June imagined Beatrice waving her arms. Was there really someone there? Had they made it to firefighters?

“Come *on* Logan. We’re so close. Come *on*.” June urged.

But looking over her shoulder at Logan, she looked awful. She was stumbling blearily, the smoke and exhaustion overcoming her.

June couldn’t lose her focus. She had to pay attention to dodging the flames now, as a tree to her right then a tree to her left succumbed to the fire, raining down sparks and burning branches around them. Gusts of wind sent embers flying all around, and June instinctually jumped around, moving forward while dodging the hottest spots. She was running with the fire now, breaking out into the clearing—a field still dotted with trees, but not as thick as the woods they had been in.

“Hey! We’re here!” Beatrice’s voice was carried away by the wind, so June could barely hear it, but she could’ve sworn she heard a man’s voice responding, a deeper rumbling thing, and then some other voices.

June turned around, and in the mass of orange and smoke, she couldn’t see her sister. “Logan?” June called desperately. “Logan!”

Suddenly, a horrifying scream broke out from the flames.

“Logan! Logan! Oh my god.” June looked around furiously, and finally found her—she was on the ground, practically dragging herself forward, screaming. June grabbed her arm (oddly

sticky), and clumsily pulled her extra-heavy body forward, through the trees. A flame singed her shoulder, and she was sure the heat had destroyed her eyebrows. But she couldn't think, couldn't even feel, as she dragged her sister forward. "Help!" She called pathetically, her voice shrill and broken like a dog's yelp. "Help! Please!"

Tears were rolling down her face, coughs wracked her body, and each breath hurt worse and worse. Then—

Her vision went black. Everything was fuzzy. She tried to hold onto Logan. Really, she did.

The next thing she knew, she was in an ambulance, an oxygen mask covering her face. Selena was beside her, an oxygen mask connected to a portable tank over her mouth as well, and next to her, an EMT—she knew because she had seen the EMT uniform Logan had worn for various jobs, and they had the same badge.

June took a deep breath and found it didn't hurt as much as it had before. Being able to breathe; it was such a luxury that she had never before considered.

When Selena saw she had opened her eyes, she jumped up and took off her mask. "June? You're awake!"

"Selena?" June said. She didn't recognize the sound of her voice; it was so hoarse. "What...?"

Selena placed a hand over June's where it sat beside her on the gurney she was laying on. "It's okay. We're in an ambulance, heading to the hospital."

The EMT stood up and June groggily listened to his directions as he took her vitals and ensured she was okay. There was a burn on her shoulder, which the EMT ensured her was only third degree, like the one on her forearm. It still hurt like a bitch. "We're about 20 minutes out.

They'll rehydrate and wrap your injuries when we get there." The EMT said. "For now, just keep breathing in the nice fresh oxygen. You'll be okay."

"Where's Logan and Beatrice?" June asked.

Selena frowned. "They're in an ambulance ahead of us. We'll meet them at the hospital."

"What about the fire? How'd we get out?"

"It's still burning, but we're officially out of the danger zone, now. We ran right into some firefighters digging a fire line. They called the ambulances for us. We're safe."

June took a steadying breath and relaxed back down on the gurney. "But Logan—"

Selena's face was pinched, like she was trying to decide what to say. "June... Logan's really bad. She has a lot of burns."

The sound of Logan's screams rang in June's ears. She remembered grabbing Logan's hand. She remembered dragging her away from the flames. But nothing else.

"How bad?" Her voice was thready, and tears pooled in her eyes.

Selena's expression was grave. "Bad."

The EMT, just a young guy, clean shaven and bright-eyed, looked anywhere but at them. He was chewing the inside of his cheek.

When they finally arrived at the hospital, they wouldn't let June get off the gurney, instead making her lay down as they rolled her into the emergency room. In the outdoor space between the parking lot and the hospital room, June absentmindedly stared at the blue sky above them, amazed to see a world bathed in color again, an afternoon sun approaching the mountains. In the distance, plumes of smoke rose high into the sky, and from here, June found them to be oddly beautiful, lined with shades of pink, blue, and yellow. Everything felt wrong, and June was reaching the end of her capacity to process new information.

She let the nurses admit her into a room, administer an IV, and dress her burns, thankful for Selena who never left her side even as she breathed through an oxygen mask, and Beatrice who came in and out to check on her. The only thing she could think of was Logan, a pit in her stomach making the world feel dark and bleak. Every time she asked about her, the nurses promised she could see her once her oxygen levels returned to normal.

So, June focused on breathing and recovering her strength. They were out of the fire. Everything was going to be okay. Right?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

July

The good thing about having all your worldly possessions destroyed in a fire was that it made moving apartments really easy. June could spend most of her time helping Selena make trips from her house to their new apartment in Echo Park—the same building where Beatrice lived with Joe, in a studio only one floor down.

It all seemed a little surreal—like everything moved so fast. But to get an apartment in this city, especially one you could afford, you had to be willing to jump onto a lease when you could get it.

June leaned against the hood of Selena's car, parked in the street with the hazard lights flashing, waiting for Selena to come down and take another trip. It was a gloomy day, but it wasn't too cold. June could count on the sun coming out by the afternoon.

Down the stairs came Selena's father, sweating a little after helping lift boxes from the car to the apartment. June was surprised her parents were helping at all. From what Selena said, they'd been fighting more and more the last month, with Selena not wanting to follow their rules anymore, not wanting to put up with their constant critiques and judgements. Eventually, Selena decided she couldn't live at home; she was an adult, and she needed space from her family. Of course, her parents didn't approve of her wasting money on rent she didn't need to pay—not to mention, moving in with June—but still, they were there to help them move, and seemed

relieved to be bringing in two small mattresses instead of one big one. It was complicated, and June tried to stay out of it.

Mr. Alvarado leaned against the opposite end of the car, staring at the door to the stairs, waiting for Selena to arrive out of it so they could make their next trip. “I hear Joe got you a new job,” he said.

Uncomfortable small talk. June could work with this. “Uh, yeah. I mean, he didn’t just, like, *give* it to me...”

Last month June finally quit her job at the oil company when she was hired by the same environmental organization that Joe worked for. Sure, she may not have been as qualified as people with college degrees, but June went through the same interview and hiring process as any other applicant and was ultimately chosen with Joe’s recommendation. It was another boring desk job, and had fewer benefits, but it was enough to pay the bills and help June continue to save, without feeling like she was sacrificing her soul every day.

Joe had been added to her long list of people she would be forever grateful for, and she only hoped she became a good enough person one day to deserve all the help she had been given.

“Oh, no, I’m sure,” Mr. Alvarado said. “Do you like it?”

“So far, yeah,” June said. “It’s a bit boring, but I can’t complain. The people are...”

“Less evil?” He joked.

June laughed a little. “Well, the people at my last job were never evil. They just needed money, same as me... It was just the whole company, you know?”

Mr. Alvarado nodded. “I get it. I’m glad you’re exposing them.”

“Me too.”

An unbearably uncomfortable silence stretched between them until Selena arrived, unlocking the car from the key fob in her hand. “Alright guys, ready for round 2?” She asked.

Something in the world seemed to shift into place when June lived in the same building as Selena and Beatrice again. It wasn’t the same as their house on 143 North Star Road—there was no cottage, no forest, no garden, and no sense of magic intertwined with the simple beauty of the place. But there was the flower box on the windowsill growing herbs in the sun, and there was warmth and security that felt like magic after so long without.

June fell into a new routine, working a new 9 to 5 doing something she actually believed in, spending time with Beatrice, Joe and Selena when she was off, and saving money to get their apartment in shape and maybe even buy a car soon.

Almost every day after work, June walked up the flight of stairs to Beatrice’s place, knocked on the door, and found herself welcomed in with open arms. Sometimes Selena would join her, but she worked variable hours at the grocery store so often June would go alone. Beatrice would offer her coffee or tea, and maybe June would stay for 20 minutes to say hi or maybe she would stay for dinner and a movie. They always joked that Beatrice should just give June a key, but she could never be bothered to go out and make copies. Still, Bea and Joe’s apartment felt like an extension of June’s; it felt like home.

One day when June arrived at the door, Beatrice opened it before she could even knock, ushering her in with a quick hug. “You’re just in time, the tea’s just done brewing,” she said.

June walked in and followed Beatrice to the kitchen, saying hello to Joe who was reading something intently on his laptop on the couch.

In the kitchen, Beatrice had the windows over the sink cracked open and a few candles lit next to a fruit basket. A glass teapot was steaming.

June breathed in deeply. “Is that lavender?” She asked.

“You got it! I made it because it’s—”

“The full moon,” June finished, smiling.

“I could practically feel the chaotic energy coming from your apartment. I figured you could use something calming for the mood swings,” Beatrice explained. She poured the tea into two mugs and handed one to June—it was a standard white mug with the fading logo for the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign, some relic that Joe refused to get rid of.

“Thanks,” June said. “I needed this.” It had been a bit of a rough day.

“The lavender’s from the community garden. I sent a bunch of people home with bundles last week and gave them directions on how to brew it.” Beatrice had been working part-time teaching gardening classes at the community garden closest to their building. June could see how happy it was making her, to go out and work in the dirt again, to work with people again. “Get this—one of the gardeners told me she just microwaves hot water for tea. Can you believe that? Microwaves!” She huffed. “Well, I gave her very detailed instructions on how to *actually* make a cup of tea, so hopefully she follows it.”

June laughed and sat at the bar while Beatrice put some dishes in the sink. “You’re the expert,” she shrugged.

“You know, there’s something else I’ve been meaning to talk to you about. Louise—you remember Louise, right? Jerry’s niece?”

June nodded. How could she forget her? Every moment of that day of the wildfire was burned into June’s memory.

“Well, she somehow tracked me down on the internet and got my phone number!”

June chewed on her lip. “Can I make a confession?”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes.

“I gave it to her,” June admitted. “She already followed me on Instagram, and she DM’d me asking for you a couple weeks ago. Sorry.” The follow request had been surprising, but not unwelcome. It was nice to connect with people from their old life again.

Beatrice clicked her tongue. “And you didn’t tell me?” She shook her head in exasperation. “Anyways, she said she’s heading towards LA soon, and she wants me to do a reading for her.”

June raised her eyebrows. “Really? What’d you say?”

Beatrice squirmed a little, wringing her hands around her mug. “I told her I would. I think it’s time for me to start psychic-ing again. Not full time—Just, sometimes, for old clients and friends. You know?”

June grinned. “Beatrice, that’s great! I think you should!”

“Well, I know you’re busy these days, and about to get even busier soon, but... I’d still like an apprentice, if you still want to learn.”

An old ache in June’s chest that had been there so long she hadn’t even noticed its presence unwound itself. “Of course, Bea.”

One afternoon June stood beside the couch in their living room, folding a basket of warm clothes she had just hauled up from the laundry room on the first floor, when she looked up and saw Selena, sitting at their dining table, mindlessly scrolling through social media and humming

to herself. Midday sun was streaking through the window, throwing planes of light over their increasingly decorated apartment, and June couldn't help but smile.

More parts of June's life had somehow seemed to fall into place. They fell clumsily, like a rock flung over a cliff, hitting every ledge and tree branch on the way down, but they found their place nonetheless. June's relationship with Selena, for one thing, progressed nonlinearly but felt right all the same. June met her parents, moved in with her, and committed to her long-term before ever asking her on a date.

Still, the day that June officially took her to a nice restaurant and bought her flowers was magical in a 1950s kind of way, like they were from a different time, or a different universe. As she smoothed the wrinkles out of a pair of jeans and folded them carefully, she remembered the red dress Selena wore that day and the way they strolled through the streets of Santa Monica, watching the sunset over the ocean. Selena's hand was soft and warm when she held June's. And for the next week June couldn't stop grinning to herself like a teenager every time she thought of her.

Selena had quickly become her rock, her everything. They laughed together, bickered about trivial things, and held each other when the weight of the grief became too heavy. It was fun doing things with her—they'd recently thrown a party to bring together Selena's old friends with Nani and some of June's other new friends—and they were powerful force when they worked together. Selena's parents had also been coming around more for dinners, and inviting the two of them places together. When they told them they were dating, their disappointment wasn't quite as intense as June had expected. And when they saw how happy June made their daughter, it lessened more and more. They didn't understand it, and they wished Selena was on a different path, but they were starting to respect the choices that Selena made for herself.

June had never been one to make plans; she had always been with Logan, and Logan was the planner. Without her, June had felt like she was drifting, aimless, a vague goal in mind but no trajectory to get there. But now, she and Selena made lots of plans, and trusted each other to do them together. Selena was going to go back to college, finish the 25 units she needed to get her degree. June was going to buy a car, so she didn't have to rely on the bus and rides from friends all the time. They wanted to go to the Griffith Observatory, go to Disneyland.

And Selena wanted to get Logan back, just like June, even knowing how significantly it would change their lives. But it was the kind of life Selena had always wanted, even if the way they came about it was unconventional, and June couldn't help but agree.

So, they made plans to get Selena a more consistent job, to buy a queen bed and move into one bedroom, to make space in their lives for Logan. They made plans to get married, not now, but one day.

And, as June finished up folding the last sock at the bottom of the hamper and looked up to make eye contact with her girlfriend, she thought to herself, *I'm glad we made it here.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

October

Once June's burns had been fully treated and her oxygen levels returned to normal, the nurses gave her pain medications and checked her out of her hospital room, hurrying to make room for more people who had been impacted by the fire. The hospital was a flurry of chaos, as another hospital had had to evacuate and now this one was overflowing. Either because of the sleep deprivation or the drugs in her system, June was feeling woozy, and her mind lagged as she and Selena left their room and met Beatrice in the waiting room.

Beatrice gave June a long, warm hug, and June let herself go limp in her arms. Then they took their seats amongst other worried people.

"Where's Logan? Can I see her?" June asked.

"She's currently in surgery," Beatrice said. Her tone was steady, her expression carefully neutral. This worried June more than if she had been openly crying.

"Surgery? Why? Is she gonna be okay?"

"I talked with the trauma surgeon operating on her before she went under. Doctor Bruner. It's... it's really bad. She has second and third-degree burns all over her body, and her lungs had severe damage."

June's ears were ringing. Why were they ringing?

“But she’s gonna be okay, right? And the baby?” Already June was thinking about the scarring that comes from such awful burns. Logan had always taken pride in her appearance and liked the way people found her attractive. What would she look like now? How would she raise a baby if she was recovering herself?

Beatrice didn’t respond, and June felt nauseous.

Selena, sitting in the chair next to her, took June’s hand and rested her head on her shoulder.

June decided that hospital waiting rooms must be a special circle of hell. The smell of antiseptic, the sterile florescent lights, the worn plastic chairs. A woman in the opposite corner was holding back tears, wiping her eyes with her sleeve every now and then. A man two chairs over was tapping his foot incessantly against the floor. There was a stack of magazines on a table in front of them, the kind that Beatrice would like, but they looked like they hadn’t been touched since 2011.

June was filled with an all-consuming anxiety. She couldn’t stand not knowing how Logan was doing. More than anything, she just wanted her here.

Selena was obsessively checking news sites and social media for updates about the fire. She would occasionally show June photos people had posted or give her the official updates from the fire department (always 0% containment), but June really couldn’t find it in herself to care. What did it matter how the fire was spreading, whose town had burnt down or who was currently being evacuated? They were all powerless to do anything about it. And they were too late to save themselves.

All that mattered was Logan, somewhere in an operating room with severe burns and a fetus ready to enter a world that was burning around them.

Beatrice was slumped into her chair, and kept almost falling asleep before jolting herself awake. Selena's foot was tapping unceasingly against the floor. June still felt like she couldn't breathe.

"I'm going to go get some coffee or something," June muttered, forcing her stiff legs to stand up. She couldn't stand just sitting here. "Do you guys want anything?"

"Maybe a tea," Beatrice said, as Selena shook her head.

June wandered off down the hall, following the signs that led to the hospital cafeteria. The clinical environments of hospitals had always creeped June out. She could practically feel the misery in the air, could feel all the lives that had been lost in the building. She had goosebumps, even though she wasn't cold, and every once in a while she heard noises that weren't there.

June finally arrived in the cafeteria and spotted an automatic espresso machine in the corner. For only \$2, she was able to buy a coffee for herself. There was a hot water option, but no tea bags. June didn't have the energy to go searching for tea elsewhere. Sorry Beatrice.

She allowed herself to drift exhaustedly through the halls, thinking about how when they were in high school, Logan volunteered at the hospital every Wednesday. Her dreams to work in the medical field began at a young age, and she talked about her volunteer job like it was the coolest place in the world. One day, June consented to join her for a shift, and Logan really did seem in her element: the nurses she worked with loved her, and she was so good with even the most agitated patients.

June, on the other hand, couldn't stand it. The volunteer headquarters were in the basement. "How can you work right next to the morgue?" June remembered asking. "Think about how many dead bodies are there!"

“You can’t think like that,” Logan responded, not dissuaded for even a moment.

“Imagine about how many lives are saved here.”

June found her way back into the waiting room, and settled down in her seat, sighing.

At Beatrice’s raised eyebrow, June said, “No tea. Sorry.”

Beatrice nodded, a faraway look in her eye. “I hate hospitals,” she said.

June could tell Beatrice could feel the energy here, the same way she could. “Me too.”

She took one sip of her coffee and then set it down by her feet.

Finally, finally, a doctor walked through the doors, a tall man with wire-framed glasses.

“Doctor Bruner!” Beatrice greeted.

June stood up so fast she almost tipped over the cup of coffee. Her stomach plummeted as if she was on a roller-coaster. She was simultaneously desperate for information and terrified of what she would hear.

Doctor Bruner seemed like the kind of person who might be friendly, but his expression at the moment was stricken. “Are you the family of Logan Moore?” he asked.

“Yes! I’m her sister,” June said. “How is she?”

He looked from Beatrice to Selena. “Do you have any other family we should call?” He asked.

June took a step back. “No, it’s just me. Well, us.”

He nodded and adjusted his glasses. “I am very sorry to tell you this, but Logan did not survive the surgery. The extent of her burns was too immense, and we were unable to repair the damage that had been done.”

June stared at the man for a moment. Blinked. There was a bitter taste in her mouth, in the back of her throat.

“What?” Selena gasped, a hand covering her face. “That’s not. No! Oh my God.”

“But—But we got out of the fire. We made it in the ambulance. I don’t understand...” Tears were blurring June’s vision, and blood rushed to her head. This wasn’t possible. This couldn’t be possible.

June let out a sob, and the tears flowed out, hot and heavy, making her throat burn. She had been holding back the urge to cry the entire day—the entire, awful day, and it was like a dam breaking. Selena immediately pulled June into her arms, and Beatrice put her arms around them both.

“There—There’s something else, too,” Doctor Bruner interrupted. “Sorry, I wasn’t sure how to tell you. Maybe I should’ve led with this. I’m sorry.”

June looked up from Selena’s shoulder, shuddering, swallowing thickly.

“We were able to save the baby. He’s a healthy baby boy. We did an emergency c-section.”

June’s stomach did a somersault, a loopy-loop, feeling emotions she didn’t even know it was possible to feel. Grief and shock and joy and anger. The baby lived! She had a nephew!

The baby lived, and her sister was dead.

“Wait. What?” Her heart was pounding. “The baby’s alive?”

There were gasps and exclamations from Beatrice and Selena, but June couldn’t process them.

“Can I—Can we see him?” She craned her neck around the Doctor, as if he was hiding the baby somewhere. “Where is he?”

“He’s in the nursery right now, I can take you there.”

They followed him into the elevator, up a floor, and down the hall towards the baby nursery. The nurses here wore pink scrubs and people smiled as they passed by each other. This area of the hospital was much more lighthearted, as births tended to be much more joyous occasions.

But not for June. She felt like she was drowning.

Doctor Bruner handed them off to a nurse before leaving. June was sure the woman introduced herself, but she couldn’t remember the name. She was speaking with Beatrice while they walked among the babies.

June’s nephew was in a plastic bed, wearing a swaddle and a tiny beanie, face pale and wrinkled like all newborns looked.

“This is him?” Selena asked. The nurse affirmed that it was.

Above his bed was a tag. Babyboy Moore. 7.4 lbs.

June desperately scanned his face for any sign of Logan. Did he have her nose, her eyes? Would his hair get the same cowlick on the right side of his head?

But here, with his eyes closed, he looked like any other baby. Logan was really gone.

“Can you tell us the name of the father? We can contact him for you,” the nurse asked quietly.

“We don’t—nobody knows. She didn’t tell us. I don’t think she even knew,” Selena said, still staring at the baby.

“Logan had a lot of flings,” June said, as if it even mattered anymore.

The nurse nodded, and an agonizing silence fell over them. A baby cried somewhere in the nursery, and June struggled not to burst into tears herself.

“Did you know the name his mother had in mind?” The nurse asked June, gently.

“What? I... no. No, it was supposed to be a surprise.” Her voice sounded hollow, even upon her own ears.

The nurse hummed, at a loss for words for a moment as they all stared at the newborn, the accident, the bundle of joy, the survivor. He slept innocently, not aware of the hell they had been through to get him here.

“Would you like to hold him?” She asked finally.

June nodded. “Yes, please,” she said.

The nurse gently picked him up, and showed June how to hold her arms so she could cradle his neck.

He was so warm, and his breaths were soft and steady as he slept. He squirmed for a moment, but didn’t awake.

Something in the world seemed to open up, as if June had just become privy to a color she had never seen before. She looked at him and knew she would never be the same again.

Tears began rolling down her cheeks again. They dripped onto his face.

“Did—” June said hysterically, her chest heaving. “Did Logan get to hold him, before she died?” Her voice cracked, and in that moment, the baby almost fell from her hands, if not for Beatrice rushing over to steady June’s arms.

The nurse’s eyes widened in panic. “Maybe we should put him back down...” she said, and June barely noticed, because she was sobbing too hard.

Selena was there again, to hold her, to cry with her.

“I think we should name him after her,” June said, as the only thing that could come to her mind was *Logan. Logan. Logan*. “She wanted that, right? Do you think that’s what she would want?”

Beatrice nodded. “I think that’s a good idea,” she said, voice choked with emotion.

“Logan,” Selena said aloud, bestowing the name upon the child.

The nurse nodded. “I’ll prepare his birth certificate.”

June was too overwhelmed by her emotions to pay attention as Beatrice and the nurse discussed something important, something about the baby.

A social worker arrived, and there was an argument, but all the while June couldn’t keep her eyes off Logan, laying in his little hospital cradle.

She didn’t have the capacity to fight, couldn’t even form words if she tried, when she was guided out of the nursery, leaving Logan Moore with strangers. She knew it was for the best, that she couldn’t raise a baby right now, that she didn’t even have a home to raise him in.

But she knew one thing: she might not be able to bring her sister back, but she wasn’t going to lose Logan too. She wouldn’t let him grow up the same way she had, bouncing around from foster parent to foster parent. Someday, somehow, he was going to come home to his family.

EPILOGUE

It was another year before June finally, finally brought Logan home with her. It was a long road, including a court room, a CPS inspection, and a lot of paperwork. But ultimately, the state prefers to keep children with their closest living relatives, so June was the rightful guardian of her nephew.

It was incredible how much he had changed since she saw him for the first time. He was almost 3 feet tall now, and could walk, on tiny wobbly legs that just couldn't sit still. He had wispy light brown hair and the same blue eyes as June's sister—when they made eye contact for the first time, it was like looking through a window to the past. His nose and round face June didn't recognize, and made her wonder if she would ever find this Logan's father, or if he would even want to be found.

Logan was a happy kid, even if a little shy and cautious. When they met for the first time, in an arranged meeting with the social worker at his temporary home, he hid behind the leg of his foster mother, and she smiled apologetically at June as she explained to him slowly who June was. It broke June's heart a little, that she was a stranger to Logan, but it was far from the worst heart break she had ever endured. June and Selena crouched down to his level, smiling patiently, and introduced themselves. Logan, to his credit, was willing to give them a chance, and slowly warmed up to them after some silly banter about ice cream and dinosaurs.

Soon after, she was finally able to show him to his new bedroom, which she had already begun decorating with a kid-sized bed and some shelves with various books and toys. Selena had long since moved into the same room as June, but there were still star-shaped sticky glass clings on the window that she had put up, and a faint smell of roses like her favorite lotion.

Even though the room was unfamiliar, Logan was excited to see a box of toy cars, which were hand-me-downs from Selena's brother, and liked the softness of the rug they had placed over the hardwood floors. It amazed June that someone so young could live through so much hardship, and still laugh and play like everything was right with the world.

Now, June could hardly believe the simple bliss of watching Logan as he played on the playground at the park closest to their house. It was a hot, sunny day, as summer seemed to stretch out longer and longer each year. But Logan didn't seem to mind it, instead focused intently on digging a hole in the sandbox, burying leaves like they were pirate treasure chests. He was entertaining himself on his own, but he looked up every once in a while to make sure June and Selena were still there, sitting on the park bench outside the sand.

"You know, he probably won't even remember ever being in foster care," Selena mused, her expression soft and warm watching their kid.

"Yeah, probably," June hummed. He wasn't even two years old yet, so she doubted he could form long-term memories. Still, June herself had lived through foster care, and knew the anxiety, the mistrust, and the hyper-independence that came from it. She could only hope that she could soothe any attachment issues he could have formed from his tumultuous first years of life.

When Logan looked up and caught June's eye, he grinned and threw a handful of sand in the air, exclaiming "fireworks!" in that adorable toddler voice of his.

June laughed, and said, “Be careful, don’t throw it at anyone else! And don’t let it get in your eyes!”

How was it possible to love someone this much? June had never been particularly responsible growing up, not like her sister—the one time June got herself a pet fish, it died within the week. Now, though, Logan was always on her mind. She never knew it was possible to feel such fear for another person, or to feel such joy for them either. Every time Logan cried, it opened a chasm in her chest. Every time he smiled, it was like injecting happiness straight into her bloodstream.

She knew Selena felt it too. Selena made an amazing mother—she was patient and gentle and filled in the gaps in all the places June lacked. They were both so young, and there was still so much to figure out. When June didn’t know how to calm a temper tantrum, Selena was there to say all the right things and stop Logan’s crying. When Selena panicked because Logan was sick or doing something dangerous, it was June who reminded her that everything was going to be okay.

Everything *was* going to be okay, and June knew it because she had all her people with her. Beatrice was only a floor away, and she loved helping raise Logan, assisting around the house and babysitting during the days Selena and June both worked. Selena’s parents, too, were even eager to offer help, giving advice that only tenured parents would know. It really did take a village.

And on the days when the grief came back in full force, when she felt the urge to isolate and hide away again, she woke up next to Selena, and remembered she wasn’t alone.

A kid around the same age as Logan was playing on the slide when he fell, letting out a miserable wail. It set June’s nerves on fire, bringing her focus back to Logan and the playground.

The other child's father came running to him, and June felt assured seeing that all the kids at the park were accounted for.

"Are you nervous about Wednesday?" Selena asked, leaning into June's shoulder affectionately.

June played with a strand of hair. "Not really," she said. "Joe's been preparing me, and I know how it's gonna happen."

Her deposition for the lawsuit was on Wednesday, so June could testify her experience working at the oil fields office. They were in what Joe called the 'discovery phase,' where both parties were gathering evidence. This included the EPA report that was done on the true pollution emissions in South LA, and the audit of the company's falsified records, as well as testimonies of numerous employees, some of which June knew personally.

It would probably take years, Joe said, to either reach a settlement or go to trial, but either way, people like Selena and her family were likely to get a lot of money. Still, no amount of money could fix the thousands of people with respiratory illnesses or make the life expectancy of the community higher. It made June's blood boil if she thought about it for too long. Why did companies only ever get held accountable after people had been sacrificed?

Selena held her hand and rubbed her thumb methodically over June's. "I requested Wednesday off, but they scheduled me anyway," she said. "But Beatrice said she can take Logan for the day."

"She's an angel," June said.

"True, but don't tell her that. It'll go to her head."

June snorted. The wind blew gently, and for a moment an acrid smell hit June's nose. The smokey scent was faint, but it still brought her right back to the past, to the woods and the mountain lion and Logan's screams.

"It's just a barbeque, probably," Selena said, squeezing June's hand more tightly. "Maybe a bonfire."

"Yeah, probably," June said. But what if it wasn't? What if there was another fire somewhere near here, just getting started, heading in their direction?

June looked up, and the sky was its normal blue, with only a slight haze in the air. They were in the middle of a city. She liked to think that it was unlikely a fire could ever burn that fast and uncontrollably amongst so much concrete.

But still. The climate was changing before their very eyes, and what once seemed impossible was becoming common. There always seemed to be some sort of disaster, somewhere in the world.

June took a steadying breath, focusing her attention back on Logan, who was now playing in the dirt at the base of a tree and letting roly-polies crawl up his arms. Logan, who encountered the world with such curiosity and excitement, full of endless hope and wonder.

Will he still love this earth when he's old enough to know that it killed his mother? Will there be anything left to love?

The smell of smoke passed, but June was still on edge, the possibilities of things that could go wrong running rampant in her brain. She was learning to live with the unknown, to expect the unexpected. No amount of psychic knowledge could fix the past, or change the future, but maybe Logan could, one day. For now, all June could do was hold her people closer and face each day when it began.