

MAYELY

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
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A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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TO THE KIDS WHO HOLD THE WORLD TOGETHER,
WHETHER THEY ASKED TO HOLD THE WORLD OR NOT

THERE IS NOTHING TO SAVE, NOW ALL IS LOST, BUT A
TINY CORE OF STILLNESS IN THE HEART LIKE THE EYE
OF A VIOLET.

-D. H. LAWRENCE

THE PEOPLE OF ELL AYE

THE ANGELENOS

THE DOMINANT PEOPLE OF ELL AYE, THEY ARE A LARGELY PEACEFUL FEMALE-LED SOCIETY WHO LIVE PRIMARILY IN THE HILLS. THEY ARE MADE OF FOUR INTERRELATED PEOPLES:

- **THE HOLY WOOD**

THE OLDEST ANGELENO SETTLEMENT, ON THE SHORES OF THE LAKE OF THE HOLY WOOD AND THE OLD HOLY WOOD SIGN.

- **THE MALIBU**

THE FARTHEST WEST OF THE ANGELENOS, WHO LIVE IN THE MOUNTAINS NEXT TO THE OCEAN OF MALIBU.

- **THE DOWNTOWN**

THE DOWNTOWN GUARD THE FORMER TOWERS OF ELL AYE AS SACRED GROUND AND LIVE IN A GIANT STADIUM IN A RAVINE.

- **THE SAN FERNANDOS**

THE SAN FERNANDOS LIVE IN THE GREAT VALLEY NORTH OF THE HOLY WOOD AND FREQUENTLY COMPETE WITH THE HOLY WOOD FOR SCARCE RESOURCES.

THE LAST LIFERS

A FERAL BAND OF CHILDREN WHO'VE GONE MAD IN ANTICIPATION OF THEIR EARLY DEATHS; THEY LIVE THROUGHOUT ELL AYE IN VIOLENCE AND CHAOS BECAUSE THEY FEAR NO CONSEQUENCES.

THE PALOS (THE BITERS)

A CANNIBAL SOCIETY FROM THE SMOKING PALOS VERDES PENINSULA, THEY ARE ELL AYE'S MOST FEARED ENEMY. THEY ARE INTELLIGENT, VICIOUS, AND WELL ARMED.

THE ICE CREAM MEN

A WANDERING TRIBE OF TRADERS WHO TRAVEL ON THREE-WHEELED ICE CREAM CARTS, THE ICE CREAM MEN KNOW ALL THE PEOPLES IN ELL AYE.

THE KINGDOM

A MIGHTY CIVILIZATION BUILT BY FORMER GANG MEMBERS, THE KINGDOM OCCUPIES A HUGE CASTLE FORTRESS IN ORANGE COUNTY, THE OC.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOLY WOOD

All of your years are marked. At thirteen, the changes come, the Olders tell you. At fifteen, you become a Mama. At seventeen, you begin to End.

The words beat through her head as if they've always been there, because they have always been there. Only now she understands what they mean. She's breathing calm on the promontory above the Holy Wood, but the words make her feel as if she's scrambling through the village, legs pumping and lungs burning.

The sunrise breaks over the ridge and lights the roofs below, soft and gold. Jemma can make out all the shapes of her life as the sun blankets them in warmth, one by one: the kitchen, the Smiths' hut, the Gatherers' house. And then the Little Doctors' house, where Zee died, and Jemma is cold again.

There's a cough in the Daycare, and then another. Jemma soaks in the quiet because it's about to shatter. Crying, yelling, fighting, laughing . . . there's nothing noisier than a village full of Children.

The quiet breaks for good, with a baby's wail, and Jemma stirs. She should get out before Trina sees her. Before Lady sees her. Buddha Teevee Jesucristo, before *anyone* sees her.

The sky is bleeding white, and she can see the ruined city just beyond the ridge protecting the Holy Wood. She forgets that there's a city down there, that there's a full world beyond this village. She's relied on the Holy Wood to keep her safe, but Zee reminds her that the world still cuts in. She's not any safer behind the Bear Wall.

Maybe it's time to join the world.

Jemma winds her way down to the village, padding softly instead of running like her body wants her to. There's nothing unusual about a Gatherer getting an early start on her day, even if that Gatherer is fifteen and should have other things on her mind.

She glides through the streets, ignoring the early risers and amazed at how easily they ignore her. All these years, and so few people care if she's coming or going. Until she reaches the house of the Muscle, the guards of the Holy Wood. The Muscle are mostly boys, because boys start to get stronger than the girls in their Tweens, and that strength is useful in a fight.

The house is boxy, mostly greasy glass. It used to be white but looks gray, as if generations of boys have overwhelmed it. Chicken bones and orange peels line the sidewalk. As she creeps by, two Tweens stumble out, hitting each other. She doesn't know what they're arguing about, but it doesn't matter. Tweens—and Muscle—are always hitting each other.

"Oh hey," one of them says, and he disentangles from the other. His name is Jamie, she thinks, but he's only thirteen. "You want to roll with me, chica?"

"You can't handle me," she says. "I'm more Muscle than you."

His swagger only seems to get more swaggy. "C'mon, chica, you look like you need it."

She scoops a rock from the curb and throws it at him. It just misses. "Not from you. I heard about your little pecker." She hasn't, but it's a safe bet.

The Muscle pauses, then punches his friend.

Jemma stops in the Circle, the ring of houses at the heart of the village that beats along with the Holy Wood in work or anger or joy. She fills her water bottles, the Long Gone ones they call litros, clear plastic with red lids. Everything that came from the past they call Long Gone. She watches for the Olders or the Muscle, and her eyes rest on one of the grand old houses, white walls and orange tiles dripping with creeping

fig. But her eyes keep sliding into the sooty pit next to it, charred timbers clawing their way out of the earth. The blackness crawls along the ground into the street, and she can't quite see where it ends.

It was a house that caught the flu, fell so quickly to the disease that the Children couldn't leave. The Little Doctors couldn't save them—they never could—so the Muscle barred the door. When it was finally quiet, they burned the house and everything in it where it stood. Now it sits on the street but doesn't, and the Children pass by it without glances, just tiny shivers and hitches in their step. It's there by not being there.

The embers from Zee's body fire were still glowing last night when Trina, the Oldest, cornered her. "You fifteen tomorrow," she said. As if Jemma had forgotten she was fifteen, as if she didn't have every last year etched in sharp lines. "A good Day to you."

They've forgotten everything else, but they know when your Day is.

"It's time for you to become one of the Mamas," Trina said.

"Just like that?" Jemma had asked Trina.

"Oh, Jemma," Trina said. "Our whole life is just like that."

And suddenly childhood felt so short and the rest of her life even shorter. Even if she survived the baby—fifteen now, a baby by sixteen, and a year feeding it before life is all gone. Two years left, and none of it for her.

Jemma steps away from the water barrel when Lady catches her arm, almost spinning her around. Her hair, curly where most of the Holy Wood's is straight, is wild from her pillow. "Where you going, mija?"

"Gathering," Jemma says, and it's true enough. Gathering is her role in the Holy Wood.

Lady is her best friend. She's named for one of the ancient priestesses who lived in the Teevee, their most important god, but Jemma doesn't see the priestess in her. Lady lives squarely in this world, fierce and open. She studies Jemma's face and says, "By yourself?"

You don't Gather by yourself, not even in times of peace, and Lady knows it. Finally Jemma says, "Just today."

"I miss her, too."

Yes, but you ain't fifteen today. You wasn't walking with Zee when she doubled over in agony, when blood stained her dress. You didn't run screaming to the Little Doctors.

Jemma can't stop thinking about Zee. Zee was the last person you expected to want to have a baby. She led the Gatherers as if it were the most important job in the Holy Wood, and with her you thought it was, as if all it took to keep the village alive was the fruit and shoes and rice in their bags. But no—what really mattered to everyone was in that belly when she got pregnant.

Zee loved it. She did. When she became a Mama, the roundness got rounder, the flush in her cheeks got brighter. A girl in there, she said, a warrior or a Gatherer or a priestess. The other Gatherers were drawn to her, this beacon of life. And then—

She wasn't old enough to End, even. But Zee Ended all the same.

Jemma's not sure she can ever say this about Zee aloud. So instead she simply says to Lady, "You didn't see me today, okay?"

"Okay, this time. But you don't come back by dark I'm gonna kick your ass."

"Deal," Jemma says, just glad to be free before Trina grabs her, too.

A Tween almost clips her with a battered bicycle, and she moves toward the iron gates. They're tall and spiked. They once held off whatever evils kept the Parents awake at night, but now they work just as well against the lions and bears that grow more fearless all the time.

Wagons are rumbling down from the Great Field to pick up the last winter spinach. Their people have claimed every flat space chiseled out by the Parents: their lawns and parks and sacred places turned from grass to vegetables and fruit, their swimming pools holding fish and water for drinking and growing. For all they built, the Parents could never have imagined building a world like this.

The lake below looks like god's hand, blue fingers pushing aside the trees and the dirt, and the Bear Wall a bracelet around its wrist. Maybe the gods did place it there behind the Wall, because in all the hills only the hand holds fish, and water that lasts through the summer when the

desert winds slice through the valley. That's why they guard it. That's why it's the Lake of the Holy Wood.

And there is the Holy Wood sign on the mountain, with an aytch as tall as ten Children. You could see it from across the valley, Jemma thinks, see it calling all to the Holy Wood when the priests still walked the hills and the god Teevee talked to Children in their homes.

Today Jemma doesn't want to speak to the gods. She barrels down the hill and doesn't stop until she sees the Bear Wall, a long curved dam that spans the canyon with bears' stone faces guarding the face of it.

Her legs stretch out to cross the Wall, but strong arms grab her from behind. "Not that way, Jemma." The voice is starting to deepen. It will not last, she thinks, and she turns toward Apple. Of course Apple saw her leave. Apple is the best Muscle in the Holy Wood, not because he's the strongest but because he sees everything.

"I need to leave," she says.

"I know," he says. "I saw you at Zee's fire last night." Yes, he sees everything.

"We getting low on fruit."

"Really? I know you your whole life, and you try to tell me you looking for fruit?" He steps close to her, so much taller than she is—even though she's the tallest girl—and still growing at almost seventeen. His chest and shoulders are bare, now that the rains have gone, and she counts the raised scars on his bicep from the lion that mauled him. *Gods*, she asks, *how do we still live?*

"I'm not going back." She feels the fight starting in her stomach, and it has never let her be. Any other Muscle, any other Gatherer, he would have hit her and dragged her back, but this is Apple and Jemma.

"Believe it or not, Jemma," he says as he looks to see who's watching them, "I don't always think like a Muscle. I'll go with you."

Her heart climbs in her chest a little at that, and she pushes it back down.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Jemma thinks Apple of all people knows what she meant when she

said she missed Zee. He was as close to her as Jemma was. That's the reason she doesn't have to say it.

They slide down the hill away from the Bear Wall, yellow dust cascading under their feet. They reach an unfamiliar road and push down into the ravine. In just a few turns, Jemma doesn't recognize it and wonders how in all her years as a Gatherer she's never seen this before.

Others have passed this way. The doors are all missing, probably chopped for fires, and the houses start to collapse from the wounds exposing their insides to the world. They don't scavenge those long-stripped houses, just snatch fruit from ancient trees that look as if they're about to stop bearing.

"What you gonna do for oranges when those stop?" Apple says.

"You'?"

"We," he corrects himself, but she knows he has stopped always thinking as We.

"Don't you have Muscle-y things to think about?"

"Aren't you supposed to be a Mama today?" She can tell he senses the sting as it leaves his tongue.

The answer is slow to come and then it's gone, because she sees an explosion of red spike before her, and under it a slip of white. A wall.

"A house?" Apple asks.

"Red spike don't always mean houses." The Parents used to plant the spiky vines around their walls, called by a name no one can pronounce. Once Jemma came across a bungalow completely swallowed by red flowers. She imagined a girl like her, a girl from the Parents' time, sleeping ageless in the darkened spiked bedrooms, waiting for the End to end.

Jemma pulls her hatchet out of her belt just as Apple lifts his machete. Both of them hack at the twisting cords supporting the flowers. The red flowers are blinding and beautiful but hide spikes an inch long, so they try to touch them only with their blades.

Apple's breath hisses, two long lines of red welling on his forearm

from the spikes. “That’ll match your lion scars,” Jemma says. “But maybe you should make up a better story about where you got em.”

Beneath the spikes are the battered lip of a gate, iron studs pounded into the wood. The iron would trade well. She already knows she’ll be back to this place with a larger crew of Gatherers.

“So,” he says, and his voice is lower, more intimate, “you don’t want to be a Mama.”

Jemma swings at the vine harder than she should, and her hatchet digs into the wood beneath it. She grunts, pulls it out. “Why would I?” Talking about a choice that isn’t a choice.

She never had the Mama in her. In the Daycare, she was banned from watching the babies like all the other kids did. She’d either ignore them while they wandered into the koi ponds or—worse—goad them into trouble. When she was five, she talked a three-year-old into drinking his own pee.

“We need you to be a Mama,” Trina had said earlier today.

“You need me? Or this baby?”

“We need your baby,” Trina said.

“If I roll with someone,” Jemma said, “it’ll be cuz I wanna be with him. Not to give you a goddamn baby.” She smiled when Trina flinched.

“Then it’s easy,” Trina said. “Become a Mama—or leave.”

Her life, or her tribe. Jemma feels everything tearing in two.

But as Apple looks at her right now she just says, “Being a Mama’s hard. *You* have a baby.”

“I tried,” Apple says, “but it didn’t work.”

And he pulls her back. It’s so easy with Apple. He lives in her first memories, has always been the shadow over her shoulder, but despite a life together they’ve almost never been alone. Every boy Apple’s age has asked to roll with her, even though she always turns them down. Not Apple. Why?

Now the gate is clear. There’s a rusted latch, but a few strikes at the old wood and she can kick it open. Apple lets her. Jemma needs something to strike.

The house still has its door. Jemma lifts her hatchet again, but Apple says, “Wait.” He turns the knob, and the door swings open as it must have the day the Parents disappeared.

The air fills the lungs but doesn’t feel as if it belongs there. Smells of things Long Gone hit Jemma, and she can’t identify anything but decay.

They look for metal and glass in what must have been the kitchen. Everything else has rotted, but in those the Parents’ food sometimes lasts. Most of the cans are rusted or bulged. Gatherers know to stay away from those and the death they bring. Three of them hold corn without rust, and she places them in the bag.

Gathering brings riches with it. Gatherers are the ones who find tools and supplies, and sometimes they keep stuff for themselves. Sometimes extra food from the fields can fall into their packs when Farmers need something they have. That’s why all the Gatherers are girls—because girls get the good jobs first.

It’s getting hard to Gather, though. The Parents’ homes near the Holy Wood have been picked over long ago. They have to push deeper and deeper into the Flat Lands, the deserted city blocks at the base of the Holy Wood. In ten years, she thinks, most of it will be gone. Then it’s just whatever the Children can grow or make.

“Yes!” Apple whoops. He has disappeared into another room and he emerges, arms filled with tiny rattling bottles. “Look, medsen!”

Medsen will make this trip. It can cure fevers, maybe keep another flu house from burning. Only the Parents could make it, and every year they find less.

She watches Apple celebrate, and sees a dusty fragment of herself in the glass behind him. She can see why Apple never wanted to roll with her. She’s not pretty the way the other girls are—hard when she should be soft, gawky when she should be lithe. She doesn’t have the kind of body that makes a good Mama, doesn’t have the kind of desires. Sex is such a part of the Holy Wood, so important to the survival of the Holy Wood, that the other girls wear it like a fur. But for her it’s never fit so well.

She looks down the narrow hallway where they stand. In it are the kinds of pictures that the Parents made, as if they convinced life to stand still. They had that power. She hasn't seen one up close in a long time, and she studies them now: Children frozen in place, one blinking, one crying, but mostly she sees the Parents. Bigger than the Children, faces made of tree bark. Smiling, two of them, in picture after picture.

"Look how light they are," Apple says, pointing at their skin. "I thought only cannibals was white."

It's true. The two of them are the descendants of all the peoples who lived in the Holy Wood, with skin that almost matches the brown of the hills, but this family has pink skin, blue eyes, and unnatural yellow hair. Like the creatures from their nightmares.

"Maybe the Parents was gods to live so long," she hears Apple say.

"Maybe," she answers, feeling all of her fifteen years. "Then why we stop turning into gods?"

CHAPTER TWO

THE STACK

Apple doesn't expect anyone to wind down the choking street—they're the first people to cross the gate since the Parents died, and no one is racing to cross it now. Still, Muscle training doesn't die—he stands with his back to the wall, in the shadow of a barren pomgrant tree, both ends of the road in view. The only motion comes from Jemma.

Apple watches Jemma pull the red spike back, weaving the lighter tendrils across the gap until from a distance he can't see a gate. It only needs to keep till tomorrow when Jemma comes back with a crew, but she's had salvages busted before by another tribe.

He admires her fingers' dance among the thorns. She's a good Gatherer, but not the best. She'd be a good Farmer, if she could stand still. She'd be a good Muscle, if she could handle the blood. He doesn't know if he likes her more for all the things she is, or for all the things she isn't.

Jemma's been marked since they were Middles at age seven. The others are so sure of themselves, of their place in the Holy Wood. Jemma asks and asks. She doubts. It takes a special person not to be sure.

Her questions saved him.

The tribe forbade going to the Holy Wood sign after sunset. The gods return to it at night, and the Priestess says they dance and cry and will kill any Child who comes to the ayth. Jemma said, "Why? Why would they do that? If we got gods on our doorsteps I got a couple of questions for em."

She snuck over the fence and made her way up the hill without a

torch, she told Apple later. She sat on the ayth in the moonlight. She didn't find the gods, but on the way back she found Apple getting killed by the lion.

He had been standing sentry over the field, lowly new Muscle duties to keep out the deer and pigs that raided it. And because deer and pigs came, so did the lion. He never heard the lion's cry, just felt the bite at the back of his neck and hot fur bearing him down to the earth. He slipped free somehow, rolled loose long enough to find a rock. The lion pinned him down, ripping his bicep, its tan face and white cheeks snapping at his. He smashed at it, but it only grew angrier.

Jemma had no weapon besides the rock she threw to distract it. Even if she had, she probably wouldn't have attacked. She was too scared. Instead, she drew herself up and screamed, "Look at me, puta! Look at me!" She puffed herself like a bullfrog, made herself taller and wider, and screamed.

Lion Tamer, the Muscle called her later. Even the lions can't stand your voice. She was nine.

It was a stupid taboo, and only the Priestess cared when she broke it, but they sentenced Jemma to the shed for the week. The Muscle were so grateful to Jemma that they let her walk out the very first day.

She walked out with Apple's heart.

"Home?" he says when she steps away from the gate. Jemma shakes her head, and he's glad.

Apple sheathes the machete but takes his bow off his shoulder. All the Muscle carry bows once they pass out of the Holy Wood. They used to send more Muscle with the Gatherers. Then Pablo rebelled with the Muscle, and they don't trust the Muscle anymore. The Muscle get smaller and smaller because the Olders are more scared of their own army than what's out there.

Apple should care more about being mistrusted, about being pushed to the side. But this isn't his time anymore. These aren't his people. The only "people" he has left is holding a hatchet in front of him.

"Can we go down to Ell Aye?" she says. The great city that includes the Flat Lands. He knew that's where she wanted to go.

He nods and gives her a quick grin, showing the dark sockets in the side of his smile that used to be his teeth. Two went missing in his Tweens, and he has never told her the same reason for the loss. Sometimes it's him biting back the lion, sometimes it's a rabbit bone. "How'd you lose your teeth?" she asks, returning to words from older days.

"A cannibal took em," he says, as if he had three more answers after that. "They was the only things sharper than his skinning knife."

"Someday you'll tell me the truth," she says.

"Maybe today," he says, and he touches her shoulder, leaving his hand there until her soft skin gives way under his fingers. He wonders if she knows, if she—

She cocks her head toward him, and he smiles and slowly pulls his hand away.

"Today?"

"Maybe," he says.

They break through trees and the entire lost city stretches out at their feet. The palms soar above the houses, all leaning south toward the sun. From above, Ell Aye looks untouched, unbroken from the Parents' time, but on the street it's as if the city has burst. The houses are falling apart, the streets have overgrown, and the only people who live there are Last Lifers and bears.

The Holy Wood territory ends in the wide wide Flat Lands of Ell Aye, where all territories end. They're too difficult to defend, too open for ambush, too far from water. If you're brave, though, it's still rich. Gathering teams have come back loaded down with tools, food, medicine. The Gathering teams have also come back without people. They left bodies lying in the wide bolvards, carved up with a Long Lifer blade.

The whispers in the Holy Wood talk more about the Palos, because the white skin and the necklaces of teeth make for gossipy shivers. As a Muscle, he knows the Last Lifers, the ones no one talks about, are far more dangerous. They're closer to the Holy Wood, and their minds are gone.

The Last Lifers are kids who turn sixteen or seventeen and lose hope

and turn mad, unable to handle what comes next. Nothing matters, so nothing they do matters. They strip down to rags. They paint their eyes black with charcoal and hack at their hair until they look like browning skulls. They slash their skin with scars instead of tattoos. They slip away into the Flat Lands of Ell Aye until they find others like them. They nest in the Long Gone buildings. They eat and sleep and roll whenever. They hunt the Holy Wood for sport.

They should be going down with an army. “You know it’s not safe,” he says.

“Even more reason to go, huh?” She acts as if she’s without fear. He knows it’s probably creeping up inside her, and she’s fighting to push it down. Jemma does more brave things when she’s afraid than someone who’s actually brave.

He doesn’t respond, because he’s looking beyond the city to the lone hill rising up from the sea in the south. The Palos. “Smoke,” Apple says. “Always smoke.”

“They can’t still be eating. They gotta stop to kill people, right?” They laugh, but small. The cannibals put a hush on everything.

“Someday they’ll come here,” he says.

“They never come this far. Not since our Mamas’ Mamas’ Mamas’ times.”

“Then the pull’s gonna be that much stronger.” Everyone knows the Palos will come. When they do—when they do, Apple knows, they will cook the young and the old in their fires. He’s heard the stories, he’s seen the camps burned in their wake. But the in-between kids they will steal. They don’t make babies of their own, the stories say. They steal you and they turn you into them. And then your tribe will see your own brown eyes in the blue ones killing them.

“Buddha Teevee Jesucristo,” Apple says, never sure which god should hear.

Not today, though. And today Jemma wants to go down. She points to the tower she calls the Stack because it’s round and stacked like plates in a kitchen, plates stabbed with a sword. “I’ve been wanting to see it

my whole life,” she says, and he feels the rest of that sentence. He knows what it is to want for your whole life.

Apple follows her fingers to the spire and shakes his head. He’s taken Gatherers there before. “It’s picked over, has been before we was born.”

“Not to Gather. To see.”

To wonder why the Parents built it, he thinks, knowing how she thinks, how they could build such a thing and then vanish.

He shrugs. It’s dangerous, but he’s a Muscle. And he’s not just with her to protect her.

They drop down the hill, speedy on the winding road. Without warning they’re at the bottom and the 101 looms above them.

It was the grand road of the ancient people and figures in all the old stories. The Parents would spend days on the 101, they would say, living in the cars that litter the city. Even now, a mass of cars jams the east side of the 101, as if they all stopped and gave up.

Once a flock of birds fell from the sky in the thousands and hit the camp, their dead wings carpeting the streets and everyone scooping them up and roasting them, not caring if they were diseased. He wonders if they simply froze in the air.

Apple has never seen a car move, but these remind him of the birds. Where were they going, and why didn’t they get there? He knows but can’t bring himself to say it.

“Why is it called the 101? A hundred and one miles long?” Jemma says. This is an old question, but it’s clear she’s asking it to take her mind off the darkened bulk of the 101 now above their heads. He’s feeling it, too. Vines hang down from its belly, leaking decay. Everything the Parents built has started to rot.

“A hundred and one ways to die.”

Jemma punches him. “Now you just thinking like a Muscle.”

“Maybe,” Apple says, trying not to react to the punch or the fact that her hand lingers on his arm after it, “but it’s a good place for an ambush.”

After the underpass, the Stack climbs before them in a yellowing white pile of plates, hundreds of feet high. The plates that shade the

windows are broken in places, as if a giant has chipped them against a doorjamb. A spire juts from the top, like the sundial they built in the village.

The closest door is ajar, and Jemma moves toward it, but Apple stops her. “Not yet,” he says, and leads her on a long loop of the building.

“You know peoples who left Ell Aye?”

“I met some traders once. At the Downtown. They go all around our world.”

He had escorted the Olders to a meeting with all the tribes of Angelenos, the people who own the hills of Ell Aye. All the tribes were there: the Holy Wood, the Downtown, the San Fernando, even the strange and far-off Malibu. During the meeting the Downtown had been visited by traders pedaling bicycle carts, and the giant stadio where the Downtown lived was buzzing with talk about their treasures and the world beyond. He found himself swept up in this strange new world, like Jemma is now.

“What they called?” she says.

“Ice Cream Men.”

“They men? Like, old?”

“Nah, they just kids like us, boys and girls both,” he says, “that’s why I membered their name. It didn’t make no sense.”

“There are peoples I didn’t even know about, and I barely left the Bear Wall,” she says. “I wasted so much time.”

Apple is thinking the same thing. He’s waited too long. He knows he’s waited too long. Why hasn’t he told her? Maybe because for what he feels, they’ve lost their words. A boy and a girl, they can’t just be.

They enter the Stack after their circuit, and Jemma falters next to him. Nothing about the entry room tells them what the Parents intended; there’s no message in its shape. Splinters remain of a wooden table that must have once been bolted to the floor. “Up?” Apple asks, checking her courage. He once dared her to climb down a cliff with him and she did it one-handed. She won’t say no.

“Up,” she says, and pushes into a staircase. The dim wash of the first

room pales to nothing as they climb, even with the door wedged open. The door to the first landing won't budge for them, so they keep climbing. The third door opens, and he breathes in the lightness.

"Nothing is square!" Jemma says, and then laughs. "Of course not." The outer walls are curved. The rest of the room is a jumble of the chairs the Parents seemed to love, with wheels that let you roll anywhere. Jemma steps to the window and pushes. It holds even when the one next to it has shattered.

Apple picks up a phone. They know what they are although no one has ever used one in this life: a way for the Long Gones to talk to you from the dead. Somehow that connection is lost. What would he ask the dead if he could?

He almost imagines he can feel it coming. In the last few months he's found a way of looking at the world, a way of understanding how all the pieces fit, and he thinks: *How cruel, to finally understand it, and then to leave.*

Those are the Children who die first: the curious, the wise, the calm. When the End comes, it comes first for the ones who see the world better, who control their actions, while the beastly and the stupid remain. The Children call them the Touched, as if they're marked for a sooner death. It may be only six months, nine months shorter, but in their lives every month matters.

It feels almost as it did when he was about to leave Daycare to head to the fields before he became a Muscle, that moment when leaving means nothing you do matters. It's not like the Last Lifers, it's not as if he doesn't care, it's just that he floats through the world with a lightness as if nothing he touches will last.

They say you feel better, before the End, so much better that everyone looks surprised when they actually End. They call it the Betterment, for the way that life seems to surge through your skin. Broken bones knit themselves together, scars heal. Your vision clears, your breath arrives quicker. And then you start to bleed through your nose, as if life is draining from the inside of your head. He doesn't feel that way yet. But he knows it's coming.

Jemma shoves a desk out of the way to get to the window; he watches her muscles ripple. He loves that she's a match for his strength. He taught her how to fight last year, and then she started winning. The other Muscle think that their strength is their only advantage against the Olders, the only thing that keeps them from being totally shut out, so they don't trust a girl like Jemma. Seeing that in Jemma just makes Apple think they were born as mirrored selves.

If you asked him where he would want to be on the last day, he would have said here. Unearthing the secrets of the Parents, here. Exploring their own lives, here. The important thing is that the *here* is Jemma.

Now they're looking at the towers the Downtown people worship almost as gods but never visit. She reaches out, touches Apple on the shoulder. She would never have done that before this day.

"We should leave the Holy Wood," she whispers, and he's not sure if he's meant to hear, the way the sounds seem to melt right into his skin.

Apple doesn't answer because his eye catches more pictures, this time on a table next to a kind of glass rectangle. Two Parents, two Parents with two Children. On the next desk, two more Parents, smiling.

"Something else in those pictures, Jemma," he says. "They was always together." He hasn't been able to explain what he felt, but the pictures show it.

"So?"

"They didn't just live forever. They was together. That's what made the Parents the Parents."

"I would take either," she says.

"I don't think it works that way," Apple says. "Together takes time." Enough time. *Now now now*, he says, only to himself. *Now*. He leans toward her, and her lips are just open so that they fit right between his.

He's waited too long.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOWL

Jemma hadn't imagined his look from before, the one that left her open and naked in the center of the room, because he's looking at her that way again and then he's kissing her, brushing her lips softly while she holds completely still.

She pulls back. "You never asked me to roll," Jemma says.

"I never asked no one to roll," he says, and she realizes she's never seen him with anyone else.

"But why?"

"Cuz I feel something different for you." Before she can show the way that cuts, he says, "Something good. Something like the Parents. And no one told me how to show it."

"Oh," she says, spinning that thought in her mind but still, this time, kissing him back. This time, allowing herself to feel it: the cracked skin of his lips growing softer, wetter, as they explore hers. She's kissed lots of boys—all the girls have—but all that is gone with those lips. The two of them are kissing as if they're trying to uncover the truth of each other under that skin.

The sun interrupts them, its rays pushing under the window coverings as it swells onto the horizon. "It's time," Apple says, and they reluctantly pull apart.

"A little more. We could see so much more higher," she says, a pleading note. She knows they will never be back, and maybe Apple sees that, too, because he doesn't argue, just climbs. Is that why he left with her today, because they are running out of time?

The other floors are more of the same, and when the sun finally sets, she's ready to go at the next flight of stairs.

They reach what must be the top of the tower and crack the door. Unlike the other floors, it's dark inside. Apple chokes and backs into Jemma. "You smell that?" he whispers.

Yes, oh gods, she does. "It smells like shit!" she hisses. Shit and something else, blood and death and something wrong. And as the darkness through the door resolves, she sees dim shapes moving, clothes rustling. Something waking up. Something they woke.

Jemma is bounding down the steps before she knows it, trusting the railing that slides under her hand in the blackness. She barely hears Apple behind her, both of them knowing the only thing that matters is speed.

Death whispers past them—really there or not? It doesn't matter. At any moment a knife will pierce her back; she can feel it between her shoulder blades. But then she hears the shouts, hears the voice of the Last Lifers, and knows a quick knife is more than she could hope for.

They burst through the greasy white room and into the street.

"Home?" Jemma says, attempting to sound casual.

"It's probably dinnertime," Apple says as calmly as he can for someone running for his life.

When they reach the underpass, though, Apple steers her away from it, even though the voices pour out of the Stack into the streets.

"That way's home!" she says.

"Look in the shadows," Apple says. And then Jemma looks at the underpass the way Apple does and sees an elbow and then an arm and then an ax.

Then she sees something more, a sharp flash from the overpass of the 101, a long tube of something, and Jemma screams. "Gun!" A gun? How did the Last Lifers get a gun? And they dive behind a low wall before something loud bites into the bricks, like an unseen chisel.

The Last Lifers are coming at them from the south and the east. They're blocking the way home. That means that, for now, home is to the north and west.

"With me," she says, and she pulls Apple to the north side of the

street, the uphill side, as they push west. She looks over her shoulder at one of the Last Lifers and she knows the scowl under the blood and the grime, knows it from her own village.

“Andy!” she pants to Apple. “That’s Andy!”

“That *was* Andy, then.” And that’s why the Last Lifers are so terrible. They’re not demons like the Palos, they’re brothers and sisters. Andy once gave her blackberries that he found bursting through a car overwhelmed by bramble. Now he has a spear raised toward her, and if Jemma stopped to greet him, he would bury it in her guts and twist. That and worse before she dies.

There are more behind Andy, still visible in the thickening dark. Seven Last Lifers at least, more than you’d ever find together at once. They don’t usually get that big because they kill one another off. They run in packs like coyotes, but coyotes don’t tear one another’s hearts out. These animals do. They’ll idly attack one another if they don’t have other prey.

Jemma knows where to go now, remembering a Gather with Lady and a Muscle long gone, looking for a Long Gone store of medsen. They stumbled upon another way home, and—and here it is, so fast that they almost run past it. She tacks hard to the right, almost losing Apple and maybe losing the Last Lifers, through a long narrow alley and then up a flight of stairs.

At the top, the stairs are flanked by walls, and they crouch behind one. Apple pulls back his bow and looks down the steps. She can’t see over the wall as she ducks, only watches him unleash an arrow and hears a scream below. Six. Apple notches a new arrow, but he must have missed because he quickly fires another before there’s a gurgle, closer than before. There’s a quiet as the Last Lifers regroup.

“I never seen you work before,” she says. “It’s nice to look at.”

“It’s nice to be looked at,” he says, with a little smile. “But you a better kisser than the other Muscle.”

“Now what?”

“The rest gonna charge at once,” Apple says.

“How you know?” she asks.

“They used up all their strategy down on the street,” he says. “Now all they got left is crazy.”

Ahead of them in the dark, away from the staircase, is a tangle of streets, narrow and twisting even in the Parents’ time but now choked by brush. If she barely knows her way, she has to hope the Last Lifers, maddened as they are by the End, will know even less. She twists left and right, hoping that the circles they’re running will take them north to the next underpass through the 101.

Behind them they hear the screams of the Last Lifers, closer than they should be.

The street drops them back down the hill, and they pull up at the bottom, lungs burning, the underpass not where it should be. They’re in a sort of glade, a place where the Parents used to park their cars, and there are still a few of them, overgrown until they’re just ivy-covered mounds. But there is no 101. “That’s not right,” Jemma says. Beyond the glade is a street, and they race to it, hoping to get their bearings.

Jemma spies the letters then as she sees all of it at once—the first of the Last Lifers pouring off the hill, the 101 farther than she thought, too far to reach now, and the forbidden gate in front of them. They’re at the Bowl, one of the Gathering places of the Parents. It’s the place all the stories warn about, and they’re going to have to enter it if they want to live. She can only hope that whatever force has guided the Last Lifers, maybe the evil in the Bowl will be enough to throw it back.

She can’t move, even though she knows she must. Apple pulls her shoulders toward him, looks at her with clear eyes. “Time to meet our ghosts,” he says. Somehow his gentleness makes her feet budge where the Last Lifers couldn’t, and they’re past the gate and into the terror that seems to close in on them.

None of the Holy Wood have ever entered the Bowl, even though they can see it from their ridge. It’s not that they don’t dare, although they certainly do not. It’s that every taboo, every confusing, conflicting legend, agrees on this: Stay out of the Bowl.

It should smell, she thinks. She thought it would smell, of death and worse. But even as she wonders how long the smell lasts, she does sniff something, the scent of the pines that line their path. Then she thinks it's far more beautiful than she could have imagined, with ponderosas thick and green, and pine needles up to her ankles—

But then a final turn and it opens up before her and it's worse. It is a bowl. She sees immediately how it gets its name, like a giant scoop from the hillside. Seats climb the walls of the Bowl; at the bottom is a platform and a kind of shelter like a clamshell. She couldn't have even thought of how the Parents used it—religion, games?—except the old stories said they used to sing here. The Holy Wood Bowl, they called it.

It doesn't matter, though, because now the Parents use it in another way. Everywhere she looks are bodies: draped over chairs, tossed roughly into walkways, piled seven deep, tangled arm over leg over head, the Bowl filled with them. The bodies are bigger than they are. There's no flesh on them anymore. Jemma feels horror rising in her throat, but also a sort of awe. This is the place where the future came to its End.

"We found the Parents," Apple says.

There is nowhere to hide among the bones and smiling skulls. They climb midway up the Bowl before they hear the shrieks of the Last Lifers. Jemma looks around, panicked, for some kind of hole. "Help me," she whispers, to whatever god will hear.

Crunches of bones at the bottom, the crackling cries growing louder. "Help us," she says, the fear rising. "Show us where to hide."

And—and something does. There's a buzz in her ears, like the beginning of a headache. It's like her head can't quite grab on to the sound, and the disconnect hurts her head. The sound recedes. In the silence, a blue haze floats down over the Bowl, like scattered ash at first, then brighter and brighter like stars.

She worries that the Last Lifers will see it, but even Apple doesn't seem to notice it. The haze swirls in clouds around her, until it takes the form of Children.

It's showing me the Last Lifers about to attack, she realizes. Not in

perfect images—the edges of the Last Lifers are blurry, as if the haze doesn't know how to draw bodies. The features are sketched out in dots. She saw a painting once, in a grand Long Gone house under a giant banyan tree. It was of a girl, a dancer made of little dabs of paint. When Jemma looked at it up close, she saw only the dots and an impression of the shape. When she stepped back, she saw the girl.

The haze looks like that kind of painting—vague and blurry if she looks right at it, but falling into shape if she looks at it out of the corner of her eye.

The Last Lifer shapes in the haze come toward her. When she looks back up the hill, this time, she sees a passageway under the bones. One of the benches has been dug out by a coyote—a burrow in the bones. It's invisible to her real eyes, but the haze shows her a way in. In the haze, the Last Lifer figures seem to walk right past it without noticing.

Jemma hesitates. *Is it safe?* Then she thinks, *You asked for help from the gods. It'd be rude not to take it.* She leads Apple straight to where the burrow should be. She moves two skulls, and it's there. Under a long bench, under the bodies, there is a pocket big enough to hold them both. Jemma crawls under, followed by Apple.

"Did you see that?" she says, but Apple looks at her blankly. She shakes her head, but a loud bone crack below stops her next sentence. Apple slides up behind her as she lies down on her side, staring out into the bones. The smell of ancient death settles upon them.

She whispers quietly to ward off the panic that threatens to smother her under the bones. "This ain't what I planned today," she says.

The Parents used to bury their dead, but when the End came, they died so quickly that there was no one left to bury them. All the Children could do was drag their Parents into the Bowl and leave them there to rot. Now they burn their dead the day they die.

Now, she thinks, we're all orphans.

The Last Lifers are supposed to be afraid of the dark, because the gap between worlds is narrow then. They're supposed to be afraid of deaths and ghosts and anything that can steal their souls quicker. But these Last

Lifers move as if ghosts aren't real, smashing through the Bowl, angry and sure.

She can hear their calls as they divide and scale the sides of the Bowl. They sound wild, like lions or bears, but neither. A bear never talked or thought or loved like they did, so in those cries are everything lost and abandoned. Jemma finds something strange pushing aside the fear: sadness for Andy, the ten-year-old who loved the Long Gone cars, the thirteen-year-old who dove off the Bear Wall first.

She breathes hard and sharp, and Apple mistakes it for panic. He wraps his arm around her waist, threads his leg between hers, until their hips and shoulders and breath match and her head nestles under his chin. For the first time since they ran down the Stack, she feels a flash of calm. When she was seven she hid from the Olders and the others looked for her. Apple found her under a table, crying. Instead of pulling her out, he put his finger to his lips and climbed under.

Jemma is aware of every place where Apple's skin touches hers. Her skin seems to heat on contact and spread until all those places are linked and on fire, as if he's touching her everywhere. He feels it, too, because he rubs against her, presses his fingers wide across her belly. *We can't be feeling this here, among all this death, with people hunting us*, she thinks. And yet, why not? Isn't it all part of surviving?

She can see windows of the sky through the lattice of bones before her, but can't see down any deeper into the Bowl. Someone is two rows down, stomping the skeletons as if they're dry wood. The cracks shoot through the still air.

Footsteps fall in their row, and she can't help shaking until Apple's stillness draws the shivers out of her. Three people, just like in the haze. The feet crunch closer, closer, closer, in front of her eyes, and then they're past. She doesn't breathe.

Then they fade away.

The buzz comes back, and then the haze does, suddenly, as if it's just popping in for something it forgot to tell her. In the dots of the haze she can see Andy's face, those empty eyes. The haze can't quite draw his

features, but she recognizes the pain in him. Is it real? Is Andy coming back for them?

“I think they’re gone,” Apple says, starting to move.

“Wait,” she says.

They wait long moments, listening for the sounds. Maybe Apple was right. But a smaller set of footsteps start again. Toward them.

She feels Apple tense to reach for his machete, but he can’t swing it properly while he’s wrapped around Jemma. Her fingers reach for her hatchet but they’re not quite there and she doesn’t know if she could bear to swing it, and then a foot smashes away the bones in her face and it’s Andy’s face but not, Andy lost in eyes rimmed with coal, reaching in to tear them apart.

“Andy,” Apple says calmly, probably seeing that Andy doesn’t have room to swing his spear under the bench. “It’s us. Your friends.”

Andy hesitates for a moment, life flashing across his eyes before flickering out, and Jemma swings the hatchet, buries it deep into his skull. He collapses without a whimper, with a face as clear and confused as a baby.

Jemma pulls out the hatchet, wipes it off. Carefully. But her hands shake so much that she’s worried she’ll cut herself. *Andy. Andy. Andy.*

They huddle close together in silence, hoping that no one heard Andy fall. Jemma shivers so hard she’s afraid the bones will rattle signals to the Last Lifers, and Apple pulls her closer to calm her. “We ain’t meant for this,” he whispers.

“You almost seventeen,” she says. “How you keep living?”

“You gotta remember what it’s like to be alive.”

They listen for the crashes as the Last Lifers move to the top of the Bowl. If they knew Andy, if they remembered him, the Last Lifers don’t look for him. Just when she’s shaking with cold and exhaustion, Apple pushes with his thigh. Out.

They make their way down through the Bowl, the only Children to visit the Parents.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE OLDERS

On top of everything else, there are goats in the koi ponds. Trina is almost seventeen, but she doesn't have to worry about floating off the earth anytime soon. As the Oldest, the leader of the Holy Wood, she's tethered to this life through an endless string of annoyances.

The Little Doctors started throwing scissors at one another in the middle of trying to patch up the leg of a Farmer. They fight all the time. The Farmer lost the leg and now, if he lives, he can only work in the Daycare. Jemma threw a fit last night, and now Trina has to fix it. The goats are eating all the plants in the koi ponds.

And then Zee—she was wrong, it's not the goats on top of everything else.

Trina doesn't believe in grief, but she's setting some of it aside for Zee. She talked Zee into becoming a Mama. She was the only person who thought Zee would be a good one.

Before she became an Older, Trina was the head Farmer while Zee was head Gatherer. They were the rare Children who did their jobs thoroughly because they liked doing things right.

They used to wonder if they came from the same Dad, but no one kept track of the Dads. Then they would hear the identical tones in each other's voices when they yelled at a Middle and thought that they were right.

After she heard about Zee, after she lit the fires to burn her body,

she pulled out a bottle of whiskey, a gift from Zee, and drank it until her forehead was numb.

Now she's walking down the main street, taking the pulse of the village around her. Nothing feels different from yesterday, before Zee. Grief doesn't live in the village; that's the good news. It just lives in the few people too slow to run away from it.

The life in the street, though, it has a way of rubbing off. Everyone seems to be running, to be shrieking. Two five-year-olds kiss on the ground. A line of kids leave the Daycare, from shortest to tallest, and every one of them is singing. A different song. As much as she hates it sometimes . . . for Trina, this is the center of the world.

She sees every age group out there. The Angelenos have all the kids marked off in neat bunches by age, each with their own roles. The babies go to a year and do nothing. The Toddlers go to four and terrorize the Holy Wood. Nino goes to six, and that's when kids start to learn how to work in the kitchens and fields. The Middles go to nine; they start watching the Toddlers in Daycare and teaching them the stories. By Tweens, they have found a trade. The Teens start at thirteen and get ready to become Mamas and Dads. At fifteen, they stop naming you. You make a baby or you don't, and you End.

Never leave the Holy Wood empty, they say.

The memory of her talk with Jemma is rawer than it should be. "You fifteen now," Trina had said.

"You talking to me about that *now*?" *Ah, that bitch.* Did she think she wanted to be here talking about Mamas when she's talked her friend to that death? "You ain't had to do this. The Oldest don't got to make no baby," Jemma said.

"I couldn't," Trina said, remembering the clumsy hands on her from all the boys they sent her way, the pain in her stomach when what would have been a little girl died and all her hope did, too.

"If I roll with someone," Jemma said, "it'll be cuz I wanna be with him." And Trina flinched and remembered the boy she liked, who died before she even tried to become a Mama.

Trina almost likes Jemma. But right now she needs her to just say yes. She has enough pendejas to deal with today.

The rest of the Olders are already at the Older House when she gets there.

When Trina enters the front room, Mira is draped across the big chair the Olders use for ceremonies. “Jesucristo, Mira, get off the throne,” she says, and Mira lazily swings her feet to the ground. The rest of her doesn’t move.

The Olders aren’t really the oldest in the village. Just five hags who can’t have babies and like to mess with people, she thinks. This is who leads the Holy Wood. It’s supposed be an honor to be an Older, but everyone looks down on them a bit because they couldn’t make babies. Olders might have power, but the Mamas get all the honor.

Trina’s in charge of all the Olders as the Oldest, but “in charge” just means someone willing to do all the work. Mira is the actual oldest girl in the Holy Wood, grown unmoored in the way all the seventeen-year-olds tend to be. Trina almost wants her to go. In-sook milks her spot as an Older for everything—the first meat, the best Gathers, sparkly rings. Lupe is still young and wants to fix things like the Carpenter she used to be.

The only one who’s dangerous is Heather, who leans against the wall and watches her. Heather is smart, and all that smart pours into an acid tongue. She talks like a true believer in the gods, but mostly she talks of the weakness of boys. Every mistake the boys make is a reason to take something away. Heather got the Olders to create a rule that made boys get a girl to speak for them before the boys are allowed to become anything that isn’t a Muscle or a worker.

The boys get only the strong jobs, not the smart ones, which means most of the Muscle are boys. Any girl can be a Muscle, but with so many other things girls are allowed to do, most don’t bother.

A group of girls, mostly Tweens, have started following Heather around: the Hermanas. They carry big sticks. When a boy breaks a rule, increasingly it’s the Hermanas, not the Muscle or even the Olders, who punish him. There never used to be beatings. Now the boys find

themselves under the sticks all the time. Trina tried to make a rule against the Hermanas, seeing how much power that gave Heather, but that time she got outvoted by the council. “Girls need girls to protect emselves,” In-sook said.

None of this would have happened without Pablo’s Rebellion. Pablo was the head Muscle of the Holy Wood, one of the best they’d ever had until he decided that the strongest should rule, not the Olders. Trina was thirteen when Pablo rose, when he peeled away a dozen other Muscle. He was tall, cunning, full of fire.

He claimed the gods spoke to him. Their voices rang in his ears. He saw visions tinged in blue. He said that boys were not meant to serve.

“We ain’t Muscle!” she remembered him rage in the Circle the night he declared war. “We the rightful Oldest. You oughta be following us.” He claimed that boys once owned the earth, a lie that shook the entire Circle, it was so bold. None of the girls believed him, but it was the lie that some of the boys needed. The Olders didn’t see the hunger the boys had to be equal. When the Oldest exiled him, most of the Muscle followed, with scores of Tweens.

The weeks that followed froze the Holy Wood. Pablo burned wagons full of corn, killed Gatherers in lonely houses. Some of the Muscle rallied in defense, but most of the strength was with Pablo.

When the sentries saw him coming in force with burning arrows, the village retreated to the Zervatory, the holiest Holy Wood place in the hills above them. If the gods had brought Pablo to that place, they abandoned him there. He broke on the Zervatory walls.

The Zervatory was big enough to fit the entire village behind its barred windows, which Trina knows from a long week hiding in the lower chambers with barrels of water and rations while Pablo’s Rebellion went on above.

She heard the shot that ended the rebellion. The rebels rushed the gates, most of the first wave falling to the archers. Pablo stepped out from behind the Star Watchers Pillar, a monument in the center of the Zervatory’s great lawn.

“The gods do not speak to girls,” he said, his speech flowery and unnatural. “They’ve shown me what used to be in the Parents’ day, and what is yet to come.” She remembers thinking: *Even the priestesses don’t claim to speak for the gods. Why is he different?*

The Zervatory was silent. Between his pauses, Trina could hear a drop of water escaping a cask.

“The Holy Wood will fall,” Pablo said. Trina can almost remember seeing his face, but of course she couldn’t. “There are weapons that will destroy—”

The Oldest shot him with the One Gun, resting the rifle on the Zervatory wall to steady her aim. The bullet tore through his throat and burrowed into the feet of the bearded Star Watcher behind him. The rebellion was over. No amount of boys could fight the One Gun.

That’s the biggest secret the girls keep from the boys. The boys think all guns died with the Parents, although some wonder. There is more than one gun still out there—but for the Olders to stay in power, there can only be One Gun. When the Gatherers find guns, the Gatherers who are always girls, they bring them to the Olders, who destroy them. If the Muscle ever believed they could have their own guns, if they didn’t walk in fear of the Olders’ gun, the balance of power might shift to them.

The lie bothers Trina, just a little, but it’s one that has gone from Oldest to Oldest to Oldest since the Holy Wood began. And it has kept them safe.

The Holy Wood beat Pablo, but it never recovered from the terror. The Olders set curfews for boys. No one balked. They gutted the Muscle, left their defenses weak. No one protested. By the time Trina became the Oldest, the boys found themselves hemmed in, weakened.

The Hermanas, the girls who follow Heather, are supposed to keep the girls safe as well, but they terrify the shit out of Trina. They hang out near the kitchens and demand that smaller kids bring them their food. The Hermanas cut marks in their wrists to show that they can hurt themselves worse than a boy ever could. They wear matching pink lipstick, freed from some Gatherer’s stash. Only the Mamas were supposed

to wear lipstick, the red lips of their Waking. Trina tried to ban the pink, too obvious a sign of defiance and violence, but it keeps coming back.

Trina has no love for boys, for all the chaos and violence that comes with them. But if she had to choose between them and anything Heather wanted, she'd bring in a whole army of boys.

Heather doesn't waste any time. "The Muscle been leaving the gates without asking," she says.

"Everyone leaves the gates without asking," Trina says.

"Yeah, but the Muscle are a lot more dangerous," Heather says.

"That's what makes em good at their *job*," Trina says.

"We should make em ask before they leave," In-sook says, and just like that Trina loses the vote: Heather, Mira, In-sook. They usually don't have to vote on things, really—Trina could look around and see which way the group's decision will go.

"I been thinking," Heather says. "Don't you think we got too many Muscle? I talked to Hyun. He says it's hard to train em all."

"So he just wants to . . . not train em?" It should surprise Trina, but it doesn't. Hyun is the head of the Muscle and has tried his hardest to run them into the ground. Ever since Pablo, the Olders have been scared of anyone too strong or smart heading the Muscle, afraid he'll take their power. They picked the exact opposite of that with Hyun. They should have picked Apple, who's as smart and calm as a girl.

"What would you do with em?" Lupe says.

"Keep some as Carpenters or Farmers—or Exile em," Heather says. Trina just stares at her. Some boys go through the rage when they became Teens; some get it so bad that the Olders make them leave. But they've never Exiled them just for being boys.

"Aww, don't get rid of the Muscle," Mira says, squirming a little on the throne. "They're my *favorite*."

The past few months, Mira has been rolling with any boy she can find. It's her version of the Last Life. Instead of not caring how she dies, she doesn't care how she lives.

"We ain't cutting down the Muscle," Trina says. "We need the

protection. And if we wanna make babies, we gonna need *someone* for the girls to roll with.”

“We ain’t had a vote,” Heather says.

“You don’t got the votes. I can tell you that right now.”

“We gonna.” They don’t vote on it now, but Heather will push and push it until one of the Olders goes her way.

On the way out, she watches two kids go, in moments, from hoisting well water to shouting to punching. She grabs the bigger kid’s shoulder.

“What you doing?”

“He said I ain’t doing it right!”

“Are you?”

“He can’t tell me what to do!”

Trina looks at the two boys, both trembling with anger, and the water sloshed all over the dirt. She’s about to answer, then just shakes her head and walks away.

There are shouts at the gate, and Trina looks up in time to see them clanging shut. They’re never shut in the daytime, except for in times of danger. She sprints toward them. If Hyun is manning them, he might end up killing someone. It won’t be the right someone, because he’s too stupid to know the difference.

Trina shoves through the crowd that’s sprouted in front of the gate. Behind the fence, behind a wall of machetes, are three dusty boys. “Exiles,” Hyun says, suddenly at her side. But she didn’t have to be told. Exiles—Malibus, based on the shorts they wear.

The Malibus live along the ocean and eat fish. It’s too far for the other Angelenos to fish themselves. When whales beach, though, the Malibus tell the other Angelenos so that they can all feast on the whale. Trina has made the trek to the water to harvest the whales, one of the only Holy Wood to see the ocean. She’ll never forget when she stood on a cliff and saw the blue open up beyond the fringe of pounding white. She felt as if she were about to fall off the edge of the world.

Every few months boys wander in from the other Angeleno peoples:

the Downtowns, the San Fernandos, and the Malibus. The Angelenos are a united people. They keep the peace, although squabbles over land are common, and they trade. Sometimes, they trade boys.

The Exiles are cast out from the Angeleno tribes because they were too violent or too strange for their people. So they roam in packs, sometimes looking for a home that fits them better, or they die. But sometimes those Exiles are what other tribes need—a boy who steals from the Downtowns might fit into the San Fernandos because he’s a good hunter. All of the Angelenos do this. It keeps their boys calm, their babies healthy.

The first Exile at the gate is a giant compared to the other Children. He must have been a threat to the Malibu Olders, who are stricter than other Olders and don’t tolerate even a little rebellion. With his size he will be in demand as a Dad. Trina knows the tribe will vote to accept him, even if it means they kick him out in weeks for the rage he shows simply standing there. That’s the line with the boys: You want someone strong enough who will create strong babies, but not so strong that you can’t control him.

The second Exile looks strong like him but smaller. The third, though, doesn’t look like an Exile. He’s too young, too small, as if an earthquake would topple him. If they expelled him he must have caused harm of a different kind. He’s the one Trina watches.

And he is the one who speaks. “We traveled through the lost city and hidden hills to the Holy Wood,” he says in the stiff official speech that only gets used when you talk to other Angelenos. “Under the ways of our peoples, we Exiles ask you to accept us.”

“Bad timing—we was just talking about how we got too many boys,” Trina says. She doesn’t even try to echo his tone.

“We got strength and skill to share,” the little one says. A standard Exile line.

“We all full up. Try the Downtowns.” She doesn’t like the look of the first two, and if the little guy was too much trouble for the Malibus . . . Less than half of the Exiles find a new home. These will be ones who don’t.

Trina turns to Hyun. “Keep the gate barred. If they reach through, chop off their arms.”

She’s stopped by that small, calm voice. “Please,” the little one says. “We got news of the Malibu.”

“I hear more than I want,” she says.

“You ain’t heard this,” he says. “The Malibus got someone who lived.”

Trina doesn’t breathe. Someone who didn’t End? A way to dry the trickle of life that seeps out of this village every year. Maybe the kid’s lying. But what if he’s not? She has to hear more.

She tries to keep her expression neutral as she says, “Open the gate.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CIRCLE

Gonna kill that girl. *If she's alive.* Lady stays at the gate long after the Exiles have passed through, long after the coyotes have started howling, long after the gates shut in her face.

She should have known. No, she knew. She's been best friends with Jemma her whole life. She saw that set in the jaw last night at Zee's fire and read it again this morning for what it was: Jemma was already half-way to stupid. She has a little bit of Last Lifer in her, Lady thinks; ready to shank the world the second it pushes too hard. Lady has a short temper, but Jemma has something different, sometimes worse.

Apple is with her; that's what the sentries told her. That's the only thing that doesn't send Lady out into the night after her.

Lady hears the rising sounds of the Children in the Circle, the night promising a jolt. Whenever Exiles come, the Holy Wood changes, its pattern weaving in new threads from the Exiles, and becomes new cloth.

She saw the big Exile, the beautiful one, looking like the old pictures of the holy ones on the billboards in the Flat Lands. When he came through the gates she rushed toward him to be seen. That has less to do with him than the ball of excitement she feels all the time lately rising in her chest, threatening to burst out whenever someone touches her skin or casts her a lingering look. His eyes slide right past her.

The sentries see Apple and Jemma before Lady does, stumbling out of the night. No, not stumbling. There's nothing wrong with them, but

something drags their bodies down, slows their step. Something happened to them in the night.

Anger fights with relief, and for a moment anger wins. Luckily for Jemma and Apple, it's directed first at the sentries who are blocking the gate with drawn machetes.

"Open the gate," she hears Jemma say, her voice sounding old.

"Hyun says don't open the gate. Why you out?"

"We was jumped by Last Lifers," Apple says. "Let us in."

"But you was outside the wall."

The other sentry says, "Hyun says we gotta ask him first."

"Jesucristo, you idiots, let em in," Lady says, pinching one of them hard on the neck and dragging him away from the fence. He's a little bigger than her, but she's madder. She glares at the other one until he sheathes his machete and draws back the bar.

"Thanks, Lady," Jemma says, walking through the gate and leaning forward to hug her. "It's been—"

"You shut up," Lady says, grabbing Jemma in a headlock that Jemma barely resists. "I been waiting for two hours. Last Lifers? What the hell you doin anywhere near em? What the hell you—" But then she sees streaks of tears on Jemma's cheeks under the headlock, Jemma who she's only seen cry when she fell off a house and knocked her wind out. And the always-calm Apple, jaw now tense and tight.

Lady releases Jemma but keeps her hand on Jemma's arm. "Last Lifers? You—you okay?"

"It's . . . it's tranquilo now," Jemma slowly says.

Tranquilo. All good. But Lady knows from that voice that it isn't all good—and whatever happened out there, Jemma won't tell it right away.

Then she remembers why she came to the gates in the first place, the news that couldn't wait until they were back in their house.

"Exiles," she says. That should be all she needs to get Jemma's attention. But Lady has more. "The Malibus," she says. "They got someone who lived."

"I don't understand," Jemma says, seeming to stumble over the idea.

“Someone’s—old. Actually old.”

Jemma squeezes Apple’s hand at that, and he squeezes back. Lady catches the movement but looks away. The two let go, but as they walk toward the Circle, she sees the way they lean toward each other, providing invisible support. They went out two. They came back one. *What else happened out there?* Only the waiting Circle keeps her from asking.

There’s a difference in the Circle: part party, part war council. The bonfire is lit, the Tweens dancing around it, and the Olders sit back in a tight knot.

Across the flames she sees Trina, remembers her arguing with Jemma last night. Trina starts speaking. The Tweens stop dancing and are pulsing around the Circle.

This is the Story. Every night starts with the Story.

“Once we was a family, Children and Parents,” Trina says. She’s flinty. You have to be like that to be the Oldest, the keeper of the One Gun. “They stayed with us forever, and we grew old and grew Children of our own. Then came the End. The End of the Parents, the End of our lives. We wasn’t warned, and the Parents died in minutes. They didn’t know what killed them, but still they died. In oceans and the hills, still they died.”

“Still they died,” the crowd repeats in unison.

Trina glances around the fire, watching the red glow flicker on the faces. The Children are still rapt after hearing it every day, because, really: It is the only Story. “The Parents died. The weak Children died, them who lived in high places. The strong and humble lived. We was all colors, Whiteys, Tinos, Korenos, and now we one. We grew our food, we Gathered. But even that wasn’t enough, cuz we lived but we didn’t make new life. We died before we could become Mamas and Dads. But we learned how the body dies fast, and we lived our lives faster. Of all the people of the world, the Angelenos last, cuz we remember this: ‘Never leave the Holy Wood empty.’”

“Never leave the Holy Wood empty,” they repeat.

“To keep the Holy Wood full, we bring in Exiles,” Trina says. “Do we accept them?”

The biggest Exile, named Li, goes first. At least half the thirteen-year-olds raise their hands to accept him. Lady's hand shoots up first. They accept the second Exile, Tomas, although with fewer votes. Lady doesn't raise her hand.

The third Exile is so small. So small. Lady didn't notice him before when he came in the gates, but now she can't quite look away. Such a strange kid, the way he watches them, as if he's the one who decides who stays or not. Lady can't tell his age. She guesses fourteen, but he's twelve in size and seventeen in his eyes.

"Do we accept him?" Trina says, and no one shouts "Yes." He's too young for a Dad, too weak for a Muscle. None of the Holy Wood see him in the future. The ring is silent.

"He's gonna die out there," Jemma whispers. Lady knows it's true. He won't have an Exile gang to protect him in the wild.

"He will," Apple says. Lady can see his jaws working. He's seen the bodies of those who've been forced to wander alone. Only the girls can accept an Exile, though, so he can't say anything.

Lady sees Jemma's mouth start to open, her shoulders tighten. She's not sure why Jemma cares—they've rejected lots of Exiles in the past, and it hasn't bothered her. Lady elbows her. "You can't. You just gonna get more trouble." Trina's already mad at her for staying out, Lady heard. Heather shot her dirty looks after she walked in with Apple. Why make it worse?

"Do we accept him?" Trina says. Jemma's mouth almost opens again.

"Do we accept him?" Trina says. It's the third question, the last question, then the boy will die unwanted as he should be. The Angelenos have stayed strong by only taking the strong.

There's no fear in the boy's eyes, though, and Lady wonders if they've read him wrong. His eyes are filled with an almost lazy curiosity, and they alight on everyone in the Circle, touching faces and moving on.

Whatever happened out there today, Jemma doesn't seem to care anymore. So when Trina says, "Exile from the Malibus, the Holy Wood people don't accept—"

“I do. I accept you,” Jemma says. The rest is a clanging of Lady seconding the acceptance, of Trina shouting, of Apple squeezing Jemma’s waist—squeezing Jemma’s waist?—and through it all, the little Exile staring at Jemma without emotion.

Jemma, stepping on the world’s neck again. Lady is proud of her, even though she doesn’t know what it will cost them. “I hope you like trouble, puta,” Lady says, watching the Olders watching Jemma. “Cuz you just bought it.”

Jemma’s ribs move under his hand. Apple’s aware that she is speaking but feels it as a vibration under his fingertips and not a voice in his ears. Claiming the Exile. Saving a life. He smiles wide at that, at the good under the tough.

Until he sees Hyun tramping toward them through the Circle, Apple in his sights. Hyun’s cheeks puff out, building himself up for a fit. The leader of the Muscle. The Head. That’s the perfect name for Hyun, who has the biggest head in the Holy Wood, sitting on his shoulders like a sweaty egg. If there ever was a visible neck, Apple doesn’t remember it.

Hyun motions him away from the fire into the shadows, and Apple steps toward him at the closest speed to disrespect. He doesn’t want to leave Jemma. He catches her eye, though, and walks into the dark.

“You went past the Bear Wall,” Hyun says.

“I pass it every day,” Apple says.

“Nobody asked me.”

“Gatherer needs protecting, I protect her.”

“You heard Heather. One Muscle to five Gatherers. She wants to go off, you let her.”

“That ain’t safe.”

“You heard Heather.”

“Why you letting Heather tell the Muscle how much Muscle we use?” Apple says. “You the Head.”

Apple should have been the Head, until Pablo terrified the Olders

with his rebellion. Anyone smart enough to do the job was ruled out after that because they were too big of a threat to the Olders, and Hyun was the most qualified idiot left.

“Yeah, I’m the Head. And I tell you this Muscle stays home if Heather says.” Hyun grabs Apple’s arm, and Apple remembers his one qualification. Hyun is strong, maybe stronger than Apple, even with a coat of fat and a chest like a girl’s. That he’s fat in a village where no one’s fat shows how good being the Head has been to him.

Apple brushes off the hand as if he weren’t really being held. “We got bigger problems than your boner for Heather,” he says. “The Last Lifers.”

“Stupid jwi,” Hyun says. It’s an old Koreno word for rat but means something else now. “They ain’t getting over the fence.”

“They changed. They got smart. They got a gun.” Apple remembers the way the Last Lifers ran in formation, the way they plotted to head him off—most important, the gun. None of that is like any Last Lifer pack he’s ever seen—usually they’re just a pile of crazy. But Last Lifers who can plan? That’s a danger.

“I ain’t believing that if I ain’t seen it.”

“Then you gotta see it.”

“Nah, I don’t,” Hyun says. “Heather says no.”

This time it’s Apple grabbing an arm and Hyun brushing it off. “This matters, pendeja,” Apple says.

He shouldn’t have called him that, because Hyun puffs up even bigger. “Oh, pendeja? Don’t you got some sentry work to do?”

“That’s for juniors,” Apple says.

“You a junior now,” Hyun says. “Ya lo cagaste.” *You screwed it up, Apple.*

Apple never cared about being passed over as Head of the Muscle until now, until he sees how vulnerable the Holy Wood is, from inside and out. He shouldn’t care. His time is Ending, right? No, that’s not right. Apple looks back over his shoulder and sees Jemma with Trina and Lady and the Exile.

The End is gonna have to wait.

The Exile seems untouched by the uproar he's caused. The tribe flows around him like he's a boulder in a flood.

As the only one who spoke, Jemma will have to introduce him to the Holy Wood. For the next thirty days, he will be her shadow. She's not sure what she expected from him—gratitude, fear?—but she doesn't get any of it as she approaches. He just watches her, and she doesn't say anything for several long seconds. "You little for an Exile," she finally says.

"Yeah, but my mouth is big," he says.

"I believe that," Lady says. "You got a name?"

"Pico."

"From the Malibus, right?" Jemma asks. He nods, and she whispers the next question without intending to: "It true that someone lived?"

"Ah," Pico says. "Only question worth asking. Yeah, it's true. And I think I know why."

Jemma feels the shock run through her chest, little tremors pushing into her lungs and stealing the breath. "We could live longer?" The picture Apple was holding settles in her head, and in it the two of them are now the Parents.

"Maybe. But not sure you'd want to."

She's shaking her head at that, at the stupidity of that, when Trina blows in like a dark cloud, trailing angry daggers of rain. "You!" Trina says, digging her fingers into Jemma's arm. "You . . . !" she sputters again, but she runs out of words.

"What, Trina, what?" Jemma says, matching Trina's anger.

"Accepting this Exile when you never cared about Exiles before. You messing with me?" Trina says.

"This ain't got nothing to do with you!"

"Then what?"

"Ain't gonna kill someone else today," Jemma says. Softer than she meant.

“What?”

“I saw Andy today, me and Apple did,” she says, hearing her voice crack but unable to stop it. She meant to sound like a Muscle, a warrior. She doesn’t. Instead, she sounds like someone who had to kill a friend she loved, and that opens her insides to the world, raw and sad. “Me and Apple got chased into the Bowl by the Last Lifers. And one of em was Andy, and he tried to kill us, and I split his head.”

“Oh,” Trina says, and their argument is forgotten. She’s the Oldest again. She pulls Jemma to her chest and holds her there until Jemma finally feels herself stop sobbing.

Trina releases Jemma, gently pushes her toward Lady and the Exile. “Go to bed,” Trina says, but catches Jemma’s wrist. “We gotta talk, though. About the Mamas.”

Jemma sees Apple standing there watching them. She doesn’t know how long he’s been watching. She feels herself floating toward him, away from Trina and the others. “About the Mamas, sure,” she says. “It’s all about living, right?”

“About making babies, about keeping us alive as a people,” Trina says.

“I think it’s about live like you’re alive,” Jemma says.

Apple takes three steps, Jemma takes five, and she folds herself into him. His arms form a protective shell around her and she’s kissing him, kissing him hard, with everyone watching, and she doesn’t care.

In the Holy Wood, they want you to kiss, they want you to roll. Your whole life is meant for you to be a Mama, because making a baby will save the tribe. You don’t have to like someone to make a baby. But touching lips and brushing thighs, that’s one thing. This feels different. This feels as if they’re a whole.

Apple holds her face in his hands. “Jemma,” he says wonderingly.

“Why does it feel like this?” Jemma asks.

“It’s deep, it runs deep.” Apple points to the gaps in his teeth. “I earned these when I was a Tween, the day I learned it. Two Muscle was talking about you, and I told em I didn’t like it, and so . . .” He smiles.

She touches his lips, says, “It’s always been you, ain’t it?”

“It’s what the Parents—what the Parents called love,” Apple says. “But we don’t got time for love.”

Love. If that’s what it meant, then yes. If it meant being two halves of a circle, meant breathing the same breath, meant melting into each other’s hips. Maybe she could be a Mama and more than that. She would love like the Parents did.

“Jemma,” Apple says again. She sees smiles in the firelight, then the glare from Heather, the Older. Heather has never liked seeing Jemma with Apple. And even as Jemma pulls Apple tighter, she realizes: It’s not just that we don’t got time. We’re not brave enough. The most dangerous thing in this world is to love.