

## GraceLand

I focus on the icy water that runs between my fingers. It revives me. It should revive me. But all it really does is bring me one step further towards hypothermia. I pull my hand out, rising with popping knees, and shake my moist fingertips off on my muddy jeans. They are starting to get thin, I'll have to find new ones soon, if I can.

Wrapping my last blanket tighter around me, I force my chin up to face the frozen yellow beams of the fading sun. We have two hours at most before we'll have to stop and camp. If we're lucky we'll get a couple miles from this stream. It would be dangerous to sleep here, even with a watch. Anywhere with fresh running water is. We'll have to risk making a fire. Unless we want to freeze to death.

I dreamed once that a woman in a white robe was leading me by the hand into a cave that met with a river. It kind of looked like this. It was itchy and damp in there, but I wasn't scared. There was a tiny orange light that illuminated our slender faces in the darkness, bringing us warmth. I used to believe that if I concentrated hard enough before sleep I would find my back to that place. After a while, I gave up. There's enough in the waking world to preoccupy my mind. I didn't have time for distractions. Distractions get you killed.

"We have to get moving," the man said, "It'll be pitch black soon."

"Can't we just stay here?" The boy asked.

With one last look at the glistening water, I turn to the little, shivering boy. His empty dark eyes stare up at me. He's not more than eight, but he somehow seems younger, smaller.

"No, darlin'," I say attempting a smile. "We need to find a place with higher ground."

His only reply is a nod. The man gives me an approving glance. The boy has a harder time listening to him than he does to me.

Slinging our backpacks over our shoulders we set back out towards the road. We never walked on it, only by it, and only because it was guiding us to our final destination. The road is dangerous. People like to camp on it because its solid surface is the least affected by harsh moods of weather. It is most affected by the people on it. Many who camped on the road didn't make it through the night. The man didn't want to risk it, and I agreed. I didn't want to risk the boy.

We finally settle on a hill that tucked itself into the corner of a mountain. It isn't as high as I would like it to be, but we're surrounded by thick trees that will help shield us if it rains and the rock will easily camouflage us from anyone walking by. I put one tarp on the ground while the man works on building a fire. I stare at his rough skin and slightly crooked left foot. He's not more than thirty, but that's old these days. I never met anyone past forty. There isn't enough food or people. And most of those people weren't worth reaching old age. The fire crackles to life and my gaze switches to it. I could never make one when as was a kid. That alone should've killed me.

"Do you want me to take the first shift?" The man asks me.

"No," I say, eyeing the trees suspiciously. "I'll take it. You take second."

He asked that question every night. Lord knows why. Out of our pack of three, I am the only girl, and the lateness of night bolden even the mostly cowardly. I always took the first shift, it was safer. I didn't like to sleep much. I could never beat the dreams away. The boy never takes a shift. He's too young. And I'm too weak to let him.

We warm ourselves while inhaling a rusty can of beans that I found in an overturned supermarket a couple of days ago. It was lucky, really. Almost nothing was left unpillaged anymore. We have two cans left between the three of us. Enough to get us to our destination, if the man is right.

After we pass the water jug around that the man filled in the steam, the boy asks me to sit with him until he falls asleep. I oblige. The man can wait to sleep for another ten minutes. It only takes five. I slip out from under the child's thin arm and take a pistol from the man.

"You shouldn't do that," he says, looking at the boy.

"What?" I ask.

"Baby him like that. He's hardly a baby."

"And you're hardly a man."

"You know what I mean. One day he'll have to –"

"Hurt someone? Kill someone?"

"Yes."

"One day isn't today."

"But it will be. Probably sooner rather than later. He won't make it if he doesn't."

"Oh? And what about your GraceLand? Will he need to kill people there too?"

"No, but he might have to kill people who try and attack it."

"You said might that time."

*"You know what I mean."*

"He knows how to shoot. Just in case"

"Yeah, but only at a tree."

"I drew a bullseye on it. He hit it."

“So?”

“So what *is* your problem then?”

The man doesn't reply but gazes at me like the fire somehow stood up from its place on the ground and walked into his eyes. I hold my breath. The man has a temper, but I've never witnessed him taking it out on me or the boy. I don't think I will. With a heavy sigh, he stands and moves behind me to roll out his sleeping sheets from his bag. He lays and in a minute I hear the rise and fall of air circulating through his lungs.

GraceLand. It's a boarded community just east of here. A two-day walk. I've heard that it's the start of a revived civilization. I don't know about that. But I do know that if we stay here, we'll die. There's no getting around that. The only way is something new, even if part of me doesn't believe it's real. The boy does though. So. I guess I believe for him.

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The wind attacks my rosy cheeks as I tend to the fire. I always thought that I'd find the night peaceful if I wasn't aware that it stalks me like a lion. It is quite, still, everything the world is not.

The man and the boy sleep soundly. I don't watch over the man like I do the boy. The man is strong and intelligent. He comes from a family of hunters. That's what he told us. Maybe he's right. I shouldn't treat the boy like a child. But I found the boy in a gutter, starving, back when I was on my own. It was two years, thirty-seven days, five hours, and eight minutes ago. I remember it exactly. So maybe how I treat him isn't my choice at all.

My nose twitches. The fire smells extra potent tonight. I frown at it. No. That's not from our fire. My eyes shoot into the horizon. A red hue plagues the sky.

*Oh no.*