

September 9, 5:05 p.m.
Portland, Oregon

Approximately 28 hours, 25 minutes left

“I DON’T think I can stand the waiting any longer,” Emerson tells Vince. “I mean, what’s the point? It’s basically over.”

She sits across from him, on an empty bed, as he throws a small bouncy ball at the wall.

Bounce. Catch.

Bounce. Catch.

Bounce. Catch.

The guy couldn’t sit still if his life depended on it. When they panhandled, he had this crazy thing he did with his feet, shuffling back and forth and side to side as he held the sign they’d made that said, WE’RE HOMELESS AND HUNGRY. ANY LITTLE BIT HELPS. THANK YOU AND GOD BLESS. Vince just likes to be moving, somehow, someway.

They’ve been in this youth shelter for two weeks. It’s nice. For the most part, Emerson loves it. She’s had a bed with a pillow and a shower every morning. The hardest part has been figuring out what to do with all the extra time. A silly problem that is only temporary, she realizes.

Before, they slept in parks, in alleyways, in backyard sheds. They scrounged for food in restaurant dumpsters, or begged for money on the street. Every day, it was about survival. It was a dirty, ugly life, but they became pros at living that way.

When the news hit and things got crazy, Vince found this place, and fortunately, there was room. A lot of the kids had left, hoping to return to their families or catch rides to the northeastern states. Hard to know if it would be far enough, but most people didn't want to sit around and do nothing.

Emerson jumps up and catches the ball. She sits down next to Vince. Her best friend. Her confidant. Her brother on the streets.

He reaches over and takes the ball from her hand. He has big hands. Big feet, too. The kind you see on professional basketball players. She's often wondered if he ever had any desire to play. But she's never asked. If he'd said yes, all it would have done is made them both feel bad. She tries to avoid that happening as much as possible.

"Yeah, I've been thinking about it," Vince says. "Maybe it's best if we go out on our terms. Decide how and when, you know?"

Emerson looks for fear or sadness in his eyes, but there is none. Not that she can see anyway. If it's true, if he isn't afraid, he's in a much different place than she is. Although, it's not just this day that she feels afraid, it's every day, really. Afraid of getting discovered and sent home, but also afraid of living on the streets forever. Afraid of getting hurt again the way her family hurt her, but also afraid she'll never love anyone ever again. The fear is always there, buzzing around in her head like an annoying fly that keeps bumping up against the window, trying to find a way out. Mostly, she tries her best to ignore it.

"The question is," Vince continues, "whether you want quiet or dramatic."

She raises an eyebrow. “Quiet? Like, what, we find ourselves some Nerf guns?”

He sits up and gives her knee a little shove. “You know what I mean.”

“Well, what do you want to do?”

His eyes stay locked onto hers, but she looks away. Not because she’s embarrassed or self-conscious. God, not with Vince. He’s seen her at her worst, more times than she’d like to admit. They’ve gone days without washing themselves. Weeks, a few times. What a sight she must have been. Stringy, greasy hair. Zits on her face. Dirt caked underneath her fingernails. She studies her hands now, small but strong, and most of all, clean, thankfully. It’s a relief to look in the mirror now and not be ashamed of the image she sees, with full, shiny hair and her blue eyes bright and well rested.

No, it’s just that sometimes, Vince looks at her like he wants to spill the contents of his heart at her feet. He’s like the old jukebox at her dad’s place that sits there quietly until someone puts a quarter into it. So she looks away because she doesn’t want him to think she has a quarter to give when she doesn’t. She’s broke. In more ways than one.

As she avoids his gaze, Vince seems to wrestle with the best way to answer her question. Finally, he says, “I just want it to be . . . easy.”

Emerson nods. He’s nailed it. Because sitting around, waiting, for the next twenty-eight hours does not sound easy. “I was thinking the bridge,” she says softly. “You and me. On the count of three.”

He tilts his head slightly. Studies her as he considers this idea. “Like little kids, jumping in the pool.”

Right. Except there's no water under Suicide Bridge. Only cold, hard pavement. City officials erected a barrier a few years back, to try to prevent people from jumping, but it didn't work as well as they'd hoped. People who are determined just climb around the barrier.

Emerson tries to imagine grabbing Vince's hand, and jumping with him. Happy-go-lucky Vince, in his Charlie Brown shirt. She'd found it last week underneath a bed. Someone left it behind. It's yellow, with a big black squiggle at the belly. It makes Emerson smile when she remembers how thrilled he was when she gave it to him.

"The yellow looks good against your dark skin," she told him.

"Charlie Brown should have been a black kid," he said. "That *Peanuts* gang needs a little diversity."

"There's a black kid," Emerson argued. "But he didn't get much airtime. I can't even remember his name."

"See? So typical. Put him in the background, out of the way, because that's where someone like him, like me, belongs, right?"

Though Emerson isn't black, she'd related to his comment, because she often felt like a background character in her own life. Hell, in her own *home*. Well, what used to be her home, anyway.

It hadn't been so bad when she was younger. When her dad still lived with them, and they were a normal family. In fact, she and her dad both adored Charlie Brown. And Lucy and Schroeder, too. Every year, they'd watched the Charlie Brown Christmas special together.

She quickly pushes the thoughts away. The last thing she needs right now is to take a sentimental trip down memory

lane. It won't help anything. In fact, she's pretty sure it will only make things worse.

"Okay," Vince says, interrupting the silence. "Whatever you want is fine with me."

"When?" Emerson asks, nervously picking at a loose thread on her jean shorts. "When should we do it?"

"I don't know."

She looks up and stares at him. Tries not to think about what it's going to be like. Whether there will be any pain before the peace.

"Soon, I think," she says, tucking her straight brown hair behind her ears. "Soon would be better. For me, anyway."

"Okay."

She takes a deep breath. "Okay. So do we just . . . go? Leave our stuff here?"

"Yeah. It's not like we have much anyway, right? Anything you want to do first?"

She looks out the window. Late summer in Portland is the best. If they hurry, they can make it before it gets dark.

Death at sunset sounds nice.

"No," she says. "If you haven't noticed by now, there's nothing here for me." She pauses. "Except you, of course."