

THE END OF LIFE

BIRTHRIGHT

CHAPTER 6

SANCTUARY?

ZOE

Try as I might, I cannot hide the slight trembling of my hands. I cannot say if it's fear or whatever is going on with my health—sadly, I doubt I'll ever get the doctor's results with all that's happening. Do I have brain cancer, a tumor, or, hopefully, something as stupid as a vitamin deficiency? Seriously, the world is ending, and I'm worried about my health; how silly. For God's sake, it feels like the apocalypse, and for an atheist like me to believe something like that, I... well, I don't know what to say. My mind is a whirlwind of questions and doubts, about keeping Mara safe, about all the horrors we witnessed yesterday, and selfishly, about my life... am I dying?

RAYMOND

Casting a sidelong glance, I couldn't ignore Zoe's intense grip, her hands clenched so tightly that her knuckles were turning white. "How are you holding up?" I inquired, my concern genuine as her well-being visibly waned.

"Hmm, oh, I'm fine," she replied with a strained smile, her attention briefly diverting to the back of the car. Following her gaze, I spotted Mara, peacefully asleep, her head nestled on a pack of toilet paper. "Did you really need to take all the toilet paper in the house?" she teased.

I chuckled, "Absolutely, if there's anything the pandemic taught us, it's that you can never have too much toilet paper. Let's just hope the old man doesn't need any when he gets home."

Her laughter, though fleeting, warmed me momentarily before I recognized the lack of genuine mirth in her eyes. She was putting on a brave face, yet again.

The remainder of our journey unfolded in silence. Zoe eventually made her way to the backseat, joining Mara. They both drifted off to sleep, comfortably nestled against a makeshift pillow of toilet paper rolls. I tuned into the radio, scanning through various AM news broadcasts, but the reports were muddled, offering no clear understanding of the unfolding situation. The only definitive piece of information was the widespread technological failure at the epicenters of the mysterious event zones. Intriguingly, satellite

imagery had captured an anomaly: indigenous people on a remote island in the north Indian Ocean had apparently halted one such event. The specifics, however, remained elusive, shrouded in the island's isolation.

Our journey neared its end, with the quaint outlines of our grandmother's floating cabin coming into view, I silently wished for a safe haven, especially now. My thoughts lingered on my father's safety, hoping he was alright.

As I gripped the steering wheel, I noticed my knuckles whitening—a trait I apparently shared with Zoe. The overwhelming cascade of events left me at a loss, uncertain of our safety outside the ominous 'event zones' we were desperately trying to avoid. Relief washed over me as our journey neared its end, the gas gauge indicating our timely arrival. I harbored a fleeting hope for resolution, longing for the normalcy of returning home, though that seemed increasingly fraught. Our recent act of desperation, commandeering this car, had burned bridges, particularly with Mr. Jefferson, whose hostile reaction was now a stark reminder of our dire situation.

Dawn's first light revealed Bayview, unusually silent and deserted. The town's floating homes, once bustling with life, now stood empty, casting a haunting yet beautiful reflection on the water. The ease of finding a parking spot only heightened the sense of abandonment, signaling the haste with which residents had evacuated, presumably due to the spreading event zone.

The familiar cabin awaited, its emptiness a poignant reminder of the current crisis. Thoughts of Mrs. Ritter, my grandmother, intertwined with concern and uncertainty. The need for refuge was paramount, and while the thought of breaking in was unsettling, it seemed increasingly likely as our last resort.

"Are we there yet?" Mara asked, her voice thick with grogginess.

Casting a look over my shoulder, I noticed Zoe softly snoring. "Yeah, we're here. I'm going to look around and will return shortly," I softly told Mara, easing myself out of the car and gently shutting the door.

Gazing out over the water, I observed that the quaint town consisted mainly of floating boathouses. While various houses dotted the shoreline, the town's unique charm came from its majority of floating homes, nestled amidst steep hills and dense forests. Looking back, there may have been additional houses on the land, but they hardly figured into what I considered the town's character; they were mere afterthoughts. In essence, Bayview existed almost entirely on the water—gross water I wouldn't dare swim in, but beautiful all the same.

I strolled along the docks, which were linked together like a communal boardwalk. I made my way nearly to the end of one of them until I found the oldest, ugliest house in the collection and gave a swift knock on the door. I was relieved to hear footsteps on the other side; however, I was not expecting the person who answered the door.

“Mom?”

“Raymond,” she blurted out, nearly coating me with her coffee, which smelled eerily like whiskey, as she lunged at me for a hug.

“Mom, please, it’s just Ray,” I replied. “What are you doing here?”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m often staying here with Mrs. Ritter, the two of us get along pretty well,” Mom smiled at me as she squeezed my cheek like I was some kid. “So, where’s your dad?” She smiled as she leaned out the door to look down the docks but frowned when she didn’t see anyone else. “It’s not just you, is it?” she said, sounding—what, disappointed?

“No, Mara and Zoe are in the car,” I bit back my frustration when I caught a glimpse of disgust on her face.

“What? Why would you bring that mutt here?” another voice called from behind Mom. I glanced to see my grandma. “It’s good seeing my favorite grandchild,” she added as if I hadn’t just heard her comment about Zoe. “What brings you here without calling?”

“Haven’t you seen the news?” I asked.

“No, I can’t stand watching that hogwash,” Grandma stated. “Now, do come in, I don’t want any flies in my home,” she added.

“I’ve got to go tell Zoe and Mara you’re home,” I quickly stated, prepared to turn around to get them.

“I don’t want that mutt in my home,” Grandma blurted out as I noticed Mom nodding in agreement. “Now, do come in and tell me what brought you here.”

Fighting back a retort, I took a deep breath and walked in, ready to tell them what was happening. Though, I still wasn’t over why Mom was staying with Grandma; I mean, she was Dad’s mother after all.

ZOE

I was jolted awake by the sound of the car door slamming shut. Turning around, I saw Ray, his expression contorted with fury.

“Why did you slam the door, you jerk—” Mara began, her voice rising in indignation, but she fell silent as I placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“What happened?” I inquired, striving to infuse my tone with calmness.

“My racist grandmother and mother, that’s what,” Ray spat out, his frustration palpable. “They won’t accept what I’ve been telling them. I even showed them the news on TV, but Grandma dismissed it as fake news, and my mother? Too drunk to understand anything,” he

fumed, the anger in his voice sharp as a blade. “Mrs. Ritter,” he said, his voice dripping with scorn, “made it clear she doesn’t want you around, and neither does my mom want Mara,” he concluded, his jaw tense.

“Me?” Mara questioned, her finger pointing to herself, a look of disbelief on her face.

“Yeah, we have different moms, and it seems Mrs. Ritter has her favorites, siding with my mom,” Ray’s words were laden with bitterness, a tempest brewing behind his clenched teeth.

“So, what’s our next move?” I ventured, the situation’s gravity sinking in.

I was aware that our arrival might not be celebrated, yet the hostility they showed towards Mara was unfathomable. Both she and Ray were Mrs. Ritter’s grandchildren, after all. With the world in chaos, you’d think family would band together, not cast each other aside.

Retreating wasn’t an option, not with the lurking dangers we’d fled. “Mara, can you get any updates on your phone?” I asked, hoping something has changed for the better.

“I’ll check,” she murmured, fingers swiftly navigating her phone, only to look up moments later with a frown. “No service, nothing.”

“That figures, considering where we are,” Ray muttered, his annoyance unabated.

Squeezing past boxes and an extra pack of toilet paper, I stepped out of the cramped and stupidly ugly muscle car for a much-needed stretch. Our predicament seemed to escalate by the minute, not due to mythical monsters, but because of two unwelcoming bitches.

Outside, I couldn’t help but admire the natural beauty enveloping us, the serene trees, and the glistening water, despite the sour taste Mrs. Ritter’s news left.

“Umm, guys,” Mara’s voice quivered with unease. “Guys!” she repeated, more urgently.

Leaning back into the car, I saw her pale face, her phone lifeless in her hand. “It just shut off,” she announced, panic edging her voice.

“You should’ve charged it,” Ray muttered, his frustration evident even as he slumped over the steering wheel.

“It was half-full just now!” she protested, her confusion mirroring our growing alarm.

A chilling thought struck me, and I voiced it, a knot forming in my stomach, “You don’t think what happened in Spokane is starting here, do you?”

“Oh, fuck me,” Ray cursed, a heavy sense of dread settling over us all.