



Silence permeated the warm kitchen and made Gabbi want to fling open the closest window to see if it was as quiet outside as it was in the bakery. But she couldn't. Not until her younger sister's voice filtered through the intercom.

Stealing a glance at the mound of dough on the counter, she sighed. The ovens were ready, heating the small space to an unpleasant temperature. Why wasn't Renna explaining the daily rules?

Mother peeked her head through the double swinging doors of the kitchen, relief evident on her round face when she spotted Gabbi. "Did I miss The Reading?"

"No." Gabbi wanted to gesture to the ovens and mounds of dough overflowing the ceramic bowl, but instead just said, "Nothing yet."

She joined her by the counter, counting the empty loaf pans. "I'm sure everything is fine."

She wished she'd inherited her mother's optimism, but Gabbi teetered on the glass-is-half-empty opinion. "Of course."

Mother didn't reply but instead tied an apron around her waist. "Why don't you start kneading the dough?"

Gabbi's voice betrayed her shock. "We can't. What if it's not a bakery day?"

"It's always a bakery day." Mother gave her a look like Gabbi had suddenly sprouted another head.

"You know what I mean. We can't start our day until Renna reads the rules." She grabbed the nearest towel and wiped her forehead. How much longer was this going to take? Gabbi desperately needed the windows open. "We've had to close before."

"Not in a very long time."

It was true. Their little bakery had been passed down through the family bloodline for generations, and there was always a line of people waiting outside for them to open up. The sirens went off minutes ago, and Renna should have begun reading immediately. But nothing.

It didn't make any sense. Renna was a Speaker. And even though it shocked Gabbi they chose her family—her younger sister—for such a prestigious role, Renna had never flaked on her duties before.

Renna the perfect.

And Gabbi the overlooked.

That wasn't exactly fair. Or true. Gabbi was the oldest in the family of two girls, and her parents depended on her more than she wanted to admit. But for some reason, no matter how much she tried to be content, she longed for more. Anything but baking bread and stuffing pastries.

"Did your sister say anything to you last night?"

"I haven't seen Renna since suppertime." Gabbi reached for the bowl and turned it over. Mother was right. They would need bread. Even if the unthinkable happened and no one could leave their house, her family would still be hungry. She shuddered at the thought of having to stay in the stifling bakery. How could she miss her evening walk—she needed open skies.

“She usually says something before she leaves for the Monitors, but I didn’t see her either.” Mother’s hands shook as she reached for a bar of soap.

Gabbi punched the dough down and kept kneading. She had to get the loaves ready and then move on to the pastries, and if she had time, maybe her mom would let her decorate the tiny round cakes today. They were already baked from the day before and sat on the counter, waiting for colorful flowers. Mother was a master at designing cakes and could pipe flowers faster than Gabbi, but never let anyone else decorate them. Instead, she set aside a couple for each of the girls to decorate for fun. Gabbi never wanted to admit it, but the only thing in the bakery that brought her a smidgen of joy was making a cake from start to finish.

“Is Father with you?” Gabbi strained to hear her father bustling around in the dining room, but there was nothing but silence.

“No. He’s still at home. He wasn’t feeling well this morning.”

Gabbi’s hands froze in the dough and she peered over at Mother. “How are we going to open the bakery without him today?”

“I assumed Renna would be here after The Reading, and we would call in Opal.”

Just the three of them to run the entire bakery? No wonder Mother wanted her to get started without the go-ahead from The Reading. The bakery’s demand required all four of them, plus occasionally help from Opal, a teenaged orphan from the children’s home.

With Father ill and Renna missing, Gabbi had no idea how they would make it through the day, even with Opal’s help. Gabbi moved the bread pans over to rise and glanced at the clock. Thirty minutes past The Reading time.

“What are we going to do if there is no Reading?”

“Gabiella James, I don’t want to hear that come out your

mouth!" Mother opened the cooling unit and brought out the fruit fillings.

"I'm sorry, Mother. But it's after 6:30 a.m." Gabbi watched the color drain from her mother's face.

"I'm sure we will hear your sister's voice any second."

Gabbi sighed and grabbed a piping bag for the fruit filling. "I like this apple pie mixture."

Mother dragged her eyes away from the clock and back to the pastries. "Me too. The secret is in the spices."

"Great-grandmother Dottie's recipe?"

"The very one."

Gabbi filled the pastries in silence, counting how many of each flavor was needed in her head. With each passing tick of the clock, it became clear. No rules today. But why? An image of Renna getting fired from her job flashed in her mind, and the bag of filling slipped from her fingers, knocking a few pastries to the ground, sending bits of dough and fruit all over her apron.

"Gabbi," Mother chided as she raised her arm to deflect the flying pieces of pastry.

"Sorry!"

Mother suddenly burst into laughter, the sound a welcome reprieve from the mean thoughts of her sister. "Oh, Gabbi, you have fruit in your hair."

"At least it will smell good now."

"It might, but perhaps you should rinse it out."

"I think you're right." Gabbi pulled at the goopy mix of apple and cinnamon. "I'll be right back." Making quick work of untying her apron, she tossed it in the laundry bin before leaving the kitchen. The bakery dining room was eerily quiet. Rows of tables topped with yellow tablecloths and linen napkins stood waiting for customers who weren't coming.

She glanced back at the swinging double doors of the kitchen, but Mother didn't follow her. No doubt, she was

already cleaning up the mess she had made. Before Gabbi could chicken out, she marched past the tables and toward the front door. What would one peek outside the curtains matter? She could get a quick glance of the street, just to make sure that something wasn't wrong with their intercom. Maybe it was broken, and there was a huge line of customers waiting on the porch and wrapped around the building. Like normal.

Or maybe she didn't want to look out the window. What if danger from the forest had finally made it past their walls and broken into the Outpost? Her heart thundered in her chest as she reached out a shaky hand to the blue and white curtain. What if everyone was gone?

They had rules for a reason. Stay inside, curtains drawn, until the Speaker announced daily rules brought in by the Runners. Everyone followed these, except her family. Her parents had petitioned the Guardians after Renna was born to move from their upstairs residence to a bigger apartment.

For a second, she wished they were back home instead of the stifling bakery. At least there, they would be more comfortable and could keep an eye on her father. If they were home, though, they would be in the same predicament as the rest of the Outpost—limited food supplies.

What were the people going to do? Would they get desperate and try to break the rules? Surely not. Except, there was a time before the rules even existed. When people disappeared into the forest and never came home. When food and medical supplies would suddenly stop for weeks for no reason at all. There was a time when no one left their homes for fear of being taken away, curiosity their only crime. Curiosity for what was outside the Gates, beyond the Outpost.

Gabbi wasn't old enough to remember the times before the rules, but her grandparents told her parents, and her parents told her.

Now, the rules were enforced above all else.

What if the Guardians were waiting for people to pull back their curtains and poke their heads outside? Gabbi took a step backward and let the fabric fall back into place. Their family would already be on the watch list because of Renna. They would be expecting her to come to the bakery to be with her family.

“Gabbi, these cakes aren’t going to frost themselves!” Mother’s voice cut through her thoughts of Renna and the shame she had brought to their family.

“Almost finished!” She shouted back, running toward the bathroom. As she scrubbed her hair, anger welled up inside of her. What would happen now? Never had a Speaker abandoned their post.

Her foolish, headstrong, curious sister.

She quickly threw her wet hair up in a bun and joined her mother in the kitchen as the three-chimed tone of the announcements belted through the bakery speakers.

Gabbi’s heart picked up pace, meeting Mother’s worried gaze. *Come on, Renna, please be there.*

“Citizens of The Outpost, you will remain in your homes until further notice. Anyone seen outside will be arrested.” The voice was cold, impersonal, and threatening. Not Renna’s reassuring and gentle tone.

Because it wasn’t her sister at all, but a voice Gabbi didn’t recognize. Which meant only one thing. Her sister was gone.

“Oh, Renna, what have you done?” she whispered, slowly looking away from the intercom and toward her mother, busy scooping purple frosting into a decorating bag. She turned to Gabbi, her face void of any emotion.

“You can pipe the violets on the tiny cakes today.”

Tears fell from Gabbi’s cheeks as she reached for the bag. Mother handed it to her and gave Gabbi a nod, then left her alone in the kitchen.