

WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU

“**G**uess we won't know.” Jin took my hand.

It was a plastic move in a surreal moment. Drones whined all around us. Red government warning lights washed Nat's soft natural ambiance in a bloodbath. My neighbors wore the expression of the destroyed.

I wanted to pull away from Jin, but it was touch, my first in a long time, and I was stunned. His hand was odd, cold and leathery, lacking warmth or comfort. Instead of filling the emptiness, it carved out a hollow cavern and filled it with disgust.

“It's my neighbors,” I said. My tone was wooden, even to me.

“You can be certain in the dealings of our justice system. The FBA does not make mistakes. You are living next to dangerous criminals. Personally, I thank the FBA for protecting you from these disgusting people wasting our resources and costing our community.” He squeezed my fingers gently.

I pulled my hand out of Jin's and stood. “I wonder if the FBA will investigate their home?”

Would the FBA's search come too close to my flat? I took a

step toward the family. Would I be next? Clear conscience or not, could I be guilty by potential association?

A dark-skinned FBA glanced at me. His hazel eyes wished they knew my name, said they would find me in another life. Mack was written on his nametag. He winked at me with a half-smile tipping his lips.

Who smiled with a job like his? Who tore families apart but still flirted on the side? What was it with men?

I gave him an obligatory tight smile and dipped my chin in forced respect.

His jaw clenched as he turned his attention to the Meander family. "Your family has been found in violation of Section Three of the Acceptance Law. You'll come with us."

An FBA Enforcer stood beside each of the family members. Felice still cried. Her brother now struggled in an FBA Enforcer's grip.

Skies. They were taking the children in. The FBA didn't take whole families. It was always one.

One here.

One there.

It took one mistake.

One rogue thought released in one misspoken word.

One simple action could change everything.

I knew that more than anyone.

But it was never a whole family.

Mr. Meander's mouth opened and closed.

"This is probably just a misunderstanding." He told his ashen-faced wife in a shaky voice. When she didn't reply, he turned to Mack. "What seems to be the issue?"

Mack stepped toe-to-toe with him. "Is there a problem?"

Mr. Meander turned, caught me in his gaze like a spider's web and locked on, as if his eyes could telegraph a message to me. To me. Why me? I glanced at Jin, who shrugged. Mr. Meander dipped his chin as if in agreement with something I

said and turned his attention back to Mack. "There is no problem here. We are having dinner as a family."

"We've done nothing wrong," the mother said.

Mack glanced my way, seeming to try and read the telegraphed message Mr. Meander left hanging in the air between us, but Mack turned back, squaring his shoulders. His voice thundered through the restaurant. "You will have your trial. Come with us."

The Meander's little girl whimpered. "Daddy."

Mack cut off the little girl. "We no longer need to disturb the peace of this wonderful establishment."

He caught my eye again.

Something about him, some internal conflict I could only see in his eyes, made me want to linger there for a heartbeat. It was as if the restaurant's entire assembly of patrons held their breath. Everyone froze in time while we existed in a stolen moment of silent communication.

I blinked, and the spell broke.

The FBA turned like a well-oiled machine, a hand on each member of the family, and marched them one by one out of the building. The last to leave was Mack, with Mr. Meander. In those last seconds, I both hoped and feared one of them would make eye contact with me again. Neither did.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, probably for the first time in a minute or two. "What on Earth?"

Could I possibly be next?

I turned to Jin. I don't know why. Maybe I hoped he'd rescue me from the mess of noise going on in my head.

His eyes searched mine and narrowed. He tilted his head as if he was thinking, but something in me, a gut instinct, warned me to be careful. "You look pretty guilty."

Jin's words sent a shock through me. I must dance delicately on the eggshells scattered across the room. In moments like these, those loyal to the government were

notorious for leaning in to hear any complaint. Censorship at its finest. Was Jin someone I should fear?

The morning after always brought at least three more reports of families divided because of a citizen's tip. People were always telling on themselves after an event. It was almost more dangerous to be near one than anywhere else.

Thanks a lot, Shea!

I laughed despite my heartbeat thundering through me. "What kind of person wouldn't look some kind of wrong after seeing a family and their children taken by the FBA?"

"It almost sounds like you are a sympathizer."

"I'd have to be made of stone not to feel sympathy for those children. Their brains aren't even fully developed."

Jin's chin tipped a notch higher, as if he was distinguishing himself from me. "My mother assures me the children are well cared for."

"I'm not working in the upper echelons of society like your mother. I'm sure you're right. All I see are the children I work with. How they're changed when the FBA returns them."

Shadows. They bring shadows of people back.

"There is a place for every person in our community. It is always good to know one's place." Jin wore a smug expression. Self-satisfaction and elitism rolled off him in reeking waves.

I sighed, wishing I had the courage to say, 'And aren't we guilty in some way for their creation?' But I was a coward. I tucked my chin and said, "Either way, they're never going to be the same."

I locked eyes with Jin. He shrugged.

He was so convinced in the Dome's way, so unaffected by the people around him. Those were people I knew. "Those are my neighbors."

"They were your neighbors. I don't mean to seem uncaring. I didn't realize you cared for your neighbors so much, but neighbors or not, they broke the law. The law must be upheld. That's what keeps our city peaceful." He took a sip of his

water. The restaurant resumed its clattering as if the moment was an apparition that passed through the room and was forgotten as soon as it left.

“Peaceful. Hmm.” I nodded as if in agreement. Sure. It was so peaceful. You couldn’t find love, have a family, or make connections. Not without loss. Not without risking being left with pieces of your soul gouged out. Yeah, the monster inside me shook against its chains, but I ignored it and wiped my lips with my napkin. “I just don’t think ...”

Jin leaned in, the muscles in his neck supple. The hard planes of his face chiseled in breath-taking angles that canted toward my next words. The scent of his cologne wafted around me, and I wished for his touch back. I could almost still feel where his fingers connected with mine. If he could just touch my hand again. Maybe this time, it would feel right.

In those powerful arms, I might forget my own thoughts. My stomach could settle, and I’d remember the images I’d always longed for: marriage, quiet nights under the star canopy, and all those whispers of my soul released and reflected back ... babies. It would be beautiful. A time when I slipped through each second of this life without dreading what might come next.

“What were you going to say?” He picked up his water and let the ice cubes clink against his crystal glass.

I leaned back. I’d lost my appetite. My stomach twisted in knots. My desire to be around other humans wholly evaporated with one exception—to be held. However, the look in his eyes annihilated that wish too. “I think I’ve had enough time out for today.”

“You only ate a bite.”

I looked down at my plate. Forced another into my mouth. He was right. I would at least need some food. It stuck like cardboard in my throat. I swallowed it down with more coffee, but it got caught there, and I coughed.

“You okay?”

“Is anyone really ever okay?” I can’t tell him what I really thought. Suddenly, his curiosity was far too suspicious.

“Absolutely.” He smiled and leaned back without a care in the world.

“I guess you’re right.”

“I am.”

“So, it doesn’t seem strange at all to you they took the whole family? I mean, I’ve never seen them take a whole family.”

Without thinking, I pushed my chair back. I didn’t want to hurt Jin’s feelings, but I no longer felt able to connect with another human. Especially when it might end in the arms of the FBA. Escape pulsed with every heartbeat. Something wild, like an animal, drove my movements.

I’d done nothing wrong, but somehow, I just knew I was next.

“You don’t need to worry. They’re not after you. It’s that family. They did something. You’ve done nothing. You keep your head down, your nose clean. You’re good. No reason for you to worry. Is there?”

And see, there it was. That question, in the end, was the epitome of why I had to leave. Why I couldn’t let Jin any closer. Why I couldn’t let him touch me or connect with him. All of his elegance hid something underneath. My instincts blared their warning.

A server drone flew by to take a plate to a nearby table. I flinched. A Merdership, flying high above the buildings, passed by, its engines rumbling through my bones as it scanned the city. The conversations buzzed all around me. I couldn’t live in a world without any connections, and yet, it wasn’t safe to connect. I put my cloth napkin on the table.

I was good alone. “It was nice to have dinner with you. We should do it again sometime.”

I didn’t mean it.

“We’re doing it now. Stay. You don’t need to go.” He patted the chair beside him as if I just needed a bit of a nudge.

A blush of heat raced over my face. How nice it was to have my presence desired, to be wanted, to have someone who wanted to be near me. I pushed the chair under the table because those idealistic thoughts belonged to a world long ago, somewhere lost in the pages of history. “I’d really like to do this again.”

He stood. “At least let me walk you back to your house.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I have Shea with me, and she’ll keep me company until I reach my flat.”

“What’s Shea going to do if you’re attacked?”

“Just because I live in the flats doesn’t mean someone is going to attack me.”

He flinched. He knew he messed up when he said that.

I smiled to ease my barbed response. “Who’s going to attack me? The government has everything under control. I’ll be fine. I will see you in the morning. Thank you for this wonderful evening.”

Appearances were everything in my world, so I smiled and slipped away as if life were right as rain.

My heart still lived in my throat. The cold air made me cough. Four FBA drones circled the block. My gaze glimpsed the remnants of the Merdership off in the distance.

“Tough night.” Shea’s words were both commiseration and a psychological temperature gauge.

“It was good to get out.” I’d needed to remember why I stayed in.

The click of my heels would have been comforting if they alone followed me home, but the slight disturbance in the air behind me, the here-then-gone whisper of wings, left my legs weak.

So much invisible, undetectable tech could follow me home, trace my every action, and dive deep into my secrets.

I was the last of my family, and my grandfather, a true

sympathizer, made me promise to keep going, to carry on, to hold on to hope. It was what kept me moving when everything in me begged to quit. I would do anything for my grandfather.

And I would do anything for the kids in my class. We weren't supposed to get too involved. It was only a few years of mandatory service. Something to prove our loyalty, but I couldn't just go through the motions. Maybe because I had no one else, I developed these bonds with my students. But to them, it mattered if I showed up.

I could *not* be next.