

The bus only goes to the edge of town. Then it's another twenty-five-minute hike on rough terrain to get to Dad's old hunting blind in the woods overlooking Forest Grove. When he died last year, the small camouflaged tent became the last place that felt like home.

"Take this, sweetie," Maggie, the elderly driver called before I could step off the bus at my usual stop; the end of the line. "There's a storm comin'."

She looked ominously into the gray sky and clucked her tongue.

"It isn't supposed to rain," I told her, readjusting the strap of my pack so it wouldn't dig into my shoulder so much. Weighed down with my schoolbooks and two new ones from Jacqueline's shop, it felt heavier than usual.

Maggie shook the nondescript black umbrella at me and narrowed her warm brown eyes. "These old bones don't lie."

I shook my head but reached out and took it. "Thanks, Mags. I'll get it back to you tomorrow."

She nodded tightly before turning back to the road. "Be careful out there, Miss Allie."

My lips pursed and I turned away quickly so she wouldn't see how her words struck me. I pressed my lips into a tight line; Maggie didn't know I lived alone in the woods.

No one did.

The folding doors closed, and I watched the tail lights of the old city bus jar as it went over the bumpy, pockmarked road. I barely got fifty feet onto the slender trail before the first droplets of rain hit the top of my head. I snorted as I opened the umbrella. I'd have to remember to thank Mags tomorrow.

It wouldn't be the first time I'd arrived at my makeshift home soaked to the bone, but I couldn't afford to get sick like last time. It would be winter soon. I figured I had about two months, maybe less, before the cold got so bad I wouldn't be able to stay in the blind anymore. That meant I needed every shift I could get at the book shop in town.

I'd been looking for a second job for ages. One where I could earn tips. But seventeen-year-olds can't serve liquor, so I'm not exactly a prime candidate for that sort of job.

I sighed as my calves burned, the muddy terrain making the climb into the trees more arduous than it had been yesterday. At least the exertion was keeping me warm. It seemed a lot colder than it should've been for mid-September and my hard breaths clouded the air around my face with each step.

The weekend couldn't come soon enough. I had Sundays off work and school and couldn't wait to cuddle up and read for the entire day.

No six am wake up to get to Forest Grove High in time to shower before first period.

No running to the bus stop to make it to the book shop for my 3:30pm shift.

No long, bumpy bus ride.

No twenty-minute hike into the trees at dusk. I *loved* Sundays.

A creak in the trees to my right had me spinning and squinting into the growing dark. I had the bear mace out and the safety clip removed in less than a second. My skin bristled. But a long neck and black eyes lifted from the brush instead. Only a deer. I smiled at the creature as its jaw worked to chew what remained of its dinner.

"Better get home," I told it, and its ears pricked, noticing me. "Storm's coming."

I could feel it in the atmosphere now. Mags was definitely right. The rain was coming harder, and the wind whistling through the old pines on the mountainside was growing louder. "Go on," I said a bit louder and it took off in the opposite direction, its white tail bobbing as it vanished into the greenery.

Shoving the mace back into the side pocket of my pack, I picked up the pace, eager to get home before night fell in earnest and the storm truly started.

I closed the umbrella as the blind came into view. A camo shelter no bigger than your average closet, set fifteen feet from the ground, nestled between two trees. Hurriedly, I climbed to the hatch set into the floor and closed it firmly behind me. Where the walls and roof were made of good quality waterproof canvas, the floor was a solid wooden platform, bolted securely into both trees.

My sodden bag dropped to the floor and I rushed to remove the books from it, not wanting them to be ruined from the damp. I set them into the small nook in the corner and set to removing my damp sweater and muddy boots.

The wind howled outside, making the thick canvas walls snap and ripple. I gritted my teeth as I tugged on a dry sweater and pulled the sleeping bag from the floor to wrap around my shivering shoulders. The scents of cold pine and musty earth enveloped me. I considered lighting the camp stove for a bit to get some warmth into the tent but thought better of it.

I didn't have very much propane left and if I wanted a warm breakfast in the morning, I'd better save it.

The buzzing of my cell broke through my daydreams of warm oatmeal with huckleberries. I clicked to my messages and ignored the fifty-three unopened texts from Devin, my stomach souring at the mere sight of his name. My fingers absently went to the still tender skin along my neckline.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I opened the new message from Vivian at the top.

Vivian: You get into the city ok? Looks ugly as fuck out there.

Allie: Yep. Home safe and sound.

Vivian: You going to Thompson's party this Saturday?

Allie: I'm not sure yet.

Vivian: Yes you are.

I rolled my eyes, thinking about it. Devin and Thompson didn't really hang out. What were the chances he would even be there? *Slim*, I thought, biting my lower lip.

Allie: Only if I can crash at your place?

Vivian: Deal.

Allie: Night Viv.

Vivian: xo

I clutched the phone tightly in my palm. The guilt of keeping up all the lies made my stomach churn. Vivian was one of my best friends. Along with Layla. If I thought I'd have been able to stay with either of them when my aunt and uncle decided to up and move to Florida until spring, I'd have asked. But I knew it wasn't a possibility.

Layla had seven brothers and sisters and they were already three to a room.

Viv's parents fought like hyenas, and her dad was a loud, and sometimes mean, recovering alcoholic. They wouldn't want me around that. It would make them uncomfortable.

The solution seemed simple enough at the time. My aunt and uncle made it clear they wanted to go. My uncle thought it would save their marriage. My aunt wanted to drown her sorrows in cheap strawberry wine by the pool. Who was I to stop them?

So, when they said they wanted to Airbnb their pristine digs in the city to fund their trip and asked if I could stay with a friend until spring, I didn't hesitate. I was already enough of a burden to them since Dad passed; I could give them this one request.

Now they think I'm staying with Viv. And Viv and Layla, and just about everyone else, thinks I take the bus back into Portland every night after work.

No one needs to know the truth. Besides, by the time they got back, I'd be eighteen. Hopefully have my own place. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't have to move back into their fancy condo in Portland at all.

I grimaced when I noticed my battery only had a ten percent charge left and switched to battery saving mode. I'd forgotten to charge it in History this afternoon like I usually did.

Damn. I just had to hope it would last until morning. Without my alarm, I wouldn't wake up at the ass crack of dawn to make the bus into town.

A violent gust of wind rushed over the tent and the window flap came loose, lifting to let in a hard gush of cold wind. I rose to secure it back into place, the boards beneath my feet creaking under my weight. I glanced out into the night and my lips parted in a silent gasp.

Over the boisterous sounds of the howling wind and rustle of leaves and needles, was the unmistakable rumble of thunder. The rain was sheeting in sideways, misting my face with its chill through the mesh window lining.

In the distance, between the branches, the storm approached rapidly from the north. Racing over the sky like a band of wild horses, each of their hoof falls striking the clouds like a blacksmith's hammer against hot metal, shooting sparks into the night.

Lightning snaked through the clouds like veins beneath pale skin. The groan of a tree falling somewhere far in the distance ended with an earsplitting crash.

Hurriedly, I fixed the flap back into place, knotting the string twice to make sure it stayed put. My heart in my throat, I dug through the rumpled heap of my sleeping bag until I found my phone. I winced when I saw the battery had already gone down to eight percent.

Shit.

I flicked over to the weather app on my phone. It took a second for the app to update, and I had to hold my phone high to get the second bar of service I needed.

High wind alert. Heavy rain. Flood watch.

I shut off the phone, needing to conserve the battery in case—

No. I'd been through worse out here.

"It's going to be fine," I told myself aloud, my voice sounding muted in the deafening roar of the wind. The grumble of the sky above grew louder as though it were trying to disagree. I flipped it the bird and patted the photo of Dad I kept pinned to the canvas wall. It batted against my fingers, but I found the strength I needed in his watchful stare and set my jaw. "We got this."

We don't got this.

Water poured into the hunting blind from the tear in the roof. I rushed to move everything out of the way so I could patch it up, my fingers growing numb and stiff from the wet cold.

The lightning turned from a low rumble far away to sharp loud *cracks* that illuminated the tent in startling blue hued clarity. I flinched as each one struck earth, the creaky boards under my feet trembling with the force of their impact and the near constant vibration of resonant thunder.

I tore a strip of duct tape from the roll with my teeth and struggled to get it into place to stop the deluge of water. Already, my sweater and jeans and most of the floor were soaked. If I didn't get it patched up fast, I wouldn't have a single dry thing left to wear when the storm passed. The idea of having to curl up wet and cold had me pushing myself. Working harder. Faster. I forced my clumsy fingers into obedience.

Finally, after three more strips, I got the tear patched. I wasn't sure how long it would hold with it still raining so hard, but I *prayed* it would last through the rest of the storm. It had to be over soon, right? How much longer could it possibly go on?

My trademark ponytail had come undone and I had to move my long dripping hair from my face, bending to catch my breath as I felt around in the dark for the fallen hair elastic.

Until the unmistakable sound of canvas tearing made ice water flood back into my veins—and into the tent. A branch had pierced the roof on the opposite side and was hanging over the nook where I kept all my schoolbooks and the ones from the shop.

Water and dead leaves rushed in, covering them.

Not my books!

I lunged to stop the slaughter, but as I reached them an even louder *crack* stole my breath. The light from the lightning strike was vibrant neon right above the tent. It blinded me. Sparks flashed like fireworks into the inky dark.

The only warning I had was an ominous groan before the sharp sound of splitting wood broke the spell that had me frozen in place. It was like an ax coming down on a block. And it could only mean one thing.

I dove out of the way just as a large section of the great tree holding the hunting blind in place broke off from the whole and came smashing down, taking me and the tent with it on its descent to the ground.