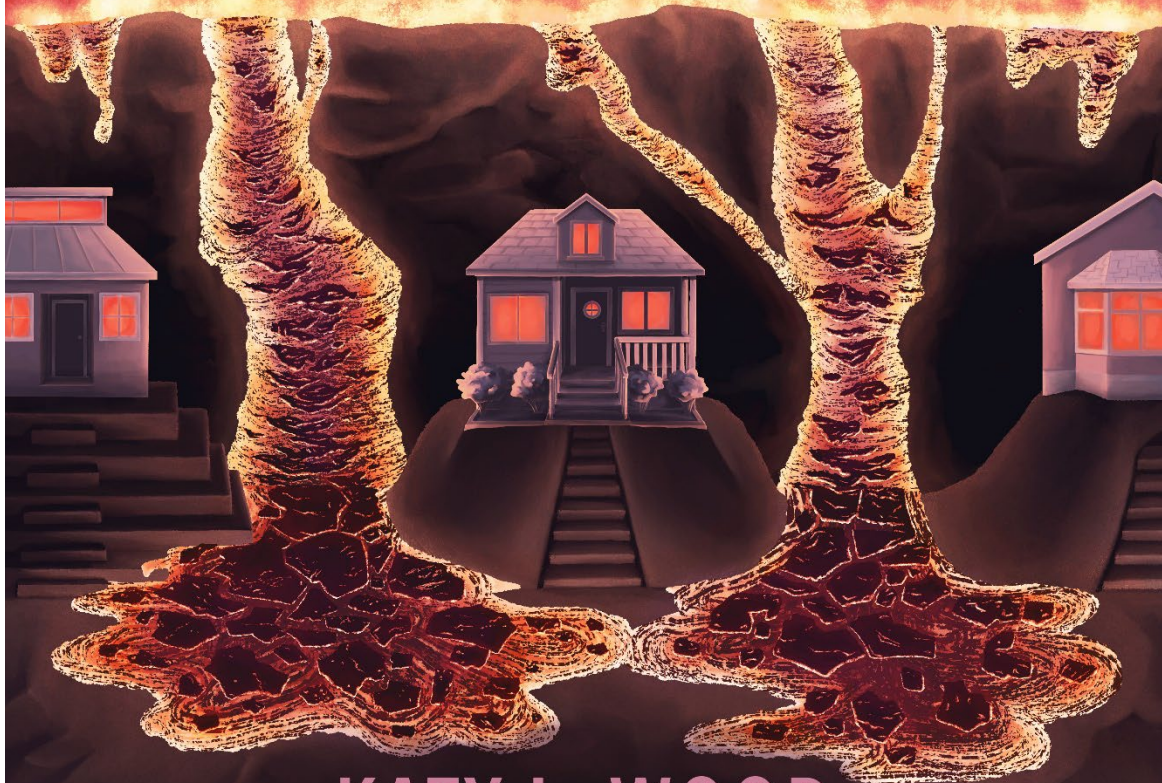


WITHOUT A STAR



KATY L. WOOD

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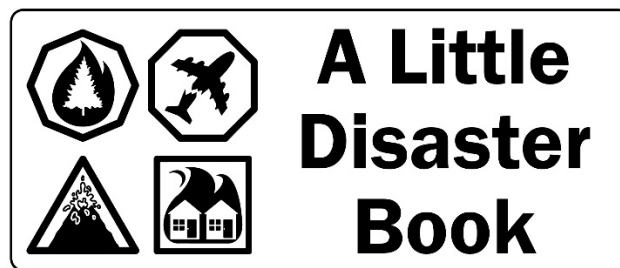
Summary:

Four recent high-school graduates are caught in the middle of a volcanic eruption in Iceland when they go on a tour with a seemingly trustworthy volcanologist, only to discover he only has his own interests at heart.

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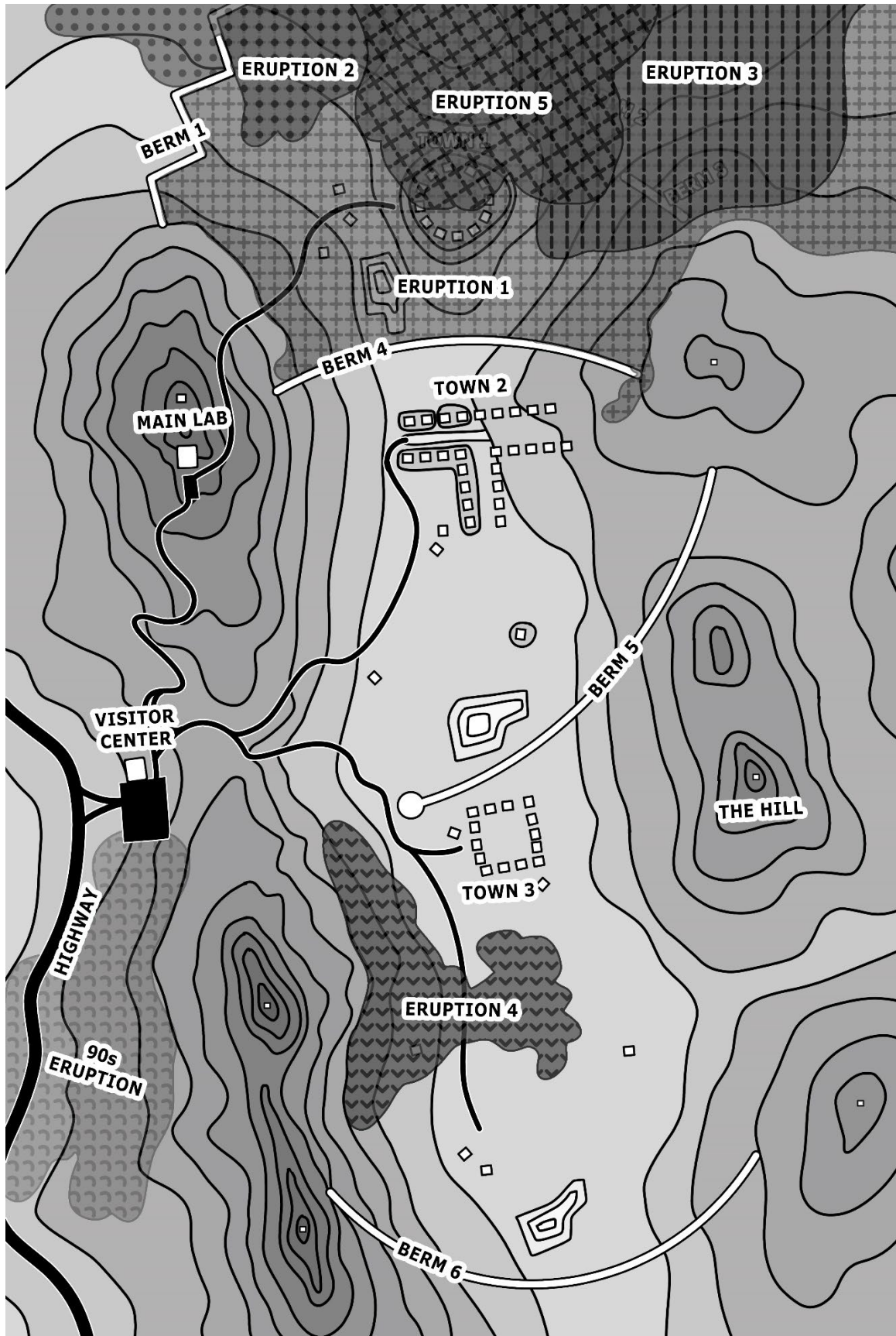


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For those still looking for a path out of the dark:
may you find your star.





Prologue

The volcano trembled under Jane's feet, a steady hum you didn't quite feel until it stopped and your whole body felt still in its absence. She wanted to leave. Wanted to run. Hide. But her graduate advisor just stood on the porch of the "lab" they'd been provided to work out of, watching everything unfold like a harmless film where the actors would all laugh and go home at the end of the day, warm and safe.

Really, the "lab" was just a two-room house that happened to be positioned well enough to give a good view of the volcano and had been unoccupied when they'd arrived with their truckload of gear. The place had served them well, despite its rickety, ramshackle nature. It wasn't going to hold up against this onslaught, though, and she knew it. Nothing here was.

But he just wouldn't *leave*. He stood there, iPhone blaring out some hair metal rock song from his back pocket as he watched the citizens of the small Colombian town they'd been calling home all summer run for their lives without having anywhere to go. There weren't enough vehicles in the town to get them all out, not in time.

"Doctor Cristi, we have to *go*," Jane pleaded, standing at his elbow.

He threw his hands out wide, gesturing to the whole tableau spread out before them. "It's such a shame, isn't it, Jane? All these people about to lose everything."

A woman ran by screaming, a bundle of blankets clutched to her chest. Jane thought she heard a baby crying from within it, but she chose to believe it was an animal of some sort. It was easier that way.

"Yes, it's terrible," Jane agreed. That was why they'd been here, after all. To try and help these people before the volcano blew, to try and give them enough warning. But they'd failed.

Doctor Cristi's eyes tracked a different running, screaming person, this one a teenage boy with a bleeding arm. "I don't know why we bother trying to predict these things. There's no point trying to predict the whims of nature."

Something whistled through the air, crashing into the street a dozen feet away. A lava

bomb, Jane realized. Just a little one, maybe two inches across, but white-hot. More than enough to cave in someone's skull. Or set a building alight.

"Doctor, please, before the roads get washed out by a lahar," Jane urged, trying to sound firm rather than terrified. She'd known what she was getting into when she'd picked Doctor Cristi as her advisor. A charming yet also stubborn man. Set in his ways. Some out-there theories. But also a maverick at the top of his field at only thirty-five years old. Of course he had an ego; he'd earned it. She was used to the delicate dance of trying to convince him to listen to her, just not during a life-or-death situation like this.

"Instead of wasting our time on predictions," Doctor Cristi continued as if she hadn't even spoken, "we should be focused on this." He swung a hand out again to indicate the chaos around them. Jane could see at least two people dead in the street, dozens more running and screaming as the ash continued to swirl, the clouds punctured by more and more lava bombs.

"We can't focus on anything if we're dead," Jane begged, fear finally leaking into her voice.

"It's not the *eruptions* that are deadly, it's what they *do*."

Jane wasn't sure what the difference was, but she realized they wouldn't be leaving until he got whatever this was out, so she didn't interrupt.

"We don't need to predict *when* they'll erupt, we need to study how to *survive* when they do. How to build better housing. How to build shelters. If we really studied these things properly, in a decade we could be building towns on Vesuvius and Kīlauea and Fuji that ride out eruptions as if they're nothing more than a spring storm."

"Okay, sure," Jane said. "Sounds like a great paper. We'll talk about it at the airport."

He sighed, rolling his eyes at her, and waved her toward the clunky old truck they'd bought for \$300 when they arrived in Columbia two months earlier. Jane threw her hands up over her head and bolted for the passenger seat. Doctor Cristi came much slower, getting in and sliding his phone into the holder on the dash before starting the truck. It coughed and spluttered before finally turning over on the third try.

"The problem is," Doctor Cristi mused, pulling them out onto the street. People immediately started pounding on the doors and climbing into the bed. Jane wished they had

room for all of them. “The problem is that by the time us scientists get there, it’s already all said and done. We rarely get to watch the destruction happen. Can’t see exactly how it all falls apart. We have to just make a guess based on what’s left behind.”

So that’s why he wanted to stay. Jane somewhat understood where he was coming from; there *was* something to be said for more resilient building codes and the like. But that sort of thing would only help people who were rich enough to pay for it. Not small, rural places like this. People still needed to know when an eruption was coming so they could at least try to get out of the way.

“What we need,” Doctor Cristi said, “is a town we can watch get consumed from start to finish, without any of this getting in the way.” He swerved around a man desperately trying to lead a stubborn donkey down the middle of the road.

“This?” Jane said, one hand holding the handle of the door and the other the edge of her seat, both gripped tight as the truck jostled over the deepening ash and other debris. The thought that they might be running over bodies made her stomach climb even higher into her throat than it already was.

“The people,” Doctor Cristi clarified. “No getting wrapped up in rescues and distracting personal tragedies. Just pure science. We just need the town.”

Jane couldn’t imagine a way to ever do something like that. You’d never find a town without people, or at least without people who cared about it, not unless you built one just to be studied, like they had to test nuclear bombs. But with bombs you knew where and when they’d be dropped, where to put the town. Without being able to predict eruptions, you could never know where to build your test town. Except.... A news story that had come across Jane’s feed a few days earlier flashed across her mind.

“Iceland.”

“What?” Doctor Cristi said, glancing at her.

“The eruptions near Grindavík. They’ve been occurring almost monthly for the last six months, with no signs of slowing. We couldn’t use Grindavík, but what if we...what if we built *another* town there?” It was a wild idea that would require more funding than either of them had ever had, though that didn’t stop Jane’s mind from starting to whirl with ways to get what they

needed.

Doctor Cristi opened his mouth to respond, but all Jane heard was a crash and horrendous shriek of tearing metal. The whole cab of the truck filled with yellowish smoke, the vehicle jerking hard to one side without slowing. Jane found herself slammed up against the door, scrabbling for the latch, the need to escape screaming through her brain over and over. A laugh brought her up short, made her turn back towards the driver's side. The smoke started to dissipate, leaving behind a cloying smell of sulfur and burning plastic as Jane stared in horror at the seat between her and Doctor Cristi. There was a hole charred through the fabric, a baseball-sized lava bomb sizzling there. When Jane looked up to see if Doctor Cristi was alright, she found him smiling at her with a crooked grin, continuing to drive like nothing had happened.

"I guess you better book us some tickets to Iceland then."

Chapter 1

Helio

When Helio had signed up for a mini-semester abroad, something fun before officially starting college in the fall, he'd somehow forgotten to account for the fact that he'd have to *fly* to Iceland. Flying in general he was fine with. Flying over the ocean, however, was another story entirely, especially at night, and it was very much night right now. It felt like he was floating through space, a sensation that made his stomach do flips.

"Helio, stop closing the window." Beth reached across him from the middle seat to slide the window cover open again.

Helio groaned and closed his eyes. He'd been surprised when he found out Beth was coming on this trip, though he couldn't decide if it was a good surprise or a bad surprise. They'd been best friends when they were kids but had fallen out of that friendship when Beth's mom had been sucked into the realm of Mommy Bloggers, dragging Beth down with her.

"Just switch seats with me," Helio said, trying not to take out his discomfort on her.

"No, I'm already set up here," Beth replied.

She really was. The second they'd reached cruising altitude after leaving their layover in New York, Beth had pulled out a phone stand with a ring light and started filming a makeup tutorial. Ten steps to making yourself look fabulous on a red-eye.

"Let me do yours, then you don't have to look out the window," Beth said. He cracked an eye open to see her waving a pallet in his direction.

"You don't have my colors," Helio tried. "We've got totally different undertones. Your stuff would look terrible on me."

She wiggled the pallet. "Oh, have some faith in my skills."

Helio sighed and gave in, turning his back towards the window and his face towards her. He'd chosen Iceland for this trip specifically because it was so queer friendly, so he may as well make the most of it and go all out on being his nonbinary self while he had the chance. He spared a glance at Beth's phone as she angled it toward his face. Any attempt at getting her to turn it off would be a waste of effort, so he didn't bother.

“Hi everyone!” Beth narrated in her influencer accent as she balanced the palette on her lap and flipped it open. “I’m here with my childhood bestie who just changed their name to Helio, which I loooooove. It fits them so well. I think they need some makeup to match their new name, don’t you? Let’s see what we can do in this last hour of our flight to beautiful Reykjavík for our mini-mester abroad!”

Helio smiled indulgently as she swirled an applicator brush through a square of goldish-brown eyeshadow.

“So, what classes are you taking for this mini-mester, Helio?” Beth asked.

Helio barely managed to bite back an annoyed sigh. “One on landscape photography, one on sustainability in the face of the climate crisis, and one on the geology of Iceland.” He still hadn’t decided what he wanted to do his bachelors in so he’d picked a few different classes that sounded vaguely interesting without bothering to think about how they’d apply later on.

“Oh, me too! Well, the geology one, anyway,” Beth laughed. It sounded fake, but everything Beth did anymore came across as fake.

“You’re into geology now?” Helio asked.

She rolled her eyes with a smile, like it was a silly question. “I’m into all the gorgeous videos I’ll get in front of the places we’ll visit for the geology class. My mom and I themed an outfit for each one.”

Of course they had. Though, based on the class list he’d seen, Helio suspected there might be another reason Beth had picked the geology one.

Someone cleared their throat behind Beth. Helio looked up to see their former science teacher standing there. Mr. Mossburg was the one who had helped a bunch of their graduating class apply for this mini-semester abroad program, coordinating scholarships and travel and everything else. All told, there were a dozen people from their school going on the sixteen-day trip, including Beth and Helio.

“I’m filming, Mr. Mossburg,” Beth told him, not even pausing in smudging colors across Helio’s eyelids.

“I can see that, Ms. Jeong, but I need to speak with both of you about room assignments,” he told her.

Beth sighed and hit the record button on her phone to stop the video, turning around to face Mr. Mossburg. "Well?"

Helio got the distinct impression from Mr. Mossburg's long pause that he wanted to say something to Beth about her attitude. In the end he didn't, just looked down at the list in his hands. "Beth, you'll be with Jessy."

Beth tilted her head. "Who?"

"Jessy Wilson," Mr. Mossburg said.

Beth turned to arch an eyebrow at Helio, who resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Curly brown hair down to her waist, kind of quiet? Started at our school in December last year? She was in our Comparative English Lit class." Not that Beth had ever been in the class enough to know. It had been the last class of the day and by then Beth had usually vanished to make some video or do an appearance.

Helio didn't really know much about Jessy beyond that basic description, however. She'd always been incredibly quiet in class, though the few times the teacher had dragged an answer out of her she'd seemed pretty damn smart.

"Never met her," Beth said.

Mr. Mossburg sighed. "I'll introduce you when we get off the plane. Helio, if you're alright with it, I'd like to put you with Noah Lopez. I think it would do him some good to have a friend like you on this trip."

At the mention of Noah, Beth went ramrod straight, eyes flying forward to where Noah was sitting five rows ahead. His shaggy black hair was easily visible over the top of the seat his tall frame had been crammed into. He'd booked an exit row for himself, apparently, but when the flight attendants saw he only had one full arm they'd made him move.

"I'm...not sure Noah...ah...wants friends of any sort," Helio hedged, trying to be polite about it.

"You have to, Helio," Beth said, rounding on him with a pleading look in her eyes.

"If you're not comfortable with it, I can put you each in solo rooms," Mr. Mossburg said. "We'd have to pay a fee to the college for an extra dorm, but under the circumstances, I can cover it."

Helio glanced between Beth, Mr. Mossburg, and the back of Noah's head. Noah had been a great guy before the accident, though Helio only ever knew him by association at their large school. After the accident, when he'd finally come back to school, he'd been withdrawn, sometimes downright surly. He'd broken up with Beth even before he'd gotten out of the hospital and had entirely ignored her ever since, according to school gossip. If Beth coming on the trip was surprising, Noah coming was downright confusing. Sure, it had all been in the works before everything happened, but if there was ever a reason to cancel a trip, non-refundable deposits be damned, it was an accident like that.

"Why me?" Helio finally said, addressing his teacher.

"Well, you're kind of the mother-hen of the guys on this trip," Mr. Mossburg said. "I've never seen you fail to make friends with someone. I think that'll be good for Noah."

Helio smiled thinly. He wasn't a "mother-hen." He was the oldest of eight siblings and had grown up functioning as a third parent to all of them. It was a trait he struggled to turn off even when he wanted to. Everyone knew him for it, even his former teacher, apparently. People were always coming to him for advice and a shoulder to cry on. What was he going to do, turn them away when they were struggling? He wasn't heartless, even if it was annoying sometimes to be the person everyone else relied on.

"Okay, I'll give it a shot," Helio agreed. The worst that could happen was living with someone who ignored him for sixteen days straight. He'd been given the cold shoulder for much longer than that by various siblings over the years, usually for petty things like saying no to visiting friends until they got their grades up or taking away video games when they fought with one another.

The second Mr. Mossburg moved on to talk to the next set of students, Beth leaned in to whisper to Helio. "Help me get back together with Noah."

It wasn't phrased like a request. It also confirmed what Helio had suspected: Beth had probably signed up for the geology class knowing Noah would be in it as well.

"He broke up with you," Helio stated. "Time to let it go."

"He broke up with me because his life turned upside down out of the blue, but that was *months* ago," Beth pressed.

“He lost half an *arm*, Beth. His dominant arm. And his little brother. That’s not something you get over in four months.” There were so many rumors about the accident, Helio had no idea which ones might be true. The only other things he knew for sure were that it was a car accident and Noah had been driving.

“*Please*,” Beth begged. “We were so good together. I’ve tried reaching out so many times, but he won’t answer anything. But if you two are sharing a room, you can talk to him for me.”

Helio stared at her, thinking it through. From what he’d seen, Noah and Beth *had* been a pretty good couple, at least from the outside looking in. The tall, handsome goalie who had been offered full-ride soccer scholarships at half a dozen colleges around the US and two abroad, and his world-famous influencer girlfriend. Picture perfect in every post Beth made about their dates in the two years they’d been together.

“I’m not making any promises,” Helio said eventually. He didn’t want to outright say no. That would be a recipe for Beth hounding him the entire trip. But he also wasn’t going to harass Noah about it. The guy had been through enough. He’d, maybe, bring it up once. That was it.

Beth huffed but let it go there, starting the recording again and diving back into doing Helio’s makeup. A ding from the intercom system almost immediately interrupted them, causing Beth to let out an annoyed groan and stop the recording once more.

“Hello everyone, this is your captain speaking. Due to priority traffic, our landing has been delayed by twenty minutes. The tower has granted us permission to enter a holding pattern that will give both sides of the plane a view of the current volcanic eruption outside the town of Grindavík, so take a look if you get a chance! This eruption started a week ago and has slowed significantly, but it’s still a sight to see!”

For this, Helio was willing to look out the window. He turned around, feeling Beth lean over his shoulder. At first he couldn’t see any sign of the eruption, then the plane began a slow, wide turn that tilted them over the land. A glowing fissure came into view, bubbling and spitting molten rock. Judging how long the fissure was, or how high the fountains of lava were, proved tricky from so high up, but they certainly weren’t small.

“I can’t believe they aren’t letting us go to that one,” Beth said. “I want pictures with an active volcano, not some crusty old lava field.”

“There’s too much gas,” Helio told her. He’d been reading up on the eruptions for the last couple weeks. This series of eruptions weren’t “tourist eruptions” as Iceland called them; too dangerous, too unpredictable. “You’d be risking your life going out there. And the ‘crusty old lava flow’ we’re going to for class is only a monthish old. It’s still dangerously hot in places. They’ve built a whole lab, and three little towns, to study how volcanoes affect infrastructure. There’s nothing else like it in the world.”

“If it’s not red and glowing, it doesn’t interest me,” Beth replied, tugging him back around to finish his makeup.

Helio sighed, letting her do it.

Gathering everyone’s luggage at the airport took twice as long given that Beth had brought five suitcases, and one of them didn’t show up with the others. Finally, almost ninety minutes after they’d landed, they got on their transport bus and headed for the college in Reykjavík. The college campus was dark when they arrived, only a few yellowish streetlamps providing a bit of illumination. When the first people in their group stepped from one pool of light to another, excited shouts rang out, everyone pointing up.

Helio joined them, astonished to see brilliantly clear auroras dancing in ribbons of green and red above them. He’d seen the northern lights a couple times before, but they’d been much fainter to the naked eye. You could only really see them well if you used a camera. These, though, were indescribably vivid. They rolled and pulsed, furling and unfurling. All around him people were holding out their phones or digging out real cameras from luggage. Beth had snapped her phone into a gimbal and was twirling under the auroras away from everyone else. Helio just watched, not wanting to put a lens between himself and the beautiful show above. He’d get pictures from someone else later.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Noah stood apart from everyone else, eyes closed and jaw tight. Helio took a half step toward him, not quite sure what he was intending to do, but before he could get any closer Noah turned and continued on towards the dorm they’d been assigned. Helio watched him go for a moment, then turned his attention back to the astral show above their heads.

When he entered the room fifteen minutes later, Noah was haphazardly throwing all his clothes into the dresser. He didn't even glance up when Helio entered.

"Hi," Helio said.

Noah ignored him.

"Not sure if Beth ever mentioned me, we used to be friends when we were kids. I just changed my name, though. To Helio. Used to be Elliot."

Still nothing.

Helio gave up, going over to the unclaimed bed and starting to unpack his own stuff. Having Noah silently unpacking behind him made his skin itch. How hard was it to say hello? Or at least give a grunt of acknowledgment, or something? If he wanted to spend the rest of the trip being standoffish, fine, but was a single greeting so hard?

Something crashed behind him and Helio spun around, finding Noah's suitcase on the floor with the rest of the contents strewn out around it where they'd fallen. Noah was scowling, fist clenched tight. Helio took a step forward, intending to help, only for Noah to turn his scowl on Helio instead.

"Don't touch my shit," Noah snapped.

"I was just—"

"Don't," Noah snapped again, louder this time.

He reached out with his foot and scraped everything into a pile, kicking it under his bed before stomping into the bathroom and slamming the door. Helio was left standing there, no idea what to do. Silence he could put up with for two weeks. Angry outbursts, not so much. But, at the same time, he sort of felt obligated to at least try, despite a little voice in the back of his head whispering that he couldn't take home every feisty stray kitten he found. For all his dislike of being a mom-friend, it was hard not to try to help when someone needed it, and Noah clearly did.

"Two days," Helio muttered to himself. "I'll put up with him for two days, then I'm out."

Chapter 2

Jessy

Jessy unpacked her small carry-on piece by piece. It was all she'd brought other than her backpack. She hadn't wanted to risk losing her luggage by checking a bag, something she told herself was practical and had nothing to do with the fact that she could still perfectly recite all of her parents' rants about TSA being untrustworthy thieves. As hard as she'd tried, and even though it had been months since she'd seen them, their paranoia still stuck to her instincts like glue.

The arrival of Jessy's roommate was heralded by the sound of Beth narrating her way down the hall. "Isn't this college just *adorable*? I am totally going to have to do a room tour when I get unpacked!"

The lock clicked and Jessy quickly shrugged her hair over her shoulder so it would hide her face. Beth strutted in like she owned the place, squealing in a way that made Jessy's ears ring. Some poor guy had been roped into wrestling her suitcases for her, including the fifth one that had been located somewhere. He hauled them in, setting them near the door before making a quick escape. Jessy envied him.

When their teacher had put her with Beth, Jessy's first thought was that she wanted to jump out of the plane rather than deal with someone like that. She'd only *barely* managed to get clearance to leave the country for this trip, despite the scrutiny her parents were under. The last thing she needed was to live with someone who had a camera turned on and broadcasting 24/7.

"Ugh, these bedspreads are horrid," Beth said from behind her. Jessy risked a glance over her shoulder, relieved to find Beth's phone tossed down on her desk.

"I think they're cute," Jessy replied. They were navy blue with a pattern of puffins around the edges.

"Nope." Beth leaned forward and got a grip on the bedding, yanking it all off in one go. She bundled it up in her arms, then went and dropped it all out in the hallway. Coming back, she opened her largest suitcase to reveal what looked like a brand new full bedding set.

"You can't be serious," Jessy said before she could think better of it. She wasn't sure what

was more off putting, the removal of the bedding, the dropping it in the hallway, or the expensive replacement set she'd brought. Probably the dropping it in the hallway, since she clearly expected someone else to come deal with it.

Beth scoffed. "As if I'd be caught dead using the same musty bedding as who knows how many people before me. I have an image to keep up."

Jessy wondered if she did the same thing every time she stayed at a hotel. "Look, about your...image...and your videos, all that stuff, don't film me. Please."

Beth turned to her, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow crawling up her face. "What was that?"

"Don't film me. Please." Jessy wanted nothing to do with being on Beth's countless feeds. Too many people might recognize her face for all the wrong reasons. Jessy didn't want that and, if she knew the reasons, Beth wouldn't want Jessy associated with her either. Not that Jessy had any plans to share those reasons. She'd have to find some other way to get out of this if Beth pushed it.

"Yeah, that's not going to work," Beth said. "My mom gave me a list of a couple hundred videos to take on this trip, and at least forty require roomie participation."

"Well, you'll have to talk to your mom about that, then," Jessy told her. Given they'd graduated a couple months earlier, Jessy also wondered why Beth seemed so beholden to her mother's plan. It was time to grow up, like everyone else.

Beth shook her head. "Ah, no. We've been putting this together for months. You'll have to swap out with someone." Her tone made it seem like she considered this a perfectly acceptable request, not one anyone would find rude.

"If you want someone to film with you, you'll have to be the one to swap. I'm fine where I'm at," Jessy returned. She didn't want to spend the whole trip at war with her roommate, or dodging her camera, but it was the principle of the thing. Except as soon as she said it, she heard her father's voice crooning in her head saying, "That's my stubborn little girl."

"I don't have time for that," Beth said. "I have two videos I need to do tonight, and that's after I get the room set up."

Jessy, still cringing from the realization that she'd been behaving in a way that would've

made her father proud, thought she detected a slight hint of worry in Beth's voice. Or maybe she was projecting her own issues onto Beth. But still. She didn't want to be the kind of person her father would've praised. Not anymore.

"Look, I just don't want my face on camera," Jessy hedged. "Maybe we can compromise somehow? I can run the camera, or you can shoot from angles that don't show my face?"

Beth crinkled her nose in disgust. "Ugh, no. That's so cheesy. Whatever, I'll find you someone to swap with tomorrow and just figure out a way around you for tonight."

She waved her hand like she was brushing Jessy away, going back to making the bed. Jessy rolled her eyes. She'd tried to compromise. That was something, at least. It certainly would've annoyed her father.

Beth held true to her word about filming her videos for the night, turning their four hours of sleep into two as she strutted around doing take after take. Jessy tried hiding out under her blankets, but Beth's well-trained voice was clear as a bell even through the pillow Jessy put over her head. In one of her videos Beth made a comment about her "sleepy roomie hiding out under the blankets," then thanked Jessy for doing that so Jessy could be swapped out for someone else in the rest of the videos. Jessy had somehow resisted the strong urge to flip her off.

When Jessy woke up the next morning, Beth was gone. She didn't show back up until after breakfast as everyone walked to orientation. Despite the lack of sleep, she was dressed to the nines, clutching a coffee that didn't seem to have come from anywhere on campus. She had on a full face of makeup and an outfit that probably fell into the category of "dark academia," something Jessy only knew about from nights hiding under the covers as she scrolled the internet on a phone her parents hadn't known she had. The outfit consisted of a deep gold pants suit with a desaturated reddish button-up underneath, half unbuttoned to reveal a black tube-top that barely covered anything, a hat the same color as the suit with a flat, circular brim, and plenty of artificially aged jewelry. It had to be exhausting to be that put together even with a good night of sleep, let alone without.

Jessy watched as Beth went to each of the other six girls from their school and tried to cajole them into swapping rooms. Two were twin sisters who immediately said no because of

that. Everyone else came up with their own excuses. Stymied, Beth slowed to meet Jessy and Mr. Mossburg where they were walking at the back of the group.

“Mr. Mossburg, I need to be switched to a solo room,” Beth said. Jessy was starting to notice that Beth didn’t ask for things, she just told you something and assumed you’d agree.

“That won’t be happening, Ms. Jeong.”

“You said yesterday you’d switch Helio to a solo room if they didn’t want to room with Noah,” Beth pressed.

Jessy continued walking, and listening, from a few steps away. She tried not to seem as if she was studying them, even though she was. She wanted to see how normal people argued. Even if Beth didn’t quite qualify as normal, she was more normal than anyone Jessy had grown up around.

“There are special circumstances involved in that case, as you of all people are *well* aware, and the college only has one additional room available. Were I to give it to you, I would not be able to give it to Helio should the need arise,” Mr. Mossburg said. His tone was firm but even. No undercurrent of a threat. No confusing sentences that could lead to multiple interpretations that the speaker could use to confuse someone later. Jessy replayed it in her head a few times, trying to memorize exactly what he’d done.

“But—”

Mr. Mossburg sighed and stopped walking, turning to Beth with a hand raised in a gesture clearly meant to indicate that Beth needed to stop and listen to him. Jessy made note of that as well, her hand twitching into the same loose but slightly pointed position at her side. She slowed as well, trying to hang back and listen without being too obvious.

“Ms. Jeong, as I am no longer your teacher, I am going to give you some very frank advice: no one owes you anything. The fame you have curated for yourself is certainly impressive, and I am sure it requires a lot of work. But this trip is not for you nor about you. I suggest you use this trip to take a break from your normal obligations and really explore yourself as you enter the next chapter of your life, as opposed to continuing on in the same persona you have built.”

With that he turned away and walked off before Beth could say anything, leaving Beth standing there with her mouth open. After a second she snapped it closed and strode over to

Jessy.

“Well, I guess we’re stuck with one another,” Beth declared. “Is there *anything* I can do to convince you to do the videos with me? I’ll help you start your own channels and get everything monetized. You’ll be clearing big brand deals by the time we head home, I promise.”

Jessy groaned. “Look...you don’t want *me* in your videos, okay? I’m...recognizable to a certain group of people, and your channels or whatever would tank when someone recognized me, alright?”

“What are you, some alt-right weirdo?” Beth asked like it was a joke. Jessy’s jaw tightened. How the hell had she managed to guess it in one go? When Jessy didn’t respond, Beth gasped. “Oh my god, *are* you?”

“My *parents* are,” Jessy hissed, trying to keep her voice low. “I’m not them. But people in their circles still know me. So the less I put my face out there, the better. Now shut up about it.”

With that Jessy stomped off, heading into the seminar room where their orientation was being held. She found a spot in the very back, in a corner, and sat there with her arms crossed. There were several dozen people in the room, students from all over the world, and Jessy was more than happy to hide behind all of them. Beth glanced at her, then went and sat next to Helio. They made for a funny contrast, Beth in her darker getup and Helio in a violently patterned yellow and orange ankle-length skirt that looked straight out of the 70s, with a matching yellow top and yellow-tinted glasses. Even his hair was sunflower yellow. Beth whispered furiously at him, not hiding a few glances sent back Jessy’s way. Helio sighed and said something about agreeing to pretend to be her roommate. Good. Now it wasn’t Jessy’s problem anymore.

“Hæ! Welcome! Welcome!” A woman greeted, standing at the front of the class. “My name is Professor Ólafsdóttir, and I am the head of our mini-mester program here at the university. This morning we will go over everything you will need to know for your two weeks here with us, as well as a safety briefing about the current eruption in Grindavík.”

Some interested murmuring picked up.

Professor Ólafsdóttir smiled. “Not to worry. The eruption itself poses no risk to us here in Reykjavík. The only potential concern is if the winds shift and blow gas from the eruption this direction, which is unlikely this time of year. In the event it does occur, all activities will be shifted

indoors.”

She continued to drone on, talking about schedules and class locations and outings and meals and everything else they all needed to know. Jessie wanted to be excited about all of it, but she was still trying to figure out what excitement felt like. At home, before Jessie had shattered it all, excitement had been a thing to tamp down and hide, lest it be used against her. She hadn’t been excited since she was little, since before things had gone wrong, back when her parents were just Christians with some outdated views, not the horrible militants they’d become over the last decade.

When everyone started to shuffle out, splitting into groups to tour the campus, Jessie hung back until the end, not wanting to get caught in the crowd. She regretted her hesitation when she ended up in a group with Beth. Her phone was in hand, clipped into a gimbal as she narrated the tour. Jessie took care to stay out of frame. Helio glanced back at her, then at Beth, before slipping over to walk next to Jessie.

“Sorry about her,” Helio said.

Jessie shrugged.

“I’ll deal with the videos.”

“Are you friends?” Jessie asked. She couldn’t recall ever having seen the two of them hanging out at school.

Helio made a so-so gesture with his hand. “Used to be, when we were kids. Just kind of grew apart. You know how it goes.”

No, she didn’t. She’d never had friends that lasted more than a few months. Maybe she had when she was really little, but after that her family started moving once a year at least, until they’d settled on the rural edge of a suburb outside Dallas when she was ten. After that she’d been homeschooled. Home indoctrinated, to be more accurate. Then...well...

She’d eventually ended up with her grandparents, starting at a new school in a new state in the middle of her senior year, missing class all the time because the FBI had more questions for her. So no, she did not know what it was like to grow apart from a childhood friend, or any sort of friend.

“Well, ah...yeah,” Helio said. Jessie guessed based on his tone she should’ve said

something in response to his previous comment. She couldn't figure out what it might've been. "Like I said, I'll handle her. Just send her my way if she starts to get in your face—"

The end of his sentence cut off when the ground beneath them abruptly decided it needed to be somewhere else about six inches to the left, then changed its mind and jumped back to the right. Helio yelped and flailed out, grabbing onto Jessy's arm for stability. She spread her feet and rode out the tremor while steadying him.

"Oh, that was a good little quake!" Their tour guide said with a laugh. "I guess our island wanted to say hello!"

Helio huffed, letting go of Jessy's arm while still hovering his hand close, like he thought he might have to grab on again. "Bit more than little."

"We stayed upright," Jessy said. And it hadn't ended the world. It was fine.