

NO LIGHT

NO CONTACT

NOWHERE TO HIDE

THE BURIED

Author of RATED

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CHAPTER 1

SASH

The nightmare was never quite the same.

There were always differences. Sometimes they were small things. A watch on the left hand instead of the right. The color of a shirt. The absence of a necktie. But the meat of the dream—that never changed. It was the same, every night it came to visit.

Sash hovered in that space between sleep and waking. She could feel the weight of the blanket against her legs. It was bunched up around her knees, as it usually was when the nightmare struck. Her grandmother said she kicked in her sleep, rhythmically, like she was trying to run to something. Or away.

It was always away.

Her limbs were heavy. Useless. Whatever residual energy they'd contained when she'd gone to bed had been wasted during the night as she tried to outrun a memory.

It helped if she kept her breathing methodical. In and out. In

and out. Each inhalation equal to every exhalation. A nice, even four seconds each way. Her heart rate slowed as her body began to wake.

The dream sloughed off her like mud, clinging to her skin with stubborn refusal to let go. Bits and pieces remained. The sense memory of her arm burning. The sound of an explosion so loud that it blew out the hearing in her left ear. The right one was fine. She'd had that ear pressed to her father's chest when it happened.

It.

That was how she always thought of it. An event that was not to be named. Giving it a name would make it seem even more horrible than it was. She refused to call it what most of the adults down here did. The Cataclysm. That was a stupid name. Sash hated the way it felt in her mouth when she said it, all jagged edges and burnt metal.

Better in her opinion to just refer to it as . . . it. *It* took out the sting. *It* dulled the power. *It* made it seem inconsequential. Small. Just two tiny letters.

Something soft and fuzzy slammed into her face. It was a cushioned, gentle slam, but a slam nonetheless. It was enough to jolt her awake.

Thank God.

The dream had relinquished its hold on her for one more day. It would come back. It always did. But now, at least, she was free.

Opening her eyes, Sash reached for the soft fuzzy thing that had spared her slumbering subconscious mind further torment.

It was a little pig, once a vibrant pink bordering on lavender,

now a sad grayish shade of dusty mauve. One of the pig's eyes was missing, replaced with a crosshatched section of black thread. It glared at her like an empty socket.

She had loved that stupid pig. She still did, though she pretended not to. She was too old for little pigs.

"Wake up," said a harsh voice from the doorway.

Sash considered not doing that at all. She could pull the covers over her head and go back to sleep. The nightmare never came back twice in the same night. Or morning, rather.

But Misha didn't like to be kept waiting. Her brother was a stickler for the rules and acted like it was his personal responsibility to make sure Sash followed them as slavishly as he did.

"Go away," she mumbled.

Misha snorted. "If you miss breakfast, don't come crying to me."

"I have never once in my life gone crying to you," Sash muttered, but it was too late. Misha and his unearned sense of superiority had already departed, off to choke down the same sad gruel they ate every day. It was also a bit of a lie, so it was for the best that he wasn't around to hear it. She and Nastia had clung to Misha a lot as children, especially during those first few months in the bunker. But things changed, as things were wont to do. Misha changed. Sash changed. They all did. The bunker, however, remained the same.

Her arm twitched as sensations—real ones, not dream ones—began to flood back to her body. Painful tingling ran down the length of her arm, from her shoulder to the tips of her fingers. She'd slept on it funny. She usually did. The bunks weren't built for comfort. They had been constructed with necessity in mind, not luxury. There were more than enough to fit them all without

having to double down—for that much Sash was grateful—but she was still sharing a room with her younger sister, older brother, mother, and grandmother. Unacceptable at the age of seventeen if anyone asked her, which no one ever did. And even if someone did ask, what could she say? What could she do? She wasn't going to move out and go to college and strike off on her own. There was nowhere to go. No colleges left to attend. There was just the bunker and everyone in it.

She sighed into her pillow, moving her arm in teeny-tiny increments to keep the painful tingling to a minimum. If she jolted out of bed too fast, it would only hurt more.

If she kept her eyes closed, she could at least pretend to be somewhere else. Anywhere, really. She wasn't picky. There was an old atlas—dated 1987—in the small, sad stack of books they called a library in the small, sad space they called a classroom. She had pored over that atlas so often she could probably draw every single map from memory. The names and shapes of each place were emblazoned in her mind, but they were about as real to her as Narnia or Atlantis. Fictional realities she would never know. She'd always wondered about Arizona though. That was a fun name. Arizona.

"Alexandra!"

Her mother's voice rang through the room like a reverberating cannon. The walls were metal, riveted together in great big sheets, perfect for bouncing sound around a confined space like a demented pinball.

"I'm coming!" Sash kicked the blanket to the foot of the bed. Pins and needles pricked at her limbs as she stood, dulling the cold sensation of the floor beneath her feet. Misha would have a fit later if she didn't make her bed with military precision. So

she didn't make the bed. There wasn't a lot to do in the bunker, and she had to make her own fun where she could.

And besides, the gruel might be boring and sad, but her stomach was rumbling. She would choke it down for one more day. And then another. And another. And another, until they ran out and died of starvation, hiding underground like a pack of terrified rats, huddled together in the comforting darkness, away from the sun.

"And don't call me Alexandra!"

She tugged on her sweats with more force than she should have. They were flimsy things. The holes in the knees had been patched up countless times. The cotton there was a completely different color than the rest.

They hadn't been hers originally. Nothing she wore these days was.

She had grown out of the clothes she'd been wearing the day they entered the bunker within the first year. Maybe less. Now, she wore her mother's old clothing. Her mother wore the clothes they'd found in the bunker, packed away for a family who had never had the chance to wear them.

Sash caught sight of the letters stamped into the metal wall paneling near the floor.

CPM INDUSTRIES

Everything in the bunker was emblazoned with those words.

Sash didn't know what industry—or industries—had been involved in the construction of the bunker, but she knew she hated the sight of those words.

Every day she saw them was another day spent here, trapped

in these walls. Buried, like a forgotten memory. Like a corpse just waiting for death to catch up.

"I told your mother not to pick that name for you," said a gravelly voice from the doorway.

Sash glanced up to find her grandmother standing at the threshold, gray eyes crinkled with mischief. Deep wrinkles were etched into her face from frowning and smiling, two things she managed to do in equal measure, even down here. Not even a world-ending catastrophe would steal the slightest bit from Olga Eremenko's expressive nature. She'd used it to light up the stage of opera houses from Moscow to Paris. Now, all she was lighting up was a tiny corner of space they'd carved out of the earth. A pit of survival.

"From the minute I felt you kick in her belly, I knew you weren't an Alexandra. But she insisted."

"Well, Babulya," Sash said, tugging the sweatpants up as she stood. "I'm a Sash now."

She was the only one who called Olga Babulya. Her siblings would call their grandmother Baba Olya but Babulya was Sash's thing. To the non-Eremenko kids, the eldest of their clan was Grandma Olga. It was nice, having a thing that was theirs and theirs alone. The Russian diminutives were reminders of the world outside—of the world Before—and the cultures that once made it whole.

"Alexandra!" Misha bellowed down the hallway.

"I'm coming! And my name is Sash!" She tightened the drawstring on the pants. They were slightly too loose. Her mother had worn them as warm-ups before ballet class, back when she'd been on tour with the Bolshoi. Those words and the image they painted might as well have been fiction to Sash.