

flint

41 DAYS, 9 HOURS, 42 MINUTES

THIS IS WHERE I'm going to die.

From my spot in the back seat of our Jeep, wedged in between overstuffed suitcases, I stare sullenly at the ultramodern “cabin” in front of us.

It's all sharp angles and gleaming wood. And glass—so much glass. The low-slung October sun glints off huge floor-to-ceiling windows with a glare so hot it stings my eyes.

It's the only house in view, tucked neatly into the Pennsylvania forest. All around it, bright orange leaves flame on branches. The whole scene could be on the cover of some glossy architecture magazine.

Not exactly what I pictured when I thought about where I'd spend my last forty-one days.

Forty-one days. I can't believe that's all that's left for me.

I blink hard. Swallow down the tightness in my throat that's been permanently lodged there for exactly half my life. Well, almost exactly half.

Outside the car, birds chirp in the autumn sunshine. Inside, the three of us—my mom, my dad, and me—are silent. Nobody even makes a move for their door handle. This is a threshold, and no one wants to take the next step.

“Well, we made it,” Mom finally says with forced brightness. Her words ping off the tension like a needle thrown at plate armor. Weariness smudges her at the edges, and I know it’s from more than just the long drive.

The me-about-to-die thing isn’t all that’s making this awkward. I haven’t seen my parents in the same room since their divorce, and now Mom’s riding shotgun in the Jeep like old times, sharing a bag of M&M’S with Dad. Acting like we’re a normal family again.

When Mom came up with this plan, she said it’d be like a vacation. Pretty dismal vacation, in my opinion, but I was a good son and kept that observation to myself. I know this trip is really so I don’t have to spend my last few weeks alone while they’re at work.

She asked where I wanted to go, listing a string of beach towns and bustling cities, but we’ve been down that road before. When we first found out about my expiration date, she dragged us to a million places, determined to give me as much *life* as she could in the time I had left. But weekends in New York City and boring drives to national parks didn’t make us feel any better—and it nearly bankrupted them. I’m already an emotional burden. I won’t let myself be a financial burden too.

So instead of letting Mom plan a postcard-worthy last hurrah, I told her I wanted to go to the one place I knew wouldn’t leave my parents in debt. The town where I grew up: Carbon Junction.

My dad grumbles something, then yanks the keys out of the ignition. “Can’t sit here all day,” he says. I can always count on his grumpy ass to bail us out of moments like this.

We get out of the car, stretching our stiff legs in the autumn chill.

I'm wearing my standard black T-shirt and black jeans, and goose bumps break out on my bare arms, spreading in a rush from my shoulders to my wrists.

Mom comes over and side-squeezes me, looking up with an encouraging smile. She's not super short or anything—I'm just abnormally tall.

Of course, she notices the goose bumps. "Oh, Flint, you must be—"

"I'm not cold," I interrupt. We've been over this. It's my standard response every time I refuse to wear a jacket.

The thing is, I'm lying. I am cold—I just like that it hurts. If I stay cold and hungry and miserable, when the end comes, it won't hurt. It'll be a relief.

We trudge up the driveway to the front porch, our shoes thumping hollowly on the deck. This cabin wasn't here when we lived in Carbon Junction. A lifetime ago, the three of us in our cozy house on the other side of town.

Dad checks the Airbnb instructions on his phone and pushes the code into the keypad on the door. The dead bolt retreats with a mechanical whir, and he plunges unceremoniously into the house. Mom and I hesitate for one heavy second, then we follow him in.

The cavernous space is painfully modern, with hard floors and even harder-looking furniture.

"I'm sorry it's not more . . . homey," Mom says as we look around. "I can get some pillows for the couch. A few area rugs. Make it a bit warmer in here."

Mom's an interior designer, the Leslie Larsen of the tiny,

struggling Philadelphia-based Leslie Larsen Interiors, and if I so much as nod in agreement, she'll spring into action and completely overhaul this place.

"It's fine, Mom," I say, plopping down on the couch. "Don't get anything."

My divorced parents exchange a look, further cementing the fact that this is going to be weird.

I rub my knees. In the Jeep, my legs were crunched up, and my kneecaps were pressed against the front seats. But other than my sore knees, I feel . . . fine.

That's the worst part, I think. That I'm healthy. There's not a single thing wrong with me. No chronic disease eating away at me, no defective organs. My body should be able to keep on trucking for years, decades even. But it's October 23, and sometime on December 4, it's going to stop like a watch that's run out of batteries.

That date has become more important to me than my own birthday. I've written it on every form I've ever had to fill in. Pre- or post-half-life? they all ask. In school, I'd watch as my classmates circled *pre* with carefree swishes of their pens. I'd draw a tight box around *post*, nearly ripping the paper. Everyone around me would get to skip the next question, but I'd have to answer it.

Deathday: December 4.

Birthdays and deathdays. All lives are bracketed by them. Everyone half-lives; I'm just one of the unlucky people who had it happen when they were a little kid.

I shake off the memory of the day I twinged. Of the sudden,

splitting headache that I remember and the seizure afterward that I don't. That day was the demarcating line that was drawn down my life, separating it into before I knew when I was going to die and . . . after.

Dad scratches at his stubble. "Flint, why don't you go get our stuff out of the car?"

Mom's chin snaps up. "Don't make him do that, Mack."

"Why not? He's perfectly capable."

"It's fine, Mom," I cut in, before this devolves into one of the "differences in opinion" they used to have.

I don't mind getting suitcases out of the car. At least Dad still makes me do normal shit. That's why I chose to live with him after the divorce. Well, that and because Mom's efforts to stay positive and cheerful around me were wearing her down. She pretended she was fine, but she was getting thinner and more washed out right in front of my eyes. I couldn't watch that. Be the reason for it.

While I'm busy bringing our stuff in, Mom messes around in the kitchen trying to get the fancy coffee machine to work, and Dad sticks his head into the cabinet under the sink, probably improving the water pressure or something. Since my dad's name is Mack, we joke that he's a "Mack of all trades" because he's had so many weird jobs over the years. Before I was born, he was one of those guys who put out fires on offshore oil rigs, then he was a guide for a whitewater rafting company. Now he manages a team of industrial welders in Philadelphia, and he can fix just about anything.

I should be happy my parents are here with me, but I wish they'd leave me here and go back to the city. Back to their jobs and their

friends and their separate, Flint-free lives. I don't need them here. I can die just fine on my own, thanks.

Finally the Jeep's empty. It locks with a *beep-beep*, and I head toward the house—but something stops me when I get to the door.

I can see Mom and Dad through the glass. They aren't bustling around the kitchen anymore—they're frozen, perfectly still. Mom's at the coffee maker with one hand pressed over her face, the other propped on the counter, like she doesn't have the energy to stand up straight. Dad's on the other side of the kitchen, staring at her back with a helpless expression I've never seen on him before.

I make a big deal out of opening the door and shutting it behind me.

When I turn around, Mom's upright, smoothing her sweater, blinking hard. But there's the same hush over everything that you'd find at a funeral. A thickness in the air. A dead body in a box at one end and everyone tiptoeing around, saying careful things. Only in this case, the dead body isn't in a box yet—I'm still up and walking around.

This whole idea is stupid. We can't pretend we're the family we were eight years ago.

I go to the back window and stare out over the forest so they can't see my clenched jaw. I force myself to breathe, to focus on the leaves rustling on the trees.

Through the half-bare branches, I can make out the backs of a few houses on the other side of Maynard's Creek, which burbles in a dark ribbon at the bottom of our sloping backyard. I know the street on the other side—it's called Harker's Run. Weird how the name comes back after all these years.

My old life in Carbon Junction is almost more real to me than my eight years in the city.

But at least one thing has changed—one of the houses has been painted bright purple. It looks out of place in all the burning, dying colors of autumn. I narrow my eyes. I don't remember there being a purple house on that street. But as garish as it is, it's not the part of the view I hate the most.

Above the tree line, two buildings sit on top of the biggest hill in town, proud and exposed. The Castle and the Crown.

The Castle is the old coal power plant—apparently the three giant smokestacks look like turrets. It shut down years ago. It's rusting and rotting now, cordoned off with a mean chain-link fence, but from far away it's still massive and imposing. Back in the day, virtually everyone in town worked there. When it closed, the town would have been sucked under by poverty and weeds if it hadn't been for the other building on the hill—the Crown. Because that's where everyone in Carbon Junction works now. Or nearly everyone, anyway.

The Crown is a brutally modern tower of white concrete rising thirty stories over the town, topped with a circle of curved spikes that look like some evil, alien crown.

How painfully ironic that my hometown—the place where I was born and the place where I'm going to die—is home to the Half-Life Institute, the world's premier research facility into the phenomenon humans have been living with since the dawn of time.

If I had the energy, I'd give it the finger.

I think my mom is secretly pleased that I wanted to come back to

Carbon Junction. The Institute exists primarily to figure out what's causing the half-life (which I doubt they'll ever make any progress on), but they offer all sorts of supplemental "support" programs too. If she thinks she can wrangle me into talking to one of the Institute's therapists, she's dead wrong.

The sun shifts behind a cloud, and for a second, I can see my own reflection in the glass. God, I look rough. I'm just so *tired*.

Something thwacks into the glass right in front of my face. I jolt back, startled.

On the deck, lying on its side, is a small gray bird. As I stare, the bird twitches once, then exhales, its tiny chest deflating. It doesn't move again.

For a second, I'm in shock. I've never seen anything *die* in front of me before.

The ever-present lump in my throat swells. "Mom? There's a dead bird on the deck."

"What?" She comes over right away. "Oh god, honey, don't look. I'll get Dad to put it in the trash can on the driveway."

"Wait." I feel connected to this bird now. After all, I'm going to die here too. "Do we have a box or something?" I ask.

Mom softens. "Of course."

While she's looking for one, I rifle through the kitchen drawers. I didn't think to pack a shovel for this cheerful little vacation, so a serving spoon will have to do.

Mom hands me an empty coffee pod box. "Will it fit in here?" she asks.

I nod and head for the back porch.

“Flint, wait—take a coat.”

I turn around and she’s already holding it out to me.

“Please?” she adds.

I take it, but I have no intention of wearing it once I’m out of her sight.

She snags my elbow. “Is there anything you want to do this afternoon?” she asks. “I was thinking maybe we could order some Thai food, and Dad can set up the TV?”

“I’m pretty tired, Mom. I might just crash in my room.”

That’s not going to go over well. I know what she expects from these final weeks. Neither of them could take an entire month and a half off work, but there’s still plenty of room for Quality Family Time. And Mom will want me to talk about my feelings.

“Flint . . .” She reaches up to push my hair back from my face. “I know this is hard, but we can do some fun things, even though you’re—”

She can’t say it, even after eight years of living with it.

She holds her hands out helplessly. “You can’t just do nothing here. You deserve to live a little.”

“*Little* being the operative word,” I mutter.

Hurt flashes on her face.

I want to say sorry, to hug her and hold on like I used to when I was a kid. But I can’t. I have to make sure she doesn’t miss me when I’m gone.

I sigh. “Thai is fine, Mom.”

She gives me a stretched-thin smile, but at least it’s a smile. “I’ll order it now. Love you.”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

Outside on the porch, I crouch and nudge the bird’s limp body into the box. Then I set off through the trees. I stop next to a towering hemlock and peel off my coat. As I push the serving spoon deep into the cold soil, all I can think is *Forty-one days*.

A wave of something bleak and endlessly shitty grips me.

I thought I was used to the countdown. But now that there are six weeks left, I keep getting these waves of hot, clammy panic. Some days it’s worse than others. Sometimes I can almost make it go away, but now that we’re here, the tightness in my throat is impossible to swallow down.

I’ve been through a lot over the past eight years. I was still a kid when I half-lived, just a dorky little third grader, and I didn’t really understand it at first. We moved away because people started treating us so differently. It wasn’t as bad in Philadelphia, at least at first. I could deal with no one at my new school wanting to be friends with the kid who was going to kick it in high school. But then freshman year came and . . .

That was the worst year. For a lot of reasons.

I finish burying the bird and wipe my hands on my jeans. I pull my phone out of my back pocket. I’ve set the lock screen to be a countdown, and for a minute I just stare at it. Watch as the seconds tick by.

Another second, gone.

Tick.

Another.

What could I have done with that second? What *should* I have

done with it? Sometimes, in between the waves of fear and sadness and anger, there's guilt. I hate the guilt the most.

Death is going to be a hell of a lot easier than this crap. Easier than sitting around just waiting for the end.

Here's the thing about half-lifing: Nothing can kill you before your deathday. I could walk out in front of an 18-wheeler or tie myself to train tracks, and I wouldn't die. I'd be a mess, but I wouldn't be dead. Not until December 4. I shudder when I think about the cultlike groups that have popped up over the years or the weird phases in history when it became fashionable to thrill-seek. Cliff diving with no training, swimming with stingrays and alligators, drag racing. People say it's about the rush of adrenaline, or taking back control and defying death, but I've seen how it plays out too many times. The injuries are brutal. Limbs ripped from bodies, third-degree burns, paralysis. Excruciating pain is why most people don't screw around. We just live with the countdown.

I look at the spoon jutting out like a headstone over the bird's grave.

And that's when the thought hits: My parents are going to have to *bury* me.

For all the time I've spent waiting for my deathday to roll around, I don't know how that never occurred to me before.

My parents are guaranteed to grow old. My dad half-lifed two years ago, when he was forty-two, and eighty-four is a long way off. My mom hasn't even had hers yet, and the half-life is never wrong. One day, they'll make it to a birthday where they'll have spent more years without me than they spent with me.

My chin starts to wobble. God, not this again. I just want to make it through my last few weeks and die without hurting anyone. Is that too much to ask?

I glance up at the cabin. When I go back in, Mom will want to hug me, comfort me about the dead bird. Dad will argue my side every time Mom treats me like fine china. Maybe I'll hear her cry herself to sleep like she does every weekend when I stay at her place.

I press the heels of my hands to my eyes. I can't go back up there. I can't breathe in that house.

There in the woods, an idea starts to form.

I need to find a place to spend my final few days. That way they won't have to hear my last exhale or watch the light go out of my eyes.

I can't let them see me die. It'll break them.

I breathe in the smell of the forest. Wet bark and pine needles, the sweet pecan scent of decaying leaves.

I think I know just the place.

Instead of going back up to the house, I turn and head deeper into the woods.