

Red and white lights blinked in quiet looping succession overhead.

As soon as everyone else had made it out safely Madeline Loraine had turned off the blaring siren and thudding countdown.

They had argued with her that she should come with them, make a run for it out of the facility, but Madeline knew that someone had to stay behind to make sure that everyone else got out in time. The doors had to be manually overridden from within as safety precaution because any of the chemicals spilling out into the world had the potential of killing thousands. Once overridden to allow for everyone to escape there had to be someone had to be someone physically there to make sure that the doors closed again.

It was one thing to get everyone out, it was another to keep everyone safe.

Research and development for a healthier planet, that's what had caused this mess, that's what she was going to die for.

As a child Madeline had wanted to save the world, stop global warming and retire with a Nobel prize. With each passing year her dream slipped further and further away as she realized two things: First, people didn't care about things that didn't affect them in an immediate way and second that she was not the next 'beautiful mind' destined to save earth.

Intelligence was her blessing, being just short of brilliance was her curse. Close enough to see what was needed and far enough to not be able to achieve it on her own. Still, she wanted to make a difference so when the job in R&D came up she had taken it. Acceptance involved moving out to small town situated a few miles away from the middle of nowhere and an industrial hub of a city.

Never really one for driving, it gave her anxiety after all, Madeline had felt somewhat isolated by the location of the facility...until Mark.

Mark who had offered to drive her into town for groceries.

Mark who had invited her out to coffee... then dinner...then to a life with the two of them together.

Mark who she had lost in a stupid argument over starting fresh somewhere new.

After the near miss last month had wanted to get away, to start a family somewhere safer.

Mark had been there despite having giving his two weeks, when the alarms had started after the first explosion. He had gone into the aftermath and carried out the new girl from HR in his arms looking every part the hero he was. Performed first aid on the unconscious woman while Madeline made the decision to stay behind.

“It’s one life,” she had said with a quiet determination, refusing to look his way. If she looked at him she would want to go, she would want to leave with him, tell him that she loved him, beg him to take her back so they could just run away together.

If the alarms hadn’t been blaring, if the fear hadn’t been pumping through everyone’s veins they might have argued against her being the one to stay. She was young after all, and there were those so much closer to death’s door than herself. The toll of the pre-recorded countdown with its emotionless voice had a certain effect on people and they wanted to live.

So they left and let her stay.

She hadn’t watched them go.

Mark did not say goodbye.

Returning to the board Madeline did what she had stayed behind to do and turned the master key. The doors to the outside closed for the last time and while she couldn't hear the metal seal shut she felt that last window to the outside world vanish away.

For a moment Madeline closed her eyes and allowed herself grief for all she was leaving behind.

Her sister would be devastated, they were supposed to be having thanksgiving dinner together next week. She had been dreading the reunion and having to explain to her baby sister that mark would not be joining them for Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or ever again.

Now she would give anything to have that one last meal and be thankful.

Flipping open her cell phone Madeline pulled up her sister's contact.

There was no signal on her phone, there was never signal in the lab.

Some of the other staff had complained about that fact on a regular basis. Madeline had never really minded. It kept distractions away at work and helped her focus on what was important.

Mark used to send her messages while she was down below so that the first thing that she received when she surfaced were notes of love. So every time she came back to the real world she would be greeted with him.

It was the absence of a message that first day after the fight that let Madeline know it really was over.

Strange how the lack of something could be such a knife.

As the numbers on the screen in front of Madeline counted down in silence she stared at the phone in her hand and tried to figure out what to say. If the phone made it through at least she would leave her sister something, but what was she supposed to say?

She glanced at the countdown. There wasn't enough time to think of something poetic or write everything that should be said so she typed the only three words needed to be said and clicked send.

Leaning her head back against the side of the console Madeline closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She tried to calm her ratcheting heart. She had never pictured herself facing death by choice, even if it was a choice that involved saving others. There was some strange comfort in knowing that any misdeeds she may have been remembered for would be far out shadowed by her final act.

Gas started filling the room and Madeline coughed.

The red numbers counted down.

Madeline picked up her phone once more. She had one last message to send. She needed to tell Mark she was sorry. She needed say she loved him.

A bang at the door startled the cell phone from her hands. Her fingers tingled and she wiped her nose, the back of her hand coming down red. Her brain felt foggy.

Another knock.

Terror that someone else had been forgotten. No one else should have to die today. They had said over the com that everyone else had made it out safe before she had shut the door.

The numbers were so blurry before her eyes, but it didn't take seeing them to know there was no time for them to escape.

The idea of telling someone else that there was no time and no hope left was more terrifying than the idea of facing death alone.

She tried to stand, her legs didn't answer the call.

All at once he was there, kneeling in front of her.

Mark.

No, thought Madeline, her heart ripping in two. Someone like Mark should not be here. Someone like Mark deserved to be out there in the world making things better. That's what Mark did, he made everything better, he always had.

"You shouldn't be here," Madeline managed.

"I couldn't not be," he answered and touched her face.

"Why?" she managed coughing. She could taste the blood in her mouth all coppery and sweet. He sat down beside her and drew her up into his arms.

"Because I already know what it feels like to live without you, and I am not going to spend the rest of my life that way."

Mark buried his face into her neck and Madeline closed her eyes and inhaled.

She felt a peace in his arms as the final number passed.

“Hey Mark,” Madeline’s little sister reached out touching his shoulder at the funeral. “How are you holding up.”

Mark’s eyes were red almost as much as her own.

“I never told her,” he said. “I never told her I was sorry after the fight.”

“She knew,” Madeline’s sister wrapped her arms around Mark in a hug. “I am sure she knew.”

“I didn’t say goodbye. When she chose to stay I...I just left,” he pulled back from the hug and wiped at his eyes angrily. “I loved her and I just left.”

“You saved that young girls life,” she said quietly, trying to offer some condolence. “The paramedics said if you hadn’t dressed her wounds and started on CPR when she flat lined outside she would have died.”

“But I didn’t say goodbye, I should have said goodbye. I shouldn’t have let her stay.”

“Mark no body *let* Madeline do anything. She was a strong willed stubborn pain in the ass sometimes. She also loved you.”

“In the end she hated me.”

“I don’t think so,” Madeline’s little sister shook her head. “Her phone was open to your name when she died Mark, and I think she was going to send you the same message she sent me.”

“She sent you a message?”

“I didn’t get it till after they retrieved the phone, you know how signal is down there.”

“Yeah,” he muttered pulling a hand back through his hair. “What did she say?”

Through the grief Madeline’s little sister smiled.