

3rd Place Winner – Sarah Thompson – The Leap

This place was perfect. I'd spent the last few hours here in blissful quiet, high above the sleeping city. The sun had since peeked over the horizon in all its pink and orange glory and I knew what was happening in the countless houses and apartment buildings in the valley below. The people were waking up, getting ready to go to whatever job the government had deemed them suited for, and not a single one of them would stop and wonder why.

Freedom was just a thing that my grandparents' generation had begun to sell to the government, bit by bit, for a profit. My parents' generation was worse. By the time they had finished, what was left wasn't worth much. My generation finished giving it away with no more consideration than you would an old shirt that doesn't fit anymore. That still wasn't good enough for Emery, the leader of the farce that passes for government these days. He decided to remove even the chance that someone might have an independent thought and fit us all with transmitters to keep everyone nice and under control. The sad part is, we were so trained and conditioned to trust the government by then that not many people even thought to object. I was one of the few.

The soldiers had come at dawn, on a day much like this, a couple of years ago. They went methodically from one house to the next pushing people in front of them into the streets. They herded us like cattle, forcing us into lines in the middle of the city for processing and tagging. I searched the crowd looking for anyone who felt the panic to leave like I did. The most I saw was boredom or anger at being detained. But, that was only until they were implanted with the chip. Then, there was nothing, only blind obedience to the orders of the government. A supply truck drove by the line I was in, so I climbed in back and huddled under a tarp, listening to my thundering heart, as I waited for someone to give away my position. No one noticed, or no one cared if they did.

I left everything I ever knew and put as much distance between me and the city as fast as I could. I'm not sure how I knew what to do, but some inner survival instinct kicked in and I knew I could hide and survive if I made it to the mountains. I met others along the way. Later, we learned that the government called us insubordinates, those of us who dared to defy their blanket control. But, that day we were just survivors who were happy not to be alone. We became a community high in the mountains. That's where I met Jesse.

Jesse was a couple of years older than me, in his early twenties, but he seemed so much older in wisdom. Just the thought of Jesse brought the familiar thrill to my stomach, followed soon after by the dull ache in my chest that was also becoming familiar. It was never far behind when I remembered that Jesse was gone. He had died saving me. He pushed me out of the car but not before making me promise I would carry on with our plan without him. Then, he went over the cliff.

Ping. Ping. Ping. The dreaded warning signal alerted me that Emery's army was close. Damn. I wasn't ready yet. He was never far behind, but lately it seemed like he knew what my next move would be, like he could read my mind. If he could, then fighting was useless, but it didn't matter much now anyway. One way or another, I was done fighting Emery. I wouldn't give up, but I just couldn't go on much longer alone. I looked around for anything I could use, but there were only a couple of lonely cars on the top level of the parking garage at this hour.

With Jesse it had been different. There were tender moments that made everything else seem bearable. Countless nights in the cold caves when we didn't need anything more than each other to stay warm. Evenings spent wrapped in Jesse's arms as we talked about possible plans for the future but never really

made any definite decisions. We even spent hours huddle over maps and reports, planning our next move against Emery's forces, but when our hands would brush and our eyes would meet, it was a feeling only the two of us understood. The rest of the world fell away and we could forget about merely surviving and feel what it meant to be alive. There were moments of pure humanity even Emery couldn't take away. Without Jesse, the price of living seemed more than I could afford to pay.

The alarm sounded again and I knew that they must be in the building by now, searching for me. I wouldn't be too hard to find. I was sure of that. It wasn't too late. I had the remote in one hand and the clasp to my harness in the other. I could go now, but I needed to make sure. I was eyeing the cable that was to be my escape route when the doors to the elevator and the stairwell opened and they filed out. The tapping of the shoes and the clacking of their weapons echoed through the space.

Jesse had always stressed the importance of knowing your enemy. After years of fighting Emery, I knew him pretty well. Crushing the insubordinates had become a personal conquest for him. One that he had proven to be efficient at. I knew he would come in person to see his army capture me and, as expected, he brought his cabinet members to witness his moment of glory.

"Good morning Miss Henderson," Emery pretended civility in his nasally voice. His light blond hair and cream colored suit made him practically glow in the early morning light.

"Emery," I returned.

"It's President Emery," he said through gritted teeth, "and I wondered if you would like to see my newest invention. Proceed, Mr. Collins." He nodded to a man near him with a handheld computer and the elevator doors opened again with a ding.

"You invented a remote controlled elevator, Emery? I'm very impressed," I feigned admiration.

His smile remained cool and unaffected. "Your humor has always amused me, Miss Henderson. Let's see if mine amuses you."

I couldn't stop the gasp that escaped my lips as a man stepped out of the elevator...at least I think it was a man. His movements were jerky and robotic, but he certainly looked like a man. He was big, over six feet of muscle covered in a camouflage uniform. That was normal; that's how all of Emery's soldiers looked. What was peculiar were the heavy metal braces binding his arm and leg on the left side and the thick cable that ran up his neck and disappeared into the top of his head somewhere amidst the thick dark hair. In his right hand he carried a heavy assault rifle. When he turned toward us I could see high cheekbones, straight nose, and full lips. Jesse's face but not his eyes. They were the same honey brown that I remembered from the hours I spent lost in them, but now they were dull and empty, devoid of the spark and emotion they always held.

"Jesse," I said weakly and took a couple involuntary steps in his direction.

Emery burst out with a cruel chuckle. "He is perfect. Isn't he? He still resembles your Jesse, but I assure you, darling, he is completely my weapon."

“I saw him die,” I said lamely.

“Dead, no. Broken, yes. It took my surgeons several hours to piece him back together. He had barely enough flesh left on the left side to cover the titanium rods they had to use to replace his shattered bones. But, his spirit was very much intact. That took a little more work. He kept telling me that you would be my undoing. That’s what gave me the inspiration, your Jesse. He kept saying that he knew you better than anyone, and you would never stop until my government was destroyed. Then it came to me. If he knew you so well, then who better than him to find you for us? It was brilliant, really, don’t you agree?”

I took another fleeting glance toward the edge. I was out of position. The cable was too far away. If I even tried for it, they would shoot me before I could push the button.

“Don’t be so forlorn, darling. It doesn’t have to be this way. The two of you can still be together. We can do an overhaul on you and I’ll have two weapons to exterminate the vermin, all the better.”

He was talking about our people and I knew it. I was just a test. He planned to use Jesse to find and destroy every last insubordinate. That made it ever more vital that this mission not fail.

“I’m not leaving you this time, Jesse,” I promised. “It’s me, Jesse. It’s April. No matter what, we’ll be together.” He stood stone still like before. “You told me something once. Do you remember? You said death wasn’t the end to be feared, not if we died well. The end that you feared was becoming one of Emery’s zombies, just going through the motions of living but never getting to really experience it.”

He blinked, but gave little other evidence that he even comprehended what I was saying to him. “You don’t want this life, Jesse. It’s the one thing we always knew for sure. We weren’t sure what we wanted, but we always knew that we didn’t want this, to be one of Emery’s pawns. Don’t you remember, Jesse?”

“Well,” Emery said. “It sounds like you’ve made your decision, Miss Henderson. That’s alright. There’s a poetic justice in this as well. Have him kill her,” he ordered and Collins entered the command into the tablet.

Jesse was propelled forward and his hand closed around my throat like a vise. He pushed me to the edge of the platform until only my tiptoes were on solid ground. Darkness circled my vision and I was afraid I’d lose consciousness before I could push the button. I had to push that button. That was more important than anything else. I had known the risks when I’d made the plan. I knew something could go wrong and I might have to set off the charges with me still here, and I was ok with that as long as I took Emery and his army with me. But, that was before Jesse. How could I push the button with Jesse here? How could I not? I circled the button with my thumb as my other hand came up almost of its own volition and touched his face. My fingers traced the familiar line across his jaw and down his throat.

He jerked his head away like he’d been burned and his grip loosened enough for me to take gulping breaths. When I could focus again, I finally saw a trace of human emotion in his eyes. Confusion. His eyes took on a wild look and raced over my face, searching for answers. His body began to shake with the effort it took to resist Emery’s orders. It was now or never, so I reached up and kissed him. These were Jesse’s lips, warm and firm, so familiar and yet foreign. He didn’t respond to me like he used to, but when I looked into his eyes again, I saw Jesse. I didn’t know how long it would last, so I had to act quickly.

“Come with me, Jesse,” I pleaded. “Come with me.”

His only response was a slight nod of understanding when he followed my gaze to the cable and his hand tightened around the clasp I pushed into his palm.

I heard Emery swear and the computer crashed to the ground. “Forget it! I’ll do it the old fashioned way,” he yelled and lunged for the weapon that Jesse had dropped.

Metal clinked as Jesse latched the harness to the cable. His arms wrapped around me, lifting me. The brace on his arm bit into the flesh of my back, but I ignored it and shifted my legs higher on his waist to avoid the brace on his hip. I wrapped my arms around his neck, the remote still in my hand.

Understanding dawned in Emery’s eyes and he froze halfway to the gun. “Kill them! Shoot them you bastards!” he screamed to his men.

As Jesse took that first step into nothing, I pushed the button. Emery’s army scrambled in useless disarray as the charges I’d set began going off in level after level of the parking garage and the government building it attached to.

I had asked Jesse to take a leap of faith with me, literally. He didn’t know what kind of plan I had in place or if I had one at all. It was one for me too, because I didn’t know if that plan would work. I wasn’t sure that the cable would hold me, let alone both of us. Also, I had no idea if all of Emery’s army would be killed in the blast. There may be some waiting at the bottom of this cable to shoot us if we did survive the jump. But, most of all, I wasn’t sure about Jesse. I didn’t know if the mind control was reversible. The best I could hope for was that we survived the fall and I could get Jesse back to our people so that Doc could take a look at him. Whether or not he would ever truly be my Jesse again was still to be determined, but right now I didn’t care. He was alive, and he was here with me. That was more than I had a few hours ago, and that was all that mattered now. Well, that and the fact that we had won. Humanity would soon be waking up to new found freedom, Jesse’s and my last gift to them. What they did with that gift was up to them, because I was going to keep the promise I had made to myself. This wasn’t our fight anymore; no matter the outcome Jesse and I were finished. We had done our part.

And Emery knew it too, in the end. The last thing I saw, before gravity pulled us out of sight, was his face twisted in horror as the car next to him exploded.