

# Somewhere in The Middle

## Part 1 of the Cymothoa Series

**\*\*TEASER EDITION\*\***

By Lucas Coon

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Somewhere in The Middle is the first book of the Cymothoa Series, and kicks off the trilogy. It is also the first book I wrote and, as such, holds a special place in my heart. The story centers around Mitchell Swartz, a history teacher that is caught up in the middle of something much larger than himself. Namely, a parasitic outbreak over the city that he calls home. Separated from his wife due to bad timing and unfortunate disagreement, his main goal is to find her and make sure she's safe.

The full novel is 329 Pages long, 20 chapters, and has been described to me as "A drama-focused Walking Dead".

If you have any questions, you can always reach out to me in any of the following ways...

Email: [LucasC@Vivaldi.net](mailto:LucasC@Vivaldi.net)

Twitter: @Lucadaco2

Facebook: [facebook.com/Lucadaco](https://www.facebook.com/Lucadaco)

::REVIEWS::

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Loved the details and twists! Kept me reading even after bedtime, just couldn't put it down. Looking forward to more from this author."

-Kelli on Amazon

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"I was looking for a great read when I stumbled across this, not what I expected but definitely a page turner. I fell in love with the characters from page one. And don't get too comfortable with this author, just when you think you know what is going to happen next, he flips the switch and you are headed off in a totally different direction. I could not put it down. I am very much looking forward to seeing what he brings to the table next. I am fortunate to have not passed up this great find."

-Samantha on Amazon

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Once you start you won't be able to put it down! Compelling and great characters.

This is a gem for sure"

-dk696 on Amazon

## **Chapter 1 – Preface**

Evolution is regarded as the process in which an organism changes over time to better adapt to its environment to ensure survival. It can be natural; a species can change over time due to something as simple as a shift in climates. Life will do everything that it possibly can in order to replicate itself. Every generation leans a little more towards what the species will be in the future. Without a system of self-replication the chain would effectively come to a screeching halt. These are the two extremes in natural evolution; either the change is gradual, lasting hundreds to millions of years, or it all falls apart.

It can also be artificial. Humans have been known to play a large role in the changing of the way the world works. We destroy beyond reason. We have no problem completely removing species from existence to get a few extra bucks out of a small piece of land and the delicate ecosystem attached to it. We regard our "duties" of tearing trees out of forests, dumping our toxins into large bodies of water, and burying yesterday's cheeseburger wrapper as a higher priority than doing anything to help the only planet that we have the ability to live on. We couldn't care less if we've removed natural selection from the picture entirely, as long as we can make a few million dollars. We destroy the systems that were put in place by nature millions of years ago without a second thought. We also commit the worst possible sin against the natural process of evolution; we invoke the other end of the aforementioned spectrum. We force evolution to occur in instantaneous spurts through biological experimentation. We attempt to create the fittest, but quite often they don't survive. We've proven that while we can alter the system, most of the time the results aren't stable. Take mules for instance. They are a genetic combination of a horse and a donkey but are sterile throughout their lives. This proves that our splicing has no genetic benefits. Why do we do this? Is it pride? To prove we can?

In our own minds, we are gods. We create societies, we destroy societies. We destroy ecosystems, and then recreate them in your local city zoo. We are aware of the consequences of our actions, proven through the millions of conservation efforts and "Save the Animal" pamphlets (I won't get into the irony of these), but have no problem throwing away a half-empty foam Chinese takeout container of Chicken lo mein. We are hypocritical in our efforts to protect endangered species through the use of a television commercial produced by for-profit corporations that use one-percent of all funding to actually aide in their cause. The worst part of our god-complex is that we end up abandoning our own. We kill innocent people in foreign countries over mounds of dirt. We draw imaginary lines not to cross, and then throw

anyone that does in a cage. We've effectively built our own system of Darwinism. We don't even realize that we follow the laws of survival of the fittest to the letter. We've inflated the definition of "fittest" mind you, but we still do. Our economic status has become the label by which we are judged, and more often than not, the circumstances of one's birth deal higher in this than the work they put into it. If you're born rich, you're part of the fittest. You will, more than likely, never have to deal with the burdens of scrapping for food. If you're born into a low-rate country with a dictatorship for a government where food is scarce, then the men at the top wish you the best of luck.

The most demonstrable actions we take to fall in line with Darwinism, is war. We pit our strongest youth against each other in a battle to the death over whatever the top of the chain desires. We will wipe out entire societies at the word of the most powerful men, without ever questioning why those men don't have to see the light of battle. We've killed for the most ridiculous things in our history, and we've killed for things that we could consider noble. For instance, we've fought with oppressive rulers to be free from the reigns of kings. On the other hand, we've murdered our own brothers because some of us thought we should be allowed to keep other humans as indentured pets. Yes, all of that is in the past, but what about in the recent times? We've killed people because they were born of a different skin color than those in power, a circumstance completely outside of anyone's control. When we finally stopped doing that (at least most countries) we decided to move on to killing people for living differently behind closed doors.

The main point to be made here; we will almost do anything to satisfy our desire to be gods. If there was a promise of power for killing the first born son of every family, you can bet that someone out there would supply the bullets. In our grab for ultimate power, we've made mistakes along the way. A number of times we've faced complete annihilation by our own hands. We've laid the end of our society, potentially our planet, on the table several times. This is the extent of our society; this is what we've accomplished. We've killed billions. We've wiped out species. We've perfected the art of systematic murder to the point that we can get entire societies to perform it on each other. Our civilization has built itself to an absolute paramount, only to constantly fall back to the base of the mountain. Odds are we will never succeed, and eventually we will fall by our own hands. We will be dragged down by our inactivity, all the while verbally complaining about the unjust activities of our leaders.

One day it will all come to an end.

## **Chapter 2 – Mitchell**

Sweat was beginning to build on his arms and forehead. The sun was bright today, and the temperature was starting to push into the high nineties. 'It has to be at least one' he thought. He glanced at his wrist watch. The glass covering was cracked in a manner that spider-webbed across the surface. The arms seemed to not be moving and, based on what it said, it was around eight-thirty. He knew this wasn't right. 'It must be broken.' He started to undo the clasp from the leather band, but paused mid-removal. His face changed to a smile, and he reconnected the strap. The watch may have been broken but it was a subtle reminder of a better day. A day when he didn't have to guess whether or not falling asleep would end his life. A time when living meant something.

'Why? Why am I still going? Why haven't I just laid down and died yet?' He pondered his reasons for continuing. 'It makes no sense to keep going anymore. It's all gone. It's all over. Death would be a sweet release from this hell.' He coughed. It was a dry cough. The heat was rising, and he needed to not sit around. If he was going to live another day, then he would need to make sure he was safe, and that there was enough in ways of provisions for another day. He stood and looked around the room. He was holed up in an executive's office on the third floor of an office building. He didn't bother reading the name of the company when he was running for his life, he was just looking for safety, and this was the first place he found it.

The office was mostly glass. He liked the way it gave him a view of the city. Or, rather, he would've liked it, prior to all of this happening. It wasn't very high up, but it offered a beautiful way to look over the smaller businesses in the downtown area. He could see what looked like a mom & pop burger joint right next door, as well as a number of fast-food conglomerates, and a strip mall less than a mile down. All of these could be great locations for finding provisions, but could he make it there and back? The sun was high, so his chances were slightly better than if it were darker out, but there was always the possibility of failing. However, if he stood there and did nothing, death was a certainty. 'Is that such a bad thing?' he begrudgingly thought. He shook his head. 'I can't keep thinking that way. I have to keep going....' He peered out the window onto the street below, and he saw that they were out walking the streets. It was just like every day, the streets were never clear. He managed to get here, but could he get there and back? He scouted the paths he would have to take to

*get to any of the potential destinations. He decided the closest option might be best for a first day of scouting. If nothing else he would get a feel for the area.*

*"If only I knew what damn time it was." He muttered.*

*"It's around two..." a small voice responded...*

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He was frantically running for his life only two days prior, desperately trying to locate a safe place to hide. It was beginning to get dark, and nowhere seemed to offer the appropriate shelter. He searched for any sign that he was headed in the right direction, and then he saw it. On the third floor of an office building there was a large black 'X' inside a circle spray painted on the window. This had become the universal sign for "Safe Zone" or any zone that they had yet to breach. He knew that this could be a false-positive, and that it could've been abandoned already, but his options were to die here or die there. He chose to die there. He ran in the front doors and past the desks. The lights were on so it was bright enough to see in the lobby, he quickly scouted the floor for an elevator or stair well. The stairs were in the south eastern corner of the room; he ran in and flung open the door as quickly as he could. He stopped on the other side of the door for a moment to breathe. It didn't seem like they were following him anymore. Did he actually outrun them? Or did they just get distracted by an easier target? He went up the stairs to the third floor and attempted to open the door. It was locked and the window was blacked out. 'Dammit!' he thought. He banged on the door. 'Please let there be someone....anyone!' He heard the click of an electronic lock. He opened the door and ran in and turned to shut the door as quickly as he could. He gasped and turned while slinking down to the floor. He opened his eyes only to be greeted by the business end of a twelve-gauge.

"Who are you and are you infected?" The person behind the gun shouted angrily. The voice was male, he sounded young and frightened. The room was dark, making it hard to fully make out the shape of his face, but he could see some of his features. He had longer hair that was slicked back, and a rough jaw. He was physically fit. Looking at him, one could assume that he visited the gym regularly, possibly every other day. He probably spent a majority of his time on the treadmills, set at a high pace, running just to clear his mind after a long day of work. He may have also participated in weight-lifting, but it was hard to tell in the dark. Despite all of this, one thing was obvious; he was being protective. It was also quite odd to Mitchell that

he had given this much time for the man on the floor to examine him and build a physical profile.

"I said, who the hell are you?" There it was. He tensed his trigger arm to indicate that he meant business.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! My name is Mitchell Swartz. I am not infected, I was running and I saw your window safety marker!" Mitchell kept as still as he could to prevent the possibility that this man would think that he was going to make a move.

"Open your mouth!" Mitchell complied. The man shined his light into Mitchell's mouth while maintaining the aim of the shot gun. He peered into Mitchell's mouth as closely as possible, before lowering his weapon. It was clear, at this point, that he had decided that Mitchell wasn't a threat. The tension quickly began to drop as soon as the weapon was aiming at the carpet.

"Can I, uh, move now?"

"Yeah, yeah, stand up." The man reached his arm down to help Mitchell stand. Mitchell grabbed it and lifted himself to his feet. Now that a few moments had passed and there was no longer the possibility that, within the next second, his head could be sprayed on the door behind him, Mitchell's eyes had begun to adjust to the dark. He could tell that he was in a room with a number of cubicles. There were a couple of lights on, closer to the back of the floor, indicating that there may be more than just the gunman on the floor. To the right there was what looked like a small kitchen, probably for office employees, and on the left was the large painted window.

"I'm Darren. Sorry about all that." It had become obvious at this point that, had Mitchell been infected, Darren wouldn't have been able to actually shoot him. It was blatantly clear that he didn't want to handle the gun, much less point it at someone or pull the trigger. The low-light of the room was just enough, at this point, to help Mitchell see more of Darren's details. His hair was jet black and he had a dark goatee surrounded by a five o'clock shadow. It was obvious that he hadn't shaved for a while, which, with how things were, who could blame him? He sighed. This was all stressful for everyone, and unfortunately Darren wasn't exempt from the situation.

"Come on over this way Mitchell. My wife and daughter are over on the far end. There's another couple on the other side. It's only the five of us. Well, six, now, with your arrival. It's safe up here for now. The door to this floor has a solid lock that requires someone inside to unlock it. There was a key-fob system in place as well, but that doesn't seem to work anymore." Darren turned and started walking towards one of the lit cubicles. His stride was quick, defensive even. It seemed as

though he was designated as the leader of the pack. He didn't have the mentality though. Mitchell walked a few steps behind him. As they walked down the rows of cubicles, he saw a number of personal effects of the former employees. There were a number of photographs and children's drawings, as well as a couple of potted plants strewn around the floor. One cubicle had a vase filled with flowers that were starting to brown, complete with a small card that said "Happy Second Anniversary! Here's to many more." That was almost too much to bear. The thought that maybe a week or two ago, a young couple were probably sharing a fairly pricey dinner at a classy restaurant down the road. They probably ordered something from the part of the menu they never looked at, because it was a special occasion. There were more than likely a few glasses of wine involved, which lead to aggressive flirtation fueled by alcohol. They probably laughed uncontrollably at things that really weren't that funny, and when their eyes locked near the end of the meal, the sexual tension peaked. Odds are, they drove home too quickly to finish out a romantic night, and both felt invincible. There would have never had been the thought that any of this would happen at all. It was likely that they had plans to move into a nice sized house with extra bedrooms so they could have chil--

Mitchell's thoughts ceased right there as he felt himself choking up. This was a thought he couldn't finish, and he opted to forget about the couple entirely. They continued down the way to the end of the cubicles. As they approached the end, the faint light was refreshing. Even though little time had passed, or at least it had felt like little time had passed, it had gotten completely dark outside the security of this office building. They approached the small segment of the room that had become the safe-haven to Darren and his family

"This is my wife Kayla, and my daughter Lilly-Anne."

"Don't call me that daddy!" The small girl's voice boomed in protest.

"Sorry! Lilly! Her birthday was last week and ever since she's been picky about what you call her. She just up and decided that she needed to be a full-grown woman at the age of 5, and that pretty ladies aren't called Lilly-Anne, they're called Lilly." He smirked at her, and she stuck her tongue out at him. For a moment, you could tell that they had both forgotten where they were and what was going on outside. For that instance in time, they were both in another world. It was a world where the undying love of a father and daughter was enough to keep everything going. It was enough to keep the planet turning and the sun burning for another day. For a couple of seconds there was a warmth in the room that had emanated from the family. They obviously loved each other. This situation, and the fact that

Darren had just recently threatened to murder a man that he'd never met before, however reluctant he may have been, indicated that they were in it for the long run. It was quite nice to see that some people were still happy, even without a permanent place to call home, and the threat of being eaten, or worse, infected ringing true every minute of the hour.

"What's your name?" The small girl chimed in after a few moments of silence. Her hair was as black as her fathers, but her face was more round and almost chubby. She wasn't any thicker than a child her age should have been. Her mother was in a defensive position, clenching her tightly. She had red hair that was obviously dyed, and freckles under reflective eyes of an almost auburn hue. She looked fit, but healthy. She had the body shape of someone that would be considered unanimously attractive, but not displayed in a magazine because she would be "over-weight" by their standards. She looked to be the perfect match for Darren's build, and the genetic combination had created the adorable girl that was staring intently at Mitchell. As he looked at her preparing a response, he noticed that she too had freckles. This child was a genetic lottery ticket with matching numbers in every column. Two attractive parents and an amount of cute you would fall in love with within the first moments of a prime-time commercial.

"Well, Lilly, my name is Mitchell, but you can call me Mitch if you'd like. It's a pleasure to meet all of you." He smirked as much as he could through his exhaustion. It was a delight to see a happy family after all he'd been through. "And the couple down there?" He pointed in the direction of the other light. He guessed they could hear them talking, though they hadn't even perked up to see who the new resident was. Maybe they weren't as happy as this couple, but he decided that they still deserved to know that there was a new guest.

"They holed themselves off over on that side of the floor. Feel free to go speak with them if you want, but I haven't gotten much out of them. They showed up two days ago and haven't spoken much since." Darren's voice had lowered to almost a whisper at this point. It was obvious that he didn't want to offend them, just in case they were listening. "His name is Abram. I don't know her name, if that tells you anything."

"Alright, I'll at least go say hello, let them know there's a newcomer." Mitchell started his stride towards the back end of the office. He once again noted the markings of a previously thriving office environment. There were still laptops and various office supplies still littering several cubicles. He didn't look too far into it just in case he would upset himself again. He wanted to hold on to the little of joy

that Darren and Lilly had offered up a few moments ago. He walked with a swift pace, hoping to get the introductions over with. It wasn't that he didn't want to meet these people, or get to know them; he just wanted to find a spot and go to sleep. It felt like eternity since he'd last had a good night's sleep, and tonight might actually offer some rest. He turned the corner to the entrance of the couple's makeshift room. The couple was asleep in a corner, holding tightly onto each other. 'That makes sense as to why they weren't interested when I came in. Even if they don't want to mingle, you'd think they still would've wanted to make sure I wasn't infected.' He thought silently. 'I guess I'll just introduce myself tomorrow'.

He turned to walk away and noticed a picture hooked to the wall. It was obviously a family photograph of the couple that was lying on the floor. The only difference between the photograph and the current scene on the floor was the number of people. The photograph had two children in it, both boys. One looked to be in his teens, probably a freshman in high school, and the other was younger, maybe ten. Mitchell assumed the worst possible scenario, and it made sense why they weren't exactly talkative to Darren and his family. They'd lost their sons to the monsters. He walked away and went back to where the original three were chatting. He heard his name and paused for a moment. Based on what he'd heard they approved of him staying. 'Well, at least they won't kill me' he thought before he walked back into their cubicle.

"They were asleep. I'll go ahead and wait until tomorrow to introduce myself."

"Alright, fair enough. Well, Mitchell, feel free to choose anywhere to set up shop. We're going to go to sleep for the night, that way little Lilly here doesn't get fussy." He patted his daughter on her head jokingly.

"I don't get fussy Daddy!" This was an almost ironic statement with the tone of the little girl's voice. Yet again they had offered up a bit of joy. If it was what he'd get for now, he'd take it.

"Well, not to be rude, but I'm actually going to take the office in the corner. It looks like it's good sized, and this way I don't get in the way of you guys or the other family over there."

"That's not rude at all. If we hadn't chosen this cubicle, we would've gone with that office. We only stuck with this because we could easily get to the door, and had a clear view of the street to see any emergency vehicles." Darren gestured that Mitchell had made the right choice. Mitchell nodded. They said their good-nights and he walked over to the office. He turned on the small desk lamp, but left the overhead lights off, much like the families outside. He shut the door behind him,

but he didn't lock it. Within the time that had passed between him walking in the door, to saying goodnight, he'd developed a sense of character for the family. He had no reason to lock it, as he had no reason to worry.

He put his backpack under the desk and looked around the office for a few moments. Shelves, a computer, a sturdy wooden desk, a decent leather office chair, and some motivational posters. Nothing out of the ordinary for an office. He walked over to one of the shelves and looked at the trophies that lined the top shelf. "Manager of the Year; Richard Patrick." He mumbled to the etchings on the base of the metal. There were several of these, all with consecutive years going back half a decade. "Largest Donor, Charity Golf event of Corporate Offices." This was one of the different trophies, and was the only one made of glass. He guessed that the man that worked in this office was a good man. One that cared about his employees and obviously cared about his community. He also probably had more money than Mitchell would ever know what to do with. That being said, he seemed to enjoy giving it to people that needed it. Mitchell continued peering at the other shelves. There were books about golf, no surprise there. There were books about how to be a good manager, and the effective habits that successful people typically had. The odd one out was a fiction book about an alien invasion and them enslaving the entire human race. Mitchell took it off the shelf and tossed it onto the desk. It looked like a good read and he didn't want to miss out on it. He spotted a notebook on the third shelf and pulled it off. He opened the front page. "Looks like Mr. Patrick was monitoring his blood pressure. Well, at least for a couple weeks. He didn't get past the second page." He tore the pages that had writing on them out and put them back on the shelf. He then tossed the notebook onto the desk beside the science fiction book that he has previously decided to keep. Nothing else seemed to catch his eye on this shelf, so he walked over to the desk and sat in the chair. He eyed the laptop. It was a good quality computer, not top of the line, but it definitely wasn't of low quality either. "It may come in handy at some point. Well, if not I can play solitaire before I die." He put the book and the computer, as well as the power cable to the system, into his bag. He grabbed several pens off the desk and put them in the bag as well. He thought about writing in the notebook

"I should keep a journal. I always said that if my life was interesting enough, I would keep everything documented to look back on." He chuckled under his breath at the thought of ever being able to look back at today in the future. He opened the notebook to the blank page at the beginning and touched the pen to the paper. He wrote 'Dear Diary' on the top line. He then quickly scribbled it out. "No, that's how a

twelve year old girl starts their journal. Come on Mitchell." He then wrote 'To Whom it May Concern'. He paused. "No, wait. This isn't a memo; it's supposed to be a personal chronicle of what may be the last days of my life." He scratched that out as well. He sat there staring at the page, now complete with scribbling over words that were too impersonal. He thought about what he should open his journal entry with. It had to matter to him. It had to make him want to write the story of what was happening. If it was too plain, he may write plain. It had to actually touch him in a manner that would encourage him to write his internal most emotions and thoughts. Something that would make him muster up the desire to fill the blank pages. There was only one thing in his life that would give him the encouragement to fill an entire page, and that was her name.

He steadied the pen at the first blank line, the one under the scribbled out headers, and wrote out her name. 'Aria'. Her name had a Latin origin. It roughly meant "Beautiful Melody" and it was a name that held true to her. Her voice was like music when she spoke to him. She was the only woman he'd ever loved, that's why he made her his bride. They had been married for three years prior to all of this happening, and were together a total of five.

They always told the story of how they met because it was the self-proclaimed "Funniest Story Ever". While they were both in college, they had attended the party of a mutual friend that was about to be deployed overseas. As with every unruly group of twenty-somethings there was alcohol and loud music involved. Mitchell was standing on the back wall watching her socialize with her friends. He was trying to muster up the courage to go over and introduce himself. He had few drinks, but, by his definition, wasn't drunk. After watching her for what felt like forever, the song changed over to one he knew. It could have been hormones, or maybe it was the alcohol. It could even have been a combination of the two, but, at that instance, he pushed himself off the wall and started walking straight over to her. They locked eyes and she smiled; a good sign. He got as close as he comfortably could and began to introduce himself.

"Hey!" He said that louder than he meant to.

"Hi." She replied.

"I love this song!" Real smooth.

"Me too. It's a good rhythm."

"Yeah. My name's Mi-" His introduction was cut short by possibly the most unfortunate event that could happen at a party when you're trying to introduce yourself to someone you're attracted to. Another party-goer, one that had drunk

much more than Mitchell had that night, was dancing very aggressively and stumbled, smashing into Mitchell in mid-sentence. Mitchell fell forward and slammed, quite hard, into Aria, knocking her into the table that was laden with party foods and drinks. He attempted to catch her, only to end up going down with her. By the end of the whole ordeal, the longest ten seconds in recorded history, they were both covered in alcohol, what appeared to be a fruit-punch like drink and cheese flavored tortilla chips.

Mitchell laid there staring at the ceiling. The room seemed to be spinning at this point. Aria stood up and helped him get to his feet. He turned his head from left to right to analyze the situation, and the analysis was that the party had essentially stopped because everyone was too busy staring at the two soaked strangers. They worked their way through the crowd and out to the front yard. Aria gestured for Mitchell to follow her, and they slowly trotted to her car where she handed him a towel. He dried his face off and opened his eyes to see her giggling at him.

"That went well didn't it?" She was somehow able to mutter this sentence without breaking into uncontrollable laughter.

"For me, that was actually quite impressive!" He was able to make a joke, again, a good sign. What wasn't a good sign was that he started to feel a pressure in his stomach. His smile slowly turned into a frown. Aria noticed the change in emotions and immediately knew what was going to happen. Mitchell gestured that he needed a moment with his hand and he turned around. He had apparently turned too quickly because the motion caused him to expel his last meal onto the sidewalk. He remained motionless for several moments just in case it was going to continue.

"Are you OK?" She seemed genuinely worried.

"I'm....I'm fine... What was your name?"

"It's Aria."

"Well Aria, my name is Mitchell. I'm going to have to ask you for a favor."

"OK...."

"I just threw up all over my shoes, and I don't think I'm good to drive. Do you think you could take me somewhere to get new shoes?" Aria burst into laughter.

"Put your shoes in the trunk. We'll get you taken care of." They had known each other less than 5 minutes, and already he had made a complete moron of himself. Why was he worried about his shoes? He loaded his shoes into the trunk and that was the last thing he remembered doing. Aria would always finish the story from here because she hadn't been drinking that night, so she had a clear memory of the whole thing. She would always go on to tell the rest of his foolish actions.

"So I took Mitchell back to my apartment so he could sleep it off, and when he got in the door he immediately asked why we weren't at the shoe store. When I told him that they were closed, he looked like he was about to cry. I told him that we would go in the morning and that he should sleep it off. He starts walking towards my bathroom and taking his clothes off and I ask him if he's going to take a shower. He says "No, I'm going to sleep." I asked him why he was stripping in the bathroom then, and he said that he wanted to sleep in the bathtub. So I'm standing in my living room watching this man that I've known less than twenty minutes strip naked and lay down in the tub and ask me to turn off the light for him. I asked him why he had stripped naked, mainly because I had a feeling he was going to have a good answer, and he simply responded, "Do you normally wear clothes when you get in the tub?" I couldn't argue that logic, so I turned off the light and closed the door. My roommate asked me who he was, and I told her the story. She laughed. Then she said the craziest thing I'd ever heard. She looked me dead in the eyes and said "Aria, you realize you're going to tell this story at your wedding." I have no idea why she said that, I had just met him and had no intention on marrying him. Three years later we were married and she was right." This was the part that always made Mitchell grin from ear to ear. The fact that her roommate was somehow clairvoyant enough to know that this was the beginning of a relationship that would blossom into a great marriage was always entertaining.

He looked back at the blank page. He could feel his eyes welling up as he thought about how it all started between them. She was the sweetest woman in the world. The fact that she took in a drunk stranger and took care of him exemplified how kind she was. She had no idea who he was, or his past, but because of a few corny jokes and drunken antics, she had started down the path that led them to what was supposed to be a lifetime of love. It really was a funny story.

He kept his eyes focused on the page. He couldn't keep his mind straight at this point in time. Too much had occurred in less than a week, and he had no idea where he was going from here. He knew he wanted to live, there was always the possibility that it could all go back to normal, but, at the same time, he wanted to die with the possibility that it wouldn't. He knew every day from here on out would be a struggle to keep going. The name on the page would have to serve as the reason to continue. He would have to do everything for her. He would have to move forward, and do anything he could to try to get back, to try to find her. There was a possibility that she was still alive, but he wouldn't know unless he stayed strong and lived to find out. That was that. He would stay here for a while to help the families

that were here, but he would have to move on eventually. Maybe the military would see the sign that he saw on the window, and maybe they would come rescue them. He could tell them that he needed to go find his wife, and they could escort him to where she was. Maybe, just maybe, he would find her there, and find her safe. No, he couldn't deal in possibilities, he would find her. She would be safe. Life would go on. He felt his confidence rising, like he had a newfound strength within him that would force him to keep going. This was the boost he needed.

He began to glide the pen across the notebook page. He could only think of one thing to write for now. While it wouldn't be a full page, and it wouldn't be an incredible detail of the events that had occurred prior to that exact moment, it would be enough to let him sleep through the night. He finished writing his thought and looked at the page, now complete with a simple message.

*"Aria,*

*My Beautiful Melody.*

*I miss you.*

*-Mitchell"*

It was simple and straight-forward. It was the only thing he felt at that exact moment. He would chronicle the last few days later, until then this would suffice. He closed the notebook, and pushed the pen into the metal spiral for safe-keeping. He placed the notebook in the front pocket of his back pack; it was the only thing in that pocket at this point. He pulled a bottle of water out of his bag. He looked at the label for an address. The closest thing he could find to a location was a small tag that was marked "Bottled Locally". That was no help, he needed to know where it was bottled, an exact location. He unscrewed the cap and took a drink. It was warm, but it was water. He tightened it back on and placed it back in the side pocket of his bag. He had decided that all of this was enough for one night. He glanced at his watch. Ten-thirty PM. He then pulled the phone out of his bag. He held the power button to try to turn it on. Nothing happened. 'Don't know why I even bother.... The battery is dead.' He grumbled at himself. He left in a hurry, so he really couldn't blame himself for forgetting to grab a charging cable. 'Sometimes, it's the little things you forget that make the most difference....'

He threw the phone back in the bag and placed it back under the desk. He took his shirt off and balled it up on the floor. It was the closest thing to comfort that he would achieve given the circumstances. He lied down, placing the shirt under his

head and glared up at the ceiling for what felt like hours, but eventually he began to feel the grasp of sleep begin to overtake him. It came down to a fight between his thoughts and his eyelids, a fight that he didn't understand why he was fighting. He eventually gave in. There was no more time to think, he was gradually drifting into a world of unconsciousness. His eyes rolled back and his eyelids covered his vision in darkness. The day was over and tomorrow would come soon enough.



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