

## “Last Dance”

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We are standing in the middle of the ruined mall, Noah pressed against my chest as the toxic rain pours outside. All the windows are broken, glass scattered across the floor, interspersed with puddles of rain and ruined merchandise. And blood. There are a few streaks on the walls and floors, and the arm trapped under a chunk of the ceiling might be from a manikin or a person -- I don't really want to know which. We hear thunder roaring across the empty valley and Noah jumps, pressing himself closer to me. He is shaking violently and his soft, shivering sobs echo in the wide empty hallway. The sound is like a knife being jammed into my chest, carving at my heart, and I almost cry with him. But there is no use crying. There is no use in anything anymore. We lost, we failed, we fell. The entire human race, not just us, but every living thing has been destroyed, smashed into the ground as if we were no more than a flake of ash, small, delicate, and ready to crumble into nothing. And here we are. Two boys, the only two standing alone in the last place left on earth, hiding from the rain and the horrors outside.

“Finn?” Noah's voice is a strained whisper.

“Yeah, love?” I answer quietly, though there is no reason to be silent. He doesn't answer at first, so I ask again. “What is it?”

“Nothing, I- I just wanted to hear your voice. There's no noise except the rain, and it's too big; it reminds me of how empty the world is now.”

“Me too.”

“Can we talk about something? Please?”

“Of course,” I think for a moment. There is nothing we can really talk about, nothing left to talk about. “If you could eat anything right now, what would you have?”

“My mom's empanadas, with yellow rice and potatoes,” he replies immediately. The mention of Noah's family is physically painful, tearing at my chest like a hungry wolf. I remember his mother, warm and welcoming, his sisters, loud, smart, and fierce, and his baby brother, tiny Lio, barely a year old. None of them made it. None of them ever could have survived what happened to them.

“Your mom made the best empanadas in the world.” I reply softly.

“Yeah, she-” his voice breaks and I feel his shoulder shake fiercely with sobs. I try not to, but I can't stop the tear that slips down my cheek. I remember his family, and I remember mine. I remember my older brother, who had been married for only a month before he and his wife both died, my older sister who always bought me Twix whenever she came to visit, and who suffered much longer than she should have, and the brother a few years younger than me who was going to be an engineer for NASA when he grew up. Before I know it my cheeks are wet with tears, but I don't give in. I have to be strong for him, for whatever time we have left. We hold each other tightly for another minute before I hear a sound. I tense before I realize that it's music, stumbling crookedly from what's left of the mall's PA system.

“Noah,” I whisper in his ear. “Listen.” He is quiet for a moment then tilts his head up to look at me, surprised. It seems like a miracle, a last moment of beauty before everything is destroyed once and for all. A last goodbye at the end of the world. I look down at him and try to smile. “Dance with me?”

He nods and we sway to the soft tune of the song that seems to describe us perfectly. It never seemed sad before. We both know it by heart, and as the melody fills the air, I sing it

softly, my mouth next to Noah's ear so I know he can hear it, and I feel him humming along. It feels like our world has been reduced to the two of us and the music; nothing else matters.

"Finn?" Noah whispers again, during the instrumental break.

"Yeah?"

"We're going to die here, aren't we?"

"Yeah," I reply. There is no use denying it.

"It's coming, I can feel it."

"I know." It feels as if death rushing in from the ruined mountains and across the broken valley, coming to crash over us like a wave. Yet we are both calm.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I just want you to know that. I just wanted to say it one last time, before-" He can't finish the sentence and looks up at me with bright blue eyes full of tears.

"I know. I know. You know I love you too, more than anything. I will always love you, until the end of time." I gently kiss his forehead, then the lyrics begin again I pull him close to me, heartbeat to heartbeat. The words of the song we love tumble from my mouth, quiet and slightly lower than they should be. I sing, even though I know we won't make it to the end.