



HONESTY. Vol.1

By Franzi Kopka

Chapters 1-4

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First the virus extinguished 99 percent of humanity. Then the lies contaminated what was left of our world. War raged, devouring its way through every country on the map, until nothing was left but patches of ash. But there was is a cure. Thanks to Ernest Sestiby, we found a way to end war for ever and carry on. To conquer darkness. To rebuild part of our world. To live in peace. With truth in its purest form: VeriTab X02.

Truth is inviolable. All peoples and state authorities are bound to honour and protect it.

The Good Law, article 1, paragraph 1

CHAPTER 1

The MedPlex tower juts out at the edge of the square like a sore thumb. It is too big, too white, too modern compared to the surrounding houses. But it is the living proof of how well our government cares for us. Countless solar panels loom large up on the roof, providing Ring Five's urban centre with energy. At just before 7 a.m. they are facing east, waiting for the sun to creep over the grey roofs. Like every year, a whole bunch of medical staff are inside the building, ready to examine us. To ensure we are physically and mentally well.

I suppress a yawn. Normally I wake up at six automatically, but on check-up days, for some reason, my body simply refuses to get out of bed. It doesn't help that it's so freaking cold, today of all days! At the weekend it looked like Spring had sprung, but last night we had sub-zero temperatures again. The fitted lining I made for my coat is hardly any use, seeing as I'm only wearing a skinny blouse and thin trousers underneath. Shivering, I push my hands deeper into my coat pockets, feeling for my SmartPad and EarPods on the right, and the small hole on the left that I really must mend. One of these days.

The queue slowly moves forward towards the MedPlex. Today's appointments are for birth cycles J8 to M8, which is why everyone

here is between seventeen and twenty years old. The younger cycles had their check-ups last week, including my sister Cara. Pops' and Dad's appointments aren't until next week.

I recognise a few faces. From school or our neighbourhood, or from last year's check-up. Like the girl standing in the row in front of me who is looking in my direction, and talking to the guy beside her. It would be so easy to catch her attention, a small smile, a wave, but I look down instead. Pretend I haven't seen her. *No eye contact, no conversations, no questions. No questions, no dangerous answers. No Verification.*

That mantra has been etched on my mind for as long as I can remember. I don't know who taught it to me. Dad, maybe? Or my brother Nick? It could even have been Grandma, whispering by my bedside late at night, when I was too young to understand the meaning of the words.

No questions, no dangerous answers. No Verification. The more I repeat it, the more nervous I feel. I take a deep breath, channelling the flow of cold air into my lungs as I look around for Nick. I'd been looking forward to chatting to him, but as soon as we got here his phone rang and he stepped out of the queue. He's been on the phone ever since. It must be something to do with work.

He exudes an aura of seriousness in his sleek grey guard attire; his posture is more upright, his gaze a touch firmer. Not lacking compassion, but with an air of assurance, command, and firmness. As if nothing bad will happen as long as he is nearby. I wish I could believe it, to get rid of my nervousness.

Nick smiles when he sees me watching him. For a moment I think he is going to end his call, but then he turns and moves even further

away from the queue. I sigh and stare at the HoloBanner on the streetlight instead. Apparently, the waiting time for this section of the queue is eight minutes. Which means that Nick will be back in seven minutes at the latest. He hates being late: for check-ups or anything else.

The message drops to a corner of the screen and a news bulletin comes up instead. Probably a reminder for the next birth cycle I think and reach for my SmartPad. Then I suddenly realise what I am actually seeing. A journalist and ... Harold Green. Who just happens to be my boss, Edgar Moore's, most important business partner.

I grab one of my EarPods and plug it into my ear at once.

"AISS? Turn up the HoloBanner," I say.

"It's a pleasure, Maeander," her gentle voice purrs away in my ear. AISS always sounds as if she is smiling. But, she is just a piece of software, an *Artificial Intelligent Service System* designed to support us and keep us safe – or AISS for short.

I can hear the journalist speaking now: "... it showed up on the inventory. Harold Green, do you have any idea why it took two weeks for the issue to come to light?"

Edgar's business partner looks straight at the camera. His face an unreadable mask. "Not the slightest. According to my co-workers the inventory was audited and no mistakes were found. I assume there's a problem with AISS."

"A problem with AISS?" the journalist repeats in a tone that sounds *doubtful*. That's interesting. "How do you know none of *them* have infiltrated your workforce?"

Now the expression on Harold Green's face does change. Not much, but it is visible on the razor-sharp display. He narrows his

eyes slightly and there's the hint of a frown. "It's inconceivable," he says and turns to the interviewer. "We conduct extensive control meetings with all our employees after every VeriTab dose. If a Liar is amongst us, they must have avoided the cure somehow. In which case my company is in no way to blame and the problem lies with MedPlex."

Harsh words - even the journalist loses the thread for a moment. There is an uncomfortable silence, while she decides how to proceed. "Well, thank you Harold Green from Green Holding for that first statement. All the employees at the factory on the outskirts have since been questioned and given the all clear. According to a first accountability report, two Liars from Ring Seven have been detained."

The scene switches and I watch two women being led away. One of them is still wearing the hair net that prevents long hair getting caught up in the machines. She hangs her head and shoulders dejectedly, stumbling along as if she would collapse without the guards on either side. In contrast, the other one has torn off her hair net, releasing a mop of unruly blonde hair. She is screaming at the top of her voice, spitting drops of saliva into the guards' faces, and desperately trying to scratch Nick's colleagues with her bound hands.

Not only are the two women accused of stealing five bails of linen from Green Holding - they have broken the highest law of our land! Somehow, they have managed to stop taking the cure. They will be charged, of course, but the verdict is clear. There is only one sentence for Liars: expulsion to Ring Eight and total exclusion from society.

“As soon as the investigation is completed, the full report will be available online in accordance with section 5, paragraph 2 of the Transparency Act,” the journalist says while I can’t take my eyes off the Liar fighting her arrest tooth and nail.

That’s what happens if someone refuses to take their VeriTab. Sooner or later, they go mad – our human consciousness can’t handle the disparity between truth and lies. The symptoms are harmless enough to start with. A quickened pulse perhaps, flushed cheeks, nothing you’d notice straight away. Then in a day or two you have your first emotional overreaction. And after that it is just a matter of time until the end. Your heart is overloaded and eventually stops beating. The Liar on the screen must have reached the last stage. I hope they can save her life before she is resettled in Ring Eight.

“Isn’t Harold Green one of Edgar’s business contacts?”

My brother appears beside me, making me jump. I can’t get used to the fact that he’s shaved off his beard. His face looks even more angular. And his light brown skin is so smooth, you’d think he’s had an alignment. Lucky him!

“That’s right,” I say, taking the EarPod out of my ear. The news report is over anyway. “Which means there will be a heap of work waiting for me when I get to the office.” I’m sure Edgar is going to ask me to check all the files referring to Green Holding. Just in case the investigation sector decides to give us a call.

“I guess you are right,” Nick agrees. “But listen, could you do me a favour? ... You know my blue coat? The one with the zip?”

The sudden change of subject takes me by surprise. As soon as Nick asks the question a warm feeling starts tickling the back of my throat. A gentle reminder from Veritas that I am obliged to answer.

“If you mean the one you had on when you charged out of the house yesterday – of course I do,” I say, teasing him as I pop my EarPod back in my pocket. “Let me guess: you were wearing your uniform underneath and didn’t want to have an argument with Pops about appropriate dress codes?”

Nick’s eyes tell me I’m right, but he’d never admit it. Ever since his first day as a student at the Silver University, almost four years ago, the only time I have seen him out of uniform was just before the procedure all able young men must have to avoid getting someone pregnant. At that time, Pops and I could stay with him on the ward until they wheeled him away in his hospital gown. Oh, and on his and Kira’s first anniversary, he wore a different pair of trousers, at least

“That’s the one,” says Nick. “You know Kira’s parents: Edgar doesn’t care about appearances, and you can’t impress Gloria with an ironed shirt and a pair of chinos.”

At the mention of Gloria’s name, I try not to roll my eyes. Although I work for her husband and not for her, she can be a real killjoy at times. No idea how Nick can bear the idea that she will be his mother-in-law someday. If Aiden’s mum was like that I’d ... *what?* Abandon my feelings for Aiden? Give up on the two of us? A pain stabs my heart, the first sign of an emotion I shouldn’t be able to feel. I dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands automatically, to banish the feeling.

“What sort of favour?” I pick up the thread quickly. “If it’s got anything to do with Gloria then the answer’s no. I have promised myself to keep out of her way all day.” Although I am wearing the clothes she handed me on Friday, wrinkling her nose. Just in case.

“Don’t worry. I just want you to pick up my coat. It should still be hanging on the coat stand at the Moore’s house, by the back door, not the main entrance.”

“I might be seeing Aiden after work.” Another jab of pain. “Can’t you just ask Kira? I thought you two were going to the theatre this evening?”

“We are, but you know how nosy Kira can be and I don’t want her finding the jewel case in my inside pocket ...”

“Nick!” I can’t believe this. “You hid the engagement ring in your *coat* pocket?!”

“Yep.” Looking sheepish for once, he runs his fingers through his short hair. “I was going to take it home after I picked it up, but then everything took much longer than expected. I ended up going straight to the Moore’s house so I wouldn’t be late for dinner. And Edgar sent me home in a taxi. The long and the short of it is: I’ve only just noticed.”

“Are you serious?” There’s no need to ask.

“Afraid so. Look, if you could just hide it for starters. The main thing is that Kira doesn’t find it.”

I’m groaning inside. Since Nick told me of his plans, I’ve tried to keep out of Kira’s way if possible. One silly question, one wrong word, and I’d have to tell her everything. If she sees me going through his pockets ...”

“Okay,” I give in. “But if she catches me, I can’t promise anything.”

“That’s okay. I owe you one.”

As Nick talks, the queue edges forward bit by bit until there are just two people ahead of us. I am feeling nervous all over again.

There are several terminals in the MedPlex lobby where you can register. AISS scans my face and my basic data shows up on the screen.

Maeander Elking, birth cycle M8, gender identity female, psychological questionnaire completed on: 10th March 2306.

At the bottom of the screen, I consent to the check-up with a finger print. My pulse is too high. AISS sends us a questionnaire from MedPlex to assess our mental health, which we have to fill out, at least one day before the physical examination. More than fifty questions about my current eating and sleeping habits, my attitude to work, social life and hobbies! I handed it in the day before yesterday, but I won't be allowed to proceed to the physical examination if my answers aren't approved. I stare at the bar on the screen: **data is being analysed.**

It only takes a few seconds, but it feels like an eternity. I stop myself from biting my lip; I know AISS is watching. She monitors everything, even the smallest detail. In official buildings like this, her eyes are everywhere - in every corridor, in every room, at every terminal.

At last the display turns green: **approved.**

I nearly whoop for joy. I have passed the first hurdle. Below the approval, another piece of information appears: **Changing room G3.** *No questions, no dangerous answers. No Verification.* I hope the physician waves me through as easily.

I step away from the terminal at the same moment as Nick and together we walk towards the long sterile corridor.

“Where are you going?”

“To the first floor, changing room 11.”

As usual, we are divided by gender identity for the check-ups. But I had been hoping to stay with Nick a little bit longer. Now our paths separate almost immediately. Just beyond the entrance hall, the stairs ascend to the next level, with two lifts on either side where several people stand waiting. We stop a few feet away from them.

Nick's expression shifts back to that of a guard, no sign of embarrassment in sight. “I'll meet you here after the check-up, okay?” He studies my face and I know what he is trying to tell me. “As long as you stick to the rules, everything will be fine. Trust me.”

“Okay,” I reply too quickly. But if Nick is sure everything is going to be all right, he's probably right. I just have to keep one small part of me secret. That's all. Just like I've done every time in the last five years. “See you in a minute.”

As I turn to go Nick grabs my shoulder. “Oh, and Mae,” There's a gleam in his eye. “Let's see if you can get below my heart rate in the CardioCases for once.”

CHAPTER 2

There are thirty women in my group again this year. When I go into the changing room, some of them are already undressed; others are sitting on the plastic benches undoing their shoelaces.

I avoid all eye contact as usual as I walk past looking for a free locker. There is one right at the back, next to the door with the flashing red light. The sign to say that the examination hall next door is being disinfected at the moment. As soon as the lamp switches to green, everything carries on.

“Good morning dear attendees.” AISS coos from the speakers under the ceiling. “Your annual check-up will begin shortly. Please remove your clothing and place it in the lockers provided. You can keep your underwear on for the time being.”

I take off my coat. Everyone here seems to know someone. All around me, people are chatting, laughing and giggling. Two women next to me are making plans for the weekend, others are talking about a party last Saturday. I clench up and try to fight off a surge of *envy* by taking long deep breaths.

Another feeling that shouldn't even exist. That's why the idea of friendship isn't an option for me. It's impossible to hide my feelings from other people for long. They would be forced to report me before we'd had the chance to get to the point I am at with my family or Aiden. Where they'd understand that I am not a Liar, not any threat to peace, just ... slightly *broken*.

“Do you remember fifth Grade?” The woman next to me grins at her friend as she takes off her shoes. “That story about Teacher Pfeiffer?”

I try not to listen, focus on me and what I have to do: Go in there, smile, get examined, find Nick, go to work.

I put my coat and boots in the locker, and take off my blouse. Pops steamed it for me especially this morning so there's not even a single tiny crease anywhere. The cream material must have cost a fortune,

which is why I assume that it must be from Kira's cupboard: Gloria would never dream of wasting credits on me. Or kind words. All she said when she handed me the things was: "we don't want you looking like a Five, do we?"

It would make you laugh if it wasn't so bitter. The blouse covers the freckles on my body, but it can't hide the reddish speckles on my face. Zillions of rusty dots on beige skin. I loved them when I was small because I thought they made me special. Then we went on that school trip to Ring Two and I got it. No one with any money would have blemishes like mine. No one wanted red fuzzy hair if it could shine instead and nobody would buy the watery sea green colour of my eyes when they could have emerald, lapis lazuli or rose quartz instead. I remember asking Pops when I could have my first alignment and he told me the truth and it's been a part of my life ever since. "Never. Maelley. Not unless you marry well, a Two at least, or better even, a One or a Centre." I wish I had more of Dad's DNA like Nick - fewer flaws.

At least I'm not the only imperfect person here. Some have moles or scars; I see pitted skin on people's thighs, bruises, stretch marks. That makes it a bit easier to get undressed. Soon I am standing there in my underwear like everyone else. Pale blue with pink flowers. The only set I could find that didn't have small holes, or a droopy elastic waistband.

As soon as I shut the locker, the signal jumps to green. There is just enough time to tie my hair up in a bun before the door opens. The examination room is like all the other ones I have been in. White tiles, a HoloScreen on the wall and thirty CardioCases in the middle. Bikes in glass boxes, Dad called them when I had my first check-up.

The doctors greet us at the door, all dressed in white coats with friendly smiles. We walk in pairs, ready for them to insert the VitaTracks. I try to stay calm as the punch-pen touches my arm. It's no worse than getting a jab. A small prick on my shoulder, and then there's a tiny silver plate gleaming amidst my freckles. I've watched the explanatory videos, so I know they analyse our blood values. Dad explained the three most important parameters: oxygen saturation, hormone levels, and blood sugar. I focus on the facts as I head over to the CardioCases. Facts. Not emotions. I know the bikes are ergometers. They may not move, but they record information about how well our cardiovascular systems work under stress.

"Move along until all the CardioCases are taken," one of the physicians says.

I end up in one of the boxes at the back. As soon as I sit down, the ergometer saddle adjusts to my height automatically. Surprisingly, it's more comfortable than it looks. Straps on the pedals keep my feet secure. When everyone is settled, the glass doors behind us close with a hiss.

"The hermetic seal has been initiated," AISS whispers, which means the oxygen I need now comes from the small holes in the floor. This way, they can measure exactly how much I consume.

My hands feel sweaty as I grab the handles of the ergometer. Not a good sign. *Come on, what else do you remember?* I ask myself, trying to distract myself. My gaze shifts to the case's glass ceiling. There are black scanners in the corners. In a moment, they will scan my whole body, checking every organ, even taking a CT of my brain. According to Dad, the radiation levels are as high as possible, which

is why this type of scan is only allowed once a year. It means most illnesses can be detected early and treated successfully.

“Hello Maeander,” AISS greets me personally now. No external sounds penetrate the case. “Stay as still as possible for the next minute. The BodyScan will commence in three ... two ... one ...”

A single peep signals the beginning of the scan. I sit on the ergometer, as still as a statue, hardly daring to breathe. If you move accidentally, the scans can be blurred. Then you need an extra physical examination which takes a lot longer.

“Finished,” AISS announces at last. “Now, please start pedalling. Expect me to adjust the resistance during the session to simulate different load levels.”

It is always easy to start with. Like cycling in first gear with no hills. Then the first level of resistance clicks in and it gets harder and harder bit by bit.

Sweat starts running down my back. The idea that I could ever beat Nick’s heart frequency makes me laugh - a mistake. Breathing is even harder . I’m not totally unfit, but Nick goes to the guards’ gym five time a week, at least. No doubt he’s still totally relaxed while I can’t wait for the resistance to drop. The good thing is: I don’t have enough energy to feel nervous. Or anything except burning muscles and needing to breathe.

At the end I am literally gasping for air. Luckily so is everyone else, as far as I can tell. We are handed a glass of water and a towel as we climb out of the cases, and told to go down the hall the next station. This corridor is smaller than the first one, and if you look closely, you can tell that we are in Ring Five. There are fine cracks on the tiles in places, and a yellow stain on a ceiling panel. Also, the chairs

lined up on the left side of the hall are plastic. I decide to stay standing. I don't want to stick to the surface with my bare skin.

Opposite me, a long row of doors lead to the examination rooms. My name is called almost immediately.

Compared to the examination hall, this room is tiny. The front corner is curtained off. A cluttered table full of all sorts of gadgets Dad might know, a stool on wheels and the examination chair are cramped together in the remaining space. I bite my lip. This is the part I hate the most. But unfortunately, some parts of the check-up can't be done with a scan or the VitaTrack.

"Maeander!" A physician steps forward out of the shadows. "I knew I recognised the name. Oliver and I were talking about you just the other day. I never thought I would see you again in person so soon."

Talking about me? See me again? I smile politely, while I rack my brains. By Oliver she means Pops. Pops knows loads of people, but I usually avoid his contacts the same way I stay away from most people. Especially if they are as interested in me as this physician seems to be. *No questions, no dangerous answers, no Verification.* Something tells me this is going to be more difficult than I thought.

"Ah." The physician raises her grey eyebrows. "Of course, you wouldn't remember me. It must have been years ago. Six? Seven? Yes, I am sure it's seven years." Nodding enthusiastically, she walks over to the table. „Margret Wieler.“ She calls over her shoulder. Giving me more useless information. "Your father and I are on the planning committee for the Ring festivals. We organised the Winter Spectacular at the City Hall, making pumpkin heads ... does that

ring any bells?” She pauses with one hand on a drawer and looks at me expectantly

“No. Sorry,” I apologise.

“Oh well, never mind.” she says batting my words away with the back of her hand. “Oliver brought you all along. You and your siblings. How is that big sister of yours by the way?” She married someone in Ring Two a while back, didn’t she? She has certainly come up in the world!“

I wish I could run away. Vain is one of my least favourite topics of conversation. Which doesn’t stop Veritas. I feel the heat at the back of my throat. “Vain is a 2 now, yes.” I reply, hurrying behind the curtain to avoid Margret’s inquiring eyes. “But I’m not sure how she is. We don’t ... see each other much.”

There’s a lump in my throat all of a sudden. I try to swallow it but it won’t go away. Why couldn’t someone else call me up? A stranger interested only in my health?

“Naturally,” Margret chatters on. It sounds as if she is opening the drawer. “Vervain has got kids now, hasn’t she? So, she won’t have much time to spare. How many again? Let’s see if I can remember. Oliver did mention their names. The boy is something beginning with L ... Leonardo? Louis?“

“Yes, three kids,” I manage to say. I set my bottle and towel down on a stool. There is a hospital gown hanging on a hook, to put on if you feel awkward. *Awkward* doesn’t come close. As I rip open the cellophane, Veritas reminds me that I haven’t answered Margret’s last question yet. “Leopold, Georgina and Martha.“ I say somewhat unwillingly.

After I put on the gown, I take off my underpants. Does VitaTrack detect my higher adrenalin levels, I wonder? And what about my pulse? There aren't any scanners here. But I know AISS monitors neck pulse at times. Without thinking, I undo my hair and stroke it flat with my hands. It's a feeble effort, but I can't think of anything better to do.

"Three!" Margret repeats enthusiastically. "Do say hi to Vervain from me when you speak to her! I bet she remembers me."

I doubt it. Since Vain became a 2, I'm not sure she even remembers her own sister. Otherwise she'd be in touch more often. Or message me at least. „Will do,“ I say nevertheless. "If I don't forget." Every inch of my body is baulking at the idea of opening the curtain. I have to force myself to do it. Outside I sit down on the edge of the medical chair and look at the padded leg stirrups. *Just a few more minutes, Mae, then this will be over.*

"Hello dear, let's have a quick look at your file." Margret picks up a HoloPad from the table and rolls over to me on the stool. "There is just one open query, apart from that your questionnaire is fine." She scrolls down the display. "Yes, here it is. About your sleeping habits: it says you have been waking up suddenly in the night recently because of nightmares disturbing you?" She looks up at me and raises her eyebrows. "Can you remember what these nightmares are about?"

Damn. I knew this could come up, although I'd hoped It wouldn't. There's the heat again. I have to reply. If I don't answer within a few seconds, the heat will increase, getting hotter as it spreads to the roof of my mouth, burning my tongue. Then, if I still refuse to answer, it

will travel down my throat all the way to my heart. One time I waited until my heart missed a beat. It's not worth it, I can assure you.

"Sometimes," I say. Trying to stay calm and breathe normally.

Margret takes notes. "Is it different nightmares or always the same one?"

"It's both. Some parts are always the same and others new every time."

"Which parts?"

Are these questions professional or personal I wonder? But I must answer anyway. "I always end up being ... *abandoned*," I manage to croak.

"Abandoned?" Margret's eyes dart to my fingers. I know exactly what she is looking for: an engagement ring. Or a wedding ring even. But I've nothing to show apart from more freckles and a small scar on my index finger.

"Yes." Although I'm breathing deeply, trying to distract myself, my heart aches relentlessly. It's a dangerous mix of jealousy and fear, that I've had for weeks and is growing harder to cope with day by day.

Margret looks up at me again. She's staring at me intently now and I want to disappear into thin air. How far will she probe? And if she finds out what is wrong, then what?

But her gaze softens. "Oliver told me things haven't been easy for you recently." A sigh. "Do you think a conversation with a therapist would help you sleep better?"

Pops told a stranger about Aiden and me? I feel sick. "No." At least Veritas seems to be on my side this time. "Was that all?"

"Let's see," Margret scrolls the HoloPad up and down. "That's all. We just have to do the swab tests, then I'll take out the VitaTrack

and you can be off.” She gives me a kind smile that sends a tremor through me. *Please let this be over soon.* Margret rolls over to the table and puts on a pair of latex gloves.

The mouth swab only takes a moment, then comes the unpleasant part. I reluctantly put my legs up on the supports. *Just a few more minutes.* Just one more breath, just pretend Margret is another physician, and I can leave.

I stare at the ceiling, listening to the rustling sound of plastic. She is probably unwrapping that small brush-like instrument.

“Now a little prick ...”

Ouch!

“There we go. See, that was quick.”

Not quick enough. I contradict her in my mind. As soon as Margret rolls out of my way, I take down my legs, pull my shirt down over my thighs and slide to the edge of the chair.

“You're familiar with the procedure. Your complete report will be available on the HoloTerminal by the end of the week,” Margret concludes as she inserts the swabs into one of the gadgets on the table and removes her gloves.

“If any issues arise or further tests are required, AISS will schedule an appointment for you in the relevant department. Remember, you'll need a valid excuse if you need to cancel.” It's the usual protocol. Margret swipes the HoloPad one more time - and pauses. “Oh, I forgot. Before you go, we need a blood sample. It's a new measure for everyone under twenty-one.”

Dad didn't mention any new measures. I don't tell her that though. I don't want to encourage her to start chatting again. She's busy

trying to find a suitable vein to fill the tube with blood. Vain usually feels sick when someone takes a blood sample. But I don't mind. Maybe that's one of the few things I get from Dad.

When Margret is finished, she swiftly removes the VitaTrack and applies a HealFix stick to my punctured skin, which stops bleeding immediately. All you can see is a shiny transparent film of plaster. One more smile, I think, a quick goodbye and ...

"You know, Maeander," Margret suddenly barges in to my thoughts. "You are a great girl. Oliver thinks the world of you. So, no matter what Aiden decides: I'm sure you won't end up in Ring Seven."

That does it. All the emotions I've been holding back come flooding in at once. "I ..." It's just a croak. "Thank you." Then I make the V-shape with my index and middle fingers, touching the spot above my heart. "For Truth." is all I manage to say before I dodge behind the curtain.

No idea if Margret makes the usual „For Peace,“ response. I need to get out of here. Fast. I pull on my underwear and hurry away. I feel a tell-tale pricking sensation behind my eyes.

By banning falsehood, humans have been cured of any feelings that distort perception and lead to unconsidered actions: Anger. Hate. Panic. Malevolence. Envy. Grief. Jealousy.

As of now, destructive feelings will be classed as an emotional overreaction. The symptom of being a Liar. Verifications will be necessary to confirm guilt.

**Excerpt from The Good Law, Enhancement, published by Ernest Sestiby,
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CHAPTER 3

AISS can see me. AISS can hear me. AISS will know that something is ... *Pull yourself together!* I say to myself. I might be walking a bit faster than usual and I left my towel and bottle in the examination room. But I managed to fight back the tears. I don't think I've given myself away yet.

I follow the signs back to the changing rooms; this time there are just two other women there. I walk past them without saying a word. And open the door of my locker. Are my fingertips shaking? I clench my fists and then relax my hands again. I was going to take a quick shower but it's better if I disappear as soon as possible. I hope Nick is outside already. Usually the men are a bit faster, they don't need the smear test for one thing.

My blouse slipped off the coat hanger, and is lying crumpled at the back of the locker. Never mind. There is dust on my black trousers. I get dressed slowly and deliberately. My smile frozen on my face. There aren't very many help books with advice on how to avoid a panic attack. Seeing as they aren't supposed to even exist. But somehow Dad managed to find an article for me somewhere. Apart from the breathing techniques it described, one other recommendation really helps: "Think through your worst-case scenario to the very end; ask yourself what the consequences would be and you will realise that things are less grave than your fear would have you believe. "

Okay. Worst-case scenario. AISS has registered my emotional overreaction already. A couple of guards from Nicks college are waiting outside the changing rooms. They ask me to follow them for a

Verification. Would they handcuff me like the two Liars on the news? On my one and only Verification so far, they were very friendly when they asked me go with them. But I was only twelve years old at the time. Forget the handcuffs: In the worst case, they take me to an interrogation room and give me a high dose of Veritas. Then they ask me all the questions they usually ask potential Liars and, in the end, they find that I am not a Liar. I take the VeriTabs as prescribed and they work for me like they do for everyone else – apart from the destructive feelings.

No! That is not the worst-case scenario. It's just a re-play of what happened last time. But overreactions at the beginning of puberty aren't so unusual. Some people need several adjustments of their VeriTab dose during the hormone change. But I am nearly eighteen. What happens if they don't *believe* me this time around? It's nuts. I am *not* a Liar.

Then why is my heart pounding against my ribs so fiercely? And why am I scared of those interrogation rooms? Maybe because there is no precedent for being *broken*. I don't know what they'd do to me. Would they simply adjust my dose again or would they hound me from one research centre to the next? To find out what causes my defect. Or would they classify me as a Liar despite everything, send me to Ring Eight, separate me from everyone ... *enough!*

I pull on my shoes and my coat and slam the locker shut with more force than I intended. "Sorry," I mumble as the startled women turn and stare at me.

I'm out of here. The door glides open – no guards. Just a physician hurrying down the hall, lab coat flying, with a HoloPad jammed under their arm. I walk in the opposite direction. My eyes glued to the floor. So that AISS can see as little of my face as possible. Are

my eyes red, I wonder? The burning sensation is still there. In fact, it is worse than before I started imagining worst-case scenarios.

Nick is sitting on the steps. When he sees me, he grabs his bottle and leaps to his feet. “How did it ...?” He pauses and looks at me. “Come with me.” After all these years, he can spot the warning signs immediately. So, he doesn’t reach out or touch me in any way. He knows that any form of empathy will make me more unstable. Instead he pretends that everything is fine. “Did you see Pops message in the family group? He and Dad are visiting the Caivanos tonight,” he says casually. “To discuss their birthday party, though I don’t think many people will be coming.”

His words wash over me, while I focus on smiling as best as I can. Although we’ve left the MedPlex building, we are not out of harm’s way yet. AISS monitors the forecourt outside the building, and our SmartPads and EarPods are listening in too. Most of the time it’s really useful: I just have to say the word and AISS will take notes, play whatever music I want or remind me what is next on my to do list. But right now, I wish I could switch her off.

Nick strides half a step ahead of me as we make our way towards the station, then slip between two rows of houses. Despite his attempts at small talk, I can hardly hear him. Margret's last words echo loudly in my head: "*So, no matter what Aiden decides: I'm sure you won't end up in Ring Seven.*" Well, that's a relief! I'm not sure how much Pops shared with her about my situation, but I'm glad *she* is so sure.

Nick stops so suddenly that I almost bump into him. We are next to a gap between two houses, barely three feet wide, leading into darkness. On the corner of the left house, there is a waste chute,

transferring refuse directly into the underground system. Nick quickly scans the surroundings and steps into the alleyway. With a swift motion, he lifts a flap and ... tosses his SmartPad and EarPods into the chute.

I stare at my brother in disbelief, but he simply nods at me to follow suit. How on earth is he going to explain *this* to anyone without being roasted by Veritas? Nevertheless, I slip into the gap beside Nick and rummage through my pockets for anything with AISS installed. My hands tremble as I pull out my most prized possessions, but I obediently toss them into the chute. Squeezing past Nick without a word, I move down the alleyway until I'm hidden in the shadows. Only then do I dare lean against the wall – my legs feel like jelly. With a silent sob, I sink to the ground, struggling for air, for freedom, for clarity of thought.

“What happened?” Nick asks, crouching down in front of me, his voice is a whisper.

Even in situations like this, you can rely on Veritas. “My physician,” I manage to stutter between gasps for air. “She is one of Pops ... friends. She knew about Aiden.” One of those wretched tears trickles down my cheek. Quickly I wipe the wretched thing away.

Nick’s face is unreadable. “Did she tell anyone?”

“I don’t think so. Not while I was there.” I clutch my knees to hold back the pressure in my chest.

“But I left pretty promptly.”

“Did you walk or run?”

“Walk,” I say. “And I kept smiling.”

“Did AISS say anything?”

“No.”

“Okay, I am going to ask you a question. I don’t want you to answer until the warmth turns to heat.” He looks me in the eye and I know he is ready to count the seconds. “What was your first thought when I introduced you to Kira?”

Of course, he asks an awkward question. Way too soon my throat starts burning, forcing me to tell the truth: “That she is far too pretty to fall in love with a Five like you!” The fire in my throat dies away immediately, but my cheeks continue to glow.

The corner of Nick’s mouth twitches into a smile. “Well that’s true enough.” He relaxes. “That was just two seconds. Your dosage is fine.” In other words, he doesn’t have to report me or arrest me even. And he knows that I take my VeriTab regularly, especially as he is usually sitting next to me at the time.

I chew my lip. I wonder what is going on in his head. How broken does he think I am? I don’t dare ask. There are some truths you don’t need to hear.

“Here.” Nick fishes a blister of tablets out of his breast pocket.

I feel a wave of relief. Dad’s tranquilisers. I reach out and he presses one of the white pills into the palm of my hand. Of course, I know they are for emergencies only, but this is an emergency. Unless I leave this hiding place in the next ten minutes I’ll miss the train to Ring Two even if I run all the way. And if someone at work asks why I am late ...I place the pill on my tongue.

Nick gives me his flask of water. As I raise the bottle to my lips something behind Nick catches my eye. Someone is standing at the entrance to the alleyway. A silhouette with the morning sun behind it, a diffuse shadow, a faceless person, who turns away. Did they

recognise me? No. They might have seen *someone*, but it would be impossible to recognise my face at this distance. *What if?* One more reason to get out of here.

I wash down the pill. I haven't eaten anything yet today so it should start working fast. "Thank you." I pass the bottle back to Nick and let him help me to my feet. My legs still feel wobbly but my pulse has calmed down thank goodness.

"Are you okay now?" Nick studies my face closely.

I try to register my feelings. Somewhere inside the jealousy still hurts. And the fear about a Verification is gnawing at me. But it feels more distant now, more like a far-off echo than something real. "I think so, yes. We should go."

"Yep. But we need to fetch our things first."

"What?!"

Nick turns and walks back to the waste chute. I stumble after him.

"Like I said: We have to recover something," he says again. "You didn't think I'd let us throw away our SmartPads?"

"I thought ... yes." Confused, I watch Nick lift the flap and reach into the chute. "I was wondering how we would explain why our SmartPads ended up in the recycling centre."

"Only they didn't." he smiles. Sure enough, Nick doesn't even have to reach down very far. He hands me my SmartPad and EarPods – they look fine – they are not even dirty.

How on earth ...?

Nick simply shakes his head. Of course, AISS is on now, so I can't ask any more questions. Nick switches back to small talk. "Pops wants to know if you are coming tonight," he says. "I said you are probably out somewhere."

“Probably,” I just repeat what he is saying. The pressing pain in my chest has disappeared. It feels like I am wrapped in cotton wool and will be for some time.

Although we're both headed in the same direction, we part ways at the station. Nick and a few others waiting are allowed to board RapidTrain 05, while I join the rest on line 106. It's the only CityTrain route directly from here to Ring Two. Despite that, the journey still takes over an hour and a half. By then, Nick and the others will be nearing the centre, although they'll need to change trains along the way.

I manoeuvre my way through the crowd to a window seat for four. Pulling back my hair, I tie it into a low plait and then plug in my EarPods, making them very visible for everyone to see, in the hope that people will leave me alone. “AISS? Play Secret Sirens’ new album,” I whisper loudly. I know the songs won’t move me the way they usually do. That’s the downside of Dad’s pills. They suppress the dangerous emotions but they kill the good ones too. Joy, the pins and needles and tingling skin when a chord really hits home.

I listen to the music for a while, before I look at my SmartPad. Three new messages in our family group. That’s all. No sign of Aiden. No ‘I miss you’, not even a ‘Good Morning.’ *Perhaps he is on the early shift today?* I think, trying to excuse his silence. All I know is that he didn’t have to go for his check-up today. He is from the same birth cycle as Nick. But because he lives in Ring Four, his MedPlex offered appointments sooner than ours.

I click through the apps randomly. When I call up GoSocial I freeze. Anna has changed her profile picture today. Where before

she was grinning into the camera on her own, now there she is standing beside Aiden, her head resting on his shoulder. I wish they weren't such a pretty couple; the photo could be an advert from a dating app. Ann has silky shiny shoulder-length hair, the black harmonises perfectly with Aiden's unruly hair. Her skin is the same warm shade of brown as his, they have the same dark eyes, and worst of all: they look ridiculously happy together. Ann has her arms wrapped around Aiden's toned chest, above the heart that beat only for me for the past ten years. I've learned to adapt and can handle most things, but this is tearing me apart. It feels like poisoned darts piercing my soul, until every memory is clouded by shadows that Dad's pills can't banish.

I press my lips together until it hurts. I notice the couple sitting opposite. Or more precisely, I notice their clasped hands, the gleaming wedding rings: polished copper, not expensive, but worth more than all the credits in the world. Until three weeks ago, I was sure Aiden and I were going to spend our lives together, and nobody would ever be able to separate us. But then he met Ann, and something ignited within him. Now all I can do is cling to the hope that our love is deeper, more consistent, more *logical*. That the spark will fade if we spend more time together and he remembers the promise he made. I was only seven, he was nine, when he popped the top of an old plastic bottle onto my finger and swore to marry me as soon as we were old enough. We were just children but Veritas allowed him to say the words and that means that Aiden believed them at the time.

Without thinking I call up our chat and my fingers fly over the screen.

Good morning. ♡ I passed my check-up. How are you?

Send. I can see that Aiden is offline but as soon as he sees the message he has to answer. Veritas is more lenient when we write than when we talk, but after no more than thirty seconds his fingers will start to twinge.

I close the messenger and the logo of the partnership app Eternity lights up ominously next to it. It's been there for a month now: two interlocked rings. The emergency plan that I am trying to ignore. I put away my SmartPad and stare through the window at the landscape flying by at two hundred miles an hour as I focus on the music.

Although there are no boundaries, I notice the transition from Ring Five to Ring Four. The houses look prettier, somehow, some of the fronts are painted like half-timber houses although obviously there's no real wood here. Far too expensive. In Ring Three the bare gravel front gardens make way for shrubs waiting for the warmer months yet to come. In between it is the same picture everywhere: wide open spaces of parched earth. Huge fields used to grow here. I've seen the pictures in the archives, bright yellow rapeseed and flowers and maize. But during the war, chemical weapons poisoned large ground areas, so you need to be wealthy to grow anything inside the rings – with enough credits to be able to afford the necessary fertilisers and irrigation. Like the people living in Ring Two.

The closer we get to our destination, the greener the spaces: grasses, early bloomers, even occasional copse of trees flash past, perhaps someone's private wood whose business is booming. I know

Edgar considered buying one once, but he is saving his credits for something else now. If Kira and Nick really do get married, they'll both receive the status of the elder person which means Kira will have to move to Ring Five – unless someone can put a considerable sum on the table. I know Edgar wants to be that somebody.

Not much later the train comes to a halt at the end of the line. As the doors swing open, the thoughts I had banned come creeping back. My pulse would be racing again if it weren't for Dad's pills. *What if AISS reported me after all? What if that person at the end of the alley recognised me? What if the guards are out there waiting for me?*

I hide my hands in my pockets before they start shaking and give me away. Bracing my shoulders, I step off the train and turn this way and that as I take in everyone on the platform waiting for the next train. No grey uniforms. No one telling me to come with them. Perhaps I'm off the hook after all.



"Kira's engagement ring", by M. E.

CHAPTER 4

The Moores' house is at the corner of a crossroads, only a short fifteen-minute walk from the station. It's way bigger than ours, with three stories. And the front of the house is a shiny bright white because Gloria gets it cleaned regularly. There's even a small balcony on the second floor that leads to Kira's room, and above that, there's a garret window poking out of the dark roof shingles. It's where Edgar has his office, and it's my favourite spot to take a break.

Although I doubt there be any time for breaks today.

I walk past the steps that lead up to the main entrance, heading toward the small green door on the side of the house. It's not as shiny as the front. Even Gloria's love for perfection has its limits—especially when it's not for her own benefit.

I punch in the code on the display next to the door, there's a click and then I can turn the door knob. The Moores could probably afford gliding doors if they wanted but I guess they prefer a more vintage look.

The light in the hall comes on. It's empty. Perfect. I race over to the coat stand, if you can call it that. Just a few copper hooks on the concrete wall. There are three coats hanging there. The bright red one belongs to Luisa, who works in the kitchen. The dark green one must be Birgit's (she probably even made it herself) and the last one is Nick's. I plunge my hand into the inside pocket. Got it - thank goodness! Although my joy is muffled by the tranquilisers. Nick

described the ring to me in such detail that I don't need to see it. Instead, I pop the box into my own coat pocket. Or is that a good idea ...?

"Mae?" I hear the voice above the music in my ears. "Have you seen the news? About Harold Green?" It is Luisa, who must have seen my EarPods log on to the Moores' employees circuit.

"I have." I answer. "AISS? Music off." Immediately the song breaks off, instead I can hear the clunking and banging of pots and pans in my Ear Pods.

"It's pretty serious," Luisa shouts above the noise. „Do you think they'll send the investigation sector in?"

"They might." A loud clatter makes my ears hurt. "What are you doing? It sounds as if you are preparing a feast." I shout back.

"That's exactly what I am doing – I hope. The Eisenhauers are coming to dinner, all of a sudden, and Gloria wants everything to be perfect."

„The Eisenhauers?" I hang up my coat next to Nick's and take the ring box back out of my pocket. "Are they the ones with that stuck-up son?"

"That's them. I think Gloria wants to match him up with Kira."

I roll my eyes as I turn the box in my hands, wondering where best to hide it. MY trouser pockets won't do - the bulge will show. "Has she forgotten that Kira is going to the theatre with my brother tonight?" I ask, although Luisa won't know anything about that.

"No idea. Gloria told me to cater for eight people."

There are three Eisenhauers, and five Moores. In which case: Gloria *is* expecting Kira to be there. Not surprising really. It wouldn't be the first time that she ruined a date for him. Nick can't

do much about it. He knows he mustn't interfere, or Gloria will never forgive him.

"Okay." I try hiding the ring inside my décolleté. That doesn't work either. I don't have a big enough chest for starters. "Have you seen Edgar yet, today? How is he taking the Harold Green news?"

"No and I don't know." The clattering has ceased, replaced by the sucking sound of Luisa kneading dough. "But I heard Gloria scolding him just now, because he hasn't been downstairs since the news."

At just gone 11 o'clock. How terrible! The irony feels nice although I know Veritas would never let me say such a thing. "I'll see if I can help," I say, staring at the coat again. I could take it upstairs with me, but Edgar might start asking questions ...

The doorbell rings suddenly, interrupting my musing. I can hear it in my EarPods, so it must be the back door.

"Mae, can you get that?" Luisa calls. "My hands are all covered in dough. And Bridget is busy altering clothes on the sewing machine, so she won't hear a thing."

"Of course, I'm still downstairs anyway," I call, although it isn't my job to answer the door. A few more minutes won't make any difference now. I pop the ring box back in my coat pocket and take out one of my EarPods, before I open the door.

There is a guy standing outside with an old-fashioned shoulder bag. A mailer. He can't be much older than me but judging by his copper ring, he is married already.

"You aren't Luisa or one of the Moores," he says, stating the obvious.

"You are right. I am Mae, Edgar Moore's archivist."

He's holding a large envelope in his hands. It looks expensive: beige parchment, golden ink, sealing wax. The flowing letters are handwritten as far as I can tell. And although I can't read the whole address, I know what it says: *Family Moore, Rouge Place, 14, Ring Two*. "Sorry to hurry you, but I have to go up now, so ..." I hold out my hand.

The mailer shakes his head. "I have to give this letter to the Moores in person."

"Why did you ring the back door then?"

"Gloria is busy talking to a neighbour...and she hates being disturbed. Look. Never mind. I'll try again later. ..."

"No wait." Sighing I lean against the side of the door and fold my arms across my chest. "You try to avoid meeting Gloria, ring at the back door and then ... what? I don't get it"

His fingers grip the parchment and his eyes widen as he looks at me. I sense fear in his pale green irises and realise something is wrong. I look at his ring again. But it is too late.

"Lu... Luisa is my wife," he stammers, his cheeks are flushed red with Veritas. "Normally she opens the door and if it's her, I give her the letters. And she ... delivers them."

Damn. I know Luisa is married to a mailer. Why didn't I notice the same pattern on his wedding ring as hers?

"Please, Mae ... I trust my wife one hundred percent. We've known each other since playschool. No letters have ever gone missing."

I hate the pleading sound of his voice and it's no use anyway. Even if starts begging on his knees, or offers me tonnes of food vouchers. He can't take back the truth and I can't forget it.

“Can’t you just ... fetch Luisa?”

“No.” I’m sorry.” It’s amazing they haven’t been found out until now. “But I can ask Edgar Moore ...”

“Is that the mailer?” someone calls behind me. So much for *keeping out of Kira’s way*. Well, at least she can’t check my coat pockets, now, I don’t think.

Kira comes running over with her skirts billowing around her. She looks very pleased, as if she has been waiting for this very letter - and beautiful, of course. Her blue dress drapes over her light brown shoulders, underlining her customised sapphire blue eyes, which perfectly complement her long chestnut-brown hair. Her updo is adorned with golden hair clasps, presumably a trial hairstyle for this evening.

“It is“, I say as if it weren’t obvious. Without Dad’s pill, my pulse would be at 180 again. I do not want to be here.

“I’ll take that. Thank you.” Kira plucks the letter out of the mailer’s fingers. “Please send the van Steegens our best wishes.” Then she makes the usual V sign with her middle and index fingers. “For Truth.”

“For Peace,” Luisa’s husbands croaks and repeats the gesture. His cheeks are still bright red. If he runs into the guards looking like that he doesn’t stand a chance.

I close the door. “Kira, I ...”

“Do you know what this is?” she interrupts me. There’s no chance of getting away.

“No,” I say. “but I can guess. Could it have anything to do with the birthday gala at the van Steegens?”

“Bingo!” Grinning from ear to ear, Kira breaks the seal and pulls a card out of the envelope.

Everyone who works here has heard stories about the van Steegen birthday gala. It takes place at a villa in Ring One and is said to be as opulent as any of the parties in the Centre: champagne, canapés with caviar from the fish farms on the outskirts, sweet strawberries and fresh orange juice. Thanks to Edgar’s connections, the Moores were invited for the first time last year.

“Just look at this invitation! It’s a work of art.” Kira sighs and leans against the wall as she hands me the card. “Last year there were these little butterflies made of tissue paper. And a huge fountain of melted white chocolate. It would have been perfect ... if one person hadn’t been missing.” The parchment under my fingertips feels as soft as silk. Just like the envelope, it is written in shimmering golden ink. I see the word *Invitation* followed by details about time, place and dress code. When I read the last line my stomach twists, despite the layer of cotton wool. *This invitation is for Family Moore and partners who are officially engaged.* Oh no, no, no! I can guess what Kira is going to ask!

“Mae? You know your brother better than anyone. He hasn’t given any hints away but do you think there’s any chance of him ...?”

“Stop!” I interrupt her, pressing the invitation back into her hands. “If you ask, I’ll have to tell you everything.”

Kira contemplates the card in her hand lost in thought. “I ...” She pauses. “I don’t want to know everything. So just one question okay? Is Nicholas going to propose before the gala?”

It would take hundreds of Dad’s pills to cancel how my stomach is feeling right now. For a silly moment, I actually imagine keeping

my mouth shut until my heart stops beating, and I faint. Nick would never want that to happen though.

“Of course he’s going to propose!” The heat disappears but that doesn’t ease my guilty conscience.

“Thanks,” Kira’s happy smile is proof that my brother doesn’t have to worry about her answer. “Then I’ll let the van Steegens know that I’ll be bringing someone with me. Nicholas is going to be so impressed.”

“Look, I really have to go upstairs to Edgar. Harold Green ...”

“Oh of course.” Kira steps out of the way. “Tell Nick that I am really sorry about tonight. I was really looking forward to going to the theatre with him.”

“Oh, he will understand. See you, Kira.” I force a smile and flee at last. How I wish Nick would hurry up and put that ring on her finger. Then we could stop playing hide and seek all the time.

The hallway on the third floor is full of kitsch. It is Gloria's personal dumping ground for all the paintings and sculptures that she has tired of, hasn't manage to sell, or were brought here by someone else. Right next to Edgar's office, for example, there is a hideous bust with three letters on its pedestal: J. I. M. Kira's eldest brother Connor bought it six months ago and it has been up here ever since. The only people who get to see it regularly are Edgar and me.

The office door is open. As I expected, Edgar is sitting at his desk surrounded by files spread out in front of him. Several ink cartridges are scattered between bits of sealing wax and his golden fountain pen. The richer you are the older everything has to be. I've never

understood why it is considered good manners to waste as many valuable resources as possible.

One time I was in the office with Edgar when one of his trade partners complained about a *friend* who would only send digital invoices. As if he couldn't afford paper or was deliberately trying to be rude. Edgar didn't say anything. Like Nick says, he doesn't care about appearances. But he knows how to generate respect in the richest circles.

I knock on the door. "Hello Edgar."

"Ah, Maeander," He looks up. His eyes are a striking colour, a light grey which goes well with his smooth black skin. His hair is natural. And there is no need to change it. Edgar is one of these people who age well. His white chin beard and the strands of white in his dark hair make him look dignified. "I am sorry but we don't have time for breakfast today. I am busy going through all our transactions with Harald."

"That's what I thought. How can I help?" I go over to my desk which is piled high with files. It looks like a scene from a distant century.

"I want you to check all the entries for last financial year." Edgar says without looking up from his books. "Especially the last two quarters. There must be a number of transactions."

I take the file from year 2305 off the shelf. I am groaning inside. This is going to be a very long day. Although I don't mind the overtime. If I miss the last direct train home, I'll have to take the one to Ring Four. And it would be the most natural thing in the world to ask Aiden if I can stay the night. He has always said yes. He can't turn me down now.

(...) Recent studies have revealed that hormones produced in stable, long-term relationships significantly diminish the necessity for Veritas. In fact, the dosage of VeriTabs for happily married couples can be substantially lowered, leading to significant cost savings. Further research is recommended to corroborate these findings.

Excerpt from "Study concerning the effect of partnership hormones on Veritas", published by Research Team 3, Centre-MedPlex, 07. 09. 2221