FRAGMENTED
SOULS
KASHA ROSS

FRAGMENTED SOULS

KASHA ROSS

Fragmented Souls
Copyright ©2021 Kasha Ross

Edited by Nancy Tamblyn

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

ISBN: 978-1-66780-800-0 (print)

ISBN: 978-1-66780-801-7 (eBook)

CONTENTS

Prologue (20 years ago)
Chapter 1 (Harley)
Chapter 2 (Harley)
Chapter 3 (Jimmy)
Chapter 4 (Harley)
Chapter 5 (Harley)
Chapter 6 (Jimmy)
Chapter 7 (Harley)
Chapter 8 (Harley)
Chapter 9 (Jimmy)
Chapter 10 (Harley)
Chapter 11 (Jimmy)
Chapter 12 (Harley)
Chapter 13 (Jimmy)
Chapter 14 (Harley)
Chapter 15 (Jimmy)
Chapter 16 (Jimmy)
Chapter 17 (Harley)
Chapter 18 (Harley)
Chapter 19 (Jimmy)
Chapter 20 (Harley)
Chapter 21 (Harley)
Chapter 22 (Harley)
Chapter 23 (Jimmy)
Chapter 24 (Harley)

Chapter 25 (Jimmy)
Chapter 26 (Jimmy)
Chapter 27 (Harley)
Chapter 28 (Harley)
Chapter 29 (Harley)
Chapter 30 (Harley)
Chapter 31 (Jimmy)
Chapter 32 (Harley)

PROLOGUE

(20 YEARS AGO)

Icy sheets of rain soak through Noah's only sweater and pair of jeans. Puddles form in seconds, turning to quicksand-like mud that fills his hole-ridden shoes. Today, Noah turns seventeen, an age that has at times seemed unlikely for him to reach. Usually, he'd be with the two people he loves most, sharing a piece of chocolate cake on the roof of the tall, less-guarded glass building. Instead, he's forced to stand amongst a claustrophobic crowd of a million people who smell of rot and onions, kept in place by Hunters: so-called law enforcers, who are the eyes and ears for the leaders. The Hunters arrest the innocent, team up with criminals, steal, beat and kill anyone in sight because to them, it is fun, as if it were a game.

Noah keeps his elbows pointed out, and his feet cemented to the ground as bodies push against him, each person either fighting for room or fighting to hide behind those bigger than themselves. The citizens drawn toward this gathering occupy the streets and empty places, pressing close to the glistening glass buildings, anxiously awaiting new laws to be announced.

A nimble hand slips into Noah's as his girlfriend reaches him through the crowd. She's always able to find Noah, even when he tries so

hard to keep her away from these situations. The stress in Noah's chest grows thicker along with the air as he pulls Ophelia closer, kissing the top of her head, her hair pressed flat and made darker by the rain. She draws circles on the back of his hand, knowing that this time, it won't calm him down.

Three floating billboards move in front of the buildings, positioned to display three men in a way that forces the citizens' eyes toward them, even those who cower behind drawn curtains.

The most powerful leader of the three sits in the middle, the other two shying away, allowing him to hold the crowd with his presence. He smiles, his demeanor rehearsed and manipulated to make him seem pleasant, though, even if he wore a mask, it wouldn't stop his cruelty from showing. Eyes always give away a person's true nature.

No one cheers when they appear. A collective breath is drawn in as people try to stay silent and invisible. Before the leaders address the crowd, all eyes obediently move to watch as two Hunters drag a hooded man to the front of the crowd, placing him on a wooden pedestal for all to see.

The leader in the center, Boris, opens his mouth, the slightly amused smile hiding at the corner of his lips, only hinting at his cruelty. "As we all know just two days ago, one hundred people were banished into the trees for — threatening us, your beloved leaders..."

Everyone stares blankly at the hooded man whose hands are tied behind his back. His shirt is torn and bloody, chest shaking as he openly sobs in front of the crowd. It is true that one hundred people were banished into the trees, but everyone knows it was only for beginning to talk of voting new leaders into power — and although a change in

leadership is necessary to the people's survival, they bite their tongues and pinch their lips, too scared to say anything.

"...Therefore he must accept the fate he brought upon himself," Boris says, his voice lost in the echo of a gunshot and the man's body splashing into a deep mud puddle. Ophelia turns into Noah as a woman screams, everyone in proximity begging her to stay quiet, to keep from running to her loved one. "What a shame," Boris clicks his tongue, acting as if he watched the man die. No one turns away, not even when a Hunter steps onto the pedestal where the man's blood is still fresh, his body not yet cold as they drag him away. The Hunter holds something — someone bundled in wet blankets.

"As we have done before every gathering, we shall take in an orphan who lost his mother at birth. Two-year-old Aron is to be brought up in the towers, raised in comfort and wealth," the leader to Boris's right explains.

The crowd forces applause, feeling only lament for the child and the life he will be trained for. However, Noah stays still, knowing this adoption is not out of kindness but rather for Boris's benefit. Before every gathering, a person is killed to show how easy it is for the leaders to win and the citizens to be disposed of, and to display their seeming benevolence, a child is adopted. However, in this case, this infant is rumored to be sired from an affair Boris had with a Hunter after his wife passed away. Once word got out about this mistake, the Hunter mysteriously vanished, and Aron was deemed to be the child chosen to be liberated from a life in the city.

Noah holds Ophelia tighter, terrified of what is to come — that he might fail to protect his only family. The leaders are trying to buy

obedience with little things that will win the citizens cooperation. However, no one knows how long the leaders can put out small fires when they expect people to live in an overcrowded city where the ghostly hands of death steal you from your front porch. Where citizens starve and turn on the people they once loved. Where people are beginning to think death is better than life.

Boris folds his hands together as the child is taken inside, and the citizens' attention returns to him. "Today marks the tenth year of our survival from the toxic gas released from Mother Earth's soul. The tenth year of our perseverance, despite the loss of cities, our homes, and especially our loved ones who perished. It also marks the day I scoured the earth looking for any survivors, risking my life to save you. I brought people to this forest, cutting down only the trees necessary to build our haven where you made me your leader." Boris pauses, waiting for applause, gratitude — but still, the people remain silent, frozen in place. "We are survivors who have lived among each other in peace. Yet, I am afraid we may turn against one another one day, as all humankind tends to do." A pleased glint sparkles in his eyes. The two other leaders share a wary, sad look before turning back to the citizens, pretending not to be anxious.

"Noah?" Ophelia whispers, pulling on his sleeve, trying to meet his eyes, but Noah shakes his head slightly, knowing that anything they say among this crowd could be overheard and used against them.

"I bring you good news. Over the past couple of months, five towns have been built around the city, all separated from each other and from us by a thick wall of trees to ensure privacy. If people wish to travel to the city or other towns, they may use the one road that connects us all,"

Boris says.

"Privacy," Noah grunts as quietly as he can into Ophelia's ear, risking being overheard, "More like a way to keep us apart and prevent us from getting together quickly to overthrow the leaders."

"Four thousand chosen people will be sent to each town in five days. You will be informed by tonight," the leader to Boris's left says, addressing his hands rather than the audience.

The crowd erupts into murmurs, expressing their thoughts and concerns, some naive, some angry. Boris raises his hands, asking for silence. Only a small group fails to obey his order.

"The second piece of good news is that you will now have a chance to gain immunity from the unknowns who beat and kill innocent people." Boris purses his lips, blatantly acting as if those unknowns aren't his law enforcers, his Hunters. He's outwardly gloating that no one can or would dare to challenge him, not even his fellow leaders. "We will now have rankings and gangs will be formed. Anyone allowed to create or join. Anyone allowed to be on their own and not participate. Gangs will fight once a week both in the towns and city. Winning gangs will move up in the rankings. The top five gangs in each town and the top ten in the city will receive immunity, and extra food. I will give you one week to form your gangs and after that, the fights will begin. Choose wisely." Boris smiles as the screens fade to nothing and float away.

Noah watches as the Hunters holding shiny batons and large guns surround the crowd, shoving, herding people away from the towers. It reminds him of the way police dealt with protesters before they died from the treacherous gas catastrophe. Noah wasn't even eight yet when It happened. He can barely remember it, but the law enforcers and

incompetent leadership lacked the skills to prevent the destruction of the world — to save their people. Today, nothing has changed.

The day death lay waste to the world, Mother earth was angry with the people, for they took everything from her, never caring to give anything in return. She gave them chance after chance to redeem themselves, but of course, they did nothing. In a moment of pure disgust and irritation, Mother Earth spread toxins through the air, sparing only what she had created, such as animals and trees. She suffocated the guilty, stalled engines, sent buildings to the ground and plunged the world into darkness. She killed almost eight billion people, the population dropping to fifty thousand in weeks, leaving the survivors to wish they had died like the rest.

The crowd begins to disperse except for a small group, the same group who failed to fall quiet when everyone else did. Suddenly they surge toward the Hunters, screaming in defiance. Gunshots echo off the buildings. Random people begin to fall.

"Noah!" Ophelia panics as the world erupts into chaos. People push, grab and trample bodies as they slip in the mud, trying to get away, trying to stay alive. Noah grabs Ophelia's arm, holding on for dear life — protecting her from the elbows and hands, keeping their heads down, praying that their shoes keep their grip and hoping their faces don't meet the earth.

As evening replaces the sun and scatters the night with stars, Noah sits atop the roof of the orphanage where both he and Ophelia live. He holds Ophelia as she sleeps, thin twisted wire around both their ring

fingers. Footsteps shuffle behind Noah, but he doesn't jump or turn to see who they belong to. He doesn't want to wake her.

"Shh," he tells the boy who settles beside him, sighing as he leans back against the brick ledge.

Maddick, Noah's best friend of ten years asks, "Are you scared?" as he places a piece of rich chocolate cake between the two of them.

"Yes," Noah readily admits. He's never met anyone, besides Ophelia, who he trusts or cares for more than Maddick. For years, the two have protected each other during fights and run-ins with Hunters and have always stuck together. Most importantly, Maddick has never let Noah's most dangerous secret slip from his lips.

"You have to be even more careful now," Maddick whispers, handing Noah a fork, taking the first bite.

"I know," Noah nods, stroking his bride's hair. "Thank you — for being witness to the wedding," Noah sighs, wondering if he and Ophelia will regret their decision. Both knew they were too young to get married, but the only way they would be able to stay together and not be sent to separate towns was to sign a piece of paper binding them by law. That evening after escaping the Hunters' gunshots and the stampeding crowd, they got married. "Maddick, we can't keep living like this; we need a new ruler — we need a soul ruler."

"I know," Maddick sighs, losing his appetite, realizing what Noah means. Maddick slings an arm around Noah, the only person in the world who he sees as family and who doesn't hate him because of who his family is. "Today I was told that in two years my twin brother and I will be trained to replace two of the current leaders. So wait. Wait 'til you're nineteen before doing anything rash. See if things will get better.

Let her live with no burdens." He points to Ophelia, watching as Noah pushes a strand of hair from her face. "If you were to start a family, bringing a baby into this world wouldn't be safe, whether it be a girl or boy. Not now, not ever, especially because of who you are. Wait two years and I will be able to get you out of here if need be and into the town I will be given to run. I'll be able to hide you, give you new identities, new names — and if you have a baby, I can make sure the baby remains hidden for as long as possible. I can keep them off the baby's trail until it's ready. Your children will never truly be safe. My brother isn't like me," Maddick mutters, looking up to the stars, wishing life could be different.

Noah pulls Maddick into a hug, careful not to move Ophelia. "Thank you," he chokes out, pretending not to notice the tears rolling down both their faces.

The two boys sit, eating their rich chocolate cake and listening as screams and fights echo below them. They understand nothing will get better. A new leader is necessary, one born from power. One with all the qualities a fair, level-headed leader requires. They need someone to rescue the humanity that is slowly being ripped from their souls as the seconds tick by.

CHAPTER 1

(HARLEY)

I remember what it felt like, to feel his anger, his hurt, his pain, as his knuckles collided with my skin, how my flesh split and warm-blood crawled down my cheek. I remember how his lips curled up when I refused to hit him back. It didn't hurt after the tenth punch. It never does anymore. I've become numb to the pain. My nerves, too overwhelmed with the constant stimulation, have given up on trying to tell me of the damage being caused.

So whenever they happen, the beatings, I start to count, wondering how many it will take or if one punch will knock me out. Isn't that the dream? Having the pain disappear after the first time you're introduced to it?

I remember the feeling of passing out and waking up on the carpet floor, an iron taste in my mouth, gravel-filled laughter feeding into my nauseating headache. I pushed through sweaty bodies and out the door into the streets, voices calling after me, mixing with their thundering party. I was so unaware of the threats lurking in the shadows, easily able to snatch me up on my way to my alley. On these disorienting nights, when I can't make it far, I fall unconscious on my mold-ridden couch. That's what I remember. That's what makes its way into my dreams as I

start to regain consciousness.

"Harley — Harley!"

I try to open my eyes, still blurry with sleep. The stale air raises goosebumps on my arms, my skin blanketed by the morning dew. I push myself further into the couch, trying to rid myself of the unsettling chills brought on by last night.

"Harley."

I drift in and out of last-minute dreams before letting my eyes open, but only one does. Groggy, I follow the voice until I see a shadowy figure leaning against the chipped bricks. My heart knocks against my chest when I can't quite make the person out, but then he ruffles his fingers through his hair.

"Jimmy," I sigh, relieved that he isn't a three hundred pound Hunter coming to jump me.

"Parents fighting again?" His voice comes out weak and tired, as if he'd been yelling all night. He probably has. Jimmy Carter, the boy known to egg the shit-talkers on and shut them up with one punch, yet no one has ever seen him start a fight.

I nod, not ready to start my day. He scans my body, looking for anything out of place, and I do the same. His pale blue eyes sparkle as the rising sun stretches across his face, crystal against his golden skin, contrasting with the black hair that lies untidy across his forehead. His left hand is slightly bruised, not as bad as I've seen it, but his right is wrapped in a white t-shirt spotted with blood.

"Another fight!"

“Another win,” he huffs.

He sits awkwardly against the brick wall, his lean muscular build fatigued and restless all at once. Dressed in worn jeans and a ratty button-up with the top two buttons missing, the shirt hangs lazily open, showing the thick scar on his chest. He’s styled in a way that adds to how insanely handsome he is. It’s the kind of handsome you’d whisper about to your best friend as he walks by. Jimmy says he doesn’t notice, but I catch him flashing his goofy grin every time it happens.

“Let me check your hand,” I offer, pushing myself up so my back presses against the wet cushions, the dew seeping through my shirt.

“Harley, are — are you okay?” Jimmy asks, leaning forward, his eyes shifting to my cheek. Momentarily forgetting his hand, I lift mine gingerly to my face, careful as I run my fingers over a tender bump just below my cheekbone, where dry blood makes the surface rough.

“I’m fine,” I say, which is somewhat true. I can barely feel it, though that’s probably not a good sign.

“What happened?” He stretches his hand toward me but lets it fall to his side, not sure if touching my face would hurt or help me. I want his hand to rest there because just his touch makes me feel a thousand different things.

“Nothing. Promise.” I try to smile, but the movement only makes my cheek throb.

I start to stand and instantly regret it. Every damn muscle in my body screams at me as I strain to make my movements appear fluid, but apparently, they aren’t ready to listen to my brain. Jimmy gets to his feet and, without saying anything, he pulls my arm over his shoulders, pressing my body against his and taking all the weight from my legs.

My body loosens as we start the walk to 'The Shed' through dusty streets, past cowering, underfed crowds of lonely people and gangs who start their day dreading the next. Jimmy lets me go, and I pretend not to flinch with every step as he pretends not to notice.

It's not much farther to The Shed, an old rusty abandoned barn on the corner of Brooks and Baker. Jimmy and I came across it when we were eight and on our way to fry worms. It's an ugly-looking thing, but it makes an impenetrable hideout. It's curtained by two willow trees whose branches intertwine with one another, weeping to the overgrown grass and shielded by six-inch thick bushes.

From the outside, it looks small, covered in weather-beaten wood, rusted window panes and missing shingles. Just the look of it couldn't appeal to the hollow imagination of adults. Though, if you are lucky enough to make it past the broken steps and the alarm system of slime and pinecones set by Rey Dezmend, our gang member with a mad scientist's mind who causes more issues than not, you'd think the door led to a different place. The inside is lined with cedar, 'borrowed' from Finn and Rey's job site, complemented by sidewalk furniture, lamps from the Opulent parts of town, two heaters and a Ziegler Mahal carpet that Tequila claims she found in the trash. (Though the mayor reported a missing, fairly expensive Ziegler carpet from his office days later. The security footage was mysteriously wiped and destroyed.) She managed to steal some solar panels to power the TV and lights, too.

If the Hunters actually cared to look into The Shed, we would all be sentenced to death or banishment. It's a good thing they're too busy

beating people up to care. If not for The Shed, there would be no refuge for the five most important people in my life.

The walk from my alley to The Shed is an easy twenty minutes on a good day when we don't have to dodge the wrath of Hunters. Today, however, by the time we get there, I'm sweating profusely, my cheek has a heartbeat, and my head is pounding. So I stop, catch my breath, and prepare myself to go inside. I know I will not be blessed with an empty room and no questioning looks on the other side of that door. The Shed is basically Uri's home, and Tequila has probably already brought in stolen goods for everyone.

Jimmy pushes the door open, and I'm greeted with wide eyes and open-jawed stares. I guess the side of my face looks pretty bad.

"You okay? Let me take a look," Finn says, bringing his hands to my face. His sandy blond hair sticks up in weird places, never cared for. His eyes fix intensely on my face, allowing me to notice how the greens of his irises fade into yellow.

"I'm fine!" My voice comes out shakier than I want it to, but Finn doesn't notice. He only notices what needs to be healed.

"You have pretty heavy bruising. Your cheekbone doesn't seem to be fractured, not a deep laceration, so it doesn't need stitches and I don't think there's any damage to your eye, but we'll have to see when it opens up," he says, dropping his hands and moving on to treat Jimmy. "You should clean it, though," Finn says over his shoulder.

"Thank you," I mumble.

"What happened?" Tequila rubs her hand over my shoulder, directing her question more to her brother, Jimmy, than me. Tequila's twenty, the oldest and no more than 5'3", with elbows too pointy, ribs

too noticeable and cheeks hollow. She turns from me, hitting me with her crimson hair that stops in a straight line at her shoulder blades, with not a piece longer than the next.

"I swear if someone asks me that one more time, I'm going to punch them!" I try to laugh, but the movement sends irritating pains through my ribs.

"Chill! Chill, champ!" Rey says, pretending to box, only to end up hitting Uri in the face.

"Whatever!" I snort.

Uri flashes me a gentle smile, no pity in his expression. His cropped coal-coloured hair blends with his skin and boldens the whites of his eyes, making his hazel irises appear as tranquil pools, scattered with gold mist. His eyes are my favorite feature. He tosses me a shirt to replace my blood-stained one.

They smile, going back to watching cartoons on our ancient TV and that's the reason I love them. They don't pry.

I walk into the bathroom, cringing when I see my reflection in the broken mirror. The left side of my face is a deep purple with a cut from the top of my cheekbone to my chin. My eye is sealed shut, and when I lift my shirt, dark red bruises line my ribs. I push on them, deciding nothing's broken.

I place my hands on the cold sink, steadying my tired body, my eye trained on my reflection. Brown hair falls in tangled waves across my sweaty, oily skin, and my pupils are still dilated from the adrenaline coursing through me. I always look like this; Uri calls it dysfunctional beauty. I call it a mess. I carelessly scrub my face clean, hoping to rid myself of last night's memories that threaten to crawl to the surface, but

Jimmy's presence in the doorway and his steady breaths ease me a bit.

"If you want to know what happened, Eric was drunk, he and my mom were fighting, and I just got in the way. I'm fine. I can't feel anything anyway," I say, pretending to be annoyed. But honestly, telling Jimmy is like releasing all the pressure in my chest and remembering what it feels like not to constantly fight for air.

"I know. I mean, I know you're fine. I know you can take care of yourself. I just want to help if you would let me." His shoulders tense, and he drops his gaze like he's said something wrong. We know each other so well that even the slightest change sends us to one another, making it our sole duty to fix what's broken, even when we can't.

I want to say that he's delirious if he thinks he can do anything. My parents are drunks, and my stepdad Eric is a Lackey, a brainless drug dealer for the Big Three. They're heartless people who feed on your insecurities, convincing you that the only way to live is to escape into a world of drugs, spending all the money you have to survive, on a reality that constantly slips through your fingers. Eric's been a Lackey for so long, ice fills the spot where his heart once was, making him ruthless and easily aggravated. Every time I blink the wrong way, it brings on a fight.

"I know," I sigh as I push a thick slab of cream across my cheek before sliding past Jimmy.

He reaches his arm out, showing his already stitched-up hand, bringing his lips so close to my ear that it tickles. "You're so fucking stubborn," he whispers.

A smile finds its way to my lips. "We're similar in more ways than one," I say as we walk back into the main room.