

If Stalin Ruled in 2041

In 2041, California filed for secession from the United States. In an attempt to stop this newly-formed political power, U.S. President Joseph Stalin IV, a man bent on domination and conformity, mandated that all political activists of the California Sun Party and their families be deported to the coldest, most barren regions of Alaska. Families were systematically transported by railway up the Pacific coast into Canada and then to Alaska. Men were separated from their families. Women and children went to a camp in Barrow, Alaska. While many of them knew the likelihood of their exile, they were ill prepared for the hardships they would face.

Summer 2041

Los Angeles, California

Tiffany Minkus flipped her long blonde hair over her slender shoulder with a flounce. "So, like Kelsey said Kaleigh was on like the first train, and you know what? There are like NO outlets! How am I going to charge my zCom? Oh em gee! That is like totally not cool!"

"I know, right?" Lexi Thatcher replied, then puckered her lips in a pout. "So Brittany texted me at like 2:30 this morning, like, all stressed out because they're like being forced to sit in the cheap seats instead of like first class or something. She's like so bummed because she can't charge her zCom and it's like almost dead, ya know?"

Tiffany checked her makeup in the mirror to make sure she was flawless, then tossed her cosmetics into the bag she was packing. "When do you think they'll come for us?"

"Geez, I don't know. Like, I hope this whole thing is just like over before that happens. Can you like imagine us in Alaska? It's like totally cold there all the time, or something!"

"Me too! I so totally do not want to have to like do work that might totally wreck my nails. It took me like forever to get them perfect." Tiffany held up her nails for inspection.

"Totally. Love the purple swirlies!" Lexi looked at her own nails. "I wish mine would like look like yours."

There was a knock on the door and Tiffany's mom poked her head in. "Hi girls!"

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Mrs. Minkus."

"How's the packing going?" Mom looked with a worried expression at the piles of clothes strewn about.

"Chill, Mom," Tiffany exclaimed with a roll of her eyes. "It's no biggie."

"Honey, this is serious. If they come for us, we have to be ready to go. We need to take only necessities and practical items. You can't take your whole wardrobe."

"Geez, like I know, Mom," Tiffany huffed with exasperation.

"Okay, but please hurry," Mom turned to the door and left the cluttered bedroom.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Minkus, I'll like keep Tiff in line," Lexi hollered through the closing door.

The girls broke into giggles as the door latched.

August 2041

Alaskan Wilderness

Tiffany squirmed in the cramped space, jostling Lexi awake.

"Hey!" Lexi grumbled.

"Sorry. I'm like sooo uncomfortable!" Tiffany whined.

"Me too. Do you think we're almost there? Like, wherever 'there' is?"

"I hope so. It reeks in here! Nobody's showered in like forever."

"Girls, stop whining. Others are still trying to sleep," warned Tiffany's mom.

Tempers had been flaring for days now, so both girls settled down, not wanting to suffer the wrath of those around them. Unfortunately, the girls couldn't return to sleep. The oppressive stench and stuffiness were too overwhelming.

It was a relief when others began to stir. At least they could get up and stretch and use the facilities, such as they were. Tiffany never dreamed she'd be relieving herself in a bathroom that was little more than a bucket attached to the floor. It was disgusting! But it was all they had, so she went. She'd long since stopped complaining out loud; so many adults had cautioned her to keep quiet, she'd finally given in.

Soon after returning from the bathroom, Tiffany noticed a change in movement. She leaned over to Lexi and asked, "Do you think we're slowing down? Maybe we're stopping for a break!"

"I don't know. It does feel like we're slowing down, but I couldn't see anything when I peeked out the window a few minutes ago."

Suddenly, the passengers lurched forward as the train came to an abrupt stop. Everyone looked around. Some were happy, while others appeared to be afraid of what they might find outside the relative safety of the train.

The door flew open, and soldiers began shouting. "Get out! Get out! Now -- move it!"

People scrambled for the doors, trying to grab their belongings while hurrying so as not to be noticed by the soldiers. Out on the platform, the sun was blinding and Tiffany shaded her eyes to look around. There was little here. A crudely-shaped building stood a ways away with a smaller, more tidy building standing just off the platform.

People were being pushed forward in the direction of the larger building, and Tiffany wondered what they would find there. She looked at Lexi, but both girls kept silent.

The building had two doors on opposite ends. The boys were being directed to the first door while the women and girls were pushed down the path to the other door. Tiffany caught sight of a shower through one of the cracks in the wall. She whispered to Lexi, "There are like showers!"

Lexi grinned. "Awesome!"

She'd spoken too loudly. One of the soldiers moved closer, gun raised. He shouted, "Keep quiet! Everyone keep quiet!"

Lexi cowered closer to Tiffany, who was finally somewhat happy to be close to her mom. They all walked on in silence.

At the door, the women were ordered to strip and shower. Some began entering the building, but soldiers stopped them. "Strip here," they ordered.

There were cries throughout the crowd. One mother sheltered her pre-teen daughter, while another replied, "No way!"

Another girl of about fifteen became hysterical, screaming and crying. She was pulled aside despite protests and disappeared around the corner of the shack. The girl's mother ran after her. Moments later gunfire was heard. Gasps arose in the crowd followed by immediate "shushes" from several mothers.

Everyone fell silent, hiding tears where possible. First one woman, then another began undressing and the others followed suit. Soldiers nodded and leered.

Once disrobed, they were allowed into the shower room, which turned out to be a single, large room with several rudimentary shower heads that sprayed lukewarm water. Still, they were able to clean themselves, and it felt good.

November 2041

Barrow, Alaska

The first three months in Barrow, Alaska, were a nightmare. The land was barren, too cold to grow any crops. The only food was that which could be taken from the sea. Even that was scarce. Forced to work long and grueling hours for the government's benefit, little time and energy were left to supply for their own needs. The government allotments of 6 ounces of raw fish and 12 ounces of bread per person per day provided a meager existence. Fishing for oneself was allowed, if you didn't mind fishing in the dark in subzero temperatures. By the end of the day, most prisoners were too tired to endure these conditions.

Housing consisted of poorly-constructed huts. Each hut was approximately 100-square-feet in size and contained one wood stove, one table with two chairs, and two mattresses. Two families were expected to share a hut. The floors were thin plywood and there were gaps in the wall boards, so cold seeped in. On the most brutal days, the wood stoves could not keep the huts warm. Conditions were unlike any these Californians had ever experienced.

Much to their relief, Tiffany, Lexi, and their mothers had been housed together. Some families they knew had been forced to share huts with strangers, and the girls just knew they couldn't have endured that.

"Did you like hear that one of the fishing boats totally capsized this morning?" Tiffany whispered to Lexi.

"Like yeah! Two of the older boys like almost drowned!" Lexi replied. "I mean, like, they could've died!"

Tiffany shuddered. "Do you know who they were?"

"No. They weren't from our train."

"It would be so nice to like be able to like socialize and get to know some of the others stuck in this dreadful place. There must be like some cute boys around here." Tiffany giggled.

"Boys is right. I heard the oldest guy here is like just 14, except the totally old men who can't work as much and like a couple handicapped teenagers. The rest of the teenagers like went with the men to like another camp." Lexi picked at her hands that had become scarred and calloused from the long days of processing fish in the government packing plant. She never would have dreamed her life would be like this.

January 2042

Tiffany rushed into the hut anxious to find Lexi. "Guess what!"

Lexi looked up wearily from her place on the mattress. She wasn't well, but Tiffany didn't seem to notice in her excitement. "What?"

"Someone told the soldiers that I could like draw and paint! The Commander like wants me to paint his picture!" Tiffany squealed in delight.

Lexi stood up. "That is totally rad!"

"Thanks! I can't wait. I mean the man is like a total creep, but I'll get to like hang out at headquarters where it's warm, and I haven't like been able to paint since we got here. I am totally stoked!"

The girls hugged, and at that moment both mothers walked in visiting quietly. Seeing the girls, Mrs. Minkus asked, "What's so exciting?"

"They've asked me to paint the Commander's picture!" Tiffany replied with a a clap of her hands and a slight giggle.

The mothers stood silently, looking.

"Like earth to mother," Tiffany finally said, "what's wrong?"

"No daughter of mine is going to spend time alone with the Commander!"

"But Mom, I won't be alone, and I have like so missed painting. I want to do this."

Lexi and her mom started to leave, but Tiffany called them back in. "Don't leave. We're all like a family now. You can stay for this."

Mrs. Thatcher asked, "Who else is going to be there?"

"Several of the guards, and like the Administrative Assistant, Miss Jane, will be there. See, I'll be like totally safe with her around."

"What if she can't stay the whole time?" Mrs. Minkus asked.

"Like, what if they would let Lexi like come with me?"

Both mothers shook their heads. "I don't want either of you going," Mrs. Minkus replied. "But let me think about it."

"I'll think about it too," said Mrs. Thatcher.

The girls hugged. They were sure they could convince their mothers that this would be okay.

Three days later, Tiffany and Lexi walked into the front office of Headquarters.

"Hi girls, what can I do for you?" Miss Jane asked in a professional, but friendly tone.

"I'm here to paint the Commander's picture," Tiffany stated with more confidence than she felt.

"Ah, yes, I did see that on his calendar for today. I'm not sure he's quite ready for you, though."

"That's okay, we can wait," Tiffany replied.

"Fine then, please have a seat over there," Miss Jane stated with a wave of her hand in the general direction of a small waiting room.

The girls sat next to each other in silence for several minutes, nervous.

Finally Miss Jane stood and disappeared through the door behind her desk. When she reappeared, she motioned with her hand and said, "You may come in now. The Commander is ready for his sitting."

The girls looked at each other then walked to the door. Miss Jane ushered them in and introduced them.

"Commander, this is Miss Tiffany Minkus. She's the talented young artist you've heard about." Turning to Lexi, she said, "And this is Miss Lexi Thatcher, Miss Minkus' friend."

"Hello girls," the Commander said in a deep and booming voice. "Please, have a seat." He indicated a lovely sitting area to his right with a fireplace and leather furniture. A fire was burning pleasantly, emitting a soothing warmth.

"If that will be all," Miss Jane said. She waited for the Commander's nod, and walked out of the office, closing the door behind her.

Tiffany and Lexi sat on the leather sofa near the fireplace, and the Commander took the chair opposite them. He had what appeared to be a genuine smile, and Tiffany thought he could be considered handsome, if he were younger and not such a brute.

"So, where did you learn to paint, Tiffany--may I call you Tiffany?"

"Yes sir," Tiffany replied. "I like always loved my art classes, so my Dad like paid for me to have private lessons a few years ago."

"And how about you, Lexi? Do you paint as well?"

"No sir. The best I can do is like really crooked stick figures," Lexi replied with a nervous giggle.

The Commander laughed, a loud and deep laugh that filled the room. "I must confess that is the extent of my artistic ability as well."

After a few more minutes of small talk, the Commander pointed to the art supplies on the table across the room. "So shall we begin?" he asked.

"Yes sir. I'm ready," replied Tiffany. She suddenly felt nervous and shy, but she got up and walked to the supplies. She eyed them reverently. It had been so long since she'd had access to so many things, and she immediately began to relax, thinking only of the joy that the process of painting would bring.

June 2042

Tiffany entered the hut quietly. Her mother had been ill for days and now Lexi seemed to be sick as well. She hoped to find them on the rebound, but instead they were both sleeping fitfully. She crossed the room to her mother and placed a hand on her forehead. It seemed obvious her mother had a high fever. On the opposite side of the room, she felt Lexi's forehead. She too was burning up.

What were they going to do? There were no medical services in the camp. She hadn't dealt well with the common cold before coming to this wasteland. Now she and Mrs. Thatcher would have to nurse her mother and Lexi back to health.

At that moment, Lexi moaned. Tiffany moved closer. "Hi Lex. I'm like right here. Can I do anything for you?"

"Water. I need water."

"Sure." Tiffany crossed to the table and filled a glass with water from the bucket of melted snow. "Here you go."

Lexi drank slowly. She handed the cup back to Tiffany, rolled onto her side, and quickly rested her head on the pillow. In little more than a whisper, Lexi said, "I feel awful."

"I know. I'm like really sorry. I wish I knew what we could do to like help you and Mom get well."

"We like need better food, vitamins, something more than just fish and bread day after day."

"I don't know where to get that stuff. Like the soldiers and government employees have lots of good food, but you know they're like under strict orders not to share anything with us. I like feel so hopeless!"

"It's okay. It's like not your fault. I'm gonna like sleep right now. Okay?"

"Sure, Lex. Rest and feel better."

Tiffany waited until she was outside to cry. She was so worried about her mother and Lexi and she'd hardly slept last night because her mother had thrashed around so much. She hated this place more than ever. She'd heard of others who'd died recently. It seemed like if they'd made it through the worst of winter, it should be getting better. It wasn't! She'd also heard that their only chance for better nourishment was berry season in August. They couldn't wait until August!

Afraid and exhausted, she dropped to her knees. She hadn't prayed since she was a child, but today it seemed like her last option.

"God, I know I've like not been the best person. I've like made fun of people and not been like helpful when I should have been. I like know all of that. I'm like really, really sorry!" Her words squeaked out around her sobs.

"We need You now. Things look so out of control. I like don't know how to help Mom and Lexi. What do I do?"

For a moment there was silence. Nothing but the sounds of her own muffled sobs. Then behind her she heard the crunch of boots on gravel, and she looked up, startled. There was one of the younger soldiers. He stopped, made eye contact for a moment, then turned and walked away.

Tiffany buried her face in her hands and wept harder. If the soldiers found out she'd been praying, they would likely take more of their rations away. What had she done?

The next morning Tiffany rolled over to check on her mother. There seemed to be no change -- she wasn't better, but at least she wasn't worse.

Mrs. Thatcher was still asleep near Lexi, so Tiffany quietly got up and went outside for some much-needed fresh air. She wrapped her jacket around her shoulders; mornings were still so cold, even in June. At least the sun was finally shining again. Somehow that realization gave her a measure of peace and hope, though she was still terribly worried about her mother and Lexi.

She looked up at the sky and smiled at the brilliance of the sunrise. When she looked down, she noticed an object hidden slightly behind the corner of the hut. She hadn't noticed anything there yesterday, so she walked over to it.

It was a box; a large box. Tiffany looked around but saw no one, so she carefully opened the lid. She gasped. Was it really possible? She couldn't believe it!

Here in front of her was the answer to her prayers. She laughed out loud, grabbed the box, and ran into the hut. She didn't care that she was waking everyone up.

"Guess what?"

Mrs. Thatcher sat up and hushed her. "They're still sick; don't wake them!"

"But I have a surprise, and everyone needs to know. Look!" She set the box on the table and pointed.

Her mother rolled over and looked at the package. "What is it, Tiff?"

"Oh Mom, it's so totally wonderful! It's a box of food -- canned fruits and veggies, rice and beans, there's even some mac and cheese in here. Isn't it like so awesome?"

Everyone else got up and came to the table. They couldn't believe what Tiffany was telling them, but it was true. There before them sat their hope of survival.

Tiffany danced around the small area as she moved back to the door to close it. As she reached for the door, she saw movement and paused. Walking away from the side of the hut was the soldier she'd seen yesterday. He stopped and turned, and for a moment it seemed to Tiffany that he was actually smiling. Then he turned and walked away.