



SARA DE WAARD

DEFY

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to Isaac & Ava

For making the transition from when you looked up to me to
when I looked up to you lovely.

PROLOGUE

The system was not broken, but one man thought of a way to fix it.

He was a powerful man — Telova Job — who was always invited to town meetings to share his insights. All government members respected him for his impressive financial success as a hardworking citizen. There was mutual benefit in this relationship as long as it remained in the public eye ... but once it hid behind closed doors, the downfall of the town became inevitable.

Before it was Zalmon, the town offered all its citizens fair, unlimited access to health care, as needed. The townspeople compensated for the enormous price tag with due diligence to use the service responsibly, volunteer contributions to the hospitals and rehab centers, and pay general taxes on purchases (back when traditional money existed).

Telova had lived an impoverished childhood with his immigrant parents, who worked countless jobs to make ends meet.

When he came of age and entered the workforce, he searched for something that could sustain him as he planned to ask for the hand of the woman he loved. The job was insurance. But it wasn't enough for him to deal with policies for life, vehicles, and property. He craved more. He yearned for that life of ease and luxury.

Before long, Telova weaseled his way into the minds of government officials, enticing them with surefire ways to earn votes. He proposed to lower taxes and ease individual contributions to society, letting private insurance companies, like his, run the health care show.

Telova was director of it all, and before long, the consortium became so powerful and money hungry that the health needs of the people were sacrificed to protect the financial bottom line. It became about the mighty dollar rather than human life.

The government crumbled and succumbed to Telova, who, in turn, established Zalmon — a place that had new ways of running things for the good of its people. It promised that under its watch, the only illness to ever plague its citizens would be Datura — a strange, uncontrollable phenomenon that can't be cured or treated. Symptoms include severe apathy, a robotic persona, glazed eyes, minimal communication skills, and the embarrassing inability to contribute to society effectively.

Things couldn't have been better for Telova and his wife, and one day, they welcomed their precious son.

INGRAIN

Excerpt from *The Book of Zalmon*:

Peter Grindin was the first Leaver. He abandoned his family in early Zalmon days — for reasons unknown to anyone who knew him, he just up and Left. Grindin's pregnant wife and two young sons were sentenced to hang in Town Square to deter further citizens from following in Peter's footsteps.

Minutes after the Grindin Three were hanged, the eldest boy's rope broke, sparing his life. His explicit, terrifying recount of his brief encounter with a Natural Death traumatizes Zalmon people to this day.

He said, "Natural Death stole my last breath, but it did not stop there. It dug its scissor-sharp nails into my flesh and ripped me open from my shoulder down my arm,

all the way to my middle fingertip, exposing my veins and draining my blood. As I suffocated, chest concave, my eyes burned and summoned salt from my insides to pour down as tears into my wounds. Piercing pain sent me into electric shock. My throat choked me from within, halting hope and drowning will. The butterflies that once fluttered in my belly regressed to crawling, scratching, gnawing vermin.”

Zalmon no longer executes the families of its Leavers; rather, they face the power of the shame inflicted on their legacy and the gross embarrassment to the remaining family members.