

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

6-26-2020

Bite Radius

Jordan Renee Evans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Evans, Jordan Renee, "Bite Radius" (2020). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2084.
<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/2084>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khhgerty@memphis.edu.

BITE RADIUS

by

Jordan Evans

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2020

Copyright© Jordan Evans
All rights reserved

Dedication

To Simon Pegg—

You've got red on you.

Chapter One

Glass crunched, and Ella sat up. Someone had gotten inside.

She'd fallen asleep under the counter last night. She'd come back from scavenging to find that someone had stumbled upon the gas station while she was out and had taken her stash. Ramen cups, Powerade gel, Jolly Ranchers. She'd even found a box of band aids and a bottle of Tums. All gone. So, she'd grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels from behind the register and a two-liter of ginger ale from the not-working fridge aisle and poured one out for her dinner. She passed out while looking at the pieces of gum stuck underneath the counter, drawing imaginary lines around them and making up constellations and wondering if she should move on from this place. That stash was all she had to eat, aside from a few granola bars, and scavenging had been a waste of time. She'd been squatting in this area for so long—nearly ten months—and the houses in the nearby neighborhood had been picked clean from other people. She knew she had to move on. She'd just thought she'd have a bit more time to pack.

She sat up slowly and listened to the footsteps. The tread was heavy, slow, and trying to be quiet, though the shattered glass made their steps ring. They were alive.

And stupid, she thought. A smarter person would have gone around to check for a back entrance, to make sure no one was here and to do so quietly in case they were. It was what she had done two weeks ago when she'd found this place.

“Hello?” The voice was deep, male. Even stupider or was waiting for something to react to his voice so he could blow them away. Ella couldn't look to see what kind of weapon he had without giving herself away. She had no interest in crossing paths with some trigger-happy idiot who was either asking to get killed or itching for a target. Moving more slowly than she wanted to—it wouldn't be too long until he started looking around after “clearing” the place—she

crawled out from under the counter. The door to the storeroom was directly in front of her, her backpack leaning against the door frame.

Rustling plastic made her flinch, before realizing the man was probably grabbing the last few chip bags from one of the aisles. The noise was enough to get her moving. She grabbed her backpack and slid one arm through the shoulder strap, then moved as quickly as she could while crouched like a goblin.

The storage room connected the front of the store with the back entrance. As quickly as she could, Ella disabled the alarm she had set up, cursing herself for not putting one in the front entrance as well. The beer bottles sat on the concrete floor in neat little rows, like green and amber sentries. She grabbed a pair of clippers and cut the thin wire that spanned the length of the room to connect the door handle to a wooden pallet that stood upright just past the glass soldiers. It wobbled threateningly, and she froze, as if it might follow her lead. When it finally came to rest, she let her shoulders drop, turned around, and carefully opened the door.

It was a push-bar, so she couldn't help a little bit of noise. She kept it as closed as she could while still squeezing through, to avoid creaking hinges. The sun was out; she could feel the heat warming her neck.

But then she felt and heard a rasping breath in the same place.

She hadn't checked. She hadn't fucking checked.

She spun around, elbowing the body she could feel was right behind her and shoving out with two hands. It was risky, but panic had a tighter hold on her reflexes. She fell back against the door.

She had once been a woman in her early thirties. Pink yoga pants, dirtied and torn at the knees. A jacket hanging by one shoulder, white padding leaking out from a ripped spot. Her hair

hung down around her face. Scratches on the cheek not hidden by her hair. Ella couldn't see where the bite was, but she didn't have to. The woman's stare was hollow, devoid of expression. Her eyes were dulled from the dirt that collected on eyes that no longer blinked. She made rasping, throaty sounds, but showed no emotion in the face.

She grabbed for Ella again. Ella sidestepped her and ran back a few steps. The gas station was on a random stretch of highway, with nothing around for a mile or two. There was a small patch of concrete that connected to blacktop—maybe so garbage trucks could drive back to do pickups—but then it was just dirt and grass, leading into the woods. She crouched down and reached for her ankle as the woman rushed forward, almost tripping herself as she did.

Ella managed to pull the mini box cutter out of her boot and shove the grip up with her thumb, exposing half of the little snap-blades. They would break apart as soon as she hit something.

The woman stepped closer, jaw snapping involuntarily, and Ella lunged. She took the woman's hair in her fist, as close to the head as she dared, yanked her head down to stop her momentum, and stabbed up into the base of the woman's skull.

There was no blood, no spatter or mist of red. Just a squelching sound and the resistance the blade met as the tissue fought against the intrusion, despite no longer being alive. Ella shoved the knife as far as she could, even after she felt the bits of metal break away from the handle, until her fist was flush against the head. Ella had the thought that the infected bodies should have begun rotting a while ago.

She let go of the knife and backed away, and the woman dropped immediately, unmoving. Ella stood there, fighting the urge to start panicking. It never got any easier.

The door groaned, and Ella saw the man step through to the outside. Both hands gripping his rifle, he called out, “y’okay?”

Ella turned and ran into the trees before he could get any closer. She heard him call out after her, but she didn’t look back.

She ran until she couldn’t anymore, which was stupid. If something snuck up on her now, she was fucked. Ella took a giant breath in and held it for as long as she could in an attempt to slow her racing heart, but her lungs weren’t having it. She wound up hacking and gasping for a moment, alerting everything with ears of her location.

“You’re okay,” she said out loud. Her throat was tight, and every time she breathed in, she made a high-pitched wheeze. “You’re okay.”

Bent at the waist, she stared down at the ground, at her hands. Her wrists were bare. She’d been so focused on leaving as quickly and as quietly as she could, that she hadn’t taken her wrist guards out of her front backpack pocket. Panic spiked again, and she pushed her sleeves up as far as they could go. She ran her hands over her legs, under her shirt. She closed her eyes and wiped her face. She felt a tacky wetness, and when she opened her eyes she saw red caught in the grooves of her fingerprints.

She felt panic crest in her mind. Forced herself to move slowly, despite every instinct shouting for the opposite reaction.

It didn’t get in my mouth, she thought. She thought it as hard as she could. *I would have tasted salt. I would have known.*

Water trickling over rocks. She could hear it. Walking as fast as she could without breaking into a run, she moved through the trees until she nearly fell into a small creek. She slid her arms

out of the shoulder straps and submerged her face into the water. The cold bit her skin, but she endured the discomfort as she scrubbed at her face and her neck.

She held herself under the water until she couldn't stand it and reared back with another gasp. The dark red cloud drifted away with the current. The sun glinted off the water's surface, and a sheen that reminded her of an oil slick reflected off the blood that sat at the surface. She made fists, wet soil and leaves gathering under her nails and between her fingers.

The adrenaline was leaking out of her system. Her whole body began to tremble and shake, and she tried to will calm into her veins.

She hadn't come this close to being bitten in a while. She liked to think the dead didn't scare her, though she wasn't stupid enough to think they weren't dangerous.

"Stupid shotgun-shooting prepper," she muttered to herself. She'd been so focused on getting away before he'd noticed her that she hadn't put on her wrist guards, hadn't cleared her exit path, hadn't done anything resembling that she'd been taking care of herself these last few months.

He hadn't looked familiar. She'd been staying in the same general location for some time now and thought she would have recognized him. She'd switched houses every week or so, just to be safe. The dead seemed to retain a little bit of their memories. Maybe it was just muscle memory, or maybe the familiar sights registered in their stagnated brains, or maybe they could just smell her out. Either way, they'd cluster in groups every now and then, like leaves caught in an eddy, in the neighborhood driveways and cul-de-sacs before breaking the formation at random and continuing to drift towards nothing. She'd gotten used to anticipating their patterns and was often gone a few hours before the exterior house she'd stayed in was overwhelmed. She didn't want to get put in a position where she'd try something risky, like climbing out a second-story window or jumping along rooftops.

Most of the houses felt the same. The kitchens were bare; families wouldn't have cleared out their stores, but wanderers like her had picked them clean. Some still had a faint smell of rot and decay from produce that was never eaten, cheese that was left to turn green and consume itself. Bathroom cabinet doors lay broken on the floor, their shelves free of any drugs or first aid supplies.

The pictures were always left behind. Ella could think of plenty reasons why no one thought to take the physical memories with them. They thought they were coming back, they took their phones with them, didn't think access to electricity would ever come into question. So, whenever she climbed through a window, or walked through an entrance that had lost its door a long time ago, she'd take a look at the mantles above the fireplace or sit on the desks that hadn't been hacked at in attempts to use the wood for fuel and wonder who they were. She wouldn't revisit houses unless she was playing keep-away with the infected, but each time she looked at another set of family portraits and candid vacation shots, she'd wonder if Gary had had beef with Jeremy, if Tonya was secretly jealous that Irene from next door could afford those trashy blowouts every week.

She made the names up, too. She'd learned that no one wrote details or dates on the backs of pictures anymore. She'd once stayed at a house in a neighborhood she hadn't visited before and found a picture of an old classmate staring back at her. That was when she'd decided to hike the few miles down the highway that the neighborhood butted up against and shack up at the gas station. She could feel the ghosts of the neighbors as she raided their homes, slept in their spaces. If she recognized the residents at one of the houses, there was a good chance the few she hadn't yet explored would also be familiar.

She didn't think about how Barret Pines was about a half mile away from her right now. That neighborhood was off-limits. She hadn't been back there since leaving six months ago. She remembered the knife in her hand, the vibrations stuttering against her palm as she'd carved her and her mom's name in the pintle of the front door.

It was a strange feeling, to know what lay on either side of her for a dozen or so miles, know what corners she could hide in, and still feel lost. She'd known the day would come when her methods would stop being effective. Finite resources couldn't last forever--even sooner when others were taking stuff right out from under her.

Ella closed her eyes. She could feel a headache coming on and remembered that she was likely hungover. Adrenaline had pushed it out of her mind, made her numb to her body's messages, but now it was making itself known. Stronger than fear or panic was an irritation that she remembered feeling when she'd left an assignment to the last minute. She had to figure out what to do next, and she didn't have time to write out a pros and cons list.

She turned around now, squinting as she tried to make out details beyond the trees, as if she could somehow scoot past the branches with her eyes. She didn't think he would come after her. In her experience, you didn't run unless someone was chasing you, and you didn't chase after someone unless you were dead, or they had stolen something from you, and you hadn't been clever enough about it. Ella was too smart to steal from people, mostly because she knew she wasn't clever enough to do it well. She preferred resources that didn't have competition attached, hence why she stayed so close to city limits. But with the dead appearing out of the trees, it would seem that that precaution had become just as moot a point.

"Where haven't I looked?" she thought out loud. With her stockpile jacked, she had enough food for two days, if she felt like watching her figure. That wouldn't be so bad, if she'd put the

water bottles in her backpack. She could see them now, the bulk pack encased in shrink-wrap, one wrinkled, open tear from where she'd been pulling them as needed, leaning against the mop in the storeroom of the gas station. She'd been confusingly lucky in the water department up until now, but she wasn't about to complain. Bottled stuff wasn't in abundance, but most of the houses out here ran on private wells, and their taps were still working for the most part. As a result, she'd never had to worry about finding water purifying tools. And thank God for that, because she didn't know the first place to start in finding them; it wasn't like Walmart ran them on the front page of their marketing campaigns.

She looked down at the creek. The water ran clear now, the smooth surface disturbed only by the rocks that disrupted the current, and the pinpricks of a water-glider's legs. She thought of oil slicks, and blood darker than it ought to be, oxidized by time and slowly turning to sludge in people's veins.

There was no use playing dumb. She would have to go downtown tomorrow.

Chapter Two

Ella laid her hand on top of the car's horn, wondering if the guy in front of her would flip her off if she pressed it.

Traffic had been fine for about twenty minutes, then had slowed, and slowed, and slowed, until Ella had finally had to put the car in park to avoid getting an ache in her ankle from pressing down on the brake.

Despite it being the early afternoon, the summer sun had Ella baking against the peeling leather upholstery. She'd emptied her water bottle already and had plowed through the small trove of snacks she'd brought along for the whole weekend. If she'd known the hour-long drive was going to take three hours and counting, she would have stopped somewhere before getting on the highway.

She didn't see any flashing lights ahead, and no ambulances had driven past on the shoulder, so the crash was likely too far away for her to see. She knew the Firefly music festival was popular, but she doubted everyone had decided to arrive at the same time. She wasn't even halfway there, anyway. She knew she should have planned to leave yesterday.

Ella was bored. She'd turned off the playlist she'd made for the drive after it had begun to cycle through the songs a second time and couldn't seem to get any radio that wasn't news or irritating morning show broadcasters. She wanted to talk to someone, but she didn't want to risk waking up her mom if she was still asleep, and she wasn't planning to talk to Audrey until she had photos of the sets she went to make her feel guilty for bailing.

Staring at her phone, she poked through different apps, none of them refreshing. Out in a populated area and she couldn't even get her data to work. With no other option, she grumbled to herself and scrolled back through Audrey's texts. She hadn't watched the video Audrey had

sent—no doubt some compilation of photoshopped images to look like another virus scare—but she didn't have any other options. She tapped on the screen.

The video opened up.

A hospital hallway was bleached out in sallow fluorescent light, made worse by the poor quality of the camera. The person holding the phone was narrating the procession. “So, I just got here a little while ago,” she said. Her voice had the ghost of some long-faded accent, but Ella couldn't place it. She sounded calm, if a bit nervous. The title didn't say where it had been filmed; it just said, “The TRUTH about Huntington Plague—govt tried to CONCEAL from its ppl.”

Ella was going to take a picture with a hot guy, nerves be damned, and send it to Audrey as punishment for subjecting her to this video.

“As you can see, it's really quiet, not too busy right now, which is surprising. I'm here to see my Mom, she had back surgery yesterday.” She must have been recording for a vlog or something. There was soft background music, a xylophone or something tapping out a cutesy tune.

The camera stopped at a door marked 1-A. “I'm not sure if this is the right one, maybe I should text my sister and ask—”

The door opened. It seemed to stretch on forever, but the video timeline said only two seconds passed. A man in scrubs leaned over a figure half-sitting in a hospital bed. His right hand was on the pillows above the figure's head; the left hand was gripping her waist as if he was scared they might try to get away.

The girl gasped, and the man raised his head. His eyes were wide, the pupils blown out as far as they would go; in the dim, pixelated light, they looked all-black. His mouth was open. Blood

soaked him from his mouth, down his neck and darkened the mint green of his scrubs to crimson. The figure beneath him was a woman; her throat was laid open, muscle and tendons chewed and frayed in the center. Blood flowed out of the jugular like he'd forgotten to turn off the tap. In the moments before the girl started screaming, Ella thought she could hear the wet rattle of the woman trying to breathe.

The man started power-walking toward the camera. After that, it became too chaotic to make out a clear image; the picture shuddered and shook as the woman dropped her hands to run, the sound of the door slamming closed, then an almost polite knock, that became a thud, that became a slam as the man threw himself against the door. The video suddenly stilled; she must have dropped the phone. After the man ran past the phone, there was just fluorescent lights for ten seconds. A tone rang out over the loudspeaker, calling for a doctor somewhere else in the hospital.

Ella threw her phone into the passenger seat. She felt like throwing up. The patient in the bed...Ella had seen the inside of her throat. That wasn't a thing she should be able to know.

It couldn't be real. She grabbed her phone again, tried to open the internet. Nothing.

It was fine. She was letting Audrey's paranoia get to her. She just needed to talk to someone, work herself down off the ledge her nerves were leading her towards.

Her mom was probably busy, but she'd call back if Ella left a message. Despite the lack of internet, she still had pretty good cell service to put the call through. She waited, expecting to sit through all five rings.

The phone clicked after one. "Ella? Baby are you okay?"

Ella felt something like a bolt of electricity shoot up her spine. Her mother's voice was high and panicked. "Are *you* okay?"

“I’m at the hospital. What’s wrong, what happened?”

She was still at the hospital. “I’m fine. Stuck in traffic.”

“Traffic...” her mom’s voice grew distant, like she held the phone away from her to shout at someone else. Ella could still hear her as she shouted, “don’t *fucking* touch that, so help me god.”

“Mom, why are you still at work? Did they not let you off?”

“Ella, honey...” her mom paused. Ella gripped the steering wheel. “That virus, the one on the news? We had a dozen cases show up last night, almost all at once.”

“What?”

“Hey, hey!” She was talking to someone else again. “You heard what he said in the meeting. We can’t use those rooms anymore, we don’t have the resources to properly decontaminate them!”

Ella took a deep breath. She felt the animal instinct to run, to flee, but she was stuck in this seat. She wasn’t even near an exit she could get on. “Are you okay, Mom?”

“What?” Her mother’s voice grew louder, though she sounded like she’d forgotten Ella was on the phone at all. “Don’t worry about me. Tell Audrey to call her parents, tell them not to leave their house.”

“Audrey’s not with me. She backed out last minute, and I went by myself.”

“You...fucking hell, Ella.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Okay, where are you now?”

“On the highway. There’s some kind of pile-up? I’ve been in park for almost an hour.”

“That’s probably related to this. Are you near any buildings, any stores?”

“Not right now, but a couple miles back, yeah.” The traffic inched forward. Ella thought she could see some movement ahead, but she was too focused on listening to her mom. She took the car out of park, just in case.

“Then you need to go there. Text me when you get somewhere, and I’ll come and get—”

Silence.

“Mom?” Panic had her by the throat. She kept her phone to her ear, waiting for a click, a dial tone. She’d even take an infuriatingly calm robot woman’s voice. Nothing.

Ella’s mom was scared. That never happened.

“What the fuck,” Ella whispered to herself.

Hands banged on her window and made her yelp. A man in his late thirties smacked the glass with the flat of his palm. He was bleeding at the spot beneath his thumb, and it smeared on the window. “Help me!” His eyes were wide, white edges surrounding every side of the iris. “Please, they’re almost here!”

She had her finger over the button to pull the window down, when something moved in the rearview mirror. There was a crowd behind them, surrounding and moving around the cars.

And over them, too. Someone appeared as they walked over the roof and down the hood of a pickup truck. They tripped and disappeared from view as they fell. When they stood back up, Ella could make out blood on their face. They just kept coming. Some people were trying to run, but their hips and elbows glanced off side view mirrors, or they tripped themselves on tires. They mostly moved at a power-walk pace.

The man beat on Ella’s window even harder. “Please, you have to let me in. They’ve gone insane, they’re going to kill me!”

“What’s wrong with them.” The words came out more quietly than she’d thought.

“Open the goddamn window!” The man made a fist and threw it into the window. The glass splintered with a deafening *crack*. Ella shrieked involuntarily and leaned over the center console. Flailing as she watched the window and waited for it to shatter, she flipped the glove compartment open and start feeling for the pocket knife she knew was in there.

The man looked like he wanted to punch the glass again, but he turned his head towards the mob, and Ella saw the color drain from his face. Without saying anything else, he ran around to the other side of the car. She fumbled to make sure the lock was down, but he didn’t spare her a glance. She watched as he tripped into the drainage ditch, then began to clamber his way up the other side, nothing but a cornfield ahead of him stretching as far as she could see.

There was a rumbling shudder. Ella had a water bottle sitting in the cupholder. The water was trembling. She had a random thought about *Jurassic Park*, and then something slammed into the trunk of her car. She sat, frightened into stillness, looking through her windshield to try and see what had sent the man running in the opposite direction.

Things seemed to happen both in slow motion and too quickly to follow. She heard cars rev as some people began to try and plow through traffic. The guys next to her started shouting; she saw them run backwards before losing sight of them. The individuals standing next to their cars started to form a tangled group, pushing past each other in different directions. Some went forward to try and stop the people at the sedan. More voices were screaming. Some were close to Ella, sounds of panic as people scrambled. Further away, the screams were longer, wordless.

Ella blinked, and suddenly there were people running towards her. She didn’t stop to figure out what kind of people they were. She slid off the hood of the car, onto the side facing the ditch. She ran back the way they’d driven, away from the group that was still beating on the

sedan. She looked back, and saw they were beating on the car behind it now as well. She saw bloody hands streaking the glass. Then she turned back to look ahead of her and ran.

She got about fifty feet before something tripped her and she fell, her left foot sliding down the incline of the ditch and taking the rest of her with it. She landed at the bottom, into brown water with oil shining the surface. She pulled herself to her feet. Ahead of her, she saw a black plastic tunnel, its opening sticking out of the ground stacked above it. Ella began to move towards it. The people above her weren't even looking at her. She kept an eye as she neared the opening.

A hand gripped her shoulder and pulled hard. Ella fell on her back in the water again. A figure stood over her. A woman, with black hair tangled around her face. She had on a white tank top and a plaid flannel shirt atop that, despite the summer season.

The white fabric was dyed dark red around her abdomen. The woman's eyes were wide open, like she was trying to see everything at once. Her jaw hung slack, blood on her chin. She screamed at Ella and grabbed her shoulders.

Ella managed to get her arms up just as the woman went to her knees, almost like she was trying to hug her. Ella shrieked and pushed against her chest. She didn't seem heavy, but every muscle on the woman was tensed. Ella turned her face away, but the movement had her face underwater. She wedged her foot between their bodies and pushed, catching the woman off balance. Ella scrambled away from the tunnel as the woman righted herself and lunged for her again. She wasn't moving quickly, but her limping gait had purpose. She tripped on something in the water and fell but began to crawl as though she hadn't even noticed.

As she rose to her feet, Ella pulled the box knife from her pocket and pushed the blade out of its slot. The woman grabbed at Ella's ankle, falling to her knees immediately as she did, as

though she couldn't feel the impact. Ella lost her balance again. The woman lowered her head and tried to bring Ella's foot to her mouth. Ella snatched her foot back and kicked the woman square in the face. She could hear a crackling sound as the woman's nose broke, but she kept moving forward. She climbed up Ella's body, eyes on her shoulder. Ella slammed the box knife into the woman's eye.

There was a horrible feeling of resistance as the blade went through to the socket. Ella felt the blade scrape something hard, and she jerked backwards, taking the knife with her. Blood poured out of the wound, hitting Ella's chest and neck. She screamed and turned her head. The woman went still, her body collapsing as though she'd stopped tensing every muscle at once. Ella got to her feet and ran towards the tunnel, going as far in as she could. She crouched on her feet, box knife slippery as she clenched it in her fist.

She saw someone fall into the ditch. Here in the darkness, the light bleached the scene to the point that she couldn't make out any features. Two men fell in after them and tackled the person, who jerked and screamed. The two had the person pinned, facedown into the ground, and they lowered their heads to the person's body.

Screams were dampened from the person's face being pushed into the dirt. She was too far away to see details, but she shut her eyes anyway. She could still hear wet squelching as the screams died, grunts that sounded too human to be real coming from the two men.

Ella held a hand to her mouth, trying not to make any noise. She didn't know what they could or couldn't hear, but she only saw blackness beyond her. There had to be an out eventually, but she didn't think she'd make it that far, however far that was. She was wearing sandals—she'd dressed for the music festival—and her feet were stinging from cutting on something in the water.

The men growled and made noises like they were clearing their throats. She looked up and saw them climb up the ditch and out of sight.

With her hand still on her mouth, she fell on her butt in the water. It was colder in here, soaking through her shorts and giving her goosebumps across her legs. She couldn't stop shaking. She looked out once more, and her eyes caught on the woman. She was face down in the ditch, half-submerged in the water. Her hair floated on top, tangling in cattails that had avoided being broken as they'd fought.

She'd killed her. She looked down at her hand that held the box knife. Her grip was so tight, the tendons stood out on the inside of her wrist. The blade was dark in the tunnel, but she thought she could smell iron. Slowly, she retracted the blade and slid it into her back pocket once more. She listened to the screams and shouts outside, some of it resembling discernible words, some of it just guttural sounds. Then she began hyperventilating.

Chapter Three

Ella awoke with a gasp that caught in her throat and sent her into a hacking cough. She buried her face in the crook of her elbow as she cleared her throat. A bird took off above her, startled at the noise. Its wings flapped noisily, a deck of cards sent flying.

She'd walked for as long as she dared, following the sun as it made its way behind the horizon. It would have been faster to do a loop back towards the gas station and follow the highway into town, but the trees provided cover and peace of mind. More valuable to her, though, was a sense of rightness that came from walking in the woods. Standing on the blacktop of the highway felt wrong, not just because she wasn't used to being on a road unless she was in a car, but because roads weren't supposed to be empty. As long as she'd gone since being in a functioning vehicle, she couldn't convince her mind that an empty road wasn't incorrect. Nor could she convince her memories to stay in the box where she kept them, so long as she remained vigilant. Or conscious.

She'd walked until maybe an hour after nightfall, then had found a covered spot to wedge herself into and had fallen asleep with her back to the tree, hugging her backpack in front of her like a teddy bear. Waking up flat on the ground, her whole left side was now damp, and mulchy forest loam invaded her senses. Dawn had broken already, but the sky was still transitioning from blue to violet. A long day made longer by the inconvenience of her stupid memories.

Yawning, she scratched at her arms. Her wrists were already itching from the sweat getting trapped under her wrist guards, but there was nothing for it. "It's never over," her mom once said while they were watching an alien movie, "until the door's locked and your back is against a wall." She wasn't taking them off again until she was somewhere secure and hidden.

Her wrist guards were actually two separate pieces. Ace bandages wound around her from knuckles to forearm, held in place by safety pins. Over that, two wrist braces that were made for carpal tunnel treatment. Navy blue on the left, gunmetal grey on the right. Both were dotted with stickers from a pack hanging on a hook at the gas station. Mostly generic stuff like stars and smileys, but the grey kitten on the navy one was her favorite. She'd swiped the braces from a house with photos of an elderly couple with one too many Pomeranians, in Ella's opinion; the bandage fabric was from her car's first aid kit. She'd snagged it on the way out, somehow.

"So how do we do this?" she wondered aloud. While the woods weren't exactly secure, and she had actually discovered an infected person once by stepping on them when they were concealed by leaves and muck, she wasn't as concerned with keeping quiet. The infected seemed to rely more heavily on sight, in her experience. It was also easier out among the trees to hear anything coming, since the dragging of feet under dead leaves or stepping directly onto branches would ring out like a gunshot. She still had to worry about people, but no one was out here.

No one had been for months, until the man with the shotgun showed up. "Probably migrated from somewhere else," she said. It was rare to see anyone so close to a metropolitan area. No one came this close to the city unless they were either on their way to someplace else, or desperate enough to risk the numbers.

"So," she said. She needed to keep moving, so she didn't have the time to write out her plan. Hearing it aloud would work fine. "Get into the city limits by, say, three p.m. You can't just go door to door, or you'll exhaust yourself in the worst possible location."

She eventually couldn't keep walking through the woods; the brush became too thick to move through without constantly scratching at her face and neck, and she wound up coming across a ravine that was waiting for her to slip on the wrong patch of mud. She turned right and went

towards where the trees thinned. Before she jumped over the small drainage ditch to the highway, she looked left and right to check for any surprises. "Gotta look both ways," she muttered to herself with a smile that no one was around to see.

Chapter Four

When Ella had first made it home, after the freeway, the ditch and the runoff tunnel and the blood and her shaking hands, she'd sat in the living room, still in shock, she now realized, waiting for her mom to walk through the door and tell her they were going somewhere. She'd dug out an old radio in the closet that first night and had turned the dial aimlessly until that awful emergency-only tone blared out of the speakers.

The woman's voice was monotone. Ella wished it hadn't been a recording, or that the woman had sounded scared. Her robotic drone only had her asking herself again if she was just in the middle of a vivid nightmare.

"Please make your way to the nearest disaster relief center for screening and mandatory quarantine, in order to contain the spread of infection. The governor of Virginia has issued a declaration of martial law. All residents must make their way to the nearest relief center. There are no rescue extraction efforts scheduled to occur, due to the high level of undue risk. Only travel by car if your route is unimpeded. If you cannot leave your home, lock all entrances and cover windows so they may not be seen through. Please listen for the following locations of relief sites: Abingdon, Arcadia..."

Ella had walked up to her room then, though she'd kept the radio turned on. She knew her Mom would already have decided where they were going, so it didn't make much difference to learn which relief center was closest.

She took a shower. She felt the shaking in her hands as though they still trembled, though they hung steady at her sides. As the water began to grow cold, the chilled spray on her back ran down her body and slid to her feet.

She remembered how the dark water seeped through her canvas sneakers and socks. It was colder than she had expected. The body had been face down in the water. She'd kept an eye on it, waiting for it to sit up and lunge for her.

It was at that moment when the power cut out. The bathroom went black, the water stopped flowing. Ella jumped in surprise and slipped, landing on her knees and elbows, and slipped into a panic attack

The next week or so was consumed by the waiting. Waiting for the power to come back on, which it never did. They had a gas stove, thank goodness, but she naively sat around waiting for the house to suddenly hum back to life. Each day, the smell that met her when she opened the refrigerator got a little worse. She couldn't take it outside to the trashcan, though.

Every day, another one or two people would walk into the neighborhood. Ella would peek from the piece of cardboard she'd set in front of the kitchen window to see. They had the same expressionless face, the same untended wounds, the same circular bite mark—or marks, for some—in various places on their bodies. Some neighbors, holed up like she was, tried to make a run for it. She didn't know how many succeeded. She kept the cardboard up, and every so often she'd hear screams and squealing tires.

After about two weeks, she couldn't stand it any longer. The moaning from the outside was keeping her up, and every night, she thought she could hear the stairs creaking from steps. She wanted to believe, each time she thought she saw a shadow move, that it was her mom, and Ella just hadn't heard her unlock the door. Each time she believed it was one of her neighbors coming to tear into her, the way those people on the highway had done. She still wasn't sure how she'd made it back. So, she upended her backpack, pens and folders and her graphing calculator clattering onto the carpet, and she filled it with as many supplies as she could think of. The

backpack was purple--her favorite color in middle school when she'd picked it--and drawn all over with silver marker, and had holes near the zipper, but she still filled it nearly to bursting, and packed a second backpack with some changes of clothes and extra food for her mom.

She went out the back door. Her bike was rusted over from being rained on, and the basket shook when she put her mom's pack in it. She walked it out of the backyard, keeping close to the side of the house, and looked.

She recognized the Keller family wandering just past their lawn in the road. Three kids, all older than Ella; none of them had wanted to go to college, and their parents were what Ella's mom called "dangerously supportive."

She threw her leg over the bike before she could talk herself out of it and pedaled as hard as she could. Only Travis, the oldest of the three, turned when her tires bounced off the curb and onto the asphalt, but the rest of his family turned when Travis screamed--she remembered how he sounded like a heavy metal singer--and they all began to chase her.

Chapter Five

As the cityscape went from a blur at the end of the highway, slowly sharpening into high-rises and signposts, Ella had let her guard down too quickly. The roadway split like tree roots into narrower streets, cigar shops and stores advertising bail bonds morphing into townhouses and restaurants with hipster-ish names, like Alabaster Rail--which could have been a cafe or a copper pipe wholesale shop, she couldn't really tell.

She knew there weren't as many infected as there had once been. She'd sometimes hear the screaming of airplanes from the attics of the neighborhood homes, and the dull thud of explosives going off from far away followed some of the time. The first few hadn't, and Ella assumed that the wealthy and stranded had managed to get a hold of someone to pay for an extraction, despite what the woman's voice on the radio had said. Still, it took her by surprise when she'd looked through three townhouses--not much besides a few cans of sliced peaches and a thermometer she'd have to sterilize later--and there hadn't even been a stray animal to startle her.

So, when two hours had passed since entering the city limits, she found her gaze returning again and again to the Crossroads. It wasn't skyscraper-tall, none of the buildings really were, but it was still the most impressive sight by far. Its glass windows reflected blue-green rainbows in the afternoon sunlight, and only a handful were broken.

"It's almost been a year," she mumbled to herself. She knew this voice of hers well. It was the same one she used to use when justifying to herself why she didn't need to study for tomorrow's test, not when she'd just gotten inspiration to draw something, or was in the middle of reading non-required reading. She'd always bombed the test the next day, but she only ever felt remorseful once her mom found out.

It had to be deserted. She made her way down a main road, weaving carefully through the cars that had jumped the curb, going around, rather than over, the ones that had accorded into one another and formed a sort of barricade. She didn't need to scrape up against a piece of rusted fiberglass or get stabbed in the gut with a windshield wiper and get an infection she couldn't treat. Pharmacies had plenty of stuff in pill form, but blood coagulant was more of an army surplus store thing. She traded supplies with a guy named Burt, who lived in a strip mall a few miles past her neighborhoods. Maybe she'd ask him to get her some next time he went on a run; the guy was like a cat with a hoard of bottle caps, he could find absolutely anything, and he hoarded everything he found and only did barter trade when it suited him. Until then, she'd have to stay careful.

The building looming bigger and bigger as she came closer. It just had to be. There was nothing besides the typical debris, a couple of traffic barricades with the CDC logo on it, and chunks of rock and asphalt where emergency vehicles had raced through. If anyone was living up there, they either never came out--why would you, when you could raid the grocery store that had boasted its sustainable business practices, and sterilize the water from the YMCA pool on the second floor until the end of time?

Maybe I can hole up here, she mused. I could even deal with a couple of neighbors, maybe. It was a big space; she could avoid them if she needed to.

A hacking shriek froze her in place. She looked to her left and caught sight of a figure moving a few cars ahead of her. She ducked behind a red Beetle and watched as it moved towards her general direction.

She hadn't realized until she'd reached Barret Pines that the infected made noise even if they weren't running after someone. She knew there was probably some reason, but since they didn't

seem to communicate with each other or coordinate movement at all, she was at a loss. It had sounded normal, at first. They had the same voices as when they had lived, and muscle memory didn't fade just because the brain stopped giving commands. Sometimes they would speak, or at least, that's how it sounded. The neighborhood had echoed with "no," "hey," "yeah" most of the time. She could make sense of the words, but they always came out at an angle, the mouth not moving in time with the voice, so it seemed like they were throwing the word out with their tongue. Over time, the words had grown more and more inscrutable, so their exclamations were shapeless rasps and howls.

When they weren't howling with aimless intent, though, the groans that came out of their mouths was more human than anything else they said. Whenever Ella woke, stretching and yawning, she thought she sounded like them sometimes.

He hadn't noticed her. His bite mark stood out on his bicep as he pushed against the car door. He had bled a lot when it happened; his lower arm was stained light brown, though the blood itself had likely scraped off of something a while ago. She could take one if she had to, but not yet. She waited and watched. She could just barely make out movement further down the street, the intersection lights drooping comedically down, but still intact.

She had to move quietly, and quickly. She'd learned the hard way that the virus that had claimed these people didn't really care that their bodies were dead. If they'd died old, or were small, or had sustained big enough injuries, they shuffled slowly enough. But most of the time, the dead moved as they had in life, and Ella had no way of knowing if the person scraping at the blue pickup's hood had been an athlete or worked a desk job their whole life until it was too late.

The cars gave her plenty of cover, but the situation demanded patience. She silently circled the building, not daring to run for the front entrance. The concrete ramp that led to the automatic

doors was bare, except for a few trees that were just starting to bud pink spring flowers. She'd be spotted in a moment. Instead, she worked her way around to the side entrance, where she knew there was a door that led to a restaurant's kitchen.

There was someone facing the door. It was at the top of a set of stairs, since the road dipped down into a ramp that connected with the basement-level loading dock. She could try that way, but she didn't like the thought of being blind in an unfamiliar route. The sun was reflecting off the building's facade, throwing rainbows into the street. Even with the blinds drawn, she'd be able to see all the way to the ceiling.

The infected woman wore dull blue kitten heels, caked in mud, one with the heel missing as the weight of her unhurried pace her dragging them instead of lifting her feet to step. She had probably been facing this door for a few hours now. It took them a while to reset, like the Roomba with dying batteries that Ella had found in one of the houses. She'd let it run on its long-ago programmed timer for a while but turned it off once she caught herself talking to it. She wasn't about to have a Wilson moment if she could help it.

Her head and left shoulder leaned all her weight against the door, fingertips swaying back and forth, further dirtying her once-white capri jeans. Her box-dyed red hair was kinked up randomly, like she'd been pulling at it, but the blond highlights in it make Ella think she could have been a soccer mom, or someone who asks to speak to a manager.

Ella put her hand on the hunting knife that now rested on her right bicep, in its plastic sheath and held in place by the wrap of a blood pressure cuff. She'd found it in the same house as the wrist guards. She'd put it back on the way here, thanking whoever up above wasn't doing anything about this whole situation that she had put it in her backpack before getting drunk the

other night, rather than setting it next to her. She'd been worried she might play around with it and nick herself by accident.

She crept up to the woman, pulling her backpack strap down to keep it from thumping against her shoulders. She was a step below her; she didn't like the position, but she couldn't get any closer without the woman noticing, and she wanted a moment to brace herself.

The reason Ella hopped around the houses in The Ridge was the same reason she'd run from the pilgrim at the gas station. She had never liked this part. It would be too easy for her to lose her balance on these steps and fall on the rebar that sat at the curb behind her, or for the woman to hear the scrape of her shoes on the metal and wheel around faster than she'd anticipate.

But the other reason was that this woman's face wasn't going to look much different from the runner outside the gas station. Dead stare, dispassionate aggression. Her dusty eyes uncanny and wrong, because she still looked human. She was human. And Ella would have to want to kill her in order to get it done. She was going to have to put in her best effort, if she wanted in that building.

She kicked at the metal railing, the clang reverberating through her body, and climbed the final stair.

The woman straightened and made an inquisitive croak. She was right against the door, and Ella managed to move fast enough that the woman didn't turn around in time. She pushed herself against the woman's back, their feet tangling together like they'd forgotten the steps to a dance.

Ella tried to move quickly, but the adrenaline was already spiking. She grabbed a fistful of copper-colored hair and tried not to inhale as she stabbed blindly.

She'd meant to angle the knife up and go through her chin, but the woman got an arm free and knocked her arm away. Broken, bloody nails scrabbled backward, scratching at the cuff on

Ella's arm, elbow pushing against the hard plastic of her wrist guard. Ella pushed harder, pinning the infected's upper arm to the door, and stabbed again.

She felt the blade sink into the woman's neck as she continued to writhe. Her croaking shouts were muffled against the door as Ella gritted her teeth and began to saw at her throat.

She tried to move quickly, but it was equal parts physically difficult and awful to understand. She tried not to focus on the vibrations that rustled up her forearm as she moved the blade back and forth. It wasn't until the blade knocked against her spinal cord, and Ella yanked it to the side like she was twisting the stem off an apple, did the woman stop struggling. Her body slumped a little, still pinned between the door and Ella's body.

Ella took a small step back, still grasping the head like some kind of Shakespearean play. She turned her head away and breathed in, too aware of the blood that was soaking her collarbone. She'd need to find a water source immediately, or maybe the kitchen had a hand sanitizer dispenser. Carefully, she set the head down. It rolled to the side and rested face up to her.

The bite lay high up on her cheekbone, just barely grazing the bottom of the eye socket. When she'd been caught, their lip must have grazed her eye, like a toddler trying to give her a goodnight kiss. Two dotted-line crescent moon marks forming a perfect circle.

Ella felt a multitude of impulses. The knee-jerk desire to cry at the latest reminder of this reality that just kept happening, to vomit at the violence of how she'd done it. A tension sat in the center of her abdomen, the knowledge that she could sit down right now and end things. Hell, she could even just sit and do nothing, and wait for another one to come stumbling around the corner.

Her mom had never had much patience for the moments when Ella wanted to give up on something. Sometimes that had worked to Ella's benefit; her mom would just say "to hell with

this math homework," and pull out a deck of cards to teach Ella how to play Hearts or Rummy. As she'd gotten older, though, and things like art school became more than make-believe, she'd gotten creative. "You get to say when you're done trying," she'd say. "But if there's a hill in front of you, you owe it to yourself to climb up and see what you're letting go."

Ella knelt down slowly, the moans of other infected echoing off the nearby buildings like canyon walls and wiped her knife on the body's pink corduroy jacket. She kept it out and reached for the doorknob.

The door opened without a sound.

Chapter Six

The Crossroads Living Center had originally existed as a factory, long before Ella was born. At some point, the company went bankrupt and abandoned the place, but nobody else could afford to buy the land.

“That’s what they say,” Ella’s mom used to tell her. “But really they’re just scared, because the ghosts of the building refuse to give up what’s theirs.” Her mom would always tell a different story about a ghost who’d died while working on the line and got their hand caught in a machine, pulled in like a fish on a hook. Other times it would be the fiancée of a businessman who killed herself after being jilted or murdered in a fit of passion because she’d fallen in love with a working woman below her station. No matter what story it was, it would always end with the ghost being inducted into the army of the dead, and that the presence of so much afterlife was the reason they called it the Crossroads now.

It had looked haunted, a rundown eyesore taller than most buildings in the skyline. Eventually some startup rich kid bought it and decided to turn it into everything they could think of. When it reopened, all industrial revolution with most of the original material still present, people kept using the term “vertical ecosystem.” The idea was that a person could theoretically live in the building without ever needing to leave. The bottom floors were restaurants, boutique shops, a YMCA, and doctor’s offices. There was even a grocery store where everything was organic or grass-fed or range-free and had the markup to prove it. There was office space for rent, and then the top half floors were all converted into apartments. The place had been covered in plant life, hanging planters dangling a hundred feet in the air, in case you weren’t aware of the solar paneled glass or the compost chute every tenant could utilize for free.

Ella and her mom would go there sometimes, mostly just to hang out. There was a play place next to one of the water fountains, and Ella would climb all over the thing while her mom worked on her stories while sitting in one of the multicolored armchairs. Ella used to look up, all the way past the balconies lining her view, all the way to the top of the building, watching the sunlight fracture into rainbows from the glass roof, and think she was on a ship heading to terraform a faraway planet. She'd stretch out her arms and pretend she could feel the wind as she flew. She'd never managed to meet any of the ghosts.

It was where her mom had brought her the Sunday after her father left. She'd bought them guest passes for the YMCA, and Ella divided her time between going down the thick red plastic waterslide and doing laps in time with an elderly lady in the adjacent lane, her swim cap and red goggles making her look like some kind of toad-like creature.

"He's gonna regret thinking he could find a better life without you, Ella." Her mom wore a purple one-piece with a matching sarong; Ella had noticed how she didn't like to show her thighs and would always leave the room if Dad teased her about it.

"He said he was gonna come back," Ella said. She was still breathing hard from swimming for so long. "Was he lying?"

Her mom stared at their joined hands. She still hadn't taken off her wedding ring. Ella felt the metal push against her knuckles where her Mom held her hand. "Not on purpose," she said. "But I don't want you to have to get your heart broken later on, when he doesn't come back. He probably meant it." She was crying now, her nose turning red. "He always means what he says, when he says it."

Ella knew what she meant. Her dad handed out promises like they were pieces of candy. She'd heard his phone-muffled voice say the word many times, usually when her Mom was

asking him to pick something up, or when Ella had an assembly or PTA meeting her parents had decided they wanted to be a part of at the start of the seventh-grade term. When he couldn't make it--or maybe just didn't want to, Ella had thought then--the next thing she'd hear him say was "sorry." He usually had takeout with him as a consolation prize.

"Mom," she'd said. She was crying now, too, but she hoped her face was still dripping from the pool, and her mom wouldn't notice. "Does Dad have a girlfriend?"

Her mom looked away from her and let out a shaky breath. She wiped at her nose and began to compose herself. "No, honey, he didn't. He just didn't want to come home." She'd kissed Ella's head and told her she could do two more laps if she wanted.

Chapter Seven

Stupid. Ella was so *stupid*. What had she been thinking?

She crawled back towards the door and reached for the handle.

The knob didn't turn.

She shook it, as quietly as she could. The door was locked from the outside. She tried to figure out how that was even possible, but the noise shook all the rational thoughts out of her head.

Maybe ten feet ahead, the entryway connecting the kitchen to the dining area was clear to see through. There was a glass wall separating the dining area from the lobby, but there had never been any doors to the restaurant, just gaps cut into the glass. The view of the space during the daytime had been inspired by the Louvre, according to a plaque on a wall somewhere, and it was how they could mark up the price of the food.

As a result, Ella had a clear line of sight when she turned around after closing the door and could make out the mob a few hundred feet away from her.

There were maybe fifteen or twenty of them, shuffling around the empty space. She could see a body half-submerged in the fountain, the water half-gone. She wondered if the others had learned through observation. She knew from watching the ones in Barret Pines that, whether through their few remaining memories, or by establishing new muscle memory, the infected could figure out a route to repeat over and over without bumping into things, at least while they weren't in pursuit of prey.

She had to find a way out. The front door was there, but she'd already seen enough were outside to make her reconsider that. Besides, there was a chance those doors were locked too, and if she let herself be sandwiched between them and an industrial glass wall, that was it.

She crept into the dining room, staying crouched at level with the tables. Her backpack poked out like a turtle shell, but she was in shadow, and if she moved slowly enough, they might not notice. She remembered that there had been a florist in the space next door. Maybe they had a door for deliveries as well.

She made her way up to the entrance of the restaurant. She'd have to step out into the main space and inch along the wall. Her heart was thudding so hard in her chest, it was a wonder it didn't knock her off balance.

She fought the urge to crawl on her belly and make herself as small as possible, opting instead for a slightly taller creeping movement. As she stepped out into the main area, the sounds seemed to grow larger. Their creaking sounds and moans seemed to reach up through the empty space. She looked up. The greenery she'd remembered was gone, a few yellowed-dry plants still holding out hope in the higher levels. Ella wanted to keep her eyes on them the whole time, but she knew she had to look forward, or else risk losing her balance.

One moan seemed to pierce through the din, and she chanced a peek over her shoulder. A boy, no older than ten years old when he'd flipped, was staring her down with an almost curious expression. He took a step towards her. She froze. He took another step, letting out a whining sound of confusion.

Then she saw a head turn. Further back, a middle-aged man stumbled towards them, croaking again and again. He wasn't running, but she knew he wouldn't stop moving until he was right on her.

"Fuck me," she whispered, then broke into a run.

The croak turned into a shriek, and a dozen or so more rose to meet it. She felt the rumble of feet hitting the tile floor as she raced past the entrance to the florist. She'd trap herself in there. Instead she ran straight ahead, towards a door with a sign for stairs on it, and prayed it was open.

She slammed into the door and pushed on the handle. It gave under her touch, and she wheeled around it to push it closed. The infected were right on her ass, luck the only thing that had put enough distance between her and them to grant this head start. She let go of the door and raced up the steps, her steps clanging up the stairway as she moved as quickly as she could without falling to her knees.

The door slammed into the wall as they followed her. She heard the shrieking rasps, hoping that the steps had them stumbling over each other. She climbed, waiting to feel fingers on her heel. The sound rang throughout the space, making it impossible to know how many were near. She fought to keep panic from blinding her as she tried the door for the second floor. Locked. She didn't linger on the third floor, tugging it once before abandoning it. They were getting closer.

When she felt the door to the fourth floor respond to her pull, her legs nearly gave out with relief. She slipped through and pulled the door shut, screaming in panic as the door's design tried to slow its slide home. She jerked her hand back as the bodies on the opposite side smashed against the door, causing it to shudder in its hinges.

She ran down the hallway, not bothering with trying to stealth. It only took one luckily placed arm for them to work out how to pull that door open, and if there were any here, they would already know she'd arrived from the sound.

There was a small set of stairs at the end of the hall—these were probably for customers, with the other set for emergency exits or custodians—that she climbed, taking the steps two at a time. She hesitated at the top, taking a moment to assess.

It was eerily quiet up here. Through the walls and a floor below, shrieking cries floated through the air. She fought to control her breathing. Not much could be done for the shaking in her limbs as she stepped into the hallway and started towards the open apartment to her right. She stopped in the doorway and leaned on an exposed pipe, catching her breath.

Something broke above her head, and then there was a deafening crash. Her vision went dark as debris rained down on her. She got to her knees and put her arms over her head, when something huge slammed into her back and made her collapse.

She couldn't breathe. Ella made a fist with one hand and counted the seconds, trying not to panic. The wind was knocked out of her.

As the air slowly made its way into her lungs, she wiggled her hands, her feet. She flexed her leg muscles, moved her head back and forth. Everything was functioning, and apart from the pressure from the weight on top of her, nothing hurt when she moved it. She was still alive, but she was still buried by whatever had fallen out of the ceiling.

She began to army crawl forward. The tile was slick; she had a vague memory of moving like this on the living room floor, the stiff carpet fibers burning her skin as she dragged her body from the cabinet full of DVDs to the coffee table. She tried to move quickly, but the debris was so heavy.

The weight on her back moved. There was a groan, and then a hand against her shoulder.

She screamed involuntarily and smacked the hand away, crawling as fast as she could. Hopefully it was disoriented, if that was even possible. The hand grabbed her ankle and started

pulling her back. Ella kicked back as hard as she could and connected with something squishy. It gave out a yell and let her go, and she crawled a few feet further before turning around and sitting-up.

This one had turned later. Their face was almost totally concealed under a balaclava, long sleeved shirt, dark jeans, hiking boots. They were dressed for the winter that was on its way out. She couldn't even tell where they had been bitten, not that it mattered.

They lunged forward, tripping over themselves so they were level with Ella's eyesight. Their eyes, the only thing Ella could see, darted back and forth as they pulled themselves forward, Ella crab-walking backward at the same time. Her funny bone rang with pain as she bumped up against a corner, causing her to lose her grip on the floor and hit her head on the ground. The figure began to climb up her body, their hands gripping her hard.

"No, no nonono!" Their weight bore down on her, and Ella could feel her thoughts starting to lock up. She knew it was the panic clouding her vision, but she could swear they looked at her with rage, with hunger.

Something shifted in her mind just then. It had been the same when she'd once gone to a haunted house that her mom had forbidden her to see, claiming it was too scary for ten-year-old kids. She'd walked through the halls, her heart threatening to beat its way out of her throat, the soundtrack and the sound of people screaming further ahead of her had her shaking, regretting that she'd even come. But when the first figure jumped out and started screaming, a mummy with trailing bandages, Ella had been overcome with a kind of rage. The possibility of something she couldn't see, but knew could see her had been terrifying, but when they stood in front of her, she went from flight to fight in a split second and punched the mummy in the gut.

Her panicked cries became a shriek of rage. Who the fuck did this infected think they were? No one decided when she died, least of all somebody who was already dead.

Ella shoved the figure as hard as she could and leaned in, gripping them as they fell onto their back, so she was on top of them. They tried to push her off, and when she wouldn't let go, grabbed at her face with one hand and tried to push. She tried to bite them on instinct, like she was a toddler, but stopped herself almost immediately, realizing how that would be the actual worst way to die—from pure idiocy.

“Get—off!”

Ella froze at the voice—deep, though muffled by the fabric—and her guard dropped just enough to lose control. The figure swept their arms out, catching hers and causing her face to slam into their chest. They rolled over her, positions reversed, and gripped her throat.

“Stop,” she tried to say. They were bearing all their weight down on her throat, and she felt the pressure in her head increase as they cut off her air. Their arms were too long; too far away for her to reach their face, try to scratch at their eyes. This person was alive, and they were going to kill her. Maybe that was the plan, but Ella had to make sure they knew they were killing her, and that she wasn't already dead. She fought every instinct raging in her body, including the one that said if she didn't start breathing was going to die. She raised her hands up, as far as she could extend her arms, and lowered them slowly until her hands were framing her face. She'd always thought that when the moment came where she'd surrender, or give up, that she would know it was the last thing she was ever going to do. Now she was giving up, but with the hope that it would save her. It felt so wrong in her head, like it didn't compute.

She felt them start, their whole body jolting in alarm. “What the hell?”

Black spots crowded the corners of her vision. They were still killing her. Out of ideas, she rotated her left hand, so her palm was facing away from them, and lowered all but her middle finger.

They shoved themselves away from her, pushing hard on her throat before releasing it. The black spots almost immediately disappeared from Ella's vision, though she was still seeing stars. She turned onto her stomach and gasped, practically throwing the air into her body. She coughed again and again, so hard that she thought she would throw up. Her hands clawed at the concrete floor, her nails threatening to bend in protest, as she braced for an attack, prepared to push herself up and run.

Instead, she heard a less muffled voice say, "are you alive?"

She looked over her shoulder. The figure was on the ground, propping themselves up by their elbows as they faced her. They pushed themselves to a sitting position, and one hand pulled down on the balaclava on their face.

He looked close in age to her, maybe a year older. Warm brown skin was shiny from sweating under the balaclava; he stared at her with an incredulous look, his mouth hung open, brow furrowed upwards.

"Of course, I am, genius." She flipped him off again and waved it back and forth.

"Oh my god," he said on a sigh. He started to laugh, and then scooted closer to her with one arm extended.

"What are you doing?" She backed away and held a hand out towards him. "You just tried to kill me, don't touch me."

“Sorry, sorry, I just...” he pulled his balaclava off his head, black hair tumbling out of it to his shoulders. Ella had a sudden jolt of envy. The world gone to shit, and a boy just gets to have hat hair that looks like *that*.

He changed the angle of his arm, so he was going for a handshake rather than a hug. “I’m Sanjay,” he said. “I’m pretty sure you’ve just saved my life.”

“I’m pretty sure you just blew my cover. We’ve got maybe ten minutes before every infected person in the building wanders up here. They would have heard that. I need to find a place to hunker down until they get bored.”

He shook his head. “I just fell out of the last really secure place in this building. The door locks are on an emergency setting. I think it was for in case of a fire, and it got tripped on accident. None of these doors will lock until the system is rebooted.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Sure, I can; I’ve been stuck in here for weeks, playing hide and seek with those fuckers.”

Ella looked him over. He was tall, but skinny, like he was slowly starving. A red backpack hung from one shoulder, stuffed near to bursting. He looked like a turtle who’d gotten his shell knocked loose.

“Come with me,” he said. “We can’t stay in this hallway for much longer. I’ve got a plan to get out, so unless you want to practice your death rattle—”

“Shut up, they’re gonna hear you.”

“You got it.” He made his way down the hall without looking to see if she was following him, turning left, right, right again, until he pushed through a door that led to a storage closet. She hung back but couldn’t see any other choice besides climbing higher. The door closed shut behind Ella, throwing them into pitch black.

“Hang on.” There was a crack, and a small flame from the lighter in his hands illuminated the space between them.

“Okay, okay.” He seemed to forget she was here as he set his backpack down. He walked forward for a few steps before leaning against a metal shelf, his eyes closed.

“Um, hello?” She stayed by the door.

He straightened and looked at her. “Hi,” he said breathlessly. “Sorry I fell on you.”

“What the hell are you doing up here?” From the looks of it, he’d been here for a little bit. There was a journal on the shelf, the spine broken and causing it to lay flat, pages up. She couldn’t make out any of the writing. A bunch of canned food sat next to that, and a toothbrush next to that.

“Meditation retreat,” he said dryly. “What does it look like?”

“Looks like you’re stuck.”

“You’re quick,” he said. He stuck out a hand. “I’m Sanjay.”

She looked at his outstretched hand, then back at him. “Ella.”

He pulled his arm back. “What are you doing here, anyway? You’re not exactly one to act like you’re not also up a creek.”

“I made a number of shitty decisions that led me to run for my life.”

He nodded. “Sounds about right. So how do we get out of here?”

“Well...”

He sat on the ground, laying an arm across a red backpack that was filled to bursting. “In case you can’t tell, I don’t have a plan. So, any answer is appreciated.”

She didn’t move away from the door as she thought. “Have you not made it downstairs?”

“Not yet. Hadn’t worked up the courage.”

“Well the emergency stairwell is filled with...infected.” He nodded, unsurprised. “So that would leave the main stairs or the elevator shaft.”

“Do you have any climbing gear?” he asked hopefully.

She gave him a look and raised her arms helplessly. His face fell a little. “Okay, so what? We just rush the stairs?”

“I don’t think there’s another option, if you haven’t found one in...how long have you been here?”

He shrugged. “Couple of days, maybe a week.”

She shook her head and rubbed her temple. She was fucked either way. This guy clearly had no options, but if they managed to make it back outside? What then? She’d have to be ready to outrun him, and hopefully lose him down an alley or something. “Okay, let’s go.”

“What, now?”

“You do what you want,” she hissed. “I’m not dying up here. If you need someone to impress, I’m your one and only chance, impossible as that will be for you.”

He closed his mouth with a snap. “You’re...assertive,” he finally landed on.

“I’ve already fucked up once tonight. Don’t make me reconsider this as well.”

Without another word, he stood up and slung the backpack over his shoulders. He grabbed the journal, closing it and sliding it into his back pocket. He extended a hand towards the door in an *after you* motion.

Slowly, fighting the urge to start running again, she pushed open the door and stepped out, looking to her right.

A hiss sounded on her left.

"Watch out!" He shoved her against the wall and dove past her. One hand reached out and grabbed an infected man that she hadn't noticed by the hair, shaking it like a doll until their legs buckled and they more or less hung from Sanjay's hand. With his other hand clutching the screwdriver, he brought it down with a swing. The metal lodged itself in the infected's ear, and it let out a horrible cross between a shriek and a roar. It was the least human thing Ella had ever heard. It sounded like an animal crying out in pain.

They didn't stop moving, so Sanjay stabbed at them again. This time the screwdriver buried itself all the way to the plastic handle. The sight was unnerving, knowing what something like that would do to a living person. They stopped moving, and Sanjay let go, keeping his grip on the screwdriver. It released with a liquid sucking sound, and the body crumpled at his feet.

"You gotta be more careful," he panted. "That was kind of a lucky break."

"Let's just go," she said, and stepped over the body. "I'm guessing they're on the floors above and below?" He nodded affirmation. "The crashing would have alerted them to this floor. We don't have time to sneak."

They wound their way down and down the first set of stairs. She could hear shouts and shrieks, but everything seemed too far away to pinpoint. She tried to focus on not tripping as she gripped the railing.

There was a crash above them. Sanjay shoved her shoulder. "Go, go, go!"

She flinched at his touch but had no time to do anything about it. They passed another floor, and she saw movement out of the corner of her eye as they kept running. Shouts became louder, Sanjay moved around to her side and started to outpace her. She had the sudden impulse to jump over the railing, but that would just end in broken bones.

Finally, the entryway greeted her once more as they spilled out into the space. The infected she'd seen before were gone, still trapped in the stairwell or out on other floors, now chasing behind them once more. Straight across was the florist shop. She had no other ideas, no other assurances of a way out. She ran across, Sanjay trailing behind her, the dead immediately after.

The flowers were all long-dead as she raced past them, jumping over the register counter. The back was cluttered with walls that forced her to move around the snaking pathway. Crashing metal rang behind her as she ducked around the shelf corners.

The door had a small handle with a thumb press. She threw herself on the door and pulled. It stuck, but she felt it give.

“Hurry up!”

“Fuck off,” she muttered as she gave another yank on the door. Sanjay wrapped his hands around the door and practically threw it open, giving Ella just enough time to jump clear of its swing inwards. They stumbled out and pulled it back towards them. She didn't stop when she saw fingers thread their way around the door but put a foot on the wall and pulled hard.

The fingers came away and fell to the concrete ground, any sound they would have made deafened by the shouting. Ella took a step back, turned to look at Sanjay. He wore the same expression she assumed was plain across her face.

“Go team,” he said weakly.

She turned and ran down the street. She heard his footsteps follow close behind.

Chapter Eight

They ran, skirting around cars and broken glass. Ella didn't look back, even when the groans of an infected noticing them made her want to duck behind a truck and listen for footsteps. Eventually, they ran into a bookstore, the shelves still more than half-full. She supposed they wouldn't be worth more than tinder now and took up too much space to hoard in bulk. Unless you were Burt, of course, though he mostly cultivated a library for its intended purpose. He was surprisingly invested in a harlequin romance series Ella had never heard of.

After they had caught their breath, Sanjay perked up almost instantly.

"We should probably keep moving. It'll be dark soon, but I'd rather get clear of town as quickly as possible. Zacks don't really move around much at night, have you noticed that? Wonder if it's just out of habit or maybe the disease responds differently to colder temperatures."

"Did you just call them Zacks?"

"Yeah. Why, what do you call them?"

"I don't really call them anything; I don't know their names."

"They don't have names anymore though, do they? When someone dies, you don't hear someone refer to them as them; they just call it 'the body.'"

"Have you never been to a funeral?"

"Sure, I have, but that's not the same thing. When you're giving a eulogy about Mom, she's not normally standing up or looking at you."

Ella tossed the hammer harder than she needed to. He barely managed to catch it before it flattened his nose. "Fuck you."

"You're the one who asked." He twirled the hammer absently in his hand. "I think you might take things too seriously."

"Let's just go."

"So, what do you think?"

"What do I think what?"

"Does the cold have an effect?"

She shrugged. "Doubt it. I heard once that it was a mutated strain of the flu. Not a parasite."

"But the flu is airborne. This is just through fluids."

"Well I also heard someone claim that it's God's wrath, which is about as likely as all the other theories."

"It only takes one, I guess. Just wish I knew which one."

"Would it make a difference?"

"Maybe not, but at least then things would make a little more sense than they do now."

Ella adjusted her backpack. "As long as I know what not to do, I'm good."

"Okay, Sarah Connor. Lead the way."

She held her middle finger up to his face as she strode past him.

"Have you noticed you do that a lot? The whole flipping-off thing?" Sanjay's backpack let off a riot of clinking zippers and rustling nylon, and Ella wheeled around and put her forearm to his chest, shoving him against the brick.

"Listen to me right now," she whispered. "You will not be the reason I'm bitten tonight, understand? Run your mouth, alert them to the two of us, and I will cut your Achilles' tendon and leave you for them. I don't need a car, and I don't need dead weight. Got it?"

The humor had dropped from his face. He didn't even look shocked by her words. He stared down his nose at her, jaw clenched hard enough that she could see the muscle flexed underneath his skin. He nodded once, and she took a step back.

A voice in the back of her head said that she hadn't needed to do that. This guy was annoying, but unless he was lying, he'd been surviving for weeks amongst a force that had nearly devoured her in a few hours.

He seemed to shrug off the moment, and looked down at his arms, ran his hands along his legs, wincing where some glass had carved a line clear across his right thigh. She could see the tear in the fabric of his jeans. "We should stop at the hospital. I don't like the look of some of these cuts; I'll bet not everything's been cleared out there."

"No," Ella said immediately. "There's nothing there, I've scoped it out a dozen times."

"You've scoped out an entire hospital?"

"I've had plenty of time to work my way through, okay?"

"Fine, then what else is close? I remember passing a neighborhood called Barret Pines earlier--"

"No," she said more forcefully. "I told you, there's nothing around here. And I'm not taking us there, so if you want to scope it out for yourself, be my guest."

He held a hand out in surrender. "Fine, fine. If there's nothing here, then we should head north. There's a survivor's compound at this old military fort."

Ella frowned. "Are you talking about the Barracks?"

He paused in his pacing and turned to her. "You know it?"

She knew of it. It was the only reason anybody new crossed through here. "About sixty miles north, right?"

Sanjay looked at her, confused. "Well, yeah." There was hesitation in his voice. "How'd you know that?"

She shrugged. "People pass through here. I don't talk to them much, but Burt doesn't care one way or the other, as long as they can afford him." She could see Burt in her mind, his face twisted into a permanent grimace. He'd told her about the stroke that had laid its hands on his looks.

"Make no mistake," he'd say, pointing a finger at her and raising an eyebrow, "it only gets some of the credit. The rest is all me." He'd talked up such a big game about being proud of his assholeishness. She could see now that she'd bought that line a little too quickly. She always had thought that he just didn't mind the danger, seeing as he'd be dead sooner or later even if the world hadn't ended.

She shook her head. "He'd tell me about who came through, where they were holing up, so I could keep clear."

"Huh." She looked at Sanjay. He'd already turned away, so she couldn't see his expression. She had the feeling of being viewed under a microscope, like he was seeing parts of her she kept hidden, only he wasn't going to reveal how poorly she'd concealed them. She adjusted her backpack and put a few more steps of distance between them.

"He's about a day from here. We get clear of city limits, make camp, then get there by tomorrow afternoon."

"And then what?"

She shrugged. "He might have a map for you. Depends on what you offer him."

"Aren't you gonna come?"

“No way. I’ve got no interest in living by the rules of people who think the authority they had in a past life means anything to me.”

“I can’t make it by myself. I was with someone up until a few days ago, or else I wouldn’t be heading this way.”

“What happened?” She hadn’t meant to ask; it was from a long-dead habit; her mom would come from a shift, say some passing comment about how crazy people were, and when Ella asked what had happened, she’d launched into the craziest stories of patients that always seemed to one-up the one she’d said before.

“He got bit. He, uh, didn’t say anything right away. Didn’t want to worry me, I guess. But then he did, and I wound up crashing the car and getting stranded here. I figured those apartments were high up enough that anything that could have made it up there had...I don’t know, starved or decomposed by now.”

She shook her head. “If only they’d do us the courtesy of rotting.”

He nodded in agreement. “And that’s why I can’t go by myself. You saw how that just went; I won’t last a week on my own.”

“Look, I don’t mean to sound like a dick, but I’m trying not to die out here, same as you. My advice? There’s plenty of suburbs around here, and most of the houses are empty. Take your pick and do what you want.”

“But you said yourself that this whole area is practically barren, right?”

She closed her eyes and cursed her mouth. How did someone who rarely talked to herself manage to start spilling truth the second a new face showed up?

“What about this guy, Burt? You think he’s got food stores?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I didn’t go to him first because he’s a tight-fisted sonofabitch, and only ever trades. Says he’s not a soup kitchen. The less I can find to give him, the less likely he’ll even keep letting me have anything.” Now that she thought about it, it might have been easier to just try and rob Burt. He wasn’t always home, and she was pretty sure she could find a way past his alarm system if she really wanted to. Why had she bothered going into town? She shook her head, still chastising herself.

“Okay, then what if you just escorted me? Just help me get there, and then you never have to see me again.”

“It’s a couple weeks by foot to the Barracks. I can handle myself on my own because I don’t go where I don’t already know the score.”

He sighed heavily. “Goddammit, okay. Look.” He ran a hand through his hair before meeting her gaze. “My family. They’re all gone, yeah? And we had this cabin we rented for a while. Eventually my parents bought it from the rental company, like a lease-to-buy?”

“Money doesn’t really buy status anymore, dude. Why should this impress me?”

“It should, because it’s maybe a twenty-minute car ride from the Barracks. And if you help me get there, you can have it.”

Ella laughed. “Bullshit.”

“I’m not lying, I swear.” He swung his backpack off his shoulder and pulled out an old leather wallet. In one of the plastic photo sleeves, there was a picture of a family in front of a cabin and a bunch of trees. Sanjay, a man and a woman roughly in their fifties, a young boy with red hair, and a young Latina girl with ebony hair down to her waist.

“You’re adopted,” she said.

“Not the point.” Sanjay pointed to the house behind them with his free hand. “That’s it. It’s not fancy or anything, but it was connected to a water line. There’s probably a bunch of dry goods there, probably water bottles or some Gatorade. And the next cabin is like a half mile away.”

She squinted at the photo. It was hard to make out any details. “When was the last time you were there?”

“Just before,” he said.

She cocked an eyebrow. “So, you wanna explain why you’re not holed up in a private home that’s stocked with food that you legally owned?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t want to be alone,” he said. “My family’s all gone. So’s Eli. If I were on my own for longer than I just was, I doubt I’d have made it.”

She couldn’t argue with that. She watched as he put the wallet back in his pocket. “Do you actually have money?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Couple of singles. Never spent them; guess they’re relics, now.”

She began to pace back and forth. “You lead me to this cabin, I check it out, make sure it’s not a shithole or overrun, and then if it works for me, I’ll take you to the Barracks. If it’s not, you finish the trek on your own.”

He held his hand out immediately. “Hell yeah, that sounds like a deal to me.”

She reluctantly took his hand and squeezed it once, pulling back as soon as she could. “Well, we still need to go to Burt’s. I’ve got next to nothing to eat, and he might have something for your leg. If nothing else, I can let him know I’m clearing out, and he can take over my turf.”

“Didn’t you say there’s nothing left?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’ll find something worth looking for.” They stopped talking as they continued through the streets. Ella looked back at the Crossroads, aware that this was probably the last time she’d ever see it. She remembered after getting accepted to NYU, before any information about financial aid came in, she would look around wherever she was at random and take it all in, wondering when she’d be in that place again.

That Ella would have been crying at the sight of Crossroads, still standing vigil over the city that was just a graveyard now. She would have thought it looked lonely. Now, she just wondered why the hell she’d been so stupid to come to town in the first place.

Chapter Nine

The strip mall was the only place that looked better than it had before everything went to shit. Ella often wondered what that said about how it had looked compared to everything else. How it had managed to still bring in business from the respective stores--a Mexican restaurant, a Circuit City she was pretty sure wasn't legit given the whole death-by-Recession, a dollar store, a travel agency, and an arcade.

"Don't say anything when we get in there," she told Sanjay as they walked through the parking lot. There were a few abandoned cars on the edges, all of them parked without regard to the lines. Burt had emptied them long before Ella had even started venturing out of the house. She'd slept in the blue SUV a couple of times. Burt didn't operate on any kind of schedule, so he wasn't always home when she needed to pick something up. He locked the doors, too, and warned her that if she broke his windows, he'd break her face. He'd tell her he suspected the dead had enough lingering intelligence to put the pieces together.

"We like patterns, humans," he'd say to her. His voice was raw, vocal cords rubbed down to nearly nothing from his chain-smoking habit. "We don't like coincidences, don't like bein' surprised." He'd always been on about something, and Ella had never been able to find a way around hearing him out. He'd never give her whatever she was trading him for until he'd finished this rant or that story. She didn't mind it much, but she was always painfully aware of the sun dipping behind the trees as he wound his way around his own memories. "You tell any Joe Shmoe that the world revolved around chaos and bullshit, and he'll wanna kick yer ass for it."

"Is this guy one of those mole people?" Sanjay kicked a rock out of the way as they walked. "Thinks we need to offer up people to the Zacks, so they'll leave us alone?"

"What the fuck? Do people really think that?"

"Probably not." He grinned and pointed a finger at her. "But I had you convinced, right?"

"On second thought, you should bang on the glass and go in first. He'll love that." She sped up to get ahead of him. "I only meant he hasn't met you before, so it might be easier if I do the talking."

"But you said he does business with whoever comes around?"

"He has his off days."

She led them towards the Circuit City and put her hands to the glass to peer in. "I don't see him. He might be in the back, sorting stuff." The glass was hard to see through. Months' worth of dust and rain had given it a layer of scuzz that clouded her view of the darkened room.

Fingerprints smeared the glass at varying heights, remnants of people living or not passing through and trying a peek. There was dried blood on the door, but that had been there for a while.

"Well let's go in." Sanjay had his hand on the door's handle before Ella could warn him about the locks. She was about to stop him when he pulled on the door. It swung out towards them without resistance.

There was a clattering crash of metal falling on metal. Sanjay jumped back as a box sitting on the nearest counter fell over, a piece of nylon paracord tying it to the door. Nails, screws, and all other types of hardware spilled out on the dusty green carpet; the floor deadened some of the noise, but all the pieces rang against each other well enough to make Ella jump in shock.

"It's just me!" Ella shouted into the store. "Burt?" Silence responded, and she led them in. She scanned the room a few times, her suspicion growing.

"Watch out," Sanjay said. Ella was already jumping over the counter to avoid the sharp bits of tools on the ground. "That some kind of alarm system?"

"Something's not right," Ella said. "He normally has the door locked if he's not expecting anyone. That alarm's for if someone manages to pick the lock. I'm supposed to knock so he can unlock the door." She cut him an accusatory look, and she was pleased to see a little bit of embarrassment flush his neck.

"Should've taken things slower," he said. "Sorry about that."

"It's over now, so let's just see where he is."

She watched as Sanjay took in the sight of the room. Even after having been here so many times, she could still recognize how impressive a sight it was. Burt had emptied the shelves of everything that had been there before he'd moved in, tossed what was worthless, and stripped what he could use for parts. Shelves that had once held DVD cases, he'd manipulated and hung them flat against the walls, now cradled every weapon Ella could think of, and plenty that she couldn't. "I've had fifty years to let my brain get a whole lot weirder than yours, darlin,'" he said to her once. He'd offered her a cigarette every time they met up, but this time she'd stuck around, hoping that he'd soften up and let her walk away with more of those MRE packets he loved so much.

The left wall held all the guns. There were a dozen pistols, all the same make, that he'd nabbed from the shooting range five miles east of here. Each one had a star sign carved into the grip. Hunting rifles, twelve-gauge shotguns, sawed-offs of varying lengths, compound bows, the arrows stored in the container that used to hold wall posters.

The right wall looked more like some kind of art installment. Cans with labels for tomatoes or baked beans were filled with nails and bits of broken glass, a small glass jar of gasoline buried underneath it all with a piece of linen poking out of the side. PVC pipes formed what looked like a bazooka, but she had been informed by Burt it was a potato gun. "Shoots more'n just potatoes,

though," he'd said to her. A wooden baseball bat with nails embedded and poking out all sides. An aluminum bat that he had chiseled pieces out of and angled the edges outward, turning into something like a cheese grater. There was also a flamethrower. The left side of that wall was also where he displayed all his blades. Everything from pocket knives to machetes. There was even a longsword he said he'd pulled out of a mansion tucked away in the hills.

"So, this guy's just garden variety crazy," Sanjay offered.

"It's a way to kill time," she said. "Burt?" She wove through the bins that used to hold clearance items, now designated for all the miscellaneous things he found most often; nails for weapons, matchboxes, empty beer bottles, to name a few.

The back door gave way to what had once been two rooms, but Burt had renovated the space into a single long room. The stall doors covered the windows and reinforced the door that led to the outside, giving him one giant storage room where he kept water bottles, his MRE packets, canned food, and boxes and boxes of pasta and rice. He'd let her take plenty of the grains, claiming they'd have next to no nutritional value come the one-year mark. A card table held a hot plate and a kettle, packages of paper plates stacked underneath.

"Uh, Ella?" Sanjay's voice came from the other end, in what had once been the manager's office. Ella turned and made her way through.

Burt's work was evident here too. There had probably been a desk and a desktop computer here once. Now, milk crates stacked together, tied with zip ties, to form a floor-to-ceiling shelving unit. A mattress fit just right in the far corner against the wall.

Burt lay on the bed, his back to the two of them. A few bottles of beer sat near the foot of the bed on the floor. He was covered with a dirty duvet with a compass pattern.

Ella crouched down slowly. With one hand, she put two fingers under his jaw.

His skin was cold, his pulse absent.

She snatched her hand back, leaning on the mattress for balance. Something clattered, and Ella looked down as a green plastic bottle rolled off the bed and stopped at her feet.

"What is it?" Sanjay asked.

She picked it up and turned the label to her. "Oxycontin," she said. Her voice came out raspy. "For a Peter Cho." A voice in the back of her skull couldn't help but repeat the mantra: where the hell did he manage to find this?

"So, not his."

"No." She placed a hand on Burt's shoulder and rotated him, so he was facing them.

His pale skin had gone even paler, the discolored spots from age and various scars standing out in stark contrast on his face. His white, shoulder-length hair was pulled into a topknot, the hair tie a little crooked from where it had been pressed into the pillow. Despite the sense that everything in here should be handled with gloves, he'd always managed to keep his beard trimmed close to his face.

His eyes were closed. If they'd been open, Ella might have started checking for bite marks. Sanjay would be able to see that they were grey.

"Look," Sanjay said. She pivoted from her crouched position to see him holding out an envelope. "It was sitting on top of everything in there." She turned and looked at the heavy-duty black plastic tub to her right. Orange plastic flip locks were undone, a disorganized pile of titty magazines layered on top of whatever else Burt had deemed so valuable as to stay near him in sleep.

"What is it?"

He flipped it over. Her name, written in pen, in Burt's barbed scrawl. She took it from him and studied it for a moment.

"Do you want to read it?"

She shoved it into her back jeans pocket and stood up. "We need to take care of him. The smell could attract infected, and we don't want to give them any reason to lessen the distance between us and them."

"We don't have time to bury him."

"I wasn't talking about burying him." She knelt again and dug in the chest, shoving aside a couple of issues of *Playboy* with one finger. Burt had been thorough in keeping things for function, but he was also a hoarder. There were more packs of batteries in here than he could have used in three lifetimes. And he'd been greedy, too; there was no way he'd ever be able to use everything he gathered, but he only ever let her have something for equal exchange. And because their territories overlapped, his scavenging cut down on what she could find and use to trade with him. A part of her felt a little smug at finally getting to see what he was hiding, but it was outweighed by the moment, and by the fact that most of this stuff seemed to be just junk.

She finally found the trowel she'd been looking for and tugged it out of the chest with a grunt. A booklight snagged its arm on the handle and came clattering out, and Ella nearly thwacked it against her head. "Thought he might have one nearby." She opened the cover and pulled out a small shovel, folded in half on itself in order to fit in the case. She unfolded it, and it locked into place with a snap. "We can just dig enough for him to lay in. I think he has canisters of gas just outside." She turned and scanned the milk crates until she found a lighter, the kind with the long tubing that she'd always thought looked like a magic wand. She grabbed it and put it in her back pocket, where she felt the bottom of the handle crunch against the envelope.

"I can dig if you want--"

"No," she said. "Carry him out."

He blanched and looked down at Burt. "Are you sure?"

"I can't do it. I'm not strong enough, so unless you want to burn down the whole office..."

She watched as he looked back to Burt and visibly steeled himself. She looked down at the body.

Burt was a tall guy, a whole head taller than her. But lying in bed, his knees drawn up like that, his hands close to his chest like he'd breathed his last with his arms crossed, Ella was struck by how old he really looked. How frail, how small. He'd never looked vulnerable before.

Looking at him like this felt like a betrayal of some kind.

She turned away and went outside.

Unlike her gas station, there was no concrete pad or space for trucks. There was a stoop, and then just dirt, the grass scrubbed away by who knew how many employees on their smoke break.

She tried to work fast. They didn't have a lot of light left in the day, and she didn't think she could sleep in Burt's room, every inch of junk and gun oil assaulting her with the reminder of what he'd done. He'd been collecting bricks for some reason, maybe for an invention he'd been planning, so she used them to line the space and keep the fire from spreading out of the pit.

She laid a bath towel she'd found in the employee bathroom onto the ground. The canister was awkward, the gas inside sloshing around and forcing Ella to shift her balance again and again. Carefully, trying not to get it on her--she'd never get the smell out--she tipped the canister forward and poured until the towel was soaked through.

Sanjay took the canister from her when she stood up. She didn't say anything, too focused on her task. She fought the urge to wring the towel dry, cradling the now-heavy, dripping towel like

Sanjay had been holding Burt, and knelt down to drape it over Burt's still form. She brushed a smudge of dirt off of his forehead and smoothed out his beard, biting her cheek as she did, before covering his face with the towel. She could taste blood as she stepped back.

"Maybe I should handle the flame," Sanjay said quietly. "You've got gasoline all over you."

She shook her head and fished the lighter out of her jacket pocket, handing it to him without looking away. The towel was a bright blue, the dull color brought to life from being soaked through. It looked wrong against the muted colors of this patch of grass, against the sun-bleached parking lot behind them.

She could feel anger bubbling in her chest, but something else moved with it. "Go on," she said.

Sanjay knelt in the space where she'd been, clicked the lighter until it caught, and touched it to the towel. It reminded Ella of lighting candles in Mass, back when her father had been around. He'd insisted they go every Sunday. It usually sparked an argument between him and her mom, where she would remind him of how Sunday was her only day off. They'd never gotten riled up enough for it to become anything uglier than bickering, so Ella never thought much of it. She didn't realize until later that that had been the first sign. To look out for.

She tried now to think back to the last few times she'd seen Burt, running their conversations through her mind. It was impossible to notice in memories what she hadn't noticed at the time, but still she tried to remember. What signs had she missed this time?

It went up quickly. Sanjay jumped back, as though he were afraid the fire would grab at him and pull him into the grave. The smell of gas was overwhelming; this close, it managed to burn Ella's eyes, the smoke burning her throat. The tears she'd been blinking back stubbornly fell

down her cheeks, given unfair advantage by the smoke. She was just glad that was all she could smell.

"Did you want to say anything?" Sanjay asked her.

"There's nothing to say," she muttered. Her voice was thick. She cleared her throat and swiped at her cheeks. "He was right to do it. He could move, but he was always bitching about his joints. Probably had cancer, too. Wouldn't stop with those fucking cigarettes. Better to have your say, pick your spot. It's the only thing we still have any control over anymore, and sometimes not even then." She nodded at the pyre. "I only hope I have the balls to make the call when it counts, Burt." She sat on the ground.

"It's, ah, probably going to take a while," Sanjay said.

She sniffed loudly, tried to shake off the feeling that was clamping down on her heart. "I'll be in in a minute. You should see what we can take with us, what's not total space junk."

She saw his nod out of the corner of her eye, and then he was gone. The door thunked against the chair as it fell back into place after him. Ella just sat and watched the flames dance.

"I'm stealing all the shit you never let me play with, Burt." The flames crackled in response. "The nail bombs, the bowie knife. You can keep the jaw harp, though." She had the sudden impulse to run back in and find it but stopped herself. "You've probably got it on you already. That thing was nasty, and you know it. I know you never sanitized that shit." She realized she was using the voice she always used when she was trying to haggle with him. She wondered if she'd ever have the opportunity to do it again. Probably not.

"I'm moving on, too, Burt. Woulda invited you along if you were hellbent on a change; I hope you know that." She bit down on her lip and took a deep breath. "Probably would have

been safer with you. Not too sure about this guy. I won't get caught though, promise. I'll make you proud."

She sat there for a few more minutes, ignoring the way her throat hurt, the way her face began to itch from the tears drying on her cheeks. Burt would have told her to "stop that shit." "All right," she said. She pulled herself upright. "No sense lingering in the doorway, right?" He'd said that to her the first time she'd set foot in the shop. "I'll see you on the other side, Burt. Hope it's peaceful where you're at." She left him to burn and closed the door behind her.

Chapter Ten

Sanjay suggested they sleep in the arcade. Ella started to argue, but fatigue had begun to wash over her in waves, and all she did was nod.

This place, she knew, was unlocked. Another one of her waiting spaces when Burt was out of commission. She'd gone there once or twice before the world stopped spinning. The place was a mix of new and old--classic machines like Pac-Man and Street Fighter lined one side of the space. The glass register counter had once been lit to look like a jewelry case, with figurines and action figures you could win if you managed to beat your best high score on a machine. A rack of single-issue comic books stood to the right of the register, a vintage piece that she remembered used to jam all the time.

Two black pleather couches, the upholstery picked to shreds by impatient kids watching their friends play, divided the room and faced the opposite wall, where three flat-screen TVs had been mounted on the wall. Low shelves had housed consoles, organized by brand. Nintendo in all its iterations, PlayStation, and Xbox. The consoles and TVs were long gone, snagged by looters when cash still had value, and the point of looting was padding an emergency fund, rather than finding food or medicine. She knew it was more complicated than that, but the bare-bones left side of the store was such a stark contrast to the vibrant, humming blue and red universe she remembered sitting in when she was twelve.

She'd watched other kids play for a while but could never manage to get next game. Everyone else had come in pairs, and they refused to deviate from their inside jokes and "traditions," as they'd explained to her. She'd waited until her mom came in after talking with a friend who worked at the travel agency, and then the two of them played Mario Kart until the store kicked them out.

"I wish I'd played video games when I had the chance," Sanjay said wistfully. They made a beeline for the couches and threw their things on the ground. Ella had been the one to suggest they take what they could and determine what to keep and what to leave behind later on. She went to the console shelves and plugged in the hot plate. She knew the whole strip ran on a backup generator Burt had found one time. He'd stuck it in the travel agency and barricaded the doors with laptops and double-sided tape before locking the doors from the inside, to ensure no one ever messed with it.

"Give me the kettle. I'll fill it up in the bathroom." She took the kettle from Sanjay and walked back beyond an outer-space themed curtain, where two-bathroom doors faced each other.

She closed the door of the women's room behind her and filled the kettle as best she could. The sink was too small for the whole thing to fit easily under the faucet. When it began to overflow, she twisted the knob and set it down on top of the toilet seat lid and crossed her legs to sit on the floor next to it.

It was tough to get the envelope out of her pocket once she was already sitting, but she managed to extract it without ripping the paper. He'd even gone so far as to seal the envelope. She took out her box knife as she grumbled to herself about paranoid old men and sliced open the short side of the envelope. Pulling a Maglite from her jacket pocket, she twisted it to bathe the room in blue-white light.

The letter was written on notebook paper. It was dirty at the corners, like he'd been halfway through cleaning his guns when he got the idea. She leaned back against the wall and read.

Ella,

You probably knew by the time you opened the door without issue. Never let it be said I lost my wits, you hear me? Had my head screwed on till the very end. Didn't want you to deal with any blood and guts. Or shit, I heard once fellows shit themselves when they die

Take what you want, burn what you don't. Hell, turn the whole place into one big honeytrap for those fuckers and ring the dinner bell, then get the hell out.

Shit got too hard, kid. Got too tough seeing people come and go. Knowing they had something to walk towards, while I kept running in circles. Was playing a waiting game, and I realized I wasn't waiting for anything other than this. Figured I'd stop wasting my time and do something about it.

Hope you find something to run towards, and I mean run. Otherwise the sumbitches'll get you before you get where you're going.

Burt

She folded the letter, leaning her forearms on her knees. She could hear the tap dripping. Sanjay was singing; his voice managed to make its way through the drywall.

Ella felt so tired all of a sudden. Tired, and sad, and angry at herself for bothering to feel sad. Burt had never been nice to her, not really. Like a favorite customer, maybe.

Maybe she was mad at him, too. She was too tired to tell, and the prospect of untangling the root of her emotions did not sound like something worth the time it would take, when she could just fall asleep and move on the next day.

Shoving the note back into her pocket, she grabbed the kettle and walked out to the room.

"This guy must have had a hell of a lot of stories, right?" Sanjay had laid out a mix of items on the coffee table in front of him. A bowie knife, a sleeve of MREs, four cans of refried beans, and three small paperback novels with women in giant dresses on the covers.

"Toss those." She slid the cans away from the line-up. "Too heavy." She set the kettle on the hot plate

"Fine by me; I hate refried beans." He flipped through the MREs like it was a card catalog. "There's a lot of variety here."

"Burt talked a big game about having something to live for. Said no one liked eating the same thing twice, except for people who packed the same meal for a week, since they were already slaves to society."

Sanjay raised an eyebrow. "Did he have a pipe bomb and a manifesto written in blood, too?"

"He was just kidding around. He liked soapboxes, said me listening to them was part of the cost of stuff." She started to smile, but it faded away just as quickly. "Wonder if maybe he just wanted to have company for longer."

"Hey, don't blame yourself," Sanjay said. She looked up and saw a pitied expression on his face.

"I don't." She flopped down onto the adjacent couch and pointed to the bowie knife. "That's mine." She waved her hand at him to hand it over.

"Didn't you grab the tomahawk?"

"It's called a hatchet, and it's also none of your business." He didn't move; she sighed and said, "if you want, I can pull the 'my weird old man buddy just offed himself and I want it to remember him' card."

Sanjay snorted. "How sincere."

"You didn't know him, he would have thought that was hilarious." She took the knife from him and put it in her backpack.

"So, what exactly was his deal? I mean, how does a guy collecting Social Security checks manage to get around and find all that stuff?"

She tried to come up with an answer that would explain Burt's deal. She'd sometimes wondered, if it had been a while since she'd last seen him, if he was some kind of stress-induced hallucination she'd manifested so that she didn't go crazy from the knowledge that she only ever talked to herself. "I asked him what his name was when I met him," she said. "Technically, the second time; first time I ran away before he could shoot me. He said, 'Burt fuckin' Reynolds.'"

Sanjay shook his head. "What?"

"He never explained why. When I said I didn't know who he was talking about, he went on a rant about bandits and disco. Handed me a bunch of DVDs--he didn't actually toss them, just moved them onto those milk cartons. Wouldn't listen when I said I couldn't watch them."

Sanjay started to laugh but stopped when she didn't join him. "Sorry, I don't mean to insult his memory."

"I'm fine, really. He was a weird guy, but he never did anything creepy or tried to kill me with his flamethrower, so I guess that made him one of the good ones."

"Wanna drink to his memory, or something?" He reached into one of the totes he'd been carrying and pulled out an unopened bottle of berry-flavored vodka. *Seriously, Burt?*

"Not to his memory, but I'll try anything once."

"That's what she said." She snapped her head, and he slapped a hand on his mouth. "Sorry, sorry, not meant to be creepy, it legitimately just slipped out."

She laughed at the fear on his face. She almost felt bad for making him worry about her feelings. “Been a while since I heard one of those.”

He laughed nervously and ducked his head, messing with his hair with one hand. “Okay, then.” He unscrewed the purple-white striped cap. Putting the bottle to his mouth, he tipped it back and took a dramatically small sip, in her opinion.

“Well?”

He grimaced and smacked his lips together. “It’s not good, that’s for sure. Doesn’t make me wanna die, though, so I guess it’s also not bad?”

“Wishing for death comes in the morning. Let me try.” He passed her the bottle, and she took a sip.

Where the whiskey she had had the other night had burned a warm path down into her chest, this burned cold. She inhaled through her nose after swallowing, and her throat burned as the air chased the vodka. The cold reminded her of breathing in menthol from the cold medicine she used to take. Hiding under the general burn of cheap vodka, there was a twinge of sweetness that reminded her vaguely of the fruit gummies her mom used to pack in her lunches.

“Burt fuckin’ Reynolds,” she gasped. Pain like heartburn began to hit her chest. “A weirdo to the very end.”

Chapter Eleven

Something tapped and scraped against glass. Ella had only just started to drift off. It had begun to rain outside, and their hand-cranked LED flashlights had dimmed a while ago. With her sweater pulled over her shirt to serve as the closest thing to bedding, she practically felt cocooned, and more comfortable than she'd expected these couches would allow.

The scraping noise didn't let up. She propped herself up on one arm and squinted through bleary vision towards the front door.

A man stood at the door. She saw the twitching, unhurried movement of his body, and she slowly lowered herself back to the couch, slow enough that her arm began to shake from holding her weight. In her experience, their sight depended more or less on how long they'd been walking.

The man was thin, like he was starving before. She couldn't make out any details in the darkness, just his silhouette. He had on a long-sleeved shirt, the sleeves stretching limp past his hands. He had one arm raised, the palm turned towards him, his hand running against the glass. He was probably wearing a ring, the likely source of the noise.

His forehead was pressed against the glass, as though he were pausing to rest. She followed his hand's movement as he dragged it as far down as he could, only to raise it and start all over. His thumb scraped the door's handle each time, and she held her breath each time. If it had been a push-bar, she'd already be dead.

A shadow crossed behind the man. She couldn't make out any details, but it moved slowly. Then another.

Shit. Where had they come from? Had Burt's smell actually drawn them in?

She reached across the armrests and tugged on Sanjay's pant leg. "Wake up," she murmured. She tugged a little harder, hoping he wasn't a startler. "Sanjay."

She heard him inhale deep through his nose. "What?" Sleep scrubbed his voice into a whisper. "You good?"

"We've got company."

He rotated onto his stomach and looked towards the doors. The man outside leaned harder against the door, and she saw one of his ankles roll. There was the smallest popping sound through the glass. She stifled a disgusted sound as he rolled on his shoulder until his back was to the door and began to walk away, dragging his now dislocated ankle with him. Two more came up to the glass and leaned on it. One pushed on the door with her head, and the curve of her skull made her rock back and forth slightly. Ella could see dark shapes behind them, growing larger as they came closer.

It was hard to tell what had drawn their attention. There was also no way to tell if they'd be there for five minutes or for half a day. The infected responded to environmental stimulation, which meant they could be as easily drawn to run somewhere by the sight of a living person or by the twitching movement of a leaf on a branch.

"What do we do?" Sanjay slid to the floor and looked up at her.

"There's a back door," she whispered. "We can loop around onto the road without them ever spotting us."

He nodded and reached for his bag. She did the same, trying to move smoothly and slowly. She could feel their gazes piercing through the glass in her direction. She remembered crouching in the drainage tunnel, looking into the blackness that stretched past her, waiting to swallow her up before the people outside had a chance. She imagined going underground, living in darkness

so thick she no longer existed, quiet that pressed on her with two hands, in the safety of being out of control. And feeling herself slowly go insane, with no way to slow down the process, or speed it up.

Sanjay briefly touched the back of her hand. "What if they notice us?"

That was the trade-off. There was never an opt-out option. No way to know ahead of time which idea was sound and which was a death sentence. Just choices, and time that was always running out.

She knew they didn't know she was there, and there was no way they could smell the two of them, but their presence put her right back in the Crossroads. The escape here was simpler, but if they managed to give chase, she and Sanjay were fucked. There wasn't much to obstruct their view outside, and the infected had no sense of fatigue. They would run for as long as she held their attention, until something came along. With the only other possible distractions being birds and trees, she'd never outrun them, and there were too many to fight quickly enough. She'd be overwhelmed by the second or third swing of her axe.

She had her pack slung over one shoulder when there was a crash. Sanjay caught himself before hitting the floor face-first. She could see the wire that had snagged his ankle and thrown what looked like a router off its spot on the table.

Neither of them moved.

She watched as the closest infected by the door snapped his head towards the glass and moved until his chest hit the door. He raised his hands and began to beat on the glass, moving his arms up and around, trying to find a way in. The others heard him and ran his way, some quickly, some slowly. Faster than Ella thought, they were all against the glass, hitting it with dull thumping sounds. The gathering group spurred them on, and they beat the door harder and faster.

The one that had been there first started to throw his whole body against the door. He couldn't get much of a ramp-up, though, as he had people behind him and to his side. He didn't let that stop him and gave a little jump before throwing himself against the glass.

"We gotta go—"

She had barely started speaking when she heard the glass crack. She looked to Sanjay, his eyes wide, when a sharp *thud* rang through the air, and the infected charged them.

"Move!" She pivoted on her heel and ran, gripping the strap of her backpack tightly as she rushed through the dark hallway, her arms out to push the door open. The rain gently fell as she nearly tripped, running for the grassy incline. She didn't look back as she began to climb.

Ella clambered up the hill. She could feel her boots threatening to slide off her feet with every step she took, the grass slick from the rain. She dug her fingers into the ground and pulled herself forward.

She felt the explosion a second before she heard it. The ground gave a small shudder, glass tinkling behind her where the storefront windows shattered. She turned to a sitting position and looked back to see bodies thrown back into the parking lot. Two stood back up, but the others mercifully stayed down.

One of the figures started towards her, the other following close behind. She didn't think they could have seen her here, but she wasn't trying to be stealthy. The hill was at its steepest here, but they ran to the place where the hill eventually melded with the ground, making their climb that much quicker. She reached for her axe and scrambled backwards, trying to get upright, when they started to wave.

"It's me!" Sanjay slowed his pace, and Ella saw that he was limping.

Ella stood up. "Out of the way," she shouted. He took a step to the left and she lunged forward, swinging her axe at the teenager snarling as she came towards them. Ella felt fingers scrape her side as she buried the axe on the side of the girl's head, the momentum causing the girl to lose her footing and fall. Ella managed to catch herself, her grip still on the blade, and she pulled it back to hang at her side.

It was too dark to make out most of her features. She could smell smoke, but the back of the building had only a few windows on the second floor, and it would take a while for the fire to spread that high up. She was glad for it, though; she wasn't interested in seeing how young this one probably looked.

"Are you okay?" Sanjay bent forward, hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

"I think so." She remembered fingers grasping at her side and checked her shirt for any tears. Lifted her shirt and tried to see if there were any scratches. All good. "You really didn't hear her coming?"

"My ears are kind of ringing right now," he said. He shook his head for emphasis.

"What the hell were you thinking?" She sat back down on the grass to tie her boots. "I'm a little surprised you're not dead right now."

"Didn't have much of a choice," he panted. "If we'd both run out the back, they'd have chased us, and wouldn't have been so close to the grenade."

She stopped tying the knot and looked at him. "The what?"

He reached in the pants pocket near his calf and produced a large egg-shaped ball. She could see the outline of the pin. "Burt had a weird organization system. I found these next to his socks. Doesn't matter, it worked."

She shook her head, trying to find the words. "I thought you were pulling some hero shit."

He scoffed. "I do have some sense of self-preservation. But this way we both had a shot."

She slowly tied her other shoe. She hadn't expected him to still be standing here. She realized that her only other plan, since he hadn't shown her any directions or pointed out the cabin on a map, that she was going to have to just head back to the gas station, or maybe go back to Burt's and see if he had written down the locations of his supply routes. "How are you not dead right now?"

"Uh..." he looked down at his arms, at his feet. She could see he had a bunch of smaller cuts now, in addition to the larger one hidden by his shirt, probably from the glass. There was a big scrape on his cheek. "I'm not really sure? I ran so they'd follow me behind the register, then hopped the counter, threw the grenade..." he was counting off on his fingers. "One figured it out and started to chase me. I opened the door, and then everything went a little static."

She stared at him, dumbfounded. "I think you might be a ghost."

"I hope not. Being dead shouldn't be this uncomfortable." He pulled on his jacket, and a few beads of glass fell to the ground.

"Well, thanks for thinking ahead, I guess," she said. She cringed mentally at her choice of words. He'd just saved their lives, she realized. He'd thought quickly enough, and he came back for her, too. It made sense logically, it was the whole point they were doing this. It didn't make her any less shocked that he'd bothered to risk his life for an outcome where they both survived.

"You should grab your stuff," he said, pointing back to the door. Her backpack lay, the contents spilling out and getting soaked on by the rain.

She made her way down slowly, eventually opting to slide down on her butt. She was already soaked through. They were going to have to find a way to dry off. She had hand warmers, but her clothes were nearly soaked through already.

He followed her down and began to gather the stuff furthest from the bag as she ran through her mental checklist. She could tell not everything was there. Her sketchbook was somehow dry; she stuffed the items back in her bag and pulled the drawstring quickly, not wanting to risk the pages getting wet.

"Well?" Sanjay was wearing his backpack. He'd somehow managed not to lose it through the whole thing. She thought she could see a bit of scorching on the front of it. "On the road again?"

She blinked a few times, willing herself to focus. Everything still felt like she was hallucinating. Maybe she'd inhaled smoke. She took in his hesitant grin, and without thinking, said, "if you're gonna quote music, can it be from this decade at least?"

His grin expanded into a full-blown smile. "Sure. I take requests, but I do not accept constructive criticism."

"Don't worry, it won't be constructive." They walked out towards the edge of the parking lot and began to cut across the grass towards the highway.

They walked until the sun began to rise, then laid down with the highway in sight and rested. Sanjay had on a solar-powered watch that he used to mark the time and how far they'd gone. At midmorning, Sanjay asked to stop as he dug a map out of his backpack. He muttered to himself, occasionally cursing under his breath when the map bent the wrong way and threatened to tear and began tracing the paper with his finger. The crossbow that he had also taken from Burt's—though she had noticed that one, as it was bulky against his backpack—was threatening to slide off his shoulder every few seconds, and he'd give a big shrug to try and push it back into place.

Ella peered over his shoulder, hoping he wouldn't notice. It had been a while since she'd seen a roadmap, even before the outbreak.

“We could follow the road,” he said, “but it wanders around everything. We should cut through residential spots when we can.”

She nodded and followed his lead. Eventually they found an entrance to a neighborhood called Centennial Forge. It was smaller than the development Ella had holed up in, one road that snaked around in a circle, the houses all in different shades of pastel color.

“We should look through these houses,” Ella said, keeping her voice low just in case.

“Don’t we have enough stuff? I don’t think I can fit much more in my bag.”

“That’s because you have too much shit in your bag. We need to prioritize what we keep, but there’s always a chance something will be in better shape than what you have.”

“If you insist.”

They went through a few houses, without much luck. Ella wasn’t surprised; it had been a long time, long enough for others to do what she was doing now. Still, not looking gave her a mental itch that she couldn’t let go unscratched.

They heard the groans a few hundred feet before they came into view. Crouching against the side of a house with a yellow exterior, they took in the site of five or six infected milling around in the road. There was a median strip going down the road to allow for two-way traffic with bushes that they brushed against as they shuffled around each other, leaves falling every time their legs caught on the branches.

Ella led Sanjay onto the back porch and through the screen door that had once held glass. They went up the stairs slowly, listening for any footsteps. They were met with silence.

She followed Sanjay into a nursery. The crib was laying on its side, the changing table bare of any diapers or clothes. She wondered what it would be like to have to do this while protecting

something completely helpless. How badly had it gotten here, that they'd decided anywhere else was safer?

She turned back to where Sanjay stood in front of a window looking out onto the street. He crouched slowly so as not to catch any wandering eyes and put his backpack on the ground. He removed the crossbow too, and she could see where the strap had pressed into the spot where his shoulder and neck joined, leaving a deep red mark.

He held the crossbow at different angles, seeming to inspect it. "What are you gonna do with that?" she whispered.

He set the crossbow on the ground and pulled a bolt from the holster affixed to his leg with Velcro straps. Some of the bolts were metal and plastic, probably part of the set, but she spotted a few with wooden shafts instead. Burt must have thought quantity over quality was a better bet with those. She watched while he set the bolt into the weapon and pulled the string back with a hooked metal rod, its shape like a stretched-out wire hanger.

"Destressing," he said. He knelt by the window, the glass long since smashed out onto the lawn below. She stood by the other window and looked down into the street.

There was a heavy *thwap* and then a wet smack as the bolt flew into the leg of the closest one. He looked like he was in his thirties and was wearing athletic shorts. The bolt went through his calf and hit another one, this time in the ankle, its motion halted. Dark pooled slowly out of the infected's calf, but he took no notice.

"Shit," Sanjay said. There was a hint of reverence in his voice.

"Didn't hit bone," Ella said.

"I'm learning as I go. These sight things are weird." He grumbled as he messed with a knob on the scope until he was satisfied, and set another bolt in place, losing his grip twice as he tried to pull back the string. It hummed like a tuning fork every time.

"Okay, okay." She peered at him from the corner of her eye. He had the crossbow braced against his shoulder, his head inclined to squint one eye through the sightlines. His mouth was moving, and she realized he was counting seconds. He pulled the trigger, and the bolt flew.

It went all the way through the jogger's forehead, just above his right eyebrow. He dropped instantaneously. The infected immediately to his side turned and gasped to investigate, the movement setting off their instinct to swarm.

Sanjay laughed in disbelief, ducking down below the windowsill and covering his mouth. Ella shifted so she stood against the wall between both windows.

"I think I like this toy," he whispered. "Did Burt have the keys to an armory or something?"

"I've been hanging out in rich neighborhoods," Ella said. "He definitely got that from some forty-something surgeon's basement."

"Well, god bless the rich and their repressed sadistic tendencies, I guess."

She waved a hand at him. "Let me try."

"You sure?" he raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were all about melee weapons."

"That's for last resorts. I'd sooner just hide or find a way out, but they didn't seem to notice the noise." He moved so he knelt by her left side and handed her the crossbow, waiting until she'd set the bolt before handing off the instrument to pull it back."

"And we can go get the bolts once we're done. Be careful, it's a lot harder than it looks."

She ignored him as she braced her knee on the floor and pulled back the string. She felt like it was going to slip and snap back any second, sending the bolt through the floor. There was a small snap as it locked in place.

"Don't put your finger on the trigger until you're ready to set it off," Sanjay warned.

"Quit backseat shooting. You seemed to handle it just fine." He grumbled but stayed quiet, and Ella grinned to herself as she positioned herself by the window. The weapon was heavier than she'd anticipated, and she kept one eye on the bolt as she tried to brace it squarely on her shoulder. She straightened her spine, raising her view up by a little bit, and leaned in to rest the scope against her eye, looked down once more into the street.

Everything was a little bit blue through the glass. Black dots stood in a column in the center of her vision, the bodies passing through them as they walked and swayed. Their skin was tinged from the glass, making them all look even more dead than they already did, no matter their skin tone.

"Which sight did you use?" she asked.

"The first one. They're not that far."

She shifted her stance until a woman with silver hair stood in line with the center of the scope. The blood on her green blazer reflected the sunlight in its dull wetness. The ends of her hair were stuck to the blood, and it had soaked through up until about collarbone height in a sick imitation of an ombré style. Her eyes were the same as all the rest, but her mouth seemed stuck in a perpetual snarl. There were bite marks near her chin, and near her jawline as well. Someone hadn't gotten the memo that she'd already been tagged.

For a moment, the infected woman seemed to look straight at her. There was no reaction; she didn't understand what she was seeing, and they were upwind of any breeze. But she stared at Ella, her teeth bared, and an expression crossed her face. It almost seemed like a taunt.

Ella breathed out and pulled the trigger. She had a perfect view of the bolt go through the bridge of the woman's nose. She dropped to the ground, and then so did the one behind her.

"What?!" Sanjay whisper-yelled as Ella gasped. "That's not fair," he whined, but she could tell he was joking. "How'd you do that?"

Adrenaline soared through Ella as she continued to stare through the scope. She looked at the other one she'd gotten, the bolt sticking up through their eye. They had on a bike helmet that had fallen off their head at some point, the chin strap leaving it hanging in front of them.

She felt a thousand feet tall. She wanted to scream out the window like a barbarian. She wanted to skip down to the remaining three with a bat and twirl through them, their heads popping off like wine corks.

"You good?" Sanjay had an expectant grin on his face when she backed away from the scope. She slowly pulled the crossbow back through the window and held it out to him.

"That was kind of fun," she said, breathless.

He smiled and nodded. "Oh, to be a surgeon with a basement."

She scooted out of the way and handed him the crossbow, taking her spot by the other window to watch.

By the time they ran out of bolts, there was one still standing with bolts sticking out of his shirtless chest and back. Sanjay offered to go down and take care of him and collect the bolts while Ella started looking through the houses. She especially wanted to find some alcohol or

something to sterilize the bolts. Though she didn't think the crossbow would be helpful in most situations, she didn't want to chance carrying around infectious pointy sticks on their backs and be killed by tripping on their own two feet.

She managed to work her way through four homes before it got too dark to continue. She'd caught a lucky break at the first house—a mess of reusable shopping bags, sitting atop the washing machine—and now walked back down the block, a bag hanging from each arm, thudding against her thighs as she walked towards the house where they'd had their target practice.

Sanjay sat cross-legged on the floor of the living room. His backpack lay on the couch behind him, a pair of shirts to one side. In front of him sat a plastic bucket filled halfway with water.

“What’s that for?”

He grabbed a half-full bottle of dish soap at his right, twisted the cap off, and upended it. The soap was a bright purple color. The air suddenly filled with the scent of artificial lavender and the sharpness of chemicals. “Figured I could cut up some shirts, use them as bandages.” He nodded towards the left of her, and she turned to see an opened bulk package of water bottles. “We can’t haul those around anyway.”

She nodded, impressed. “Wish I’d thought of that. How’s your leg, by the way?”

He wiggled his left knee. “Still sore, but better than yesterday.”

“You should let it breathe, so there isn’t moisture trapped.”

“I will, don’t worry.”

She felt the urge to press him further but reached for the pile of bolts and sat opposite him. She pulled out a tub of disinfecting wipes—lemon-scented—and a set of gardening gloves

she'd found at the third house and began going over each bolt meticulously. They worked in silence, the sound of fabric being cut and the splashing of water the only thing to interject. When he'd washed all the fabric, Sanjay opened the closest window and popped the screen out, nearly missing the open window entirely when he went to dump out the soapy water.

Ella clicked on the electric lantern she'd found as he filled the bucket with the rest of the bottled water. She'd cleaned the bolts as thoroughly as she could, until she'd felt like she was going cross-eyed from staring so intently in the search for specks of gore. She'd gone over the rest of her finds from the day—an old-school bottle opener that she figured could do some damage, for as long as the pointed end held out, some juice packs that would have gone in a kid's school lunch. She hadn't known which flavor of snack bars Sanjay would prefer, and these PTA moms had apparently hoarded them, so she'd brought back a bunch of boxes for them to take their pick. She'd even found a lone, unopened bottle of hand sanitizer, which she hadn't seen since before the infected had overwhelmed the world. When it was just a spreading disease on the news, when the details were still being kept from the public for fear of a panic, hand sanitizer had become nearly impossible to find, and never again for a reasonable price. She'd revealed it to Sanjay, and he'd done a double take.

She wasn't tired, though. She suddenly felt self-conscious, like she'd forgotten to grab something. She realized it was the urge to reach for her phone and scroll through her apps to pass the time. She hadn't felt that itch in a while, and her phone was long gone. She couldn't even remember when she'd lost it. But that hadn't mattered until now, when she had an audience. She didn't like the idea of just staring off into space as she zoned out while Sanjay was doing something productive.

She reached into her backpack, trying not to disturb the arrangement of items. The sketchbook was in the space where she used to put her laptop. The spiral had been smushed over time to the point where she couldn't flip the pages over but would hold it open like a long book. She was hyperaware of the sound of the water splashing as Sanjay wrung out the fabric strips as she leaned against the armchair at her back and looked at her old drawings.

"What's that?"

She fought the urge to cover the sketchbook with her body and pretend like there was nothing to see. "My sketchbook."

"Really? Where'd you find it?"

"It's mine. I used to draw."

"Used to?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't take all my stuff with me. The different pencils, erasers, watercolors, I mean. I stuffed my backpack with everything I thought I might need later on." She remembered packing a flash drive she used for school. It had had stuff on it like her college entrance essays and test scores. She'd really had no idea what was going on.

"Wait a second." Sanjay pulled his backpack in front of him and began rummaging through the pocket. He was elbow-deep at one point. It reminded Ella of *Mary Poppins*, and she had a sudden image of Sanjay with a parrot umbrella. He pulled his arm out like he was wrestling it out of an animal's jaws and produced a mechanical pencil. "Here you go."

She hesitated a moment, finally reaching for it and pulling the pencil from his fingers.

"Thanks," she said.

He could see her hesitation. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, nothing."

"Is it, like, not to the industry standards?"

She gave a soft laugh. "Well, technically no, but I'm not really in a position to be picky, am I?"

"True." He put the backpack back behind him. "So, what did you like to draw?"

She started to tense up again. "Nothing in particular. School assignments, doodles."

"Nude portraits?"

Her face began to heat. "No!" It came out high-pitched, and she blushed even harder.

His eyes widened, and he started to laugh. He covered his mouth to muffle the sounds, but he didn't stop. Ella buried her face in her knees.

"I'm sorry," he said, still laughing a little, "that was just such a surprising sound to come out of you."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she said, her voice muffled by her legs.

"I'm not used to you speaking above a low grunt." She looked up to glare at him to see him smiling. His eyes crinkled at the corners. "I also didn't know you were capable of lying."

"I wasn't lying," she insisted.

"You sure about that? Usually people don't object so strongly to something unless it's to cover something up."

"I don't lie," she said.

"How do I know that's not a lie?"

"That's your problem," she said. "Besides, if my school had had the budget to hire models for *life drawing*, they would have given it to the marching band or the athletics teams first."

He nodded. "Wouldn't surprise me."

"Anyway." She thumbed the corner of the book. "I only ever showed my stuff to my mom, so--"

"Gotcha. Say no more." He stood and took the bucket over to the window to dump it out, closing the window once he was done. The strips of fabric lay in a line on the couch behind him. Somewhere, a suburban ghost wailed at the realization that the water would leave marks on the leather upholstery.

She watched as Sanjay sat down and reached once more into his backpack. He pulled a piece of wood out of his backpack and started scraping at it with his knife.

Ella watched him for a moment. "Where's Pinocchio at?"

He looked up suddenly, like he'd forgotten she was there. "What do you mean?"

"What are you doing?"

He pulled the knife away from the piece of wood. "Well, at first it was a way to kill time. And then I got bored and started carving stuff on purpose. But I had most of them in the car with Eli, so." He trailed off, disappointment on his face.

"What do you like to carve?"

"Nude figures."

That caught her off guard, and she snorted. "Touché."

"I don't know what this one will be yet." He held out the lump of wood. It was jagged in some spots. There wasn't much definition to it. It reminded Ella of a classmate she'd had who liked to make impressions of the inside of their hands with clay. He'd claimed it was to show the difference between them based on assigning emotions to how he clenched his fists. Ella always thought he was bullshitting so he could spend the whole class squeezing clay and flirting with whichever girl he saw first that day.

"I don't know either," she said.

He shrugged and began carving again. After a few minutes, she reached for a chocolate and strawberry-flavored snack bar, and tossed another one at him, narrowly missing his face. The lantern was solar-powered, so they kept it on until they were both too tired to stay awake. By then, the piece of wood resembled something like a giraffe.

Chapter Twelve

Over the next two weeks—despite Ella’s occasional complaint at how long they’d been walking, to which Sanjay would point at the solar-powered watch on his wrist and announce the time at the top of the hour for the rest of the day—they fell into a pattern. They followed the roads, only diverting or cutting through unpaved ground when Sanjay’s map indicated the need to adjust their trajectory. They walked when the sun was up, stopped once or twice to eat and rest, and continued until they came across a building or neighborhood they could hole up in until the sun returned. They only had to camp outside a few times, but Ella hated how vulnerable she felt whenever they did. She always made sure to sleep with her back to a tree or bush, and with Sanjay in view.

They came across infected more often than not, but never in numbers like they’d encountered at the Crossroads. They took turns with the crossbow, making sure to disinfect the bolts as soon as possible. They started a tally of who had more one-shot kills. Ella was ahead by two.

“So how big is the cabin, really?” They were close to the Barracks, maybe three or four days. She’d started thinking about what came after, once she followed Sanjay’s instructions to the cabin and was on her own again. “Like, are we talking plastic surgeon summer retreat-sized? Or is it more of a little house on the prairie kind of deal?”

He shrugged. “Dad’s family built it in the seventies, I think? We couldn’t have afforded a place like it if we bought it today. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms. You couldn’t take a shower the same time as someone else, though, unless you wanted to get a third degree burn or frostbite.”

“I don’t think I’ll have that problem,” Ella said.

He made a grumbling sound. “I still don’t get why you won’t just stay at the Barracks once we get there,” he said. He circled back to this topic every so often. They never made any progress, merely agreeing to disagree or just not talking about it after they’d exhausted their argument points.

She tried not to focus on how much it bothered him. If she was being honest, she’d gotten used to having him at her side. She’d almost tried to convince him at times to change his mind. It was his family’s cabin, after all. She understood the pain of remembering what had been lost, and knew that if she had the option, she wouldn’t go back to her old home.

She could tell she was going to miss him, and it bothered her that she would. But the thought of sleeping on a cot in a tent—or building, maybe, neither of them really knew the details—sharing the space, the food, with hundreds of strangers rose like a wave in her mind every time she thought of the alternative. Yielding control to people who only maybe knew more than she did at what would guarantee another day to live felt too much like sitting in her Jeep, waiting for the traffic to clear. The waiting, the hoping for someone else to decide, would be the thing that killed her. Not even the promise that Sanjay wouldn’t get pulled from her—or that he wouldn’t trade her in once he had the ability to choose who he could rely on—was enough to tempt her through a security gate.

“Come on,” he said. He tapped her on the shoulder, shaking her out of her thoughts. “I think there’s a store up ahead.”

The Safeway was surrounded by two or three other buildings. There had been a fire here; the building furthest from them was a pile of charred debris. The pharmacy next to it had scorch

marks all across its facade, the grocery store maybe half as much. Whoever was here had managed to put it out before it had consumed everything.

They checked the other stores for people and supplies with practiced thoroughness. Ella wasn't surprised when the pharmacy yielded nothing but a few band aids, but she was disappointed all the same. Sanjay had been running a fever the other day, and she was worried that going slower would keep them out on the road longer, meaning he could stay sick for longer, or even catch something worse. The disease wasn't airborne, but Ella's mother had described a weakened immune system like an unlocked door. It wouldn't take much effort or bad luck for other types of viruses or bacteria to find a way in.

She couldn't tell if he was feeling better or just good at keeping things from her, but he was in better spirits today. His hair was tied back in a half ponytail, a step or two ahead of her as they made their way towards the grocery store. "What would you eat right now, if you could?" he asked.

Ella thought about it for a moment. "Ice cream." She said the words slowly, as though she could taste the sugar. "Any flavor with cookies in it."

Sanjay nodded, and said, "an entire loaf of bread. Burn-your-mouth fresh."

"Hawaiian pizza."

He groaned. "You just ruined the game," he said as they reached the doorway of the store, but then added, "tacos."

The automatic doors were jammed open with a shopping cart. Ella pulled it out slowly, the metal screeching in protest. When she finally wedged it free, the doors didn't move.

Sanjay went through first. "Oh, god." He put a hand to his nose. "Something died in here. I don't think we should go in."

The smell hit her nose, and Ella instantly recoiled. She recognized it. “Jesus.” Her voice came out muffled through her hand. “It’s the meat and poultry section. All the product has gone bad.”

“How do you know?” He looked down at her as she walked ahead of him.

“We had a neighbor who liked to hunt, sold us venison. I don’t know if he was scamming us or just didn’t know anything about preserving meat. Or maybe he was trying to hook up with my Mom. She wanted to beat him bloody once we recovered.”

His eyes widened. “You ate it?”

She nodded. “And for the next few days, I wished it had killed me.” She thought of lying in bed, her stomach knotted tight. Her mom, just as sick but trying to power through, sitting at the foot of her bed, rubbing Ella’s ankles to comfort her. She felt herself smiling against her hand.

She looked up at Sanjay, who was watching her expectantly. She stopped smiling. “Anyway, it’s just because there’s so much back there, I bet. If they were in there, they’d have come running by now.”

He gave her a doubtful look, but eventually walked in. She followed, as they passed through one of the narrow checkout aisles. The lights were off; one of the lights had fallen to the ground, broken glass scattering from either side of the metal beam.

It was smaller than she’d expected. Maybe she was used to these kinds of places brimming with people, taking up so much space with carts and baskets and screaming children. Looking at it now, Ella could see that the store wasn’t that much bigger than a school gymnasium.

It was in pretty rough shape. Most of the shelves were bare, some knocked out of place and dangling by one end. She turned the corner into the baking aisle, where the floor was streaked

with flour. Footprints muddled through the white, with flour dirtied to brown; she couldn't tell if it was mud or blood.

"Ella," Sanjay called. She followed his voice to the dairy aisle. It didn't smell of anything back here, somehow. There wasn't much left on the shelves—people always stocked up on dairy when a hurricane came, so it had likely happened before everything fell apart—and the smell of meat wasn't as strong on this side.

Sanjay held a hand against a swinging door. "Check this out." He pushed the door open, letting her go first. "Through the door on the left."

She followed where he pointed and turned the knob on the door. It was unlocked. She pushed the door open and flipped the light switch out of habit. There was a buzzing sound, and then the fluorescent bars overhead flickered to life.

"No way," Sanjay said. He reached for the switch and flipped it down, then back up, then down again.

Ella smacked his hand away. "You're gonna jinx it," she said, stepping slowly into the room.

It must have been the employees' break room, before. Strings of Christmas lights were affixed to the ceiling in curving patterns, their green wires snaking over the ceiling tiles. Stripes of blue masking tape keeping them secure, the plug taped against the wall just next to an outlet. A counter filled the right wall, with a small sink and a microwave affixed to it. Mismatched coffee mugs lined the shelf above. The fridge was humming.

"How is all this running," she asked breathlessly. "The stuff outside wasn't."

Sanjay just shrugged, dropping his backpack to one of the black pleather futons that sat in the center of the room. A coffee table sat between the two, covered with a plastic tablecloth patterned in red and green squares, Christmas trees with cartoon faces smiling up at them.

“That’s only slightly unsettling,” Ella said dryly. She skirted around the couches and crossed over to the fridge. “What do you think?”

“Open if you dare,” Sanjay said. She gave the door handle a jerk, and the airtight seal gave way. There wasn’t much inside; she took one look at a few boxes of ready-to-eat salad, the greens dark and limp from age. She tossed them towards the trashcan just behind her. The shelf on the inside of the door held four unopened cans of Sprite.

“Catch.” She plucked one out of the shelf and tossed it to Sanjay. Grabbing a second can for herself, she held it out in front of her. Sanjay extended his arm, and they snapped the tabs open.

Ella brought the drink to her lips. “Oh my god.” The bubbles buzzed down her throat, and she nearly choked on the sip. “I can’t remember the last time I had a drink that was actually cold.” She tried to take it slow, savor the too-sweet taste, but time hadn’t eroded her addiction to sugar, and she only just managed to keep from chugging the whole thing.

Sanjay sat on the couch, arm on his backpack while he drank slowly. He fixed his gaze on her expectantly. “Well?”

She looked around, understanding his meaning. “It doesn’t exactly feel real.” She’d daydream sometimes about finding a secret door behind a bookshelf in one of the houses at the Ridge, one that led down to a room with food and water and books and music and heat. A space that had already guessed at what you might need, so you wouldn’t have to worry about problems until they’d already happened. All you had to know was which drawer to open.

“I know what you mean. Should we stay?”

She looked at him. “Do you want to stay?”

He nodded. “But do you want to? Do you think it’ll be safe?”

She shrugged. “We’ll have to keep the door unlocked, in case we need to bail.” She didn’t like the idea of a space not having more than one way in and out, but she tried to think of it as a hiding place, rather than a trap. They shouldn’t have to worry about getting out, because nothing would ever know they were there.

He smiled and stood up, crushing the now-empty soda can in his hands. “Well, then. Wanna go run some errands?”

They made trips to the aisles and back, plugging their noses if they drew too close to the side of the store that housed the rancid meat. Ella insisted that only one of them should be moving through the aisles at a time, in case the movement caught any passing attention. Sanjay didn’t fight her on it, but she could tell he thought she was being paranoid.

On her way back, Ella walked down an aisle with plastic beach toys and pool floats and grabbed the biggest beach towels she could find off of the shelves.

“Next time we should make camp in a Walmart,” she said as she stepped through the door. “We could snag actual bedding there.”

Sanjay let go of the coffee table from where he’d dragged it against the wall. The futons now sat against each other, the backs angled up to form the most strangely proportioned bed frame she’d ever seen. He looked up at her and raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think the break room at Walmart would be this nice. I call dibs on the green one.”

Ella tossed the towel at him and began unfolding the remaining striped blue towel. “What have you got there?”

His tote bag was cradled in his arms, the straps hanging limply. He set it down on the coffee table and began rifling through it, moving things to the side and occasionally pulling out a few

items. A bulk package of black socks, a roll of toilet paper, a small electric lantern. If her gear was like Walmart, his was closer to a Target back-to-school commercial.

He pushed his way past a giant bag of trail mix and pulled out a small circular tub.

“What is it?”

He had his hand over the container, concealing the logo. “Close your eyes, please.”

“If you’d said it without the please, I’d be less suspicious.”

“I think you’ll like this.”

She gave him a glare, but there was no heat behind it. “Fine,” she finally said, and covered her eyes with one hand.

She heard him messing with his backpack, and then felt the warmth of his body as he stepped right next to her. “Trust me,” he mock-whispered.

“You’re such a fucking creep.”

“I aim to please.” There was a dull popping sound, and then he said, “breathe in.”

She did, and the smell hit her.

She remembered her arms dusted ghostly with flour as they had made a mess in the kitchen one weekend. Mom had snagged a Saturday off, and Ella had had a craving for brownies more intense than she’d thought possible. Ella had pulled the cocoa powder out of the spice cabinet on tiptoes, but they’d lost the lid to it once before, and the layer of tin foil they used as a substitute fluttered away as the tub tipped out and cocoa powder sailed down like snow.

She opened her eyes. Sanjay stood right in front of her, his face almost too close to hers. He had a look on his face, an expression that said he knew she’d been somewhere else just now.

“You’re not allergic, are you? That may have been a bad idea, I’m just now realizing.”

Sanjay brought the tub of cocoa powder closer to himself and sniffed, his grin widening. “I don’t think I’ve had anything chocolate in forever,” he said, closing his eyes.

Ella stepped back and reached for her backpack. “You know it tastes like ass, right? You’re supposed to use it with baking.”

“I know.” He brought the tub to his face and breathed. Ella could see the brown powder floated out like spores from a fungus, and she watched as Sanjay breathed in. A small smile spread across his features, his eyes closed.

Neither of them spoke as the scent floated between them. The powder made her think of dust motes floating in late afternoon sunlight. Ella used to fall asleep on the couch when she came home from school. It sat against the sliding glass door that led to the backyard and into the forest beyond it. If the sun was still out when she woke up, it would be late enough that the light would have deepened in color as it struggled to stay above the trees and would set the dust in the air alight. She’d sometimes reach out and try to catch them, her hands causing them to swirl and circle around themselves.

She could feel the day catching up to her, fatigue pulling on her wrists like an insistent child.

“I think I’m gonna pass out.”

“Go ahead. I’ll stay up, keep an eye on the door.”

“No, that’s not fair. Your fever might come back.”

“I’ll be fine.” He reached back in the tote bag and pulled out a bottle of cold medicine, orange liquid sloshing around as he shook it.

“Where did you even find that?” She’d checked the health aisle first thing. She’d been able to find boxes of tampons easily, but the medicine and disposable razors were long gone.

“It was hiding under a shelf that had fallen off the frame. Hasn’t expired yet, either.”

“Lucky break. So, is it just knockoff Dayquil, or is it the kind of cough syrup they used to make you show ID for?”

He snorted. “Why, you trying to get high?” He broke the seal on the cap and took a small swig. “Tastes like burnt orange Jolly Ranchers,” he said with a grimace, wiping at his mouth with his shirtsleeve.

“When you get to the Barracks, you should see if they’ll give you anything stronger.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “I figure a place is only as safe as how high you can get without worrying about the infected catching you off guard.”

He shook his head. “Not interested.”

“You’re such a boy scout sometimes,” she said.

“No, I’ve been high before. Just not a fan of it. It’s a different impairment than being drunk, you know? Shit feels too heavy, like gravity’s pushing down harder.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, so who’s the boy scout, now?”

They went on like that for a while. There were no windows, so they couldn’t tell if the sun was still up or not. Ella could feel the tiredness behind her eyes, but it crested and fell as the conversation did. The ability to speak above a low mutter had them chatting for at least an hour, and about nothing very important. Ella wondered what other kind of blessings this place was willing to put forth. Maybe the plumbing would still work, and she could wash her face later.

The silences between their conversations began to stretch longer. At one point, she pulled out her sketchbook and began to flip through to some of her better drawings. She thought about the

strangeness of where they were sitting, and of how it didn't really register in her mind as strange. She couldn't tell if the knowledge bothered her or not.

She looked at Sanjay, who was flipping through a magazine he'd taken from one of the aisles. She could remember the name of the celebrity whose face smiled at her from the cover. Wondered if he was alive, or if the celebrities were all wandering in their cavernous houses, unable to hit the keypads that would unlock their private gates and allow them to feed.

"Do you think we're better off?"

"What?"

She shrugged. "The whole thing. Do you think it'll be for the best, like in the long run?"

He frowned. "Of course not. What are you talking about?"

"Sometimes I wonder if this is some kind of an overcorrection. Environmental retaliation, nature trying to restore itself. Like antibodies going after a virus."

"You're assuming that the natural world isn't inherently brutal. There's a breed of louse that feeds off a fish's tongue until the tongue falls off, and the louse *becomes* the tongue. Fungus that takes over ants' minds, driving them up a tree to explode and rain spores down on all the other ants."

"Why do you know any of that?"

"I was an Animal Planet nerd as a kid. My point is, this isn't about restoring balance to the ecosystem. This is just more of the same, only we're not used to being on the receiving end." He played with the flashlight, tapping out Morse code on the ceiling. "The human race doesn't like being dominated, but it's forgetting that we are a part of the ecosystem that caused us to lose our status as apex predators in the first place."

"So wise, Sanjay."

“So then why do you think it’s a good thing?”

“I don’t think it’s a good thing, necessarily. I don’t want people to suffer.” She paused to try and find the words. “I remember this nature doc I saw once. One of the people being interviewed was talking about how climate change wasn’t about saving the planet. If the environment collapsed, eventually it would heal itself, or evolve into something else.”

“You’re assuming that this is going to wipe us out all the way, but that’s never happened.”

She laughed. “And thus, is never going to happen.”

“Maybe someday, but not now. You’ve been on your own for too long. You haven’t seen some of these compounds they’ve set up. The world’s not ending, Ella, just changing.”

“I think it’s too soon to tell.”

“The Black Plague killed a third of the world, and we’re still here. Spanish Flu infected as much, killed two to three percent. It could be too soon to tell, but that goes both ways.”

“Okay, fine, so if we’re not getting wiped out, and we’re gonna bounce back, or all the infected are going to eventually crumble into dust, then what’s gonna happen after that? You don’t think people—or society, I guess—can learn from it, and be better?”

He gave her a look. “Maybe? Probably not? It’s the future, I don’t know. I didn’t think you’d be that optimistic about it, to be honest.”

“I feel like I don’t have a choice. I mean, if things just keep being shitty, then what’s the point of all this?”

“There’s no point to it. Not on purpose. Bad shit happens, shit that doesn’t come with helpful explanations, or directions.”

“Doesn’t that make you angry?”

“Sometimes. But I can’t think about that when we’re on this side of the wall. You know what that’s like.”

She did. She’d been pushing her thoughts down into a corner of her chest for almost a year now. Sometimes it felt like she was pushing all of herself in there too and watching from behind a screen while her body and brain did the work to keep her alive. She was preserving herself, holding onto everything until she eventually found refuge to let it all spill out. That day had started to seem less and less likely to come the longer this went on, and each day was just more of the same. Keep moving, ration supplies, don’t let your guard down, eyes and ears open wide.

“Sometimes I wish I could just step outside and scream,” she said absently. “Or even just sing off-key.”

“You used to sing?”

“Not like I was a singer. But just that fun, stupid way people sing. Showers, car rides, weekends where Mom had a twenty-six-hour shift and I had the house to myself. Sometimes I’d turn the TV up so loud I thought a neighbor would start banging on the door.”

He smiled to himself. “If you came to the Barracks with me, we can make them start a karaoke night. Heck, they might already have one.”

She sighed. “Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not. All I mean to say is, if you ever get tired of being on your own, you’ll know where to find me.” He put away the magazine and stretched. “Do you mind if I turn off the light?”

She shook her head and started to put away her sketchbook. The room went black for a second, but then lightened to where she could see things dimly. She looked up to see the Christmas lights were on. Red, blue, orange, and green bulbs set the room in a warm glow.

“That’s actually pretty awesome,” Sanjay said as he walked back over.

Ella unlaced her boots, but kept her socks on, and draped the beach towel over herself. There weren't any pillows, but the cushion was comfortable enough.

She stretched flat on her back, muttered a goodnight to Sanjay as he settled himself, and stared up at the lights for as long as she could.

Chapter Thirteen

Ella felt as though she were underwater. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears as she stood in a darkened hallway, taking in the sight of the mess that lay before her.

She'd tried her hardest to keep from dreaming up this memory, but there really wasn't any way to wish for better dreams. Not in ways that made it come true, anyway.

Ella's mother lay on the ground. Her arms wrapped around her torso, as though she were hugging herself. Or as if someone had arranged them that way. Blood had pooled on the right side of her head; her hair, wrapped in the bun she always twirled it into before she left the house, lay soaking in it, light brown darkened to russet. The space where her shoulder met her neck was stained red.

Ella dropped to her knees and leaned forward. She slid herself along the floor until she was closer.

The blood was only a little damp; she'd been lying there for a while. Ella put her hands on both sides of her mother's neck, pressing with her fingers as she tried to find broken skin. She was struck with a memory of her mother doing just this to her, checking her lymph nodes when she was sick. She found nothing.

She stretched the fabric of her mother's scrubs away from her neck. The blood was darker here, but no bites. As she ran her hand across the blood, she felt a small hole. Ella tore her backpack off her shoulders and pulled the water bottle out of the pocket. Before Sanjay could stop her, she unscrewed the cap and poured it out onto the wound, scrubbing away the stubborn bloodstains.

The space in her mother's skin looked out of place. Ella knew she had to be going into some kind of shock, subconsciously. That her reaction to seeing a bullet wound would be one of

confusion, rather than literally any other possibility, was a result of her mind trying to protect her from the truth of what she was seeing.

Ella opened her eyes. The ceiling was glowing from the holiday lights. She put a hand to her chest, willing her racing heart to slow as she reminded herself where they were. She gripped at the towel that lay over her and rubbed her thumb against it, forcing herself to pay attention to the sensation of the fabric on her fingers.

“Ella?” In the darkness, Sanjay’s voice was soft, as though there were others he didn’t want to disturb. “You okay?”

She pulled the towel almost to her chin. “Fine.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

She bit the inside of her cheek. She wanted sleep, but she knew that wouldn’t come for another hour or so. The futon felt too big for her; she couldn’t reach either end, laying so close to the center as she was, and with the dark rendering her totally blind, she had an uncanny feeling of being untethered from the world. She imagined this was something like those sleep deprivation tanks she’d seen a video about.

“I found my mom’s body at the hospital,” she said. She knew she had said it out loud, but the act of speaking felt involuntary. Something about the silence when Sanjay was around gave her the sense that she needed to fill it.

“It was after I got home. I’d had to abandon the car on the highway. Traffic was backed up from an accident that was probably from someone turning while they were driving. Anyway, I got out, hid in a ditch until everything died down, then started walking back. I was just glad that I hadn’t gotten very far. I’m sure I would have died of hypothermia if I’d had to walk any further.”

"Are you talking about when this all went down in August?"

She nodded. "I was on my way to a music festival. I was supposed to go with my cousin, but she blew me off at the last second. I knew Mom wouldn't let me go alone, so I just didn't tell her. But I called her when shit began to go down, and she told me to get home. So, I did."

"There were bullet holes in her torso. I couldn't see at first—her blood had soaked into her scrubs, and the color was so dark, almost black. I didn't want to touch it." She remembered how her mother's body had looked. Her eyes were open, staring off down a hallway. She seemed like a wax figure, as though she was a solid object, and not a collection of body parts put into motion by her soul. Ella hadn't wanted to touch her, because she knew that her mother wouldn't respond. She wasn't there anymore.

"There were a bunch of medical supplies around her, a tipped over cart. They must have been looting the place for supplies. I don't know." She sniffed loudly. "I grabbed what I could, and I left. I knew she wasn't the only body in there, and I didn't want to stick around for any of them to start moving."

She closed her eyes, not bothering to fight against the onslaught of memories as they came. Blood on her tongue when she bit down on her cheek to keep from sobbing out loud. The skin of her cheeks itching from dried tears after she'd been sitting in the same position—legs crossed, her mother just out of reach—for what felt like forever. The emptiness she felt when she closed her mother's eyelids with two fingers, as she could tell even from such sparse contact, that no warmth lingered in the body.

"That's why you didn't want to go to the hospital," Sanjay said softly.

"I shouldn't have stopped us from going," she said. "If your wounds had gotten infected--"

"Don't worry about me."

She folded her hands over one another, trying to fight the urge to fidget. Her guilt at steering them away from the hospital surprised her. When she'd lied to him, it had been out of the fear that he'd make her go back in there. What would have happened, though, if they had? He wasn't sadistic or had any hidden agenda; she'd known that as soon as he'd opened his mouth.

If they'd gone back to the hospital, looking for basic first aid, would they have been overwhelmed by the infected? Would the place have been humming with the droning hum of dead voices? She remembered a theory someone had had about ghosts, that they stuck around in the mortal world because they had unfinished business. Something that they had left unresolved in the world before parting with it so unexpectedly. She'd always assumed they made the sounds they did when they saw someone unbitten, like wolves howling across distances to let each other know they'd found prey. She imagined them as they seemed--lost people, crying out for help--and wondered what sorts of errands they were asking her to run, what messages they were trying to pass on to her, if only she could understand.

But she was less afraid of facing a horde than she was of the possibilities of how she'd find her mother if she went there. Would she be faced to see how much of her mother had decomposed? Would the body be missing?

Would her mother be walking towards her, the blood from her gut wound now wine-dark and iridescent?

"I holed up in a house in The Ridge. I'd left the door to the house unlocked, let Spartacus run into the backyard. I couldn't go back there, never went back to that neighborhood."

"Wait, where did you live before?"

"Barret Pines."

"What?" she nodded, keeping her gaze downturned. "You used to live there?"

She nodded again. "So, I wasn't fibbing about that one. I really had cleared everything out. There hasn't been anything worth salvaging there in three months."

"So, you just...stuck around." She looked up to see him giving her an astonished expression.

"Well where was I going to go? My car was miles away. I still hadn't really understood the magnitude of what was happening, so I didn't want to steal anyone's car at first. I mean, I didn't like any of my neighbors, but I still knew them." The clock ticked loudly. "And the neighborhood wasn't deserted. Some were still holed up in their houses, waiting it out. The ones who turned couldn't remember the mechanics of their doors. I wound up walking into more than a few houses with infected doing laps on the first floor, waiting for something to chase."

"Sometimes," she added, "I used to think about going back to the hospital. To bury her, cremate her. Daydream's a better word for it. That'd probably be easier."

"You can't." Sanjay's voice trembled.

She sighed. "I didn't say I'd do it. It's more like an imaginary bucket list, or a false promise. You know how you lie to yourself about the future?"

"I think you might be talking about hope."

She wiped her face. "No, I'm not. Hope is when you believe in the chance that things will change. You genuinely think you can reach something better, despite what it will take to get it. Even when it's impossible, if your belief is earnest, you can call it faith. I'm talking about the ways we trick ourselves into pretending that there's something to look forward to, because we're too scared to face reality, or too cowardly to take the easy way out."

Sanjay didn't say anything. He didn't have to; she could read his thoughts across his face as if he'd shouted them at her. "Don't worry, I haven't got any plans for that. Don't want to. At

least I know what I'm up against in this life. I'd rather fight the monsters I know, then walk blindly towards one I couldn't see." She shrugged. "Unless I get bitten."

"You won't get bitten."

"You literally can't know that. It's a likely possibility, basic probability. I'd rather face the unknown before I let myself stay trapped in a void like that."

"I don't think anything is in them anymore."

She gave a wry grin. "You don't know that, though, do you?"

He shrugged. "Call it faith, I guess. But I believe it's the truth. I have to."

"Why?"

"Because if I thought that the ones I loved—the ones I lost—were still in their bodies, still on this plane, then I could never have left them. I don't think I would have been able to leave them, even if it meant being bitten." He sighed, then added, "if you're so resigned to keep on living, you might want to think about finding something to live for."

"I am. I'm living for myself. For my mom."

"She wouldn't want you to be alone, though, would she?"

He had it backwards. Her mom wouldn't want her to be alone, because her mom was supposed to still be here. If she hadn't been so hell-bent on doing her job, on helping people that didn't care about her, that saw her as a messenger to shoot over and over while she saved their stupid lives and made them more comfortable than they deserved. If she had called off work that day.

If, when Ella called her, she'd left the hospital, driven home, waited for Ella there. Or if she'd driven out to the highway and picked her daughter up. If she hadn't left Ella alone, she

wouldn't be where she was. She wouldn't be looking up at the ceiling, trying to find where the squiggly black line led to Sanjay's side, wondering if she'd gotten things wrong, somehow.

Just then, she wished her mother was there, if only so she could scream at her for leaving Ella so unprepared.

"She would want me to do the smart thing," she finally said. "The thing that keeps me alive, and that doesn't allow for fuckups."

"What, like me?"

"No," she said quickly. He lowered his head back onto his armrest. "I mean mistakes. Margin for error. The more people around you, people who may have good intentions, who want the same things you do. But you can't expect people not to look out for them and theirs first."

"Can you blame them?"

"I don't," she replied. "It's what I'd do. What I did, until I didn't have the option anymore. I'd never fault someone for choosing a loved one over a stranger. But I also don't want to put my life in the hands of someone who won't view it as it is to me, as something irreplaceable. And if someone isn't part of your family, your tribe, then they're always replaceable."

"You're not replaceable, Ella. Not to me."

She fought the urge to remind him that he didn't have anyone else, either. "I'm living for her," she repeated. "I'm the only one left to remember her. The only one that would count, anyway. I keep going because she didn't get the chance to do it herself."

"And who is going to remember your mom when you're not around? Who's going to remember you, if you don't let anyone get the chance?"

She burrowed further into the couch. "You won't?"

He turned his gaze to her. "Of course, I will."

“Then I’m set.” She grinned like she was joking, but she could feel her heart racing. She hadn’t really given any thought to what would happen when they got to the cabin. Logically, she knew that if he said he was going to push on and head for the Barracks, that he wasn’t just saying it to say it. She felt like a little kid hanging onto Sanjay’s sleeve, pulling him back as he tried to walk away. She’d always held onto her solitary nature like a badge of honor. Now, it felt more like Sanjay was holding his hand out to her, trying to pull her back from drifting into emptiness.

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t push. “When the sun’s up.”

Her eyes were finally adjusting, and she could just make out his shape. There was rustling noise as he adjusted himself. “Okay.” He rotated until he was almost on his stomach. His arm stretched out across the cushion. She watched as he let his hand rest across the seam between their futons. His knuckles just brushed the heel of her palm.

He’d touched her before. Grabbed her wrist to make her run faster, pushed her out of the way of something. Tried to kill her. But those times had been tainted by adrenaline, and everything that had happened either didn’t register or felt like she was being slapped from how surprised she’d been at the contact. She looked at his fingers, curling in towards his palm slightly, and realized that she hadn’t touched anyone that hadn’t been dying or trying to kill her in almost a year.

She’d never been a touchy-feely kind of person. The only one she ever showed any real affection toward was her mom. She and her cousin had mostly stuck to high-fives, but mostly showed their love for each other in the kinds of ways people used for the people they’d grown up with. There was no need to put on any sort of face or be at all composed or put together. Most of their time hanging out had been shared in silence, spread out across the living room furniture as

they scrolled through their phones and read out tweets or described memes if they thought they were worth mentioning.

But Ella had been on her own for so long. By choice, maybe, but it was only possible because of something devastating. His fingers against her hand felt like an accident. She'd read about touch starvation before, though she hadn't really thought twice about it. The difference, she now realized, between avoiding being touched by those she didn't trust and having nothing to orient herself with in the world, no way to know if she was still acting like a person, was this. His touch may not have been intentional, yet it managed to communicate more to her than she would have believed if he'd said it out loud. That she wasn't alone, that he was looking out for her, and looking to her to do the same. She was struck by how much she didn't want him to die.

She pushed her hand out a little, turning it over so their palms were against one another. His thumb gently brushed the back of her hand once, his eyes closed, breath even. She closed her eyes and waited for sleep to take her as well.

Chapter Fourteen

She awoke again a little later. For once, her dream hadn't been a memory. She'd dreamt that her backpack had gone missing, and she'd been going from room to room in all the houses in the neighborhood, trying to find it. Infected kept crossing her path and gave her directions, but she couldn't understand through the dry rasping moans. Quietly, she stood from the couch, wincing when it creaked, and stepped outside. After learning that the plumbing did, in fact, still work, she walked out into the main store area, stretching her legs.

She closed her eyes and walked down an aisle with one hand outstretched, her fingers running along metal shelves and various packaging. The sky was a dull lavender hue, painting the store in cool shades of bluish light. She wound her way down one aisle, then up another.

Ella wondered if it wouldn't hurt to stay here for just another day. They weren't that far away from the Barracks, maybe two or three more days of walking. She thought it might be a good idea to follow him there first, then just have him write the directions to the cabin out for her. She didn't want to move in, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to know how to get there, if something happened and she needed help. They probably had some sort of communications set up with people like her and Burt, people who didn't care about going into treacherous areas to track down supplies. She wondered now if that hadn't already been going on with Burt. It would explain how he was able to move some of his heavier finds, seemingly without any help. He'd never invited her along, at the very least.

She walked outside and walked around the building, trailing her hand along the rough brick exterior. She realized as she kept walking that the spoiled meat smell was discernible out here too. But it wasn't the smell—which she now realized was nearly unbearable—that made her cover her mouth to muffle a scream as she rounded the corner.

There were bodies on the ground. They were stretched out next to each other on a blue outdoor tarp. Blood trailed from them, on the tarp, and spilled out onto the hard-packed earth, dull from coagulating. Dark, oil-slick blood and dull, garnet blood had drained out of the bodies, resisting each other like oil and water. The bodies were all so close to one another. Heads rested on chests, arms draped over one another. It was as if they'd all settled in to watch a movie, falling asleep against each other.

Bite marks stood out on some of them, the blood loss bleaching their skin to brightness. Bullet holes marked their temples, their cheekbones. One of them was missing an eye, the socket blown out and widened so that bone peeked from behind skin.

She couldn't tell which bodies had been infected and which had been human. She supposed it didn't really matter now.

She began to back away. Her heart was racing, hands shaking. She normally would have been relieved to see dead bodies, rather than moving ones, but this wasn't normal. Someone had laid those bodies out. Brought them here. Either killed them on the tarp or killed them somewhere else and dumped them and the tarp in the store. The store that had felt like a clubhouse, like a hideout, suddenly felt like a bear trap, with Ella's foot poised over the trigger panel.

Just then, a sound cut through the early morning stillness.

Tires rolled on asphalt. The rumble of an engine clicked off. For a second, there was silence.

Then Ella heard voices.

She immediately crouched down and flattened herself against the wall, looking ahead to try and get a look.

She could see three figures moving. There was a flash of color, but it disappeared before she could understand what she was looking at. They were still by their vehicle. She couldn't see a logo, but it had the same angular frame of a Jeep, if bulkier. Maybe a Humvee.

Ella forced herself to breathe slowly as she crept backwards. The adrenaline was making her hands shake as she pushed herself to half-standing. She turned the corner, sidestepping the bodies, and saw a door along the back wall. A cinderblock kept it propped open. Slower than she wanted, but faster than she should, she made her way over. She opened the door only as much as was absolutely necessary, squeezing herself through the doorway. She turned and looked down towards the front doors. She was in the same small hallway as before. The break room was just up ahead.

As her fingers touched the door to the break room, she heard faint footsteps near the front of the store. She opened it and slid behind the door. She dragged the trashcan and placed it against the door.

"Sanjay." She knelt by the couch and shook him. "Wake up, we have to go."

He groaned a protest. "What's wrong?" His voice was deep and scraggly from sleep. She kept shaking him as he dragged a hand over his face, eyes squeezing tighter as he stretched. "Cut it out, I'm awake."

"We have to go now there's people coming." Her heart was in her throat. She began mentally checking off her list. Where was her bag? Maybe her dream had been a premonition.

The fatigue was still there, but he sat up and blinked his eyes open, alert. "How many Zacks?"

"No Zacks. People. Three just pulled up and there's a pile of bodies around the back of the building."

He reached for his jacket. "What do you mean?"

"You were right, okay? We shouldn't have stayed here, I should have checked and made sure it was safe."

He shook his head. "We should have checked. Are you sure?"

"Do you want to go see for yourself? The door's right back there."

"No, no, let's just get out of here."

They left the groceries they'd set on the coffee table. Sanjay unplugged the Christmas lights, plunging them back into darkness before slowly opening the door. Ella crouched and walked towards the aisles, peering around the corners and listening for any movement.

"You sure we shouldn't try the backdoor?"

She shook her head. "That's wher they put the bodies; what if they're headed there now to dump more?"

"Then come on, we can run if we have to."

"But they've got a car."

"Ella, what do you want to do? We can either hide and wait for them to find us, or we can run. Those are our only options."

She swallowed. Her heart was pounding. No one had seen them yet, but she felt hunted in a way that she had never felt with the infected. "Let's go."

They moved as quickly as they could without making noise. Ella walked carefully this time, eyes trained on the floor to avoid kicking anything down the aisle. She cleared the aisle, Sanjay just behind her, and started towards the checkout stations.

"Ella." Sanjay's voice was low, but louder than it had been before. "Hang on a second."

"Stop talking."

"Hands where I can see them," said another voice. Ella whirled around.

An older man stood behind Sanjay. Bald head, grey-white beard shaved close to his jaw. He rested one hand on Sanjay's shoulder. The other held a pistol against Sanjay's temple, finger on the trigger.

"What are you doing here?"

"Get the fuck away from him," Ella snarled. "Right now."

"Something tells me this gun's gonna be a little faster than that butter knife you got there."

"You won't get to pull that trigger twice, asshole."

"If it's all the same to you," Sanjay said in an even tone, "I'd like to be left out of this Mexican standoff, please."

"Shut up, Sanjay."

The man pushed the muzzle of the gun deeper against Sanjay's temple. "You oughta listen to her. I'm fine with killin' you as it is; least she's got the balls to stand her ground."

Ella heard footsteps. "Jesus, Shaun, do you have to be such a cliché?" Two others stepped into the aisle.

Ella hadn't lived in complete solitude these past months. Burt, the strangers that crossed her path, the ones she'd begrudgingly trade with, if she felt like they'd leave if she humored them. They more or less were all dressed the same; function over form, colors muted and dulled by time and use. This woman looked so unlike those that she had seen, that Ella had a fleeting thought that she was hallucinating or still asleep and dreaming up a very strange nightmare.

The woman who'd spoken to Shaun couldn't have been more than twenty-five. She had on an army surplus jacket with buttons and patches ironed on. Black boots, distressed blue jeans. She

wore a number of gold rings--and weirdly, Ella noticed, what had likely once been an intact Ring-Pop--that complemented her warm brown skin.

None of that really registered, though, as Ella took in the sight of her cotton-candy colored hair. Pink, purple, and turquoise hair dye had been applied seemingly at random to her bleached white hair. Most of it was wound in a main braid, the thin locks that weren't wound up in it draped across her shoulders. The sides of her head were shaved, though it was starting to grow in. Ella noticed, after the initial surprise at such a sight, that she had a fair amount of dark regrowth coming in at the roots, and the color was faded in a way that didn't look intentional. Some of the blond was greyer, as previous dye jobs overlapped one another, the remains mixing over time into a muddy lavender.

She still managed to look like something out of a comic book. She had makeup on, for some reason, red-orange lipstick and thick black winged eyeliner. She was strapped from head to toe in holsters and harnesses, some legit, some improvised from other materials like Ella's. She wanted to ask where the girl had gotten a damn machete, but now didn't seem like the right time.

"These two were fixin' to take the car," said Shaun. "Or does that not fall under your list of important matters, Orla?"

Orla glared at the back of his head. "Okay, can you stop pouting for a second? If they had a gun to shoot you with, I don't think she'd be holding a hand axe."

"I got the drop on both of them, so you're welcome."

"And do you see either of them packing?" Orla walked into Shaun's line of sight and waved between Ella and Sanjay. "Or did you already ask to see their conceal-carry licenses?"

"You wanna tell your friend to take this gun off my head?" Sanjay turned his head slightly to look at Orla, but Shaun pushed the gun harder. Sanjay closed his eyes and exhaled loudly. Ella fought the urge to bum rush them.

"He's being excessive," the other person said, "but he's also right. We're not gonna let you take our car." Ella watched as they came into view. Red, curling hair fought to be set free from a dark blue beanie that was trying its best to stay on its owner's head. Where Orla seemed to be drawn in bold, her features were softer, except for her jawline, which was clenched into sharp relief, betraying her soothing tone of voice. Equally as decked out as the other two, Ella kept an eye on the hand holding onto a sawed-off shotgun.

"They've got a point," Orla said to Ella, pointing at the redhead. "That's Bailey, by the way." Bailey waved, giving a smile that didn't reach their eyes.

"So, here's the thing." Orla took a step towards Ella. Ella didn't back away, but she didn't raise the axe between them. She didn't care that she was outnumbered, or that they had bullets. She'd cut them all down if she had to.

"You seem cool. Take-no-shit, scrappy kind of girl."

Ella raised her eyebrows. She saw Sanjay wince out of the corner of her eye.

"It honestly feels like there's a misunderstanding going on. And we've been driving around all night, and I'm honestly just ready to go to sleep. But we can't really move on unless people start answering questions, instead of adding more to the pile."

Ella took a step forward. "You're right. So why don't you tell the one with the bullets to back the fuck off before I decapitate him and put him with the rest of your friends?"

Orla blinked. "What do you mean?"

Ella caught movement. Bailey came closer, so they were facing Shaun. “Did you not burn the bodies, Shaun?”

Shaun faltered, the gun moving a half inch away from Sanjay. “Did you seriously expect me to do that on my own? They’re fucking heavy!”

“You realize how unsanitary that is?” Bailey rubbed their forehead. “You don’t know what their bodies are releasing into the air. Or what they’re attracting? We could have walked into a horde right now!”

Shaun shoved Sanjay between his shoulder blades, causing him to trip forward. He holstered his gun under his left arm, the leather straps of the harness creaking loudly as he did. “I’m getting so damn sick and tired of gettin’ paired to go on supply runs with fuckin’ kids. We don’t work as a team, nothing gets done.”

“Well then you should have told us, Shaun.” Orla turned away from Ella, the three strangers now all facing each other. Ella glanced sideways at Sanjay. She suddenly felt like she was eavesdropping on their meeting. “Maybe we shouldn’t have just told you to do that on your own, but you should have told us you needed the help. How else would we know?”

Shaun just shook his head and muttered to himself. “What I need is a drink.” He stormed off towards the back hallway. Ella fought the urge to run after him.

“So,” Sanjay started. Orla and Bailey turned around to face them. “Who are you, for starters?”

Ella began ticking off on her fingers, “who are the bodies, why did you kill them, what do you want with us—”

“Want with you?” Bailey gave Orla a confused look. “We don’t want anything from you. If anything, I’m kind of curious why you’re here?”

“We thought the place was deserted,” Sanjay offered. Ella fought the urge to glare at him. She knew there wasn’t much else to do but start answering questions, but the habit of keeping herself to herself died hard. “The break room was empty. There was stuff in the fridge, from before.”

Bailey gave Orla a look. “Told you we should have done a sweep first thing.”

Orla waved a hand dismissively. “We haven’t been sleeping in the store. Too easy to get trapped.”

Ella nodded in agreement. “So then where were you sleeping? In the car?”

“The roof.” Orla pulled herself free of the leather scabbard holding her machete across her back, laying it down on one of the checkout conveyor belts. “You can see for miles, there’s a ladder leading into the building and one that leads down the back wall, and you can’t climb either without still having a pulse.”

Bailey laid their weapon down next to the machete. “The bodies were here when we arrived. We think whoever lived here had one or two that had been bitten. Some of them had gunshot wounds; it kind of looked like a suicide pact.”

Orla added, “and either some of the bitten chickened out at the last second or were already too far gone by the time they bit it.” Bailey visibly cringed at the pun. “The doors were shut and locked when we first rolled up. Once we took care of them, laid them where you found them, we put a shopping cart in the door to make sure it didn’t ever catch us off guard. You might not have been able to open it just now, if you’d made it that far.”

Ella shrugged. “Glass always breaks if you use enough force.”

Orla gave an approving nod. “We’re sorry if they scared you. They were supposed to be cremated by now, but we wound up getting kind of lost while we were scoping out a nearby

suburb, so we figured it'd be safer to move once we could see better. The headlights on the Jeep don't work."

"So," Sanjay said, "where are you all from?"

The whole thing felt very surreal to Ella. She felt like she was doing an icebreaker on the first day of school.

"We're from the Barracks." Bailey took off their beanie and ruffled their hair, sending it bouncing around their head. "We were sent out to do a supply run."

Sanjay's eyes lit up. "The Barracks? What are you doing here, then?"

"Supply runs aren't like a Target run, or a trip to the grocery store." They grinned expectantly. Orla made a disapproving noise and rolled her eyes. "The more we can bring back, the less often people have to go out and put themselves at risk. So, we hole up here, and every day we go out and pick up where we left off, and we don't stop until we can't fit anything else in the car."

"We're pretty close to calling it," Orla said. "I can barely drive the car anymore, I'm so smooshed up against the steering wheel from all the stuff in the cab."

"Plus, Shaun is getting to be unbearable," Bailey added. They shared a pained look with each other. "But, to answer your other question," they said to Ella, "we'll be out of your hair in a few days, as long as you don't mind having upstairs neighbors."

Ella looked at Sanjay. She could tell he was excited by this new development, but she couldn't quite get the knot out of her stomach. She'd been ready to lose him, and ready to die herself, but not without taking at least one of them with her. Now they were sleeping fifty feet from each other.

“I guess we’ll go put our stuff back,” Sanjay said. Ella bit her lip and nodded, not wanting to talk in front of them.

“Okay,” Orla said. “Well,” she trailed off, and with an awkward nod of her head, walked back out towards the Jeep. Bailey gave a wave and followed in Orla’s wake.

Chapter Fifteen

“I know what you’re gonna say.” Sanjay followed Ella into the break room, shutting the door behind him.

“I’m still gonna say it.” She turned to face him.

He let his hands fall to his sides and sighed. “Okay, go ahead.”

She began to count off with her fingers again. “We don’t know them, they could be lying, he had a *gun* to your head—”

“This is all true.”

“I don’t care if they’re from the Barracks, we can get there without them, I don’t even need to be here—”

“Come on,” he interrupted. “I thought we were past that. Just ‘because they let us ride along doesn’t mean they’re gonna drag you past the gates kicking and screaming.’”

“You don’t know. What if their numbers are dropping, and people have stopped volunteering for stuff? Press-gangs were a thing, you know.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and locked eyes with her. “That’s not gonna happen, okay? If they try any freaky shit, we leave together, yeah?”

She blinked. “You mean that?”

He shrugged. “Why would I want to stay somewhere that wouldn’t let me leave except for being their Postmates guy? I made a promise, okay? You don’t go into the Barracks unless you want to.”

“I *don’t* want to.”

“I know.” He squeezed her shoulders before letting go, then turned and opened the door.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna go talk to them.”

“How stupid are you, really? If this is going to be a regular thing you do, I’d like to know now so I can quit while I’m ahead.”

“That guy already threatened me. If they’d thought we were worth killing, they would have done it already. At the very least we can see if they’ll let us take from some of their haul.” She knew he was just fishing for excuses. She could see the eagerness in his posture. He wanted to go make friends. Still, Ella couldn’t shake the dread from her thoughts.

“What if they’re cannibals?”

He had his mouth open to speak, but he closed it with a snap. He blinked a few times and fought to contain a grin. “Cannibals?”

“It’s the end of the world; you don’t know what people are capable of.”

“Okay. Okay, you know what? You seem like the kind of person who believes things when she sees them.”

“I guess so?”

He flashed a crooked grin. “Then watch this.” He opened the door and disappeared behind it.

For the next few hours, Ella alternated between pacing the room, counting their supplies, reorganizing her backpack, and fighting the urge to just start running. She even tried to distract herself by reading Sanjay’s magazine, but the only sort of pop culture drama she and her mom been interested in was the *Bachelor* franchise, and the magazine’s date was during one of their hiatuses.

She didn’t want to ditch; not like she’d wanted to initially. This came from the animal instinct she’d spent so long listening to and tuning it out was easier said than done. She was

afraid that these people couldn't be trusted. She was afraid that Sanjay was getting himself stuck in another high-rise, one that she wasn't sure she could help him escape, if they turned on him. She knew, though, that there was a chance they didn't want to hurt them. Hell, if Sanjay was any indication, they could genuinely want to help the two of them.

She didn't like not being able to let her guard down. She'd started to learn how, with Sanjay. He didn't know everything about her, and she knew she wasn't ready to bear every secret of hers to him, but he'd cleared some of her shorter walls. She thought of his hand in hers, sleeping when he kept watch these past weeks, him doing the same when she watched over his sleeping form. She'd been able to trust him, even to rely on him a bit.

What if they took him from her?

The door opened suddenly, and Ella shot up to her feet and bumped into the coffee table, falling on her butt. Sanjay stood in the doorway, looking down at her, surprise and worry crossing his face.

"What the fuck?" Ella picked herself up off the floor. "You could have been anyone. What if I was changing?"

"Sorry, sorry," Sanjay said. She could tell he wasn't, really. His face was wide with excitement. "Ella. Come upstairs. They finished getting rid of the bodies—disgusting, by the way, I get why you freaked—but now they're up on the roof. They've got a campfire going. They found a billion unopened packages of hot dogs in some dude's freezer."

"Bonfire? The sun's not even down yet." She knew she was distracted right now, but it couldn't have grown that late, could it?

"Can you not be all cool and unbothered right now?" He grabbed her shoulders the way he had earlier, only this time he squeezed tighter. "Ella. Listen to me. They've got marshmallows.

They are making *s'mores*." He laughed, disbelief in his voice. "Can you believe it? Come on, I'll show you how to get up there." He walked back out the door, leaving it open, and disappeared as he turned right down the hall.

Ella sighed. She told herself it would be smart to stay close to them, in case they tried anything. She couldn't protect either one of them if she hid in the break room the whole day.

When she came out, Sanjay was standing by a metal ladder with peeling yellow paint on the rungs. He pointed up, to where she could see a door slanting down into the small tunnel where the ladder surpassed the ceiling.

"The door won't stay open, but you just push on it once you can reach it," he said.

She tore her gaze from the ladder to look at him.

He gave her a reassuring look. "It's gonna be okay," he said. "Promise."

"What did I say about those?"

"I already saw the Hershey bars. If I can't keep this promise, then you can have my crossbow." With that, he turned and began climbing up the ladder.

Ella leaned against the wall and waited while he climbed. She heard the door give a yawn from metal moving against metal, and then the definitive *slam* when he let go of it.

She made her way up the ladder and pushed against the door. It opened with a whine. Holding herself on the metal rungs, the view straight up was unobscured. A panorama of nothing, save for blue sky and white clouds, puffy and large to the point where they didn't seem real. She almost felt like she should be able to reach out and feel them deflate at her touch. Her muscles were starting to burn as she stood there, but she couldn't bring herself to look away. Unable to see the broken buildings or cracked pavement, she could almost forget that it wasn't just any other day before the world had turned inside out.

A head appeared in front of her, and she nearly lost her footing as she flinched.

“What are you doing?” Sanjay leaned on the lip of the opening. “Come on up.” He disappeared from view.

Ella fought the urge to climb back down and slowly pulled herself through the opening.

They’d started a bonfire near the edge of the roof. Plastic lawn chairs sat around the flames, sales stickers peeling at the corners on the seats. Orla was sitting on the far side, with the fire between them. Shaun was slumped so far down in his chair, it was a wonder he hadn’t already slid out of it, as he contemplated a small, tattered paperback book. He was frowning, the expression exaggerating the lines on his forehead. There was a stack of old wooden pallets standing a few feet away; Bailey was currently taking wide swings at one with a long-handled axe.

“They’re gonna put an eye out,” Ella muttered.

“Maybe we can get them an eye patch. The whole pirate look will really round out the group’s whole style, I think.”

“You don’t have to babysit me all night,” she said. “I can socialize, even if I don’t like it.”

“Hermits aren’t supposed to know how to socialize. I bet they wouldn’t think it was weird if you only spoke in grunts.”

“I’m gonna throw you off this roof.”

“I’ve lived a good life.” He patted her on the shoulder and took a seat.

“Ella, right?” Setting down the axe, Bailey reached into a blue backpack and pulled out a bottle of beer in offering.

“Yeah.” She took the bottle.

"Oh, shit, hold on." Bailey crouched down next to Ella and took out a keyring, on which hung a bottle opener. They made quick work of it and pocketed the bottlecap. "There you go."

Sanjay grinned. "Worried about littering?"

Bailey patted their pocket. "Actually, I'm working on some bracers for my arms. Figure they can't bite through it on the first try."

Sanjay smiled and gave a knowing sideways look at Ella. "Great minds flock together, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

Sanjay motioned to Ella. After a moment's pause, she held her left arm out. "These work too, I guess. There might be some downstairs."

Bailey came closer. They raised one hand, then stopped and met Ella's gaze. "Is it okay if I..."

"Oh. Yeah, go ahead." She stretched her arm further. Bailey gently took hold of Ella's forearm with one hand. "I wouldn't touch the wristguard, though," she said. "I haven't had a chance to wipe it down in a little while."

"How much use have you gotten out of them?" They let go, and Ella let her arm fall to her side. "They look like they're in pretty good shape."

"Not much," she admitted. "I prefer to keep my distance from them when I can. There've been a couple scrapes, though."

"They definitely work," Sanjay added, still grinning.

"The bandages are just so it doesn't chafe," she continued. "Though I guess if they're small, or young, they might not be able to bite through that, either."

“Not with the front teeth, anyway,” Bailey said. “Canines are for tearing, but they’d have to be able to move their head while they’ve got you. Clamping down won’t do much on its own unless they can keep a hold on the arm.” They nodded, their eyes wide with excitement. Ella could see the wheels turning in their head. “I wonder if it’s a better idea to use weaker glue, so that if they dent you can take them off and replace them more easily.”

Ella shrugged and nodded. “Sounds good to me. I’m no expert, though.”

Bailey gave a small shake of their head. “Go, have a seat, grab some food. I won’t bore you with shop talk, that’s not why you’re here, right?” They grinned, dimples showing, and led the pair over to the fire.

Orla handed a skewer, a hot dog already impaled on it, and handed it to Ella. “Should only take a little longer,” she said.

Ella nodded. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“So, uh…” she tried to think of something to say. She could practically feel Sanjay’s encouraging face directed at her and fought the urge to smack him. “When did you find the time to do that?” She pointed to her own head.

Orla played with a loc. “Well the way I figure it, we’re in the end times, right? I decided I might as well embrace the aesthetic.” She grinned, exposing a gap in her front teeth.

Ella resisted the urge to reach up and tuck her own hair behind her ear. She scratched at her nose instead.

She mostly just listened as they traded stories with one another. Sanjay took to them as easily as breathing. She felt stupid, not being able to just make conversation.

As time went on, Orla started firing off questions for everyone to answer. Ella gave short answers where she could but opted out whenever possible. The only stories she had made her seem pathetic by comparison. Most of them just involved her killing time in a house, moving to another one, she realized.

Sanjay raised a hand as he finished taking a sip of beer. “Okay, I’ve got one. What is the thing you least expected from the end of the world?”

Shaun put away his book and took a deep pull on a copper flask.

Orla leaned forward, an unreadable expression on her face. “Sometimes blood is beautiful?” Her voice swept to a high pitch as she finished her sentence, transforming it into a question.

Sanjay’s jaw dropped. Shaun just kept drinking. Bailey held their head in their hands.

Orla flopped back into her chair, hands covering her smile. “Jesus, that sounded so fucking morbid.” Her voice was muffled from her hands, but Ella could hear her words starting to slide together.

“Maybe some context?” Sanjay suggested.

“Okay,” Orla went on. She put her arms out in front of her. The flames seemed to try and reach for her fingertips, but she wiggled her fingers like she was taunting the fire. “So. Winter’s almost over, right? But before spring could show up, we ran into a crazy-big snowstorm while we were out on a supply run. Were you guys around here for that?”

Ella had nearly frozen to death that week. Though the houses in the neighborhood had mostly still had running water, the houses were all older, and had gas heating systems that had stopped functioning way before Ella got to them. She remembered the pipes freezing, so she’d had to scoop snow into a container with her bare hands until she’d managed to find an oversized set of gloves from Mr. and Mrs. Wristguard’s closet.

She brought it in and would let it melt in her mouth to keep warm—she'd run out of water bottles and once the storm hit, there was no way she was leaving the house to look for more. She gathered up every piece of clothing the owners hadn't taken with them, pulled every blanket out of every closet and dresser drawer, and had burrowed under the fabric mountain in the master bed and tried to block out the wind moaning through the neighborhood like a phantom looking for someone to haunt. She only crawled out when she'd had to gather more snow and use the bathroom—the only time she forced herself to leave the indoors. Each time the sun went down, she'd count her breaths as they formed in front of her face, wondering if she'd fall asleep, and if she did, if she'd wake up.

“That was a rough week,” was all Sanjay said. Ella nodded her head in agreement.

“So, we were heading towards Arlington, but stopping whenever we could to see if we could gather enough stuff before having to go into the city proper. And *most* of the time, the Flatliners freeze up if it gets cold enough. Whatever's going on in their brain can't overpower the physics of body mass freezing up, I don't know, I'm not a scientist.” She paused to finish off her bottle and waved at Bailey to toss her another one. They obliged as she went on.

“The *point* is, one that was probably a linebacker or some shit comes barreling through the door of a rinky-dink pharmacy and rushes us. We take him out no big deal—”

“Heyheyhey.” Shaun snapped his fingers. “What was that now?”

She held a hand up in apology. “*Shaun* takes him out no big deal. It was fuckin' sick. He hit the ground, didn't get up. Shaun cracked him on the top of his skull—jumped from the roof of the car, seriously it was like some *Kill Bill* shit—so the blood just went *whoosh!*” She sat down, breathing heavily like she had just swung the bat herself. Her brow creased as she held out a

hand. “And there were just a few seconds, before any of us reacted or moved on, that it was totally silent.” She looked across to Shaun and Bailey, who both gave nods.

“It’s always silent,” Ella said.

“No, I know.” Orla pulled her seat forward until she sat directly in front of Ella. She leaned in close, like she was revealing a secret. Her eyes were wide; the alcohol had turned her cheeks red, and the firelight almost seemed to make her skin glow. “But it had been snowing, right? It was still snowing while all of this was happening. We were, what, half a mile outside of the city? But with the snow, you could barely make out the skyline, no horizon. No cars, no tracks for the most part. We could have been anywhere. And the silence snow makes is familiar. So, for like a second,” she snapped her fingers, “everything was fine. The silence felt right, felt normal.” She stared at Ella, lit up by the memory almost like she had witnessed a miracle.

“Sure.” Shaun sat a little straighter in his chair, groaning as he did. “Until you look down at the ground and see the necrotic fella with his brains turned into abstract art.”

Orla stood up. “Oh, that’s right! That’s where I was going with this.” She waved her hands around, taking a step back. “I mean, his blood was soaked into the snow, and there wasn’t anything else to dirty it up. Just that dark, deep wine-red color against a white backdrop.” She shrugged drunkenly. “I just had a random thought right then that it was kinda pretty, in a disturbing way.” And with that, she plopped down into her seat and took another sip of beer.

“Our resident storyteller,” Bailey said, holding their beer up in cheers. Orla did the same with a wink.

The day stretched on, the sunlight deepening as it made its way toward the horizon. Orla, Shaun, and Bailey all took turns swapping stories. Some were their own individual experiences,

but most of them wound up with Bailey and Orla yelling over one another to deliver the next detail of a supply run gone awry. Sanjay told them about the Crossroads and the arcade. He began telling them about the first time they'd used the crossbow, but Ella jumped in when he started claiming he was a better shot than her. Someone brought out the ingredients for smores; when Ella bit into hers, she could have cried.

Orla and Bailey migrated around the fire as conversations shifted. Shaun never stood from his lawn chair, alternating between staring into the fire and interrupting to correct something Orla or Bailey said.

"He's so much fun," Orla said under her breath as she sat down next to Ella.

"I knew a guy once, around the same age as him," Ella said. "They would have been best friends."

Orla didn't push her for details, thankfully. Thinking about Burt still stung. "So crotchety. I wanted to bring some stuff with me for slow days, but he nearly talked my ear off about non-essentials that I wished I'd never mentioned it in front of him."

"Stuff like what?"

She took a sip of her drink before answering. "I paint," she said proudly. "I think if it had been just normal paint, or pencil drawings, he wouldn't have cared, but he said watercolors would be wasteful. 'You can't hydrate by looking at something,'" she added in a close imitation of Shaun's voice, squinting one eye shut as she did.

"Wait, watercolor painting? When the hell do you find time to even do that?"

Orla shrugged. "Downtime? I'm a night owl, so I got the higher-ups to schedule my 'personal time' in the morning, so I can sleep in. It's not a bad system, though I'm living for the day I wake up and have nothing on my to-do list."

"How many people live there, do you think?"

She made a face, squinting hard as she thought. "I'd say, roughly like a hundred fifty? Probably more, people come in and out, you know. You've got people still making it out of No Man's Land, you've got messengers from other stations passing messages along, you've got babies being born, old folks dying. Though I guess that would keep the numbers even, wouldn't it?" She laughed at her own joke. "You'll see for yourself, when you guys get there."

"Sure." Ella didn't feel like answering the questions that would come from telling her the truth. She could feel the itch to curl back into herself, now that she'd run out of stories to tell. Anything she could tell them past what she and Sanjay had shared would just get her looks of confusion or pity. "I'm gonna head down for the night, in case he asks." She pointed over to Sanjay, who seemed deep in conversation with Bailey. Orla nodded, and Ella made her way to the open door. She realized that she had never actually closed it, and it had been open all this time.

Ella had just finished undoing the wrappings on her arms when Sanjay came through the door. "Hey, what's with the Irish goodbye?"

"I was starting to fall asleep. Things were winding down anyway." She reached down to take off her boots as he threw his jacket onto the coffee table.

"That was really fun, though," he said. "You can't deny me this victory."

"As long as your celebrating doesn't wake me up, we're fine."

He didn't stop smiling as he walked over to the fridge and opened the door to look in. "Promise. I was talking to Orla, and she said as long as we helped with organizing their supply tomorrow and the next day, they'd let us bum a ride."

He wasn't looking in her direction as he said this, so he couldn't see how his words made her pause what she was doing. They'd estimated they were two or three days away from the Barracks by foot. They'd never talked about how long they'd be staying here before moving on. This room felt like a secret, like they weren't just hidden from threats, but removed from the world entirely. It was impressive, how quickly something like running electricity with an unknown source could make her feel like there was nothing to worry about. The Barracks had still seemed like a story, or a symbol.

Now, they were a day of packing and a long commute away from reality. The cabin felt less like the goal she'd been moving towards, but like a dream that was getting harder and harder to remember. She could guess the time from now that she'd be on her own again. Only one mouth to feed, one back to watch. Things were happening faster than she'd thought they could. Too fast, she suddenly thought. Too soon.

Sanjay closed the refrigerator door and settled on his couch. "I missed bonfires. Why didn't we ever think we could do one during the day? There's no reason not to, since you're already pretty visible."

She looked at him, still stuck in her thoughts. "Well, uh, we've been walking during the day, remember? Wouldn't have made sense to just sit down in the middle of the road."

"Well, I'm glad we got to do it now. I missed that. Reminded me of camping on vacation." His gaze grew distant as he remembered. "You miss anything like that?"

"We weren't the camping type."

"Well what do you miss, then?"

"I miss everything. But—" she paused, suddenly unsure of herself. The silence began to stretch and tighten.

Sanjay cleared his throat. "Tell you what I miss; three-day weekends."

She made a face. "Isn't this just one long, really terrible weekend?"

"Exactly. Three-day weekends were rare, and they were special, so anything you did on that extra day was better because it normally couldn't have happened." He sighed wistfully. "Now it's just one day in front of another."

Ella stared up at the Christmas lights and blurted, "I had a cat."

The futon creaked as he moved. "Not surprising. You don't seem like a dog person."

"I am," she said indignantly. "We just couldn't get one. We were too busy, and dogs are way more expensive to take care of."

"If you say so."

"I had to set him loose when I got back home. There was just no way I could have kept him, he would have bolted the second he freaked out about something, and I knew I probably wouldn't be staying at the house for much longer. So, I tore open his food bag and put it by the screen door, and then I just left it open." She fought the tears that sprung up whenever she thought of Spartacus and his big, stupid, gorgeous self.

"Did he ever steal your hair ties?"

Ella looked over to Sanjay. He stared back at her, his expression as serious as if he was asking for a medical diagnosis.

"Yeah?"

He nodded, like he'd just settled a bet. "My mom liked to use that as an excuse for why we couldn't get one. Said if she had to compete with an animal covered in fur for a piece of elastic, she'd wind up feeding it to a zoo animal." He smiled, like he was remembering.

"I think maybe she was just looking out for you. Pretty sure you're at more of a loss right now than I am."

He shook a hand through his hair. "Guess so," he said, then looked over at her. "Why do you cut yours so short?"

She shrugged. "One less thing that can get grabbed."

He nodded. "I thought you'd say something like that."

She scrunched her face. "Why do you care?"

"I don't. Just curious what you'd look like with longer hair." He looked away quickly up at the ceiling, as if the question embarrassed him.

After a few minutes, she muttered, "like Cousin It, most likely." She turned to see his reaction. His eyes were closed, chest rising and falling deeply.

The world could end, and you'd just be dreaming away. Her mom used to say that.

She remembered staring at herself in the mirror before, playing with her hair. Before everything, she used to grow it out like she was training to be locked in a tower. Her mom once said that adopting Spartacus had been pointless, since Ella shed enough hair for three cats. She was practically afraid of getting it cut and would let it grow until it began to split at the ends and look like some kind of witch's mane.

It had been her best feature, then. Now, if she had to pick, she'd probably say something like her aim, or her lung capacity. She didn't mind not looking like Orla, not if it helped her stay alive. But if a place existed where Orla could do something so indulgent as make herself look how she wanted just because, it made Ella feel like a child cutting her hair off with kitchen scissors while the babysitter wasn't looking.

Sanjay didn't stir as she got up and flipped the fluorescents off. The glow of the Christmas lights softened the hard edges of his face, making his features look almost childlike. Looking at him, it was almost as if he was already gone. She could feel his absence already. She'd been alone before, and it had been normal, but now the idea felt more like a loss. He wouldn't be gone, he would be missing.

She didn't want to say goodbye.

She thought about what Orla had said about the Barracks. There was space to relax, other people who watched their backs, enough resources that they weren't constantly moving to satisfy the next impending need. Ella must have looked so childish to them, living at a constantly higher risk when there were reinforced walls and shift rotations only a few hours away.

She didn't fall asleep for a long while, turning her thoughts over and over in her mind like a stone.

Chapter Sixteen

Ella sat on the rooftop with Bailey checking the seals on medicine bottles and throwing away the ones that weren't still intact. They could see down in the parking lot, where Orla and Shaun were sorting through various other supplies into piles. Ella couldn't tell from here what the criteria for each pile was, but she supposed it didn't really matter. She hadn't seen Sanjay in an hour or so, but he'd said something about feeling nauseous and wanting to take a nap.

Ella hadn't missed the way Shaun had looked at him when he'd said that. His eyes had tightened, and his lips had thinned. He hadn't said anything, though, and went back to drinking his whiskey and giving the occasional grunt as they'd sat around the fire. She'd put the trash can in front of the door, ignoring Sanjay's jibes while she did, and set her backpack against the door as well before laying down. It wouldn't stop anything, but it was one more thing that could make noise and wake her up. She'd fallen asleep with her hand under her pillow, clutching her hatchet.

"So, what do you do when you're not on supply runs?" Ella read the label of the bottle--lisinopril--before checking the seal. She'd been putting aside some of the busted seals in a third pile behind the milk crate she was sitting on. Just because it wasn't good enough for the Barracks, didn't mean she was gonna turn her nose up at a half-empty bottle of Midol. She still wasn't sure where they'd managed to find all this. She felt a little twinge of indignance, like she was an athlete who'd come in second place.

"I'm usually in the kitchens," Bailey said. They'd taken their beanie off a while ago, their red hair now gathered in a high bun on top of their head. "I've always been a big foodie. It's not the same, of course, usually just a lot of the same, lot of the canned food we find on runs like this, but it's nice to still be able to use that part of my brain." They scratched at their arm as they

reached back for a canvas tote bag filled with unchecked meds. "And it's usually easier for people not to give you shit when you're the one to keep them fed."

"People give you shit?"

They shrugged. "The end of the world doesn't mean the end of ignorance, unfortunately," they said with a wry grin. "People still get just as cranky when you don't want to use the labels they've already made. I actually refused to serve some people because they kept calling me ma'am and didn't like it when I said I wasn't one."

"I'm not surprised," Ella said.

"Still sucks, though."

"Of course. Why do you think I've been hermitting it up this whole time?" She bit her cheek, realizing what she'd said a moment too late.

Bailey glanced at her, then started sorting again. "People suck on a good day. Whole life being upended can make them worse, but it's also made them better, in my experience."

"You think so?"

"I figure it's like a band of brothers sort of thing. We used to try and figure out if we had anything in common with a person. Now, there's this one thing that we all have gone through. Maybe not in the same way, but we know that none of us is where we thought we'd be."

"I never really looked at it that way, I guess."

Bailey grinned. "No shit. And if that's not enough to convince you how this has brought people closer, you just have to look at the three of us." They jerked their head towards the edge of the roof, indicating the others. "You think we all met each other at night class or something?"

"I figured you just got assigned, like getting grouped up at school or something."

"Shaun might agree with you, but even he'll admit we're a good team. We work well together, keep each other from getting killed, which is all he really cares about."

"How come?"

"Aside from the obvious? He really likes taking out Flatliners. Takes that baton of his, swipes their legs out from underneath, brains them." They mimed blowing the smoke off a gun. "Moves on to the next one."

Ella suppressed the urge to shudder. Something about the visual made her skin crawl. She knew that's not what Bailey was trying to say, though. "It's nice to have someone to rely on like that."

Bailey scrunched their brow at that. "Is that a new thing for you, too?"

"Yeah, I guess. Trying not to get too used to it, though. He's not always gonna be around."

"What do you mean?"

She cringed internally. She wondered if Bailey was really feigning ignorance, or if they'd trained as some kind of interrogator in a previous life. "I just mean, it only takes one moment for things to go sideways. We could get separated, one of us could die--"

"I get that, but I promise you, the Barracks are like a steel drum. Not literally, the walls are actually kinda crumbly, but they keep the patrol airtight. There hasn't been a risk of breach since I've been there." Their eyes lit up. "I even snuck out one night to hang out with Orla. It was a rush."

Ella fought the urge to chastise them. "Did you run into any infected?"

"No, but I was sure we'd get caught. They put you on inventory duty for lesser infractions, and it's tedious as shit. But try telling Orla she's not allowed to do something." From the look on Bailey's face, Ella could tell they didn't have that problem.

"I don't think even I'm that stubborn," she said.

"Well, you can certainly try. When we get there, I'll give you the spice of your choice for every time you get Orla to listen to you." They raised a smug eyebrow and held out a hand.

"Deal?"

Ella looked down at the hand in front of her, noticed the callouses on their palm. They had on a ring with an amethyst set in the middle. She wondered what kind of spices they had at the Barracks.

Just then, the hatch swung out with a yawning creak, and Sanjay climbed up. Bailey dropped their hand and turned to see. "How's it coming along?" they asked.

"What?" Sanjay looked dazed, like he'd just realized where he was. "Oh. You know, in its own time."

Ella cocked an eyebrow. "You talking in riddles now?"

He laughed, but it came out breathy and strange. "I'm probably dehydrated or something." He shifted his feet. "Hey, Ella, you got a minute to talk downstairs? I think I may have stuck my first aid kit in your bag by mistake, but I don't want to mess up your system."

"Then why were you messing with it in the first place," she said dryly. She turned to Bailey. "You good?"

"I don't know," they said. "These look a lot like spice bottles, I may end up spiking our dinner by accident." They grinned and waved her away.

Seeing her stand up, Sanjay pivoted back to the hatch and was down the ladder before she'd even reached it. She tried to guess at what was wrong with him. She'd never seen him nervous before. A few ridiculous theories invaded her thoughts, but she shook them away as she climbed down the ladder and followed his retreating form to the break room.

He almost looked like he was trying to run away from her.

Chapter Seventeen

"So, I was talking with Orla, and she was asking me what kind of skills I had, trying to figure out what kind of job I might ask for at the Barracks, and then she asked what you'd wanna do."

"So, you told her I'm not coming?" She blew her lips together. "I mean, I would have rather told her myself, but I guess it's not that big a deal." She wondered if they did any sort of school stuff for little kids there. She'd thought about being an art teacher when she was younger.

"No, I didn't really say anything." He wouldn't stop messing with his hair. He started to pace back and forth. "And I realized that I meant to tell you something, but in addition to some other stuff, I kind of...forgot."

She shook her head. "You're starting to weird me out, and you're obviously trying to say something, so could you just--"

"I was at the cabin with my siblings when they--" he stopped himself short and closed his eyes. "When they turned. It was fast--not the turning, I know that took longer--but when they left and came back, that happened faster than I thought it would. I hadn't seen anybody turn before them."

She couldn't figure out where he was going. She wanted to ask him about his siblings, but he barreled on.

"I had to kill them both." It came out almost like a shout, and he looked over Ella's shoulder, at the door she'd left cracked open, to see if anyone was watching. "I had to--I was starting to panic, and they both ran for me. I didn't expect they would be so fast. They'd been so sick only a couple of minutes ago. The virus, it acts like any other sickness, and they were so small, it didn't make sense that none of that would matter after I'd felt their pulse stop beating."

Ella waited for him to continue. Her heart was pounding in her chest; it knew something she didn't.

"My brother managed to knock me down, and I hit my head. I was lucky--" he practically spat out the word, "because that was the moment I managed to connect with him." He shook his head. "When I woke up, he was gone."

"And, I must have knocked over a candle when I was moving. I can't really remember anything that clearly, so it could have happened differently, a blown fuse or something. But when I came to, the couch was burning. And all I could think was *I don't have time for this*. Didn't have time to find the fire extinguisher. I couldn't even really remember how to use one. So, I got in the car and drove until I ran out of gas, which was about a week before I ran into Eli."

"I don't understand."

"Which part?"

"Sanjay, what are you trying to tell me?"

He raised one hand, like he was going to touch her arm, but dropped it. "The cabin burned down that night. It's been gone for a couple of months now."

She took a step back. "Wait, what?" Her heart didn't stop racing. She thought she could feel a tremor thread itself into her fingers. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it's true." The pained expression on his face seemed to take a different shape. A moment before, she thought he was just trying to wrestle with whatever memories he was holding in his mind. Now he resembled a dog waiting to be smacked on the ears.

"Are you telling me the cabin wasn't real?"

"It was. But, no. Not anymore."

“Are you sure? You didn’t stick around, maybe it put itself out.”

“It didn’t. You're not listening to me, Ella. I thought about waiting it out, but once the blaze got big, it started attracting...them. I don’t know where they even came from. I think there was a campground nearby, or maybe a trailer park, but I hadn’t seen it since I was a kid, so maybe I made it up. I left before they could catch wind of me. I’d left a window open, so the smoke was in the air, helped mask my scent, I think.”

"Are you fucking kidding me? You're gonna talk about masking your scent right now, after what you just told me?"

"You have every right to be upset--"

"No shit, Sanjay! Where the hell do you get off lying to me?" She was trying to form the reason in her mind, try to anticipate whatever he was about to say. She suddenly felt naked, exposed. Like she had been for weeks, and he could see and hadn't said a word to her about it. She felt the urge to run, the urge to hurt him.

He could have been waiting for the moment to steal her shit, but that didn't make any sense. She'd taken him to Burt's. He could have locked her in the back with Burt's body and disappeared. Unless it wasn't about stealing. He'd been sincere when he said he wouldn't make it on his own. But he'd been sincere other times, too.

The things she'd told him...and he'd been laughing at her the whole time.

He took a step towards her. "Ella, I know I--"

She punched him in the kidney.

He staggered backwards, bent at the waist and groaning in pain. Ella could feel tears pricking her eyes. She blinked them away as they blurred her vision. Her face was hot as she began to

breathe hard, clenching her fist as hard as she could so she wouldn't feel how much she was shaking.

"I'm sorry," he said, still bent over himself. "I shouldn't have said that it was standing."

"*Why* did you say it was? What the fuck do you want from me?"

"Nothing!" He straightened and looked at her but came no closer. "I swear, Ella, I just panicked and said something stupid." He held his hands out in supplication. "I knew I couldn't make it all the way to the Barracks by myself. Eli did what he did, and I was on my own, and I didn't know what to do."

She shook her head. "If the cabin didn't exist--"

"It doesn't Ella, please don't think you're gonna go off and find it, you're gonna get yourself killed."

"Shut up." She put her hands over her eyes and tried to think. Nothing was getting past the wall in her mind, the one that was still trying to convince her that he was lying now, he was screwing with her, he was just bad at goodbyes. "I just...where have you been taking me this whole time?"

He blinked. "The Barracks. Where else?"

Her chest felt too tight. "What, you were gonna handcuff us together once we got there so I couldn't leave?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't get to choose where I go, Sanjay! How did you think you were gonna get me to stay?"

"Ella, you can't be serious. If you stay out here, you're going to die in a matter of months. I still don't understand how you managed to stay alive this whole time."

"Why can't you let me worry about myself?"

"Because it's been my job to watch your back, just like it was your job to watch mine."

"So, what, you're worried it'll ruin your reputation if you break a verbal contract? Can't risk hurting that well-rounded resumé?"

"We've kept each other safe. I care what happens to you. Does there have to be anything else to it than that?"

"Safe? You've been lying to me this whole time. Who knows where I could have ended up by now?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I stuck with you because you said you knew where there was shelter, and that nobody would ever find it. It was remote, there wouldn't be any infected for miles. That's what *you* said."

"If I hadn't found you, we'd both be walking in the Crossroads right now."

"Found me?"

"If we hadn't found each other; is word choice the most important thing right now?"

"Kind of!"

There was a knock at the door. "Everything okay?" Orla pushed the door open and slid in. Her eyes were wide with concern.

"Do you need to be here?" Ella shoved past her and started towards the ladder but stopped short. Bailey was up there. Orla in the breakroom. Shaun was probably out by the car. She tried to figure out how this had become her reality. She felt like she was suffocating, like she was paralyzed. She turned, and saw Sanjay standing by the breakroom door.

"Get out of my way." She started towards him.

“You’re not thinking clearly,” he said in that calm voice of his. The one that had kept her from breaking down, the one that she’d followed in the dark.

“You’re not gonna tell me shit right now,” she spat.

“Don’t run off,” he pleaded. “I get that you’re upset—”

She shoved him with both hands. His back hit the wall and she put her left forearm against his chest.

“Hey, hey!” Orla moved towards them.

“This is none of your fucking business, Orla,” she barked over her shoulder. She pushed harder on his collarbone, brought her face close to his. “Do you remember what I told you?”

He looked down at her, jaw clenched. He exhaled through his nose, his breath tickling Ella's hair against her cheek. "No dead weight?"

"I don't talk to hear the sound of my voice. I have never needed you. I was fine before you came along."

"We both would have died up there. You're not invincible, Ella. I couldn't have left you if I'd wanted to."

"I am the one who decides what happens to me," she said through gritted teeth. "I do not exist to serve your fantasies of being a hero." She lowered her gaze to the pulse at his throat. He was still so calm, like he was waiting for her to finish her temper tantrum before going back to sorting drugs. She wondered, if she shifted her arm up and pressed against his throat, if she would feel it racing.

She looked back up at him. She could feel the tears falling, could feel that something had broken in two. The understanding they had had, the trust that she had given him. She'd kept it tucked tight against herself for so long, and he had been the only one she'd met who she thought

wouldn't take off running as soon as she held it out in her hand. She could see now that he'd taken it from her, replaced it with something else of the same weight, and had thrown it away when she wasn't looking.

She pulled back her arm and stepped away from him. He kept his back to the wall, letting her decide what came next.

"I need to go outside. I can't breathe in here." She rushed down the hall, through the barefaced aisles, and through the doors into the parking lot. She walked parallel to the brick wall, following it around the corner and around until she was face to face with an overturned dumpster bin. She put her back to the brick and slid until she sat in the grass. She breathed in, and everything inside her fell out in a sob. She buried her face in the crook of her elbow, her flannel sleeve in her teeth, as she collapsed from the inside out.

Chapter Eighteen

Ella sat against the wall as the sun fell and the building's shadow began to swallow her, stretching as it consumed her chest, her fingertips, her boots. She'd stopped crying a while ago; she hadn't wanted Bailey to come asking what was wrong. There was no way they wouldn't have heard her. She guessed that they had intercepted them and filled them in.

The field stretched out in front of her. There was a cluster of houses maybe three hundred yards away, with two that were unfinished, all yellow plywood and what had always just looked like paper to her, plastered on the walls. A neighborhood half real, half thought. She'd have walked over if she'd thought they offered any real shelter from the elements. She doubted any plumbing had been set up, either. Besides, if she'd decided to leave right then, she would have had to go back for her bag, and if she had to look any of them in the eye, she wasn't sure what she'd do.

She didn't think she'd lash out at any of them. Maybe Shaun, but only if he bothered to say anything, which was unlikely. She just knew how small she would feel, how the weeks by Sanjay's side would keep rolling through her head like a film reel, the same way they'd been doing the whole time she'd sat against the wall. She'd been trying to remember if he'd had any sort of tell. Trying to remember how many times the cabin had come up, realizing she really hadn't pressed him for details. She'd let herself begin to consider the idea of staying there with him.

Or maybe, she thought, that she'd gotten things twisted in her mind. At some point, she'd assembled the thought that he would stay with her. He hadn't known anyone from the Barracks. It was just a name on the radio for him, a manifestation of the desire for security and certainty. A wall on either side of you, and a closed door in front of you.

She'd thought that the fact that they had a good thing going, that they made a solid team, would make the choice for him. That he'd rather stick with her, Barracks or no, than risk an unknown place with nothing but strangers to size up.

She'd built that whole structure, made of nonsense and childish logic, and had been climbing it all the way here. Where else was there for her to go when it had inevitably collapsed? What else could she have been met with but the unrelenting, immovable object that were the facts?

They'd known each other for only a few weeks. That wasn't enough to build anything that could last the first real obstacle. He'd been headed for the Barracks when he'd lost his friend. He was seeing a goal through to the end. She understood it. It's what she would have done. Another body to watch the blind spots that came from moving with uncertainty, and a body to serve as a distraction, if things became desperate. It's what she would have done. She kept telling herself this. And still, when she thought to the moment when he'd first told her of the cabin, and she'd asked him if he was really willing to give her something from his past? Was he really about to trust her with it? And he'd said yes.

She'd really just thought he was that naive. She could see the irony reflected back at her as easily as if she'd been standing in front of a mirror.

Gravel crunched, and Sanjay rounded the corner. She could see the tear on the shin of his jeans from this vantage point.

"Can I sit?"

She motioned to the ground in front of her.

"Was kinda hoping you would let me share the wall."

She sat up straighter and said nothing. He hesitated for a moment before lowering himself to the ground. His legs were unnaturally long-looking at this angle as he attempted to sit cross-legged, and finally settled on one leg laid flat, resting an elbow on one knee.

"Should I talk first," he asked.

"I've got nothing to say, so you might as well."

"Ella, come on," he said softly.

"Come on, what, Sanjay?" She met his gaze. He wore a pinched expression as he scratched at his jaw. She realized he had a beard coming in, wondered how she'd missed that. He seemed irritated, as though faced with a crossword puzzle he couldn't hack. "Do you expect me to just let this go?"

"I would think you'd be able to see this for what it is."

"And what is it that I'm not seeing?"

"That I fucked up. I made a mistake. I reacted out of fear, and I lied to you so I wouldn't have to make this trip by myself. I wasn't trying to trick you or lead you down some path. I was afraid of being alone, and of dying alone." He scooted slightly closer. "The stuff we talked about, everything we did, was genuine. I was never putting on a show for you, and I know that's what you think this is, and I swear to you that you're wrong this time."

"Was Eli real?" She raised a brow as he opened his mouth, ready to be offended, but he paused.

"Yes."

"How many siblings did you have?"

"Two."

"What were their names?"

"I never told you that."

"Why are you avoiding the question?"

"This interrogation isn't going to give you what you want, Ella. I can't take back what I did. To try would be an insult to you, so I won't even waste my time. I can only tell you that I am sorry that I hurt you. I didn't think it would matter, and I was already too little too late when I realized that *this*," he gestured between them, "was more important than that."

She nodded her head, staring over his shoulder. She wanted to close her eyes. "I believe you."

She stood up and held out a hand. He hesitated for a brief moment before taking it and clambering to his full height.

"You're sleeping on the roof," she said.

He stopped moving. "Seriously?"

She shrugged. "Don't worry, you'll have company. Maybe you can explain to them why and they can explain why you deserve plenty worse. They'll want to know what happened anyway, if you didn't already tell them." She crossed her arms and tried not to tap her thumb against her arm. "I just need some time to myself. I haven't had that in a while."

He looked at her, pleading with his eyes, but she just shrugged and looked at the ground. He walked with her back to the front entrance, through the aisles, and into the room to grab his sleeping bag. "I'm just glad I grabbed the heavy-duty one," he said with a faint grin. She nodded a few times, looking away, and he cleared his throat. "I'll see you in the morning." He closed the door behind him, his footsteps quickly fading away.

Ella made her way over to the wall where the Christmas lights began, turning the little base with the battery pack over in her hand. There was a small dial on the side, a timer so it didn't

need to be turned on and off by hand. She set the timer to 4:00 AM and, pressing the button twice, sent the room into near darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

Since Ella had left that morning without checking her pack, she didn't realize until she couldn't see the grocery store that she had given Sanjay her compass. She decided to follow the sun's rising and just start walking east. Maybe she'd make it to the beach. The world had ended during the off-season, so there was a good chance Norfolk and all the little beach towns were sparsely populated. Hell, maybe she'd even figure out how to start up one of the boats and sail up to Tangier Island. Few people lived there, and even less went to visit. It was so cut off that her class had watched a documentary once, talking about how the accent they used was preserved from centuries ago.

That was a long way ahead, though, so she tried not to let herself start making plans. Instead, she just watched the sky as it began to lighten. The sun rose slowly, reluctantly, like it was crossing its fingers that things would look a little better than they had yesterday. Ella realized as the darkness gave way to blues and purples that the clouds were obscuring the sun from having to face the truth: that this day would be no different from the one before, and the one after would hold no surprises either.

Ella tried not to think about it as she walked. Not being on her own had been different, obviously. The feeling she had, like a current was trying to slow her step and pull her away as she walked through fields of long-rotted crops, was making it hard to accept that certainty.

She should have been glad. She didn't have to worry about being slowed down by others or getting killed because of other people making bad calls. She didn't even have to worry about Sanjay. They were all already halfway in love with him, setting him up with weapons and swapping stories. They'd watch his back, she knew it. Probably would do it better than she could.

All she knew how to do was hide, make herself as small as possible so that she didn't even register.

It had worked, she knew. Maybe a little too well, but she couldn't let herself take unnecessary risks. She'd stayed away for a reason. Maybe Orla had had a good time, maybe nobody bothered Bailey anymore, but they were exceptions, she knew, that proved the rule. One way or another, the picture they'd painted had a film on it, maybe not a lie, but not the truth, either. She was alone. She'd been alone, even before her mother had left her. Her father had left, had promised that nothing would change, that he wouldn't stop loving her, and she never saw him again. If flesh and blood could make her feel that way, what was to stop strangers who only saw what she could contribute through her work?

The Barracks were a concept, a fantasy, as safe against the infected as a water gun.

That was why she felt herself wanting to turn around, and why she knew it would be a stupid thing to do. She was thinking on how it had been, having someone there. And she'd begun to hope that it would stay that way, and that that would somehow spell a better future. But she knew that wasn't true. Even if someone stayed with her, they had as much control over the future as she did. Her mother hadn't known that staying at the hospital, trying to help people, would be selfishness, would be what kept her from Ella forever.

Sanjay hadn't even done that. He'd lied to her, used the last little morsel of trust she placed in people to draw her out of safety, into an unknown world. He'd been leading her towards a ghost, or a cliff for her to tumble down. He was good at telling her he wanted her to stay, that it was about more than just a set of eyes he could trick into looking out for him. But this, whether he'd planned to or not, had been a good lesson for her. She'd gotten too used to Burt, let herself forget

that the old world wasn't waiting to rise back up. The next time she let someone draw her down their path, she wouldn't get another chance.

Sanjay couldn't control the future. Ella couldn't control the truth that he would soon see what she couldn't give him, what was sitting right there with Orla, and Bailey, and everybody at the Barracks waiting for him with open arms. Ella could see that, even if she couldn't see the future any more clearly. It wasn't a premonition to know that the world had never needed her, never wanted her. She'd gotten lucky with her mom. She was only hurting herself by pretending that hope, the outcome she thought she wanted, was any more tangible than the precedent her life had set for her.

She hadn't even been enough for Burt. He'd gotten to know the ones who came through, had heard of what lay outside their domain. Maybe he didn't think he'd make it, maybe his body would have let him down. But she could have gone with him. Kept him from running his mouth, getting them killed by someone who didn't think his jokes were funny.

She tried to convince herself of this as she made her way across the field, staring at her shoes to keep herself from tripping. Amongst the yellow-brown of broken, dried corn stalks, the edges of the stems threatening to scratch up her ankles, green pushed through. Ella didn't know anything about plants, so it all looked like grass to her, but every couple of steps she might see a small flower bud peeking through with the smallest dot of color. There was a twitch of movement in her peripheral vision. She looked over and tensed. A squirrel shuffled over the dead plants and started rooting around one spot, revealing a mostly-black cob of corn. It began poking and prodding at the kernels, tail twitching the whole time. She wondered what it made of all this. Or if it even noticed that anything was different, if it had been at all affected by a world that had

made her this way. It was content to just go about its life; whether she was there or not didn't make much of a difference, it seemed.

It stopped its work and stood upright, smelling the air. It shifted so that its body was lined up with Ella's. She took a step towards it, but it didn't move.

"Not afraid of people anymore?" she asked it. "Just cause Zacks don't eat you doesn't mean I can't."

It gave a flick of its tail, took its time sniffing at the corn cob one final time, and scurried away. She sighed and realized that she was relieved. She had enough MREs to last her a while, and it would be a waste of energy to kill something just because it meant the meal would be hot. She was tired of having to make choices based on whether its lack would lead to her demise.

She decided to stop just before the sky began to darken. After the crop fields, there was a large pasture that once held some kind of livestock. The gate was wide open; the owner had probably left it that way, so the animals could leave once the water trough went dry.

She camped out on the far edge, where the pasture met the tree line and stayed just inside along the fence. Anything coming from the woods would have to deal with the fence, and the wide expanse of empty field and ankle-high grass meant she would see anything coming long before it got to her.

She ate a few MREs, letting herself feel the bloated discomfort that came from eating until you couldn't anymore. She was on a small incline, and with all the farmland surrounding her, she could see farther than she ever could in the attics of the long gone. The land sprawled before her, hills rolling like an opened scroll. She could make out the barns, and then the houses, the blacktop winding in and out of view before being swallowed by a number of buildings. A town.

Maybe she'd go there tomorrow. Scope for supplies, maybe pick a house to station herself in, if there weren't too many infected still around.

While there was still some light, the ivory of the overcast sky slowly dulling into grey-blue, she took out her sketchbook. When she'd gone through the aisles of the store, one section had been left nearly untouched. She'd grabbed a few pens and a pack of mechanical pencils, but for now, she pulled out the slim box of colored pencils that she'd taken and kept hidden from Sanjay. She hadn't wanted him to try and ask to see her art again. It fit perfectly in the compartment that had been intended to carry a computer. These days it carried her sketchbook and rolls of gauze folded flat in plastic bags to stay sterile.

She flipped past the pages with the photos, ran her hand over the blank sheet. A bit of dirt came away from her finger, but she managed to blow it off without it leaving behind a mark.

For as long as she could, until it became too dark to see, she drew the breakroom. Her wrist guards made it hard to get her wrist at the right angle, so she undid the Velcro and set them aside. She looked at the Ace bandages, saw how grimy they were, and unwrapped them one at a time. Tomorrow she'd find a water source to rinse them off. The colored pencils meant she could recount the Christmas lights almost perfectly. Her hands didn't remember the movements very well anymore; they hadn't been used for precision, or for anything gentle, in a long time. The futons came out more like normal couches. Sanjay's jaw was harsher and stronger than it was in real life. She tried not to focus on all the ways she had lost her skills and was probably messing it up and drew the view from the doorway.

Chapter Twenty

The next morning started later than she'd planned. With the sun hiding behind the trees, and her back to the fence, her body hadn't registered the time until it was nearly midday.

She took her time getting ready, winding the bandages back around her arms slowly. She likely wouldn't get the chance to take them off for at least a day, longer, depending on how long it took to make sure that town was safe for her. Leaning against the fenceposts, she arched her back in a stretch and held it, remembering the time her mom had signed them up for yoga.

She heard footsteps. Too close for comfort. She swung around and reached for her knife--

And saw Sanjay trudge his way up the hill.

"The hell are you doing here?"

He held her gaze but said nothing as he continued to walk towards her. He was panting hard; she could see sweat marks on his shirt. He practically stomped his way up to the fence and threw his backpack down on the ground dramatically. Ella stood up and waited for him to speak, but he just leaned on his elbows against the fence and looked down towards the village, catching his breath.

"I didn't ask you to follow me," Ella started. "How did you--"

"You know," he said, taking a deep breath in, "there have been a couple times since we met where I could tell you had some stuff going on. Stuff you weren't telling me about. And that's fine, I get it, I've got shit I haven't told you about."

"Why aren't you with--"

"There have even been a couple of times," he continued. He spoke too loudly, looking away from her as he made his way towards his point. She fought the urge to shush him, in case

something heard. "A couple of times where I thought to myself, this girl had to have gone through some really tough stuff to think *that* was the way to go."

"Can you please just tell me what you're--"

"But now I'm starting to think I gave you too much credit. See, the only way I can describe the idea of striking out on your own, into territory you're not familiar with--don't know how many Zacks around, don't know if there are any drifters, any camps full of all those people you keep saying are waiting for a chance to do any number of awful shit to you--and *actively* walking away from safety and security because someone hurt your feelings? The only word that I think can accurately describe the shit you're trying to pull right now--"

--I went by myself on purpose, I'm not pulling anything--"

"Wait, I remembered it!" He put a hand to his head, fingers splayed dramatically as he mimed feeling faint. "Stupid! That's the right word! Right on the tip of my tongue, it was!"

"Will you shut up? Someone's gonna hear you."

"Is that someone you? Or would that be too much to ask?"

She knelt and grabbed her backpack, staying parallel to the fence as she walked away from him. "You know, most people would take sneaking away in the dead of night to be a hint that they don't want to be followed. You ever think of that?"

"What, should I prefer that you storm away at noon? You could have at least stolen the crossbow. You're not gonna survive on box cutters forever."

"I don't need this," she muttered. "I didn't need this. I could have stayed at Burt's, holed myself up in his basement, would have been totally safe--"

"Burt had everything he needed, and he still killed himself. Is that what you'd call an ideal living situation?"

"Well I would have at least had the option to decide for myself. You took that away from me when you lied about the cabin."

"Do you take any accountability for yourself? Like, ever? Or can you not fit that in your backpack?"

"You don't get to put this all on me. Yes, I lied to you. That was shitty, and I know that."

"You knew it, and you did it anyway."

"Yeah, I did."

"What is it with you and your need to be the fucking knight in shining armor? Why should what happens to me matter to you at all?"

He gave a hollow laugh and wiped his face with a hand. She noticed his fingers were shaking. "If you really can't understand why I'd do that, maybe you are better off on your own."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about my humanity, Ella. Basic fucking human decency. Why should I care about you? How about the fact that I don't like being alone in this world? How about the fact that before I found you, everybody around me was dying?"

"Everybody everywhere has been dying, Sanjay. For ten months. I lost everybody too—"

"And how many of them did you have to kill, huh?"

"It's not a contest. I only had one, and when I lost her, I knew I wouldn't survive it if I tried again."

"Well you didn't win just because you've been hiding from the world. And you may not care what this is doing to you, where you're gonna end up because of it, but I do, okay? If you were so set on trying not to matter, then you should have tried harder to get rid of me." He wiped at his brow with his shirt.

Ella took a step towards him. “Sanjay, are you okay?” Dread bloomed in her stomach. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen him winded, other than just after the Crossroads.

He wouldn’t meet her gaze as he stared out over the field. He swallowed hard, gripping the wooden beam tightly with one hand. “What do you mean?”

Adrenaline made her head feel too light, like she was about to float away. “When did it happen?”

He finally met her gaze, eyes glassy. “When did what happen?” The heat had gone out of his voice as he followed her movements.

She crossed the distance between them and grabbed for his arm, trying to push up his sleeve. “Stop lying to me.” She heard the tremor in her voice, and cleared her throat as if that would keep her from thinking *no, no, please no*.

He placed a hand on hers, stilling her movement. She looked up at him, tried to guess where the bite was before she demanded answers again. How could this have happened? Was it back at the arcade? Or had he really gone and gotten himself killed in the day that she’d been away from his side?

He sighed. “It’s not what you think,” he said. “I’m not infected.”

She didn’t breathe, didn’t release her grip on his sleeve.

He let go of her and took a step back, leaning on his left leg. He’d found a pair of cargo pants at some point on their journey, olive-colored with streaks of white paint across the legs. He reached over to his right side and pulled the zipper at his thigh halfway open.

The cut he’d gotten at the Crossroads was wrapped in one of his homemade bandages that had formerly been a white shirt. Dull red and yellow stained the material, following the line of the wound. He pulled the top of the gauze down just enough to reveal the edge of the

wound—she could see how his skin swelled at the site—and thin, snaking red lines that raced up his leg, disappearing under the fabric of his boxer briefs.

She let out a breath and fought the urge to fall to her knees. Fear and relief crashed through her as she realized that he wasn't going to turn. She turned away from him, so he couldn't see her fight to keep unwanted tears from falling. "You keep lying to me," she said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you think—"

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?" She leaned on the fencepost as she remembered that first day. He'd said something about the cut, and she'd shouted him down. Guilt shoved its way into her, along with everything else.

"I didn't think it was going to get that bad," he said. She felt the beam shudder as he settled his weight on it next to her. "I put some of Burt's vodka on it, that night at the arcade. I couldn't find anything else at his place."

She shook her head. "Not surprising."

"I didn't know if it would help. When it started to get infected, I hoped it would just hurt for a while and clean itself out. Kept it under wraps, made sure it wasn't exposed to the air, just in case." He hesitated before adding, "I was worried at first that if you knew, you'd ditch me. I didn't want to be dead weight. And then, as time went on, I didn't want to make you worry. We'd get to the Barracks, they'd patch me up. It'd be like it never happened."

She put her head in her hands. She recognized the red lines, not from sight, but from her mom's lectures. "Sepsis is deadly serious, honey. Treat every cut and scrape the same," she'd say, stethoscope dangling from her neck as she'd pace the living room floor. She'd still have momentum from a busy shift and would walk around for a while saying whatever was on her

mind, until she'd go upstairs and collapse on her bed. "Don't go around panicking and cutting your arm off, but don't let carelessness be the thing that takes you down."

Ella straightened and looked at Sanjay. Her emotions were still roiling around inside her. Added to that was a kind of helplessness. She felt trapped, in the same way when she'd been pinned down by the infected outside of the arcade. She could stomach letting go of Sanjay when it had been her choice, when she knew that he was only absent from her life because she'd willed it so. But he'd gone and gotten his blood poisoned, and now she could feel the tether connecting them together, the one that they'd been weaving together. Despite her best efforts, she now realized that she would not be able to walk away from him. The possibility of his death loomed over his shoulder, promising to wipe her out if she continued to stand so close. Here she stood, safety from the deluge within her reach, but all she could will herself to do was brace against the wave.

The hospital was too far. He had a day or two before fatigue overtook him. He already looked worse off than he had the other day. He must have been downplaying his symptoms the whole time, claiming he'd eaten food that had sat too long in its packaging. She realized that he probably hadn't rested since following her. His timing suggested he'd followed her as soon as he'd realized she was gone.

She wiped her face with her sleeve. "If we walk quickly, we can make it to the Barracks in a few days." She wished she'd been angry enough to be petty and steal their car. "They'll have antibiotics, fluids. You'll be okay." She looked him over. Now that she was facing him, she realized he was leaning on the fence for support, as though it was an effort to hold himself upright.

He blinked a few times. “They didn’t leave yet. Orla and the others are still at the store, waiting for us.”

“Oh.” She shoved her hands in her pockets, embarrassment taking over. “Waiting for you, you mean.”

She saw him tense as his frustration with her returned. “I didn’t have to ask them to wait. They offered it up themselves.”

“What, all of them?”

He made a face. “Shaun was pissed about it.” She wasn’t surprised. “They said they’d come with, but I knew you’d just hide if you saw them coming or would do something equally as irrational.”

“You should have let them do it. You look terrible.”

His laugh turned into a breathless cough. She took a step forward, but he held out a hand. “I’m fine,” he said once he caught his breath.

“You’re not contagious, either,” she said, stepping closer. “You should have just gone if you’re this sick. You can’t afford to waste your time on me.”

Sanjay looked her in the eye as he said, “at the very least, this should tell you that I’m not just looking to you for survival.” He pulled her into a hug. She resisted at first, out of habit, but he didn’t let go.

She wrapped her arms around his torso, her head buried in his shoulder. She could feel the heat coming off of him, the fever pushing through his clothes, and squeezed her arms harder. She forced herself to ignore everything she was feeling—the guilt, the fear, the knowledge that she would have no one to blame but herself if this killed him—and allowed herself to exist in this

moment. He was alive right now. She was there right now. They still had time to fix this, and if that meant following him to the Barracks, she'd do it.

Chapter Twenty-One

The walk back took twice as long. Sanjay tried to convince Ella that he could keep pace. The third time he said so, she sat down on the ground and waited until he realized she wasn't two steps behind him before standing up again.

She could tell he was hurting bad by the time they were upon the outlet strip by the way he wasn't hiding the fact that he was limping. When the store's scorched exterior came into view, Ella slowed. Orla stood by the Jeep; Ella could make out her hair from this distance.

"You okay?" Sanjay bumped her shoulder with his own.

She turned and face him. "I should be asking you that." He'd gotten worse over the last two days. He'd refused to let her carry his backpack, but the crossbow was slung over her shoulder, the weight of it throwing him off more than once. His face was pale, the warmth leeched from his skin. She'd noticed his hands shaking a few times, though he was quick to stuff them in his pockets when he caught her looking.

"I'll be fine; stop worrying about me." He took a step forward, and she followed close behind.

"You walk for a day on a bad leg by yourself, tell me you're dying, and you expect me to stop worrying?"

"You're right," he said between breaths. "That is stupid. Who would go off on their own like that?"

Orla looked up from what she was doing, straightening as they walked over to her.

"Glad to see you're both in one piece," she said with a smirk.

"Yeah," Ella said lamely. "Sorry about that."

Orla shook her head, then turned to look at Sanjay. Ella saw the moment she realized something was off as the grin slid from her face, her eyes widening slightly. “You didn’t—”

“He’s not,” Ella said quickly. “But we need to get going as soon as we can. He’s got an infected wound from a while ago.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone?” Her voiced rose in pitch. She started to dig in the box she had on a seat in the Jeep, looking for something. “Go inside. I’ll get Bailey. You shouldn’t be moving around if you can help it.”

They made their way through the open doors and through the aisles. Sanjay began to lean on Ella, and she forced herself to match pace with him, fighting the urge to grab him around the waist and haul him back to the breakroom.

Someone came down the ladder to the roof just as Ella opened the door. “What’s going on,” Shaun called. Ella ignored him as she led Sanjay over to the couches and let him settle himself on the couch.

“Go ahead and unzip your pants leg. I’m pretty sure there’s some rubbing alcohol in one of these drawers.”

“She’s getting me to take my pants off,” he said to the ceiling. “And in a compromised condition, no less.”

“Please don’t pretend to be delirious,” she said, fighting a smile at his joke. “I need to be able to tell the real thing apart from you being a smartass.”

“Shouldn’t fevers make you hot?” he said.

“You’re cold?” He nodded. “Give me a second.” She tossed her backpack onto the opposite futon and began digging for the hand warmers she knew were in there.

She heard the door creak open. There was a gasp, then a click.

"What the fuck is that?" Ella looked up at the sound of Shaun's voice. His face was tight, eyes wide, as he stood in the doorway. He had both hands on his pistol as he trained it on Sanjay.

"The hell is wrong with you, son?"

Ella pulled her hunting knife from the sheath on her thigh and stood upright, putting herself between Sanjay and the gun. "Put that down right now," she ordered.

"What the hell is he doing in here lookin' like that?" He took a step closer, and she held out her knife.

"He's not infected."

"Bullshit. I fucking know what that look is, I've seen enough of them to know." He leaned his head and said, "how long you been hiding your bite from us, huh?"

She heard the rustle of fabric behind her. "You can see for yourself Shaun," Sanjay said, his voice low and even. "It's a cut from a piece of glass. I'm not bitten, I promise you."

"He's not bitten!" Ella's voice was decidedly less even as she tried to put Shaun's attention back on her. "Jesus Christ, can't you tell the difference between teeth marks and a cut?"

"You sayin' a cut never got infected with other shit before?"

She fought the urge to keep shouting at him. "He's had that cut under wraps since he got it." Technically a lie, but if it got him to lower his gun, she'd say whatever she had to. "You think I would have stuck with him if I thought I was in any danger?"

Shaun looked pointedly at the gun in his hand. "Looks that way to me, sweetheart."

Her temper rose again. "Put the safety back on that gun before I cut your hand off."

"Think you can move that fast?"

Orla and Bailey appeared in the doorway. Orla stood between them and Shaun, her arms raised. "What are you doing, Shaun?"

“Take a look for yourself,” he demanded. He waved the gun at her. “He’s turning as we speak!”

“Is he exhibiting any significant symptoms of infection, Shaun?” Bailey came around and started towards Sanjay. Ella fought the urge to keep them in her sight as they disappeared from view. “Did you see a bite mark? Do you know how long he’s had a fever?”

“I don’t need to check some goddamn list, I’ve been doing this my whole damn life!”

“The fuck are you talking about, Shaun,” asked Bailey.

“Dogs with rabies are the same. They just seem under the weather, do all the shit they do when they’re feeling rough. They cuddle up to you, give you the eyes. I worked for Animal Control for thirty years, I know what a dead thing looks like when it’s still walking around.”

“Okay, you know what?” Orla pointed a finger at Shaun. “We’re gonna do this right. Go outside and put that gun away. Bailey’s gonna examine him, confirm that he’s not gonna Flatline, and then we’ll go from there.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ella looked at Orla and fixed her with a warning glare.

Orla gave a miniscule shake of her head. “You and me, Shaun. We still gotta finish loading up the car anyway.” She walked towards him, waving him towards the hallway. He kept his eyes trained on Ella, who stared him down until the door closed between them

“Jesus,” Bailey muttered. “Um, okay.” They walked over to Sanjay and crouched near him. “When did you hurt yourself?”

Ella sat there as Bailey asked Sanjay a litany of questions. She offered up knowledge where she could, explaining her mom had been a nurse when Bailey gave a curious look. When Bailey finished, they walked over to the kitchen counter with a sheet of paper Ella had torn from her sketchbook and a pen, making notes.

She stepped aside so Bailey could continue to look him over. Orla walked back in then, and Ella walked over to her. “Well?”

Orla hesitated before she met Ella’s gaze. “I kind of fucked up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I walked with him to the Jeep, and he grabbed the keys out of my hand. He’s out there right now, and says we either leave without Sanjay now...”

“Or what? Kill us both right now?”

“He said something about waiting for the inevitable.”

“Hey,” Sanjay said from his spot on the couch. “You can tell him he doesn’t get dibs to pull the plug. That’s Ella’s job.”

Ella turned to glare at him. “You’re the only one who thinks that’s funny.”

“I’m only half-joking,” he said.

“Well, I reject that offer, so shut up about it.” She turned back to Orla. “What’s to stop him from just driving away?”

“Protocol,” she said. “If he rolls up with an intact vehicle and all of that shit we hauled, nobody’s going to believe we got tagged by Flatliners. He’s not much of a liar, and there’s a whole debriefing process once we come back. Besides all that, we’ve got friends back there who’d kick his ass all over camp before forcing him to drive them out to confirm his story.” Ella opened her mouth to say they should keep eyes on him to be sure, but Orla ignored her and looked down towards Bailey. “Well?”

“Ella’s right,” Bailey said. “The wound wasn’t treated how it should have been. I’m surprised he’s only just started to show symptoms this severe.”

“But he’s not Flatlining?”

Ella turned back to Orla. “What did I just get done telling you?” Orla didn’t acknowledge her as she waited for Bailey to speak.

“He’s fine,” they said. “Well, you know what I mean. Infection sites on victims typically have strange discoloration. There’s redness, sure, but the skin also has a blue tinge to it, like a bruise. The immune system is sort of hacked by the virus, told not to try and fight the infection, so the tissue starts to die more rapidly. But you can feel the heat coming off of the cut. His body’s definitely trying to fight this thing.”

“Which is why his whole circulation system winds up compromised,” Ella added. “The heart keeps moving new blood through his system, but it takes the infection back into itself and the rest of the body.”

“Shit,” Orla whispered. “Can we do anything?”

“Not here, definitely.” Bailey stood and pocketed the sheet of paper. “He needs an IV drip, at the very least. Not to mention some kind of antibiotics, as well as something to slow the rate of the spread. He might even need a blood transfusion.” Bailey and Orla shared a look that Ella couldn’t translate. “We could use caffeine pills in the meantime, but it’ll only buy us a little bit more time.”

Ella bit her lip. Reluctantly, she asked, “how much time do we have right now?”

Bailey held their hands out helplessly. “Enough to get back. Hope nothing has happened since we left, that nobody has any serious problems going on at the Barracks.”

“What does that mean?” Sanjay sat up straight and put his feet on the floor.

Bailey and Orla shared another look. “There’s a chance,” Orla started, “that they could turn you away.”

The silence at her statement felt thick, the humming of the lights above the only thing to cut through it. Ella stood, staring at the two of them, waiting for an explanation.

“I’m gonna see if I can talk down Shaun,” Orla said, adding “let’s leave as soon as it gets light,” before leaving the room. Ella moved to Sanjay and grabbed his wrist to look at his watch. Somehow it was after seven p.m.

Sanjay shifted his weight in his seat. “It makes sense,” he said.

“No,” Ella shot back, “it doesn’t. So please, explain it to me like I’m an idiot.”

Bailey took off their beanie and turned it over in their hands. "The Barracks has stood for as long as it has because it is built on a foundation of rules that are never broken. It was first erected by the military, and sort of still is, but it's evolved as time has proved that some of the old rules don't serve a purpose anymore."

"Okay, so?"

They sighed. "Look, we came out here to find any supplies that we could add to the Barracks' stores. We're not the only ones, either; every two weeks, they assign teams and send them out in multiple directions. We came this way, but another went west, another went south. Those stores are always being replenished as a result, but they are also constantly being used up, since we can only bring back so much. People are always getting sick, getting hurt, because everything has to be done by hand now, and so there's a greater chance for someone to hurt themselves doing the simplest things. And there are people who were sick before everything happened, too, and if we don't find a way to work around the lack of access to aid, people are going to die. And that can't happen; that's the Barracks' entire purpose."

"Can you please just say what you're trying to say?"

Bailey nodded sheepishly. "The Barracks more or less runs on a triage mentality. If you're bleeding out, we can help. If you're vomiting your guts up, if you've got an existing issue, then they do what they can to step in. But smaller things are disregarded. If you have a fever, there's a forty-eight-hour mandatory waiting period to see if it'll resolve itself before you can make a request for a physician to examine you."

"Sanjay doesn't have a fever, his own blood is killing him."

"And the type of materials he needs are rarely found on supply runs. You helped me sort out what we found, so you know it's true. They have a finite supply of the kind of stuff you'd find in a hospital, and they are stingy as fuck with it." Bailey folded their arms across their chest, avoiding Ella's gaze. "And Sanjay is an outsider." They didn't say it with any malice, but the word had thorns. *Outsider. Deadweight. Expendable.* "It doesn't mean they'll turn him away on sight, but if someone we already know needs it, they'll have priority. If that's the case, the best you can expect is they'll help you stay comfortable."

"What, like fucking hospice care?" Ella wanted to punch something. She wanted to go out and find a band of infected and just start swinging wildly.

They shrugged. "I didn't say it was right. Point of fact, I hate it."

"But?"

Their chin trembled. "But," they said slowly, voice thickening, "this whole...event? It's made it impossible to always choose right over necessary." Orla sat on the couch next to where Bailey stood and squeezed her hand. "We can't afford to listen to our humanity. This virus, or parasite, whatever it is, has turned our humanity against us, in more ways than one. The ones who get bit, they're forced to live out an imitation of what their lives once were, in service of this disease fighting to breed and thrive. And those who aren't, are forced to choose who deserves to live,

who we can afford to help." They wiped a tear away. "I remember watching a video where there was this old woman who fell down between a subway car and the platform, and everybody there got together and *pushed* on the train to get her free. When things became dangerous, when people got in trouble, we had the ability to change the outcome. We decided, maybe not all of the time, but people typically wanted to do what helped people the most. And now, we don't get to make that choice. Unless things work out and you're lucky enough for that to be the only option at your disposal, the leaders, the ones giving the orders, don't even blink twice about assigning priority to someone over someone else, and for reasons that shouldn't matter."

"But they do," Ella muttered.

Bailey nodded. "They do." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "We can try. I'm not saying they won't help. I just know that a lot of people think the Barracks is sanctuary, like it was never touched by the virus. It's just what we have left."

Ella nodded, looking at the ground.

After Bailey left to give them some space, Ella couldn't sit still. She went from pacing the room, to sitting on the couch, to laying down, to pacing again.

"You might be giving me motion sickness," Sanjay said. "Though that could be just me."

"What about the hospital?"

Sanjay looked up at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Arcadia Methodist. My mom's hospital. You weren't wrong, that time you talked about going there."

"You said it looked like the place had been raided."

“Yeah, but I didn’t get past the first floor. What if there’s antibiotics up there? Probably stronger stuff, probably with longer shelf lives than the stuff they’ve found on their runs.”

“You said yourself it’s too far away. You’d have to drive there.”

“You’ve never seen me drive. I’d be back before the day was done.” She could hear the desperation in her voice, wished she could conceal her thoughts as well as he apparently could.

Sanjay gave a shake of his head, his shoulders shuddering. “I don’t think we can try for both options. We have to pick one and roll with it. Driving to the Barracks is safer. There’s no risk of Zacks, and if they did show up, there’d be more of us to deal with it. If you got stuck up there, and couldn’t make it back out, you’d be fucked, and we’d be stranded.”

She wanted to argue that they’d all go to the hospital, and half of them could just wait in the car, but it sounded ridiculous without even leaving her head. “I hate this.”

“I know fatalism is kind of your thing,” he quipped, “but given that I’m the sick one, could be a little more optimistic so I don’t have to try as hard to be?”

She met his gaze. His hair was stuck to his sweaty forehead. They’d redressed the cut, and now he sported a bright yellow strip of cotton around his thigh. She could only just start to see where fluid was beginning to seep through, but it was definitely darker in one spot. “I’m not gonna let you die, Sanjay. Not while I haven’t gotten the chance to make up for running off.”

“Well, if that’s the motivation you need, I certainly won’t complain.” He grabbed the water bottle on the armrest above his head and unscrewed the cap slowly before taking a sip.

“You saw how long it took me to get used to you,” she said with a grin. She held out her hand, which he took after putting the cap back on the bottle. She gave it a squeeze. “You can’t leave me with three strangers on my own. I won’t know what to do with myself.”

“You were fine the other night,” he said, squeezing back.

“I guess.” She didn’t explain that she wouldn’t have gone up if he hadn’t pushed her to. If she hadn’t known he’d be there to fall back on. His presence made things easier, made them worth reaching out for.

He cleared his throat. “Now we just have to worry about Shaun holding us up in the morning.”

“You let me worry about Shaun,” she said.

He glared at her. “I know that face. You don’t need to kick his ass to get him to calm down, Ella.”

“You sure about that?”

“Let the others talk to him tonight. They all know each other; I don’t think there’s a lot of love lost between them, but at the very least they can probably talk him down from doing something stupid more easily than if you point that knife at him.”

“Fine,” she said. He relaxed in his seat, arms crossed over his stomach.

She couldn’t let him die. She wouldn’t, no matter what.

Chapter Twenty-Two

She turned the fluorescents off when she caught Sanjay covering his eyes with his hand. She plugged in the Christmas lights, though. She didn't want to be blind to anything that happened, especially if he got worse.

"You're surprisingly good at this whole caring business," Sanjay joked. His voice was scratchy. Ella pulled another water bottle from the shrink-wrapped pack and unscrewed the top.

"Can I tell you something?" He took the bottle from her and putting it to his lips. She took a clean one of his T-shirt bandages and walked over to the sink to soak it in cold water.

She shook her head as she walked back into his line of sight, setting the fabric on his forehead. "I'm not doing any kind of deathbed confessions, all right? So, unless you want to tell me you blew up the arcade because you wanted to set off a grenade for the hell of it, then I don't care."

"It's neither of those things. You asked me something a while ago, and I didn't give you an answer."

"What? When?"

"Back when we first met. You asked me why I call the infected Zacks. I didn't tell you why, but I don't think you noticed."

She shook her head. "I didn't really care. I just thought you were weird." She sat on the edge of the bed and patted the back of his hand. "For the record, I was right."

He gave a heavy sigh. Ella could feel her nerves building, but she forced herself not to show it.

"I told you I had two siblings." He reached for his backpack, and she hoisted it onto the mattress for him. She waited, watching as he searched in the front pocket for something.

He pulled out a single photo. It was in terrible shape. The fold down the center was close to breaking apart, the corners had long since lost their edges. He flipped it around so she could see.

Sanjay from before had even more hair than he did now, it seemed. He stood against a brick wall, his eyes nearly obscured by his hair. He was wearing the same yellow shirt as the two kids standing to his side, with a big red circle that read "Thing 1" in the center. The boy standing next to him was at shoulder height. Sandy blond hair and a smile that showed off blue braces. The girl hit his shoulder, with tan skin and pin-straight black hair that hit her waist. The boy's shirt said, "Thing 2," the girl's "Thing 3."

"You were happy," was all she could think to say. She looked up at Sanjay.

The sadness in his eyes was fathoms deep. Without a word, he took the photo from her and turned it around.

Blue ink, a mom-like handwriting. *Sanjay, Zachary, and Alma (16/12/8), first day of school in Meridian County.*

Ella read the inscription again. She looked at Sanjay. He sat taller in the bed, his hand palm up on the mattress. She put the photo in his hand, her fingers resting lightly on his.

"Dad went to help a neighbor. Mrs. Hennessy. She always told me to call her Theresa. 'Mrs. And Mrs. Hennessy sounds ridiculous,' she'd say. 'Just call us Theresa and Annabel.'" His smile faded. "She got bit. I know that now, but at the time all I knew was that she was sick and acting weird. You remember how scared people were. The news kept saying the same shit, the government wasn't moving fast enough or explaining what they knew. No one understood the virus, and all they knew was that it was spread through contact. Annabel didn't want to risk going out in public to a doctor, and she was scared Theresa was going to hurt herself, so Dad went over." He stopped and took a deep breath. "I heard my parents talk about it through the

bedroom door. She bit him, got out of the room, and ran off. I don't know what happened to Annabel. Dad ran back to the house, holding his wrist." His expression changed, as if he was seeing something Ella couldn't. "It looked so strange. Just wrong, my brain couldn't comprehend it."

"Dad went to the doctor. The doctor gave him a rabies shot, which didn't make sense to me, and then some random antibiotics. They didn't have any answers, so they were just throwing prescriptions at people, hoping something would stick." Ella nodded, remembering the weeks leading up to it all. Her mom wouldn't let Ella hug her, would put her scrubs in a vacuum-sealed bag before taking really long showers. They ate a lot of microwave dinners then; her mom didn't want to have them both eating from containers they were both using. She remembered the circles under her mom's eyes, the way she seemed small and defeated when she'd come home. They couldn't even hang out like they normally would, because her mom would need all the sleep she could get before going back in.

"He didn't get better. His fever spiked, he said his hand went numb. We called the doctor to follow up—tried to, that is. Phone lines were choked, we just got voicemail. Mom didn't want us going near Dad. She and him holed up in their bedroom. I could hear him moaning in pain. Some nights it was so bad, I'd take the kids downstairs and camp out in the living room. Play Disney movies, turn the volume up all the way."

He paused and looked down at his hands, palms clasped as if in prayer. Ella leaned forward and unwound his hands from each other, threading her fingers through his.

"One night, I came home from work to find Mom loading up the car. Zack and Alma were buckled in. Zack was crying. Alma was just staring into the distance. I asked Mom what was wrong."

“Your father. He attacked us, the way he said Theresa did. He tried to grab Zack.’ She wouldn’t look at me, just kept grabbing suitcases and loading them into the back of the car. Her hands were shaking. ‘He chased him down the stairs, so I grabbed the gun out of the nightstand.’ And then she told me I had to take them to the cabin, I had to get them away from there. And then she...”

He closed his eyes, ran his free hand through his hair. Ella looked down at her shoes and waited.

“She showed me where he’d bitten her. She refused to come with us. I grabbed her arms while I was arguing with her, and she shoved me away so hard I nearly fell down. She said that he’d bitten near a vein, and she was scared it wouldn’t take her as long as it had taken Dad to lose himself.” There was a pause. “The last time I saw her was in the rearview mirror; she was standing in the doorway. The kitchen light was on, and it turned her into just a silhouette.”

Ella didn’t want to say it, but she knew it was better to rip the Band-Aid. The pain in his expression was too familiar to her, and she wanted this story to end for his sake, as well as for hers. “Why do you call them Zacks?”

Sanjay wiped his nose and caught her gaze. “Alma was bitten first. I was gassing up the car, and I’d let them out so they could stretch their legs. There were others around, and she was so small. I still don’t get how it didn’t go for anyone else before it came for her. But I heard her scream, and I saw the man leaning down over her, and the next thing I knew he was down on the ground, and I was holding a hammer. I know it came from the car, but I don’t remember grabbing it. I patched her up, and we drove off.”

“I lied to her. Told her he wasn’t sick; when everything happened with Dad, Mom said neither of them saw anything, and she shut the bedroom door so they wouldn’t see Dad’s body. I

sterilized the wound, wrapped it up in gauze, and told her not to touch it. I was still telling myself the two weren't related. He was just a junkie or something, and he was dead, so it didn't mean anything now."

"It took longer than it should have to get to the cabin. They shut down the highway about twenty miles before we would have made it, so I ditched the car and we went on foot. Left the suitcases, just their kiddie backpacks and the hiking one Mom had packed. We camped out that night—no fire, just laid down once they got tired—and made it around nine the next morning."

He'd started crying. Ella watched the tears fall; he didn't bother to wipe them away. His voice kept the same even tone, and for a split-second Ella was thinking how she envied him for it; she hated the way her voice sounded when she cried.

"At some point, Zack tripped and fell into a bush with thorns on it. I pulled him out, and he was all scratched up, bleeding all over the place. He started crying—everything caught up to him, he was barely eleven years old—and Alma, she went over to hug him. She told him everything was gonna be okay, and then she gave him a kiss on one of the deeper cuts on his arm. 'I kissed it better like Mama,' she said."

Ella tensed. "Fuck," she whispered.

He just shook his head. "I didn't even think anything of it when it happened; we were so close to the house, and I was trying so hard not to look at the bandage on her shoulder, but it made a bump underneath her shirt and jacket."

He wiped at his face, taking the strip of cloth off his forehead. "They both turned a few days later. Same day, actually; I don't know why he turned at the same time, she kissed his cut a while after she'd been hurt." He looked at her, and the expression on his face broke Ella's heart. "I don't...I don't think I can—"

She squeezed his hand twice. “Don’t worry,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.” He started to protest, but she cut him off. “Shut up, you know what I mean.” She reached into her backpack and pulled out a wrinkled pack of tissues, handed it to him.

“Thanks.”

She busied herself by unpacking and repacking her bag, her back turned to him.

When she was done, he cleared his throat. “I failed them,” he said. She turned back to face him. “I was supposed to keep them safe, but I was too scared. I didn’t want to face what was happening, that everything was connected. It didn’t matter that it was happening everywhere. They had no idea what was happening, they didn’t even know that our parents were gone.”

Ella played with the strap in her hands. “You were just a kid, too. Hell, we’re still technically kids.”

“That shouldn’t have mattered.”

“You know they aren’t a hive mind, right? Sanjay, your siblings didn’t turn into monsters. They were sick, like the other infected, but that didn’t make them stop being the brother and sister you loved. If you keep forcing yourself to associate them with the ones we run from, the ones we shot from the window...” she looked down at her hands, afraid to say the wrong thing. “It’s not the way to remember them. It won’t work like you think it will.”

He shrugged helplessly. “I don’t have anything else. This picture’s practically dissolving. Everything is either rotting at home or burned with them.” He gripped the pack of tissues in his hand. “I know I’m going to forget their faces. Their voices. It’s all already starting to slip away. Even Eli’s face is fuzzy sometimes, like I’m looking at him underwater.” He reached for her hand, gripped it tightly. “I can’t keep doing this, Ella.”

She turned her body so that she was fully sitting on the bed and facing him, crossing her legs on the duvet. She didn't say anything as he covered his face with the bandana.

"I know what it's like to fuck up," she said. "I really do. And to do it in a way where you can't take it back, and it doesn't matter what you meant to do or how you couldn't have known beforehand that you were going to fuck up." She tried to find the words, even as she felt herself starting to cry. "It sits with you, and it feels like it's the only thing that this world can't hurt, like it's gonna follow you around forever."

"So, what do you do?"

"Well if you're me, you get used to it being around, since no one else is, and it starts calling the shots, and it takes a guy with some impulse control problems and a few near-death experiences to shake you out of it." She smiled weakly, but he didn't return it.

"And what if you're me?"

She paused, and before she could start convincing herself not to, she reached for her backpack and pulled it up onto the bed. She let go of his hand as she unzipped it and shoved aside a few things. She was becoming a hoarder just like him.

She pulled out her sketchbook and flipped it open. He leaned forward for a better view.

She showed a few of the ones from Before. Stuff she'd done for school, stuff she'd done for herself. She showed him the one of the break room, and he started to smile.

"Wasn't enough to be smarter than me; you had to go and have talent, too?"

"I'm trying to make a point here, stop deflecting."

"Your bedside manner is awful."

She sighed, and after a brief moment, she grabbed most of the blank pages and flipped to a spot near the end of the notebook.

Sanjay's smile faded. She let him take it from her as he studied the page.

About a dozen photos of Ella's life looked back at the two of them. The photos and the pages were layered in clear packing tape, to keep them from getting wet or yellowing with time. It had held up pretty well, all things considered.

Six-year old Ella gave a giant, toothless grin at the camera, a stack of pancakes in front of her. Ella's mom wore a dress-up feather boa and a cowboy hat, Ella standing next to her with a tiara on her head. Spartacus lounged in a sunbeam blazing through the patio door.

Ella and her mom stood next to each other, the Lincoln Memorial behind them. Her father's arm around her shoulder was still there, but she had cut him away after he'd left. Ella and her mom posed, Ella's acceptance letter from NYU in their hands.

Ella wiped her face as the tears began to fall in earnest. She didn't want to damage the photos.

"You can't bring them back. None of it—the people, the way things were, the way our futures were supposed to turn out—is ever coming back. And we can't grip it so tightly that we stop moving. You were right about that."

"So, then what do I do?"

"You bring them with you. You remember what matters, that you loved them, that they loved you. That they would want you to remember the parts that made you happy to be their brother and their son. You remember them by remembering them, and you tell me about them, so I can remember them for you when you need me to."

"I told you how I killed them." He looked down at the pictures, lost in thought.

"Then tell me something else about them. I didn't get to have siblings, so I feel like I'm owed a few stories about what that's like." She pointed a finger at him.

“Like what?”

She shrugged. “Did they have any random hobbies? Knowing you, there’s no way they didn’t.”

“Um...” he wiped tears from his eyes. He was better at talking through them than she was, she thought with some jealousy. “Alma wanted to be a space alien, I think.”

“She sounds like a perfectly weird little girl. I remember I wanted to be a lizard at that age.”

He laughed, and this time it sounded genuine; lighter, like he wasn’t having to push it past anything else. “And Zack had it in his head that he was going to write comic books when he grew up. He snuck *Watchmen* into the house and hid it under his pillow, and Dad found it when he was being the tooth fairy one night.” He smiled wider at the memory. “He wrote a note from the tooth fairy, saying that reading books your parents didn’t like meant your teeth would fall out faster, but you’d get less money every time.”

She sat there and listened to him tell her about his family. When he got tired, or when his fever had him shaking, she’d take over and talk about life after her dad left, how the air became lighter once it was just the two of them. How her mom became lighter, even when she had to work longer hours to make up the difference. How watching her mom go back to school and get her nursing license had taught her that she’d never have an excuse to give up on anything ever again.

They traded stories until Sanjay exhausted himself. She put her towel on top of his own, pulling the two of them up to his chin.

Chapter Twenty-Three

There was a knock at the door. Ella stood and grabbed her hatchet off the coffee table, sliding it into a belt loop.

She cracked the door open. Shaun stood there, glaring down at her. “Got a minute?” he asked.

“You’ve got a tenth of that to get away from this door.”

He sighed and looked down at his feet. “I’m not gonna hurt nobody. I just wanna talk, explain myself. Apologize, even.” He moved to the right, disappearing from view.

Ella looked back at Sanjay’s sleeping form. He’d curled in on himself, the towels slipping down to his waist. She didn’t know what to do. She knew, though, that as long as she could see Shaun, that Sanjay was safe. She’d do whatever was necessary to keep it that way.

Shaun was waiting at the opening of the hallway for her. “Come on,” he said in a low growl. He motioned for her to follow him with the hand that was holding his flask. Her stomach tightened as she watched him shuffle unsteadily through the aisles. The Jeep remained where it had been before, though she didn’t see the keys anywhere.

He turned left and rounded the corner. She followed him as he made his way down the narrow alley formed by the building that was halfway burned down, open on the far side as well as the way they’d come from. She pulled a small headlamp out of her pocket and turned it on, angling it towards the ground.

She could see the blue tarp just behind him. The tarp was empty, but some of the blood remained.

“Weren’t you supposed to burn that?” she said flatly. “You could at least try to clean off the blood if you’re going to reuse it.”

“You know,” he said as she drew closer to him, “I had a granddaughter your age, long time ago. ‘Fore all this bullshit went down.”

“So did a lot of people.”

He grunted out a laugh. “I suppose that’s true. Her parents, my daughter and her husband—bet he’s dead, he was a coward—didn’t like me drinkin’ round her, but I always reined it in. Never had too much, never used foul language around her. Wasn’t enough, I guess.”

“What do you want, Shaun?”

“Point is,” he said, “as much as it hurt for them to say they weren’t comin’ around anymore, I’m glad it all turned out the way it did. I dunno where they are these days, if they’re still around. And I find most days I don’t really care. Y’see,” he turned to fully face her. She could smell the booze coming out of his flask and on his breath. If he was lucid now, he wouldn’t be for long. “The lesson they taught me was hard, but necessary; you can’t let sentiment get in the way of practicality.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, think about it. They made the call, but we were still family. Amelia loved her granddaddy, and we never argued in front of her. I suspect what they did broke her heart, and they had to look at her face and know that they caused that hurt. That was their cross to bear, but it was for a reason they thought was right. It doesn’t matter if the decisions hurt, or if they make people hate you.” He pulled at his beard, his gaze vacant. “Because the name of this game is outlasting the fucking Flatliners. And sometimes, that means making hard calls when no one else will.”

“You’re not going near him,” she said. She put one hand on the blunt edge of the hatchet, thumb hooked in her front pocket.

He looked down at her hand, looked back up at her, and chuckled. "I can do that too. Watch." He reached across his torso with his free hand, letting it rest on his pistol in the shoulder holster he wore between his shirt and jacket. He flicked open the snap that lay against the grip. "Doesn't mean nothin', though. All your posturing ain't worth much, sweetheart."

"It's only posturing if you don't mean it."

He nodded. "Okay, fair." He pulled out the gun and began to raise his hand.

She hit the wrist of the hand holding his flask and knocked it out of his hand, dropping the headlamp and letting it fall. He looked reflexively, and she did the same to his other wrist, but then grabbed it and twisted hard. He cried out in pain, and finally let go. She twisted the gun around in her hand and shoved him back until he was pressed against the brick wall, gun pointed at his brow. Her right arm gripped her latest box knife, forearm up against his chest.

"You could just let me walk away," he said as she scanned the ground for something to tie his hands with. The light was angled away from them, throwing them both into shadow, but she was close enough that she could see the snarling grin on his face. "I'm not going to waste my time and energy trying to kill your little sidekick. I'd rather get clear of this death trap and carve my own path."

"You mean that literally, don't you?"

"Does that really bother you?" He nodded in the direction of the grocery store. "Be straight with me. If it wasn't him, just some other poor fucker who didn't know how to keep out of trouble, what would you do? People didn't wise up just 'cause the world ended." His words began to slur. Ella flinched as a fleck of spit hit her cheek. "People don't pay attention to what's happenin' unless it affected them. World was already shit before; it was just easier to ignore when you could afford to look the other way. They weren't worth the gas bills they paid to drive

around in their cars, to go to jobs that contributed nothing to the world, while men and women died so they could stay free. They pissed their pants and ran screaming the second things got tough, and now we're about to die because they couldn't clean up their own messes. You want to explain to me why they deserve an ounce of kindness?"

"I never killed someone that was still breathing. You don't wanna help people, you're just adding bodies to the other side." She felt him push against her arm, and she dug her heels in to keep him pinned. "We're just trying to survive, same as you. I'm not trying to pull something past you."

"But you're judging me. Every one of you little bitches has had their eye on me this whole time, when I've been the one keeping those two from falling into the void."

"You are not the single person holding back the end of the world," she said. "No one on this earth experienced anything that could have made them more prepared for this than you or me."

"And now your fucking boyfriend's stupidity is what's gonna kill me, in the end."

"He got a cut, running for his life. How is that stupidity?"

"His stupidity was trusting you to be better than you are. What would he say right now if he saw you pointing that thing at me, huh? I bet he'd tell you to let me go, huh? Proved him wrong, you did; he walked a whole damn day on his own to get you back, only for you to turn around and show that people don't change their stripes."

Ella felt something in her unfasten. She thought of her father, of the man who'd beaten on her car window. Any number of people who'd made her feel small, made her feel like she was destined to fuck up. Everyone who ever gave her mom a look for not being able to hold on to her man, thinking *she must have done something, why else would he leave her?*

Every infected person who had come at her teeth first. They were all in the ground, turned to dust. And she was standing on two feet.

"Maybe he would." She tightened her grip. "But he's not here."

He moved to knock her hand, but she'd been waiting for it. She slammed the butt of the gun into his temple, and when he began to recoil from the blow, she let the gun fall to the ground. With her now empty hand, she grabbed him by the hair, and she drove the box knife in her other hand into his throat.

He struggled, and she could feel her grip loosening. Warm blood gushed out onto her right hand. She remembered doing this same thing to an infected and realized that she'd gotten used to blood feeling cold when it spilled. She fought the urge to pull her hand back in disgust as Shaun's life spilled out onto her.

She held him tight against her chest, as though she were hugging a friend, using all her strength to pin him there with her body weight as she pulled the knife back and stabbed him again. He tried to yell, but all that came out was a liquid gurgle as he struggled to breathe. She looked up at the sky, the stars clustered in their millions, the view unobscured by light or clouds. She counted the stars as she felt him grow weak, felt his legs begin to slow their kicking. His sounds of struggle began to quiet, sounded less emphatic. She kept counting for twenty seconds after he'd stopped moving altogether, and the blood began to slow. She recoiled as if he'd burned her, and he slumped to the ground.

Ella's whole body shook with adrenaline. Her right hand was black, and she could feel where it had sprayed across her chest. She looked down at Shaun, half-expecting to see a bite mark across his face.

She stared down at his body, his face frozen in an expression of surprise that no longer made sense. She let go of the box knife; it was still embedded in his neck. She stepped back and turned away from him.

She could feel herself wanting to break down. She hadn't needed to do that. She could have fought him off; hell, if she'd wanted to kill him, she could have done it with a few hard shoves; the brick wall would have done the rest of the work for her, taken some of the blame.

She waited for the guilt to come, the wave to crash over her and cause her to self-destruct. She'd just done something savage. It shouldn't have felt different. She'd always thought that her complicated feelings towards the infected meant something, meant that she could separate her choices based in survival from everything else that made her *her*. That she was still a human, and not just because she was breathing.

He would have killed Sanjay, she told herself. Maybe not with his own hands—Orla had mentioned something about him waiting—but he would have stood in the way of Sanjay's only shot at recovering. He'd been afraid, and maybe that was a good thing. Maybe he was right to suspect an infected body, even if it wasn't from a bite. She knew nothing about the virus, beyond what happened afterward. She didn't know how it worked, why they didn't decompose like normal, how they actually became infected from it. It very well might have been airborne. But it might not have been. Ella had been on her own, with only Burt and the occasional necessary encounter with the strangers that were making their pilgrimage to what counted for civilization in this strange new world, for almost a year now. She had only ever seen infection from bites. But she'd been on her own for so long. For too long, she now realized. And now that she had found something, someone, worth relinquishing the assurances of solitude, she remembered with painful clarity how it had felt to lose that the first time.

She wasn't losing anyone again. She'd already done too much to keep that from happening. If she failed him, if Sanjay died from this wound, she wasn't sure what would be left of her when she unraveled.

She felt calm return to her senses, felt her breathing deepen. She turned back and looked at the body.

She had a sudden thought and fished in his jeans pockets until she felt metal and plastic, pulling out the set of keys to the Jeep. She took hold of Shaun by the wrists and dragged him until he lay on top of the tarp. She couldn't burn him, though the paranoid voice told her he could still come back as something else. The light would be too bright in general, and she didn't want the smell to wake up Orla or Bailey. If they were asleep on the roof, like she assumed, it was a wonder that they hadn't heard anything already.

Looking down the alley, she noticed a dull blue door leading into the burned building. She walked over and gave the handle a tug. It resisted, then swung open with a low whine. She couldn't make out any details, but after a minute of waiting, nothing came out to face her.

They'd have questions in the morning. Ella had no answers, besides the truth. Would they let her continue on with them, if they found out? Would Sanjay?

What mattered was that they would all be able to make that choice for themselves. Shaun would have burned through all of them, if he'd thought it was the right choice. She'd worry about that in the morning. She walked back over to the tarp. Wrapping it around the body, she began to drag it up the small set of stairs.

The store felt too quiet as she crept back in. It had taken at least thirty minutes to pull Shaun into the other building, which she'd realized upon entering had once been a Chinese

restaurant. She'd put his wrapped body next to a pile of blackened rubble that had likely been a dining set, but it had been impossible to make out details with no light. The keys, she'd set down on the hood of the car. No one was around to steal them, anyway.

She was sweaty and bloody, but she told herself to ignore it all as she made her way down the aisles and silently opened the door to the breakroom.

The soft hum of the lights greeted her as she closed the door behind her. She hadn't been gone very long; she doubted anyone had messed with the timer since she had, so they'd stay on for a while. She grabbed a water bottle from the case and walked over to the sink. Undoing her wrist guard and unwrapping her arm bandages, she ran some of the water over her bloodstained hand and armor. There was an abandoned bottle of dish soap by the faucet, the cap sealed over with dried soap. She drizzled it over her forearm and scrubbed furiously, using her shirtsleeve as a washcloth. She scrubbed and rinsed at the bandages and the plastic until the water bottle was empty. She hoped it had been enough, but in the warm red glow of the light, she couldn't tell at all. She'd have to find out in the morning.

Trying her hardest to stay quiet, she toed off her boots and laid her weapons on the floor, as close to the edge of her futon as she could without disturbing Sanjay's own couch. She looked him over, trying to assess if his condition had changed.

His eyes were closed, brow slightly furrowed from whatever he was dreaming of. She watched his back move up and down as he breathed, counting the seconds in between.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sanjay's watch went off at six thirty the next morning. Ella woke to pitch darkness. Scrambling over the armrest, she opened the door to let in the dull morning light that just barely reached them and turned to look at Sanjay.

He began to stir from the sound of the door. "Ella?" His voice was deep from sleep, his eyes only just starting to open.

"How are you feeling?" She walked back over and felt his forehead. He felt warmer than he had before, but she could feel the tremor in his body from where she touched him.

"Tired," he mumbled. "Just gotta wake up." He slowly rose to a sitting position, wiping the sleep from his eyes. "Get my blood pumping, you know." He looked up at Ella and smiled at her unamused expression. "Too soon?"

Ella fought the urge to have him lie back down. They needed to move as soon as the others were ready. She didn't want to waste another second.

There was a knock on the open door. "Hey," Orla whispered into the room. "Got a sec?"

Ella stood and followed Orla into the hallway. She could hear footsteps above them; Bailey, she assumed. There weren't any other options to guess from.

"We ready to go?" Ella asked.

Orla nodded her head. "Just about. Have you been up for very long?"

"I woke up right before you came in."

"Okay, well..." she looked down at her feet, ran a hand over her face. When she looked up again, Ella knew what she'd say next. "Did anything happen last night? The two of us fell asleep, and when I woke up, Shaun was gone. All his stuff is still here, or most of it."

Ella breathed in deep, crossed her arms. “We had an argument; more like a discussion, I guess. There wasn’t any shouting or anything.”

Orla raised an eyebrow, her expression solemn as she listened.

“He said he wasn’t going to change his mind, and I more or less said the same thing. And then he...left, I guess.” She gave a small shrug. “I didn’t see him after that.”

Orla said nothing, holding Ella’s gaze. Ella could see Orla was biting the inside of her cheek and fought the urge to look away, the urge to consider what she did as something she would take back if she could. She straightened to her full height and stared back, waiting for Orla’s response.

After a long moment, Orla closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. “Here.” She handed Ella a small green bottle. “Caffeine pills, like we talked about. Let’s go. Sanjay doesn’t have any time to waste.” Ella nodded and moved to the side, letting Orla pass her into the main storefront.

When she walked back into the room and flipped the switch, Sanjay was slowly putting on a clean shirt. She waited until he’d finished changing before handing him the pills and a bottle of water. “Two for now, I think,” she said. He nodded without looking up and fumbled with the cap for a moment before screwing it off the bottle.

It was a tight squeeze fitting into the Jeep, even with one less person. They had brought an assortment of differently sized plastic containers. Ella noticed one in the trunk space that had “Christmas” written on each side in faded black Sharpie; that one held dry foods like bags of dried beans and boxes of instant mac n cheese.

Orla sat in the driver’s seat, Bailey in the passenger. Ella sat behind Orla’s seat, her feet resting on top of the tub filled with the medicine she’d sorted through with Bailey. A box of

differently sized books sat between her and Sanjay, who had his head leaned up against the window. He was already halfway back to falling asleep. Every time Ella looked over at him, she felt a new spike of fear that they were wasting time.

Orla spoke quietly to Bailey in the front. Ella couldn't make out what they were saying but caught a few of the sideways glances Bailey gave her.

"Hey, Ella." She turned and looked at Sanjay. "When's the last time you were in a moving car?" He gave her a halfhearted grin.

She gave one back. "It's been a minute." She patted him on the shoulder, trying to ignore the heat she thought she could practically see coming off of him in waves as he leaned his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes.

"Okay, let's do this," Orla said. She turned the key in the ignition. The Jeep gave a low groan before turning over. The whole car shuddered hard, vibrations skittering up Ella's arm where she laid it against the door.

"If this breaks down before we get there," Bailey said to Orla, "I won't be surprised."

"It'll get there," Orla said reassuringly. They pulled out of the parking lot in a wide circle, cutting through the grass to land on the highway before speeding up suddenly.

Ella watched the trees blur past them, the sunlight slowly warming them to their true colors. She had the sudden urge to look for her mom in the driver's seat. Once she'd gotten her license, the only time she wasn't in the driver's seat was if her mom was driving them somewhere for one of her rare Saturdays off. Ella had always been partial to their visits to a nearby lake.

They sped down the highway, covering more distance than she and Sanjay had made together on any given day of their journey here. She wondered how close everything still was; could they have made it to Barret Pines in an hour? The thought of the last few weeks of her life

compressed into only a few moments was hard for her to envision. She decided to just let herself keep looking out the window.

She knew they weren't just going to let her walk into the Barracks like nothing had happened. She remembered them talking about debriefing, about verifying if someone went missing during a supply run. Could she convince them to lie for her, at least until they had someone look at Sanjay? Would she even have to? There hadn't been much love lost between them and Shaun, from the looks of it. She wondered if he had many friends on the other side of the barricades.

"There's this, uh, old electronics store back where we were," Ella said loudly enough for them to hear over the engine's rumble. "Guy I used to know was a big scavenger. I could come with you next time you're out on a run, show you where it is."

"Didn't we burn it down?" Sanjay chimed in, his eyes still closed.

"I don't think so." He made an affirming noise.

Bailey looked to the back, then looked out their own window. "Sounds like a lucky break," they said. Ella could sense nothing from the tone of their voice. "Might be a while, though, before we head back out. Depends on what everyone else found."

Ella nodded, though no one could see it. She looked out the window again. A shape streaked past her vision. After a while, there was another. Then two more. People, standing upright, walking along the sides of the highway. She looked ahead, and could see three figures coming into view, dead center of the pavement. "Are those--?"

Orla swerved, but managed to hit one of the people with the driver's side of the car. Ella gasped, question at her lips, when she realized. "Are they—"

“Flatliners,” Orla said simply. “The Barracks draw them to us. Don’t know how, it’s not like their hearing’s any better than it was before.”

“Maybe it is,” Bailey offered up.

“But I’ve heard of a bunch of people who were making their way here on foot.”

Bailey gave a resigned sort of wave at the people standing on the right side. As Ella looked behind, she saw the figures break into a run, though they were driving so fast that she couldn’t tell if they kept up the pursuit for very long.

“So, we would’ve probably…” she trailed off. “You talked about the Barracks like it was a bunch of refugee tents. How do you keep them out, if there’s so many?” She could see more up ahead, though she couldn’t make out any details.

“You’ll see,” Orla said. “We’ve thought of everything,” she added, a bit of pride in her tone.

Ella watched as they passed more and more over the next few hours. They mostly stayed on the side of the roads, for reasons she couldn’t discern. It was likely a good thing, too; this Jeep was sturdy, but she wasn’t interested in finding out how many hits it could take before it skidded to a stop.

“We’ll probably be there by about noon,” Bailey said. “You should get some rest; they always have a bunch of questions for newcomers, and you’ll have to deal with that much more to convince them to look at Sanjay.”

Ella nodded again and closed her eyes, willing herself to let the car’s movement lull her to sleep. Every so often there would be a smacking sound, like birds hitting a windshield. She reached across the books and took Sanjay’s hand, counting the beats of his pulse where her thumb met his wrist.