



Once Upon an Apocalypse

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: As quickly as her dreams come true, the world around Lori turns into a desolate, post-apocalyptic nightmare. And it's not just the undead she fights against to survive. Subjected to cruel experiments and inhumane treatments as a prisoner in a secret underground facility has turned her into a weapon fueled by enmity. Escape finally comes at the moment she embraces death. A stranger named Amos takes her to a survivor camp known as The Valley. Surrounded by hills and the farmlands of Central Pennsylvania, this community has remained hidden away from the hordes of zombies decimating the world. The Valley offers a glimmer of hope and a chance at a new beginning for Lori.

As she settles into her new surroundings, Lori finally feels a sense of security that has eluded her for so long. This tight-knit community, filled with people who believe in the values of maintaining their humanity, history, and culture becomes a place where Lori can dream again. And maybe find love again.

However, Lori quickly realizes that sitting around playing house is not for her. Knowing she possesses special abilities from her time as an experiment, abilities that could be invaluable in the fight against the undead, she must prove herself to her new friends. To Amos. Danger lurks in the world beyond, but she will risk it all. Risk her safety, risk her humanity, in order to save those she loves. With her unique powers and her unwavering spirit, Lori becomes a force to be reckoned with, a beacon of hope in a world consumed by flesh-eating monsters.

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Prologue

Silence. That is all I hear as I approach the arena, walking somberly through a dim tunnel. There's a light at the end, but not one of hope. As I take a step into the sunlight, I breathe in the fresh air. After years of being held captive, I relish every second I'm allowed on the outside. Even if my time is spent fighting for my life.

One more step and I'm surrounded in the light of the blazing sun, my bare feet sinking into the arena floor. Where there was once green grass, there is now dry, rusty sand, meant to look like the sandy fighting grounds of the mighty Roman gladiators. Though the stands are filled with cheering people, there is nothing but silence piercing my ears.

My mind and body have become numb to this routine, as if I have the ability to escape from my damaged body and become a temporary ethereal being, watching myself face death for the hundredth time.

Today, I will finally let myself die. I will no longer be the entertainment. I will no longer be his experiment. There is nothing left inside of me to fight for. Everyone I've loved is likely dead, or worse. I had hoped that I'd see them again. Spent years hoping I'd find a way out. Now I know. The only way out is through death.

When I think of my friends and family, it feels like I'm remembering faces from another lifetime. Have I felt love in this life? Was there ever such a thing as pizza? Did I have a mom? A dad? Did I fall in love? As much as I try to recall all these memories, they still fade away as if I had simply dreamed them. Everything I was in that past life no longer matters. Everything I am in this life is not who I want to be. I

don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to know what other horrors this life will bring.

Even if I believed my loved ones were still alive out there, somewhere, how could I ever hope to find them? It is better to believe they are dead. There is no way they could have survived this horrific world. If they have, they will die soon. Or Doctore will find them, a fate worse than death.

I cannot go back to my past life, so I must escape this one. Perhaps a better life awaits me in the next. A life where needles aren't shoved in my veins every day. A life where the sun greets me with warmth and not icy dread. A life that brings laughter to my heart instead of fear. If that's even possible, since the world has ended.

I allow myself to feel for five seconds, to remember a time when I felt love, joy, and hope, even if these feelings are from another lifetime. These few seconds give me all the courage I need to face this fight. To let myself die.

Pulling myself back to my body, I take a breath, and walk toward the middle of the blood-caked sand. As I reach the middle of the arena, my eyes lock on his. Doctore. His lips curl into an evil smile as he stares back at me with soulless eyes. My only regret is that I will die before killing you, I think to myself.

Chapter 1

4 Years Earlier...

We are never going to get out of here, I think to myself as my brother, Hayden, disappears into a secret room. The door appeared after I pulled a chair from the wall. We've been searching this bunker-like escape room for forty-five minutes. It is crunch time. There is no way we are failing, but I am doubting we can make it out within the next fifteen minutes.

My mom walks fearlessly into the darkness of the secret room, but I stay in the main area, looking for more clues.

A doomsday bunker equipped with everything we need to save the world from the apocalypse. How convenient. We just have to find all the pieces and put them together. If we don't, the door will open to the sad realization that my mom, brother, and I have failed to save the world from this fictional apocalyptic event.

I walk over to what looks like a control board of some kind. Though I've scanned this thing a million times, I have found nothing useful. But I know there is something here. I know it. As I bend over to look closer at the controls, I see a symbol I hadn't seen before.

"What do you guys see in there?" I yell through the wall to my mom and brother, who have been dead silent in the darkness of the secret room.

"Some sort of altar. Looks like it's missing something though," Hayden yells back to me.

"What are we missing?" my mom hisses under her breath. Her competitiveness is coming on strong in these last few remaining minutes.

"I think I know what we need to do!" I shout.

"What?" Hayden and my mom yell back in unison, rushing out into the main room.

I point to the symbol I thought was a smear on the otherwise symbol-less control board. Some sort of bird. A phoenix?

"Oh my god, I'm so stupid!" my mom groans. "Never overlook something in an escape room, Cathy."

Without consulting us, my mom walks over to the pile of items she has been collecting from the room. Most of them have already been used to figure out the other clues. All except one. A phoenix talisman. Hayden's eyes light up in excitement as I glance up at the clock that says we only have three more minutes.

Hayden grabs the talisman from our mom's hands, but instead of dashing back into the secret room, he gives it to me. "Let the birthday girl do the honors."

I beam at my brother before rushing into the dark room. As soon as my eyes adjust to the dim lighting, I find the altar-like platform, scanning it for a spot to place the talisman. There! With my mom and brother behind me, I hold the talisman up to the matching symbol, slide it in place, and turn. The platform opens up, blinding us with a bright LED light before presenting us with a key. I grab it and run to the door we had entered fifty-nine minutes ago, but the door opens on its own.

Karl, the guy who locked us in here, greets us with a sad face. "I'm sorry to say that you were just five seconds shy of saving the world."

Prick, I think to myself. I was just about to unlock the door!

"Fucking hell, man, you couldn't have given us those five extra seconds?" Hayden whines.

"In a real-life situation, the world would have ended in those five seconds."

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“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Hayden mumbles as he pushes past Karl with a defeated huff.

“Well, it was still a fun time, wasn’t it, honey?” my mom asks as she wraps an arm around my shoulders and kisses my temple.

I smile up at her, “So much fun, mom. Best birthday ever!”

“Come on, dorks, let’s get our picture of defeat over with and go eat,” Hayden mumbles.

Karl hands Hayden a “womp womp” sign with the biggest doofus face. I couldn’t help but cackle out loud. I place a hat on my head while my mom gets the “I’m with stupid” sign, pointing it at Hayden. It’s not often the three of us get to be together, so even in defeat, we put our best smiles on for the camera.

As the three of us sit down at one of our favorite Manhattan restaurants, I pull out my phone to send Jonah and Sarah our defeat picture from the escape room. I send the messages separately, hoping to get some flirty messages from Jonah, knowing he wouldn’t send them in a group chat with my best friend, who also happens to be his twin sister.

I’ve lived next to Sarah and Jonah Rosenberg my whole life. Our houses share part of a driveway that bridges over a stream in a wooded area of Flanders, New Jersey. While Jonah’s house is a mini mansion, that’s way too big for his family of four, my house is a typical bi-level, perfect for a family of four. With my brother off at college and my mom working at the hospital most days, even our small house feels too large.

If my dad was still alive, I'm sure I'd still have the house to myself. I don't mind it, but I definitely miss having a full house. I miss family time.

The Rosenbergs were our lifeline then after my dad died. They would watch Hayden and me whenever my mom had to pull double shifts. We were their second pair of kids for a solid three years until we were old enough to be on our own. During those years, Sarah and I became like sisters. We had already been super close, but after spending so much time together, we became inseparable. And my feelings for Jonah intensified.

Is it weird that I have a major crush on my best friend's twin brother? No, not at all. At least that's what I tell myself. But I feel strange keeping my feelings from Sarah when Jonah is now so very aware of them.

Since my car has been an unreliable piece of shit all school year, Jonah has been driving me and Sarah to school every morning, and me to work every evening in his very reliable Honda Accord. The trip to and from work is only five minutes, but I don't always leave his car right away when we arrive home. One night, we started flirting with each other. Another night, we almost kissed. A few nights ago, we confessed our feelings for each other.

I look down at my phone as it vibrates, smiling when I see Jonah's curly mop of brown hair on my screen.

Jonah: You didn't escape the room? I'm a little shocked. You guys have never been defeated before.

Me: Five seconds! We missed it by five freaking seconds!!

Jonah: What was the theme?

Me: End of the world, so we screwed up big time

Jonah: Nah, we're okay, I mean, at least the world isn't ending today or tomorrow, maybe in the next ten years

I send Jonah a scream emoji before looking up to find my mom staring at me with a shit-eating grin.

“What?” I ask

“Is that Jonah you're texting?” my mom asks in her sweetest voice, propping her head in her hands.

Hayden looks up from the menu he's holding, and says in a sing-song voice, “Ohhhh, Jonah Rosenberg? Have you finally gotten in his pants?”

My mom smacks Hayden on the backside of his head, making the blush on my cheeks turn redder as I giggle at the shocked look on his face.

“What? Lori has been pining for Jonah for years.” Hayden pats the back of this head delicately, mouthing an “ow” before saying out loud, “Take a break, sis. If your face gets any redder, mom will have to perform CPR.”

Damn my ginger genes. I can never hide my embarrassment with this pasty white skin. Taking a deep breath, I calm my nerves, which instantly spike out of control when I read Jonah's next message.

Jonah: So...you turn 18 tomorrow

The winky face he sends next makes it impossible to breathe. So I send him a quick response, telling him I'll call him when I get home, then drop my phone back in my

purse. “Can we talk about something else, please?”

“I need to run to the little boy’s room. If the waiter comes over, can you order me a coke?” Hayden asks.

“Sure, honey,” my mom says as Hayden turns to head toward the bathroom. But she’s not done with the topic of Jonah. “I saw you two in the car the other day. You looked very cozy together.”

Jonah and I still haven’t kissed, but have come close a few times. I keep making excuses not to kiss him. He’s my best friend’s brother. He’s eighteen and I’m seventeen. We are only a few months apart in age. Despite that, I’m a stickler for the rules. But tomorrow, that will change.

“Yeah, we’re friends.” I try to sound casual, but my mom sees right through me. “Okay, so he confessed to me he’s been in love with me for years and then I let it slip that I’ve had a crush on him for forever. But we are just friends. For now.”

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The sound my mom makes is something between a seagull and a yelp, making me jump off my seat. “Dammit, Mom, what was that?”

“Sorry, I’m just so fucking excited. I’ve been waiting for you guys to finally confess your undying love to each other. Just do me a favor, be safe. Even though you are on birth control, it’s important to practice safe sex.”

“Mom!” I shout as Hayden slides back into his seat.

“What did I miss?” he asks, looking right at me as if he already knows what we were talking about.

“Nothing,” I say at the same time my mom says, “Jonah and Lori love each other and are going to have the cutest kids one day.”

“Mom!” I shout a bit louder, throwing one of my harsher looks at her. Hayden just laughs.

“Okay, okay,” my mom giggles.

The waiter interrupts us with a “Welcome,” and asks us what we’d like to drink. Once our orders are placed, my mom is sobered up but still staring at me.

“In all seriousness, I think you two will be great together. I know you are scared of opening your heart up, but the hardest part is over. You both have expressed your feelings. Keep that open line of communication and you guys will get through anything.”

“I like Jonah a lot,” Hayden says. “Much more than that shitbag you dumped a few months ago.”

Hayden doesn’t bother looking at me as he gives his unsolicited opinion, but it warms my heart to know that my family approves of Jonah. Who wouldn’t? He’s literally everything a girl could dream of. Smart. Caring. Handsome.

Those smoky quartz eyes of his have haunted my dreams for years. Eyes I never thought would be fixed on me. As I sit with my family, I try so hard not to imagine my fingers twirling his thick, brown curly hair as we lie in bed together. I can’t help but think of his arms around me. How perfectly we fit together, even though he’s so much taller than me.

I long to get to know him better. More than just my best friend’s brother. Because I already know everything about who he is and where he comes from. Now I want to dive in deeper. Become something more than a friend. I’m just not sure I’m ready for that. Or perhaps it’s only fear holding me back.

Chapter 2

“There’s something I’ve been dying to ask you,” Lexi says from behind me as I change out of my gym clothes in the girls’ locker room at school.

Without turning around to look at her, I roll my eyes, readying myself for an insult or some kind of bitchy comment. Lexi has hated me ever since I made the varsity volleyball team and she didn’t. I wish I could say her comments don’t bother me, but they do. So I attempt to ignore her, hoping she’ll leave me alone. An attempt that doesn’t work.

“Did you not hear me?” Lexi’s cringe-worthy voice makes me want to punch something. Her face. Instead, I take a deep breath and turn around.

“Are you speaking to me?” I ask, feigning ignorance.

My friends from swim team step closer to me, offering me their support if I need it. Jenni even takes a little step in front of me. I love my friends. They are fiercely loyal, in the pool and on dry land.

“Yes. I was looking at you, so who else would I be talking to?” Lexi places her hands on her hips in a defensive stance.

“So sorry, I don’t have eyes on the back of my head.”

Elice chuckles at my side, making Lexi’s eyes narrow on her. But she swings her gaze back to me. “Actually, it’s a question my boyfriend wanted me to ask you. You know Jake, right?”

My chest clenches at the name of my ex. Shit. I didn’t know he and Lexi are together now. I dumped that douche months ago after I found out he cheated on me. We hadn’t even gone all the way together, just heavy make-out sessions. I wasn’t ready to go all the way with him. Something that he wasn’t too happy about.

When I don’t answer, Lexi continues with, “He wanted to know if the carpet matches the drapes and hoped I’d be able to catch a glimpse of you in the locker room, but you cover up so quickly. So I figured I’d just ask.”

My face burns with humiliation. I knew nothing but venom would come out of Lexi’s mouth, but I wasn’t expecting this comment. The embarrassment is so obvious in my face as I feel it burn even redder. Jenni pushes Lexi away from me, saying, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“She’s just jealous because Lori is a badass bitch whereas she is just a...bitch,” Elice says, putting her hands on her hips.

Lexi laughs. “At least I know how to treat my boyfriend. You wouldn’t even give him head? What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing is wrong with Lori,” Elice says as she steps in front of me, completely blocking Lexi’s path of destruction. But I’m already destroyed inside.

I bolt for the hallway like a pathetic coward, heading for my next class. Before I make it there, my head slams into a brick wall. A brick wall that smells like a gust of fall wind. Arms wrap around my waist, pressing me closer.

“You okay, Shortcake?” Jonah whispers into my ear, using his nickname for me. A name I used to hate when I was little, but it’s grown on me over the years.

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I press my face into his chest and cry, not caring if anyone else is in the hallway. How long have I wanted Jonah to hold me like this? Forever. I shouldn't let my best friend's twin brother hold me like this in the middle of the hallway though.

But, in this moment, I don't care. I let Jonah hold me and he doesn't break our embrace. With his mouth against the crown of my head, he says, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's just Lexi being a bitch. I can usually take her insults, but this one really hit hard." I say as I pull my head away from his chest. "Girls can be so cruel sometimes."

"Want me to get Sarah to kick her ass?"

"I'm pretty sure Elice and Jenni are doing that as we speak."

Jonah's chuckle does something to my insides that I can't explain. Mush. My insides are mush. With his hands now gently caressing my lower back while keeping me pressed against him, I can feel that I have an effect on him too.

Pretending not to notice, I place my hands on his chest, saying, "Do you think I'm a prude?"

"What? Wait. Did I do something wrong? Because we don't have to kiss or anything until you are ready. Eighteen. Nineteen. Whenever. I'll wait until you are ready."

My forehead collapses against his chest, this time on purpose, and Jonah's arms wrap around me again. Why does this feel so right, so good? I want to stay in Jonah's arms

forever. Then Sarah's voice echoes from behind me and I let go of Jonah, turning quickly to face her.

"I just heard from Elice about what happened in the locker room. Are you okay?" Sarah asks, grabbing one of my hands.

"Yeah. I am now." I look up at Jonah, who offers me a shy smile.

"Come on, let's get to class," he says, keeping his hands in his pockets.

A few weeks later, Jonah and I are still skimming the line of just friends, but I'm happier than I've ever been. Just knowing that Jonah loves me is a dream come true. I only wish we'd been open with each other sooner. Our senior year is coming to an end, and with that, an uncertain future.

We are going to different colleges. Though I'm open to a long distance relationship, I'm so worried it could not only break any possible romance between us but also our friendship. Still, flirting is fun, and quite a confidence boost after what Lexi said to me. I know I shouldn't let her or Jake get to me. They are only jealous.

Not only am I in the running for a tri-athlete award before graduation, but I've been the MVP for both of the varsity teams I've played on so far this school year. Jake might be a star football player, but he didn't get a full scholarship to Rutgers. I did.

The only thing that would make my near future perfect is if Jonah was also going to Rutgers. But he's wanted to go to Stanford since I can remember. He won't choose me. I can daydream anyway.

Prom is next month and though Jonah hasn't officially asked me to go with him, we have joked about wearing matching outfits. I never cared about these things before, but Jonah makes me want to do all the cheesy couple things. Even though we aren't

officially a couple, I want everyone to know that he's mine. I want my teenage dream to live a lifetime with Jonah Rosenberg.

Sarah interrupts my daydream by complaining out loud about how her boyfriend, Dylan, hasn't made a promposal yet. They've been an official item since the beginning of the year, yet I can't help but compare how different our respective relationships are. I've known Jonah for most of my life. We were close friends before confessing our feelings for each other while Dylan and Sarah admired each other from afar, not really getting to know each other until recently.

Dylan has not quite grasped how utterly controlling Sarah can be. He laughs at her impulses, thinks she's adorable when she has a panic attack. But maybe that's what she needs. Someone to balance out the crazy. Sarah has already planned out her promposal and given Dylan a blueprint of her expectations as subtly as she could.

I know Dylan has his own plans for how he's going to ask Sarah to prom. He's doing it on his terms though. Dangerous. Still, I'm very excited to see how this plays out for the both of them.

I look up from my creative writing journal and say, "Give him time. He's totally into you. And who else would he invite to prom anyway?"

"What if he doesn't even want to go to prom?" Sarah collapses on her bed, where she has completely abandoned her AP history homework.

"Has he said that to you whenever you've brought prom up? Because I don't think that's where his mind is at."

"So you know he has a plan then?" Sarah pounces on the trap I fell into. Shit. She got me good.

“I didn’t say that! It’s just...well, you told me you guys have talked a lot about prom. Wouldn’t he have said to you that he didn’t want to go?” Solid recovery, I think to myself.

“Hmmm. Maybe you’re right.” And just then, Sarah’s phone rings. “Speak of the devil!”

She answers the phone with a “Hey, boo bear,” and flips herself over so she’s lying on her stomach.

I take this opportunity to slip out of Sarah’s bedroom and look for my own “boo bear.” He’s not in his bedroom, so chances are he’s in the basement playing video games.

As I reach the kitchen on the ground floor of this mini mansion, Sarah and Jonah’s dad startles me. He sits hunched over the kitchen island, watching videos on his phone. “Hello, Laurel. How are you and the family doing?”

“Hi, Mr. Rosenberg. Everyone’s doing well. Hayden is loving New York City, though I’m not sure he’s loving the college part of it all. And my mom is as busy as ever. Shooting to get promoted to Chief Nursing Officer.”

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“Go Cathy! That’s wonderful to hear.”

“Yeah. I’m really proud of her.”

“And I know she is incredibly proud of you. Full-ride to Rutgers I hear.”

The heat on my cheeks tells me I’m blushing enough for it to be visible, so I drop my gaze to the floor. I’ve never been great at receiving compliments. “Thanks. Yeah. It’s very exciting.” To change the subject, I ask, “What are you watching?”

“Oh. A news report about a research lab in Pennsylvania that exploded earlier today. There were people running out of the building engulfed in flames. I haven’t seen anything like it since 9/11. Those poor souls.”

“That’s terrifying.” I don’t know what else to say as I imagine the scene Mr. Rosenberg described. Utterly terrifying. Fire doesn’t usually scare me. My father was a firefighter. But the idea of people still being alive as they escape an inferno like that, terrifying.

“Oh, hey, Lori,” Jonah says from behind me at the basement door. “What are you up to?”

“I was looking for you, actually. Sarah is on the phone with Dylan.”

“I came up for a snack, but would you like to hang out downstairs?” He gives me a look that says we can do more than hang out if I want. And I cannot resist.

“Yeah, sure.”

Jonah grabs a bag of sour cream and onion chips from the pantry and reaches out for my hand, dragging me downstairs. “I was playing online with some friends, but I can log off if you want to talk or do something else?”

“I’ve got my creative writing journal, but I’m not feeling very creative.” I place my journal on the coffee table and flop down on the futon. Jonah joins me, sitting so close that our thighs touch.

“Well, I’ve been meaning to tell you something,” he says, twisting his fingers nervously, which is so unlike him. He’s always so sure of himself.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’ve chosen to stay here for college. Knowing you feel the same way about me, I no longer want to be on the other side of the country. I want to be with you. I want to see where this leads.” He moves his hands between us as he says this. “So I’m going to Rutgers.”

“You got into Rutgers? How? The application deadline pas—”

“I applied to every college you applied to. Part of me hoped you would dump that sack of shit and fall into my arms. When you did break up with Jake, I was still too much of a pussy to tell you how I feel. I love you, Laurel Hill.”

“Oh,” I breathe out as my body turns to rubber and my heart thumps so loudly I’m sure Jonah can hear it. Before I can say anything else, Jonah’s lips are on mine, parting the seam to taste me, and I let him in. I let him explore, our tongues in a frenzy at finally being able to touch.

When we part to gasp for air, I say, “You’re a really good kisser.”

Jonah’s breath tickles my cheek as he chuckles. “Do you want to see what else I’m good at?”

“Hmmmm, yes.”

His lips return to mine, but this time for a soft peck. “I also wanted to ask if you’d like to come to prom with me.”

“What? I mean, yes. I mean, are you sure? Really?” I’m so flustered I immediately think that I didn’t hear him properly. That part of my daydream from earlier infiltrated my mind.

“Really. I can’t think of anyone else I want to go to prom with. Even if we go as friends. I want to share that memory with you.”

“And what if I want to go as more than friends?” I ask, my heart beating so fast I’m afraid I’ll pass out.

Jonah leans back in, lacing his fingers with the hair at the nape of my neck, and kisses me. This one is slow but full of a raw hunger I’ve never tasted before. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull myself on top of him. We are so absorbed in each other that we don’t hear the door to the basement open, nor do we hear footsteps walking down the stairs. It’s only when Sarah’s voice echoes off the walls do we let go of each other.

We are off the couch and miles apart within the next breath. Only the heaving of our breaths can be heard until someone breaks the silence.

“This is...this is...” Sarah takes a deep breath to compose herself. “You have no idea

how long I've waited for this to happen! I mean, ew, but yay!"

She runs over to me with arms wide open, squeezing me tightly. Then waltzes over to Jonah, punching his arm while yelling, "You perv!"

"Ow! You just said you were happy for me and Lori. Why the fuck are you beating me up?"

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“Because...well, I don’t know. You could have told me! Both of you.” Sarah’s hands are back on her hips. She stares at me while Jonah rubs his sore arm.

“Call me a perv all you want, sis. But I love your best friend.” Jonah’s confession makes my chest flutter all over again.

“And I love your brother,” I say to Sarah.

Chapter 3

“I’m sorry I won’t be here for prom night, honey,” my mom says as she packs for her long weekend trip. She was invited to speak at her alma mater and I couldn’t let her miss the chance all because of prom. Even though I’m bummed she won’t be here, I am so incredibly proud of my mom. I won’t let anything stop her from kicking ass.

“Don’t be silly, Mom. This is an amazing opportunity. You deserve the spotlight. And hey, maybe you’ll meet a sexy, single man who will sweep you off of your feet.”

My mom and dad met when they were in their twenties while on call for an emergency. One of the biggest, deadliest fires in Morris County. Mom was an EMT and Dad was a fireman. I honestly think Hayden was conceived that same night because whenever I hear the story, it ends with, “And less than a year later, your brother was born.”

After my dad died, my mom began working double shifts at the hospital to pay the bills. She still works her ass off and is two steps away from becoming the lead nurse. In no time, she will be running the entire hospital. I just know it.

“There will be no one else after your father. He was my one and only,” my mom says.

“I know. But...I worry about you. Once I graduate, you’ll be all alone here. And I’m not saying you need to find another man worthy of Dad’s shoes, just someone to warm your bed and cook you hot, delicious meals.”

“It’s not like I haven’t put myself out there. I’ve been on dates and hooked up in the supply room at the hospital during a late night shift. No one has ever really stuck though. But don’t worry about me. I will be okay here. And you’ll come to visit all the time. You won’t be far away.”

“Every weekend. Promise.” I hop onto her bed, avoiding the neatly folded clothes she is carefully packing into her suitcase.

“Well, not every weekend. You need to experience college. Sign-up for extracurricular activities, spend time with friends, sneak around with your boyfriend.” My mom cackles at my embarrassed gasp, slapping me playfully on the arm. “Are you excited for prom?”

“Yeah. I mean, I never thought I’d care this much. But I’m so freaking excited to see Jonah all dressed up. I can’t wait to get my nails and hair done.”

My mom pinches a few locks of my pin-straight coppery hair between her fingers. “You could show up to prom with knots the size of bird’s nests and you’d still have the most beautiful hair in the room.”

I know she is thinking of my dad as she continues to idly twirl my hair. I look a lot like him with my ginger hair, blue eyes, and fair, freckled skin. But he was a skyscraper of a man where I am a shack. Short and wobbly. The shortness I get from my mom. Hayden inherited the tall genes and my mom’s blonde hair.

“I miss him too.” I pull her into my arms as we silently sob into each other’s shoulders, still grieving, even after all these years. Grief never really leaves. It burrows itself deep inside, and when you think it’s gone, it pops back out and hits you in the gut. If my mom and I keep crying like this, we won’t get anything done tonight. So I push my grief back into the dark corner of my heart where it lives and squeeze my mom tight before letting her go.

“Please be careful, Mom. I’ve been hearing some crazy stories about people eating people because they are so high on some drug. It’s been happening a lot more recently. Jonah told me there were a few cases in Pennsylvania just this week. Please don’t get eaten.”

My mom chuckles at that. “I’ll be okay. It seems to be isolated. And I’m not so sure it’s drugs. We’ve gotten word at the hospital that there’s a new virus going around that affects the brain. Scary fucking shit.”

“What!” I stare at my mom, hoping she’ll start laughing, but she doesn’t. She’s serious.

“If anything, you will be around more potential drugged up and/or contagious kids at prom. So let’s promise each other to both be safe. Don’t share drinks or food with anyone who looks sick. And stay away from drugs.”

“Ew. I won’t ever touch that shit.” In fact, I’m one of those rare teens who doesn’t even want to experiment with alcohol. My dad is dead because of a drugged-up alcoholic, so naturally, I don’t go near that shit.

“So tell me what Jonah will be wearing. Did you pick out your outfits to match?” my mom asks.

“I haven’t seen what Jonah got, but he promised it will be the same color I’m

wearing. Sarah is helping him, so I trust it will all work out.”

My mom is now staring at me with tears welling up in her eyes. “What, Mom? You’re not gonna eat me, are you?”

“Ha! No,” she laughs. “I’m just so happy for you. Young love. It’s a beautiful thing. I don’t want to ruin your outlook on love, but I need to be real with you for a moment.”

My mom closes up her suitcase and pulls it down from her bed, then hops up on the spot where it had been splayed open and wraps her arm around my shoulder. “I know you really love Jonah and his feelings for you are just as strong. But you two are young. He might not be your one and only. So please do me a favor and do not force it if it’s not meant to be forever.”

My mom’s words are like a blow to my stomach. Jonah is my forever. That’s that. There is no one else for me. As if sensing my train of thought, my mom says, “I know you think Jonah is your only chance at love. Maybe he is. Before your father, I thought I found my true love twice. Both relationships ended in flames. And one of them was a good friend of mine before we started dating. I’m not saying every friends-to-lovers scenario is the same. Just promise me you won’t lock yourself into a relationship at the age of eighteen.”

I take a moment to think about what my mom said, even though my heart has already decided. Jonah is my lifelong journey. My end game. I feel it in my bones. But I nod my head in silent agreement. “Can you make the same promise? Don’t give up on finding love again?”

“Yes. That’s more than fair.” My mom presses her lips to my forehead before pulling me into a vice-grip hug. We lie back on the bed and fall asleep with unshed tears in our eyes.

Chapter 4

If this isn't pure, intoxicating happiness, I don't know what is. Jonah holds me flush against his body as we slow dance to "Lover" by Taylor Swift. I keep replaying the moment he appeared at my front door wearing a dark gray suit with a green striped bow tie. His curly brown hair freshly cut and neatly slicked back. His smoky quartz brown eyes fixed on me as I stood at the top of the stairs in my v-neck tiered a-line dress made in rich peacock green chiffon.

I thought I would be too short for such a flowy gown, especially since I didn't want to wear heels. Sarah brought me to the family seamstress, who altered this dress to fit like it was made for me and my slip-on Converse. Earlier today, to Sarah's amazement, I let her take me to a salon where we got mani-pedis and our hair all done up. Well, my hair is done down. I just wanted simple, wavy curls. A texture I don't usually get with my pin-straight hair.

Sarah and Jonah's mom took a million pictures of us in our finery. Pictures of the three of us, of Jonah and me, of Sarah and me, of Sarah and Dylan, and of each of us on our own. Mr. Rosenberg only stayed for a few minutes before going inside to lie down. He hadn't been feeling well, which is unusual for him. I can't remember ever seeing him sick.

My thoughts return to the present as Jonah plays with the ends of my hair, tickling my shoulders as my arms are fastened around his neck. He hums into my hair, sending a shiver down my spine. I could stay in this moment forever.

Then a scream from somewhere outside rips me from this perfect moment. The music

is too loud and I can't make out anything else following the scream. But I feel it. A shift in the mood. A change in the atmosphere. Something is terribly wrong.

All at once, everyone on the dance floor stops swaying. I look up into Jonah's face, which is concentrated at the back of the room where there are French doors leading out to a Roman-inspired patio. Being a foot taller than most makes it easy for Jonah to see over the crowd, but his expression is unreadable.

"I think we need to leave," he says so quietly I can barely hear him.

"Why? What do you see?"

Jonah doesn't answer with words. He grabs my hand and pulls me through the exit at the front of the room leading to the lobby of the venue. We weave our way through the crowd of curious, secretly tipsy teens, reaching one of the exit doors as the screams begin again. This time, they come from the left side of the room. And then all hell breaks loose.

If we had stayed where we were in the middle of the dance floor, we would have been stuck among the chaos unlikely to escape. Jonah pulls me through the doors and closes them behind us.

"What are you doing?" I scream. "We need to help them."

Jonah doesn't seem to hear me as he continues to run through to the lobby. Using all the strength I can muster, I stomp my feet onto the floor and stop him. A hand grabs my shoulder from behind, making me spin on my heels. I nearly deck Sarah in the face. She scared the shit out of me.

"Sarah, are you okay?" I ask. She's shivering but feels warm to the touch. Too warm.

“No, Lori. I’m not fucking okay. Dylan bit me.”

“What?” I shout, noticing the bite mark on her neck.

“We need to go!” Jonah grunts, grabbing my hand again.

I let him lead me to the front doors, taking one look backward to see the doors of the dance hall burst open. Jonah doesn’t let me look long enough to see what follows. As the doors leading out to the parking lot close behind us, Jonah stops short. A man runs toward us from the other side of the building and he’s...growling? It sounds like a growl. Shit. Did he take one of those drugs that turn you into a cannibal?

As the man gets closer to us, I notice that it’s Coach Warren. He was chaperoning inside earlier. A scream gets stuck in my throat as I turn to my left to see more drugged up people running toward me, Sarah, and Jonah. As if possessed, Jonah grabs one of the stanchions and swings it at Coach Warren’s head just as he lunges at us.

A scream finally escapes my mouth and pierces the chilly spring air. Coach Warren falls down to the ground with a sickening thud as Jonah captures my hand one more time, nearly dragging me through the parking lot. He throws me into the front seat of his Honda Accord, slamming the door as my feet hit the floor, and sprints over to the driver’s side.

As Sarah slides into the back seat, Jonah glares at her. His glare is menacing for a quick second, as if he is thinking about whacking her with the stanchion too, which he hasn’t let go of yet. Then his face softens into a mixture of dread and sadness that breaks my heart.

“What did you see?” I ask again as he places the stanchion behind the center console and buckles himself in.

“Put your seatbelt on. This might be a bumpy ride,” Jonah says, still ignoring my question. He glances in the rearview mirror to look at Sarah, who hasn’t yet put on her seat belt. But he doesn’t bother repeating himself.

Jonah pulls out of the parking lot like a whip, making me slam my head against the window. That’s when I see it. A scene from a horror movie, a nightmare. It is unreal. But now I understand. Looking back at Sarah, tears pool in my eyes.

“When did Dylan bite you, Sarah?” I ask.

“That fucker! He disappeared for an hour and then came back high as a kite. We are so done.”

Jonah chokes on what sounds like a laugh, but when I look at his face, he is trying so hard not to cry. I reach out my hand, surrounding the white of his knuckles as he squeezes the shifter. My gentle caress does nothing to soothe the fear racking through his body. His focus is impressive though. I would be driving in zigzags, especially at the speed we are going.

“How long ago did he bite you?” I repeat.

“I don’t know. Why does that matter? He fucking bit me.”

“Sarah,” I say as I turn around to look at her. I don’t exactly know what’s going to happen, but then I remember what my mom told me. That these people turning into zombie-like cannibals isn’t from a drug, but some kind of unknown virus. From what I saw back there, it sure as hell looked like they were zombies out of some horror movie. Is that what’s going to happen to Sarah?

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How long does Sarah have? Minutes? Hours? And if she turns, will she know who I am? I don't say any of this because I don't want her to die in fear. If death is what happens when you turn into one of those things.

Instead, I say, "I love you. No matter what happens tonight. I love you. You will always be my best friend."

"I love you too, Lori. But why are you being so sentimental?"

"Because you are going to die, Sarah." I guess Jonah didn't share the same thoughts I had, intending to keep Sarah calm.

"What the hell, Jonah!" I scream at him.

"You know," he says simply, stealing a glance at my horror-stricken face. "You saw."

"Yes. But we don't know what they are. We don't know what happened to them."

"Saw what?" Sarah asks. Before I can respond, Sarah's head collapses to her chest in a groan. "What...what...is happ—"

Another groan of pain escapes her throat and I want nothing more than to climb in the back seat and hold her. But if I do, I'm as good as dead. Sirens wail as we speed down Route 10, flashing lights following behind us.

"Fuck!" Jonah screams at the top of his lungs but slows down, pulling the car over to

the shoulder. “Sarah, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s okay, Jonah. It doesn’t...hurt too much. I...you guys...I love you.” Sarah seizes, her head rolling to the side. A moment later, I can hear her life’s breath escape her. Tears run freely down my cheeks, splashing on the chiffon of my gown. My own breath keeps getting caught in my throat as I attempt to breathe, a panic attack forming in my chest.

“License and registration, please.” The cop sounds like he’s miles away. Everything around me is submerged in water. I can’t breathe. Then Jonah’s hand is on my knee, giving it a gentle squeeze, a reminder to swim up to the surface. I pull myself out of the abyss to see Jonah pulling out an envelope from the glove compartment. After handing the documents to the cop, Jonah takes my hand in his.

“Do you have any idea how fast you were driving, Mr. uhhhh Rosenberg?” the cop asks as he glances at Jonah’s driver’s license.

“I apologize, officer,” Jonah says, the calmness in his voice making way for the deep panic inside him. “We are just coming from our prom, which was attacked by...by. I’m not exactly sure what happened, sir. My sister is hurt. I’m afraid.”

The officer points his flashlight at me in question, examining my features for injury. “She looks fine to me.”

“That’s my girlfriend. My sister is in the back. I think she’s...” The quiver in Jonah’s voice pierces my heart. Dead. Sarah is dead. And yet, I can hear moaning coming from the backseat. My hand shoots out of Jonah’s, ready for action. I stop breathing again, but not in panic this time. Fear? Yes. My heart is pumping so fast it must think we are running a marathon.

As the officer aims his flashlight at the back seat, the moans turn into an animalistic

growl. I shouldn't look. I don't want to look. I do not want this version of Sarah to be the last time I see her. I will not look. Don't look. Don't look. Do not look. I close my eyes, not trusting myself.

I keep them closed as I hear the back door open.

I keep them closed as the officer yells, "What the hell is wrong with her?"

I keep them closed at the sounds of a rabid animal latching onto its prey.

I keep them closed as I feel the car plummet forward.

I keep them closed when all I hear is the sound of the car's engine and the crashing of my beating heart.

"Open your eyes, Lori," Jonah whispers, pressing his lips against my cheek.

But I can't open my eyes. I do not want to see this new world.

Chapter 5

"Please, Lori. Open your eyes." The desperation in Jonah's voice pries my eyes wide open. When I can finally see in the dim light, it is Jonah's beautiful face before mine. "We are home, Lori. Safe. For now. But we need to get inside."

As I look around, I recognize the familiar forms of home. But is this still home? The world has ended. Literal zombies have taken over. Home doesn't exist anymore. We are stuck in a horror movie now.

"Lori. We need to get inside."

I nod my head, trying my best to keep the fear at bay because I'm terrified of leaving this car. Jonah contorts his body to slide the stanchion onto his lap, bracing it in front of himself like a shield as he opens the driver's side door. Nothing happens. It seems to be quiet. No zombies lurking in the dark corners of our shared driveway at least.

Jonah marches over to my side of the car with careful steps, like he's one of the characters he plays in those shooter video games. With his back to the car, he opens the passenger door with one hand while the other keeps a tight grasp on his weapon. I slide out quickly and close the door as silently as I can. Jonah motions me in front of him to take the lead to my house.

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When I begin walking, he turns around to face the rear, making sure nothing comes up from behind. But what if something attacks from the front? I don't have a weapon.

The pockets in my dress were a dream before, but now have proven to be lifesaving because that's where I put my house key and phone. I walk up the three steps to my front door and slide the key into the knob.

A branch snapping in the direction of Jonah's house has my bones jumping out of my body. Before I can turn to see what made that sound, Jonah moves to my side, opens the door and shoves us both in. The door is closed and locked behind us, but I still feel unsafe, like at any moment something is going to pound down that door and eat us alive.

"Is something out there?" The voice that comes out of my mouth is unrecognizable, as if I am drowning in water and not just fear.

"My dad," Jonah says, his voice void of all emotion. "We need to make sure all the windows and doors are secure. Okay?"

I nod, taking the cue that he does not want to talk right now. Since I am so in the camp of not splitting up because when people split up in horror movies, bad things happen, I walk alongside Jonah as he checks every door and window on the ground level of my house. I help him push the large couch in front of the sliding glass door that leads out onto the patio.

As we head upstairs, I hear shuffling outside the front door. I stare at the door for a moment, hoping I hadn't heard Jonah properly. "My dad." Jonah grabs my hand and

leads me upstairs, where he closes the child gate securely. My mom installed this a couple years ago when my cousins would bring over their littles. They are big enough now that we don't need to use it, but it's just become part of the furniture. Now an extra added layer of security, I guess.

I let Jonah continue to lead me down the hallway and into the bathroom. He switches on the light and begins to undress. "We need to make sure neither of us has been bitten."

A wave of panic hits me hard and I nearly collapse, but Jonah rushes over, holding me against him. "Lori, are you okay? Please tell me you weren't bitten."

"No. I mean. I don't think so. I'm just scared."

"Me too, Shortcake." Jonah uses my childhood nickname, likely to bring my spirit up. It works. I can't help but smile.

When he sees I can stand on my own feet, he slips his hands behind my back to unzip my dress and steps back to continue removing his prom attire. Then Jonah puts his hands on my naked body. Not in a sensual way. I am being examined. When it's my turn to examine Jonah, my hands tremble. Not just from fear, but nerves. I've never been naked with Jonah before.

No bites.

I breathe a sigh of relief as Jonah's arms wrap around my waist. He hoists me up—still naked—and brings me to my bedroom where we fall into bed and a few minutes later, a restless sleep.

Jonah is gone when I wake up in the morning. His side of the bed has already gone cold. I wrap the blankets tightly around me as I roll over to my side, staring out the

window. Flashes of the previous night run through my mind. A scream piercing through the slightly too loud music Jonah and I were happily dancing to. Sarah with a bite on her neck. Coach Warren with his bloodshot eyes and pale skin looking like a drugged up zombie. He was a zombie. That's what I saw last night, right?

I close my eyes tight to remember the details I missed in the chaos. Coach Warren's eyes weren't just bloodshot. The white of his eyes had completely turned red. I don't think he could actually see us with his eyes, but somehow sensed we were there. When he was running toward us at horrifying speed, he wasn't looking at us, but through us. As if he was following the sounds of the screaming within.

If I'm right, Coach Warren didn't see his undead death coming. He likely didn't see his actual death coming either. Neither did Sarah, at least not until the very end. My best friend is dead. Likely all my school friends. Jonah's dad, probably his mom too. My brother and mom? I don't know if they are alive, how badly the zombie outbreak hit them. If this even happened anywhere else.

I was too hyped up last night to even check my phone. Where is my phone? My dress. Which is in the bathroom. I begrudgingly roll out of bed, wrapping the blanket around my icy body. When I step out into the hallway, I hear no signs of Jonah. Please be okay. Please, please, don't be a zombie, I think to myself.

Our prom attire is on the floor of the bathroom, right where we left them last night. I grab my dress and pull my phone out of the pocket. There are a few texts from my mom asking if I'm all right. Nothing from Hayden though. I try to call my mom, hoping that the phone lines are still active. I breathe a sigh of relief when it rings. But the ringing doesn't stop.

I hang up and try Hayden. Same thing. Then I try my mom again. Nothing.

The phone slips from my hand as I crash to the floor, letting all the emotions from

last night explode from my chest. I yell to no one in particular. My words pouring out of me. I feel like I am suffocating. The world around me is gone. Everyone I know is gone. Except for Jonah. Where the hell is he?

I gasp for air, trying to remember how to breathe. Why is it so important to breathe anyway? Jonah sprints into the bathroom, collapsing in front of me.

“Shit, Lori, what’s wrong?”

My head feels like it’s made of lead and my throat closes as if someone is pressing their hand down on my windpipe. Black spots appear before my eyes. I’m likely going to pass out if I don’t calm down, but I cannot breathe.

Jonah wraps his arms around me, saying, “I’m here, Lori. I’m here. I love you so fucking much. Breathe, Shortcake. Breathe.”

With one hand on the back of my skull and the other gently stroking my back, Jonah holds me against him like I am the most precious thing in the world. Perhaps I am now. To him. Because Jonah is the most precious thing to me. I have no one else. We have no one else. We have each other and maybe that is all we need to survive this new reality.

I take a shuddering breath, filling my lungs with cold, stuffy air. It burns, but it’s blissfully fulfilling.

“That’s it, Shortcake. Keep breathing.” When my breathing evens out, Jonah lets me go just enough to place his forehead to mine. His whispering voice brushes my lips. “What happened?”

“I...I was checking my phone. I can’t reach my mom. She texted me last night.” Tears fall freely down my face again, but I keep breathing, steadying myself against

Jonah.

“That doesn’t mean she’s...your mom is a tough motherfucker. She’ll be okay.”

Jonah’s confidence brings some warmth back into my blood and my heart pumps a little stronger.

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“You think?” I ask.

“For sure.”

Jonah pulls me back into a tight embrace for another moment, then hops up and helps me off the ground. That’s when I notice he’s only wearing boxers.

“Did your brother keep any clothes here?” Jonah asks. “I don’t really want to put my prom suit back on.”

“Yeah. He keeps a bunch of clothes here. His closet should be stocked. Help yourself to them.”

Jonah gives me a kiss, which I deepen, unwilling to let him go. But he pulls away, holding me back with his hands on my arms. “You need to get dressed. We have to figure out how we are going to survive this. Okay?”

I look into Jonah’s eyes and see hope. We will survive this. No matter what. I nod and he loosens his grip on me. Before I head back to my room, I kiss him on the cheek and say, “I love you.”

Chapter 6

Sixmonths.We’vemadeit six months. Fall is right around the corner and we are running low on resources even after raiding all the houses in our neighborhood. None of them showed signs that their human inhabitants survived the outbreak. If they did, they didn’t stick around. Most of the houses around here are surrounded by rocky

terrain or a stream. An environment that has likely kept us safe for this long.

But we had our fair share of zombie encounters while raiding our neighbors. Likely people who'd gotten bitten somewhere else, came home, turned, and ate their families. The thought makes my stomach churn. Jonah's dad had turned before we even returned from prom. I know Jonah put him down because I didn't hear or see him again after that night.

Jonah's mom...she was waiting for us as if her zombie self knew we'd try to sneak in through the garage of her house. Something Jonah and I hadn't attempted until five months after the outbreak when all the other houses nearby had been emptied of the resources we needed.

We were as prepared as we could be upon entering Jonah's home, but nothing can prepare a person to see a loved one turned into an emaciated flesh-eating zombie. Knowing Jonah had put down his dad, I couldn't let him do the same to his mother. He'd been through enough. He'd lost so much.

And yes, so have I. But there's also a bit of hope for me. Just because I haven't heard from my mother and Hayden doesn't mean they are dead. They could be alive. Jonah's parents, his sister, are dead. We saw them die.

Putting down Mrs. Rosenberg had been the hardest thing I've ever done. Not physically, but emotionally. Unlike the zombies on day one and even ones we'd come across on our raids, this one was slow. Perhaps it was because it had been locked in a house without a food source for months, decaying at a faster rate, becoming less of a threat. I acted on instinct, not just needing to take the burden from Jonah, but because it has now become my instinct to kill first. Something I had gotten pretty good at during our raids.

Six months of surviving has been exhausting. So much so that Jonah and I haven't

really explored our relationship. I've been too much on edge to let Jonah touch me, even when we are safely barricaded in my house. Sex was never a priority for me in relationships anyway, even in the before. I need time to feel comfortable with someone. Which is why I never had sex with Jake. Or anyone.

I feel more than comfortable around Jonah. I want to have sex with him. I really do. I'm just freaked out every second of the day. He understands. In his own way, I don't think he's ready yet either. We've both been through a lot. Too much.

Our number one priority is finding a way out of our abandoned town and into a safe zone. We had found a radio in one of the houses we raided. After turning through the channels a million times, we finally locked onto a message about a survivor community. Jonah's family camper van will get us there. We just need to stock up on resources and figure out exactly where to go. The last thing we want to do is leave our own small safe corner of the world and venture into the unknown without a plan.

First step of the plan? We raid ShopRite. It's a risk, but we are hoping it's not overrun with zombies. Jonah and I have already done a drive-by. It didn't look too bad. If we can grab a huge supply of canned goods, toothpaste, and soap, it'll be worth it. Since Jonah and I had worked at ShopRite for the last few years, we have an intimate knowledge of the layout and know exactly which aisles to target.

The parking lot is eerily quiet, even though there are a good number of cars parked. Cars that have likely been here since day zero. Jonah parks his family's camper van in front of the online order pickup and delivery doors. We figured this would be a safer route inside. Before exiting the van, Jonah and I suit up.

After putting on work gloves, we then take turns wrapping duct tape around our most vulnerable areas. Ankles. Wrists. Anywhere our clothes might slide off to show bare skin. We even go the extra mile and put our old roller skating protection gear over our knees, elbows, and wrists. The end result makes us look like total nerds, but at

least we are safe nerds.

Jonah nods to me after we wrap scarves around our necks and head, the final step in applying our raiding gear. The late summer heat of September is making way for fall, but it's still hot enough to roast us in all this gear. But I'd take safety over comfort any day in this post-apocalyptic nightmare.

I follow Jonah out of the van, holding my choice of weapon securely in my right hand. A softball bat. The bat I used to score the winning point in the playoffs last year. The bat I used to smash in Mrs. Rosenberg's head. Closing the camper van's sliding door gently, I follow Jonah into the side entrance of our local ShopRite.

The small vestibule where groceries are stored for online pickup orders shows zero signs of life or undead movement. My chest unclenches part of the way, relieved we don't have to start off fighting our way inside. I head over to a triple-tiered rolling cart filled with crates, then empty all the perishable goods that have turned moldy or decayed. There's quite a few canned goods in there too, which I keep in one of the crates.

I nod to Jonah, who is stationed at the interior door, looking through the glass for any signs of movement. When he sees that I'm ready, he slowly opens the door, stepping out to look around the corners before waving me through. He lets me pass him before stepping in pace with me, guarding my six. I head down the last aisle of the store where all the snacks are, passing the aisle of moldy bread.

As quietly as possible, Jonah and I grab as many packages of nuts, jerky, and trail mix as we can find. I take the last bag of dark chocolate almonds as Jonah slips by me to get a few bags of potato chips. "I know we don't need these, but I've been craving these real bad," he says as he gently places them in one of the crates.

I smile up at him, shaking my head, and pull the cart around to go move to our next

targeted aisle. Beverages. As we pass by the ice cream aisle, the reality of our situation hits hard. How many times have I walked down this aisle, perusing the unlimited choices of frozen treats with my mom and Hayden as we prepare for a cozy night in?

Forcing my gaze away from my memories, I look ahead, spotting aisle ten. I slowly push the cart around into the aisle, stopping to peer down for a better look. Clear. That knot in my chest loosens a bit more. Jonah grabs the last few gallons of water left on the shelf, placing them on the lower rack of the cart.

We get back into formation, Jonah looking behind us as I look ahead. All that's left to grab are canned goods and some hygiene products. As I turn into the next aisle, I pause when I see a shadow at the other end. Squinting my eyes helps to provide a better visual of the shadow. It's just a paper towel from the meat section in the back. I breathe again and turn all the way into the aisle.

Jonah doesn't join me as I pick up canned beans, carrots, and whatever else I can find. When I look over to see what he's doing at the front of the store, I accidentally drop a freaking can. In any other scenario, it wouldn't have sounded this loud. The bang it makes as it drops to the floor echoes off of every single surface in the store.

I don't move. I don't breathe. I don't blink. Jonah is by my side a second later, holding a firework in his hand, motioning me to move. Now. At the other end of the aisle I hear groaning, but I don't look back. The groaning is quickly accompanied by the shuffling of feet. Lots of feet. At least it's not the loud stomping of feet from the zombies we encountered in the first couple of months after the outbreak.

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“Stay here,” Jonah whispers, ripping the firework from its packaging.

“What are you doing?” I whisper-shout back.

“Saving our asses. Now stay here. We don’t have time to argue.”

My body freezes in place as if obediently listening to Jonah’s words and my chest is back to clenching so hard I can barely breathe. The zombie from the other end of the canned goods aisle is not even half-way down, but the space between us gets closer and closer with each little shuffle it takes toward me.

Then a loud crackling sound blasts from the other end of the store. Fireworks. Jonah sprints back the same way he had gone as color flashes from the produce section. As he approaches me, the slow zombie I had been staring down slowly shifts around to investigate the new sound.

“We’ll have to make do with what we have in the cart. Let’s get out of here,” Jonah whispers.

“I’m so sorry,” I say softly, placing my hands on the handle of the cart and pushing it back toward the way we had come in. This time, at a run.

“It’s okay, Shortcake,” Jonah whispers as he runs at my side. “We have more than enough. Who needs soap when we’ve already gotten used to each other’s stench?”

A smile fights its way through the fear riddling my body. Before I can shake off a single drop of fear, a zombie steps out in front of us, grabbing at us but missing by a

foot. Like I had thought since that very first night, these things can't see. But they can hear. Jonah slides my bat from the top crate and swings with all his strength, hitting his mark. The zombie goes down and we don't wait to see if it gets back up as we quicken our pace to sprinting.

Jonah pushes himself faster, making his way in front of me and the cart to open the door to the home delivery vestibule. Once inside, we take a quick survey of the room that had been unoccupied before. All clear. I breathe in deeply, listening to the faint sounds of fireworks from the other side of the store.

"How many did you set off?" I ask Jonah.

"A whole box." Jonah pushes a cabinet in front of the interior door, then turns to me, grabbing me by the waist and kisses me like his next breath depends on it.

"Sorry to interrupt," an unknown voice says from behind Jonah, where the door leading outside is. Jonah goes still, his lips still brushing against mine. The both of us stop breathing.

"Really, I am sorry. But I must insist that you detach, unarm yourselves, and step over to me and my men without causing any trouble."

A shiver runs down my body, but not the blissful passion I had felt less than a minute ago. Dread. That is what I feel now.

"What do we do?" I whisper to Jonah.

"I can hear you," the man says. "So let me answer. Do what I asked, and you will not be harmed."

Jonah reaches around me, grabbing the hilt of a knife I had placed there as we armed

up. He turns around slowly, keeping his hand on the hilt behind my back. Three men stand inside the vestibule. They must have slipped in while Jonah and I were kissing.

“Now don’t do anything stupid,” says the man on the left.

Does he know we are armed? What do they want? If they wanted to just steal from us, they would have killed Jonah and me already.

I feel the blade of my knife slip from its sheath as Jonah moves his hand away from me. But I can’t hear a damn thing as he launches toward our assailants. It looks like the man in the middle is laughing at Jonah, but the thumping of my heart drowns out everything else. The man on the left takes one swing, knocking Jonah out cold.

“No!” I scream, trying to run to him. Then the world around me goes black.

Chapter 7

My consciousness awakens before my eyes are ready to open. All I can make out is a monotone beep playing on a loop. It sounds like a heart monitor. Two distinct voices—a man and woman—are close, but far enough away, I can’t make out what they are saying. My body aches everywhere, as if I had been tackled by an NFL linebacker.

Then I remember what happened. My eyes open to a dimly lit room. The beeping noise is, in fact, coming from a heart monitor, which I’m strapped into. There are no windows. The walls are made from cinder blocks. Damp air hits my nose as I take a deep breath in. It smells like a basement. Maybe a bunker? Maybe we made it to a safe zone somehow.

No. I don’t feel safe. Jonah. He was injured. Bleeding from his head. He wasn’t moving. I try to sit up, which is when I realize I’m bound to a gurney. An IV is

hooked into my left arm, pumping some kind of red liquid into me. It's not dark enough to be blood. Even if it was, I don't think I suffered an injury to warrant a transfusion.

As I attempt to pull off the restraints, a man wearing a white doctor's coat walks in. A smile attempts to soften the demonic look from his brown eyes. Eyes that nearly match the tone of his skin, making the white of his teeth brighten his smile. If I were only looking at his mouth, I would say that this man is charming, kind, and handsome. But I cannot stop looking into his eyes.

Eyes that drill into me as I lie helpless on the gurney, unable to move, to protect myself. I squirm, attempting to escape even though I know I am not going anywhere. Still, I have to try. And I won't stop trying.

"You will only exhaust yourself," the doctor says in a rich voice that has an odd calming effect. My body relaxes against my restraints as he says, "Very good. Now you may be wondering where you are and how you got here."

I nod my head, looking around.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“I do apologize for the way my men treated you and your companion. Sometimes they must act according to how they are treated and since the boy you were with attacked without warning—”

“Is Jonah okay?” I interrupt, anxious to know if he is alive.

That smile of his turns vicious for a second before resuming its charming position. “Jonah. Very good to put a name to his face. And may I have the honor of knowing yours?”

Shit. I shouldn’t have said his name. They will probably use it against him. Against us. I shouldn’t tell him my name, but it feels like a betrayal to give up Jonah’s name and not be willing to betray my own.

“Laurel,” I whisper loud enough for the doctor to hear.

“Very nice to meet you, Laurel. I am Dr. Tuwile, but you can call me Gabriel if you’d like.” He smiles brightly at our introductions as if he has won me over. So I let him think I feel safe and offer a shy smile back to him.

“So now that you know how you got here, I will tell you where you are. This is Novus Seclorum. It is a safe haven for those who are looking to start anew and create a new generation of humans. All who enter are required to make a sacrifice for the greater good in order to remain here. Since you were unconscious, your sacrifice was chosen for you. Well, your DNA chose for you, I should say.”

My heart pounds in my ears as terror takes hold. This is a cult. This is a freaking

cult.Jonah. Where is he? Please be okay.Tears leak from my eyes as my head pounds from the sound of my hammering heart. I need Dr. Tuwile to tell me the rest, to tell me what my sacrifice is. Yet, I don't think I'm ready to hear it.

“Your genetics meet a certain criterion for a mutation I have been attempting on humans. One that will make us immune to the virus running rampant all over the world. If your body accepts the mutation, you will live. However, if your body rejects it, then you will die and become a monster.”

The frequency of the heart monitor beeps quickens as a sharp pain shoots down my spine. A scream releases from the depths of my soul at the pain and anger that boils under my skin.

“I know this is a terrifying idea, but I believe you are the missing part we have been searching for these last few months.”

Something I'm sure he's said to every other lab rat he's kidnapped into captivity. I scream at him, my anger coursing through my veins, making me feel stronger. I use it, every ounce of strength until I hear the velcro on my restraints loosen. Before I can try again, Dr. Tuwile adds something to my IV drip. The strength I felt a moment ago disappears, leaving me limp and immobile. I'm so tired.

As my eyes flutter shut, I hear Dr. Tuwile say, “Keep her sedated. I think it's working.”

My dad, a hero, the bravest and kindest man I've ever known. I've relived the night of his death over and over again since losing him. He died how he lived, protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. I was eight years old when he got the call. We were out celebrating Hayden's tenth birthday, so we all hopped in the car and drove over to the fire station.

Mom drove Hayden and me home, but we couldn't sleep. We never slept when dad got called to a fire, car accident, whatever required his skills as a trained firefighter. This call was for a domestic. A man set fire to his house after arguing with his wife. His kids were inside with his wife, but all he did was sit in his front yard and watch the house go up in flames as he drank himself into oblivion.

The three of us sat quietly at home, but after an hour of waiting, my mom couldn't take it anymore. It became a routine of ours to remain calm at home and wait for dad to get back. But Mom would always cave and drive us to the scene, putting together some snacks for Hayden and me as well as for the responders before heading out. That night, she made two dozen salami and cheese sandwiches and brought along a big carton of Goldfish.

The fire was nearly out when the three of us arrived, pulling up behind the emergency vehicles. Mom told us to stay in the car, but we never would. As soon as she disappeared around the ambulance in front of our car, Hayden and I hopped out. We stayed on the sidewalk a safe distance away from the scene. Far enough that we couldn't see anything that was going on, but close enough to hear.

A few minutes passed by and the controlled fire burst into flames again. Shouts echoed around the cul-de-sac neighborhood and I swore I heard my dad's voice in all the chaos. Three loud bangs sounded close-by and that's when Hayden wrapped his arms around me, pulling me back to the car. But I was a statue. My mom's wailing came next, screaming for my dad.

I just stood there, staring at nothing, unable to see the scene, but I could hear all of it. I could hear the agony in my mom's voice, willing my dad to stay alive. I could hear the shouts from the bastard who shot my dad, threatening to keep shooting if anyone else attempted to save his family. And I heard the final shot that came from Officer Boggan's gun, putting the insane bastard down.

This memory is one of the flashes of my life that has kept cycling through my mind while stuck in a constant state of sleep for days, weeks, maybe months. I'm only granted small moments of lucidness when my consciousness wins its battle against the drugs I've been given. I have no idea how much time has passed by, if any time has passed by. It is like I have become a non-corporeal being, shifting between dimensions of non-existence. I am nowhere, yet everywhere all at once.

Sometimes I can hear the doctor's voice, other times I hear the voices of more strangers. And once, I thought I heard Jonah. Perhaps that was a dream. It is difficult to recall reality from the nightmares I get trapped in or the moments of awareness from the dreams I want to stay in.

It is an endless cycle that begins with a searing fire in my veins and ends with a flash of clarity. I am left with nothing of myself. I feel like I'm slipping away. Falling into an abyss I will never fully wake from. Yet I hold on. I remember. Jonah. Hayden. Sarah. My mom and dad. Jenni. Elice. Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg. Even Jake and Lexi. I remember the names of the people in my life. A life I will never get back. A life I want to keep in my memory.

I fight the pain. I fight the blackness. I fight to remember who I am.

And I hope Jonah is fighting too. I hope we will find each other again, somehow. I cannot accept that this is the end for me, for us. I know the world outside holds no hope for a future, yet I still want to live.

As I blink my eyes open to the dim lights of my dank prison, I feel the pressure of fluid enter my veins. Yet my veins do not burn this time. I no longer feel the searing pain that follows. I welcome a new sensation. Cold. My skin comes alive with goosebumps and I shiver as if I am trapped in the arctic without proper attire. Perhaps this means my torment is over. Or maybe it's just begun.

Chapter 8

I'm jolted awake by the sound of an alarm. Like a siren. As it continues to ring, I take in my surroundings quickly. My body feels light without the pressure of restraints. But I don't feel free. The room—no cell—I'm in has no doors or windows. Though the ceilings are tall, it's basically a big cement box.

There are five other people in the cell with me. All of us are wearing the same gray clothing, like a uniform. Loose fitted joggers and nondescript t-shirts. I can only describe the ensemble as gray prison garb. At least they are sort of comfortable. No shoes though. All of us are barefoot.

As my fellow inmates come to full attention from the sound of the alarm, I inspect them closely. Two men and one little boy. One woman. One little girl. Two genders from three different age groups. This has to be an experiment.

I try to recall what Dr. Devil Eyes said to me when we first met. Well, that was the only time we actually met, as he had me in a medically induced coma for an unknown amount of time. I must have been strapped to that bed for weeks. Or maybe it could have only been a few days. I honestly don't know. My body feels strong though when it should feel weak.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“Your genetics meet a certain criterion for a mutation I have been attempting on humans,” the doctor had said. He is trying to find a cure or make humans immune to whatever is turning us into zombies? I think that’s what he was explaining to me. I’m freaking the hell out about what kind of experiment he has planned for us in this cement box with no hope of escape.

What do the six of us have to do with this mutation? Why are we here in this windowless room with an alarm blasting into our ears? Everyone looks as terrified and confused as I must look. I try to catch their eyes, but no one wants to interact. It’s every person for themselves I guess. But then I look at the kids. The boy and girl can’t be older than ten.

I push myself up to a standing position with my hands still placed over my ears to block out the unbearably loud alarm. If no one else will look after them, then I will. As I take a step forward, the alarm stops, making me lose my footing. I catch myself just as I hear a groaning sound to my left.

The older woman seizes, foam dripping from her mouth. Shit. If I hadn’t seen how Sarah turned, I would run to her and make sure she didn’t swallow her own tongue. But I have seen this before. She’s turning. She’ll soon be a flesh-eating monster with a five-course meal to feast on. Looking around, I don’t see anything I can use as a weapon. Nothing.

As if the walls read my mind, a panel opens up on the other side of the room, filled with weapons. Double shit. This is the experiment. Who will become immune and who will turn into a monster? Fight. Survive. Live. My new mantra. I chant this in my head as I sprint to the weapons cache, which is filled with a bunch of obscure items. I

pick something that looks like a mace, perfect for smashing in zombie heads.

The little girl's scream pierces the air. I spin around to see the older woman and the younger man—both zombies now—cornering the little girl. The little boy and older man attempt to stay still in opposite corners of the room. I run as fast as I can and swing the mace at zombie number one. Before it can hit the ground, I'm already swinging my mace at the head of the next zombie. I give them each another powerful smack right on the skull to make sure they are dead-dead.

Then I turn to the little girl to make sure she's okay, or at least unbitten. She's frightened of me at first, which I totally get because I just double-tapped two freshly turned zombies. Holy shit. How did I even do that? I mean, I've ended zombies before, but it took so much energy out of me. Maybe it's adrenaline pumping through me, keeping me from losing my shit. I feel like I can go all day.

"Stay by me, I'll protect you," I say to the little girl. She nods shyly and follows me to the weapons cache.

The other two are still in their own respective corners, too afraid to move. Who will be next? What if it's me? No. Fight. Survive. Live. I hand the little girl a crowbar, telling her, "Swing it as hard as you can if one of them comes at you. Okay?"

She nods a little more confidently this time, as if all she needed was a weapon. I hope that is a good sign she will not change, that she feels the same strength inside her to get her through today and every other challenge the doctor and his psychos throw at us. Our heads snap over to the corner on the left where the older man is groaning. The little boy wails and the panic glues me to the floor a second too long. The older man turns quickly, making the boy sob even louder.

I run, trying to intercept the zombie, but I know I won't make it. I'm already crying as I run, hearing the horrific screams coming from the little boy as he's being ripped

open. Three strides away, I swing the mace back, letting it land with a thud on the back of the zombie's skull. I swing again, and again, and again until the sounds of screaming, chewing, and groaning are all a distant memory.

The adrenaline has worn off, replaced by terror and a depression that will never leave my soul. I sink to the ground coated in blood and other stuff I don't want to think about. No other doors have appeared. No sign that we are even being watched.

A loud sound, like metal falling on concrete, brings my attention back to the little girl. She dropped the crowbar I gave her. When I look into her eyes, they don't see me. It takes everything inside me not to make a sound when all I want to do is cry, scream, bang on the walls.

I should just let it out, let her end me, but no. Fight. Survive. Live. She is not a little girl anymore. She is a monster. I need to put her down, but she is so little it doesn't feel right. So I decide to wait, to see if there is someone on the outside watching. To see if my body has taken to this mutation. If it has, if I'm right, then I won't become a zombie. I will be immune. And if I am immune, I can fight my way out of this hellhole and survive. Find Jonah. Maybe even find my mom and Hayden.

The little girl—no, zombie—snoops around the room. Attempting to remain quiet, I slide myself over to the wall, needing its assistance to stand. The squishing sound of my movement is enough for the zombie to hear and it changes course, heading straight to me. In my experience, I know zombies cannot see, at least not clearly, even in the bright, piercing light of this room. They hunt using hearing, or maybe vibrations. That's my own scientific guess.

I tip-toe away from the slaughter scene as quietly as I can, stopping when I get to the next corner, where I had ended the first two zombies. As I keep my eyes focused on the little zombie, something pierces into my ankle. I look down to see zombie number one's mangled head taking a large chunk out of my skin. Mace still in hand, I throw

all my weight down on the zombie's head until its mouth releases my ankle.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Don't freak out. You are immune. That's what the doctor said. Please be right. Please.

All the sounds I made attracted the attention from the last remaining zombie. That poor little girl. No. Zombie. I need to end this. I yell as loud as I can, drawing her right to me, and position my body as if I'm up at bat in a softball game, ready for the pitcher to throw the ball. When the ball is within my reach, I swing, hitting the zombie's head so hard blood splatters everywhere. It falls on its knees before keeling over to the side.

I am utterly alone. Fear is my only friend. I need to hold on to the hope that I will survive. That I somehow will not turn. That the doctor was telling the truth about attempting to make me immune. That I won't lose the last remaining shreds of my humanity if I do survive.

Not wanting to be near any of the carnage made from my rage, I limp over to an empty corner, fall against the wall and slump down to the ground where I stay for an eternity, staring at the bite wound on my ankle. Maybe it's my imagination or perhaps this is what happens when you turn; your brain starts to reanimate and sees things differently. I don't feel any different. In fact, I feel the best I've ever felt. Physically, at least. I'm a freaking wreck emotionally right now.

But my ankle is healing. The skin has already stitched itself back together. A few minutes later, and the only evidence that I was bitten is a rough scar on the side of my ankle. Holy shit.

The entire ceiling illuminates, blinding me for a moment. Then a door appears on the other side of the room and in walks the doctor with that menacing smile of his.

Chapter 9

“Dr. Tuwile, be careful, she could still turn,” a stout woman with rusty red hair and a southern accent says as she rushes in behind him.

Dr. Tuwile. Gabriel Tuwile. Now I remember his name. He crouches in front of me, ignoring the pleas of the woman who is now grabbing him from the collar of his coat. “Don’t you see, Angela? We’ve finally done it.”

Angela doesn’t seem impressed. She keeps looking around the room, horror written all over her face at the smashed up bodies. As if sensing her anxiousness, Dr. Tuwile stands up and orders two guards to escort me to the showers then turns to the other people in lab coats, saying, “Incinerate the remains of the other test subjects.”

Test subjects. So that’s what I am.

I follow one of the guards out of the room and another falls in step behind me. There is no remembering what direction we came from or where we are heading to. Perhaps the guards are walking me in circles so that I won’t be able to figure out where the exit could be. Not that I’ve gotten a glimpse of a possible exit anyway.

The guard in front finally stops to open a door, ushering me inside what looks like a small gym locker room. In the center of the room is a single section of lockers with three benches in the middle. On the right side are toilet stalls and sinks. We head in the opposite direction to a larger section where the showers are. Instead of single shower cubicles, the entire space is open and lined with showerheads and handles.

So much for privacy.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

I stare at the guards—both men—waiting for them to leave or turn around. The tall one with beach-blonde hair has the audacity to smile at me. Thankfully, the other man, short but built with muscles, grabs the tall one and walks over to the entrance of the locker room. As I step into the large shower room, the damp floor makes my feet slippery.

Holding onto the wall, I find a corner of the room where I feel secure enough to remove my prison clothes. I toss the shirt and joggers near the doorway, but I don't turn the water on. The sight of blood caking on my fingertips, running down my arms, and coating my feet makes me sick. I dry heave, catching myself as I fall to the floor. Nothing comes up. There's nothing inside me as I haven't eaten real food for who the hell knows how long.

Then a dam opens up inside me, releasing every emotion I've felt since I found myself in hell. Since I lost everything. I scream and cry at the wall as if it's responsible for everything I have been through since I saw my first zombie.

I punch at the tile, feeling nothing. So I punch again, and again, and again. I keep punching until I crack the tiles and I still feel nothing. When I look down at my hand, the bones are already mending and my skin stitches itself back together.

What the hell?

I stare at my knuckles, probably wasting all the time I've been given to clean myself up. But I'm fascinated. How is it possible that my broken hand can heal so quickly? Is this part of the mutation too?

“Oh my God, Lori. Are you okay?”

In slow motion, I turn my head to see Jonah, as beautiful as I remembered him in my dreams. Okay, now I know I’m going crazy. I think to myself.

My hallucination crouches down beside me, and I can feel the ghost of his touch, but it’s real. “Wait, are you really here?” I ask.

“Yes, Shortcake, I’m really here.” Jonah gathers my naked body to his strong, lean, clothed body.

“When did you get all these muscles?” I poke at his arm, testing its strength, but it doesn’t give.

“We can talk about that later. Let’s get you cleaned up, okay?” I nod into his chest, but I’m unwilling to let him go, so he lifts me up effortlessly and brings me over to an unbroken part of the shower. Without letting me go, he turns on a faucet, testing the water before walking us both under the hot streams.

I sigh in relief as the hot water washes away the blood staining my hair and body. It has been ages since I took a hot shower. We lost power four months after prom, which was one of the reasons we started making plans to leave our little safe corner of the world.

Jonah sits me down on the ground so that the streams of water can still reach me, and pulls a piece of soap from a pouch in his pocket. He lathers it in his hands before placing it on a little shelf on the wall. Kneeling before me, he scrubs the creamy froth over every inch of my skin. I barely feel a thing, though the ritual is soothing. As Jonah massages my scalp, I feel a little tingly. Perhaps I just need to relax.

A strangled cry vibrates from my throat as Jonah’s fingers detach from my hair. I

don't want him to stop and I'm about to say as much when he stands up and says, "Rinse up. I'll grab you some fresh clothes."

Before he turns around, Jonah helps me up, our eyes locking on each other for a moment. He seems different, but I can't place it. Then he turns around, and the thought disappears. Jonah is alive. He is here. He is taking care of me.

Jonah returns with a towel and a fresh pair of gray joggers with a gray t-shirt. I guess I haven't upgraded from test subject prison garb. That's when I realize Jonah is wearing a similar outfit, but all in black. I quickly dry off, twisting my hair to release any excess water. It's gotten longer, now down past my collar bone. At prom, it only just touched my shoulders.

When I look up, I catch Jonah staring at me. I clear my throat to get his attention, making him blush. Jonah has seen me naked before. But there's something different in his eyes this time.

As he tosses me my dry clothes, he says, "Sorry. It's been a while. I miss you."

"How long have we been in this place?" I ask, pulling the t-shirt over my head.

"Five months. Your birthday just passed actually. So, happy birthday," Jonah says with a smile.

The shock of his words causes me to lose balance as I step into the joggers. Nineteen. I'm nineteen now. Jonah catches me with a quick reflex and those strong muscles. I had a feeling we'd been down here for a long time, but hearing the truth from him has my mind reeling.

"Come on. You need to get some rest."

“Apparently I’ve been asleep for five months,” I huff.

Jonah takes a step away but remains close to me, allowing me to steady myself before walking out of the shower. I realize I still don’t have any shoes on, nor did Jonah give me any. Looking down at his feet, Jonah is wearing heavy combat boots.

“Do I get a pair of those?” I ask, pointing to his shoes.

“I wasn’t provided with a pair to give to you, but I can ask.” The way Jonah talks so casually about this place makes the hair on my neck stand on edge. But I follow him out of the locker room without hesitation. My two guards are nowhere nearby. I should feel better about that, but something inside tells me this is not right.

How can Jonah have free rein of the place only five months after arriving here? And it’s not like we are honored guests. We were captured. Jonah put up a fight and was knocked out cold. We didn’t have a choice. They brought us here against our will. Strapped me to a gurney for five months, pumping some kind of serum into me that mutated my genes, making me immune to zombie bites and wall punches.

What have they done to Jonah while I was asleep?

Chapter 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

As we enter a small cubicle of a room, Jonah pulls off his wet clothes. The tiny room can barely be called a bedroom, but there is a bed. Across from the bed is a small desk and a chair. There's even an open closet which contains more of the same black clothing Jonah had been wearing. He doesn't make a move to grab a fresh pair of clothes because he's too busy studying me as I examine every inch of the suffocating white walls in his prison cell.

I should back away from his gaze, uncertain about who Jonah has become, if my Jonah is still in there. He obviously still cares for me. The way he caressed me in the shower, scrubbing all the blood away, he was so gentle. Now, his eyes are hungry for me. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the same way. That I didn't want the same thing. I know I should look away, lie down, rest, try to forget everything that happened today.

Perhaps Jonah can help me forget. I pull off my clean t-shirt and joggers, standing naked in front of Jonah, hoping he is still the man of my dreams. In the blink of an eye, Jonah's skin is flush with mine, our lips crashing into each other.

"I thought I would never see you again, Lori," Jonah mutters against my lips. "You have no idea how much I missed you."

I sigh into his mouth before I capture his lips again; so hungry, so needy. My legs wrap around Jonah's hips as he lifts me up and walks me three steps backward to the bed. He lays me down so gently that my heart breaks into a million pieces. Just an hour ago I was fighting for my life, afraid I would die, turn into a zombie. And now? I am in a sterile white prison cell with my childhood crush who became my boyfriend right before the world ended. I don't know what kind of future we have. Actually, I

know we don't have one. Not here, at least.

But right now? In this moment? He is mine and I want to take him fiercely. I want to feel him everywhere.

As Jonah pulls off his boxer briefs, I sit up on the bed. When he sits down next to me, his touch is tender. The opposite of what I need. I push him down on the bed, straddling him in one quick move. Our lips crash against each other again, the both of us starving for each other. Reaching my hand down between our bodies, I place myself above Jonah and push down until my butt touches his hips. Jonah groans loudly, thrusting his hips to push in deeper.

There should be a pinch of pain from the intrusion, but I barely feel anything. I lift myself up, bracing against Jonah's solid chest, and thrust myself so hard against him. An even louder groan escapes from Jonah, so I keep going, riding him like my life depends on it. Ride until I feel something, perhaps the beginning of an orgasm, or perhaps that was the end of it. What I do feel is Jonah finishing inside me, a faint vibration, wetness.

When I look into his face, I realize I might not have my IUD anymore. I have no idea what Dr. Tuwile did to me. Shit. So much for trying to forget. Still attached to Jonah, I tell him about the IUD, worried that we just had unprotected sex.

Jonah pulls me down to him, shifting our bodies so we lie on our sides facing each other. "We're okay. Everyone at Novus Seclorum takes birth control, even the men. Doctore says we are not ready to repopulate the world yet. First, we need to make it safe. We need a cure to keep us all from devouring each other."

"Hmmm," is all I can think of to say. I don't disagree. The last thing anyone needs right now is to worry about a crying baby. Then I turn my mind to a less taxing topic.

“I don’t remember you having so many big muscles,” I say lazily as I snuggle next to Jonah, tracing his biceps.

“I’ve been training with Doctore’s men.”

“Doctore?” I ask. It’s the second time he’s mentioned this name.

“Dr. Tuwile. He’s built this place to emulate one of the greatest empires of history. So everything has a Roman name. What he’s doing is incredible.”

“Incredible?” For some reason I cannot get more than one word questions out of my mouth.

“You are incredible, Lori. The very first person to become immune to the virus these flesh-eaters carry. If Doctore can make this cure work in every living human being, we will take the world back.”

Jonah speaks with wonder in his eyes, as if he sees this brilliant plan built from glory and honor. But it’s built from death and betrayal. “Do you know what happened to me, Jonah? What Doctore made me do?”

“I know we were brought here by force, and I’m sorry for what you’ve had to go through. Isn’t it worth it though? Don’t you want to save the world?”

I stop stroking Jonah’s skin, but because of the limited amount of space on his tiny bed, there is nowhere else for my hands to be other than on his body. My mind is whirling. Do I disagree with him? Yes. I mean, sure, I want to save the world, but not like this. Not if that means killing kids. Not if it means kidnapping innocent people. Because if we do this, then what will humanity become?

I’m not sure I want Jonah to know how I feel though. If he’s this far gone, deep in Dr.

Tuwile's pockets, then I don't know if I can trust Jonah. So I simply respond with, "Yes."

"I'm really sorry for what you had to go through. I don't know all of it. I didn't even know where you were until a week ago."

"What did you think happened to me?"

"Every time I would ask about you, they would beat me. So I stopped asking. I started obeying. I started listening. When I opened my eyes and saw the world Doctore is trying to build, everything clicked into place. I started training to be a soldier in Doctore's Praetorian Guard. Then I got my own room. It's small, but I prefer this over the dormitories. I get to eat better food. And then, a week ago, Doctore came to see me himself. Told me you were alive and well but that you were being tested."

Jonah holds me tight against his chest, as if he's revisiting the feeling of losing me. "When he explained that you might be a carrier for the cure, I was so scared for you. I knew whatever tests you were going through wouldn't be easy."

I hold so much back in my response, when all I want to do is beat some sense into him. "Do you know what I had to do today?"

"No. I wasn't there. But I know you got bit and the bite healed itself. You put down the zombies that attacked you and proved that Doctore has the knowledge to cure the world."

I don't agree with his wording at all. Dr. Tuwile might have a cure to this plague, but that doesn't mean he will use it to cure everyone. My skin crawls at the thought of him possessing such power. Those dark eyes will forever haunt me. Dr. Tuwile—Doctore—a mad scientist with charisma on his side. He has won over the

hearts of Jonah and others like him. People who are kind at heart and only want to do the right thing. I know that's what he's doing. I know he believes he is doing good. How do I tell him the truth? Especially when I don't have proof.

Even if I simply tell him all the details of what "test" I was put through, he would brush it off as a necessary evil for the betterment of humanity. I have to bring him back to his right mind. I only hope my sanity will remain intact and I don't end up brainwashed with him.

I sigh into his chest and say, "I'm so tired. Can I sleep here?"

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“Of course. Doctore gave us the night to be together. He says we both deserve the break.” Jonah kisses the top of my head as I shiver at his words. He is in so deep, I don’t think I can pull him out. But I will try. Fight. Survive. Live.

“I love you, Lori.”

My heart skips a beat at his words. Words I had once longed to hear from his lips. But I don’t say it back. I’m not sure I still feel the same way about Jonah. I’m not sure I love him anymore. I am too broken.

Chapter 11

Idon’tknowwhatI thought my life would be in this hellhole of a bunker everyone calls Novus Seclorum—a new age. I knew I was a prisoner, even though I had been granted a night with Jonah. A night I had dreamed of forever. A night I had the chance to experience with Jonah months ago but was too freaked out to give him all of me. All I needed was to break, I guess.

That night I was granted with Jonah recurs occasionally. We eat our meals together most days, which is the only time I really get to see him. Meals are the only indicators of passing time and have allowed me to keep track of how long I’ve been down here. Five months had passed while I was in a medically induced coma, turning into the supposed first human to become immune to zombie bites. Seven more months have gone by, making it an entire year since Jonah and I have been down here. A whole year since I’ve seen the sun.

As a captive, I’ve been given the illusion of freedom. I’m allowed my own prison

cell, which looks exactly like Jonah's, except mine has a window on the door. No privacy for me. Every morning, a guard escorts me through the dimly lit hallways and into a massive cafeteria where the Praetorian Guard, medical staff, and scientists have their meals. I guess I should feel special that I'm allowed to eat here, that I have the privilege of eating two meals a day.

After meal times, I'm escorted back to my prison cell where the door is locked from the outside. In between meals, I'm escorted to the lab where the scientists study me. My body. My DNA. My reactions. I'm a captive lab rat. If I behave well, I get rewarded with a sleepover in Jonah's room. If I behave really well, I'm allowed to walk the bunker without an escort.

Though I'm mad at Jonah, I still cherish the time I get to spend with someone who knows me, loves me, cares for me. Even in his own fucked up way.

Every subtle move I've made to bring Jonah back to rational thinking has failed. He can't see past this vision of Doctore's new world. He can't see the unease and fear I try so hard to show him. He can't see how wrong everything is around us.

Jonah is too busy to notice with all the training he's doing. He has a purpose, something that keeps him going. He's striving for a leadership role in the Praetorian Guard. I couldn't help but roll my eyes when Jonah told me how he wants to become a legatus, which is like a Roman lieutenant or something. Doctore is freaking obsessed. Everything down in this bunker has been anointed with a name that references ancient Roman times.

Novus Seclorum, a new age in the dawn of a new era in human history. But it's all backward here. There is no poor or rich in this world. At least in terms of money. Strength, power, and cunning, that's what you need to survive here. If you don't have rank, power, or any important skill that benefits the community—or rather, the empire—then all you get is the benefit of shelter.

For the families who have sons and daughters in the Praetorian Guard, they get food, clothes, and comfortable accommodations. But for those who have nothing to sacrifice, they must work for scraps. Young orphans, the elderly, people who aren't physically capable of joining the guard or clever enough to work in the labs, are only provided with shelter and enough food to sustain them for a long day of work in this power-hungry empire that Doctore has built. If they want more, they must fight for it.

The Colosseum is where the weak and powerless can win additional resources for their survival. It's not literally the Colosseum from actual Rome. I haven't seen it with my own eyes, but Jonah explained that it's an old high school stadium. If you break the rules, you get sent to this outdoor arena. If you challenge someone for a resource, that's where you fight it out. Most don't make it back. The ones I've seen leave to fight up there, at least.

When I'm granted a free walk through the bunker, I always head down to the slums, or the Pauperem Quartam, as Doctore likes to call it. As a lab rat with perks, I have access to all the best rations. Rations I bring down to the powerless. In particular, to the orphans of Novus Seclorum.

The back section of the slums is set up like a sleepover fort, sheets held up by poles and pillows scattered on the floor. There are countless orphans here, but the ones I always come to see are those who don't remember what life was like before the zombie outbreak.

The powerless. How can Doctore let these poor children starve? They deserve a chance at life. They are our future.

When I first started coming down here, they treated me like a disease, and were afraid to come near me. They didn't understand my kindness. But then I brought food, extra clothes, whatever I could steal from the Praetorian Quartam or the lab. They are always grateful for what I can scrounge up.

Today, I smuggled a few pieces of bread from the cafeteria and a towel from the lab. It's not much, but at least it's something. A few of the adults who live here also help these children out. There are also some who try to steal from these poor little kids. One day, I'll try to steal something sharp for them to use as a threat. A thought that makes my stomach churn. But I will do anything to keep these littles out of the Colosseum. I will give them anything they need to stay away from the violence that occurs up there.

Allie is on watch at the front of the fabric fort. Her sweet brown eyes light up when she sees me approach. "Ms. Lori!" she shouts, bringing the other kids out of their hiding spots. All eight of them ranging from the ages of five to twelve.

"Hello, my friends," I say in a voice coated with sugar. These children are so precious and have no one to trust, to love, to rely on. While I'm down here, I try to be all of those things for them. "Is it all right if I come in?"

"Yes!" they all shout, their little voices filled with unfiltered joy.

Before I settle down on the dank pillows, I pull out my offerings, which they take with more grace than a child being given a giant bowl of ice cream in the before. They are so grateful for anything I can provide for them.

"Ms. Lori?" Evan, one of the smallest of the kids here, looks up at me with pleading eyes. "Can you read us a story?"

"I'm sorry, Evan. I couldn't find a book. The one thing this bunker lacks is a library."

"But we have a book!" Nando shouts, then quickly throws his hands over his mouth as if he said a bad thing.

"Let me see," I say tentatively.

All the kids look at Allie, who nods her head. Evan pulls the book from under a pile of dirty blankets and hands it to me. I recognize it immediately before reading the title Goodnight Moon. “Do you know this one?” I ask.

Only Allie nods her head. Being the oldest, she probably remembers more of the before than the others. “I’d love to read this to you. But you all need to sit, be still, and listen very carefully.”

I meet no resistance as the children plop down on the pillows all around me instead of in front of me. They snuggle in close, but I still need to turn the book in both directions for them all to see the pictures. I have never seen children so engrossed in a book reading. So focused. So enthralled. It helps keep me grounded as I read, remembering what this story is telling.

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Though we must say goodnight and go to bed, everything will be as it was when we wake up in the morning. How much I wish for that to be true.

Chapter 12

“I’ll scorth back to my room,” Jonah says, intercepting the guards who’ve been assigned to me today.

“Yes, sir,” the guards say, not bothering to question Jonah’s authority. He’s rising among the ranks, proving his loyalty whenever he can. Which is why I can’t confide in him. And yet, I still care about him. He’s Jonah Rosenberg. The guy I’ve crushed on my whole life. My boyfriend? Is that even a term we use anymore in this new world? And he is kind to me, as kind as he can be in this underground hell.

Before I can say anything to Jonah, he scoops me up in his arms and sprints to his prison cell. After closing his door, he slides my joggers down my butt, pulling them over my ankles. While kneeling in front of me, he locks his gaze with mine and says, “I love you, Laurel Hill.”

“What’s this all about?” I ask, shivering from the rapid change in temperature.

Jonah doesn’t answer as he stands up, towering over me with a crooked smile on his beautiful face. Suddenly, his lips are on mine, giving me a kiss that is soft with a hint of urgency, like he is holding himself back, savoring me. I moan against his lips and he pulls me closer so I can feel his hardness against my belly. He kisses me like he has been starved of kisses his whole life.

My arms wrap around Jonah's neck as he lifts me up on the bed, laying me down so my legs dangle off the edge. The feel of his warm hands as they travel down my body ground me to this moment. I know where he is going, and the anticipation is agonizing. He chuckles as I wiggle to bring my core closer to his hands, but he obliges by slipping his long fingers between my thighs.

"Jonah," I moan, as he expertly explores the sensitive folds there. "Yes."

"Fuck, Lori, you are so fucking sexy like this."

I arch my back, pushing into his hand, needing more of him. Needing all of him. As he stands in between my legs, I reach the buckle of the belt on his pants, but my shaking hands fumble to unfasten it. Sensing my need, Jonah assists me with his free hand and helps me slide his pants down to his knees.

And, oh, what a glorious sight it is to see Jonah so ready. I grip him with both of my hands, but he only lets me stroke him a few times before he pulls away. Before I open my mouth to complain, he throws off his shirt and steps out of his pants.

Jonah is so beautiful. He's always been beautiful. Now that he works out, his tight, flat stomach and long, muscular legs are toned to perfection.

As I continue to devour him with my eyes, I remove my underwear and shirt. His smirk tells me he's very aware of my admiration. Our eyes lock as he pushes my legs apart, settling himself between them.

Jonah kisses my forehead, then turns me to my side. At first, I'm confused when he slides into bed behind me, thinking that maybe he just wants to snuggle. Jonah's hand trails down my stomach and I have to swallow a moan as he plunges two fingers inside me. My back arches into him, placing my ear under his mouth, which he gently nibbles on. This sensation is my absolute favorite. Why can't I feel like this every

minute of the day? Tingly, careless, warm. Good. I feel so good with Jonah's fingers pulsing inside me and his tongue licking my ear.

I bite through the pain of my recently healed arm and reach back to grab Jonah's solid length. Taking my cue, Jonah effortlessly slides himself inside my entrance.

"Lori, fuck," Jonah moans as he thrusts deeper.

"More," I plead.

"Hmmm, yes. More." His voice is hoarse, lost in the passion of our joined bodies.

The more we have sex, the more I need it. The escape from reality. The escape from pain. The escape from fear. For one moment, I am free. I just have to stay in this moment. Focus on Jonah's breathing. Remember that he loves me. Pretend that we are in the before, in my bedroom at home.

As long as I can keep up the illusion, I can feel something more, something good. Really good.

"Lori," Jonah yells into my ear, finishing inside me before that something good can erupt in me. It's okay though. At least he made me feel something.

Jonah wraps his arms around me, holding me tight against him. I wince at the pain, an instant reminder that my arm had been sawed off during my morning session as the bunker's lab rat. It only took six hours for my arm to reattach itself and another hour to close up the wound entirely. While eating dinner, the redness began to recede so that by the time Jonah swept me off my feet, the evidence of my torture was no longer visible. I should tell him. I know I should. But would he do anything to stop it? I don't know. And that scares me more than getting my arm sawed off.

A pair of hands yank me from sleep, pulling me away from Jonah's bed. The both of us are thrown to the floor and told to get our clothes on. My hands shake as I pull on my clothes while Jonah's hands are steady. He dresses as if he's on a mission, no traces of fear lining his face.

"Did we do something wrong?" I ask the guard, a man I have seen with Jonah many times. His superior officer, I think.

"You did not have approval to take Doctore's property into your bed last night, guardian," the man says to Jonah.

"What?" I shout, disgusted at being called property. Even more disgusted that Jonah says nothing against it.

"I will accept the punishment, Legatus. She should not have to answer for my error."

"You will both be punished. She has her own crimes to answer for."

"Crimes?" I ask, fury vibrating through my body.

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“Stealing rations from the Praetorian Quartam.”

Two guards enter uninvited, one grabbing my arm, the other guard grabbing Jonah's. There's no chance for apologies. No trial. Just punishment. That means we are being taken to the Colosseum. I don't put up a fight knowing I need to conserve my energy for whatever awaits us in Doctore's arena.

We are ushered into an elevator which brings us up to the surface. My eyes strain at the harsh light burning down from a cloudless sky. I haven't been outside since the day these assholes kidnapped me. For over a year I've been kept inside the bunker where there are no windows to the outside, only dim fluorescent lighting.

The guards throw Jonah and me unceremoniously into a black SUV. Once the doors slam shut, the vehicle lurches forward.

A few minutes later, we arrive at the Colosseum. It's not what I imagined, but exactly how it was described to me. A high school football stadium. The exterior walls have been fortified, though I'm not sure if that is meant to keep things from getting inside or staying inside.

We pull up next to the fortified walls and a beat later, two armed guards open the car doors and pull me and Jonah out. The both of us go willingly enough that the force is completely unnecessary. But I get it. Show of strength.

Looking closer at the fortification, it looks like a complete addition on the side of the stadium. When we walk inside, I understand why. This is an armory. A gladiatorial armory. On the other side is a walkway that likely leads directly onto the arena floor,

just like the real Colosseum.

Jonah's hand wraps around mine, making me realize how badly I'm trembling. He doesn't risk pulling me into a hug while the guards keep watch, just a quick squeeze to my hand. I can't look at him. I can't acknowledge that he is okay with this. Punishment. Because I stole some bread to feed hungry children. Because Jonah wanted a night alone with me. His girlfriend. Doctore's property.

My bones rattle from the force of my trembling body. But it's not just fear coursing through me. It's anger. I feel like I could rip Doctore from limb to limb with my bare hands. This is the strength I hold on to as one of the guards tells us to pick a weapon for the arena. I grab a mace. It helped me in that cement box. It will help me again. Holding it in my hands emboldens me, making me feel stronger. Fight. Survive. Live.

The guards escort Jonah and me through the walkway. As I had thought, it's a tunnel that leads out into the football field. Once my feet touch the gritty sand of this new arena, the doors close behind us with a loud bang. The stands are filled with living people, cheering to be entertained by witnessing death and dismemberment.

I think of the cement box where I defeated five zombies. I can do this. I will kill anything that Doctore throws at me. Then I think of Jonah. He's strong. He can fight. But what if he gets bitten? I can't let that happen. He's all I have at the bunker. I don't want to be alone.

The crowd quiets as Doctore begins his announcement. Jonah and I take a stance in the middle of the field—or rather, the arena.

“As many of you know, I have been developing a cure to the virus which has caused the end of civilization as we knew it. Through my research and experimentations, I have created something better. A gladiator.”

Oohs and ahs drift across the stands at Doctore's words as he continues. "The girl you see before you is immune to bites. Perhaps another time I will give you all that demonstration, but for now, it is punishment she and her companion are in the arena for. They will fight to the death. Only one of them may leave this arena with breath in their lungs."

"No," I say aloud. Then louder, "No!"

I turn toward Jonah whose face is ashen with fear and tormented with agony. Acting on instinct, I drop my mace and close the distance between us with a few steps. Before he can react, I grab his hand—the one gripping a large hunting knife—and plunge it into my heart.

"Lori!" Jonah shouts. He tries to pull my hand from my death-grip but I won't let go. Then I'm falling to the ground, bringing Jonah with me. He cradles my head as blood seeps through my gray shirt.

We stare at each other, neither of us able to come up with anything to say. What is there to say? I will heal. That's my theory at least. But I won't let Jonah remove the blade from my chest. Doctore won't let Jonah live if I'm breathing, so I have to die. Temporarily.

A large shadow cascades down on us. When I look up, Doctore looks happy even though the crowd is booing and calling for more action. He moves his gaze to Jonah and demands, "Remove the blade."

Jonah grabs the handle of the knife, pulling it out of my chest with no effort. I'm too weak to stop him. When I look at his face, I notice a tear escaping from his right eye.

"Now stab her again," Doctore says as if he's just asked for extra hot fudge on his ice cream sundae.

I try to lock eyes with Jonah, but he looks away from my face, raising the knife in his shaking hands. I don't look away when the blade pierces my skin. It takes everything in me to not let out a scream. Not from the physical pain, but because my boyfriend, a guy I thought I loved, stabbed me. All because Doctore told him to.

"Again," Doctore says. "Again. Keep going until I tell you to stop."

A scream shatters the silent awe of the crowd. But it isn't my scream. It's Jonah's scream as he stabs me over and over. I lose feeling after counting to twelve.

Chapter 13

Twoyears goby. I play by the rules. I give my own rations to the hungry children instead of stealing extras from the cafeteria. I keep my thoughts to myself. Jonah and I only spend time together when we are given permission. And yet I'm still forced to fight in the Colosseum. Not as punishment. I'm the main attraction now. Doctore's favorite gladiator. Well, the only one.

Maybe it was all a trap set by Doctore. My first appearance at the Colosseum. Putting me against Jonah. A test to see where my allegiance lies; to myself or Jonah. I chose to save Jonah because he's all I have left in this world, even if he isn't the same boy I fell in love with.

Doesn't really matter if it was a test. Every few months, I'm whisked away to the surface to fight hordes of zombies at the behest of entertaining Doctore and his minions while Jonah is back on track to becoming a legatus.

Sometimes Doctore throws in non-infected humans who've broken the rules in his empire. I'm forced to kill them when they are given a weapon to fight against me for their lives. It is my life or theirs. Unlike with Jonah, I've always chosen my own survival. Fight. Survive. Live.

Each fight is a test. Doctore is constantly testing my strength, my stamina, and how quickly I can heal from each wound. I've learned a lot from these fights too. That I'm fast. That I heal incredibly quickly, even when dealt fatal blows. And I'm strong. Maybe not super hero strength strong, but stronger than I ever thought I was, considering I don't lift weights in the gym like Jonah does.

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I've also learned a lot about zombies. How they move. How they kill. How they die. The fast ones—freshies—are newly turned zombies. They are quick, strong, and hard to outrun. When I look back at how Jonah and I survived prom night, I can't help but think how lucky we were to have escaped without even a scratch.

Then, there are grabbers. These guys are slow, but if you are not careful, they'll grab you. Some of them can run too, so it's always best to stay alert. Deadies are old, withered zombies that move incredibly slow. It is easy to walk away from them unscathed.

The easiest way to tell a deadie from a grabber is by how much skin they have left. These things have been dead for at least a year. Their skin is in the advanced stage of decay, making them mostly bone. I don't understand how these monsters can still move by how much muscle and skin have decayed. I guess it's why they walk so slow. Grabbers still have plenty of freshly dead muscle. Their skin has a grayish tint and their eyes are a foggy red color.

As I walk the hallways of the bunker on my own, I wonder when my next fight will be. Not that I'm eager to fight. I'm anxious not knowing when it will be. I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to fight. I don't want to kill. I can feel defeat deep in my bones. Doctore has taken so much from me. Denied me a life. A life I know I can no longer have. So why fight for it?

I know now that there is no other future for me. This is it. A dank bunker and a bloody arena pit. That is all I know now. And yes, every so often I get a reprieve from the horrors of this life when Doctore allows me a night with Jonah. But I no longer cherish those moments. I don't love Jonah anymore. The thought should hurt.

I'm numb to it. After years of torture. Of fighting. I've accepted defeat.

My only regret is that I will die before killing you, I think to myself as I look into Doctore's soulless eyes. No. I cannot die. I cannot let him win. As much as I want to throw myself at the horde of zombies I know are waiting for me, let them devour every morsel of my flesh, leaving nothing to heal, I can't. Even if my mind and heart are ready to die, I don't think my body will let me.

When I turn toward the groans and shuffling I know to be the sound of deadies, five zombies are waiting for me. I look up at Doctore again, trying to read his thoughts. I can put down five deadies effortlessly. Though I know the crowd in the stands are cheering to be entertained, I don't take my time with these deadies.

After putting them down quickly, a door at the far end of the arena opens. Five more zombies come pouring onto the sandy floor. Two of them are grabbers. Another glance at Doctore tells me all I need to know. Another challenge. He will not go easy on me. Though I know I can take these five just as easily, this wave isn't the last awaiting me.

I put all five down without a scratch using my trusty mace. But I'm losing my stamina. When I turn to look at Doctore, who loves to watch from his VIP box, perched like the emperors of his beloved Roman Empire, I want nothing more than to kill him. I want to rip that fucking smile right off his face.

Three doors open, each one with three freshies sprinting out into the pit. I know they can't see me, that the sound of the crowd impairs their hearing, but my breathing is so loud from fighting ten zombies already. They might not know exactly where I am, but there's nowhere for me to go.

I could maybe take on two or three freshies at once, but nine? I swallow hard, pushing the fear down as deep as it allows me. Trying to calm my breaths, I ready

myself for battle, still unwilling to give up even though I was ready to die a real death just a few moments ago. I twist my fingers tighter around my mace and charge.

The first two freshies go down with three swings of my mace. As I double tap the second one, another freshie tackles me from behind, sinking its rancid teeth into my neck. I kick it off me, roll onto my stomach, and push myself up. Then I sprint, giving me some distance from the horde of freshies, but two of them hear my movement and barrel toward me on wobbly legs.

They look like a pair of drunk teens. Where did Doctore get all these newly turned zombies? It looks like they had been alive only a few hours ago. But I can't let that thought stop me from putting them down. They aren't alive. They aren't human. They are monsters.

I ground myself, digging my toes into the sandy ground and swing when the first one is in reach. If its head wasn't firmly attached to its body, I would have scored a home run. No time for jokes. I spin around, narrowly missing the second one, and jab up, smashing the back of its head with my mace. When the freshie drops to the ground, I land another blow to its skull.

Three more freshies are so close my shadow tries to tear itself away from me. I'm running out of steam, but I keep pushing myself. I look behind me for a second to see how close they are when another one comes at me from the side. I dive to the ground, rolling sideways to avoid being trampled by four zombies.

One of them grabs my foot. My bare foot. I hold in a scream when I feel teeth gnaw on the sensitive tendons. Using what energy I have left, I raise my mace and bring it down with a force that shatters the zombie's face. Another freshie grabs my shoulder, anchoring its teeth to the bone as another reaches for my abdomen. I swing my mace in every direction, attempting to knock the zombies far enough away so that I can get out from under them. But one of the freshies knocks the mace out of my hand.

I'm unarmed. Defenseless. Lying in a death pit. There is no way out. A scream ruptures the air around me as my entrails are pulled from my stomach and my arm is ripped out of its socket simultaneously. Thankfully, the pain knocks me out, saving me from witnessing the rest of my body being ripped to pieces.

Chapter 14

Fight.Survive.Live.Isurvived. I am alive. Most of my physical wounds have disappeared after months of healing. Like it never happened. But it did. The memory of it will never leave me. The tearing of my flesh echoes in my ears at night as I try to sleep. The groaning of a freshie hot on my tail haunts me every time I close my eyes. Every time I open them too.

And Jonah has no idea. Or maybe he does, but he's choosing ignorance. I was in the lab for months. Months. When Doctore had my arm sawed off, that healed within a day. But that was a clean incision. Easy fix. This time, my body was shattered. Tendons, ligaments, bones, organs, and muscles all needed to weave themselves back together.

It took a full staff of scientists, nurses, and doctors to put all the pieces of me back together like a puzzle, to hold me in place long enough for my body to heal and regrow was eaten. Months.

And Jonah didn't show up for a single moment of it.

I'm furious with him. Furious that he's chosen this place over me. Chosen this place over his own humanity. I'm furious that he tells me he loves me one moment and looks away the next as Doctore throws nine freshies in my direction. I hate him. Not just Doctore. I hate Jonah.

"I've been told the last of your scars have fully healed," Doctore says in that deep

voice that does an almost perfect job of mimicking calm. I hate it. I hate that he has the power to make me feel safe when the pit of my soul is screaming to run. “The crowds at the Colosseum have missed you.”

Is he serious? I hold back the massive eye roll as I turn toward his frame, casually leaning against the wall of the room I had spent most of the last few months in. He is serious. What does he expect me to say to him?

The willpower I once had has dwindled over the years I’ve been held captive here, forced to fight, forced to endure pain and torture. I have nothing left to hide behind and zero fucks to give. I show Doctore my real face. The face that shows him my unfiltered rage and hate. A vision of my hands around his neck invades my mind, and it is all I can think of. Anyone else should be afraid of the look I give him. Doctore simply smiles at me.

“There she is, the monster of my creation. My gladiator.”

His words make my face fall. “My creation,” he said. And he’s right. The person I am today, this person filled with so much hate and fury, this is his creation. I never thought I could kill a person. Yet, here in this hell called Novus Seclorum, I have killed. Not just zombies, but living human beings. I killed because I wasn’t given a choice. But the truth is, I was given a choice.

I can’t die. That much is evident from my last appearance in the Colosseum. Though I might not have known it at the time, I wasn’t willing to chance death. So I killed anyone Doctore threw at me. Everyone except Jonah. As much as I hate him, I don’t want to kill him. I don’t want him to die. Somewhere inside, my Jonah still exists.

Jonah, all the Praetorian Guards, me...we are all Doctore’s creations. He is more than the gladiator trainers of Ancient Rome. He is the creator of monsters. Mindless monsters with nothing better to do than kill. Our humanity has been taken from us.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“Your last fight in the Colosseum has taught me so much about what the sacramentum gladiatorum can do,” Doctore says, ignorant of the internal epiphany I just had. I look up at him with questions in my eyes. Unspoken questions he readily answers. “Sacramentum gladiatorum. It was the oath taken by every gladiator in Ancient Rome. What I now call the serum I’ve developed which has not only made you immune to the plague, but invincible. So now I ask you, will you give me your oath? Will you fight for me, with me, to bring us into this new age? To save humanity?”

I hold back a cackle, which comes out like a scoff. “Do you really believe you are saving humanity?” I ask.

“I am saving—”

“No. You are destroying humanity. You might be this brilliant scientist who created a sacred gladiator serum or whatever, but you are not good. You do not intend to use this for good.”

Doctore’s lip curls into that maniacal smile again. “I never said I was good, Laurel.”

I stare at him. Am I shocked at his confession? No. And yet I’m frozen in place, speechless. Somehow I find my next words. “What do you envision saving humanity looks like then, if you aren’t in the habit of doing good?”

“I’m so glad you asked this question,” Doctore says as he takes a seat on the round stool next to the gurney I’ve been sitting on. “I plan to create an empire from the ashes of the old world. Just as I am doing here. The world will bow to me, their new

god, creator of life. For that is what I have given you, Laurel. Life. Fight with me, and you will see a thousand lives. Fight against me, and you will see a thousand deaths.”

I can’t. I won’t. But I know if I say this to him, he won’t just kill me over and over, he will kill everyone I care about. That might be a small list, but I can’t help thinking about the children in the slums. Maybe I can help them by bargaining with Doctore. I can do some good, even if I sign away my soul to the devil.

“If I give you my oath, will you help those poor children in the Pauperem Quartam? Create a school where they and other children can be educated? Grow up to be something other than bunker urchins or die without ever becoming who they are meant to be?”

“And here I thought you would ask me to promote your boyfriend or spend more time with him or both.” Doctore crosses his arms when I grimace. Great, now he knows I don’t care about Jonah as I used to. At least that means Jonah is safe if I ever cross the line. I hate that I still care about him. That I still need him. He’s my only connection to the before, even though we are both chained to this place.

“I’ll give you some time to think, Laurel.” And with that, Doctore disappears back into the shadows from where he spawned.

Chapter 15

“Are you okay, Lori?” Jonah asks as he hovers on top of me. I had gotten lost in my own thoughts, drifting away from him.

“Sorry, I was...thinking.”

“Thinking.” Jonah pulls out of me and rolls over to his side.

“No, it’s okay. You can finish.” My voice is monotone. I can’t seem to fake the synthetic concern I usually invoke when he is upset. I no longer care to hide it anymore.

“It’s not okay, Lori. For the past month, you’ve been so distant. I can tell you aren’t enjoying sex anymore.”

I can’t help but laugh at Jonah’s revelation. My sarcasm speaks for me, saying, “Oh? So you have noticed my misery?”

“Yes. Of course I have. You are my girlfriend. I love you and hate seeing you so sad all the time.”

Okay. Now I’m pissed. I roll out of bed, not wanting to be anywhere near Jonah, and pull on my gray prison garb. I should just walk out the door and leave him guessing as to why I’m acting so “sad” but I can’t hold it in anymore.

“You love me?” I shout.

“Yes. You know I love you.”

“No, Jonah. You don’t love me. You haven’t loved me since the day you chose this place over me. That’s the day I realized I don’t love you either.”

Jonah has the balls to look heartbroken. Maybe he is. Maybe he truly didn’t see this coming, just like he can’t see how messed up everything is in this bunker. That he can’t see how cruel Doctore is to anyone, including his precious Praetorian Guard. Meanwhile, the women, children, and men who are unable to offer their physical services to Novus Seclorum are treated like cattle. We have no freedom here. Sacrifice. That’s what Doctore said when I first met him. We all need to sacrifice for the greater good of humanity.

“How can you not see my pain and anger, Jonah? How can you sit there and pretend that everything is okay? My body was ripped to shreds in the arena. I didn’t see you for months while I was being monitored, tested, and put back together in the lab. You have no idea what I go through in the arena or the lab because you are never there to see it. And I know Doctore will do that to me again, just to see what will happen. Even if I give him my oath.”

“Lori, you don’t understand—”

“Don’t understand? I’m a test subject. An enslaved gladiator. A captive. And you are a brainless soldier in his empire. This new world he is trying to create. A world I cannot, no, will not accept.”

Tears stream down my face as I try with all my might not to ugly cry in front of Jonah. He takes my silence to mean that I’m done, that I’ve gotten all my feels out. Grabbing the pair of boxer briefs from his chair, Jonah pulls them on and walks over to me. When he attempts to wrap his arms around my body, I push him away.

“No. Jonah. No.” I keep him an arm’s length away from me as I say, “We are done. I can’t do this anymore.”

I spin around and sprint out the door. When I don’t hear his footsteps follow me, the last remaining pieces of my heart wither away.

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Jonah gives me space for the next few days. He even takes his meals at a different time to avoid seeing me. Good. As I walk the busy halls of the bunker that have been my home for what feels like forever, people stop and stare at me. The unkillable gladiator. Doctore's favorite lab rat.

These past few days have been...peaceful. I've been left alone. No escorts. No tests. No fights. When Jonah knocks on my door, for a moment I think I see the boy I fell in love with. When I look around him, there are two guards. The two guards who are my usual escort to the arena. This is a first. Jonah has never been to the arena to see me fight. At least, not since we were forced to fight together and then against one another.

As I follow Jonah down the long hallway leading to the staircase, I can't help but ask, "Are you going to actually watch me get torn apart this time or go back to your corner like a good little pet and pretend that everything is okay?"

Jonah doesn't respond, staying focused on the task at hand. But one of the guards behind me punches me in the back of the skull, making me fall to my knees. Someone pulls on my braided hair, lifting me back up to my feet. Just when I'm about to throw punches, I feel a soft touch on my arm. Jonah.

He pulls me behind him and addresses to the two guards who attacked me. "Were you ordered to subdue the test subject? Or escort her to the Colosseum?"

My head snaps up to look at Jonah's rigid face. Did he seriously just call me a test subject?

“No, sir. But she spoke out of turn and—”

“I don’t believe I asked you for an explanation. You are dismissed. As are you, Georgie.”

The two guards answer with a “Yes, sir,” and turn to walk in the opposite direction like good little soldiers.

“Are you okay, Lori?” Jonah asks, letting go of my arm.

“Oh, am I Lori now? Not test subject?”

Jonah’s face softens as he answers, “I’m sorry. That is what you are here and how I must treat you.”

I nod, trying not to care. My heart has already shattered. There’s nothing more to break. “Why did they call you sir?”

“They are my command. I have a small legion of men now.”

“Congrats,” I say dryly. Then remember what Doctore said. How he thought I would ask for him to give Jonah a promotion. Is that what this is?

“Yeah.” Jonah drags a hand over his head, pulling his thick, brown hair between his fingers. “Let’s go.”

We walk in silence the whole way upstairs, all ten flights to the surface. There’s an elevator, but I’ve only been taken up that way once. When we reach the exterior door, Jonah pulls out a key. A key. Jonah has a key to this place now. He can get us out. I want to say this to him, but then I remember what Jonah has become. He doesn’t want to leave this place. He has become this place.

Jonah opens the door and ushers me through. As my eyes adjust to the harsh sunlight, I notice Jonah didn't have the same reaction. Perhaps he's allowed outside more often than I am.

Making sure I'm secure in the back seat, Jonah slides into the driver's seat of the black SUV that is parked just outside the exterior door of the bunker. The chariot that will bring me to my death. And yet, death never sticks around long enough for me to die.

"Are you not afraid I might jump out of the car?" I ask, staring at him in the rearview mirror.

"I've got the child locks on," Jonah locks his eyes on mine for a second before turning his attention to the dirt road. The Colosseum is only a five-minute drive away, but it's much safer by car. Another reason only the powerful and cunning can go to the games. The poor and unfortunate would not have the means to get there.

We park in front of the back entrance to the Colosseum. An old high school football field converted into a gladiatorial death pit. I wait for Jonah to open my door. When he does, I don't take the hand he offers, but I wait for him to close the door before walking toward the stadium.

Jonah brings me all the way into the armory where I choose a weapon and silently wait for my entrance to be announced. A spear is my weapon of choice today. Not my favorite, but I don't have plans to last long in today's fight. I only hope that my pseudo death will be quick.

"I wish I could give you a different world, Lori." Jonah breaks the silence, a silence I thought I had to myself. "But this is the one we have."

There are so many things I should say to Jonah. He was my friend, my boyfriend.

Hell, he was so much more than those things. But that was so long ago. Today, I am angry with him. I don't know if I will ever not be angry with him. He needs to feel that anger. He needs to understand. I want him to feel my pain.

“And I wish I could still love you for who you were and not hate you for what you've become,” I say, before turning toward the arena.

My eyes immediately find Doctore's as I walk onto the arena's floor, the compact sand squishing between my toes. He rises from his seat in the VIP section where a platform has been built close to the walls of the pit, just like a Roman emperor. As I stare into Doctore's dark eyes, he smiles at me again, lifting his arms to signal for the doors to be opened. I don't need to turn around to know that there's a horde of freshies behind me. But there is something odd about the sound of their groaning. My grip on the spear tightens when I turn around to see that all eight freshly made zombies are from the group of orphans I have taken care of in the bunker for the last few years.

I know my scream will lead them right to me, but I don't care. I won't die. But Doctore will. As I lift my spear, his smile fades. I throw the spear with all my strength. Just before a set of teeth sinks into my arm, the spear sinks into Doctore's stomach. I smile. Even as more teeth tear at my skin, I smile through my screams because I got him. I put fear into the eyes of a fearless man.

Chapter 16

“Lori!” TheechoofJonah's voice rings in my ears as I try to remember where I am. Gun fire. Chaos. Zombies. Orphans.

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Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

My eyes fly open, taking a minute to adjust to the bright light of the midday sun. As things come back into focus, I realize I'm no longer in the arena. A seat belt holds me upright in the backseat of a car. I gasp for air, not realizing I'd been holding my breath, and that's when I feel the shooting pain coming from everywhere.

"Shit. Are you okay back there?" a voice asks from the driver's seat. In my haze, I can't quite tell whose voice it is.

"Jonah?"

"No. My name is Amos. I'm taking you somewhere safe."

"Safe...where is safe?" A practical question because literally nowhere is safe. But exactly where is this stranger taking me? I groan as my skin burns up, phase one of my healing process.

"You aren't going to turn, are you? I saw you in the so-called Colosseum months ago. You were ripped apart. And here you are, chewed up a bit, but nothing like—"

"Who are you?" I ask, feeling dizzy, my head spinning as I try to focus on everything this stranger says to me. "Are you one of Doctore's guardians?"

"No. I'm not part of any of that."

"Where are you taking me?"

"I promise you are safe with me. For the most part." This guy winks at me as he looks

up at the rearview mirror. He freaking winked at me.

I fall back against the leather seats and close my eyes. Then I realize, this is the first time I haven't been taken back to Doctore's lab after getting bitten like this. What if I need some more of that serum to make sure I heal instead of turn? It would be rather rude of me if I end up eating my savior.

And who the hell is this guy anyway? He said he'd seen me get ripped apart, meaning he had to have been at the arena months ago. Why was he there? How did he get in? I can't imagine Doctore lets just anyone in to see his prized gladiator.

The heat inside me radiates to infernal temperatures. Usually I'm hooked up to IVs and covered in ice packs when I'm like this. Though it was always a painful process, I guess it took most of the pain away. Now I'm feeling every twinge of pain. I cry out, unable to hold it together.

"Shit. Tell me you are going to be okay."

"I'm...I'm not turning. It's just...healing. It hurts. Body hot. Head...need water."

"Let me pull over. We are just about to enter The Wall. I'm afraid if we stop inside, there will be questions. If anyone sees the state of you, they'll execute on the spot."

The Wall? Execute on the spot?" "This is...safe?" I ask aloud.

"The Wall is the safest way to travel in the region, yes. But the military is ruthless and will not risk any infected getting through. We are only using The Wall to get us where we need to go as fast as possible. I promise. You will be safe."

I feel the car slow to a stop. My savior, whose name I've already forgotten, grabs a pack from the front seat and starts rummaging through it. I close my eyes against the

next wave of pain, then I feel cool hands on my head. “Copperhead, you are on fire!”

“Copperhead?”

“Sorry, I don’t know your name, so I’ve just been calling you Copperhead since your hair is the color of copper. Very original, I know.”

“My name...ahhhhh.” I throw myself against the car seat, grinding my teeth at the pain. It is unbearable. So much so that I’m doubting my earlier statement. Maybe I am turning.

I hear the click of the seat belt and feel hands on my body as they guide me down, but I can’t open my eyes or unclench my jaw. A cool drip of water touches my lips, shocking my system for a moment. That moment is all I needed to loosen the grip of pain and open my mouth for a delicious sip of cold water.

“That’s it. Good girl. Slow sips.”

As I take another gulp, my eyes slowly open to see the face of the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. Wavy black hair. Golden brown skin. A face perfectly chiseled and scruffy. Brown eyes speckled with gold. A freaking angel. Although, I never imagined an angel would have a beard. Especially a scruffy one. A fallen angel then. I smile at the thought, which makes some of the water from his bottle drip down my face.

This angelic man pulls the water bottle away and awkwardly squats in between the center console and where I’ve sprawled out on the backseat. “What are you smiling about?”

“Angels with beards,” I reply with a slur.

He chuckles. “You might be delirious and feverish, but you are definitely not turning into a biter. Though I wouldn’t mind if you nibbled on me.”

Is this guy seriously flirting with me right now? My skin is a furnace, healing from the multiple bite marks and other wounds I received in the Colosseum. I close my eyes and push through the pain to pull myself upright.

“Here, take one more sip.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“What’s your name again? I already forgot.” I’ve always been bad with names. With everyone I meet. It takes me multiple introductions to maybe remember a name.

“Amos. Amos Rogers, if you need my full name to run a background check.”

Another slice of pain runs through me as I laugh, but I’m able to hold it together now. “I’m Laurel Hill.”

A flash of recognition hits Amos’ face for a split second. “Nice to meet you, Laurel. Though I like the name ‘Copperhead’ much better. It suits you. Dangerous in battle but unaggressive in default mode. Are you poisonous?”

I shake my head as if Amos just asked me a serious question. Then look up into his golden eyes and smile back at him, saying, “I don’t think so. I’ve never bitten anyone before.”

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes before he turns away from me, hopping back into the front seat. “We should get going. I don’t want to be driving too long at night. Even inside The Wall. Do you need anything else? I have some bandages in my pack. Didn’t have time to wrap you up back there. I barely got you out without being seen.”

Looking around me, I see that I’ve bled all over the black leather seats. But my wounds aren’t bleeding anymore. “I should be okay, I think. I’m just going to lie down and let my body do its thing.”

I hear a muffled, “Okay,” as Amos turns the car back on and pulls onto the road. “How does your body heal itself? How are you not a biter?”

“Biter? Is that what you call a zombie?” I ask as I slowly lie back down on the car seat bench.

“Yeah. Zombie just feels made-up. A sci-fi horror monster. Biters are real.”

“That they are.” I close my eyes for a few minutes before responding to Amos’ original question. “I don’t exactly know how I can heal. How I’m immune to whatever virus these zombies have. Doctore—Dr. Tuwile—explained to me years ago that he was attempting to mutate my DNA to fight against the virus.”

A long stretch of silence falls between us as we pass through a small tunnel leading onto Interstate 78. Two walls made from compressed vehicles and cement have been built along the highway, shielding it from the wilds of the apocalyptic world.

“Is this The Wall?” I ask Amos.

“Yes. The government began building this shortly after the outbreak. It isn’t completely sealed, but it is better than some of the other highways in Pennsylvania. The Wall goes all the way to New Jersey but stops near Clinton. The area past that was hit hard and is still too dangerous.”

“That’s close to where I’m from,” I whisper, suddenly so tired. My eyelids shroud me in a cocoon of darkness and my body finally loosens from the tension of the day, letting me fall into a deep sleep.

Chapter 17

“LaurelHill?” I hear someone say my name as if they are shocked at my existence. The voice is far away, muffled by a wall perhaps. I’m still fighting to open my eyes after what feels like a century of being trapped in a nightmare. Images I wish I could forget keep swimming to the top of my mind.

The sounds of bones breaking and flesh tearing echo in my ears. Those poor little orphans. Doctore did that to them. He turned them so I would be forced to put them down. This wasn't for science. This was pure entertainment and spite. The look on Doctore's face as I threw a spear into his gut. Gun shots. Jonah was shooting the zombies in the arena, screaming my name as they tore into my flesh.

Was I really saved from that hell? Did Jonah save me? No. He might have saved me from being ripped apart again. But he was not the one to bring me out of the arena. I have a vague memory of an angelic figure pulling me from my prison.

I don't know what's real. I'm terrified to open my eyes just to find out that none of it happened. That I wasn't saved. Or if I was, then where am I now? Anything is better than where I was though, right? I dive deeper into my mind, trying to remember anything about what happened to me after I threw that spear. A vision of golden eyes appears in the front of my mind. Not an angel, but a man I've never met before.

He somehow hijacked the car that was transporting me to the lab. I don't know if he killed the guards. Part of me hopes he did after he pulled me out of the black SUV.

Amos took care of me, gave me water, and talked to me like a human being. He said he would take me somewhere safe. Is this that place? Am I safe?

I open my eyes to a slit, taking a peek at my surroundings. I'm lying on a bed in what looks like a hospital room. My clothes feel much softer than the coarse gray uniforms I wore in the bunker. The all too familiar sound of a heart monitor and hospital setting makes me bolt upright and throw my eyes open. I'm not in the dank bunker lab. There's a large window to my left looking out onto an open football field, pond, and what looks like a college campus.

"Lori!" My head whips around to see a person I thought only existed in my memories. Without waiting for my response, her arms wrap tight around me so hard I

feel like she might pop my bones apart.

“Mom?”

She doesn't answer right away, as she is too busy sobbing into my hair. The shock of seeing my mom again after years of not knowing if she had survived the apocalyptic zombie outbreak delays my reaction. When I finally wrap my arms around my mom, the tears hit me hard. I cannot stop. Neither can she.

My mom! We hold each other for a long time, letting each other feel every emotion we've felt on our own these past years. Our bodies bob in unison to our sobbing and our voices wail with relief. After what feels like hours of crying, we finally unlatch our arms and look deeply into each other's eyes.

My mom's stark blue eyes stare into mine, seeking to unveil all of my past anguish, hoping to extinguish it. Her face is just as I remember it, pale and covered in freckles. Though there is a scar across her cheek that wasn't there before. The shoulder-length blonde hair she once had is now cut short into a pixie.

“Mom,” I say. “You're alive.”

“So are you, my darling little girl.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“Did you...is Hayden okay?” My voice shakes as I ask this question, not really wanting to hear the answer if she has one.

“I don’t know. New York City was hit hard. Few survivors made it out. That we know of. What about Jonah and Sarah? All the folks back home?”

The quick change of subject leads me to believe that my mom has no hope that Hayden made it out alive. She probably never expected to see me again, just as I had stopped believing anyone I loved was still alive. But my mom survived. We found each other.

“Prom night was rough.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, honey.”

“Jonah and I got out. It was just us for months and then we...got captured. And Jonah he...”

My hesitation must have made my mom think the worst, that Jonah died because she starts crying and says, “I’m so sorry you lost Jonah.”

“He’s not dead. He’s just different. Being in that place changed him. It changed me too, but...I don’t know if I’m ready to talk about everything that happened there just yet.”

“That’s okay, honey. Come here.”

We hug each other again, but someone interrupts before we can resume our sobbing fest. “Excuse me, Cathy, but we will need to ask the girl some questions now.”

My mom turns toward the man who entered my hospital room and gives him a look that would scare a viper. “The girl is my daughter, and I will let you know when she is ready to answer your questions, Norman.”

“Cathy, we put it to a vote and agreed that we need to ask first before we can trust her. It’s been four and a half years since you saw her. You don’t know what’s left of your daughter.”

“I can trust her,” my mom says with such devotion.

“But can we all trust her? Please, Cathy, do not make me use force.” Norman pushes his chest out in a show of dominance that makes me laugh. I can’t help it. My laugh deflates his confidence instantly, but before he can accuse me of anything, a tall, dangerously handsome man steps forward.

“Calm down, Norman. We also agreed to give Cathy a moment with her daughter.”

Amos. I remember him being flirty, kind, straight to the point. I see the latter now, but the flirty and kind has gone out the window. He’s all business here, barely sparing me a glance. But at least he has some manners.

“She has had her moment,” Norman snaps back at Amos. Big mistake.

Amos puffs out his chest, and when he does, Norman shrinks back. “Do not for one second think you hold all the power here. We voted. Cathy gets to have some time with her daughter before we interrogate her.”

“Interrogate?” I ask.

“Yes, girl. Interrogate. We need to know everything you know about Dr. Gabriel Tuwile.” Norman attempts to walk into my room, but Amos grabs him by the arm and growls.

“No one goes into this room unless Cathy says it’s okay. Do you understand, Norman?”

“Amos, this is not what the five of us agreed on.”

“No. You didn’t agree to this. Jeremy, Anna,” Amos calls to two people I can’t see from my bed. “What did we vote on? Can you remind me?”

“To give Cathy time with her daughter,” a female voice responds.

“And Cathy will invite us in when she’s ready for us,” a man says from behind Norman, who huffs as he pulls his arm from Amos’ grasp.

“Fine,” Norman says, then stomps away like a toddler.

Amos looks at my mom to apologize for Norman’s behavior, completely ignoring my existence. He even bows his head to avoid my stare as he closes the door.

“Are you and Amos close?” I ask my mom.

“Yeah. We are good pals. He was a professor here when shit hit the fan. I don’t think I would have survived without him.”

“A professor? Where are we?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“My alma mater. I was having drinks with a few alumni when the town was attacked. We didn’t get hit hard in the beginning and we worked fast to set up barricades around the safe parts of campus. Me, Amos, Norman, Jeremy, and Anna. The five of us took the lead and made this place what it is today. A safe zone. We haven’t had an outbreak inside our walls for three years. And though there have been attempts from outsiders to get in, we have not been breached. There are quite a lot of survivors here, but we have protocols in place for new arrivals. Even my daughter has to follow them.”

“I understand. You can’t really trust anyone in this world. I’ll do whatever I need to.”

“If you aren’t ready to talk, you don’t have to, but you’ll have to stay here. In this room. Under constant surveillance.”

“Nothing I’m not used to.” I close my eyes and sigh. I know I’m safe here. My mom is here. She is one of the leaders. “I’m not ready to talk about all of it, but I’ll try. Jonah, he’s not a subject I wish to discuss yet.”

Chapter 18

After I tell my mom that I’m ready to talk, she hops off the bed to notify the other leaders. Anna and Jeremy offer me sympathetic smiles as they walk to the other side of the room to stand next to the window while Amos and my mom chat quietly by the door. When Norman enters, taking the chair across from my bed, I can feel the tension in the room thicken.

Now that I have a good look at Norman, he instantly reminds me of Ben from the TV

show LOST. Large nose and forehead with a small mouth. A mouth that likely talks a lot. He even wears small round glasses.

I cross my legs as I push myself further back on my hospital bed, bracing myself for all the questions they want to ask me. No surprise Norman is the first to speak. I don't really hear his words as I'm still preoccupied with Amos, who is now leaning against a wall, staring at the floor.

Why is he ignoring me? Why do I care so much? I glance at my mom, who's leaning against the same wall inches away from Amos. She offers me an encouraging smile. Then I remember Norman was talking to me, so I turn my attention back to him.

"Sorry, what was the question?"

Norman sighs as if I am nothing but a waste of time. "Dr. Gabriel Tuwile. How did you become involved with him? And how can you survive a bite without turning?"

"A few months after the outbreak, my boyfriend and I were raiding our local ShopRite. We were captured and brought to Novus Seclorum," I say.

"Novus Seclorum?" Anna asks, fidgeting with her long brown hair.

"That's what Doctore and his cult followers call the bunker he rules over," I explain.

"And what is this Novus Seclorum all about?" Jeremy asks as he leans against the wall of windows. His dark brown skin glows from the sunlight pouring in, a brightness that's reflected in his kind brown eyes.

I smile up at Jeremy, then laugh when his question registers in my brain. "Just a bunch of Roman-obsessed muscle heads who think they're saving the world."

“Are they? Saving the world?” Anna asks.

“I don’t really know what they do apart from the experiments Doctore did on me and...the Colosseum.”

My mom holds back a sob and when I look at her, she’s barely holding it together. Amos wraps an arm around her in comfort, still avoiding eye contact with me.

“What experiments?” Norman’s voice brings me back to him again.

“He was attempting to mutate my DNA. Not just me, others too. He said it was a cure.”

Norman gags a laugh at my answer, pushing his glasses up. “A cure? For what? The virus he created?”

“What?” I ask.

Ignoring my question, Norman asks me another, wanting to know more about how I became immune. “Can you tell us more about the treatment?”

“Treatment? He tortured me. And countless others.”

“Was he able to replicate his success? Are there more super soldiers like you?”

“Super soldiers? What?”

“Genetically modified soldiers. Difficult to kill because they can heal quickly. And not just heal, regenerate skin as if they were never wounded. Amos told me he saw you get ripped apart, yet here you are all intact. Even your wounds from yesterday are nearly gone.”

“Norman, stop!” my mom screams. “My daughter obviously was not in his inner circle and knows nothing about his experiments except for the torture she endured.”

Norman ignores my mom and looks right at Amos. “This is why we should not have included her in the interrogation. If Cathy cannot handle herself, you need to escort her out.”

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“No, Norman. If you cannot handle yourself, I will escort you out. We all know your history with Gabriel Tuwile. You are closely involved in all this too. Why don’t we let Jeremy and Anna ask Laurel some questions?” Amos stares with deadly aim, looking down at Norman.

That seems to put Norman in his place. He rolls his neck, then falls against the back of the chair. Even though he is done questioning me for now, I can’t help but repeat his words in my head. Super soldier. Genetically modified soldiers. I know I won’t get any more information on that subject with the current company, but I will try to ask my mom about it later.

Anna walks over to my bed and gently sits down on the edge. In a honey-glazed voice, she asks, “Laurel, I’m so very sorry for what you’ve been through. Would you mind telling us what you remember about what Dr. Tuwile did to you?”

“Please call me Lori.” I look down at my hands, fingers twirling around each other as I find the courage to relive my worst memories at Novus Seclorum. “I was hooked up to an IV for months. He kept me in a drug-induced coma during that time. I don’t have very many memories of what he did to me because I had very few lucid moments. But I remember the pain. Hot, searing pain. It felt like my veins were on fire.”

“How did you know it had been months?” Jeremy asks from the window.

“My...someone told me.”

“Who?” Norman can’t help himself, he needs all the answers.

“No one you need to worry about, Norman.” There’s a warning in my mom’s voice.

Not wanting him to urge an answer out of me, I continue my story. “When I finally woke up, I was in a large room with five others. One by one, they turned. Not realizing I could survive a bite, I fought for my life. I put them all down, including a little girl.” My voice falters for a second and I look to my hands again. “After I killed them all, I noticed a bite on my ankle. I thought I was going to turn. Instead, the bite vanished.”

Silence followed, lingering for so long I thought they all had left. Anna places a hand on my knee, gently squeezing. “That sounds horrifying, Lori. I’m so sorry we are making you relive all of this. But it is important that we know what your role was in this Novus Seclorum.”

That’s a simple enough answer. “I was a test subject. Even when I was used for entertainment, I wasn’t just the unkillable gladiator. Doctore wanted to see what I could withstand. If I could heal from fatal wounds. I was allowed a room to myself in the Praetorian Guard’s quarters. I think that’s because it’s the safest area in the bunker. Doctore might have tested my body to inhumane limits, but he didn’t want his lab rat to get harmed by anyone else, especially if he wasn’t watching.”

“Are there more of you?” Norman stands up, walking to my bed but keeps his distance.

“I don’t know.” I shrug, avoiding eye contact. I’m so tired all of a sudden. All the healing my body has had to do on its own without the help from the drugs that Doctore would give me after every test and fight in the Colosseum drains my energy quickly.

“How can you not know? You were right there.” Norman takes a step closer to my bed.

Somehow I find the energy to look up at him, saying again, “I don’t know.”

Before Norman can fire another line of questions at me, Amos grabs him by the shoulder. “Enough.”

“We are just getting started, Amos.”

“I said enough.”

“You are not the only one in charge here. I am not done questioning our prisoner.”

“Prisoner?” I ask shyly, my voice giving away the fear I thought I trapped deep inside me long ago.

Amos turns to me, finally looking me in the eyes. “You are not a prisoner here, Lori. You will never be a prisoner again.”

Our eyes lock together for a moment that seems to go on forever. His golden with my blue. I see so much in those eyes, and maybe that’s why he was hiding them from me all this time. Fear, sympathy, anger, curiosity. I nod at him in understanding and my body relaxes from the relief of knowing that I haven’t been imprisoned again.

“But,” Norman shouts one last time.

“We are done, Norman.” Jeremy steps away from the window. “I’m sure Lori will be available for us to question tomorrow.”

“She needs to rest,” Anna says, standing up from the bed.

Jeremy and Anna walk Norman out. Before Amos turns to follow, he looks into my eyes one last time. “Norman can be an ass sometimes, but he has good intentions.

When you are ready, we can continue our conversation. There is much to unpack from what you've already told us. Thank you, Copperhead," he adds with a smile.

"Yeah. It's the least I could do," I mumble.

Once the door closes behind Amos, the weight of tiredness presses against my body. I collapse down on the bed and am barely still awake when I hear my mom say, "I love you, sweet girl."

Chapter 19

My mom brought me some books to read while I "heal" in this room I've been confined in. I've been healed for days. The chewed up skin on my arms, neck, legs, and back is now smooth as a baby's bottom. I had a few broken ribs, but even those are feeling like a distant memory.

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Until the assembly of leaders has agreed on what to do with me, I must remain here in this room. Not a prisoner though. I understand their concerns. I would hesitate trusting a stranger no matter what state the world is in. A post-apocalyptic world? Trust no one. Yet I can't help but trust Amos when he promised me I am not a prisoner.

He hasn't stopped by since the interrogation. Why would he? But my mom visits me frequently throughout the day. Anna has also stopped by a few times with some food, and Jeremy has come in to check on me too. They seem...nice. Civil. Eyes full of curiosity. My own eyes are sure to return that sentiment. I want to know more about this place, about Dr. Gabriel Tuwile, about me. What did Doctore do to me?

I won't be getting my answers anytime soon, so I lie in bed and read. Or I sit in the chair by the window and read. Or I wander around the room and read. In the before, I used to read all kinds of books as an escape, to send my mind to an unrealistic world full of unrealistic possibilities.

Now I read dystopian fiction to learn. Because this is my new reality. A world where a scientist can kidnap a girl and turn her into a super soldier. Fight. Survive. Live. That's what all these characters strive to do in these books. Through all the challenges they are thrown into, they fight to live another day. They survive not just for themselves but for their family.

Heroes are people who have something greater than themselves to fight for. I wouldn't put myself in that same category, but I'd like to believe that I would fight for something important. Maybe this is my chance. I am uniquely qualified to fight the zombies contaminating this world. I knew something was different about me and

not just my immunity or fast healing. I'm strong. I'm fast.

When I think back about my state of mind a few months ago, I'm ashamed that I gave up. I hate myself for it. I hate that I let Doctore win. Did I kill him? The spear I threw landed in his stomach. I saw the blood pouring out of him. I saw him fall to the ground as the zombies that were once little orphans surrounded me and tore into my skin like it was the food I used to sneak to them.

If I killed Doctore, does that mean his experiment is over? Are there others like me? More gladiators? I have so many questions bouncing around my head I can't concentrate on the book in front of me.

As I slam the book shut, I notice movement in the doorway. Amos is staring at me with a curious smile, like he was about to open me up like a book and devour every single page of my mind. I shiver at his stare and ask, "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough. Can I come in?"

"If I say no, will you come in anyway?" I cross my arms in defiance.

"I don't wish to bother you. But I thought you would like some company besides the fictional characters you've been surrounding yourself with."

"I like my fictional characters," I say stubbornly.

"Hmmm. Then why did you slam your book closed? Did your characters upset you?"

"Oh, they upset me all the time. But I still love them."

Amos smiles brightly and I swear something inside of me comes to life as if I am a

budding flower and he the sun.

“I’ll leave you guys alone then.” Amos slowly turns around as if waiting for me to stop him, and I do.

“Wait. You can stay. Don’t tell them I said this, but I could use some real life company.”

His laugh is like a sun shower, warm and refreshing. A nice change from the quiet, cold life I’d been living. Amos waltzes into my room with ease, dropping his body into the armchair by the window. We remain in a comfortable silence for a while, the both of us staring out the window.

I roll out of bed, placing my bare feet on the ground and stretch my arms up. My sudden movement has Amos’ attention immediately. He’s staring again.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s just...incredible. You’re incredible. A week ago, your skin was in shreds, your body bruised, ribs broken. Now you are standing in front of me with not a single blemish on your skin. How is this possible?”

“Apparently, all you have to do is get kidnapped by a mad scientist.”

Amos shakes his head before letting it fall into his hands. He drags his fingers through his wavy hair, leaving a path in its wake. “Norman wants to do tests on you, Copperhead. He wants to replicate the mutation in your DNA. Your mom is against it and the others are unsure what they think about any of this.”

“And you?” My voice shakes at the idea of becoming a science experiment again.

“We need to understand what Dr. Tuwile did to you. Norman and Gabriel used to work together, so Norman is familiar with his work. He is the one who gave me the intel which led me to finding you.”

I take a step back from Amos, my thighs pressing into the hospital bed. “So you came looking for me then? A prize to steal away from one scientist and give to another?”

“No, Lori. Nothing like that. Only...”

Why did I trust him? He’s going to use me like any other person who finds out what I am. I close myself up as I sit back down on the bed, curling my legs to my chest.

Amos walks over to me and places a hand on my arm. I pull away from him. “Don’t touch me,” I snap.

“I’m sorry.” Amos steps away, slipping his hands in the pockets of his pants to show me he won’t try to touch me again. “I’m telling you all this because the leaders won’t let you leave this room if you don’t provide us with more answers. And your mother is trying to protect you from Norman. He can be vile, but he’s a brilliant scientist. I won’t let him hurt you. I promise.”

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My eyes squint up at him in anger. “You also promised that I wouldn’t be imprisoned here, but now you tell me I can’t leave this room. I’ve been stuck here for a week trying to convince myself that you were being honest. That I’m not a prisoner.”

“You have a choice, Lori. Stay here where you can be monitored and agree to testing, or you leave The Valley.”

The Valley. My mom used that phrase before when talking about this college campus turned safe zone. The Valley. It has a nice ring to it. Way better than Novus Seclorum. But it feels the same, even with the idyllic view from my window. Walls are suffocating when you aren’t allowed the freedom to choose to leave them. But I have a choice.

I don’t want to stay here in this room for the rest of my life. I don’t want to leave when I know my mom is here and I wouldn’t make her choose me over the safety this place can provide her. Closing my eyes, I replay all the words Amos said to me. He’s giving me a choice. Giving me the illusion of a choice. I mean, really, there is no choice here. If I want to survive, if I want answers, if I want to stay with my mom, I have to agree to their terms. I have to let them perform their tests.

A tear escapes from behind my eyelids even through my attempts to banish it. When I take a slow breath in, the air rattles inside my windpipe.

“Lori. Please think about it.” Amos’ voice is so soft with a tone of kindness. My heart wants to trust him, but everything inside me wants to run away. And then the waterworks burst.

“I can’t do it. So much pain. I...I...” Tremors of fear wash over my body and I can’t shake them away. Memories invade my mind, threatening to paralyze me. Then I feel two solid arms around my waist, pressing me against something warm. Home. It feels like home. I fall into the haven of Amos’ body, not caring that I was pissed off at him moments ago. My mind goes blank, forcing the unwanted memories back into the black abyss where they belong.

Amos’ arms wrap tighter around me. “We’ll find another way, Copperhead. I promise.”

Chapter 20

“We’re removing you out of this room today,” my mom shouts as she enters the hospital room I haven’t been imprisoned in for the last two weeks. She places some folded clothes and sneakers on the nightstand.

“Really? How?” I ask, looking up from the book I was reading, hoping this wasn’t one of those rare happy dreams I have.

“Amos.” How can one word make my skin sizzle with goose bumps? “He convinced Norman to give you more time.”

“More time? Why?”

My mom scooches me over on the bed so she can slide in. She wraps an arm over my shoulder and pulls my head to hers. “I can only imagine the horrors you have been through, honey. We want to help you through all that. The reason Norman is allowing you time is because Amos told him you need counseling to help you manage your PTSD symptoms. He told Norman that if we force testing on you now, you might not be sane enough to finish.”

“So Amos pulled the crazy card for me?” I ask sarcastically.

“Honey, this is important. I mean, what other post-apocalyptic community do you know with a therapist?”

I laugh dryly. “There definitely wasn’t a therapist at the bunker. Everyone there is crazy. Jonah was...” I stop myself, not wanting to tell my mom what happened to him.

“You know you can tell me anything. But if you can’t right now, that’s okay. I’m here for you, however you need me.”

I throw myself at my mom, hugging her with all my might. Well, maybe not all of it because I could break her with my super strength. Do I even have super strength? Or is it just extra strength?

“I understand why it is important to test my DNA and find out exactly what I’ve become. I also want answers. But the idea of becoming a lab rat again...the pain, the trauma. Yeah, I want help. Where is this therapist?”

My mom places a kiss on my forehead. “Dr. Alison Jeong. She’s on the other side of the train tracks where the dorms are. You can meet her tomorrow. For today, I want you to focus on getting settled. I’m going to take you around The Valley, show you where everything is.”

“Okay.” The smile on my face hurts. When’s the last time I actually smiled? My facial muscles creak at the movement, like I’m made of metal and haven’t oiled my hinges in years.

As my mom hops off the hospital bed, I roll off the other side, placing the book I was reading on top of the pile of books I finished in my confinement. When I turn back

around, my mom holds out the change of clothes she brought for me. She walks out of the room, giving me some privacy as I get changed. When I slip on the pair of sneakers, I feel a sense of freedom I haven't felt in years. Shoes. Such a simple thing and yet, it means the world to me to have the freedom of shoes.

When I open the door to the hallway, my mom puts her hand out, waiting for mine. I grab it and let her drag me out of the door. My suspicions that this place isn't quite a hospital ring true when we walk down the hallway. It doesn't have that same smell or sterilized feeling.

"You have been wondering what this place is, I'm sure. You are in a state-of-the-art building where the health professions students of this college would take their courses. It was well-equipped with medical supplies to begin with. So, naturally, we made it into a make-shift hospital."

"Is this where you learned how to be a badass nurse?" I ask.

"This building? No. We didn't have anything like this when I was a student here. This was built decades after I graduated. Would've loved to have studied here though. Not just for the equipment available, but the views of the campus. It's the best spot in The Valley."

The front doors loom into view, making my hands shake. When I was allowed outside the bunker, it meant I had to fight for my life. I know I am safe here. I know my mom would never force me to do something that would put me in danger or cause me pain. But being this close to the outside has me frozen.

"Lori, it's okay. We don't have to go outside just yet if you aren't ready," my mom says, sensing my fear.

"Seeing the outside from a window was one thing. Going outside is another. I forget

what freedom feels like.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“Would you like to try the terrace first?”

I nod my head, unsure if that will be easier, but willing to give it a try. My mom turns on her heel to head back up the stairs and I follow closely behind. As we approach a wall of windows, my breathing becomes erratic, so I grab my mom’s hand. I give her all my trust as she guides us outside. I feel the brisk fall air on my face before I open my eyes. It reminds me of the last time I was out in the open. When I was free.

Summer was moving quickly into the chill of autumn. I was with Jonah. We lived together in my family’s house. For months we lived rough. But we were free. The trees had just begun to turn from their vibrant green color. I remember thinking how we wouldn’t survive the winter if we couldn’t find enough resources.

Maybe we would have died if we never got captured. That’s an interesting thought. And perhaps it’s true. We had no idea what we were doing. Surviving one day at a time.

My mom squeezes my hand, bringing my mind back to my body. I take a deep breath and slowly open my eyes. It’s as if I transported my memory to the here and now. I knew it was fall just by looking out of the window in my room. But breathing it in, feeling the chill of fall air makes it feel like the bunker never happened. That Doctore was just a distant nightmare. For a single moment, I thought that Jonah and I made it here together.

I walk to the railing of the terrace and look out at the campus grounds. A pond filled with ducks surrounds the top of the football field I saw from my room. A large building sits to the left, likely an athletic center. Beyond that building is a wall that

looks like it's made from cinder blocks, rocks, and headstones? The wall extends behind the building I'm currently in and wraps around to the other side. I'm assuming it continues all around campus, but I can't see where it ends.

"How big is this place?" I ask my mom. When I turn to look at her, she is smiling out at the view in front of us.

"We were able to enclose most of the campus and part of the town. It took over a year. An extremely long, terrifying year."

"I can imagine. And all this," I say as I spread my arms out, "is safe? There are no zombies?"

"No biters. It's safe, Lori. I promise."

Just then, the sound of shouting breaks our peaceful moment on the terrace. My mom and I look down to see Amos holding up a woman with the help of another. Two men follow hastily behind. As if sensing our presence, Amos looks up, locking eyes with me for a moment, then turning to my mom.

She nods and bolts inside, sprinting down the stairs. I follow at a slower pace, not wanting to hear bad news. Today is supposed to be a good day. The two men that were walking behind Amos hold the front doors open for him and the injured woman. I stay behind, peeking around a corner.

As Amos talks to my mom, she nods, giving him her full attention as she examines the injured woman. She calls out instructions and the two other men hoist the woman up and bring her into a small room down the hall. Then my mom looks around until her eyes land on me.

She hurries over to me, saying, "I'm so sorry, Lori. I can't take you on that tour."

“It’s okay, mom. I understand. Is everything okay?”

“Dana, a leader from one of our sister communities, fell off a roof, and it looks like she broke her leg in two places. It’s going to be a difficult time setting her bones, so I have to be quick about it. She’s already been like this for a day.”

“Go. I’ll be okay. And what’s another day being cooped up anyway?”

My mom looks at me with such sadness in her eyes. “Amos!” she shouts. A second later, the man himself is at my side. “Can you take Lori around campus? She’s moving into the room right across from yours. So after you show her where everything is, you can be the gentleman I know you to be and walk her to her new home.”

Amos salutes my mom as she hurries away, then turns to me with the most beautiful half smile, his golden eyes glinting in the dim light of the hallway. “Are you ready, Copperhead?”

I roll my eyes at the nickname but can’t help the smile that forms on my face. The stiffness already loosening the second time. I hesitate for a second as we reach the front doors. Just a second. Then I take a step toward freedom and my new life.

Chapter 21

“Let’s grab a bite to eat,” Amos says after showing me most of this beautiful campus. The building I had assumed was for athletics has an indoor track, basketball and squash courts, and a pool—though drained and unusable at the moment. There’s also a gym which is where Amos trains the patrol units that go out scavenging for resources and protect the perimeters of campus. After seeing the sports center, we walked around the football field where he pointed out the field hockey field and past that, a large pedestrian bridge, which Amos explained is guarded 24/7. The other side

of the bridge is past the barrier they had built around campus.

There are barricades on the bridge and the stairs on the other side are impassable for even the freshies to figure out how to climb. But it is still a passage for humans seeking shelter and one of the three entrances into The Valley. The second entrance is a large gate for vehicles a few yards away from the bridge. The third entrance is on the other side of campus.

I was surprised when Amos guided me over to another bridge. This one is built over sunken train tracks that divide the campus in two. Spikes line the walls around the tracks to prevent anyone or anything from climbing over them.

This side of campus is made up of two quads. The social quad and the academic quad. Though The Valley is no longer a functioning college, the academic buildings are still used as classrooms for the younger survivors. Because math is still important in the apocalypse? I rolled my eyes when Amos explained that they also provided courses for adults who want to enrich their minds.

“We need to keep our knowledge and history alive. Education is the best way to hold on to our humanity,” Amos had said.

His words stirred something inside me. Humanity. He’s trying to save humanity. So was Doctore. But in an extreme and violent way.

“So,” I say to Amos as we sit down in an industrial atrium. He hands me a sandwich he’d grabbed from the little food stand in the middle of the large sitting area. “What’s this building used for now?”

“Is that really the question you want to ask, Copperhead?” Amos looks at me dead in the eyes, as if he can read my thoughts. I mean, of course I have a million questions swirling around my head. But will he actually answer them? Let’s find out.

“Okay. What do you know about Doctore?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

Amos sits back in his chair, getting himself comfortable as he decides what to tell me. He takes a large bite of his sandwich, delaying his answer. Just as I open my mouth to ask another question, Amos says, “For the past two years, I’ve been looking for traces of the man who is responsible for the end of the world. Dr. Gabriel Tuwile. In the before, he was testing genetic modifications on humans which he planned to sell to the military. Make soldiers immune to biological warfare, heal wounds so they can jump right back into battle, and carry more weapons and ammunition on their backs. Super soldiers. Norman had worked with Dr. Tuwile for years, but left the project just before the outbreak.”

Amos takes another bite of his sandwich as I fiddle with mine. “You need to eat,” he says with food in his mouth and points to the sandwich in my hands. I take a big bite, slowly chewing on the soft bread and peanut butter. I might not have starved in the bunker, but they didn’t have peanut butter.

“We heard rumors that Dr. Tuwile was still alive and continuing his research. Rumors that he was abducting survivors. I made it my mission to hunt him down. A year or so ago, I heard about the Colosseum. It took me months to get an invitation, as it was an exclusive venue. So I made friends with someone I knew to be a sort of investor. He took me to see you fight. Everyone around me was betting each other over how long you would last, how many biters you’d take down. It was disgusting.”

With a little too much aggression, Amos tears into his sandwich, dripping peanut butter on his hands. He licks his fingers slowly and I cannot stop staring. When his golden eyes look up at mine, that half smirk appears again. I quickly look away and bring my mind back to what Amos was saying.

“Did you place a bet?” I ask.

Amos’ face falls, looking ashamed. “I had to in order to fit in. But I bet on you.”

“That’s a shame, considering I lost that day.” The memory of my flesh being ripped from my bones until the tendons snapped threatened to consume every corner of my brain.

“My bet was that you would survive. And you did.” Amos reaches out a hand, pinching my chin ever so slightly. “You might be small, but I knew you were a viper.”

We stare into each other’s eyes for longer than should be acceptable. I should feel uncomfortable with the way he is staring at me, but I’m staring back with the same intensity. Amos finally breaks our connection by lifting my hands—still holding my sandwich—to my mouth and saying, “Eat.”

After we finish our sandwiches in comfortable silence, I ask, “How did you end up at The Valley?”

Figuring he’d brush this question off, I try to think of another question to ask. To my surprise, he answers. “I was a professor here. Music.”

“Music professor?” Two things I would never have guessed.

“You look shocked.” And Amos looks amused.

“Yeah, well, I just can’t see you being a professor or even knowing how to hold a tune. You are just so...so...”muscular, big, deadly, sexy. “Tall,” I say after fumbling for an appropriate word to use. What a stupid thing to say.

Amos' amusement travels to his eyes, the golden flecks sparkling as he laughs. "Musicians come in all shapes and sizes, Copperhead. So do professors."

"Sorry." I drop my gaze to the ground, unable to look at him as my face burns with embarrassment.

"It's okay, Lori. If it makes you feel better, you don't look like a super soldier."

And here we are, back on the topic I've been burning to discuss with anyone. But I don't want to talk about it right now. So I turn the discussion back on him. "How old are you? You look so young, like my age."

"How old are you?" Amos asks, his eyebrow askew.

I squint at him with a challenging glare. He stares back. His eyes aglow with curiosity and mischief, making my stomach do a backflip. Or maybe that's from the peanut butter. I haven't had something so rich in years. My tastebuds are still doing a giddy dance.

Amos holds his stare, waiting for me to answer. So I give in, breaking our gaze and ask, "It's been four years since the outbreak, right?"

"Four and a half." Amos nods, the mischief in his eyes fading to sadness, which I ignore because I will not take anyone's pity.

"That makes me twenty-two. My birthday is February 26," I say.

"I'm twenty-nine. May 2nd."

Twenty-nine. That feels like so much older than I am, yet he looks so young. I cross my arms, suddenly feeling awkward as Amos continues to look at me with sympathy

in his golden eyes.

He startles me as he shoots out of his seat. “You must be tired. I’ll walk you to your room.”

I nod, standing up while keeping my arms crossed and my head down as I follow Amos out of the building and across the academic quad. As we walk by the music building, a question falls out from my lips. “Do you still teach music?”

“No,” Amos says curtly, letting me know with one word he won’t be giving me a reason. But I can tell there’s something in that answer. Pain that goes deep. I harden my face, not wanting to show pity or sympathy, but I need him to know I understand his pain. My hand instinctively reaches for him, landing gently on his elbow. His fast pace halts quickly and he turns to look at me.

Our eyes lock onto each other as I say, “I’m sorry.”

A simple thing to say, but I hope he can hear all the words behind them. He nods, grasping my hand before I release my loose hold on his arm. A second later, we are walking side-by-side down a walkway leading to the main road on this side of campus.

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As we cross the road, Amos points at a white two-story building that looks like a large house. “That’s where Alison’s office is. Our campus shrink. She was a psychology professor here before the outbreak. We usually have all the new arrivals go through her for screening. Make sure we don’t let any psychopaths in. But she also schedules time with our residents to help them through tough times, trauma. You are to come here tomorrow morning at ten. Alison will then decide if more meetings will be necessary.”

Amos turns to me, locking his eyes with mine as he continues. “I need you to understand how important it is that you show up for your sessions with Allison. Not just because of our compromise, or to make sure you aren’t crazy, but for your own mental health. Okay?”

I break my gaze from his and stare at the white building, unsure what to make of it. Mental health. What even is that? And how can one person help an entire community cope when the world has ended? Amos places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently, coaxing a response from me.

“I understand.”

“Good.”

Amos turns me away from the white building and we continue walking down the sidewalk toward the dorm buildings. My brain turns off as we walk. I’m not sure if he says anything else to me. All sound, feeling, smells, everything turns off. I don’t even notice that we’ve stopped walking until Amos’ deep voice pierces the void I had curled up inside.

“Lori, are you okay?”

I shake my brain. “Yeah. Just a lot to take in.”

That pitiful look on Amos’ face makes me want to strangle him, so I ignore it, turning away to stare at the door in front of us. Amos opens the door, telling me to go inside. He doesn’t follow me in, but stands at the door.

“Oh, hi, Amos!” Three girls are gathered on a couch in the communal living room. There are five doors behind the living space, one looks like a bathroom. The others are all bedrooms.

The girl who greeted Amos stands up and walks toward us. She is skinny with toned arms and legs. Her blonde hair cascades perfectly over her shoulders. Tanned skin tells me she spends most of her time outside. And the look on her face as she stares up at Amos tells me there is something going on between them.

Or perhaps I’m imagining that because Amos looks past her to the others as he says, “This is Cathy’s daughter, Lori. She’ll be rooming with the three of you, so I expect you all to give her a warm welcome and help her as she transitions from life outside The Valley.”

Brighteyes is still staring at Amos, waiting for him to look at her. He doesn’t. Instead, Amos turns to me, giving me his attention as he says, “If you need anything, anything, I’m right across the hallway. Okay?”

No words come out of my mouth as I nod. When I turn toward my new roommates, I hear the door close behind me. Brighteyes left with Amos and that’s the last thought I allow myself. The other two wave me over to them on the couch. I numbly follow their welcome and collapse onto the couch.

Chapter 22

“I’m Cal—they/them. This is Mina—she/her. And the one who went chasing after Amos is Katie—also she/her.” Cal sits half cross-legged on the couch with their arm draped over the back. Mina is on the other side of Cal, curiously peering over at me.

I stare up at the pair for a moment before I say shyly, “Nice to meet you guys. I’m Lori—she/her. I hope it’s okay that I’m rooming with you?” I don’t know why that came out as a question. The discomfort I felt after eating sandwiches with Amos has singed every nerve ending in my body, leaving me anxious and irritable. I just want to be left alone.

“Where did Amos find you?” Mina asks with an accent I can’t quite place, but I don’t think English is her first language, though she speaks it perfectly.

“Um, I don’t really want to talk about that.”

“Yeah, Mina, leave the poor girl alone. She’s been through hell.” Cal turns to give Mina a look, making her slump backward.

If they know Amos found me, I wonder how much they know about me already. If my mom or any of the other leaders had told the community here what I’ve been through. The thought makes me feel naked. Like my entire life story is laid bare on my skin.

“It’s okay. I’m just tired. Actually, I think I’d like to lie down, if that’s okay?”

“Yeah sure, roomie. Your room is the corner on the left,” Cal says with a friendly smile.

I offer a small smile in return and a thanks before shuffling to my room. It’s small,

finally something I'm used to. But it is nice to have a solid door, no window for my captors to peer through. I haven't had privacy like this since before the outbreak. There's even a lock on the inside. I can lock myself in instead of being locked in. It feels strange.

Ever since I left the confines of that hospital-like building, I've felt strange. Like I'm walking in someone else's shoes. Literally. Being in a small room is the only thing that has felt normal all day. Perhaps this is where I'll stay for the rest of my life. No one will force me to fight again. I'm safe here. And in this little room, no one can hurt me.

Fight. Survive. Live. My mantra still pulses through me. As much as I try to convince myself that I am safe, my survival instincts continue to electrify everything else. I'm not safe. They want to put me through tests. Even Amos. He might have charmed me, but I won't allow him to use me like Doctore did. I will not allow anyone to use me ever again.

I lock the door and curl into my small bed, staring up at the ceiling until exhaustion pulls me into a heavy sleep. A sleep that is hastily interrupted by pounding on the door. I jump up in my bed and stare at the door as if it's going to blast off the hinges. But nothing happens. Then I hear it again, but it's not as loud as my mind imagined in its dream-like state.

The sound becomes clearer as I focus on it and I quickly figure out where it's coming from. Outside. I have a small window in my room that overlooks a beach volleyball court. A group of people my age are playing volleyball. That's the sound I heard. No one is pounding on my door. No one is here to take me away. I'm safe. For now.

I used to hate being woken up by the sun. I hated it so much that I used my hard-earned cash from my job at ShopRite to purchase blackout curtains to hide the blazing beast from my bedroom. But after living in a bunker with no sunlight for four

years, I relish the feeling of the sun on my skin. Even if it woke me up from a rather enjoyable dream featuring a man with golden eyes.

A light tap on my door has me in fight mode. I jump from my bed before whoever it is can catch me in such a vulnerable state. Sleep. I was actually sleeping. I haven't had a full night's sleep in years. Even in the hospital room I had been staying in for the last two weeks, I couldn't fully sleep. Knowing people were watching me, waiting to pounce on me with questions.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

I relax when I remember where I am, in my new room with a lock on a solid door. The knocking sounds get a little louder, this time accompanied by my mom's voice. "Lori, are you up?"

"Yeah, mom." My voice sounds groggy, like I haven't used it in a while and not just one night.

I shuffle over to the door, unlock the bolt and swing it open. My mom nearly tackles me to the ground in a violent rush to hug me. "Oh, baby girl. I missed you so much."

"Mom. I saw you yesterday," I say with false exasperation, but let her continue to hug me for as long as she needs because, let's face it, I didn't get any hugs for years and really missed my mom's hugs.

"I know, honey. But having you back, knowing you're alive, seeing your beautiful face when I thought I'd never see you again...I don't ever want to be parted from you. You are stuck with me, got it?"

"Got it," I chuckle.

My mom finally lets me go, stepping back to take in the sight of me. She laughs as she asks, "Where did you get those pajamas?"

I look down at the red silk ensemble and shrug. We both laugh at the atrocious pajama set that looks like it came from Santa Claus' closet. "They were in my dresser, the first thing I grabbed. Honestly, they are the most comfortable pair of jammies I've ever worn. I will only sleep in these from now on."

“Sleep in? Fine. But go find something fit for public. I’m taking you out for breakfast.”

As soon as my mom closes the door, I rush over to the closet to peruse the gently used clothing that had been selected for me. Since it’s getting chilly outside, I grab a colorful knit sweater and a pair of loose fitted jeans. In the dresser I find underwear and socks that thankfully look brand new. Back in the closet, I find a pair of boots and the sneakers I wore yesterday. I can’t help but smile.

Doctore never let me wear shoes. I always felt like it was a sign of my enslavement. You can’t run far or fast without shoes.

As I slip on the pair of boots, a layer of fear falls away. I’m safe.

Breakfast is in the campus cafeteria. The aromas of pancakes, bread, and bacon hit my nose like I’ve just ran into a screen door. Stalling for a moment outside the glass walls of the cafeteria, I close my eyes and breathe in every scent. Bacon. Yes, please!

My mom fed me well while I was staying in the hospital room, but she didn’t bring me bacon!

When I open my eyes, my mom is staring at me with a delighted smile on her face. “Smells good, right? Sorry I couldn’t bring you any of this food. We aren’t allowed to take food from the cafeteria. The health center has its own little snack bar.”

I’m reminded of that industrial atrium Amos took me to for a peanut butter sandwich. I wonder how many snack bars there are around campus. And why would anyone choose to eat at one of those spots when you can come to this heavenly place where the air smells like bacon pancakes?

As we walk along the buffet tables, my mouth waters. They have fresh fruit too. The

strawberries are sparse, probably the last of the harvest. But there are apples and peaches. I grab a honey crisp and bite into it before grabbing a plate. The juices burst in my mouth, making me moan so loud everyone around me stops what they're doing to stare at the weird stranger eating an apple in the middle of the food line.

"Sorry," I say shyly. "They didn't have apples in the bunker I came from."

That makes everyone chuckle, resuming their morning routines. My mom steps in beside me, holding out a plate. "What kind of food did they feed you?"

"Lots of mush, protein packets, military grub. It kept me fed but had no flavor. Sometimes we'd have enough flour to make bread. Those were the best months. How do you have so much fresh fruit and meat?"

As my mom fills her plate with grapes, a slice of bread, and a spoonful of scrambled eggs, she explains they started growing their own crops a year after the outbreak. There are also several farms nearby that have remained untouched. Every week, groups of foragers go out to the farms to collect food. They even started bringing back livestock.

"You might have noticed that the field hockey field has turned into a pasture for sheep and cows," my mom says.

"I didn't get a good look at it," I say as my mom's sliced bread falls out of the rotisserie toaster and onto her well-placed plate.

With my plate filled with bacon, pancakes, and my half-eaten apple, we walk to the seating area, taking a small table by the outside windows. As I take a bite of the fluffiest pancakes I've ever tasted, I can't help but feel like I'm in a dream. Or perhaps I died. There's no way a place like this can exist in a world that is overtaken by the dead.

The saltiness of the bacon overwhelms my senses and when I take another bite of my apple, the contrasting sweetness nearly sends me spiraling to the ground. “Mom? Is this heaven?”

Her laugh quickly turns into a cackle. One I remember so deeply. One I missed so much. It doesn’t matter if this is heaven or not. If I’m really dead. Because I’m here with my mom. But if this was heaven, then Hayden would be here. So would Jonah. Sarah. All the people I love. So the logical answer is that I am alive. The Valley is a true haven on a decimated Earth. And somehow I’ve found my way home.

Chapter 23

“So, Lori, what would you like to discuss today?” Alison asks as I sit down in a cushy armchair in front of her. Dr. Alison Jeong, the campus shrink. She insisted I call her Alison when my mom introduced me to her ten minutes ago. As if calling her by her first name would make me feel more comfortable about this arrangement somehow.

I’ve been prescribed therapy so that I don’t go crazy from whatever tests Norman has planned for me. The illusion of safety had me going for a while. But now the curtain is drawn back as I remember why I’ve been allowed to leave the confinement of my prison cell. Is my mom in on it too? Bringing me to breakfast where I stuffed my face with food I never thought I’d have the pleasure of eating again?

I scoff at the thought. No. My mom would not trick me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“Lori? What are you thinking about?” Alison asks.

I look right into Alison’s almond-shaped brown eyes before answering. “I’m not sure if I’m still imprisoned or if I’m safe here. Amos promised I wasn’t a prisoner, but I can’t help feeling that I am.”

“I see. And why do you feel like a prisoner?”

“I was only allowed to leave my prison cell—the hospital room—under the condition that I see you. I’m escorted everywhere around campus. And Amos, one of the head honchos, just happens to live across from my dorm room where I’m surrounded by three strangers who are no doubt charged with watching my every move.”

Alison takes in every word I say, her eyes never leaving my harsh gaze. “Have you thought that perhaps all of this is in place to keep you safe and make you feel comfortable? You are, after all, in a new place. You do not know how this community functions, nor do you know your surroundings. It seems only right that you have escorts until you find your bearings.”

I huff, “Of course you’d say that.”

“Has anyone threatened you, Lori?”

“No.” I break our eye contact as my head falls down in defeat. My brain keeps going into survival mode, even when I’m safe. Alison is a therapist, not an evil scientist. I’m here for my mental health. But shit, this is going to be hard to quiet my fears.

“Amos, your mother, and the rest of the leaders here only want what’s best for you. There might be a condition for you being here, but we all need to make difficult choices in order for this community to thrive. If you have vital information that can protect us from outside threats or even save others who have been through what you have, I know you will want to help us with that.”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s not like I know what Doctore did to me. Why I can survive zombie bites. And I don’t know where his bunker is. Or the Colosseum. Amos knows the location better than me.”

Alison places the journal in her hands down on the coffee table between us. “I am not asking you to tell me these things, nor do I expect you to. I want you to talk about whatever you wish to discuss.”

I look up at Alison for a moment before shifting my eyes to the window that looks out into a garden. A freaking Peace Garden. Seriously, what is this place? As I stare out at the little bridge over a tiny pond, my mind flashes to Jonah. I haven’t really thought of him since Amos rescued me. I haven’t wanted to. But maybe he is where I should begin.

“My boyfriend betrayed me.” I pause for a long moment, but Alison doesn’t say anything, sensing I have more to share. “Jonah was my everything, even when he wasn’t. I’ve loved him since we were kids. But he was the first to admit his feelings for me. I wish we had more time. I wish he would have chosen me and not Doctore.”

Alison slides in a question as I take a deep breath. “Jonah was at the bunker with you?”

“He most likely is still there. We were captured together. When I woke up in the bunker, I didn’t know if he was alive. It wasn’t until after...after...” Tears burn the corners of my eyes as I try to hold them back. “After my first test. They let him clean

me up, all the blood and guts from the people—no—zombies I had put down. One of them was a little girl I tried to save.”

Alison tries to hide a gasp as I continue with my story. “I wanted to trust Jonah. But he was brainwashed already. He believed what Doctore was doing would save the world, and he turned a blind eye to what was being done to me. To others less fortunate than him in the bunker. I think he was instructed to watch my every move, to make sure I fell in line. And I did. I let Jonah do whatever he wanted with my body. I let Doctore experiment on me. I killed for him. I bled for him. I...”

The tears now feel like shards of ice, slicing through my skin, bringing that fear back to the surface. Fear I would use like a shot of adrenaline. My hands shake uncontrollably as I finger a scar that was never there. The one on my stomach. The one I’ve never acknowledged before.

I push the memory back, not wanting to relive the sight of my body cut open as Doctore took what wasn’t his. Closing my eyes against the icy tears of my fear, I squeeze my fists to stop my hands from shaking. It doesn’t work. My whole body is shaking now and I can’t seem to get any more words out.

“Breathe, Lori. Take a deep breath in.” Alison’s voice sounds miles away, but I try to latch on to it like a tether. Every breath is an attempt to pull myself out of the deep despair I’m falling into. But my breaths are shallow, weak, and shaking. I cannot get a good enough grip.

“Lori, listen to my voice. Breathe. You went too deep today and we do not have to go further. I just need you to breathe in slowly and let it out.”

On my next breath, I feel as if I am choking. The tears of my pain are stuck in my throat. Alison’s warm hands find mine in the darkness. She squeezes them as she talks to me, but I can barely hear her words over the pounding in my ears. When the

warmth of her hands leaves mine, I know despair will win. Perhaps if a pair of solid arms didn't wrap me in a cocoon of warm comfort, I would have spiraled completely.

As I attempt to take another breath, a smoky citrus scent hits my nose and I finally relax. Amos. How did he get here? He pulls me off the armchair, lifting me up in his powerful arms. I can't help but nuzzle closer into him, not yet ready to open my eyes to what my body is clearly imagining. This comfort, this warmth, it is something I never experienced during my time in the bunker. Even with Jonah. His love had turned cold.

"Hey, Copperhead, I've got you," Amos whispers in my ear. The threads of fear that had wound around me during my session with Alison loosen and I can finally take a strong, steady breath.

I keep my eyes closed as I feel movement. Amos holds me tight against him, walking me to an unknown destination. I should feel scared not knowing where he is taking me, but my body relaxes in his arms, trusting him. Trust. That's also something I hadn't felt in years. I lost my trust in Jonah as soon as I realized his loyalties weren't to me. And there was no one else I could trust in the bunker. No friends. No other lovers. No one.

My arms tighten their grip around Amos as he lowers me down. I'm not ready to let go. I'm not ready to forget this feeling of trust, comfort, and love. Love in the way he cares for me so unconditionally. Amos doesn't owe me anything. In fact, it's quite the opposite. I owe Amos my life. He saved me from hell and has only shown me kindness and sympathy. I don't want to let go of that.

"It's okay, Lori. I'm putting you down on your bed. Open your eyes."

I shake my head against his chest. Then he shifts underneath me, sitting me down on his lap as he lies down with me. Keeping my eyes closed, I ask, "Are you real?"

A shaky laugh escapes Amos' mouth, the breath of it hitting my forehead. My eyes find his the moment they open. The gold flecks in his eyes are darker, as if clouded by worry. Is this concern for me? My sanity? My wellbeing? How can a stranger show me so much compassion when my boyfriend, the love of my short life, couldn't?

"Hey, Copperhead. Nice to see those sapphires again. You had me worried."

Worried. My heart stops for a moment, then the waterworks burst from my eyes. All the pain, anger, fear, hope, and despair I've kept inside fall out of me in a torrid of tears. Amos pulls me in closer to him as we lie on my small dorm bed. His arms provide an anchor for me, not allowing me to fall into the pit again as I release the worst of my fears. He holds me like this until my body feels light and sleep takes over.

Chapter 24

I wake up in the middle of the night. Alone. Part of me thinks Amos was a figment of my imagination. How can he be so caring, so considerate, when all he wants to do is test my body to find the miraculous mutation that makes me immune to zombie bites? But he does care. He helped me through an uncontrollable bout of depression, anxiety, and fear. Why?

My dry mouth interrupts my thoughts, rolling me out of bed in search of water. When I enter the living area of my shared dorm room, Cal and Mina look at me with all-knowing eyes from their designated spots on the couch.

Cal speaks first, saying, “There she is. How did you sleep?”

“Pretty good...considering.”

Cal nods their head as if they know exactly what I have been through, am still going through. “Come sit. Amos told us to keep an eye on you and make sure you’re okay.” Cal pats the cushion next to them. “Are you okay, Lori?”

“I’m thirsty.”

Mina hops up and scurries over to the corner of the room where we have a rationed supply of water. She pours the water from a jug into a small cup as I sit next to Cal. As soon as Mina places the cup of water in my hands, I chug every drop. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Mina says with a smile. “Better?”

I nod. “Better. What time is it?”

“Oh, well past midnight. Mina and I are night owls, so we take the late night shifts. But Amos relieved us of our usual duties at the perimeter so we could keep watch here.” Cal’s thorough answer makes me feel vulnerable again.

“Why?” I cross my arms, gently rubbing my elbows.

Mina and Cal exchange a look I don’t quite understand. When Mina looks back at me, she says, “Because he was worried about you. So was your mom. She came by to check your vitals and make sure you weren’t catatonic.”

So Amos being worried about me is normal. I mean, I guess I am his responsibility since he’s the one who brought me here. His presence felt more than an obligation though. Like he was truly, deeply concerned. I could feel it as he held me in his arms. And I didn’t want to let go of it.

Taking a breath, I move my mind onto a different subject. “So you guys obviously know where I’m from and how I got here. What about you?”

Cal answers first. “I’m from Colorado originally. Came here as a student. Computer science. Load of good that will do in this new world.”

“My family immigrated to The States from Columbia when I was ten. We’ve moved all over, but settled down in Pennsylvania when I was a senior in high school. I’ve only been at The Valley for a year,” Mina explains. “I came here with a few others. We were all strangers, picking each other up along the way. I can introduce you sometime if you like. It’s nice to have friends after being alone for so long.”

Mina's words were laced with so much sympathy I had to look away. From the corner of my eye, I see Cal elbow Mina in the side. "Ow! What was that for?"

"Obviously it's a sore subject for Lori." Cal grabs my hand to pull my attention back to them. "Don't let those memories become who you are, Lori. That's all I'll say until you are ready to talk more about it."

Their words pull me back into the okay mood I was in when I woke up. I offer them a smile as I say, "Thanks. And it's okay to say these things in front of me. It would be selfish of me not to hear your own stories and losses. I'm sure you both know what it's like to feel...alone."

Mina and Cal are silent for a moment, then Mina asks, "Can I hug you?"

"Me too," Cal chokes out.

I nod and both of them immediately tackle me into the most comforting group hug I've ever been part of.

"It's nothing against you guys, but I'm still feeling tired, so I think I'm going to go back to bed." When they pull away from me, I add, "Thank you. Even if you were ordered to be here, I can tell you both care for me. You are strangers to me, and yet you've shown me more kindness than anyone in that bunker."

"That's what friends are for," Mina says with a smile.

Friends. I have friends.

"We'll be here, keeping watch. You have nothing to worry about." Cal's kindness is a radiant beam of light that hits me in all the cold places of my soul. I can't help but jump at Cal, wrapping my arms around them. And I'm not surprised when I feel Cal's

arms around me, reciprocating my hug.

When I pull out of the embrace, Mina says, “I’m a good solo hugger too, if you’d like to know.”

I open my arms out for her, and she immediately pulls me in for another great hug. I smile at the thought that I won’t starve for love and hugs in this place.

“Thanks, guys. It’s really nice to have...friends.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“Just remember that’s who we are, okay?” Cal looks at me until I nod in agreement. “We are tasked to take you to the gym in the morning, seven A.M. sharp. You were supposed to train yesterday, but Amos took you back here instead.”

“Train?” I ask, confusion and fear mixing in my chest.

“Everyone at The Valley needs to train at the gym to strengthen our muscles and keep our endurance up. You know, in case we need to run away from biters?” Cal explains.

“Oh.” The relief melts away the fear and anxiety that began to bubble up again. “See you in the morning then.”

Mina and Cal walk me over to the athletic center at seven o’clock in the morning, just as they promised. They don’t stay though as it’s now their bedtime. I walk through the glass door hesitantly. Not sure what to do, I look around at all the exercise equipment. When I spot a treadmill, I change course. That’s something I know how to use at least. Halfway to my destination, I’m stopped by a man who looks like he could be Captain America.

“You must be Lori. Amos is waiting for you over there,” Cap says, pointing over to a corner of the large gym where there are machines I have never seen before.

“Should I be scared?” I ask with a hint of amusement.

“Terrified.” His green eyes shine with false terror. “I’m Kyle, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Kyle.” I reach out my hand to shake his.

“Don’t leave tall, dark, and handsome waiting too long. He will never forgive you for that.”

“Yikes. See ya, Kyle.” I spin on my heels and walk toward Amos at a brisk pace.

Amos doesn’t notice me as I approach him while he works out on one of those rowing things. I can’t help but admire the muscles in his arms as he pulls himself forward. Each bulge of his triceps is hypnotic. After a minute, I realize I’m staring awkwardly at Amos’ sweaty, well-toned body and pull myself out of the trance by clearing my throat.

“I was wondering how long you were going to just stand there, Copperhead.”

I’m mortified. How did he know I was standing there? When I look up, I notice a partial reflection in the window in front of us. Yes. Mortified. “Sorry. You make it look so...easy.”

The sound that comes from Amos could be called a chuckle, but the deep, rich tones of his laugh stir something wild inside of me. Amos carefully lets go of the bar and stands up to face me.

“Easy, huh? Well, I do not intend for you to have an easy morning. Have you warmed up yet?”

I shake my head. “It’s been a while since I’ve been in a gym and never one like this.”

“They don’t have one in the bunker?”

“There is one, but I wasn’t allowed in. It’s exclusively for the Praetorian Guard.”

“Then how did you train for your fights?”

I'm taken aback by Amos' question. Fury bubbling up from my core. "You think I was allowed to prepare for that? I was a lab rat. They threw me in a pit to see if I could find my way out alive."

"Sorry, that was a thoughtless question."

I grind my jaw, holding my anger in because I know Amos didn't mean to be hurtful. But I can't help thinking that this was his way of not-so-subtly continuing the interrogation. Still, I let him guide me over to a mat where we stretch, warming up our muscles. Amos eyes me with apprehension the whole time, treading lightly.

He starts me on the treadmill, the same one I was heading for when I first walked in. Thirty minutes later, I'm on a horizontal leg press. My legs are burning after a hundred presses, but Amos doesn't tell me to stop. His focus is on my legs, not in a creepy way. It's as if he is studying the way my muscles move, seeing them get stronger with each press.

"Okay, Copperhead. Take a break and stretch your legs before we move on to the next exercise." Amos hands me a metal water bottle, which I take large gulps from.

"So, are you my personal trainer or something? I don't see anyone else with one," I say, putting my hands on my hips.

"If that's how you want to think of me, yes. I'm your personal trainer."

"Why?"

"One of the rules at The Valley is that everyone needs to—"

"Cal and Mina explained that to me. But do you train everyone here?"

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“No.” Amos’ curt response tells me he doesn’t want to talk anymore. “Arms next.”

I follow his direction and every suggestion, pushing my body to its limits. I understand the importance of being in shape, even when the world wasn’t a dangerous pit of walking dead looking for a quick bite of flesh. Now it’s even more important to maintain our physical health so that we can outrun and outlive these zombies.

But I am exhausted after two hours. I’m starving. And I have to pee.

“Amos,” I say during what I’d hoped was the end of our session, but turned out to be another water break as he is now directing me to a piece of equipment I have no interest in figuring out. “I’m done.”

“You are done when I say you’re done.” His face is stone cold, so unlike the kind man I thought I was getting to know.

“Are you going to hold me prisoner and break your promise?” A fissure breaks the cold frame of his face. I use his hesitation and sprint out the door, not stopping until I reach the cafeteria.

I’m so freaking hungry. The adrenaline from my long sprint to the other side of campus has my lungs sparkling in flames. I take a slow deep breath in, letting it out in a controlled release. Once I feel stable enough, I walk into the cafeteria. As I step through the glass doors, I realize this is the first time I’ve been unsupervised at The Valley. The freedom feels refreshing. Even when I was with my mom, I still felt like I was on a leash.

Maybe I broke the rules by running away from Amos. I'll likely get into trouble, but I don't care. I grab a bagel and a peach, then turn back to the door. As I make my way out, I catch sight of Norman, who looks offended that I'm free ranging right now. I give him my best smile before taking a bite out of the bagel and walk out the door.

Chapter 25

OfcourseAmosiswaiting for me at the door to my dorm. He looks furious. Like I'm not? I ignore him, pushing past his hulking figure and sprint through the door. He's hot on my heels, following me through the living area. But I don't let him in my room. No. I close the door right on his face and lock it.

"Open the door, Lori." Amos' voice is husky and raw. I nearly give in right away. "I'm sorry I pushed you too hard today."

"Are you?" I whisper shout back, not wanting to wake Cal and Mina.

"Lori, open the door." A thump from the other side tells me he's fallen against the door or hit it with his fists. Not aggressively. "Please."

My hand reaches out on its own and unbolts the lock. I turn and collapse on my bed before he gently opens the door, closing it quietly behind him. He hesitates for a moment, looking at my curled up form on the bed, then joins me, keeping his distance by sitting on the other side.

"I'm really sorry, Lori. I don't know what came over me."

"You turned into a freaking psycho." I somehow manage to keep my voice calm.

"Yeah, I did. I don't really have an explanation for it." Amos has the decency to look ashamed, which definitely helps his case.

“You better try.”

Amos looks out the window, leaving us in silence for a while. I can't help but stare at his beautifully chiseled jaw pulsing as he thinks about what to say to me. Those golden eyes have gone a bit dull in this pensive state. When they meet my gaze, the gold flecks shimmer back to their alluring brilliance.

“I wanted to be a musician in a traveling orchestra. That had been my dream all my life. After playing in Broadway pit bands for a few years, I completed my masters. Then my mom was diagnosed with cancer. She didn't have family here, as she had left them all in India to start a new life in America when she was young. So I quit my job and moved back to Pennsylvania. Luckily got a job at this college. A steady job that allowed me to take care of her. Chemo was rough. After a year, her hair grew back, and she was starting to live again. That's when the outbreak happened. I brought her to campus as we were fortifying the area. She thrived for a few months, but without the meds she needed, the cancer came back. She died before we had the campus completely secured, so she couldn't go outside.”

“I'm so sorry, Amos.” I want to give him a hug, but I can tell there is more he wants to share with me.

“My mom was all I had left of life from the before. When she died, I threw everything I had at this place. Determined to make it a safe haven. Building a secure perimeter. Training the survivors inside to defend themselves. So yes, I've trained others, not just you. It's been a while since I...cared this much about some...one.”

Amos looks away, gazing out the window again. I'm not sure if he's talking about me or remembering his mother. I know he cares, but in what way? I keep my thoughts to myself, waiting for him to finish his explanation.

“Lori, you are the hope I've been looking for these past few years. You are the one

who can save us from this nightmare.”

I pull my knees in tighter as I say, “I know you think my DNA holds a key to saving the world but—”

“No. Your strength is what I am talking about. Your will to fight. Even that day in the arena when you gave in, you went out fighting. You nearly killed Dr. Tuwile.”

“So he’s not dead?” Dread consumes my heart at the thought of Doctore still alive, performing more experiments, brainwashing other prospective soldiers to his cause.

“According to my sources, he survived. But is still recovering.” Amos gives me some time to process this information before saying, “I won’t force you to join this fight. I want you to have a choice. No matter what, I still expect you to be at the gym four times a week, at least, like everyone else. If you want to help me take down Dr. Tuwile, I would welcome your help.”

“Why do you need me to train? If I already have the strength to fight, why is that so important?” I feel frustration gnawing at my fingers. “You still haven’t explained why you pushed my body to the limit this morning.”

“I don’t really know how to explain that. I...I keep remembering your broken body. It’s a vision that haunts me. I thought...if you were stronger, that would never happen to you again. It’s irrational, and it doesn’t make up for what I did to you. I’m sorry.”

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I place my hand over Amos', which is clenching the blanket on my bed. "It's not okay. But I forgive you."

Amos takes in a strangled breath. When he exhales, I can feel his tension loosening with it. "I would like you to train with the patrol teams too. That is, if you want to help us take down Dr. Tuwile."

"Of course I want to take him down. Sign me up! I will take fighting over being a lab rat any day." I perk up, eager to finally do something instead of twiddling my thumbs and waiting for an opportunity.

"You will still need to take some tests, Lori. I cannot change Norman's mind on that. But I promise you will not be a lab rat."

Another promise. Should I trust it? My heart says yes. But my brain is remembering all the times I was ripped apart, cut into, probed, and worse. Memories I wish I could erase. Those four years of my life were nothing but endless torture.

"And you must continue to see Alison. I know yesterday was rough. You don't have to open up all the way, but please let her help you. Okay?"

I mentally check the boxes off for my conditions to being free.

DNA and other testing, but not a lab rat. Check.

Training to join a patrol team hunting for Dr. Tuwile. Check.

Daily therapy sessions to stay sane. Check.

I can do this. Fight. Survive. Live. I must do this.

After Amos leaves, I take a shower, scrubbing the dried sweat from my skin. My conversation with Amos replays in my mind over and over again. He wants me because of my strength. Not because I have some superhuman strength. I don't even know how strong I actually am. When Amos was pushing me at the gym, I thought he was testing me, seeing how much my body could take. But it was more than that. If I believe him.

He's difficult to read. Amos. The man who saved me from a lifetime of death and dismemberment. He can be playful and light, but then it's like something flips inside him, turning him serious and ferocious. I want to hate Amos for this side of him, and yet I don't.

When I'm around him, even today when he pissed me off, I feel safe. I know he would never hurt me. Maybe it's that naive part of me I thought had died in the bunker. If it is naive to think that Amos cares about me, in whatever way that means for him, I don't give a shit. I need people to have my back, to give me a reason to keep going, and to offer me more.

Amos has given me that reason. And though I have conditions for staying here, so does everyone else. I no longer live in a world where I can hop in the car to pick up frozen samosas at ShopRite or open an app on my phone to order Doner kebab. In this new fucked up world, humans have to work together in order to survive and thrive. That's what they are doing here at The Valley.

I need to find my mom after my session with Alison today. I need to tell her I'm ready for testing. At least some of it. I need answers just as much as Norman does. Even if it is scary, I have a support system here. And I know they will be with me

every step of the way.

I find my mom at the health center turned hospital, sitting outside on the terrace. The early fall wind is already chilling my bones through the knit sweater I threw on over a pair of yoga pants. One of the few seasonally appropriate outfits I have in my closet. When my mom sees me approaching, she hops up and runs downstairs to greet me.

“How did you know I was thinking about you?” she asks as she pulls me in for a warm hug.

“Well, that’s funny, because I was thinking about you.” The smile on my mom’s face wipes away the rest of the unease I’ve been feeling since I had made up my mind earlier. “Do you have time to talk?”

“Do you want to sit up on the terrace or go somewhere else?”

“Maybe we could just walk around? It’s a little too chilly to sit outside. I need to move my body.”

My mom prods the knitted holes in my sweater, saying, “No wonder you’re cold. This is barely a sweater.”

“It’s all I have.” I shrug as my mom continues to examine my outfit.

“Let’s go find Anna. She will surely allow you to go through the selection of clothing Amos’ patrols have collected over the years.”

My mom’s words make me realize I don’t quite understand how everything works at The Valley. I have to get permission to “shop” for clothes? This opens up a new line of questions I want to ask my mom, pushing my previous thoughts to the side.

“Anna is one of the leaders, right? Like you.”

“Yes.” My mom slides her arm through mine as she guides me across the street in front of the health center. We walk down the path leading around the right side of the football field.

“So she is in charge of...clothes?” That can’t be all she does. I mean, clothes are important, but there are more important things for a leader to protect. Did the U.S. government have a department of clothing? I laugh out loud before I can stop myself.

“That is part of her responsibilities, yes. Think of her as the Director of Human Resources. She coordinates with Amos to make sure we have enough supplies for the residents here. Clothing, first aid, toiletries, and such. Everything stocked in your dorm is arranged by her. But because your move from the health center was sudden, she didn’t have a lot of time to go through the clothing racks.”

As we walk along the path, I get a good view of the field hockey field where there are cows, sheep, and pigs living in harmony together. I point to the field and ask, “Who’s in charge of them?”

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“Jeremy. He was a chef before, a farm-to-table chef. So he knows a lot about food, how to grow it, raise it, cook it. The perfect fit for the job.” My mom smiles at her wit in describing The Valley as one big business venture. And I guess it sort of is. The Valley is in the business of keeping humans alive.

“Amos seems to be a military leader of sorts,” I guess. “Training warriors, organizing patrol squads, and leading missions.”

“Right on the money there. Amos is our general. Though he has no military experience, Amos is a natural leader. The men and women who have joined his ranks listen to him without question. And the other leaders respect him, even though he is young and inexperienced. Though how can one have experience with an apocalypse?”

My mom takes a moment to breathe as we climb the steps over the train tracks. “Amos put in a lot of effort to make The Valley what it is today. His patrol units guard the surrounding farmland we use for the crops we can’t grow on campus. He’s even set up trades with nearby communities.”

“There are other survivor communities?” I ask.

“Yes. Not all as big as ours. But there are many communities near The Wall.”

“The Wall. Amos had driven me through The Wall to get here, but I haven’t heard mention of it since.”

“It’s literally a giant wall that surrounds the main highways from Pennsylvania to

New Jersey and manned by the U.S. military. They offer us intel and safe passage. In return, we provide them with resources.”

“Do you know if Doctore and his men have access to The Wall?”

My mom stills at the mention of my captor. “I honestly don’t know, but I hope not.”

I honestly don’t think I want to know. So I shift our conversation. “What about Norman? What’s he in charge of?”

“Norman is our Head of Education. He organizes classes and enlists anyone who wishes to share their knowledge. I know he seems rather harsh, but he is a brilliant man and does an amazing job of keeping an important part of our humanity intact.”

I nod, not having any words to give my mother at the moment. In truth, I’m a bit scared of Norman. Afraid of how similar to Doctore he could turn out to be. If they had worked together, I’m sure not everything Norman has done was...humane.

“Mom?” I pause in the middle of the bridge leading to the residential and educational buildings.

“Yes, Lori.”

“It’s okay. I consent to testing. Maybe not all of it right now and nothing invasive. But if Norman agrees to go slow, I will give him consent.”

My mom grabs my face, forcing me to look at her. “Lori, are you certain?”

I nod again, not trusting myself to stay strong if I say anything more. My insides quiver at the thought, but I remind myself that I have my mom. Mina and Cal. And Amos. They won’t let anything bad happen to me. As my mom pulls me in for

another one of her warm hugs, I let one tear through the barrier of my eyes. Just one. The tear feels like ice on my cheek, disappearing as I wipe my face with the back of my hand before my mom can see.

“Let’s go get you some clothes. You’re shivering!”

Chapter 26

A few weeks later, that checklist has become my new routine. And honestly, I’m kind of loving life here. I train with Amos’ patrol units four times a week. Even on my off days, I still go to the sports center to either workout in the gym with Amos or participate in a yoga class. After an hour or two at the gym, I shower, then head to Alison for my daily therapy session. Twice a week after lunch, I head over to the health center, where I meet my mom and Norman for medical analysis. Sometimes Amos is there for extra moral support.

Today, Norman asked to use an ultrasound machine. I didn’t realize they had such tech at The Valley, even in the well-equipped health center. My hesitation makes my mom begin to answer for me, but I interrupt her, giving Norman a sharp nod as I try to conquer my fear.

Norman hums as he examines the screen while moving the lube-coated wand along my abdomen. The sound of his humming and the uncomfortable movement on my abdomen cause me to feel nauseous. So I shift my mind to think of something else. And what comes to mind? Katie.

My third roommate and I sparred for the first time together earlier today. It wasn’t the first time I’ve sparred though. It’s required training for anyone who wants to join a patrol unit because out there, it’s not just zombies we will be fighting.

Every time Amos looked away, Katie would throw an aggressive punch. Most times,

I was able to block her or roll out of the way. But she was relentless. I know she hates me. At first I had no idea why. But now I'm pretty sure it's because of how much time I spend with Amos. It's not like we are dating or anything close to having a romantic relationship. Amos is helping me strengthen and tone the muscles in my body that have been ripped and torn to shreds and misused during the four years of my captivity. Though he can be cold with me, especially on the training mat, I know he cares for me.

Perhaps that is what Katie sees too and is jealous that all she gets from Amos is his coldness. But she tries too much. Amos is the kind of guy who enjoys conquest. Katie doesn't challenge him. Everyone can see he isn't interested in her. Yet she still throws herself at Amos every chance she gets.

Katie landed a punch to my nose, making it crack loud enough to turn Amos' attention our way. He didn't do anything though. Cold. That's his only mode at the gym. And he has to be while training a battalion of zombie killers. There's no warmth out in the world, not even from him. I took the punch like a champ, knowing it would heal in the next few minutes. Katie seemed to have forgotten that fun fact about me.

I bounced back quickly and had her pinned under my elbow in no time. Instinctively, I looked up at Amos. His glacial face melted ever so slightly in approval of my win. Like Amos, I didn't show my elation at his distant praise. A moment later, Amos called us all over in a circle to hand out patrol assignments. Assignments he didn't include me in. Again.

Every time I confronted him about my lack of assignments, he would give me the same answers. I might know how to fight, but I need to learn how to work in a team. How to protect my unit. The world outside is not like the arena I fought in, survived in, probably died in. Like I don't know that.

Amos and I might get along, but not when we have this discussion. I didn't want a

repeat of our weekly fights today, so I just stormed away from him instead. I'm sure that made Katie smirk to herself.

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I roll my eyes at the memory of her going at me like I murdered her cat and sigh when I remember that I'll have to see her later today because we live together.

"Does that hurt, Laurel?" Norman asks as he continues to press the ultrasound wand along my belly.

"Oh, no. I was just thinking." My eyes remain glued to the ceiling, not wanting to look at Norman's focused gaze. He's only being kind to me because my mom is there and she would deck him in the face if he hurt me.

"Would you like to know what I found, Laurel?"

No. Yes. I don't know. The internal voice in my head says. On the surface, I simply nod my head.

Norman takes a deep breath before explaining, "The ultrasound detected some scarring in your uterus. A curious find considering your healing ability."

That is curious. Looking at me, no one could tell that my limbs and skin had been ripped from my body less than a year ago. But Doctore made sure to always put me back together again. For the most part.

"Can you tell what the scarring is from?" I ask hesitantly.

"It doesn't look too aggressive, perhaps a minor case of endometriosis. But I'd need to do further testing before I could answer that question. Testing that would be rather...invasive."

I shiver at the word invasive, pulling my knees up to my chest in an act to protect myself. Then a question pops up in my brain and before I can stop myself, I ask, “Could I get pregnant?”

My mom’s head jerks up and she narrows her eyes at me as if attempting to steal into my brain.

“I wouldn’t say it’s impossible, but that scarring could make it difficult.”

My head won’t stop nodding at Norman’s response. I didn’t even realize that he had left the room as I fold into myself. My mom brings me out of my stupor with her own question. “Are you concerned about becoming pregnant?”

I laugh at her question. “No. It’s not like anyone would be interested in me knowing what I am.”

“And what are you, Lori?”

“A freak. A lab rat. A mutation.”

“You might be all of those things, but you are so much more. You are a survivor. You are strong. You are beautiful. You are caring. You are goddamn inspiring.”

Before I can disagree, my mom folds me into her arms, squeezing me with all her strength. Now that I have built up my muscles, I only give her a small squeeze back, not wanting to harm her in case I have super soldier strength. Even though I don’t, I’m still afraid that I’ll hurt someone if I’m not careful.

“But back to your question,” my mom continues as she pulls out of our embrace. “We have a supply of IUDs which I know how to...install. Would you like one?”

I don't hesitate to answer because I never want to get pregnant. Not with the world the way it is now. Even though I have no plans on ever having sex again, having a Plan B is always smart. "Yes."

"Let's get you one then, sweetie. And just so you know, if you change your mind, it's very easy to remove. Okay?"

I nod in understanding, letting her take my hand and guide me to another examination room where I'm assuming the contraceptive merchandise is stored.

By the time I get back to my dorm in the late afternoon, I'm so exhausted I drop onto my bed. I must have fallen asleep because when I wake up, it's pitch black outside. It feels like no time has passed, which means I didn't have any dreams. Good. I hate when I dream because it's never about unicorns and rainbows or endless pizza buffets.

Right on cue, my stomach grumbles, telling me I've missed out on dinner. Hoping that it's not too late to grab a bite, I roll out of bed and shuffle over to the door. With my hand on the knob, I give it a jerk to the right, but it doesn't budge. In my exhaustion, I hadn't locked my door, so it should have opened. Maybe it's stuck? Though that makes little sense. I try the lock again, but it isn't bolted. What the fuck! I grab hold of the knob and twist as hard as I can, wishing I had that superhuman strength to bust open this goddamn door.

I push. I kick. I slam my whole body into it and still can't get it to open.

Someone locked me in. That's the only explanation. They imprisoned me here when Amos promised me that would never happen again. After shouting and banging on the door for what feels like hours, my breathing turns shallow and my vision goes black. I am falling. Falling into darkness. And as hard as I've fought against the darkness of my mind for years, I can no longer hold it back.

Then I hear banging. But the sound is muffled. I can't see anything around me, making it difficult to figure out where the sound comes from. My breaths drag heavily against an unseen force, as if I'm underwater and trying to swim to the surface. But the water doesn't break. Fear consumes me again, bringing me back into its dark abyss.

My ears strain to hold on to the sounds of shouting from far away. A last attempt to ground myself. When I hear a familiar voice, my body relaxes enough for me to pull myself out of the void inside me. Warmth. The fast, steady beating of a heart. Comfort. That is the first thing I feel when my mind steadies itself. After a few shaky breaths, I can see again.

Amos has his arms wrapped around me as he holds me tight against his chest. I'm curled up in his lap in the goddamn closet. How the hell did I get here? What happened?

I must have said that last thought out loud because Amos responds with, "I have been asking you that for the last thirty minutes, Lori. You scared the shit out of me. I've never seen someone stuck in what looked like shell shock for so long."

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He pulls me in tighter, as if afraid he'll lose me. If I had been stuck inside my mind for much longer, I might not have been able to pull myself out. I wrap my arms around Amos' neck, letting him hold me tighter. This is a place I could spend eternity in. Amos' arms. It doesn't feel real. This comfort. This safe place. This...love.

"Am I dreaming?" I whisper against his neck, causing his skin to perform a wave in goosebumps.

"No, Copperhead. You are very much awake," he says into my hair. The intimacy of our two bodies pressed together and our mouths touching such sensitive places makes my body shiver. Assuming the shiver is from being cold, Amos shimmies us out of the closet and places me on the bed, tucking me in under a warm blanket. "How's that?"

I mumble an affirmation even though I'm now much colder without the heat of his body under mine. Before he turns to go, Amos gently caresses my cheek with a calloused hand. Our eyes lock for a moment. A moment that feels like infinity. He quickly turns away from me as if afraid of the infinite possibilities a look like that can grant. With his back to me, I turn my head to the window to see it's still dark outside.

I grimace in pain, my stomach groaning in hunger. How long was I locked in here? How did I get locked in here? I open my mouth to ask Amos, but he's talking to someone else from the doorway of my room.

His voice is low, but menacing. I would hate to be on the receiving end of that voice. Sitting up, I attempt to listen to the conversation he's having. But I don't have to try too hard.

Katie screams at Amos. “You have no right to do that! I have done my duty. Every single day. You cannot take me out of patrol duty.”

“I just did. You will also be moving rooms.”

Katie makes a loud tantrum-like huff before saying, “Why should I move? I was here first.”

Ignoring Katie, Amos calls out for Kyle, who I’m guessing is in the living room. “Help Katie move what little belongings she has into my room and bring my stuff here.”

My heart hammered in my chest for a second, thinking that Amos meant for Katie to move in with him. But he’s going to swap rooms with her. Why? As if sensing my question, Amos turns to look at me, offering a subtle smile. But he doesn’t offer to explain what the hell is going on. While his body is half turned in the doorway, I notice the crowd of people in the living room.

Cal and Mina are in their usual spots on the couch. Anna is leaning against the backside of it. Katie is pacing back and forth as if attempting to burn a hole in the floor. When Kyle walks back in with what I’m assuming is Amos’ stuff, I notice my mom. Our eyes meet and I can see the desperation there.

“Mom?” I say, unable to keep the shakiness out of my voice.

She quickly turns to Amos as if pleading with him. A slight nod from him supposedly gives my mom permission to cross the barricade of his body. Amos takes a step back for my mom to enter. Once she is all the way inside my room, Amos resumes his stance like a secret service agent guarding the president.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” my mom asks as she scoops me in for a hug. I have no

time to respond as she says, “I was so worried about you.”

“What happened?”

My mom sits back against the bed and looks at me as if she is debating on how to respond. She sighs before saying, “Katie locked you in your room.”

“What?! Why? How? The lock is on the inside.”

Another sigh, this one with a bit of anger attached to it. “I don’t know how she did it. A chair and some rope were involved. As to the why, I have less of an answer.”

I probably have the answer, but could jealousy really drive her to do this to me? Did she know how I would react? She tried hard to break me on the sparring mat today, but didn’t succeed. I’ll have to give her this one because she broke me mentally. If Amos wasn’t here to pull me out, I’m not sure I would be here, at least with my mind intact. I really thought that I was a prisoner again. This time, I’m not sure where my mind went.

At the bunker, I could always disassociate myself from my surroundings. It was the only way I was able to get up every day and keep moving. But what happened tonight? It’s like my mind couldn’t take it. I didn’t want to go back to that way of existing. Taking a strangled breath, I reach out to my mom. She holds me against her as she lays me down on the bed, wrapping me tight in her maternal embrace. It’s exactly the medicine I need.

Chapter 27

After the incident with Katie, I rarely see her. Amos had her moved to a different dorm building a few days later. I thought he’d move back into his original room after that, but six months later, he’s still taking up residence in the room next to mine. At first, I

was a little embarrassed, thinking everyone would see me as weak. That I needed a bodyguard.

Amos barely spends time in my dorm though, as if he is trying to give me some space and freedom. But every night, Amos returns, takes a shower, then heads to bed. I still haven't quite gotten used to the sight of Amos in nothing but a towel. Every time he comes out of the bathroom, Cal has to nudge me in the side to keep me from drooling all over myself.

Holy hell, is Amos a gorgeous god of a man. The first time my eyes witnessed the chiseled flesh of his abdomen, I could not stop staring at the lines of his muscle, imagining where they lead to. I've gotten better at hiding my shame, especially after he caught me ogling at him. When he winked at me, I was mortified. The humiliation runs deeper than that when I touch myself at night, thinking of his glistening pecs.

If he ever found out how many times I've come undone just imagining his strong fingers on my body, I would never be able to face him again. Somehow, I am able to keep a straight composure with Amos at the gym, when we eat together, and when we take long walks around The Valley. He's like a different person in those moments. My personal trainer, my companion, my friend.

We've learned a lot about each other and a bit about our pasts from the before. I can tell it still hurts him to talk about his mom, but there's a layer of pride and love in his voice. Amos' mom, Charvi, immigrated to America as a teenager. She came here from India all by herself, wanting to study medicine. While on the path to become a doctor, she fell in love with his dad, an Irish-American car mechanic.

When Amos told me about how his father had ginger hair, a darker shade than mine, I couldn't help but think of the ginger children we could have together. I try so hard to erase these thoughts from my mind, reminding myself that Amos is my friend.

But at night, when he emerges from the bathroom after his showers, he becomes all my wet dreams. I'm like a teenage girl salivating in front of a Timothée Chalamet poster. Except Amos is not a poster. He is a real-life male with golden eyes that can pierce souls, powerful hands that can crush enemies, and a body that...

"Lori, what are you thinking about?" Amos asks as he approaches, startling me from my daydreaming as I walk down the long hallway in the sports center.

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“Oh, hey, Amos.” My face is no doubt showing the lingering blush from my scandalous thoughts. But I do my best to brush them off and jump into business mode. “What are we going to work on today?”

“Arm strength.” Amos slows his pace to keep in time with my short stride.

“I think my arms are strong enough. Can we work on something else today? Something we’ve never done before? Something that will prove to you I’m ready for patrol?”

Amos rolls his eyes, most likely talking himself down from giving me another lecture. But instead of leading me to the gym, Amos leads me into the indoor track, where we usually meet with the patrol units for combat training. I follow him into the middle, through one of the mesh dividers, and step onto the mat.

“Okay, Copperhead. Show me what you got.” Amos falls into position, ready for a fight.

“What? You want me to spar with you?” I’ve sparred with everyone else, even Kyle, who is a hulk of a man. But I’ve never sparred with Amos. It’s like there is this unspoken rule between us. We shouldn’t touch. I mean, yes, Amos has held me, comforted me. But this? Sparring? It’ll be too much. Too intimate. As weird as that sounds.

“I want you to give me everything you have.” Amos stands up tall as he continues to look right at me with that hawk-like stare. “Do not hold back. Show me what you’ve learned from your training. If you defeat me, I’ll think about assigning you to a patrol

unit.”

“You’ll think about it? Suck my dick!” I yell in mock anger, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“Do you have a dick to suck? Because I would enjoy sucking your dick, Copperhead.”

Amos’ retort makes my arms fall to my sides. My jaw also falls open in shock. Did he just say he’d suck my dick? Wait, does Amos prefer dick? Well, there go all my nighttime fantasies. Or perhaps that only makes them wilder. A smirk curves the side of my face at the dirty thoughts that enter my brain. For a moment, I forget that I’m not alone.

“I knew you had a smutty mind,” Amos chuckles, reading the thoughts on my face. An instant later, the soft lines around his eyes go rigid as he attempts to pierce me with gold flecks. “Fight me, Copperhead. Take me down.”

Oh, he is so on. I charge at him before he can get himself ready for my attack, but he’s quick on his feet, stepping to the side. He grabs me around my middle and flips me over to my back. Every bit of air is thrown from my lungs, incapacitating me for a moment. Then I remember why I am fighting him. I need to prove myself and every second counts.

As Amos attempts to swoop down to grab me again, I roll away from him, heaving myself back onto my feet. Bouncing on my toes, I weigh my options. There’s no way I’m going to win by strength. That superhuman strength everyone thinks I have from the super soldier serum I was injected with? Yeah, that’s non-existent. The only extra strength it gives me is more endurance. I will have to win this fight through stealth, wit, and perhaps a diversion or two.

We circle each other, trying to gauge what we are planning on doing to one another. I know Amos' moves from watching him spar with Kyle, Andrew, Lucas, and Olivia—Amos' four commanders. I've seen him spar with others too. Rarely does he lose. In fact, I've only seen him defeated once. I keep my head from shaking at the realization that this was all a trap. Amos will never let me go on a patrol.

My eyes meet his with feral anger and I leap at him, this time ready for any of his reactions. He dodges every single one of my punches. Parries my kicks. His reflexes are so fast that he grabs my ankle after I aim a kick at his face. Next thing I know, I'm on my back. Again. Punching the mat in frustration, I quickly get back to my feet.

“Is this the only way you'll let me go on patrol, Amos? If I defeat you in battle.”

His smile is anything but hideous, even with the maniacal undertones. Shit. Why does he have to be so freaking beautiful? I shake my head, ridding it of any other thoughts that portray Amos as anything other than my enemy. At least for this moment. I charge at him again, which might be a mistake considering this is a repeat move. But Amos makes his own mistake by attempting to grab for me again. I hoped he would.

I launch myself at him, my legs hurdling over his arms to wrap around his neck. Using the momentum, I swing around and flip myself backward, throwing Amos to the ground Black Widow style. I twist my ankle as I land on the ground, but push through the pain. Not wanting to give Amos a chance to recover from the shock of being thrown to the ground, I pounce, straddling him in a way that I hope will overpower his massive body.

His body relaxes underneath me even though he could easily throw me off since I neglected to subdue his arms. Instead, he places his hands behind his head as if getting ready to take a nap and says, “Impressive, Copperhead.”

I swat at his chest as I make to stand up, but the sudden movement to my twisted ankle makes me wince. Amos' hands are on my waist, hoisting me off of him with a gentle ease and placing me down on the mat to examine my injury.

"I'm fine," I say. "Just twisted my ankle. In an hour, it will be good as new."

"You might not have an hour when you are outside The Valley." Amos' hands caress the skin around my ankle, making me shiver and not from coldness.

"You aren't going to let me outside, are you?"

Amos kneels down beside me as he scoops my hand in his. "Lori, you are an incredible warrior. Every day you come in here, you work your ass off to prove yourself. I need you to know I see that. There's no reason to keep you from going out there. But I can't get the image of your body ripped to pieces out of my mind."

Shit. I know I am still traumatized from that day. But I didn't think Amos would be. I never really thought about it, even though he'd told me he was there that day. That he thinks of that day. The sight of me must have been horrifying. Still, it doesn't excuse him from keeping me cooped up when I can fight, when I'm willing to fight. Even after all I have been through. I am just about to say this out loud when his fingers interlace with mine.

His hand feels like it belongs there. I stare down at our joined fingers as he says, "Physically, you are ready. But I need you to be mentally prepared. Talk to Alison. If she clears you for patrol duty, I promise to put you on the next mission. Deal?"

I thought this moment would make me happy. Instead, I feel fear, worry, and doubt. All I can do is nod my head in agreement, not wanting Amos to know I'm feeling this mixture of emotions. The gentle brush of his thumb on my palm sends a jolt of electricity to another part of my body. I suppress a whimper as I let out a sigh.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” Kyle walks through the mesh barrier hesitantly, looking directly at Amos, avoiding our joined hands. Instead of releasing my hand, Amos grips it tighter as he helps me up to my feet.

After checking that I won’t keel over from my injury, Amos turns to Kyle with a stone-cold face of composure, asking, “Do you have a report for me, Kyle?”

Is he not a hot mess from our closeness? Does this not have any effect on him? I slowly untangle our figures with the excuse that I need to check on my ankle for bruising.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

Kyle pulls Amos far enough away that I can't hear what they are discussing. Whatever it is looks serious, making me wonder if I'll be made privy to the conversation afterward. I test the weight on my twisted ankle and it's already feeling better. Amos looks back at me with a smile, but I can see the worry behind his facade.

I give him a questioning look, which he doesn't respond to. When I take a step forward, my ankle still twinges but not as bad as before. I test out a few more steps, but I'm very obviously limping. Amos is at my side in three long strides, scooping me up in his arms.

"What are you doing?" I instinctively wrap my arms around Amos' neck but quickly change tactic, attempting to wiggle out of his arms.

"You're injured. I'm taking you to the health center."

"I'm fine, Amos."

"There's no point in arguing with him, Lori. He's an overbearing puppy." Kyle laughs, dodging Amos' leg that attempted a "this is Sparta!" kick.

"Woah there, little pup. It's okay. Calm down." I mean to stroke his cheek playfully, as one would scratch a dog, but it quickly turns into a sensual touch. A touch that shoots lightning through my fingertips. The kind of lightning that tingles in all the right places and I know he feels it too. Our eyes lock for far too long, tempting me to lean in closer.

"I feel like I'm still interrupting something," Kyle says from behind me. I quickly

remove my hand from Amos' face, placing it around his neck. That stone cold face of his slides into place, and the three of us fall silent as we walk out of the sports center.

Chapter 28

Alison cleared me for patrol duty a few hours after Amos and I sparred. When I went searching for him, I discovered he had left The Valley on an urgent mission. One of the freezers in the kitchens went out, nearly spoiling all the meat that's stored in there. So it's up to Amos and a few others to either find a replacement or the part needed to make it work again.

Knowing he was out hunting for freezer parts didn't make me as mad as when I thought he'd left to hunt Doctore without me. He asked me to join him in this fight months ago. And I agreed. I was and am now still a willing participant. I want to take that fucker down. Now that I have clearance to go out there, my patience is running thin. Amos has been away for six days. Six days!

This isn't the longest he's been away, but this is the most anxious I've been for him to return. I keep telling myself it's because I want the chance to go on patrol, to see what the world outside looks like, to contribute to the cause. But my mind keeps lingering on Amos. His eyes. His mouth. His body.

I'm just a horny twenty-three-year-old. As I lie in bed waiting for sleep to claim me, my body keeps me awake with a need I know I won't be able to fulfill. But I try. My hand wanders down my stomach, slipping underneath my pajama pants. I'm already wet just thinking about Amos.

Images of him still wet from the shower are pinned to the backs of my eyelids. In my imagination, the towel slips from his slick body, revealing every inch of him. Though this is a fictional version of him, not having seen him completely naked, I devour it nonetheless. My fingers part the wet folds of my sensitive skin, making me gasp with

need as I pretend they are Amos' fingers.

I can almost feel the warm weight of him on my thighs, parting them to push in deeper, faster. Closer, closer, so close. I suppress a moan as the bundle of nerves from my core burst in flames of passion. Holy shit. If this is how I feel after flicking my own bean, how would it feel if Amos was the one doing it?

The blush on my skin burns brighter at the thought. But my body is now relaxed and ready for a good night's sleep.

The morning brings on the same routine I've been living for the past six months. While Amos is away, I train with Kyle. He's a brute, but takes it much easier on me than Amos. Today is a little different though. When I walk into the gym, Olivia and Kyle are waiting for me. When I met Kyle, I remember thinking he was a real life replica of Captain America. Olivia is the female equivalent, but with bronze skin, hazel eyes, and black hair.

"Morning, Lori," Olivia says with a bright and cheery smile. It's a little unnerving.

"Hey guys. What's going on?" I hesitate to approach them, taking small, timid steps in their direction.

"Norman wants to run some endurance tests." Kyle's arms are crossed. At least he has the decency to look annoyed as he tells me what the plans are for the day. "You are going to do your normal workout with me, then Olivia is going to take you to the pool."

"The pool?" Rapids of dread flow through my veins. In the before, I would not have flinched at being told to go to the pool. I would have run and dove right in. But here? Now? I have been instructed to never enter the pool area at the other end of the athletic building. The thick wall of windows have even been painted to prevent

anyone from looking in from the indoor track. All I've been told is that Norman does his experiments there.

"Why the pool?" I ask.

"Norman has set up some kind of obstacle course," Olivia vaguely explains.

"Okay, and I'm just going to have to run the course?"

She shrugs in response while Kyle nods his head, avoiding eye contact. I continue to look right at him as I ask another question. "Does my mom know about this?"

"No. Should she have been informed?" Kyle is now alert, concern creasing his brow.

Yes. I think to myself. I don't want to make a complicated situation for Kyle and Olivia though. Norman has cooled down on the over-enthusiasm, becoming sympathetic during our sessions, which are now just interviews as there aren't many other tests he can do to me without causing physical pain. Still, I have never been left alone with him. My mom has always accompanied me. And if she can't be there, Amos is there. But Amos is far away from The Valley.

"Will one of you be joining me at the pool?" I ask, looking between Olivia and Kyle.

They look at each other in question. "Would you like us to be there?"

My head begins to nod but changes course into a shake. "No. I guess I'll be all right. It's just a little strange that I wasn't notified about this 'test' as I'm always given ample notice on what tests Norman has planned for me."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:40 am

“I can be there if you need emotional support. Honestly, I’m fucking pissed that Norman is ordering me to do this to you when Amos isn’t here. I promised Amos to look after you,” Kyle says in all seriousness, but he still can’t meet my eyes, as if he’d give something away if he looked at me.

“Why would Amos ask you to do that?” My question is rhetorical, or at least I know the answer...I think. I know Amos cares about me. I know there is something between us. I’m just not ready to face it.

“I dunno.” Kyle shrugs, still avoiding eye contact.

Olivia sighs in frustration, rolling her eyes at Kyle. “We all know the answer to that question. Now let’s move. Norman doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

I follow the exercise routine Kyle planned for the morning. Some weight training before a butt ton of cardio. After two hours, my endurance is waning and I don’t know if I have the energy for Norman’s obstacle course. Kyle ends our session without a cool down, sweat lining his brow as he had done every single exercise alongside me.

After a drink of water, Olivia joins us and we head down the long hallway to the aquatic area. I see Norman waiting for us as we approach the glass door to the pool. He opens the door, allowing me through, but stops Kyle and Olivia from entering.

“Where she goes, I go, Norman.” Kyle stands his ground, giving Norman a look that would make Amos proud.

“Same with me, doc. Our orders from Amos were to make sure his lady is well taken care of.” Olivia smirks at me as my eyes widen at her statement.

I want to say I’m no one’s lady, but the words don’t make it out of my mouth. All I can do is stand awkwardly on the other side of the door, hoping that Norman doesn’t lock them out. I don’t know why I’m so afraid to be alone with him. It’s not like we are in an abandoned building, but this pool has always given me the creeps. The secretive way Norman sneaks in here to perform experiments no one talks about. Well, I guess I’m about to find out what those are at least.

Norman sighs as he opens the door wider to allow Olivia and Kyle inside. “You can sit in the stands. Do not interrupt my experiment.”

Before following Norman into the pool area, I ask, “Am I the experiment today, Norman?”

I will not be made a victim again. I will not be someone’s plaything again. I don’t say these words out loud, but I give Norman a look so he knows he will not get away with the same shit Doctore did to me.

“I would simply like to test your endurance. If you can hold up to a higher level of stress and exercise than most. How do you feel after your workout with Kyle?”

“A little tired, but I feel like I’ve already recovered.” I cross my arms, stubbornly following Norman into the pool area as Olivia and Kyle follow close behind.

Norman halts at the pool and turns around to look at us. “And you, Kyle? How are you feeling?”

“I would love a large sandwich and a nap to refuel my body. I’m just grateful I don’t have to do that.” Kyle points into the pool where a myriad of contraptions and

obstacles have been built.

“Did you build this for me, Norman? Or already had it set up?” I ask as I look ahead of me at the twenty-five-meter bone-dry pool.

“It’s been a work in progress for a few months. Now,” Norman says as he spins around, motioning us to follow. “Olivia and Kyle, you can head on up to the stands as spectators. Laurel, climb on down.”

I lean over the edge, looking down at the shallow end. It’s a small jump in. Once my feet land on the solid floor of the pool, I look up at Norman for instruction. His only words are, “Try to make it to the other side.”

Shit. This will not be fun. The obstacles begin before the floor slopes down to the deep end. I can’t see a way out, but I move ahead anyway through something that’s a hybrid of a playground and an American Ninja Warrior course. A few pathways await me. A tunnel on the left. A floating bridge on the right. In the middle, a large rock-climbing wall.

I choose the wall first, hoping it will give me an advantage. When I reach the top, there is no view of the inside. If I climb down on this side, I’ll be walking into a dark unknown. Pass. So I climb back down the way I came up and head over to the tunnel. It’s another dark passage, but I can see light at the end, so I get on all fours and crawl to the other side.

The tunnel ends with a drop and no way to get down except for the fly wheels hanging over the deep end of the pool. Looking down, I can’t tell if there’s any padding that will lighten the fall. If I don’t make this jump, I could break my legs. I try to see where the floating bridge leads to, but I can’t see it from this vantage point. Everything is cleverly hidden under canvas canopies or sheets of plywood.

Taking a literal leap of faith, I jump onto the first fly wheel, swinging my body back and forth to gain momentum. I fly into the air, reaching the second fly wheel. From here, all I need to do is land on the small platform a few feet ahead. One more swing will get me there. As my feet land heavily on the platform, the solid ground underneath my feet disappears and I fall to the pool floor, smacking my head on something on my way down.

It's dark underneath the enclosure of the obstacle course, but I can make out the shapes of walls, something that looks like monkey bars, and...shit. Something moved. Something fucking moved. Maybe it's my mind playing tricks on me, but I can't shake the feeling that this is wrong and I need to get the hell out. I sprint for the monkey bars, jumping up to grab hold of the closest rung. Then I swing my feet up, sliding my legs in between the rungs to pull myself through.

When I'm safely off the ground, I turn toward the movement I saw earlier. My eyes land directly on a deadie. Behind it is a fresher zombie. Not one of the fast freshies, but there's enough flesh on this one to make my adrenaline kick into gear. My eyes scan the dim light for anything I can grab to hoist myself higher. Spinning delicately on the rungs of the monkey bars, I spot a rope hanging from the roof of this deadly obstacle course. I'll need to run in order to make the jump.

Taking a deep breath, I pull myself up to my full height and sprint with delicate precision, landing each step on a rung before reaching the end. With every ounce of strength, I launch myself off the last rung and grab onto the hanging rope as if my life depends on it. Which it sort of does because if I fall, I will be eaten alive. There is no easy access for anyone to stop the zombies from doing so in this arena.

Fury ignites inside me. How could I let this happen again? If I get out of this hellhole, I am going to kill Norman. I climb the rope, sliding down a few inches for every foot, but I'm making progress. When I reach the top, I find a small opening in the trusses of the make-shift roof covering the deep end of the pool. It's a big enough hole for

me to climb through and stable enough for my full weight. Out in the open, I find Kyle on the stands and shout, “Get me out of here! There are zombies inside!”

Kyle is on his feet and sprinting down the stands a moment later, Olivia right behind him. Norman only smiles at Kyle’s screaming fury. I can’t hear what they are saying to each other as fear and adrenaline are still pumping through my ears. While they argue, I look for a way out. The roof is not flat enough to walk across, but I could jump from panel to panel even with them angled dangerously toward the pool floor.

Thankfully, my sneakers have a good grip, giving me confidence to go for it. I make the first jump with ease. After the fifth jump, my fingers are bleeding and my knees are sore from being banged up. But I have to keep going. I’m so close to the edge of the pool. When I reach the end of the roof, I only have a few feet to jump in order to reach safe ground.

I grip the plywood of the roof hard before making one last leap. In midair, my foot gets caught on something, bringing me up short. I’m able to grab the edge of the pool with the tips of my fingers, pulling myself up to my elbows. Something grabs my ankle, pulling me further down. I scream as I lose my grip. I scream louder as I feel my flesh being ripped open by decaying teeth. Right before another scream rips through me as my fingers slip on the smooth concrete, a pair of arms reaches for me, pulling me up and out of the obstacle course of death.

Chapter 29

Olivia walked me back to my dorm while Kyle continued to rail into Norman. I'm surprised no one made me seek medical attention, especially since I had been bitten by a zombie. What if I'm not immune anymore? It's been over half a year since the last time I was bitten. Is that what Norman was testing? He obviously couldn't care less about my endurance.

That bastard. He's just like Doctore.

Once in my dorm, I head into the bathroom to examine my wounds. What is nice about these dorms is that each quad room gets their own bathroom with a large vanity and mirror. There's even a separate room for the shower and toilet. Standing in front of the mirror, I stare at my bruised face. It looks okay, just a small bruise on my cheek. With my shredded hands, I pull off my yoga pants, revealing the scary bruising around my right knee. The bite mark on my ankle is already healing though, so that's a good sign.

Maybe a hot shower will heal the rest of me. I pull off my shirt, careful of my tender shoulder and head to the door separating this space from the shower. To my surprise, the shower is occupied. I must have been so deep inside my head that I didn't hear the shower running. I wasn't expecting anyone to be around considering Cal and Mina are still sleeping.

The curtain to the shower is open enough for me to see Amos. Every delicious inch of him. He's hunched over, a hand bracing his weight as he lets the hot water cascade down his body. I gasp when my eyes land on what his other hand is doing, making

Amos very aware of my presence. He smiles at me while he strokes his hard dick faster as if sensing my arousal, our eyes only breaking from each other as mine roam down to watch him pleasure himself and he to take in my nearly naked body.

I know I should leave, but my feet are glued to the floor. My eyes cannot look away. And when Amos reaches release, I feel my body ache in all the places I want him to touch me. I don't watch his hands as he orgasms. I watch his face. His once piercing eyes are now cloudy with desire. My name falls from his lips as he moans into the water still pouring out of the showerhead.

All at once, awareness of what just happened shocks my system and I slam the door shut. But I don't run away. No. I have to face Amos to make sure things won't get awkward between us. The water turns off a couple minutes later and my anxious nerves force me to pace the length of the small room attached to where Amos is drying off his gorgeous body.

I try to shake the image from my mind. I try to cool my nerves. Deep, calming breaths. Just as I'm about to run to my room, the door to the shower room opens. Amos' golden eyes claim mine the instant I turn toward him. That's when I realize I haven't put my clothes back on. There's Amos in nothing but a towel, a sight that has been the inspiration for all the horny dreams I've been having lately. And a few feet away, me, in nothing but a bra and panties.

Amos closes the distance between us but doesn't reach out to touch me. "Did you like what you saw, Copperhead?"

"I...I didn't know you were back." Deflect. Yes. That was the right move.

"I only just returned twenty minutes ago. Needed a shower for more than one reason." His gaze could burn the rest of my clothes off. God, how I want to let him.

I take a timid step back, which he respects, but when his eyes roam around my body this close, he can see all the bruises I received from Norman's obstacle course. The feeling of his eyes inspecting me makes me feel vulnerable, naked, anxious. I cross my arms over my chest and take another step back.

"What happened? Lori, who did this to you?" Anger, fear, concern tangle like ribbons in his voice.

"Why do you care?" Shit. Why am I getting so defensive?

"Lori, tell me what happened." Amos grabs my arms and every bit of composure and control I once had goes out the window. I push him off of me, not even blushing when Amos' towel slips dangerously below his hips.

"You don't get to make demands of me. You don't get to order me around. And you sure as hell don't get to treat me like I belong to you. I am not 'your lady' or your charity case. I don't owe you anything."

The hurt in Amos' eyes flash into anger before he storms out of the bathroom. I try to ignore the pain in my chest, but it grows stronger with each breath I take. It's not fair that I put all my emotional weight onto Amos. He's not to blame. He was the one standing in front of me when I snapped.

I should go apologize to him and tell him everything that happened. Instead, I grab my towel off the hook and head into the shower room, trying to forget the image of Amos jerking off in there. At the same time, part of my brain has already saved a file to open up later when I'm desperate for his touch.

After I'm showered, dried, and dressed, I don't quite know what to do with myself. I have my usual appointment with Alison, but I don't think I can stomach a session today. Maybe that's exactly why I should go. I collapse on my bed, replaying

everything I said to Amos. Not the near-death experience I had earlier this morning. No. The hurt and anger I saw on Amos' face tears at my heart. I never want to hurt Amos. Never.

Rolling out of bed, I pull on my sneakers and head out the door. I'm not quite sure where I'm going yet, but I take the sidewalk that runs between the dorm buildings. A group of kids kick a ball around on the lawn, not a single care in the world. I envy them. Their ignorance. Their inexperience of how cruel this world is. And I hope it stays that way for them.

As I approach the sidewalk that leads to Alison's office, I decide to take the long way there and walk through the Peace Garden. I once thought it a silly, useless place, but it's become one of my favorite places to sit and think, especially after a mentally taxing therapy session. I push open the gate to find Amos hunched over on the little bridge overlooking the small koi-less koi pond. He doesn't notice me right away, so I clear my throat to get his attention.

Amos looks at me but doesn't say a thing, only turns his body as if to walk away. I run to him, not wanting him to leave but also not knowing what to say just yet, so I pull him into a hug. A hug he melts into, wrapping his strong arms around my shoulders. Our bodies are flush against each other, not leaving any room even for a gust of wind to break through.

With my face against his chest, I say, "I'm sorry, Amos. I didn't mean those things I said to you."

His hand lightly strokes the small of my back, sending shivers up and down my spine.

"I know."

We stand in silence for a few moments, swaying in the early spring breeze. It's still

cold enough to give me an excuse for needing this excessively long hug. But Amos doesn't seem to mind. In fact, he pulls me in tighter until every muscle in my body relaxes in his arms. Then he says in a whisper so quiet I can barely hear him, "I nearly killed Norman."

I try to pull away, but Amos has me locked in a tight embrace, which I'm totally okay with. I actually never want his arms to leave my body. So I ask against his chest, "What do you mean you nearly killed Norman?"

The anger inside him stays down to a simmer, but I can tell he was enraged before wrapping me in his arms. His mouth moves against my hair as he says, "Kyle had to hold me back. I was ready to break Norman's fucking neck. It's my fault. I should never have allowed it to happen."

"It's okay, Amos. This isn't your fault. I willingly went into that pool."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:41 am

“It’s not okay, Lori. And it is my fault. I should have known he would pull something like this while I was away.” Amos’ grip around my shoulders tightens until I can barely breathe. But this breathless feeling fills me with more than air.

He lets me go suddenly, air filling my lungs, cold claiming my skin, and an emptiness takes up residency inside me again. “Kyle said you got bitten. Can I see?”

I answer with a nod, bending over to pull my pants up over my ankle. The skin is still red, a fresh scar now instead of a nasty bite wound. Amos kneels next to me, lightly skimming my raw skin with the tips of his fingers, causing me to shiver and not from the cold spring air.

“Let’s get you inside. You’re shivering.” Amos pulls the fabric of my pants back down over my ankles and reaches for my hand, which I take without hesitating. “You have your appointment with Alison now, right?”

“Yeah.” My response is short only because my mind is working in overdrive. Amos’ hand in mine fills me with a sense of security I haven’t felt in ages. As we approach the French doors at the back of the building, Amos holds one of them open to let me through, then follows me in.

Alison looks up at us from her desk, a question on her brow. “Is everything all right, Lori? Your mother was just here, frantically looking for you.”

“Oh? I’ve been in the garden with Amos. Is she still here?” I ask.

Alison nods, standing to open the door to the lobby. “Cathy, Lori is here now. Do you

want to see her?”

My mom bolts into the room and scoops me away from Amos, who seems like he’s about to leave.

“Wait!” I shout, not quite ready to explain my abrupt emotional shift, but knowing I need him here. “Could you stay? And you, Mom? I...I’m ready to talk about something. Something that has been hard to process because I’m not sure if it really happened, but I know I need to talk about it.”

“Of course, sweetie,” my mom says as she brushes a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

“Are you sure?” Amos asks, looking hesitant, like he’s unsure if he really belongs in this conversation.

I nod. “It will save me having to repeat it. But after the shit day I’ve had, I know I need to get this off my chest.”

Amos nods his head in understanding. The seriousness of what I’m asking is written all over his face, except for the twinge of a smile at the corner of his mouth. Yes. I think to myself. You are important to me. You are the keeper of my secrets. Please don’t betray me. I send my thoughts to him, hoping he can hear me. When his eyes meet mine, they are full of understanding.

My mom and Amos follow me over to the couch in Alison’s office, sitting down on either side of me. Alison takes her usual seat on the opposite side of the coffee table. Wasting no time, she asks, “What is it you want to discuss with us, Lori?”

“I know you all probably want to hear about what happened this morning. It sucked. And I will no longer be allowing Norman to run his tests on me. I don’t care if that gets me kicked out of The Valley. He doesn’t come anywhere near me.”

My body shakes, not from fear but anger. Then I feel Amos' hand on my thigh as my mom grabs my hand, bringing it to her heart.

"You will not be kicked out. And I will make sure that Norman never comes near you again," Amos promises. I believe him. Even if it's against what the rest of the leaders want, I know Amos will get his say.

My mom gives me her approval, saying, "If Norman tries anything else, he will be the one kicked out."

I breathe in a sigh of relief knowing I am safe. Knowing I have people who will protect me. When I look at Alison, she nods her agreement. "I just want to ask you one question before we start, Lori. Since you've invited Amos and your mother into this session, do I have your permission to discuss with them in their private sessions with me any of the topics you will bring up?"

I'm taken aback by the question. "Wait, you guys go to therapy too?"

"We all need help getting through this new way of living, sweetie." My mom's answer is gentle but straightforward. Amos doesn't answer at all, just keeps his gaze on the ground.

"Yes. You can talk about me if it comes up," I say.

Alison's eyes dart to Amos for a split second before landing back on me. When she nods, I begin telling them something that happened to me in the bunker. The thing that broke me like nothing else. When I lost my unborn baby.

Chapter 30

2 Years Earlier...

I wasn't sure I was pregnant until I'd puked my brains out for a week straight. It didn't make sense. Yeah, Jonah and I had sex often. We both were given pills that prevented pregnancies though. No one else in the bunker had gotten pregnant. At least, not that I knew of. I was terrified to say anything about it, but I knew Doctore would find out soon.

Every morning I had to show up for my examination. Some days, it was a simple check to make sure I still wasn't turning into a zombie. Other days, I'd spend hours in the examination room or the lab where Doctore would run various tests on me. Shocking every part of my body to see how much I could withstand. If my heart stopped, would it come back to life on its own? I blocked most of it out, pushing my consciousness somewhere else.

After another week, it seemed like my pregnancy wasn't detected on any of the machines. My nausea went away too. Maybe I just had a stomach bug or something. After another week, I was convinced that I wasn't pregnant. Two months later, I could feel the baby bump even though I wasn't showing yet.

Jonah, the one person who would have noticed, didn't say a goddamn thing. Another month later, I looked like I was getting fat. At four months, it was becoming obvious. Still, no one said a single thing. None of the nurses working for Doctore nor Doctore himself. There was one day when he gave me a look that said "interesting" but it was paired with a maniacal smile. One that sent dread prickling down my spine.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:41 am

It'd been four months and no one had said anything to me to confirm my pregnancy, ask how I was feeling, or even comment about my weight gain. One night, while lying in Jonah's arms, I finally gave in and asked him if he noticed anything different. He shook his head and told me, "You are just as beautiful as the day I fell in love with you."

"According to you, we were six years old, so...ew." We laughed together. Something that was rare for us. The thought made my laugh cut short, and I looked Jonah right in the eyes as I said, "I'm pregnant. Did you not notice?"

"What? No. That can't be right. We both take those birth control pills Doctore developed."

"Yeah, but what if they aren't for preventing pregnancy? Or what if he gave us pseudo pills? Or, now here's one that doesn't sound like a conspiracy: what if they simply didn't work one of the times we had sex?"

"I don't know, Lori. Doctore is serious about the rule of no babies allowed. Our society isn't ready to repopulate yet. We need to first secure the world around us before we rebuild it."

"What happens if we can't provide a secure world? Will humans just die out because Doctore said so?" I sat up, wrapping the thin sheet around myself, not wanting Jonah to see my pregnant, naked body.

"Lori, what's gotten into you?" Jonah was shocked by my rebellious tone, looking around as if we were being watched, even in his own private room.

I let the sheet drop then, showing Jonah my pregnant belly. He couldn't deny what's right in front of him, right? For a moment, I could see paternal pride and joy. Just for a sliver of a moment. Then his face went stoic as he said, "You've just put on a little weight, Lori. Nothing more. You're still beautiful."

That's the moment I knew he was too far gone. I knew the Jonah I loved was no longer this man. This shell of a human who'd been so brainwashed there was no way to rewire his brain back. It hurt. More than hurt, my soul was torn to bits at the realization. The next day, when I was sent into the arena, Jonah didn't do a damn thing to stop it.

It was the only time I protested. I fought the entire way to the arena. When I was thrown onto the sandy ground, I yelled out into the crowd, "I'm pregnant! Please don't let him do this to me. I'm pregnant!"

That fight was the only one fought without the cheers of the crowd. Doctore didn't win that round. He lost the favor of his empire. But he still got what he wanted. Me. And my baby.

I was clumsy, more than usual with the extra weight. Still, I won, walking away with only a small bite from a grabber. The bite healed within an hour like it usually did. But the next day, I woke up in excruciating pain and I was bleeding. There was so much blood on the bedsheets I thought I had already died. Perhaps it was my super human healing ability that kept me alive. But I felt like death.

Jonah carried me to the infirmary and walked right back out, leaving me alone as I bled out on the gurney. He couldn't even bother to look back at me as he walked out the door. I was alone. So alone. And I was dying. My baby was dying.

I lost consciousness shortly after Jonah dropped me off. When I woke up, Doctore was hovering over me with sharp medical tools. My abdomen was ripped open and

though I could feel everything, I didn't scream until Doctore pulled out my undead baby from my womb. As loud as my scream was, it didn't drown out the growls and groans from the baby that died inside me. The baby that Doctore ripped from me. The baby that Doctore killed.

His triumphant face said it all. He knew this would happen. He knew my baby wouldn't have inherited my immunity. And he threw me into that arena to test his theory. Like a prized steed, Doctore delicately laid down my squirming child into a clear plastic crib, like the ones used for premature babies. Once his work was done, Doctore left me on the gurney, not bothering to stitch me back up. It took days for my body to close itself up. During that time, no one came to see me. No one came to comfort me. No one came to tell me what the hell had happened to my baby.

A week later, with my flesh healed and my stomach flattened back to how it looked months before, it was like the whole thing had never happened. And I believed the lie.

Present Day...

When I emerge from memory and into my current surroundings, Amos is hunched over with his elbows on his knees and my mom is staring at me with silent tears running down her cheeks. I turn to Alison, who looks as if she is on the verge of crying. She simply says, "Thank you for sharing your story with us, Lori."

"I'm sorry it took me this long to get it out."

"It took just the right amount of time that you needed. Now we all can help you heal. It could take years to heal from this trauma, but you have made the first step toward moving forward. This, Lori, is a wonderful thing. How do you feel after telling your story aloud?"

I sigh, feeling lighter than I've ever felt. "Relieved," I reply. "I feel relief."

Amos still hasn't looked at me and I'm slightly afraid he thinks low of me now after hearing how truly weak I am. Not just for letting harm come to my baby, but for thinking I was safe enough. That Jonah would stand up for me. My mom holds me to her chest, her tears now pouring in droves down my face.

"Oh, my sweet baby girl. I'm so sorry this happened to you. I knew something bad happened with Jonah, but...I'm so sorry." My mom pulls me tighter to her as if doing so will erase all these terrible memories. I wish it worked like that.

"Amos, is everything all right?" Alison asks, peering down at him. He's still hunched over. Quiet and still.

"I'm just..." Amos hesitates, then sits up to look at me. "Why did you want me here? Why tell me this?"

Still in my mom's arms, I let my honesty speak for me. "Because I wanted to tell you. Because you've been with me since the moment you rescued me from that hellhole. I wanted you to know what you rescued me from. How grateful I am that you brought me to this place, reunited me with my mom. You gave me a chance to not just survive, but to live."

I detect a struggle behind those golden eyes which have dulled down to a dark amber. I can tell he's thinking about what happened to me today. Here. In a place that's supposed to be a safe haven.

"It's not your fault, Amos," I say. "That was all Norman."

"The obstacle course was my idea. Not just for you, but for the unit. There are times when we have to run from the fast ones—freshies, as you call them. We don't always

have a direct route to run through. But I intended for this obstacle course to be zombie free and used by everyone. Norman used my idea against you, put you in danger, and it's my fault."

I pull from my mom's embrace and slide to the floor to kneel in front of Amos. The move makes his eyes go wide. I straighten my back to reach his face, cupping it in my hands. "I told you my story, because I trust you. Because you were the only one to see me as a person, even when my body was torn to pieces. You are the one who fought for me. I will never forget that."

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A single tear escapes from Amos' eye, which I gently brush away with my thumb. The weight of his guilt disintegrates under my touch. "I will always fight for you, Lori."

Chapter 31

"Isthisreallywhatpatrolling is all about?" I ask Olivia. Amos finally assigned me patrol duty, looking for feminine hygiene products. Freaking lame. I expected...well honestly, I don't know what I expected, just not this. It makes me think of the times Jonah and I would raid our neighbor's houses, which was an essential part of our survival. So I get it.

Olivia has driven us to at least a dozen different pharmacies and stores in search of menstrual cups, pads, and tampons. Nearly every one of these places had a huge supply. Perhaps feminine hygiene is the last thing on everyone's mind when they are being chased by flesh-eating monsters. But it has been nice to have these supplies available at The Valley. In the bunker, we had to use reusable cloths, which were eco-friendly but very difficult to maintain.

"For today," Olivia responds. "We are going to hit up one more place, then head back before it gets dark."

"Okay," I sigh. Am I really craving action? I should have had enough. Or maybe I just want to find something I can punch to a pulp.

The last place we stop is at a CVS that looks untouched for the most part. Olivia had explained that most of the nearby towns evacuated so quickly there was no time for

looting. So our job of looting is that much easier. The only thing we really have to worry about out here is the stray deadie or two.

We hop out of the car and cautiously walk into the already open doors of the pharmacy. Once inside, we bang on the inside of the door and run for cover under the registers. A strategic move I learned quickly today, which lets us know if there are any zombies inside. They hear a noise and it's like flies to a light. Nothing comes out from within the store after five minutes, so Olivia and I head for the feminine hygiene section.

Like with all the other stores, it's fully stocked. As Olivia fills our basket, I browse the sexual wellness section. Condoms would be a good thing to have in stock, not that I'm planning on using them. I grab a few boxes, then pause when I see a vibrator. What kind of CVS is this? In the middle of Pennsylvania, of all places. They sell—or sold—personal stimulators. I can't help myself. My hand moves on its own to pick one up.

I've never used a vibrator, being a teen with very little sexual experience when the world ended. And the bunker sure didn't have any in stock. It's heavier than I expected, more solid. My finger slides down a button and it vibrates. Loud. Olivia reacts to the sound, ready for a fight. But when she sees the cause of the noise, she snorts with laughter.

Laughter that is cut short when a deadie appears around the corner of the aisle. Shit. Behind me, Olivia drops her basket gently and reaches for her weapon. But the deadie has me on his radar, attracted to the sound of the vibrator in my hand. So I give the vibrator to it, shoving the curved end right into its cloudy, gooey eye. With one more shove, the vibrator reaches the zombie's brain, putting it out of its misery.

“Did you just off a biter with a fucking vibrator?” Olivia whispers, careful to keep her cool in case there are others hiding in the dark store.

I simply smile back before grabbing a few more vibrators. Even if the batteries eventually run out, it still looks like a fun toy to play with.

The next day at lunch, I'm sitting with Cal and Mina in the cafeteria. They cannot get over the vibrator story. I hadn't even been the one to tell it. Olivia has been going around telling literally everyone. It's a little embarrassing, even if they all think it's badass.

"Can we talk about something else, please?" I beg Cal.

"Okay, okay. But you will now be known as vibrator girl."

The three of us cackle at that. In this moment, I feel oddly normal. I don't come with any baggage. My mind is fully sane. I don't have a mutation that makes me immune to zombie bites. I don't have some kind of inhuman power to heal incredibly fast. I'm just Lori.

"What are you three laughing about?"

And there goes my happy moment. Katie sits down at our table as if she still belongs in our little roommate club. Cal and Mina's faces go rigid with vile hate. If those faces were directed at me, I'd be terrified. Katie brushes it off, flicking her hair back as she turns to me.

"I heard you went on the tampon run with Olivia yesterday. Fun." The sarcasm in Katie's voice is obvious. What's not so obvious is the venom behind it.

"What the fuck do you want, Katie?" Mina asks, trying to move Katie's attention from me. It doesn't work.

"I just want to hear all about this story everyone is talking about. How Lori killed a

biter with a vibrator? So original. I bet Amos is so proud of you.”

“Get over it, Katie.” Cal looks as if they are about to leap out of their seat. Both Cal and Mina look more pissed than I feel. It puts a smile on my face to know I have loyal friends. Unconditional friends. All because we got paired together in a dorm room.

Katie doesn’t even look at my friends though. Her eyes are fixed on mine. “I used to be on tampon duty. It was the easiest patrol run. Is that why Amos assigned you to the task?”

“What does that mean?” I ask, feeling myself deflate.

“Don’t listen to her, Lori,” Cal says. “She’s trying to bait you.”

“It means,” Katie drawls. “Amos doesn’t think you are up for the big fight. He thinks you’re weak. Just a silly girl killing biters with vibrators. Hilarious. I bet he keeps you at an arm’s length too, just like with me.”

“What do you mean, just like with you?” Mina snorts. “Amos never even looked your way.”

“Not after she showed up. And now Amos is using Lori just like he used me.” Katie’s anger is so vapid and crazy, but some of the words she says fuel my own kind of crazy anger. I’m teenage Lori again, letting Lexi’s mean words get to me. Doubt settles in and I know that’s what Katie is trying to do, but she’s right. I am weak. I am the tampon and vibrator girl. That’s what Amos thinks of me.

I stand up, ignoring Cal and Mina’s protests as I storm out of the cafeteria. In a whirlwind, I find myself back in my dorm room as Amos is about to head out. We nearly collide with each other, but I use the momentum to push him back into the

living area.

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“Do you think I’m stupid?” I yell at him, pushing him over and over until he’s against a wall. He doesn’t fight back, doesn’t even try to stop me.

“Lori, what are you talking about?” The confusion on his face infuriates me for some reason.

“You think I’m weak?”

“No. Lori, where is this coming from?”

“Have you been lying to me, Amos? Because if I find out that you have, that I’m just here for your amusement...I can’t...” Words. I can’t find the right words because what I’m saying is nonsense fuelled by irrational anger. Instead of finding better words, I push against Amos’ chest again. This time, he holds my hands in place.

“Lori, I don’t know what brought on this outburst, but you know I would never lie to you. I care about you. I...” Amos looks away, as if words have also escaped him.

“What about Katie? She said you are toying with me like you used to do to her. What did she mean by that?”

“Katie. This is about Katie?” Amos laughs, not in a mocking way but as if he’s relieved by my crazy thoughts. “The most I’ve ever spoken to Katie was that night she locked you in your room.”

“But she said—”

“Whatever she said,” Amos says, “was a lie. She wanted to rile you up. You let her win.”

“So you do think I’m weak.” The words come out as a statement, not a question. I try to pull my hands from Amos’ chest, but he holds them tight, unwilling to let go.

“Never once have I thought you weak. Never. Lori, you are the strongest person I’ve ever met. You know that. You killed a biter with a vibrator. Fucking badass.” His smile lights a flame of sanity, bringing me out of the cloudy anger Katie so easily put me in. How did she get me so angry so fast? Amos. She was trying to get me jealous and yeah, it worked.

“What are you thinking about, Copperhead.” Amos’ playful voice makes me want to do bad things. But I can’t. He’s my friend. My trainer. My roommate. He might care about me. He might flirt with me. That doesn’t mean he wants me. I think that’s what Katie was trying to unplug inside me. If that’s true, then she’s smarter than anyone gives her credit for.

“I wish I could hate you. It would make everything so much easier,” I mutter.

“Hate me? Why do you want to hate me?” Amos releases my hands as he looks deep into my eyes, trying to figure me out while giving me the space I need.

Instead of letting my hands fall to my side, I lightly grip Amos’ shirt. Fuck it. I launch myself up, smashing my lips against his. An instant later, Amos’ hands are on my ass, hoisting me up to wrap my legs around his waist. He kisses me back with a hunger that makes me want to give myself to him to feast on. I yelp as he spins with me still in his arms, walking us to his bedroom.

My back hits a wall before he breaks our kiss. I try to pull him back to me, but he stops me. “Lori, I need to know that you want this, that you want me before we go

any further. Because if we do this, I don't think I'll be able to stop."

I reach for the door, slam it shut, and turn the bolt. Taking my cue, Amos resumes devouring my lips and tongue while walking us over to the bed. He gently lays me down, moving his kisses to my throat, my collarbone, the peaks of my breasts through my shirt, torturing me as he makes his way down past my belly button.

There are no words for how much I need this man right now. No words for how turned on I am that this strong, powerful, gorgeous man is kneeling before me as if he worships the very air I breathe. Breath I hold in as I watch his fingers unloop the button on my gaucho jeans. Breath I let out when he pulls the zipper of my jeans down with one hand and with his other hand, slides up my t-shirt.

Since I'm not wearing a bra, Amos has full access to my breasts. And he uses his access well, swirling the tip of my nipple with his thumb as he places feather-light kisses on my stomach. The sensation has me reeling. Never have I felt so much. Yet somehow, I need more. I want to explode from this feeling.

Just when I am about to burst into a euphoric oblivion, a loud, frantic knock pounds through my ears, bringing me back to myself. Amos ignores the sounds, shifting his hand to my other breast. My body tries to release itself from my brain to fall back into that euphoria, but my mind is now occupied with the insistent knocking.

"Amos," I whisper anxiously.

"Go away," Amos shouts at the door.

"Can't do that, sir. You are needed for an emergency meeting of leadership," Kyle responds in his best soldier boy voice.

"Fuck." Amos' hand is still latched to my breast, unwilling to let go. I don't want him

to let go either. I place my hand over his, pushing it harder into me. With more desperation in his voice, Amos says again, “Fuck.”

Kyle knocks again. “Is everything okay, Amos?”

“Yeah, Kyle. Just give me a minute,” Amos shouts toward the door. When he turns back toward me, his face is full of longing. He wants this as much as I do, but duty calls him away. “You were close, weren’t you? I could feel it. If you need the release, I can get you there in a few minutes. But that’s not enough time for me to do everything I want to do to you.”

“Wow, so confident in your skills, huh?” I giggle, then sit up to straighten my shirt. “I do need the release. I’d rather do the everything with you though.”

A devilish smile curls a corner of Amos’ mouth. As I lean in to kiss that smirk, Amos zips up my jeans, securing the button using only one hand. When he stands up, he has to straighten himself out.

Kyle knocks again, shifting Amos’ composure to stiff anger. “We’re coming. Fuck off, Kyle.”

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“We?” Kyle’s voice from the other side of the door sounds confused.

Amos grabs my hand, pulling me against his body for another kiss. This one tender and sweet. “I’m not done with you yet, Copperhead.”

I simply smile back and let him guide me to the door. When he pulls the door open, Kyle’s confusion turns to shock before melting into an all-knowing smile. “I fucking knew it.”

“Knew what?” I ask innocently.

“That you two were fucking.”

Amos punches Kyle in the shoulder, hard. “We are not fucking thanks to you interrupting.”

“Ow, man. Sorry. Jeremy asked me to fetch you. There’s been a message from The Wall. About Dr. Tuwile.”

“Let’s go then.” Amos attempts to bring me along, but Kyle stops him.

“Leadership only, Amos.” There’s a warning behind his voice I don’t quite understand.

“I don’t care. Lori comes with me. If the other leaders have a problem with that, then they can tell me.”

Kyle backs away with his hands up as Amos pushes us forward.

Chapter 32

As Kyle had predicted, no one in leadership agreed to allow me in the meeting. Not even my mother. Amos wanted to protest, but I stopped him, telling him I'd be waiting on the terrace for him after the meeting. It's been over thirty minutes since Amos walked into the conference room and I'm getting nervous.

"Do meetings usually last this long?" I ask Kyle, who followed me up to the terrace shortly after escorting us to the health center.

Kyle shrugs. "Sometimes they're in there for an hour, sometimes only fifteen minutes. But when we receive a message from The Wall, it's usually a serious meeting and lasts for a while."

The Wall. The first time I heard about The Wall was when I was bleeding all over Amos' car after he rescued me from the arena. My mom explained more about it and I've heard mention of it since, putting the pieces together over the last few months. There are several safe zones from Pennsylvania to New Jersey. All of them are set up near The Wall, which spans multiple highways across the two states. I can only imagine how hard it must have been to not only find the resources and living humans to build a solid enough wall spanning hundreds of miles, but to do so without suffering major losses from zombie hordes.

The U.S. military guards the outposts inside The Wall. Communities like The Valley work with the military to share food, resources, and information. No one from outside a sanctioned community is allowed transit within The Wall. It makes me wonder how Doctore's men get around. Jonah and I weren't the only ones they kidnapped. Has Jonah become one of those men now? Kidnapping innocent people to become Doctore's lab rats? The thought makes me shiver.

“Are you cold, Copperhead?”

I whip around to find Amos taking unwavering steps in my direction. He stops a foot away from me as if purposely keeping his distance, yet I know how much he wants to close the space between us. For just a moment, it feels like we are the only two humans left in the world as we stare into each other’s eyes.

He breaks the spell, turning his gaze away from me and out to the view of The Valley as he leans against the low wall of the terrace. “I’m really sorry, Lori, but I’ve got to head out.”

“What? Take me with you,” I plead. “I’m ready.”

“I know you are, but I don’t want you to be seen at The Wall. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“I was gonna promise to tell you everything when I get back. But since that won’t quell your curiosity, I’ll tell you this much.” Amos pauses, taking a breath as he glances over my shoulder to where Kyle hunches over the edge of the terrace. “We know that Dr. Tuwile has spies at The Wall. I cannot risk bringing you there.”

I stop breathing when I hear Doctore’s name from Amos’ lips. It’s the last thing I expected him to say. I’m safe. He can’t get me here. I’ve believed in this safe haven for months, thinking that Doctore can never find me here. But what if he can?

“Does he have spies here too?” My voice shakes, giving away my fear.

Amos finally closes the distance between us, pressing me against his body and wrapping his arms around me. “No. Not here. But out there? Yes. They are everywhere, Lori. If you want to fight, if you want to join us out there, you have to be

prepared for them.”

“That’s why you’ve been keeping me from going out there?”

“Yes. I know you can handle it. I just—”

“No, I get it.” The fear in my voice makes me sound angry, so I soften the fear and try again with, “I am scared. I won’t deny that. But I’m ready to face them. I am ready to fight.”

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Amos takes a small step away from our embrace to look me in the eye. “I know you are. I promise I will be back in a day. Two at most.”

I nod, not trusting myself to say another word. I don’t want Amos to go. We’ve only just discovered what we mean to each other, what we could be. “You better be back in one day, Amos.”

He laughs at my attempt at assertiveness. “I will do my best. And when I get back, when things are settled, we can talk, we can fuck, whatever you want. I am yours. Got it?”

Amos’ words hit me with a force I wasn’t ready for, nearly knocking me over. To hold myself up, I wrap my arms around his wide shoulders and pull him to my lips for a tender, hungry kiss. A kiss that’s interrupted way too quickly when someone from the other side of the terrace clears their throat. When Amos and I step away from each other, I turn to see my mom walking toward us.

“You should leave now, Amos, before it gets too dark.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry, Cathy. I just didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye to Lori.”

“I see that,” my mom says with hands on hips. But I know she’s not angry. In fact, she is quite enjoying herself as Amos gets all self-conscious and worried about being caught kissing her daughter.

Amos gives me a shy smile and an innocent peck on the cheek. “See you later.”

“No longer than a day,” I demand, pointing my finger at him as he walks backward, not yet ready to turn away.

His shy smile turns devilish at my neediness. Goddammit, why does he have to go? He peels his eyes from mine and calls over to Kyle. “Lucas is coming with me. He’s prepping our cargo with Anna now. You are in charge while I’m gone.”

“Yes, sir!” Kyle says in all seriousness while playing the role of the general’s lieutenant. Not that Amos is an actual general, but well, he kinda is. The two men exit through the glass doors leaving me alone with my mom, who stares at me with a look that says, “you better tell me everything.”

“We only kissed, Mom. That’s it.”

“Mmhmmm.”

“Okay, fine. I really like him. I’ve liked him for a while. And today I found out that maybe he likes me. We kissed. We almost had sex. But Kyle interrupted us.”

How does my mom have this power over me? I am always forced to tell her exactly what I’m feeling. I can never lie to her. I honestly don’t know if it’s a curse or a gift.

My mom joins me at the half wall around the terrace. “I knew Amos had serious feelings for you, but I wasn’t sure how you felt. You were still so raw about Jonah. Are you ready to explore feelings for another man?”

Such a good question. One I’ve thought about quite a lot, but my thoughts about Jonah are few and far between now. He’s in my past. And even if I were to see him again, there would be nothing for us. So I answer from my heart. “Yes.”

Three days later, Amos is still not back from The Wall and I’m about ready to gather

a battalion and go after him to make sure he's safe. I feel like I could kill anyone who gets in my way. And if someone has hurt him or...no, I can't even think about that. Amos is fine. He'll be back. He has to come back.

As I anxiously pace back and forth in the living area of my dorm, Cal emerges from their room. Mina should be up soon too, but she requires more sleep than Cal. I don't stop pacing as Cal weaves their way through the living area and into the bathroom. I'm still pacing when they re-enter after freshening up from a long sleep.

"You are driving me crazy. I could feel you pacing while sitting on the toilet," Cal says, collapsing on the couch. I stop pacing, but my anxious energy requires me to fidget. "Shit, Lori. What's going on?"

"Amos said he'd be gone for a day, two days tops. It's been three. Where is he?"

"Damn, girl. You really got it bad for him."

"What? No. I mean, yeah, I like him. I'm just worried for him, that's all." But I think I do have it bad for him, I say to myself.

The corner bedroom door opens and Mina pops her head out. "Are you guys talking about how Lori has the hots for Amos?"

I roll my eyes as Cal confirms the topic of conversation and fold myself into the armchair in the corner of the living room. "Does everyone know I have a crush on him?"

Mina scurries over to the couch and curls up next to Cal. Both of them answer at the same time. "Yes. At least the patrol crew does."

Cal adds, "And he has a crush on you. Is it true that Kyle walked in on you guys?"

I am mortified. “How do you know about that? I mean, no, Kyle didn’t walk in on us. The door was locked. I mean—”

Cal and Mina cackle like a couple of old hags, making my body relax at how ridiculous I’m being. We are all adults here. There’s no shame in having sex with someone, even if it didn’t happen. I think about one of the last things he said to me before leaving three days ago, “I’m not done with you yet, Copperhead.” The flush on my cheeks is likely visible, but I don’t care. I hold on to that memory of him, the way he looked like he wanted to spread me wide and feast.

“What are you thinking about, Lori?” Mina asks wide-eyed.

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“Why?” I ask innocently, keeping my composure this time.

“Spill. We want to know everything.”

Cal nudges Mina, saying, “Don’t include ‘we’ when it’s you who wants to know.”

I can’t help but laugh as I say, “Then you might want to leave the room, Cal, if you don’t want to hear about it.”

“Wait, what? Are you going to tell us?” Cal perches on the edge of the couch, looking me straight in the eyes. What are friends for if not to coax out the deepest, darkest, juiciest secrets? That’s who Cal and Mina are to me, right? Friends.

“So it’s us now, huh?” Mina crosses her arms in mock anger. Cal just shrugs and relaxes back into the couch.

I tell them everything about what happened three days ago after I stormed out of the cafeteria. They sit so still I’m not sure they are even breathing as they listen to every detail I give them. In a post-apocalyptic world such as the one we live in, there’s very little entertainment. Movies, television shows, concerts? Non-existent. Drama and gossip are the way to pass the time when we aren’t fighting to keep our community thriving.

My trust in Mina and Cal to not tell a soul about Amos and me must run deeper than I thought because I tell them every little detail down to the way his hands felt on me, to the things he said after our make-out session. “If you need the release, I can get you there in a few minutes. But that’s not enough time for me to do everything I want to

do to you.”

“Oh my freaking God, Lori. How did you not just drop your pants right then and there?” Mina shouts.

Cal’s laughter vibrates off the walls. “I’m with Mina there. Amos gets me going with just one look. I don’t know how you could walk away after all of that.”

“What do you mean ‘gets you going’?” I ask, glaring at Cal with my viper-like eyes. My gaze softens, though, when I think of Amos’ pet name for me. “Copperhead.” I’m his viper, and he only has eyes for me. Well, at least I hope so. We still haven’t really talked about what we did, were about to do.

“Lori, Amos is a fox. He can wet anyone’s panties regardless of their sexual preference,” Cal explains, making me blush.

“Yeah, he’s not so bad to look at.” The smile on my face fades almost instantly. “I miss him.”

Cal and Mina hop up in tandem, propping themselves on either side of the armchair I’m sitting in. The comfort they offer helps soothe my worries. Knowing they care about me has me feeling all kinds of things. Friends. How did it happen that I have best friends? I haven’t had this kind of relationship since...Sarah. A vision of her gorgeous tanned skin and smoky quartz brown eyes infiltrates my mind. Tears shred at my eyeballs as I attempt to hold them back.

“Lori, it’s going to be okay.” Mina pats my back as she holds me in a loose hug. “Amos always comes back. He’s relentless. And he has unfinished business with you. That man needs to come back.”

My body wrangles with the emotions twirling around inside, and my chest clenches at

the thought of never seeing him again. That he'll become just another person I've lost to this dangerous world. That he'll become a face that will fade from my memory.

"He freaking better!" Is all I can say as I give in to the tumult of tears.

Chapter 33

Two more days pass and it's business as usual. Amos' room is barren and unused as I walk past the open door and make my way to the athletic center. Cal and Mina have been keeping me steady, letting me cry it out, and offering me their unconditional support and love. During the nights and mornings, my mom steps in to keep my mind occupied when I'm not training.

I feel so hollow inside. A feeling I know all too well from a time in my life I'd like to never revisit. This hollowness is different. Before I was alone. Now? I'm surrounded by friends and my mom. So why do I feel hollow? It can't all be because Amos has been missing. Well, that's a bit dramatic. Apparently he's checked in on the radio, but it's only a one-way radio. It's how The Valley receives messages from The Wall.

How I wish I could just talk to Amos for one minute. We aren't even anything, just the idea of something. I guess that something filled a void I didn't know was still inside me. Goddammit, I miss Amos. I miss him way too much to be healthy.

As I blindly walk along the sidewalk and up the stairs over the bridge that leads to the northern part of campus. I stop halfway across the bridge to look out at the train tracks below. A lone zombie—a deadie—barely holding on to the last scraps of dead flesh, wanders aimlessly along the tracks.

"I feel ya, buddy."

The zombie's head flicks up but not in my direction, as if it can barely even hear me. I

wonder how long these things can unlive for. It's been over five years since the outbreak. All the information I've been given on these undead humans is pretty much the same. They decay like any other dead creature, but the process is slower. I guess that's how these things can still be standing so many years later.

I turn away from the deadie and continue my route to the sports center for training. When I step on the training mat, Kyle is at his normal spot at the front, ready to start the session with our unit. Olivia and Andrew are on standby, awaiting his instructions. But it isn't Kyle who shouts for attention. I twirl around at the voice that said, "Good morning," from behind me.

Amos. He's back. And he looks even more gorgeous than the imprint of him on my eyelids. As he walks by, he gives me a quick wink. That's it. A freaking wink. I want to be angry that he didn't give me more, like a goddamn explanation as to why he was gone for so long. We are at training though. He'll make time for me later. So I brush off my shock and calm down my racing heart.

"Alright, everyone, let's circle up," Amos says as he reaches Kyle at the front of the mat. "As you all know, Lucas and I went to The Wall after receiving a message on the radio. One of Dr. Tuwile's spies was captured and brought in for questioning. General Greene requested my presence. I was not allowed to interrogate the spy directly, but I relayed our own line of questions."

Amos pauses for a moment, scanning the faces of our large squad of warriors until his eyes find mine. Something about his gaze grounds me, makes me feel safe. I allow my mouth to curl into the smallest of smiles to let him know I'm okay.

But he doesn't look away as he says, "The intel we've received from this man is not good. Dr. Tuwile's men are on the move. They have been kidnapping not just lone travelers and small nomadic groups along The Wall, but targeting established communities too."

My heart hammers in my chest. Kidnapping. Targeting. It's happening again, has been happening all this time. Doctore will not stop. This must mean that there are weak spots along The Wall if our communities aren't safe. I don't know how many there are, where they are, but the idea of our allies being taken by Doctore is terrifying.

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Amos silences the murmuring voices. “Since we are the only community in Central Pennsylvania with a direct line of communication to The Wall, I’m putting together four groups of two to go out to our sister communities and warn them about what Dr. Tuwile is up to. If any of you find yourself in the direct path of the Praetorian Guard, kill them. We are not taking hostages.”

His words surprise me. What surprises me more is that I agree with him.

“Lucas is going to remain here and reinforce the watch around the perimeter. Kelly is with Andrew. Ryan with Olivia. Ben with Kyle. Lori is with me.”

All eyes turn to me as my skin flushes a deep red. The embarrassment I was expecting to feel at such attention fades away as Amos calls everyone’s attention back to him.

“The rest of you will stay here to guard The Valley. Lucas will assign your duties and stations. Stay vigilant and prepare for the worst.”

“Yes, sir!” the squad shouts in unison.

Amos turns on his heels, Kyle, Olivia, and Andrew following, then Ryan, Ben, and Kelly join behind. I remain unmoved until Amos looks up at me, tilting his head in invitation to join him as well. Excitement and fear blend inside me, creating a jittery feeling I can’t quite control. Amos whispers something to Kyle, who nods his head in understanding. Then Amos slows his pace, letting me catch up to him. His hand captures mine and the sharp tinge of fear fades.

“Are you okay, Copperhead? You’ve gone deathly pale.”

I squeeze his hand before saying, “I’m fine. Just my natural coloring.”

Amos stops suddenly, whipping me around to face him. Those golden eyes are dull with concern. “It’s okay to not be fine.”

“I...you...are you sure you want me to go with you?”

A chuckle from deep in his throat brightens his golden eyes. “You’ve been begging me to assign you to a mission for months, Copperhead. Now you doubt yourself?”

“I thought I’d be pilfering for supplies or scouting terrain. I didn’t think you’d let me so close to the action.”

“I asked you to join the fight. If you aren’t ready for this, you don’t have to come with me.”

Amos does his best to convince me with a steady voice and unblinking stare. I can see how much he wants me with him on this mission. I want to be by his side too. I’ve been desperate to be by his side again. I won’t let him out of my sight.

“No. I want to come. This is just...a lot. It’s an important mission. There are others who are better trained, have more experience. I just want to make sure you are choosing me because I’m the best choice for the job.”

“Lori, I can put you against anyone on that training mat and you’d wipe them across the floor in minutes. You are incredible with any weapon I’ve given you, steady under pressure, and you’ve survived horrors those guys couldn’t even dream up in a nightmare.”

Amos points toward the indoor track where the rest of the squad huddles around Lucas. As he pulls back his hand, he grasps my chin between his finger and thumb, lifting my face up to look him in the eyes. “Only part of my decision was for selfish reasons. I missed you. I need you with me on this mission.”

His thumb lightly brushes my lower lip as he lets go of my face and I immediately need that hand back on my skin. But I push the urge down and say, “Then I’m with you.”

After Amos gives instructions to the other pairs, we make our way to the parking lot where Anna and Jeremy are filling up four cars with clothes, food, and other supplies. My mom is there too, nervously pacing back and forth. When she sees me approach, she runs to me, throwing her arms around my shoulders.

“I know I can’t stop you. Your father could never resist the need to help others in peril. Just promise me you will not do anything foolish,” my mom says against the side of my skull.

“I’ll be back in no time,” I promise. “I love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too, my sweet girl.”

Amos guides me into a red Honda CRV, the same car he’d rescued me in. I wonder if my blood still stains the back seat as I buckle myself into the front passenger seat. It’s hard to tell as the interior seats are black leather.

Amos slides into the driver’s seat, backs us out of the parking spot, and drives up to the gate. As the others line up behind us, the gate opens, and we are off. To where? I don’t know. Amos only gave the instructions for the other pairs. He didn’t say where we were going to. So I ask him, not that I’d know where anything is. I grew up in New Jersey. Before Amos rescued me, I’d never been this far into Pennsylvania. I’d

only ever driven through it with my family for trips to D.C. and Gettysburg.

“Lancaster. There’s a small community that’s been built around an old manor house. We should be there in about an hour, depending on the state of the roads.”

I nod my head, staring out the window as I prepare myself for whatever awaits us. Zombies. Doctore’s Praetorian Guard. Fallen trees on the road. I know I’m ready, but I can’t shake the anxiety that causes my leg to bounce uncontrollably. Amos’ large, warm hand slides onto my thigh, giving it a squeeze and calming it down to a slow bounce.

I take a deep breath and look up at his face, which is focused on the road ahead. “Tell me something about yourself.”

He laughs, stealing a glance my way before saying, “You know more about me than any living person. What else do you want to know?”

“Anything you want to tell me.”

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Amos' hand slips away from my thigh, leaving it cold and lonely. He's silent for so long I start to think he doesn't want to play the get-to-know-each-other-better game.

As I turn my head back to the window, he says, "The first time I went out to scavenge, I was looking for medicine for my mom. She was not doing well. I was desperate to find something, anything, that would ease her pain. I had already given up on saving her. I drove to one of the nearby hospitals, a small one that wasn't swarming with biters. We didn't have much at The Valley then. Our weapons supply was non-existent. I went into that building with nothing. I was fucking terrified. But my will to help my mom was stronger than my fear."

"I don't know if I could have gone into a building possibly infested with zombies all alone. I'd have pissed myself."

"Nah, you'da done it. You would have been braver than me." Amos pauses before continuing. "I did run into biters. The freshies, as you call them. Fortunately, they didn't see me because they were busy feasting on a group of survivors."

Amos' voice breaks as he holds back the pain of reliving such a horrible memory. "They were still alive, screaming for someone to help them, and I ran in the other direction like a coward."

"Amos, there's nothing you could have done." And there's nothing I can say to convince him otherwise, but I try anyway. "One bite is all they need to turn you. One bite and you're dead. Well, unless you're me. But, Amos, they were already dead. If you had tried to end their suffering, you would have died."

“I know. But I’m still ashamed that I ran away. That I couldn’t even comfort them in their death.”

I think about the orphans at the bunker, the ones I would sneak food to. The ones Doctore had turned into flesh-eating monsters to rip me apart in the arena. “This world is cruel. I used to believe the only way to survive it was to accept its cruelty and find a way around it. But I was wrong. There’s a better way to survive.”

Amos’ eyes meet mine as he takes his eyes off the road for a second. “And what is that better way?”

“You. And the others at The Valley are the better way. Surviving together. Fighting together. Helping those in need. If we want to save humanity, we have to save what’s left of it in ourselves first. It’s not just about surviving, it’s about living. You did the right thing when you chose to live because you are making a difference now. You are saving lives now. You saved me.”

A single tear falls from Amos’ eyes and he doesn’t try to hide it. He reaches out for me and I grasp his hand in mine, bringing it to my lips. When I drop our hands on my lap, Amos lets out a deep breath, then clears his throat.

“Can you tell me about Jonah?” Amos asks, keeping his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

The question catches me off guard, but I answer with, “That’s a bit of a layered question. What exactly do you want to know?”

“Do you still love him?” Amos’ voice cracks a bit, as if he’s terrified of my answer. “Because if you do, if you aren’t ready to move on yet, I understand. I’ll keep waiting. For as long as it takes.”

My heart clenches. We haven’t really talked about us. About that kiss. About what

that kiss means. “No,” I answer, squeezing Amos’ hand as I keep it in my lap. “I once thought he was my end game and maybe if this world didn’t turn him into a mindless, heartless soldier, I would still hold on to that love. It’s not there anymore.”

Amos breathes a sigh of relief. “Kissing you...I’ve thought of little else since that day. If I’m completely honest, I’ve wanted to kiss you since the day I brought you to The Valley. I can’t explain this need. But I need you, Lori. I will take anything you are ready for. And if that’s just friendship, you have it. I’m yours.”

“Your friendship means more to me than you’ll ever know, Amos,” I say as my heart races inside my chest. “Without you, I would still be broken. You’ve mended my heart, my courage, everything that I couldn’t mend myself.”

“So you just want to be friends then?” Amos says in defeat, refusing to look at me.

“Shut up and listen, Amos, because that’s not what I’m saying. I kissed you. Do you not remember my own need that day? I need you too. I just wish I had gotten the courage to show you months ago. I want your friendship, but I also want more of you. I’m yours,” I say, using his own words to make my point.

Amos answers with a smile that makes me catch my breath. Then he lifts my hand to his mouth, kissing the sensitive skin in the middle of my wrist. I feel that kiss all over my body as it settles between my thighs. Amos smiles again, this one full of mischief, as if he knows just how much that not-so-innocent kiss has affected me.

We fall into a comfortable silence, his hand clasped in mine, our bodies humming. I find myself daydreaming about when I’ll have this man to myself back at The Valley. All the things I want to do to him.

The images I conjure are interrupted as I spot an overturned car on the road. Smoke fuming from under the hood.

Amos slows down as we approach the accident. It must have happened recently, an hour ago maybe. Ensuring the doors are locked, Amos drives slowly around the vehicle, attempting to examine the scene from the safety of our car.

“I know this car. It’s one from The Manor House community I told you about. We might be too late in warning them.”

Chapter 34

Dreadtricklesdownmyspine as I scan the wooded area for any movement. Zombies. The Praetorian Guard. Jonah. Doctore. Anyone or thing that could pose a threat to me and Amos. That dread turns to ice, locking me in place when I think of Amos. He isn’t like me. If he gets hurt or bitten...NO. I’m not going down that think trap.

Nothing seems suspicious or out of place besides the overturned vehicle on the side of the road. Amos brings our car around, sliding the shifter into park and cutting the engine. We sit in absolute silence, waiting for something to happen. Every few seconds, I check the rear-view and side mirrors. Nothing.

After ten minutes of keeping our eyes peeled for the slightest bit of movement, Amos says, “I need to see if there are any survivors.”

“What? Amos, that is a terrible idea. We don’t have the weapons to protect us if we get surrounded by freshies.”

Amos shakes his head, keeping his gaze on the woods to our left. Thinking he wasn’t paying attention, I open my mouth to repeat myself, but Amos interrupts. “Don’t worry, Copperhead. We have weapons.”

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“Crossbows and bats aren’t going to keep a horde from biting, ripping, scratching us to shreds. Amos, you could die from the smallest scratch. I’m not taking that chance. If you want to know if there are any survivors, I’ll go.”

That gets his attention. Amos snaps his head around to glare at me. “And you think I’m willing to take that chance on you? Fuck that. We do this together.”

“But Amos, I can take on any zombie and come out alive.”

“Until the day you don’t. No, Lori. I will not let you go out there alone, not knowing if something happened to you. What if Dr. Tuwile’s men are out there waiting for you?”

That icy dread is back, spreading like wildfire, ready to suffocate my lungs. Am I ready to take on humans? I’ve killed the living before when Doctore had put me in the arena with anyone who broke his rules. I should have found a way around death. I should have convinced them to fight with me and not against me. But I was living for one reason. Fight. Survive. Live.

Now? I’ve been given a chance at humanity again. A chance at life. I don’t want to tarnish that. But I need to survive. Amos and I need to survive together.

“Have you ever killed before? A living person?” I ask Amos.

He looks down in shame as he says, “Yes.”

I reach out and cover his hand in mine. “So have I. It’s not something I intend to do

again unless I have to. And if Doctore's men are waiting for me in those woods. I will slaughter every last one of them. I will not let them get you. I will not go back there."

The gold flecks in Amos' eyes shine bright in something that feels like admiration, desire, fear? I'm not sure. But I know I would kill to protect this man as he would do for me. We are in this hellish world together. We will fight to stay alive together.

"Okay. We both go in. But we need a plan if shit hits the fan."

Amos' face loosens into a laugh. "Do you have a plan already, Copperhead, or should I think of one for you?"

I punch him lightly on the shoulder and think for a minute. "When we exit the car, lock the doors immediately and keep the key fob in your left hand. At all times. What weapons do we have?"

My developing plan is interrupted as I had forgotten about the weapons that Amos mentioned. He turns toward the backseat and grabs one of the duffle bags Jeremy and Anna loaded into our car.

Guns. Lots of guns. We'd only practiced with paint guns at The Valley so as to not waste precious ammunition, but I didn't think we had a cache of real guns. I twist around so I'm kneeling on the car seat facing the back of the car and gently pick up a rifle, testing the weight of it in my hand and nod. I pull some twine out of a side pocket of the duffle and ask for the key fob. Placing the rifle on the backseat, I grab the key fob from Amos' outstretched hand and thread the twine inside the keychain hole of the fob. Before I tie the end of the twine, I turn myself toward Amos.

"We are not going to be those stupid people in a horror movie who drop the keys to the car, okay?"

Amos chuckles as I lean over the center console to tie the twine around his neck. With the key fob securely in place around Amos, I place my hands on his wide shoulders and give his cheek a gentle kiss before sitting back down on my seat to tell him the rest of my plan.

Ten minutes later, my hair is tied back in a braid. Amos and I have our guns loaded, each of us carrying a rifle ready to fire and a handgun safely tucked into holsters. Since I'm wearing yoga pants, the belt of my holster is fastened across my torso. As I demanded, Amos locks the doors of the car behind us and we walk toward the woods.

Going into an unknown battle was the norm for me in the four years I was held captive at Novus Seclorum, Doctore's bunker. This time, it's different. I'm armed. I'm ready to fight. And I have someone by my side. I breathe in deeply, keeping my adrenaline from pumping too loudly in my ears. As I breathe out, Amos and I take a step into the woods.

The trees surround us after a few minutes of walking and I have to remind myself of my plan. Walk straight, don't look back, count your steps. Amos and I put a few feet of distance between each other, but no more than three. We will always be a step away from each other. Another one of my rules for this stupid mission into the unknown woods to investigate if there are any survivors from that crash. My gut tells me there are none. And if there are survivors, they are no longer alive.

But Amos needs to know. He needs to see for himself. He needs to do everything he can to make sure there is nothing he could do to help. We agreed to only go a mile in, no further. I'm just hoping he keeps his promise.

Keeping my mind focused on this mission, I scan the surrounding trees and push out unwanted thoughts from clouding my hearing. I have never been this aware of my body. Even my skin is on high alert. My bones and muscles are ready to move on their own, without my brain making commands.

Amos puts up a fist, signaling me to halt beside him. We've walked 156 steps, a little more than the length of a football field. A doable distance to sprint. While Amos scans the woods to the right, I turn my head to the left. About ten feet away I see a lone boot, no body attached to it. I focus on the trees and bushes around the boot until my eyes fall on a hunched figure. It's leaning over something.

Reaching my right hand back, I tap Amos on the arm twice, our silent signal for "warning" then grab hold of my rifle, sliding it into place. I turn left, careful not to lose direction of where our car is parked. Amos follows close behind, three feet to my right.

The sound of sucking and chewing makes my stomach churn. Breathing in deeply allows me to ground myself in this moment. Breathing out washes away the fear that threatens to freeze me in place again. As the figure comes into full view, I can now see what it's hunched over. The zombie is feasting on a fresh corpse, likely one of the survivors from the car crash.

Amos confirms my theory in a whisper. "That's Earl. He's one of the leaders of The Manor House." Then, without warning, Amos fires two shots. One in the zombie's head, and the other smack in the middle of Earl's forehead.

We both have suppressors on our rifles to muffle the sound, but I'm still pissed he took that chance. Sometimes people act impulsively, even if they have mastered self-control. As I feared, the shots are loud enough for the surrounding zombies to make themselves known. It's like they were waiting for the best opportunity to strike, leaving us with few seconds to react.

"Run," I say loud enough for Amos to hear me and pivot my body to the left.

Sprinting at full speed, we make it to the edge of the woods in thirty seconds. As instructed in my exit plan, Amos pushes the button on the key fob, opening the trunk.

We speed up our pace, desperate to outrun the freshies hot on our tails. My skin crawls with the closeness, imagining their breath and rotten teeth. Amos jumps in the trunk, not waiting for me—as instructed—then spins around, aims his rifle over my shoulder and shoots.

A gentle spray of something slimy hits the back of my neck. As I jump into the trunk, I turn my body and start shooting at anything that moves. The trunk closes with both Amos and me safely inside, keeping aim at the last of the horde. We don't drop our aim until we hear the lock slide into place.

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A series of bangs interrupt our miniscule moment of relief. The freshies didn't slow down their sprint as they approached the car, running full speed into the solid metal. But that doesn't stop them from trying to pound their way inside.

We are safe enough. Zombies might be able to move quickly, but they aren't strong enough to punch through the metal of a car. Amos takes hold of my rifle and places it on the back seat of the car after turning the safety on. I slip off the belt and holster holding my hand gun, handing it to Amos, who tosses it back into the duffle bag. Instead of climbing back to the front of the car, we collapse onto the floor of the trunk.

Before I can take a sigh of relief, Amos' lips crash into mine, his tongue pushing its way inside my mouth. The warmth of him is gone a moment later, just as I was about to ravish his lips back.

"Fuck. I'm sorry, Lori. This is not the time for—"

I throw my body at him, claiming his lips for myself to shut him up from saying something rational. I don't care that our car is surrounded. I need Amos' lips on mine.

"I need you inside me," I whisper against his lips. And in a pleading voice, I add, "Now."

Amos deepens the kiss, pressing himself firmly against my body, as he wraps my legs around his hips. "Fuck, Lori." Amos pulls out of our heated embrace. "I am not done with you, but we really need to get out of here."

The sound of banging brings me back to reality. Right. Zombie swarm. I press a gentle kiss on his lips before hopping carefully over the back seat and into the passenger seat. Amos slides into the driver's seat a moment later. With the car turned on, we slowly make our way out of the horde and off to safe ground.

Chapter 35

I press my hands against the shower walls as the cold water hits my flesh like a thousand needles at high speed. It's a welcome feeling. A stark difference from the molten flesh Amos turned me into just a couple of hours ago. As we drove in silence toward Lancaster and The Manor House community, my skin burned for him. Every minute was torture not having his hands on me.

But with the threat of a zombie horde and possible ambush by the Praetorian Guard, we needed to focus on getting to a secure place for the night. And Amos needed to check on The Manor House to see if it had been attacked by Doctore's men. It took longer than usual to arrive at our destination, according to Amos. As we drove through Lancaster, it was obvious that it had been ransacked recently. The make-shift walls around the community had been blown up and a few houses near the perimeter were still smoking from a fire.

Dread filled my veins again at the thought of Doctore and his men being so close to me. They were here. They had swept through like they were on a mission of vengeance and destroyed this survivor community. A community that worked in tandem with The Valley to keep as many people alive and safe from the many dangers of our new world. My thoughts immediately turned to The Valley. What if Doctore was heading there next? Would our people be safe?

After seeing all the destruction and finding no survivors, Amos drove us outside the ruins of the community walls and found a house still intact for us to spend the night since the sun had begun to set.

Driving at night is never a good idea, as the lights of the car would attract unwanted attention from both the living and the dead. After confirming the house was empty, we grabbed all our gear from the car and barricaded ourselves inside the abandoned house, taking turns to eat and shower.

I turn off the nozzle, instantly shivering from the cold water, chilling me to my bones. Amos had left a towel on the sink for me. I grab it, wrapping it tightly around my body. But it's frayed and fragile, likely from years of disuse. All it's really good for is dusting. So I throw it off and search for my clothes, but they're nowhere in sight.

"Amos!" I shout. "Where are my clothes?"

No answer.

"Amos!"

Goddamn him. If he's playing a game with me, I'm not letting him win. But I really don't want to walk around this house naked. I pick up the raggedy towel, attempting to cover myself up enough, then stalk out the bathroom door in search of my clothes. Amos steals my attention in the bedroom across from the bathroom. He's sprawled on the bed, completely naked.

My towel slips from my grasp and I fumble to put it back in place, which makes Amos laugh. A deep, sultry laugh that has my skin melting again. How I want him to touch my skin with that laugh. With that mouth. With that tongue. As if sensing my thoughts, Amos rolls over on his side and gives me a look I can't say no to. My feet walk on their own, called to him like he's a goddamn siren or something.

"Do you still want your clothes, Copperhead?" Amos smiles at me as I approach the edge of the bed. I shake my head and let him tear the towel from my grasp. Getting on his knees, he towers over me on the bed as he takes in every inch of my

nakedness.

Before I can cover myself up with my hands, Amos grabs my waist and throws me around him on the bed. A breath later, his head is in between my thighs, his tongue licking and sucking every sensitive fold of skin. I shiver, not from the cold, but because my nerves are on fire. I have never felt so alive.

Amos takes his time devouring me, sliding a finger in to stretch me open for him. When his tongue flicks my clit at the same time a second finger slams into my core, I lose focus. Everything around me stills. Time itself is non-existent. There is only Amos. His fingers. His tongue. His moans of delight at tasting the most intimate part of my body.

The orgasm he gives me from his fingers and tongue is like nothing I have ever experienced. It leaves me panting and hungry for more. Hungry for him. I try to squirm away from him, my overstimulated body battling for more relief. Amos grabs the sides of my sex-hungry body and pulls me closer to his mouth. His hands tighten around my hips as he lifts me up with him so I'm hanging upside down, my legs wrapped around his neck. Not for one second does he loosen his hold on me or take a breath away from my body.

I need him inside me. Not just his fingers and tongue, I need his dick. I try to turn myself in a way where I can access any part of him, but he holds me firmly against his chest, unwilling to detach his mouth from devouring me.

"Amos," I moan. "Amos, please. I need to touch you. I need more of you."

His answer is to push his two fingers back inside me, pumping harder and deeper this time until I scream his name. "Amos!"

"If you want something more, you'll have to fight for it, Copperhead," Amos says

with his lips against my clit.

Before he can coax another orgasm from me. I shift my legs, lying my feet on his shoulders. I test my balance, placing my hands on the bed and pushing myself harder against his mouth, which causes a delightful moan to fall into my entrance. The movement also causes Amos to loosen his grip enough for me to push out of his arms. He falls backward on the bed as I flip around, quickly mounting myself over his hips.

A wicked smile etches into the corner of his lips and he grabs my hands before I can make my next move. All I can do is roll my hips, pinning his hard length between his stomach and my soaked thighs.

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“Fuck, Lori. You are so wet.” Amos’ eyes roll into the back of his head as I coat every inch of his dick with my wetness. He lets go, placing his arms behind his head so I can guide him inside me with my hands. The most intoxicating sound escapes his throat as I push myself down his entire length. “Fuck.”

“Does that mean I win? Do you concede defeat?” I knew that would set him off, the competitive soldier I know him to be waking up to play.

“Never,” Amos whispers. He grabs my hips, pushing me down until there is no end to where our bodies join. Then he flips us over, taking back the power. “How will you get out of this one, my Copperhead?”

“I won’t. I’m right where I want to be.” I smile up into his golden eyes, which are aflame with desire. His hands spread my thighs wider as he positions himself over my supine body and begins pounding into me. Pain and pleasure thread my skin together, reminding me how alive I am. I didn’t know how much I yearned to feel.

Amos’ thrusts become erratic as he gets close to his release. I focus on him. His face. The sweat dripping down his shoulders. The line of his muscles as they contract with every thrust. The sound of his flesh pounding against mine. Every beat of our love making brings me closer to my own release and I relish every delicious second of it.

With one more thrust deep inside me, we lose ourselves in the pleasure of our joined bodies. As Amos collapses onto the bed, he moves me safely out of the way, then lays me on top of his damp chest. Minutes pass as we catch our breath and bring our minds back to the present. Back to reality.

“I hope I didn’t make too much noise,” I say, now realizing how being loud can get us killed.

A soft chuckle tickles the top of my head. “I wanted to make you scream louder.”

The thrilling trickle crawling up my spine isn’t dread this time, it’s excitement. A satisfying fulfillment washes over me as Amos snuggles me closer to him. I thought I knew what love is with Jonah. But this? This is different. Maybe it’s love. It’s also a mutual relationship filled with need and want.

I used to think Amos saw me as an obligation. It tore at me to think I was a burden. This torn and broken woman in need of a safe haven. Amos has become more than the man who saved my life. He brought me home and gave me a place to find the person I am meant to be. Though I’m still on that journey, I know I’m walking the right path. The lightness in my chest brings me peace I never thought I would see again.

“When we get back to The Valley,” Amos whispers against my hair. “Would you like to move into one of the couples’ housing dorms?”

“Couples’ housing?” I repeat. I remember my mom talking about the different housing options on campus. Most of the dorms are for single people, mainly the younger ones without a family. The houses on campus are for families—young, growing families and those who survived the outbreak together. I hadn’t heard about the couple’s housing though.

Amos clears his throat. “One of the dorm buildings is meant for couples on campus. We’d share a room together. It’s nothing serious, but will give us a chance to see where this goes. We’d also have more privacy than in the quad dorm. If you want.”

“Is that what you want, Amos?” My heart pounds loudly in my chest as my nerves stop

working for a moment.

“Yes. But only if you want to.” Amos speaks so quickly I can tell he’s losing his nerves too.

I roll out of his embrace, kneeling over him as I take his face in between my hands and kiss his soft lips. “I would like to try that.”

Amos’ arms encircle my waist and he sits up to deepen the kiss. When I feel his dick nudging my thigh, I gasp in delight and straddle myself around his hips. I slide down his length effortlessly, as if my body was made for him. We make love slowly this time, savoring each morsel of pleasure we give to each other.

In the morning, I roll out of bed feeling pleasantly sore in all the right spots, as if my body refused to repair itself after a night of lovemaking. Beside me, Amos groans in frustration, not ready to start the new day. He grabs for me, but I swat his hand away.

“We need to get going, take advantage of the light.”

Grabbing the bag Anna packed with extra clothes, I make my way to the bathroom to clean up a bit. After pulling my clothes on, Amos slides in to get ready for the day but doesn’t let me leave until I give him a kiss. A generous one that leaves me winded. Before heading downstairs, I grab the other bags filled with weapons, food, and water.

A few minutes later, Amos finds me in the living room at the front of the house. He looks at me with a hunger that has me ready for another round or five.

“Stop it. Don’t look at me like that. We have to go,” I say, not at all convincing.

“Just one more time. I’ll make it quick.” Amos suddenly has me locked in his arms.

“What makes you think I want you to make it quick?” I say darkly, locking his golden eyes to mine.

His mouth is on me, licking and sucking every inch of exposed flesh until I give in, melting in his arms. I don’t realize until a moment too late that someone has kicked open the door to our temporary sanctuary. Amos and I were too lost in the moment to react. By the time we catch our bearings and reach for our weapons, five men surround us.

Chapter 36

The Praetorian Guard found us. How stupid I was to think we would be safe here. That Doctor’s men had already moved on. These guys must have stayed behind to make sure all the survivors were snuffed out. But I refuse to go out this way. I lunge for the man closest to me, snapping his neck before the others can stop me.

Amos joins me a moment later, fighting the four remaining men. But our efforts are for naught. Within minutes, we are overpowered. A tall man with bleach-blond hair and a crooked nose grabs me from behind, pressing a knife to my throat. Amos roars in anger, throwing one more punch before he’s subdued by the three other men. Still, he fights, trying to loosen himself from their grasp to get to me.

“Let her go!” he shouts.

“Nah, I don’t think so. It’s been a while since I had a good lay. I think I’ll try this one out.” The bleach-blond man says with a cockney accent. An accent I recognize. Georgie. One of the guards who used to escort me to the Colosseum. He doesn’t seem to recognize me.

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“Far from home, are you?” I turn my head around and spit at him. But I don’t try to get out of his grasp. I need him to take me somewhere private so I can get his knife and gut him. Then sneak up on the others.

He takes my bait, pulling me backward. Amos must not realize what I’m doing because he loses his shit, screaming and shrieking at the men holding him. “Don’t you fucking touch her. You’re dead. You’re fucking dead!”

I want to tell him I’ll be okay, but I can’t give my plans away. Then he says something that tears me apart, making me want to scratch my plans and gut this man right here and now.

“Touch the woman I love and I’ll fucking kill you all!”

One of the guys holding him back punches him in the face. Blood instantly pours from his nose, causing me to panic as I shout for him. “Amos!”

Before I can do anything more, Georgie throws me to the ground of the home office located down the hall. I can still hear Amos shouting from the living room, though each word is interrupted as he takes what I’m sure is a harsh beating. Stay alive is the only thing I allow myself to think.

Georgie kneels in front of me, pointing his knife in my face. “Now be a good girl and pull down those pants.”

I spit in his face again. This time, he reciprocates with a slap. Behind him, the door opens and closes, followed by a voice that tickles the cobwebs of my memory.

“What’s going on here?”

As if caught stealing candy from children, Georgie stands to attention and explains, “I was only having a bit of fun, sir.”

“Fun? Is that right?” says the man behind Georgie.

I stretch my neck to see who it is, and every single cell in my body freezes. Before I can stop myself, his name slips from my lips. “Jonah?”

“You know this slut, Legatus?” Georgie asks, turning to look at his commander.

“Legatus,” I laugh, cooling down my rage at the hilariousness of Doctore and his Roman obsession. The other side of my face is met with another slap as I’m told to shut up.

“That’s enough, guardian,” Jonah says. “Don’t you recognize your captive?”

Georgie takes a better look at me. When his eyebrows shoot up toward his bleach-blonde hair, I know he remembers exactly who I am. A greedy smile spreads across his face. “Doctore will be happy to have you back.”

I don’t have any time to even throw a nasty glare before Jonah says, “Continue with your...fun.”

Jonah spares a glance at me, showing no recognition for who we once were to each other. Ice has replaced the once warm brown eyes I used to love.

He makes no move as Georgie stabs his knife into the floor, carving a shallow cut on my cheek. The power move brings a smile to his face, thinking he’s terrified me into paralysis. When he reaches for my pants, I reach for the knife he’s left so close within

my reach. Before I can pull it out of the carpeted floor, Georgie freezes above me, his eyes bulging from the sockets in shock as a large hunting knife pierces through his skull.

The knife retracts, causing Georgie to fall in my direction. I quickly roll out of the way, grabbing his small knife to hold up to Jonah's massive blade. What I thought was the tip of a hunting knife turns out to be a machete. Pushing through the memories of those kind brown eyes, I take a step to attack, but my feet won't budge. I might hate Jonah for how he treated me in the bunker, but could I kill him? Especially after he just saved my life? Why did he save my life?

"You're thinking very loudly, Shortcake. Unfortunately, we don't have time for a catch-up. My men have got your man tied up in the living room and are hungry for blood."

I growl at Jonah's words, anger boiling inside me. "Every ounce of blood your men spill will be returned a thousandfold."

"So, you are willing to kill?" The coldness in his eyes thaws just enough for me to recognize the boy I once knew. The innocent boy who would only use a machete if he was playing a violent video game. As if realizing his slip, he pulls himself back into the cold, heartless man I remember from the bunker. The man who survived and thrived in Doctore's Novus Seclorum.

I nod, flipping the knife in my hand to get a better grip, just like Amos had shown me months ago. Jonah motions me out through the doorway of the office with a nod. As I walk in front of him, he grabs the hand holding my newly found knife, twisting it backward. Before I can scream at him, Jonah furiously whispers, "Don't drop the knife."

Do I trust him? No. But what other choice do I have? I allow him to push me down

the hall and into the living room where three men take turns using Amos as a human punching bag. He's unconscious. All body parts are intact though. And no puncture wounds. A sigh of relief will have to wait until we are out of trouble.

Jonah twists my arm again, producing the perfect scream to bring his men to attention. "This little bitch killed Georgie. Who'd like to have a go at her?"

My look of pure hate quickly melts away as Jonah throws me to the ground. I hold on to the knife, keeping it from view until the first douchebag attempts to grab me. Swinging my arm around, I slice off two of his fingers. His blood-curdling cry is cut short as I roll myself to standing, and swing my arm up, carving a new mouth on his throat. This one screams a river of blood.

Two men remain now, menacing hate radiating from their faces. I don't give them a chance to make the first move. I run toward the couch as they let Amos's unconscious body fall to the ground. One of the men pulls out a gun, grazing me with a bullet before I sink my blade in the other man's spine. Using him as a human shield, I charge at the idiot wasting bullets on me. Then I throw the repulsive swine I'm holding into the armed idiot's hand, knocking the gun from his grasp.

We circle each other, his eyes darting around the room and back at me. "Sir?" he calls out, looking for Jonah who comes out of nowhere, swinging his machete high. The man's head falls to the ground with a thump.

"Legatus?" a voice from outside shouts. "Is everything all right in there? We heard gunshots."

The pounding of feet on the porch outside echo the pounding in my chest. Jonah motions me down and I silently obey, crouching over to where Amos lies crooked on the ground in front of a couch. I listen to his even breathing as Jonah talks to his men. When I hear him giving orders for the men to comb the house for more hostiles, I

collapse on top of Amos, playing dead.

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I hear five sets of feet march down the hallway to the back of the house and up the stairs. Jonah startles me as he crouches over Amos' head. "Take the two guardians in the back. I'll take the three upstairs," he whispers, then points at the dead men surrounding Amos and me. "But first, make sure those three don't get back up. You need to sever the spinal cord."

His words shock me, but I don't have time to question him as he sprints away. I do as I'm told though, slicing the spinal cords of the men who hadn't been decapitated. Blindly following the orders of a man I hate, whom I distrust down to the marrow of my bones, I take a moment to think about this situation we are in. Jonah could have easily let his men rape and beat me just for me to heal and have them do it all over again. He could have captured me and brought me back to the bunker as a conquered prize.

Or perhaps...my thoughts are interrupted as I reach the end of the hallway. With quiet feet, I slide into the powder room next to the staircase. When I hear the guardians making their way back from investigating the kitchen and closets, I slam the door in their faces, knocking them on their asses.

A bullet hits me in the stomach, but I power through the pain, grabbing the gun from the woman's loosened grasp before smashing her nose in with my boot-covered heel while firing a shot into her companion's head. Turning them both over, I slice through their spinal cords. The implications of Jonah's words scare the shit out of me. I need answers from him. But first, I need to make sure Amos is okay.

I sprint back to the living room, hoping that Jonah has dispatched the rest of his men upstairs. As I loosen the ropes around his hands, Amos wakes up. He groans loudly,

reaching for his head. I help him sit up, which causes his eyes to fly open.

My arms circle around his waist carefully, but he pulls me in tighter, wincing at the pain in his ribs. I try to pull out but he won't let me go, so I give in, lying my head against his solid chest and say, "I love you, too, Amos."

His response was not what I expected. "Shit, Lori." He lets me pull away this time. "Did you do all this?"

I follow his gaze, finally breathing a sigh of relief and silently hoping that he isn't deflecting from the words I spoke to him. Why would he when he said those very words to me? Well, not to me, but at me. Same thing, right? I shrug and say, "I had some help."

"From who?"

Jonah saunters in from the hallway, weapons looted from his fallen soldiers filling up his arms. He gently drops them to the ground before collapsing on the couch. "From me."

"And who the fuck are you?" Amos sounds more curious than angry.

Before Jonah can introduce himself, I answer for him. "This is Jonah. Jonah Rosenberg. My...ex."

"What the fuck is he doing here, Copperhead?" The anger in his voice has dissolved all curiosity. Amos seethes with hate. If he wasn't so beat up, I'm sure he'd have Jonah in a headlock, ready to snap his neck. He turns his golden eyes to me, whispering loud enough for Jonah to hear, "I told you if I ever met this asshole, I'd kill him."

“And I’d deserve it,” Jonah responds, casually folding his hands behind his head.

Chapter 37

Amos stares at Jonah with a mixture of hatred and fear as I inspect the bruises on Amos’ face. When I attempt to lift his shirt to check on the damage to his ribs, Amos holds his shirt down.

“I’m okay, Lori. I’ve had much worse.”

“So have I.” I hold Amos’ gaze for so long it would feel uncomfortable with anyone else. I know he’s remembering the time he witnessed me fighting in Doctore’s Colosseum. The last thing I want to do is stir his anger, but I need him to know I am here for him like he was for me. We are in this together. We survive together.

Keeping my gaze, Amos asks, “What should we do with him?”

I fight the urge to loosen my eye contact. “I know you said no prisoners, but I think we should take him back with us. He could be useful.”

“Useful.” The golden flecks in Amos’ eyes lose their shine. “Is that the only reason?”

“Jealous, are we?” Jonah chuckles, becoming that arrogant man I met in the bunker.

Instead of giving in to my anger and decking Jonah in the face, I place my hands on Amos’ cheeks and pull him gently to my lips. His rigid body relaxes just enough to know he got my message. But I tell him with my words. “I love you, Amos.”

The relief I feel from his body is mirrored in his face as he sighs against my forehead, pressing a kiss there. “Okay.”

That's all the response I need to know we are good, that nothing can break us. Not even a surprise appearance by my ex-boyfriend who happens to be a legatus—a commanding officer—in Doctore's Praetorian Guard. I never thought I would see Jonah again. I hadn't wanted to. Having him in the same room with me hurts in places I forgot existed within me. Then I remember the gun shot to my gut. Checking that there's an exit wound brings attention to the blood seeping through my shirt.

Amos grunts through the pain as he kneels in front of me to examine the wound.

"Clean shot. Are you okay?" he asks, caressing the exposed skin there.

I nod, helping him stand up. On his feet, he grabs my hands, pulling me close to his side, and wraps an arm around my waist. The move feels so natural. Like we've been a couple for years when, in reality, we've only known each for eight months.

"Put all your weapons into that bag," Amos instructs Jonah.

"Fuck that." Jonah grabs the machete he placed on the couch, holding it to his chest. "I don't go anywhere unarmed."

“Lori, would you do the honors of disarming our prisoner?”

I squeeze the hand he placed on my waist before walking out of his protective embrace. Stopping in front of Jonah, I hold out my hands. “We can do this the easy way or...”

“Fine. But don’t look to me for help if we get caught in a horde.” Jonah holds out the machete and I grab the hilt with one hand while keeping my other hand out to receive the rest of his weapons. A handgun from his hip holster, a tactical knife slid into his belt, and a smaller knife tucked into his boot.

“Is that all?” I ask. When he nods, I spin on my heels to put the weapons away in the duffle bag carrying our rifles. Then pick up the bag, throwing the straps over my shoulder. Amos bends down to grab the other two bags, but Jonah swoops down to grab them.

“I got these. Don’t want you to aggravate those injuries, old man.”

Amos’ seething anger couldn’t get any hotter. Before he can start throwing punches, I walk between them, grabbing Amos’ hand. He lets me pull him with me begrudgingly.

“Can I just punch him once?”

“No. Not yet.” I turn to look up at his brooding face, giving him my best smile. Considering the circumstances, I’d say it was a brilliant one too, because those golden eyes glow when he meets my face.

Before exiting through the broken door, I peek my head out to monitor the surrounding area outside. No zombies. Good. We hustle to our car, parked along the curb. Amos heads right for the driver's side of the car, unlocking the door with the touch of his hand since he has the keys hanging safely from his neck still.

I drop the bag of weapons a little too loudly and slide my body between him and the driver's seat. "You are injured. Let me drive."

"Lori. Really. I'm fine."

"You might be fine now, but what happens when you have shooting pain in your ribs or your vision goes blurry? The last thing you want to do is put us in danger, right? A walk in the woods to find survivors is something I can handle. A car crash in the middle of a zombie infested road? Is that something you want to chance?"

My brief speech seems to be enough when I see the stubborn walls of defiance break in his eyes. He nods, keeping his hand on the open car door as he says, "Not a scratch. Got it?"

Before waiting for my answer, Amos leans in for a kiss. A kiss that is interrupted by Jonah shouting from a polite few feet away. "Amos, watch out!" he screams, dropping the two bags with our supplies and heading for the weapons bag. We hadn't noticed the approaching zombie until it's at the car door, grabbing Amos' hand and pulling his living flesh into its decaying, rancid mouth.

My reaction isn't fast enough, but the scream that pierces past my throat is instantaneous. I pull the zombie off of Amos, sinking my newly acquired knife into its eye. As the deadie falls to the ground, I take in our surroundings, clear of any other zombies. This one must have been wandering aimlessly all alone, attracted to all the noises we've been making. How the hell didn't we notice it approaching?

Then I turn back to Amos who has fallen against the car, his left hand pressed to his chest, staring down at the deadly bite. “No,” I whisper. Then, louder, I shout out into the universe, as if I have the power to change reality. “No!”

Jonah slides into view, holding his machete, yelling at me. But I don’t hear his words until he shakes me out of my shock. “Lori! Snap out of it. If you want to save Amos’ life, grab his hand and hold his arm out.” To Amos he holds out his belt, instructing, “Bite down on this and brace yourself.”

No thoughts enter my mind as I follow Jonah’s orders. I hold on to Amos’ bitten hand, desperate for this to be a nightmare. I love this man. I love him. My savior. My friend. A man who would move mountains to protect me. I refuse to let last night be the only one we share together. But what can I do? There is no cure. Unless you’re me.

I watch in horror as Jonah swings the blade of his honed machete down on Amos’ arm, just below his elbow. I force myself to look away, to look anywhere else, but my eyes lock onto a sight I wish I could unsee immediately afterward. The fear in Amos’ eyes turns them black. Barely a sliver of gold lines the darkness of his pupils.

His severed arm falls against my thigh as his pupils constrict, revealing the brilliant gold of his irises before being overtaken by black again. I look down at the arm that once held me, comforted me, pleased me. Bile rises in my throat at the sight of it and my body shakes in horror. Memories of my own arm being cut off, ripped off. The pain. Oh god, the pain. I drop the arm unceremoniously to the ground and turn my focus back to the man who was once attached to that arm.

Jonah has removed the belt from Amos’ mouth and is now making a tourniquet to stop him from bleeding out. At least he’s good for one thing, being calm and collected during a crisis. I collapse next to them, reaching out for Amos’ remaining hand. His fingers instantly capture mine, crushing them as he grunts through the

excruciating pain of losing an arm.

“Will he be okay?” I ask Jonah.

“I can’t say for sure.” Jonah slumps back on his heels after buckling the belt tightly around the stump of Amos’ arm. Blood soaks his arms, hands, and legs. “I’ve seen this work a few times. You have to be quick enough to stop the virus from spreading to the heart. A bite to a hand, foot, leg, arm. Those can be taken care of. If he’d been bitten on the neck though...”

Jonah doesn’t finish his sentence, likely remembering how Sarah died. Movement at the front of the car brings us to attention. I grab my knife as Jonah springs into a fighting stance with his machete in hand. Four living humans corner us against our car, aiming guns right in our faces. Knives against guns, not great odds. I grip the knife tighter in my hand, preparing myself to fight through bullet wounds, but no shots are fired at us.

A woman with long wavy blonde hair pulled back in a half bun steps forward, lowering her gun as she looks past us. Something about her is familiar.

“Oh my god,” she yells as she pushes through Jonah and me to kneel next to Amos. “What happened, Amos?” Before Amos can answer, she turns to me and Jonah with fury painted on her face. “Which one of you did this to him?”

Untamed jealousy racks my body. The way she hovers over him. They must have been something to each other. But Amos never mentioned another woman. Am I the other woman? The thought makes me laugh out loud, causing the four armed strangers to look at me with care.

They grip their weapons tighter as they stare at me, only breaking their hardened glare when Amos clears his throat. “Don’t mind, Lori. I fucked her hard with those

fingers last night. She must be a grieving mess.”

My skin burns, my throat going instantly dry. How could Amos joke like this after everything that had happened in the last hour? After losing his arm. After nearly dying. Twice.

“So this is the famous Lori?” The blonde woman stands back up, taking two steps to hold out her hand to me. “I’m Dana. Amos used to fuck me with those fingers too. Until he met you.”

Before I could even fathom a response, Dana turns back around and asks, “What the hell happened?”

Chapter 38

After we piled into our car—all seven of us—I explained the last half hour of events to Dana. I took the driver’s seat while Dana slid into the passenger’s seat. Amos was helped into the back seat by two of the other strangers, and Jonah was thrown into the trunk with another.

As I continue telling the story of how Jonah’s men tried to kill us, how I killed them, Dana gives me directions to their safe house. She had offered to drive, but there was no way I was going to put my life in her hands. Even if she’s all buddy-buddy with Amos. Her familiarity hit me soon after telling her what happened to us. The day my mom was going to give me a tour of The Valley, the day I was freed from my hospital room, Dana had been carried in by Amos. Her leg was broken after falling off a building.

I forgot all about that woman, not thinking to ask who she was. Taking a peek in the rearview mirror, a shiver of fear crawls down my spine, erasing all thoughts of jealousy about who Dana is to Amos. He’s mine now. And I need to focus on getting him somewhere safe, where he can heal.

Amos looks deathly pale. A shade so unnatural to his natural brown skin. I push down my anger, fear, and sadness. Push everything down to keep my mask from breaking as I finish telling Dana how Amos had gotten bitten. All because he was being a stubborn asshole. Amos gives a dry chuckle in the back when I use those

exact words.

“That was a smart move to cut off the arm,” Dana says, turning toward the back. “We were able to salvage most of our medical supplies. One of our scouts had seen the incoming siege, but we had little time to get everyone to safety. Some fled by car, but others...weren’t so lucky.”

The rearview mirror shows me Jonah’s defeated face as he looks down at the floor of the trunk. Part of me wants to know what he had done to those people. What he did in the bunker to climb the ranks to become a legatus. He might have saved Amos’ life, but he has a lot to answer for.

“Pull in here, Lori.” Dana points to a long driveway off the main road. An old farmhouse sits at the end. I park on the side of the house and turn the car off, unlocking the doors.

Dana hops out quickly, walking to the back of the car to let our prisoner out as I help Amos out of the backseat. The bleeding hasn’t stopped, but it’s slowed down enough to ease some of the tension in my chest. When I wrap his whole arm over my shoulder, he slumps down so low I stumble for a moment but stop us from tumbling to the ground. I straighten my body and restore my stance, holding him up with a strength I had only felt in my scariest moments.

We follow our company to a side door of the farmhouse. Dana knocks twice, then again three times. The door immediately swings open. With her gun pressed to Jonah’s back, she pushes him inside, relinquishing her guard to the two others who flank her. Then she ushers me and Amos in, bringing us upstairs to a make-shift infirmary. It’s really just a two-bedroom suite in this farmhouse turned bed-and-breakfast.

The room Dana escorts us to has two full sized beds with a nightstand in between,

and a tall dresser to the left of the panoramic windows. Everything is decorated in charming shabby chic decor. I lie Amos down on one of the clean beds. The white linens instantly staining from the blood dripping from Amos' arm stump.

Tears threaten to tear me apart again, but I push them down as I hear Dana order someone to hook Amos up to an IV before leaving us in the room. A woman not much older than my mom, with curly brown hair and a sharp nose, carefully unwraps the hasty bandages Jonah used from his own shirt.

"This needs to be cleaned out before we can work on closing it up, though I'm not sure how to do that without shaving down the bone," she explains.

Amos groans, turning paler by the second.

"Use my skin," I nearly shout.

"What?" Both the women in the room look at me like I've grown a second head.

When I look at Amos, his golden eyes have lost all their luster, but I know he's aware of what I'm suggesting. "Lori, no. I'm not worth the pain this will—"

"You are worth everything, Amos. So shut up. I will heal. Let me help you."

My eyes plead with his until I win. A black woman with frizzy gray hair and large, round glasses on a small, round face approaches the bed, saying, "Hey Amos, I'm sorry but this might pinch a bit."

She gently pushes the IV into Amos' right arm, making him wince. "That was nothing compared to getting an arm chopped off. Thank you, Ruth." To me he says, "If I don't make it—"

“No. None of that.” I sit on the edge of the bed, my butt gently pushing into his thigh, and grasp his only hand between mine. “You will survive this.”

Amos doesn’t answer as the drugs from the IV drip have taken effect already, dragging him down to a deep sleep where he hopefully won’t feel a pinch of pain. I look up at Ruth, asking, “What can I do to help?”

“We need to clean the wound. You can assist Angie, making sure she has enough linens to clean and dress the stump of his arm. Do you think you can do that?”

I nod, walking over to the other side of the bed where Angie is setting up shop. She pulls another chair over for me to sit on and we get to work. The blood-soaked shirt Jonah used as a bandage has already been discarded. Angie had placed a towel underneath the stump of Amos’ arm. The sight of it makes my heart stop and this time, I can’t prevent the tears from leaking out of my eyes.

“There, there, my dear. We are going to clean him up right as rain.” Angie’s optimism is the candle of hope I need to keep myself together. Even if she’s lying to me, I don’t care. I latch on to her words and remind myself of what I said to him. “You will survive this.” We will survive. Together.

“Lori?” Ruth asks from across the bed, monitoring the IV drip. “What did you mean when you said, ‘use my skin’?”

“Did Amos not tell you all about me?” I ask, holding a bowl of warm water for Angie. She dips a bit of bloodied cloth into the bowl, turning the water a sickly red. “I am immune to the virus that creates zombies. I can also heal very quickly.”

“Are you the gladiator we’ve heard tales of? The one Dr. Tuwile experimented on?”

“Angie, don’t be insensitive!” Ruth barks, turning eyes of pity and sadness on me.

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I look away, focusing on the water as it turns a darker shade of red. “It’s okay. It’s the truth. I thought Amos had shared this news with his—our—allies.”

“No, my dear, he did not.” Angie finishes up with the linens, satisfied there are no more germs or bits of dirt that could cause an infection. “Do you think your skin could close up his wound?”

I shrug, careful not to splash any bloodied water on my legs. “I don’t know if it’s been tried before. Doctore—Dr. Tuwile—did unspeakable things to me, but I wasn’t always conscious for them. I’d like to try this. If there’s the smallest chance it will help Amos.”

“Let me see how much anesthetic we have,” Ruth says, but I cut her off.

“Don’t waste that on me. I know what it feels like to have my skin torn from my body. It hurts. But I can bear it. For him, I can bear anything.”

“How romantic,” Ruth sighs, tears dripping from her eyelashes. “But are you sure?”

I nod, standing up before I lose my nerve. I place the bloody water on the nightstand, pull my shirt over my head, and lie myself face down on the bed next to Amos’. Taking deep breaths, I attempt to relax myself. Tensing my muscles will only make this hurt more.

“Take as much as you need,” I say with my face buried in a pillow. The last thought I have before pain consumes every inch of my body is of Amos. His golden eyes taking in every bit of my naked body last night. The pleasure he made me feel. The ecstasy.

The love. I will do anything to feel that way again. To be safely wrapped around his body. Stuck in a time and place that only exists for us.

Chapter 39

After Ruth and Angie finish stitching my skin over Amos' stump, my back is pretty much all healed up. I leave the room, needing some air as I cling to the hope that my skin will help close Amos' wound. The sting of my newly healed skin is the only reminder of what was likely a gruesome sight less than an hour ago. But I heal fast. Faster now than I ever did in the bunker. Perhaps the healthier lifestyle and diet are more agreeable than the life I spent as a lab rat with limited access to a dank and dark basement.

Dana is the first person I see as I descend the stairs, leading into a cozy living room. I stand over her, watching as she cleans her rifle. Without looking up at me, she says, "We moved the prisoner to the shed. Two of my people, Marcus and Alex, are on guard. Do you want to talk to him?"

My intention was to stay far away from Jonah, but my head nods before I can even think about it. Dana makes quick work putting her rifle back together and swings the strap around her back. I follow her out the same side door we had entered over an hour ago, walking past the red Honda and a small vegetable garden.

"What is this place?" I ask Dana, remembering what Amos had told me about where we had been heading to.

"One of our safe houses. The old manor house was hit by Dr. Tuwile's men. Thankfully, we got everyone out of there before the raid, but the surrounding houses...we suffered too many casualties."

"I'm so sorry. Amos and I left as soon as we heard about the planned attacks. We

found a car crash. No survivors. Amos mentioned the name Earl when we found a...body.”

Dana’s steps halt abruptly, choking on a sob. “Oh, Earl. He was a good man. One of our leaders. During the attack, he and a few others took one of the cars and tried to take out as many of the bastards as they could. We weren’t sure if...well now I know. Thank you for telling me.”

I place a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. She reaches back with a squeeze of her own before continuing down the grassy path. “Amos has told me so much about you and yet, I knew there was something big he wasn’t telling me. You not only used to live with Dr. Tuwile’s people. You are his super soldier.”

Dana didn’t ask, which means she likely figured it out or Jonah had been talking. I nod anyway. “Amos saved me from that hellhole. Brought me to The Valley.”

“What I don’t understand is why? The Valley is one of the most well-protected survivor communities on this side of The Wall. They rarely ever bring in new survivors and never those from Dr. Tuwile’s crew.”

“I was not in his crew. I was...” Memories of pain, anger, grief shock my system for a moment, leaving me breathless.

“Our prisoner, Jonah, says you were...friends.”

“More than friends. That stopped the moment he chose Dr. Tuwile over me. I don’t know what he’s doing here. Why he saved our lives. Why I even want to talk to him.”

Dana stops a few feet from where Marcus and Alex stand guard outside the shed where Jonah is imprisoned. “Closure is likely the reason.” She doesn’t wait for my response, only orders Marcus and Alex to open the door and give me privacy. “Only

open the door back up when Lori says she is ready.”

I walk past Dana, and she stands aside for her guards to open the door to the shed. Marcus stands back, holding out his gun in case Jonah tries to make a run for it. When Alex waves me in, I take hurried steps past her and into the dimly lit shed.

Jonah sulks in the back corner, crouching over his knees. He doesn't look up until the door closes behind me, the lock bolting back in place. I clear my throat, delaying as I find the right words to say. What do I even want to say? But Jonah beats me to it.

“Is Amos okay?”

Hearing Jonah say the name of the man who's become my friend and lover in the last eight months is a strange sensation. An out-of-body feeling that makes it hard to tell if my feet are firmly pressed to the ground. Jonah is here. Jonah saved my life. He saved Amos' life. Though there is still the possibility that Amos could turn into a zombie if the virus made it into his bloodstream.

“He'll be okay,” is all I say.

Silence fills a void between us, one I want to stay in place because any more words would mean I forgive Jonah. That I'm grateful for him. And yes, I am, for what he did today. But how can I forget about the four years of torture he let me endure all because he believed Doctore was building a future for us? For humanity. I can't forget those four years, no matter how hard I try.

Before Jonah can break the silence again, I ask, “Why did you help us? You could have easily let that man rape me and kill Amos. Taken me back to Doctore. I'm sure he would have rewarded you with more Roman titles of honor. And why did you tell me to sever the spinal cord of your men? Were they infected?”

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My voice comes out cold and vapid, just as I had intended, but the reaction from Jonah takes me by surprise. He hangs his head low in shame, mulling over my words, feeling every harsh syllable.

“Before that day...when you escaped...” Jonah hesitates before continuing. “I hadn’t wanted to see you in the arena because I knew what Doctore did to you. I didn’t want to see it. Seeing it would make it real and I wanted to live in the ignorance of seeing you whole. I was wrong. Wrong about Doctore. Novus Seclorum. Everything. I’m sorry, Lori.”

“Sorry?” I shout, cutting his apology short. “You are a legatus. Obviously Doctore trusts you enough to give you a cohort of ten vicious men to go out and murder innocent survivors. To kidnap those you don’t end up killing. How many people have you killed? How many people have you let him torture?”

“I had to, Lori. If I didn’t keep doing what he expected of me, he would have killed me!”

“And that justifies killing?”

“No. It justifies surviving. I held my men back from doing their worst. I did everything I could to protect anyone we came across. But I had to remain on Doctore’s good side.”

“What, were you afraid he’d turn you into his lab rat?” The fumes of my anger radiate off my flesh, making the heat of the warm June sun feel like a blazing fire. I pace around the shed, letting my anger drown all rational thinking. Flashes of my time in

the bunker race across my mind. Jonah escorting me to the lab. Doctore cutting me open, examining all my innards, testing my limits. Jonah fucking my tired, hollow body. Zombies tearing me to pieces on the arena floor. Hungry orphans. A little girl turning.

I throw my hands up to my head, attempting to push all the memories out. Alison had helped me cope with the worst of my trauma, but I can't remember a damn thing she's said to me. How to breathe. How to ground myself in the present. I'm spiraling. Hard.

A pair of warm hands brace me, gripping my shoulders. Warm hands I know aren't Amos' because he no longer has a pair. The thought is enough to break me in my fragile state. As my weak points begin to shatter, Jonah squeezes my shoulders. The slight tinge of pain helps bring me back. Then his voice coaxes me to open my eyes.

"All of his soldiers are dosed with the virus, just enough to bring us back from the dead to keep killing. Including me." Jonah sighs. "I didn't know this until after you left. A lot of things fell into place for me that day. I swore I wouldn't stop until I found you. A vow I gave to Doctore as he laid on a hospital bed for weeks after you skewered him with that spear. But my promise was to you. That I would find you and make sure Doctore never laid another hand on you."

Our eyes meet for a fraction of a second, and in that moment, I see the boy I once loved. My lifelong crush, high school sweetheart, prom date. That boy might still be somewhere inside the body of this man, but he no longer exists. And yet, the man who stands before me now is not the same man I grew to hate in the bunker. The coldness gripping my heart cools my fury just enough to breathe deeply.

After a few breaths, I feel the chains of my trauma break, releasing me from the pain for now. "I don't know if I can ever forgive you, Jonah."

“Don’t. I never dreamed forgiveness would be possible. All I want is for you to allow me to protect you. To keep you from falling into his hands again.”

I shake my head. “A lot of people want you dead, Jonah. You were part of a raid that killed so many innocent people in this community. The Valley won’t let you in.”

“If I can convince Amos, do you think he could change their minds?”

I smile. “Do you think you could convince Amos?”

Jonah shrugs, finally releasing my shoulders from his grip. The weight I had been feeling against my chest releases as he takes a step back. “If anything, I have a lot of useful information about Doctore. Who’s working for him. Where to find him. What other experiments have been successful.”

Before I can ask about the other experiments, a hurried knock sounds at the shed door. “Lori, it’s Amos, he’s up.”

I rush back up to the farmhouse, leaving Jonah behind in the shed. The raw emotions of my conversation with Jonah are still stirring up inside me. When I walk into Amos’ room, I’m breathless, crying, and ready to collapse from the overstimulation.

“Are those tears for me?” Amos asks, sitting up on the bed.

In five steps, I’m at his side, crying my eyes out as I carefully collapse into bed with him. He pulls me against his chest, using his good arm. “I was so scared, Amos. The thought of losing you when I only just—”

“It’s a good thing your boyfriend thought to cut my arm off.” Amos’ joke is anything but lighthearted. His voice is dark and menacing, as if he’s imagining ways of killing Jonah. I glare up at him, hoping that he didn’t mean it, that he can’t possibly think I

see Jonah in that way.

“Are you jealous? Or worried that I’ll go back to him?” I ask in all seriousness, but Amos tries to brush it off, shrugging his shoulders like it doesn’t bother him. “No. Don’t do that. We are not that kind of couple who dismiss each other, ignoring the doubts and fears we try to hide deep inside ourselves.”

“You think we are a couple?” His voice shakes, unable to hide his feelings in such a weakened physical state.

“You will not push me away, Amos. You won’t get rid of me that easily. Or ever. We are moving in together when we get back to The Valley. We are going to be that annoying, disgusting couple who can’t keep their hands off each other. We survive together.”

Amos holds me tighter against him as he whispers in my hair, “I love you, Copperhead.”

Chapter 40

A few days later, Amos is cleared by the medical staff from what’s left of The Manor House community. Cleared meaning he won’t turn into a zombie as it’s been well over twenty-four hours since he’d been bitten and no sign of infection. Days of sleep have done him good, but Amos has a long road to recovery ahead of him. A road we will take together.

Jonah, to my surprise, is coming with us back to The Valley. He’d spoken to Amos during one of the rare hours Amos was awake and lucid. Whatever he said to Amos was enough, convincing him of his worth, at least enough to keep him alive as a prisoner for now.

Dana was hesitant to let Jonah go with us, worried he would lead us into a trap. But we've had no trouble on the road. Amos has been instructing me on how to get back to The Valley since I'm unfamiliar with the roads out here. This was only my second time leaving the safety of campus. What a hell of a week it's been.

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My mom must be worried sick. She hated the thought of me going on patrol, but knew how much I needed to do this. To help. To fight back. I wonder what she'll say to Jonah. I told her my worst memory of who he'd become. Amos too. And yet...he still allowed Jonah in the car with us.

As I pull up to the gate next to the pedestrian bridge, Amos waves out the window, giving the safe signal but also the sign for prisoner. The guards on the bridge hurry to relay the news to the guards at the gate. A minute later, the doors open. Amos' hoarse voice instructs me to drive in slowly and follow the guards who will grant us safe passage inside.

I can tell Amos is fighting to stay awake. His body is so weak from all the blood he lost, but his skin has regained some of its color. A color that reminds me of a watered-down chai latte.

"What are you thinking about, Copperhead?" he asks, catching me glancing at him.

"Nothing. Just that you are looking much better," I say as five of The Valley's patrol guards surround our car. The one in front waves us forward.

"Better than?" Amos asks, holding onto the "n" sound. I dare not look at him as I carefully drive the car down the short distance to the medical center. "You think I look better with one arm? Had I known, I would have chopped it off months ago."

A smile explodes on my face as I think about the months I had dreamt about Amos, not knowing if he thought of me as anything more than a liability. Now that our feelings are out in the open, I can breathe easy.

The prisoner in the back seat complicates things a bit. Not that I would ever choose Jonah over Amos, just the idea of Jonah being here, at The Valley.

It was hard to find a path toward a peaceful life before. And now? The imminent threat of what Doctore poses to us, to the rest of the world, is right at our doorstep. I never thought I'd get a happy ending, not since prom night. With Amos, I know I'd die happy at least.

The guards to my left step onto the curb and motion me over. I follow their instructions, pulling over as close as I can get, and turn off the car. Though it's a hybrid car, we are still instructed to turn off any vehicle we operate once the car is put into park. Fuel is a difficult commodity to come by in this world, and these hybrid cars can only go so far on electric power.

One of the guards holds open the door while two others point their weapons at Jonah, motioning him to exit the car.

"Why is the prisoner not restrained?" a guard asks; I think his name is Ryan.

Amos responds with, "He's not a danger to us. In fact, he saved our lives. But he is a legatus of Dr. Tuwile's Praetorian Guard."

At the mention of the Praetorian Guard, every single one of the guards on duty outside our car grips their weapons tighter, focusing their aim directly at Jonah's head.

"Calm down, boys," I say, turning around to see Jonah take a hesitant step out of the car.

"Listen to Lori. This man has sensitive information. He is not to be harmed. Escort him to conference room three."

“Yes, sir,” they all say in response.

As the guards surround Jonah, taking him inside, I hop out of the car to help Amos. My mom intercepts me though, pulling me into a hug that would likely suffocate me if she didn’t stop in the next ten seconds. I gently nudge out of the hug and slither over to the passenger side of the car where Amos has already opened the door.

My mom screams when she sees the stump of his arm. “Oh my god, Amos! What happened?”

“I’m fine, Cathy.” Amos hops out without any assistance, but I’m there a second later as he loses his balance. When I steady him, I take a step away to give him some space, not wanting to smother him. “Angie and Ruth patched me up with some of Lori’s skin.”

“Your arm,” my mom says in shocked astonishment, as if she didn’t hear a single word Amos said. Amos looks down at the phantom limb. “It’s...gone. Oh my god, Amos. What happened?”

I interrupt my mother’s interrogation. “You can examine him inside, Mom, and ask us whatever questions you have.”

My mom nods, standing aside to let us through. “I’ve sent someone to fetch Anna and Jeremy. Norman has been bothering me for days about where the two of you could be. He had a theory that you weren’t taking this mission seriously and had shacked up somewhere to fornicate.”

I burst out laughing and Amos gives a little chuckle, holding back the pain he must be feeling.

“Is that your wording, Mom? Or Norman’s?” I ask.

“Norman’s,” my mom says with a laugh. Then she inspects me closely, eyeing me suspiciously. I can’t help the blush that spreads across my pale face, making it so obvious. “You two didn’t...”

“Didn’t what?” My voice instinctively turns on its defensive mode, which makes me sound incredibly guilty.

“Fornicate?” Amos asks, the weight of him getting heavier as I hold him up. He must be at his limit. “Yes, we did. Many times. Even after I lost the other end of this.” Amos holds out his arm, putting the stump on full display. “Though she was much gentler with me.” He has no freaking shame right now, whereas I’m sure my face is the color of a beet.

I’m gonna hit him. I’m gonna punch him right in that beautiful, perfect face. “You’re lucky you’re injured,” I scowl, but I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips.

Amos chuckles again, the deep tones of his laughter pulling at my core. My mom clears her voice. “So you were fornicating.”

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The three of us burst out laughing, a sound that should not be possible after the week we had. As if the universe needed to knock us back in balance, Norman comes rushing over, staring at Amos and what's left of his arm.

“What happened? Why did you bring back a member of the Praetorian Guard? Where is the rest of your arm?”

Comedic relief scene over. Now it's back to business.

“Let's go somewhere private. One of the medical rooms, perhaps?” I suggest, now seeing all the curious eyes looking our way. My mom nods, leading us upstairs and into the room I had once occupied as a pseudo prisoner.

Norman keeps quiet in the corner, allowing my mother to examine the healing wound that is Amos' arm. Angie had stitched a large patch of my skin over the stump, covering more than was necessary to allow for a bit of cushioning over the bone. To everyone's astonishment, my skin healed the incision. It took longer than if it was a wound on my body. Still quite miraculous. Even the stitches have been removed.

As my mom continues to examine the closed wound that should have taken weeks to get to this stage of healing, I say without thinking, “I keep wondering if I could have prevented this from happening. If my skin can do this, what if I acted faster and...I dunno...sucked the zombie venom out like you do with a snake bite?”

My mom gasps and Norman jumps up from the corner, whisper shouting, “You were bitten! And you came back to The Valley? Amos, you know our rule. Anyone bitten must remain outside our walls. There are no exceptions.”

“It’s almost like you wanted me to die out there, Norman,” Amos says casually, doing his best to keep his cool-guy persona up even though he’s about to collapse. “I was bitten four days ago. No fever. No sign of infection. Jonah sliced off my arm within seconds. He stopped the virus from spreading. He saved my life. That is why I brought him here.”

Anna and Jeremy walk in with questions and concerns for Amos while my mom asks, “Jonah’s here?” and Norman says, “Fascinating. Where exactly was the bite?”

“Okay, okay. Let’s do one question at a time, folks!” I yell, feeling overwhelmed all of a sudden. “First, we need to let Amos rest. He had to be on alert during the entire drive to give me directions back here.”

“I’m fine, Lori,” Amos says, reaching out for me with his injured arm as if he forgot he had no hand attached. I can see the sorrow in his eyes at the realization of what he tried to do.

In two steps, I stand in between his legs, holding him tightly in my arms. “I know you are fine, Amos. But you need to sleep. Please. I can handle their questions.”

I feel him sigh in relief, his breath tickling against my collarbone. When I release him, he looks up at me with tired eyes, ready to give in. I lie him down on the bed he’s been sitting on and press my lips against his forehead. “I’ll be close by if you need me, okay?”

He smiles drunkenly, eyes fluttering closed as he falls effortlessly to sleep.

Amos needed more sleep than I thought, so I stayed in his hospital room for the night, cuddling up on the armchair in the corner. I spent hours with my mom, Norman, Anna, and Jeremy, answering their endless questions. There was only so much I could say. The rest was for Jonah to answer.

As everyone recessed for the night, I pulled Anna back into the office we had been conferring in, asking what Amos and I needed to do to get one of those couples rooms. I thought I'd surprise Amos when he's ready to leave the health center. Turns out it's a bit of a process to secure one of those couple suites. They are exclusively for couples in a serious relationship.

I hadn't thought much about the seriousness of our relationship, as it's brand freaking new. But I know one thing: I don't want anyone else but Amos. Still, I'm not sure we are meant for this kind of relationship. The steady climb to marriage, which will then lead to having children. Amos and I are fighters. Domesticity isn't the life I had imagined.

Maybe once we defeat Doctore. Maybe. And yet...I still asked Anna if we could apply for one of the couple's suites.

I fell asleep thinking about how different life would be with Amos if we didn't live in this messed up world. Then again, would we have ever met? I'd likely still be with Jonah.

The door to Amos' hospital room opens, but my mind is still too groggy from sleep, so I keep my eyes closed, hoping whoever it is will leave us alone.

"Can I come in?" Jonah asks. I don't hear another voice. That must mean he's on his own. Or perhaps someone has escorted him here. My eyes are too tired to see for myself.

Amos lets out a grunt of approval and the next thing I hear is the door closing behind Jonah and his footsteps approaching Amos' bed. Their hushed tones spark my curiosity, so I keep my breathing even, pretending to be asleep as my ex and my new boyfriend have a civil conversation.

“Did anyone try to kill you?” Amos asks.

“A few. Lori’s mom and Norman were very convincing. I answered all their questions, kept nothing from them.”

“So you kept your word. Good.” Amos sounds stronger today, his voice rich and deep. Just the vibrations of his voice send me into a frenzy.

Jonah clears his throat before saying, “I hope you know I won’t try to get in the way between you and Lori. I love her. I will never stop loving her. But I don’t deserve her love again for what I’ve done to her. To us. When I saw the two of you, I felt a pang of jealousy but also relief. All I want is for Lori to be happy. Thank you for being that person to bring her happiness. Thank you for saving her life. Two things I couldn’t do for her.”

Amos is so silent I’m about to open my eyes to see his reaction when he says, “Then I won’t have to kill you.” There’s no tension or anger in his voice, just a passive understanding of a simple fact.

“Before I go, I wanted to fill you in on something I briefed the other leaders on.” Jonah pauses, waiting for Amos to respond.

“Go ahead.”

“Doctore has been looking for Lori. That is why our attacks have been more frequent and, well, messier. He’s been able to replicate her reaction to the cure, but he needs more of her DNA to purify the concoction. A few more subjects were successful but didn’t have a lasting effect like Lori. They ended up turning after a few weeks. Lori has been the only success. He’s becoming desperate to create this army of super soldiers. Even testing on his own soldiers which has created doubt among his people. I’ve weeded the doubtful out, careful not to shine a spotlight on us. There were not

enough of us to fight and win, but I'm hoping they are continuing to plant more seeds of doubt."

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Amos makes a sound, like a grunt, then is quiet for a long time before he says, “Lori told me about the baby.”

Jonah’s sigh of grief nearly pulls me from my fake sleep. Then I remember how he denied our baby. How he dropped me off at the lab when I was bleeding. How he said nothing. Just as he’s doing now. Remaining silent.

“Do you know what Doctore has done with it?” Amos asks.

My heart pounds in my chest so loud I’m sure they can hear it. When Jonah answers, I squeeze my fingernails into my palms to keep from screaming out.

“Yes. He showed me. She didn’t...it took everything inside me not to break when I saw her decayed body. Doctore took from her just as he took from Lori. He explained to me then why it was essential to get Lori back. That he couldn’t use the DNA of her undead offspring. It wasn’t enough. Then he incinerated her little body right in front of me.”

Tears of fury force their way out from underneath my eyelids. I fight to hold back the shaking that radiates from my heart. The pounding in my ears blocks out everything else Jonah and Amos say. It isn’t until I feel a warm hand on my cheek that I open my eyes. Amos’ golden eyes glow with concern.

“I didn’t know you were awake. I’m so sorry you heard that. Are you okay?”

The grief I was holding inside me rushes forward like a broken dam. I throw myself into Amos’ outstretched arm. I don’t know how, but he lifts me up and brings me to

the bed, placing me on his lap as he kisses away my tears.

“I’m so sorry, Lori,” Jonah says, standing awkwardly by the door.

Before I can answer, Amos says, “We’ll continue our talk another time.”

Chapter 41

After spending weeks on the application process to get a couple’s suite, Amos and I are finally living together. The suites are single dorm rooms with an en suite bathroom. The beds are wider than the standard dorm twin, which makes it much more comfortable for two people to sleep on. Especially when Amos has a difficult time getting comfortable with only one whole arm.

My heart breaks for Amos even though I know his injury will not break him. He is the strongest person I know. He will get through this. I will help him get through it. Which is what I’ve been trying to do since we returned to The Valley.

I know it will take time for him to heal, for him to find his balance. Since my skin actually healed the worst of the wound on his arm, Amos could start physical therapy with Olivia right away. She was a student here in the before, a near graduate from the physical therapy program, which means she was just a couple months shy of earning her doctorate.

If it was anyone else, I don’t think Amos would be so welcoming of the help. Olivia can take his bullshit though. Actually, she doesn’t take any of it. That’s exactly what Amos needs right now, someone to whip him in shape. I walk with Amos to the athletic center most mornings, but we go our separate ways once we enter the gym. I’ve taken to training with Kyle while Amos works with Olivia.

There have been some bad days and really bad days when Amos lets frustration take

over. He's nearly demolished the rowing machine, which honestly is impressive considering he only has one whole arm. I keep encouraging him, tell him how great he's doing, but I know it's not enough. And it worries the hell out of me.

We've only been living together for a couple of days now, figuring out our space together as Amos navigates a new way of life. Today was an especially tough day for Amos. He had to rely on his commanders to take a mission at The Wall instead of going himself. I know that was hard for him.

After slipping on my pajamas for the night, I peer into the bathroom since Amos has left the door halfway open. He's just standing there, staring at nothing. I walk over and knock on the bathroom door.

"Is it okay if I come in?" I ask.

My voice shakes him out of whatever horrible place his mind had been dwelling in. He looks up, locking his eyes with mine through the mirror above the sink. Without saying a word, he nods, keeping his eyes on me. I wrap my arms around him from behind, gently stroking the stump of his arm.

It's incredible. My skin actually healed over his. And what's even wilder is that my skin transformed into the same tone of his skin. I was worried my skin would look like patchwork, a pale white blob on his beautiful golden brown. But it's seamless.

Amos jerks away at my touch, making me step back. Then he turns around, smashing his lips with mine. I meet his urgency, wrapping my arms around his neck and deepen our kiss. In a whirlwind, Amos detaches his mouth from mine but keeps his hand on my hip as he says, "I want to touch you."

"Then touch me. I'm yours, Amos."

When I attempt to resume our kiss, he steps away from me. “I want to touch you with both of my hands.”

Oh. I think to myself. But he sees the way my face falls, and I know I’ve unintentionally hurt his feelings. “It’s okay, Amos. I know it’s going to take time to—”

“All the time in the world will still not bring back my hand. This is who I am now.” Amos sags into himself, making him look so small and timid. I reach for him, but he interrupts me again, saying, “I just want to go to bed. I’m tired. It’s been a long day.”

I nod, letting him walk past me to the bed, where he collapses without giving me a kiss goodnight. My heart clenches in pain. I know he doesn’t mean to hurt me. I know he’s going through more than just the physical healing after losing an arm. But it still hurts that he walked away from me.

The next couple of weeks don’t get any better. After securing our own suite, I thought Amos and I would grow closer. Stronger. The opposite has occurred. I only see Amos in our suite before the both of us crash into bed. We don’t touch. We don’t talk. We just sleep. It’s unbearable.

I had to leave the gym this morning when I saw Amos smiling at Olivia after he was able to use the rowing machine by himself without beating it up. I should have run to him in that moment to offer him my support and my love. I hated that he smiled for Olivia when all he’s given me these past few weeks is...nothing.

Maybe I should do more for him. Or maybe he needs more space. But I know he doesn’t want either of those things. He is not the kind of person who will allow his meat to be cut up for him. He thrives on being independent and I will not take that away from him. If he wanted space, then he would have told me. Not push me away in silence.

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As his girlfriend, I know I'm the one to see the worst of him. Experience the worst of his depression. It's just too much for me. I miss him. I miss his golden eyes on mine. I say as much to Alison during our session and her only question is, "Have you talked to Amos about your feelings?"

"He dodges me every time I try to talk to him," I say, throwing my head in my hands. "He wouldn't even give me the time of day when news came in from The Wall that they shut down The Colosseum. That the bunker, Novus Seclorum, had been located. And when Kyle came back with Lucas after raiding the place that took my humanity from me...Amos shut down even more. I needed him. I need him now. And he couldn't give me a single minute of his time."

I know Amos wanted to be on that mission. A mission built on the information Jonah had given him. Information he had to trust with Kyle and Lucas because he wasn't physically able to travel to The Wall yet. I know that kills him. I know how much he wanted to be there. To destroy the place that tried to destroy me. Hell, I wanted to go. I wanted to see it burn. I wanted to see Doctore burn. Turns out he wasn't there. Lucky fuck.

Alison sighs, trying her best to hide the sympathy behind her eyes. "I know this is difficult. For both of you. Right now, communication is so important. If you both can't express your feelings to each other, then you won't be able to move on together. Would you like to use this space to open up together?"

"What, like couples therapy?" I ask.

Alison nods. "You wouldn't be the first couple in here. But you need to understand

that I don't take sides. I will tell you both what I see and hear."

I shake my head, staring down at my hands. "I'd like to try one more thing before dragging him to this couch. I know he loves me. I know he wants us to be together. But there's something he isn't telling me. I think I can reach him. I just need time."

"You understand that the time he needs could be more than you can handle, right?" Alison's eyes meet mine as I look up. All I can do is nod. If I say anything, I'll break.

Chapter 42

I wake up in a cold bed. Again. Amos and I have been "living" together for a month now, but we barely see each other and not because we are busy doing different things around campus. Amos is actively trying to avoid me. Why? I have no idea. My overthinking brain works nonstop day in and day out, trying to remember if I said anything to hurt him.

Then the intrusive thoughts that I'm not good in bed or we were only meant to be a summer fling slip into my mind. Even though I know these couldn't be any farther from the truth, doubt has taken root like a stubborn weed. As much as I try to pull it from the foundation of my mind, it keeps growing back.

Usually Amos comes to our room in the evenings, falling to our bed in exhaustion after taking a shower. He didn't come home last night though. I stayed up late into the night waiting for him. And now, just before the sun crests over the surrounding tree lined hills, Amos is nowhere in sight. The hollowness I feel is another reminder of how lonely I've been feeling since we moved in together.

What baffles me is that Amos wanted this. Amos asked if I wanted to move in with him. My silly, naive, love-drunk self thought nothing of it. All I could think of was how much alone time I'd get with Amos. Having unlimited access to his mouth, dick,

and hands—now only his one hand.

We haven't had much sex since becoming a couple. I didn't think much about it, even after moving in with him because he'd just been through a trauma that I know needs time to heal.

And now? I feel like discarded leftovers, even though I still love him. I still want him. I still need him.

Grunting my frustration, I roll out of bed. After checking the bathroom for any signs he was here, I put on a pair of linen shorts and a tank top. The August heat blisters in the early morning, making it miserable even indoors. Though we have electricity here at The Valley, we have to conserve every bit we generate ourselves from the solar panels just outside the campus walls. We don't have enough to turn the AC on.

After pulling on some socks and a pair of running shoes, I make my way out, setting off for a morning jog instead of going to the gym. The idea of running into Amos there has my stomach in knots. I haven't missed a day of training since I've been here, but I just can't bring myself to go today. Maybe my absence will spark a reminder that I exist. Maybe he'll miss me if I take a turn to avoid him.

I jog across the bridge that leads to the other half of campus. Turning left to avoid getting close to the sports center, I head directly for the health center. My mom is exactly where I expected, on the terrace with a cup of tea in hand. Even on the hottest days, my mom will still drink a hot cup of tea. I hope she's ready for the day when there will be no more tea in stock. I wave up to her as I enter the building, turning swiftly toward the stairs leading her way.

To my surprise, she has another cup of tea waiting beside her. "Are you expecting someone, Mom?"

“Just you,” she says with an uncomfortable smile.

“Uh oh, did I do something wrong?” I sit next to her at the small round table, grabbing the warm cup of tea in my hand and cautiously take a sip.

“No. I just thought you might want to talk. I’ve noticed that you and Amos haven’t been spending a lot of time together. Is everything all right?”

So it’s obvious. I mean, of course it’s obvious. Amos doesn’t sit with me at meal times anymore. We don’t go on walks. We don’t train together.

I look out at the view of The Valley, glowing in the early morning light. “He’s just busy.”

“Hmmm.” My mom takes a sip of her tea before putting it down. “But he’s not. He doesn’t go out on patrol any more. Kyle has been helping more during training. If anything, Amos has less to do here than ever before. I think that is making him anxious.”

“Amos? Anxious?” I test the two words I never thought I’d say together as my mom nods. Perhaps she’s right. Amos’ injury was life-changing and in this limiting world, it’ll be difficult for him to adjust. “Then why won’t he talk to me? He’s barely said two words to me in weeks.”

“Have you spoken to him?” my mom asks.

“I’ve tried. He just...deflects. He was always so open with me before. Maybe he is regretting moving in with me.”

“Now that’s a thought we are going to toss right out. You are still thinking about yourself in this scenario. Have you thought about him at all? What he is going

through?”

“Of course I have. I’ve been trying to help him in any way I can.”

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“What about helping him in the way he needs?”

“I’m trying. Or are you saying I’m being too overbearing or not overbearing enough?”

“I didn’t say any such thing. But if that’s the thought that comes to mind, perhaps you’re thinking too much.”

I take another sip of the tea, which is still hot to the touch. Talking to my mom is making some gears turn in my head. There is a gear that keeps getting stuck on not understanding why Amos would be so cold and distant toward me. Was I being overbearing? I don’t think so. Maybe. I was only trying to help. Taking care of him. Isn’t that what couples do for each other?

“Can I spend the morning here, mom?” I ask, deciding it would be best to maintain my distance if that’s what Amos needs right now.

“Don’t you have training now?”

“Yes, but I just don’t feel like going today. Is that okay?”

My mom smiles, saying, “Absolutely. I’ll write you a sick note.”

I spend all morning assisting my mom in the health center, cleaning minor cuts and scrapes, mopping up vomit, and even helping Norman put together a new machine the scouting patrol found last week. When I ask him what it is, he only shrugs. I’m so emotionally capped I don’t bother pestering him for answers. Honestly, I just don’t

care.

By the afternoon, I'm starving, so I say farewell to my mom, kissing her on the cheek, and make my way back to the part of campus where it is thrumming with life. Kids are out in the quad playing tag and kicking a soccer ball around. As I walk by the gazebo next to the cafeteria building, I spot a young couple making out under its shade. My heart aches, missing Amos, missing his kisses as if I've had them my whole life.

My feet turn on their own, sprinting back over the bridge and into the sports center. I run down the long hallway until I reach the gym. The unit I usually train with in the mornings is nowhere in sight, which makes sense because it's lunchtime. Kyle is still there though, cleaning up the equipment.

"Is Amos around?" I ask sheepishly.

"Yeah, I think he's in his office." Kyle barely looks up at me as if I've got some affliction that makes everyone want to forget my existence.

"Got it." I grunt at the dismissal.

Instead of going straight out of the gym like I usually do, I turn left, heading down a smaller hallway. The hallway ends with two choices. Stairs going up or an entrance into the basketball court. I choose the stairs. The offices up here all have glass walls, making it easy to see if any are occupied. When I spot Amos sitting on the edge of his desk, my heart skips a beat.

How does this man affect me so much? I'm supposed to be mad at him and yet I just want to hold him in my arms. Wait, am I supposed to be mad at him? Remembering what my mom said, I try to see through Amos' eyes, feel what he's feeling. The anxiety of living in a dangerous world with only one arm. The fear of not being able

to protect...me?

Taking a deep breath, I step into his office, tapping on the door to let him know I'm here. The sound startles him, but when he turns around, the surprise on his face melts into something I can only describe as depressing. He's not happy to see me. He doesn't want me here. I need to know why.

"Can I come in?" I ask politely.

"Seems like you already are." Amos turns his attention back to the wall where a large map hangs. Pins hold up strings, making some sort of route or pattern. I didn't come in here to look at a map though.

"What's wrong, Amos?"

"Not now, Lori." He dismisses me so quickly, his tone already getting aggressive.

"Yes now. I told you I wouldn't let you push me away. So stop and tell me what's wrong."

"Lori, please."

I walk around the desk, placing my body in between him and the map. "If I've done something wrong, I need to know."

Amos doesn't answer, only shakes his head, keeping his gaze away from mine. But I can see it. See him struggle to keep his face clear of emotion. See him shake away the tears that threaten to weaken his stubbornness. And I swear I can hear his heart pounding against his chest.

"I'm sorry if I've been too overbearing or not helping enough. If I've made you feel

any less than you are. I want to take care of you. I want to be there for you. But if you need me to take a step back, I will. Just don't push me out." Still more silence. "Amos."

"I'm sorry I put us in this situation. I'll speak to Anna and have our things moved back to our separate rooms. We should have never moved in together. We barely know each other. Anna only approved our application because of our—my—circumstances. She felt bad for me and saw how much you cared."

"If you are going to lie to me, then look me in the eyes when you do it."

Amos lifts those beautiful golden eyes, piercing me with his gaze. He can't lie to me, not when I can see how his eyes are filled with sorrow. His mouth quivers as he attempts his lie again. But something shifts in his demeanor, his eyes glowing with a dark shimmer of rage.

"Is this what you wanted to see, Lori? The shadow of the man you loved. This weak shell of a person who can't even lift a fucking box on his own. I'm useless. I can't protect you. I can't provide for you. I can't even pleasure you properly. Useless. Worthless. Piece of shit."

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Whoa. It's worse than I imagined. But instead of giving him pity, an act of sympathy I hate from others, I give him anger.

"Are you angry because of what I think of you or what you think of yourself? Because you're right. You couldn't even find the courage to dump me properly. You abandoned me in our new home. Left me to think I had done something wrong. If you think you are worthless, what does that make me? The worthless girlfriend of a cripple?"

Okay, maybe I went too far with that last comment, but I need to spark something inside him that will fight back. Because the man I know would not give up without a fight.

"Lori," Amos growls.

"No. I told you I wouldn't let you push me away. If this is what you want, I will push right back."

And I do. I punch Amos in the face with every ounce of strength within me. He goes down hard, caught off guard. Inside, I want to cry as he closes his eyes in pain. I use the advantage and jump on top of him.

"If you are so weak, I bet you can't even throw me off your crippled body." Every word comes out like a knife slicing into his beautiful brown skin. I don't mean to break him. I want to wake him up from this pitiful nightmare he's stuck himself inside. And yet the hurt in his eyes is so real, so visceral. Just when I'm about to dismount and apologize, Amos curls his amputated arm around my waist enough to

secure me to his chest as he spins us around.

The air is knocked out of my lungs, leaving me vulnerable for a moment as I gather myself together. Amos pins my hips down with his and it takes everything inside me not to wrap my legs around his ass and push up against him. Not to attempt an escape, but because of the need I have for any kind of friction. Our eyes lock on each other, anger quickly dissolving into something else.

This is my opening, my one chance to bring him back to me. “You are no less the man you were because you are not physically whole. You are more. I don’t need to be protected. I don’t need you to take care of me. I just need you.”

I watch as a tear breaks from the surface of Amos’ golden eyes, sliding down his chiseled face. It drips onto my cheek, following the path of my own tears. My breath catches when I look into his eyes, seeing the rawness of his love for me.

As Amos dips his head closer to mine, I whisper, “You make me come like no one else can. You make me feel everything in a way that terrifies and delights me. I will never leave you. I could never leave you.”

The door to his office swings open and Jonah waltzes in like he owns the place, not noticing us until Amos shouts, “Get out!”

“Oh shit! Sorry, Amos.” Jonah freezes, seeing the full picture of our situation. His voice cracks when he says my name. “Lori?”

As Jonah takes a step back through the door, he steps on Kyle’s foot, who then bumps into Olivia. Amos pushes himself up with his good arm. The movement pushes another part of him against me, making me squeeze my thighs against his hips. He grunts at the pressure, then whips his head over to our unexpected audience and shouts, “Everyone get the fuck out!”

The three of them rush out, slamming the door behind them. To my dismay, Amos pushes himself out from in between my thighs, standing up with grace. Just as the last piece of my heart breaks at the rejection, I hear Amos rushing to close the blinds against the glass walls of his office. I perch myself onto my elbows, watching him struggle with the last one.

A satisfied smile creases the side of his face as he wins the war with the blinds. Then he turns his eyes on me. Every step he takes in my direction shatters me until I'm quivering beneath him. When he holds his hand out to me, I take it. A giddy yelp escapes from my mouth as he pulls me up so quickly I practically jump into his arms. His whole arm secures me against him as he walks us over to his desk.

Amos places me on top of the papers scattered over his desk and I keep him in place between my legs. He presses his forehead against mine as he says, "I'm sorry, Lori. I'm so sorry."

"Talk later. Fuck now." The heat of him against my body has me feeling desperate and needy. The same feeling I had after we jumped into the car after being chased by a horde of freshies. I need Amos inside me. Right now.

His lips smash against mine with that same need. His tongue seeking entry I all too willingly grant. A moan of delight falls from Amos' mouth to mine and I answer with my own. In a swooping moment, I'm on my back, legs up and pressed against Amos' hard body. I help him pull down his shorts, then he grabs the waistband of mine, pulling them over my knees. He dips a finger inside me, testing my readiness. And, oh, how ready I am for him.

"Holy fuck, Lori. You are soaking my fingers already."

"Did I mention I need you?" I grab his hips and pull him into me. We groan in unison as he fills every inch of space and I hold on for dear life as he plows in and out. His

thrusts are wild and untamed. Going deeper and deeper. Yet I still need more of him.

“Amos!” I shout as he stops abruptly to pull my shorts all the way off my legs. He wraps my legs around his hips, allowing me to lock him in place. Then he licks that glorious thumb of his before pressing it down on my clit, making me arch into him. He resumes his thrusting attack, circling my clit as he pounds into me. I know I’ll have bruises from this brute show of strength and power, but I don’t care. I welcome the bruises even though they’ll fade within an hour. But the feeling of him inside, that will leave a lasting imprint for ages.

Chapter 43

Holidays are a rare occasion in this new world. At The Valley, we try to celebrate life whenever we can. The fall solstice is one of them. It’s a time that brings our large community together to celebrate the harvest. Our patrol units have been out picking buckets of apples for weeks. The campus gardens have flourished over the summer, providing an abundance of other fruits and veg that will last through the winter.

Today also marks one year of freedom for me. According to Amos. I would sometimes lose sense of time in the bunker and had no idea what day it was when I came to The Valley for the first time. The first thing Amos said to me when I woke up next to him in bed this morning was, “Happy anniversary.”

I looked at him with sleepy, confused eyes until he explained he brought me to The Valley on the first day of fall last year. It’s hard to believe that was a year ago when it feels like another lifetime. My first year at The Valley has been one of the best years of my life. A depressing thought when I think of the world I live in now. But I found my mom here. I fell in love. Even getting Jonah back in my life has filled that void, the one that threatened to take all of who I am away.

The surrounding laughter warms my soul more than the fire blazing before me.

Marshmallows. I'm roasting freaking marshmallows in the middle of the social quad. They might be expired, but who the hell cares? Freaking marshmallows! I wish we had some chocolate and graham crackers, but no one could find any on patrols even though Hershey is a thirty-minute drive away. Apparently, that area is still swarming with zombies and is off-limits for the foreseeable future.

Maybe one day we'll have enough people and weapons to storm the area and hoard all the chocolate being guarded by the undead. One day. Today, I'll happily roast these marshmallows. When it catches fire, I pull it out, blowing on it quickly. The fire goes out instantly, but I keep blowing to cool it down so I don't burn the inside of my mouth.

"That's definitely not burnt enough," Cal says sarcastically as they keep their marshmallows on the edge of the fire, giving it a gentle roast.

"Lori has always burnt her marshmallows," my mom says as she adds more marshmallows to the tip of her roasting stick.

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“You can blame my dad for that one. A fireman who loved setting fire to his marshmallows.”

“Your dad was a fireman?” Mina asks as she licks the sticky sugar off her fingers. “No wonder you crave danger and adventure.”

“And I was the one to stitch them up afterwards.” My mom places her fresh marshmallows over the fire, looking at the flames with a sadness I know all too well. I place an arm around her waist and lay my head down on her shoulder. She pulls me into a deeper side hug, breathing in deeply to simmer down her grief. It’s been nearly fifteen years and the loss still feels raw. A grief that lives deep inside my heart, in a place that will never fully heal.

“Hey guys,” Jonah says as he walks up to our little huddle. I haven’t really spoken to Jonah in the last few months. At least not more than our neutral chats in the gym and cafeteria. Amos spends a lot of time with him though, picking his brain about Dr. Tuwile. Surprisingly, Amos hasn’t tried to kill Jonah like he promised he’d do if he ever met him.

“Hi, Jonah,” Mina says with a bright smile. Maybe a little too bright of a smile. Cal nudges her in the ribs and Mina quickly shifts her face to impartial. Jonah took my old room, so I’m sure he spends a lot of time with my old roommates. I don’t care how he spends that time. He’s a free man.

“Hey, Mina.” Jonah winks at her, that bright smile returning times a thousand. Yeah, definitely something there. I don’t hide my smile as I see Cal nudge Mina again and give Jonah a face that would scare the fiercest warrior.

“Want any marshmallows?” Mina asks, holding out the bag to Jonah.

My mom and I answer for him in unison, “Jonah hates marshmallows.”

“What!” Cal shouts. “What spawn of Satan are you?”

Jonah laughs at that as he takes the bag of marshmallows from Mina. “I dunno. Maybe I’ve grown out of it. It’s been ages since I tried one.”

“Mom, Hayden, and I would have a fire pit every week during the summer and make s’mores. Whenever Jonah joined us, he’d just take graham crackers and chocolate, balance them on two sticks to soften the chocolate and eat it sans marshmallow. Freaking weirdo.” I punch his arm in jest as I laugh at the many fireside memories we have together.

My mom’s hand slides into mine, giving it a quick squeeze before saying, “I’m going to mingle. You kids have fun.” She kisses my head, then spins on her heels to head to the next huddle of people around another firepit.

Jonah takes a marshmallow out of the bag and hesitantly holds it up, examining the fluffy treat with caution. He gives it a little squeeze before popping it in his mouth. His face instantly grimaces as he chews much longer than is needed for something that basically melts in your mouth.

“Disgusting. How are you guys just eating handfuls of these things?”

Cal, Mina, and I bark in laughter. I have to hold my stomach, which is full of the soft sugary treat as my cackling reaches an uncontrollable level. It’s like my body can’t get enough of this euphoric feeling. “Oh, Jonah. Some things never change.”

The joy on his face instantly shifts to sadness and pain. I could punch myself for how

insensitive that last sentence was. Because everything has changed between us. We used to be inseparable. We used to be in love. We used to trust each other. And now? I might have a huge cache of childhood memories with Jonah, but I also have memories I wish I could erase. Sensing the rising tension between us, Cal and Mina turn their attention to the others huddled around our firepit.

“I’m sorry, Jonah. I didn’t mean to spoil the mood.”

“No, it’s...you didn’t spoil anything, Lori.” Jonah stares into the fire with a force that would cause an explosion if he had telekinetic powers. Then he turns that intensity on me, but it’s not anger, hate, or fear. It’s love. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you for some time, but I could never find the right moment.”

“Jonah, I—”

“Please let me finish, Lori.” Jonah takes a deep breath before continuing. “I know there’s too much time and change between us now. I know we can never go back to who we were. What we were to each other. All I ask is for your friendship. I want to move on. Move on from you. From the bunker. From who I became.”

Without hesitating, I open my arms to him. He falls into my embrace so naturally. When his arms close around me, I nearly cry. This is the Jonah I remember. The Jonah I loved. Yet, my love for him has evolved into something different. Perhaps that’s because my heart belongs to another. That doesn’t mean this love I feel is any less real.

“Of course we can be friends, Jonah.” His arms squeeze tighter around my shoulders before he releases me.

“You have no idea how much that means to me. Even though I don’t deserve your friendship.”

“I might not be able to forget what happened between us, but I forgive you, Jonah. It wasn’t fair to blame you when you were just as helpless as I was.”

Jonah holds back a sob, looking away to collect himself. When he turns back to me, there is sadness still written on his face, but it’s softer. Soon that sadness will be a ghost of a feeling for both of us.

“So...are you and Mina...” I don’t finish the sentence as I don’t really know what to ask. I’m just glad he wasn’t giving those side glances to Katie.

“No. I mean, maybe? I don’t know. I like her but I also don’t know how permanent my welcome is here. If I’ll be kicked out or killed once I’m no longer useful.” Jonah looks anywhere but my face as he rambles on.

“Jonah. No one is going to kill you.” I try to reassure him, but I don’t know how confident my voice sounds.

“So they’ll kick me out then?”

“No. They would kill you rather than kick you out to prevent you from leading other people here. No one is going to kill you.”

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I can see a visible release of the fear and anxiety Jonah must have been carrying around on his shoulders. He breathes a sigh of relief. A relief that is validated when Amos slides next to me to say, “I can promise you, Jonah, you are safe here. You wouldn’t have been given a room, nor would you have been invited to this celebration if we didn’t consider you a member of the community. Just don’t mess it up.”

“Thanks, man.” Jonah sticks his hands in his pockets, getting a little shy.

Amos pats Jonah on the shoulder, then turns his attention to me, sliding his hand around my waist and spinning me around to face him. “You look stunning tonight, Lori.”

“You can thank me for that. I picked out that gorgeous dress,” Mina shouts from the other side of the firepit.

Amos just laughs, turning his golden eyes back to me. He takes a couple of steps backward to take me in. Dress and all. I can’t help but agree that the dress is stunning. A large floral print spaghetti strap dress that hugs my waist, flowing down to my ankles. Something wild flashes in Amos’ eyes, and I want to know what he’s thinking. I’m already desperate for him to do whatever it was that flashed across his mind.

“Can I steal you away?” Amos whispers in my ear, sending a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

“I’m yours. Remember?”

Amos grabs my hand, twirling me around and starts walking us across the quad. I look behind me to wave farewell to my friends, who give me a smile in return. Before I turn my attention back to Amos, I see Jonah slide close to Mina until their shoulders knock into each other. Freaking cute.

Chapter 44

Amos guides us through the celebration in the social quad, following the setting sun. When we break from the crowds of people, Amos makes a beeline toward the music building. I've never been inside before, but I know this is the building Amos used to work in as a music professor. The idea of him teaching music to a bunch of college students is a vision I can't seem to conjure. It's so unlike the Amos I know. Perhaps that's because we rarely talk about who we were before.

I let go of his hand as he opens the door to the music center. When we are both inside, he lets the door close behind us. The hallways are a stark contrast to the loud, rowdy party happening outside. Quiet and still. I need to take a moment to readjust my equilibrium to the chilling silence, but Amos keeps walking down the dimly lit hallway.

He walks backward, taking the sight of me in. His smile is contagious, spreading a happiness within me I don't think I've ever felt in my entire life. I love this man. How, in this wretched, deadly, post-apocalyptic world, have I found the most wonderful man? The most beautiful soul of a human being has chosen me.

I feel my smile widen, not just on my face, but inside my chest. My heart beating to a rhythm only Amos can hear. He reaches his hand for mine and I take it as if my hand has been waiting for the invitation. My balance is nearly thrown off as he twirls me into him. Before walking me through a set of large double doors, Amos plants a soft kiss on my forehead.

Chills creep down my spine as we enter a dark room, but I trust Amos with my life. He walks confidently through the room like he knows every inch of the space. He stops us just before the wall at the back, his hand gently pressing against it. That's when I notice it isn't a wall, but a curtain. Amos throws the curtain back and ushers me through to the stage of the auditorium.

"What are we doing here?" Anxious nerves rattle my body. I hate being on stage. I hate being the center of attention. No one else is in the auditorium. It's just me and Amos, and yet I can't help but feel like we are being watched.

Amos doesn't answer. In fact, he leaves me alone on the goddamn stage. After a minute, some of the lights flick on, giving me a better view of the space. We are most definitely the only ones here.

I whip my head around when I hear notes of a piano. Amos snuck back in, taking a seat at the piano on the other end of the stage. I walk over to him, slowly, savoring the music he makes with his five fingers.

Silently, I slide onto the bench until our thighs touch. His amputated arm wraps around my waist, as best as it can, and he continues to play a haunting melody that rips apart my soul. Tears threaten to burst as Amos' fingers glide along the keys, coming to the end of his song. A song I've never heard before but sounds vaguely familiar.

When he plays the last note, I take in a shaking breath, releasing it with a sigh. "What song was that?" I ask.

"A song I wrote." Amos keeps his fingers hovered over the keys as if he's itching to play another song. Instead, he drops his hand down to his thigh.

"It's beautiful." My compliment comes out in a whisper, like the quietness of the

empty auditorium has muted the volume of my voice.

“I wrote it for you. Every note, every stroke, is you, Lori.”

“Me?” I look up at his golden eyes, sparkling in the stage lights. There’s fear in his eyes too. A fear I don’t understand as his attention is focused solely on me. We are alone in this large auditorium. So why does he look afraid?

“I hadn’t played music in years. After the world ended and then my mom died...I didn’t care about music. Then you came into my life and this song was all I could hear. You brought music back into my soul, Lori.”

“Amos,” I sob. A happy sob.

“With you in my life, I’ll never give up on music again. And I’ll never give up on us again. I want you to know that. Because what I did—”

“Shush, Amos, you don’t have to explain again,” I interrupt.

“Yes. I do. I tried to let you go because I thought you deserved better. I even told Jonah he was free to win you back. The asshole refused. Said I’d be stupid to let you go.”

“Stupid indeed, thinking you could get rid of me that easily.” My voice wobbles as I try to be light-hearted, but those few weeks of loneliness when Amos was trying to push me away is not a memory I want to linger on.

“What would you say if I asked you to marry me?” Amos asks, his golden eyes locking onto my blue ones. I go still, as if someone placed a freezing spell on me. All I can do is look into those beautiful, dreamy eyes. Amos pulls out a silver ring from his pocket, fingering it gently with his thumb.

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“You’re serious?” I finally ask.

“Yes.” Amos steadies the tremble in his voice. “I don’t know if either of us has a future. If this cruel world will provide us with one. All I know is that I want whatever future I have to be with you. It doesn’t matter if we are married or not. I just want to spend the rest of my life, however much is left of it, with you.”

The need to be closer to Amos makes me throw my leg over his, straddling him on the piano bench. I place my lips above his, breathing in his smoky scent, tasting a bit of burnt marshmallow on his breath. Then I kiss him. I kiss him as if today is the only day we have left on this hellish planet. I pour every ounce of my love into him, feeling it back like a tidal wave crashing on the sand.

“Is that a yes?” Amos asks while I suck on his lower lip. I don’t answer him with words, just more kisses as I trace his jaw with my lips. “Lori?”

“Yes, Amos. Married. Not married. I am yours. You are mine.”

I pull back far enough for Amos to slide the silver ring down my offered finger. Then Amos stands up with me in his arms, gently kicking the bench backward while sitting me down on the piano. The keys play a jarring tune as my ass hits them, making me giggle in delight. A giggle that turns into a moan of pleasure as Amos kneels in front of me, not to propose, but to eat me out.

He gives me just enough time to brace myself before his mouth is on me, his tongue tracing the sensitive folds of skin. “Mmmm...no underwear,” he says appreciatively, then slides one of his long fingers all the way in.

With just one finger, he has me begging for release. With a flick of his tongue, I'm shouting his name. When he releases his finger from my depths, I grunt, eager to be filled again. Two fingers slide back in as his tongue flicks around my clit, driving me insane with pleasure. My hips move on their own, seeking more, needing more, wanting more.

I grab his wavy hair, pulling him closer as he resumes his torturous massage. His name falls out of my lips over and over as I pant from the overstimulating pleasures he gives to me. Then my body bursts into a thousand tiny flames as the world beneath me collapses. My hand smashes down on the piano, the only indicator that I'm still whole. Amos grips me by the thigh to help keep me upright as I come back down from the high of the most intense orgasm I've ever had.

When my strength returns, I help Amos up and say, "Take your pants off."

He does as he is told, quickly unclasping his belt and ripping it off in one swift motion, holding my gaze as he does so. I can tell he's been practicing on his own, wanting to be able to do everything with his one hand. I'm so proud of this man. So proud to call him mine. So ready to show him.

As he unbuttons his pants, I reach out for him, anticipating the spring of his hardened dick as he releases it. Amos lets his head fall back as I take him in my hands, licking the tip, getting it sopping wet before taking him deep in my mouth.

"Fuck me," Amos growls.

"I'm getting there," I respond as I take a breath, getting ready to take him deeper.

With every breath, I stroke him harder and faster until his panting becomes shallow and he begs to be inside me. We've played this game before. Usually it's me doing the begging.

I tease and lick and suck until he can't take anymore. He grabs a handful of my hair and pulls me away from him, keeping me an arm's length away as he takes a few deep breaths. When his eyes open, I stand up, lift the skirt of my dress up, push him down on the piano bench, and sit myself down to the hilt of his dick.

The way he fills me so perfectly is enough to get me going again. With my knees draped on either side of his hips, I lift myself up and down, savoring every inch of him inside me.

Amos reaches behind me, pulling at the zipper of my dress until the bodice falls below my breasts. As the cold air hits my skin, Amos' mouth covers my right nipple while his hand plays with my other. That overstimulating, tingling sensation rises inside of me again, taking my body prisoner. I give in to it so easily. Let it consume every part of me.

I grind into Amos desperately as I grip his shoulders tightly, holding on as my release quakes through my body. My thighs tremble around Amos' hips and when he pinches my nipple, I lose all control. Pounding my body into his, I take everything he gives to me and don't stop until he screams my name in his release. I collapse onto Amos' solid chest, letting my legs fall behind him on the bench, not wanting to part with his body.

"Promise me something," I whisper against his neck.

"Anything." Amos kisses the top of my head as he wraps his arms around me, trying his best to lock me in place.

"As my husband, vow to me that we will fight together, survive together, and never live this life alone. And I will vow the same to you."

I pull myself out of his embrace enough to look him in the eyes. I know this is an

easy promise for Amos to make. He would never leave me to die alone, but he would leave to fight my battles if it meant I was safe. I can't have him doing that. Even if he had two hands.

"I promise, Copperhead. We fight together to survive together. I will never let you face death alone. You will never feel alone again."

Our lips brush as we make our vows to each other, promising to love and cherish one another. To care for each other. And all the other gushy nonsense I never understood in the before. I get it now. Because I've found a love I never want to let go of. I found a love that will destroy me if he's ever taken from me. I found a love I would kill to keep.

Chapter 45

Just once, I would like to sleep in with my naked legs tangled around Amos. Just once. Today was supposed to be our day off together and yet someone is relentlessly banging on our door. Amos groans into the pillow, pulling me closer to his warm, sleepy body. With his eyes still closed, his mouth finds mine. I block out the banging and Olivia's voice calling out our names.

Then Amos shifts our bodies until he's on top of me, grinding his hardened dick against my stomach. My legs open for him like the petals of a flower seeking sunshine and Amos slides himself home. I will never tire of him, of this feeling, how he fills me, makes me whole. With his lips still devouring mine, he balances on one arm, thrusting into me.

Though my attempt to ignore the pounding on our door is successful, I cannot ignore Jonah's voice as he echoes Olivia's request. "Amos. Lori. Get your asses out of bed. We have a situation."

Amos growls in frustration, thrusting into me again with so much power I cannot stop the scream from slipping out of my throat. “You like that, Copperhead?”

“Mmhmmm.”

“Do you want me to do that again?”

“Yes. Please. Don’t stop.”

Before Amos resumes his torturous thrusts, he whips his head back toward the door and shouts, “Give me one hour to pleasure my wife in the way she deserves. One fucking hour. Then you fuckers can have our attention.”

Wife. The title still throws me off, even though we’ve been married for weeks now. When Amos and I rejoined the fall solstice party, my mom immediately saw the ring on my finger. Of course she couldn’t keep her mouth shut. Word spread around so quickly. Thirty minutes later, Jeremy ran over to us. Apparently he was also an ordained minister in the before and had married a few couples at The Valley.

When Amos proposed, I honestly didn’t think we’d really get married, that it would be more of a symbol. In that moment, with the idea of marriage a real possibility, Amos and I couldn’t say no. We didn’t want to say no. Hell, we’d basically already said “I do.” Jeremy married us that very night. It’s not legit in the way marriage used to be. We didn’t sign any official paperwork. But we are married. Amos and I are husband and wife.

The reminder of our vows to each other fuels my love for this man who is plowing me as if it’s the last time he will ever be inside me. I raise my hips to meet his, needing to feel him deeper. Reaching out a hand, I gently caress the stump of Amos’ left arm, causing him to shiver, but he doesn’t lose focus.

Amos' forehead smashes against mine as he comes undone, his breaths becoming shallow.

"I love you Amos," I say, my lips brushing against his. My words shatter what's left of his control. In one final thrust, Amos finishes inside me. Knowing I still haven't come, he quickly replaces his dick with his fingers, curling up into that spot he knows drives me wild.

"I love you, Lori." His words are soft and sweet, a contrast to the hard and fast motion of his hand. I begin my spiral into oblivion, welcoming the out-of-body feeling I've become addicted to. A feeling only Amos can produce. A feeling I only ever want to share with him. My husband.

As promised, Amos and I are showered, dressed, and heading out of our room an hour later. Jonah and Olivia are waiting for us outside our building. Without a word, they turn on their heels to escort us to the other side of campus. The silence and seriousness of their steps makes me anxious.

"What's happened?" I ask, breaking the tension.

"Not here." Jonah whips his head around quickly, giving me a warning look.

"An hour ago you were ready to pound down our door. Just tell us what's going on," Amos barks at Jonah.

Jonah stops abruptly, Olivia halting after a few more steps. Just as Jonah starts to speak, Olivia interrupts him. "It's a sensitive matter that would best be discussed behind closed doors. Please, let's just get to the conference room now." In a quieter voice, Olivia turns to Amos and says, "The safety of our community could be at risk."

Amos doesn't respond with words but with a force of authority. He steps in front of

Olivia and Jonah, taking the lead as we walk to the health center where all leadership meetings are held. This time, I'm allowed to join. All the leaders of The Valley are waiting in the conference room when we arrive. Their faces are painted with worry. The rest of Amos' commanders stand in the corner, arms crossed as if they are bored.

Norman is the first to speak, saying, "So nice of you to finally join us, Amos."

"Shut the fuck up, Norman. It isn't every day we have a wedding. Let them enjoy their honeymoon phase while they can." My mom looks ready to slice Norman's face off.

"What if we were being attacked? Would you be so understanding if our general was late in commanding his men because he wanted to stick his geni—"

"Give them a break!" Jonah shouts. I spin around to see him fuming. I have never seen him so angry. "The safety of this community might be at risk, but no one is attacking us. Amos and Lori have been through hell. They deserve some peace, especially on their day off."

Norman has the decency to look ashamed as he bows his head in apology and steps toward the conference table to take a seat. Anna, Jeremy, and my mom follow him to the table as Amos takes my hand, ushering me to sit as well. Amos then motions Andrew, Lucas, Olivia, Kyle, and Jonah to sit then asks, "What the hell happened?"

Kyle clears his throat before explaining that he had returned from patrol early this morning with a survivor he'd met on the outside. "This guy passed all our checks. But he must have known what questions I would ask him. Hell, I found him being chased by a horde of biters, so how the hell was I to know he was one of Dr. Tuwile's fucking Praetorian Guards?"

"What?" Amos and I shout in unison.

Jonah answers next. “I was on duty at the gate when Kyle returned. I recognized Matthew immediately, but he didn’t see me. I instructed Kyle to bring him to the holding room. That’s where he is now.”

“Who is keeping watch at the holding room?” Amos asks.

“Kelly and Ryan, sir,” Olivia answers in her official soldier voice.

Amos nods his approval, then turns to Jonah. “You are sure this guy didn’t get a good look at you? He thinks he has fooled us?”

“Positive.” Jonah looks so worried, like he knows something more. My suspicions turn out to be right when he opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out.

“Jonah, what is it?” I ask.

“Doctore has been looking for you, Lori. He suspected you’ve been hiding in one of the survivor communities. That’s why he sent out his Praetorian Guard to hit those places months ago, to smoke you out. The Valley was the only community he didn’t know about. So he’d send out individual guards hoping one of them would stumble across someone from The Valley, someone that would take pity and bring them exactly where they’ve been trying to get to. I think that’s what Matthew is doing. Infiltrating.”

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“But how can you be sure? You said yourself that others were starting to see through Dr. Tuwile’s lies. What if Matthew is someone like you, someone who escaped?” My mom has a valid point, but one we cannot risk by playing the nice, welcoming hosts.

“Let me question him,” I suggest.

“No,” everyone in the room shouts at once.

“Why? He’s looking for me. Let him see I’m here. He’ll have a reaction, then we can react.”

“It should be me who questions him,” Jonah says.

On the other side of the table, Norman lets out an audible huff. “And let you plot with our enemy. I don’t think so.”

Jonah glares at Norman with unfiltered hate in his eyes. As far as I know, Jonah and Norman have had very little to do with one another. But it looks as if there is some kind of history there. Something I don’t know about.

“Jonah will be the one to question Matthew,” Amos decides. When Norman takes a breath to start rambling a disagreement, the rest of leadership agrees. “Make him believe that you have infiltrated our community and ranks. That you are gathering intel to send to Dr. Tuwile.”

“This is a terrible idea, Amos.” Norman stands up, slamming his fists on the conference table.

“Jonah has proven himself to us. He saved Lori and Amos’ lives. He’s given us valuable information that brought down Novus Seclorum.” Anna says.

My mom nods her head in agreement. “We need to have each other’s backs here or none of us will survive. We need to trust each other. And you, Norman, should understand what it feels like to want that trust.”

The tension in the room thickens as everyone turns to stare at Norman, whose frustration at being outnumbered is obvious in the way he grinds his jaw. “Fine,” he says, giving up and storming out of the room.

“Well, I guess that concludes our meeting,” Jeremy says with an uncomfortable smile.

As Jonah heads for the door, Amos stops him. “Take Olivia and Kyle with you in case Matthew gets defensive. Lori, come with me. There’s something I need to tell you.”

Jonah and Amos’ commanders all share an ominous look that makes my blood curdle. So obviously I can’t wait for Amos to tell me whatever it is. But he refuses to say another word, dragging me behind him as he walks us to the sports center and into his office.

Chapter 46

Norman is still working for Dr. Tuwile. Jonah had told Amos his suspicions about Norman after seeing him for the first time at The Valley. That’s the big secret Amos has been hiding from me for months. I didn’t suspect a thing.

I collapse into the armchair in the corner of Amos’ office, processing everything he just explained to me. We all knew he’d worked for Dr. Tuwile in the before, but

Jonah claims Norman was working with him until a few months after the outbreak.

It would make sense as Norman didn't show up at The Valley until the walls were nearly complete, according to Amos. As they were organizing their leadership, Norman was an easy choice for leader having exclusive knowledge about the virus that destroyed the world. The community needed someone to head their education system too. Norman showed up just at the right time. Without him, The Valley wouldn't be the safe haven it is today. It wouldn't be a thriving community devoted to spreading knowledge and remembering human history.

Sure, Norman is a vile asshole. He's a scientist first. Human second. Just like Doctore. But I've seen him with the kids here. He treats them like gems, nurturing their knowledge and coaxing them to grow into future leaders. I think of the orphans in the bunker. They were starving. Had no one. Doctore could have easily provided for them. Instead, he used them as an experiment, turning them into monsters.

If Norman was working with Doctore, why didn't he just turn me in right away? Why let me live in peace at The Valley for a year? Why let me fall in love? And if he knew exactly where I've been, why attack those other communities to look for me? Something isn't adding up here.

I push myself off the armchair and begin pacing the length of Amos' office. He just stares at me, waiting for me to respond with words. Patience is one of his strongest virtues. Amos could stand at his desk like a statue for days waiting for me to say something.

Jonah storms into Amos' office, halting my panicked pacing. Olivia enters shortly after, catching her breath as Jonah says, "He told me everything."

A huge grin spreads across Amos' face. "Tell me."

Jonah doesn't answer Amos right away as he looks me over for a moment. "You all right, Shortcake?"

I nod as Amos explains that he told me about his suspicions of Norman. Jonah pinches his mouth together before opening to say, "Norman might be innocent. At least Matthew didn't have any intel on what Norman is up to or what he was working on with Doctore."

"What did he say?" Amos asks, pushing off his desk to walk over to me. His warm, solid hand slides across my back until it reaches my hip. Anchored to Amos' side is my personal safe zone. I melt into him, laying my head on his shoulder as he moves me to the armchair, sitting me down on his lap.

Jonah and Olivia hop up on Amos' desk, getting comfortable as Jonah reveals everything our new captive let spill. "I knew Doctore would move around sometimes. I never knew where he would go though. Until now. Matthew was one of Doctore's most trusted guardians. His personal bodyguard, traveling everywhere Doctore would go. And Matthew has given me all of Doctore's lab locations. The reach he has is more than we could have imagined. If we are to take him down, we need the military to help us."

"They don't really help us. We help them," Amos sighs. "They provide us safe passage inside The Wall and pass on intel to keep the survivor communities safe. But they don't leave their posts to actively help us if there's no direct threat to them. Taking down Novus Seclorum was a rare occasion. Going on a wild goose chase to maybe find Dr. Tuwile?" Amos pauses, looking up at me before saying, "We should still go to The Wall and at least talk to General Greene."

Jonah nods. "There's more." Before Jonah continues, he looks at me with so much sadness, making his brown eyes look muddy. "Doctore has been successful in creating more gladiators. Lori isn't the only one."

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Amos squeezes me against him as I shout, “What? How many?”

“Matthew said there were at least a dozen successful gladiators from his other laboratories. Not all of them achieved the same mutations. None of them can heal as quickly as Lori. Half of them died when he ripped their bodies apart. The others took months to heal and months more to recover. Some never recovered mentally and had to be put down like animals.”

My body temperature plummets, turning my skin to frost as Jonah’s words wash over me. Amos’ hold on me is the only thing keeping me grounded. “So what Doctore did to me, he’s done to a dozen others?”

Jonah nods again, looking away from me as if ashamed. “In different arenas all around the country. He lied to me when he said he needed your DNA. He already created other gladiators. According to Matthew, they aren’t as strong as you.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You are also inhumanly strong.”

“I am?”

“Yes,” Amos says. I turn to him, his face so close to mine I can feel his breath against my cheek. “You’ve bruised my ribs before and come close to fracturing my bones. You can also take a lot more than you think. Your skin is tougher.”

Amos’ golden eyes glimmer with lust as he looks me up and down, likely recalling

how rough he can be with my body and I never complain. In fact, I always beg for more. I nudge him in the ribs, bringing him back to this moment.

“Ow,” Amos shouts in jest.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I bruise your ribs again?” I pout at him, pushing out my lower lip, which causes a reaction I instantly feel beneath my ass.

“You can bruise any part of my body, Copperhead,” Amos whispers so that only I can hear him. Jonah clears his throat, reminding us that we are not alone. We pull back from each other slowly, and I adjust myself enough to cause a quiet moan from the back of Amos’ throat. “Oh, I will get you for that later.”

“Promise?” I smile up at him before turning my attention back to Jonah and Olivia, who are doing their best to look anywhere else but us. “What should we do with this information? We can’t just sit here and wait for Doctore to send his goons here. If we know where his other labs are, let’s destroy them.”

“Lori,” Amos says, likely about to say something I don’t want to hear. “We can’t do that. If there are others like you, other super soldiers...we need to know who we are up against and if we can fight it and survive. And we still don’t know what Norman’s part in all this is. If he has a part to play. We could be walking into a trap.”

I know Amos is right. I know we are safe here. But I don’t want to be a sitting duck waiting for the Praetorian Guard to find us. “Did Matthew say anything about me? What Doctore still wants with me?”

Jonah winces as he says, “You’re his gladiator. He created you. He thinks you belong to him.”

Amos growls, clenching his fist. “I can’t wait to kill this fucker.”

I lay my head on Amos' shoulder, hiding my fear in the crook of his neck. He holds me tight against him as if telling the universe to try and take me away from him.

"Who's going to The Wall?" Olivia asks, just as impatient to do something as I am.

The vibration of Amos' voice soothes me a little, but I hate the words that come out of his mouth. "I will go later today. Kyle and Lucas will accompany me."

Olivia sighs. I can tell she wants to tell him "no" just as I want to chain him to me so that he won't be able to leave. But it has to be Amos. He is our general. Even though it's not an official title, that's who he is to this community. Since he's fully healed now, I cannot stop him even if I begged him to stay. Which I will attempt to do later.

"You should bring Kelly," Olivia suggests. "One of the soldier boys has a bit of a crush on her. Maybe she can sway him to get General Greene to help us."

Amos nods, brushing his chin on the top of my head. "Give them their orders. I want them ready to depart in an hour. And tell Anna to pack our car with enough supplies for a week."

After Jonah and Olivia leave the office, I lift my head off Amos' shoulder. "Please don't go, Amos. Please."

"I don't want to leave you, but I have to go."

"I know, but Amos...what if something happens to you? At least let me go with you."

"No." Amos' face hardens, not with stubbornness but fear. "There could still be spies at The Wall. And General Greene doesn't know you are at The Valley. He knows of you though. If he sees you, makes the connection, he wouldn't hesitate to take you from me."

“Why? I thought we are allies with The Wall.” My voice shakes at the raw fear on Amos’ face, making my fear spread like wildfire inside my chest.

“You are one of Dr. Tuwile’s super soldiers. A gladiator. The gladiator. General Greene would kill to have a super soldier under his command.”

“Fuck that. I would never follow his orders.”

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“He would make you listen.” Amos presses his head against mine, breathing deeply. “Lori, love of my life, please trust me when I say that you can never go to The Wall. General Greene might be on our side, but he isn’t that much different from Gabriel Tuwile. We all become monsters when our survival instincts take over. Some of us have better control of these monsters. Some of us still cling to our inner humanity.”

“The world has always been full of monsters, Amos. It just took the end of it to see them.” My head falls against Amos’ shoulder, feeling utterly defeated.

“Does that mean you won’t fight me on this?” Amos asks.

I sit back up, adjusting my legs so I straddle his. “If you aren’t back in three days, I’m coming after you. Three days, Amos.”

“Three days.” He kisses me to seal the agreement. I want to feel his love and confidence. But all I can feel is ice-cold dread.

Chapter 47

Doctorehoversabovemewith that sickening grin of his. He’s proud of himself. Proud of whatever discovery he made while dissecting my living body. I look down at the open incisions slowly stitching themselves back together. When Doctore laughs, fear locks me in place on the gurney. No need for straps to hold me down.

A knife slices into the newly closed wound on my stomach, exposing my intestines. I would scream if my throat was intact, but that too has been sliced open. Doctore’s hand dives into my abdomen with no intention of being delicate. A wicked smile

spreads across his face as his hand finds what he's been looking for.

When he pulls out a crying baby, I know I'm dreaming. I'm dreaming because this isn't the same nightmare memory I always replay. No. The baby Doctore holds in his hands is a healthy living baby with brown skin and red hair. When she opens her eyes, they hold the same golden irises Amos has.

My heart flutters for a moment at seeing our baby. Then she cries. Wailing at the sight of my mutilated body. Doctore takes her away to soothe her cries. I try to get up off the gurney, silently screaming for my baby. It's a dream. I try to remind myself. It's a dream. It's a dream.

"Lori," a worried voice in the distance breaks the haze of my nightmare. I hold on to that voice. Amos' voice. "Lori, wake up. Wake up. You're having a bad dream. Please wake up, Lori."

My eyes shoot open, catching Amos' golden glare as he looks at me with fear riddled concern. I try to move, to say something, but nothing happens. Am I still dreaming? When did Amos get back?

Amos scoops me up from the bed and places me on his lap, holding me tightly against his chest. His stump secures me against him as his hand slides up to brush the hair out of my face.

"I got you. I'm here now. You're all right," he whispers into my hair.

"Amos?" My voice is scratchy, likely from the screaming I thought was silent in my dream, but must have woken up half the campus. "When did you get back?"

"An hour ago. I was walking up to the building when I heard screaming from inside. You scared me to death."

“Amos,” I repeat, this time believing I am awake and safe. My voice breaks with relief, but the images of my nightmare refuse to leave my mind. “Doctore took our baby. Our baby girl. He took her.”

“Shhhh, it was just a nightmare,” Amos says, but he can’t quite keep the quiver of fear from his voice. “I will never let Doctore near our children, should we have any. What you dreamt was not real. Not real.”

Amos lays me back down on the bed. Before joining me, he throws off his dirty clothes and pulls the blankets over our bodies. The warmth of him behind me and the pressure of his arms holding me tight against him loosen the last thread of fear keeping me tethered to that nightmare. I fall asleep quickly in his arms. No dreams this time.

The Wall will offer no military assistance. No surprise there. Honestly, I don’t blame them. What if Doctore’s men attack them and they don’t have the numbers to protect The Wall while they are all over the state of Pennsylvania looking for traces of his lab? But what if we are attacked? Our community is only a fifteen minute drive to the nearest outpost at The Wall. Would we be enough to stop Doctore, his Praetorian Guard, and gladiators from invading The Valley?

My logical brain says “no” but my heart wants to believe we can hold them back. We need to protect this place.

I sit at the table of the conference room looking at Norman as Amos and his commanders talk strategy. Norman’s face gives nothing away. No fear. No hint of our inevitable demise. Nothing.

When I turn my head to look at my mom sitting next to me, her face shows nothing but fear. The Valley has been attacked before, by small groups of raiders. People scavenging for food. Nothing like what we are facing if Doctore were to knock at our

gates. Anna's and Jeremy's faces are ashen. Neither of them have anything to contribute to the discussion, but as members of leadership, they will be making a decision on what we should do.

The current plan is to send out messengers to the other surviving communities. Not all of them were hit like The Manor House, but they are all scared enough to likely board up their houses and stay put. They won't help us. We need to go after Doctore before he comes for us. But no one has put that option on the table yet.

I know it's a gamble. If we bring all our fighting forces, then we leave The Valley defenseless. It's likely that Doctore doesn't know where I am. Matthew didn't stumble upon this location. Kyle brought him here. There's no way for Matthew to communicate with Doctore. He's been held prisoner all week. Unless Norman has a way of sending messages.

Then there's that question that keeps popping up in my head. Why hasn't Norman told Doctore where I am already? He's done his tests on me, well, not all the ones he'd like to do. I would think that would fuel his reasoning to contact Doctore since he is no longer allowed near me. I hate him, but I am not buying it. It just doesn't make sense that Norman is still working for Doctore.

Amos breaks my thoughts to ask me, "Lori, what do you think? It looks like you've got gears turning in your head."

"They are turning, but you're not gonna like my idea." I lock my eyes with Amos. He knows my opinion, and he doesn't like it. But he's offering me a chance to bring it to the table. I appreciate his democratic approach, even though I know most of the people in this room will vote me down.

"I think we should attack. We know the locations of his labs. One of them is just a few hours away. Let's attack that one first. It would give us an idea of what we'd be

fighting to bring down the other labs.”

“But what if attacking his labs puts a spotlight on The Valley?” Lucas asks. “We might have a small army of our own, but we are nothing compared to the Praetorian Guard. They are made of hundreds of brain-washed psychos. No offense, Jonah.”

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“None taken.” Jonah shrugs. “It’s an accurate statement. But I’m with Lori on this one. We can’t just sit around and wait for Doctore to find us. If we hit his smaller facilities, we decrease his numbers. Maybe we can even turn the gladiators to our cause.”

“That’s incredibly dangerous,” Norman says, finally opening his mouth to voice an opinion. “You cannot be certain that these so-called gladiators won’t be just as brainwashed. Lori might be the only exception. But she fought Dr. Tuwile’s programming. Not an easy thing to do.”

“How do you know that?” I ask, squinting my eyes at him.

“Because I helped him develop the program. It’s not my proudest moment. There were a lot of things I regret from my time with him.”

“Are you still working for him?” My eyes gouge into his, trying for the intimidation tactic, though I’m not sure I have that down.

“Lori,” Amos warns.

“It’s a fair question, Amos.” My piercing gaze shifts to Amos, who shakes his head at me.

“It is. And perhaps it is time I come clean.” Norman sits up in his chair, eyeing each person in the conference room. “I didn’t cut ties with Gabriel. At least not when I left his lab. I needed to convince him I was loyal, not dissimilar from Jonah. When he started kidnapping innocent people, I was done. I met you down in the bunker, Lori.

I'm sorry I couldn't save you."

Amos gets up from his chair so fast, but I'm faster. I hold him in place, hugging his tall, broad frame to my petite one. And goddamn, Iamstrong. Amos struggles against the restraints of my arms, but I don't budge.

"Amos, calm down. Let Norman finish. Then I'll let you at him," I say.

A grunt of agreement is all I need to loosen my grip on Amos. When he sits back down, I grab his hand, squeezing gently. He squeezes back more firmly, not letting go as Norman resumes his tell-all.

"I understand Gabriel's mission. I agree with it in some ways. As much as you all might disagree, he is a brilliant man. Sadistic? Yes. But brilliant. When he accidentally created the virus that brought us the undead, he went a little mad. He didn't think he was doing God's work, but became a god himself. Re-animating the dead. Creating a new...species. Breaking every ethics code to get there. What he did to Lori, what we did. That wasn't the first time. I put my head down and followed orders because I didn't want to be the next test subject. Then I had the opportunity to leave the bunker as a field scientist. Gabriel wanted more observations on how the undead moved around, hunted, and turned in a natural environment. He gave me a small team. A few weeks later, we stumbled into a horde of undead too large to escape, but I got out. I found this place. It was a chance for me to start over."

"Why were you so against having Lori here when she first arrived? Were you afraid she would recognize you?" My mom's voice cannot hide the rage she tries so hard to contain.

"No. I didn't think someone could override the programming," Norman says so casually.

“What programming?” I ask.

“While you were sedated, Gabriel would play specific messaging to change the way your mind thinks. To make you forget about what’s being done to you. To keep you thinking forward instead of in the now.”

At Norman’s explanation, brief clips of words reach my ears. But I can’t remember what they said. “I might not remember everything Doctore did to me. But I remember him ripping my unborn baby from my womb. How the hell can anyone look forward from that?”

Norman stares at me with the intriguing eye of a scientist. “I have many follow-up questions to what you just said, but I would like to present a theory as to why I believe you were unaffected. You have an inhuman ability to heal yourself incredibly fast. Perhaps your brain was able to delete all traces of Gabriel’s programming and that is why you could keep your own thoughts and memories.”

“What about me?” Jonah asks, attempting to hide his horrified shock. I had never spoken to him about what happened when I was having a miscarriage. He never asked, and it never came up in conversation after he came to The Valley.

“Trauma can untether the bindings of Gabriel’s programming. I saw it happen a few times. I tried helping those poor souls who were unraveling, but Gabriel got to them quickly. He would either have them executed or resubmitted for further programming. You must have hid yourself well, Jonah.”

I feel Amos loosen from the fuming anger tormenting his heart, but I keep my hand in his. The silence in the room is deafening. Everyone barely breathes as we process everything Norman has revealed to us. Hewasstill working for Doctore, Jonah had been right. Do I believe Norman wanted out? That he miraculously got his chance to escape without Doctore being suspicious that one of his scientists betrayed him?

“Why wait until now to tell us?” Anna asks, twirling her hair nervously.

“I wasn’t planning on telling you ever, but I figured Jonah would recognize me sooner or later.”

“I did. I told Amos immediately,” Jonah snaps.

“Good soldier.” Norman’s tone isn’t condescending, but the way he says those words to Jonah sends a shiver down my spine. “No one has asked the most important question yet.”

“And what’s that?” Amos says, pulling his shoulders back as he releases my hand.

“What is Gabriel Tuwile’s biggest weakness?”

Chapter 48

The past three weeks have been exhausting. Everyone at The Valley has worked tirelessly to fortify the fences and walls surrounding our community. Patrols have been going out daily to pilfer for any and all resources they can find. The plan is to outlast the enemy should they come to our gates while a few of us go in search of Doctore’s satellite labs.

No one has spotted a potential threat nearby, but that doesn’t mean we are safe. Doctore and his men could come our way any day now. Or maybe we are all just paranoid and expecting the worst outcome. My best hope is that it’s paranoia. I need The Valley to remain untouched by the evil that is Doctore. There needs to be a safe haven for all who are looking to live, to prosper, to find purpose again.

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I've found my purpose at The Valley in more ways than one. I'm a daughter again. A wife. A friend. And a warrior. I will fight until my dying breath to protect everyone and everything inside The Valley. And it just so happens that I have what Doctore wants. I am his weakness. His first gladiator. He will do anything to get me back.

As I look out the window of the car moving against the autumn backdrop of Central Pennsylvania, I take a deep breath, settling my anxious nerves. Fight. Survive. Live. My mantra resurfaces after months of feeling safe. It holds more weight now than ever before because I have so much to lose, not just my own life.

Amos places his hand on my thigh, grounding me to this moment with him. His other hand, a mechanical one that Norman had built for Amos, casually steers the wheel of the car. The sight of it makes me nervous. When Amos first showed me his new arm, I was happy for him. Happy because he was happy.

"I'm whole again," he had said to me. Even though he was always whole to me, I kept my mouth shut. He felt like his old self again. He can play the piano with two hands again. How could I take that away from him? But I don't trust Norman, not after the stunt he pulled by throwing me into a zombie-filled obstacle course. Something Doctore would have gladly done to me without blinking twice.

I know Amos still holds a grudge against Norman for what he did, which is why it makes me so nervous that he accepted this new arm so easily. Perhaps this is Norman's way of making amends, trying to do the right thing. I hate it, but I believe his story. That he has broken ties with Doctore.

"This is it," Jonah says from the back, sitting between Olivia and Kyle. He folds up

the map he'd been studying, a smaller version of the one Amos has hanging in his office. With help from Matthew's intel, we've narrowed down the area where Doctore's satellite lab in this region could be.

It took us three hours to drive here and we didn't have to drive through The Wall. Knowing that Doctore and his goons are this close to The Valley makes my blood boil and my stomach wrench. All I can do now is hope that everyone back home is okay. That the fortifications are strong enough to hold back an attack.

Amos slows down the car to a stop, scanning the trees surrounding us. If this was any other day, I would say the endless trees changing their colors are freaking gorgeous. But one of Doctore's labs is somewhere out there. We are entering unknown enemy territory filled with danger at every turn. Traps. Zombies. Super soldiers.

"We are not splitting up. Got it?" I say for the millionth time.

"Aye, aye, captain," Amos says in a joking spirit.

"I thought I was your captain," Kyle mock-whines.

"You're my lieutenant."

"Oh, yeah, right," Kyle says as he opens the door. Jonah and Olivia hop out after him, readying their weapons for battle.

Amos and I join them, huddling one last time to go over the game plan. There's an old mining village we suspect is near the lab we are searching for. Since we don't know the exact spot, it could take us hours to find it. We'll need to find shelter before the sun goes down, even if that means we have to sleep in the car.

So we plan a path in several directions, walking thirty minutes before changing

course. After four hours and changing direction eight times through the thickening woods, Olivia spots an overlook tower. Kyle checks our bearing before turning us toward the tower. This will have to be our last stop before turning back to the car. The sun is already sinking down low in the sky, warning us of the impending night time.

My skin tingles, a warning sign, as we approach the lone tower. But there's nothing I can see that tells me danger is afoot. Doesn't mean there isn't danger out there, lurking in the shadows of the trees. Amos slides a hand around my waist, pulling me to his side. He places a hard kiss on my head, shaking the lingering fear from my body.

"Kyle and I will head all the way to the top. Olivia, scout from the middle. Lori and Jonah, stay at the bottom ledge," Amos commands.

"I thought we agreed to stay together." I look up at the face of my husband, his golden eyes fixed on the top of the tower.

When he looks down at me, a smile tugs at his mouth. "We are not separating. But we need visuals at different heights."

I press my head into his chest, afraid to let him go. So silly when we will literally be climbing the same freaking tower. He will just be a hundred or so feet above me. I can do this.

Amos kisses my head again then whispers into my hair, "I love you, Copperhead."

He doesn't wait for me to respond, turning abruptly to climb the stairs on the lookout tower. Kyle follows him, then Olivia, then Jonah and me. My heart feels like it rips in two when Amos continues up the stairs as Jonah and I remain on the bottom ledge. I fight through the ridiculous emotions tearing at my heart with every step Amos takes

away from me, and focus my attention on the ominous woods surrounding the tower.

Some of the leaves have already fallen from the trees, giving us a partial view into the woods, even from the bottom ledge. I aim my rifle, looking into the scope, and scan the scattering of trees to my left as Jonah does the same on my right. We walk slowly around the ledge, meeting on the other side.

“Hey, Shortcake,” Jonah says.

“Hey, pal.” I offer him a cheerful smile, which fades when I see the misery on Jonah’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I need you to promise me that if anything happens to me, if I die, you won’t let me turn.”

“You won’t turn—”

Jonah interrupts me, saying, “Do you remember me telling you how the Praetorian Guard are dosed with the virus? Just enough so that if we die, we will come back. Doesn’t matter if we die from a bite. I will turn into one of those monsters and I need you to promise me you won’t let it happen.”

I try to keep my voice as confident as I can, even though dread threatens to annihilate every shred of hope. “I promise. But, Jonah, we are going to be all right.”

“I hope so, Shortcake. Just remember, sever my spinal cord.”

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A branch snaps in the distance, likely from the dampness from a week's worth of rain. I know it's just the sound of nature, but I rush over in the direction of the sound and look through my scope. Nothing.

Before I can breathe a sigh of relief, a voice calls out from the ground. Three men approach the tower, looking directly at Jonah and me. I quickly glance up to the landings above my head, but can't see the others. When I look back down, the three men have guns pointing at us, so I point mine right back at them. But Jonah doesn't.

"Took you long enough!" Jonah shouts.

"What?" I gasp, losing my breath at the shock of Jonah's betrayal. He doesn't even have the decency to look at me.

"Legatus Jonah Rosenberg! We thought you were dead," shouts the grizzly looking man with hay-blond hair wrapped tightly in a man bun. The beard covering his face is a shade darker, making it look like he rolled around in the dirt. The other two men are lanky but just as menacing.

"Nah. I'm too tough for death." Jonah has transformed into a completely different person. Shoulders back, looking confident, like he has no care in the world.

"Who do you have there?" the grizzly looking one asks.

"You don't recognize her? Doctore's prized gladiator that ran away?" Jonah pulls me to his side and I'm too shocked to push myself away. "I found her in a little survivor colony not too far from here."

I look up at Jonah, so close to his throat that I can hear his pulse throbbing. Is he scared? As if sensing my internal question, Jonah turns his eyes to me and winks. "Play along," he whispers before kissing my cheek. "We got married there. It was fucking adorable."

Jonah pulls me along, guiding me down the stairs. With our hands tangled, I can feel the slight nervous shaking of whatever fear he's trying so hard to suppress. As we walk down the stairs, he asks the men on the ground how many more of them are in the area.

"Why?" lanky man number one asks.

"Because there are others nearby, Seb." Jonah halts, pretending to see one of these "others" in the distance. "I knew someone would be out here, so I led them straight to you."

"How do we know you haven't joined them?" grizzly man asks, squinting his eyes as he scans the surrounding trees. "That you weren't the one who sold us out?"

"Waylen, you know me. You know I am loyal to Doctore. I swore to him I would find his gladiator and I have. I had to play pretend with the locals in order to get her out. There was no other way. Bonus is that I got to fuck her whenever I wanted to, so maybe I took my time getting us out."

Jonah squeezes my hand. An apology for the things he is saying perhaps. My body moves with him, but my mind is miles away. How are we going to get out of this? I squeeze back in understanding, keeping my face from giving him away. When my feet hit the grass, it takes everything in me to not look up.

Waylen takes a step toward us, examining me with suspicious eyes. "It's just the three of us here. The others are back at base."

Jonah nods. “Do you have a radio?”

“Negative.”

“We need to move fast then. The team I was with will be closing in any minute.”

“How many are with you?” lanky man number two asks.

“Three others.”

“We can take that number.”

“Not when we are at a disadvantage, Hank.” Jonah’s outrage feels so authentic. The hairs on my arm freeze.

“How did you get them to come all the way out here?” Hank asks, suspicion brewing in his seafoam green eyes.

“Are we done with the stupid questions?” Jonah sighs, grasping my hand tighter.

“Answer the question, Jonah,” Waylen demands.

The two brooding men stare at each other for an entire minute. A minute filled with a dreadful tension that makes my skin shiver. Before I can take another breath, Jonah shouts up to the sky, “Now!”

The sound of gunfire ignites the air around me as Jonah pulls me to the ground. What little breath I had inside my lungs gets caught in my throat as I attempt to yell at Jonah. He helps me crawl under the base of the tower as the gunshots echo around me. Not just from above, but from all around us. Waylen lied to us. There are more Praetorian Guards hiding out of sight in the woods.

I look up just in time to see Hank get a bullet right between the eyes. Waylen is already halfway to the trees, dragging a wounded Seb. I make my way under the tower, crouching low as I try to balance myself and point my rifle at the woods. Looking through the scope, I see a militia approaching us. I shoot. Each pull of the trigger lands with a bullet in an arm, leg, throat, wherever I can get them. But we are grossly outnumbered. They must have found us wandering the woods long ago, or perhaps we are much closer to the lab than we thought.

Jonah collapses to the ground next to me due to having the butt of a rifle slammed into the side of his head. I try to whip my gun around, but I'm not fast enough. Waylen is back, grabbing my arm and pulling me out from under the tower as someone else grabs Jonah's limp body. Out in the open, I look up to see Amos at the top of the tower, his rifle aimed at Waylen's head.

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“Get your fucking hands off her!” he screams, making my blood curdle.

“You must be the real husband then,” chuckles Waylen. “Come down here yourself and try to pry my hands from her.”

“No!” I shout with all my might. “Just take me. I will go with you willingly if you let them live.”

“Lori, no!” Amos makes a move to sprint down the stairs, but Kyle stops him, barely able to hold him back.

“We won’t be letting anyone go, girly.”

Ew. Did he just call me girly? “You know I can rip your face off in one second.”

“Not before I sink this big, beautiful, shiny knife into your side.” Waylen presses a knife against my throat as if to make his point.

I laugh at the knife. “You forget, I can’t die.” Without thinking, I lift my foot up and slam it down with my inhuman strength. The loud crunch of broken bones pierces my ears before Waylen’s wailing scream. He lets go of me enough for me to whip my head back, likely breaking his jaw. As he stumbles backward, I grab his big, beautiful, shiny knife from his hands, preparing myself for battle.

That’s when I see Jonah. Unconscious. Helpless. With a gun to his head.

“Drop the knife. Surrender. And all your friends will be kept alive for Doctore to pass

judgment upon.” The man holding a gun to Jonah’s head keeps my stare. I recognize the man’s face. He’s one of the assholes who kidnapped Jonah and me five years ago.

I growl, dropping into my fighting stance. “A judgment that will lead to death.”

“Then should I kill him now?” He pushes the muzzle of the gun into Jonah’s temple, and before I can even think about my next move, the knife flies out of my hand, sinking into the man’s throat. I dive toward his fallen body, pushing him away from Jonah and grab the handgun he held against Jonah’s temple.

With my body protecting Jonah’s, I chance a glance to the top of the tower. Olivia joined Kyle at some point, both of them holding back my husband from doing something stupid. Looking back at the Praetorian Guards surrounding me, I grind my teeth, saying, “Let them go unharmed and I won’t kill every single one of you fuckers.”

“Lori, behind you!” I hear Amos shout before the world goes black.

Chapter 49

Thefaceofmynightmares is the first thing I see when I come to. The dark color of his skin erupts from the shadows draped around the room. A room that looks nothing like the lab setting of my nightmares. It feels different too. There’s an odd smell, but it isn’t the dank damp of the bunker at Novus Seclorum. It couldn’t be, since the military had raided that bunker.

Doctore’s soulless eyes stare at me with menacing curiosity. I close my eyes, wishing I was stuck in a dream. When I open them again, Doctore is still there, standing in front of me.

It’s as if he commands all the shadows in the room. They seem to radiate around him,

then scatter away when he takes a step toward me. A rickety light swings over my head, shining just enough for me to see the rest of the room I'm being held in. Some kind of office. I turn away from Doctore's menacing smile, looking for signs that I'm not alone. Then again, I hope I am. I hope Amos was able to escape. Even though my heart knows he would never let me go without a fight. If I am here, so is he. The only question is where?

As Doctore takes another step toward me, I attempt to pull my arms free from the restraints keeping me supine on this table. With one more step, he towers over me, that smile never wavering. My strength fails me and with each movement. I feel myself getting weaker.

"What did you do to me?" My voice is quiet, as if it's been unused for days.

"I made you better." Doctore speaks with such command in his voice, my skin prickles in fear.

"What do you mean? How long have I been here? Where are my friends?" I try to rein in my terror, but with every question I ask, the more I lose control of my emotions. I'm so damn tired.

"So many questions. How about we play a game? You answer one of my questions and I answer one of yours. Shall I go first?"

He barely blinks at me as he asserts his dominance in this game, showing me I am powerless.

"Did you wish I had died that day?"

What kind of question is that? Like he wants me to feel remorse for throwing a spear into his gut.

“Yes.”

Doctore’s eyes narrow at me, examining my tells for the truth behind my words. Did he truly think I had any regret for trying to kill him? I don’t wait for him to tell me it’s my turn as I ask, “Are my friends alive?”

“For now.” I want to wipe that disgusting smile right off his mouth. My attempt to pull free again leaves me winded immediately.

“Waylen tells me you married the man with the metal arm. Very curious. Could you tell me who made his metal arm?”

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If I tell Doctore, then he will know that Norman is still alive. I can't tell him because then he would most certainly attack The Valley if he hasn't already. But if I don't answer, then I won't get a question of my own answered. So I lie, as best as I can.

"There's a guy at the survivor camp I was living at. He's super smart and resourceful."

"Is this man's name Norman?" Doctore asks.

"My turn for a question now. How long have I been here?"

"Three days. What is the man's name?"

"Eric. What do you want with me?"

"I told you, to make you better—"

"No bullshit. Give me a real answer." I hold my ground as much as I can while tied down to a table. My intimidation tactic is worthless on Doctore.

"Where have you been hiding for the last year?"

"Nowhere you need to know about. Now tell me what you did to me and tell me where my friends are."

Doctore turns his back to me, laughing under his breath. "You will see your friends soon enough. Rest up. Gather your strength. You will need it."

So much for our game. And with that, the phantom of a man is gone, sinking deep into the shadows suffocating this room I will never escape. I close my eyes and think of Amos. I try so hard to bring his bright, smiling face to mind, but all I can see is Doctore's menacing smile. Fear is winning, consuming every thought, bringing me to the worst-case scenario. Doctore said they were alive, for now. What does that mean?

My breathing becomes shallow as I imagine Amos tied down, unable to move. I don't want him to have the same fate as me. I don't want him anywhere near Doctore. I'm terrified for him. Terrified that something horrible is going to happen to him, to us.

A sharp pain has me suppressing a scream, straining against the restraints. It feels like my insides are on fire. A sensation I recall from my first encounter with Doctore. Has he given me a new serum? Or taken away my immunity?

I am unable to suppress the next scream when another sharp pain radiates through my entire body. Through the shattering agony, I hear other screams echoing outside the room I'm in. It takes every ounce of control to keep myself awake in the haze of pain. Part of me hopes those other screams belong to Amos, Jonah, Olivia, and Kyle. If they are screaming, that means they are still alive.

Someone calls out for me. Their voice faraway, like they are under water. Or maybe I'm the one under water. Am I breathing? Yes. So not under water. Then why is it so hard to hear? I lock onto the voice calling my name.

"Lori. Wake up, Lori. You need to wake up now."

I try to pull myself from the dark hole of my mind, but it's like grasping at air. There's nothing to hold on to. Then my body shakes. A pressure on my shoulders. Someone's hands. I grab hold of them, tethering myself, and pull myself out of the deep, drug-induced sleep I must have been forced into after refusing to give into pain.

Pain. I don't feel it anymore. I feel nothing. That same numbness I grew so used to the last time Doctore held me captive. I thought it was the feeling of losing hope, but perhaps it is the effect of whatever he put in my veins.

"Lori," Jonah shouts, pulling me all the way out of my haze. He tugs me to his chest, squeezing me too tightly that all the breath knocks out of my lungs.

"Jonah, I can't breathe," I manage to choke out.

"Sorry. You had me so worried."

"Lori!" A shout from far away makes me turn my head.

"Amos!" I shout back, standing up to run to him, but Jonah puts out a hand to stop me. When I growl at him, his eyes shift to the ground. "Holy shit."

"Holy shit is right," Jonah agrees.

We are in a fucking arena. Not the same sandpit I had once fought in as Doctore's treasured gladiator. No. This arena is an epic upgrade. Completely indoor with u-shaped stadium seating that could accommodate thousands of people, but only half the stadium is used for seating and half of those seats are occupied. The walls around what looks like a cement hockey rink have been reinforced with chain link fencing and, for an added layer of protection to the audience on the other side, the seating around the fence has been replaced with spikes facing the arena pit.

Jonah and I are on a platform on one end, while Amos, Olivia, and Kyle are on a platform at the other end. A solid wall in the middle of the arena separates us. My eyes meet Amos' from across the arena. No fear. Just determination to get out. Together. I nod to him, causing his lips to curl in a smirk that makes my heart race. Then I notice his arm. Amos still has the metal arm Norman made for him. Curious

why Doctore let him keep it unless he wants to give the illusion of a fair fight.

My eyes dart around the arena as the crowd in the stands settle in their seats for what is sure to be one hell of a show for them. There's no way to climb down the platforms without possibly breaking a bone. But there are floating ropes leading to various platforms, climbing walls, and ominous contraptions, like some sort of suspended maze. It reminds me of the obstacle course Norman built. Did the bastard know Doctore was building this here? Did he help Doctore build this one?

A rattling above has me looking toward the ceiling. Some sort of net is hanging high in the shadows up there. I cannot see what's inside, but the moaning tells me exactly what to expect. Zombies. A whole lot of them too, by the sound of it. Then I see a way out. A small opening in the ceiling. The only way to get up there is to let the net down. Letting the net down would be a disaster. I will not risk anyone's life to get out. We will find a way out of this together.

My hands fly to my ears as a sharp sound like microphone feedback pierces my ears. After the shock, I let my hands fall to my sides as my eyes land on Doctore. He's high above the stands in some kind of executive box seating, safely behind plexiglass this time. Even from here, I can see his menacing smile. A smile I've tried so hard to forget, yet my nightmares refuse to let the image go.

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“I do apologize for that horrid sound.” His deceitful sympathetic voice makes me want to vomit. “Now, as you can see, I have quite the treat for you all today. My very first gladiator has returned to me, bringing with her some friends.”

I am going to kill this man. This is the last day he will breathe the foul air of this wretched world he built.

“To make it fair on all the players in the arena, I have treated them with my new sacramentum gladiatorum.”

It takes me a second to understand what the hell he just said. When I see Jonah’s face drop in horror, I remember exactly what sacramentum gladiatorum is. Doctore dosed my friends, my husband, with the same shit he gave me five years ago. The red serum that cured me from the zombie virus and made me his gladiator. I turn my gaze to Doctore again, seeing red.

“I believe I have perfected the serum,” he boasts, “but there is still a slight chance that one or more of them will turn. It will be quite a shocking surprise. I would very much love to know who you place your bets on.”

Dead. He is so fucking dead.

Chapter 50

The platform shakes before descending toward the arena floor, leaving us little time to decide our strategy. Jonah jumps for the climbing wall to our left, reaching it by the skin of his fingertips. I hesitate too long, wanting to keep my eyes on Amos for as

long as possible. Once the wall blocks my sight of him, I hop off the ledge of the platform, which is now only a few feet off the ground.

I look over my shoulder to the left of me, where Jonah has climbed to the top of the climbing wall and is now attempting to walk across a suspended bridge. He takes his time, testing each step before putting down his entire weight. Smart. Everything in this arena is likely meant to trick us, hurt us, and eventually kill us. But Doctore wants to put on a show so he can't kill us too quickly.

My eyes dart around this side of the arena, looking for anything I can use as a weapon. A wooden shed sits in between the solid wall that separates me from Amos. I sprint to it, thinking how much it looks like the shed my dad got at Amish Mike when I was a kid. There's a single door and a window on this side of the wall. I peek through the window and see a cache of weapons. Bats, whips, machetes, knives. Any weapon fit for hand to hand and close range fighting.

I try the door. Of course it's locked. But there's a note that says, "Gone fishing."

"What do you see, Lori?" Jonah shouts from above.

"Weapons. But it's locked. Do you see anywhere to go fishing for a key?"

Jonah points behind me, toward the audience. "There's a ball pit. Try there."

A ball pit? A freaking ball pit. As I sprint over to it, a sharp jab to my arm stops me in my tracks and I fall to the ground. Looking up, I'm prepared for a fight, but there's little I can do against a bunch of spikes moving in and out of a wall.

"Lori!"

"I'm fine!" And I am. I look down at what I thought would be a huge gash in my

upper arm, but the wound is already healing. This new super juice has escalated my healing abilities.

Standing over the ball pit, I hesitate for a moment, looking down into what should be a colorful pit of delightful chaos. The rainbow colors are unnoticeable underneath the rancid, decaying gore that I hope came from animals and not Doctore's human lab rats. I kick at the inflatable pit, checking to make sure there are no undead surprises waiting for me. One more kick just to satisfy my anxiety, then I slowly step in.

There has to be more blood and gore than plastic balls. The smell of it has my gag reflex struggling to keep my stomach at bay. It's only knee deep, but I know it won't be easy finding a key in this carnage. Before I begin searching with my hands, I hear shouting from the other side of the wall. Amos, Olivia, and Kyle have company, and not the kind you'd invite to dinner, but they are ready for a feast.

I know Amos will be okay because he has to survive this. We have to survive this together. I drown out everything around me—the shouts from the arena floor, the cheering from the crowd, the squelching sounds of the guts under my feet—and focus on finding the key to the shed. My hands search every layer, every inch of the ball and gut pit until it lands on something solid. I scoop it up, cleaning off the excess sludge, and hold it up to examine a piece of blood-soaked paper.

Carefully, I climb out of the pit, wishing again that Doctore would supply me with a pair of fucking shoes. I wipe my feet on the ground as I open the paper, which says, "The key is in your hands."

I run back to the shed and punch through the window, not caring if that's what the note meant. The broken glass shreds my hand, but I'm able to reach inside and unlock the door. As it swings open, I pull my arm out of the broken window and run inside, grabbing the first weapon I see, a mace, and open the double doors on the other side.

Zombies are everywhere. Deadies, grabbers, and freshies. I go for the fast ones first, drawing them away from the shed so that the others can grab some weapons. I chance a glance up, hoping to find Amos safely on one of the raised beams. He smiles at me before climbing down, sprinting for the shed. Kyle and Olivia at his heels. With four of us armed now, we make quick work of the remaining zombies and run for the shed again, closing the doors behind us. Jonah joins us a moment later, all of us out of breath, but alive.

From the safety of the shed, I take a moment to examine Amos. Apart from the obvious fatigue of enduring Doctore's sacramentum gladiatorum, he looks in good shape.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"I've been better." He wraps his arms around me, pulling me to his chest as he breathes me in. "I'm so fucking scared, Copperhead."

"I am too. If you die in here, if you turn—"

"Doctore doesn't leave this place alive," Amos interrupts. Using the name only his guards and those who fear him call him. Because today, we are going to conquer fear itself. "We will do everything we can to bring him down. Today."

I nod against his chest, attempting to drown out the boos from the crowd. As much as I want to hide in here forever, we can't risk getting surrounded by zombies.

"Which side should we defend?" I ask.

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Jonah answers with, “Our side. There are things we can climb up to higher ground, even though there’s a net full of zombies hovering over us. We might be able to climb out of the arena and into the empty stands.”

“But there is some kind of control panel with levers and buttons on our side that could give us a way out of here,” Kyle says hopefully.

“Do you really think that psycho would give us a way out?” Olivia says in anger. “The objective is to watch us die, slowly. Or maybe we won’t die because we are all like Lori now. But I don’t want to gamble on that. I say we go over to the other side and take our chances there. Together.”

“I’m with Olivia on this,” Amos says, keeping me tucked tightly to his side. “You have great instincts, Kyle, and I love your optimism, but we have to stick together.”

Kyle nods in agreement, grabbing a few more knives from the shed’s gracious supply. The rest of us arm ourselves as heavily as possible, using rope to secure extra weaponry to our bodies since the gray prison garb doesn’t offer many pockets. But they have belt loops.

“Ready?” Jonah asks, but doesn’t wait for us to respond as he opens the door.

The five of us rush over to the climbing wall, hoping to make it over the suspended bridge and onto the elevated rock wall that will bring us over the chain-link fence. It’s a risky move, but one we have to take. There are no other choices. As Olivia and Jonah make it to the top, Kyle is already climbing. I nudge Amos to go next, but he doesn’t budge.

“Together, remember?” he asks, flashing a beautiful smile that makes his eyes glow.

I smile up at him, the love in his eyes so pure and enduring my heart clenches.
“Together.”

Halfway up the wall Amos lets out a roaring wail, losing grip of the wooden slats. I reach out to him, holding him up as his body vibrates with an invisible torture.

“My arm!” Amos shouts. “Take my arm off!”

Then I hear it. A sound like a taser gun. I climb over his back, holding him against the wall with my hips as I grip the edges of his metal arm, squeezing the buttons on the side to release it from his stump. The crowd lets out a groan of astonishment at the sight, reminding me we are not alone and we don’t have a single breath to spare. As I toss the metal arm to the floor, the sound of chains rattling from above makes me look up at the zombie-filled net.

Someone is lowering the net, opening the sides up slowly to allow the crowd a moment of anticipation. A lone zombie rolls off the edge of the net, aiming right at us. I shield Amos with my small body, not ready to test his immunity. The zombie bounces off my back, thrashing its undead limbs. The splattering sound as it reaches the ground causes my stomach to churn. I just swam through guts and gore. I can endure more of this.

“Come on,” I say to Amos, helping him find his footing on the wooden slats of the climbing wall. Kyle holds out his hand to Amos, hoisting him up onto the skinny platform. Jonah and Olivia are already at the other end of the bridge, getting ready to jump to the rock wall as I reach the top of the wooden climbing wall.

A loud bang makes me grip the wall tighter. Looking around, I try to find where the sound came from, if it’s something we should be worried about.

“Jonah!” I hear Olivia shout.

Pulling myself up over the platform, I can’t find Jonah anywhere. Olivia stands at the edge of the bridge alone, looking down. I follow her eyes to the ground.

“No!”

I release my grip on the climbing wall and slide down to the ground, side stepping the unmoving corpse that fell from the ceiling as I run to Jonah’s side. A giant hole in his chest makes my knees buckle.

I look up at the others on top of the bridge. “Get down! There are cannons!”

Another boom leads my eyes into the empty stands where I see a small cannon, smoking from its recent shot. Amos, Kyle, and Olivia quickly get to cover, sliding down the wall just as I had. Jonah’s hand reaches out for mine, violently shaking. I grab hold of him just as the net above releases. Zombies rain down on us from every angle, most of them landing on the two square trapeze nets strategically placed so that all the zombies don’t splatter all over the ground before having the chance to feast on our flesh.

“To the shed!” Amos shouts, grabbing one of Jonah’s arms to help me drag him to safety.

Olivia and Kyle fight off the zombies closing in on us, quickly creating a tripping hazard for the other deadies and grabbers. Amos and I pull Jonah into the shed as gently as possible. Once inside, I kneel back down to examine his wound. It’s fatal. He won’t live for very long unless Doctore’s sacramentum gladiatorum works on him.

Grabbing his hand, I call to him. “Jonah. Please don’t die. Please. I know I said I

would kill you before you turn, but you might be cured. I can't..."

He grunts in response, making the tears I've been holding back come bursting out. I quickly wipe them away. No time for crying. Not yet.

"Now what?" Kyle asks.

"Looks like we are going to have to go with your plan, Kyle." Olivia crosses her arms. "We're fucked, aren't we?"

"Yes. But we will not stop until we get out of here. All of us." Amos kneels next to me, kissing my temple. "You need to go after him. Now. A surprise element. They all think we are cowering in here. But we are going to blast through those double doors, use them to barricade the tunnel in case there are more biters down there. You are going to climb up and jump out of the arena. Hunt that scum of a man who calls himself Doctore, and rip him to shreds."

I like this idea. I do. Even though it means splitting up, which was something I've never been about. I don't want to leave my people behind. But it's the best plan we got. The only plan. Standing up, I prepare myself for the battle ahead. Olivia and Kyle dismantle the doors as Amos gets ready to take on whatever is waiting for us on the other side. When the doors are off the hinges, all four of us charge into the arena. I help Amos take down a few wandering grabbers, swinging my mace into their skulls once, then twice, for good measure. Once the arena floor is clear, I drag Jonah out of the shed for the crowd to see that he is still alive, placing him under the elevated beams.

I hand Olivia my mace, then sprint for the hanging ropes and jump onto the one closest to the wall in the middle of the arena. I climb up a few feet before swinging. On the fourth swing, I've got enough momentum. Letting go of the rope, I let my pure hatred fuel my confidence in the plan I'm formulating in my mind.

Chapter 51

Myfeethitsolidground, landing in the middle of the balance-beam-thick wall. A gasp of surprise from the crowd turns into a shocking scream as I sprint toward spectators in the front row. Even Doctore looks surprised as I leap over the spikes jutting out of the ground. This time, my feet barely make it to the ledge of the half wall in front of the stadium seating.

I quickly get my balance in check, jumping down to the ground in front of a stunned and frightened audience.

“I’m not here for you,” I say. “I’m here for him.”

I point my finger toward the back of the stadium seating, where Doctore attempts to hide his fear behind that menacing smile. He might think he’s safe in that box, but I’m coming for him.

The people directly in front of me leap from their seats and sprint down the aisles as I climb up the rows of seating, keeping my eyes fixed on Doctore. He doesn’t even blink at my intimidating glare, believing I won’t be able to get to him this time. How I yearn to break him. When I reach the top row of the stadium, I lose sight of him. Before I look for an exit to find the room Doctore is hiding in, four Praetorian Guards charge me at once, dodging my swinging fists. They are fast. But I’m faster.

I drop to the floor, spinning my feet to knock over the bulkiest of them. He goes down with a sickening thud. I waste no time launching on top of him, sliding out a knife from the pocket of my pants. Instead of landing a killing blow, I place the blade

to the man's thick neck and look up at the others.

“Do you really want to fight for a man who cowers in the shadows? Who kidnaps innocent people to torture them, turn them into slaves, kill them? Whatever he's promised you doesn't exist. He can only offer you death.”

“Don't listen to her,” a girl my age with short brown hair says. “She'll poison your minds just like she did to Jonah.”

“I didn't poison him. He just woke the fuck up. Doctore brainwashed you all. If you are survivors of his super solider serum, he thinks you belong to him.”

The man under me attempts to flip me over. A solid attempt that ends with my knife deep in his throat. As I slide the knife out, his blood squirts at my gray clothing, adding to the red stains from the ball pit. The three remaining guards look at me with pure hatred. A look I give back with no remorse. Remembering what Jonah told me, I stab down at the man's neck, severing his spinal cord.

A scream like a banshee breaks the rising panic from the crowds as they continue to make haste toward the exits. The three remaining guards circle me as I stand up from the bloodied corpse at my feet. They aren't armed with guns, but I can tell they are deadly. Just not as deadly as I am. Copperhead. That's what Amos has called me since the day we met. And that's what I am. A venomous viper, ready to kill when provoked. Oh man, am I ready to kill.

The four of us dance to the sounds of the surrounding chaos. Fists aimed at my face, rib cage, and kidney all miss their targets as I dodge, drop, and spin away from their attacks. I perfectly time a dive to the ground, making two of the guards punch each other. Suppressing a laugh, I stab my knife down into the neck of the girl, severing her spinal cord with a twist.

Two down. Two to go. These guys aren't as big as the first one I felled. Maybe just as built as Amos. If they are gladiators like me, I need to fight harder. Backing away from them, I pretend like I'm hesitating to go up against them, already winded from the fight. When they think they have me cornered against a wall, I drop to the ground, rolling away from them, then sprint toward them before jumping in the air. Pain radiates through my bare feet as they land satisfying blows on each guy. One foot aimed for the groin, while the other hits a face after flipping around in midair.

I land hard on the ground without twisting an ankle. Something I usually do when attempting these jump kicks. There's no time to celebrate as the guy I hit in the face recovers quickly. He grabs for me, gripping my braid and pulling me down hard. The force knocks the wind from me, but I jump up, swiping up with my knife. The tip of my blade slices into the soft, tender flesh of his belly.

Blood flows quickly from the wound, but he doesn't take notice. I roll backward to give myself the momentum I need to stand up quickly, placing my feet firmly on the ground. An explosion behind me makes me lose focus. Turning around, I see that the shed in the arena has blown up somehow. When I turn back to my opponent, his fist meets my jaw, causing me to fly backward over a row of seating.

My heart races. Terror rising in my chest as I think of Amos down there, fighting for his life. Facing more than just two Praetorian Guards. There were so many zombies down there and now there's no place to hide. He wouldn't want me to go after him though. He would be livid if I gave up my chance to kill Doctore.

The reminder of my objective has my head swiveling to where he'd been standing at the plexiglass window. He's gone. Shit. Then I see movement to the right. The guy I kicked in the balls runs away, likely going to secure Doctore. I need to make quick work of this last asswipe so I can follow him.

I jump over the row of seating I had fallen into, quickly spinning away from another

blow. Reaching down with my knife in hand, I slice into the guy's Achilles tendon. He immediately falls to the ground. Wasting no time, I slam my knife into the back of his neck.

My feet are numb as I run down the corridor outside the stadium. Willing myself to run faster, I launch myself up the flight of stairs to where I guess Doctore is waiting for me. At least I hope he's waiting for me. A hallway of doors awaits me when I reach the top of the stairs. Taking a deep breath, I center myself, reorienting my location.

Third door on the right, I think to myself. It takes me eight long strides to reach the door. Then I use all my pent up rage, fueling my inhuman strength and kick down the door, entering the room with my knife at the ready. But there's no attack. The guard I kicked in the balls stands next to Doctore, who sits calmly in front of a wall of screens. Monitors looking into the arena. Even though he has a panoramic view of the arena through the plexiglass window, these monitors allow him to view every possible angle of the carnage down there. I force myself to look away. I am on a mission and I will not fail.

"If you want your friends to survive, you will put that knife down, Laurel." Doctore's falsely soothing voice makes my skin crawl. The terror that once owned me threatens to take hold, but I refuse to give up. I refuse to let him win.

Loosening my fighting stance, I let the knife slip down between my fingers, pretending I have given up. When Doctore turns away from the monitors, my fingers grip the tip of the handle and fling it at the guard. The blade sinks into his chest as I sprint at Doctore. He turns away, attempting to press the scary red button on the table in front of the monitors, but I get to him first.

Pulling him by the collar of his too nice button-down shirt, I rip him off his chair and throw him to the ground. My hands wrap around his throat, squeezing with all their

might. His dark skin turns a deeper color as he loses oxygen. His soulless eyes plead for life. No mercy. Death. I squeeze harder, feeling the tendons in his neck snap.

A sharp pain to my side loosens my death grip on Doctore's throat. I grab the hilt of the knife from the guard's hands and pull it from my side. Blood soaks my clothes. My blood. Shit. Before the guard can attack me again, a small red circle appears on his forehead, snuffing the life from his eyes. He goes down like a large sack of corn.

A gunshot. I spin around to see two military men with rifles. They aim their guns at me, asking my name.

"Laurel Hill. I'm from The Valley. This man kidnapped me and brought me here with my friends. They are in danger. In the arena."

My answer seems to satisfy the men as they lower their weapons in Doctore's direction. "This must be the infamous Dr. Gabriel Tuwile. General Greene is eager to meet you."

Doctore's once intimidating stare is now full of dread as he recovers from near death. I cannot let him live. My hands shake, not from fear but from exhaustion. And likely the excess blood loss to my side. I grip the knife in my hand, waiting for Doctore to look at me one last time. When his soulless eyes meet mine, I lunge at him with my knife. The blade lands dead center between his eyes.

"No one will be meeting with this man ever again," I say before falling to the ground.

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Silence engulfs me. A silence accompanied by the thumping of my heart as blood continues to pump out of me from the knife wound at my side. How fitting this is that I should die at the feet of the man who made it his mission to create an undying soldier. I once craved death. I yearned for the day to arrive when I would no longer take another living breath. As I lie in pain and exhaustion on a blood-soaked floor, all I want is to live.

Chapter 52

Amos

Idon'tknowifit's this gladiator serum shit that has me seeing red or simply fear coursing through my body. Yes, I'm fucking terrified, but I'm also amped up. Ever since I woke up tied to a cold table, every instinct inside me says fight, kill. Though that could be because my very first thought was about Lori, how the Praetorian Guards had her surrounded. I fucking lost it.

Kyle, Olivia, and I shot at every fucker who came out of the woods. But they had an army waiting for us. I was so scared they were going to kill Lori right in front of me. Even knowing she can't die. Images of her torn to pieces fueled my rage. I'm still raging. We tried to hold the Praetorian Guard back, but we were simply outnumbered.

The rage I felt only strengthened after we surrendered. I was blindfolded. Herded through the woods. Thrown into a vehicle. All the while not knowing if Lori was somewhere close by. All I could do was hope that she would be taken to the same place they were taking me. That she would be okay.

While I was tied down—my metal arm removed—Dr. Tuwile explained everything he was doing to me. That he was injecting me with that gladiator shit. I was helpless to stop it. The serum burned through me. I thought every cell of my body was on fire. Waves of pain hit me at every angle until I couldn't control my screams. I felt like I was going to die. I thought I had died.

Then, all of a sudden, I couldn't feel anything. A woman reattached my metal arm. The arm that sent a shock of electricity through my body. I hope it was Dr. Tuwile who rigged it with a taser and not Norman. If it wasn't for Lori, I'd have fallen off that climbing wall. Though we weren't that high up, I know I'd only have caused Lori to hold herself back to take care of me.

Lori. If I lose her...no. I can't think that way. Fear threatens to paralyze me as I watch Lori hand her mace to Olivia. I can't look. I can't watch as the love of my life leaps out of the arena to face her demons. To kill Doctore. All I can do is shove my fear aside and find a way out of here with my friends. Lori will be okay. Not because I need her to be, but because she is fucking fierce. Nothing will get in her way.

But fuck, I wish I could be by her side. It's selfish, but I want to be the one to kill Doctore. I know Lori has every right to kill the fucker. It doesn't change my need to plunge a knife into his heart and watch his life fade from those demonic eyes.

"Amos!" Olivia shouts, bringing me out of my rage.

I look down to find a biter. Its head smashed in from the multiple swings I took with the metal bat in my hand. This side of the arena is clear, but we still need to reinforce the doors against the tunnel that likely leads to a locker room filled with more of these flesh-eating monsters.

I sprint over to Olivia and Kyle. They've secured the doors enough to hold back the few biters that lingered in the dark tunnel. It doesn't look like it will be enough to

hold back a swarm of them though. The thought terrifies me. We have nowhere to run to unless we go up. That would mean leaving Jonah behind, which I refuse to do.

Olivia stands with her hands on her hips, Lori's mace haphazardly hanging from a belt loop of her joggers. "What now?" she asks.

"Kyle and I will take a look at that control board looking thing, see if we can open a door out of here," I say. "Keep watch over Jonah. If he turns—"

"Got it," Olivia answers quickly, stopping me from saying more.

I should hate the guy. I did hate him. That was before I met him. Before he saved my life. I don't want Jonah to die. If not for my sake, then for Lori's. Though I know she isn't in love with him anymore, Jonah is still an important person in her life. I will do everything I can to make sure she doesn't lose another person she loves. Including me.

Kyle and I step up to the section of the wall where the control panel is. Or what we believe is a control panel. Nothing is labeled.

"Let's play," Kyle says as he examines the panel.

A wave of fear races through my heart at the idea of playing this deadly game of Russian roulette. I go first, pressing a black button, setting off the cannon again. The loud bang that follows sounded as if it hit the other side of the metal wall.

Kyle and I look up at each other, eyes wide. "Fucking hell," he says. "Should we keep going?"

"What choice do we have?" I pat him on the shoulder. He feels hot to the touch over the thin fabric of his gray shirt. We are all probably overheating with anxiety, anger,

and fear. “Your turn.”

Kyle goes for a red button next, making the metal spears on the left side of the wall shoot out. I look back to where Olivia and Jonah are huddled a safe distance away. When I turn back around, I try a lever, pulling it all the way down.

A loud, whining sound makes me look up to the ceiling as the pulleys that held the net up come crashing to the ground. One of them nearly got Kyle and me, but the other pulleys definitely landed on some biters on the other side.

As Kyle reaches out a hand to grab at a knob that looks like a volume dial, he groans in pain, falling against the panel. Several things happen all at once: the platform rises, the cannon goes off, and the shed explodes. I’m knocked backward from the force of the explosion.

Silence fights with sound as my ears regain their hearing. I roll over to my side and push myself up with the only hand I have. My vision is a little blurry, but I can make out Kyle’s gigantic form, hunched over in front of the platform. I crawl over to him to make sure he’s okay, hoping he didn’t smash his head too hard against the metal of the platform.

“Hey, man. Are you okay?” I ask, as I reach out, grabbing his arm to pull him up. When his eyes open, the green of his irises is surrounded by red. “Kyle?”

My best friend launches for me. I’m slow to react, shocked at what is happening, refusing to believe that he’s gone. One second he was my best friend, the next...

He bites me hard on the soft spot above my shoulder, gnawing on my flesh for a few seconds before I kick him off of me.

“Kyle!” I scream, hoping to reach any part of him that is still human. But I know

better. Kyle is gone. The monster in front of me is not my best friend, as much as he might look like him.

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Spotting the weapon that flew out of my hands from the explosion, I sprint, hoping the biter follows me. I see Olivia with the corner of my eyes and yell, “Stay there!” My voice acting like a beacon for the biter to follow me and stay away from my remaining friends. Please don’t turn. I think to myself.

I swoop down, my hand effortlessly gripping the handle of the bat. As I turn around, I use the momentum and swing as hard as I can. The tip of my bat hits its target, crushing the biter’s head. It goes down with a sickening thump. But I don’t have time to grieve. The sound of moaning is all around me. Now that the shed has been destroyed, the remaining biters from the other side are making their way over here.

Olivia is at my side, a large hunting knife in one hand and Lori’s mace in the other. Our heads whip over to the tunnel where more biters are attempting to break down our barricade.

“Is Jonah okay?” I ask, my voice breaking.

“I think he’s healing. But obviously is in no shape to fight.”

I nod and ask if she’s okay. “Do you feel warm? Feverish?”

“No. But I’ve got a big ball of fury I’m going to release on these dead assholes.”

I try to smile, but the pain in my heart doesn’t let me. So I let the anger in. I let it consume me as I prepare for battle. When the first of the biters break through the flames licking the remains of the shed, shooting sparks out all around us. Olivia and I jump for cover, but the bullets aren’t aimed in our direction. All the biters stumbling

toward us fall to the ground.

A voice calls out through a megaphone over the sounds of carnage around us. “This is the U.S. Military. If you are among the living, put your hands up. We mean you no harm.”

Relief washes over me, but not enough to remove the fear that has been threatening to consume me. If the military is here, where is Lori? Olivia and I stand up with our hands up and wait for the military to put down the surrounding biters. One of the soldiers recognizes me and passes on the information to the men and women around him. They put their weapons down immediately.

“Has anyone been bitten?” one of the soldiers asks from the stands.

Shit. I’ll be executed if they see the bite mark on my shoulder.

“No,” Olivia answers. “Can we put our hands down now?”

“Yes. Stay put. We’ll get you guys out.”

“Olivia, if they see I’ve been bitten—”

“There’s no bite mark, Amos. It healed,” Olivia says, examining my shoulder closely.

“What?” I nearly cry, my knees going weak from the relief I feel. I’m okay. I’m not going to turn.

Olivia pulls me in for a hug, holding me so tight my bones would pop if it weren’t for my newly acquired super soldier strength. When we let go of each other, we rush over to Jonah. He’s alive. The wound still looks deadly, but he’s alive.

“I need to find Lori,” I say to no one in particular.

Instead of answering, Olivia sprints away from me, over to the other side of the arena. When I see her sprint back through the ruins of the shed, she has my metal arm in her hand. “I pulled out the taser, so it should be safe. Put this back on and go find your lady.”

As I run to the fence, I hastily reattach my arm. The strength I feel inside me gives me the power I need to climb over and the confidence of knowing I will make it out. I leap from the top of the fence, landing on the edge of the seating area like a cat. Then I’m running. Pushing everything and everyone out of my way, letting nothing stop me from getting to Lori.

After climbing a flight of stairs, I find a group of soldiers. General Greene is among them, calling out an order. “Bring her in for questioning.”

I sprint over to the general, pushing him out of the way. When I see Lori lying unconscious in a pool of blood, I howl. The rage I’ve felt since she was taken at the tower threatens to explode like that shed in the arena.

“Amos, what are you doing?” General Greene asks, gripping his weapon tighter.

I ignore him, pushing my way into the room. Two soldiers hoist Lori up with their hands. My fist meets their jaws, but I hold myself back, not knowing how strong I might be. Before Lori falls back to the ground, I scoop her up, holding her against my body, glaring at everyone around me.

“Amos. If you do not release our prisoner, I will have to detain you as well,” the general threatens.

“She is not your prisoner. She is my wife.”

“Shit,” one of the soldiers behind me mutters.

“Yourwife killed the man we have been searching for.” General Greene’s anger is of no concern of mine. The rage inside me tells me to kick him through the chest. An irrational instinct that will get both me and Lori killed, or imprisoned for life since we both can’t be killed.

I look behind me to see Dr. Tuwile on the ground, his eyes devoid of life. I can’t help but smile. Then I turn back, yelling, “I could fucking care less who she killed. Actually, I’m fucking proud as hell that she killed that monster.”

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“Amos, please. You are not thinking rationally.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen, general. You are going to bring me, Lori, and my friends back to The Valley. If you would like to ask my wife questions, you can do so there, under my supervision.”

General Greene sighs, but I don’t let him talk. “You refused to help us, which left us to go out and find Dr. Tuwile ourselves. If you wanted him so badly, you would have helped us. You were too late. But you will still get to reap the rewards. You get to take his empire now. All I ask is that you leave Lori alone.”

After a few beats of silence, I add, “And all the research you find in this and any other facility will be brought to The Valley for Norman to catalog. If there’s anyone who can find a true cure, it’s him.”

I don’t wait for the general to respond. With Lori in my arms, I push through the soldiers. They let me go without a fight.

Chapter 53

Lori

Ijolt awake, breathing in a gulp of beautiful, sweet air. I’m alive. Then the pain hits. Radiating from my side. I touch the tender newly healed skin, wincing at the sharp tendrils of discomfort. Lifting my eyes, I take in my surroundings. I’m not in that room with all the monitors. The room where I killed Doctore. Shit, I didn’t sever his spinal cord. But he certainly wouldn’t have dosed himself with the sacramentum

gladiatorum if he wasn't absolutely certain he had perfected it.

Closing my eyes, I try to remember what happened after I killed Doctore. The soldiers were angry, but I lost consciousness fast and can't recall anything after that. When I open my eyes again, I look at the white walls around me. It looks like one of the medical rooms at The Valley. But that would mean I've been out for hours, maybe longer depending on how far away Doctore had taken us.

The bed I'm lying in feels warm, further evidence that I've been out for longer than I thought. I gently pull the blankets off, revealing a fresh change of clothes. No more rancid blood stains, yay. Even my feet look like they've been scrubbed. How long have I been out?

I must have said my last thought out loud because a voice responds to the question. "You got in a little after midnight and it's now..." My mom pauses to look at the watch on her wrist before telling me the time. "Ten past four in the morning."

"Mom," I say before breaking into a side-splitting sob.

She runs to my bed, pulling me to her chest as she lies down beside me. "Oh, honey. It's okay. Everything is okay now."

"Is it? Where's Amos? Jonah? Olivia and Kyle? I don't remember how I got here, if they got out."

My mom gently strokes my cheeks, brushing the tears away. "Amos is fine. Jonah was badly injured, but he's healing. Healing quickly too. Olivia has a few broken bones, which are also healing quickly."

That means the sacramentum gladiatorum worked for them. That means they are immune like me. Relief sweeps over me, but then I see the look on my mom's face.

“Kyle?” I ask.

“I’m really sorry to tell you that Kyle didn’t make it.”

“No.” My chest clenches. “But Doctore gave him the sacramentum gladiatorum too. What happened? Amos can’t be okay after his best friend died. I need to go to him.”

I try to stand, but my mom pulls me back down. “Let him rest. He had a tiring night bringing you back home. General Greene was ready to throw you in the brig for killing Dr. Gabriel Tuwile. That man has wanted his hands on Gabriel for years. I’m glad he’s dead. Sorry it had to be you to kill him though, sweetheart.”

“I’m not sorry. It needed to be me.” I rest my head on my mom’s shoulder, letting my body relax. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, honey. Amos reminded the general why it was better this way. Persuaded him it would be dangerous to keep Gabriel alive. Now there are hundreds of soldiers with no one to command them. General Greene needs men. It was the perfect compromise. The only thing Amos couldn’t stop was the confiscation of Gabriel’s super soldier serum, which I believe is called sacramentum gladiatorum?”

I nod. “That guy was obsessed with anything Roman. Honestly, he would have conquered the world if I let him live.”

We both chuckle at the morbid joke. After a few silent moments, I nearly fall back asleep, then my mom’s voice pulls me to alertness. “I was so worried about you, Lori. I knew I couldn’t hold you back. There’s no stopping you when you are on a path. When you didn’t come back when you were supposed to, I feared the worst. I kept reminding myself that you came back to me twice, and you would do it again. I was so scared.”

“I’m sorry, mom. I promise not to scare you like that again.”

“Don’t you go making promises you can’t keep.” My mom turns her head enough for me to see that sharp side eye of hers, making me giggle.

Shifting on the bed a little, I stifle a groan of pain. My side burns. Usually a good sign that I’m healing, but still unbearable.

My mom gets up, responding quickly to my quiet groans of agony. “Let me get you a painkiller.”

“No, I’m fine. I’ve been through worse without any. Please don’t waste them on me.”

“You sure?”

I nod, patting the side of the bed for her to lie back down and resume cuddling. “Do you know how the military found us?”

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Once my mom lies comfortably at my side, she explains how a patrol unit had seen a fleet of vehicles—Amos’ red Honda among them—heading for Hershey, the danger zone. “They followed as closely as they dared and stopped once they reached the quarantine signs. The patrol then split up, half heading straight for The Wall and the other half back to The Valley. It took the military a day or so searching the area before they found your location. The Giant Center. Where hundreds of living people were fleeing.”

The timing couldn’t have been any luckier, I think.

“The military swooped in with their helicopters and raided the arena,” my mom continues. “Looking for Dr. Tuwile, and perhaps they were also hoping you’d still be alive. I know they value Amos, but I doubt they brought their forces in to rescue all of you. You found Dr. Tuwile’s super secret lair. And they wanted it.”

“Makes me even more furious that they refused to assist us in our search and to help guard The Valley when we thought our community was in danger,” I say. “Twats.”

“Twats they are.”

“At least they arrived in time to save us. Most of us.”

Kyle. I didn’t know him very well, but he and Amos were so close. He was Amos’s right-hand man. He was a good guy. He deserved better.

I can’t help but believe that it’s all my fault. Doctore wanted me. Capturing me with my friends must have been a dream come true for him. A way to punish me for

escaping. Closing my eyes, I soak in the memory of his soulless eyes losing their wicked spark as his life drained away.

The sight should cause me to feel remorse. Some kind of human reaction to killing another human. But Doctore was the devil incarnate. He is the one responsible for killing billions of people, for creating this nightmare world. Maybe he deserved to live in his creation, but I couldn't let him continue his work. Even if it was through the command of someone on the side of humanity.

"You're awake."

I lift my head up to see Amos standing in the doorway of my room. If I hadn't known all that'd happened, I would have been able to guess from the state of him. Black hair askew and those once lively golden eyes have turned a dull, muddy color surrounded by red that tells me he's been crying. But he's cleaned up, wearing fresh clothes that aren't those horrid gray uniforms of death. My mom rolls off the bed as he approaches.

"I should reprimand you and tell you to go back to your room for more sleep," my mom says with a false motherly command in her voice. "But I know you'll get more rest with each other. Just promise me you will sleep. Both of you."

"Yes, Mom," we both say with a laugh.

Amos locks his eyes on mine as he makes his way over to my bed. A tether hooked to my heart. I pull on it, urging him to me faster, and he quickens his pace. The bed dips just before Amos grabs me firmly by the skull, smashing our lips together. His kiss is hard and fierce and everything I need.

When he pulls away, his warm breath tickles my chin. I yearn for more, but our bodies are so tired. Still healing from the battle we endured. I wrap my arms around

him, holding him close as I press my head against his chest. The thumping of Amos' heart grounds me as my mind replays all the moments I thought I was going to lose him.

"I'm so sorry about Kyle," I say, needing to get the worst of it all out in the open.

Amos squeezes me, holding back a sob. "Me too. He was a good guy. A great friend. A hell of a fighter." Amos kisses my forehead. "Now let's go back to our room, shower, and sleep in our own bed."

"Are we allowed to leave the medical building? Don't we have to get discharged?" I ask with a smile.

"Nah. If anyone tries to stop us, I'll just punch them with my new superhuman strength."

"You have superhuman strength?"

Amos shrugs as I hop off the bed, the cold floor shocking the warm skin on my feet. Then I think about the combat boots I had been wearing when I got captured. Those were great boots and not so easy to come by in my size. But I don't want to think about that just yet. I don't need to fight. I need to rest. I need to live. At The Valley, with Amos, I can live. If the world will let us.

Epilogue

4 Months Later...

"Happy birthday, Lori!" a crowd of people shout in front of me. I nearly punch the closest person in the crowded cafeteria in my shock at walking into my surprise party. It's been years since I celebrated my birthday. Last year, my mom and I had a special

dinner, but I told her I didn't want to make a fuss. This year was Amos' doing. And Jonah's, apparently. And well, I guess the entire community here because they see me as some kind of hero.

Amos pushes me through the doorway with a huge smile on his face. A rare sight in these last four months. Not that Amos and I aren't happy together. We are so in love and happy it would feel like we were in some cheesy rom com if it weren't for the whole zombie apocalypse thing.

Losing Kyle was very hard for Amos. Still is. He misses his best friend. He misses his arm, even though he has a new metal one. He's worried about what Doctore did to us when we were held captive. I'd be lying if I said I'm not worried too. Both of us have lost so much to this world. We've changed so much because of it. But we've been able to keep something precious through all the horrors we've endured. Humanity.

I can see the celebration of human life all around me as Amos walks me through our friends and neighbors. It feels a little surreal. Like we've been transported to an alternate reality where everything is back to normal. A place where Amos and I could raise a family. We've talked about having kids, but first want to build a safer world. That is what we are fighting for now. A future.

It took countless sessions with Alison to push past my fears and look to a future where dreams can come true again. Maybe not all of my dreams I had from the before will come true, but I have Amos, my mom, Cal, Mina, Jonah. We have never been safer here at The Valley and Norman is working tirelessly on a true cure. One that will wipe away the virus from the world. It can't bring back those already lost, but it has the possibility of bringing the world back to what it once was. Perhaps even better.

Sometimes I catch myself thinking about Amos holding our baby in this better world.

The thought makes my heart do a little happy dance. One day.

“Honey, you are glowing!” my mom squeals as she pulls me into a hug. “Twenty-four. That’s how old I was when I had Hayden.”

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I squeeze my mom to keep her from falling deeper into that thought. We rarely bring up my brother because it causes us so much pain not knowing if he survived the outbreak. When we do bring him up, we like to pretend that we know exactly where he is and what he'd be doing. Perhaps not the most healthy thing, but it's our way of grieving.

Amos directs me to our table at the other end of the cafeteria. It's decorated with colorful banners that say "Happy Birthday."

"Isn't this a little much?" I ask Amos, elbowing his side.

"I think it's perfect. Plus, there's an overstock of party supplies everywhere."

My face drops. "I hope you didn't ask anyone to go out and find these decorations."

"No. We've been collecting this stuff for years. It's important to celebrate life, Lori."

I sit down, feeling exhausted from all the socializing I did in just thirty minutes. And hungry. I'm so freaking hungry. As if reading my thoughts, Amos slides a burger in front of me. My eyes go wide before lifting it up to my face. As soon as I take a bite, someone approaches the table. When I look up to find Jonah's amused face, I relax and take another bite. Amos pulls out a chair, inviting him to sit with us.

"How are you feeling, Jonah?" Amos asks, picking up a homemade potato chip and tossing it in his mouth.

"On the mend. But I still haven't been cleared for patrol. Physical therapy has been

helping me stay in shape at least.”

“Jonah, you were shot with a freaking cannon ball. Even with accelerated healing, that injury is going to take a long time to heal all the way. It took me nearly six months to recover from—” I stop myself from continuing because I know the reminder of my torn up body will upset Amos and that is the last thing I want to do today. Not after he’d gone through all the trouble of setting up this birthday celebration for me. “Well, you know.”

Jonah nods, likely remembering those months because he didn’t come looking for me once. Or at least that’s what I thought at the time. It’s hard to forget how much I had hated Jonah. I’ve forgiven him since, for everything. But forgetting? Not sure if I’ll ever get there.

“I heard you two are retiring to live a domestic life inside the walls of The Valley. I’m a little surprised, but if anyone deserves it, it’s you two.”

“Thanks, Jonah,” I say with a smile. “I wouldn’t say we are retiring. We just want to focus on building safe communities around The Wall. And keep an eye on Norman. But also, we just want to enjoy living for now.”

Amos kisses my temple. “We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us. But it will all be worth it, especially if Norman can really create a cure for the virus.”

“It’s funny, the before feels like a fever dream,” Jonah says. “To think that there’s a possibility that every human can walk freely in the world, even if there’s a chance of getting bitten, and still make it out alive...that’s honestly the craziest idea to me right now.”

The three of us laugh at how absurd this world is. How quickly the idea of what is absurd has changed for us. Looking at Jonah, I can see in his eyes that he is truly

happy here, but I also see the hint of regret there. A pain that will never go away. For both of us.

He does a better job swiping the pain away though, brightening up his smile as Mina approaches with Cal, saying, “What’s up, guys?”

Cal slides past to sit next to me, leaving the seat next to Jonah open. “Happy birthday, friend.”

I give Cal a side hug, muttering a shy, “Thank you,” before diving back into my burger. It’s very rare that we have burgers at The Valley. I know Amos ordered this as a special birthday gift to me and I am so incredibly grateful. I love this man.

As if reading my thoughts, Amos stands up, bringing everyone to attention. I try to stop him, not wanting more of a spotlight than I already have, but everyone is already quiet and staring at him.

“As you all know, today is my beautiful wife’s birthday.” Celebratory shouts echo off the walls in response to Amos’ joy. “I am in awe of this woman every day of my life and so grateful to have found her in this fucked up world.” Amos turns to me, a cup of home-brewed beer in his hand. “Thank you for saving me, Lori. Thank you for giving me a chance at a future. A future that will bring not only you, but everyone, many birthdays to come. To life and living in it.”

The cheers and clapping are louder than any of the crowds that came to see me fight in the arena. A sound that still causes my skin to freeze and stomach to churn, but I hold it together, grounding myself in the wake of Amos’ happiness. In my own happiness. Cal reaches out to calm my bouncing knee, squeezing my thigh gently before grabbing my hand. I squeeze their hand back, needing something physical to touch.

When Amos sits back down, he wraps his arm around my shoulders. “Did I say something wrong, Copperhead?”

I look up into his eyes, erasing the sounds of cheering from my mind to replace them with the celebratory whoops of my friends. Tears slide down my face. Not tears of sadness, but tears of joy.

“I’ll tell you about it later. But now, I just want to eat this burger and be with you in the here and now.”

Amos kisses me tenderly, lingering a moment which makes our tablemates clear their throats. I grab the abandoned burger on my plate, finishing it with a few more bites. Then I look at Jonah, whose hand is stroking Mina’s on the table. He looks so content. He’s been through so much. He deserves a life of peace too.

“Why are you so eager to heal and jump back into battle?” I ask him.

“I feel it is my responsibility to make things right. As much as I regret what I did in the bunker, in the outside world, following orders blindly, I still did those things. Me. There are others like me who haven’t woken up from the brainwashing. The ones who escaped after the raid. Some of them might be gladiators. I need to make sure they aren’t using their strength for bad. Aren’t hurting innocent people anymore. I need to make sure all the arenas have been shut down.”

“That’s not all on you, Jonah.” I say.

“I know. But I need to do something about it.”

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I nod. Understanding what he means. I felt that need. But I killed Doctore. Not something I'm proud of, but something that needed to be done. Something I needed to do.

"Just promise me you won't do it alone, okay?"

Mina seconds my question, saying, "I'll have to hunt you down if you go out there by yourself."

"Alright, alright. I'll ask for volunteers." Jonah puts his hands up in mock defeat, then casually places one over the back of Mina's chair, making her smile brightly up at him.

"You won't have to ask," Olivia says, pulling up a chair to sit in between Jonah and Amos. "I have a team ready and willing to go with you. Me included. If that's all right with our general."

Olivia looks to Amos, who shrugs. "I'll look the team over and help you prepare them for what's out there. And Lori and I can join later on when Norman finishes the cure."

"So now you have a team, Jonah. But you better make it back because you have a family here," Cal says.

Cal really knows how to gut a person with love. The table falls silent with sniffles as Amos says, "Cal's right. We all understand that you need to make things right. But you belong here with us. Promise you plan to come back."

Jonah's skin flushes in embarrassment at all the attention. "I will. I promise."

"And together, we will all rebuild the world so that when we have children, they have all the same worries and fears we had when we were kids. Like getting homework done on time, or staying healthy so you don't miss the most important swim meet of your life," I say, smiling like it's an addiction I can't stop.

"That was oddly specific," Cal says.

"Well, I got a scholarship for swimming, a full ride to Rutgers. I had thought maybe I'd be an Olympian one day. Different life, different dreams."

"What are your dreams now?" Amos asks, his golden eyes glinting with all the hope for the life ahead of us.

"I think you know that answer." I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder, soaking in this feeling of pure happiness. Knowing that life is full of possibilities now. All I need to do is keep on living.