



Say You'll Stay

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Olivia never imagined giving birth in a subway bathroom while the infected pounded on the door. She didn't expect her husband to turn into one of them, either. Rescued by Cole, she clings to him as her only chance of survival for both her and her baby. Hes gruff and reserved but she soon feels safer with him than she ever did with her late husband. She'll fight to stay by Coles side as the world crumbles around them.

Cole's only mission is to find his best friend until Olivia and her newborn baby derail his plans. The world has fallen into chaos, and hes been surviving alone, but now he's playing protector to a woman he just met. Navigating a crumbling city full of the undead is hard enough. Keeping them all alive might be the most dangerous challenge yet. As they journey to the safety of the mountains, they realize that they share similar pasts, and a bond forms between them. In a world shattered to pieces, love was never part of the plan, but sometimes, the end of everything is only the beginning.

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His idiot best friend went and got himself lost.

Well, maybe that's not entirely true. He could be dead by now instead of missing, but Cole's choosing to assume that's not the case yet, or there's nothing to keep fighting for.

Never got along with Wade most days, but he's still the only family he's got left and considering the world's gone to shit in the last few weeks, there's never been a better time to appreciate that.

Except Wade got distracted by a woman and followed her out on a supply run into the fallen streets of DC.

Instead of appreciating anything, Cole's just angry.

He warned him not to let his dick lead the way, but not even a pandemic that has the dead rising was enough to stop Wade from chasing a skirt.

Cole's come up empty in his search every day for the last week.

Spent longer than usual combing the streets tonight out of sheer frustration and lost track of time.

When the sky runs pink, it's a sign to pack it in.

He's not sure if the dead cluster worse after dark.

No one's sure of anything yet, but there's plenty of reason to get back to the apartment he's been squatting in before it's too late.

And if he can't find his best friend soon...his brother, then he'll have to make some hard choices about following their plan alone. Shit's only getting worse in the city and he doesn't intend to get trapped.

Cole catches sight of a woman up ahead, the first live person he's seen all day. Just last week, they were all in a panic, screaming and falling over each other.

This one runs away from him before he can try to stop her.

Not that he thinks she'd be useful. Wade's a needle in a haystack.

He's only going through the motions to feel like he's doing something.

Gives up trying to follow the girl after a few moments of token effort, watching a streak of pink hair disappear around a corner just in time to hear a blood-curdling scream at the edge of a subway entrance.

It's distant and high-pitched, almost like a kitten...or a baby.

What the hell would a baby be doing in the fucking subway, he thinks with annoyance. What kind of parent drags their kid into a place that's sure to hold plenty of the dead? Even if it doesn't yet, all that racket's a good way to attract them.

Not his problem.

He's got shit to handle that doesn't include taking a detour on a suicide mission.

His feet still end up on the steps, though. Curiosity gets the best of him when he

knows it shouldn't. The last thing he needs is to actually find a baby. What would he do with one? It would be a giant neon sign painting a target on his back.

Maybe he'll get lucky and it'll be a kitten after all. That he could handle.

The first landing is clear, but only because all the rotters are clustered at the bathroom door a couple of yards away, trying to break inside for a tasty baby-sized snack. He fucking knew it. Those shrill cries are honey for a swarm of killer bees and even if he wanted to help, it's too late now .

No way he could take out the dozen blocking the entrance. There's sure to be more coming from deep within the tunnels, slowly ambling toward their destination. He needs to get out of here and put this behind him. It's a shit situation, but he can't save everyone.

Can't save anyone.

Slowly, he turns to leave. They haven't spotted him yet, and he's got a clear shot back up top, but then another pitiful cry slices through the air, so terrified and angry like every newborn he's ever heard on TV. He stops in his tracks.

If there's a baby, maybe there's a mother, too. She'll either turn soon and eat her own offspring or she stuffed the poor kid in the bathroom in hopes of saving it, and she's long gone already.

Fuck.

He's about to do something as stupid as Wade chasing after a girl he met last week.

Cole aims his gun for the trash can at the far end of the subway and pulls the trigger to knock it to the ground, attracting the buffet-goers.

It works like he thought it would and they all abandon the bathroom for an easier target, passing him where he hides out of sight on the steps.

Without hesitation, he rushes behind the group and opens the door, unprepared for what he finds on the other side.

At first, he thinks they're all dead. There's blood coating the floor and splattered across the ugly green wall tiles.

It's hard to tell who's actually alive, but then the baby in its mother's arms begins to squirm and scream.

The woman crushes herself to the wall, trying to protect her child while begging for mercy.

He rushes in because he's got no damn choice.

The rotters are already coming back. He can't leave now, not when someone's just given birth on this bathroom floor and he's guessing that happened sometime after she stabbed the man a few feet away that's still reaching a blood-coated hand in their direction.

"It's alright," he says, shutting the door and flipping the broken lock that only dangles loose again. "Not gonna hurt you."

She's unconvinced.

"Please. Please. Please." She cradles the child to her chest like he might rip it away, a kitchen knife gripped tight in her other hand. She's ready to use it, but clearly hoping he won't test her.

“Only trying to help. You can’t stay in here. They’re swarming on the other side.”

Her pretty blue eyes dilate and glaze over before she can reply. Dammit, she’s about to pass out or die right in front of him and this shit isn’t what he signed up for.

Cole barely has time to catch the baby before it rolls free from her arms as they go lax on the dirty floor.

‘ Lucy,’ she gasps on a painful breath.

Has to be the kid’s name, he assumes, watching her mother slump unconscious against the wall. He presses a careful finger to her pulse, surprised and relieved to find it still beating. That’s the best news he’s gotten all day because what would he have done alone with a baby?

A kid needs her mother. Not some random stranger that swooped in at the last second.

The scratching at the door starts up again, and he groans, trying and failing to shush the screaming child, who’s picked up another impressive chorus.

The woman in front of him is a mess. Her long dress is bunched up to mid-thigh, revealing blood from the birth coating her legs. The placenta lies a few feet away, half eaten by the man on the ground with a knife wound in his head.

Cole doesn’t try to clean her up. Not in the business of groping women he’s never met or even ones he has. If she wakes up, and god she better wake up , then she can do it herself and if she doesn’t, he’ll have a lot worse to worry about.

He does, however, grab a towel from his pack and bunch it up under her head. Can’t leave her passed out all crooked. Gonna cause a crick in her neck later.

“Shhhh. Shhh. You gotta quiet down,” he whispers to the baby, who’s got no intention of following instructions. She’s brand new and already fighting for her life right along with everyone else on this sorry planet.

“Your momma will wake up any second now. Feed you. Get you taken care of.” He does his best to clean the gunk off pink skin with paper towels from the dispenser and wraps her up in his only spare shirt dug from the bottom of his bag.

Looks healthy, like she took every ounce of nutrition her mother ate. The baby is chubby, but the woman on the floor is thin enough that he wouldn’t have known she was pregnant if he didn’t have the evidence in his arms.

“She’ll wake up and it’ll all be just fine,” he soothes. “Just fine. Lucy? That’s your name?”

She blinks up at him, her little brows already knit together like she can’t fucking believe the bullshit she’s been born into.

Cole likes babies. Kids. Animals. They’re kinder than adults.

They don’t judge or dismiss and he’s always had an easier time with this group than he ever did with his own peers.

At least he thought so, but Lucy isn’t having his attempts at calming her, continuing to fuss and yell and stirring up a commotion outside.

Her tiny fist grabs his pinky finger and something idiotic comes out of his mouth a second later.

“I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry.”

Like hell he will. What the fuck is he thinking?

He doesn't need the hassle.

It's not his baby.

He's never seen this woman before in his life.

He's off the hook when it comes to keeping them safe. Yet here he is in a subway bathroom playing instant father anyway. Wade would have a field day with that. He'd laugh his ass off and then some.

Cole slides down to lean back against the sink cabinet in a lone spot not covered in gore, rocking this baby that's not his while staring at that woman he doesn't know.

Bruises ring her wrists in fingerprint indentations, crawling up her arms in angry purple dots.

She's got a busted lip and some sort of burn on her bare feet, and all of that could've come from anywhere these days.

Plenty of ways to get hurt, with plenty of assholes still roaming the streets ready to do the hurting if the dead don't get you first, but he suspects it's not that.

Knows because he's had similar injuries and it didn't take an apocalypse to earn them.

He wonders if it's that fucker in the corner who did it.

No one is sure yet if those who turn still think . If they do, then this one was a special kind of evil for his first thought to be how much he wanted to eat his family. He

deserved that kitchen knife she shoved into him.

Finally, the baby begins to quiet, nestling into the curve of his bent arm with a yawn .

How is he going to feed this child if her mother doesn't wake up? Baby formula was the first thing cleared out, along with toilet paper. There's not a single store in a five-mile radius that hasn't been looted clean, and he knows because he and Wade have been there already.

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“Lucy. That’s a good name,” he says softly, but the tone is unpracticed and it comes out rough at the edges, threatening to wake her. “Bet your momma’s name is real pretty, too.”

The baby doesn’t reply, not that he expected one.

She’s dozing now. For how long, who knows?

If they’re lucky, the dead will move on once they lose interest, and getting out of here will be easier.

He just wishes he had a clue what to do next.

None of this feels like enough when he’s half certain someone is bleeding out right in front of him while he does nothing to stop it.

Blood pools crimson on the old tile floor between her legs, creeping slowly toward the drain.

He’s not sure how much someone can lose, but she’s gotta be nearing the limit and it’s not like he can stuff a towel there and apply pressure like he could on a bullet wound.

The problem isn’t on the outside. He paid enough attention in biology class and saw enough farm animals birthed in the backwoods to know that.

Gently, he gives her shoulder a shake to try to rouse her, getting a groan in reply that

feels like a victory until she fails to wake.

“You gotta hang in there,” he tries. “Your baby’s waiting for you, and I gotta be honest here. I’m the last guy you want to leave your kid with. Don’t know shit about raising babies. So...come on, then...wake up so we can get out of here.”

She doesn’t stir, and he slumps in frustration. Checks his knife in its holster in case she turns and hopes he won’t have to use it.

She fought hard to keep going, didn’t give up when the worst happened and it would be a tragedy to go out like this now. If anyone deserves a chance, it’s someone who had a baby on a bathroom floor while fighting off a rotter.

This kid deserves her mother.

He deserves to move on from this and get back to what matters. Finding his best friend.

It’s at least an hour later when she finally begins to wake. Slow at first, weak and confused until she spots her baby, and then her cat-like reflexes catch him by surprise. She lunges for him, dragging herself his way to grab the child like he stole it.

She’s still half drunk off losing all that blood, but she fights him like she must’ve fought that guy in the corner and he doesn’t even try to deny her what she wants.

Gives the kid over easily and holds his hands up in surrender while she squishes into the corner, fresh tears dropping from wild eyes onto newborn blonde hair.

“Just trying to help,” he repeats. “If I wanted to hurt either of you, I had plenty of time while you were passed out.”

That sinks in a little better. Her shoulders relax, and that fresh rage at seeing some strange guy holding her baby fades a fraction when her memory of what happened seems to filter back in.

He fetches a bottle of water and a granola bar from his bag, ignoring her flinch at the movement. “Here, don’t have orange juice and cookies like they force you to eat after giving blood, but that’ll do.”

She winces, maybe having forgotten for a moment what she’s sitting in. A flash of shame draws her face down before she takes his offerings and inhales them.

“I’m Olivia,” she says, near the end of that granola bar when the baby begins to squirm again.

“Cole.”

“Thank you.”

“We need to leave and do it fast before she starts crying and they swarm the door.” He has no time for gratitude. It only gets him all flustered. “Can you walk?”

She nods. Doesn’t ask for help or complain even though he can tell she’s suffering from the way she pales when rising to her feet.

“Can you...give me a minute? I’ll be quick.”

It takes him a moment to understand she wants to clean up with the paper towels. He turns around facing the wall, glad the water still runs but that’ll be out soon too, like most of the power a couple weeks ago.

She looks less like she walked out of a horror movie when he turns around again.

Half the dress is still red, but there's nothing to be done about that.

"You're sure it's safe out there?" she asks.

"Hell no. Nowhere's safe."

"Right. Of course."

That was too rough. He always sounds mad when he's not and tries to soften this time around. "Sounds clear, though. I'll go ahead, you stay back a few feet, and if things get bad, run the first chance you get."

Olivia nods, her cheek pressed to the baby's small face. If something happens to them, it's on him now. If he dwells on that, his brain may fizzle out, so he seizes the handle, readies his gun, and steps into the darkness.

There are a few stragglers, but the mini herd has shuffled on.

Using his knife, he silences two rotters as they ascend the steps.

The baby's constant gurgling and squeaking threaten to expose them at the worst moment, and Olivia trips on a step, almost face-planting.

He should have been helping her more. She just had a baby, and he's expecting her to keep up with him.

Forgot for a minute that she's not at one hundred percent. Barely looks charged to thirty.

He loops an arm under her shoulder and tugs her to her feet as they emerge into a cold, pitch-black night. Tries not to notice how she slumps against him or how weak

she is.

People who slump can't be left alone, and he absolutely needs to take her somewhere remotely safe so they can both be on their way. He's done his good deed for the year. The rest is up to her. He's got other shit to deal with.

The baby has quieted and not a moment too soon.

The streets are littered with the dead and only the cloak of darkness protects them as they creep toward a back alley and aim for less populated areas.

The eerie silence feels like a trap. Every step on crunching glass and squish of blood under his boots is a GPS beacon to their location.

By the time they make it to a deserted side street with plenty of options for looting a living space, he figures this is as good a time as any to part ways.

No rosters in sight. Lots of ground-level apartments.

He'll even bust open a window for her and make sure she gets settled.

He'll give her his knife, so she has two.

She could take one of his granola bars.

That's doing a lot right there, more than anyone else. He won't sit around feeling bad about it, not for one second.

At least, not until he turns to face her, and he knows exactly what she's about to ask before she even says it.

“Please don’t leave us.” Her voice cuts through the silence in a barely there whisper, mindful of drawing the wrong attention. “I can keep her quiet, I promise. I can be useful. We won’t be any trouble.”

Shit.

Olivia’s watching him like she’s afraid to hope that he might not be a total asshole.

He’s no one’s savior. Doesn’t want the responsibility they’ll saddle him with or the guilt he’ll feel when something goes wrong, but instead of doing the logical thing and leaving them behind...

he adds another stupid choice to a long list.

“Come on, then. We’re wasting time standing around.”

He hates how relieved she looks and that tentative smile she tries to give him, but even more than that, he hates that it feels good to be on the receiving end.

It would have been a lot easier to find a kitten instead.

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She has a baby.

She's in a random apartment with a strange man.

She killed her husband.

A lot has happened in the last few hours and it's all doing a decent job of scrambling Olivia's brain.

One of those might not be entirely true.

Jason could have been dead already before the knife reached his skull.

Faced with the choice of letting him eat their newborn or defending them both, she took the obvious option.

She doesn't regret it, but the growl he made and the way he clawed and scratched as she fought him off still flashes on repeat in her mind.

Just like Lucy's birth, on a dirty bathroom floor, plays out again and again like a horror movie.

Olivia aches all over. She remembers every contraction and every searing burn of the delivery, but when she looks down at the bundle in her arms, so beautiful and perfect and hers, it's easy to shove that to the back burner and smile down at her child.

Cole's given her the bed in this studio apartment he led her back to. The idea of a nap

sounds like bliss, but she's too on edge for that despite the woozy, dazed fuzz she can't shake.

He's in the kitchen, doing something out of sight. She hasn't had a chance to feed Lucy yet, so she uncovers a swollen breast and offers her baby a first meal.

In a world lacking formula, she fears the consequences if they don't get the hang of this fast, but Lucy finds her target and Olivia breathes a sigh of relief.

She shuts her eyes and leans back against the pillows while endorphins flood her nerves and tries not to think about how filthy she is, or how her whole body alternates from numbness to blazing inferno.

They're alive. That's all that matters now.

"Oh shit. Sorry. I'll be in here. Let me know when it's okay."

Cole's voice startles her, but she's always been jumpy. It's an ingrained reflex after years of a violent marriage. That's not going away anytime soon. Not even after leaving Jason on that bathroom floor.

She's too exhausted and preoccupied to give a shit if the remainder of the human race wants to stare at her breastfeeding.

A woman in her Lamaze class told the whole group that after her third child, she wouldn't care if the janitor at the hospital wanted to watch the miracle of birth.

Olivia laughed then, not understanding how easy it could be to abandon thoughts of modesty after feeling like she'd been hit by a truck.

It is important for her to keep things on good terms with Cole, though. Can't make

him uncomfortable. Can't make him think too hard about what he's agreed to. He is their only chance at survival, and it's her job to keep him happy. Good thing she's got plenty of practice in that area.

"You can come out," she says, after draping a blanket over her shoulder to hide the baby.

He emerges from the kitchen with two bowls of soup and her stomach growls at the promise of food.

"Gas stove still works, and I got some of those ramen packages. Not much but it's dinner tonight." He places her meal down on the side table before taking up a chair a few feet away.

"Thank you."

He only grunts in reply and eats like he's starving.

Slurps on the spoon and leaves noodles hanging from his mouth.

It's not that she minds, but she's never seen anyone attack their food so ferociously and it's difficult not to slide him the occasional glance.

His dark hair is a short but wild mess, and the scruff on his face has a sparse silver dusting.

It all adds to the overall picture of someone half-feral, but she won't jump to conclusions, either.

She's starving, too. Has been since before the world ended, when her husband rationed her food for amusement.

She curbs the desire to mimic Cole until he drinks the broth from the bowl and she thinks, fuck it.

Abandons her attempt at maintaining manners and does the same thing once she's eaten most of the noodles.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Fine."

"Really?"

She sighs. "No, not really."

"Hurting?"

She only nods, watching him cross the room to dig in a new bag, pulling out a ziplock filled to the brim with pills.

"Got anything you could want in here."

"Are you a drug dealer? Sorry. That came out wrong. I didn't mean—"

He snorts. "No, it's my friend's stash. Wade is always prepared."

"Is he coming back soon? "

"Don't think so."

He doesn't offer details, and she doesn't pry, but she's relieved there won't be another man joining them. She's having a hard enough time adjusting as it is.

“I can’t take anything other than aspirin. Not when she’s nursing.”

“Figured. Got some Advil in here near the bottom. In its own little bag.”

After a few moments, he victoriously hands her two Advil-shaped pills. It won’t eliminate all the aches, but it’s a hell of a lot better than nothing. She swallows them dry and longs for the moment when they kick in.

“That guy in the subway. You know him?” He slides her a few tentative glances.

“He was my husband.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m not.” She pauses, remembering what led them to that potential tomb.

“We heard there was a safe zone not far from here. Doctors. Food. Fences. But then he got bit, and we were surrounded. Escaped to the subway and then everything happened so fast. I had no choice. He was going to kill us both.”

It’s no secret that someone hurt her. The bruises she can’t hide in short sleeves and her lip that still throbs from where Jason smacked her after he’d been bitten, saying it was her fault for not moving fast enough, are proof of that.

Her indifference should connect a few dots, and Cole nods knowingly .

“You’ll get no judgment from me. They aren’t them anymore when they turn. If you hesitated, you wouldn’t be here.”

She doesn’t want to think about that anymore, so she changes the subject, hoping he’ll let her. “You said your friend’s not coming back. Is he...”

“Ran off after some woman. Been looking for a week, but it’s only getting worse out there. I gotta keep moving. Might’ve waited too long already.”

“You’re leaving? To where?”

“We had a plan to start heading east. Lots of farmland out that way. Me and him, we grew up in the system together. There was this place our foster parents took us once. Only once. Acres of land, fruit trees for miles. We’ll have a better chance out there.

You have anyone you’re trying to get to? Family? Friends?”

“No. It’s just me and Lucy now.”

Her face has fallen and she can’t control it.

He didn’t say this was permanent. One night might be all they get.

She couldn’t fault him for that. They are a burden, plain and simple.

Eating precious resources and sounding the alarm every time Lucy cries.

All her promises about keeping quiet were only a desperate lie.

Babies cry. No matter what. There’s going to come a time when she can’t stop it and they both know that.

Cole gets up to peer out the window, speaking to the glass instead of her. “Never said anything about booting you two out on your own, but—”

“But?”

“No guarantees here. Hell, I could step out that door and get bit tomorrow. Don’t go expecting any heroics. I can’t promise to keep you safe and if something happens...”

“I understand.”

“Okay. Good.”

He has no idea that he’s already done more for them than anyone has in a very long time.

Her emotions are all over the place and she’d be tempted to cry them out in relief at knowing she won’t be alone come morning if she wasn’t still so doubtful.

He doesn’t seem like a liar, but trusting anyone fully is difficult.

Olivia props a sleepy and full Lucy over her shoulder for a burp, patting her tiny back while she gurgles.

“She’s real cute,” Cole says, in the first soft tone she’s heard all evening.

The pride that washes over her is brand new, but welcome. “She’s the only good thing to have come out of that marriage. He didn’t want her, but I do. It was all worth it because now she’s here.”

“Is that normal?”

She squints in confusion at the odd question until he gestures to the red stain she’s leaving on the bed sheets after shifting around.

Olivia’s learned to shut down her tears or risk being on the wrong end of a fist. She spent years waiting for Jason to leave for work so she could cry alone. But now, her

face cracks and creases as a few salty tracks escape. “I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up. I’m sorry.”

She should have known this would happen. She read the books and googled until her fingers threatened carpal tunnel.

“I’m not trying to give you a hard time about it,” he replies. “Never known anyone that’s had a baby. Not sure if you’re about to pass out again.”

“Oh. I think it’s normal for a couple of days, maybe a week or two. I don’t feel like passing out.”

“Couple weeks? How can someone bleed for that long and not die?”

The innocent and perplexed way he asks has her huffing in sad amusement. “Your guess is as good as mine. ”

She’d like to change the subject, but the reality of the situation won’t let her.

She can’t go to the local Walmart and purchase the entire ‘ what to expect when you’re expecting’ shopping list. This is something that needs to be addressed unless she wants to ruin everything she comes into contact with for the foreseeable future.

“Do you need anything?” he asks, cautiously.

Every item in the baby section of the grocery store, she thinks. “I can write out a short list? If that’s okay.”

Cole seems relieved when she offers him a task. Rifles around in the kitchen drawers for a pen and paper and hands them over.

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She scribbles off a few lines of what she'll need to keep everything she touches from looking like a murder scene, along with essentials for the baby.

Diapers. Hand towels. Wipes. Tiny clothes if he can find any.

Every single feminine product he can get his hands on that's not a tampon.

The last thing she ever wants to do again is shove anything up there.

Olivia's prepared for a scowl or curse. Her husband would tell her she better control the mess or else, as if she has any control over it whatsoever. Cole only scans the list with a cursory nod and heads for the door.

"Wait! You're leaving now?"

He pauses, confused. "You need the stuff or not?"

"Yes."

"Then let me go get it? The stores are all raided by now, only four apartments in this building, but we weren't looking for any of this when we went through them. Might be some left around here. Won't be long. Hang tight."

He escapes like the room is on fire.

It's not until he's gone and the silence of the room begins to engulf her in her own thoughts that everything crashes down at once. The baby she carried for months is

now out in the world. Wrapping her head around that is mind-blowing, even when the evidence is blinking up at her.

The weight of the last few hours, days...weeks, all shoves at her until she's clutching Lucy and trying to suppress persistent sobs.

She can't lose it now. If she starts crying, she'll never stop.

"Hey, baby," her words catch as she nuzzles against soft new skin. "I've been waiting so long to meet you."

Lucy hiccups on a wet burp.

"It's gonna be okay. I promise it will. I'll take care of you. We'll be fine."

This isn't how she imagined she'd be a new mother. Terrified in a strange place and alone except for someone who may or may not be trustworthy.

"What do you think about Cole? A little gruff, huh? But he's been kind to us so far, so maybe he's a good man. Think we can trust him? I hope we can trust him. But if we can't, it's okay because it's me and you now against the world and we can do this."

Cole's the only light in her storm and she wants so badly to believe he won't abandon them. He's out there rummaging through empty apartments right now to find her supplies and that has to be a good sign...assuming he comes back.

He didn't have to let them come along, but he did.

She tells herself that as the minutes tick by and her anxiety begins to spiral.

The longer she's alone, the more she begins to accept she always will be and was a fool to think otherwise.

Better start making a plan for the next steps, but then the front door swings open and Cole breezes in with a bag full of supplies .

She's never been so fucking happy to see someone she just met.

"Couldn't get everything, but I grabbed what I found.

Dunno if these shoes will fit you, but you can't go around barefoot and it's cold as shit outside so I snagged you a coat.

The diapers look bigger than her, but giant diapers are better than pissing on the floor.

We can cut them in half or something? I dunno... what? Something happen?"

"You came back," she whispers.

He frowns. "Said I would."

"Yeah, but you're the first person I've known in a long time who said something important and meant it."

He softens a bit, nodding like he understands, and maybe he does. She hasn't cornered the market on receiving empty promises.

She'd almost forgotten she lost her sandals while running for her life. Now she's got a pair of black boots and a pile of clothing that's bound to fit well enough once she picks through it. She has the option of switching from the dirty dress to something clean.

He left no stone unturned when it came to feminine products.

It won't last as long as she needs, but it's enough to go a few days if she's lucky and right now she feels pretty lucky.

At least until he disappears down the hall and she is reminded, for a moment, that she promised him she could be useful.

Olivia can't wait too long to prove her worth, so she settles the baby on the sofa, swaddled tight, and follows him.

"I can do this," she whispers to herself.

She finds him in the bathroom, both hands braced on the sink, his head hung. He looks stressed, worried, upset...a lot like someone who's having second thoughts about keeping them around. That only strengthens her resolve to do what she came in here for.

He startles at her presence, standing up straight and crossing his arms. "What's wrong? Need something?"

"No, I'm fine," she lies, ignoring the way her body protests the slightest movement.

She told him she could be useful and while she has few practical skills to offer, there is one thing she can do for him and can't waste any time in making it clear.

He is strong enough, capable enough from what she's seen so far, to protect them.

There isn't a chance in hell she'll allow this opportunity to slip through her fingers. Her daughter's life depends on it.

He raises a brow. “What is it then?”

“I wanted to thank you again for helping us.”

He sighs. “It’s fine. I’m tired, can we—”

His words come to a halt when she takes a step forward and reaches for his belt.

She may not be helpful in ways that can keep them alive, but she is infinitely skilled at keeping a man satisfied.

Has given plenty of blow jobs to keep her husband from tossing her in front of a herd to save himself since the world started crashing and burning.

This is her only currency now, and it doesn’t matter that she feels like she got hit by a truck.

She will use what she can to keep herself and her baby safe and protected.

What’s one more blow job anyway? What’s a hundred more? None of it matters. She will make Cole come again and again until he can’t bear the thought of being without her mouth wrapped around his cock. Her only goal is to give him a clear reason to keep her around.

It doesn’t go exactly how she planned, though. He doesn’t smile and drop his pants for her, doesn’t grab her head and shove it into his crotch. He grabs her wrists instead in a hard grip and rips her hands off his belt, his gaze wild.

“What the hell are you doing?” he yells, releasing her to step back, only to bump into the bathtub and stumble, having to snatch at the shower curtain to stay upright and regain his balance. “Can’t go around grabbing people like that!”

Now she's confused. Her face reddens and her words come out jumbled. "I was trying to...I didn't mean...I'm sorry. It's just a blow job, I don't mind. I want to. I want you to know how thankful I am for what you've done for us."

His face transforms into the most horrified expression she's seen since the reporters on the news got eaten on live TV. "You want to thank me? By sucking my dick? That's what you think I expect? There's a baby on the other side of the wall. I don't even know you."

She hadn't considered that being strangers would matter.

He is a man, and she is offering him the one thing she can, but now she only feels stupid.

Of course, he isn't interested. She looks more than a mess and he is keenly aware of the fact that she squeezed a human out of her body less than twenty-four hours ago.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, she can't even do this right.

She backs away. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I thought you would want—"

"Well, I don't," he snaps. "Do that again and I'll leave you both in the middle of nowhere and let the dead sort you out."

The warning is clear, and she nods, realizing a second later that it means he won't be leaving them yet. She moves from the doorway, letting him pass and following him back to the living area where Lucy is asleep on the bed.

"You should eat something else." Abruptly, he shoves another granola bar her way. It's a clipped suggestion, but the kindness in his eyes softens the edges. "Got a whole box of these."

She takes it, but exhaustion tugs at her, overriding the embarrassment at her own actions. “Later. I need to sleep for a while.”

“Alright then.”

“Are you sleeping, too?”

“No. Gonna keep watch for a bit longer.”

“When are we leaving? You said we can’t stay here.”

“Real soon,” he replies evenly. “Can’t wait. If we do, then we’ll never leave. Should talk about that safe zone you heard about tomorrow.”

Her eyes already droop as she grabs one of the giant diapers and wraps it around Lucy as best she can before her body stops working and she begins to drift.

Things might be looking up, after all. It’s a weird thought to have, all things considered. A few hours ago she was unsure if she’d take her last breath in that subway bathroom and now she’s warm and relatively safe with her baby sleeping on her chest.

Tomorrow they’ll start a fresh journey to that fruit farm, or the safe zone, or wherever they might end up when it’s all said and done. One thing is true regardless, she already feels safer in the company of a stranger than she ever did with the man she married.

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A pretty woman tried to give him a blow job, and he's never felt worse. Not that Cole gets regular offers for that sort of thing. He doesn't. He's always kept people away, and that's how he prefers it. Letting anyone close enough to see him was never an option.

This, though...is a whole new level of horrifying because she only offered out of assumed obligation.

As if he's a waste of space asshole that would require sexual favors from anyone, let alone someone who just birthed a baby in an apocalypse.

She caught him off guard, nearly causing him to fall into the bathtub during his escape attempt, but he shouldn't be surprised.

He's not blind to the realities of this new world and she isn't wrong to try to give what so many would take by force.

It was smart on her part. Keep him happy and secure herself and her baby's protection. Logically, he knows it was a calculated choice that likely had very little to do with anything he's said or done.

Emotionally, he is offended, upset, and on edge.

None of it changes the fact that if something happens to them, he won't be able to live with himself. Said she shouldn't expect any heroics, and he meant it, but the truth is they're his responsibility now whether he asked for that or not.

Olivia is strong enough to fend off one of the dead while having a baby and he can't imagine how difficult that was, but she's vulnerable and so is Lucy.

They wouldn't fare well alone while the city deteriorates by the minute.

They need him, and that's some scary shit.

No one's ever needed him for anything. The possibility of failing weighs heavy before the journey's even begun.

It better begin soon, though. If not, they'll be trapped while everything crumbles around them.

He hasn't missed how miserable Olivia is or how many of those Advil she's asked for.

Lucy had no problem waking up her momma every few hours all night, and he still feels like a jerk suggesting they head out when she needs rest.

Starts to rethink if another few nights holed up here could be an acceptable sacrifice.

Should the worst happen and they get caught in a bad situation, she'll need to be steady on her feet if he expects her to run for her life with a child in her arms. He doesn't dare suggest that he carry Lucy.

That's like getting between a momma bear and her cub.

She doesn't trust him yet. It's no secret now that her ex was a piece of shit and she probably expects the same from him.

She's not far off base. He's just a different type of trash.

He waits while she's in the bathroom, changing into the clothes he found her. She zeroed right in on that deep purple top, stroking the fabric as if it were silk.

When she emerges again with the baby on her shoulder, in a pair of cargo pants and that purple top hanging off her in all the right ways, his first thought is that she's got a lot of pretty freckles clustering across her skin like stardust.

"Looks real nice." He watches her eye him with suspicion .

"Are you screwing with me?"

"What? No..." Shit, he can't even give a simple compliment without fucking up his tone.

He doesn't get a reply, but her face wrinkles like she's confused as she grabs one of those sweater things women like to wear over other tops.

A cardigan, hoodie, whatever. His innocent comment could be mistaken for a flirt under the worst circumstances.

He tries to shift attention away from the lingering awkwardness to something practical. "Tell me about that safe zone."

"Supposed to be a mile east from here, set up by the army. Heard it on the radio before that went dark, too."

"Could be overrun."

She nods. "It could be."

"Or maybe it's not."

“You’re thinking we should check it out?”

What he’s thinking is that he should check it out and then come back and get her if it’s safe, but she’ll assume he’s leaving for good. “We could swing by on our way out of the city. See what’s up. You know the route?”

“Yes, I remember how to get there.”

“Okay then, you good with this? Not saying we’re rushing right in. Don’t trust the government far as I can kick ‘em, but on the off chance it’s safe we should give it a shot.”

She pauses, surprise raising her brows. “Am I okay with it?”

“Yeah?”

She opens her mouth to reply, but her nose scrunches instead and a gag reflex kicks in.

“Oh my god,” she whispers in horror

Instantly, he’s worried something happened. Doesn’t matter that he’s been staring right at them this whole time, there’s a problem that needs fixing. He rushes over before he can stop himself, getting a whiff of the worst smell known to man for his efforts. “Holy shit.”

“I know!” She sniffs at the baby before laying a fussing Lucy on the bed and unwrapping the bunched-up diaper twice the size of her body.

Cole’s gonna pass out right here in this awful apartment. Fall flat on his face and call it a day. He’s never encountered such a dreadful smell, and he’s accustomed to

repulsive things. His eyes water while Olivia fairs even worse, closer to the source.

His frantic attempt to wave the scent away only spreads and amplifies it.

“I’ve heard the first ones are bad, but I didn’t know it was this bad.” She flails for a place to put the dirty diaper, holding it away from her as if it’s a bomb.

“Hold on. Wait. Just wait a minute.” He runs for the kitchen, snatching a trash bag from under the sink and holding it open for her to toss the grenade into before tying it in several knots and pitching it straight off the balcony.

The only person in the room who looks pleased is Lucy. Her little face is rosy and her fists open and close in the air.

“Is she smiling?” he asks. This kid might be having her first grin and he watches her expression change, mesmerized.

Not that he cares. He doesn’t.

Not his kid. Not his wife. Not his family. Who gives a crap if she smiles or not? Except that it’s sort of cute, until he realizes the word cute formed in his brain, and he scowls.

“I think it’s just gas. It’ll be easier when we’re not in such a small space.” She promises, her amusement fading at his expression. “Then we can stay further away and the scent won’t travel as much. I know it’s awful.”

She’s been placating him since they met, like he’ll change his mind and leave them at any minor inconvenience. Must think he hasn’t noticed, but it’s not hard to miss when someone’s trying to manage him.

“Nothing to get worried about. Gotta figure out what to do about those, though.”

He examines a diaper, then goes to the kitchen for scissors and the bathroom for a head ribbon he noticed near the sink. Cuts the diaper in half and hands it over to Olivia along with the headband.

“Maybe tie that around her waist to hold it still?” He suggests.

“Did you just MacGyver a diaper?”

“If it works, then yeah.”

He missed his calling in life. Shoulda set up shop as a diaper crafter.

It fits just fine. Snug enough to hold all the toxic waste inside and he has to curb the urge to offer Olivia a high five for solving this problem.

He’s in his element so long as he’s got a task to focus on.

Something to fix. It’s having to interact with them on a regular level that leaves him lacking.

“I’m good at checking out the safe zone,” she says, finally.

“Thing is, we’ll have a hard time driving there. Could hot-wire a car, but the roads are all a mess. Should wait until tomorrow, at the very least. Give us some time to rest first before we start hoofing it.”

“Cole, I made it here, didn’t I? If it’s not safe to stay, then we shouldn’t wait.”

“Didn’t say you couldn’t do it. I know you can.”

“Then we should go. I’ll be a lot more comfortable with doctors and supplies anyway once we get there.”

Still, he hesitates. Doesn’t want to put her in a situation that might end in tragedy because he’s impatient to leave the city. It’s easy to see she’s trying hard not to be a burden or a hassle, but it’s not his job to doubt her, either. If she says she’s fine, then she’s fine.

The choice is made for them when a voice wafts in from down the hall. Suddenly, the only reasonable option is to get the fuck out of here.

He brushes a finger to his lips in the universal sign for don’t say a word when Olivia sends him a wide-eyed stare.

Quickly, they gather up what supplies they can carry in his pack and he leads them to a fire escape from a back room.

Can’t go out the front when he can already hear their visitors rummaging through the neighbor’s shared wall.

The ladder clinks against the ground when he lowers it despite his best efforts at keeping silent, but they haven’t attracted attention yet.

The process of getting down is another battle.

She’s only got two arms and one of those holds Lucy, still swaddled tight in his spare shirt.

He notices Olivia’s panic as she realizes she may not be able to climb down and hold her baby at the same time.

The odds aren't in her favor when she's not at one hundred percent.

"Give her to me. I got this," he offers. If there's one thing his biceps can be good for, it's working his way down a fire escape with one arm.

"You're sure? One-handed?"

"I'm sure. We'll go first and wait at the bottom."

She hesitates, not wanting to hand over her child until the front door begins to crack and splinter, then she shoves Lucy his way at light speed. The child can't weigh more than five pounds. Easy to clutch against his chest propped near his shoulder while he works his way down the ladder .

Olivia quickly follows, her feet hitting the ground while a head peeks over the window's edge and a man yells for them to stop.

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They race to the building's corner, then head east for two more blocks, maneuvering around slow-moving herds of the dead.

Finally, they find refuge behind a diner.

There's a warm hand in his and that's when he realizes he reached for Olivia to pull her along.

Or maybe she reached for him. Not sure which, but someone did the reaching, and now they're holding hands next to a dumpster like something out of a bad rom-com.

He lets go like she burned him, handing the squeaking baby back to her mother.

There's a thank you on the tip of Olivia's tongue, but he's grateful she doesn't speak it. He can see it well enough in her eyes and even that much makes him uncomfortable.

"You good?" he asks, softly.

"Always."

Lucy objects with a few ear-piercing cries. Olivia tries her best to soothe her, but it's no use. They have to get inside the diner or they'll have a mountain of rotters on their heels.

A windfall leads them in through an unlocked back door, where they are promptly greeted by the staff. He stabs the cook with his knife and gets two waitresses after

that. Yells at Olivia to stay back by the door until it's clear before a few of the patrons head his way.

The dead have no muscle mass and no strategy.

Flesh hangs off them in gruesome layers, exposed bones grinding together from whatever wounds led them to their fate.

They're often easy enough to dispatch, but he is only one man.

Three customers at once are pushing it on a good day.

The counter slows them down enough that he's not overwhelmed.

Manages to get it down to the last one, but this fucker is bigger than him by a hundred pounds at least and freshly turned.

Cole's boots slip on the greasy floor and then the world spins and tilts until he thunks hard on his back while the wind rushes out of him.

Those snapping teeth edge closer despite his best efforts to hold them at bay.

He lost his knife in the fall. There are no other weapons within range and the pressure from the weight of the other man is already suffocating.

He's about to meet his maker, or would be if he believed in any maker at all, but then everything stops as quickly as it began.

The rotter falls to the side, revealing Olivia standing over him with a cast-iron skillet in one hand and a baby in the other.

Quickly, Cole grabs his knife and shoves it through a soft eyeball just to make sure the dead man doesn't rise again.

"Are you okay? Did you get bit?"

"What the hell are you doing? Told you to stay back," he growls, scooting away from her fussing, imagining how easily she could have died trying to save him.

"That was before you almost became dinner in this restaurant. Should I have watched it eat your face?"

"Yes!" he yells. "Yes, you should have!"

She only narrows her eyes, the angry edge to her tone still ringing in his ears.

It's justified, considering he stuck his foot in his mouth.

What he actually meant to say was thank you .

Instead, it came out as an irritated scolding, as if he's got any business scolding her, especially after saving his life.

He doesn't know how to apologize, though.

His tongue ties and he fumbles, brushing past her to make sure the rest of the place is clear, even though he could see it fine from where he stood.

The baby is crying even louder than before, but at least they aren't in the open. Cole starts raiding the kitchen for anything they can use while she gives Lucy lunch and that's when the noise goes quiet and all he hears is the sound of his own regret.

He needs to make this right. Show her he's not the same kind of jerk as her dead husband.

Gives her a while until she's got a sleeping bundle in her arms and then sets down the package of graham crackers he found next to a jar of Nutella, joining her on the opposite side of a fifties-style diner booth.

"Bet they put this on the pancakes." He grabs a cracker from a fresh sleeve and dips it into the chocolate before sliding the container her way.

"I love this stuff," she replies, scooping out a generous dollop.

"Shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Thanks for saving my ass."

There it is again, that gentle look he doesn't know what the hell to do with.

"The most violent thing I've ever done before all this was kicking the washing machine when it shook too much.

Now I'm the one shaking," she jokes, holding a hand out so he can see the tips of her fingers vibrate.

"It feels like all of this can't be real.

What's happening out there...I keep thinking it has to be some awful nightmare."

He nods. "I was out hiking when it happened. Didn't get back until the shit already

hit the fan. Thought it was some kinda joke at first, dunno how it would have been, but I blamed Wade for a second there like he did it all himself.”

Cole snorts at the memory, shaking his head.

‘The fuck did you do!’ he yelled at his friend as a reporter on TV ran screaming down main street.

‘Appreciate that you think I got all this power, but if I did, I’d be using it to win the lotto and getting laid by a long line of pretty redheads,’ Wade scowled.

“Might not get a chance to blame him for anything else ever again,” he continues. “I didn’t leave him a note. He won’t know where we went.”

“You think he could go to the safe zone on his own?”

He fiddles with two crackers, making a little tent on the clean tabletop. “Maybe, but he hates the law more than me, so he might go the opposite way.”

Her frown tugs at those pink lips he catches himself staring at. “We’ll start leaving notes from now on if we have to keep moving. You could still see him again, Cole.”

She’s not wrong, and he has no plans to give up, but his perspective is starting to shift toward what’s really important.

At the moment, Wade is a slim hope with no leads, but Olivia and Lucy are right here in front of him.

It’s only logical to put them first from now on and that’s what he intends to do.

“Rest here a while?” he suggests.

“Okay. We’ve got two blocks less to go than when we start again.”

Part of him is ready to rush forward and find out what lies ahead, and the rest is sounding the alarm on how dangerous it could be if the safe zone is overrun.

They can’t live in this diner, though. A few hours’ rest, that’s what they’ll take, and then push on, hoping their destination turns out to be a blessing instead of a curse.

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Olivia hardly recognizes the person staring back at her in a dirty bathroom mirror.

The bruises on her skin have turned mustard yellow and the split lip is healing, but that's not the surprising part. It's the fact that she still looks pregnant.

Ninety percent of her body seems untouched by the new life that grew inside her, but her stomach is still distended like Lucy never left. She runs a hand over the coveted purple fabric she'd been so eager to wear, turning in the mirror, looking for any minor changes, and coming up empty.

It doesn't matter, she scowls. She's not trying to impress anyone.

She's aware she's not desirable, pregnant or not, and that's a good thing.

If anyone tries to touch her, she'll crumble where she stands.

She convinced herself she could please Cole if she had to.

She would have followed through if it meant survival, but she's relieved it doesn't.

The idea of being close to anyone like that makes her skin crawl.

Jason would already be pawing at her mere days after giving birth.

A man has needs, he'd say, and she'd appease him one way or another or risk the consequences.

He wouldn't give a shit that she's miserable, and she is.

She told Cole she's not overdoing it, but that's a lie.

The ache between her legs is constant and throbbing, like a deep bruise.

She is bone tired, and crippling cramps hit her at random intervals.

Her uterus put a lot of effort into creating the perfect baby bubble and now it has to revert to normal again.

She braces on the counter when a fresh wave of pain has her wincing and fighting the dizziness she's been ignoring. At least Lucy is healthy. In desperate need of a bath, but chubby for her small frame. She sleeps peacefully on the counter, oblivious to the crumbling world.

They could both use some cleaning up. She'd sell her soul for a shower to clean what paper towels have missed, and Lucy is on her way to diaper rash if they don't find wipes or consistent running water.

Already she's failing as a parent. Maybe they'll find a baby store when they get moving again, and that'll be soon if Cole's anxiousness is any indication.

Much as she'd like to curl up in a corner and sleep here for the next few days, they're lucky they made it this far. Waiting might be suicide.

Olivia washes herself as best she can in the bathroom with the bottle of water he gave her, uses the other half to clean Lucy, and then spies the towel dispenser in the reflection.

It's an older pull type with a cloth loop running through it.

That's a germ magnet on a good day, but there hasn't been anyone here in a while.

The white is actually white, not a stain in sight, and beggars can't be choosers.

She pops open the metal cover and yanks the fabric off its roller, pleased to see that it's twice as long as she expected.

It wraps around her shoulder and under one arm twice, wide enough to make a sling that'll fit Lucy.

She can't go hands-free, not secure enough, but it'll ease the strain on her arms.

When she emerges again with the newly crafted sling holding her baby, Cole spots her project from where he's stretched out on a booth.

"You McGuyvered a baby holder," he says, throwing her own joke back at her.

"Took a page from your playbook."

"Looks good. Smart."

That's not true, she's far from smart. She suppresses her objections at his compliment, just like when he said she looked nice in this new shirt. "She seems comfortable. If you're ready to keep moving, I'm good to go."

"It's alright, just relax for a while. Only been an hour."

"I'm fine." She is defensive when she shouldn't be. He's trying to do her a kindness, and she's shutting all over his effort. Been told before that she's impossible to please and apparently that's true.

“I’m not. Could do with resting up a bit myself.”

He’s a terrible liar, unpracticed and obvious, but sincere enough. Finally, she mimics his pose across the booth. Her body protests, cramping as she sits and her poorly hidden gasp prompts his expression to change into a silent question.

“It’s nothing. Normal. Hurts for a while after, that’s all.”

“Day three of anything that hurts is always the worst,” he replies. “Don’t mean that I know what you’re feeling, just that every time I’ve been injured, the third day is a pile of shit.”

“No, you’re right, and having a baby is absolutely like being injured. Not as bad as the third day of broken ribs, though.”

He sucks some air between his teeth in sympathy. “Broken ribs make you see stars for a long time. Takes forever to heal. Third day of a burn is pretty rough, too.”

“Oh god, when it starts throbbing so hard you can’t move and it still feels like your skin is cooking?”

“Yep. That’ll make you lose your mind. Can’t get away from it. The creams are useless.”

She mentally rifles through every cigarette that found her skin over the years. The car lighter pushed to the bottom of her foot, when Jason punished her for attracting a herd with the sound of her morning sickness, is almost healed by now, but the scent of her flesh burning is hard to forget.

She knows Cole likely saw that for himself when she was passed out barefoot in the subway, but he doesn’t bring it up and she’s glad for that.

“That one moves to the top spot, after all. Don’t get me wrong, though, squeezing a watermelon through an opening the size of a small lemon is traumatizing, but at least when it’s over, it’s over. Mostly...sort of.”

No use sugarcoating things now after he’s already seen her at her worst and, to his credit, he only looks mildly disturbed by that description.

They’re sharing past injuries without offering details on how they were acquired in a way only those who’ve known abuse can.

Matter of fact and lacking any excess emotion.

Another injury, another day, no big deal.

That’s how she kept going for the entirety of her marriage, and it’s a hard habit to break.

Someone must have hurt him too and they’re connecting on a level she wishes they weren’t.

Olivia wants to punish whoever made it possible for him to remember what a burn feels like on day three, but she hadn’t been able to conjure up the same outrage for herself over the last decade.

Her fingers trace the cluster of bruises ringing her wrist and crawling up her forearm. “At least I won’t have to worry about this again. That’s something.”

“That’s a lot,” he agrees. “You hungry?”

“Always. What else did you find? ”

He moves across the room to grab a bag of chips and slides it onto the table before taking up his spot again.

She rips into a small bag of cheddar and sour cream, ravenous despite inhaling half a bottle of Nutella an hour ago. Must look pretty awful if he's always trying to feed her and the urge to explain that is overwhelming.

"I think he might've been trying to starve me so I'd miscarry." She fills the silence with an answer to a question he hasn't asked. "He didn't want the baby. Tried to beat her out of me at first, but she's a survivor."

She threw a sad story on the table between them without warning and he struggles for a reply.

A flicker of anger on her behalf ghosts across his face and those impressive biceps twitch as he runs a hand through his hair.

Flexing muscles catch a glint of sunlight shining through the dirty diner window, and a barely there rumble under his breath vibrates his Adam's apple.

All at once, Olivia knows exactly why she's been so preoccupied with her appearance today.

She's attracted to him.

It has to be some sort of biological throwback from when humans were cave dwellers haunting her genes at the moment, telling her to find a father for this baby in case she doesn't make it herself. Cole is more than acceptable.

He'd be a good provider.

He is strong and skilled at survival.

He's been kind to them.

Her primal self has latched onto these basic qualities that her last option didn't have.

That's all there is to it, she thinks. She couldn't possibly be attracted to anyone for reasons that don't include keeping herself and Lucy alive, only days post delivery, in a sudden apocalypse, and when she hasn't felt anything of the sort in years. That would be ridiculous.

"I just need you to know why I'm such a mess," she adds, trying to ignore her revelation.

"You're not a mess. I'm real glad he got what he deserved, though."

"Me too."

"Why don't you get some sleep? I'll keep watch," he offers, no doubt noticing the endless stream of yawns she's let loose.

"You haven't slept much either. I know the baby has kept you awake."

"Don't go worrying about me. Always been a dozer. A couple of hours here and there and I'm good."

"Maybe I'll nap for a little while," she agrees. If she's tired enough to drift off sitting up in an uncomfortable booth, then the nap wants her even if she doesn't want the nap.

She stretches out lengthwise, tucks Lucy between herself and the back of the seat so

she won't roll off her lap, and tries her best to relax on squeaky fake leather.

Every time she closes her eyes, she's right back there in that subway bathroom watching her husband's bloody teeth snap in her direction.

The dribble of fluid down his chin when he starts consuming the umbilical cord wrinkles her nose in disgust.

Thankfully, sleep drags her into oblivion before she can let her memories wander even further.

* * *

Cole's insistent calling of her name in a careful whisper has her alert through the groggy haze of a terrible nap.

"Something's happening out there," he says. "People are moving through the stores."

"They're coming here?" Her sleep-addled brain thinks that's a reasonable question when he has no more clue about a stranger's plan than she does.

"Don't know, but we're not sticking around to find out. They're in the front, so we go out the back and keep heading east."

He doesn't strike her as the type to run from every possible encounter.

If she wasn't weighing him down, he might stay and take his chances.

There's safety in numbers and finding others to link up with could be in his best interest, but he's not risking it with her and a baby in tow.

She feels a flash of guilt for holding him back.

A wave of lightheaded fuzz rushes to her head when she stands too quickly, but she fights it to follow his lead. She's fine. She can do this. There is no choice.

Lucy's ready for a meal, but they don't have time and when it's not offered, the baby starts to fuss. Not a full-out cry yet, only a few high-pitched squeaks. That's all it takes for the voices to get closer as they move out the back door.

"Go, go, go!" Cole yells after Lucy offers a desperate scream, giving their location away to anyone listening.

She nearly stumbles, trying to keep pace with Cole.

He grabs her hand, just like before, and pulls her along.

It's a repeat of how they left the apartment, only this time her swimming vision has her thinking she might not make it much longer.

He won't let her quit, but her legs are on the verge of giving out and she worries that she'll drop Lucy.

She yells out his name in a warning as they round a corner to a dead end.

She sags against him, trying to shove the baby into his arms before passing out, but he only helps her to the ground with her back to a dumpster and keeps Lucy in her lap.

How fucking useless she is at protecting her own child if she can't even run away from danger?

Even if they slipped the people at the diner, there could be more held up in their apartments trying to ride out this storm. They'll follow the baby's screaming to see what the fuss is about.... if the rotters don't get here first. She can't climb the chain-link fence blocking the exit, but Cole can.

Her heart skips a few beats, her thoughts are jumbled and foggy, and her muscles weaken with every passing second. The growling shuffle of the dead in the distance tells her they won't be alone for long.

"Cole, take her. Take her and go. I can't..." She doesn't understand why he won't take the baby. Terror at the possibility that he might abandon them here as a distraction and be on his way alone flares up like it never left. "Don't leave us! Don't leave her! Please!"

She begs him now like she did that first day, convinced she's made an awful mistake in letting her guard down even the smallest amount.

Of course he's leaving. She's been kidding herself this whole time, thinking it would go any other way when she has nothing to offer him that he wants.

There's no benefit in keeping them around.

The edge of her vision starts to blacken. She can stuff the baby between her and the wall before she falls unconscious to protect Lucy from the dead. It won't be enough, but.... the sound of other voices halts her panic.

Cole is talking to someone. She can barely keep her eyes open, seeing only blurry figures a few feet ahead. The baby squirms in her arms and she forces herself to stay awake. If she passes out and he leaves them, then they'll both be dead .

'Don't you even look at my wife.'

That's confusing. She's no one's wife anymore. Cole's angry, loud, and ready to fight whoever he's yelling at.

The conversation fades, but suddenly someone tries to grab her, and adrenaline rushes in. She kicks and struggles to break free, but her resistance isn't enough, and her burst of energy quickly fades.

"I'm not leaving. I gotcha, it's okay," Cole says, slipping an arm under her legs and one around her back to lift her up into his arms. Her head lulls against his shoulder, the weight of the baby still heavy on her chest.

He didn't leave. She's safe in his arms and that's the last thought she has before the world closes in and unconsciousness calls her name in a soft lullaby.

* * *

'.... not sure.... trust them...'

She fades in and out, only aware of Cole's voice, the feel of a soft bed under her body, and a hard sting in the crook of her arm. Can't understand what he's saying. It's all garbled, but her flailing hands can't find her baby any longer.

'Took her.... right across.... screaming...'

An older woman with white hair up in a bun sways gently a few feet away, her back to Olivia as she looks out the window toward a torn city.

"Lucy," Olivia mumbles, feeling the pull of sleep nagging her again.

"She's here," he says, in the first clear reply she's managed to hear since this began.

He hasn't left them. He's right beside her. She reaches for him without thinking, her hand curling around his forearm where it rests against the white bed sheets. She asks for her baby again, certain he'll offer a better answer, but the darkness pulls her under before she can hear it.

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If someone told him a week ago that he'd be at his wife's bedside holding their baby in his arms, Cole would have laughed because that's ridiculous.

It still is. He's no one's husband and Lucy isn't his, but he claimed them anyway, thinking it might offer an additional level of protection. Now he's getting the side eye from their hosts.

They saw the bruises on her skin when inserting the IV.

They've assumed he's the one who put them there.

Haven't said anything yet, but he's boxed himself into a corner.

When Olivia wakes up from her six-hour nap, after curling her hand around his arm like he's some sort of security blanket, he'll have to explain why they've become an instant family.

The mixture of shock and disgust he knows he'll see at that revelation isn't something he's in a hurry to prompt.

At least Lucy seems unbothered. He had to wrangle the baby back from the older ladies fussing over her. Hadn't wanted to give her up at first, but needed to be free to defend them, and a bunch of grannies didn't pose any threat.

"Momma's gonna wake up real soon," he says to Lucy, where she's snuggled into the crook of his arm. Those clear blue eyes gaze up at him and her little hands grab his offered finger .

She's a good baby. Olivia thinks he'd call her a hassle, but she only cries when she's hungry or wet.

Doesn't carry on for no reason. Perfectly happy to be loved on by three grandmothers and even looks up at this dirty stranger like she knows him.

Babies don't know anything at this age, but she watches Cole like she watches Olivia, as if he's important.

She imprinted on him, perhaps, but she'll learn soon enough that he's no one and nothing.

"They think I hurt her," he whispers to Lucy. "Probably think I'd hurt you, too."

She makes a weird face, shoving half her fist in her mouth.

"Yeah, that's what I think, but not like I can blame them. Said you both were mine. Your daddy left his mark behind, so now I look like the asshole. Don't tell your mom I said asshole."

He's got to cut back on the cursing. He'll feel terrible if her first word turns out to be fuck .

"Need to explain soon or we won't get to stay. Well, you two might. Don't think they'd kick you out, but I'm not trying to leave yet. Sure as hell, don't trust anyone new with you."

She grabs his pinky finger again, giving it a squeeze.

"Seem decent enough, I guess. Too soon to tell, but they helped us. That's something. What do you think?"

The string of drool down the corner of her mouth is all the reply he's granted.

"Alright, well, if you get some opinions, feel free to let me know. Don't be shy about it."

Her face screws up in concentration and he winces. "Are you making one of those toxic shits again? Warn a guy."

He's already changed her twice and both times he felt the scent waft deep into his soul and nearly strangle the life out of him.

He's never changed a baby before, but one of the ladies shoved a diaper at him with a hard glare as if he better earn his keep and he didn't argue.

She gave him instructions the whole time with a judgmental frown, as if he might chuck the entire baby out the window instead.

When he glances over at Olivia, he's surprised to find her awake, watching them both with a hooded gaze and that warm half-smile he's growing fond of.

"Hey," she says, reaching out to run her fingers over Lucy's blonde hair.

"Hey. How long have you been up?"

"Just long enough to find out that I'm married again and my baby makes toxic shits."

There's wry teasing in those words, and he can't help but huff out an amused sound as he braces for that incoming look of revulsion. "About that..."

"You thought we'd be safer if someone new saw us as a family. If they assumed you'd fight for us."

“Yes. I dunno how safe they think you are with me, though. I’ve been getting a lot of hard stares.”

“They think you’ve done this.” She gestures to the arm that still holds an IV right above those yellow fingerprints. “I’ll set them straight. I promise.”

There’s no trace of that disgust he expected. She’s not so turned off by him after all that she’d scowl at his attempt to help with a well-crafted lie. “That’ll be hard to do without admitting the truth.”

She nods with an agreeable sigh and scoots upright, only asking for the baby when Lucy starts to fuss. She was going to sit there and let him hold this kid all he wanted, like it was no big thing. Didn’t snatch her back the moment her eyes opened. That feels big to him, almost monumental.

“She likes you. Babies have good instincts about people.”

He wants to believe that, but instead of agreeing, he only blurts out what’s been bothering him since it happened. “You thought I’d leave you alone in an alley.”

“That’s got everything to do with me and nothing to do with anything you’ve done. I’m the one who’s broken when it comes to trusting, but I’m trying. I really am.”

She was delirious and almost unconscious. He doesn’t hold it against her, but it hurt all the same. Only now, her soft voice and those slow blinks hiding a regretful shine to her eyes are like a balm on the deepest part of him that never feels good enough.

“You know that ‘trust no one’ line from that TV show about aliens?” she continues.

He nods.

“Been my motto for a long time. Hard habit to break.”

I get that.

No worries.

I’m fucked in the head, so I’ll do worse than leave you, eventually.

All perfectly decent answers that never see the light of day.

“We ah...we’re good. It’s all good.” Is what he stutters out instead, wishing he could pry the foot from his mouth.

“You’re already the best husband I’ve ever had,” she says softly, with a glint of mischief.

He snorts with a duck of his head.

“So, what’s wrong with me? Did they tell you? Where are we?”

“You’re exhausted and you’ve overdone it. That’s what the nurse said.”

“There’s medical staff here? Is it a hospital? Someone had to put the IV in.”

“Just the one. It’s a long-term care facility,” he tells her. “They’ve been protecting the residents.”

“Then why do you look so worried?”

“That trust no one thing isn’t only your motto, but they did us a favor when they didn’t have to. Maybe it’s alright and I’m worried for nothing.”

He doesn't admit that his biggest concern is the lack of barriers between this place and the outside world, especially in the city.

She'll probably want to stay. Hell, he does too at the moment.

They have soft beds. Everything's clean, with plenty of running water and even electricity from the generator.

Supplies if they get sick. It's a fucking oasis, and he's grateful they found it when she needed it most, but she might not want to leave with him again when it's time.

That's a bridge to cross later, though. He's thinking too far in advance when he needs to be happy she's awake and looking better than she has in days.

"Want some dinner? A shower?" he asks.

"There's hot water?"

"Yep. I was gonna take one but didn't want to leave until you woke up."

"You go first. She and I will be okay until you get out."

He hesitates. The bathroom is only a few feet away, but he'd be unable to help if something goes wrong. These people think he hurts his wife. They could be waiting for him to fall asleep or leave the room to try to get her away from him.

"Go, young man. You smell like the sewer."

A sassy voice breaks in, attached to one of the women who fussed over Lucy .

"Miss Sally here took a liking to the baby," Cole explains. "Said she'd come to check

in again.”

“You heard her, then.” Olivia winks. “Go wash the sewer off. Leave the door open a crack.”

He does as he’s told. Can’t be smelling awful around Olivia. He’s on edge the entire time but scrubs with that flowery soap on the counter and can’t deny how good it feels to be clean. Even runs a comb through his dark hair for the first time in forever.

Without intending to eavesdrop, he catches a few snippets of conversation. Sally goes on about how cute Lucy is, telling Olivia she had six kids back in the day and she better get some rest...or else.

When he emerges ten minutes later, he’s glad they’re alone and Olivia’s got a tray of food in front of her filled to the brim with muffins, soup, and bread.

“There’s one for you, too.” She points to the corner where his tray waits, her eyes crinkling when she gives him a once-over.

He’s self-conscious about the effort he put in, but she doesn’t comment or make fun.

Half a tray of food later, he’s left alone with the baby as if he’s completely trustworthy while she takes her turn in the shower, and fuck if that doesn’t feel better then it has a right to.

That’s a running theme with her, he realizes.

Feeling a lot of new things he never expected or wanted, but now that they’re here, he cycles between fighting it and admitting, if only to himself, that it isn’t so bad.

“Just me and you again, kitten,” he says to Lucy, opening a package of chocolate

pudding. “Wait until you’re old enough to eat this stuff. It’ll change your life.”

* * *

“That’s an interesting nickname you have for her.”

When Olivia returns, all shiny and clean and highlighted by the window light, he has to fight the urge to look away. She was pretty before, but something about her fresh from the shower has him mesmerized.

She’s got nice collarbones. They carve little valleys into her body and he wonders what they might feel like under his fingers if he traced one. Her long, dark blonde hair has gone wavy as it air dries, hanging soft against delicate skin.

Even the slope of her nose catches his attention with how gracefully it glints in the light of the sun. She is like something out of a painting and he’s certain the creator fussed over every perfect brush stroke.

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“Fuck this pudding,” he scowls, angry at himself for noticing her like this at all, and lashing out at the food as a diversion. He tosses the empty cup onto the table and flushes a shade of red when he spies her curious, confused stare. “Too much sugar. Not healthy.”

That was lame as hell and she knows it. “For someone who’s not a pudding fan, you sure did eat it all.”

“Can’t waste food.”

“Mhmm.”

“When I first heard her in the subway.” He tilts his head toward the baby, reaching for any conversation that can serve as a distraction. “I thought she was a kitten.”

Olivia shakes her head with a sad smile. “Bet you wish you found a baby cat instead, huh?”

“Must be feeling better if you took your own IV out?”

Cole’s saved by a new voice that startles Olivia into moving a few inches closer. “Andrew’s a nurse. Took good care of you when we got here.”

“Oh. Thank you. I’m feeling much better.”

“That’s good news. You were pretty out of it at first, but nothing some rest and food won’t fix. Try to up your protein intake and no sex for at least six weeks.”

He rattles off instructions the way medical staff often does, assuming everything is fair game to talk about. That last line was delivered directly to him, and Cole bristles at what feels like a clear insult.

“What kinda jerk do you think I am that you even gotta say that?” he growls.

Andrew holds up his hands in surrender, his eyes traveling to the bruises on Olivia’s arms. “It’s standard advice.”

“It’s not what you think,” Olivia tries. “Cole isn’t the one who—”

“None of my business. As I said, just standard instructions. You got a perfect storm right now that landed you in that bed. Take care of yourself, okay?”

He means well. Probably thought he was doing her a favor by telling him outright he shouldn’t try anything when he thinks she can’t say it herself, but the whole room is stuck in a thick, awkward haze and if Cole could crawl through the floor to escape, he would.

“I’m trying to. It’s rough out there,” Olivia replies. “The world is sort of ending, you know?”

“I’ve noticed. Fair point. You two got enough food? Need anything?”

“We’re good,” Cole answers.

“Bedside manner is lacking,” she says after they’re alone again. “But could be worse. I’m sorry, you didn’t deserve that. ”

He hums out an absent sound. “It’s fine.”

“Are we staying for a while?”

“Few days for sure. He’s right, you need the rest. We both do, but we don’t know them yet.”

She nods, glancing toward the hall. “Are we prisoners? Can we move around?”

“I don’t get that vibe, but you heard the orders. Gotta rest.”

“I can’t sit here all day. My legs will go numb. I’m good for a short walk. Let’s check this place out?”

He relents because, of course he does. After she spends a few minutes using that fancy running water to clean up the baby, they head out into the hall.

They haven’t taken his weapons, which is either a show of trust or a massive oversight. Thankfully, he hasn’t needed to use them yet, but the weight of his pistol is a welcome reassurance. He sticks as close to Olivia as he can without tripping her. If she minds, she doesn’t say.

He’s certain that he looks about as stupid now as he did in that alley, growling about not touching his wife.

When they wander into an auditorium filled with people, Olivia and the baby may as well be a cure for the virus for how quickly the patients flock to them, lavishing attention on Lucy, who responds with one of those gassy smiles.

“You a hostage, too?”

It’s a joking question asked by a man at the opposite end of a game of checkers.

“Better not be,” Cole replies. “You are?”

“Nah. I got separated from my people. Tried to loot this place a few days ago and now...here I am.”

“They’re treating you, okay?”

“Sure. Dunno why. Figured every decent person was long dead by now.”

Cole squints. “Does that mean you aren’t decent? Did they make a mistake in helping you?”

“No! That’s not what I meant. I’m grateful and I’m sure you are, too.” His eyes dart back and forth as if searching for ghosts in the shadows.

He tries not to judge based on appearances.

Cole knows how easy is it to assume the worst about him, from the tattoos running a sleeve up his left arm, the permanent disgruntlement on his face, and how quick he is to anger.

He and Wade have been on the receiving end of plenty of glares, all earned by simply existing.

That doesn’t mean he can’t spot a junkie when he sees one, and this guy is definitely jonesing for a fix.

“Feeling okay?” Cole states plainly.

He’s given a shifty nod in return.

The man opposite the checkers board kindly pats his opponent's hand. "Waylon here is getting clean. Everyone deserves a chance, even in a world like this."

Waylon bristles. "Damn, nothing's private, I guess."

Cole shrugs. "Not my business. Was good to meet you."

He doesn't waste time in collecting Olivia and the baby and herding them back to the room again before laying out the details of that exchange.

"None of this sounds good." She winces.

"Nope. I mean, it's an admirable thing to do, but he'll turn on them soon and we shouldn't be here when it goes down. He has people out there. This place has enough drugs in it to kill ten elephants. No chance they won't try to take it when they show up."

He's not one to hide from every threat. In other circumstances, he might help these folks out when the time comes, but taking chances isn't something he's willing to do anymore. He's got one mission at the moment, keep his wife and baby safe, and anything that conflicts with that is a problem.

"We'll leave tomorrow," she agrees.

"Yeah. Tomorrow. I was hoping for longer, but I got a weird feeling."

"Maybe...it's not a bad idea to stay married," Olivia says suddenly, sending him a tentative but hopeful glance. "I was going to set them straight, and I still will about certain things, but I'd feel a lot safer if everyone thought we were together. This group and anyone else we meet."

“Pffft. Some shitty proposal right there.”

She gasps, a full white-toothed smile blooming on her lips that he hasn’t seen before.

“I was barely even awake when you married us! Not very romantic on your part, either.”

“Alright, alright. You wanna stay fake married, I’m in.”

“Thanks, honey. Sweetie. Darling.”

He scowls. “Already regretting this.”

Her laughter makes it worth it, though. He wants to keep hearing that musical sound. Likes that she’s comfortable enough to joke with him, and hates that he enjoys it even one tiny bit.

This is all practical, he rationalizes. Smart. She sees the value in projecting themselves as a unit.

“Did you ask them about your friend?”

He frowns. “They haven’t seen him.

“I know you must be worried.”

“It is what it is. Wade can take care of himself. I gotta believe that.”

“If he’s even a little like you, then I know that’s true,” she says softly.

Wade would deny that being like him is anything to aim for, but Olivia thinks it is.

He's sure as hell doing a shit job of keeping them both at arm's length, he thinks. Got fake married already. Worries about them like he cares, which he absolutely does not. Olivia gazes at him like Lucy did before, as if she's imprinted on him too.

The most surprising part is that only half of him wants to fight it.

He'll have to get a handle on this going forward or he's only setting himself up for depression, regret, and self-doubt when they inevitably go their separate ways.

He's not stupid enough to think she'll want anything to do with him once he's no longer needed for protection.

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Olivia hasn't felt this good in weeks.

The dizziness is gone, along with the urge to pass out.

Only after she found relief did her denial no longer mask how miserable she was.

Feeling less alone helps, too. Her doubts about Cole have been consistent and nagging, as she waited for him to have a change of heart, but hearing his one-sided conversation with Lucy did a lot to squash that fear.

'Not trusting anyone new with you.' He said to her, with no trace of his usual gruff facade.

This baby isn't his, but he saved her life and she looks at him like she knows him.

Part of her wonders if it's a bad thing. If they stay together long enough, Lucy may grow attached only to be crushed when he leaves. Olivia knows he will someday.

This isn't permanent, fake marriage or not.

Still, she thought he'd leave them in an alley, assuming he'd make the same choices as her dead husband, but it's clear she's wrong about that much. He's only doing his best to hide a soft heart. She hopes he might learn to trust her one day and reveal the side of himself that Lucy has seen.

"When can she eat real food?" Cole asks, from the small sofa by the window he's sprawled out on, shoving Cheetos in his mouth.

“I think at six months. Not sure. Why?”

“Trying to remember what foods I liked as a kid. Couldn’t stand bananas, but liked broccoli well enough. Wonder what she’ll like.”

“I had banana cravings the whole time I was pregnant, so maybe she’ll hate them too since she had them so often,” Olivia muses.

“And junk food...a kid’s first taste of ice cream has to be funny.”

“If we even have ice cream anymore. Need freezers for that.”

“Solar power for a freezer should be one of the first things we get set up at the farm. Can’t imagine a world without ice cream,” he replies wistfully.

She smirks. “Find some cows, too?”

“Hell yeah.”

Their conversation about running a post-apocalyptic dairy enterprise is cut off by a commotion outside, and he rushes to lock the door after glancing out the window.

“Bunch of new people. Might have come for the junkie, Waylon.” He flicks the safety off his weapon as gunfire erupts below and footsteps filter through the halls.

Someone’s horrified ‘ what the hell did you do!’ is the only clear sentence above the muffled racket.

Cole flips the lock to peek around the door frame and just like that, she doesn’t give a shit who’s hurt out there, only cares that he might join them and end up on the wrong end of a bullet.

“Please leave it,” she whispers. “They can handle it. Please.”

“One of the grannies is hurt. Stay here. Don’t move.”

He’s gone before she can object. If she could reach out and drag him back by the shirt collar, she would.

He left them. Granted, it’s to help someone else, but that doesn’t do much to quell her fears.

She is selfish at the moment. Not confident enough in her ability to protect both herself and Lucy, and they need him for the foreseeable future.

Anything that might compromise that isn’t something she’s willing to entertain.

Then, a twinkle of worry in the back of her mind reminds her she’s growing fond of him and it isn’t only about wanting protection anymore. She might miss him. What a bunch of nonsense that is, she thinks with a sigh. She’s so fucking desperate that she’s latched onto this man like a leech already.

When curiosity gets the best of her, she leaves Lucy sleeping in the middle of the bed and cracks the door an inch, peering down the hall to watch the scene unfold.

Cole and one of the leaders have their guns trained on a stranger while a nurse tries to keep one of the residents from bleeding out on the white tile floor.

“I didn’t see her,” the new man pleads. “I swear it. If you woulda told me the truth—”

“Only truth I see is that you got a hard-on for shooting old people if it gets you what you want,” Cole shouts. “Is all this worth those drugs? Need a fix that bad?”

“You don’t know what it’s like... there’s nothing left out there. We can’t go much longer.”

“Yeah, everyone needs something these days, don’t they? Get in line.”

When it’s confirmed the resident didn’t make it, there is arguing and cursing between the standoff and sobbing in the background.

The sickening crack of a knife through a skull forces a rippled flinch through Olivia’s body. Andrew put down the one who passed like a rotter, but a bullet isn’t a bite. She’s having a hard time wrapping her head around why he’d bother.

In the end, their attackers are outnumbered by a small margin and escorted out with a handful of the drugs they came for.

“They’ll come back,” Cole tells Andrew. “You can’t let them go like that.”

“What’s the alternative? Shoot all three of them in the head point blank?”

Cole raises a brow with a half-shrug. “I’m not saying that. I’m also not not saying that. Everything’s different now and you got people to protect.”

“Gave ‘em something to hold them over. They know we don’t have much more. Maybe they’ll move on now.”

“Even if they do, they won’t be the last.”

“We’ll deal with that when or if it happens. One day at a time, right?”

The one who brought all this to the care home’s doorstep has apparently defected and stayed behind. He pipes in with a regretful reassurance. “They won’t come back, I

promise. We all had plans to keep going north. They aren't looking for me anymore. They'll move on."

Cole only offers him a glare, holsters his weapon, and stalks down the hall with a rumble that gets louder once he spies Olivia in the doorway to their room. "I told you to stay in here. Something coulda happened. Got bullets flying all over the damn place."

"And I told you not to leave," she counters. They're a foot apart, locked in a stand-off she refuses to back down from.

Her instinct is to shrink away from conflict. Do anything to keep him happy, like she told herself she would when they first met, but she forces herself not to cower or beg forgiveness. Cole only gets angry when he's worried and the odds of her catching a backhand are slim to none.

She can't spend however much of her life she has left, fearing the next blow, so she stands firm and matches his irritation with her own. If this is all an act and he really will hit her, she should find out now, when there are people to help, rather than later when there won't be.

This time, he didn't yell at her like he did in the diner. He kept his word that he wouldn't repeat that performance.

"They needed me out there," he replies.

"We need you here." Her words soften at the edges, and that's when he deflates.

His shoulders slump as he moves past her to check on Lucy, where she's still sound asleep. "I'm trying to keep you both safe. I need you to help me out with that. You could have caught a bullet if it got worse before they left."

“You think they’re coming back?”

“Not sure. Weren’t happy about not getting all the drugs, but the traitor who stayed behind says they’ll move on.”

“They’re outnumbered. They know that.”

“For now,” he replies.

“Thanks for what you did back there.” Andrew appears in the doorway, cutting into their conversation.

Cole tips his head in a quick nod. “Sorry, you lost someone in all that.”

“Me too. Thought it would be the virus we had to worry about but looks like it’s other people who’ll get us instead. Don’t know if this will turn bad again. Like you said, they won’t be the last. Y’all are welcome to stay as long as you need, but if you wanna skip out, I don’t blame you.”

“Have you heard anything about the safe zone?” Olivia asks.

“More like the shit zone. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt that says oh shit, I almost died.”

Cole scowls. “So that’s fucked now, too? Nothing left?”

“Last I heard, only the dead live there now. Good thing you ended up here, if that’s where you were going.”

They’ll have to leave. This place isn’t safe long term, but for now, she’s desperate to stay. If she’s forced to run for her life all over again so soon, she isn’t sure she can

keep bouncing back. Thankfully, Cole doesn't make a choice without her. That's something she's still getting used to.

She stops Andrew before he can leave, wanting to get one thing straight without waiting another moment.

"I need you to know that we ran into some trouble before you found us. That's what this is from.

" She gestures to her faded split lip and bruising circles ringed her arm.

"Cole wouldn't hurt me. No one said anything, but I know what the assumption would be. I should have said something sooner."

"We were coming to that conclusion ourselves. Cole doesn't fit the description. Not the way he's been carrying on talking all sweet to that baby."

"Jesus," Cole groans. "Everyone and their grandma's been snooping. I haven't been carrying on."

"Sorry, man, better get used to it. You got a daughter now. This is what happens. Turns you soft in all the good ways."

This is the problem with being a fake family.

People think it's real and then a weird twist forms in her stomach, teasing the possibility of what-if.

She has to remind herself that she doesn't know him well yet.

It's too soon to let her mind conjure up scenarios where none of their relationship is

fake .

He isn't interested, anyway.

Not a chance in hell.

Cole falters for a reply, choosing to change the subject. "About the one who didn't make it. Why'd you stab her in the head like a rotter? She wasn't bit."

"People pass here frequently from natural causes. When the second resident came back after a heart attack and tried to eat someone, we started making sure, just in case."

Olivia squints, putting the pieces of a grim puzzle together. "But that would mean—"

"That death is all that's needed to turn, and a bite only gets you there faster. That's what we think, at least."

"Heard that rumor floating around," Cole replies. "But it wasn't confirmed before the news cut off."

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“We all have whatever this is already?” Olivia whispers. “Everyone?”

“Don’t know for sure, but it would make a lot more sense about why it got so bad, so fast,” Andrew replies.

Her first thought is that she brought her daughter into this world already infected. Barely a week old and she’s saddled with a virus that’s killing most of the population.

When they’re alone again, she can’t help but let the stress of it spiral. “If what he’s saying is true...”

Cole shrugs. “Even if it is, that doesn’t change anything. You still have plenty left to fight for, right?”

Without Lucy, this knowledge could easily consume her. “Right.”

“So, the safe zone is toast.”

“Sounds like it. I’d like to stay here for now. I know it’s dangerous if those people come back, but the pros outweigh the cons. They’ve got all the supplies I need. Things for the baby.”

“Okay.”

“Really?”

“Sure. I mean, they’ve got toilet paper and everything. We’re living in a palace here,”

he jokes.

“Never knew how much I’d miss that until it was impossible to find.”

“People dying in the streets and all the crazies stocked up on ass paper.” He peers over to Lucy, where she’s begun to wiggle awake from her nap. “I see you found her some fresh wraps.”

She no longer wears his spare shirt. Soiled it through the sagging diaper and Olivia had no choice but to use a small fluffy towel from the bathroom.

She hums out an agreeable sound, taking up her spot on the bed to curl around the baby.

“She’ll need real clothes soon,” he continues.

“Got to be a baby store somewhere that hasn’t been ransacked.”

“It’s getting colder. We’re gonna have a whole new set of problems once winter really hits. Another week, maybe two and it’ll start snowing, and then—”

“Well, aren’t you a ball of sunshine tonight?” She cuts in.

“Sorry. I was hoping that the safe zone would be a warm place to stay and now it’s a no-go. Shoulda known it would be one of the first to get fucked. We already have one group out there to avoid like another plague. At least there’s still the fruit farm. Maybe.”

He’s not even trying to hide his stress, and she feels terrible that she’s piled on more of it by asking him to be an instant father out of the blue .

“We’ll be okay.” It’s an empty promise, but she makes it, anyway. “Just relax for now. You’ve been awake this whole time.”

He keeps telling her not to worry about him, but he’s not immune to the effects of sleep deprivation. Those dark circles under his eyes are prominent, and the relentless tapping of his foot comes from exhausted, jittery energy.

“Need to keep watch.”

“I’ll wake you up if anything happens. I’ll be awake with the baby, anyway. I’ll lock the door. You’ve got a gun. You can rest.”

He huffs out a heavy exhale, and lowers onto the sofa, punching the pillow, tossing and turning with restless energy.

“What did you do before all this?” she tries, offering him a distraction.

“Got any guesses?”

“No. You’re sort of a mystery.”

“I was in the army for a while. Me and Wade joined up together. I left before he did. After that, not a damn thing. Odd jobs here and there.”

“I didn’t do much either,” she admits. “But I had plenty of dreams. What did you want to do?”

“I like to build things. Woodworking. Furniture and kitchen cabinets. Used to think I’d open up a shop one day and do custom work. I carved out a whole owl for someone once, as big as your head. Not much market for that anymore.”

She hadn't pictured him as a creative type, but somehow, it fits. He's reserved at best, and carpentry is a job that can be done alone. She imagines him in a sunlit workshop carving animals out of hunks of wood or piecing together coffee tables, and she smiles .

His frown is quick, as if she's making fun. "What?"

"Nothing, just thinking about that owl. I would have loved to see it. I bet it was beautiful." She pauses, gathering the courage to ask something she should have already.

"Is there...anyone else out there you'd like to see again, other than your friend? A girlfriend?"

"For someone that wanted me to sleep, you got an awful lotta questions."

"I'm trying to get to know you, that's all."

"Having second thoughts about your tour guide?" Cole replies with an even stare.

"No. Not even a little bit."

"There's not much to know. No one else out there. I've never been the dating type. All that online shit before the world crashed was a hassle, anyway. Didn't even bother. I've got no regrets, so don't go giving me one of those faces."

"What faces?"

He fluffs the pillow again, smacking it with a fist to flatten it before leaning back. "You know the face. The one people use when you say you're alone. The pity face. It's bullshit."

“I wasn’t about to give you the pity face. After what I’ve been through with...him, I have no doubt that being alone is far better than being in a bad relationship. All those years he was hurting me, I would have given anything to be alone. Anything.”

Despite it being on the tip of her tongue, she doesn’t say that Cole doesn’t have to be alone anymore.

He has her and Lucy now. They could make it through this world together without a looming endpoint, but he might take it wrong and assume that she’s making a move or flirting.

He seems to need a friend as badly as she’s longed for one, and even if they’re only ever that, it could be a welcome relief from what they’ve both known.

“You’re not now, though.” He tilts his head toward the baby. “Alone. You have her and she’s lucky to have you.”

“I don’t know. I spend pretty much every waking moment worrying I won’t be enough. That I can’t keep her safe. Before, I worried I couldn’t save her from him. Now, it’s everything else.”

“You’re doing fine. I know a thing or two about shit parents after running through a long string of them provided by the state. You’re one of the good ones. She’s lucky, and that’s all there is to it.”

Lucy perks up, shifting in her swaddled blanket like a caterpillar caught in a cocoon until Olivia loosens the wrap and her arms spring free, one of those gassy smiles spreading fast and bright.

Cole’s grin is slight, but it’s there for a brief moment while he watches the baby. “When do they start having real smiles? How can you tell?”

“I’ve heard it takes a month, at least. I wonder if we’ll be able to see the difference or if they’ll all look gassy.”

He watches as she rubs Lucy’s tummy with a light hand. “I’m gonna try to doze for a while. You wake me if anything happens. Don’t hesitate.”

“Okay. I promise.”

For a long moment, he remains quiet before offering a final statement that both excites her and instills a healthy dose of fear. “We need to get you a weapon. Something that’ll slice through those rotters like butter.”

She isn’t much of a fighter. Didn’t think she could do what she’d done already until there were no options left, but Cole thinks she can handle it and his confidence sparks her own.

Five hours later, Andrew informs them that he’s heard rumors about the Smithsonian.

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He's waved into a supply closet by a man with a cane who's gotta be pushing one hundred.

Reluctantly, Cole follows. Can't ignore him. Whatever's going on might be important.

It could be a secret exit in case things get rough.

Or extra supplies for the baby.

Perhaps more information on rumored safe zones because everyone knows nursing homes are cesspools for gossip.

Instead, Cole's staring at a shiny, half-used box of condoms. His mouth drops open as he squints in confusion. "That's not...I don't need...what the hell, man?"

"For you and your wife. Gotta be careful. You'll knock her up again right away if you go at it without a rubber after a baby." The man shoves the box into Cole's hands with a wink. "Trust me. I ended up with baby number three that way when I was in your shoes."

"Why do you even have rubbers in here? Not worried about babies anymore, are you?"

"No, no, it's not the kids that'll get you at my age, son. It's the syphilis. The clap. Everything else. No one wants to spend their golden years itching or struggling to take a piss."

Well, damn. Gossip isn't the only thing spreading like wildfire in here. "Thanks, but no thanks. Sounds like you need them more than me."

This is way more information than Cole signed up for and he has zero use for condoms. The odds of getting laid are so slim they've gone into the negatives.

Even if the Jason and baby factor were both a non-issue, he's pretty sure Olivia wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole, especially after he tripped over himself to get away from her when she tried to give him a blowjob.

They are only friends, and even that's brand new.

She doesn't want him. She just had a baby. Sex isn't on her to-do list.

He won't risk fucking up the tentative trust they've built. Certainly not now, and not any time in the future, either.

"Don't be silly. We've got plenty. There's a whole stack behind the paper towels. Take them, take them. You'll be happy you did later."

He doesn't have a chance to protest further before his gift giver shuffles out, after fondly tapping Cole's shoulder with a closed fist. Now he's standing in a supply closet with half a box of condoms. He should shove it back on the shelf and leave well enough alone.

Last thing he needs is for Olivia to find them and assume the worst.

What he does next he can't even explain to himself, so he doesn't bother trying.

His hands act on their own, grabbing two foil wrappers out of the box to hide in his pocket and leaving the rest behind.

He doesn't need them. He will never need them.

That's a fact no matter which way he slices it, but it'll get harder and harder to find things like this out in the world the longer this pandemic goes on.

People like to fuck before they die and some of them are practical about it even then.

So, he keeps these two rubbers that he absolutely won't need and tells himself he can always dump them later. What's the harm if they burn a hole in his pocket?

They have plenty of other uses, like carrying water and making a slingshot. He could wrap one over a wound or use it as fire kindling. He could even trade them to other people for supplies.

Keeping them doesn't mean he's looking for sex.

It's rude to turn down a gift. The old man was only trying to help, so Cole will respect his elders and keep these condoms because that's what a decent guy would do.

He shoves them so deep in his pocket he's in danger of ripping the stitching, flings open the door, and nearly runs smack into Olivia with Lucy in her arms as she rounds a corner.

He springs away like she's made of molten lava, his face burning as red, and words stuttering like she caught him jerking off. "Dammit, shit, almost knocked you clean over."

She stares while he flounders, running a nervous hand through his hair and shifting on the balls of his feet. "Are you okay?"

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be? Fine. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She tilts her head, trying to puzzle out why he’s acting weird as hell. “Any time someone says fine more than once, it’s never fine.”

Get it together, he tells himself. It’s not like she has any idea that he’s got two ribbed and extra lubricated condoms in his pocket that he kept on the off chance she may want to sleep with him one day in the very, very distant future.

Because that’s not why he kept them. Not at all.

“Looking for more towels for the baby,” he covers. “You good? Need something?”

“You didn’t find any?”

“Hmm?”

“Towels?”

“Oh, nope. Not in there.”

She nods, watching him with narrow-eyed suspicion. “Okay. Dinner’s ready, mac and cheese tonight.”

She’s been helping out in the kitchen since mixing food and putting it on plates isn’t labor intensive.

He wants to be useful too, but isn’t much good at anything around here aside from pointing a gun when needed.

There’s been no sign of any other challengers, but supplies are dwindling and another

group is becoming a secondary worry.

He follows her back to their room where hot food awaits and ruins it by plowing right into a subject he's been trying to avoid. "Need to talk about what happens after this. When we leave. Where we go."

Her face falls, and so does his gut. There are moments when he thought she'd be eager to stay with him and others when he's not so sure.

"It feels wrong to leave these people," she says, softly. "The longer we stay, the more guilty I feel."

"I know. I wish we could hang around here and do our best to keep this place afloat, but finding supplies in the city is already rough. We don't need to get stuck in a wasteland."

"So we leave the residents here to get stuck while we push on?"

"They got others to try for them. This isn't on us." He feels like a jerk to say it out loud, but what's best for her and Lucy takes priority.

"You're right. I just didn't think I'd feel as bad about it as I do."

"Not trying to force you to leave if you don't want to. If you ah...you know, if you'd rather stay here, maybe I can stick around a bit longer and make sure you're settled."

Her deep, horrified frown proves he's only fucking this up. Trying to make her understand it's her choice how this goes and she's not stuck with him, but it only came out sounding like he wants to ditch her. He might stay too and starve with the rest if she refused to leave.

“I want to stay with you,” she replies, the sadness in her words stinging some cold part of his heart that she’s begun to thaw.

“Alright. I’m only making it clear that you aren’t saddled with me and my shit plans.”

That eases some of the hurt he saw a moment ago and her next reply is a lot more teasing and far less tinted with fear of betrayal. “ Our shit plans. We’re doing this together. Good or bad. That’s how a fake marriage works, and I’m not asking for a divorce yet.”

He ducks his head, hiding an amused half-smile. “Okay then. What do you think about Waylon’s Smithsonian idea?”

They’ve been mulling over it for the last couple of days. Rumors say this place is free of corpses and stocked with emergency supplies.

‘I dunno, man, I fucking forgot, okay? I was in a bad way when I got here. My brain’s just starting to feel normal again now.

’ Waylon claimed, when they asked why he never said anything before.

‘They ain’t storing Ativan or morphine in there next to the giant dino statues, so I didn’t give it much thought. ’

“If it’s still standing and there’s help there, then that has to be the safest spot in the state,” she replies .

“Yeah, or a trap.”

“Or that. Only one way to find out.”

He sighs in resignation. “It’s not too far, but we’d have to drive for sure. We can’t walk there.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. If you’re up for it? If not, you gotta say. Want you to be feeling your best before we head off again.”

She’s looked better than ever these past few days. Got plenty of sleep, quick with a smile and steady on her feet. Even the hollows in her cheeks are filling out, but it’s all precarious and if he pushes her too fast, it won’t end well.

“I can do it. I promise.” She’s confident enough that he doesn’t question it.

“Okay. Tomorrow. You, me, and the museum.”

He’d been trying to convince himself that it wouldn’t matter if the allure of this place took her from him. She was never his to begin with, but knowing she’s choosing to follow him is both a relief and a brand new burning anxiety. It’s the only way. Staying here means certain death.

Still, he must be smiling the barest bit around this forkful of mac and cheese because she gives him a quizzical look. “What?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs.

She’s skeptical, their glances catching and mingling before breaking away, and her own tentative smile spreading across her lips.

She might be the first person to choose him over another option, and he’ll do his best to make sure she never regrets that.

* * *

Later, he's in the shower thinking about their impending trip, the condoms he never should have taken, and how beautiful she looked today. All rosy cheeks and eye-squinting smiles and he'd swear her skin looks softer now that she's not close to passing out every five seconds.

He isn't trying to get worked up, it just happens.

He thinks of Olivia and his dick rises to attention, the shaft thickening and hardening even as he tries to ignore it.

It's not right to think of her like this.

Not respectful. His body has other ideas that don't cooperate with the logical side of his mind and before he knows it, he's got a raging hard-on swaying in the air, begging for relief.

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He soaps himself up, purposely avoiding that area.

Tries thinking of that one dead guy with half a missing face, or the pile of guts he stepped in on the stairwell when he first escaped his apartment.

Plenty of gross shit to focus on these days, but it's equally easy to stray into forbidden territory the moment he isn't putting all his effort into conjuring up disgusting images.

Cole wonders how they might use those condoms he shouldn't have accepted.

Imagines her soft and wet, clinging to his cock.

Her gasp of pleasure as he moves slow and deep between her legs tickles his ear, and his dick jumps in response.

He's never felt this attracted to anyone.

Sure, he can appreciate a beautiful woman.

He's watched his share of porn and it's served its purpose.

Had a few extra short flings in the army.

This is a whole new set of feelings he doesn't know what to do with and it's stressing him the hell out.

Guilt is quick to consume him for considering using her as spank bank material.

The cold tile is smooth against his forehead, and his body is on fire with desire he can't quench.

Going out there like this is impossible. Obscene. Not an option.

He has no choice but to jerk off and get rid of it, so he wraps a hand around the shaft and mindlessly strokes. He doesn't think about anything. Not her. Not anyone. Looks at the grout in the tile and counts the little dots where it's begun to break down and crumble.

Six. Six tiny spots in the nasty grout in front of his face.

His orgasm is nowhere to be found, so he pumps faster, bracing his other hand on the wall, desperately trying to find relief. He's caught in the worst boner of his life. Hopelessly aroused and unable to come.

In the end, it's not even something sexual that gets him there.

The moment he pictures her face and that beautiful, sweet smile, he's trembling under his own touch and spilling his release with a grunt.

His vision whites at the edges, his knees tremble, and a groan escapes his throat as thick ribbons of semen flow from the tip to land on the floor and disappear down the drain.

How can he even look at her now? She'll know exactly what he's done the moment she sets eyes on him. He's sure of it.

She appears clueless when he discovers her moments later, lying on the bed with a

book, looking like a damn painting. When her attention finds him, she offers up that same gentle smile he'd been jerking off to in his head.

His shame is evident on his face, but she remains oblivious, only happy to see him as if he's been away for more than ten minutes.

Her happiness falters when he can't return her gesture and he promises himself from here on out he'll never wrap a hand around himself and think of her again.

It makes him shifty when he sees her, and that's not doing either of them any good.

A few seconds of bliss isn't worth the fallout. She's his friend, nothing more.

He absolutely does not think of her naked in the shower when she takes her turn.

Not for a second.

* * *

"You sure about this?"

He's staring at a tiny Toyota sedan. It's the kinda car he'd have been an ass about before the turn, but now it's the best thing he's ever seen, nestled in the garage like a protected pot of gold.

"We're not using it, and the museum is too far to walk.

So yeah. If you want it, then it's yours.

We owe you anyway for helping out before.

” Andrew says, handing him the keys. “The alley out back isn’t blocked and you’ve got a clear shot for another mile.

Not so sure after that. I put a few extra things in the trunk, too. ”

Their destination is eight miles away, which may as well be eight light years for how difficult he fears it’ll be to reach if the roads get clogged up. This’ll cut down on a few miles and he’s not about to turn down. He takes the keys with a grateful nod and pairs it with a handshake.

“Are you ready?” he says to Olivia, who’s got the baby in her arms and a bag of supplies on her shoulder.

“Yes.”

Her immediate agreement boosts his confidence in the plan.

They’ve got enough food to last a few days. Supplies for the baby and for Olivia. They’ll be good for now, but he still wonders if he’s doing the right thing. He’d be out of here already if he was alone. No question. This facility isn’t a long-term solution.

He’s only hesitating now because he’s thinking of them and second-guessing himself.

So, he forces that worry aside and gets in the car, trusting his gut, which hasn’t failed him yet.

Olivia joins him in the passenger side with Lucy on her lap as daylight streams in through the newly opened garage door.

She’s trying to be brave, but he can see that flicker of doubt when she thinks he’s not

looking as they slowly peel out onto the road.

The way she grips Lucy snug and how wide her eyes have gotten have him wishing he could say something to distract her.

Comfort her. He isn't skilled at reassurance, though, and doesn't try.

"Eight miles," she says confidently. "That's how far the Walmart used to be from my house. Easy drive. We can make it."

"We got this. No big deal."

They're both bullshitting each other, but they go with it. No turning back. Fake it 'til you make it is the motto of the day.

"This isn't just on you. You know that, right? You're not forcing me to do anything and if I didn't agree it was a good plan, I wouldn't have said yes to it. That's at least one thing you shouldn't worry about, okay?"

He hums a sound of agreement. "What makes you think I am?"

"You do a specific wince when you're worried and there's a definite scowl happening."

Cole scowls harder. "I don't do any of that."

"Hmm. Okay. Sure. "

"I don't," he replies evenly, knowing full well she's right because he can feel his face doing exactly what she described.

“The important point here is that whatever happens, it’s on both of us. Not you.”

That’s a hard thing to accept. Letting go of full responsibility won’t be easy, but he agrees with a grunt of approval, gesturing to Lucy, who’s sleeping even deeper than before. “Her first car ride.”

“Think she likes it. The vibrations are soothing. Babies fall asleep easily in cars.”

“I used to lie across the back when I was little and count the trees passing out the window.”

Olivia grins. “Me too.”

They make it one mile with little trouble. There’s a few people peering out from their windows and more than a couple of rotters on the streets, but overall, it’s manageable.

This is a quiet area. Residential. Most people either left before the virus got them or have barricaded themselves in their apartments and brownstones. It’s only when they reach the more commercial districts that the difference begins to warp into something out of a nightmare.

They’re in the middle of it before there’s any time to change course. The streets are littered with the dead, most of which are following the noise from their engine by now. They have to hop onto sidewalks and push trash cans and kiosks out of the way with their car to get anywhere at all.

Two blocks turn into four with every foot getting more crowded and he begins to worry they won’t make it much further.

Olivia stays silent but when he tells her to hold on tight, she grabs the ‘oh shit’ handle

with one hand and the baby harder with the other and then they're plowing through rotters like a bowling ball down an alley.

If he stops, he'll lose momentum. They have to make it past this area or risk getting stuck in a pile of bodies. One squish after another they bump and roll over the dead, creating a splatter he clears with the wipers.

"Fucker won't quit," he growls when they fail to shake a stubborn one hanging onto the hood.

He taps the brakes, but it won't budge until another gets thrown up there too and knocks him free.

They've left a gruesome trail in their wake and one last push has them flying through a wall of the dead and into a clearer, quieter part of town. He glances over at Olivia, the two of them locking eyes until she breaks into nervous laughter.

"Just like playing a video game, right?" she jokes.

"A game I regret buying and want a refund on, but yeah."

She flips open the crudely drawn map of their route, pinpointing their location with a finger. "Almost halfway."

"Should be pretty smooth sailing from here on out."

"What do you think the Smithsonian will be like? They have to have living quarters for the staff, right? A place that big had to have overnight workers. I've heard there are some parts underground."

"It's a government building, so it's bound to have some tricks up its sleeve."

“Bet they’ve got electricity, water, plenty of food. Stockpiles of it,” she muses.

They’re heading to a museum on the word of an addict with a slim hope that it could be a safe place to rest and it’s got to be the craziest thing he’s done since this whole mess began.

Still, he has to believe that it’s their best shot.

For now. If whoever runs that place even takes them in.

At least no one can look at Lucy and shut the door in her face.

Even if they don’t take him, and that’s a worry he’s not voiced yet, Olivia and the baby will have a place to ride this out. Right now, that’s all he cares about.

He’s so busy stuck in his head that he almost doesn’t notice what they’ve driven into as the car crunches over concrete rubble, glass, and whatever else is buried in piles that keep getting larger.

He’s forced to stop a block from their destination when everything ahead is smoke.

Gone.

Something bad happened here. An earth-shaking explosion destroyed all the surrounding buildings in its path, flattening them in a ripple effect from the source. They’ve rolled into the wasteland of a war zone and not even the dead walk it now.

“This isn’t a homemade job.” His heart sinks and all the hope he had only moments ago evaporates. “Whatever did this was government issue.”

There used to be a museum up ahead. Now, there’s only dust.

Olivia curls a hand around his forearm as they stare at what could have been their salvation.

Habit nearly forces a flinch. He hates being touched, but her skin is soft and her hold comforting. It's a whisper of possibility in a single moment that makes him wonder if he could be the kind of person to enjoy this sort of thing outside of impending doom.

That's all that's on the menu lately, though. One heaping helping of impending doom after another .

“We can still go back,” he offers.

“No, let's find that farm you told me about in the mountains. I want her to grow up somewhere like that. Not here. Not like this.”

This roadblock could be a sign urging them to reverse course if he believed in signs. He chooses to hope it's only a detour to something better, puts the car in gear, and aims them toward what lies beyond the city.

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What's left of the museum vanishes in their rearview mirror as their plans crumble and spiral down the drain.

They head toward an unknown destination with no place to stay and no guarantee of safety.

Olivia should feel upset, afraid, and depressed, yet surprisingly, she's happy.

It doesn't matter that the Smithsonian is gone.

Her future still holds more promise now than it ever did before the virus took hold.

The end of the world, for her, marks a turning point that offers newfound freedom.

That's something she can embrace now that they have officially decided to stick together.

She's not alone in this anymore. So, instead of crying over the literal explosion of a good plan, she can't stop smiling.

Probably looks ridiculous, all things considered, but she's seeing everything with fresh eyes today and each mile they drive further from the city only stokes her excitement.

Cole's been sliding her curious glances now and then, catching her mesmerized at the passing scenery as if she's never set foot outside before.

Instead of waiting for the inevitable question, she offers up an answer.

But first, she rifles through the glove box, digging through oil change receipts, to victoriously yank out a few shiny disks.

She pops one in the old CD player and leans her head back against the seat when an upbeat, soft melody wraps around them like a hug.

He doesn't comment on her music tastes. Despite her suspicion that this isn't exactly his kind of song, he still taps his finger against the wheel.

"You know when I said I never did anything before all this?" she begins.

"Mhmm."

"I didn't just mean work. I never left the house much. Never saw anything new. Met anyone new or did anything exciting," she pauses, wincing at her own words. "That sounds wrong. I know this is dangerous. I know people have died. Never mind. I don't know what I'm saying."

Her explanation is falling flat, only making her sound frivolous.

"If it wasn't for the army, I'd have never left the middle of nowhere town I grew up in.

A visit to that farm would have been it for me," he replies evenly.

"Me and Wade would go hiking in the woods when we got older. Then hit up the bar sometimes. Him more than me when it comes to that. Wasn't much else to do. "

"How did you end up in the city?"

“A friend of his lived out here. Wade’s an ass but he’s loyal. Usually. This guy saved his life one time, so when the virus hit and he didn’t pick up his phone, we came to check. He didn’t make it. He was already rotting when we found him. How ‘bout you? Did you live in the city?”

“No. We only came this far in because Jason wanted to try the safe zones. Thought they’d offer a better chance.”

Cole snorts. “The only guy to go into the most populated areas to stay safe. ”

“I never said he was that bright. Would have been smarter to stay in the suburbs, but right about now I’m not regretting anything about how it all happened.

If we didn’t come out here, then me and Lucy would still be with him.

” Cole goes silent, and she realizes she’s doing that thing again, focusing on the past instead of the future.

“Sorry, I talk about him a lot. Too much. He doesn’t deserve to be remembered. ”

“Can’t forget that fast. This one here is still brand new.” He gestures to Lucy, asleep in her arms. “The rest of it is, too. The only thing that’ll get rid of that kinda demon is time and even then, they stick around.”

“Spoken like someone who knows from personal experience?”

He nods but doesn’t elaborate. She’s gathered that he had a hard time growing up in foster care, but Cole keeps his secrets closer than she does.

Then again, she’s the one who’s had all her wounds slashed open in the last week and he happened to be there to see it.

Maybe it makes sense the pages in her book are far easier to read.

“Anyway, I know what you mean about being excited to see new shit, even in all this.”

She raises a brow, her tone light and teasing. “You’re excited, huh? I dunno, kinda hard to tell.”

“This is my excited face,” he deadpans. “And this is the usual ‘ain’t got time for this shit’ face.”

Watching one corner of his mouth quirk up to break the stoic facade, she can’t help but laugh at the identical and emotionless expressions. “I see the difference. You should tone it down.”

“Too much?”

“Way too much. Your excitement is overwhelming me. ”

No one has ever possessed or tried to hone the skill of making her smile like he does, but he wields it effortlessly.

“I won’t let it be like that for her,” Olivia says, softly. “She’s going to see things. Not right away because I know it’s not safe, but one day, when we can teach her to protect herself, she can be a part of the world instead of sitting on the sidelines. She won’t be afraid like I was.”

We. That word slipped right out before she could catch it.

“You haven’t been afraid much since I met you.” Is all he says, as if she’s far braver and stronger than she actually is. They both know that’s not true.

“I hide it well. Usually.”

“Like my excited face?”

“Exactly.”

“Hey check that out.”

She follows his pointed finger to a small strip mall at the edge of a park before he pulls into the lot in front of a posh storefront boasting fancy baby items.

A lone rotter scratches at the glass. Strips of skin hang from her teeth and blood coats her mouth, all clear evidence that she bit someone before getting stuck in here. After finding the door unlocked, Cole carefully stabs his knife through a small gap and leads the way inside.

It's like Disneyland for new parents. Rows upon rows of clothes and carriers, creams and blankets. She stands still, uncertain of where to start, with everything she needs at her fingertips.

“Whatcha waiting for? Let's go shopping.” He nudges her with a gentle elbow.

“Some of this would have been impossible to afford before the virus.”

“Now it's all free. Everything is. The only price we pay is survival.”

She aims for a rack of clothing first, picking up fluffy coats and tiny outfits in different colored stripes and patterns. Lays Lucy on a wide display table and holds one up to check the sizing.

“Heads up!” he calls out, tossing her a piece of clothing. “Gotta take that one.”

He tosses her a onesie with a fluffy white kitten on the front playing with a ball of yarn, the perfect visual representation of his nickname for the baby.

No time like the present to try it out. Olivia stuffs Lucy's tiny arms and legs into it on the spot, happy to see it fits and impressed at how patient her daughter is about all this fussing.

"What do you think?" She waves Cole over, showing off the new outfit with a proud smile on her lips.

Cole isn't often expressive. That joke about all his faces looking the same was spot on back at the car, but sometimes, if she pays close enough attention, she can see the difference. Like when he's worried and does that scowling squint, or now, when he's trying to hide his smile.

"Looks good. You got an opinion on this?" He directs that question to the baby, who faintly squeals in response, wrinkling her nose. "I'll take that to mean it's her favorite."

"Clearly so. She has good taste."

He's got the attention span of a fruit fly when he's shopping.

He grabs a new item every five seconds, constantly fiddling with them.

Olivia's busy stuffing diaper creams in her bag when she spots him wrapping a proper sling around himself, testing the weight it'll hold by pushing on the hammock with both hands .

He hadn't noticed she'd been staring at him the whole time. Watching this man, she's definitely not growing attracted to put on a baby sling like he'd be happy to cart

around her child.

“This is a good one,” he grunts, unsnapping the straps to shove it into his bag before handing her a second sling. “Not flimsy. Could put a bowling ball in this thing. We should get two in case we lose one.”

She tries it on right away, gasping in blissful approval. “Oh my god, it’s amazing. Look! No hands!”

He flashes her a thumbs-up in return.

Lucy is little, but carrying around this small bundle for hours on end can get heavy. Now, she can let her arms rest while the baby is safely nestled against her chest.

“I’m gonna see what they have in the back room,” she calls out. “Maybe a car seat that’ll fit her. Everything out here is too big.”

“Wait!”

Her hand already brushes the door handle when he yells out for her to stop and all at once she knows exactly what her mistake was.

“Check first.” He taps on the door, pressing his ear to the wood. “Hear ‘em?”

Sure enough, the groan of the dead percolates on the other side when she leans in close to listen. Olivia was about to walk right into that with Lucy like a complete fool. She was too lost in her head and it’s a costly mistake that could have risked their lives.

Cole cracks the door an inch, stabbing the first rotter easily, but the next one takes him by surprise. It’s barely knee-high, and he almost gets a child-sized bite to the leg

before ending it. Matching blonde hair, nearly platinum, confirms who the little one belonged to.

The silence that follows is eerie like the room revealed to them. Several employees lay mauled on the ground, a party banner tangled in one's arms and the intestines of another strewn across the floor.

“Must’ve been hiding from the one out there, and then someone turned.” He pulls out the knife tucked into the waistband of the woman’s pants, hefting its weight. “Try this one out.”

It’s silver and small, but with a blade long enough to do the job. Her fingers wrap around the handle easily, a perfect fit.

“I wasn’t thinking,” she whispers, gripping the knife tight. “I almost walked right in here.”

“No one got hurt. You made a mistake, but you won’t make that one again. Right?”

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She nods. He's not angry with her, but she's angry enough with herself for the both of them. "Right."

This is her first real weapon, pulled from a mother who couldn't protect her family and given to her so she can protect hers.

The kitchen knife before didn't count. She had to snatch it off Jason after he died, and the dull blade made it difficult to get a clean stab.

A shiver runs through her spine as she remembers how it got stuck twice in his skull and she had to shove the trash can between them while struggling to rip it free.

Her pulse skyrockets, pumping anxiety through her veins as the memory blanks her gaze and traps her all over again.

Cole's tap on her arm snaps her out of it, his worried voice reminding her she's miles from that subway station. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She's not, but complaining is useless and there's nothing to be done about ghosts.

"Not much else back here unless you want that leftover cake."

Her nose wrinkles at the rotten evidence of an employee party. "I'll pass. Let's load this stuff up and check out the next store."

The window glass is broken at the drugstore, and the shelves mostly empty but not

everything is gone. After Cole puts down two stragglers, she begins browsing what's left.

Instantly, she zeros in on a pack of condoms. The ceiling may as well have cracked to let in a single sunray highlighting the box for how quickly she fixates on it.

Her attention flits back to Cole, who's none the wiser, three aisles over.

Quickly, Olivia rips open the package and takes one, shoving it in her bag before she can talk herself out of it.

Doesn't have any illusions that he'll wake up one morning and decide she's desirable enough to sleep with.

No harm in taking one, though, even if she doesn't think she wants that again from anyone.

Better to be prepared.

He'll never know.

She veers away before having second thoughts and turns back to grab a small bottle of lube and rip open the magnum-size box next to the regulars, pilfering one of those, too.

Cole's got thick fingers and wide shoulders.

It stands to reason that other areas might also be well endowed.

Not that she's been thinking about that.

Olivia shakes her head. The idea of a magnum-sized dick coming anywhere near her at the moment isn't something she's eager about, but the stirrings of attraction she's been trying to deny are already brewing.

As time goes on, she may feel differently.

So, she has multiple condoms in her bag, in case the stars align in the distant future when she's not such a damn mess.

"Sixty percent alcohol in that." He points to Listerine on the shelf when she joins him again. "If we run outta other stuff, it'll clean a wound. I found a small camping grill, too. Some matches. Once we find somewhere to hunt, I can get us real food."

"You're good at this. Knowing how to keep going and make it all work."

He shrugs. "Not much different from how I lived before, just without all the dead people back then. It'll be easier to hunt with a bow. We won't waste bullets."

"Then we need to find a hunting store?"

"Mhmm. Or a hunter's cabin. Then we can take someone else's stash. I think we're still a while from good hunting grounds, though."

"It's okay. We'll get there when we get there."

He pauses, a crease forming on his forehead. "Do you hear that?"

She doesn't hear anything and shakes her head.

"It's coming from behind the building. Stay here."

“What? No. No way. We stick together.”

For a moment, she expects him to argue. It's safer in here with all the rotters managed. They have no clue what's emitting the mysterious noise out back, but one thing she will never be on board for is splitting up. She's seen that movie and it never ends well.

He only huffs and leads them outside and around the back, the high-pitched crying finally reaching her ears.

It sounds like another baby, she thinks, hoping like hell it's not.

The last thing they need is a second child to try to keep alive when the first one is already a full-time job.

It's only a mild relief when they're greeted with the source of the commotion.

A small cat in a pink harness, tethered to its owner by a leash, hops in place across a pond.

“Nope.” Cole shakes his head. “No. No way.”

“I didn't even say anything yet.”

“Well...we can't.”

She sends him a side eye, noticing the worry in his face, how he's begun to pace a few steps back and forth at the edge of the water.

“Fuck,” he growls. “We can't just leave it like this. Have to cut it loose at least.”

“It’s pretty close. I don’t think the water is deep—”

“I can’t.” He cuts in, his tone hard with a panicked edge to it. “I um... I got a thing.”

“A thing?”

“About water.”

She frowns, taking a moment to connect the dots before they fall into place. “Oh, okay, I’ll do it. Hold the baby.”

The cat’s cries have grown more frantic during this conversation.

Now that salvation is within reach, its attempts to escape its harness become increasingly desperate.

There’s not a chance she could simply leave it there.

Poor thing already looks thin and starving to death isn’t a good way to go.

If they left, this would weigh on her. She already carries enough guilt for a lifetime.

Cole, on the other hand, is not supportive of her crossing the pond to save the animal, despite seeming to agree on the rescue mission. “You can’t go in there. We dunno how deep it is. There’s a current. That rotter she’s hooked to is still moving.”

“Cole.” She turns to face him, shoving Lucy into his arms. “We are not leaving this cat to die. The water is barely knee-deep. I can see the bottom. The rotter isn’t going anywhere, a whole tree is holding her down.

It’s perfectly safe for me to wade a few feet across and cut the leash.

You're right here. If something does happen, you can help. Right?"

He's silent for a moment before nodding, though he doesn't appear any less stressed about this plan. She isn't sure if he's more worried about the rotter or the water, but as she begins to step into the pond, the agitated way he sharply inhales as if she'll get sucked under answers that question.

"I'm fine," she calls out, halfway over, turning her attention to the cat. "Hey there, we heard you all the way inside the building."

It's a gray tabby with a white chest and little white socks on all three legs.

The right front leg is missing. A half-healed wound remains, suggesting a close encounter with the owner's teeth before the cat learned to stay out of harm's way.

She wonders if they got caught in one of the recent storms and that's how the tree landed on the woman who still tries to eat the cat at the end of her six foot leash.

Staying clear of reaching hands, Olivia cuts the leash. She wishes she was brave enough, skilled enough, to put the rotter down, too, but she still has limits, and getting closer is one of them.

She expects the cat might run off once it's free, but she soon has an armful of fluff instead. It climbs up her leg and into her arms, the purring engine at full blast. Olivia laughs, reflexively hugging the animal closer as she carries it back across the water .

"I know we can't keep it," she says sadly. "But let's try to find her a safer place to let loose, okay?"

To her surprise, Cole doesn't argue. He nods, giving her a once-over. "You're okay?"

‘After getting in the water’ is left unsaid, and she wonders what happened to him to instill such a deep fear. He has been bold and unbothered by the horrors of this world since she met him, but a pond is his weakness.

“I’m good.” She offers him a gentle smile, running a free hand briefly down his arm in a comforting gesture before returning it to the cat in her grip. “Let’s find a place to stay the night.”

After getting back on the road again, it’s not long before another downed tree and several wrecked cars have them miles off course. They find a temporary refuge in a one-story house with a white fence, secluded and deserted. It’s easy enough to break in and make themselves at home.

There are three bedrooms, but they gravitate toward the same one without a word. Sleeping apart isn’t safe, and she doesn’t want a wall between her and Cole should something happen.

The bed is big enough to share, and she’s not against it.

Knows he’d stay on his side and respect her space, but suggesting it is difficult and in the end, she can’t find the words.

She hands him a couple of pillows instead when he spreads out a blanket on the floor and hates that she can’t even be brave enough to offer him a soft bed when he’s done so much for them already.

“Should we sleep in shifts?” she asks.

“No, it’s alright. The doors are locked. Got a chair blocking this one. If anyone tries coming in, we’ll hear it. ”

Lucy is nestled into a portable mini bassinet they found earlier, attempting to chew on a fist that her kitten onesie protects.

The actual kitten has made herself at home on Cole's chest and Olivia smiles down at the image, watching the production of one-pawed air biscuits. "Are you a cat person?"

"I never gave it much thought." He strokes the animal's fur with a slow hand and fingers the air tag embedded into a pink collar after removing the tile tracker that hung low enough to catch on something.

"Never had pets growing up. Thought I might get a dog someday but it's a lot of responsibility to care for something like that.

Didn't trust myself with it. Someone loved this one enough to put two tracking devices on her before they knew those would be useless now.

She deserves a chance, and she has better odds with us than out there alone. "

"What does her name tag say? I haven't checked it yet."

He flips the muddy metal tag around and wipes it clean with his thumb. "Flower."

She smiles up at the ceiling. Flower got lucky today.

The fact that Cole worried he wouldn't get pet ownership right proves he's exactly the type to have taken wonderful care of one, but she doesn't push, choosing to shift topics rather than risk making him uncomfortable. "It's starting to get dark earlier."

"Mhmm. The higher we go in elevation, the faster it freezes, too. Have to be ready for that."

Winter presents its own set of problems and she hopes like hell they'll have reached the farm by then. She doesn't want to imagine freezing out here with a baby, moving from place to place.

As they settle into their respective beds, she grows restless. It's still early, but she's always willing to take advantage of a quiet moment for a nap, except now there are a dozen different winter scenarios playing in her head.

"Tell me more about this farm?" she asks. "What was it like?"

"Had apple trees you could pick from in the fall. Animals to pet. Sheep and some cows. Couple horses they'd hook up to a sled in the winter. Right in the Blue Ridge mountains, views for miles."

"Sounds beautiful."

"I used to wish I could live there. Used to think maybe one day I'd have something like that of my own, but that was never gonna happen."

"It could now."

"Only because the owners are probably dead and there's no one around to keep us out. Didn't earn it."

"You've survived. That's the price we pay for what we want, right? Someone pretty smart told me that once."

"Maybe they were onto something."

"I think so."

“It’ll be nice for Lucy out there,” he continues. “Safe as anywhere can be now.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

She’s half worried someone else might have gotten there first. Or that the owners are ready and waiting with their shotguns, but no sense in dwelling on it tonight.

It’s the best plan they have and they’ll find out soon enough if their destination will welcome them with open arms or shove them out the door.

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Olivia's having a dream and it's not a good one.

He heard her whimpering pitifully before, but never this loudly or for this long.

He wouldn't want to be stuck in a nightmare and hates the idea of leaving her trapped, but Cole fears spooking her by waking her up.

So, he stays on his makeshift floor bed with the cat purring at his side, useless and silent.

He's prone to lashing out with a reflexive right hook in that situation, but something tells him she isn't that type.

He still hesitates, questioning both his right and ability to free her from the clutches of an awful dream.

Surprisingly, Lucy has slept soundly through it until Olivia's cries grow more desperate, and then the baby squeaks awake.

He has to do something, he just isn't sure what yet.

Gets off the floor and hovers at the edge of the bed as she twitches in her sleep.

His fingers twitch in response against his thigh with the desire to reach out.

Cole dips the mattress with his weight and reaches a gentle hand into the bassinet to soothe Lucy instead. "It's alright. Your momma's having a dream, but it's okay."

At first, it works. She hears his voice and quiets down, but then Olivia lets out a piercing scream and Lucy does, too.

Enough is enough. He can't sit here while she suffers because he's too afraid to overstep his bounds, but he waited too long and she wakes on her own before he can give her shoulder a nudge.

She scrambles away from him faster than she did in the subway bathroom, disoriented and overcome, almost falling off the bed in her haste to escape.

"It's just me." He still sounds like he smokes a pack a day even after trying to quit and doubts his voice does much to calm her. "Only a nightmare. Wasn't real."

They're useless words, pointless and common, but she relaxes as quickly as Lucy did, her shoulders sagging and body unsticking from the headboard.

She wipes wet eyes with the back of her hand, releasing a stressed exhale.

For a moment, he wants to hug her. It's a foolish idea that might get him banished to a separate bedroom from here on out, so he doesn't try.

She has an odd habit of making him consider things that have never been an option before. He'd rather walk through a herd of the dead than hug anyone and yet...if they were close enough for something like that, he might force himself to push his own boundaries.

They are not.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?" She snuffles, hiking the rumpled blanket up her body.

"No, don't worry about it."

“I woke her, though.” Olivia scoops the baby into her arms, pressing a wet cheek to soft blonde hair and inhaling deep. “Have I done this before? Made noise in my sleep?”

“Not much.”

“I’ve been having nightmares, but don’t remember waking up. I keep hoping they’ll stop. Every time I close my eyes, I see...”

“You see what?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. It is what it is.”

“Try me.”

“You don’t wanna hear about that.” She sighs when he only raises a silent brow, waiting for her to continue. “Him. I see him. In that bathroom coming at us, or before, when she wasn’t even here yet, the virus hadn’t happened, and he was coming at me anyway.”

She’s right. He doesn’t want to think about that.

The mental image of her being attacked by her dead husband isn’t a thought he wants in his head.

There’s nothing he can do about it now except let it enrage him, but she needs to talk and he’s a decent listener.

That doesn’t mean he’s got any useful suggestions for her, though.

He’s failed to get rid of his own nightmares after all these years.

“Maybe it’ll just take time, like you said before,” she continues. “He’s dead. I know he’s not coming back. I have plenty of other things now to replace him with in these nightmares.”

“He’s not coming back, but sometimes that logical shit doesn’t matter. I still have dreams, too.”

“About what? Or who?”

It was forever ago. Doesn’t matter now and he’ll only seem like a loser who can’t let go of the past, but she’s watching him with such open honesty, so hopeful that he may offer her validation that he can’t ignore it.

So, he tells her what he’s never told anyone.

Not even Wade, though he suspects he knows anyway since he suffered a similar fate.

“One of my foster parents. He wasn’t winning any father of year awards back in the day.

” Is all he says, but her face goes soft like she wants to reach out across this bed and touch him, though her hand never moves.

“Got moved a lot. Most of them didn’t care enough to bother me.

Some were in it for the checks, a few were kind and decent.

A lot were indifferent. He was indifferent too until one day he wasn’t. ”

He’s barely said more than a full sentence and it still feels like too much.

The itch to escape pushes him off the bed and to the window, where peeking through the blinds feels safer.

Memories of that man bring back the sting of water in his lungs.

Finding the cat at the pond the other day was only another nudge.

Cole's surprised he wasn't caught in his own nightmare tonight.

"I'm sorry you had to live through that," she says softly.

"Sorry you did, too." He chews on his bottom lip a moment, fighting an internal battle to keep every awful detail a coveted secret. "The thing I have about water...it's because of him."

"Oh." There's no pity in her tone, only the desire to understand. He expects she might pry deeper and his grip on the windowsill clenches hard enough that his knuckles whiten.

He is thankful when she grants him the gift of keeping the majority of this secret, at least for now.

"So they never really go away? The nightmares?"

He shrugs. "They've faded. I don't wake up yelling as much anymore but they never disappeared. I hope they will for you, though. Could be I'm just extra fucked in the head."

No sense in sugarcoating it. Some things creep into your soul and make a home there. He's no expert at making peace with what's happened to him. He's only tried to forget.

“Well, if I do it again, you can shake me. I’ll wake up,” she says .

“Shake you?”

“Yeah.”

“Not gonna do that, and fair warning if you shake me when I’m having one, I’ll come up swinging without knowing what the fuck I’m doing. So don’t do that, okay? I don’t wanna hurt you.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe I’ll nudge you next time. A little bit.”

“That works.” Her lips curve into a gentle smile, fingers playing with Lucy’s tiny fabric-covered hands.

For the first time, someone’s caught a glimpse of the part of himself he hides with every ounce of effort he can manage, and she hasn’t turned away in disgust. That’s throwing him off by a mile.

Then, the crash of broken glass shifts both of their attention.

Urging Olivia and the baby into a closet, he hears other doors down the hall creak open and the rustling of rooms being ransacked reverberating off the walls.

She wants to help, but Lucy needs her mother more. Hiding is the only option.

Cole flattens against the wall beside the door, waiting as the hinges rattle before it pops open with brute force. The moment he sees the back of another man’s head, he shoves the gun against it and catches an elbow to the face a second later, scrambling

and wrestling with a stranger.

He learned street fighting from Wade and the kids at school long before the army taught him anything.

There is a bulk to him that makes overpowering someone easier, and he uses his weight, the heft in his biceps and chest, to hold his own.

At least, until his attacker pushes in close, reaches around, and slashes a knife across his back, ripping open an old scar that healed years ago.

A kick lands him flat on the floor, shock dragging up long-buried memories, while thick hands wring his neck and squeeze hard. He digs his thumbs into soft eyeballs and cracks a fist across a strong jaw, earning a left hook to the chin that mirrors the one he threw.

He's left dazed, but the sight of someone rushing to the closet at the sound of Lucy crying is better than a shot of adrenaline to the heart.

Fear for their safety shoves him forward to grab a handful of the man's shirt collar, yanking him off his feet in what feels like slow motion to toss him onto the bed.

Grabbing the fallen gun, Cole wastes no time in firing a bullet into his opponent's forehead.

His knees slam into the rough carpet as the closet door creaks open, his lungs burning and his throat aching from attempted strangulation.

"Are you okay? Both of you?" He can see with his own eyes that they're fine, but he's having a hard time convincing himself that he wasn't too late. That some stranger didn't get to them and do god knows what before he could stop it. That he

wasn't strong enough to save them.

Olivia nods. "We're good, but you're bleeding."

The moment she points it out, the pain is ten times worse, flaring to life like a fire poker dug deep into his skin.

He twists around like a crazy person trying to look at his back and shrugs off Olivia's attempts to help. "Don't touch it. I got it. I can handle it."

The only option is to put a door between them so he can lick his wounds alone, so that's exactly what he does. Falls back on old habits and escapes to the bathroom after pushing a dresser in front of the main door to keep them safe .

He leaves her out there with a baby and a dead body and he's gonna feel like shit about that later, but right now he's too busy panicking.

Rips his shirt off and twists around to get a good look in the mirror, freezing solid at the sight of a firm lash across the middle.

His fingers shake as he tries to reach, only brushing the edges where blood runs warm.

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He sways on his feet, remembering how he earned that scar the first time, and it had been the very first time . Hears that man's drunken voice and smells the scent of whiskey that crackles up his nostrils like a switch crackling through humid air.

“Cole? Can I come in?”

“I’m fine,” he lies. “Gimme a minute.”

Her shadow darkens the threshold, but she doesn’t ask again.

He shoves a towel into the wall and pushes his back against it to stem the flow, just as he had done years ago when he was left to suffer and heal alone in his room, coughing up water and bleeding onto his bed sheets.

Couldn’t reach it then either. He was always surprised that it healed over at all, but the marks left behind were proof he needed more medical care than he ever got.

Slowly, he slides down until his ass hits the ground, towel firmly against his back and head in his hands. Tries to push his memories to the back burner and get his shit together. This isn’t the time to fall apart. It’s been forever. It’s over. Done.

That asshole was just some guy with a knife. It wasn’t personal.

He can’t hide away in here forever when he’s got other people to think about and that’s the only thing that gets him on his feet again with a pained groan.

“Can you hand me the bag with the supplies?” he asks sheepishly through the door.

She would help him, but he can't let her. Not yet, maybe not ever.

When she cracks the door and offers the bag, he can't even meet her eyes. He only takes the supplies and shuts it again, dousing himself with peroxide that makes him see stars and somehow securing a sticky bandage on his back after a game of twister.

Her face only holds concern and her eyes sympathy that he doesn't want or deserve when he leaves the protective bathroom cocoon.

"Shouldn't have left you out here like this, with him. Wasn't thinking."

"We're okay. It's you I'm worried about."

"It's nothing. I'll heal up fine." The gaping slash across the fabric he wears, rimmed in red, proves he's nowhere near fine. The cat wraps around his legs, squeaking out a half a silent meow and he huffs a sound of amusement. "Good to see you're fine, too."

"What do you think he wanted?" Olivia says, quietly.

"Probably the same thing we do. Food. Somewhere to sleep. I don't think he was planning on finding us."

Cole killed him anyway. He forced a confrontation with his gun and once the fight started, once Lucy gave away their hiding spot in the closet, there was no turning back. It didn't matter then if this guy was decent or not. Couldn't risk giving him a chance.

"You had no choice," she tells him, as if she can see the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. "You were protecting us."

He isn't a killer, except now he is and he'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. No regrets. Cole shivers at the memory of the man rushing toward the closet at the first hint of something innocent behind it.

"Let's get out of here," he grunts, ready to leave this house, the dead body, and the nightmares suffered within its walls behind.

* * *

It's still dark outside, with only the barest sparkle of sunlight peaking over the horizon when they leave the house in search of greener, more secluded pastures.

The first few miles pass in silence. No trace of that easy teasing he was starting to like, and that's his fault for behaving like a lion with a thorn in his paw. He can't blame her for not wanting to risk him lashing out.

His back aches, leaving him unable to get comfortable. The sticky part of the bandage caught a split part of his wound, tugging every time he shifts and making him wish it were easier to accept help.

"Can we pull over? I need to pee," she says.

He finds a spot and pulls the car onto the shoulder, getting an armful of Lucy while Olivia heads for a bush.

"Don't go far," he calls out. "I wanna see the top of your head or a hand or something."

She sticks her hand out with a wave. "This is a weird yoga position."

He huffs, glancing down at Lucy, who doesn't seem to be an early riser. He thought

babies stayed awake most of the night. She gets up more than a few times to eat, but given the chance, she'll sleep in like she's doing now. It's one of the last peaceful sights left in a ruined world .

“Your momma’s silly,” he whispers, watching her face turn into his chest, seeking out the warmth. “I’m screwing up here again. Can’t seem to stop doing that.”

She offers no suggestions and when he looks up to check in on Olivia, she’s already slipping into the passenger side and leaning her head against the seat with a sigh.

“I sometimes forget that there’s still plenty of other people left who aren’t as helpful as the care home was. He won’t be the last one we run into.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you or her.”

“I know, but I need to be able to help. Sometimes I’ll have to hide with her, but if we’re in a situation where I can, then I want to. I was about five seconds from trying to do something back there and I don’t know if I actually could have. I don’t like feeling helpless.”

“You’ve got some serious skills with a frying pan already.”

She cracks a half grin. “There won’t always be a skillet nearby.”

“I can show you a few things. Where to hit if you have to? How to slip out of someone’s grip. Only if you’re feeling up for it.”

“I am.”

“We gotta get one thing straight, though. You don’t use anything I show you to help me. Not ever. Something happens and I’m hurt and there’s even the smallest fucking

chance you'll get hurt too, then you stay hiding. Run the other way. Leave me behind. You got it?"

She hesitates. "I can't promise tha—"

"Then I won't show you. You have to swear you'll only use it to defend yourself, not me. It's not your job to keep me safe. That's the deal. Take it or leave it. "

"What if I want to protect Flower?" she deadpans.

He doesn't take the bait. "I'm being serious right now."

Reluctantly, Olivia nods, though he has his doubts about her follow-through. "Fine. I'll take it."

"Okay. Next time we settle in somewhere, I'll show you how to use the gun too, but that's only for emergencies. It's too damn loud."

She offers him a tentative smile, her gaze shifting to Lucy sleeping peacefully in his arms. "Go team."

"See, told you your momma's silly," he says to the baby.

Olivia's smile only gets brighter, her next offer careful even if he can tell how much she wants him to say yes. "I can drive for a while. Just point me in the right direction."

He agrees without a fuss, switches places with her, and wraps that sling around himself for Lucy to sleep in.

It's not as safe as a car seat, but better than nothing.

He's free to fidget as much as he needs now, too, and doesn't have to rest his back against the seat, so he leans on the door instead, grateful Olivia doesn't comment.

He's going to teach her how to fight and make sure she can protect that baby if something happens to him. Today served as a reminder of how possible that is.

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Olivia feels the misery coming off him in waves and every bump in the road is a fresh reminder. The slash in Cole's shirt is clear, and blood stains through the makeshift bandage, though she hasn't seen the severity of his injuries yet.

It's hard to reach the middle of the back alone. She's tried and failed herself more than once.

He could get an infection if it's not cleaned.

If the wound is deep enough to require stitches, it won't heal properly without them.

She could help, but he won't let her, so she keeps her mouth shut and doesn't ask again.

Yet. Instead, she points her attention at the low, soft song, courtesy of another CD, and how cute Lucy is snuggled against him in that sling.

It may not be the best time to let her mind run wild, but the sight of him with the baby, so natural and easy, is doing things to her, despite her denial.

When they hit an unavoidable pothole, the cat sleeping on the dashboard bounces. Cole curses and pulls Lucy closer, pressing his shoulder into the door and temple against the glass.

"Sorry. The roads are all bad out here."

"It's fine," he grumbles.

“Take some Tylenol or Advil? There’s plenty left. ”

To her surprise, he doesn’t snap or ignore her efforts, but swallows two pills like candy.

That’s how she knows it’s bad. He’d refuse if he could, no matter how hard she pushed, but this time it took no coaxing.

When the burn gets worse, he might rethink refusing another set of hands.

She’ll offer again once he calms down, and the medication takes effect.

A plume of smoke from the car hood abruptly halts their progress, stalling the engine and leaving them stranded in the middle of an empty, tree-lined street.

“Fuck,” she whispers.

He groans. “It’s always something.”

Exiting the car, they both gape at the problem. Cole, without thinking, pops the hood, earning a cloud to the face. He coughs and sputters and so does the baby in the sling who’s erupted into a fit of dismayed screaming.

“I’m sorry. Come on, it’s alright. You’re good. You’re good. ” He’s panicked, looking to her for direction while rocking a disgruntled Lucy. “I got a bunch of smoke in her face. Shit, I didn’t mean to.”

“It was an accident. She doesn’t know that yet, but I do. She’ll be fine.”

Olivia’s not happy that her newborn inhaled car fumes, but it’s over now and Cole already feels awful. He unstraps the sling and returns the child to her as if he’d

committed an intentional sin.

He's already in a bad place, and this makes things worse.

The baby is still screaming, Cole's still bleeding, Flower is hanging from the sunroof by one paw, and the car is smoking out its last breath.

They're caught in a clusterfuck and the grumble of rotters emerging from the trees leaves them no choice but to abandon their only ride .

Cole grabs their bags from the back, pops the trunk, and snatches out another that the care home nurse stashed there.

Then they're rushing onto a separate side road, putting distance between them and the herd.

It's not difficult to get away, their enemies are slow and stupid, and breaking line of sight is most of the battle.

Lucy continues to wail, though, and others are sure to follow.

"Over there, see it?" He points to a small, crumbling house peeking out from overgrowth and she follows his lead to the front door where he busts open a window and grants them entry.

It's an older home, maybe a summer cottage, she thinks as they clear the rooms one by one.

Dust coats the furniture and shimmers across beams of sunlight.

If anything in here wanted to hurt them, it would have come rushing out by now, but

she stays plastered to Cole, a baby in one arm and a cat on her shoulder, as they methodically check anyway.

In the end, they're gifted good news when it's confirmed deserted. Desperately, she settles on a worn sofa once it's safe and offers Lucy the only thing that'll earn her silence. A meal.

Cole busies himself shutting all the curtains, checking locks, and raiding the pantry. He's got a table full of canned goods when she finds him later in the kitchen, staring out the window toward a withered, sun-drenched garden.

"I think there are tomato plants out there, and that big tree in the back will be full of walnuts in the summer," he says.

"We scored. Those are my favorite nut."

He shakes his head. "Is that right?"

"Yep." There's a dirty joke in there somewhere, and she purses her lips in a tease before changing the subject. "Did you see the playpen? They had children here. "

"Lucy can use that?"

"Not yet, but eventually."

"I'm really sorry," he says. "I gave your baby a whole lungful of smoke. Dunno, what I was thinking."

"Cole, she's okay. It was two seconds before you moved away. She's not holding any grudges."

He nods, but remains unconvinced.

“Will you take her a while? I’m gonna get started on one of these.” She unceremoniously hands over the baby, proving she still trusts him when he’s having a hard time trusting himself. “You hungry? We’ve got plenty of canned ravioli from the looks of it and...six cans of cat food.”

He sighs, sitting at the table while she searches for a can opener. “I could eat.”

“This is a nice place. Maybe we can rest here a while.”

“Mhmm. Couple days if we’re lucky.”

She expected more push back, but he’s as eager for some downtime as she is.

They make it through half their meal before he forgets to keep pressure off his back and leans against the chair, gasping in regret at his mistake. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She hasn’t asked yet, but he’s already cutting off her concern. “You should let me take a look at it. If it needs stitches, I know how. We’ve got the supplies. Once it begins scabbing over, it’s too late.”

“How’d you get this skill? First aid classes?”

“YouTube. It’s the kinda thing you need to know when going to the ER too often makes people ask questions.”

She’s stitched herself up more than once.

Jason even bought her the supplies, delivered directly to their door in a happy little box.

A deep cut above her brow, a slice across her hip, and an open wound in the meat of her thigh all could have used a doctor's skill. That luxury wasn't worth the risk.

For a moment, she thinks Cole might agree and has to keep herself from leaning forward in anticipation, but that flicker of acceptance quickly fades.

"Don't think it needs 'em." Is all he says, shoveling food into his mouth while she rocks Lucy.

"Okay."

She's walking a thin line already. Surprised he hasn't bolted clear across the house the moment she brought it up. If she tries again, he might. It's better to pick her battles than risk crumbling the tentative trust they've pieced together.

"Did you see what I found in the corner?" He points to a large bow propped against the wall, hefty enough to take down a deer and then some.

Her eyes light up and a smile blooms fast. "You can use that?"

"Hell yeah. We'll be eating good soon. There are plenty of woods around here. Should be easy pickings."

"This is a windfall," she says, wistfully. "Maybe we were meant to find this place. Look at all it has to offer already."

"Dunno if I believe in all that fate and 'meant to be' stuff, but I'll take this bit of luck."

He might not believe it, and she has her own moments of doubt, but the longer she spends with him, the more she thinks they were placed on this path together for a

reason. That isn't something she'll voice, though. Not a chance.

They finish eating in comfortable silence and spend the afternoon in an arrow crafting lesson.

Plenty of branches to pick from in the yard and he's a good teacher.

Her first arrow is a little lopsided but usable and he high-fives her as if she did something amazing.

Olivia soaks up the positive reinforcement like a dry sponge.

Having someone root for her success instead of cheering on her failure is a welcome contrast from what she's used to.

Tells herself she's not trying to impress him, but that's a lie, at least on some buried level she doesn't want to acknowledge yet.

"I didn't know the army taught DIY arrow crafting." She smiles.

Cole shrugs. "They don't. One of my foster sisters taught me back in the day. Her father taught her before he..."

She squints. "Before he what?"

"Depression made him eat a bullet, and he was the only family she had."

"Oh."

"Yeah." He holds an arrow up to the sunlight, checking the smoothness of the point.

"No shortage of horror stories back then. We all had one. I only spent one summer

with her and then she was off to some other house.”

“Can I um, and you can ignore me, or refuse to answer, or anything else. No pressure, but—”

“You wanna know how I ended up in the system?” He finishes for her.

Olivia nods.

“Never knew my real parents. They left me on the steps of a church when I was a few days old and that’s all the story I’ve ever gotten.

” His gaze lands on a sleeping Lucy swaddled on the sofa.

“I never understood it then and I still don’t now, but it is what it is.

People leave, that’s how the world works. Even more so now.”

She wonders if this obvious sense of deep-rooted abandonment is part of the reason he refuses to abandon her and the baby. There’s an odd feeling simmering in her chest, squeezing her heart. It begs her to offer him some security, no matter how ridiculous that might be.

“Not everyone leaves,” she replies gently, before her tone turns teasing, always wary of toeing the line. “I mean, you’re certainly never getting rid of me. Apocalypse tour guide and now free arts and craft classes? You know how to woo a girl.”

He snorts, ducking his head. “It was the arrow whittling that hooked you, huh?”

“Oh yeah, big time. You’re stuck with me now.”

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They're both smiling in this dimly lit room where specks of dust catch the sunlight and shimmer like orbs.

It's comfortable and easy until their eyes lock and looking away becomes a struggle.

Tension crackles between them in a brand new way and the urge to glance down at his lips almost overwhelms her.

He swallows hard and heat spreads between her legs in a forbidden reaction.

It's unfamiliar and shocking, and more than enough to startle her from whatever trance captured them both.

She coughs to clear her throat of a non-existent tickle and turns her attention back to the arrow. When she sneaks a look at him again, he's already working on the next bolt in his pile, seemingly unbothered.

The tension was solely a figment of her imagination, and if she doesn't stop creating these fantasies, she'll only face heartbreak later.

* * *

Olivia makes a dozen arrows before they quit for the night and head for the master bedroom. The idea of him sleeping on the floor in his condition isn't appealing and so she tries her best to offer what she knows he won't take.

"We can share. There's plenty of room. I'll even put the baby between us like a

barrier.” She jokes, trying to ease the mood, but it doesn’t work.

“Thanks, but I’ll be moving around a lot. I’ll keep you both awake trying to get comfortable. I’m good down here.” He grabs a blanket off a chair and takes the pillow she sadly hands over.

“You’re sure?”

“Mhmm.”

She doesn’t like this. He’s hurting and miserable, and when the top of his head disappears past the mattress, her face breaks when she knows he can’t see her, flushing with regret and frustration.

Maybe everything she hoped they were building with all these tiny steps isn’t as strong as she thought if she can’t even keep him off the floor.

Reluctantly, she accepts defeat for now, laying Lucy on the bed on her stomach. She hasn’t spent much time out of the sling or the swaddle and it’s important that she gets to do normal baby things, like all that ‘tummy time’ stuff Olivia read about in books.

She didn’t expect what she sees next, though, and it has her scaring the crap out of Cole with her surprise. “Cole! Look!”

He’s on his feet at a moment’s notice, knife in hand, ready to fight whatever might challenge them. She’ll feel bad about startling him later. Right now, the smile on her face stalls his mission as she points to the baby.

“She’s picking her head up?” he whispers, as awestruck as she feels once his adrenaline tapers off.

Olivia nods, her excitement and pride blossoming. Her first thought was to share this milestone with him.

“You know...” He settles back down on the floor, arms braced on the bedside and attention on Lucy. “I thought earlier that she was looking at me harder. You know what I mean? Focusing.”

“I saw that, too. She’s been watching us more. Tracking with her eyes.”

Her happiness over Lucy is something she’s kept to herself for nine months, expecting that to hold true for the foreseeable future, but there’s something so unexpectedly perfect about seeing her feelings reflected in Cole’s reaction.

“You’re the smartest one.” He taps Lucy’s hand with a light finger. “Today, picking your head up, tomorrow crawling around.”

Olivia lets out a gentle laugh. “I think that’s still a ways off.”

“Gonna be the best at it when it happens, though,” he says confidently, as if her daughter is the most skilled baby left on this planet.

Leftover hormones make her eyes water. Lucy is growing and changing, and that’s enough to have her emotions in overdrive.

The fact that Cole seems as delighted as she is has absolutely nothing to do with it.

Nope. It definitely doesn’t have her affection for him growing three sizes when she assumed it already reached reasonable levels.

* * *

A nightmare startles her awake while it's still dark. Although she isn't screaming this time, she is alone, and instead of Cole's voice reassuring her, there's only silence.

Scanning the room proves it empty aside from a sleeping Lucy and a purring Flower stretched out across a window ledge.

It's safe enough to go look for him, so she moves quietly toward the hall.

Her knife is ready, but the bathroom across from the bedroom offers a quick solution through the cracked door.

Cole's hands press firmly to the sink, his head hanging low and the rest of him half obscured by the wall.

Her fear of spooking him is at an all-time high. He's suffering and he wouldn't give up on her if it were reversed. He's stoic and silent when she pushes the door open, maybe sensing her there and resigning himself to the fact that she won't let this go.

There's a white bandage hanging off his back coated in blood, but her attention is drawn to the other scars across his skin climbing like ivy in every direction.

Burns, she assumes, noting the flat patchwork of healing his body has attempted.

They were created a long time ago, and their impact still resonates and flourishes in a flinching ripple as she moves closer.

Anticipation causes his shoulders to hitch as she prepares to make contact, the hard muscle in his braced arms coiling tightly.

He hasn't run yet. If he wanted her gone, he'd have made that known, so she waits silently, hoping he'll allow himself what he needs but is so afraid to accept.

Fear rolls off him and vibrates into her palm as it lays flat against his shoulder.

“I was at my lowest when you found me,” she says, softly. “I’ve told you what haunts my nightmares. Talked to you about embarrassing things. You’ve seen me hurting and vulnerable, but you’ve always made me feel safe. You can trust me to give you that in return. Let me help you. Please. ”

He only nods, head still bowed and arms stretched taut like the sink is the only thing keeping him upright.

She doesn’t waste time now that she has permission, carefully peeling the bandage away to reveal a deep, weeping slice as long as her hand. “You need stitches. No question. Gimme a second to grab the supplies.”

He pilfered an extensive first aid kit from a nurse’s room at the drug store and she pulls it from a bag in the bedroom, rushing back to lay it out on the counter. She promised not to, but she’ll hurt him all over again.

Cole lets her clean the area and spread a dollop of numbing cream across the outer edges without so much as a twitch. When she apologizes for what she’s about to do, he absolves her with an even “It’s alright”.

She works fast, stitching clean and straight until there’s a simple line left behind.

Forces herself not to pause even as she fights to keep her fingers from shaking.

Doing this on someone else isn’t the same as doing it on herself.

Before, she could stop when the pain was too much, but Cole gives her no indication one way or another.

He holds still without protest, his muscles rippling with every stitch.

She's finished only a few minutes later, and places a fresh strip of gauze across the area, mindful not to tug at the edges.

"All done," she tells him. "These should dissolve on their own, so at least we don't need to worry about that. Come on, let's get back to bed."

He's been stone still and quiet until now, but all that built-up stress comes out in rapid puffs, his hands squeezing hard against the counter's edge.

She guides him toward the bed, but he won't lay down, preferring instead to sit up with his arms hanging off bent knees, the way he keeps glancing at her from the corner of his eye hinting that he's working up the courage to say something, and so she perches on the edge of the mattress and waits.

"He caught me smoking," Cole begins. "It was one of the house rules that no one was allowed to smoke. Gave us some speech when we got there about how his father died from it, and his father before him, and so on. Didn't seem to give a shit what else we did, but smoking was the one thing we were explicitly told not to do."

He pauses, running his hands through his hair, and she already hates where this is going.

"I was fourteen. Got cigarettes from some kid at school and smoked 'em out back one night, coughing my lungs up because they tasted like shit. He heard me. Came looking. He was so much bigger than me, so much bigger. Grabbed me up so fast I hardly saw it coming. Dragged me back into the house and into the bathroom and filled up the tub. I tried to get away, but he punched me in the face and I dropped like a fucking rock. Next thing I know, he's shoving me into the tub face first, holding me under until it felt like I'd drown, until the water burned my chest. Would ask me if

the smoke was worth it and dunk me under a second time...

a third time...the fourth time I almost blacked out and I must have headbutted him without even knowing because I got loose and he was bleeding and fuck I never felt a beating as hard as what happened after.

Never felt worse than trying to breathe after almost drowning while getting punched in the gut.

When he left me alone I stumbled back outside, and I was so dazed, so fucking dazed, I didn't even know where I was going, only that I had to get away and then I fell into the fire pit he snuffed out earlier, still smoldering deep inside.

Scalded a few layers off my back. Rolled away and into the dirt and passed out.

That's where the scars came from. That's what I scream about at night. That's why I can't go near water."

"Cole..." Her voice is gentle, and he bristles.

"It was my own fault. He warned me not to smoke, and I did it anyway."

"You were a child, doing what children do. They test their boundaries. It's normal. Nothing he did was your fault."

"I can go weeks, or months without thinking about it at all. No nightmares, nothing. And then stress from something else will get my brain all screwed up and I'm right back there like I never left. Feeling the water in my lungs and the panic of not being able to breathe."

He exhales hard, like finally telling someone has lifted a weight, but then the shame

of speaking it all aloud colors his cheeks.

“Some marks go deep enough that they become part of who we are. I still have nightmares about things my husband did to me years ago, even now, when I should be dreaming about other, more dangerous horrors, like all the dead people walking the earth.”

He snorts, wiping at his face. “Living in a real life horror movie and it’s these fuckers haunting us instead of—” He gestures vaguely to encompass the state of the world. “Alla that.”

“I never claimed it made sense. Come on, try and get some sleep okay? It’s still early enough you can grab a few hours.

” She urges him onto his side and tucks the covers to his chest. He has to be uncomfortable, but he goes easily this time and it doesn’t take long for his breathing to even out, and not even Lucy waking to be changed later causes him to stir.

It’s only then, after the baby is settled back in her spot between them and Olivia rests her head on the pillow, that she allows herself to really look at him.

Sleep has smoothed out his stress lines, making him appear younger, and she feels an instinctive urge to protect him.

So much of his behavior makes more sense now that she’s seen these extra pieces of his story.

He’s been a consistent source of strength for her since they met, helping her feel safe for the first time in years while lacking that same safety himself for who knows how long.

‘ Not your job to keep me safe.’ He told her earlier, but he’s wrong.

It is her job now, one she’s glad to accept no matter how much he might refuse and she expects he will again. She’s learning how to navigate that minefield, though. Go slow and easy, ignore the outbursts or the fear like it’s no big deal. Be gentle and quiet, as if she’s coaxing a cornered animal.

It’s not far off from how she needs to be treated herself when she’s hurt or afraid. He mastered those skills with her right off the bat. Now she knows why.

The possibility that they met for a reason, that fate gave them a shove, seems even more likely than before. He might not believe that yet, but she can believe it enough for both of them.

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The first thing Cole sees when he wakes is Olivia's beautiful face.

The morning sun hits her sparse freckles, highlighting them like stardust, lashes fluttering delicately on closed lids.

There's an angel sleeping across from him and the moment that thought enters his brain, he scowls at himself.

Needs to quit watching her, but he's transfixed in a whole new way and that's when he realizes he's ass over heels for this woman.

She showed him the smallest amount of human kindness and, like a dog fed a hearty meal after starvation, he's latched onto her.

The moment she saw the horrific remnants of his broken childhood and didn't run, his efforts at staying emotionally distant crumbled.

Offered acceptance and even a dose of coveted affection, he's completely lost, with no hope of resistance.

Cole's back still aches, but he slept soundly last night. That unfamiliar feeling of being taken care of wrapped around him like an embrace and he drifted off easy.

She snuggles deeper into the pillow and he tries like hell to rationalize that he can't be falling in love with her. Allowing those feelings to grow would be crazy.

That part of him has always been broken, and even if it wasn't, it's simply too early.

It's only one-sided. She doesn't feel the same and never will.

Kindness doesn't equal attraction and he shouldn't assume her being decent to him means anything. Having only a few awful one-night stands in his past has left him unfamiliar with all of this, and his fucked-up brain is exaggerating the situation.

Seeking a distraction, he forces himself out of bed, careful to avoid shifting it, and moves barefoot to the kitchen.

Wants to do something nice for her, especially after what happened last night, so he putters around the cabinets, rechecking what he already looted the other day.

There's a box of chai tea bags in the back of a shelf and the teakettle on the stove confirms it's a solid idea.

There's no real breakfast food, but plenty of snacks, so he grabs granola bars and sets them down on the table, agonizing over the placement longer than he should before heating a can of corned beef hash. The type he'd put an egg over if they had a chicken, which they don't.

There's a winter flower bush right outside the window begging for one of its stems to grace the table next to her plate. It's a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Flowers and food go together. It's not romantic. They are only friends.

He marches out there and snags a pink one, putting it on the table.

Takes it away a second later. She'll think it's stupid.

Puts it back again. Women like flowers. It won't hurt anything to leave it there.

Cole, having already prepared the plates, takes the kettle off the stove just before it

whistles.

When Olivia emerges with Lucy in her arms, and a cat weaving through her legs, surprise parts her lips.

He fights the urge to squirm, rethinking his effort until she gives him one of those perfect smiles, like he's the best thing she's seen all day, all week. Ever.

"No one's made me breakfast before," she says, as if he's given her five-star service. "I mean, not that you did it just for me. Obviously. Do you want something to drink? I can get—"

"No, I got it and...I did...do this for you."

Her face lights up as she sits, and he pours tea into waiting cups. "Thank you."

Rather than risk shoving his foot in his mouth, he shrugs and shovels a forkful of food in there instead.

"I love chai. I can't believe you found some. You know, that's one of the things I miss already. Coffee. Tea. Starbucks. I used to stop there on the way to the grocery store and secretly buy a chai tea to drink while I shopped. Not too often. Only sometimes, so he wouldn't notice."

"You're one of those fancy coffee drinkers, huh?"

"There's something to be said for a frivolous drink made by someone else. You don't seem like a Starbucks kinda guy, though, or am I wrong?"

He sighs, admitting a long-held secret he kept from Wade at all costs. "Maybe I liked those mochas, and the peppermint ones at Christmas time. Not always. Just, you

know, sometimes.”

She gasps with a wide smile. “And you gave me shit for drinking fancy coffee!”

“Yeah, yeah. This conversation doesn’t leave this room. I got a reputation to protect.”

He drank his in secret, too, but for different reasons. Wade would never let him live it down and Cole didn’t have the patience to deal with his bullshit because he felt like drinking coffee that didn’t taste like bitter gasoline.

“I liked the peppermint ones, too.” Her nose scrunches in that cute wrinkle he likes so much.

He wants to kiss her so badly it aches, so he looks away and down at his food rather than risk exposing what must be written all over his face.

“What do you think about a fighting lesson later?” he asks. “Feel up for it?”

She nods. “I feel fine, better than I have since this all started. Are you okay, though? Don’t overdo it for me. We’ve got some downtime.”

“I’m good. We’ll keep it easy. No body slamming or right hooks,” he jokes.

“I’m not allowed to body slam you. Got it.”

He scrapes up the rest of his food in a final bite. He’ll show her a few self-defense moves. Keep it simple. No chance at all he’ll get himself in another situation where he’s gone love-struck.

She needs to learn to take care of herself should the worst happen and it’s better to start sooner rather than later.

* * *

This was a shit idea. What the hell was he thinking? He has to get close to her to teach her how to defend herself. He wishes they could do this from opposite sides of the room, but that's impossible.

She's wearing a flowy tank top that's been giving him dirty thoughts since she put it on, all that smooth skin on display, and damn if those freckles don't scatter right down her collarbones and across her arms. He is no better than every other man left on this earth, he realizes sadly.

Lusting after her when he has no right. Thank god she can't read his mind.

"We don't have to." She picks up on his hesitation. "We can rest today."

"No. We're doing this. It's important. First lesson is that it only takes three pounds of pressure to rip someone's ear off.

So, grab on and yank. Even easier to gouge an eyeball out.

That's soft tissue. You can dig a thumb in and go to town on it.

Don't try to do anything crazy if you can go for the easy stuff like that.

Second lesson, how to get away when someone's grabbed you.

Stand right there. Ima come up behind and snag you. "

Jesus, his heart has never beat so fast in his life. No amount of mortal danger he's encountered compares to his excitement and fear of being that close to her. It's not like they're about to get naked in this dusty living room. He's short-circuiting from

impending proximity alone.

Her face is serious but tone teasing as she mimes an elbow hit. “Okay. Then I sock you, right?”

“Something like that. I like having all my teeth though, so not really.”

She turns away from him, looking over her shoulder with a promise that turns low and shoots right for his groin. “I’ll be gentle. Don’t worry.”

She would be, too. Gentle. If they ever...

No. Nope. Can’t go down that road. If he’s not careful, he’ll have to explain a hard-on and that’ll only make this worse. Then, she might leave him here to chance it out in the wild alone and he wouldn’t blame her.

It’s only a self-defense lesson. Nothing sexual about it. He’s the one making it weird.

Slowly, he approaches her, expecting a flinch on contact.

She’s as skittish as he is sometimes, but she doesn’t so much as twitch.

Lets him wrap his arms around her from behind and hold snug, even leaning back the smallest bit like she’s enjoying it.

It’s right about then that he realizes he’s rarely been this close to anyone for this long.

“How would you get out of this?” There’s no chance she hasn’t noticed how strangled he sounds.

“What if I don’t want to?” she replies, flirty and teasing.

That's her personality, he reasons. She likes to tease, and it's not about him. "Will you be serious?"

"Okay, okay lemme see. Can't do the elbow to the face because you've got my arms pinned...head butt?"

"Actually, yeah. Aim for the nose, elbow to the ribs might work too if you have leverage. A heel slammed into the top of my foot is an option. Lots of tiny bones there."

"Back of the head to the nose. Elbow in the ribs. Foot stomp."

"Mmhmm. Go on, give it a try in slow-mo."

It's easy enough when they aren't actually struggling. He's on his way to controlling himself just fine until they move into the next practice pose and she turns to face him, then all the air in the room crackles and sparks like his sizzling nerves.

This is too close, too much. Her face is inches away, her chest is warming his, and if he weren't hallucinating, he would be certain that her eyes have glanced down at his lips more than once. It would be so easy to close that two-inch gap.

"How do I get out of this one?" she whispers, as if they're sharing a secret.

He gulps hard. "Bring the heel of your hand up between us and aim for the chin. Can also bring both arms up and then out, sorta like an airplane, then push my mine outta the way with your elbows."

She follows instructions and they repeat the motions three more times, but on the final attempt, he doesn't let go.

She tries again, confusion flaring clear across her face when he doesn't budge and that's when everything they worked on goes out the window and she panics.

That ghost left for dead on the subway floor manifests between them, prompting fear in her eyes.

"You're safe. We're just practicing. Think about your next move," he says quickly, but it has little effect.

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It isn't about him, he tells himself, as she struggles to get away. The flight part of her brain took over, and that's exactly what'll happen when it counts. She can't be out there alone and default to flailing if she wants to stay alive.

"Cole?" The hint of betrayal in her voice and those rapid, harsh exhales on his collarbone cut him deep.

"I'm not gonna hurt you. You know that. You know it. Think. Stop reacting and think about what we just did. Use the airplane arms to get me off you. Really use it."

He almost lets her go, fearing she'll suffer more than she'll benefit, but then she clips his chin with the heel of her hand and escapes. She shoves him and he stumbles back a step, watching anger blaze in those eyes that only held affection for him before he went and did something stupid.

He was trying to make sure she could use this if she needed to, but she isn't that far removed from what haunts her nightmares and here he is, grabbing her like that piece of shit probably did more than once.

She searches his face, looking for any sign that trusting him was the wrong choice, while he scrambles for a lifeline.

"I should've warned you I was gonna do that," he dips his head, looking away, far more guilty than he needs to be.

Silence hangs heavy, then her doubt gives way to determination.

“This world won’t warn me. It’ll come at me ten times worse and it won’t care if I’m afraid or hurting or flashing back on old memories. What good is all this if I panic and forget? What if I need to protect Lucy and I can’t? Let’s do it again.”

He doesn’t ask if she’s sure and she doesn’t hesitate this time. With each repetition, the movements become smoother and easier, and the trembling in her frame gradually fades.

“Good. Better,” he grunts in approval.

“Again?”

“We’ll come back to it tomorrow, then do a few other things, too.”

She agrees with a nod, lowering to the sofa with a hard exhale. “I used to watch videos on self-defense, thinking one day I’d save myself, but I never did. I’d freeze and forget everything.”

“That’s why we do it over and over again until it comes natural.”

“What if it doesn’t work? What if whoever has me is too strong?”

“Then do whatever you need to get away. Grab a handful of dirt and throw it in their face. Aim for the balls and the nose. That’ll take someone down real fast. Fight dirty.”

“You learned how to fight in the army?”

“Wade taught me first. Started early and didn’t let up until I could kick his ass, not that he’d ever admit that happened.”

“You think he’ll head for that farm on his own? ”

“That’s what I’m hoping. He knew the plan, so maybe we get there and he’s already waiting. I gotta believe that. Don’t think you’d like him. He’s a jerk. He’ll give you a hard time.”

She raises a brow. “I can take someone giving me a hard time.”

“He’ll try to get you in bed every chance he can and he won’t let up.”

She frowns. “Is he dangerous? Do I need to worry?”

“No, no, it’s not like that. He’s just always been the one with a line of women around the corner and he won’t let the end of the world change that. He’ll try to steal you aw—” He trails off, face burning red and his tongue tied.

‘ He’ll try to steal you away.’ He almost said, as if she’s his to begin with.

“I’m sorry I shoved you,” she says suddenly, throwing him a life raft, so he doesn’t drown after that slip. “That wasn’t part of the lesson.”

“It’s alright.”

“I know you won’t hurt me. My instincts haven’t caught up yet in certain situations, but the rest of me knows.”

“I won’t do that again.” He lowers down next to her, their knees brushing. “Thought I was helping, but you don’t need to wonder if I’m about to do something weird.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” her knee bops his and her voice turns sweet. “You can grab me all you want.”

She's doing that thing again that looks like flirting, but probably isn't. He ducks his head, mumbling a curse that makes her laugh before the baby cries from her spot on the sofa, breaking the tension with an unsolicited comment.

"One day you'll learn, too," Olivia scoops her up to push a soft kiss to a rosy cheek. "We'll teach you to be brave."

We. She's used that word before and every time it strikes a balance of fear and hope in his gut. They are sticking together, that much is certain, but years from now, who knows where they'll be.

Maybe she's feeling some sort of way about that word, too, because she changes the topic, saying they should check what Andrew from the care home put in the bag and dragging it from a corner, revealing far more supplies than he expected.

Towels, blankets, and a fresh first aid kit. Energy bars and those nutrition shakes he used to see in commercials.

"They were loaded if they could spare all this." He watches Olivia pull out a small disposable camera that they could never hope to develop.

She snaps a quick photo of Lucy. "Who do you think put this in there?"

"One of the residents? They have a lotta stuff in their rooms and no use for it now."

He leaves out his first-hand experience of how generous they were. The evidence of that still burns a hole in his pocket in the form of an unnecessary condom.

"Hmm. Maybe. Don't know when we'll ever be able to see these photos, but it's nice to have a way to take them. She's growing so fast. Soon all I'll have are memories of how little she is."

She hands him the baby, and just like that, the camera clicks before he can react, making him the unwilling subject of a photo.

“Oh, come on,” he groans. “Don’t do that.”

She smirks. “You didn’t think you were getting out of this, did you?”

“I was hoping. ”

“Nope. And there’s more where that came from.”

His lips form a thin, unamused line. “Great. Okay, gimme that thing.”

He trades the baby for the camera. Olivia’s a natural in front of it, posing with Lucy for the best photo he’s ever taken in his entire life.

Flower’s ears pop up behind Olivia’s shoulder as he hits the shutter button, and she laughs, her face transforming into the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

That’s everything he cares about right there in that picture.

He loves his best friend, wouldn’t ever say that to Wade’s face even if it’s true, but that isn’t tangible anymore.

Olivia and Lucy are. They’re what’s keeping him going now and he can’t help but feel that surge of affection he’s been trying to squash triple and amplify.

They were someone else’s family when he found them. Someone who didn’t deserve or appreciate what he had, and now Cole would give anything to make them both his.

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Lucy won't stop crying.

She's been relatively quiet since birth, but now she uses every opportunity to let them know she's unhappy and can't explain why.

It's taken its toll on Olivia no matter how often she reminds herself that it's normal. Lucy is changing and growing, and her easygoing nature doesn't guarantee that she'll always be that way. It's still difficult to accept after hours of wailing.

"Something could be wrong," she says, repeating the same complaint she's voiced a hundred times. "She could be sick. We don't have a doctor. She looks okay though, right? Can you see a difference? What do you think?"

Cole hovers nearby while she paces the room with a screaming baby on her shoulder. Even Flower has gone into hiding in one of the closets, preferring to bury herself in a pile of clothes than listen to the noise.

Olivia hasn't slept much in the last week.

Her eyes droop and her skin runs hot in a telltale side effect of being overtired.

Her stomach growls, but stress keeps her from eating, and not even Cole's attempts at reassurance have worked.

Lucy passes out from exhaustion but wakes quickly. When the baby's up, everyone's up .

“She’s not sick,” he says confidently, as if he knows, which he can’t. “There’s no fever.”

“Could be the virus. We don’t know what it does to babies. She could be having a reaction, maybe it’s mutating, maybe—”

“Or it’s colic.” He cuts in, trying to be helpful when she’s not in the mood for rational comments.

“What even is colic?” Her voice raises an octave as she yells into the void, competing with Lucy’s screams.

She wonders how Cole remains in the room with them at all. The fact he hasn’t escaped to the woods to go hunting is mind-boggling. They both have to be hanging from his last nerve after nearly a week of endless noise. Not that she wants him gone, she doesn’t. Dealing with this alone would be worse.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” she continues. “The books said it’s a symptom of something else, but what else? Fucking useless is what those books were. They don’t prepare you for anything.”

Lucy wails and Olivia hushes her with a soft apology, rocking and bouncing and feeling like she’s about to fall flat on her face at any moment.

“Hey come on, lemme have her a while and you get some rest, okay?”

“But she’s kept you awake, too. It’s not fair.”

He’s offered to suffer with an angry baby so she could rest more often than she can count. The cries echo through the house anyway, but his effort is there. At this point, she could fall asleep standing up, with Lucy yelling next to her head.

He holds out his hands and she gives him the squirming, red-faced baby. Guilt overtakes her the moment she agrees. He didn't sign up for this. He's not her father .

Lucy's real father would have fed them both to the rotters by now to get a good night's rest.

Cole cradles the baby in the crook of his arm, talking to her as if he's not annoyed in the slightest, but he has to be.

She birthed this child herself and even her patience is wearing thin.

Every time he comes to her rescue with support, she promises herself she won't accept again, and every time he offers...

she relents. He's good at hiding any irritation, though.

When they first met, she wouldn't have expected him to possess an endless stream of tolerance, but he's proven time and time again that his thread is far from unraveling.

"Thank you," she whispers, reaching out to run her hand down his arm, giving it a half squeeze before crawling into bed deep under the blankets. "I owe you big time."

"Gonna cash in on that one of these days," he jokes.

She mumbles an incoherent thought, half obscured by the pillow.

Maybe she won't feel like she's failing as a parent or like her child is coming down with some unknown illness when her eyes aren't crossing.

It takes her a few moments to drift off, but in the hazy period right before sleep, she overhears Cole talking to the baby as he leaves the room and walks down the hall.

“Let’s give your momma a break for a while, okay? Just me and you now, Kitten. Scream all you want, but we’re doing it on the other side of the house.”

I love you.

That thought emerges unbidden as her eyes water and her heart flips.

It catches her by surprise with its clarity and ferocity, but then again, she suspected this was coming. Moments like this, where he gives her a glimpse of the kind of partnership she believed only existed in fairytales, contribute to the slow and certain build of their relationship.

She’s delusional due to sleep deprivation.

Loving him isn’t an option because he’s not interested.

She should stop flirting with him so much. That nonsense only feeds the emotions she’s trying to deny. She’s rarely been the type anyway, not since her husband beat the desire to tease and flirt out of her long ago.

There is safety in rediscovering that part of herself with Cole, she reasons. That’s all there is to it.

She can’t love him. She can’t. If she doesn’t throttle those feelings now, they’ll only get worse.

* * *

It’s suspiciously quiet when she wakes. Blissful silence has replaced the constant screams. Gradually, she stretches, smiling at the tickle of fur against her face. Tucked under the covers and her arm, Flower’s purr resonates against Olivia’s chest.

They're warm, content, and well-rested, but sudden fear grips her. Something might have happened to Cole and Lucy.

Bolting from bed, she hurries through the empty kitchen and living room, her mind overwhelmed by impossible scenarios.

Cole could have gone outside to pee and been overtaken by the dead.

Someone new could have found them and is currently holding them hostage.

Aliens could have abducted them both for all she knows .

Lucy's silence is unusual and terrifying, considering she hasn't been quiet in days. Despite nearly skidding into the living room, fearing it empty, Olivia discovers a much more satisfying answer.

Lucy and Cole have made it through the eye of the storm and taken a well-deserved rest. The baby is sound asleep, her cheek against his chest and a string of drool wetting his shirt. He's fallen asleep too, one arm still holding onto Lucy while the other dangles off the couch.

Yeah, she loves this guy.

Dammit.

Fuck.

She hoped that her revelation last night was simply a product of irrational delusion, but she can no longer deny it. Watching him interact so naturally with her daughter, and seeing how close they have become, is forcing her to admit the truth, at least to herself.

It might be the first time she's been in love. She can't remember feeling anything like this when she first met Jason. No gentle butterflies in her stomach or a deep ache in her chest, longing to be closer. Wasn't smothered by her feelings in such a substantial way that it overwhelmed her.

How unfair, she thinks, grabbing the disposable camera to snap a quiet photo of a beautiful sight. It's taken her what feels like a lifetime to find him, and her affections are one-sided.

They need all the rest they can get, so she busies herself making tea and sets Cole's cup on the kitchen table, taking up a chair as rain provides a soft backdrop of white noise.

Their fight practice had her entertaining the possibility he could feel the same about her.

She put all her effort into showing him she wanted that kiss she convinced herself was coming.

He stared at her lips, inches away. Surely, that meant something.

But nothing happened then, and nothing has since.

They share this house in a domestic way that's begun to feel like the family she always wanted, yet all her efforts are met with a scoff or a tease, as if he assumes she's not serious.

Olivia's starting to wonder if that's his way of letting her down easily.

It hasn't been that long, she thinks, as he begins to stir in the other room with a groan. They are both damaged in ways that make this difficult. She can't assume disinterest

yet.

He made her breakfast and left a flower by her plate. A flower! Men don't do that unless they're interested, she reasons, wondering what the hell she knows about men when she's only been with one and he was the worst example.

When Cole wakes, he appears in the kitchen shortly after, a relieved smile on his lips and the baby in his arms. "Look, she's out like a light."

"You both were," Olivia gestures to the table. "I made you some tea."

He sits, taking Lucy with him until she's propped snugly over his shoulder. "You sleep good, too?"

"I did. I feel a lot better today. I think I was losing it for a while there. I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

"Don't gotta apologize to me."

"I do. I was spiraling off the deep end. You've kept me sane when you didn't have to." He doesn't reply, but his gentle half-nod is enough. "Maybe she'll turn a corner now. I think this is the longest she's slept since it started."

"It's gonna be a good day. I can feel it. Rain's not stopping, though, so we're inside for a while."

"I found some board games in the closet. Deck of cards. You ready for me to kick your ass at poker?"

"Pffft. We'll see who's doing the ass-kicking." Lucy wiggles in his arms, her blue eyes blinking awake. "Someone's up. You want her back?"

“No, she’s happy there. If she’s quiet, I’d rather not move her.”

“ Cole. Can you say Cole?” He slows down his words and stretches them out as if the baby will reply to this impromptu talking lesson.

Olivia smirks. “Is that what you two have been working on when I’m sleeping?”

“Maybe.”

“A little early for that, but she’ll say ‘momma’ first.”

“We’ll see.” He winks, turning his attention back to the baby. “Coleeeee. You got this. Think about it for a while. Cole. ”

“Are we making this a competition? Because I’m in.”

“What’s the prize if I win?”

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There are so many directions she could take this. Her mind spins with innuendos and offerings to do naughty things, but she reins those in. No sense in throwing herself at him until he's ready to flee into the wild of the apocalypse to get away.

"Whatever you want." She tries to keep it light, but damn if there isn't a hint of a flirt in her tone that she can't control.

"Oh yeah? Does that mean if you win, then you get whatever you want, too?"

"Mhmm."

"Gonna take all the granola bars? First dibs on the next real shower?" he jokes, completely oblivious.

Her heart sinks when he not only fails to take the bait she poorly laid out, but it seems to have flown miles above his head .

"Better hide those bars," she covers.

He winces, nose wrinkling. "I think she had her morning crap. Have to go out and find more diapers soon."

That's an important subject she's been wanting to avoid. "I know, but I don't like it."

"I'll go quick and come right back. Won't take more than a couple of hours."

She's desperate to avoid sending him alone and without a car. Anything could

happen. There's no guarantee he'll make it back, but they've already run out and she's used up every single piece of clothing found in the drawers of this house as makeshift cloth diapers.

Lucy is well on her way to having no barrier between her and the rest of the house if they don't resolve the problem.

"If the rain lets up I can go tomorrow," he continues. "Loot some of these houses around here. Gotta be someone who had a baby. Might get lucky and find a store."

"No big box stores. Promise me, please."

"I promise. Those are probably all empty, anyway. Little ones, mom-and-pop shops are the best bet."

"I wish I could go with you. I hate asking you to go alone."

"Needs to be done, so I'm doing it. Can't have her taking little shits all over the house."

Olivia huffs out an amused sound. "No, we can't. We're already cleaning up cat poops at every turn."

He frowns. "That's not her fault. There's no litter box, but she's getting used to shitting on a leash."

Flower has perfected the art of peeing on a leash like a dog whenever they take her outside, but she adamantly avoids dropping a turd on the ground.

Prefers the hardwood floor instead. When they were on the road, there was little choice except to eliminate outside, but now, in the comforts of a house, the cat's

become confused.

Olivia smirks at his defense of the cat he didn't want. "You were the one who said we shouldn't keep her."

He shrugs. "I say a lotta stuff. Don't listen to me."

As if on cue, the cat hops into the kitchen, pausing to stretch with a yawn, wobbling on three legs.

"Oh, hey," Cole says. "We were just talking about you. She's trying to put you outside to fend for yourself."

Olivia gasps, "Stop! I said no such thing. Don't fill her head with lies."

"She says you shit too much. That you're a pest." He smirks, raising a teasing brow from across the table.

She rolls her eyes. "On that note, gimme the baby so I can change her. You and your favorite cat can trash-talk me while I'm gone."

He snorts, handing her Lucy.

The banter is a welcome distraction from her anxiety about that diaper run, but it's already through the roof and eager to return. Tomorrow evening she'll feel better when he's back again.

It'll all be fine, just fine.

"Hey, Cole?" She pauses on the threshold. "Do you think we'll stay here a bit longer?"

“This place has been good to us so far. We should take advantage of that.”

“Get past this crying phase before going out into the wild again?”

He nods. “Not a bad idea. The sound doesn’t carry much in here. The walls aren’t paper thin and the trees are a buffer if it gets out. I think it’s safer for now. ”

She hadn’t realized how badly she wanted to stay a little longer until that became the plan.

“I, um... I like it here,” he continues, leaning back against the chair. “It feels...”

She thinks he wants to say like home, but he doesn’t finish and she doesn’t fill it in. This isn’t home. Reaching the farm is the plan. She won’t ask him to give up his chance to see his best friend again.

“I know what you mean,” she replies, as a flash of thunder rumbles and fails to elicit even the smallest reply from Lucy.

“Really?” He grins. “All that fussing before and now she doesn’t care about this bad weather? She’s playing with us.”

The baby only yawns and Olivia laughs, squashing that lump in her throat that springs forward every time she’s shown a brief flicker of what a family should be.

* * *

He’s leaving, and Olivia’s not handling it well. On the outside, she’s calm. Unbothered.

Inside, she’s unraveling and the only thing that’ll put her together again is having him

home safe. If anyone can survive out there, it's him and she needs to be confident about that. Logically, she's well aware of how silly she's being, but her emotional side has no use for logic today.

"It'll be alright," he tells her, as they head for the front door. "Don't go worrying about me."

"I'm not," she lies. "Like you said, it won't take long. You'll come right back. It's fine."

"Keep the doors locked."

"Of course. "

He sways in her direction and for a moment she sees her own fear plastered clear across his face, thinks he might hug her before he goes and she longs to feel his arms around her in a firm squeeze, but the contact never comes.

"Don't take any chances," she calls out, as he heads down the steps toward whatever lies beyond the woods.

"I promise."

He doesn't turn around again.

* * *

Hours later, she's in a full-blown panic as the sun begins to set and darkness threatens to engulf him, wherever he is. Something is keeping him away, or...

No. She can't think like that. If she assumes him dead, that might tempt fate to make

it reality and she won't chance their luck. She clutches the baby tighter, watching her focus on her own tiny hands for the first time. Fascinated.

It's a moment Olivia should cherish, but it's overshadowed by Cole's absence.

"We'll tell him all about this soon." She peers between the curtains, watching the treeline for any sign of him. "He's coming back. He has to."

Repeating it like a mantra in her head, she continues long into the night, even after the moon illuminates his absence.

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He's staring at the dust bunny covered rafters of a random, shitty attic.

Every so often, the men below him erupt into fits of laughter or drunken, garbled words as they play a game of poker.

This isn't where Cole expected to be. He should have been home long ago with the bag of diapers found in the nursery, but the moment he grabbed them, new voices drifted in from outside. Through the boarded-up windows, he saw a large group heading straight for him.

His options were limited. Embrace the cliché and hide in the attic, or run straight into whoever was coming through the door.

Thankfully, this group was too busy fighting among themselves to do a thorough job of checking the place.

After a knockdown, drag-out fight right below him, someone pulled out a deck of cards and a bottle of whiskey.

They played well into the night before passing out, though if Cole thought he'd have a chance of escape while they snored, he was wrong.

Bunch of light sleepers and he wasn't about to chance it.

There are two people waiting for him, and his days of risk-taking are over.

He'll sit here with a full bladder, thirsty as hell and with an aching back if it'll get

him home again.

Truth be told, all he's been doing since he left is thinking of them.

This forced solitude gives him ample time to revisit every moment he's been trying to ignore, replaying it all on an endless loop.

They just so happen to feature Olivia in the starring role.

He convinced himself since they met that there's no chance she'd have anything to do with him beyond friendship, but now he sees his own denial in crystal clarity.

All those flirty jokes and one-liners she slings his way.

Every soft smile and gentle touch. Her eyes on his lips, hands on his tattered back, and the offer to have anything he wants as a prize for that bet.

They're all glimpses of something he's afraid to accept, dismissing them in the moment because the alternative is terrifying.

Old demons whisper that he's delusional, and reading into what isn't there, but he silences them with forbidden daydreams. What the hell else can he do in this dusty attic, anyway?

The taste of a first kiss, warm and sweet, so passionate he feels nothing but her until she's seared into his skin like a brand.

Her supple body against his while he presses her into the mattress and the moan she makes when his weight nudges between her legs.

The perfect whisper of 'I love you' after she comes around his cock.

Well, hell, now his dick is springing up in his pants, begging for what he can't have.

This whole day is cursed, and it's only getting worse.

These fuckers sleep longer than Wade ever did after a hangover. He has to piss like a racehorse and he's so hungry his growling stomach threatens to give him away. It'll all be worth it if he can make it back with the supplies, but the longer he's stuck, the more he begins to worry.

Olivia has to be assuming the worst. She might try to come find him soon and if she runs across this group, he isn't certain he could save her. Not with so many of them and there's no doubt things would go south fast. Someone would want her for themselves and it's all downhill from there.

Finally, finally , the floorboards squeak in the hall after hours of fresh daylight succeed in coaxing them all awake. The leader, Ray, shoves the one on the bed until he groans and a pair of feet slam clumsily onto the floor before shuffling out the door.

"Got other places to check out, you lazy fucks," he yells. "Get it together, ain't no vacation."

There's bickering and puttering around in the other rooms and then the front door opens and closes and there's nothing but silence.

Cole waits a few extra seconds just in case before climbing down and checking the window. Spots them heading into the woods in the opposite direction of Olivia, and breathes a sigh of relief. That doesn't mean they won't turn around, but for now, his girls are safe.

His girls. That's presumptuous. They aren't his. They will never be his. Wishful thinking won't change that.

* * *

He's roughly three miles away from the cottage, but it feels like twenty. He's not that young anymore, that's for damn sure. Driven by his desire to see Olivia and Lucy, he runs, his lungs screaming in protest.

It's not until the outline of the house comes into view and he's halfway across the clearing that he pauses with his hands braced on his knees, cursing the fact he fucked himself with cigarettes for half his life .

The front door opens to reveal Olivia staring at him like she's seen a ghost. She's off the porch lightning fast, parting the morning fog that hugs the grass before meeting him in the middle. He's thrown off balance as she flings herself into his arms. All he can do is hold on tight.

He feared he might never see her again. One wrong move back there could have ended his life, but that doesn't matter now as he squeezes her close, inhaling her sweet scent while burying his face in the curve of her neck.

Her feet dangle off the ground a few inches. Even though he's worn out, she's not heavy, but he eases her down anyway, thankful she doesn't let go yet.

She grips the back of his shirt with a frantic hand like he might disappear and whispers an admission into the shell of his ear. "I was so worried. I thought something awful happened."

When she pulls back a fraction, he must be staring at her with the very definition of heart eyes. Never knew what that meant before, but he can feel it on his face clear as day and the wet tears on hers only boost his emotions.

No one's ever been this happy to see him. Certainly not enough to cry in relief.

He brushes a wet, salty streak off her cheek with a shaky thumb. "I was trying to get back the whole time. Ran into trouble, but I got diapers."

She cracks a half-smile at his mention of the whole reason for this supply run.

They're wrapped up in each other like it's an everyday thing.

Her hands braced on his chest and his carefully planted at her waist in a pose that feels intimate.

All those moments he's wanted to kiss her come flooding back full force, gathered and fed by his daydreams in that temporary prison, primed to overflow.

She needs to know what's in his heart, even if he can't say it yet.

Her eyes go wide in realization when he leans forward, her body rising up on her tiptoes to help him along. There's such eager anticipation all over that beautiful face...and then Lucy screams from the house and they snap apart.

The baby crying may as well be a bucket of ice water over them both.

"Tell me everything that happened," she says, looping her arm through his after they share an awkward moment of regretful silence. "I barely left the window all day. The trees were blurring together."

"Got stuck in an attic while another group slept in the same house," he tells her, as they make their way inside. "Felt like a fucking lifetime in there. Couldn't risk trying to escape. There's no way I'd have been able to fight them all off."

The first thing he sees is Lucy in her bassinet and he beelines for her, not even pausing to think before scooping her up. "Got you some diapers. Have you been quiet

today? Feeling better?"

He's too affectionate. Smothering this baby like they're related when they're not, but she makes a little activation noise like she's enjoying the attention.

"She's been good. A lot better than before. We're both so glad you're back safe. Are you hungry? I bet you didn't eat this whole time."

"Starving." His stomach growls in commiseration as he puts Lucy back in her cradle and carries it into the kitchen, setting it by the table before they dig into an overdue meal .

Maybe Olivia didn't eat much either because she's just as ravenous. They down plates of canned ravioli and half a bag of chips, chasing it with nuts she found in a cabinet for dessert.

"I was so close to coming to look for you," she admits.

"Glad you didn't. Don't want that bunch anywhere near the two of you."

"That bad?"

"Worse. Fighting over supplies. Punching each other's lights out. Fuckers are feral."

"Do you think they'll find us here?"

"I don't know. Went the other way a couple of miles out, so I think we're good for now, but gotta be careful. Work on setting up more traps, just in case. Should keep the candles off at night if we can. Don't want the glow in the windows, even through the curtains."

“Why is what’s left of this world overrun with people like them?” she says, sadly. “Is that all there is now?”

“No. You’re here. So is she.” He points to Lucy, who’s doing a good job of staring at her own hands like they were only recently attached. “Hey, is that new? Did she just start doing that?”

“You noticed.” Olivia beams at him. “She did it the first time while you were gone. It’s like she’s trying to figure out what they are. She’s done it with her feet, too.”

He notices everything the baby does, but he won’t say that out loud. It feels like a verbal admission of something he’s still struggling with.

“Don’t like that I missed it the first time.”

“There are plenty more firsts to come,” she replies softly.

If he has anything to say about it, he’ll try to be there for all of them, he thinks, unable to catch a yawn before it escapes .

“I didn’t sleep either. I couldn’t until you were home.” She picks up the bassinet, tilting her head toward the hall. “Let’s go to bed?”

Home. It’s not this place, it’s her. Them. He spent his life drifting before all this. Not beholden to anyone or anything, and that was how he liked it. Needed to be free or risk fighting the cage, but this doesn’t feel like being caught. It feels like being lucky.

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They've shared this room and bed often since they got here.

Him on one side and her on the other. Sometimes there's a baby between them, sometimes a cat.

Other nights he plasters himself to the edge for fear of invading her space while he sleeps, but tonight they gravitate closer in unison.

She curls onto her side facing him and he does the same, tucking an arm under the pillow and fighting the urge to look away from her gaze.

Her fingers twitch on the bed sheets, inching closer.

He mimics her move until the side of his pinky brushes hers and even that feels like crossing the Grand Canyon.

The baby blocked them when he got back. Not that he's mad at Lucy, she's already got him wrapped around her finger like her momma does, but that missed chance left a gap and this moment offers a way to make it right.

Too bad the fear of ruining what they already have keeps him from taking advantage of a second chance.

'Kiss her. Kiss her. Kiss her,' his brain yells, trying to propel him forward, but this is a risky thing. He has to be sure.

"Can I ask you something?" she whispers.

“Yes. Whatever it is, the answer is yes.”

A soft smile lifts the corners of her mouth. “You don’t even know what you’re agreeing to yet. ”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m in.”

“Can we... can you... I wanna sleep closer to you tonight. Is that okay? You can say no.”

The last thing he’ll do is say no. He nods his agreement. “How?”

“Can you lay on your back, or does it still hurt?”

“It’s alright now.” He shifts to lie against the pillow, waiting with his nerves ablaze for her to nestle into him however she wants.

This isn’t a thing he does. Not ever. Can count on one hand the number of times he’s hugged anyone, let alone cuddled in bed, and still have plenty of fingers left over.

Being close, getting attached, is a weakness and a setup for disappointment, but as she lays against his chest, her ear over his frantic heartbeat and the warmth of her soaking into his body, he is surprised to realize that there’s no desire to escape.

With a careful hand, he rubs long strokes from her shoulder to her elbow and back again, his arm curled around her. “I’m not good at this sort of thing.”

“I’m not either, but you’re doing better than you think. If I start to smother you in my sleep, just nudge me off.”

He huffs. “You won’t smother me.”

“If I do—”

“You won’t. Relax, go to sleep.”

“That’s my line.”

There’s a smirk in her voice before she goes silent and her body begins to melt into his.

The weight of her is comforting in ways he hasn’t felt before.

Cole’s never been with anyone that he cared about, and that was on purpose.

Mutually beneficial one-night stands are all he’s allowed himself to have because he has nothing to offer anyone beyond that.

Not the emotional capacity to be a good partner, or the physical ability to let anyone close enough to see his scars.

He scratched the itch when he needed to, with someone who wanted the same, and left it at that.

Assumed it was all he’d want, but now, being alone sounds worse than it ever has.

Not that he’s with Olivia. He isn’t. She’s tucked under his arm because she needs comfort and he can offer that. It’s not permission to take this further. The idea of it floats unbidden across his thoughts, though, conjuring up impossible scenarios where the three of them are a real family.

He turns his face to nestle against the crown of her head and lets his eyes drift shut. Maybe his dreams will be kinder than his waking thoughts.

* * *

He's back in that house with those men, watching them fight each other. Though they haven't noticed him yet, a small sound from the closet prompts them to rush over and fling it open, only to find Olivia and Lucy hiding behind the hanging clothes.

Cole's pulse slams in his veins as she's pulled out into the room.

The baby is ripped from her arms and men pin her to the ground.

He's fueled by adrenaline as he barrels into the first opponent, knocking him clear across the room like a bull.

Then he's in a fistfight with the whole group, feeling his bones crumble from a hard hit, blood coating his tongue.

Olivia screams from the other side of the room and he can't reach her. He can't break free from the group distracting him as the others close in on her, and the realization of their intentions makes bile rise in his throat.

The baby cries alone on the bed while her mother begs for help that Cole can't offer because he's in the middle of getting the life beaten out of him then someone grabs his shoulder, calling his name like a thread of hope in a storm.

The walls shimmer and fade into the walls of the cottage. The group of men disappear, replaced by a single person on the bed with him.

He's still lost in a nightmare, unable to grasp his surroundings or actions.

He responds instinctively, not recognizing who's talking to him.

He has the gun from under the pillow in his hand, safety off, and finger on the trigger before he can process the movements.

Then he's staring at Olivia's panicked face on the other side of the barrel.

"It's me, it's me, it's just me. You're at the cottage. We're safe. It's okay. Look at me, Cole. Look at me!"

Horror washes over him as he realizes what he almost did, and with another flick of the safety, the gun is dropped to the floor. "Oh shit, fuck, fuck, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He tries to get away from her, both hands in his hair, tugging until it hurts, and his back up against the headboard.

What he doesn't expect is for her to crawl into his lap.

Her thighs bracket his and her arms weave around him, her breath warm and soft on his neck as she holds all his crumbling pieces together.

"You're okay," she half whispers, offering him forgiveness he hardly deserves. "It was a nightmare. I know you didn't mean it. I know you'd never hurt me."

He is weak, so instead of pulling away, he draws her closer, curling into her and pressing his face against the space below her ear. "You're good? Are you sure?"

"Shhh, I'm fine. You told me before that you'd come up swinging if I woke you. I forgot. "

"You'll be scared of me now," he muffles sadly into her skin.

She leans back enough to force his gaze to meet hers. "I know exactly what it feels

like to live with a man who wants to hurt me. To be afraid of him. You could never be like that.”

It is one of his biggest fears that he could turn into someone like the foster father who left so many scars on his soul. He pointed a gun at her and somehow she still trusts him. That has to count for something, he reasons.

He'll be sleeping with the bullets separate from the gun for the foreseeable future.

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Olivia isn't sure how she managed to get back to sleep at all.

What happened had to be some sort of fever dream.

The alternative is that she slept curled up with Cole's arms around her, and she isn't the sort of person who gets what she wants.

His even breathing below her ear is real enough, though.

His solid arm encircling her belly is unmistakable, and the earthy scent saturated in enough pheromones is impossible to overlook.

They've shifted during the night. After she fed the baby and returned to bed, she felt the warmth of his chest against her back and his knees tucked in behind hers, the pressure of his embrace pleasant rather than suffocating.

They're not sleeping on opposite ends of the mattress anymore but wrapped up together like a couple and that's enough to blow her mind when she's already having a hard time accepting this sudden turn of events.

She's at war with herself, struggling with the knowledge that she wants him, and fighting it at the same time.

In the beginning, when she tried to offer him a blow job in the bathroom, it had only been an attempt to secure safety for herself and her child.

She felt nothing for him back then. He was only a stranger who showed her a tiny

amount of kindness, and that had been enough.

She never expected that her feelings for him, or anyone, could grow.

After years in an abusive marriage, wanting any man again was off the table. But she wants Cole.

There are moments when it appears clear that he feels the same.

It's in the brush of his thumb across her cheek and the shimmer in his eyes when he returned home last night.

In the way, he nestled his face into her hair as he held her.

She thought he might kiss her outside the house after she ran into his arms, but she isn't so sure anymore.

He's had ample chance since then and made no attempt.

Olivia isn't brave enough to test the theory and risk losing everything they've built.

Cole isn't the type she knows how to manage.

A hot meal and a good fuck won't keep him placated and satisfied like it did her ex-husband, and without those tools at her disposal, she's lost. It would be so simple to offend him and drive him away.

He already made it clear he didn't want her like that and she'd be stupid to try again.

Evidence to the contrary is hard against her ass at the moment, though. She was right about needing those magnums when she grabbed the condoms.

A shiver runs up her spine when she imagines being with him.

Would he be gentle with her or would that wild streak she's seen on occasion take over?

What she's learned about him so far tells her he probably doesn't have much experience, but his innocence is endearing and she isn't an expert, either.

All she knows is how to fulfill her duty as a wife.

To use sex as a calming activity for someone in a rage, or a reward for good behavior, a means to an end.

They could learn how to do this right together.

Fuck, there she goes again, daydreaming about this man. Not long ago, the thought of having sex again was repulsive to her. Now, she can't stop thinking about it. She is exactly what Jason always told her she was. Fast. Easy. Only good for one thing. Won't be long before Cole realizes that, too.

Her heart drops when he begins to wake. One of two things will happen. He'll either hold her tighter or he'll roll away and put some space between them. Literally and figuratively. Everything looks different after a good sleep. What felt right before might be a regret now.

As soon as he's fully conscious, his muscles contract around her, and his cock jerks against the curve of her ass.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." He rolls away to stare at the ceiling. "Didn't mean to..."

"It's okay. If I was bothered, I'd tell you." She wills herself not to cry, and how

stupid is that? He isn't rejecting her. He's being a decent human who won't grope someone without permission. That's all there is to it.

"I didn't wake up screaming this time. At least that's a win."

She braces her elbow on the pillow to face him. "I didn't either. Maybe we kept each other's nightmares at bay for one night."

A smirk lifts his lips and one hand tucks long strands of hair behind her ear. "Were you shadowboxing my demons for me?"

Her cheek warms his palm as she nuzzles into his touch. "Absolutely."

His look of unmasked affection takes her by surprise, but it's quickly covered again and her heart shivers in disappointment.

"Breakfast? Are you hungry? I can make us something," he offers .

What does she expect might happen? That he'll kiss her breathless in this bed, tug her pants off and fuck her sweetly until she's a boneless mess on the mattress?

She can't have sex yet, anyway. She isn't fully healed from labor no matter how badly she wants Cole. Then there's the pesky detail of his feelings about her being up for debate.

"Technically, it's a very late dinner," she replies.

They slept all day. Now, moonlight casts a soft glow on Lucy, squeaking from her bassinet.

"Look who's awake." He leans over Olivia's body to scoop up the baby and hand her

to her mother. “In a good mood today, too, aren’t you?”

“She slept well. Those diapers make a big difference. She’s not waking herself up because she’s soaked anymore.”

Lucy shoves a hand in her mouth, perfectly content after so many days of constant crying.

“Let’s get some food and take her outside? It’s cold, but we could use the fresh air.”

Lucy’s been inside for days, so Olivia has too. They’re both more than ready to leave the confines of this house, even for a little while. “Alright. Lemme feed her first to keep her happy and then it’s a date.”

She fights the urge to take back her statement now that it could mean something more than another pointless flirt.

He dips his head, his voice soft. “It’s a date.”

* * *

She stops at the bathroom with Lucy to clean up before meeting Cole outside. With no windows to let the glow through, she puts a wiggling baby on the counter and lights a candle.

Olivia’s still critical of herself, only finding a few improvements, but they’re noticeable this time. She shouldn’t base her worth on what anyone else thinks of her. It’s a common-sense concept she’s always grasped theoretically but has trouble applying.

Cole’s seen value in her and that’s made it easier to see it in herself.

Only a bump remains where Lucy was. The stress of their overall situation has done a fast job of helping her transform back into how she looked before carrying a baby.

Her cheeks have filled out and her arms have, too.

She's caught him staring at her collarbones when he thinks she's not looking, and her gaze shifts to the curve and dip that captivates him.

Traces the outline with her fingertip before skipping up to brush her lower lip, wondering when or if he might kiss her.

She's never thought herself attractive. Wild hair and sad eyes. Stress lines that crease her skin the slightest bit. That's what she's conditioned to see, but Cole sees something better and she can't help but let those smitten butterflies sing a new tune in her chest.

"What do you think, little one? Want to go outside and see the stars?" she says softly, picking up the living proof that there must be something beautiful about her if she was able to create Lucy.

That brand new, happy feeling is back, and she embraces it in desperation to feel something good.

When she finds him again, he's got two cups of oatmeal ready next to mugs of tea on the back deck, with his gaze on the lake ahead. Domesticity comes easy for him and that's got to be one of the most unexpected qualities he's shocked her with.

The dancing flurries of snowflakes in the night air are even more shocking.

She joins him at the picnic table, laying the baby flat on her thighs while they eat. "I wasn't expecting snow this soon."

“Me either. The lake is already frozen over. Gonna be even colder once we start heading higher up into the mountains. We need better gear.”

“Do you think it’s still worth it to go up now instead of waiting for spring? I know winter is long but—”

“It’s only getting worse down here, you know that. Too many people left, too many rotters. If we stay, we won’t keep getting lucky.”

She nods, knowing he’s right but fearing their ability to keep Lucy warm in the frigid cold of high elevation.

“Hey.” His foot nudges hers. “There are wood stoves at the farm. Plenty of firewood in the forest. I wouldn’t take you somewhere if I didn’t think it was the best option. Can’t promise it’ll be easy getting there, but once we are, it’ll be worth it.”

“Okay. I trust you.”

Her reply comes easy and quick, much like the hesitant smile on his face, brighter than the half ones he often forces out. She does trust him and isn’t that such a wild concept when only weeks ago, trusting anyone felt impossible.

“But you know...no pressure, right?” he jokes.

She rolls her eyes with a shake of her head. “That trust is turning paper thin. Keep it up.”

He grins in amusement. “You, ah, spend much time looking at the stars?”

It’s a sudden subject change, but she goes with it. “Not really. Why?”

“I used to lie outside all the time when I was a kid and watch them. Looked up all the constellations. When’s your birthday?”

“Are you gonna do my astrology chart? You’re full of surprises.”

“Stop. You wanna know or not?”

“Okay, okay. September the second.”

He scans the sky before settling on a spot with a pointed finger. “That one’s yours. Virgo.”

“I don’t see it.”

He takes her hand, lining up their fingers to guide her to the outline of her very own set of stars.

“Oh, there it is,” she says, softly. “I never paid much attention to this stuff. I know my sign, of course, but that’s about it. You know Virgo is the virgin, right?”

He flushes, almost choking on the air in his mouth.

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“So we know that’s not accurate. Not off to the best start here,” she teases, lips pursed in victory. “Where’s yours? And Lucy’s?”

“Sagittarius is mine. The archer.”

“Okay, that’s fitting.”

“And hers is the same, but I think Leo fits her better. A lion. Do you see it?”

“A kitten!” She grins as her line of sight follows his finger, delighted that it matches his nickname for the baby. She picks up Lucy as if she cares about any of this. “Look, a little lion.”

The baby is more interested in Cole’s shirt than astrology. Her small fist grabs the fabric, giving it a tug.

“Maybe we start easier for her. Big Dipper, Little Dipper,” he offers .

“Good idea.” She pauses, her shoulder brushing his and the next words whispering softly. “Is there anything up there that could have predicted how lucky I feel right now?”

She’s doing that thing again where she straddles the line of their friendship and risks irritating him, but his answer is a careful arm around her shoulders, encouraging her to lean in while they watch the twinkling night sky.

“I’m feeling lucky, too,” he answers, offering the reciprocation she so badly needs.

Watching Flower leave uneven paw prints in the snow, they spend the rest of their time outside in peaceful silence, exchanging glances over sips of tea.

* * *

A few hours later, they're in the middle of securing fresh traps around the perimeter. Suddenly, the hushed rustle of footsteps beyond the trees stops them cold.

Cole's got the gun up aiming blindly, only to have several other barrels emerge as a group of men show themselves.

"Easy now. We're all friends here." One of them says, too calm to be sincere. "Who have we stumbled upon?"

His attention fixates on her, but Cole intervenes, standing in front of her and Lucy. "Get your eyes off my wife before I carve 'em outta your head."

"Bold statement for a man that's got four guns pointed at him. What's your name, son?"

"I'm not your son."

"You best tell me. I'm asking nicely after all, but I won't ask again. I'll even go first. Name's Ray."

"Cole." It's a reluctant, low answer, but it sparks the oddest flicker of recognition in the other man's eyes.

"Carter? Cole Carter?" he asks. "Any relation to Wade?"

"No. Dunno who that is."

It's a well-practiced lie. She assumes after so many years Cole knows when it's a good time to claim Wade and when it's not.

The gun drops and a wide smile spreads fast on their enemy's face. "I call bullshit! You know that, asshole. Well hell, we ain't just friends, we're family now!"

* * *

"So there I am, surrounded by the dead. This is it, right? This is how I go. In this shitstorm waiting for that first bite, and then what do I see? A big ass truck plowing through the pile and I live to see another day."

Ray's got everyone gathered in the house like this is a storytelling session at summer camp. All he's missing is the smores and campfire.

Olivia doesn't connect the dots until the answer is thrust upon them.

"...Wade was in that truck," he says to Cole. "Crazy bastard saved my damn life! He drove my sorry hide back into safe territory again."

That's not exactly what either of them expected to hear. She'd been bracing for the worst, certain that Wade pissed this group off by doing something stupid.

Cole squints. "So when you said we're family?"

"I meant it!" Ray exclaims, bestowing him with a shit-eating grin that she doesn't trust for a single second.

That look is one she's seen before in the eyes of the man who had made her life miserable and it sends shivers down her spine.

Jason would give her a false sense of hope only to snatch it away again, reveling in her reaction.

Her stomach clenches and she steps closer to Cole, but he's only one man against six.

"You know what family does, right?" Ray leans forward for a beat. "They share each other's debts, and your friend...your brother, as he so affectionately called you, right before he knocked my back molar out and stole all my shit, has incurred a hefty debt."

There it is. She swallows hard, catching sight of two others sending her lewd glances.

"Thought you said he saved your life," Cole replies carefully.

"He did. He sure did. But it wasn't outta the kindness of his heart. Took my supplies not long after. It was before I linked up with these fine gentlemen. Nearly starved for a week. He didn't leave me so much as a bag of trail mix."

"We have food. You can have it."

Their position is fragile enough that an easy agreement is the only option.

It's then that the walls of the cottage close in around her. Her eyes dart from corner to corner, meticulously cataloging each intruder as if she can use the information to help herself.

One man with a shotgun standing by the window, peeking through the curtains.

Another in the kitchen searches for food and slams cabinet doors.

On the sofa, two lounge with legs spread and slouched postures, enjoying the show.

The last is close enough to reach out and touch her. She can see his fingers twitch with desire .

Although Ray's pistol remains holstered, the eagerness in his eyes betrays his intentions.

He takes a step closer, invading Cole's personal space, his next words rough.

"I know we can have the food. We'll also be taking everything else," Lucy cries from her bassinet and Ray smiles.

"Don't worry, no one's gonna touch that sweet child until she's of age.

We'll all take real good care of her. Real good care. "

After that, everything explodes at once.

With the two men grabbing her arms and dragging her across the room, all Olivia can do is scream.

She knees one of them in the balls like Cole told her to and he crumples to the ground only to be replaced by another who forces her down, pinning her with his weight, and shoving his lower half between her thighs.

Her arms are pinned above her head, and she cries out while screaming obscenities that only spur them on. She spits in her attacker's face and earns a fist to her temple for her efforts. As her head rolls against the hardwood, her vision swims and she goes lax. Stunned.

A brawl ensues between Cole, Ray, and two others across the room. Hope surges through her when he gains the upper hand a few times, but then he's overtaken a

second later. Ray's pistol goes off, shattering a lamp on the side table.

As her shoes are torn off her feet and her pants ripped down her legs, her body jerks.

Lucy's wails echo in the background.

Don't fight this, she tells herself. It's always worse when she fights it. Give them what they want and maybe they'll let her live so they can have more later. She can't save her baby if she's dead.

"Hey... guys...someone come look at this..."

The one at the window is ignored and a cold finger gropes between her legs.

"...what the fuck is that..."

She can tell Cole is still alive by the crashing and cursing coming from the other side of the room. He's still fighting.

The two about to assault her argue over who goes first, granting her a reprieve.

"...holy shit, we gotta move...we gotta go...what the—"

The terrified warnings from the man watching the window are abruptly silenced when the front door bursts open and the playing field is instantly leveled. The dead swarm into the house like locusts, so fast that it's difficult to process until half a dozen have converged on the men attacking her.

As she scrambles away, she pulls her pants back on while the shotgun goes off and then the pistol, both weapons pointed at the dead, but doing little more than pissing them off. No one cares much about her anymore. It must be hard to focus on raping

someone when your face is being eaten.

A gush of blood from a torn limb sprays across the bassinet as she lunges for it, but Cole grabs it first, along with their bag beside it.

“Run! Out the Back!” he yells.

With rotters hot on their heels, they aim for the kitchen door. She seizes Flower’s harness with one hand while grasping Cole’s with her other, snatching the cat off the counter and holding her suitcase style as they all rush outside.

She’s never run so fast in her life. Never had so much adrenaline pumped through her veins that it feels like she could levitate.

As they race across the ice-covered lake, their only goal is to outrun the dead, and she fears they may not reach the other side.

One glance back at the horrifying reality reveals dozens of rotters, all so much faster than anything she’s seen since the turn, funneling out the back door of the cottage.

They’re all going to die right here. There are too many. They can’t outrun them.

Instead of the sharp claws of death consuming her, a crack beneath her feet is the only warning before her world is engulfed by water.

She spins, disoriented with shock, and tries swimming to the surface, only to be met by ice overhead.

Her fists pound against it, trying and failing to break through.

Hordes of the dead have fallen in with her, most sinking to the bottom, but one grabs

her leg and drags her down too.

Olivia kicks and squirms in a fruitless attempt to save herself.

It is heavier than her, more determined, and unbothered by pesky needs like breathing.

Soon, her lungs burn, and her vision blurs.

All she wants is to inhale and relieve the pressure, but she resists, knowing the moment she does, she'll never see her baby again. Never see Cole again.

There is a limit to her resolve and eventually, her body takes over, forcing that deep inhale against her will. As the water fills her chest, pulling her into darkness, her last thought is a desperate hope that Lucy and Cole are safe.

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One moment he's racing across the ice, holding a baby carrier in one hand and Olivia's palm in the other, then the cat whizzes past his head and Olivia is gone.

At first, Cole doesn't understand what happened.

A horde is chasing them, and each wasted second brings them closer to certain death.

Already, he fears they won't make it. Never seen rotters this fast before, and without any barrier to stop them, his and Olivia's legs will give up long before the dead do.

Thinking she tripped, he turns back, expecting the group to be rushing towards her, ready to fight them off, only to discover the lake empty.

There are no rotters except the few stragglers at the cottage door.

An eerie silence replaces the constant groaning and growling of the dead.

A massive crack in the ice ends right before his feet. Everything chasing them has fallen in, taking her with it. Rotters, fixated on him, stream from the house's rear exit, charging into the icy water and sinking like boulders.

Cole scrambles to the edge, calling out her name, blindly reaching in with one arm but finding nothing. He abandons the baby in her carrier on solid ice, shoving Lucy a few feet away in case the entire thing collapses under his weight.

Knowing exactly what he needs to do, fear shivers through his limbs, pumping his lungs at double the pace.

For a brief moment of self-doubt and terror, he believes he can't do it, only to realize that he'd rather drown than regret not attempting to rescue her.

He takes a deep breath and slips into the jagged opening, all his organs seizing up at the freezing temperatures, and then dives beneath the surface.

The army forced him to learn to swim. He tried to quit, only to be denied.

Considered breaking his leg to avoid the water, but heard stories of men who did the same for other reasons and still couldn't get an honorable discharge.

With his luck, he'd be stuck in the army and forced to swim with a broken limb.

Somehow, he survived and passed. He spent that entire stretch of time in cold sweats in his bunk at night while the others slept, fighting nightmares in the shadows.

Learning to swim didn't help overcome his fear.

If anything, it made it worse. He is grateful now, though, that he was never allowed to quit, because Olivia's life depends on his ability to dive deep into frigid waters.

Beneath him, the sight of rotters sinking to the bottom appear as fuzzy shapes.

They're all still moving like nothing is amiss, haphazardly roaming the lake floor.

As Cole spins, his breath running out, he frantically looks for Olivia, spotting her long hair falling into the abyss.

He rushes toward her, grabbing her limp, upstretched hand and giving it a tug only to meet resistance.

She's far heavier than she should be and panic overwhelms him.

He can't breathe. He can't stay under. He'll have to go back up and try again soon if he has any hope of saving her, but letting go isn't something he's willing to do either.

Then he spots the rotter attached to her ankle like a ball and chain and stabs it through the eyeball.

Suddenly, they're both rocketing toward the surface.

His gasp of breath breaks into the cold night air, but she doesn't move in his arms, or try to pull herself onto the ice.

He's too late. He waited too long. He wasted time fighting his fears before diving in after her and now he's lost her for good.

With hot tears streaming through his frozen cheeks, he hauls her halfway onto the ice, pulls himself up, and then drags her away from the edge.

Practical application of what he learned in the service takes over even while his mind is crumbling. His mouth covers hers, breathing air into her lungs, and he pumps both hands against her chest, trying to will her heart to beat again. "Come on, wake up. Lucy needs you. You can't leave her."

There is no response, but he won't quit until she turns and tries to eat his face. He'll keep going until she forces him to stop.

"Fuck, fuck. I'm sorry, I'm so damn sorry," he chokes out between forced heartbeats, leaning down to puff against her mouth again. "I need you. I need you, too."

She is gone and in that moment he would trade anything to have her back.

He tries to bargain with a God he doesn't believe in, offering ridiculous, pointless things in trade for her life.

It's unsurprising that his prayers go unanswered.

His tears wet her face in heavy droplets, and his efforts become frantic.

Fear of her dying outweighs his worry that he might break her ribs during CPR.

He can't do any of this alone after knowing what it's like to do it all with her.

The seventh time he leans down to breathe into her lungs, he is met with a face full of lake water as she coughs up what she swallowed.

He turns her onto her side, whispering soothing nonsense she likely isn't processing, as she expels half the lake.

His first instinct is to pull her into his arms and hold her tight because he almost lost someone he didn't fully understand how badly he needed, but then he remembers they're sitting on unstable ice and one wrong move could land them back in the water.

Cole wraps an arm around her and lifts, holding the baby carrier with the other hand that contains both Lucy and Flower. "Come on, we gotta move! The ice is too thin!"

He drags her, coughing up water with each step, towards the shore.

Adrenaline pushes him forward when his body starts to fail.

His numb feet stumble in the snow while frozen breath hangs in the air and cold, wet material clings to his skin.

They're out of the water, but not out of the woods yet.

Without a place to warm up and change, they may not survive much longer before hypothermia sets in.

Frostbite is already trying its best to take his fingers and nose.

There are no structures in sight or cars to warm up in.

Thomas's gas station comes into view right when he's certain he can't feel his feet anymore. He fears that Olivia, heavy on his arm, could pass out and pauses to shake her. "Hey, hey, stay awake. We're almost there. Talk to me."

"Cole?" Her voice is confused and graveled like sandpaper.

"Yeah, I'm here. We're okay, everyone's okay."

"The baby?"

"She's fine, just fine." He props her against the gas station window before using his elbow to bust open the glass above the door lock, granting them entry.

The store is empty, and he forces them to the back room. Boxes of files litter the floor and a small, tattered sofa lines the wall. He deposits Olivia onto the cushions and starts stripping her clothes off her body without a second thought. His only goal is to get her warm again.

She flinches away from his touch and he remembers what happened in that house before the herd saved them.

"Look at me," he says softly, keeping the panic out of his voice as best he can, letting

it go soft and careful, as if she may bolt.

“You’ll get hypothermia if we don’t get these clothes off.

I will too. Let me help you, sweetheart.

It’s just me and you here. You can trust me, you know that, right? ”

He’s asking a woman who was just assaulted to cuddle naked with him under a blanket, and she has every right to be wary.

So much has happened in the space of an hour that it could grow into a chasm between them if they aren’t careful.

He fears that it’s already begun. What will he do if she tells him no?

He can’t let her freeze to death on this sofa.

She could hold the cat against her instead. It’s small, and currently curled around Lucy, keeping the baby quiet and content, but better than nothing.

There are two thick blankets in the room. She could have them both and maybe it would be enough even without his body heat.

He’ll recover without them. She was in that ice bath far longer.

Her eyes, though glazed, flicker with recognition, followed by a nod. His relief at her agreement is only matched by the moment he rescued her from the water. While helping her take off her shirt and pants, he narrates each step to calm her, unsure if it’s actually helping or not.

“Keep your underwear, but the tank needs to come off, okay?” He grips the hem of the only barrier left between her skin and the cold air.

Shivering, she nods and lifts her arms for him to remove the semi-frozen fabric, quickly covering her breasts.

He wraps her in the first blanket like a burrito, tucking in all the edges, before stripping down himself.

He isn't a fan of anyone seeing him either, but she's already laid eyes on his back before and this isn't the time to be shy.

He keeps his boxers even though they're freezing his dick into a popsicle and then tucks in under the same blanket as Olivia.

Pulls the second blanket over them both and hopes they'll catch a break this once.

She doesn't feel cold at all when he tugs her against his chest to merge their body heat, and that's when he realizes just how fucked they are.

His own body temperature is as frozen as hers, so she feels downright cozy when she's not. It might be too late, he worries. They're at risk of losing fingers or toes in this awful little gas station, or, even worse, falling into the kind of dangerous sleep that's already pulling at his eyelids.

Olivia lets out a pained cry, tucking her face into his collarbone, her hands curling into stiff fists between them.

“I know. It's the circulation coming back. It's a good sign even if it hurts. It won't last long,” he soothes, feeling his own fingers start to burn and cramp.

“You jumped in the water for me,” she chokes out.

“Of course I did.”

“You hate the water.”

“No chance I wasn’t going in after you. Fuck, you scared the shit outta me. I thought—”

“It’s alright, we’re okay. Should we bring Lucy up here? Is she cold?”

“Nah, she’s warmer than all of us. Flower is keeping her toasty. You must’ve tossed that cat right before you fell in. Saw her flying past my head.”

All at once, her body tenses again and her voice goes shrill. “Oh my god, they’re coming for us! They could find us here... what if those men find us?”

She’s still disoriented, fearing their attackers who are long gone, and he hugs her a little tighter. “They’re all dead, remember? Got what was coming to them.”

He’d been in the middle of a fistfight, his ears ringing and blood coating his mouth while she was pinned to the floor across the room. He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to will the image away. He should have kept in what he asks her next. “Did they... are you hurt? Did they—”

“No. No, I’m fine. They didn’t get the chance.”

She is far from fine, but he accepts her answer as truth for lack of any other option. He certainly isn’t going to interrogate her about it.

“Your friend’s alive,” she says softly, finally relaxing against his chest, her face

nuzzling his pulse point.

“Should have known he’d be making enemies.”

“Those men would have done what they did, regardless. It’s who they are. It’s only good news that Wade’s still out there. You have a real chance at seeing him again.”

“He’ll be going to the farm. If he makes it, then we’ll find him there.”

Cole really fucking hopes Wade shows up, not only because he’s family, but because he can’t keep Olivia and Lucy safe alone. There’s safety in numbers and the world is still ripe with people like those assholes in the cottage. He needs his friend, his brother, as backup.

“All I care about right now is that I’m seeing you,” he murmurs. “Don’t fall asleep yet. Keep talking, we’re still too cold. Are your fingers still numb?”

“Oh yeah, they feel huge, like sausages.”

He huffs. “Mine too.”

She’s quiet for a moment and he’s about to nudge her to wake up when she speaks again. “You saved my life. That’s twice now, at least.”

“We’re not keeping score.”

“You could have died, too. I’ll keep putting a target on your back, no matter where we go. I’m so sorry, Cole. If I wasn’t so selfish, I’d tell you to leave us and save yourself, but I am and I hope you won’t.”

It takes him a moment to understand. She is a live woman in a world filled with the

dead. The vast majority of men they come across will want her for themselves, more than willing to kill Cole to take her. “Don’t you dare apologize for people being animals.”

“Animals behave better.”

“I don’t wanna hear any more talk of splitting up either, alright? Those fuckers would’ve killed me anyway for my shit, even if I were by myself. You’re not a liability, you hear me?”

“I couldn’t stop them. I couldn’t do anything but lie there.”

He cringes at the mental image of her struggling on the ground with the baby wailing in the background. “Only the dead could stop them.”

“Do you still have the gun?”

“Lost it in the scuffle.”

“What about that? Can you show me how to use it?” A shotgun hangs on the office wall, and she points to it with a trembling finger.

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly in a proud smirk. “That works too.”

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She's pinned to the bed with roaming hands between her legs and hot breath in her ear, the weight of her husband suffocating her.

His skin is clammy and cold and she shivers, reminding herself that it's only worse if she fights him.

Give him what he wants. Keep him happy. Be exactly what he calls her or she'll land in the emergency room again.

As she reaches for his cock, her body goes slack, her eyes blank, and her tone sweet. "You had such a long day at work. Let me make you feel good, baby."

Olivia wakes with a start, her muscles tense and the feeling of another body flares all her nerves like fireworks.

"Easy, you're okay. It's just me. You were dreaming."

It's Cole's voice in her ear this time. His body is beneath hers, warm and solid, and his arms wrap around her back. She isn't home again in that bed, or in the cottage on the floor. She's right here in the only place that feels safe.

Despite being aware of her naked breasts pressed against his chest, she closes her eyes tightly and relaxes with an exhale, laying her head over his heart. He's stroking careful fingers up and down her spine, following each divot and prompting a delightful shiver.

"Is this too much? I was trying to wake you. "

“No, it’s good,” she hums. “Don’t stop.”

She might feel far too bold on any other day. If he were any other man, he might mistake her permission to touch as permission for more. But she is exhausted in every way she can be and craving the comfort he’s offering after going so long without.

Having moved during the night, they now lay lengthwise on the sofa, her body resting on his.

The blankets still cover them. She’s wearing her underwear, and he’s got his boxers on, but the rest of their skin touches like it was always meant to, pressing soft and warm as he flutters soothing strokes across her back.

“I was starting to think that I would never be that woman on the floor screaming for help again. I thought she died when Jason did, but I guess she’ll never really be gone.”

She thinks he might say something with the way his chest hitches, but she cuts him off. Isn’t sure why she wants to tell him this, but the words burn on her tongue and she spills them into the cold air.

“It was only violent during sex right after we got married. I hadn’t learned then that I couldn’t say no, but it was a fast lesson.

I would end up in the ER for other reasons after that first year, but never because I tried to turn him away.

If anything, I was too eager to please. Too ready to keep him happy.

” She snuffles, her nose wrinkling. “I almost did the same thing in that house. Almost played along and offered them what they wanted to try to stay alive. I don’t want to

be her anymore, Cole. I can't be."

"There's no shame in doing what you can to stay alive. For yourself, for your baby."

"Why do I feel so ashamed, then?"

"They aren't worth getting in your head like this. Not that asshole in the subway or those fuckers in the cottage. They don't get to decide who you are."

She's about to protest again, but something feels wet and she frowns, lifting her head to meet his eyes right before the realization hits. She flies away from him, taking the blanket with her to cover herself as she sits up and spots a small puddle of breast milk on his chest.

"Don't worry about it," he says quickly.

"I need to feed her. I'm so sorry."

He gets up, using the other blanket to wipe himself clean. "I'll give her to you. Stay there."

Watching him cradle the baby against himself after picking her up from the bassinet, something inside her flutters even through her embarrassment. He is the most beautiful man she's ever seen and her face flames when that desire flickers across her features as naked as her body.

"Hey." He leans down to hand her Lucy. "I said don't worry about it. Okay?"

She merely nods, as he grabs his shirt and pants to pull on before he starts puttering around the office, searching boxes.

“You ever watch that show where they bought storage units and resold the stuff?” He pulls out a dark blue t-shirt from a dusty container. “This might fit you.”

“Yes! I was addicted to it.”

“This place reminds me of one of those. So much junk in here, but there could be a few hidden gems.”

He tosses the shirt onto the sofa beside her before opening another box, only to flinch on reflex, cursing a blue streak when the cat pops out. “Fuck, you scared me, you little shit. When did you leave the baby? We could have forgotten you here. Then what?”

“We would have noticed she was gone.” Olivia smiles as he picks up the cat. He plops Flower over his shoulder, patting her back as if burping a baby, and Olivia can hear the purring clear across the room. “She’s far too attached to you to let us leave without her.”

He huffs. “I’m still not a cat person.”

“Sure, sure. I can tell.”

“Keeping her is only practical. She’s a personal heater for the baby.”

“Oh, she has a job now? I see. Yes, that’s very practical.” Olivia grins.

Just as he’s about to reply, the baby’s laughter interrupts them and they both pause.

“Did she just laugh?” Olivia untucks the baby from under the blanket.

“Think so. Looks like she’s smiling, too. That’s not gas, is it?”

“Looks different. More deliberate.” Lucy lets out a giggle and Olivia gasps in surprise at the confirmation. “It’s the first time she’s done that.”

He moves closer, as fascinated as she is. “How do we make her do it again?”

“I dunno....make a face?”

Cole sits beside her and sticks his tongue out at the baby, who finds that more than amusing. With each silly face that makes her baby giggle, she finds herself overwhelmed by a rising wave of affection for him. Her smile spreads wide as the child’s laughter fills the room.

When his expressions run dry and Lucy loses interest, Olivia looks up to find him gazing at her instead, more unguarded than she’s ever seen, her own feelings mirrored back at her.

“I like the way you look at me,” she says softly.

He doesn’t shift his eyes like she thought he might, but holds her stare like he’s glad she caught him. “Good, because I like looking at you.”

There it is again, that forbidden flutter in her lower belly that fans out into a tickle between her legs. Never has she felt more exposed, both physically and emotionally, yet she trusts this man completely. She can only hope that isn’t a mistake.

Then Lucy laughs again in an unpracticed combination of a gurgle and a giggle, and some of the tension between them fades.

“You think this is pretty funny, huh?” Olivia says to Lucy.

“Everything’s funny now that she’s showing us her sense of humor.”

“I’m glad she’s got a good one. We’re going to need it.”

Despite being stranded in a dark gas station, uncertain of their next move, a happy baby brings light to the darkness.

* * *

They’ve been circling the same ten square miles of woods for the last few days. At least, that’s how it feels.

There’s no shortage of food and supplies for looting, but one thing they can’t find is water. All the faucets fail to turn on and the one small pond they stumbled across lured them in with false hope, only to reach out several decomposing arms from its depths.

They’re wasting precious energy trudging through the woods and the last of their water was used up last night. It won’t be long before they’re fucked .

Cole assures her that they’ll find something soon. All these wild animals need water, and one pond can’t provide for them, but they haven’t found another source yet.

Through all of this, the baby strapped to his chest is oblivious to the circumstances. For someone who made a pastime of crying not long ago, she can’t keep the smile off her face. When they stop to rest, Lucy reaches for his hair, trying to grab a chunk.

Things are quiet. With a place to sleep and some water, their journey could be as easy as a walk in the park or a camping trip, but they lack both, and that fosters anxiety.

Her bones creak, her back hurts, and it’s difficult to think of anything but how thirsty she is.

Cole must feel the same, but they don't complain.

Moaning about it will only make their throats run even drier.

They're nestled in the roots of an old tree with her head on his shoulder and Lucy in his arms when he spots something in the distance.

"See that?" He points to a long stretch of pipe disappearing between the brush. "Has to go somewhere. Houses. Buildings."

"Commercial area maybe."

"Stay close, dunno what we're walking into," he mutters, as they get to their feet and follow it further into the wilderness.

The baby squeaks from her sling, providing a running commentary on their travels from her spot against Cole's chest.

"Coleeeee," he whispers. "You can do it."

Olivia smirks. "Keep trying. I told you already I'm gonna win."

"Yeah, yeah. We've been practicing. "

They haven't forgotten about that bet. Lately, it's one of their few sources of entertainment. No opportunity is wasted to try to earn Lucy's favor and influence her first word.

The abrupt stop and the jerk of her sling cause the baby to frown, almost comically, as the trees part and they face the gates of a community.

‘Magnolia Hills’ The sign reads, framed in branches.

Guards patrol with rifles, but that has to be common now, she figures. Can’t be too careful.

“What do you think?” Cole asks, like she has any clue what the right answer is.

She appreciates the effort, though. His commitment to including her in major decisions, after years of feeling that her opinion was disregarded, provides a small sense of control over her own life, even in a situation where that’s hard to come by.

“It’s risky. They could be hostile. I also think we’ll dehydrate out here if we don’t find anything else soon and this could be our only chance.”

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“Might be a way to sneak in. I could try around back, leave you two somewhere safe and pop over the back fence to see what I can grab. Fill up the water bottles somehow.”

This stealth mission is just about the worst idea he could have suggested. “No. We have to stay together no matter what.”

“If they’re hostile, I don’t want you two around when they first see us.”

“You don’t even know if you can get in back there. And if you do, then getting around without being caught is....”

“Can wait until it gets dark—”

“Cole.” She cuts him off, pausing to gather her thoughts instead of frantically rifling through them for a way to convince him this is unacceptable. “I can’t risk losing you.”

He gives her that half squint he often wears when she says something that shows she cares about him, like he can’t help but be puzzled by it. Finally, he softens in understanding. “Alright, but if we’re going up to the gate to say hello, then I’m going first. Don’t argue, okay? Please.”

Reluctantly, she nods her agreement and takes Lucy when he hands her over. He could be walking into gunfire the moment he steps out of the woods, but desperation leaves them little choice.

“Gonna be okay. We can’t risk her catching a stray bullet.”

“I don’t want you catching one either. Whatever happened to don’t expect any heroics ?” She counters, knowing full well he’s right. Her priority is to protect her child above all else, but it doesn’t mean she’s not worried about him.

“That was then, and this is now. Things change, and hey, I made it this far, right? Basically Teflon now.”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t even joke, you’ll jinx yourself.”

“Stay put.” He presses his lips to her forehead in a fast kiss that catches her by surprise, before backing away and emerging into the daylight with his hands raised.

A warning shot is fired at his feet and her heart races. She clutches Lucy tight, watching from the trees and praying that she won’t lose him today.

“We’ve got a baby with us!” Cole yells out. “We need help.”

As if on cue, the baby goes from happy to screaming, proving Cole’s statement and perhaps saving his life in the process. The guns drop a bit, alert but no longer so quick to fire first and ask questions later.

“Let us see the baby.” Someone yells back.

Cole tilts his head, signaling her to show herself.

It’s difficult not to rush straight for him, but she goes slow and keeps her body angled to the side, blocking Lucy to prevent a clear shot.

Most people wouldn’t gun down a baby, but that was before the world went to shit

and now all that's left are the types who might have no problem doing just that.

They're waiting on the precipice of salvation or death, their lives in the hands of those who could be worse than Ray's group for all she knows.

The longer the minutes tick on, the more vulnerable she feels as adrenaline zings through her veins, begging for fight or flight and being allowed neither.

All it would take is a few well-placed bullets and their journey would end here. It would be better than dehydrating to death, she thinks, shocking herself with her own morbid thoughts.

Then, the gates creak and groan to open for a man who looks like he's been granted a shower sometime within the last week. Maybe even the last day.

"Looks like you found us at the right time. Welcome to Magnolia Hills."

* * *

This place is untouched by the virus. Safe and welcoming, those first few bullets notwithstanding. It should be everything they've hoped for and it's hard to find an argument for why it's not as they're led through a manicured Main Street and waving citizens.

Shops are open and families gather on green space. Someone's passing out muffins and cotton candy from one of those big machines she's only seen at fairs. The three of them have been gifted so many smiles that it's become unnerving.

It's as if the rest of the world isn't dying outside that fence and Olivia isn't sure how to react.

The leader of this town has given the grand tour and led them to a private room with running water, fluffy pillows, and clean sheets.

“We’ll need to keep the cat for quarantine,” he says evenly.

Cole shakes his head. “No.”

“It’s only for a week. Standard procedure. We have other pets here and we can’t be too careful. No one is sure yet what the virus does to animals. You can see her at the vet’s office any time you like.”

“We don’t even know that we’re staying a week,” he replies.

“Then you can take her if you leave before then.”

They are attached to this cat now. The idea of giving her to anyone, even for a few days, isn’t ideal. There is little option, though, when food and a hot shower are on the other side of their agreement. The cat is suffering too without supplies.

Reluctantly, Olivia nods and Cole fishes Flower out of the baby’s carrier to hand her over.

“Where’s the vet? You have cat food available?” she asks.

“Just up the road on the right side. You can’t miss it. And yes, we have all the things she’ll need.”

That’s all the reassurance they get before their cat is taken away and they’re left alone.

“ This is weird.”

“Something ain’t right here.”

They speak in unison, and Cole lets out a relieved exhale. “I thought you were gonna be all for it.”

“Well, it’s nice I won’t lie. It looks perfect.”

“Too perfect?”

“Yeah. There’s no way there’s not some weird, seedy underbelly going on here. And does that man even have a name? He wouldn’t say. It’s odd.”

He flops down on the clean bed in dirty clothes. “Real odd. Don’t like him. Got everyone here playing make-believe. You see how they talked to him? Like he brainwashed them all.”

“Off!” she chastises. “Not until we shower. I want to feel these sheets on my bare legs tonight without our dirt on them.”

He rolls away and onto his feet with a wince. “Forgot I’m a mess.”

“We’re all a mess. It’s not just you. I can smell myself and I can absolutely smell this baby. Seedy underbelly or not, I’m grateful we’re here and have a chance to get clean.”

“Doesn’t mean we’re staying, though, right?” he asks, quietly. “Feels wrong. Can’t put my finger on it.”

“It doesn’t mean we’re staying. We’ll leave soon as we get some rest. Hopefully, they’ll point us in the right direction so we aren’t stuck out there again wandering aimlessly.”

“If they let us leave.”

“This isn’t the Hotel California. We can check out any time we want or we’d be locked up right now.”

He only grunts in agreement, pacing the room and peering out the windows. “You go on and shower first.”

“So you’re agreeing that I smell?”

His mouth drops open a fraction. “Nah. No. You don’t. You smell fine. Good. Baby smells fine, too. Like...you know, a baby.”

“Relax. I’m screwing with you. We reek, but thanks for saying we don’t.”

She washes Lucy first with water and soap from the sink and then leaves her swaddled in a fresh towel on the bath mat while she showers .

The hot water pelting her skin elicits a groan of pleasure and in that instant, she wonders if she’s being stupid to consider leaving a place that still offers this small luxury.

Didn’t think she was that dirty until it begins to flake off her arms and then she balks in embarrassment, remembering how close she’d been to Cole all this time and how he didn’t say a damn thing about it.

Maybe he’s gone nose blind, or he really is that kind to let it slide and never once ask for some space. He’s been getting a bit ripe himself lately, but she’s so smitten that she overlooks it, and feeling the safety that comes with being near him is worth it.

Almond body wash foams as she scrubs and the shampoo smells of vanilla. It’s not

until she's washed her hair twice that her thoughts stray to how badly she wishes he were in this shower with her.

Her hands begin to stray as she wonders what it might be like to have him here.

She travels across the swell of her sore breasts, down her stomach, and hesitantly between her legs. It's been months since she last touched herself, way before Lucy was born, and a part of her is scared to explore if anything has changed.

She's a stranger to her own body at this point. The unknown keeps her fingers above where she wants them.

If Cole were here, would he touch her?

Sex isn't an option yet, but she wants so badly to be closer to him that she burns for it.

Self doubt keeps her quiet. How could he want her like that after what he's seen?

How he found them? Their first meeting hadn't left much to the imagination.

He's never made an overt move, but there are moments that make her wonder if he feels the same way, and if he, like her, is just terrible at showing it.

There were a few times at the cottage when he'd been in the bathroom longer than usual...that one time at the nursing home when he showered...and she wondered if he might have touched himself and thought of her.

She's no one's fantasy, but if she could be anyone's, then she'd hope to be his.

There's nothing stopping her mind from running wild. Instead of dwelling on her

doubts, she imagines him behind her, his thick cock against her ass and her body bracketed in those wide shoulders, one hand traveling down between her thighs.

Her own hand takes his place, ghosting across clean skin to rub where she's already swelling in anticipation. Doesn't linger yet. He'd keep going, tracing her heat and teasing her entrance.

So far, everything feels familiar. The bleeding has stopped, and the pain is gone. Mostly. Maybe she's not damaged beyond repair after all.

‘ This kid's gonna ruin the only thing you got going for you.’

She heard it enough during her pregnancy to start believing it might be true.

Emboldened, she goes a little further, bracing one leg on the edge of the tub and a hand on the wall. Imagines him stroking her tenderly, begging permission to go deeper and her body responds with a flush of wetness that meets her fingers.

Can't expect him to touch her if she can't even touch herself. She needs to check that she's not completely different now, so she can feel more confident going into this with him later. If it ever goes that far.

She's so worked up that her pulse throbs against the pads of her fingers, but the fear of finding something wrong makes her hesitate. Quickly, before she can overthink it, the tip of her finger slips inside. So far, so good, can barely feel it.

Oh god, she thinks in horror, is she numb? Are her nerves dead? What if she can't feel him at all when they finally get there?

She pushes further up to the second knuckle in a near panic, desperate to feel something, anything, and the sharp sting at her overeager effort is both welcome

because it means she's not broken, and a whole other worry all its own.

One of her own slim fingers hurts . She can't imagine the pain of taking the entire length of him inside her.

She gives up, pulling her hand away and feeling her arousal fade fast. There's no hope of reclaiming it even after a token attempt at focusing on the spot that could get her there.

She hasn't had an orgasm in months and she won't be getting one tonight, either.

The water runs cold and she curses in frustration as she turns it off.

It's fine.

Women have babies all the time and they have sex after or there wouldn't be any siblings.

It's just too soon, that's all. She needs another couple weeks to heal, and then it won't be an issue.

Don't rush this. It's fine. He may not want you anyway, so what does it matter?

When she finds him waiting in the bedroom, his face lights up at the sight of her before she says a single word.

"You look good," he says shyly, somehow managing to make her feel beautiful with three words when she'd been in the middle of berating herself .

He takes his turn in the shower and she does not think about him naked in there alone.

Nope. Absolutely not.

Her daydreams aren't doing her any favors today, so she thinks about Lucy instead.

Lays her on the bed and unwraps the towel so her little arms and legs spring free.

Olivia can't keep the smile off her face at the sight of her daughter, so perfect and happy and so very alive.

After all the hardships they've endured, she's still thriving and if someone told her how all this would play out weeks ago, she'd have been in disbelief.

Was so sure back then that her ex would be their downfall one way or another if the virus didn't get them first. While one of those is still a threat, the other is only a memory she can't shake.

She bends down and kisses Lucy's chubby hands, giving them a gentle squeeze.

' I love you.'

' You're so smart.'

' I'm so happy you're here with us.'

A comment between every peck earns her a giggle to follow, and that's how Cole finds them later, on the bed having a quiet moment. He pauses in the doorway, water dripping from damp hair, looking like he's walked in on something he's not a part of.

"Come here," she offers a hand in invitation and slips her palm into his when he comes close. She tugs him down beside her and he goes easy, his relief at being included obvious even if he's trying to hide it.

She's never given him a reason to doubt that they're a unit now, the three of them together under whatever label they land beneath, but he's likely given himself plenty of doubts .

"You look good, too." She smiles, threading her fingers through his towel-fluffed hair. It feels like a bold gesture to touch him this way, yet he allows it.

A knock at the door startles them both, putting them on edge, but it's only a food delivery offered on fancy china dishes and that fear quickly transforms into suspicion.

"Think it's poisoned?" he says dryly once they're alone.

"I'm hungry enough that I'm willing to risk it." She takes a bite of fresh scrambled eggs, wondering where the chickens are. "This is a lot of trouble to go through for two people off the street begging for sanctuary."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"We leave tomorrow?"

He nods, tearing off a piece of bread with his teeth. "Hell yes."

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She hadn't been joking about wanting to feel the sheets on her bare legs.

Cole's in bed with a half-naked woman and it feels like he won the lottery.

It was easy enough to fall asleep from exhaustion. When she stripped off her pants and climbed in wearing only a T-shirt and pair of underwear, he'd been surprised, but that faded when she kept her distance, as she often does when they aren't overcome with stress.

All this closeness is something he'd have run from before, but things change.

She looks like she wants to snuggle in against him, but nine times out of ten she stays on her side of whatever bed they share.

They are overly careful about getting too close unless it's an emergency or a nightmare, and he wishes they could curl up together without hesitation.

He wants to feel her skin on his. Hold her close and bury his face into the back of her neck in that spooning thing that couples do.

They are not a couple. But they could be.

For the first time in his life, he wants to be someone's other half instead of running from the concept.

She brings out a needy, tactile side of him he didn't know existed, but every time she fails to initiate he backs off, too, leaving what feels like a canyon between them.

Would it be acceptable to move closer if she's not awake to tell him to back off?

Should he give her a gentle poke with his finger first, or wait until she opens her eyes on her own?

He's not planning to try anything beyond wrapping his arms around her.

At the slightest hint of her unhappiness, he's prepared to fly off the bed immediately.

He swallows hard, taking a deep breath before resting a nervous hand on her shoulder, his voice soft. "Hey? Morning."

No response.

He takes a risky journey down to her elbow and back, checking for any reaction.

Not a sound.

Even touching her this much without permission feels wrong, so he lets his hand drop away and pulls it back into his space. He won't be like those fuckers in the cottage, or like the man she left in that subway, assuming he can do whatever he likes.

She makes a pleased hum at the back of her throat, and he spies the edge of her lips curling up in a careful smile. She's been awake this whole time.

"I wanted to see what you would do." She bites her lower lip.

He props himself up on his elbow to peer down at her, curious that she hasn't rolled over yet. "What did you want me to do?"

"I wanted you to stop, just to know that you would....even though I already know

that. And then when you did, I changed my mind.”

He swallows hard. She was testing him, and he can’t blame her for that. “What do you want me to do now?”

“Hold me for a while?”

Tentatively, he slides an arm around her waist, careful to stay in the safety zone of her stomach, ready to combust at any moment from sheer nervous energy. He presses his chest to her back, but keeps his hips as far away as possible without throwing his spine out of alignment.

“This okay?” he asks.

“Closer.”

She wiggles as if wanting to shove her ass back against his crotch, so he takes the hint in bold print and nudges his hips forward until their bodies meld together.

“You feel good.” She exhales hard, hugging his arm beneath her breasts. “I only feel safe like this when I’m with you.”

He takes that as his cue to settle in, willing his heart to quit thumping against her back and his dick to stay down.

She doesn’t move an inch, perfectly happy to let him hold her, and he wonders how he lived his whole life without this.

Without her. He’s already become addicted, and she’s the pusher supplying his fix.

His willpower to keep himself at half-mast only lasts so long before he hardens.

“Sorry. It’ll go away.”

“It’s okay. You’re good right here.”

Fuck.

Dammit.

Holy shit.

He won’t survive this and now he remembers one very important reason why he’d been hesitant to hold her before. He’s already five seconds from coming in his pants with barely any contact at all.

“If it makes you uncomfortable, we don’t have to be this close,” she says gently. “But I’m good if you are.”

She’s telling him that she’s content to lie with his cock hardening in the curve of her ass.

That she feels safe with him wrapped around her and doesn’t want him to move.

He’s pretty damn sure their whole relationship shifted on its axis in the space of a few seconds because people who are only friends don’t do this.

“This is the only place I wanna be,” he chokes out, giving her a soft squeeze and nestling his face into the nape of her neck to inhale her scent.

It’s euphoric torture to feel her like this while knowing they can go no further.

Even the idea of that being a possibility later spins his brain in circles, but he is only

lucky to have gotten here at all.

As she draws little shapes on his forearm, making goosebumps rise on his flesh, he remembers kissing her forehead the day before, and how surprised she was by the small gesture.

He wants to do the same again and takes a chance at pressing his lips to her temple.

Curving and arcing, her body curls into his like a kidney bean, her smile quick and his heart warming at her response.

“I can feel your pulse dancing against my back.” She grins, and then all at once he feels her shut down. Her body tenses and she rolls onto her back to look up at the ceiling. “I’m only teasing you. It’s not fair.”

“Teasing me?”

He’s afraid for a moment that she’s playing with his heart on purpose. It’s crazy, but he has so little experience in any of this that he’s not sure how to judge what’s normal and what’s not.

“Getting you all worked up,” she continues. “I like how you make me feel and all I want is more of that, but we can’t do anything else yet and that makes me a tease, doesn’t it?”

He’s torn between the relief of being wrong and the urge to resurrect her dead husband to bash his face in for accusing her of being a tease. He’d bet money on that asshole being the source of this particular worry.

“Not fair? I’m lucky. That’s all there is to it.”

She reaches up to where he's propped on an elbow to trace his cheek with her fingertips. "I'm lucky too."

"Then let's lay here until the baby wakes up? You can feel my pulse hammering in my chest through your back again. I got a whole drum solo going on in here."

She nods eagerly, turning over onto her side so he can wrap around her from behind. Her hum of approval is the best reward. It's followed by a hiss when his feet find hers. "So cold!"

"Dunno what you mean. They're toasty," he teases and pushes their feet together.

Her laugh prompts his and all of a sudden it doesn't matter that his dick is rock hard, only inches from where it belongs.

Doesn't matter that they can't do anything about it.

He'll jerk off later and be just fine. All he cares about now is making her laugh again, seeing that smile on her lips, and feeling her warmth blossom against his body.

* * *

They're being given another tour by the leader, only this time he gets the distinct feeling that it's more of a sales pitch. They stroll past the beginnings of a market on the street, all the booths and tables half done, people scurrying about as if any of this is important.

"What's all that in the back?" He points toward a creepy-looking fair ride, one of those things that made children throw up over the rims of a spinning teacup.

It sits in the darkened shadows of an alley they pass along with several other

contraptions that look straight out of a circus horror movie.

A funnel cake stand, fluffy teddy bears hanging from a balloon-popping station, and a dunk tank made of metal and wood, larger than anything he's seen before.

"Oh, that's been here a long time. Used to be a yearly tradition before the outbreak to bring the community together and make use of that old equipment.

Some of it still stands from over a hundred years ago.

Isn't that fascinating? We still try to get a gathering going once in a while.

It's good for morale even if we can't power all the lights. "

Cole shivers as they're led away, his gaze still on the tank that looks big and sturdy enough to hold five people in its depths.

"We've got teachers here for the children. Plenty of room for new residents. Even the best doctors researching the virus," they're told.

"Researching a cure?" Cole replies.

"Yes, in a way. A cure, a treatment, but that's a discussion for a later time.

Why don't I let you two make yourselves at home?

Get to know folks. Settle in. The cookies at Lila's table are to die for.

" He pauses a moment, smiling at Lucy in a way that makes Cole's nerves fray.

"You are so lucky to be blessed with such a gift."

When he leaves them alone again, they're stuck in the middle of what looks like a farmer's market filled with people staring.

He hates being the center of attention. Hates being social.

Wants to go back to their room and avoid prying eyes.

He doesn't fit here, and that's part of why he's so eager to leave.

Olivia would fit in, though, and he'd have to be blind not to notice how much safer this is. He's only being selfish about wanting to pull them away. Creepy vibes or not.

She hefts the baby a little higher with a frown. "A treatment. You think he's bullshitting us?"

"Dunno. He wants us to stay real bad, though, and I can't figure out why."

"Did you see...maybe it was just me, but...he looked at Lucy weird."

"It's not just you."

That's about as far as they've gotten in their theories and they stall for now, admitting defeat.

"Cookies? Lila looks harmless enough," Olivia suggests.

"I could eat."

He follows her to a table filled with piles of baked goods. It's an embarrassment of riches by today's standards that no one seems bothered by but him.

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“Oh my goodness, look at that sweet one. How old is she? What’s her name? We don’t have a single baby here,” the woman behind the table coos, her two friends chiming in hot on her heels.

“How are you liking the community?”

“Do you plan to stay?”

“Isn’t she just the cutest baby I’ve ever seen?”

They pay Olivia no attention, overtly staring at Cole instead in a way that would make construction workers blush.

“Her name is Lucy,” Olivia replies, looping her arm through his. “I’m Olivia and this is my husband, Cole.”

It’s the first time she’s called him that.

She stands up a little straighter and flashes him a smile that looks as genuine as he’s ever seen.

She’s happy to call him her husband, and he didn’t know how badly he wanted to hear that until it shifted a few pieces of his own puzzle right into place.

After a lifetime of needing solitude, he wants to be someone’s husband and that’s knocking him for a loop.

“Well, isn’t that adorable,” Lila says. “You must take some cookies. Go on. Anything you like.”

They grab a few, veering off to look at other tables and suddenly he doesn’t give a shit that they’re in public with everyone watching. He only has eyes for Olivia and how proud she is to be on his arm like he’s something to show off instead of a dirty secret.

“Will you hold her a minute?” She hands him a sleepy Lucy. “There’s a bathroom over there and since they have running water, I assume it works.”

“Should clear it first, make sure it’s safe,” he replies, forgetting for a moment that they don’t need to do that here.

“I’ll be okay. You’ll stay right here?”

“Right here. Outside the door.”

He’s not moving an inch. He plants himself by the door with Lucy like a guard as those three women enter a moment later. They’re likely unaware that anyone else had entered first, too preoccupied with their own conversation.

They’re harmless, PTA-going moms. Olivia could take ‘em.

It’s not until he realizes how paper fucking thin the walls are and notices an air vent leading from the public bathroom right to the wall he’s leaning against that he understands they are very dangerous, just not in the usual way.

God, that poor thing. She is such a mess. Hanging off him like that .

Well, she’s his wife. I’d hang off him, too. He might be the last man left alive who

looks that good.

You really think they're married? There are no rings. It's a cover just because it's safer. I'm sure of it.

Are you serious? You think they're lying and he's single after all?

Absolutely. She clearly doesn't take much care of herself. Bet he found her on the street and he's just kind enough to take her under his wing. Isn't that the nicest thing? He could do so much better.

A heart of gold and hot enough to set the whole town on fire. Wanna bet on who can fuck him first? I haven't gotten laid in months so y'all are gonna have to work hard to beat me at this game.

I bet he fucks rough. Can pick up a woman and pin her to the wall.

No chance he could do that with her. She couldn't take it.

About ready to break in half already. Not that she'd even want it so soon after the baby.

I didn't want my husband touching me for months.

It's the hormones, you know. They're screwed up after. I bet he's so frustrated.

I'd be happy to let him work off that frustration as hard and as deep as he wants.

Alright, alright. Let's get back out there before all the muffins get taken. Maybe we can watch him a while longer.

We need to figure out how to get him alone. A game plan.

Meet at my house tonight at seven? We'll talk about it then. I found some wine in the main office while I was cleaning it.

They grin and giggle as they leave, unaware that he heard every awful word.

Olivia heard everything, too. Must have been in one of the stalls while they were blathering on.

She emerges pale and sullen, unable to meet his eyes before plastering on a fake smile. "Ready? I think I saw some sort of cheese table over there. I wonder how they make it."

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fine. It's just hot today, that's all. The weather has been so strange lately. Maybe we can go back to the room early?"

She's just as fine as he was during all those times he hid in a school bathroom stall, listening to hurtful comments about him and whatever foster family he landed with.

It's not the same, but it's not far off either and those women watching intently from behind a protective wall of cookies only further his building anger.

They're so convinced he could never want Olivia. That's just about the most confusing, ridiculous thing he's ever heard. Of course he wants her. She is all he wants.

He's not about to let them get away with this bullshit a second longer. "Can we give it a minute? I'd like to look at that...those...whatever those are."

Following his finger to a market stall, she nods in agreement.

He hands her the baby who she holds against her like a protective barrier until an older woman approaches to offer them a stroller. Olivia accepts with a grateful smile, tucking the baby into the cozy space, and then they wander over to a booth filled with suncatchers and wind chimes.

It's still early and the morning sun creates glinting prisms across the space.

If he had any real interest in chimes, he'd be fascinated by them, but he only has eyes for her.

She ghosts the glittering metal hanging from the booth with her fingers, her profile the most delicate thing he's ever seen.

All at once, he finds the courage to run a hand over her back, urging her to face him.

Her eyes meet his, her head tilted curiously.

There's so much trust in her expression that it reaches into his soul and holds him captive.

All those moments he thought he lost her play like a movie in his head, alongside every second he's wanted more than he thought he earned.

More than they could ever be. That isn't true anymore, though.

They can be what he's rarely allowed himself to hope for if he takes one last step over the line.

Quickly, he tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, focusing on her lips, mapping a path

along her cheek and jaw, then gently lifting her chin with a curled finger.

Her breath hitches and pupils dilate, her body swaying an inch toward him and he encourages her further, dipping his head in her direction but pausing as their noses nestle together.

Abruptly, she holds a hand to his chest, her next words both a statement and a firm warning. “I’m trusting you.”

“I’ll never make you regret it.”

He waits for a moment, giving her time to back away and tell him it’s a mistake, but she remains silent, her breath brushing his lips and her eyelashes dancing near his.

That hand holding him back slips up his shoulder instead.

It’s permission to keep going, and he accepts.

First contact is a gentle press that warms the blood in his veins.

It is chaste and simple, only the barest hint of a kiss.

The moment they part, he misses her, only grateful she doesn’t go far.

He feels the tip of her upper lip touching his, and her pulse thumping beneath his hand where it slipped down to her neck, synchronizing with his own frantic heartbeats.

The chaos of the market slows like molasses in his periphery.

Every sound from outside their cocoon fades into silence.

Her hand cups his face and his eyes slip closed again.

What started slow and tentative, turns searing and desperate.

He greedily pulls her to him, sucking her lower lip, sweeping his tongue against the seam of her, and slipping inside just as he can feel her smile.

Kissing has always been too close, too much, too intimate, but he knows what he wants today and her responsiveness makes it all so simple.

They ebb and flow, trading emotions through their lips, her body supple in his arms and her desire matching his own.

As his arm tightens around her waist, he inhales one final breath from her lungs, and they find themselves locking eyes in the golden hue of the farmer's market, kiss-swollen and exhilarated.

She offers him a sweet, gentle smile. "What was that for?"

He's forgotten what he was trying to prove. The only thought in his head now is how lucky he is. "Because I wanted to."

"That's a good reason."

"Thought so. You ready to head back now?"

She pauses, considering her options. "You know...maybe we can stay a little longer. Look at a few more tables?"

"Few more." He agrees.

Maybe it really can be this simple. Maybe the two of them can slip from friendship into more without batting an eye, because everything that's happened here only feels right.

In the depths of his soul, untouched by anyone until now, he is only sure of one thing - he's in love with her.

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Her hormones are supposed to be too fucked to want this. That's what Olivia heard stuck in that bathroom stall, but the moment they get back to their room and put the baby down for a nap, she decides to hell with what she's supposed to feel.

She wants him. Wants this. Doesn't care if it's abnormal to be so ready this soon after having Lucy. Her body already vibrates for Cole nearly twenty-four-seven. Kissing her in the middle of the street, as if she were the last woman on earth, only intensified her cravings.

No one's ever made her feel this wanted.

He has perfect timing considering those awful women had her doubting everything she knew to be true.

They aren't worth her tears or her stress, only jealous of what she has, but their words took root anyway until he chased them off with an overt gesture exactly when she needed it most.

Despite her desire to push her boundaries, a lingering worry remains that she's moving too fast. The high of a first kiss still sings in her veins. They've danced around each other for what feels like an eternity, though, and that kiss was the breaking point.

With the soft glow of sun filtering through white curtains, floating dust becomes fireflies.

Her arousal is high, her body warm, and Cole is watching her from across the room.

There's a new shimmer in his expression smoothing out that scowl he was born with and those worry lines etched into his skin.

He looks softer than she's ever seen him, gazing at her like she's some sort of gift, and she holds out a hand to encourage him closer.

'You're not a tease, you're not a tease,' she silently tells herself, willing her ex-husband's voice away, as Cole stops in front of her.

The breadth of his wide shoulders frame her outline and his palm cups her cheek.

He already knows they can't have sex yet.

It's okay to straddle that line and get as close as they can without crossing over.

The idea of seeking her own pleasure is unheard of.

Intimacy has never been about her. She knows how to make a man see stars, but being on the receiving end is brand new.

She believed herself too defeated to consider her desires, yet Cole stirred something dormant within her, leading to a surge of courage as she wraps her hand around the back of his neck and pulls his lips to hers.

It's no less perfect the second time. Her nerves shiver and a sharp inhale sucks into her lungs he tugs her flush against him, his mouth moving slow and sweet.

Careful fingers dance up her ribs as he rolls his forehead against hers. "Tell me what you want."

She shows him instead, dragging his hand down to the button on her pants.

With his lips heating the curve of her neck, they are swiftly pulled down her legs, leaving only her underwear hugging her hips.

Something in her twitches in the worst way and her gut drops. A flash of the cottage flares in her memory before sheer stubbornness pushes it back down.

First contact with intent is clumsy but enthusiastic.

For a moment, she nearly purrs as he strokes the wet fabric between her legs and nips at her lower lip.

This attention she's been starved for has her gasping and responsive to the slightest touch.

Her nails scrape against the back of his neck before she's urged down onto the bed.

She scoots up against the pillows and widens her thighs so he can fit his body between them.

Cole still has all his clothes on, and she groans, working his belt free and using one foot to help push his pants over his ass.

He chuckles into her mouth, sitting up to remove his pants himself, the length of him tenting his boxers impressively.

He covers her once more, carefully touching her with the tips of his fingers as if she might shatter.

His cock never comes near where she wants it, but his hand dips below the fabric of her underwear as he nuzzles her pulse point.

All at once, she freezes.

The skin-on-skin contact is too similar to that unwanted touch in the cottage where she'd been on her back like this and had someone else's hand between her legs.

She doesn't have to tell Cole to stop. When she quits participating he leans back, the concern in his eyes breaking her heart and making her hate herself at the same time. "What is it? You okay? Did I do something wrong?"

"I'm sorry." It is a habitual response formed long ago in the presence of another man. She falls back on it now without a second thought. "I'm so sorry."

She is crying already and can't stop the flow down her cheeks. When he moves off her, she covers her face with her hands and rolls onto her side to curl into herself.

"It's okay." He runs a careful touch over her shoulder, his thumb waving back and forth. "Just talk to me. Tell me what's happening."

"I thought I could. I thought I was fine, but then I was back in that cottage, and when I said..."

Olivia trails off, refusing to turn over and face him.

"When you said what?"

"When I said they didn't do anything, that wasn't true.

One of them touched me." She makes a frustrated noise in the back of her throat and finally flips over, her heart racing.

"And you know what's crazy? What the stupidest part of this is?

That's not even the worst that's ever happened to me.

Not the worst thing a man has done. So why am I letting it ruin this? "

"It only just happened. It's too soon. I'm the one that's sorry. You haven't ruined anything."

It feels like she has. Her face crumbles and she wills herself not to make it worse and cry even harder.

"Hey, hey, it's alright," he soothes. "Lemme lay down with you?"

She nods quickly, wanting to feel him closer while fearing he'll run.

It's only a relief when he wraps her up against his chest, tucking her in close, her head under his chin and the blanket tossed over them both.

He deserves one of those other women that'll let him fuck hard and fast, she thinks.

The ones in the bathroom gushing over him.

Yet here he is, consoling her instead, and a part of her is shattered by that while loving him even more for it.

Through all of this, her desire for him still simmers beneath the surface of her trauma, and her brain struggles to find satisfaction in any form.

"I still want you," she breathes against his collarbone.

"And I still want you," he replies. "Tell me what you need. If it's only this, then I'm still the luckiest man alive. If it's more, then I'll do anything you want. Anything,

sweetheart.”

She knows what she wants. What would ease her nerves and calm her fears, but asking him for that is selfish. “It’s not fair to you.”

“Lemme be the judge of that. Try me.”

She takes a deep breath. “I want to be closer.”

He’s quiet for a moment before asking for clarification. “Show me.”

She’s about to ask him for more restraint than she’s ever expected from anyone, but the way she craves him has her on the edge of a near panic attack and so she gives in, tracing the waistband of his boxers. “You can always say no, too. You know that, right?”

He nods. “I know.”

He doesn’t tell her no. Lets her help him remove the fabric until his cock is free and even only half hard, it takes her breath away.

Long and thick, like she thought he would be.

She assumed he was big all those times she felt him through their clothes, but reality exceeds what her imagination could conjure.

The space between her legs aches for him all over again.

She can’t have him there yet, but she wants to get as close as she can.

She peels off her underwear, turning in his arms to press her back to his chest, lifting

one leg, and humming her approval as he slots his thigh between both of hers, and the length of him presses against her.

Finally, her eyes slip shut and her body relaxes.

She's cocooned in the embrace of the only person she's ever felt safe with, every inch of them touching.

He isn't tense like she feared he might be at first. His muscles are loose and his arms snug around her, his body unmoving even as his cock hardens further.

"I've got you." It's a promise pressed to her shoulder in a soft kiss.

A flush of wetness coats the length of him and he rubs his temple along hers. He never thrusts even once, perfectly content to lay here as long as she wants without begging for more, but she wants more.

She shifts her hips slightly. "You can move, just not inside, okay? Not yet. And not with your fingers."

"I promise."

When he rocks his hips against her ass, thrusting his cock along the seam of her opening, the swollen head catches on her clit. She has never felt anything better in all her life.

With his body warming her back, she lets her mind drift and go blank.

They move together in gentle waves again and again, the rhythm slow but steady until a comforting build of tension spirals within her.

They're mimicking what they can't do yet, but the sensations are close enough.

Without warning, her orgasm hits, and a soft cry escapes from deep within her lungs while his arms tighten to hold her.

The world contracts and convulses, and she spasms against him, widening her legs as if to draw him inside on reflex, unable to control herself.

The tip of him brushes her entrance but goes no further, sliding back up to rub where she's swollen until she's boneless and lax on the bed.

Three, four...five thrusts later, the warmth of his release finds her lower belly before sliding down to the sheets, her name a breathless plea on his lips.

Well, that was unexpected.

It never happens that fast for her, and never without batteries .

"Stay," she says. "Stay with me."

And so he does, the two of them wrapped up together in post-orgasmic bliss.

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She belongs to him like he belongs to her, she realizes, and for the first time that doesn't scare her. It feels protective instead of controlling. Reverent instead of hostile.

"I used to think I didn't have anything to offer anyone." He muffles into her temple, his voice a low cadence. "That letting someone in was a mistake because I could never be enough. You make me feel like enough."

"You are. You're so much more than enough."

As her thoughts drift and the warmth of his arm around her lulls her senses into a hazy half-dream, she can't help but wonder how much different their lives would have been if they'd met sooner.

Perhaps they fit so well now because both had been broken by others, two damaged souls only coming together when they need it the most.

* * *

The third tour, focusing on medical facilities, finds Olivia increasingly suspicious.

She has a feeling not everyone here is offered the same treatment.

If the way Cole is side-eyeing Carlton from over a cluttered lab table is any indication, then she's not the only one.

The research they do here is interesting, though.

She'll give him that. Looking for a treatment that could reverse the virus either in the fever stage or after, once the host is already gone.

That part doesn't make much sense because there's no cure for being dead, as far as she knows.

They're even granted the leader's name, Grant, and not a moment too soon when having to refer to him by a title was beginning to irritate her more than all this false hospitality. She suspects it's a last name, not his first, but she'll take it.

"Don't get why you're showing us all this," Cole says bluntly. "We can't help. Not doctors. If you have a cure ready, that's another story but doesn't look like it yet."

"Actually, you might be able to help," Carlton replies, shoving his glasses further up his face and straightening his lab coat as his boss shoots him a glance across the room. "You see, what we're missing here is the ability to produce antibodies that fight the virus."

"Yeah, well, we don't have those either."

Grant rudely cuts in with even more confusing information. "In all our research, we've seen glimpses, moments here and there that might indicate the host isn't entirely gone when they're gone."

Carlton winces. "Not exactly. Not for sure. There's still more testing to be done."

"But it's possible."

"It's possible. We're still trying."

Olivia raises a brow at this disagreement, bouncing Lucy, who's begun to fuss. "Still

not sure what this has to do with us.”

She regrets asking as Carlton finally clarifies why they’ve been getting the royal treatment. Nothing comes without a price.

“The first generation exposed to the virus has developed no antibodies. There have been no survivors, but second-generation children born to parents who are carriers, and we all are, may have developed them in the womb. The world spiraled out of control before anyone was able to test that in a controlled setting.”

There’s a beat of silence where they pause to process that information. What he’s implying can’t be true.

The next thing she knows Cole’s urging her toward the door. “No. We aren’t interested. We’re leaving. Pack our shit and be on our way.”

“We hoped you’d see the value of what we’re doing here.

That you’d willingly participate. My own wife has been afflicted, and it’s my hope that the testing done here may save her life.

We aren’t monsters. No harm will come to your child.

It’s a simple blood draw and the benefits far outweigh any discomfort.

There is so much we can provide in return. Safety. Food. A normal life again.”

It’s simple until it’s not, she thinks, as they block the exit and she holds Lucy closer.

Until they need more and more and her baby turns into a lab rat.

She isn't willing to risk it, doesn't care how many lives could be saved, and doesn't even want to satisfy her own curiosity in regard to Lucy's possible immunity.

All she cares about her is daughter's safety and this situation is absolutely not safe.

Maybe it's selfish and she should jump at the chance to help humanity, but this baby, Cole, this little family they've made is all she has left and any threat is unacceptable.

"Afflicted?" Cole counters. "You mean gone? Dead?"

"You should watch your tone," Grant replies, but Cole's unbothered and already agitated enough to keep plowing ahead.

"Use one of the children in your own community for your projects," he growls, already doing his best to herd her toward another part of the room as if that'll keep them safe when there's no exit except the one they can't reach .

"That's just it. We don't have any children here born after the virus hit," Carlton replies, far more regretful than his boss could hope to fake.

Cole curls a hand around his knife handle, unsheathing it. "You touch my daughter, and the last thing you'll be worried about is this virus."

In another reality, she'd be overcome with emotion hearing him call Lucy his daughter, but at the moment, she's too preoccupied with how they'll get out of this.

Carlton cowers easily, but Grant came to win, pointing a handgun at Cole's forehead. Now she knows why they didn't bother making them leave their knives in the room.

"We hoped you'd be on board, but we don't need your cooperation."

The gunshot rings in her ears, stunning her as the bullet shatters the cinder block beside her head and she watches Cole drop like a rock.

Although Lucy must be screaming, she can't hear anything other than the dull throb inside her skull as she slides down the wall, holding her baby tight.

She thinks him dead for a moment, feels herself screaming too, but the silence is all-encompassing and unwavering, as her eardrums struggle to recover from the shock.

There's no blood. If he was shot in the head, there would be blood.

Frantically, she grabs Cole's arm to keep him from being dragged away, but it's no use. She's not strong enough and he's far too heavy.

Stunned momentarily by the close gunshot, he quickly recovers. Soon he's fighting his captors, knocking someone's kneecap sideways, before a needle is shoved into his thigh .

Slowly, sound begins to filter back in.

Lucy's sobbing, shrill and panicked.

Cole's desperate curses as he's pulled out the door and around the corner, his nails digging into the frame before being ripped away.

The sound of her name as he yells it from the hall.

Her own heartbeat is magnified in her ears like she's listening with a stethoscope.

She fights when they rip her child away, kicking out and connecting with soft tissue, but there are two of them and one of her and she's hampered by shock, disoriented,

and clumsy.

A last surge of adrenaline at the flash of a needle has the heel of her hand connecting with Carlton's nose but it's too late and the prick is followed by a flush of liquid under her skin. Her eyelids flutter closed no matter how hard she struggles to stay awake.

Earlier, she'd been riding the biggest high and now she's trapped in the lowest low, having her daughter stolen and losing the only other person she cares about.

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Olivia

The drugs have left her foggy and drowsy, her shoulders strained backward in their sockets.

A hard wooden chair digs into the back of her thighs and every time she blinks, the world spins.

She's in an office. Maybe a study or a living room.

Her brain can't make sense of her surroundings while soaked in whatever they injected her with.

Her daughter's name is her first lucid thought. "Lucy!"

Olivia struggles to stand but Grant shoves her over a desk with her hands tied behind her back, his chilling voice ghosting her ear. "You can keep having a fit, or can we have a conversation? The first option doesn't end well for you."

She doesn't answer, can't when the drugs and the stress mingle together to make her stomach roll.

She throws up all over clean mahogany, soaking papers and trinkets.

His disgusted glare as he throws her back into the chair makes her feel accomplished.

He might not rape her if he's staring at her like she belongs on the bottom of his shoe.

“Where are they?” She surprises herself that there’s not a tremble in each syllable.

“The baby is safe.” He flicks a lighter at the end of a cigar. “Your boyfriend, husband, whoever he really is, is too. For now. I’ll be checking on him shortly. Make sure he’s earning his keep.”

There was a time when her initial reaction would be to cry, but she refuses to let this monster have the satisfaction. She knows the type to get off on it, lived with one for years and Grant fits the profile.

She’ll get Lucy back.

She’ll find Cole.

She can’t help anyone unless she keeps it together.

Discreetly twisting her bound wrists earns her more wiggle room than she expected. In the corner, Olivia catches sight of their weapons. The shotgun they showed up with and the knives they were allowed to keep. Their room must have been cleared already. No trace of them left behind.

“Why would I kill someone before we make use of them?” Grant continues. “It’s been so long since we had visitors. The community is restless for another show.”

Her heart sinks. “What kind of show?”

“Nothing special. Not much in the way of entertainment around here anymore. Have to give them something to look forward to. Something to take their minds off what’s happening beyond the fence. A way to work off their aggression and fear. Something to laugh at.”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

He only smiles, walking over to a large object in the corner covered by a tarp. He flings the fabric aside, revealing a snarling, snapping rotter inside a giant dog crate, its claws reaching through the bars. “This is my wife. Your daughter could help save her.”

“There is no saving her now. You know that.” Olivia squeezes her eyes shut, willing herself not to unravel. “Lucy could be like us. Just another carrier, and even if she’s not, there’s too much damage done after someone turns.”

The ties on her wrists loosen little by little. She only needs to buy enough time before he takes her elsewhere, so she keeps up a ridiculous conversation, watching him pull a bottle of brandy from a cabinet, the likely source for the soccer mom group’s stolen wine.

“The question now is, what do we do with you? Cole has a purpose. Your baby does too. But you haven’t found a way to be useful yet and we can’t trust you in the general population for obvious reasons.”

“So you’re going to feed me to that?” she asks incredulously. “Why are we even talking, then?”

He nods with raised brows like she’s made a good point, moving to unhook the latch on the crate door.

She blurts out the first thing that might save her life. “Test a cure on me first! If Lucy has antibodies, then who better to test them on than her own family?”

Inject me with whatever you want and then let your dead wife take a bite and see what happens. That’s her offer, and it’s enough to stop his hand inches from the latch.

“A solid suggestion, but unnecessary when we have the source.”

She pales at the implication.

It was never just a blood draw.

They probably don't even have the equipment to make a vaccine or effective treatment.

Lucy would be the first test. That's how they'd find out one way or another.

There's nothing Olivia can say to save herself.

There never was. Her purpose here is to feed this creature.

Any precursor is solely for his amusement.

She has spent most of her life feeling useless and helpless, and this is no different.

For a moment, she sags against the chair, defeated.

Until she remembers what kept her alive in that house with her husband.

The skill she crafted long before the dead walked the earth.

If there's one thing she's good at, it's distracting and pacifying a man.

“How long has it been since you've come without your own hand?” Leaning back against the chair, she lifts her head, her eyes hooded. “It must be difficult to be alone through all this.”

He huffs, but his curiosity is peaked. “Pleasure is only a distraction from the mission.”

“Is it? Or could it clear your mind?”

“I know what you’re doing.”

She shrugs, letting her gaze travel down to the zipper on his fly.

“I need you to have a reason to keep me alive, and this is something I’m good at.

You wouldn’t need to worry about souring relationships with the towns folk.

Don’t need to fake it with anyone out there.

I can get you off whenever you need in exchange for my life.

That’s the offer. I won’t fight you. I won’t complain.

I’ll suck your cock like it’s a fucking lollipop.

I’ll even swallow. Let me give you a trial run, then you can decide. ”

He narrows his eyes, shifting his stance. “I am no rapist.”

“You can’t steal what I offer.”

It’s a lie, of course. There can be no real consent when she fears for her life and would do anything to find her baby again, but her answer seems to calm his objection.

Lucy screams from down the hall, and Olivia's facade falters, her voice shrill.

"Please, please, let me do this for you. Keep me alive, give me a chance to see her again if your experiments work, and I'll give you whatever you want.

If you close your eyes, I could be your wife.

You could have her back again for a moment. "

In the end, he thinks with his dick like she knew he would.

He could likely have any of the women who live in this town if he chose, if only due to his status, but there is forced professionalism in his demeanor that she suspects curbed that effort.

He wants to be respected in this place and fucking anyone who still has a pulse would be frowned upon in such a civilized community.

She is offering him a hidden outlet, and he accepts.

The cigar is muffled in a tray and the tarp flung back over the crate containing his wife before he comes closer, one hand on the button of his pants and the other on the back of her head, yanking it back by her hair. "A trial run first. Mind your teeth or I'll pull them out of your head."

She nods, feeling the rope on her wrists loosen further until her thumb slips free.

There is no one here to save her today. She must save herself.

She takes him into her mouth without any hesitation. Despite the putrid smell and taste making her gag, she persists. One stroke. Two. Bile rises in her throat as she

glances up to find his head tipped back and his eyes shut.

And then she bites down. Hard. Her sharp canine tooth slices through the flesh as her back molars clamp onto his shaft.

How many times had she thought of doing this when her husband demanded the same?

Too many to count. She was never brave enough to try then.

She feared prison time, or worse, his retaliation.

There are no police anymore. No need to explain herself to authorities. He can't retaliate if he bleeds to death.

As he flails and screams, she twists her head and bites harder, catching him off guard, leaving him to try to shove her away from his crotch.

She only lets go when she's ripped the entire thing off.

Blood drips down her mouth and she spits the remains onto the ground, bringing her hands forward, unbound by the ropes, and stands from the chair.

Unable to do more than writhe and twist in agony, he struggles to stop the flow of his own blood.

Olivia grabs the shotgun, checking the chamber like Cole showed her after they left the gas station.

She could shoot him now, but it would alert the others.

If he somehow stops the bleeding, he might live and steal someone else's baby.

He could track them down after they leave and they'll spend forever looking over their shoulders.

Leaving him alive will risk her daughter's life.

Olivia isn't a violent person, but this world changes people, and she better adapt or risk everything she loves.

Standing over him, she smashes the end of the shotgun into his forehead until the crack of his skull tells her it's enough.

Momentarily, she's horrified at what she's done and has to swallow the urge to vomit again.

She sways on her feet, stuck in disgusted shock until Lucy screams from the depths of the building and the sound kickstarts Olivia's determination.

She grabs a bottle of liquor from the cabinet and the lighter off the desk before darting out the door.

Lucy's cries echoing through the halls are more reliable than any map.

They lead her through several doors and into a makeshift lab where she finds her baby on a cold metal table, alone with Carlton.

Out of breath, red-faced, and angry, Lucy wears a band-aid on her chubby arm, which Olivia assumes is from a preliminary blood draw. She's upset but alive and when Olivia frantically scoops her up, the sobbing begins to quiet as she inhales her mother's scent.

“ It’s okay baby, it’s okay. I’ve got you now,” she says softly .

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This operation lacks planning. There are no guards, only a scientist, and several rotters in cages. A couple decapitated heads snapping in containers. Good thing too, because if she had to fight her way in here, she'd fail. Carlton backs away and toward a far exit without protest.

He stands there now with his hands raised in surrender, begging forgiveness she won't offer. "I had to. He'd have killed me if I didn't, or worse. I thought we were only trying to help people here. I never knew it would be like this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She uncaps the twisting top off the bottle and takes a few drinks to clean her mouth, spitting the liquid onto the ground.

Then, Olivia saturates every surface within reach before throwing the entire thing into a cluster of test tubes, causing Lucy to cry again.

It's an acceptable price for the satisfaction of destroying this abomination.

She pulls out the lighter, flicking it on until the flame leaps in a soft glow.

"Don't destroy it," Carlton begs. "Without this data, we have nothing. This may not have been the best way to do it, but if one sacrifice can save hundreds, thousands, then isn't it worth it?"

"Where is Cole?" she says calmly, ignoring his rambling.

"Near the back fence. They're using him for the dunk tank."

Her gut drops and her focus narrows to one thing, find Cole before one of his worst nightmares comes to life. There is no time to argue with this man and he poses little threat to her, so she dismisses him outright. “You should run now.”

Tossing the lighter onto a table cluttered with files, she watches the flames fan out in a satisfying swirl before rushing for the main exit with Lucy in one arm and the shotgun in the other.

* * *

Cole

The dirty scent of the bag over his head makes his nostrils flare. His wrists hurt from being zip-tied, and cold water tickles his feet. There’s a chain on his ankle tight enough to cut circulation and a cloth gag in his mouth.

Terrible possibilities of what might be happening to Olivia and Lucy while he’s held hostage flood his mind.

He failed them. Let himself be dragged away when he had a duty to keep them safe and now Lucy is in the hands of strangers bent on proving wild theories, and Olivia...

his heart hurts even more when he imagines her crying for her baby.

Can still hear her as he was pulled around the corner, calling out his name as if he could save them.

What if she’s already gone? What if he’s already lost them both? If he thinks like that, he’ll give up, and that’s not an option yet.

They must have some use for him if he’s still alive. Only when the bag is ripped away

and he's given a clear view of his surroundings does he understand his purpose.

The crowd cheers as he scans the area, finding families with children among the others, all holding small balls they plan to throw at the target of his dunk tank.

The cotton candy vendor in the background passes out treats, the smell of popcorn fills the air.

It all looks like a day at the state fair instead of a live murder.

So this is what the privileged do to pass the time.

Bets are wagered on how long he might last once he's under water, and then how long it'll be until he turns.

Even those snotty women from the farmer's market are eager for a chance at winning whatever the jackpot is.

The end of the world changes people, but anyone who enjoys this had to be depraved from the start.

How many people have they done this to for it to be a well-planned sport?

The rules are announced, and he braces for one of his biggest fears to become reality.

His body tenses and trembles as the crowd takes their turns one by one.

Each miss is only a short reprieve, building the horrific anticipation until he's yanking at his restraints with wild efforts.

The ankle chain slices into his skin around the same time the fifth person misses and

he wonders if he can force his foot out, even if it takes all the skin and muscle, and part of the bone.

De-gloving his foot is a better option than drowning.

If he dies here, he'll never see Olivia again. Never see Lucy. He'll be leaving them to whatever fate this place has planned and he'll do anything, anything, to make sure that doesn't happen.

The sixth contestant does not miss. His chance of escape and breath are both stolen as he's plunged underwater; his ankle chain shortened to keep him there.

Instantly, he is back in that bathtub with his foster father, fighting for his life while he's held under.

He kicks and screams into the void, all the sound of his distress muffled in his liquid prison, and water teasing his lungs.

If he kept his composure he could hold his breath longer, but he stands little chance of battling this particular demon.

He tries to pull his foot free with wild abandon, feeling the metal start to slice at his tendons, just as an explosion in the background shakes the earth and scatters the crowd .

And then he sees Olivia, parting the remnants of the onlookers and pointing the shotgun at him, signaling with the barrel for him to move to one side.

He curls up against the glass, his lungs aching for air.

All at once, the water is gone with the sound of a single gunshot.

The glass breaks and all the contents, including him, rush out.

Rolling onto his back, he coughs and sputters after that first inhale, sweet as any drug, and greedily sucks in more.

“Are you okay? Where’s the key to the ankle cuff?” she says at his side, knelt down beside him with a hand on his chest that he covers with his own.

“I dunno. Think one of them took it when he ran.”

“Don’t move.”

“What are you—”

His question is cut off by a gunshot into the ground at the middle of the chain that tethers him to the tank. Although the first shot missed, the second hits the target, setting him free.

He thought he’d never see her again and here she is, saving his life.

“Lucy?” he coughs out, sitting up with her help.

She turns briefly to show him the baby inside one of their backpacks. “We have to get out of here. Can you walk?”

He nods, wanting nothing more than to hold them both in his arms, but knowing this isn’t the time. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s not mine.” Is all she says.

“Is he dead?”

She nods, her eyes haunted.

He allows her to help him to his feet and they rush toward the back fence, stopping briefly when he notices the vet's office across the road.

It's reckless to take this detour, but the whole community is preoccupied with panicked efforts to either flee the growing flames or try to put them out before they spread to other buildings. No one cares about them anymore.

Rows of cages inside hold what he assumes were once family pets, now slated for research.

A golden retriever with a fast wagging tail, several cats meowing for help, and a pint-sized Yorkie.

One by one, they flip the latches and set them free.

Taking them all is out of the question, but at least they might have a chance now.

Their owners may not have had any idea what they were being used for and now they can find each other again.

He finds Flower in the last crate and scoops her up and onto his shoulder before they emerge into the open again, their family of four back together.

There's an old blue sedan unattended in an alley and he leads them toward it. He can hotwire it if needed but the keys are already in the ignition. No sense in protecting it when the exit is always blocked, he supposes.

Cole revs the engine, aiming for the main gate, and drives straight through the opening the rest of the crowd had forced their way through.

They keep driving until the fire is only a speck in their review mirror.

* * *

They find an abandoned house a dozen miles out, hidden away on a back road. The minute they're safely inside, Olivia's already in his arms before he can reach for her, tucking herself under his chin where he holds her tight.

"Are you both okay?" he whispers.

"We are. He told me what they were doing to you. Your foot is bleeding. "

"M'fine. Don't worry about me."

"I do worry about you," she admits, pulling back so he can see the anxiety all over her stricken face, right next to Lucy's red and puffy one.

She must. She ran further into captivity, trying to find him instead of out an open gate to freedom while that fire was raging.

"I know. I'm alright, I promise. I'll clean it up and it'll heal.

Can I hold her a while?" He gestures to the baby, and she offers him a very disgruntled Lucy who looks about the same as she did when he first saw her in that subway bathroom, dismayed and angry at being born into a world like this, and for good reason.

"How about you?" He holds the baby close with one arm while Olivia presses into his side. Lucy's hitching little breaths puff into his collarbone. She's not crying anymore, already used up all her tears. "What did they do to you?"

Pulling off the bandage covering her arm to clean it properly, he finds two perfectly shaped tooth indentations rather than a needle mark.

In the span of a second, his whole world shrinks and narrows, only encompassing how much he loves this baby and how neither of them will survive it if she's gone.

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They haven't moved from this spot in a darkened room, on a dusty old bed for hours.

Following Lucy's every breath, Olivia's hand lays splayed across the rise and fall of her belly. She has to feel the inhales and exhales for herself to know they're real.

Cole's been silent and stoic, cocooning the baby from the other side as if that'll somehow stop the inevitable.

He hasn't cried, but Olivia has. She sobbed until dry heaving was the only option and snot stuffed up her nose.

She couldn't produce another tear even if she was paid, yet her effort remains strong.

She's mourning a loss that hasn't happened yet and nothing can soothe her.

It's hard to watch someone cry and not try to stop it.

To lay quietly beside them and just be here, but he's got that skill down to a science.

The occasional brush of his hand over her knuckles is a tether that keeps her grounded and his acceptance of her tears is the best reaction he could offer.

When he thinks she's not watching, Cole's eyes well up as he gazes at the baby, who, despite not being his own, has quickly become his daughter in such a short time.

They haven't said it out loud to each other, but it's a truth impossible to deny.

He's keeping it together for her while a piece of her dies along with her child and once it's over, she fears there won't be anything left.

"I can't do it." The eerie silence is broken with a request as awful as it is necessary. "When it happens I can't...please help me? Please, Cole? It should be someone who loves her, but I can't."

Fuck. Turns out she can cry again and all it took was asking him to put down Lucy when the time comes because she's too weak to do it herself.

Takes him a moment to understand and then he's stricken like she smacked him across the face.

She's never felt so guilty, but if he says no, she'll curl up and never move again, and then whatever happens after won't matter anymore.

"I love her," he replies finally, placing a hand over hers where it rests atop that kitten onesie. "I'll handle it."

He's saving her again, just as he has countless times before.

Willing to carry that burden for the rest of his life to spare her from it and she hates how wrong it feels to accept so much of someone who keeps giving and giving.

The longer the fever rages, the closer they get to a fate that short-circuits her brain to dwell on.

So, she focuses on those tiny little breaths instead of how Lucy's begun to sweat.

"When I was pregnant, I used to talk to her all the time." Olivia smiles through her tears. "I'd tell her about all the places we'd go and things we'd see. How much fun

she'd have out here in the world. Adventures we'd take."

"Like what?"

"Silly things. Going to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower. Have s'mores by a campfire.

Ride roller coasters and play fetch with our dog.

We didn't have a dog. Things I knew we could never do, but I promised her that I'd be braver.

That I'd protect her...and look what happened.

I couldn't keep her safe. I couldn't do the bare minimum as a parent. "

"What you did back there was amazing. This wasn't your fault—"

"Cole, don't."

"No, I'm gonna say it 'cause it's true. You did that all by your damn self. You set that place on fire and got her back. Didn't need me or anyone else to rescue you. No one coulda done better. No one. You saved us both."

With her breath hitching and her heart squeezing, she only wants to settle into his lap and stay in the shelter of his arms, where tragedies like this can't touch her.

At any other time, she'd soak his words up like a sponge, but right now, nothing can reach any part of her that hears it. "You'll stay, right? The whole time?"

A deep-seated fear of abandonment forces a question she already knows the answer to.

There's no chance she could do this alone.

Can't do it at all, but without him to keep her going she'd lay down and die, too.

It's too much responsibility to put on any one person, but she lays it on his broad shoulders anyway, wishing she didn't have to.

"I'm staying. Don't give up yet, we still don't know if she's immune. It's possible."

"A lot of things are possible, but that doesn't make it likely and I can't let myself hope."

"I'll keep hoping for both of us, then," he whispers.

She has no doubt he will.

Even the cat knows something is wrong. Curled in a ball at the foot of the bed, Flower no longer seeks attention or purrs like a Harley motor.

She is quiet and sullen and Olivia tries not to take that as a sign.

Animals have a sixth sense about these things, she worries, and it's difficult not to read into the reaction.

The four of them settle in for a long night, fearing what the morning will bring.

* * *

They've got a washcloth soaked in cool water from a stream on Lucy's forehead, treating the fever despite knowing it might be futile. Unable to watch her baby suffer, they've done their best to keep her comfortable.

It's not enough, but it keeps Olivia from feeling entirely helpless.

She hasn't gotten worse but isn't better either. She hovers in limbo, hot and sweaty and too miserable to do much more than sleep. Hasn't cried after her fit at the lab when Olivia found her. She'd give anything to hear a scream right about now.

Still, twenty-four hours later, her daughter is alive, and that has to mean something they've both been too afraid to voice.

Eventually, Olivia lifts her head from the pillow, propping up on an elbow to look over the baby at Cole.

"How long does it usually take after a bite? Do you know? The news reports were all over the place."

It's like she flipped a switch, giving him permission to speak what he's been mulling over. "Not sure, but once the fever sets in, it's quick."

"Quicker than this?"

"Saw someone once get bit and turn all within a few hours."

"That's fast."

There it is. That thing she's afraid to consider.

Hope sneaks in and makes a home in this room, moving like an electric current between the two of them until it can't be snuffed out.

If they're wrong, the crash will be even harder, but if they're right, everything is about to change in more ways than she thought possible.

* * *

One day blurs into two, and before long, the fever becomes a far greater concern than the typical outcome.

Lucy is still hot and that can't last forever, but they're woefully under-supplied and lacking ways to treat it. She has to fight this on her own. It's even harder to watch when body heat makes holding her for comfort forbidden.

As a last resort, they improvise a bath by filling the sink with creek water and plugging the drain. Lucy's cry of protest when they lower her in is both a welcome thing because it means she's strong enough to do it, and heartbreaking because they've made her more miserable.

"It's for her own good." Cole wraps an arm around Olivia's shoulders while she props the baby up.

"I know. Still hurts."

They let her soak until the water turns warm and then wrap her up in a clean towel to doze on her mother's chest. Nestled together on the sofa, while rain pelts the rooftop, she indulges in holding her child close, despite the risk of worsening the fever.

Olivia hasn't slept much since this began.

She only dozed off due to exhaustion, but now it catches up to her and pulls her under, leading to the best dream of her baby laughing.

It's bright and musical, a sweet smile lifting those chubby cheeks.

It's not until Cole calling her name pulls her back to reality that the overwhelming

sadness encompasses her again and the tears begin anew.

It wasn't real. She may never hear that sound again.

"No, look. Look at her," he says, crinkling a bag of chips he must have found somewhere in this house. And just like that, everything is right with the world again when Lucy laughs from her spot on Olivia's chest, watching Cole as he makes noise with the paper.

"She isn't hot anymore, either. Check." He's unable to keep the smile off his face and sure enough, when she holds a hand to her daughter's forehead, the fever has broken.

"Does this mean what I think it means?"

"Has to. It's been too long. If she was gonna turn, it would have happened. Fever's gone. She's laughing."

"Oh my god. How?" she whispers. "It can't be immunity or she wouldn't have gotten the fever, right?"

"Whatever she's got, it's enough to fight it off."

Lucy, unimpressed with her own abilities, is focused on the bag that Cole allows her to squeeze, causing it to drop onto the sofa moments later, eliciting another round of laughter as if it is the most hilarious thing.

Not only does Olivia want to smother the baby with affection, but she also wants to do the same to Cole, whose support has quite literally kept her from falling apart.

She wraps a hand around the back of his neck, tugging him closer until their lips press together in a salty kiss.

His tears mingle with hers as that facade falls away and his emotions betray him.

“We can’t tell anyone,” Olivia breathes into the space between them. “Not Wade when we find him. Not anyone we meet, not even her until she’s old enough to understand. Promise me.”

They both know how easily the wrong people would take advantage of her for their own benefit. She’s safe from the virus, but the remaining threat is everyone else. Her blood may as well be liquid gold and they’d stop at nothing to get at her.

“Never,” he agrees. “I promise.”

All this time she worried she’d brought a child into this world predestined to succumb to the virus, but it turns out she delivered a miracle. The first generation to develop resistance begins here.

* * *

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They left most of their supplies other than one small bag at the community. They have only a few diapers for Lucy, and no towels, blankets, or food for themselves. They're starting from scratch and the first destination is a travel stop off the beaten path.

"These places have everything," Cole says. "Truckers would pull in and get a shower, a burger, souvenirs for their wives, and an oil change."

Cautiously, after tapping the outside wall a few times with the shotgun butt as a warning, they enter a combination drugstore and mini-mart. Home goods line one wall and useless trinkets sit on the other in between shelves of candy bars.

"Not bad. Still got some stuff we can use." Cole pulls a set of sheets from the plastic, fashioning a sling for Lucy. "Not as fancy as the other one, but it'll do. "

"My arms thank you." Olivia groans in pleasure as the weight of the baby is lifted. "She's getting big."

"Growing fast. Not five pounds of potatoes anymore."

"Did you just call Lucy a potato?"

"What? I like potatoes."

There's a single pack of diapers on a far wall and a backpack with a tear in the front that they grab, anyway. Olivia takes several Slim Jims, chapstick, a few pink snow balls, and a pack of underwear.

“Jackpot!” He holds up a can of sardines, opening one for Flower to eat on the floor. She inhales the tiny fish at light speed, making little humming noises of pleasure, while Cole stuffs several cans into a bag.

Olivia picks up a pack of boxers, nudging him with her elbow. “Looks like your style.”

He snorts at the reindeer smiling happily from the fabric and Rudolph’s red nose gracing the crotch, but his attention shifts to a glass case, prompting him to wander over. “Might be a good idea for you to wear one. It would be proof for the next group we meet.”

She raises a brow as he slides open the top to access a variety of rings. “Well, that’s about as romantic as the first proposal.”

“Stop, I’m serious.”

“So just me? Are you one of those guys that doesn’t wear a ring? Need to be free?”

“Pick one. I’ll wear it. Just none of those ugly shiny ones.”

She pursues the options, passing over the flashy platinum and gold he hates so much and landing on something made of wood. Earthy and raw, just like him. That’s the band that would show the world he belongs to her...if this were real. Which it’s not .

He nods his approval of her choice before taking his turn to pick hers and that’s when he balks, reaching for several rings before pulling back at the last second.

He’s putting far more effort into this than she expected, passing over the giant fake diamonds and gaudy stones before finally settling on a smaller, more delicate version of his own.

“If you want a diamond, we can get one of those instead. Just figured it might snag on things.”

“This is perfect,” she says softly, switching gears quickly to purse her lips with a tease. “Should we say something?”

“You mean like to have and to hold, blah blah blah?”

“Sure, something like that.”

She slips her palm into his offered hand while he holds the ring in the air, his tone just as light as hers. “I, Cole, promise in this here truck stop to always have your back, share my snacks with you, and go on diaper runs.”

She rolls her eyes. “That snack one is important.”

“Am I saying this or what?”

“Yes. Please continue.”

“Alright, as I was saying, snacks, diapers, whole nine yards. I’ll even beat up Lucy’s suitors when she’s a teenager.

” He pauses, something shifting that turns him serious and shy all of a sudden, as if what comes next might make her scoff or reject him.

He should know by now that her acceptance is endless.

“Promise to be good to you. Always,” he continues.

“Treat you how you deserve until you believe you deserve it, then after that, too. I

won't ever leave you.

We'll do all those things you talked about.

Maybe not the roller coasters but the s'mores and campfire.

The dog. All of it. The three of us together. ”

This started out as a prop for their cover.

More of a joke than anything serious. She hadn't considered any possibility beyond that.

He wouldn't want this yet, maybe not ever, and she'd been so certain she never would again.

Yet here she is with heat prickling behind her eyes as it all becomes so very real.

“I love you,” she says simply, hoping he can see the truth of it.

She has her own vows pulled up on short notice that she wants him to know, but he's rushing forward a moment later, responding to her admission with the warmth of his kiss.

“I was about to keep going,” she half laughs, grinning against his mouth.

“Already said enough. Love you, too. More than I thought I could love anyone.”

She hadn't dared to hope he'd say it back. When he does, she's certain her expression matches his own, full of relief and wonder at being given something they'd assume themselves unworthy of.

“I think we did this backward,” she smiles, realizing they hadn’t exchanged rings before diving right into the kiss.

“We do a lotta things backwards, but somehow they work out just fine. Come on, family photo.” He grabs the camera from the bag with his right hand and holds it out for a selfie, leaning in close as they hold up their ring fingers toward the lens. “Say ‘I Do’ on three.”

They both belt out those two words as he clicks the shutter.

She couldn’t get rid of her last ring fast enough.

She tossed it in the trash of that subway bathroom, leaving it behind along with the man this new world gave her a chance to escape.

It was a chain tying her to a life she wanted to forget, and she promised herself she’d never wear another.

Wouldn’t be that vulnerable for anyone, or risk another marriage that felt like a prison.

She doesn’t feel like a captive with this wooden band on her finger. She only feels lucky. It’s confirmation of a new family formed in the ruins of a broken world.

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They find a motorcycle in the back of the truck stop. Despite not being the safest choice, traveling this way is their quickest route to the farm. Easier to weave in and out of crashes and downed trees, flying right past anything in their path.

At least, it would be if Cole wasn't driving like a ninety-year-old granny high on pot. Olivia uses one arm to hold the baby in her sling while keeping the other free for balance. He anxiously anticipates every bump and turn, hardly breaking twenty miles an hour.

As they moved farther away from the community, he picked up speed out of necessity, but now, with no one following them, he's overly cautious with precious cargo.

At this rate, it'll take them forever to reach their destination.

She assures him they're fine more than once, saying he can speed up and joking about them all aging ten years before they get there but he maintains a steady pace for the next few miles until they come to a rolling stop for a break outside of an old, broken down motel.

When she stretches her legs out on either side of him, he reaches back to pat her thigh just because he can.

"That would have been a nice spot," she says, absently. "Good fence. Lots of room. Too bad it's overrun. "

"No one's been there in a long time. Would take a whole crew to clear it."

Dozens of roppers swarm the grounds behind the fence. In another life, it might have served as a fine home base, but here, it's only fit for the dead.

"How far do you think we are from the farm?" she asks.

"Not far. Couple hours. Need to hop on the parkway for a while first, wait until you see those views."

Wrapping one arm around his chest again, she readies for takeoff, her tone teasing.

"Is that considering our glacial pace, or if you pick it up?"

"Listen, if you hit me with another 'are we there yet' we'll be walking."

She knows full well he isn't serious. "Okay, okay."

"You ready then?"

"Mhmm."

He rolls to a start, hearing her voice flutter in his ear.

"Are we there yet?"

"Ready to start hoofing it, or what?"

Her laughter as they speed up is the best sound. He's never had this kind of easy teasing with anyone. The rest of the world thinks him angry and aggressive, but she knows him and that's a gift he never knew he needed so badly.

As they inch closer to the farm, his nerves start to frazzle. By painting this place as a perfect post-apocalyptic picture, he raised her hopes for paradise. If it turns out to be

nothing but a failure, that'll be on him.

* * *

Several hours later, they turn onto an old gravel road, and all his childhood memories begin to flood back.

The scent of apples from the orchard and the crunch of rocks on the driveway.

How safe being this isolated felt when he was little and hiding in the grove, hoping his foster family would forget him and never come looking.

The only signs of life when they pull up are a few horses in the back pasture that could easily have survived alone.

It's not overrun or uninhabitable. The log cabin style farmhouse looms over them worn and tired, but still standing strong.

A few sections of chipped paint and porch railings knocked out are the only damage he can spot.

The barn in the background with a few scattered sheds, looks even better.

Still, he parks the bike halfway up the driveway and hides it in the trees before walking the rest of the way, shotgun ready and on alert for other inhabitants.

"You were right about this place," Olivia says quietly, as they survey what he hopes is their new home. "I knew you would be. It's so beautiful."

"Doesn't look the same as it did back then. Lots changed. Most of the fruit trees are gone, but it seems safe so far. Do you like it? Really?"

“I love it. We won’t find somewhere safer than tucked right into the valley of the mountains. And look, there’s a greenhouse down the hill.”

“Might be animals in the back pastures, too. We’ll have to head down there later and see what’s left.”

The Blue Ridge Mountains surround the property on three sides, providing protection from weather and unwanted visitors.

No one could hike in through those steep hills and the chance of the dead making the journey is slim to none.

There is one way in and one way out, and that makes security a straightforward task.

As they creep toward the porch to do a cursory check for danger, three infected inside crash into the front door.

Two at breakneck speeds, pounding on the glass and scrambling to reach their targets, and one larger, slower one that ambles about like an angry snail.

Cole hoped it would be empty, if only to unburden himself of having to put down the family that still grace some of his only good memories.

“It’s two fast and one slow,” he sighs. “We need a plan first.”

“Check out the shed for anything useful?”

He nods, and they head to an oversized shed in search of anything that might dispose of the dead quieter than alerting half the state with the shotgun.

Underneath old tires, amidst odds and ends, toolboxes, and building supplies, he

discovers a complete roll of barbed wire.

Cutters and gloves are harder to locate, but eventually, they spot both in a bucket under a workbench.

He's thankful that this farm needed animal enclosures because they'd be hard-pressed to find a better way to handle the situation.

Together they form a plan, leaving the baby and the cat in the shed, tucked away in a corner where they snuggle together until the coast is clear.

* * *

"This feels questionable at best." Olivia frowns, helping him wrap the wire from one porch support to another, stringing it across the front door in three loops. "What if they're smart enough to duck? We didn't think they'd be fast until they were."

"Then we use the bullets. We're getting in there either way." He gives the wire a testing pull. "It's tight. You ready?"

"Ready."

"If any of them break through the glass back there, then come back right away, okay? We'll figure something else out."

She nods. "You remember not to get too close. Three shots back. Don't forget, there has to be enough space between you and them to eject the shell in between."

It wasn't long ago that he taught her that. She's serious and worried, with a deep and a slight pout on her lips that makes his cock twitch.

As she catches his proud smile, a blush flushes her cheeks, and she playfully rolls her eyes, ducking her head. "I'm just saying don't take chances."

"I won't. Now go on before I'm forced to kiss you on this porch." He tilts his head toward the rotters, growling behind the door. "They didn't pay for a show."

He hears her laughter as she rounds the corner and heads to the backdoor.

There's no time for amusement after that, and he focuses on the task at hand, reviewing the plan in his mind as he gets into position with his hand on the doorknob.

She'll get their attention in the back, giving him time to open the front door and get on the other side of the barbed wire.

Then he'll call for them and wait until they run into the trap.

It sounds easy enough, and at first, it goes off without a hitch.

The first rotter is the perfect height to slam neck first into the sharp metal and she decapitates herself in a clean wipe.

The second, slow one, only sways into the wire while it digs into his chest, leaving an opening for the third to run underneath.

There's a shotgun at his side, but Cole opts for his knife, quickly stabbing it through a soft eyeball and into the brain of the third rotter.

The big one is a challenge. The knife blade gets stuck and the weight of the man breaks the wire and then Cole's got no choice but to wedge the shotgun between them right before he's flattened like a pancake in the dirt, expelling a round into a decaying forehead.

It lands on him in a gross heap as Olivia appears around the corner, rushing toward him as if he'd been bit.

"I'm good! I'm fine!" he yells out. "Help me roll him off."

It takes two of them to drag the man away, allowing Cole to sit up, wiping brain matter off his face with a scowl. "Well, it sorta worked."

"I'd hug you but..."

"Come here." He reaches out with a teasing grin as if to wipe the blood on her. It's grim to joke about such a terrible situation, but finding humor in the devastation is better than crying.

Olivia steps back with a huff, and he gets to his feet, taking off his shirt to wipe at least fifty percent of the gore off himself.

He then puts his jacket back on to block the winter chill.

His next words are serious as he reflects on the family that left a lasting impression on his childhood.

"We'll bury the bodies tomorrow out back by the apple trees.

They were good people. It's the least I can do for them now. "

Running a hand down his arm, she gives it a squeeze. "May have the grand tour?"

He can't wait to show her the place that he's spent so many years wishing was his and they collect Lucy and Flower from the shed before making their way inside.

It's still early in the evening when they cross the threshold of their new home.

He hadn't come inside the house as a boy, but he imagined what it might look like in his daydreams. It is surreal to be here now and compare his imagination to reality.

Towering wooden beams hold up the second floor like trees brought in from the outside, unstripped of their bark and allowed to remain wild.

Even so, the space is smaller than he expected.

The floor to ceiling windows in the living room warped his sense of size as a child, he supposes.

It is plenty of space for the three of them, though, and the woodstove, circled by leftover ash, will keep them warm.

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Olivia's curiosity matches his, and he sneaks glances at her as they traverse the lower floor, gauging her reaction, too nervous to ask outright just yet.

She reaches a hand out toward a cluster of dusty picture frames on the wall, stopping short before pulling it back.

An old man who looks like Santa Claus smiles with his wife on his arm, precocious children make faces at the camera, and those same kids as grown adults further down the line of photos all stare back at them.

Cole used to imagine they were his family, back when he had no one and nothing and all he could do was pretend or risk being crushed by abandonment.

He will make his own family here now. He rubs a soft hand down Olivia's back and leads her into the kitchen.

Herbs stretch across the upper cabinets, hanging dried like a frame above an oversized sink.

The setting sun begins to sparkle between the leaves, casting ragged shadows on the floor and leading their attention to an open pantry stocked with enough canned vegetables and fruits to last them a few weeks.

Olivia opens the backpack and lets the cat roam freely before joining him at the pantry shelves with Lucy asleep over her shoulder.

Her eyes shine and her palm finds the middle of his chest, resting over the excited

cadence of his heart.

“It’s everything you said it would be and more. It’s perfect.”

The relief at knowing she approves forces a hard exhale from his lungs and then they’re both grinning at each other, love-struck and grateful, standing within their winning lottery ticket.

There is running water from the well and when he flips on the tap, Lucy giggles at the sound, reaching out with eager fingers toward the faucet.

Flower jumps up to bat at the stream with her paw and Olivia leans over so the baby can feel the water, too.

Lucy erupts into the loudest fit of laughter he’s ever heard.

“I think she approves,” Olivia grins. “Three guesses on what I’ll be doing tonight.”

“I don’t even need one because it’s the same thing I’m doing.”

“Shower,” they say in unison.

There’s only one bedroom in this place, something he wasn’t aware of before, but thankfully they’re in a position now to make good use of it together.

He notices an empty space in the corner opposite a second wood stove.

“I can build her a crib from leftover fence posts in the shed. There’s room over there.”

“Build her one?”

“Mhmm. It’ll take a few days, maybe.”

“Can I help? Me and Flower can bring you snacks.” She lays Lucy on the bed where the baby kicks her legs out of the wrap and flails her arms, entertaining herself.

“Absolutely.”

The fact that Wade isn’t here hangs between them unspoken. Cole assumed all along that his friend had gotten here first, but now that hope is completely shattered. The sudden sadness on his face must prompt the sympathy on hers .

“I’m not giving up on him,” he says quietly. “If anyone can make it out there, it’s him. He could walk up that driveway tomorrow. I know it sounds like I can’t accept—”

“It doesn’t.” She cuts him off, her expression fond.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, if he’s anything like you at all, and since you grew up together, I think he might be, then I fully believe he can survive whatever might be holding him up.

He knows to come here. We’ll keep hoping until he does. ”

“I was so mad at him for running off with a woman he just met,” he says with a shake of his head. “Didn’t get it. Now I do.”

She pauses, her tone serious. “Are we really doing this? Making a home here together?”

“Is that what you want?”

She nods. "More than anything."

He takes her hand in his to run a thumb over the wooden band on her finger. "This is all I want. No matter what, I just need you. Us. I'd live with you in the woods if we had to. This is only home because we're together."

She glances at his mouth and he takes the obvious hint, leaning in to capture her bottom lip between his own. Wants to make sure there's no doubt left in her mind that all he needs is what they have.

"It is our wedding night. What do you think we should do?" Her low, raw tone has his cock hardening.

"Are you sure?" He thinks they're within the safe zone time-wise, but he doesn't have a calendar to keep track.

"I'm sure. I feel good, but I want a shower first and to get the baby settled, and we need a condom, lemme just..."

"Got one!" Cole fishes out a handful from his pocket, glad he had a run-in with that old timer at the nursing home.

He shows her the different colored condoms like a bouquet until he realizes the implication of secretly hiding them.

"Shit, I wasn't...I didn't mean...these were given to me and I just thought... you know, only practical."

Pressing her finger to his lips, she quiets him before disappearing to search for her spare pants in a bag. She's got a closed fist full of something when she comes in closer again, hooking one finger through the waistband loop on his jeans.

“You were just hoping?” she says, softly.

He nods.

She holds up her hand between them and fans out an identical offering of condoms, with the sweetest smile that he wants to kiss off her lips. “I’ve been hoping, too. I grabbed them from the first store we raided together.”

They share a shy laugh, toss the condoms on the bed, and then nothing else matters except showing his wife how much he loves her.

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Olivia brought a few candles upstairs to scatter around the bedroom.

She blows out the match flame after lighting the last wick.

A towel hugs her body, and she pauses in front of the old mirror atop a dresser as the shower spray from the bathroom goes silent.

Anticipation of what's to come has her nearly vibrating.

A puff of steam follows Cole when he emerges in only a towel slung low on his hips.

She catches his eye in the reflection with a mischievous glint. "You forgot your clothes."

The warmth of him at her back makes her lashes flutter and her body melt into the arms that circle her, his breath soft at her pulse. "You forgot yours first."

She nestles within his embrace, her eyes hooded and her nerves razor sharp as she watches him rest a temple beside hers in the mirror.

His hand traces a journey down the side of her breast over the towel, and her breath hitches when he pauses at the hem to inch it up, up, up, massaging her bare hip.

The length of him is hard against her lower back and she shivers, imagining him inside her, and realizing that she's about to find out exactly what that feels like.

When his touch leaves her, she frowns until he follows the curve of her chin, turning

her attention away from the reflection and toward his gaze.

Her delicate smile is quick. It's a Pavlovian response by now.

Seeing his face is all she needs for a sense of safety, of home, to bloom gently in her chest, lifting her lips.

His thumbs wave across her cheekbones for a reverent moment before his mouth finds her in an easy, slow kiss.

The scent of sulfur from the matches and soap from the shower mingles with the pheromones he gives off, wafting up her nose and lulling her into an intoxicating high, just as their connection turns greedy and firm.

And then he loosens her towel, letting it fall to the ground before scooping her up to wrap her legs around his waist. She gasps, her mouth falling open as he suckles at the juncture between her throat and shoulder, walking toward the bed and depositing her onto the mattress.

There is a brief flicker of shyness when she thinks of covering herself, but it's only a whisper of the past and she ignores it.

He locks eyes with her, his stare so intense that it almost burns, but she doesn't dare look away.

She catches the heat and pulls it in, savoring the fire.

When he joins her on the bed and covers her with his body, flinging the towel off his hips with a flourish and a teasing raise of his brows, it's a needed moment of levity.

With a laugh, she watches the fabric hit a darkened lamp across the room.

She's never needed anyone as much as she needs him in this moment, but the push of his hips down into the vee of her legs, his thick cock meeting where arousal has her soaked, is all it takes to drag up past insults and insecurities.

It's your fault you can't get there.

Ice cold.

Broken .

Not my job to try to fix you.

Only good for one thing and can't even do that right half the time.

Sex has never been something she wanted. Used to spend the majority of her time before the world ended plotting ways to avoid having to pacify her husband with her body. It was a job, a necessity, something that kept her out of the ER... mostly.

Then she met Cole and everything changed in ways she never expected.

He's already shown her once what they're capable of together, and she hopes it wasn't a fluke. That she'll officially be someone who can enjoy sex and enjoy it often. She's eager to find out, and her desire to take this final step overwhelms her to the point of wanting to rush.

He'll be gentle, she tells herself. He'll think of more than his own pleasure.

He'll make her feel safe. She's been imagining this moment since the mere thought of being intimate with him shifted from something she dreaded to something she desires, causing a cluster of hidden fears to bubble up at the worst time.

What if she's programmed to be tense and matter-of-fact about the whole thing and there's no changing that?

Maybe Cole has his own worries, too. Despite being right there with no barriers between them, he's condom-free and they both know they need one unless they want to risk baby number two.

Instead of joining them together, he takes his time with lazy thrusts that have no intention of going further.

Pushes his tongue into her mouth as his hips nudge forward and it's almost easy to forget she's worried at all when they fit so well like this.

Her mind begins to blank, all her senses in overdrive, and every pleasure receptor sizzling and sparking.

Olivia wonders if he took an extra effort in the shower earlier because that hair trigger he had the last time is nowhere to be found. They have time to relax into this and that has her body responding even further until she's slicked the underside of him obscenely.

She could come from this delicious friction alone. With each thrust, she anticipates his movement, feeling a growing intensity until they both freeze at the pressure of his tip at her entrance.

"You good?" His strangled question is an obvious effort, pupils blown wide and kiss-swollen lips parted above her.

Unable to remain still, she nods while her legs stroke his hips almost frantically, grabbing a condom from the table to tear it open as if the packaging offended her.

“Easy with that. We gotta use it,” he teases.

She resists the urge to blush in embarrassment when he’s already doing enough of that for both of them.

“Fuck, it’s tight.” He groans with a wince after she’s rolled it onto him. “It’s alright. I’m good. It’s okay.”

He’s lying through his teeth, ready to keep going to be with her despite looking like he’s about to turn purple.

“Take it off,” she says, gently.

“But we need—”

“We’ve got options.” She rifles around the bed sheets before victoriously holding up the Magnum she swiped from the drug store.

“Oh.”

He rips the smaller one off himself and fuck , this is a harsh reminder of the other reason she’d been nervous.

He’s twice the size of anything she’s felt from another man.

The new condom is a perfect fit, and it’s beginning to dawn on her that this might not be all pleasure at first, especially considering recent circumstances.

Suddenly, she’s not so eager anymore. Bites her lip as he covers her again, oblivious to her anxiety.

“It’s ah...been a while.” He avoids her eyes, offering an unprompted apology. “Long time.”

She’d been so wrapped up in her own inner struggle that she missed him having one, too. “I don’t have any expectations. I just wanna be with you.”

His reply is a hint of pressure, trying to gain that first inch.

It’s fine. It’s fine. I can do this. She tells herself, while the tension coils fast in her chest.

Every time he moves forward, her hips twist to pull away without any logical input required from her brain. That’s when he stops, asking her what’s wrong in the sweetest voice that has her own self-loathing and frustration prickling hot behind her eyes.

Emotionally, she’s more than ready. Physically, she’s afraid the trauma she went through in that subway bathroom could make this a miserable experience when all she wants is to feel something good.

“I want this. I want you. Just go slow, okay? Please.”

Before she can process what’s happened, he’s moving down her body, kissing warm and soft from her collarbone to her inner thigh before throwing one leg over his shoulder and sweeping his tongue across her in a firm lick that has all rational thought vanishing.

This isn’t what she meant. Not what she expected at all, but he’s observant enough to know she couldn’t let him in yet. His enthusiasm is what keeps her anxiety at bay. The rumble of approval vibrating across her skin leaves her no time for self-consciousness or worry.

It should be illegal for anything to feel this good. Her legs fall open wide, nerves singing as he swirls his tongue where she's swollen and throbbing. There is a ravenous edge to the gentle way he strokes her with his tongue that leaves no room for doubt that he's enjoying every second.

She glances down, watching him move between her legs, seeing the soft indents his thumbs make in the flesh of her thighs.

A finger or two first would help open her for the rest of him, but he doesn't try and she doesn't ask.

She explicitly asked that he not touch her like that the last time they were naked together and he assumes that holds true now.

He does, however, slick the tip of his tongue up into her, massaging that first ring of muscle at her entrance.

It's a move so unexpected that she grips the bedsheet until it twists in her grip.

Then, he moves up, and a few well-placed strokes where she's swollen has her arching off the bed before it even occurs to her that she's already coming.

A strangled yelp of surprise escapes while her body rolls and contracts, riding a blissful wave until she can't do anything but collapse back onto the mattress, limbs like jelly and chest heaving.

When he fits himself between her legs again, she's so supple and mind-blown that she couldn't stress about anything if she tried. Runs her fingers through his hair and bends one knee to give him more room, feeling the blunt tip begin to tease at her.

"Lube?" he asks. "I don't wanna hurt you."

She's glad he remembered because she couldn't form a coherent thought if she tried.

She only nods, watching him sit back on his calves and grab the little bottle she sat on the nightstand.

She has never in her life seen anything hotter than this man coating his cock in copious amounts of lube in preparation.

She's so damn wet that the first inch slips in easily, but the burn still sears like a brand, ripping a hiss from between her teeth. "I'm good. Slow. Slow."

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Little by little he tries to join them together, but she is tense and her muscles contract rather than open. She braces herself to handle it anyway, knowing that eventually, the pain will subside, but the pressure between her legs is gone a moment later and he watches her with a worried frown.

“It’s too soon after the baby, isn’t it? We’ve got plenty of time. There’s no rush. Doesn’t have to be tonight,” he tells her.

Although part of her reflexive resistance is fear of physical pain, the other part is simply an attempt to avoid losing control. She trusts Cole more than she’s ever trusted anyone, but she is conditioned to expect someone to take , and muscle memory wins over logic.

“I don’t wanna stop yet. Can I...” She reaches down, wrapping a hand around his shaft. ‘Can I put it in myself?’ isn’t something she can voice aloud, but he seems to understand, offering her a nod and letting her guide him.

It might make more sense for her to get on top, then she could easily control the depth and speed, but she wants to feel him on her, pressing her down into the mattress, his body warming hers. She just needs to get past this first step.

She nestles the swollen tip where she’s wet, rubbing him there a moment to make use of the moisture before encouraging him in.

The burn is instant again, and she winces, stopping him with a hand on his hip.

He leans down, teasing her lips with a kiss but never thrusting on his own, letting her

gradually open until she takes him in her hand again at the base, bends her knee, and gives a nod of permission to enter another inch.

They join together little by little in an instinctive dance of back and forth, a fingertip to his hip to ask him to wait, a lift of her pelvis to encourage him in, until finally, finally his hipbones find hers and the length of him rests within her.

It's uncomfortable, pushing at her from all angles, but a sense of accomplishment overcomes her and she smiles up at him, her eyes watering and palms cupping his face until he leans down to kiss her.

When they move together, it's only a swaying, rocking push. He's reluctant to leave her at all, the entire shaft buried deep, massaging her walls instead of thrusting. It gives her a chance to relax and uncoil around him until the pain fades and she's certain she'll combust from the pressure alone.

All at once, she needs him to move. Needs to feel the slide of him within her and she rakes her nails down his spine, digging the heel of her foot into the back of his thigh in encouragement.

The first firm, long thrust rips a grunt from his throat that he sears into her neck and has her gasping when he hits a spot that's got her toes curling already.

He moves slow and steady, making sure she feels every inch before withdrawing slightly until only the tip holds her open, and then thrusting back in until there's nowhere left to go.

So this is what she's been missing. All those times she used to wonder how anyone could want this, crave it, desire it, when the idea of pleasure instead of pain felt like a fantasy.

Another release begins to build in her lower belly and suddenly nothing matters except capturing it. She needs him to touch her and all her reservations about that particular act dissolve as she throbs and trembles, desperate for an orgasm beyond her reach. “I need. Cole...please, I need...”

“Tell me. Show me.”

She guides his hand between them, and he catches on, skillfully tracing a few swift circles just above their connection, before losing control himself.

That’s all it takes before she’s gripping him tight, hips rolling and legs bending high by his ribs while spasms sear through her, muscles squeezing him hard with the force of it.

She’s over-sensitive and sated when he follows a few moments later.

His body jerks and his cock twitches as his face presses into the curve of her neck, her name on his lips like a declaration.

She has enough energy left to wrap her ankles around his waist and lock him in place, one hand threading through his hair and the other curled up his shoulder as she breathes him in.

As they lie together, their aftershocks mingle, his weight delicious, while the lingering heaviness between her thighs triggers endorphins to surge through her veins.

She is drunk on this feeling. Already wants to do this again and again, and can’t believe she’s even having that thought.

It’s a foreign concept, but she’s so ready for this to be her life now and so lucky that

it is.

When he finally pulls out of her, she winces, missing him already. They tangle together beneath the sheets, her ear over his pounding heart and his hand stroking warm and easy up her back.

“I wish it didn’t take the apocalypse for us to meet, but finding you is still the best thing to ever happen to me,” he says into the darkness.

“I’d do it all again if I knew we’d end up here.”

* * *

Later, after she’s fed the baby and they’ve curled up together again, quick to fall into a deep sleep, Cole flinches beside her.

His eyes move rapidly under closed lids and a pained moan escapes into the space between them.

She is about to move away, like she knows that she should, but his arm finds her and instead of lashing out, he curls into her body seeking comfort.

She pulls him closer, feeling him partially wake with a start before reflexively settling his head over her ribs and allowing her to hold him. Even one blissful night together isn’t enough to chase away every ounce of stress that fuels their nightmares.

“I’ve got you,” she whispers, letting him drift off cocooned in her arms where no one else can touch him.

His heart must know the safety she offers even in sleep and the trust in his reaction, when waking him during a nightmare had been such a violent act before, soothes

something deep inside her that only he can reach.

Secluded in a cozy farmhouse nestled in a valley, they stand on the brink of a new beginning. For the first time in a long time, she can't wait to see what the future holds.

* * *

It's a beautiful day to watch the horses in the pasture.

They've brought a blanket out and food for a picnic on an unseasonably warm winter evening and it's easy to believe for a moment that everything is safe again. That the world isn't ending and they've found an oasis.

The baby's babbling delights Cole, who's been trying to talk to her since the beginning. It's been one-sided up until now and he can't get enough of her silly responses.

"Yep, yep, that's true. You're right," he says seriously, talking to Lucy like she's an adult, pausing to let her reply with a string of incoherent nonsense while her hands flail in excitement.

"What about that spotted one over there? That's a good horse too, right?"

Lucy gurgles with a delighted squeal.

"Yeah, I get it. Brown one is shinier. How about we get a cow, too? The brown ones give you chocolate milk."

Lucy is all for chocolate cows and Olivia laughs. "Keep telling her that and she'll think it's true."

He glances up at her, long hair beginning to flutter into his eyes. “Wanna get in on this debate?”

“No.” She smiles. “You two are doing just fine.”

“Your momma says chocolate milk cows don’t exist, but we’ll show her.”

It’s hard to look away, and as he picks up their conversation again, she’s reminded of the first time she saw him talking to Lucy after passing out in a nursing home from exhaustion.

Had only begun to feel the first stirrings of affection for him at that point and then there he was, talking to the baby like she was his.

They haven’t spoken of it aloud, but she’s suddenly overwhelmed with the need to make sure he knows the role he’s been playing is open to him in an official capacity, if that’s what he wants.

It seems like an unspoken understanding already, but he is just as insecure about matters of the heart as she is.

In a world where tomorrow isn’t promised, they can’t rely on assumptions.

When he veers from cows to first word lessons, trying to get her to say ‘Cole’, she’s given a perfect opportunity.

“You’d have better luck winning this bet if you tried for ‘dada’ instead.”

“Can I?” he asks carefully, so hopeful that she aches in all those hidden places only he can bring to life.

“Of course you can. You’ve loved her, protected her, saved her life more than once. She already knows who her father is, Cole. I see it every time she looks at you. She’s ours, if that’s what you want.”

“I do.” His face instantly breaks as if she’s gifted him something he’s been too afraid to hope for.

His whole life he has wanted nothing more than a family.

Coveted it from the people who ran this farm, the children in the system alongside him who got adopted when he didn’t, and the other kids in school who had picture-perfect childhoods.

He longed for a place to belong and people to belong to and she only wishes they found each other sooner.

“You hear that, sweetheart?” he says to Lucy, letting her grab his fingers in her chubby fists. “You’ve got two parents that love you a whole lot.”

He isn’t the emotional type, and she suspects what he’s shown her over the course of these last few months that they’ve settled here on the farm is more than he’s ever shown anyone. Even now he tries to curb his excitement out of habit, but his eyes shine and his smile lifts bright anyway.

“I’ll still win that bet, though,” she teases, covering her emotions with a joke as she wipes away a tear with the back of her hand.

“Pfft. We’ll see about that. It’s on now. ”

He couldn’t be Lucy’s father any more than he already is even if they made her together, and when he flashes the baby a soft smile and resumes their lesson, she

knows this is what it must feel like to get everything you've ever wanted and more.

If only it didn't take the world crumbling to find each other.

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Six Months Later: Cole

They're in the living room on a warm spring day watching Lucy play with Flower on the floor. The cat is a good sibling, always eager to be near the baby and gentle with her reaching hands. Flower flops onto her side, offering her belly and making one-pawed biscuits in the air while Lucy pets her.

The babbling has gotten stronger lately, and they've hung on every broken syllable, waiting for Lucy to form her first real word. Cole's heart jumps when she looks at the cat and makes an extra effort to get out a purposeful sound.

"Oh my god, is she..." Olivia whispers, clutching his arm in a vice grip as they stare with rapt attention.

This is it. She's gonna say it. All their practice has paid off.

His daughter is about to call him dad and he's ready to explode from anticipation alone. It's not about winning the bet anymore, it never really was. They both just want to witness her doing something so special for the first time.

D-

Da ...

Dat...

Ca.

Caaaaaat.

Cat.

The cat in question purrs louder, rolling on the ground while Lucy erupts into a fit of excited laughter and Cole and Olivia exchange bewildered looks.

That's not exactly what they were expecting her first word to be, not even close, but it doesn't matter.

She spoke and once that's sunk in, they rush to praise her, delighting as she continues to rattle off her new favorite word.

"Cat, cat, cattts, ca. Caaaaaat."

That fluffy little three-legged cat has done more than earn her keep today. She got Lucy talking and Cole rewards her with an extra helping of tuna from a supply run later that night.

* * *

Two days later, Lucy's asleep on his chest while the rain falls, Olivia tucked into his side and the baby lightly snoring in his arms until a crack of thunder wakes her with a start and she says Dada in the most worried voice. Wraps her little fist around his shirt and lets him snug her in close.

"Yeah, I'm your dad," he whispers, the lump in his throat threatening to overwhelm him. "Go back to sleep. It's just a little rain."

She's a good sleeper. Out like a light not long after and when he locks eyes with Olivia, she's about ready to burst with affection, dropping a salty tear-streaked kiss to

his lips.

“You still get anything you want,” she whispers in the space between them. “Rules are rules.”

“Already have everything I want, but I’m sure I can figure something out.”

Once the baby is back in her crib across the room, they finally fulfill the bet made months ago.

The next morning, Lucy says momma, too.

* * *

One Year Later: Olivia

“Let’s make another baby,” Olivia says, the wine still sweet on her tongue and her smile loose.

Cole raises a skeptical brow. “Think that’s the drink talking.”

“It’s not. Lucy is already two. If we’re going to do it, then we should try now so they can be close in age. So she can have someone to watch her back when they get older. They can protect each other.”

She’s been thinking about this a lot but hasn’t said anything yet. A bottle of wine, discovered on a supply run finally prompted her to broach the subject, albeit less delicately than intended.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes. If you do. If you don’t, it’s okay. I’m happy, just the three of us, but...”

She can’t read his face and by now she’s well-versed in those expressions. The wine might have something to do with it. They’re both lightweights after years without a sip and he’s probably feeling that fuzz same as her.

“I don’t want to lose you if something goes wrong,” he replies.

“I know the risks. I think it’s worth it if we can give Lucy a family even after we’re gone. This world isn’t kind to those who walk it alone. I don’t want that for her.”

He opens his mouth three times, only to shut it without a word, and her heart drops.

He doesn’t want this.

She’s being selfish to ask.

It’s okay, she tells herself, they don’t need another baby to be happy.

“I think....” he sets the wine glass on the table. “I think I wanna meet our second child.”

“Really?”

His lopsided, sweet smile proves it true. “You sure we shouldn’t wait to get going on this until we’re totally sober? What if you change your mind tomorrow?”

“Won’t change my mind. I’m not drunk, Cole. Just tingly. Warm.”

“Let’s put those tingles to good use, then?”

Wine has always gone straight between her legs and this time is no different. She's already vibrating, and she laughs as he flips her over onto her back, dragging her pajama pants off her hips and lifting her shirt to swirl his tongue over a taut nipple.

Even after two years, she still yearns for him if they're apart for more than a few days.

She'll never get over how good that first thrust feels as he stretches her.

It occurs to her then that this is the first time she's felt him without a condom and suddenly everything familiar is brand new again.

He comes to the same realization a few seconds later, muscles tense as he bends down to whisper in her ear that she 'feels so damn good' while pushing in deep.

That reverent tone turns into a struggling gasp when being unprepared for these new sensations catches them both by surprise and he spills himself into her far too early.

"Fuck. I'm sorry. Didn't mean to yet."

She presses a kiss to his temple. "Don't be. This is the whole point, right?"

"Yeah, but you didn't..."

"We have all night and half a bottle of wine left."

They make good use of both.

* * *

Olivia loses count of how often he takes her. They should probably stick to some sort

of schedule but can't keep their hands off each other and she figures the more the better.

He finds her in the barn one day tending to the chickens and leads her up into the loft and before she knows it, she's riding him with hay poking at her feet.

It's not sweet and slow this time, but she's all for a little variety.

She lifts up and down his shaft, chasing their goal with a swirl of her hips.

The sound of skin slapping together in the slick of being joined is all she can hear over her own labored breathing, until he grabs her waist and meets her movements, thrusting up into her as she pushes down as the warmth of his release rushes in.

They often stay connected after sex, and this new mission has given them more reason to linger.

He is never selfish, and she leans backward, encouraging him to touch her. He strokes a lazy hand between her legs exactly where she needs it, his fingers splaying out around the base of his cock before cupping her, his thumb teasing where she's swollen until she's trembling in his arms.

She could definitely get used to this.

* * *

One day in the heat of summer, they play a game where the only goal is to see how often he can fill her in one day. It's a challenge with farm chores and a toddler to chase around, but somehow they make do.

She's in the kitchen in nothing but one of his long t-shirts when he finds her that

evening.

She left her underwear off to tease him but also for easy access and when he comes up behind her at the island, gripping her ass with a firm hand before dragging his touch up to her lower back, applying pressure until she bends over the butcher block, her body flushes with arousal.

“Did you get those fence posts finished?” she asks, her tone purposely mundane.

“Mhmm. Got ‘em real deep in the ground,” he replies.

“How deep?” Neither of them are good at dirty talk and she lets out a half laugh at the absurdity of it.

“Think this is funny, huh?” There’s a grin in his voice, but the clink of his belt buckle silences her a moment later and then she is so full of him she can hardly breathe.

There is no room for talking after that.

The countertop cools her cheek as she lays against it, her body jerking as he pumps in and out of her and a shiver ghosting up her spine when he bends to graze his teeth across her shoulder.

When his release begins to leak out around the base, he pulls out and drops to his knees, pushing it back in with his tongue.

She shivers at how eager he is and then her hips are tugged further back and the tip of his tongue finds where her pulse already throbs.

She comes so hard against his face that her legs buckle and he has to hold her up, chuckling when she finally goes slack and slides down into his lap, joking about her

suffocating him.

It's a pattern they follow for at least three months before she begins to worry that getting pregnant might not be so easy.

It's still early. Three months is nothing. They only need a little more time.

Three months turns into four, turns into six, and by then she has an awful feeling that something's wrong.

"What if I can't anymore?" she tells him one evening after Lucy is sound asleep and they're tucked under the covers, facing each other.

"Could be me. My swimmers could be duds."

"Or it's the stress of this lifestyle. Not that we aren't luckier than most, we are, but it's still...you know, the apocalypse."

They'll never know for sure who or what the problem is. The only certainty is that she's not any more pregnant now than she was six months ago despite their vigorous attempts, and that's left her feeling frustrated.

"It's still early," she continues softly. "Some people try for a long time before it happens."

"Then we'll keep trying."

Another few months later, they decide to stop trying and let nature take its course.

"If it's meant to happen, it will," she tells him, while they watch Lucy chase fireflies in the pasture. "And if it doesn't, that's okay, too. We're good just the way we are."

The three of us. I don't want to focus on 'trying' anymore, okay?"

The brush of his kiss finds her temple with his agreement. "Okay. Just the three of us. I'm happy like that, always have been."

"Me too. "

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Later that night, when they make love, it's slow and sweet and she doesn't think about making a baby even once. She only thinks about him, how good he feels, and how much she loves him. She won't have any regrets if this is the outcome.

* * *

Thirteen Years Later: Olivia

Lucy is fourteen when she's bitten by a rotter in the woods.

Ran after one of the horses after they spooked on a windy day and broke through the flimsy fencing surrounding their paddock straight into the tree line.

At this point, they trust her to be with the horses by herself, but never expected that spotted mare to blow right through the three board panels or for Lucy to chase her without a second thought.

She comes up the driveway leading the horse in one hand, tears streaming down her face, sobbing that she'd been bit and showing them a jagged, bloody wound on her forearm.

"Do you have to cut it off now?" she cries. "Oh my god. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone after her. I didn't think...I just saw her heading for that ravine and I couldn't let her fall in. I didn't see the rotter. Am I gonna die now? Momma, what do I do? I don't wanna die."

"It's okay," Cole says calmly, walking her inside to wash the bite out at the sink.

“You’re gonna be alright. Not losing the arm. Not dying.”

“What? Dad, what? Why are you taking so long to cut it off? It could already be spreading!” She holds out her arm, on the verge of hyperventilating.

Olivia sends him a look. The two of them are caught in a spot they knew would arrive eventually, but still aren’t prepared to handle. Her pulse already races with all the what-ifs that come with seeing someone she loves bit and how easily it could have been worse.

They’ve always been good at communicating without words and right now that skill comes in handy when Olivia easily translates his slight tip of the head. They have to tell her the truth. There’s no avoiding it anymore.

“The bite won’t kill you,” Olivia says gently. “I know what we said, but it’s more complicated than that.”

Lucy pulls back, one hand gripping her arm while betrayal and confusion flash in her eyes. “I don’t understand.”

“You have a resistance to the virus. You can fight it off. The rotters can still hurt you, though. That isn’t something that’ll ever change.”

“How? You lied to me?” she whispers sadly. “You both did? Why?”

“We were always going to tell you.” Olivia frowns. “We just needed to wait until you were old enough to understand and take it seriously. This is dangerous information.”

“Dangerous like the bite? Because that’s not so dangerous anymore.”

“We were trying to protect you,” Cole picks up. “If other people find out, they could hurt you. Can’t trust anyone out there and news travels.”

“Can’t trust anyone in here, either. I can’t believe you did this. All this time I thought one bite, and that’s it. How could you?” She glares at Cole through her tears as if she’d never seen him before. “I hate you.”

The room goes silent. Lucy stares at him like she can’t believe what came out of her own mouth, and Cole stares back like he’d been slapped across the face.

“Hey!” Olivia scolds, watching her daughter flee up the steps to her room. “Don’t talk to your father like that. Get back down here. Lucy!”

She’s already gone, the door slamming shut behind her.

“She doesn’t mean it.” Olivia watches him struggle not to break down right here in the kitchen.

“It’s okay. She’s a teenager now. They do that. I said a lot worse when I was her age. Gonna go finish the wood out back. Got a stack left.”

“Cole...”

“I’m fine. It’s fine.”

It is not fine. He’s as crushed as she’s ever seen him and in this moment she’s angry at her daughter for hurting someone who loves her without question, but then she remembers that Lucy is up in her room crying, thinking herself betrayed by her own parents and Olivia is pretty sure her heart might split in both directions.

She has to fix this somehow. Wipes the tears off her face and climbs the steps, finding Lucy curled up on the bed with red-rimmed eyes, holding her arm tight while it bleeds through the makeshift bandage.

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you sooner. We were afraid,” Olivia admits, quietly taking

up a spot on the bed. “We almost lost you once when someone found out.”

Lucy snuffles, sitting up straight. “You did?”

“Mhmm. You were only a few weeks old, and they wanted to use your blood for a cure. Stole you right out of my arms, and dragged your dad out of the room kicking and screaming. We don’t know exactly how it works.

Why you’re resistant to the virus, just that you won’t turn.

That’s both amazing and dangerous because the outside world would stop at nothing to use you.

We got you back once, but we don’t want to test it a second time. ”

“Wouldn’t it be a good thing if I can help people?”

“Maybe. But we aren’t willing to risk your life to find out. Never have been. All we’ve tried to do is keep you safe. Should have told you sooner but...the bite may not kill you, but the rotters still can. Other people still can. Wanted to wait until you understood you aren’t invincible.”

Lucy’s eyes begin to water again as guilt spreads thickly across her face. “I was so awful to him. I didn’t mean it.”

“I know. You should go talk to him. Tell him that.”

“What if he won’t forgive me? What if he doesn’t want to talk to me anymore now?”
Lucy sobs.

She has always been so close to Cole. The sun rises and sets on him as far as she’s concerned. It has since the very beginning. To see her so worried that she’s broken

that trust with a single, flippant angry comment is as ridiculous as it is heartbreaking.

“He’s loved you from the very first day you were born. When he wrapped you up—”

“In his spare shirt,” Lucy says softly, having heard this story before.

They never kept that truth from her. She had a right to know how they all came together, even if it meant admitting that Cole wasn’t related biologically. Early on, she accepted that a family can be chosen.

“He’s been the best father you could ask for right from the start, and he’ll forgive you anything.

That’s why you have to be careful not to take advantage.

Me and you, we could so easily break his heart, and he’d take it because he loves us so much.

Don’t use that against him, okay? We made a mistake in not telling you sooner.

But you made a mistake this time, too. You can still fix it. Go talk to him. It’ll be okay.”

This is the first real outburst Lucy has ever had. She’s mild-mannered and easygoing. Doesn’t fuss or fight, rarely ever talks back. She’s more upset with herself than Cole could ever be with her, but it’s still up to her to put the pieces back together again.

He’s out back chopping wood when they find him. Has gone through several stacks already and Olivia leans against the door frame, watching the two people she loves most.

He’s instantly hopeful at the sight of Lucy coming toward him, so eager to forgive

and forget if it means she won't be angry with him anymore.

Olivia didn't realize she was holding her breath until Lucy finally speaks.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said," she half sobs, on a hitching breath.

"I know."

"I'm so sorry, dad. I was just so confused and hurt and I didn't understand and... I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Come're. Come on, sweetheart." He pulls her in and she clings to him, exhaling a few strangled breaths into his chest while he holds her tight. "We say things we don't mean sometimes when we're mad. It's okay. Don't cry. It's alright."

"I love you."

"I know you do, kitten. Never thought you stopped. Love you, too. I'm sorry we let you find out about this the way you did. Just wanted to keep you safe."

Lucy nods, turning slightly to find Olivia in the doorway. "Mom told me what happened. That someone tried to steal me a long time ago."

"One of the worst days of my whole life. Wasn't ever gonna let that happen again."

"I know why you didn't say anything. You can trust me now, though. I'll keep it a secret."

Sometimes it's easy to look at Lucy and see her on her way to becoming an adult. So rational and clear-headed, capable and self-sufficient because they raised her to be, but at the moment, all Olivia can see is her baby crying in her father's arms.

Just yesterday, they were carrying her in a sling through a newly ruined world.

“Get in on this group hug,” Cole holds out a free arm until Olivia makes her way out to the woodpile and tucks in beside him.

It’s not until a few days later, when they’ve got a small fire going on a chilly evening, that Lucy quietly brings it up again.

“Do you think there are others out there like me?” she says.

“Maybe,” Cole agrees.

“Can I...could we...ever go find them? Someday? Not right now. I know I can’t tell anyone. I know it’s dangerous. But maybe eventually?”

There could be a whole new generation out there resistant to the virus and much as Olivia wants to ignore that and keep her baby on this farm forever, that might not be the best option.

She may never have a full life here.

May never see anything except what’s inside this fence and the few square miles beyond it.

Might never fall in love at some point in the future and have a chance at the kind of happiness Olivia found with Cole. The farm is a bubble that protects them, but for a teenager it can be a shackle. She doesn’t want her daughter to end up resentful.

“How about when you’re old enough we can talk about it again? Decide how to go looking if you still want to,” she replies.

“Okay.” Lucy’s happy to have any sort of approval, even if the plans are distant. “Oh,

I have something to show you! It's a surprise. Wait here."

"Few years from now she'll ask again. Are you ready for another road trip when that happens?" Cole says when Lucy is gone.

"If that's what she really wants, then yes. I told you once that we would raise her to be brave enough to explore this world. I meant it."

He nods. "No way she's going without us."

"We still have a while. Let's worry about it then. I just want to enjoy the time we have together, here where it's safe, before everything changes."

When Lucy reappears, she's holding an envelope that she hands to Olivia. "Surprise."

Olivia slides her finger under the flap, revealing a handful of photos inside that nearly take her breath away.

They had forgotten all about the camera they made use of during the first leg of their trip all those years ago. Had no way to get the film developed and it must have sat at the back of her closet or tucked away in a drawer all this time.

Now, here they are, staring up at her like memories come to life.

"This is what you've been working on in the shed?" Olivia whispers.

Lucy nods. "That old book we found from the library had instructions, and I just had to wait until we got the right supplies. I've already seen them. You two have a look. I'm gonna go feed Flower."

And then she's gone, leaving her and Cole to take a journey through their past together.

A photo of a disgruntled-looking Cole holding baby Lucy, his horror at having his picture taken on full display.

A half-focused shot of Olivia, the baby, and Flower's pointy ears over her shoulder. Everything had been so tentative and new back then, but her smile was real and she traces the paper now with a delicate finger.

A dimly lit shot of Cole with a baby on his chest. Both of them passed out after a long night. Lucy had been inconsolable, and Olivia still remembers the screaming that broke her heart. This was the moment she knew she was in love with him.

Two newlyweds smiling at the camera and holding up their ring fingers for a selfie in an abandoned truck stop, full of hope for the future.

Butterflies cluster anew when she flicks her gaze to his now, watching as he takes in the memories alongside her. There are others from their time on the farm that she'd long since forgotten about.

Flower hanging from the top of a Christmas tree Cole cut from the forest, her face full of delight in the moments before she dropped the entire thing to the ground.

Olivia on the porch swing looking out at the mountains with a cup of tea, the photo taken through the smudged glass of the living room window.

Her profile is backlit by the setting sun and she imagines him catching sight of her after some mundane farm chore and deciding the moment had to be captured.

Baby Lucy learning to walk in the summer fields. Cole is out-of-focus behind her, his hands waiting to catch her if she falls.

A menagerie of farm animals they found five miles down, begging for handfuls of grain, pushy and cute and nuzzling into Cole's palm.

Lucy, as a toddler, asleep in bed with the cat tucked under her chin.

And then there are photos she doesn't recognize, taken by someone watching them through a different lens.

Olivia spread out on the sofa with her feet in Cole's lap. His head lulled back against the cushions and his eyes closed tight.

A foggy morning at the memorial they planted for Wade, who never came home.

Cole kissing her in a darkened kitchen one evening. She vaguely remembers them dancing in the silence of a winter night, and then the click of a camera but dismissed it, rolling her eyes at Lucy's antics as the girl ran back up the steps.

At least six photos of the chickens in the coop, all with their names scribbled on the back. Olivia is feeding them in the last photo and Cole gazes at her in the background, leaning on the shovel he'd been using, a smitten look on his face.

Lucy had been capturing these moments when they weren't watching, only hoping that one day they'd see them printed on little squares like time capsules.

Olivia holds out a hand between their chairs and Cole's palm slips into hers with a gentle squeeze.

She had been so sure when they first met that he'd leave them to fend for themselves.

Feared his abandonment as much as the outside world and as she stood in that empty street, her baby still pink and brand new, begging this stranger to stay, she thought herself stuck at a fork in the road.

One path she'd have to walk alone if he turned them away, but now that she knows his heart, it's obvious that never would have happened.

‘Relax,’ she would tell her past self if she could. ‘He won’t leave you. You’ve never been safer than you are when you’re with him. Your family was born today in more ways than one. You just don’t know it yet.’