



The Fearless (When the World Fell #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Cruz

Taking a chance on a stranger in a world like ours can go either way, but assuming the worst of someone is always your best bet. Ive been let down too many times by people who wanted to take my possessions or my life, and trusting an unknown these days comes with too many risks. Lower your guard for a minute, and it could all be over—especially when you throw in roaming corpses with their insatiable hunger for human flesh.

Theres no danger with Liv, though. Something about her feels like home and putting my life in her hands comes as naturally to me as breathing. I trust her; I rely on her, and after less than a week in her company, Im falling for her. Weve outrun a gang, escaped the city she called home for the past ten years, and now were heading into unfamiliar territory.

Were driving from one side of the state to the other in search of a house shes only ever seen in a magazine spread. It feels like an unattainable goal with too many speed bumps along the way, but Ill go anywhere as long as shes with me. Ill fight for her. Ill die for her. But most of all, Ill do whatever it takes to live for her.

I want to turn this into something, make a life for the two of us in a world where that just shouldnt be possible anymore.

Im sure well meet new people on our journey—Im counting on it—but no matter how many others join us, Liv will always be my number one.

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Liv

"I'm coming." Cruz pointed his knife at an infected woman limping toward me from the right.

I'd already clocked her in my peripheral, so I planted my feet and waited for her to come to me. With a swing of my tant?, I took off the top of her head, sidestepping her body as it dropped to the footpath. I fell into stride with Cruz again, sending him a flirty look that ended with both of us smiling.

The energy between us was different today. Lighter. We'd just kicked off another round of scavenging to stock up on supplies before we left Hammond Rise, our pitstop after the bloodbath in the city yesterday. The sky was the grey orange of dawn and the weeds bordering the pavement glittered with dew—the first sign that the warmer days of early autumn would soon be over.

"Are you feeling all right this morning?" he asked.

Several of the dead were drawn to our location, a few shuffling nearby, while others were slow-moving silhouettes in the distance. Cruz jabbed his knife into the eye of an infected man who'd been lurking outside the house beside ours, shoving him to the ground whilst barely breaking stride. I dodged the body, and we continued along the street, our backpacks semi-permanent attachments to our bodies, our weapons forever at the ready.

"I'm fine." I'd never known a man to care more about my emotional wellbeing than Cruz did. Everything he gave me highlighted what had been missing from my

romantic life in the years before he came along. I spared him a glance and went back to watching the houses and the vacant land on the opposite side of the road.

We'd both crashed into a deep sleep fuelled by exhaustion last night, and much to my disappointment, nothing had happened between us other than that one momentous and very sweet kiss. Whenever I looked at him now, the memory of his mouth on mine resurfaced, and it required more effort than I wanted to admit to block out those thoughts. I wondered if I took up anywhere near the amount of space in his head as he did in mine.

"Fine?" he asked over his shoulder as he strode toward another of the dead and put it down. "That's all you've got for me?"

The smile in his voice encouraged one from me. Despite sleeping on the couch again rather than in a comfortable bed, I felt refreshed and in a better place than I was after the shootings. The peaceful environment in a new location helped clear my head and gave me the do-over I hadn't known I needed. I woke this morning with a strengthened resolve I hoped to carry with me for the rest of our journey.

"I've been thinking," I said as I swapped sword for knife and headed down the first driveway with Cruz, "and I've done a mental reset to make the rest of the trip easier on me—and you by default, I guess."

"How do you mean?" He'd washed up in the backyard this morning and thrown on dark jeans and a flannel shirt, leaving the top couple of buttons open just to torture me. He looked clean and fresh, his dark hair damp and glistening in the early morning light. His stubble had grown to the point of being scruff now, and my God, I wanted to run my hands over it—or him in general—and here he was chatting about my mental state like he had no idea of his effect on me.

"I've accepted what happened in Melbourne," I said, "and I understand how it is

now—how it needs to be."

When the pandemic went from bad to catastrophic, I'd seen so many shocking sights, but we were all just doing our best to survive a horrific time that none of us had ever encountered before. Yesterday had been an eye-opener for me in all the worst ways. News reports used to drum into us we were all in this together, and while that may have been an effective strategy for keeping people focused on the positive back then, it just wasn't true anymore.

Now we were fighting over territory and treating people like possessions.

When it came to strangers, there was no we. It was all me, me, me.

We walked around the back of the property, and Cruz frowned as his gaze swept over our surroundings. "And how does it need to be?" The door was locked, so he cracked the glass panel with the butt of his knife, keeping his eyes on me as he reached through to flick the catch.

I followed him inside and closed the door behind me, stopping to take in the room.

The interior had a musty smell to it rather than one of decomposing flesh. I passed a timber dining table surrounded by four black chairs and went straight into the adjoining lounge room. The home was sparsely decorated, with no knickknacks or pictures on the walls, giving the impression the owners had run out of time to get properly settled in; another example of unrealised potential, a life that had never been fully enjoyed.

I turned to face Cruz. Until we met, my separation from the chaos outside my doors gave me the freedom to avoid deciding who to trust and who to let into my life. I hadn't spoken to anyone other than Haruto in all that time, and my focus had strictly been on keeping us both safe. No one else mattered.

"Meaning that from now on, I'm matching my energy to the person in front of me," I said as we went about clearing each room. "If they give off positive vibes and keep a respectable distance from me like you did in the beginning, they'll get my good side."

Our search ended in the master bedroom at the rear of the house. We dropped our backpacks on the floor, intending to search the cupboards while we were here. I hoped to find at least one top and a pair of pants in my size, so I could change out of the clothes I'd been running around in all day yesterday.

"And if they don't?" he asked, sheathing his knife.

I tucked my knife away, too, and planted my hands on my hips. "They'll say hello to my little tant?."

Cruz's low laughter filled the room and his gaze passed over me, lingering in places I'd never seen him visit before we kissed.

I ignored the tingle of awareness that moved through me and lifted my chin. "I'm serious." I wouldn't let myself feel bad anymore for hurting people who had nefarious intentions, especially when all they needed to do to avoid a confrontation with me was leave me the fuck alone. It was truly that simple.

His dark eyes turned warm with affection. "I know."

I frowned. "So, why are you laughing?"

He wandered over to the chest of drawers and picked up a framed wedding photo, taking in a picture of a smiling couple who had no clue how much their lives were going to change. "I'm just trying to figure out why that turns me on... and what that says about me."

The mixture of emotions that flooded my body left me lost for words. "Oh."

When he looked up from the photo and locked eyes with me, a thrill streaked through me.

The humour and desire in his expression reminded me of the old days when life was more about living than surviving, and death and devastation hadn't been waiting outside our doors. He made me feel feminine and... normal for the first time since the pandemic had upended our lives.

But if witnessing my violent side was doing it for him, he must have been semi turned on the entire time we were together. "Want me to punch something? Stab a pillow? Tell me what you need."

He smiled as he looked me over, and I could have sworn the temperature climbed a few degrees. "You, Olivia . I just need you."

Every part of me heated to the point of being unbearable. The way he said my name in that intimate tone might have been inappropriate if other people had been in the room with us. My heart filled with so many emotions. Excitement, tenderness, relief. It was just so nice to be desired again and feel nervous around a ridiculously attractive man who challenged me and made me feel safe. "I'm right here, Cruz."

Uncertain times were ahead of us. Neither of us knew whether we'd still be alive when the sun set each day. While we were safe here in a quiet house on a deserted street, I wanted to search for little pieces of joy wherever I could find them.

He returned the frame to its previous position and kept his steady, thoughtful gaze on me, but he didn't make a move in my direction. "Bad idea, querida. "

My heartbeat quickened as I wandered over to the bed. I avoided the multitude of

decorative pillows and perched on the edge of the mattress, resting my hands in my lap. "Why?"

"That kiss last night was..." He glanced past me toward the window, then his eyes came back to mine. "Problematic."

My brows shot up, but when I picked up on his reluctant humour, I instantly relaxed. "What problems did it create for you other than the one I felt when I was sitting on your lap?"

His sudden breath of laughter brought a smile to my face. "Why don't I show you, and we'll see if you think it's a problem, too?"

Wait. What did that mean? The roughness of his voice set off a shiver inside me, and I held my breath as he came toward me. He strolled across the room like a lion stalking its prey, and my stomach bottomed out as I tilted my head to keep holding his gaze. It was equal parts exciting and terrifying to discover someone could have this much power over the inner workings of my body.

When he reached me, Cruz leaned down without warning and shoved his hand under my butt, scooping me up like it was nothing and depositing me in the centre of the bed. I couldn't remember ever being manhandled like this, and I gasped in surprise, smiling as I landed on my back.

He climbed over me, letting his big body hover over mine, and my humour died a quick death. Warmth rushed through me and skated across my skin. My breathing hitched, and I braced myself for the most thrilling moment I'd experienced in years.

With one hand resting beside my head, Cruz ran his other palm up my thigh, smiling a little at the shallow breath I inhaled. I stared up at him, mesmerised, wondering how far he'd take it now that we were both in a better place.

His hand slid over my stomach and grazed my breast with a featherlight touch that shouldn't have had me squirming in the way it did. Before I could get too caught up in that sensation, he cupped my cheek and leaned in until his mouth was almost on mine. Just a breath away, and so tempting I wanted to lift my head and close the gap.

"What do you feel?" he asked.

God. Too much . His heat, his soft breaths whispering over my skin. His closeness, and the realisation that he could never be close enough. The world around us disappeared and all I could focus on were his words, his mouth. I wanted every part of him touching every part of me. "You."

He left a trail of soft pecks over my cheek, then a series of light, sucking kisses down my neck. When I tilted my head to invite more, his jaw grazed my skin like sandpaper and I pulled in a shuddering breath, hoping I wouldn't do or say anything to embarrass myself.

"What do you smell?" he asked, touching his lips to the underside of my chin.

I didn't know where these questions were coming from, but I played along out of curiosity. Struggling through the haze of desire, I picked up on the mint of his toothpaste, the scent of shampoo in his still-damp hair, along with his heady, unique maleness. My forever favourite smell. "You."

Cruz lifted his head and gave me a vague smile, then his mouth took mine without hesitation. Surprised, I clung to him and made a desperate sound in the back of my throat.

There was no easy slide into the kiss this time around, no tentative touches or sweetness like we'd shared last night. He went for shock value, and I found myself thankful for his decision as exhilaration flooded me.

He lowered his body until the glorious weight of him rested on me, pressing me deeper into the mattress. When his tongue made one long, lazy sweep inside my mouth, I couldn't for the life of me see the problem he'd mentioned. I gripped his hair and arched my breasts into his chest, keeping up with his pace, kissing him back to release all the pent-up frustration I tried so hard to contain around him.

Our mouths moved together as our bodies aligned, and when my legs parted, his hips sank between them as if they'd found their way home. Feeling him pressed up against me, his hardness a tempting promise of things to come, I let out a sharp breath through my nose and kissed him with more force. His belt clashed with mine. Our buckles clinked together, and his hatchet somehow got tangled with my sword. We were wearing too much of everything, but I didn't want to let go of him to take any of it off.

Just when we were teetering on the brink of control, he pulled away and pressed his cheek to mine. "What do you hear?" he asked, his voice deep and strained beside my ear, his breaths coming quicker than they were only seconds ago.

"Your breaths, my weird noises," I said, feeling him smile against my skin. "My heart beating way too fast... and the voice in my head begging you not to stop."

Rather than answer me, Cruz rose on his elbows and let me take in his features. We stared at each other with a tense kind of silence hovering between us, heavy with unspoken words. "And what do you see?" he finally asked, his gaze filled with a mix of heat and affection.

What did I see?

Soft eyes, lips slightly reddened from our kiss, a strong jaw covered in whiskers. He was such a beautiful man, in the most masculine kind of way. Part of me wanted to forget all about our mission to reach Bridgehill and hole up with him here for days.

Weeks. Spend all that time making each other feel alive. "You." I drew a shaky breath, and then it all clicked into place with a rush of heart-stopping clarity. "Just you. That's all I see."

Cruz swept his thumb across my brow and down my temple. He kissed me again, slowly, stroking his tongue over mine, grinding his hips against me in an unhurried way that made me restless and needy. I wanted to tear off his clothes. Mine too. Remove every physical barrier between us—but he stopped and pulled back to look into my eyes. "See what I'm getting at now?"

Most definitely problematic. I wanted to disagree, to come up with a clever argument to tear his viewpoint apart, but the whole time he was touching and kissing me, every one of my senses had been locked on him. Complete tunnel vision. Someone could have crept up on us at any stage and I wouldn't have had a clue.

It was dangerous and reckless—and holding off on taking it further only made it slightly less so because we still had to deal with the sexual chemistry that followed us everywhere.

"Nooooo," I said, drawing it out to show how painful it was to admit. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, locking him against me in a last ditched attempt to keep him close. It wasn't an easy move with our belts and weapons in the way, which only made it more obvious that he was right. Dammit. This was so unfair. To get intimate—truly intimate—we needed to strip away all our clothes and weapons, leaving us physically vulnerable if something unexpected happened.

Cruz let me keep him captive for a while, then lifted himself up on his elbows. "You're not missing much anyway," he said, kissing the tip of my nose. "I haven't been with anyone in years. It'd be over in seconds."

A strange combination of feelings took hold of me. Respect, admiration, and an

attraction so strong it knocked the breath out of me. A Do Not Touch sign had just been slapped on the most appealing man ever. Here's the perfect guy for you, Liv—everything you've ever dreamed of and more—but you can't have him, okay? It sucked, and at the same time was so utterly, unbelievably hot to be told no by a man who wanted nothing more than to say yes.

I risked another soft, sweet peck on his lips. "The best thirty seconds of my life."

Cruz made a low groaning sound in his throat and kissed me again—hard—stirring to life long-dormant feelings, a side of me I thought had been lost forever to this new, harsh world. "You're not making this easy," he murmured beside my mouth.

He should try seeing it from my side. I wasn't the smouldering, sexy one with all the muscles and the gorgeous brown eyes. The amount of restraint I had to dig deep and find surely deserved some kind of formal recognition.

He lifted his head and looked at me as if he wanted to memorise every feature. A long stretch of silence passed between us, and an overwhelming rush of softness and warmth moved through me. It could have been the feeling of being truly seen for the first time in too long, or just the joy of experiencing an intimate human interaction in a world that now belonged to the dead.

Whatever it was, I treasured the moment—and him.

"Well, what the hell do we do now?" I threw my hands out beside me on the mattress, lost and confused.

"Focus on the goal and try to ignore what's going on between you and me?"

I sighed. "You say that like it's easy. Maybe it is for you."

The side of his mouth kicked up in the most appealing smile. "Hardly. I want to be inside you more than I want to take my next breath—and when we meet people we can trust, when we can finally let down our guards, I'm coming for you, querida ."

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Liv

We spent the next few hours scavenging in the houses surrounding our temporary base, gathering tinned food, boxes of crackers, toiletries and clothes for both of us, including my current ensemble of a long-sleeve grey tee and black jeans—in my size, no less. It made me feel cleaner wearing items that weren't connected to the violence in Melbourne and left me mentally prepped to take on another day of unpredictable events.

When we were done for the morning, Cruz opened the driver's door of the car that we'd packed to capacity with our supplies.

Before he could climb in, I slipped the key from his hand and gazed up at him from my too-close position. The memory of his rough voice telling me he wanted to be inside me kept playing over and over in my mind, and it took a conscious effort to pretend everything had gone back to normal between us.

"What's... happening here?" he asked with a frown.

"I think you should be the passenger princess this time around."

We planned to travel an hour on this leg of the journey, which would take us a third of the way to Bridgehill. Staying on the road any longer increased our chances of having car trouble, and neither of us wanted to be stranded between towns in the dark. Our next stop was a place I knew of from the old days called Wallin.

As my fingers closed around the keys, he grabbed my wrist and held it captive against

his chest. "Sure you can handle it?" he asked, his eyes warm with amusement. "You haven't driven in years."

"I haven't done a lot of things in years, but I'm pretty sure it's like riding a bike. You climb on board, get a nice steady rhythm going, and it all comes back to you." I smiled sweetly to offset the sultry tone in my voice, my faux innocence not fooling him for a second.

Cruz looked like he wanted to forget all about restraining himself and drag me back inside to finish what he'd started. His thumb slid over the pulse point in my wrist, the heat in his eyes almost unbearable to witness. A long moment passed by where neither of us seemed to know what to do next, then he finally said, "Better get in the car, mi amor ."

I had no idea how my jelly legs could still work after that, but when his hold on me loosened, I somehow slid into the driver's seat and shut the door behind me. My breaths were too loud in the sudden silence, my heart beating too fast. While he went around to the passenger side, I adjusted the seat first, then the rearview mirror, catching sight of my sensitive skin, now crimson and hot to the touch. Unfortunately, I had no control over that, so I focused on calming my breathing and reminded myself not to play those games with him while we were out in the open.

He jumped in the passenger side, and we fastened our seatbelts, the tension between us palpable.

The engine turned over on the first try, so I shoved the car in reverse. "I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have teased you like that." I backed up until I had enough room to swing around and move from the dirt to the bitumen.

"Hmm. Turns out it wasn't just the kiss that was problematic. It's your voice and the way you look at me, too."

“So, everything then?” I glanced his way as I put the car in drive and cruised down the empty street. “And by problematic you mean...” My gaze dropped to the front of his jeans.

He stared out the windshield without confirming or denying my suspicion, the hint of a smile on his lips. “Eyes on the road, querida. ”

Right. As if I could concentrate after that .

I smiled and returned my attention to the front, trying to push it from my mind and focus on the current task.

It was strange being in control of a car after spending nearly a decade either walking or catching public transport, but it didn't take long to get the feel for it again. My dad had been such a patient, consistent teacher that his instructions came flooding back, and it was almost like having him in my head as I approached each intersection.

When I eased out onto the deserted highway, Cruz and I moved our attention in all directions, checking for hidden vehicles or hordes of the dead. All the while, I ignored the way his body filled the car, and I tried not to pay attention to the relaxed spread of his legs or the muscled thigh resting beside the gear shifter.

I gave three of the infected a wide berth and glanced at the endless paddocks surrounding us. Not a house in sight. Just dry grass and wire fences, with towering trees lining the roadside that swayed in the breeze. I appreciated the contrast to the city. When there were no buildings around to demonstrate how deserted our country had become, I could almost kid myself into thinking nothing had changed, and that people were still living as they used to in a world that hadn't been decimated.

"How do you think the dead end up in the middle of nowhere like this?" I mused out loud. "There's nothing around, no towns nearby. No people to eat."

Cruz looked out the passenger window as he answered. "They just start walking and keep moving, gathering corpses along the way like a deadly snowball."

"Have you come across many hordes?" I'd only seen one cluster passing through the city from the safety of my balcony, a group of around thirty or so moving down Douglas Street like a parade of horrors. Then I remembered the circumstances in which Cruz had lost his brother, and I wanted to kick myself. Being forced to end a loved one's life with a gun or watch him being ripped apart by a horde... I couldn't imagine the pain a decision like that must have caused him. "Sorry," I said, "I wasn't thinking."

"We all have shit to deal with," he said, keeping his head turned away. "That's my depressing story. You've got your own."

My most recent one being Haruto. I still hadn't come to terms with him giving up his life so that I had permission to live mine. How could you accept someone sacrificing themselves to make your existence easier? It was impossible. Before we could lose the upbeat mood that we kicked off with this morning, I changed the subject. "Have you thought about how we're going to screen any new people we meet on the way to Bridgehill?"

Cruz looked over at me and gave me a faint smile. "We'll use the skills I've honed during my time on the job, and your intuition to work out who belongs with us."

"Really?" I scoffed as I swerved around a fallen tree branch that took up half the road. "I'm a woman, so that must mean I have some intrinsic sense of who's trustworthy?"

He moved to a more comfortable position, lifting his hips momentarily in a way that shouldn't have been distracting, but I'd apparently become a sex-starved lunatic in the time since I'd known him. "Intuition, gut feeling, whatever you want to call it—yeah, that's what I'm saying."

"And where do you get that idea?"

"Women are physically smaller. More vulnerable than men," he said, his tone conversational. "You spend your lives paying attention to visual and verbal cues to stay safe." He slanted me an understanding look, as if acknowledging it wasn't fair. "You took days to approach me for the first time, and that routine of yours was all about improving your chances of getting home again after each run—but it wasn't about the corpses. You were managing humans, carino , and I trust your gut . I'm relying on it."

Not for the first time, I realised how fortunate I'd been to stumble onto a man like Cruz. If he'd tried a cold approach rather than taking several days to ease me into the idea of meeting him, I wondered if he would have scared me off and left us both in very different places now. Would I still be following my strict routine and coming back to a sad, empty house without Haruto, utterly alone and wondering about the point of it all? The thought made me even more appreciative of what we were building and what we'd already achieved together.

"Wow, no pressure," I said. "I hope I don't let you down."

"I don't think that's possible."

Cruz sounded so sure of himself I almost believed him.

We'd been driving for half an hour when I noticed the sign for the upcoming turn-off to Beecham Falls. I remembered passing it once with a carload of friends many years ago, but I'd never had the chance to see it for myself. Living in the city surrounded by looming buildings and concrete, I craved nature and space, greenery, and life. Although this hadn't been part of our original plan, the urge to do something fun grew stronger as the turn approached.

I lifted my foot off the accelerator and appealed to Cruz. "What do you think? Should we make a short detour?"

He glanced at the sign, then back at me, no doubt already weighing up the risks versus the rewards. "We don't know what's down there or if the road's still driveable."

We'd more than likely find a breathtaking waterfall at the end of a smooth stretch of bitumen, but I understood where he was coming from. We could run into a horde—unlikely—or a group of people who were set up there and wouldn't take kindly to trespassers moving into their territory. Maybe we'd hit a pothole and irreparably damage the car—or maybe we'd make a fun memory to offset all the horror in our lives.

"If we meet new people today, this could be the last time that it's just you and me, and I want to do something that doesn't revolve around scavenging or fighting or trying to stay alive." I reached the turn and eased to a stop, lifting my brows to prompt his response.

Cruz took one look at me and huffed in amusement. "Remember in the city when I said you have me wrapped around your finger?"

I smiled. We both knew it only applied to situations when we weren't in immediate danger, but warmth rushed through me all the same. "Is that your way of saying yes?"

He held my gaze for a moment, turning the warmth up a notch, then his eyes crinkled at the edges. "Let's go check out the waterfall."

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Cruz

My attention stayed on the scenery as we headed down the road to our surprise detour. Surrounded by hills and thick growth, the area was tough to monitor from inside a moving vehicle, but it appeared isolated enough that no one would bother coming down here—unless they wanted fresh water.

"I used to love hiking and being out in nature," Liv said, keeping an eye on the countless potholes in the road surface. "I was more into trees and waterfalls than sand and waves, but I'm guessing it was the opposite for you living on the surf coast."

The change in her after leaving the city floored me. She was lighter today. More relaxed. Her laughter came easier, and the teasing glimmer in her eyes appealed to me on an insane level.

"I used to run on the beach and surf a bit," I told her. I spent early mornings at Jan Juc beach where the only company had been dog walkers and fellow surfers, the waves and squawking gulls as background noise. I missed being near open water, but it wasn't the same after the pandemic, and if I hadn't left it behind, I would never have met Liv.

She gave me an appraising look. "I'm picturing you in a skin-tight wetsuit with salty, tangled hair. It's doing things for me."

I smiled. "You need help." And I wanted to give her all that help here and now. Tell her to pull over so I could yank down her pants and ease this need I had for her—but it would leave us exposed in more ways than one, and we couldn't risk it in an

unfamiliar location. Pity, since the preview I had with her in the bedroom had left me starving for more.

She sent me another one of those flirty looks that caused me no end of frustration. "I'm doing just fine, thanks. My little fantasies are keeping me entertained."

I shook my head and smiled. "Glad they're working for you."

Liv slowed as she approached the car park entrance. My humour disappeared, and I leaned forward to check the area for threats.

A No Camping sign was peppered with bullet holes, and weeds ran rampant in the scrub bordering the parking spaces, pushing through cracks wherever they could find room. An overgrown bush partially covered a sign marking the path to the waterfall, along with the distance. Only a short walk, which meant a lower chance of running into trouble.

Liv entered the car park and swung around in a wide arc. She stopped at the far end with the vehicle facing the exit, putting us in a position where we could escape fast if things didn't go our way.

We climbed from the car and grabbed our backpacks from the rear seat, shrugging them on. Before she locked up, Liv leaned inside again to rummage through one of the duffle bags we'd stuffed with clothes and other essentials. Seconds later, she emerged holding two towels.

"Thought you only wanted to look at the waterfall."

"Maybe swim, too." She tucked the towels under her arm and removed the knife from her belt. "I'm not going to if there are bodies in the water, but with winter on the way, we won't have many more chances to swim before it gets too cold."

I took the towels from her and pulled out my knife. I wasn't sold on the idea of leaving all our belongings on the bank while we went in the water, but I'd reserve my judgement until after I'd seen the area. If it looked safe enough, it might be worth the risk. If it didn't, I'd stand guard while she enjoyed a moment of normality in a world that had turned to shit.

Before we left the car park, I took my time scanning the area in every direction, checking for details that looked out of place. Vast, open paddocks were spread across the east and south, and dense, tree-filled hills lay to the north and west.

A farmhouse sat on top of the northern hill, a ten-minute walk from here with the steep incline. There were no other houses around, and while Liv locked the car, I watched and waited for signs of movement; a shifting curtain or a glint of metal to let us know we weren't alone.

"What's wrong?" She followed my line of sight, shielding the glare from her eyes as she took in the view. "A place like that would have been so peaceful back in the day, but now it's kind of creepy sitting up there all alone. It feels like it's watching us."

We waited a beat longer, but nothing happened to put either of us on edge. "This far from anywhere, it's probably deserted." Outside of climbing the hill and clearing the place ourselves, there was nothing more we could do, so I headed for the track.

With our knives ready, we wandered single file down the gravel trail, Liv taking the front position while I scanned the bushland bordering both sides of the path from the back. It was off season for snakes, but with the long grass surrounding us, I kept an eye out anyway.

A couple of magpies warbled in the gum trees, and a shuffling sound came from somewhere to the left—too low-lying to be a corpse, too loud to be a snake. Since there were no other cars around and we were too far from anywhere to make the walk

here worthwhile, a feeling of cautious optimism came over me.

Surrounded by ferns and a thick cover of trees, the temperature cooled, and as we walked deeper into the hillside, the sound of rushing water intensified. The scent of eucalyptus hung in the air, and when we neared the end of the trail, the descent dropped off enough that stone stairs and a handrail had been added for the last part.

Liv slowed as we approached the final bend, readying herself for whatever we'd find around the corner. The waterfall generated enough noise that it blocked out every other sound, and I tuned into my other senses to compensate. "Careful," I said, ready to yank her backwards at the first sign of trouble.

She stopped without warning on the second last step and turned to me, pointing at something I couldn't see from my position. The trail opened out onto a big, bare patch of dirt bordered by slabs of naturally formed granite that made up the riverbank. The speed of the water rushing by told me Beecham Falls was just around the bend—the exact spot where Liv was pointing.

"What is it?" I leaned closer and glimpsed red nylon.

A tent.

My grip tightened around the handle of my knife, and I considered dropping the towels wedged under my arm to free up my other hand.

"I can't see or hear anyone," she said, keeping her voice just above a whisper.

That didn't mean we were alone. We'd need superhuman hearing to pick up on normal conversation over the sound of the water. I performed a quick shoulder check to make sure no one was coming up on us from behind. "Go slow."

My body tensed as she took the last two steps. She kept track of her footing to avoid the tree roots snaking across the hard-packed dirt, and I stuck close behind her. Liv shot another glance my way as we reached the flat ground, both of us vigilant as we rounded the bend to get the full picture of what was going on here.

Four tents were erected side-by-side, the nylon faded and worn as if they'd been out in the elements for years. Two red, two blue, all but one with their doors zipped shut.

A circle of rocks surrounded a pile of ashes at the front, but there were no glowing embers or the smell of smoke to suggest the campfire had been recently burning. The only scents I detected were damp earth and rotting flesh.

"Infected," Liv said softly, looking up at me.

Most likely trapped in one or more of the tents. Probably came here as a group and when some of them got sick, the others took off. It was the only way to explain the empty car park in a place this far from anywhere.

I handed the towels to Liv and grabbed a rock, lobbing it so it landed beside the entrance of the first tent. Instead of moving away from the sound, the occupant threw itself into the wall in a half crouch, mashing its face against the material and inserting a brand-new nightmare in our heads to go with all the others.

Liv shuddered. "That's... disturbing."

The activity riled up the figures in the middle tents and two or three corpses tripped over one another as they tried to bust through the side walls. We had to be the first humans down here since the original people had abandoned the site, otherwise the tents would have been knocked over by now. A couple of pegs from the third tent ripped free and the ropes securing it catapulted into the air.

While the corpses rolled around on the ground and tangled themselves up in the collapsed tent, I closed my eyes and sighed. It would have been so much easier to head back in the direction we just came from, jump in the car, and get straight on the highway again—but Liv wanted this, and I wanted it for her.

I opened my eyes and took in the scene, surveying the tree line to make sure there were no humans hiding in the area. "We'll have to clear the corpses before we can even think about going into the water."

Liv appeared to be having similar thoughts about leaving. She pursed her lips as her gaze bounced from the tents to the waterfall that I'd barely even acknowledged yet. In the end, her desire to do something fun won out over the need to keep things simple. She smiled and stood on tiptoes to kiss my cheek. "Thanks."

The sensation of her lips lingered on my skin, and I hung back as she dropped the towels on a rock and strolled toward the tents, all long limbs and take-charge energy. If I knew for sure she wouldn't need backup, I could have stayed right here and watched her put those skills of hers to use.

Instead, I went straight for the second tent and kicked the legs out from under the corpse clawing at the side wall. As it struggled with the change in position, I planted my foot on its neck through the material and aimed for its ear, my blade leaving a long tear in the nylon. All movement inside stopped, and I glanced up to check on Liv. She'd already taken down two of her own.

I moved on to the third tent and dispatched the remaining corpses.

When I straightened, Liv was already doing a walk around and checking the rest of the camp. I joined her and performed a sweep of the area near the waterfall and the river it flowed into, finding nothing but dirt and overgrown bushes. Several full garbage bags sat beside a pile of what looked to be stripped rabbit bones. No free-

range corpses in the river or along the bank.

As far as I could tell, we were safe. However long that lasted, neither of us could know.

I sheathed my knife and turned to pay attention to the waterfall for the first time. The precipice looked to be around fifteen metres high, with sheets of water rushing over and crashing down on the river stones at the base. Ferns bordered the bank, wedged between boulders covered in mist from the fall. With my back to the corpses we'd taken down, it was worlds away from the reality of our lives.

"It's so pretty here." Liv moved to the edge of the river and dropped her backpack beside the towels. She tucked her knife away and bent at the waist to remove her boots and socks. "Coming in?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the trail we'd just come down, not surprised to find it empty. We were in the middle of nowhere; the chances of anyone sneaking up on us were so minimal they barely warranted a second thought. I faced her again, drawn in by the sweet, hopeful look on her face. "Someone should keep watch."

"Oh, come on, Cruzy."

I smiled. No one had called me Cruzy before, and I never wanted to hear it again from anyone but her. "Not yet."

She stood on a rock and curled her bare toes over the edge, her voice tempting and nearly impossible to resist. I'd never been a foot guy in the past, but seeing any part of her exposed that she usually kept hidden did something for me. Her eyes stayed on mine as she slipped off her jeans, and she stood before me wearing only her long-sleeve t-shirt and panties.

My gaze dropped to take in the rest of her. Until now, I hadn't seen her bare legs, and finding them covered in bruises brought out the protective side of me that wanted to stand between her and anything that could hurt her. A scratch travelled down one shin, and another spanned the entire width of her thigh, but she carried herself with the confidence of a woman who knew none of it mattered.

"If I got naked, would that help convince you?"

With another glance behind me to make sure we were still in the clear, I pointed in her direction, torn between smiling and diving on her. "Don't you dare take off any more clothes. Remember our deal." If she stripped down to nothing, all my restraint would be gone—and so would any concerns for our safety.

"That was your deal, not mine. Just because I didn't argue with you doesn't mean I agreed." Liv took off her t-shirt and dropped it onto the rock, raising her eyebrows at me in challenge.

Now she was down to pink panties and a black sports bra, revealing the lean muscles in her arms and shoulders from all her sword wielding. Water thundered down on the rocks behind her and a sudden breeze swept through the area that made her shiver.

My eyes roamed over her, taking in the way her breasts swelled above the cups of her bra, dropping lower to admire her waist and the flare of her hips. Scrapes and bruises may have marred her skin, but I'd never seen anyone more perfect.

My mouth turned up at one corner as I tossed up my options. Did I want to stand on the riverbank like an idiot while she frolicked in the water half-naked, or get in there with her and have some fun? We had no idea what we'd be dealing with on this trip—if we'd run into others or make the journey alone.

The only thing we knew for sure was that here, at this very moment, it was just the

two of us.

With a harsh exhale, I glanced up at the tree-lined hill behind the river, then dropped my backpack beside hers. I pulled out my knife and left it on a rock within easy reach, hoping I wouldn't need to use it while we were here. As I toed off my boots, Liv let out a whoop of excitement that made me smile. Her eyes sparkled with happiness, and seeing how little it took to make her day had something giving way inside my chest.

Everyone I'd ever loved in this world was long gone, and I'd never expected to find someone to care about again. It was almost too much, and part of me wanted to keep her at a distance to protect us both if it ended too soon. Life was unpredictable. We didn't know how each day was going to end—but when she looked at me this way, all logic flew out the window. "Te ves preciosa."

"Did you just call me precious?" she asked, her voice almost lost amid the pounding of the waterfall.

"I called you beautiful but precious fits, too."

A beat passed where all we did was gaze at each other, then she shoved her long braid over her shoulder and smiled. "Come play with me, Cruz."

Her voice was so sensual and tempting I didn't know if I had it in me to be near her and control myself. "Can you behave and leave the rest of that on?" I indicated her underwear with a sweep of my hand, unable to believe the words coming out of my mouth. If Diego was looking down on me now, he'd be laughing and calling me a fucking idiot.

She blew out a sigh that had me fighting a smile. "You mean even if I want you so much it hurts?"

Her tone may have come off as light-hearted, but her words hit home, and goosebumps passed over me, lifting the hairs on my forearms. The way she looked at me healed parts of me I hadn't even known were broken. "I want you, too." I caught her gaze and held it so there were no misunderstandings. "But I don't want to be looking over my shoulder and gripping a hatchet while I'm trying to be close to you."

I glanced behind me once more, then up toward the hill where the farmhouse stood hidden from view. If anyone was still living there and wanted to ambush us for whatever reason, they should have made it to our location by now. The noise coming from the waterfall made it tough to hear if anyone was pushing their way through the wall of greenery to get to us, but there were no movements in the nearest bushes to cause alarm.

I returned my attention to Liv. "Why don't I wash your hair?"

A compromise, a way to touch her without letting my guard down. Our safety had to be our top priority if we wanted any kind of future that stretched beyond today.

When her mouth quirked with amusement rather than annoyance, I knew we were on the same page. "I'll never turn down an offer like that."

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Liv

He'd asked me to behave myself, but I didn't feel in any danger here. The place had the same empty feel to it I'd recognised in homes and office buildings. No sensation of eyes on me other than Cruz's, no raising of the hairs on the back of my neck to tell me a threat was imminent.

But he'd set a boundary, and I intended to respect it.

I honestly hadn't expected it to get this far. As he lost his shirt and loosened his belt, I didn't know how to feel about luring him into the water with me. Proud? Embarrassed? Excited? Rather than ruin the moment by analysing it to death, I relaxed and let myself enjoy the view.

The last time I saw him like this, we were getting ready to leave Melbourne, and we hadn't crossed any lines with each other yet. At the time, I had to play it cool and pretend his body had no effect on me, but now I could look as much as I wanted to without the need to hide my interest.

"Hurry," I said, unsure if he could hear me over the rush of the waterfall.

"I'm working on it." He stripped off his pants, and as I followed the line of dark hair that travelled from his abdomen to the waistband of his black boxer briefs, my breathing hitched. Seeing him hard and ready beneath that thin layer of material made me desperate to touch him. When he looked up, it was comforting to see everything I felt for him reflected in his eyes.

Cruz gave me the ghost of a smile, then grabbed both our knives and moved closer to hold mine out to me. He took my free hand in his, and my heart stuttered as our fingers interlocked. Such a simple gesture, yet so foreign to me now that it almost felt like the first time a man had held my hand.

My face grew warm as we waded into the water and picked our way through the stone-filled riverbed. We both exclaimed our shock at the temperature—it was breath-stealing freezing—as we headed closer to the rushing water. The spray hit our faces, and the overwhelming noise eclipsed every other sound.

I checked behind me, but we were still alone.

In a perfect world, we wouldn't need to scan our surroundings in an isolated place, but we had to assume we were in danger everywhere we went and stay on alert. We stopped at the base of the waterfall, and Cruz released my hand as we set our weapons on the nearest rock. The two of us spent a minute or so checking the water for signs of movement.

I hadn't been out in the wild long enough to know if the infected walked into water voluntarily when there were no humans around to follow, but it was so clean here that it wouldn't be hard to catch any threats under the surface.

Once we'd cleared the area, I pulled the tie from my hair and shook out my braid. I backed under the waterfall and laughed as it threatened to drown me with its force. So, so cold. It quickly reached the point of being intolerable, and the weight of the water nearly pushed me to my knees, but it helped me acclimatise faster. By the time I was completely drenched, I'd become used to the temperature.

Cruz eased me out from under the worst of it and smoothed my soaked hair back from my face. He looked me over with a faint smile that encouraged one from me. "Tú mujer loca. "

With a laughing breath, I looked away and took in our surroundings. I didn't need to be fluent in Spanish to understand what loca meant—and he honestly made me feel crazy sometimes. The man was addictive. His scent, his body, his mind. God, his heart .

Every day I spent with him had me falling deeper, but before I could get too carried away with that train of thought, I focused on the reason he came into the water with me. "We forgot the shampoo."

"Shit. I'll get it." He left me standing in the river and climbed onto the bank to rummage through my pack. My breaths were coming quickly, my pulse thrumming in my neck. With a sigh, I let my gaze caress his bunched abs as he bent over, then the hard muscles in his thighs and calves. His dark hair glistened in the dappled sunlight, and when he straightened again holding the bottle of shampoo, his soaked underwear moulded around him in a way that had my entire body yearning for him.

Life was just not fair.

He came back to me, his eyes locked with mine as he stepped across the rocky riverbed. "I don't know what the hell's wrong with me. I spent thirty seconds away from you, and it was thirty seconds too long."

God, I couldn't take much more of this without spontaneously combusting. His words filled me with warmth, the roughness of his voice sending every overwhelming feeling from before slamming into me again. I gazed up at him, struck dumb and unsure of what to say. We were linked somehow, a connection that went beyond the physical, because I didn't want to be apart from him either.

He smiled and swept his thumb over my cheek. "Turn around."

With a huff of embarrassment, I faced away from him as he flipped the cap on the

herbal shampoo I'd found this morning. He squeezed a dollop on my head and set the bottle on the boulder beside us.

When his fingers began massaging my scalp, I closed my eyes and smiled, the scents of rose and apple wafting around us as he turned my hair into a mass of bubbles. With a sigh, I tipped my head back and soaked up every swirl of his fingers, wondering why I hadn't let a man wash my hair before. How was I supposed to go back to doing it myself now I knew what I'd been missing?

His chest pressed against me as he worked, and I heard a smile in his voice when he said, "The view from up here is pretty incredible."

Confused, I opened my eyes and glanced down to find bubbles sliding over my damp skin. A cluster had slid into my cleavage and pooled in my sports bra, taking on a rainbow hue in the light. I thought about suggesting I take off my bra to improve the view, but he must have sensed the incoming question.

A low laugh rumbled in his chest, and he gave me a gentle nudge toward the waterfall. "Step under the water and rinse."

So demanding. The authoritative tone in his voice sent a thrill racing me. Without another word, I moved closer to the water and leaned into it, turning to face him as I flushed the shampoo from my hair. I held his gaze and gave him a small smile as I ran my fingers through the strands, rinsing until the water cleared.

His jaw hardened as he watched me, his dark eyes taking on a flinty edge that had my pulse skyrocketing. He didn't beckon me over with words, but something in the air made me move out from under the water and step in his direction. I resumed my position with my back pressed to his chest, facing the riverbank as I waited with breathless, barely there patience.

He stayed silent while he massaged my shoulders, pressing his thumbs into the base of my neck. I flicked a glance at the row of tents and sighed, trying to prove I could still sweep the area for potential dangers even as he turned me into a puddle of lust. My interest in our surroundings had already waned, though, and all my focus wanted to stay with him.

He was too distracting, too tempting.

He dipped his head to press a kiss on my cheek as he manipulated my shoulder muscles with slow, deep touches. His fingers were slippery with remnants of shampoo, his palms rough with callouses. He dug his thumbs into the space beneath my shoulder blades, and I couldn't keep my groan contained.

He rubbed his cheek against mine. "I like the sounds you make."

"You're torturing me," I half whined, half laughed.

"I'm torturing myself," he admitted. "This is heaven and hell."

I couldn't take much more of this without throwing myself at him, and he only had himself to blame.

When my attention locked on a movement along the riverbank, my smile slowly dropped, and my pulse gave a hard thump. For a split second, I wondered if I was imagining the sight, and I blinked, seized by disbelief.

"What the..." It took me a second to focus, but then my stomach dropped, and I had to accept that, yes, this was happening right here in front of me. "Someone's here."

A woman rushed toward our belongings in a crouch-like run, her footsteps disguised by the noise of the waterfall. My heart slammed against my ribs, and I sucked in a

breath as I pushed away from Cruz. When she passed beneath the shade of the trees, sunlight beamed through a break in the canopy and bounced off the rifle clutched to her side.

Not only did she have the potential to take our things, but this stranger could erase our lives .

I swiped my knife from the nearby rock and clutched the handle in a death grip. "Hey!" I yelled, too concerned with her stealing our keys to care about how little Cruz and I were wearing. The water went up to my waist, and I risked a couple of wading steps in her direction while her attention was on our backpacks. I didn't want to get shot, but leaving too much distance between us would only give her time to escape.

She appeared to be in her late-thirties, dirty and emaciated from living rough, her hair a tangled brown mass around her face. She met my eyes and spent a fleeting moment taking in the rest of me, then shifted her attention to Cruz.

He'd already collected his knife as the air grew heavy, the mood dark.

"Head on a swivel, querida ," he warned as he left my side. His deep voice was all business—and once again, we were back to fighting for our lives.

I was so tired of this crap.

We had no idea if she was alone or part of a group, if we were in immediate danger, or had time to talk our way through the situation. The thought that this could truly be the end for us motivated me to pay close attention.

She had a gun, and we had two knives between us. She wore boots and clothes while we stood barefoot and half naked in the middle of a river. The only way we could

have been at more of a disadvantage was having no weapons at all.

The single detail in our favour was the knowledge that she couldn't wrangle two backpacks and hold us off with the gun at the same time. The moment she tried taking off with the bags to search them elsewhere, we'd be on her.

She kept the rifle pointed in our direction in a silent threat as she dug in Cruz's backpack one-handed. I'd put the key fob in the side pocket of my bag, so we still had time to reach her before it was too late. If she got to our car and left here without us, any chance of us making it to Bridgehill would be gone.

"I don't want trouble," she called out. "I don't want to shoot you. I just need your car. Tell me where the keys are. I'll take it, and we can all leave here in one piece."

Two of us would leave this place unharmed, I knew that much for sure. Whether she joined us depended entirely on how the next few minutes played out.

"We can't give you the car," Cruz said, his voice calm and reasonable. "But if you put the gun down and back up a few steps, we can talk and figure something out."

A simmering rage burned inside me, and I turned my knife upside down in a pinch grip, keeping the blade secure and hidden beneath the water's surface. I'd practised throwing over and over to pass all the long, endless hours in the city, but I hadn't been nearly as stringent with my knife skills as I had with running and fitness. I could only hope my aim was accurate; if I left her injured and still able to operate a gun, we could end up worse off than if we'd just let her take the car.

Cruz sent me a fleeting look over his shoulder as he waded closer to the riverbank, his movements slow and deliberate. No doubt he planned on using his negotiating skills to avoid unnecessary violence, but if I had to kill her to save us, it wasn't a decision that required any thought.

"I don't want to talk," she said, her movements growing more frantic. "I just want the keys. I'm telling you now, I'm not leaving here without that fucking car."

Cruz took another step forward. "Did you know these people?" he asked, nodding at the wrecked tents with the bodies inside.

She ignored his question and screamed, "Where are the keys?"

I took my eyes off her to make sure no others were hiding in the nearby bushes. If she had any living friends left, one of them would have been searching through the bags while the rest kept us at bay. Hiding when they had the distinct advantage wouldn't make tactical sense.

She was alone. I'd bet the car on it. She was also on the verge of a mental breakdown after being isolated for too long. Part of me empathised with her—I could have easily ended up the same way if Cruz and I hadn't crossed paths—but the other part, the one that was desperate to survive, wouldn't allow those feelings to get in the way.

"What's your name?" he asked, his calmness a ploy to get her on our side.

She frowned, then laughed in a hysterical way that made her sound unhinged. "We're not going to chitchat, asshole. I just need your keys." She kicked Cruz's backpack aside and moved across to mine. "Tell me where they are!"

So close.

We had another minute, two at most, before she discovered where I'd stashed them. Cruz had progressed a few steps while distracting her with inane questions, getting ready to take possession of the rifle before we learned the hard way if it was loaded. We were out of time. Someone needed to act. The adrenaline rushing through me turned my gaze hard, my body rigid.

The woman glanced up while she was rummaging through the main compartment of my bag and noted Cruz's new position. Instead of threatening him, she jerked upright and swung the gun in my direction. " Don't fucking move, " she said, locking her elbows in position. Her gaze snapped from me to Cruz. "Come any closer, and I'm putting a hole in this bitch."

"Easy," he said. "Why don't you lower the gun so we can talk?"

If the rifle was loaded, all she had to do was squeeze the trigger, and I'd be gone in seconds—dead and floating in the water—then Cruz would become her next target. The thought of him being hurt ramped up the urgency.

Her arms blocked access to her vital organs, but all I needed to do was embed the blade somewhere on her body, and Cruz could dive in and take over from his closer position.

Focusing on my target, I slowed my breaths and lifted my hand from the river. Droplets of water slid down my forearm. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. With my knife cocked beside my head, I aimed and released the blade with a fast, straight throw... directly into her left eye socket.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. It seemed as if all the noise faded to silence, and the air grew still. Confused, the woman blinked her remaining good eye in slow motion, then her body dropped to the dirt with a thud. When her gun clattered to the ground a beat later, I blew out a breath, shocked and relieved.

"Nice arm." Water sloshed around Cruz as he waded the final few steps to the riverbank.

Not sure what to say or do, my gaze returned to her lifeless body as he climbed onto the bank. Her uninjured eye remained open, her head turned toward me with a blank

stare. It unnerved me, and I had to look away to gather my composure.

We never even found out her name, but I couldn't let myself feel anything.

Not yet.

We needed to secure our location first.

Water streamed off Cruz's body as he leaned over her to check her pulse. We both knew she was gone, but someone had to confirm she was no longer a threat. My hands clenched at my sides as he met my eyes and shook his head.

Dead.

I pressed my lips together and nodded my understanding.

He left her there to dry himself off, dragging on clothes and boots, covering the body I'd been close to for one beautiful, peaceful moment in the water. I wanted that time back again, so we didn't have to start today the same way we'd ended yesterday—with death and violence.

I joined him on the riverbank and made use of the second towel. Cruz kept himself busy as I changed into a fresh bra and panties and left the others lying on the ground. My breaths were coming faster as I dressed, struggling to pull on clothes over hastily dried skin. All the while, I scanned the top of the ravine, the trees, the scrub lining the trail to make sure no other sets of eyes were watching us.

The woman appeared to have been alone.

Neither of us spoke until we were fully covered and wearing our backpacks again. When our eyes met, I didn't find any judgement in his expression. Cruz curved his

hand around the back of my neck and pulled me close, pressing his lips to my forehead in a comforting gesture that immediately put me on edge.

"I need to check the gun to see if we can use it," he said against my still-damp skin. "If it's empty, it doesn't change anything."

I nodded because he expected it of me, not necessarily because I believed his words.

He bent over the woman to extract my knife from her skull, wiping it on her shirt before he handed it back to me. Forcing down my revulsion, I returned it to its sheath and kept my eyes glued to his every movement. If I knew we were truly in danger, I could rationalise my actions and eventually let myself off the hook—but what if she'd never had the option of harming us in the first place? What if we could have physically overpowered her and left this place with three hearts still beating?

Cruz collected the gun, and my heart hammered as he checked the chamber.

He sighed and showed it to me.

Empty.

A strange feeling built inside me. Guilt... or sadness. "I didn't know." Telling him I'd match energy for energy turned out to be easier than following through on those words and dealing with the aftermath.

He set the gun down beside the woman's body, his dark eyes so soft and understanding I felt like my chest might cave in. "Why didn't you give her a chance?"

I pulled my shirt away from my skin. Cornered. Claustrophobic. Droplets of water fell from the ends of my hair, leaving damp patches on the material. "She could have hidden somewhere safe and called out to us," I said, "or waited by the car far enough

away that she wouldn't be a threat..." I paused and glanced at her body, my heart constricting at the sight. "Or any other option that wouldn't leave us stranded while she took our car, our clothes, our food." I shoved my hair over my shoulders and kept going, more for myself than Cruz. "We didn't have the luxury of time or distance to make up our minds about her. She had a gun that may or may not have been loaded. She pointed it at us in a threat to shoot. I had to act immediately, or we risked losing everything—including each other."

My voice had risen, my tone becoming more agitated. I'd always seen myself as a confident, capable woman. If I didn't know how to do something, I researched and learned; I figured out a way to get it done without requiring praise or recognition. But I think a small, hidden part of me just wanted the approval of a man who meant so much to me, a man I admired and respected and wanted to keep in my life for as long as our circumstances allowed.

Cruz stared at me for a beat, letting my words hover in the air between us.

He already knew the truth.

I'd paid close attention to every detail long before I committed to making a move.

My words sank in and settled inside me, loosening the tightness in my body. A beat later, an all-encompassing wave of relief rolled through me. "I made the right call."

"For the record, she would have been dead the second her gun swung in our direction if she'd pulled that stunt in the old days," Cruz said. "You've got good instincts and doubting yourself after the fact isn't a bad thing. It just means you have a heart, that you still give a shit."

"Thanks." I drew a deep breath and made myself look at the woman whose life I'd extinguished.

We all made choices that impacted our lives, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Rather than wish I hadn't opted to throw my knife, I'd choose to be thankful that doing so meant Cruz and I got to spend one more day together.

And at this point, he was all I cared about.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:54 am

Cruz

I took over behind the wheel for the remainder of the trip to Wallin. Liv needed a break to process what had happened at the waterfall, and driving helped me forget the look on her face when it hit home that she'd just killed someone. If we'd had time to talk strategy before she made her move, if I had any idea that she was about to take the woman out like an assassin, I would have done it myself, so I'd be the one carrying the weight now instead of her.

We'd been driving in silence for around fifteen minutes, but the quiet didn't feel as heavy as it had yesterday when we were leaving Melbourne. Anyone who didn't know Liv might have assumed that meant she was doing okay, but I'd seen how well she could shove the negative crap down until the pressure grew too strong and erupted from her like a volcano.

She was passing the time meticulously cleaning her knife on an old t-shirt, removing all traces of the dead woman from her blade. I glanced in her direction and found her frowning in concentration, digging her cloth-covered thumbnail into a long groove. She wouldn't let up until the knife looked brand new again, and maybe then she could put this behind her.

"Why do you keep staring at me?" she asked, her eyes remaining on her task. "Are you worried I'm going to fall apart, or are you trying to figure out the right time to say I told you so?"

"Neither." I returned my attention to the road.

"You're thinking it, though." Liv tossed me a look. "You said we shouldn't let ourselves get distracted until we're somewhere safe and you were right. Look what happened."

She'd been a distraction since the beginning, no matter where we were or what we were doing, but if I could keep my hands to myself from now on, it would at least give us a fighting chance of reaching Bridgehill alive.

"If it makes you feel better, I didn't want to be right." I rested my elbow on the door and checked the rearview mirror, remembering the soft sounds of pleasure she'd made while I was washing her hair. I'd never known something so simple could be that sensual.

"I didn't want you to be right either," she admitted. Our gazes met and held before she smiled and looked away. "Murder sure has a way of killing the mood."

I laughed. It was the worst possible time to laugh given what we'd just been through, but she delivered her humour in such a deadpan way it took me by surprise. When our amusement faded, we both fell silent.

We'd been driving for a while when her voice filled the quiet again. "Did it change how you think of me?"

I remembered our conversation from last night when I was wondering the same thing about her. She watched me kill Jackson and another member of his crew, and now she'd taken the life of a woman who was desperate and alone. But each time either of us made that choice, it was a case of them or us—and we weren't willing to die to avoid hurting other people.

None of this was ideal, none of our circumstances normal. Our world had turned to violence, and out of necessity, Liv and I had become each other's calm in the chaos.

"No." I slanted her a look, watching her jaw move as if she was chewing the inside of her cheek. "Did it change how you see yourself?"

Liv tucked her damp hair behind her ear and met my eyes. "I think I feel bad because I don't feel bad," she said, staring out the windshield again. "I'm already forgetting about her and moving on, and now I'm sitting here wondering if that makes me a sociopath... or is it a psychopath? I can never remember which one's which." She stopped and drew an audible breath, sending me another glance. "I'm honestly not sure if I like the person I'm turning into out here in the real world."

I tapped my thumb against the steering wheel and followed the path of a corpse struggling through the long grass on the side of the road. Its dead eyes latched onto our car, its arms grabbing air as we passed by. "How did you feel the first time you put down a corpse?"

Liv looked at me, curious, then her gaze locked on the side mirror as she watched the weathered corpse we'd just passed by. "I threw up."

"Why?"

She shifted in her seat and pulled the hair tie from her wrist, busying herself with re-braiding her hair. "I kept thinking about how the infected used to be humans, and for the most part, they still looked human."

I swerved to avoid a pile of suitcases someone had inexplicably left in the middle of the road. "What else?"

"It's not natural to stab a knife into someone's eye or ear or feel the blade scrape against bone and brain matter. It's just not normal to act in a murderous way, even when the person's already dead."

"How many times did you do it before you stopped throwing up?"

Liv finished her loose braid and wound her hair tie around the end. "I don't remember." She dropped her hands into her lap. "Four or five? Maybe more."

"Why did you stop getting queasy whenever you ended a corpse?"

She took a long breath and let it out slowly, thinking my question over. "Because it was necessary, and I wanted to survive? Because I needed to get home to Haruto—and if the dead kept their distance, I would have happily left them alone and existed in the same world without resorting to violence. It wasn't that I wanted to attack anyone or anything, I just wanted to feel safe."

I let a long stretch of silence pass, then commented, "Safety seems like a pretty reasonable, human, non-psychopathic desire to me."

Liv caught onto my tactics. Realisation dawned, and her lips turned upward. Rather than answer me, she laid her hand on my thigh, palm upward, her fingers wiggling in invitation. Affection rushed through me, and I kept my eyes on the road while I lowered my hand to hers.

As our fingers linked, the warmth from her skin seeped into mine. These were the touches that hit me the hardest, where having a physical connection with me seemed to make her feel more grounded and secure.

I'd never had the chance to bring that kind of peace to a woman before.

I lifted her hand and kissed her fingers, steering the car around a body splayed across the middle of the road.

"We're here," Liv said as we approached the exit sign, "and we made it without

dying."

She'd been to Wallin on a girls' weekend about five years ago, but neither of us knew what it looked like now in the aftermath of the pandemic. We'd made good time, even with the detour. Still a few hours to spare until the sun set, giving us enough of a window to find somewhere and get comfortable before the light disappeared.

"If someone tried to steal our car in the middle of nowhere, I'm guessing it's even riskier driving through a town," Liv said, her voice surprisingly calm.

"I'll turn off as soon as I can and find a place on one of the side streets."

We rounded a wide bend and drove straight into the town centre. I pressed the central lock button and scanned the roadside to make sure no one took a run at us or pitched a rock at the windscreen. I wouldn't rule out anything after what we'd seen the past few days.

We passed a war memorial, a yoga studio, an estate agent, and a Subway restaurant. Liv pointed to a sign that indicated the turn-off to a bed-and-breakfast. "That's where we stayed," she said, smiling as if she'd dived straight into the memories. "One street over from the main road. The Italian restaurant where we had dinner and too many red wines is back there on the left. I had my worst hangover ever the next morning." She turned in her seat to face the area we'd just passed. "It's amazing how quickly everything goes bad when there's no one left to maintain it anymore. I never knew grass could grow in some of the places it does now."

"The town's definitely gone to shit."

There were several cafes with smashed doors or windows, a supermarket, a newsagency, along with a McDonald's on the corner that somehow looked more abandoned than any other building. A pizza shop had been burnt out long ago, and

the adjoining businesses had gone up in flames along with it, leaving black, empty shells behind.

Before the virus, this would have been a bustling regional city, but it was a ghost town just like everywhere else. Eerie. Quiet.

We scanned the side streets as we passed by, looking for signs of life.

At the first roundabout, I took a left and headed away from the town centre, dodging a corpse as it turned in our direction, attracted to the sound of the car. I wondered if people were hidden nearby who'd heard the engine, too. We were moving targets, drawing attention in the open like this, and time would tell whether that turned out to be a good thing.

I continued along a tree-lined street into what would have been an attractive residential area a few years ago. The road was scattered with litter and dead leaves; weeds ran rampant in garden beds and untended grass had grown to knee level or higher in some places. If the living were still occupying any of these houses, they'd be smart to let their gardens stay overrun, so it wouldn't be obvious they were here.

I took a right and kept driving, looking for a specific type of house.

More corpses were off in the distance, some trapped in a fenced-off front garden, while others wandered along the footpath and meandered out onto the road. As we drove by one of them, I took in its vacant eyes, decaying skin, and the hair hanging in stringy lengths around its face. Bony fingers reached for the car and an inhuman wail followed, muffled by the closed window.

It used to be a living, breathing person, and now...

There were still times it shocked me that this was our reality, even after living it for

so long.

My gaze returned to the road, and I scanned the homes lining both sides of the street.

Seconds later, I headed straight for the driveway of a corner house at a cross intersection.

It hit me how attuned Liv had become to our needs when she could look at a place and automatically understand why I'd chosen it. "Four streets nearby so we can leave the area in any direction," she said, tossing me a glance, "and an enclosed driveway with a carport so nobody can get the jump on us."

"Right on the mark." For all we knew, there was a group inside frantically discussing how to handle our arrival, but we had options if things didn't go our way.

The red brick home looked to be dated around the nineteen-fifties, with a path surrounded by overgrown dandelions leading to the front porch. I swung the car around and reversed into the driveway, stopping under the shade of the carport.

Liv and I climbed out and stood still for a beat, listening for movements. All I could pick up were twittering birds and the distant moans from corpses.

When it looked like we were alone, the two of us threw on our backpacks and unsheathed our knives.

My heart thumped double time as I unlatched the side gate and passed through, and my gaze jumped from one area to the next while Liv followed. We stepped into a backyard with a steel water tank in the corner flanked by two gnarly fruit trees, one bearing dozens of bird-pecked red apples and the other green.

"Over there," I said in a low voice, nodding at a tin shed near the fence. Two corpses

clocked our arrival and performed a slow-motion about-face.

Liv's gaze shifted to the house. "I guess that answers the question about anyone still living here." She pointed at the rear door swinging in the breeze.

Corpses couldn't work latches or handles, which meant neither of them had opened the gate and come in off the street. At least we knew the house was free of live humans, although there could still be more of the dead kind lurking inside. "I'll take these two." I crossed the yard and stabbed the first one in the temple before it had the chance to grab me, slamming its body into the other and knocking it to the ground. Without missing a beat, I leaned over the flailing, decaying mess, and put my blade through its eye.

My breaths were coming quicker, my pulse thumping. When I returned to Liv, her tense expression made me frown. "What's wrong?"

She tried to shake it off, but her attempt at a smile fell flat. "Nothing."

Flushed cheeks, shallow breaths. Parted lips that looked as if they were desperate to be kissed. Well, well. It looked like I wasn't the only one turned on by violence. I pinched her chin and pressed my mouth to hers. "Stop looking at me like that."

Liv glanced away and blew out a loud breath. "I truly wish I could."

I smiled and stepped past her, focusing on the next task to avoid becoming too caught up in her.

We entered a house that looked as if it hadn't been updated since the day it was built. It smelled like the dead the second we walked inside, the stench permeating the walls and carpet. Strangely, there were no signs of any moving about the place.

Liv and I cleared the lounge, bathroom, and laundry, then moved on to the bedrooms, all in a row off the main hallway. The two nearest doors were left open, the last one closed. That detail usually meant there were corpses on the other side, so we knew to be ready for a potential surprise.

The first room contained two pristine single beds that no one had slept in since the sheets were last changed. In the second room, the queen mattress was covered in blood and fluids, the gruesome sight reminding me of scenes I'd walked into on the job when life was normal.

A muffled moan came from behind the closed door at the end of the hall, and Liv stood back as I swung it open with my knife raised. A female corpse lay on the bed wearing dirty flannel pyjamas, her arms and legs bound to the bedposts, her mouth gagged. When she rolled her head in our direction, her movements turned agitated, her body twisting on the mattress. She pulled against the restraints and lifted her head from the pillow, her jaw working as if she was desperate to bite into anyone who'd come close enough.

Liv sucked in a breath. "What the hell? Were they... is she...?"

"Looks like she's been here a while." I approached the bed and gave the corpse a closer look. Her milky eyes locked onto me, her teeth snapping as if she was biting air behind the gag. Skin hung off her face in tattered pieces, and the smell coming off her made my stomach roll. "No visible injuries other than teeth marks on her neck," I said. "Probably trying to keep her safe and stop her from hurting anyone until a cure came along. The other two got sick in the meantime, and she ended up stuck here."

It was a plausible explanation. There'd been so much talk about a vaccine in the beginning that people were holding onto the hope everything would turn around if we could just hang in there — a coping mechanism to get through tough times.

I put my knife through the woman's ear and pulled it free, wiping the blade on her already stained pyjamas. Nobody wanted to admit we were never coming back from this shit, because once you gave up hope, what the hell was left?

Liv and I stripped the bed with the corpse still in it then wrapped her in the sheet. We transferred her outside and lay her beside what I hoped were cherished loved ones rather than her captors.

When we returned to the kitchen, Liv rested her hands on her hips and took a deep whiff of the air. "I can't do it," she said, scrunching up her nose. "I can't take the smell." So, she stripped the sheets in the second bedroom and dumped them in the backyard as well.

We washed our hands and filled a bucket with apples, picking the fruit with the least amount of damage. I left the haul in the kitchen while we took our time securing the house. The lingering smell meant we might need to move to another property before night came, but for now, we could take a minute to reset.

We dumped our backpacks in the kitchen and Liv hoisted herself onto the island bench. She grabbed an apple from the bucket, flicking out a couple of bird-pecked sections with her fingernail. When she crunched into it and chewed, a trail of juice dribbled down her chin. "Wanna bite?" she asked, holding the fruit out to me. Her brows lifted, and the teasing light in her eyes stirred something in me.

I leaned against the doorway as the atmosphere shifted, and I somehow forced myself to smile. My initial impulse was to lick the juice off her chin and take control of her mouth in one smooth move, but I stood my ground and pushed the urge down. "Tempting, carino, but no."

She swallowed the bite and studied me. "You don't need to stay all the way over there. I won't take advantage of you if you come closer."

Shame really. My smile came easier this time around, and I straightened and wandered over to her.

Liv set the half-eaten apple aside and widened the spread of her legs, pulling me between her knees. "Come here," she said. "You're always looking after me. Let me do something for you."

She'd already given me more than I could have hoped for, but I rested my palms either side of her on the bench and waited to see what would happen next. Hopefully, it didn't involve removing items of clothing; there were only so many times I could say no to a woman who appealed to me on every level.

Her hands came up to frame my face, her fingers sinking into the hair at my temples. I should have washed it in the river this morning while I was shampooing hers, but she didn't seem to care about it being clean. Liv massaged my scalp with slow, deep circles, taking her time and covering every inch. I sighed and closed my eyes, letting her take care of me. "That feels good," I told her, on the verge of groaning.

She didn't say a word, just continued the massage with relaxed strokes, covering the base of my skull, my temples— that part pulled a groan from me—and the top of my head. Her fingers moved through my hair, her thumbs applying deeper pressure here and there. "You're a good man, Cruz."

I released a heavy breath as all the pressure of the past few days left me. I didn't need anyone's approval, but I couldn't deny hearing it from a person I admired loosened something inside of me. I slipped my arms around her and dipped my thumbs under the hem of her t-shirt, searching out bare skin.

"I didn't think there were people like you left anymore," she continued, her voice hypnotic. "But there you were when I needed you the most."

I kept quiet as she spoke, soaking up her closeness, her touch. Feeling more like myself than I had in a long time.

She pressed her thumbs into the base of my neck and encouraged a heavy breath from me. "It's an unexpected bonus that you have pretty eyes and a gorgeous body."

I huffed out a laugh and wondered why it had never been this easy to be with someone before Ultimus took over. "No one's ever told me I have pretty eyes."

She combed her fingers through my hair and lifted my head, sweeping her fingertips across my brow, down my temples, memorising my features with her touch. When we weren't fighting to stay alive, she was so soft and real that a surge of emotion rolled through me. Our eyes met, and a smile tilted one side of her mouth. "Maybe you just never slowed down enough to let anyone see you."

Her words hit home, too insightful, too close to the truth. I kept my gaze on hers and let the silence hover instead of looking away or cracking a joke. The quiet brought me closer to her and strengthened our connection, and when I opened my mouth to tell her just that, a banging sound came from the rear of the house.

"Hello?" a female voice called out. "Hello, are you in there?"

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:54 am

Cruz

My body snapped to attention, taut and ready. My gaze flicked to the door then back to Liv.

All the tenderness between us disappeared, and I palmed the side of her face. “Stay here,” I said, pulling the knife from my belt.

She jumped down from her seat on the bench, her eyes flashing at me. “And where are you going?”

"Outside." We didn't have time to discuss who'd fill which roles in this scenario, and someone needed to take charge. I'd spent years dealing with these challenges before the virus made it onto anyone's radar; I knew how fast they could turn. If the woman was putting on a friendly front to lure us outside, I wanted Liv as far away from danger as possible.

“Stand at the back door—don't open it—and get her talking while I go around the front. It sounds like she's on the other side of the gate, so I'll come up behind her and find out if she's alone.”

Liv opened her mouth as if to argue, then glanced at the rear door. She took mere seconds to think it over. “I'll lock up after you, just in case.”

"If it turns bad, leave through the front door and run." I gave her the key fob as the adrenaline kicked in. "When it's safe, come back for the car and get out of town, querida."

"Yeah, okay." Liv rolled her eyes. "Let's pretend I'm going to do that."

I smiled despite the seriousness of the situation. "It was worth a try." Rather than argue the point, I went into the lounge room and checked the front windows. Detecting no movement in the yard or on the street, I opened the door and stepped out onto the porch, knowing I could be heading into an ambush situation. Outnumbered and overpowered—without a gun this time to defend myself.

"Be careful, Cruz."

I glanced over my shoulder and locked eyes with her. "I'll see you soon."

I waited until the lock engaged behind me and crept down the concrete path toward the corner of the house. All the while I scanned my surroundings, searching for telltale signs that people were hiding nearby, listening for sounds that carried on the breeze.

Nothing had changed since we arrived, but I remembered feeling this same sense of isolation down at the waterfall, and that had still turned to shit fast.

As I rounded the corner and approached the carport, my gaze landed on a woman who appeared to be in her early forties; short, with a strong, stocky body and loose, dark curls that brushed her shoulders. She was speaking through the side gate to Liv, who I hoped had stayed inside the house.

A young guy who looked to be somewhere around twenty stood beside her, tall and lean, with shaggy hair the same shade of brown. They both wore flannel shirts, with jeans and work boots. Neither of them carried backpacks.

"Can we talk to you?" she called out, with no idea I was close by. They weren't holding weapons, but the bulkiness under their shirts told me they had to be packing

knives or hammers. Knowing they didn't want to appear threatening created a good first impression, and my tension eased off a bit.

I checked over my shoulder to make sure no one was closing in on me from behind, then focused on the woman and kid again, ready to make a move.

"I'm waiting for my partner," Liv said from inside the house. "When he gets here, we can talk."

"When will he be back?" the woman asked, standing on her tiptoes as if that would help her see over the gate. "Where is he?"

"Right here." I braced myself as they spun around to face me.

The woman had olive skin, with a recent burn scar that travelled from her temple to her collarbone. When she spotted the Bowie knife in my hand, her eyes shifted quickly from me to the car, then back to the gate.

She had a jittery way about her, but she stood stock still with her male companion. Neither of them reached for their weapons, telling me more about their intentions than any words would have achieved. "We don't want to start anything," she said in a rush. "We're not trying to trick you or take anything from you."

"What do you want?" I asked. The back door creaked, and my stomach tensed as Liv's footsteps approached the side fence. She stayed behind the gate, stopping far enough back that I couldn't even see the top of her head from where I stood.

"Information." The young guy spoke for the first time, and my gaze travelled over him again. He had the look of someone with a foot in both worlds—the voice and height of a man and the lankiness of a teenager. His brown eyes stayed on mine to give the impression of confidence, but the way his jaw clenched told me it was

mostly for show.

“We don't want any trouble,” the woman said. “We just want to find out where you’re from, where you’re going. How you got a car.”

“Names first,” I said.

“Dawn Moretti,” she said. “This is my son, Jonah. My husband, Carlo—Jonah’s dad—was attacked by a freak two months ago. Now it's just the two of us.”

I pushed down the sympathy that rushed to the surface over their recent loss. “Freak?”

“The dead people,” Dawn said. “Freaks of nature.”

Liv opened the gate with her sword by her side, sweeping her gaze over Dawn and Jonah. “Stand back for a second,” she said, her features impassive.

When he first caught sight of her, Jonah's eyes widened, and he seemed to forget the rest of us were here. I knew exactly what he was thinking, because my reaction to her had been the same. I eyed him off as he took a couple of steps away from Liv, making sure he kept his distance from her and the car.

She strode past mother and son, oblivious to his attention, straight by me with a sidelong glance, then headed for the street where she took a minute to perform a thorough sweep. With my senses tuned into her movements behind me, I monitored the two of them, but no one moved or said a word.

When she returned, apparently satisfied we were alone, Liv lifted her brows. “Should we invite them in for a chat?”

Meeting new people could have gone either way for her today. We'd had shitty luck until now, and I wouldn't have blamed her if she wanted to play it safe, stay out of sight, and leave me to deal with strangers. Seeing her take charge without showing an ounce of fear made me want to drag her close and tell her I was proud of her. Instead, I gave her a subtle smile and gestured for Dawn and Jonah to follow us inside.

Liv stowed her sword, and we pulled out wooden high-backed chairs at the dining table. I sat opposite her while the newcomers took either end. Dawn exchanged furtive glances with both of us as we settled into our seats.

"This is Liv," I said, sliding my knife back into its home. "I'm Cruz. Let's start with the basics. How did you know we were here?"

"The car." Dawn rested her hands on the table and picked at the already irritated skin around her thumbnail. "We haven't seen or heard a moving one in about a year."

"You passed right by our place," Jonah added, "so we came outside and followed you."

Liv sent me a look that spoke volumes before switching her attention to Dawn. "Where do you live?"

"Four houses down on the opposite side of the road."

"Was it yours before Ultimus?" I kept a close eye on their body language. Both of them displayed a healthy level of nerves, and nothing they'd said or done so far was cause for concern.

"No. We moved in there when everything took a turn." Dawn tucked her dark curls behind her ear, her gaze shifting from Liv to me. "We used to have a pizza business on the main street," she said. "You would have passed it on the way here. The three

of us lived above the shop, but the rioters and looters went crazy in the beginning and set the building on fire—while we were in it. Our cars, too. It's all gone.”

"What did you do before the virus?" Jonah asked, his tone letting us know we weren't the only ones deciding if we were around trustworthy people.

"Cop." Liv aimed her thumb in my direction, then pointed to herself. "Executive assistant. What made you choose the place you're living in now?" She rested her elbows on the table and clasped her hands in front of her, appearing confident and relaxed. Whether she was feeling it didn't matter. It was all about the facade until we were more familiar with them.

"I knew the lady who used to live there," Dawn said. "Mrs. Mackley. She was a widow for over twenty years and paranoid about security. Roller shutters on every window. High steel gate at the side. She had a vegetable garden in her backyard, too. Not one of those hobby gardens the average person has— had . It was a small commercial one with fruit trees and a solar watering system." She paused and took a breath, on the verge of nervous rambling. "She supplied all the produce for our organic pizzas, and when everything went south, Carlo, Jonah, and I turned up on her doorstep to ask if we could use her spare bedrooms.”

“She'd already died, though,” Jonah cut in, slouching in his chair. “Looked like she'd been dead for weeks.”

Dawn sent him an admonishing look for his careless delivery, but he was a young guy who'd been through a slew of shit, so I figured we could cut him some slack. “From the virus?” I asked.

“Looked like it,” she said. “Jonah had to break into the house beside hers and climb the fence to get in there. He found her in the bedroom with the door closed. We think she was one of the first ones to die without being bitten and start... wandering around

again, you know.”

At the mention of dying in bed alone, Liv’s eyes met mine, and I knew her thoughts had drifted to Haruto. I would have reached across the table to take her hand if we hadn’t been in the middle of a conversation with strangers.

“So, we buried her out the front near her prized rose bushes, and the three of us took over her place,” Dawn continued. “We’ve been there ever since, living a vegan lifestyle thanks to her hard work and ours.”

“Against my will,” Jonah added, looking every bit the sullen kid.

“Because you hate being vegan or you don’t want to stay in Wallin anymore?” Liv asked.

His gaze moved over her, dropping from her face to her breasts. It lingered there a beat too long, returning to her eyes just before I gave into the urge to drag him across the table. “Both. Being vegan sucks, but being stuck here with no girls around is even worse.”

"Are you cooking the food?" Liv glossed over Jonah's comment and gave her attention to Dawn.

Dawn had been watching her son’s display just now, and she frowned as her gaze shifted to Liv. "We haven't for a long time. We tried using the wood-fired barbecue out the back, but the second people see the smoke and smell the food—"

"You're fucked," Jonah finished.

Dawn blew out a slow breath, but she must have decided to pick her battles because she didn’t call him out for his language. "We've been keeping to ourselves as much as

we can to avoid trouble, especially since Carlo's been gone."

"So, why did you come to see us?" I asked. "You have food, a place to stay. What else do you need?"

She pressed her lips together and glanced at Jonah. "Company. A car. This isn't a long-term solution," she said, picking at the skin around her thumb until a drop of blood appeared. "We want to be part of a group, and Jonah needs to be around men and other people his own age. I can't make the life for him I wanted when he was little, but I know it can be better than what we have now." She pressed her index finger to the broken skin, wincing as she held it there.

I understood her desperation for more, the push to find answers to the lost feeling we'd all been left with after the world disintegrated. Liv and I had both abandoned our homes in search of it, and we had no idea what was waiting for us when we reached Bridgehill—if we ever got there.

"We're not staying here long term," Liv explained, giving nothing away in her expression. "We're just taking a break overnight before we head off again tomorrow."

Jonah frowned. "Where are you going?"

"The east coast," I said. "There's a house we know of that looks like it might be a permanent solution."

Dawn shifted in her seat and looked at Jonah again. A silent conversation passed between them, and when Jonah shrugged, Dawn appealed to Liv and me, her eyes filled with restrained hope. "Will you take us with you? We have supplies, food, water. We're practical and good with our hands. Jonah can handle the freaks, so we wouldn't be a burden at all."

“Mum.” He sighed and rubbed his hands down his face. “Chill.”

“I can’t chill,” she said, her voice strained. “I want to chill. That’s the whole point. We need people around us to take some of the pressure off—for all of us. I don’t want to just keep... getting by doing this by ourselves.”

She had the same mindset as us, wanting to build a community where everyone could feel safe, to have a purpose in life other than struggling from one day to the next. Her son remained the only questionable part of this scenario. Was he young enough to mould into the kind of man we needed on our team, or had he been too messed up by all the shit he’d seen during his developmental years to turn him around? If there was even the slightest chance of him overstepping the line with Liv and making her feel unsafe, I didn’t want either of them with us.

“You said Jonah can take care of the freaks,” I pointed out. “Does that mean you don’t?”

Dawn picked at her thumb again until I wanted to clasp her hand to stop her from doing more damage. “Not anymore. This is the first time I’ve left home since Carlo died.”

I nodded in understanding. Her husband’s death had turned her into a borderline agoraphobe, but if she could still cross the street and talk to a couple of strangers, she hadn’t reached the point of no return.

“I kill any that hang around outside our place,” Jonah explained. “Otherwise, we just leave them alone.”

Which meant they weren’t making trips into town to scavenge or dealing with unpredictable situations that required fast thinking and reaction times. They both needed training out in the real world before we could trust either of them to watch our

backs, and we'd be throwing them into the worst of it when we left tomorrow.

"Why don't you show us your place, and we can talk some more over there," Liv suggested, pushing back from the table to stand. I had a feeling she wanted to scope out their living situation to find out what kind of people they were at home.

She slipped her knife from its sheath on her belt, and the movement lifted the hem of her t-shirt to reveal a wedge of bare skin on her stomach. Jonah's eyes went directly to that spot, hovering, and when she turned to walk away from the table, the little shit lowered his attention to her ass, so caught up in checking her out that he was oblivious to anything else.

Reading a situation these days wasn't always as straightforward as it used to be. This could be nothing more than a harmless, hormonal guy deprived of the usual experiences someone his age enjoyed. Social media, flirting, kissing, not to mention porn. He hadn't been around women other than his mother in a long time. Liv just happened to be the first one to step into his life—and she was young and pretty at that. I couldn't blame him for noticing, but I wouldn't tolerate the disrespectful way he kept looking at her.

"Stop it," Dawn whispered, smacking his arm as she slid her chair back to join Liv.

Jonah snapped out of it and sent a fleeting glance my way, his features tense with concern.

Too bad. Too late.

The two of us stood to join the women. Before he could walk away, I gripped a handful of his shirt and shoved him up against the nearest wall. He made a surprised oof sound as his back flattened against the surface, and I glared at him dead in the eye to make sure I had his full attention. "The way you're looking at Liv, it stops now."

His eyes went wide, and he struggled against my hold. “I wasn’t—”

“You were.” I pulled him away from the wall and pushed him back against it, giving it some extra zing so he wouldn’t forget our conversation. “If I catch you doing it again, any chance of the two of you coming with us disappears.”

Neither of us moved, and I kept up the stare, daring him to challenge me. If I had my way, I wouldn’t need to tell fellow adults how to behave at all, but when it came to our safety, the rules had to be crystal clear so no one could claim they’d misunderstood.

The room fell silent, and the lack of protest from Dawn said everything.

Jonah could have put up a fight or used this as an excuse to play the victim, but he must have understood the gravity of the situation, because he did neither. The heavy atmosphere gradually lifted, the pressure easing. He looked at me a beat longer, then relaxed and nodded. “Okay.” He lifted his hands in surrender, making sure he didn’t look in the direction of Liv or his mother.

“You don’t get repeated warnings,” I told him. “You’re old enough to learn some fucking self-control. Do it again, and we’re done.”

Jonah nodded and pulled in an audible breath. “I get it, okay?” When his body went slack against the wall, I released him and stood firm to see how he’d handle his freedom. “I’m sorry.” He chanced a look at Liv, but his attention didn’t stay on her for long. “I haven’t seen a girl in forever. I didn’t mean to stare.”

Liv gave him an assessing look. “Lucky you. I was about to introduce you to my tant? and teach you some manners.” When she followed up with a vague smile, I knew we were good.

Jonah didn't know her well enough to understand whether to laugh or take her seriously, so he went with the wiser option of keeping his mouth shut. He sidled past me and gave Liv a wide berth as he met up with his mother at the door.

Dawn delivered an admonishing look and a gentle shove to move him along. She unlocked the front door and passed through with him, leaving it open for Liv and me.

We grabbed our backpacks and followed the two of them, not bothering to lock up since there was nothing of value here. Leaving our car in the driveway, Liv and I travelled the short distance on foot, keeping several steps behind mother and son.

She bumped her shoulder against mine, gazing up at me with an amused look. "Was that necessary? I can look after myself, you know."

"I'm well aware," I said, scanning each house as we passed by, "but sometimes I want to look after you, too."

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Liv

The garden was just as impressive as Dawn had described.

The house itself had been built back when developers weren't overpopulating new estates with postage-stamp size blocks, and it left ample room for growing food. Raised garden beds were ripe with vegetables and herbs, and nets had been draped over the trees to protect the fruit from birds. There were apples, oranges, grapefruits—and a vine meandered along the back fence, heavy with bunches and bunches of green grapes.

Dawn must have spent most of her time out here pruning and tending the garden, and I couldn't help feeling a little envious of the life she'd built here for herself and Jonah. If we could recreate this magic in Bridgehill, it would be the perfect end to what had already been a more dangerous ride than I'd expected.

Dawn caught me eyeballing the produce and smiled. "If you're hungry, help yourself to whatever you want."

"You just made my day." I wanted to crunch into a cucumber, rub mint leaves between my fingers and soak up the scent, gorge myself on fruit until I couldn't take another bite. Once I got started, it could easily turn into a frenzy. I'd missed fresh food.

I dropped my backpack and wandered along the pathway that split the garden in half, while Cruz hung back to talk to Dawn and Jonah.

As I approached the back fence, I kept my fingers crossed that he'd warm up to Jonah after a rocky start. Dawn was the sort of person I would have spent time with pre-Ultimus, and they were the first decent people either of us had met since we'd been travelling together. It would be a waste to throw that away.

I plucked a bunch of grapes from the vine and popped one in my mouth, savouring the tart-sweet combo as it exploded on my tongue. With the abundance of food and the warmth of the sun on my face, peace spread through me, along with a level of optimism I hadn't experienced in a while.

I dropped another grape in my mouth and turned as I crunched.

Cruz was standing with his feet shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed over his chest, keeping watch on me as he spoke with Dawn. When our eyes met, a slight smile tilted his lips, and my heart thudded faster.

Just a miniscule change in his expression could have excitement moving through me, and I wondered if it was normal to feel this strongly about someone so new to me. Even with other people nearby, he could still look at me in a way that felt private, like we were the only two here.

Jonah stood near his mother, listening to the conversation. His eyes swung in my direction, then paused for a split second before moving away in search of safer ground. I smiled and headed back to them, taking my time, so I could enjoy the garden some more. I'd have to break the ice with him soon and remove the awkwardness, so this new little group of ours could thrive.

We'd waited long enough to start this second phase of our lives.

Cruz and I sat on a wooden bench that gave us an unobstructed view of the house and the backyard. Dawn and Jonah had gone inside so we could talk in private and decide

whether to take them with us.

“Hit me with it,” he said, angling his body toward mine. “What are you thinking?”

Dawn stood at the kitchen window trying to appear busy, but she kept sneaking glances to gauge which way we were leaning. I couldn't blame her; I'd be doing the same thing in her position.

I propped my elbow on the backrest and faced Cruz. “I'm thinking she has some serious skills. I know someone else created the garden, but you need to know what you're doing to keep it looking this good. Dawn's green thumb could be just as important to our group as someone's mechanical skills or their ability to fight.”

He nodded and swept his gaze over the garden, taking in the rows of vegetables, the trees, and the solar watering system fed by the tank. There was enough food here to keep a small group alive for an extended period, and when I imagined what we could achieve with more land and pairs of hands to do the work, the yearning inside me grew. I wanted this so much it had become an ache.

Cruz clasped my knee, rubbing his thumb back and forth. We shared the same view on finding good people; the challenge was convincing him these were the good people we needed.

"You're right," he said.

“But?”

He gave me a distracted smile. “The damage she did to her thumb while we were sitting at the table... that was just from crossing the road and talking to strangers. I can't see her handling the situations we've dealt with on the road. She could panic and freeze and unintentionally put us all in danger.” He paused for a moment, then

added, "And I'm still on the fence about the kid. I need to put him through some tests to find out more about him."

I pressed my lips together and glanced at the house. No sign of Dawn in the window.

I'd noticed her picking away at her thumb while we got to know one another, but to me that was a normal reaction to a situation where she'd put herself and her son at risk. He was her last remaining loved one. We were the unknowns in their world. I would have found it more off-putting if she'd breezed in full of confidence and behaved like she had nothing to worry about.

And Jonah. Since the world had gone dark, I'd seen enough bad men in action to recognise them on sight. They had a way of walking and talking, the look in their eye, their lack of care about how they were perceived. Maybe I was being naive or purposely ignoring red flags, but I didn't get that impression from him. There were no shivers of unease or compulsions to keep an eye on him in case he made a wrong move. He seemed like a normal young guy to me—considering our circumstances.

"I don't feel unsafe around him," I said, "and even if Dawn's not up to killing the infected or defending us against other people, we can keep her out of harm's way while we're travelling. All we need to do is get her to Bridgehill safely, and she can do her best work there."

Rather than point out that I'd basically just described her as a short-term burden we'd all have to bear, Cruz gazed at me in silence, his dark eyes softening as he took in my features. "What did you call me yesterday?"

I bit back a smile as my cheeks warmed under his appraisal. I had a feeling he was referring to the moment we shared while we were running for our lives—when he confessed to wanting to get me out of there and somewhere safe. Our connection sent my heart rate skyrocketing at the time, and it still had the same effect now. "A giant

ball of smooosh? Is that what you mean?"

"That's the one."

It floored me that he could make me feel so completely at ease one minute, then switch the mood up and leave me flustered and awkward the next. "Are you saying I'm a softie, or that I can talk you into letting them join us because you're a softie?"

"Both, I think." He squeezed my knee. "Let's just commit to adding the two of them, and we'll work out the rest later."

Elation sped through me, and I suddenly wanted to cheer.

Cruz didn't have the same perspective I did regarding his impact on other people; he was the type of man who'd influence Jonah in positive ways without even trying. I wouldn't risk my safety or anyone else's by being around someone that concerned me, and Jonah had already responded well to Cruz pulling him into line.

"One condition, though," he added. "We find another car and get it running for them. They travel with us, but separately. If anything happens to cause concern for you or me, we cut them loose."

Reasonable. Smart, too—and it gave us a backup vehicle if anything happened to ours. "I can work with that. So... we have a plan?"

"A starting point." His gaze dropped to my lips for a moment, and a slight smile tilted the edges of his mouth. When his eyes rose to mine again, his humour disappeared. "But I need you to understand one thing. You and me, we're the team. I'll do whatever I can to help them get to where we're going, but if I ever need to choose between you and them, there is no choice. It's always you, querida . Don't ask me to put anyone else first."

My stomach filled with butterflies. His intensity, the way those dark eyes of his stared directly into mine, had my heart feeling like it might beat straight through my chest.

I'd never experienced the security of belonging to someone in a romantic sense, and of him belonging to me. It was new and overwhelming and the best thing that had happened to me in a long, long time.

I nodded because I couldn't seem to find the right words, feeling more positive about the future today than I had for a single week since this whole mess started.

When we went inside to share the news that we wanted them to tag along, Dawn was so thrilled that she looked like she might cry, while Jonah appeared conflicted. I assumed the thought of skipping town and taking on new experiences excited him, but spending all his time around big, bad, intimidating Cruz... not so much.

He'd been stealing glances at Cruz as if trying to figure him out, so I hoped we could eliminate those concerns before morning.

The four of us spent several hours learning more about one another and sampling the food Dawn had grown in their backyard. She took me outside again and divulged some tips and tricks on getting the best out of the garden while Cruz spoke to Jonah about fighting and defence.

I showed them the article I'd torn from the home design magazine, and as they perused the photos and descriptions, a buzz of excitement surrounded us. By the time evening rolled around, it felt like we'd known Dawn and Jonah for days rather than hours.

As the light faded, she lit the candles she'd left around the lounge room, and we prepared ourselves to spend another night in a strange place.

"We have a spare room all clean and ready to go," she said. "If you want to bring your car over, you can settle in before it gets dark."

"Great, thanks." I struggled to keep a lid on my enthusiasm. A clean room in a safe house that didn't smell like the dead sounded like heaven. We could get some proper sleep for the first time since leaving my apartment.

"Do you know if Mrs. Mackley left a car in the garage?" Cruz asked. "We'll need another one for the trip."

Jonah shook his head. "She didn't drive. There's a house down the street we can try, though. We could check it out in the morning if you want."

Perfect. Cruz had mentioned wanting to test Jonah. He shared a fleeting glance with me, then returned his attention to Jonah. "Why don't we take a look now while Liv stays here with your mum?"

Jonah's eyes lit up before he quickly schooled his expression and nodded in a more detached manner. "Sure."

I knew this needed to be done to put Cruz's mind at ease, but my body still tensed at the thought of losing sight of him. It would be dark soon, and we'd spent almost every minute together since our separation in Melbourne. Now we were in a strange house in a new location with people we'd just met. Not my preferred way to end the day, but sometimes making progress meant being uncomfortable.

While Dawn lectured Jonah on following instructions and paying attention, Cruz approached me and lowered his head along with his voice, ensuring his words stayed between the two of us. "Will you be okay here with Dawn?"

It shouldn't have surprised me to know he could read me so accurately, but his

watchfulness still threw me sometimes. I unclenched my fingers and looked up at him with a smile. "I think I can live without you for a little bit."

He cupped my chin, sweeping his thumb across my jaw. "Are you sure? Because it looks like you're already missing me, and I haven't even walked out the door."

I bit my lip to hide a smile and gave his abs a push. "I will miss you, but yes, I'm sure. Get out of here."

While Jonah moved around behind us and organised his weapons, Cruz slid his hand around the back of my neck and gave a gentle squeeze. His touch had goosebumps scattering across my skin, and I leaned into him to soak up his nearness.

"Don't be long," I said, trying my hardest to keep the pleading tone from my voice.

"Back in an hour, tops." His eyes dropped to my lips as if he wanted to kiss me, but he held back. "We'll be just down the street. Scream if you need me."

I smiled at his teasing tone. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"How long have you and Cruz been together?" Dawn asked.

We were sitting side by side on Mrs. Mackley's floral couch, sipping room temperature orange juice. It was a little sour to the taste, but Dawn had squeezed it fresh, and it was a welcome change from plain water.

She kept the roller shutters in the lounge room permanently closed, and the lit candles on the coffee table and mantle created a subtle glow in the darkness. Every fabric from the curtains to the cushions on the couch had varying patterns. Flowers, checks, stripes. The mismatched decor should have clashed and looked hideous, but it gave the house a quirky warmth.

“Oh, we’re not... I don't know if we're together ,” I said, delaying the inevitable. When I told her the truth, she’d think I’d lost my mind—or maybe she wouldn’t. Dead people were walking the streets nowadays, so stranger things had happened.

She gave me a smile and finished the rest of her juice, leaning forward to slide the glass onto the mosaic coffee table. “He looks pretty taken with you.”

The mention of Cruz made my heart patter and my stomach turn queasy, like a teenage crush and the beginnings of something more rolled into one. “This is going to make me sound crazy, but we’ve known each for less than a week.” I held my breath and waited for her to look at me like I had a few screws loose.

She didn’t. Her mouth merely lifted at the edges. “I remember what that’s like, the early days when all those feelings run rampant. The slightest look or touch sets off all your nerve endings. It's exhausting and exhilarating.”

It sounded like she’d been through the same thing with her husband, which would have made the reality of living without him that much harder. “That about describes it.”

Dawn pulled a cushion onto her lap and played with the fringed edge. “Ever notice how time changed after the pandemic swept through? Spending hours with someone now might as well be months, and losing them days ago can feel like weeks. It’s hard to explain or understand, but it feels different.”

I nodded, thinking about how we’d laid Haruto to rest just a couple of days ago. I’d already adjusted to life without him, and it made me feel guilty about moving on and glad I didn’t have the grief of his loss weighing me down. “I get it. I already feel like I’ve known you for days,” I said, “and I’m happy you came over to see us.”

Dawn lifted her hand as if she planned on torturing her thumb again, but she seemed

to think better of it and clasped the cushion instead. "I didn't really have a choice."

I frowned. "How do you mean?"

She tugged a single piece of gold fringe from the cushion and balled it between her forefinger and thumb, watching the movement. "I'm not handling this very well."

Confused, I glanced at her hands, then her face, unable to decipher her mood. "Handling what, exactly?"

When she looked up again, her features were clouded with worry. "All of it. Carlo adapted to the new ways faster than Jonah and I did, almost as if he was born for it. It wasn't like he enjoyed it; he could just ignore the noise, make quick decisions, and push through when other people were falling apart. He took care of everything."

I understood her husband's ways because they were so much like Cruz's, but she'd been married to Carlo for years and had an entire lifetime with him before the pandemic to grieve and miss. "How did he die?"

"I ran out of my anxiety medication—but I told him I wanted to try living without it because I knew I was going to have to eventually," she said. "Carlo hated seeing me struggle, so he went out with Jonah while I was still asleep to find more." She pushed her hair back from her face and dropped her hand in her lap. "Jonah said they were trapped in the pharmacy surrounded by freaks, and Carlo being Carlo, threw himself into the fray to clear a path for his son."

I closed my eyes for a moment. "He was bitten," I said, opening them again.

Dawn pursed her lips and nodded. "Multiple times, but he made it back home with Jonah and hung in there until the next morning."

No wonder she'd stopped going out and preferred to spend her time in the garden. "The last couple of months have been tough for you."

She blew out a breath, on the verge of tears. "Years really, not months. I'm trying to be strong for Jonah, but I'm not sure I can keep it up on my own, and I don't want to let him down."

The sadness in her eyes broke my heart. "I can't imagine your son ever looking at you and thinking you've disappointed him. You're a good mum. No matter how old he gets, he's still going to need you. "

Dawn smiled her appreciation.

I wouldn't make light of a condition that required medication, but there were steps she could take to address the feeling of helplessness. "Try to take it easier on yourself," I said. "Acknowledge what you do well and keep practicing the areas you think need work. If the freaks scare you, we'll go out every day and run drills together. If you're frightened of other people hurting you, I'll teach you how to throw a knife and take them down. I'm happy to work with you for as long as you need to build your confidence. It just takes consistent work, that's all."

A soft knock came at the front door.

Dawn frowned and got up from her seat. "Must have forgotten something," she said. "Either that, or Jonah had enough of Cruz and ran away."

They'd already been gone for fifteen minutes, and when they were done, they were supposed to come around the back and use the key to get inside. It wasn't out of the question that Jonah might forget the plan and go to the wrong door, but Cruz didn't make those mistakes. As Dawn approached the door, I automatically looked to the window, forgetting the roller shutters were down.

“Dawn, wait.” I slid my glass beside hers on the coffee table and jumped up to go after her. “Don’t do anything. Wait a minute .”

She’d already opened the main door and unlocked the security door, but it was too dark to see who was standing out there on the porch. “What did you forget?” she asked with a smile, her fingers resting on the handle.

It all happened in a matter of seconds.

Noise, violence, confusion.

A tattooed blonde man, tall and rangy, wrenched the door from her hand and shoved her backward with his forearm braced against her chest.

Shit, shit, shit.

I pulled the knife from my belt as adrenaline flooded my body. Dawn stumbled and looked at me for guidance. “Go into the lounge room,” I said, keeping my eyes on the threat.

He stepped into the shadowed entry hall with his accomplice close behind him, a hollow-cheeked woman with red hair and pale skin. The door banged shut and rattled the steel frame.

“Nah,” he said, grabbing the front of Dawn’s shirt, “she can stay here.”

Neither of them held weapons, and the arrogance of thinking they could walk in here and intimidate us without them pushed all my buttons.

Dawn’s fear got the better of her, and she babbled a string of nonsensical words, holding up her hands in surrender instead of yanking her knife out and poking holes

in him.

“On second thought...” He let her go and punched the side of her face to silence her. She went down hard and landed in an awkward position on her side. The quiet that rushed in afterwards felt louder somehow, leaving me more alone than ever.

Oh, God. This was bad . The sight of her lying unconscious on the floor sent terror racing through me, and my heart hammered as his attention landed on me. They must have been watching and waiting for half our group to leave before they made their move. I spared Dawn a concerned look, but I'd have to worry about her later.

Before either of them could get their hands on me, I channelled every bit of rage I'd ever felt, pulling it from deep, deep down. Anger, disappointment, frustration. It rose within me in a powerful wave, rushing to the surface, desperate to be released.

When I could hold it in no longer, I stared at the intruders, opened my mouth, and let out a long, loud, throat-tearing scream, just as Cruz had suggested. It carried through the screen door and out into the evening—and with no other noises around to dilute the sound, I just knew it would reach Cruz and Jonah.

"Jesus Christ, you're fucking mouthy bitches!" the man yelled, storming toward me.

I turned and raced into the lounge room to lead them away from Dawn, silently pleading for her to be okay. With no one else to rely on, I needed to keep a clear head and make this work. If these motherfuckers wanted to take me down, I'd try my best to inflict fatal wounds on both of them during the process.

Knife in hand, I whipped around to face them. With an indrawn breath, I threw my blade at the closest target—the woman—and embedded my knife just below her left shoulder joint. I was aiming for her heart, but to hit her anywhere under pressure was a win.

Her features contorted in pain, and she howled as she ripped the knife free. Good . Even more noise to alert Cruz and Jonah. With a hammering heart, my eyes bounced from her to her accomplice. I desperately needed to check on Dawn, but I couldn't risk the distraction. As the woman pointed the knife at me with her good arm, I drew my sword, hoping I had enough room to swing it with deadly force.

Blood flooded the sleeve of her t-shirt and ran down to her wrist in a slow trickle, but she was too caught up in the chaos to care. She flung my knife back at me, and the man rushed me at the same time.

Her aim was clumsy and ineffective, but the blade flew close enough that I had to sidestep to dodge the pointy end. I stumbled over a table but kept my footing as I avoided the lamp that clattered to the carpet. In the split second it took me to scan the floor and make sure no other obstacles were in my way, the man wrapped his arms around me and took me down in a running tackle.

My sword flew from my hand. I hit the floor with a hard thud, my shoulder taking the brunt of the impact. My head smacked the corner of the couch, and a harsh breath left me. I waited for the pain to come, to find out if I'd done serious damage that would change the outcome tonight, but nothing hurt enough to think the fall would stop me from fighting.

I was okay.

I didn't have my weapons, but I had my wits, my strength—and in minutes at most, I'd have Cruz and Jonah.

With that thought in mind, I brought my elbow back and slammed it straight into the man's temple.

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Cruz

“This was Carter Lawson’s house,” Jonah said, pointing to a place five doors down from Mrs. Mackley’s. Yellow brick, solid, with a narrow driveway and a separate garage set further back. The tree out the front needed pruning, its branches scraping the gutter and dropping leaves into the knee-high grass.

I pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. “How did you know him?”

Jonah opened the passenger door and stepped out. “He was my best friend from kindergarten. We were friends all the way through... until Ultimus hit.”

Shit. He’d grown up with the guy. I could only imagine how many friends someone of his age would have lost. “What happened to him?” I asked, climbing out and meeting his eyes over the roof of the car.

“The usual.”

We’d left our backpacks at Dawn’s since we weren’t far from there, so I locked the car and walked without the bulk weighing me down. The sun was sliding closer to the horizon, and I surveyed our surroundings as we headed for the garage. It wouldn’t be long before the shadows turned to full darkness, making the corpses harder to spot. We needed to wrap this up fast and get settled in for the night.

“The virus spread around school before they shut it down,” Jonah said, grabbing the roller door handle. He tried to lift it, but it was locked. “He passed it onto his sisters and parents, and the whole family died during the first wave.”

“And no one’s lived here since?”

"Not as far as I know. They died when people were still being taken away and buried, so it should be empty.”

With my knife in hand, I walked through to the backyard. It was just a collection of weeds with an old trampoline and a rusted swing set in the centre. When the breeze picked up and swirled through the space, the swing launched into motion, and a lonely creaking sound drifted toward us.

I bounded up the two steps to the back door and tried the handle. Locked again—and with no glass panel to crack.

“Wait. There's a spare key.” Jonah’s gaze swept over the weed filled garden beds either side of the steps, and latched onto a small rock wedged between two bigger ones. He flipped it over and snagged the key from the hidden compartment, passing it to me.

As I opened the door, I threw a glance his way. “You might think there’s no one in here, but assume this place is filled with freaks. Waiting around corners, hiding in shadows. Don’t go into any space thinking you’re safe. Watch my back, and I’ll watch yours.”

He gave me a quick nod as if he’d heard the same spiel from his parents, but it bore repeating.

I took in the way he was clutching his knife, and before we went inside, I grabbed his wrist. “Hold it like this,” I said, changing his grip from underhand to overhand. “It frees you up to attack anything in the front, behind, and to the side with the same hold—and it’s harder for someone to take it off you.”

He tried it out, keeping the knife a safe distance from me. “I get it. Thanks. Makes more sense that way.”

“Better get moving. We’re running out of daylight. Eyes open.”

He nodded again, surer of himself this time, and followed me inside.

I stepped into the laundry and waited for him to join me. Jonah locked the door without being asked and paused for further instruction. “We’re just looking for keys to the garage and car,” I said, walking through to a spacious kitchen that looked like it might have been renovated not long before the pandemic. “Don’t worry about anything else for now. We’ll do some scavenging tomorrow before we leave.”

Jonah followed me, keeping his voice low. “When I used to come here, they had one of those key holders on the wall near the front door.”

I passed through the lounge room into a hallway that went in both directions. One end presumably led to the bedrooms and bathroom, and the other took us to the main entrance. There were no signs of corpses—freaks—and no sounds other than our own footsteps. The place smelled stale and unoccupied.

And there, on the wall where Jonah had said it would be, was the key holder filled with several sets of keys. “You want to check those, and I’ll give the house a quick sweep?”

“Sure.” Jonah sifted through the keyrings while I took off to clear each room and make sure there were no surprises. When I rejoined him, he was examining the bulkiest bunch. “Found the key for the car,” he said, holding up the ring with the fob attached. “They only had one car. An SUV. Carter’s dad was a cycling nut, so he rode his bike everywhere. I’m guessing the key for the garage would be on this one, too.”

“Good. We need to get moving before the daylight’s gone.”

Jonah tossed me the keys, and we stepped up the pace as we headed back outside. Night set in earlier this time of year, and he kept watch as I bent over the roller door and tried one key after another. With no cars, streetlights, or sounds that humans made during normal daily life, the atmosphere always took on an eerie feeling when daylight faded.

So, when a scream split the air, the hairs on my arms rose and every muscle in my body tensed.

I’d never heard Liv scream before, and I instantly knew it was her. I was half-joking when I suggested it was the best way to get in touch with me while we were gone, but it turned out to be an effective method. She’d used her voice like an alarm. Deliberate, loud, steady, and clear as fucking day.

When it stopped dead, my adrenaline kicked in full force.

“Mum and Liv.” Jonah grabbed my shirt and yanked me, as if he could drag me there quicker than I already intended to go.

We left everything behind and took off running, my pulse keeping time with my steps as we pounded down the footpath toward Jonah's place. When another shout split the air seconds later, my pace increased along with a growing sense of dread.

"Did that sound like your mum?" I asked, my breaths coming hard. I already knew the answer.

"No."

Corpses didn't make those noises, so it could only mean one thing.

We had company.

My heart threatened to pound through my chest as I slowed to a walk and approached the front garden. Jonah and I needed to stop twice to take out corpses in our path, each delay only compounding the urgency. If Liv had been hurt, if anything had happened to her, I'd bring down a world of shit on whoever was behind it.

Candlelight glowed through the mesh of the security door, which meant the main door had been left open. If I had to guess who'd dropped the ball, I'd put my money on Dawn. Liv wouldn't overlook a detail like that—and now someone was in there with them, more than likely using them for leverage to take the car.

This fucking car of ours was turning out to be as much of a liability as an asset.

"What do we do?" Jonah whispered in a rush.

"Wait and assess," I said. "Don't do anything without word from me first. Keep close."

If we'd had the same level of training and life experience, one of us could have gone through the front door while the other went around the back, but I needed to keep an eye on Jonah as well as everyone else. I had no idea how many were in there. One, two? A gang? If he made an emotional decision in the heat of the moment, it would put us all at risk.

He nodded his understanding and looked to be in control of himself. His eyes were focused, his body language prepared rather than scared. The signs were good, but he hadn't been tested yet. He didn't know if his mother was hurt—or if she was still breathing.

God, I hoped they were both okay.

I crept up the porch steps and flattened my back against the wall, leaning closer to check out the interior. The candles in the lounge room did a pretty good job of lighting the scene—and what I saw had me wanting to send Jonah straight back to the Lawson house to wait for me there.

Dawn lay motionless on the floor in the entryway, but I couldn't get a clear enough view of her to see if her chest was rising and falling.

I took a beat to think it over and concluded the best way to get him to behave like a capable adult was to treat him like one. Heading back down the steps, I grabbed Jonah's arm and eased him away from the door, out of sight. "You need to keep it together," I warned in a low voice. "Can you control yourself?"

"I'm good." He glanced at the house, then returned his attention to me. "What's happening?"

"Your mum's on the floor," I said, watching him. "There's no blood around her, no obvious injuries, but she's not moving. If I had to guess, I'd say she's been knocked out."

"Shit." He sent another look at the front door. "What about Liv?"

The determined note in his voice gave me the confidence he could handle the situation without losing it, and his interest in Liv's wellbeing only elevated my opinion of him. "I couldn't see or hear her."

I didn't want to say out loud what that might mean, but from the look on Jonah's face, he'd already figured it out. Liv would have fought hard and given it everything she had, but if she was outnumbered, the chances of her coming out on top were low. The thought that she might be dead had my gut twisting and my throat tightening. Surely I'd feel it if she was gone? Some part of me would have to just know she'd left the

earth.

Jonah swore again and stared at me. "We're going in, right?"

I nodded, psyching myself up to end some more lives today. "Stick close to me while we scope out the situation. We need to find out how many are in there."

He gave me a hard stare, his body vibrating with tension. "Then what?"

"We tear their fucking heads off."

Jonah held his knife in the grip I'd taught him. "Let's go."

The kid was a fast learner, and after a questionable start, I'd already warmed to him. I weighed up the options of knife or hatchet and went with my knife. If I got the chance to throw a weapon, my blade was the best bet in a confined space. All I could do was hope my aim turned out to be as accurate as Liv's this morning. "I'll keep whoever's in there occupied while you check on your mum—but we don't want to move her unless we have no other choice. Understood?"

He gave me a brief nod, and we both stepped onto the porch. I leaned in again to monitor the room. After a longer look this time, Dawn's position hadn't changed, but her chest was moving up and down. At least we had some good news. I threw Jonah a glance and whispered, "Your mum's breathing."

His eyes filled with relief, then narrowed shortly afterward. "Now we need to know what's going on with Liv."

I returned my attention to the lounge room and caught the profile of a woman standing in the corner. Dressed in filthy clothes, her ratty red hair fell around a face that was taut with either pain or concern. She rocked from one foot to the other,

agitated, and blood ran down her arm. Liv had stabbed her, and seeing any sign that she'd been alive at some point to inflict the wound gave me hope.

“What do we do?” the woman asked someone I couldn’t see from my vantage point.

“Nothin’,” a male voice responded. “Wait—and when they come back, we use this chick to get the car keys off ‘em.”

Rage burned inside me, and I pulled in a deep breath to keep it under control. Liv hadn’t made a sound, but I could only assume wanting to bargain with her meant she was still breathing. I needed to see her, just so I could confirm for myself that my entire world hadn’t ended.

“But what then?” the woman asked.

“We leave town for fuck’s sake. Get out of this shithole.”

“What are you gonna do with her?” the redhead asked.

“Jesus Christ. Too many questions. Dunno yet! Maybe we leave her, maybe we tie her up and take her.”

"The bitch knifed me! She's not coming with us—and why don't you tie her up now , so you don't have to keep holding her? "

Mi amor. It sounded like Liv had given them hell before the guy detained her. I wished she'd nicked an artery on the woman, but the redhead was still standing, so it was unlikely. The two continued arguing while I planned my next move. No other voices chimed in. I glanced at Jonah, who stood beside me with an expression of intense concentration.

We'd gathered a few important details about what was going on in there. There were most likely only two of them, Liv had fought back, and she wasn't currently restrained with anything other than a weapon or a pair of hands—which meant she could help fight if she hadn't been too badly injured.

And that was the kicker that got me moving.

I opened the screen door and stepped inside, scanning the room in seconds.

Just a skinny blonde man with neck tats, and the redheaded woman. Both had knives. No guns. Back in my early patrol days, these were the type of weasels we arrested for robbing stores while they were high on meth, and they had no issues with throwing their own mothers under the bus if it meant saving themselves—a factor that could end up working against us. They weren't people you reasoned with because they just didn't care about the same things everyone else did.

The guy stood near the entertainment unit with one of his hands clasping both Liv's wrists behind her back. The other hand pressed a knife against her ribcage. If his swollen cheek and the blood seeping from a scratch down his neck were any indication, she'd got a couple of hits in before he grabbed her.

Her sword lay on the floor near her feet.

Her knife was missing from the sheath in her belt.

Pride and overwhelming relief surged through me as my eyes met hers. She looked concerned, but not panicked.

“Evening,” I said, keeping my tone calm and casual. While my attention stayed on the strangers, Jonah slipped in behind me and crouched to check on his mother.

Both froze, and the room flooded with tension. I took a couple more steps toward them and stopped when my nearness further agitated the woman. The man jolted in surprise before trying to cover his reaction, and the hand holding the knife against Liv's torso twitched.

“Ah, he’s back,” he said, grinning a yellow-toothed smile. I'd loosen a few of those fucking teeth as soon as I got the chance.

“You know these two, Jonah?” I asked without taking my attention off the man. In a small town, it wouldn't be out of the question to think he'd come across them at some point.

“They’re a few years older than me,” Jonah said. “The one with Liv’s a tweaker who hung around the skate park back when we were kids. The other’s Shaky Sue. She used to hassle people outside the shopping centre for money and start fights with anyone who looked at her wrong. Both losers in case you haven’t picked up on that.”

“Got it.”

“That’s not nice, you little shit,” the tweaker said. “Is that your mum over there? She made a sick fucking sound when she hit the floor. Hope I didn’t punch her too hard.”

Allowing this to devolve into a trading of insults would only make it more difficult to control the situation. I switched my attention between the two of them. “What’s the plan here?”

“Glad you asked.” The tweaker smiled, but it was all false bravado. He'd backed himself into a corner—literally—and his lack of foresight would be the last mistake he made. “You’re gonna throw us the keys, and we’re gonna take that car off your hands. If it all goes smoothly, you can keep this bitch. If you try anything, we’ll take her as entertainment for all those long hours on the road.”

“I already told you,” Liv piped up, “I just met everyone today. We're using one another to get to where we're going. None of these people care about me .”

She was clever, lessening the connection in the hope it would take away their advantage, but it was too late. The glint in the tweaker's eye, even when he was smiling, told me the decision had been made. He'd committed to the deed and wouldn't be backing down, which meant I'd have to kill him.

“ This guy gives a shit about you,” the tweaker said, yanking Liv around until she fully faced me. "Pretty boy looks like he's gonna cry. I wonder what he'd do if I cut you?" The tip of his knife dug into her t-shirt, and when her eyes locked on mine, her wince of pain ramped up the urgency. “Or touched you,” he said, dragging the knife across her breast. He circled her nipple with the blade and sent me a satisfied smirk.

He knew. He knew what touching her would do to me—and most importantly, to her .

Anger turned my body rigid. The fear in Liv's eyes pushed me over the edge.

This fucker was about to die.

“Jonah.” I turned my knife until I had the blade between my fingers, the handle pointing at the floor. We were about to find out if my aim matched Liv's, and if it didn't, both of us needed to be ready to charge in.

“I'm here.” He moved in beside me.

“Watch the woman,” I told him, then I shot Liv a glance. “Quack.”

She understood. Her body dropped without warning, straight out of harm's way. Before anyone could catch onto what was coming next, I threw my knife hard and

struck the tweaker straight through the chest—the exact spot where his heart would pump its last beat.

He opened his mouth, bewildered for a fraction of a second. A beat later, his weight dropped to the floor, crashing into Liv on the way down.

Breathing hard, her gaze found mine as she stumbled free and steadied her footing.

She was safe, but we weren't out of danger yet.

The woman shifted into panic mode, and as I reached for the hatchet on my belt, she sprinted straight at us, shoving through the gap between Jonah and me.

Jonah gripped her shirt, but it tore from his grasp.

She barged outside, slamming the security door against the brick wall. While her footsteps thumped away from the house, I considered running after her and trying to track her down in the dark, but she could be anywhere and there were people who needed me here.

Everyone sprang into action at once, and the house became a hive of activity. Jonah dropped to his knees beside Dawn, trying to rouse her with a shake and words spoken too quietly for me to hear.

Liv kicked the dead guy in the stomach—hard—then leaned over him and yanked my knife from his chest in a detached manner that was new. "Asshole." She wiped the blood on the man's jeans, then kicked him again and straightened, offering the knife to me handle first as if nothing had happened. I waited too long to take it from her, and she lifted her brows.

With a sigh, I grabbed it and stowed the blade in my belt. She appeared to be

operating on autopilot, but when the urgency passed, she'd hit the wall. Or maybe she wouldn't. Liv had never been all that predictable, and our situation was ever-changing. She'd already proven her ability to adapt.

"Sit down and take a minute," I told her. "You don't need to do anything right now. Jonah, help me move him."

He'd already urged his mum into a sitting position, and Dawn blinked as she looked around and tried to grasp what had happened during the short time she was out. Her eyes landed on the dead man, then wrenched away to find me. Seeing her regain consciousness filled me with relief, but we needed to get the man's body out of here before his presence caused her further alarm.

"Grab his legs," I instructed.

Jonah jumped up from the floor with the speed and ease of youth and hooked his hands in the ends of the man's jeans.

I took the bulk of his weight at the other end and shuffled backwards to the door, pissed that we'd been put in this position again—but it could have been worse.

At least we'd met two decent people today, even if three others had let us down.

Liv rushed over to hold the door open for us, and I met her eyes as I passed through. "Back in a minute. Lock up behind us, just in case she's still around."

"Don't be long."

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Cruz

Jonah and I shuffled down the front path with the dead man swinging between us, his weight surprisingly heavy given his lean build. When we reached the street, I glanced over my shoulder at the house directly opposite; its hip-height brick fence was the perfect spot to stow a body so Dawn wouldn't see it when we left in the morning. I tilted my head in that direction. "Let's dump him over there."

Jonah was breathing heavier with the effort of hauling the man's weight. "I'm glad we're not burying him," he said. "It's more than this asshole deserves."

No argument from me. Darkness surrounded us, with only the moon to guide our way, providing enough light to see where we were going and keep alert for signs of the woman or corpses. A few figures were loitering in the near distance, but their movements were too awkward to be human.

It wouldn't take much for someone to get the jump on us while we were focused on moving a body, and we had no way of knowing if the woman had kept running or hid when she escaped. While she was still high on adrenaline and whatever else had caused those bloodshot eyes, her movements were unpredictable.

"You handled that well," I said to Jonah.

"You think so?" He stopped to reposition his hands and yank the guy's legs higher. "I was shitting myself," he said as we started walking again.

"I've been there."

“Yeah? Somehow, I doubt you get scared.” We reached the opposite side of the road and stepped up onto the curb. “You just killed a guy. Right in front of us.”

I backed up around the brick fence and dropped the body in amongst the weeds. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“But you’re not sorry you did it?”

“No.”

He huffed out a sigh. “I understand why you killed him,” he said, staring at the man. “This dickhead looked like he wanted to hurt Liv just for fun.” Jonah brushed his hands on the front of his shirt and glanced at our surroundings, but there wasn’t much to see. “What I don’t understand is how you can be so... fine with it.” His eyes moved over me as he caught his breath.

He’d find out soon enough how quickly he could accept violence. When he left his home and began moving from one unpredictable situation to the next, all the rules would change. “I’ll never be okay with killing someone,” I said, “but I can recognise when there’s no other option. If someone needs to die and there’s no other way around it, you make sure it’s the right person.”

“It’s a mind fuck knowing this is how it works now.” We walked back to the house, stopping to take out a couple of corpses that were drawn to the sound of our voices. “How many people have you killed since this whole thing started?”

I shoved a corpse hard enough to send it sprawling onto its back in the middle of the road, then bent to jam my knife through its ear. Giving Jonah an honest answer could lower his opinion of me, but I didn’t want to be around people who couldn’t handle reality. “Four.” My brother had been one of them, but I wouldn’t be diving into that memory again. “I’ve injured a few others and left them for dead.”

" Four ? Jesus." He ran his hand through his dark hair and stared at something in the distance. "You think I'm gonna have to do it, too?" he asked, bringing his gaze back to mine.

I wanted to tell him no, but I refused to lie to him. "At some point maybe—and you won't hesitate if it means keeping your mum safe."

"Great." Whatever had caught his attention before had him looking that way again. I followed his line of sight and spotted two more corpses coming for us. Jonah took care of an elderly woman while I dropped a tall, reed-thin man.

We returned to the house in silence, both of us caught up in our own thoughts.

After securing the front door, we entered the lounge room and found the women sitting side by side on the floral couch.

Liv was checking Dawn's scalp for injuries while Dawn gazed around the room, trying to come to terms with what happened. With the intruders gone and the overturned lamp and blood on the carpet as evidence, it must have been a surreal experience knowing she'd slept through it all.

"Jonah!" The second she spotted him, Dawn tried to shoot up from the couch.

Liv planted her hands on her shoulders to keep her seated and encouraged Jonah to approach his mother instead. He went straight to her and sank to his knees on the floor, letting her fuss over him until she could convince herself he was fine. The sight reminded me of my mother and the way she used to worry about Diego and me.

Liv squeezed his shoulder and rose from the couch, keeping her attention on me as she crossed the room. I looked for signs of distress, but her eyes were clear, her breathing calm. She stopped before me, and our gazes meshed as I swept some wisps

of hair back from her face. "Are you all right?"

"I think so."

She was changing right before my eyes, becoming stronger, more resilient. "Looks like you kicked some ass in here."

"I did what I could." Liv tried to smile, but she pressed her lips together and looked away, the first indicator that she wasn't coping as well as I initially thought.

Jonah stood and went into the kitchen, returning with a glass of water for his mother. Since he had the situation under control, I wanted to go somewhere private with Liv to check on her injuries. "Dawn, where's that room you mentioned?"

She pointed to the hallway as she finished her mouthful of water. "Third door down. It's all yours."

"Thanks."

"I need my things first," Liv said.

While she collected her weapons from the places where they'd landed on the room floor, Dawn stared up at me. "I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't thinking, and I made a stupid mistake."

"Mum."

She ignored Jonah and met my eyes. "Thanks for looking out for us. I hate that you had to do what you did because of me."

It wasn't only because of her. If Liv and I hadn't turned up in town with a working

car, there never would have been attention drawn to the house in the first place. “Don’t dwell on it,” I said, grabbing one of the lit candles from the coffee table, “because I won’t be. Keep an eye on your mum, Jonah. She probably has a concussion. Make sure she drinks plenty of water and rests up. We’ll see you both in the morning.”

I locked the bedroom door and set the candle on the nearest bedside table. The security shutters on the outside were already closed, and the candle’s flickering light created shadows that danced on the ceiling.

Floral wallpaper made the room feel smaller, and a queen size bed sat in the centre, clean and made-up ready for use. There was a cross on the wall above the bed flanked by a couple of homemade photo collages of people I’d never get to know.

Before I could focus on Liv, I grabbed the ladder-backed chair from the corner and wedged it under the door handle, a detail I couldn’t overlook if we wanted to catch some genuine sleep tonight. No matter how good they appeared to be on the surface, we were still sharing the house with people who were essentially strangers.

We set our weapons on the floor beside the bed, and I went around to Liv, taking her hand and keeping my touch gentle, my expression neutral. “Take a seat,” I said, easing her onto the edge of the mattress.

She settled on the bed and sighed as she looked up at me. Her features were strained, her eyes tired. It had been a long day, and as far as endings went, there were better things we could have been doing than fighting off intruders before we called it a night. “Lift your top, carino. Let me check out your ribs.”

She didn’t argue with me or try to convince me there was no need. She just grabbed the hem of her long-sleeve t-shirt and slid it higher, revealing bare skin and the blue bra she’d changed into after our dip in the river. I sat beside her and lifted the material

higher, checking the elastic edge. A puncture marred the fabric, but it looked like she'd been lucky; the knife hadn't made it all the way through. "Is it all right if I look underneath?"

Liv locked eyes with me and nodded. Her trust in me after what she'd been through filled my chest to overflowing, and I wanted to give her all the care she deserved. "Lie back and try to relax for a minute."

She scooted backwards and rested her head on the pillow, holding her top out of the way. "It doesn't feel like he cut me."

"Let's take a look." Sitting beside her, I leaned over her body and slid the edge of her bra high enough to reveal the lower part of her breast. Her skin was soft and smooth, free from damage. The only sign he'd tried to injure her was a small, irritated patch where the tip of the knife must have pressed too hard against her skin. I ran my thumb over the spot and heard her quick intake of breath.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, conscious of keeping my touch impersonal.

Her cheeks reddened, and she shook her head. "He touched me there," she said, her voice sounding thick in the quiet.

I pulled her bra back into position and lowered her top. Anger trickled through me, and I wished I could have killed the asshole all over again. "I know."

Liv rubbed her breast hard, as if trying to erase the memory. "I hate it," she said. "I can still feel it. My brain knows it was a knife, but to my body, it felt like a fingertip that made my skin crawl. I wish I could scrub it away."

It hurt my heart seeing her this way. I stretched out beside her on top of the covers and rolled onto my side. She turned to face me, and I trailed my fingers over her

forehead, down past her troubled eyes, slipping lower until I had her chin captured in my palm. I leaned in and pressed a single kiss on her mouth, breathing her in, watching every flicker of emotion pass over her face.

When Jonah and I turned up, Liv was already restrained, and I had no idea what went on in the minutes before my arrival. Dawn had been knocked out cold and Liv was left alone with two strangers. How did that asshole end up with a swollen face? What about the scratch down his neck?

"Did he do anything else?" I asked in a low voice. "His injuries, the kicks you gave him afterwards... they looked personal."

She gazed at me for a long, drawn-out moment, probably wondering if I was going to make this about me and my feelings. "Not to me," she said. "He punched Dawn. She opened the door, and he barged into her house and punched her in the head. When he tackled me down, I did everything I could to hurt him. The kicks were me letting out my frustration because I hate feeling weak."

It looked like the attack had started near the front door, which meant Liv must have lured the intruders away from Dawn to protect her from further injury. She'd made herself the focus and faced the threat on her own—the opposite of weak. I stroked my thumb over her cheek and let a long beat pass before I voiced the main thought on my mind. "I wish I'd never left you with her."

Her eyes widened for a second, then her gaze moved over my features. "It wasn't your fault."

"That's not what I meant." I kept my voice low so no one else could hear me. "I wish I hadn't left you with her specifically. You would have been safer on your own."

Liv opened her mouth as if to protest, then closed it again and stared at me. She

knew. She just didn't want to admit to another woman's failings.

Dawn had good intentions, but that didn't mean a thing in a world like ours where lives were on the line. If she'd stuck to the plan and left the door locked, it would have given her and Liv time to talk over their next move. Instead, she'd blindly opened it, trusting that Jonah and I were on the other side, and let wolves inside the fucking house.

Nothing had happened that we couldn't overcome, but what about next time?

"We can teach her. Jonah, too. We'll make sure it doesn't happen again," she said. "Everyone knows how to deal with the dead. They're predictable. If you follow the rules, you can mostly stay safe. There are no rules for humans anymore, and we're still figuring one another out."

We'd had more than two years to work on strategies for keeping ourselves safe—three if you counted all the chaos when Ultimus first kicked off. Anyone who was still slipping up now either didn't want to learn or someone else had been taking care of those details for them.

Maybe Dawn's husband had looked after her before he died and somehow kept her from the worst of the virus. Maybe his death had forced her to step into a role she didn't want and wasn't prepared for. Whatever the reason, making excuses for someone under these circumstances would only put the rest of the group in danger. "There are no laws, but there are still rules. Strangers are a complete unknown, resources are hard to come by, and people are getting more and more desperate. We need to be smart, all of us, or you and I need to leave them behind."

Her eyes were filled with uncertainty, a war between understanding my point of view and wanting to be supportive of people in need. I didn't want to kill that part of her. Not even close. Generosity and kindness still had their place in this world; they had to

if we wanted lives worth living, but not at the expense of our physical safety.

"She's a good person." Liv's gaze flicked to the door, then back at me. "She means well, but she's struggling. She just wants a decent life for her son."

"No debate from me there, but that doesn't change reality."

She stared at me for a beat longer, then rolled onto her back and sighed. "We have to take chances sometimes, Cruz. It's hard enough finding people who don't want to hurt us or take what's ours. We can't just toss the good ones out because they make a mistake."

We were on the brink of having an argument when we were essentially on the same page. I wanted to go with a wait-and-see approach and make our decisions based on facts, not emotions—especially in the early days when there was nothing tangible connecting us to new people. Liv wanted to be careful, too. "I'm not suggesting we ditch them right now. I'm saying if there are any more slip-ups like we had tonight, we go our separate ways."

Liv pulled her lower lip between her teeth and gazed up at the ceiling, taking her time before she answered. "She's a woman alone with her son. She's had to make all the decisions for the past two months when it comes to food, safety, their living situation. I wish you didn't have to be so tough on her."

Liv had done the same thing for years with no help. If I hadn't come into her life, and she was left alone after Haruto's death, she still would have survived—thrived even.

When you didn't hold people accountable, it allowed weakness to grow.

I lifted myself up on one elbow and leaned over her. She still had the bump on her forehead from when Jackson and his gang had been chasing her, and as my eyes

roamed her features, my chest tightened. A stupid lapse in judgement could have been the end for her tonight. For me too, because what was the point of it all without her? "That prick was playing with you," I said, looking into her eyes. "He would have stabbed you for pure entertainment and no other reason. Why aren't you being tough on Dawn?"

She dragged in a breath and stared at up me. "Because I like the idea of belonging to a group," she said, "of being around another woman for the first time in so long—and yes, she made a mistake, but I've made them, too. I ran straight into a man in Melbourne without thinking and nearly got myself kidnapped or killed. I kicked the keys under the car while we were trying to get away. It shouldn't be easy to toss people aside just because they did something human."

Seconds ticked by as I leaned on my elbow and mulled over her observations. It didn't take too long to conclude she was right. I sighed, wondering if I could find the balance between following procedures and understanding that not everyone's thought processes worked the same. I'd slipped up myself while I adapted to our new world, and it would be years before we clawed our way back to anything that resembled normal—if we ever got there in our lifetime.

If we wanted to get technical, I was also the only one in our current group who had any kind of formal training, so maybe I could be a little more understanding.

"I'll take it easier on her," I promised.

Liv stared at me for a moment as if determining whether I meant it. "Please don't say that just because of me."

"It's not just because of you. I can be guilty sometimes of seeing situations as black and white, right or wrong. I could learn to be more flexible."

She smiled and stroked her fingers over my cheek. “I like how you shared that as if it’s new information to me.”

Cheeky. I turned my face into her hand and laughed as I kissed her palm. With my arm wrapped around her waist, I pulled her flush against me and kept her close, thankful we still had each other.

It was the strangest time for me to miss my mother, but she would have loved seeing a woman bring out this side of me—and although they'd never meet, I knew with everything in me that she would have loved Liv.

Liv

The next morning, I accompanied Cruz to the house down the street to retrieve our car, leaving Dawn and Jonah behind to pack the food and supplies we'd need for our trip. Dawn had shown me all the jars of jams and pickles she'd preserved in recent months, so we'd have plenty of food to keep us going in the short-term, which meant goodbye to stale cereal and powdered milk. Hallelujah. I wished we didn't have to leave such a well-tended garden behind, but when we reached Bridgehill, Dawn's expertise spread across even more land would make this worthwhile.

My scream last night had pulled Cruz away from Jonah's friend's house before he had the chance to check the contents of the garage, and it turned out the owner had reverse parked a white, late model SUV inside. I shoved the roller door all the way up while Cruz lifted the car's bonnet and got to work hooking up the jumper cables. If we could get it started, our lives would become infinitely better in a short period.

Another vehicle. More people.

I'd been dreaming of this for a long while.

The garage had a small workbench with tools attached to a shadow board and an extensive collection of camping gear stowed on overhead shelving. We wouldn't need the camping equipment, but we could never have too many weapons. I grabbed a couple of hammers and a small axe, shoving the axe under the driver's seat and the hammers in the storage compartment of the door.

Cruz started our original car and climbed out, sending me a smile. "Jump in," he

called out, turning his back on me to keep watch on the driveway.

I took a seat in the SUV and left the door hanging open, waiting for the go-ahead to try the ignition. The raised bonnets blocked my view of Cruz and most of the street, leaving me feeling isolated in the garage. I rummaged in the console to distract myself, sifting through travel packs of tissues and old receipts. We may have seen the last of the dead man's accomplice, but that didn't mean other people wouldn't want to start trouble if they caught onto our existence.

When the Ford's engine had been running for a solid five minutes, Cruz leaned out to make eye contact with me around the upright bonnets. He gave me a thumbs up and I returned the gesture, putting my foot on the brake and lowering my head to press the start button.

Anticipation hummed inside me as I pictured us travelling down the highway to our next destination. We'd be another step closer to our future by today's end.

The engine turned over on its first attempt, and I sucked in an excited breath, barely able to believe it had worked. I laughed and lifted my head, leaning out sideways to share the victory with Cruz.

He was gone.

The hairs rose on the back of my neck, and my heartbeat quickened.

He'd never disappear without telling me—not while we were out in the open in this way. We always kept each other aware of our locations.

A strange feeling came over me, and I frowned as I climbed from the car to scope out the situation. It was almost impossible to hear any noises over two running engines, but it had no effect on my eyesight.

Cruz was lying face down on the concrete. At first, I thought he must have been doing something mechanical to the undercarriage of the car, but then I spotted the blood pooling beneath his cheek and fear slammed into me.

My eyes jerked to the other end of the driveway.

The woman from last night—Sue—came running toward me, shoving the slingshot she must have used to take Cruz down into her back pocket. Pulling a knife from her belt, her features went tight with determination. She wore a loose tank top and ripped jeans, and the arm I'd injured was wrapped in a bandage already covered in smudges. The wound didn't appear to affect her mobility, so I could only assume she'd found some heavy-duty pain meds.

Adrenaline coursed through me, and I readied myself, rushing back to grab a hammer from the driver's door. Yanking the tant? from my belt with my free hand, I stepped out onto the driveway and flung the hammer at her with all my might, hitting her with the heavy end smack in the middle of her chest.

She made an oof sound on impact, and her eyes filled with pain. I took advantage of her momentary weakness and ran at her, swinging my sword and slashing her upper arm. Her scream filled the air, and a look of pure rage came over her that might have worried me if I hadn't been armed with weapons and just as pissed as her.

She wanted the car. If I let her take the car to avoid more trouble, there was no guarantee the SUV would continue running or even start a second time. I couldn't risk stranding us here for good—not when we'd made promises to Dawn and Jonah and were so close to achieving our goal.

Both vehicles were unlocked with their engines running and the keys inside. I had to guard two cars and make sure she didn't hurt Cruz again while he was unconscious.

Stay focused. Keep your head straight.

“Just give me the car and you’ll never see me again,” Sue said, her words tinged with desperation.

"Fuck off now and you can live," I countered. "That's it. That's the deal."

I slipped my knife from its sheath, and with a backhanded swing, caught her forearm before she could yank it away. It was enough to inflict a surface wound, but it wouldn't slow her down for long.

I allowed myself a split-second glance at a movement behind her. Two of the infected were ambling up the driveway, attracted to all the noise created by cars and humans. More of them would come soon. They always did. Rather than causing panic, it made my job that much easier.

“You could have come and talked to us like normal human beings,” I said, jumping back as she swung her knife at me. Anger charged through me, and I channelled it, letting it drive me forward when fear might have held me back. I'd had enough of opportunists who wanted to cheat and steal. “But you tried to take what we had. Your boyfriend assaulted me, and you just stood there and let him.”

I hadn't realised how furious it made me until it began flowing from me like lava.

“And your boyfriend killed him for it!”

Although the engine noise covered the moans of the approaching dead, she was too hyped up to notice them, anyway. I needed to make sure she stayed focused on me. They'd be on her in seconds without me hurrying them along, but I desperately wanted to put an end to this so I could go to Cruz. What if he was dying behind me right now while I stood here wasting time on someone who meant nothing to us?

I made sure not to glance at the infected. If she knew they were about to surround her, she could panic and make choices I had no time to predict. The bonnet was still up on the Ford and the cables attached, but that wouldn't stop her from jumping in and tearing out of here if the idea occurred to her.

Movement stirred behind me, and relief flooded me when I realised Cruz was conscious.

“Back off now!” I yelled, coming at her again with a double swipe. Knife to the wrist, sword to the shoulder. Hard. Fast. Both attacks connected and drew blood, and she grazed my forearm with her own knife. It stung, but I didn't need to look to know she'd only scratched the surface.

In seconds, she'd be a dead woman.

The infected were a few steps away. One of them reached for her hair, and I shot an intentional look in their direction to throw her off balance. With a scowl, she turned her head to see what had caught my attention. I used the moment to run at her, ramming my hip and shoulder into her chest, sending her stumbling backward into their outstretched arms.

Breathing hard, I steadied my footing to make sure I didn't join her in the skirmish.

One of the dead got a hold of her, and the other followed suit, tangling its fingers in her hair. Sue's momentum sent her tumbling to the ground with them beneath her, and I waited to make sure she couldn't scramble free. When an infected man sank his teeth into her neck, I released a shaky breath and turned from the sight, blocking out her scream as I hurried back to Cruz.

He'd already pushed himself up to a sitting position when I got to him. “Are you okay?” I asked, stowing both weapons to free up my hands. My breaths were coming

fast, my limbs trembling with adrenaline.

He pressed his hand against the side of his head, then pulled it away to find blood. “I’m good.”

With another glance at the dead to confirm they were still occupied with Sue, I gave Cruz’s scalp a quick check, running my fingertips across his skull. Blood trickled from a cut hidden in his hair, dripping down the side of his neck. I found the sticky spot just above his ear, and he let out a hissing breath. “Sorry.” It could be a concussion or in need of stitches, neither of which I could treat without first aid supplies. “I’ll look at it properly once I’ve taken care of... that.”

Sue had stopped making noises, and when I faced the pile of writhing bodies again, she was lying on top of the other two with blood... God, everywhere . It looked like a massacre had taken place, and the smell of the dead combined with the puddles and splatters of red had my stomach lurching.

I yanked my knife free again and strode over to the group, dispatching the two infected before I checked on Sue. Her body was no longer moving. She’d been ravaged by their bites, her throat torn open, and her blank eyes stared up at me. Finding no signs of life left me strangely deflated, and my chest ached as I embedded my knife in her ear to stop her from turning.

A second death on my hands in twenty-four hours. I’d never crossed that line until yesterday, and I wondered how proud Haruto would be if he could see what I’d become.

I shut down the second-guessing and focused on what needed to be done. Keeping my eyes averted from her injuries, I grabbed Sue’s wrists and peeled her off the other two bodies. My breaths were heaving from me, my muscles working overtime as I dragged her to the section of overgrown grass beside the driveway.

Both engines were still running, the keys within easy reach. Other people could turn up at any time with weapons. We needed to get moving fast before the noise drew more attention.

Cruz stepped in and transferred the remaining two bodies to the same spot, creating space for us to leave. I wanted to jump in the car and tear away from the house. Leave all my regrets and never come back. Breathing hard, I stopped and stared at him, thankful we'd made it through another fight without losing each other.

Our gazes meshed, and my throat ached at the sight of him. His eyes were tired, his hair rumpled. Blood trickled down his cheek on the way to his jaw. We couldn't keep doing this and surviving. Luck had been on our side so far, but if we stayed on the move like this, eventually we'd encounter a situation that one or both of us wouldn't walk away from.

Similar thoughts must have occurred to Cruz. Without warning, he grabbed the front of my t-shirt in a rough grip and yanked me to him. I sucked in a breath as his arms came around me in a hug so tight every muscle in his torso strained against me. He sighed into my hair, and while the engines hummed beside us, I clutched his waist and leaned into him. "Are you in pain?" I asked, my voice thick with emotion as the fast-paced thump of his heart played beneath my ear.

"Other than a headache, I'm good." Cruz tightened his hold on me for a split second, then let me go again. "Did she hurt you?"

I swallowed and sneaked a glimpse of the bodies piled up beside us. The image of Cruz laying among them lifeless crept into my head and I forced it straight back out again. "I'm fine. She cut my arm, and I'm basically responsible for another death, but... I'm fine."

Cruz gazed down at me, his tiredness giving way to resolution. "She went about it the

wrong way,” he said, “and so did her weasel boyfriend—just like the woman down at the river. Don’t fool yourself into thinking she was a victim. You... ” He paused and clasped my face, his warm breath moving over me. “You amaze me, querida .”

My cheeks flushed, and I turned my head away, overwhelmed by his praise, but thankful for his words. Cruz had referred to me as a force on the day we met, and I hadn't believed him. I still didn't now, but I hoped to one day match the image he had of me. If I could do so without losing the most important parts of myself, even better.

"Keep doing exactly what you're doing," he said, bringing my attention back to him. "You're strong, and fierce, and kind. Promise you won't let me or anyone else throw you off the path you're on."

I wasn't sure what he meant by my path since we were travelling together. We had the same vision for the life we wanted to build, but my mouth lifted on one side. "I promise."

His gaze sharpened, and he gave me a direct look, trying to convey something I didn't quite understand. "I mean it, Olivia," he said, as if he thought I wasn't taking him seriously. "If anything happens to any of us in our group, it'll all be okay as long as you're still around. You're the key."

I frowned, more lost than ever. "To what?"

"The future."

Cruz and I parked both cars in Dawn's driveway and checked the front yard and the street before we went around the back. There were no indicators other people were hiding nearby, but after too much attention over the past several hours, it paid to remain vigilant.

During the time we were gone, Dawn had harvested and packed at least a week's worth of fresh food and stacked the tubs by the back door. Combined with the practical, non-perishable items that Jonah had left outside to take with us, the second car had become more than just a backup now.

I knocked on the locked door and tried not to overwhelm Cruz with attention as we waited on the back step for Dawn to let us in. There were no worrying signs after the attack, no nausea or dizziness to speak of, so I could only assume it meant he'd be back to his normal self after some rest.

Dawn pulled the door open and immediately set eyes on Cruz. Her gaze widened, and she stood back to let us through. "What happened?"

The alarm in her voice drew Jonah in from the lounge room, and he hung around in the doorway to assess the scene.

"She came back." I pulled out a chair and urged Cruz to take a seat at the dining table. He spared me a do-we-really-need-to-do-this look before he sat and resigned himself to some minor fussing. If he knew how much it had affected me seeing him lying lifeless on the concrete, he wouldn't hesitate to accept first aid and attention.

"Jonah, can you go outside and grab one of those first aid kits?" Dawn asked. To us, she said, "The medical supplies were already packed. I didn't think we'd need them again in the time you were gone."

"I didn't think she'd be stupid enough to take another run at us either," Cruz said as Jonah opened the back door and took off down the steps.

Dawn leaned her hip against the bench, her body language casual, her eyes anxious. "What did she do?"

I moved Cruz's hair to one side and found the long gash in his scalp. Blood was still seeping from the wound, and when I accidentally touched the edge of the broken skin, he jumped. "Took me out with a fucking slingshot," he said, clearly still pissed at being taken by surprise.

Dawn's gaze flicked to me and returned to Cruz. "I wouldn't be too embarrassed about that. Jonah nearly lost an eye to a slingshot when he was a kid. They look harmless, but they're not."

"You know what they say about sticks and stones." I ruffled his hair, and he glanced up at me, slipping his hand around the back of my thigh as I stood beside him. His mouth curled upward in a smile, and just like that, his anger faded.

I held my hand out for the kit Jonah brought back, stepping away from Cruz to open it on the table.

"How's it look?" Jonah asked, leaning in to peek at the injury while I gathered the supplies I needed.

"Not too bad. I think his pride hurts more."

"Hey." Cruz looked up at me as I returned to my previous position, his eyes warm with affection. He pulled me between his thighs and clasped my waist, waiting like a good little patient as I tore a packet open and slipped a sterile wipe free. Before I could get to work on him, I quickly swabbed the scratch on my arm just in case Sue's knife had remnants of the dead on it.

When I used a fresh wipe to dab at the blood already drying in his hair, Cruz jerked at the stinging sensation. I paused and gave him a patient look. "Aren't you supposed to be drinking whisky straight from the bottle and letting me stitch your head without anaesthetic?" I asked. "This is a little disappointing."

He let out an amused breath. "If only real life was like the movies."

"I didn't think she'd come back," Jonah cut in, sharing a look with his mum. "She was shitting herself last night. The way she ran out of here, I thought there was no way in hell we'd ever see her again."

"Cowards get desperate sometimes," Cruz said, "and when they're desperate, they're dangerous."

"Where is she now?" Dawn asked, her tone careful. I suspected she already knew the truth. We wouldn't be so relaxed if we knew she was still out there somewhere with even more of a vendetta against us.

My fingers stilled in Cruz's hair, and I drew a long breath. Two people had died since our arrival less than twenty-four hours ago, and I wondered how our behaviour would alter Dawn and Jonah's opinion of us. Would they still want to leave everything familiar and venture into new territory with us after seeing how easily we could kill others?

"Let's just say she won't be a problem again," Cruz finally answered.

"Oh." Dawn's attention bounced from Cruz to me, then across to Jonah.

"You mean you..." Jonah left his sentence unfinished.

Cruz nodded and squeezed my waist, a silent warning to let him take responsibility for the second death. Another stain on his reputation wouldn't change their opinion of him, but it might alter their view of me. I didn't want that kind of dishonesty in our partnership, or the group, though. We were good people, and sometimes circumstances pushed us to do terrible things to survive.

"We were fighting," I explained, "and two of the infected came up behind her. I pushed her backwards and let nature take its course." I finished cleaning the wound and swapped the soiled antibacterial wipe for a roll of webbed tape. No stitches were required, but I hoped I could get the tape to stay in place without needing to shave part of Cruz's scalp.

Keeping my eyes on the task, I tore thin pieces of tape from the roll, holding the wound closed as I lay each strip in place. All the while, I remained aware of the weight of Cruz's hands on my waist and the attention of everyone in the room. Rather than trying to explain myself, I let the information marinate and trusted them to understand my actions had been a last resort.

Dawn spoke first after a long silence. "I never thought it would come to this," she said. "We had a few scary times during the looting and raids, but after it calmed down, the most trouble we ever got was from the dead. Now living people are trying to kill us?" She pushed her shoulder-length hair back from her face and watched me dress Cruz's wound. "There are so few of us left that you'd think we'd try to get along, but apparently human nature doesn't work that way. People have turned mean."

I finished tending to Cruz's scalp and let his hair fall back in place, thankful no one appeared to be viewing me in a negative light. "People are mostly the same as they were before the virus," I said, "but the meaner ones don't have to worry about the law anymore. They're taking whatever they want without having to deal with the consequences."

Cruz smiled his appreciation for my care, then pushed himself up to a standing position. "Which means we need to be ready—all of us. Cars attract attention and whether we like it or not, we'll encounter other people on our way to the east coast. If you can't talk reason to someone, if they show any signs that they're looking to take what we have, react fast and use your weapons. Last night," he said, looking directly

at Dawn, "we were lucky, and we can't afford oversights like that again."

Her eyes darted to me, then back to Cruz. "I'll do better, I promise."

Jonah nodded his understanding, his features determined.

Only last night he'd been shocked that Cruz had resorted to deadly force to keep us safe, and today he'd accepted our reality. Part of me hated that someone so young needed to keep making these adjustments to stay safe, but we were living in a different world. Being cautious and slow to trust didn't mean we wouldn't meet good people along the way—we'd met Jonah and Dawn after all—but the four of us had to keep our eyes open, our senses alert, and pay attention to every gut feeling.

"So, what do you think?" I asked, cleaning up the first aid supplies. "Are you ready to say goodbye to this place?"

Dawn huffed a loud breath and looked around the kitchen.

When her eyes met mine again, she gave me a smile that looked equal parts nervous and excited—the exact way I felt when I left my apartment for the last time. "I started mentally separating myself from this place as soon as we sat down at the table to talk to you," she said. "I'm ready when you are."

Cruz

Before the pandemic, Dawn and her family spent their downtime holidaying in the eastern part of the state, so not only was she familiar with our destination, but her knowledge of the towns spread between here and there helped us choose our next stop.

Since there was no need to scavenge, we were looking for a smaller, safer town with no major shopping centres, where people were less likely to have hung around after the virus swept through. She suggested a town called Harriet, two hours from Wallin, and apparently so small and lacking in basic amenities that travellers never even used it as a rest stop.

Dawn and Jonah were up front in the Ford we'd stolen from Jackson and his cronies, and Liv and I trailed behind in the new SUV just in case there were any mechanical issues. She insisted I take the passenger seat, letting me nurse my headache and the embarrassment of being taken down by a slingshot and a fucking pebble.

We travelled the full two hours without a break, the longest distance I'd ever covered in one stretch since I abandoned my original home on the coast. No dangers or problems with either vehicle, just a straight run from one place to another, taking us two-thirds of the way to Bridgehill.

We left sunny skies and fat, white clouds behind us in Wallin, and ahead lay darkness and an impending thunderstorm—not the first of the day if the glistening road and wet grass were anything to go by. The smell of rain seeped in through the car vents, and the temperature dropped noticeably over a few kilometres.

As we took the exit and approached a sign indicating the lower speed limit heading into the township of Harriet, Liv sent me a smile. "Here just in time," she said. "Looks like it's about to bucket down, but it shouldn't take too long to find a place and wait it out."

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the wind picked up, whipping through the pine trees that hugged the roadside. I pointed out a corpse stumbling from the thick grass and heading straight for the road. Liv swerved around it and continued behind Dawn. With no weather apps to rely on anymore, we could never be sure if we were in for light rain, or if hailstones the size of golf balls were coming our way.

"How's your head?" she asked, sending me a glance.

In that split second look, I saw her lingering concern, but I'd recovered well for someone who'd hit the ground unconscious. All I had left now was a vague throbbing in my temple, nothing like the splitting pain immediately after I regained consciousness. "Almost back to normal." I stared out the window as my mouth twitched. "Are you worried about me, querida?"

"I just want to make sure you're looking after yourself, along with the rest of us."

The testiness in her voice had my smile growing, but I was wise enough to keep my head turned away. I loved having a woman in my life who cared about me, and I'd never take this sweet side of hers for granted. "I appreciate it. I'm doing okay, though."

Liv must have picked up on my amusement, anyway. She took her hand off the wheel and gave my thigh a playful shove. "Excuse me for caring. I can drop you off right here if you're going to be a jackass."

With a laughing breath, I grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss on the back of it. "If it's

all the same with you, I'd rather be where you are."

She gave me a pleased little smirk and returned her hand to the wheel.

We approached a deep bend where pine trees blocked the view of what I assumed would be the town once the road straightened again. Water filled all the dips and potholes, and the surface glistened with moisture. Two corpses in the distance struggled through the long, wet grass.

A sign welcomed us to Harriet—population five hundred—and relief swept over me.

We'd made it without losing anybody.

Dawn's brake lights came on up ahead as she reached the bend, but whatever caused her to slow wasn't visible from our position. I focused on the road, waiting as Liv eased her foot off the accelerator. Maybe she was being cautious on the wet road and didn't want to take the corner too fast.

The passenger window of the car lowered, and Jonah stuck his arm out, twirling his finger in a U-turn gesture. "Can you see what's going on from your side?" I leaned closer to Liv to check if she had a better view.

"Nothing yet—but whatever spooked her, Dawn's turning fast."

In a desolate country town, only corpses could inspire that kind of reaction.

Liv slowed further as Dawn swung around in a wide circle, only she made the turn too late and had to leave the road to complete the manoeuvre. No issue on a normal day, but after a heavy bout of rain with dirt and grass on the roadside, our run of good luck may have just ended. My stomach clenched and dread moved through me. "Shit."

“What?” Liv asked, then it clicked for her, too. “Oh, crap!” She flashed her high beams at Dawn in the hope it would alert her to the danger, but Dawn had more important things to focus on and paid no attention to our lights.

The car went straight into a boggy patch of grass and stopped dead, the tyres spinning uselessly and leaving her stranded with Jonah. Still no huge issue on any other day. We'd packed rope and a shovel; we had four people available to free the car, and we worked well as a team. A pain in the ass, yes, but nothing insurmountable.

This wasn't any other day, though.

My gaze shifted to the bend in the road. Several corpses were shuffling toward us. Five, six.

Liv slowed to an almost stop and glanced at me, but I kept my eyes on the scene. There had to be a shitload more to get that reaction from Dawn. We could have easily navigated our way through a group of that size.

Another dozen or so followed behind the original cluster, with more coming—so many more—spreading out to cover the entire width of the road.

There were too many. We didn't have time for a tow.

All we could do was evacuate and reassess when the threat had passed.

"Turn the car around and get ready to go," I said to Liv. If they surrounded the Ford, Dawn and Jonah were done for.

While our car was still rolling, I jumped out and left the door hanging open, running toward them with pumping arms and a pounding heart. Corpses may have been slow movers, but being outnumbered to this degree was a disaster waiting to happen, and

we needed to get out of here now.

The horde had another fifty metres to go before they reached our location, and the only way out was where we just came from.

“Get out!” I yelled as I ran for the car, hoping they could hear me.

Jonah poked his head through the open window and called back, “We’re bogged!”

Yeah, no shit. Dawn was still trying to drive out of the mess and only bedding the tyres in further. I swore as I approached. “Get out of the fucking car, Jonah! Both of you .”

He definitely heard that. The window went up again, and he opened his door.

I checked over my shoulder to monitor Liv’s movements. She'd already swung the car around and left the safety of an enclosed vehicle to lend us a hand. I didn't want her involved, but I already knew how it would go down if I shouted at her to stay back. Instead, I returned my attention to the Ford, relieved to find Dawn and Jonah coming toward me on foot, trudging through the mud and knee-high grass.

Dawn's features were fraught with nerves, her eyes flicking to her son before locking on me. She knew she'd messed up again. With a quick check on the corpses, the sight had me springing into gear. More of them were coming. Forty metres away. Shit was getting serious.

They'd already veered off their original path down the centre of the road and made a beeline for the bogged car. A rough headcount told me there were somewhere near a hundred of them. There was no chance of us holding them off, and all we had for cover were tall gum trees and the flimsy wire fence separating the paddocks from the road.

We needed to get the fuck out of here.

Liv appeared at my side, her breaths fast and shallow. She took stock of the situation, and as soon as it registered there was no chance of freeing the Ford, she gripped my arm. "I'll go back and clear room for them in our car."

"Just enough space for Jonah in the back. I'll drive. You and Dawn can take the passenger seat."

"Roger that. Be safe, mi amor."

I smiled at her terrible pronunciation and spared the corpses another glance. Thirty metres away. My humour died, and with a harsh breath, I approached Dawn. "Did you grab the key?" I asked, noting her panicked expression. Seeing a group of that size and knowing we had a single car to escape in would have been pushing the limits of what she could handle. I had to be thankful she was still putting one foot in front of the other.

"Oh, God. I forgot!" She turned to retrace her steps.

Irritation rose inside me, and I tried my hardest to keep it from my voice. "I'll get it. Go help Liv."

The stung expression on her face told me she'd picked up on my tone, but I didn't have time to protect her feelings. Jonah apologised as he followed his mum. As soon as they were out of sight, I pushed them from my mind, knowing Liv would make sure they were safe.

The rear tyres were in deep, the lower half covered in sludge and blades of grass. I slipped my hatchet from my belt and headed for the driver's side, dodging the worst of the mess. Two corpses were already struggling over the boggy ground and closing

in on me. The foot of the bigger one got suctioned into the mud, rendering it useless, and as I grabbed the key from the ignition, the other snagged the sleeve of my shirt, latching on with its spindly fingers.

I shoved the corpse off me with my elbow and pocketed the fob. With a swing of my hatchet, I took out the side of its head. Blood and bits of brain matter splattered my shirt, and the slimy handle nearly slipped through my fingers. Fighting down my frustration, I wiped it on the body at my feet and tightened my grip, ready to swing again.

"Watch out, Cruz!"

Liv's voice reached me over a jumble of moans that were growing louder by the second. The pressure was on. I looked up as another five corpses were about to reach me, and my heart jolted. If I didn't get moving now, I was a dead man.

The stench always ramped up whenever they travelled in a pack, and since most of them were wet from the rain they'd been walking through, it took the smell to a whole new level. My eyes watered, and I coughed as I backed away from the group, switching my gaze between the uneven ground behind me and the corpses coming at me from the front.

Thunder rumbled, and a bolt of lightning flashed nearby, the clouds a patchwork of greys so dark they were almost black.

"Hurry!"

The fear in Liv's voice had me wishing I could pick up the pace, but the ground was so soft it squelched underfoot, sucking my boots in deep with each step. It wouldn't take much to overbalance and end up on my ass, and I couldn't afford to lose the advantage I'd gained—not when there were countless more corpses on the road

heading straight for Liv and the others.

As the frontrunner of the new group reached for me, I lifted my hatchet above my head and brought it down hard in the middle of the corpse's skull. When it dropped to the mud, the next one stumbled over its body and landed knee first in the sludge. I caved its head in and looked over my shoulder to find Liv pulling her sword free, ready to run to me.

"Stay there!" I bellowed. "Get everyone in the car."

Two more came at me and it took three swings to drop them both. My arms ached. My calves strained with the effort of tackling the too-soft ground, but we were all safe, and that single detail kept me focused.

Another glance over my shoulder told me Liv had the car under control.

We were almost good to go.

As I reached the harder packed gravel at the edge of the road, the sky opened and fat raindrops belted down, drenching me in seconds. I blinked against the water pelting my eyes and checked behind me again. Metres away now, but the biggest section of the group had almost reached us.

If we didn't get moving right this minute, we'd be stuck in the middle of the kind of trouble we might never escape from. Flashbacks of the expression on my brother's face hit me, and my stomach churned. I didn't know if I had it in me to go through that again.

Feeling safer on sturdier ground, I stowed my hatchet and turned my back on the horde. As the rain soaked my clothes and streamed down my face, I sprinted for the car and dived in through the driver's door, slamming it shut behind me. Liv and

Dawn were squished together on the passenger seat, Jonah on the same side in the back. My breaths were coming hard, my pulse thudding in my ears.

"We'll be okay," I said, partly for them, partly for me.

I turned the key in the ignition, ready to get the hell out of here.

Nothing happened.

I swore under my breath and closed my eyes, willing the engine to turn over, praying to a God I barely believed in anymore.

When I tried again, the rapid clicking told me either the battery had died or the alternator needed replacing, neither of which could be fixed here and now. We weren't going anywhere without a jumpstart, and our backup car was bogged in a fucking ditch. My heart hammered, and I fought through the chaos in my mind, shoving it down to focus on the next task.

The rain came down so hard it sounded like a stampede on the roof and windows, the rivulets on the glass blocking our view of the incoming horde. We'd be surrounded in seconds, and corpses didn't give a shit about rain. They'd hang around for as long as it took to get their teeth into the bait sitting inside the tin can.

"We need to run." Liv's voice trembled with fear or cold, her eyes darting out the windshield then across to me. "We have the smallest possible window to decide. If we don't commit now, we're never getting out of here."

Time seemed to slow as I stared at the blurry images of approaching corpses and considered our options. If we ran, we'd have to keep running until we found shelter, and I hadn't seen a house for at least the last five kilometres. All of this land would have been owned by one family and used for farming. Wherever their house was, we

couldn't see it from our current position.

Even if we found it, we'd only be leading a shitload of corpses there.

All it would take during our escape was for one person to roll their ankle or run out of steam, and we were done. Having spent the past couple of years set up in a permanent home, Dawn and Jonah wouldn't be anywhere near the same level of fitness and endurance as Liv and me. There was just no tactical reason for us to run, especially with Dawn's fear of corpses.

"We stay," I said, glancing at the sunroof. "But we're going to get wet."

At the first slap of palms against the window, Jonah swore in the back seat and Dawn's breaths came faster.

I leaned forward to meet her eyes around Liv. "Are you coping?" I remembered asking Liv that same question a lifetime ago, but she hadn't raised the same concerns that Dawn's unpredictable behaviour was doing now.

She almost shook her head, then whimpered and nodded quickly, trying her best to convince herself and me. If she couldn't control her fear, it had the potential to cause us real problems. What if she flung the door open and tried to run just to get away from the pure terror of being surrounded? We'd all be goners.

"I know you're scared, but I need you to do whatever you can to keep it together. Don't look at the freaks. Close your eyes and focus on something good."

She nodded again and pulled her shoulders back, drawing a long, controlled breath like the kind women did when they were in labour. "Are you planning what I think you're planning?" she asked, her voice sounding like it was being forced between chattering teeth.

"Yep." Corpses gathered around the car, creating a constantly moving barrier, pressing their hands and faces on the glass and leaving grimy marks wherever they touched. As more of them arrived, their moans rose in volume, becoming a never-ending drone that filled my head and clouded my thinking. A claustrophobic feeling came over me and my pulse thumped faster as the sea of faces turned into a blurry mass right before my eyes. "I'll take care of as many as I can through the sunroof. When their bodies drop, they should work like a pile of sandbags and block the others from getting to us. Once it stops raining, we'll reevaluate."

"So, we're just buying time?" Jonah asked.

"That's all we've got."

I turned the key in the ignition again, hoping for enough charge to open the sunroof. Liv pressed the button overhead to engage the panel, and it moved without issue. Water battered the car's interior, drawing involuntary reactions from everyone, including me. With the sudden drop in temperature, it felt like tiny knives stabbing my skin.

I switched off the ignition and slid my knife from my belt, preparing to struggle into position.

Liv grabbed my forearm before I could move from my seat. "I'll do it."

Rain clung to her lashes, and she shoved wet strands of hair from her face. I pictured her in danger while the rest of us sat in the car, and every muscle in me rebelled against the idea. I locked eyes with her. "No."

"You won't fit. I'm smaller."

"No, querida."

"I'm not asking." Liv squeezed my arm and scrambled into a crouched position with less effort than it would have taken me. She apologised for the clumsy way she had to move in the cramped space, then slid her upper body through the sunroof and blocked out most of the rain.

Seconds later, her hips began jolting with each strike of her knife, and my heart went right out there on the roof with her. Corpses dropped in slow motion around us, tumbling and dragging their bodies down the glass. Some of them bumped against the car as they fell, sending thuds through the interior.

Liv's foot lifted at one point, as if she needed to lean out to reach one. Dawn wrapped her hands around her knee to stabilise her, and I looked out the windshield. So many corpses surrounded us that the chances of getting out of here without losing someone had sunk lower than ever. Liv couldn't take them all down. Her actions were only delaying the inevitable.

If I took out a few through my window and cleared enough space to exit the vehicle, I could jump onto the bonnet and help her. Maybe fit on the roof beside her and drop more of them from there.

"This doesn't feel right," Jonah said, mirroring my thoughts. "Should I—"

"No." Dawn cut him off, sending me a pleading look.

The rain was pouring down. My eyes moved everywhere, trying to absorb all the details at once. More corpses dropped, smashing against the window behind Dawn's head and rocking the car. Liv had made good progress; she'd already culled around a dozen, but there had to be eighty or more left.

"I'm going out there." I turned the key in the ignition to lower the driver's window.

The smell of rain and wet corpses rushed in, and I grabbed the nearest one to stab my knife into its ear. As soon as it dropped, I reached for the next and jammed my blade into its eye. Each time one body fell, I took hold of another, and before long, I had a pile of eight built up outside the door, the stack too high for others to climb over.

“They’re still coming!” Liv yelled.

I turned in my seat to face Jonah and his mum. "Stay here," I said. "There's not a single reason for either of you to get out of the car. Do me a favour and don't give me another person to worry about."

“What are you going to do?” she asked, her panicked gaze shifting to the chaos outside. Her hands were still gripping Liv's leg, holding on tight as if both their lives depended on it.

“I’m getting up on the roof from the outside.” Cold air swept through the window, bringing rain and the stench of corpses. I closed it again to shut out the noise.

"But what if..." Her voice trailed off as if she didn't want to finish the sentence. What if Liv and I died, and we left her and Jonah to deal with this alone ? The reality was that someone needed to help Liv, and we couldn't fit another person through the sunroof. As the minutes ticked by, it was becoming more and more evident that the longer we waited, the more likely we were to die here.

"We'll be okay," I said, about fifty percent sure I was telling her the truth. "Don't let go of Liv."

The bodies heaped beside the car were positioned far enough back for me to ease the door open and squeeze out into the storm. As soon as I shut the door and stepped around them, three more corpses were on me.

Breathing faster, I sliced and stabbed my way free, desperate to get to Liv. She had to be running low on energy by now, and I didn't know what would happen if she hit the wall. When I'd cleared a temporary path to the front end of the car, I jumped onto the bonnet and watched my step to avoid slipping on the slick metal.

Rain pelted my face and dripped from my hair, soaking my already heavy clothes. Thunder boomed overhead and a crack of lightning lit up the blackened sky.

"What are you doing?" Liv shouted. Her hair was plastered to her head, her sweet face drenched. With her mouth set in a grim line, she grabbed another corpse by the hair and took it out with one precise stab through the eye.

"Helping." My foot slid on the bonnet, and I righted myself before the momentum could take me down.

Liv shot me a concerned look. "Please don't fall."

Another corpse reached for me. I punctured its brain and risked a glance at the rest of the horde. The entire group had rounded the corner, with a couple of stragglers bringing up the rear. My stomach dropped at the sight. We had so much work to do under the worst possible conditions.

Liv's terrified screech had the hairs rising on the back of my neck. A couple of corpses had got hold of her at the same time and pulled her further from the sunroof. The resistance from the other end let me know Dawn and Jonah had acted fast and anchored her from the interior, but that wouldn't stop these rotting fucks from taking a bite out of her.

A third corpse clutched her hand, and urgency tore through me. She was strong, capable, and basically fearless, but she couldn't fight off a group of the dead with both arms restricted.

I lunged across the windshield and grabbed the waistband of her pants for leverage. While the rain pummelled both of us, I stabbed the nearest corpse, and its hold on her loosened. The second one stared straight at me with dead eyes, its blistered mouth widening to let out an unintelligible sound. I took it out with a strike through the ear, and it dropped to join the other.

Just as I'd downed the last one to free Liv, the intermittent beeping of a car horn cut through the mayhem, confusing me at first. I blinked the rain from my eyes while I tried to make sense of it. Two years on from the world shutting down, those once familiar sounds didn't fit with our new life anymore.

Liv had turned our car around in preparation for leaving, and the honking came from somewhere ahead of us on the clear section of road.

“What the hell is that ?” she asked, a breath wrenching from her as she shoved another corpse back from the car. A series of thuds and muffled voices came through the gaps in the sunroof, and I could only guess Jonah and Dawn were letting us know about the new arrival, too.

I killed another three that left my shoulders aching and my lungs working harder. The rain was still belting down, but the bright red SUV would have been hard to miss in any weather. “A car.”

My stomach initially tensed, and I wondered if we had another threat to worry about on top of a horde, but everyone knew the more noise you made, the more attention you attracted. The occupants of the car wanted to be noticed, and I could only hope that meant they were trying to help us.

We weren't in any kind of position to worry about their intentions. Liv and I kept ramming our knives into ears and eyes, grabbing hair and yanking heads back to jam our blades through their jaws.

The continuously honking horn would have been irritating under any other circumstance, but it caught the attention of those on the periphery of the group, and they turned involuntarily to follow the sound.

I breathed a sigh and looked at Liv. They were always drawn to the loudest noises, and whenever several of them changed direction at the same time, more of them followed. If we were lucky, only the corpses close enough to know that we were food would stick around.

My heart pounded as a young guy with dark skin jumped out of the passenger side and threw his arms over his head, waving and shouting to draw the attention of more corpses. Whoever was behind the wheel flashed their high beams on and off and the honking continued. Between the two of them, the noise and movement they generated had most of the horde swinging around and heading in their direction.

The rain and wet roads slowed their progress, but enough corpses left that Liv and I could jump down from the roof and take on the remainder at ground level. We swapped our knives for axe and sword. While we focused on clearing the threat, Jonah exited the backseat without being asked and told Dawn to stay in the car where she was safe.

The three of us worked fast, dropping one corpse after another. Dead bodies piled up around us and lightning crackled in the sky, illuminating the gloom for seconds at a time. Thunder boomed and rain drenched our faces. We were all breathing hard, yelling out warnings whenever one of us was about to be caught off guard, working seamlessly as if we'd been together for years rather than days.

The new guy jumped in his car again, and the driver performed a flawless U-turn, sticking to the road and avoiding the soft edges. The SUV travelled at walking pace while the occupants shouted from their windows to keep the horde's interest, leading the danger away and giving us a fighting chance. I didn't know if we'd ever get the

opportunity to thank them, but they'd saved our lives.

When the rain eased off to a steady drizzle, the apprehension keeping all my muscles taut finally loosened.

“We’re nearly done,” Liv called out, sending me a quick smile. Her hair was stuck to her temples, her t-shirt a transparent film clinging to her body. She must have been exhausted, but her eyes were alert, her movements fast and efficient.

Only about a dozen corpses to go before we could shift our focus to getting our cars operational again. “To your left.” My heart gave a hard thud as I pointed my axe at a corpse trying to latch onto her arm. She turned in one fluid movement and swung her sword at its head, easing my concerns in an instant.

Jonah took on more than his share, maintaining focus and keeping his eyes on each target. “Two more,” he called out, nodding his head at the area behind me.

I spun around and kicked the closest one in the stomach, sending it flailing onto its back. The second corpse—a man with tattoo sleeves and a gaping hole in his cheek where his rotting teeth showed through—tripped over the body and went down. I used a two-handed swing to embed my axe in his skull, yanking hard to free the bit.

Every time I stole glimpses at Dawn to make sure she was staying in the car, I found her tracking Jonah’s movements with an anxious expression.

Her worries would be over soon enough.

Mine, too.

When we finished dropping every corpse, bodies were scattered around the car. Some in piles, others on their own. The scene reminded me of the one we’d come across in

Melbourne just before Jackson and his team tried rounding us up.

We were alone here, though.

No one wanted to kidnap Liv, and there were no assholes trying to kill me.

She let out an audible breath and took in the massacre. “We did it,” she said. “I can’t believe we actually did it.”

Liv wouldn't complain about being tired while we were still outside, but after her efforts through the sunroof, she must have been feeling it by now. I wished I could have tucked her away in the car and let her rest, but we still had two vehicles to work on and countless bodies to move, so we could clear room to drive through.

We needed everyone on board, including Dawn, now the danger had passed.

I caught Jonah's eye and nodded at the Ford. "Help me with the car?"

He glanced at his mother and Liv as if to check they were okay, then stowed his knife. "I'll grab the shovel."

Liv

"Do you think we'll run into them again?" I asked Cruz.

The rain had stopped, the sun finally breaking through the heavy cloud cover as we rolled into the tiny town of Harriet. I gazed at our surroundings from the passenger seat, taking in the drenched streets and rundown buildings. Mass culling a group of the infected had sapped all my energy, and I desperately wanted to get changed; my blood-spattered clothes were plastered to me and stinking up the car.

"Depends how far they had to backtrack to lead the corpses away." Cruz drove at a crawl down the main street, paying attention to each business as we passed.

I shoved my damp ponytail over my shoulder and searched for signs of the dead. The horde must have gathered all the strays on the way through town, because the previous population of five hundred looked like it had dropped to zero.

It took us almost an hour to get Dawn's car out of the mud using Cruz's idea of broken branches under the tyres for traction, then we used it to jumpstart ours. Luring the horde away meant the man and his companion would have needed to move on to the next exit if they wanted to circle back and catch up with us. I wasn't sure how off course a detour like that would take them, but I figured we should have seen them by now.

There used to be heroes and good Samaritans pre-pandemic—I remembered seeing plenty of them in action during the worst of the virus, too—but I'd always been certain those days were behind us. It made me feel hopeful seeing kindness again, and

the thought that we might run into them kept my tiredness at bay.

I glanced in the side mirror to check on Dawn and Jonah, then shifted my attention to the ghost town. A dilapidated general store tripled as a post office and takeaway pizza place. There was a police station, an obligatory country pub on the corner, and a hair salon called Cheryl's Cuts.

Cruz took a left onto a residential road, and we passed a tiny primary school before we reached the houses.

I shifted in my seat to ease the discomfort of my wet clothes and paid attention to every property. We drove by one unsuitable place after another. The houses on both sides of the street had the usual neglected gardens, some with shabby front fences, others with smashed windows or entry doors that had been kicked in. It took mere seconds to determine there was nothing for us here. Every place looked as if it had been abandoned right at the beginning of the pandemic, not one of them secure enough for us to stay the night.

"This isn't going as well as I hoped," I said, wondering how many streets we'd need to cruise down before we decided Harriet wasn't going to work. "I've never seen an entire town look so lifeless."

"We might need to move on to the next stop. I'll try a couple more streets first." Cruz slowed the car as we came to a t-intersection. He flicked a glance at the rearview mirror as if to check on Dawn, then tension flooded the car, and his body switched to high-alert mode. "They're here."

Two words had my limbs tensing and my stomach filling with butterflies. "The people who helped?"

"Yeah." Cruz pulled over before he reached the intersection, and I swivelled around

as far as my seatbelt would allow. Dawn came to a stop at the curb, and the red SUV eased in behind her, the bright, happy colour a stark contrast to the anxious thoughts suddenly swirling through my mind.

My heart jumped to my throat, and I swallowed, reminding myself not to assume the best just because they'd done one decent thing.

In the past twenty-four hours, people had tried to hurt us on three different occasions. The day before that, we were hunted and cornered in Melbourne. The memories were still so fresh, my aching muscles testament to the stress my body had been put through.

I didn't want to be too pessimistic about whoever occupied the vehicle. They'd saved us from a risky situation we'd still be dealing with now if they hadn't distracted the infected. It had to mean good things.

No one would go to the effort of helping us only to come back and harm us later.

Unless they were out gathering women.

As I unfastened the clip on my seatbelt, Cruz's hand engulfed mine and halted the movement. "Stay close to me, carino ," he said, looking into my eyes. "We don't know how many of them are in the car or what their intentions are."

The memories were still fresh for him, too. "I'll be careful."

We opened our doors and met up again on the footpath, standing outside a house with a broken window and a faded curtain flapping in the breeze. The wind against my damp clothes made me shiver, but I wouldn't wrap my arms around myself to show even a hint of weakness to strangers.

Dawn and Jonah joined us, and together we presented a united front.

"Strangers intimidate me," she said, holding her hair back from her face.

"That's good." I gave her a quick smile as my heart raced. "It means you'll pay close attention to everything they say and do. Stay ready and don't be afraid to use your knife."

As two men exited the SUV and came our way, a queasy feeling of anticipation filled my stomach. I wondered if the rear doors were going to open and more people would come tumbling out, but it remained just the two of them.

They were both lean with dark skin and black hair, aged somewhere in their late twenties if I had to guess. One of them had short dreads and wore camo pants with a charcoal tank. The other was dressed in a grey t-shirt with baggy cargo shorts, his hair cut close to the scalp. They both had graceful gaits, the smooth confidence of young men.

Neither of them shied away from eye contact as they approached, and their hands remained in full view. They carried weapons on their belts, but didn't feel the need to hold onto them. I waited for a vague sense of unease to come over me, for someone's gaze to linger a beat too long on certain parts of my body just as members of Jackson's crew had done, but nothing happened. No alarm bells went off, and although I'd never allow myself to relax completely, I was already less on edge than I had been when they first showed up.

Cruz stepped forward and positioned himself slightly in front of me, holding out his hand in greeting. "Appreciate the help back there," he said, his voice deep and direct. "You saved our asses."

The man in camo pants shook his hand first, and now I could get a closer look at

them, I lowered my age estimation to early twenties at most, more like Jonah. “Not a problem,” he said. “Glad we could help.”

“I’m Liv.” I smiled at the man in shorts. “Thanks for your help. I wasn’t sure how much longer we could keep going there.”

“No worries. I’m Gabe.” He smiled. “This is my twin brother, Remy.”

As Cruz took over and made the remaining introductions, I eyed off their weapons. Gabe was equipped with a standard hammer and a knife so big it looked more like a small machete. Remy had a screwdriver with the longest handle I’d ever seen—perfect for piercing the brain—and a hatchet just like Cruz’s tucked into the other side of his belt.

We’d only just met, but while Cruz asked some basic questions to get a feel for them, I couldn’t stop picturing us as a group. Travelling together, protecting one another. Part of me was so desperate to belong to a community that I began mentally making that adjustment the second we met people who were nice to us.

I shook off the distracting thoughts and tuned into the conversation, so I wouldn’t miss anything.

"We left Adelaide about two months ago," Gabe said, in answer to a question I hadn't heard, "after our mum died."

"There were seven in our family," Remy added. "But it was down to just the three of us. We’re pretty sure she had a heart attack."

Dawn pressed her lips together and glanced away. Their mum would have died around the same time that Dawn lost her husband. More young people left behind without the people they needed the most—exactly what she feared happening to her

son. "I'm sorry," she said, looking from one to the other.

Gabe shrugged, but it was more a gesture of acceptance than one of not caring. "All you can do is deal with whatever shit comes at you, right?"

"Where were you going before you saw us?" Jonah asked.

"We're low on fuel. We were stopping here to see what's around."

When it came to cars, Remy explained that they were using the same method as Cruz, switching vehicles every couple of days. The time would come when that wouldn't be an option for any of us, and I hoped we could be settled in our permanent home before it happened.

"What about food?" I asked. "Do you have any supplies?"

"Not much." Gabe glanced over his shoulder at the SUV. "We usually just scavenge as we go."

They'd appreciate the fresh fruits and vegetables we were carrying, and it would be a practical way to thank them for luring the dead away and basically saving our lives. While I was stabbing the infected from my precarious position in the sunroof, there were several times I had to shut down thoughts that I might not survive. The smells, the sounds, the pounding rain... it was tough to keep a positive mindset until Remy and Gabe came along.

"Why don't we find a place to stow our cars and stay out of sight while we chat?" Cruz suggested.

Remy took in the houses on both sides of the street, turning around to get the full experience. When he'd seen enough, he faced us again, and his expression told me he

liked our options about as much as I did. "Sounds good, but not here."

Cruz gazed into the distance. We needed somewhere big enough to house six people and hide three cars, a place where we could spread out and not have to worry about being seen by anyone who happened to be passing through town.

Farmland made up the entire area surrounding Harriet, so our best bet would be to temporarily set up in a property far from the main street, one that could only be reached by car. If anyone showed up throughout the night, we'd see their headlights or hear their engines—and no one would attempt walking somewhere that isolated in the dark. "Should we go for a drive and see what we can find?" I asked.

Everyone was on board with the idea, but with no way of communicating between our vehicles once we were driving, we agreed to travel as a convoy rather than scouting separately. Cruz and I returned to our car while the others did the same.

I shivered as my damp clothes pressed against the leather seat.

"Are you doing okay?" he asked as we shut our doors.

"Just cold and wet." I fastened my seatbelt and tugged the neckline of my t-shirt to loosen its hold on me. "I'm trying not to get my hopes up, but I already feel comfortable around them. It has to be a good sign."

"Guess we'll know more soon enough." He pulled the keys from his pocket. "Let's see if this thing starts." After freeing Dawn's car from the mud, it had taken a while to get ours going again.

Cruz tried the ignition, and the engine turned over on the first go.

I smiled. "Woo."

We circled a block of houses in the same condition as the street we originally came down, then travelled back to the main street with the others keeping close behind. As we led the convoy away from town, Cruz took the first right onto a straight gravel road that appeared to go on forever.

Paddocks and paddocks of brown grass stretched as far as the eye could see, with swaying eucalyptus trees lining the road. The rain had left puddles in the deep ruts along the edges of the gravel, and droplets fell from the overhead branches, dotting the windshield.

Our car was a mess after being slimed by the infected, and when Cruz turned the wipers on, dirt and grime spread across the glass. "Not my best idea," he said, squirting the window with wiper fluid to clear the view.

I smiled and half-turned in my seat to look behind me. Dawn and Jonah were next in line, with the twins bringing up the rear. My gaze lowered to the road between our cars, my brows pulling together as I took in the fresh tracks we were leaving in the gravel. I hoped that little detail wouldn't come back to bite us. If anyone stumbled onto our tyre marks, being away from the main roads wouldn't do a thing to keep us safe.

I faced the front again just in time to see an open farm gate on the left, partially hidden between a cluster of overgrown bushes. A rusty letterbox sat on top of a weathered post, and the fence at the entrance looked like it was one strong breeze away from falling to pieces.

"There," I said, hoping the house was in better condition. "If someone was living here, they would have closed the gate." Cruz swung into the driveway, dodging potholes as we approached a white farmhouse peeking through a thick cover of trees. I threw another look over my shoulder at the rest of the group to make sure they were following. "Or maybe they're still here and using a reverse psychology tactic to make

us think there's no one around," I said, immediately contradicting myself.

Cruz smiled, holding my gaze just long enough to have my heart thumping faster.

"What?" I laughed, thrilled and uncomfortable at the same time.

"You're cute."

With my wet hair and the sludge from the infected seeping into my clothes, I didn't feel cute. I had a suspicion I could never scrub myself enough to smell clean again. It was so gross.

My face flamed with heat, and I looked out the side window while I tried to understand his effect on me. Whenever I sent flirty comments in Cruz's direction, I was in control and borderline confident. If he used them on me —especially in that deep, gravelly voice of his—I reverted to an innocent teenager who could barely make herself talk to boys.

"We're here," he said, his tone laced with humour. "So, you're off the hook."

"Thank God."

Cruz smiled and shifted his attention to our surroundings.

We pulled up in front of a rambling house that had seen better days, but its charming, worn-in appearance made me feel like I would have been welcome here back in the day. Massive sheds with open fronts were located off to one side, the smaller of the two stacked to the roof with dark, rotting hay bales, while the other housed several pieces of oversized farm machinery. The grass around the property was sparse and straw-like, with a carpet of dead leaves surrounding the trunks of gum trees that towered over the house—too close for my liking.

There were eight or so of the infected scattered across the entire area, an easy number for a group of our size to handle.

Cruz and I jumped out as the other vehicles pulled up, parking in a row beside us. As we drew our weapons and gathered near the open front door, Cruz scanned each face to make sure he had our attention. “Let's sweep the property in pairs and clear the corpses. If anything looks out of place, call for help. Dawn, stick close to Jonah while he checks the sheds. Remy and Gabe can take care of the house, and Liv and I will do a general walk around. All good?”

The twins merely nodded in agreement, making the situation straightforward and easier to manage.

We each took off to tackle our assigned tasks, and Cruz fell into step beside me. The ground was soft beneath our boots, and we maintained an easy pace as we kept watch on our surroundings. “So, one night here and we're off in the morning?” I asked, making sure we were on the same page. I hoped to get moving early and close the remaining distance between us and what I'd come to romanticise as Utopia. If we were lucky, we could get there tomorrow.

After everything we'd been through, the thought blew my mind.

We stopped to use our weapons on two of the infected, then continued walking. He glanced over the top of my head toward a dense row of shrubs. “Providing we have an uneventful night, and our cars start in the morning.” He grabbed a dead man by the shirtfront and put his knife through its eye, releasing the body as it collapsed.

The reliability of our vehicles was always the biggest question mark. From what I'd seen in the town centre, there were no viable options for a replacement, so we'd have to wait until the next populated area to find something suitable.

Two of the dead were coming at us from different directions—a bulky man and a petite woman, both elderly and dressed in weathered clothing suited to outdoor work. “I’ll take the small one,” I said.

They weren't as decomposed as the majority of the infected I came across, and I wondered if they were the recently deceased owners of the house. With my fingers tightening around the handle of my sword, I strode over to the woman and took her out with a single blow to the head, uttering a silent apology as she dropped on the ground.

My arm still ached from the activity with the horde, and as I turned to face Cruz, I rolled my shoulder to loosen the muscles.

He’d already ended the man, and when he caught sight of me, his brow creased. “You’re injured.”

“I’m fine.” In the distance, Jonah wandered out from the smaller shed and headed for the remaining three infected that were loitering closer to his location than ours. Dawn trailed behind him a safe distance away, giving me a thumbs-up when she spotted me. I waved in return.

Cruz spared them a glance, apparently confident in Jonah’s ability to handle the group on his own. He came over to me, stowed his hatchet, and reached for my hand to tug me closer. When his warm fingers slid beneath the sleeve of my t-shirt, I shivered and kept my eyes on his chest. “You’re allowed to show that you’re hurt,” he said. “You don't need to pretend for my sake.”

His hands worked my shoulder, manipulating my muscles until I wanted to moan and lean against him. Instead, I closed my eyes and focused on his touch. “I’m not hiding it for that reason. It’s a survival tactic. If I can trick myself into thinking I’m okay, I’ll be able to make it through the rest of the day without falling apart.”

Cruz pressed his thumb into a spot at the front of my shoulder, and I couldn't keep my groan contained this time around. His hands were so strong, his fingers somehow finding every place that needed attention. When I opened my eyes, he gave me a small smile and held my gaze. "It's all right to fall apart, too," he said. "I'll be there to catch you . Every time."

His words had my heart wanting to burst free of its cage, and my pulse thrummed in my neck. Was it possible to love someone this soon—real, deep love, and not just surface infatuation or lust? The two of us were intertwined, and I'd never felt this close to a man. I wanted to be near him, always, and no amount of time could ever be too much.

"All clear over here!" Jonah yelled. "There's a river over the fence if you want to clean up."

Cruz gave me the ghost of a smile and lifted his hand in the air to indicate he'd heard Jonah. "Better regroup," he said to me.

There were more jobs to do. There was always work to do when you lived on the road and every stop you made was temporary, but before I lost myself in the next task, I planted my feet and lifted my chin. "Kiss me first."

Cruz didn't look around to see if we were being watched or hesitate to meet a request that had honestly come out sounding more like a demand. He just slipped his hands around the back of my neck and lowered his mouth to mine in one fluid move. I sighed as we connected, and my fingers curled over his belt buckle to keep him close. His lips were soft and warm, and he kissed me with the patience of a man who had all the time in the world to spend with me. Cherishing me. Holding me. My stomach fluttered as I kissed him back and melted against him.

A long minute later, he pulled away and clasped my face. "Happy?"

My first impulse was to grab his shirt and drag him straight back to me, but I somehow contained the urge. "One more, and I will be."

Cruz rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip and smiled. He planted a smacking kiss on my mouth, walking me backward in the direction of the house. "Come on. Let's go get cleaned up. You smell like death."

And so our tender moment came to an end. With a smile, I turned and strolled beside him, happier than I'd been in a long time. "Just so you know, that's not the best way to woo a lady."

He threw an arm around my shoulder and pulled me close, more playful than I'd seen him. "I know all the ways to woo. I could speak to you in Spanish, and you wouldn't understand a single word, but I'd still woo the hell out of you."

I believed him.

If being around others helped Cruz let his guard down and show this fun side that usually stayed hidden out of necessity, I couldn't wait to see what other aspects of his personality made an appearance over the coming days and weeks.

We headed for the pile of backpacks that someone had stacked beside the rear door. I grabbed mine and slung it over my good shoulder, ready to change out of my horrendous clothes.

Once I was smelling and feeling more like myself again, I hoped it would leave me better equipped to tackle the remainder of the day... and this fast-growing, out of control attraction to a man who'd taken over my entire world.

Cruz

The house was in pretty good shape considering both doors had been left swinging open, allowing the weather to blow through. A few corpses were bumbling around inside when Remy and Gabe performed their sweep, but they'd already dragged the bodies out the back and aired out the place. Although the interior was almost as worn as the exterior, it was clean and solid enough for an overnight stop.

Jonah, Liv, and I were the only ones wearing putrid, wet clothes, so we took turns washing up in the river behind the property. Now, we were scrubbed clean and sitting with the others on red vinyl chairs in the kitchen. Dawn and Jonah had laid out fruits and vegetables on the sixties' style tabletop, while Liv and I mixed up powdered milk and poured it into glasses.

I scanned the faces around the table as we ate and talked, amazed at the group we'd assembled in such a short time.

When your last family member died and everything that once kept you grounded disappeared, it tended to change your view of the world. Not long back, I was alone and questioning if there was any point to life after everything had been obliterated. Now, I had five friends... well, four and a woman who was something else.

Something more.

Liv sat opposite me, her gaze catching mine as she laughed at something Dawn said. Seeing her like this, open and relaxed, gave me a glimpse of the woman she would have been before our lives changed—and a peek into what the future might be like

with her once we were settled. The corner of my mouth kicked up and affection swept through me. Her laughter faded, and she smiled, her gaze lingering on me for a beat before she returned her attention to the conversation.

The kiss she demanded from me when we were walking together stoked something inside me that didn't appear to be fading. Seeing her ask for what she wanted and accept it with her entire body was a major turn on, and although she'd apparently moved on from the moment, I couldn't.

I wanted more.

As the others talked around the table, my attention dropped to her lips and lingered. Liv seemed to sense my eyes on her and glanced my way again, but then her skin turned pink, and she quickly averted her gaze. She liked to act as if she had it all under control, but it was easy to send her over the edge. I loved being the only one who could do that to her.

"Do you have a destination in mind while you're travelling?" Dawn picked a couple of grapes from the bunch and looked from Gabe to Remy. "You must have been picturing what kind of life you want for yourselves. What does that look like?"

She'd already warmed to the new guys, her posture more relaxed, and her body language open. She kept adding extra food to their plates in case they were hesitant about grabbing more.

Gabe crunched into an apple and spoke around the mouthful. "Haven't talked about the future," he said, using the back of his hand to wipe juice from his chin. "Everyone's gone, so nowhere feels like home anymore."

Remy finished his milk, then looked around the table and frowned. "How do you all even know each other, anyway?"

Liv took a handful of grapes from the plate, and the four of us swapped stories about where we'd been and how we came to be together.

Remy explained that he and Gabe had moved to Australia from South Sudan with their family when they were young enough to have very few memories of their home country now. When the virus began taking family members, their mother's health deteriorated with each loss, and although they claimed she'd had a heart attack, it sounded more like it was broken by grief. Coming from such a big family must have left them feeling more lost than the rest of us now that they were alone.

Once we'd shared stories about our pasts, I moved on to more practical matters to get a feel for their plans. "Are you interested in sticking with us?" My question earned a smile from Liv across the table. "We're looking at building a community with a specific destination in mind."

Remy nodded slowly, as if thinking it over. "Depends on where you're headed."

"Wait, I'll show you." Liv wasted no time jumping up from the table and rushing to her backpack in the lounge room. She returned with her folded magazine article, spreading both pages on the table between the twins. Excitement vibrated from her, just like it had when she first shared the pictures with me. "It's a little under two hours from here on the east coast," she said, her features animated. "Fully sustainable. Power, water, space to grow food—or build more homes, so we're not living under one another's feet."

"What are the chances of a place like this being empty?" Remy glanced at Liv, then me. "Even if the owners are long gone, any locals who knew about the property would have moved in by now. That's what I would have done."

"It's almost too good to be true," Gabe added.

They had the same train of thought as the rest of us. “You’re right,” I said. “It could be occupied, or trashed, or overtaken by a bigger group—but that’s where we’re focusing our energy until we find out otherwise.”

Liv left the article between them and took her seat again. “Even if another group has already claimed it, we could talk our way in—hopefully.”

“And if we can’t?” Remy asked.

I didn’t want to give the wrong impression to people who barely knew us, so instead of suggesting we force our way in by any means necessary, I kept my answer ambiguous. “We’ll figure it out when we get there.” The darkening sky cast shadows over the kitchen, and a sudden crack of lightning illuminated the room. We still had to find candles and do another sweep of the exterior before night settled in. “What do you think?”

They looked at each other, but they must have had a twin-connection going on because an entire conversation appeared to be taking place without a word being spoken. “We’re in—until we get there and scope out the situation.”

Dawn’s face lit up, and she gave Jonah’s arm a nudge. “That’s good news.”

Jonah met my eyes with a subtle smile. Approval and relief.

Since everyone appeared happy with their answer, I pushed back my chair and stood. “I’m heading out to do another walk around the grounds. When I get back, we can work out who’s taking first watch.”

Liv shot up from her seat and rounded the table to join me. “I’ll come with you.” The speed of her reaction must have given the impression this was a private outing, because no one else volunteered to come along.

“Back in ten,” I said to the group, then I held the door open so she could pass through ahead of me.

Liv didn’t look at me, but I sensed the restlessness coming off her. Almost like a pressure cooker needing to let off some steam to avoid an explosion.

“It’s getting dark earlier now,” Liv commented as we inspected the area behind the sheds.

We had our weapons drawn, but there didn’t appear to be a need for them. After clearing the initial cluster of corpses when we arrived, no others had turned up to take their place.

Leaf litter covered the ground and wind rustled through the trees, stronger now than it was when we first got here. I stepped up to the wire boundary fence that separated the rear of the property from the river. The fast-flowing water made it impossible for corpses to cross without being swept away, and any human in their right mind wouldn’t take on the freezing temperature only to come out soaked to the bone on the other side.

This area wouldn’t require close surveillance. It was the driveway we needed to monitor—and the weather. Thunder rumbled as ominous clouds gathered, darkening by the minute. We were in for another storm, and the way the wind had picked up made me wonder if it would be worse than the last one.

I turned to find Liv watching me, and when our eyes met, she refused to look away, holding my gaze like she was trying to send me a message. Her features were flooded with emotion, her free hand clenched at her side. While I was thinking about surveillance, security, and cloud patterns, she clearly had something more interesting on her mind.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I strolled toward her.

She kept her eyes locked with mine, retreating slowly until her back met the rear wall of the shed. Her face tipped up as I closed in on her, and her body gave off a riveting kind of energy, like a ball of nerves wound tight with nowhere to go. “I don’t want to beg,” she said, her voice husky and soft.

She stared at me like I held some kind of invisible power over her, and I suddenly wanted to be gentle with her for reasons I couldn’t explain. “For what?”

“You’ve given me so much. Taken care of me, protected me.”

“You’ve done the same for me,” I reminded her. “More than once.”

Liv paused and pulled in a shaky breath. “You’ve given me so much,” she said again, as if she hadn’t heard me speak. She tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear, still damp from our bathing session in the river roaring behind me.

My attention lowered to take in the rest of her. She’d changed into a blue button-up shirt a couple of shades darker than her eyes, and I glimpsed hardened nipples pressing up against the fabric. Only a clueless man wouldn’t be able to pick up on the direction of her thoughts. We’d discussed putting the brakes on until we were among the relative safety of a group—and now here we were surrounded by others.

Six of us, when just yesterday morning there were two.

Her twitchiness had me biting back a smile. A current of desire moved through me, and I swept my gaze over our surroundings before I brought my attention back to her. I didn’t feel the same need to be so vigilant anymore—like one wrong move could mean the end for us. We had backup now, people who’d come running without a second thought. “But?”

“I want more.”

It was impossible to look at her face, all flushed with need, and pretend I didn't understand. She wanted more—specifically from me—and I couldn't let her make another move that resulted in rejection.

“In what way?” I took the last step that separated us. “Talk to me like I'm an idiot. Spell it out with very clear, very detailed instructions.”

I knew the exact moment she caught onto the fact that I was onto her. A bright smile flashed across her face, and she shoved my chest with her free hand, since we were both still carrying weapons. “Wow. You are an idiot.”

I lifted my brows. “A handsome one?”

She nodded slowly, looking me over. “Almost too handsome. It's... distracting.” Liv gazed up at me, her eyes imploring me to get on board quickly before she lost her nerve. “I want you to kiss me again.”

“How?”

“Soft and slow, while you grind against me like you did in that house on the bed when it was just the two of us. Maybe cop a feel if the thought occurs to you.”

With a laughing breath, I looked her over. If the thought occurred to me?

I moved closer, stopping when my chest touched hers. We were in a private space and a safer position than we'd ever been in, but I was still conscious of our limited time. Someone might come looking for us any minute to make sure nothing had happened to us out here. We couldn't disappear for long stretches without causing concern.

My hatchet dangled from my free hand, and I clasped the base of her neck in a loose hold. Liv drew a sharp breath and stared at me, her lips open, and her eyes soft with longing.

I dipped my head and let my mouth hover over hers, waiting and letting the tension build. We were standing so close, I could feel the nervous energy flowing through her, but she closed her eyes and seemed to just hand herself over to me, trusting me to take care of her out here in the elements. As I kissed her upper lip, then her lower lip, her pulse quickened against my fingers, and I couldn't remember wanting her more than I did in this moment.

Liv sighed and grabbed a handful of my shirt. She pulled me hard against her, but when her mouth began moving with mine, it was soft and tentative at first, the innocence of it making the moment more erotic.

She smelled like rain and earth, felt like heaven and every fantasy come to life. I'd wanted her from the moment I saw her darting across the street in the city, back before I even knew her name. Now she was here, with me, telling me with her body that she wanted and needed me. For a man who thought he'd be living out the rest of his life alone, I couldn't put into words how much her touch meant to me.

I swept my tongue across hers, and when she made an urgent, desperate sound in her throat, my head nearly exploded. Her back bowed, her breasts pushed against my chest, then her tongue met mine and pulled a groan from me.

With a pause and a quick check of our surroundings, I took the kiss deeper, pressing her into the wall of the shed, imprinting every part of me on her, so we'd both remember this when we went back inside.

"I need you," she said breathlessly against my mouth.

And I'd kidded myself into thinking keeping our distance would be the best thing for both of us. All we'd done was build the anticipation, the sexual tension, until it reached the level where both of us were ready to implode. I wanted to drop my hatchet and get both hands on her. Instead, I gripped her ass with my free hand and rubbed her against my hard-on, wishing I could have been inside her.

Her guttural moan turned the kiss wild. Out of control. It went on and on until finally we broke away, and she leaned her head against the wall with a thud. "This isn't fair," she said, breathing hard and struggling to contain herself. She could barely look at me.

"I know." I moved my hand to the back of her neck and waited for her eyes to meet mine. "But we don't have long until the others start worrying about us—and when we're together for the first time, I want you naked and underneath me in a bed, not pinned against a fucking tin shed."

My words turned her eyes into miniature storms, and the wild beauty of her had me trying to catch my breath. "That's not helping at all. "

Before I could stop her, she unfastened the row of buttons on her shirt with her free hand, and with another deft flick of her fingers, the front catch on her bra sprung open. The sight had me internally groaning and feeling like someone had punched me in the stomach at the same time. She kept her eyes on me as she showed me her breasts, and I wanted to bury my face right there and never come up for air again. God, if she smothered me to death, I'd die happy.

I hadn't seen a naked woman in a long time, but that wasn't the main reason my heart pounded so hard it thudded in my ears. She was so real and raw that I had to swallow the emotion creeping up my throat. "Olivia," I said, noting the huskiness in my voice.

Her deep breath when she heard her name made her chest rise, and my gaze lowered

to her breasts again. I stepped in close and pressed my mouth to hers in a single, lingering kiss. “You’re breathtaking,” I said against her mouth, “and you’re mine.”

My hand slid down her neck, skating across her skin until I had one of her breasts cupped in my hand. The weight of it filled my palm, and as her breathing turned shallow, I leaned back and gazed into her eyes. “Tell me you’re mine,” I said, my voice coming out gruffer than intended.

Her mouth parted as she stared up at me, her cheeks flushed with heat in the cool air. “I’m yours. In every way.”

Thunder cracked, and the wind whipped around our bodies, swirling leaves and shaking the steel wall of the shed. Her words had my heart swelling until it felt too big for my chest. I kissed her again, using my tongue as my thumb stroked her nipple and teased it to a hardened peak. She was soft, and silky, and so perfect I could barely stand it, and she kissed me back with an enthusiasm that bordered on aggression.

I groaned and pushed my lower body against hers, shoving her against the shed wall to show her how hard she’d made me. Liv clutched me to her, and her tongue thrust into my mouth as her hips moved restlessly, seeking more. We kissed a while longer, diving deeper, until her sword dropped to the dirt with a thunk and I knew we were taking this too far.

She’d stopped paying attention, and I was only seconds away from joining her.

I reluctantly pulled my mouth from hers, and her moan of protest had me smiling and pinching her chin to give her one final peck. “We’re losing control, querida . If we don’t stop now, there’ll be no stopping us.”

Her eyes were still clouded with desire, her lips an appealing shade of pink from the pressure of my mouth. A myriad of emotions passed over her features, but in the end,

logic appeared to win out. “I hate to say it—I mean, I really hate to say it—but you’re right. It’s almost dark, and this is all kinds of crazy. Anything could happen out here.”

As if to prove her point, a smattering of rain fell, and another rumble of thunder filled the sky.

“Hold this,” I said, passing her my weapon.

I cradled her breasts and lowered my head to kiss a silent, regretful goodbye to each nipple, fighting the urge to take them in my mouth and suck until I had her writhing and doing some of that begging she’d mentioned. When I finished locking a mental snapshot away for later, I pulled the cups together and clicked the catch in place. One by one, I fastened her shirt buttons while she watched me with a slight smile on her face.

I narrowed my eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m just picturing what I’m going to do to you when you finally give me the green light.”

Feeling happier than I had in a long time, I grinned as I bent to pick up her sword and swap it for my hatchet. “You just can’t behave yourself, can you?”

She laughed and stood on her toes to press another kiss on my mouth, making an adorable hum of pleasure before our lips parted. “Not when I’m around you.”

Cruz

I inside the house, I flicked the lock on the back door and lowered the roller shade. I took in the empty room. The others must have scrounged for candles and matches, because soft light glowed from various locations in the kitchen and lounge room, creating a warm feeling to offset the wild weather going on outside the walls.

Liv and I headed for the sound of voices and found Jonah and Gabe in the lounge room, sitting on two burgundy armchairs that they'd dragged around to face each other, their positions putting eyes on each entry point into the room. They glanced up as we came in, their features lit by the flickering flame on the coffee table between them.

“See anything interesting out there?” Jonah asked.

I cupped the back of Liv's neck and squeezed affectionately. “Couple of things.”

With an amused huff, she spun around to face me, her eyes glimmering with mischief.

“Should have yelled out,” Gabe said. “We could have helped you take care of them.”

Liv burst out laughing and tried to disguise it as a cough, which only succeeded in making her sound like she was choking on nothing. I pulled her to me and patted her back, fighting a smile. “All good. I had my hands full, but I managed.” She pressed her face into my chest and snorted. My new favourite sound. “Where are Dawn and Remy?”

Jonah finished a glass of water and left it on the side table. He gave my embrace with Liv a curious glance, then his eyes flicked up to mine and realisation dawned. He smiled a bit, but kept his comments to himself. “We all talked while you were gone. Gabe and I took first watch, and Mum and Remy are catching a few hours’ sleep.”

Gabe rose from his chair and approached the bigger of the two windows, peering out through the uncovered glass into the darkening evening. “Dawn’s in the room down the end of the hall,” he said, “and Remy took the one opposite her. If you want to rest up for a few hours, we’re good here.”

Their initiative and take-charge tones filled me with confidence, but I was nowhere near ready for sleep. “I’ll hang out here for a while. Do you want to head off to bed?” I asked Liv.

“Not yet. It's too early for me.”

We wandered over to the seating area and laid our weapons on the coffee table. While Gabe returned to his chair, Liv and I sank onto the couch, sitting so close our thighs pressed together. I stretched my arm along the headrest behind her and prepared to wait out what I hoped would be a short-lived storm. Lightning illuminated the room, closer now than it was while we were outside, and the initial rumble of thunder had become an almost constant presence. Those pattering raindrops that had brought us inside gained strength, turning into another downpour like the one we'd battled through on the road.

“Sucks that we can’t check whether reports anymore,” Jonah said. “We never have a clue what's coming.”

"As long as the outside stays outside, I think we'll be fine." Liv tilted her head toward the ceiling as if looking for leaks.

I hadn't thought of that. If the property had been sitting vacant for a while, there was no one around to manage repairs or monitor trees with weak branches. From memory, those eucalyptus trees were pretty close to the building, and they were known for dropping branches on tents and caravans at campsites.

The wind rattled the windows and lightning struck not too far in the distance, turning the lounge into full daylight before thunder took its place with a house-shaking boom. Strain gathered in Liv's body, transferring to mine at the point where our legs touched. Gabe and Jonah didn't appear too at ease with the situation, either. A moment later, Dawn materialised in the doorway wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and socks. She scanned the room, taking in each face with a worried expression, then scrubbed her hands over her cheeks. "I couldn't sleep with all that noise."

I shifted to the other end of the couch and encouraged Liv to move with me, making room for Dawn. She smiled her thanks and perched in the space, trapping her hands between her knees—the best way to stop herself from attacking her thumb. "I hope it doesn't last long," she said, staring out the window at nothing. "I've never understood people who love sitting on front porches and watching thunderstorms."

"Me either," Liv admitted. "How can you relax when it feels like the house is going to come crashing down?"

Dawn gave her a deadpan look. "That helped kill my nerves. Thanks."

Her bland tone had everyone laughing, but the next crack of thunder killed the mood in an instant. The room went silent, and the wind howled so loud I wondered how the house could still be standing. I tossed around the idea of suggesting we get out of here and find somewhere in town to hole up instead, but leaving at this stage could be even riskier than staying put.

We knew what we were dealing with in the farmhouse. Outside, in the dark, it was

too much of an unknown.

“This is a sturdy building,” Dawn said, her comment sounding more like a question than a statement. “It looks a bit rundown, but it was built decades ago when they cared more about quality. It shouldn’t have any problems handling a storm.”

This was the mother of all storms, though. I couldn’t remember another one like it in my lifetime. I pushed off the couch and approached the side window that looked out onto the area between the house and the sheds. Liv and I had been behind that shed not long back and now there was nowhere safe outside. Lightning hit again and lit up the yard, highlighting all our cars... and three corpses rolling across the ground at high speed.

Shit .

Just before the light disappeared, another corpse tumbled past, stopping only when it smacked into the wall. The bang that echoed through the room was so loud it sounded like a car had crashed into the house. I turned to face everyone as Liv stood and Dawn screeched in shock, launching herself from the couch as her eyes searched for the source.

For an already anxious person, the news wouldn’t help her mental state, but the wind had turned corpses into projectiles. Any minute now, they could shatter windows or hit our cars. My heart thumped harder, and urgency streaked through me. “Someone, go wake up Remy. Make sure everyone has their shoes on. Keep your weapons close.”

“What’s wrong?” Liv approached me, her brows pulled together.

“The wind’s blowing corpses around like leaves. We need to block the windows in case more of them are thrown against the house.”

She didn't ask further questions. No one did. Each person moved fast and focused on our next emergency. Gabe took off down the hall to wake his brother. Dawn grabbed my hatchet and Liv's sword, passing them to us before she rushed from the room, presumably to get her boots.

Jonah and I moved the high-backed couch against the window I'd just been looking through, and Liv dragged an armchair over to block the other one. None of the furniture was tall enough to cover the full height of the glass, but if we took care of the bottom half, it lessened our chances of having corpses land inside.

Dawn returned with the twins, and the six of us stood in the centre of the cleared room, breathing hard and looking at one another. Corpses could blow in from paddocks all around town, their bodies flailing through open spaces with no obstacles to slow their momentum—a major concern if we were out there in the elements, but if we stayed inside, we should be safe.

The kitchen had a small window above the sink and a single-entry door leading to the backyard. If we holed up in there together, we'd be in less danger. "Let's move into the kitchen."

Liv followed me in there, her gaze bouncing around the room. "Why don't we move the fridge against the door, so we only have a window to worry about?"

"Good thinking," Remy said. He went straight to the fridge and dragged it forward, while Liv wedged in behind it to unplug the power cord. Once they'd pulled the fridge from its cavity, I wheeled it to the back door with Remy, then turned to check on everyone as I smacked the dust from my hands.

Each face held a tense-but-ready expression. We'd already shown how well we could work together against the horde in the rain. The only corpses we'd have to deal with this time around were any that crashed through windows. We could do this—and

tomorrow when the storm passed, we'd have hours to catch up on any sleep we lost.

When the sound of smashing glass and splintering wood came from the lounge room, my stomach dropped. It was so loud my first thought was that someone had driven a tractor straight through the house. Dawn jumped and stumbled backward into Gabe, who grabbed her upper arms to steady her. Liv flashed me a look of concern while Remy and Jonah led the charge, running straight into the other room.

I had no clue what to expect when I rushed in there with the others, and the sight punched the breath out of me. A massive branch had taken out the entire side window and a good portion of the roof and wall, crushing the couch we'd moved there. Rain came in sideways, drenching everything in its path and bringing the smell of dirt and eucalyptus inside.

The wind killed the candlelight and left us in semi-darkness. My mind jumped from one solution to the next to figure out our next move. The branch had to weigh at least a couple of hundred kilos, and although we may have had the manpower to move it, we'd only leave a gaping hole for stray corpses to blow through.

Gabe approached the branch to scope out the situation while Jonah went around the other side. They looked like they were about to try moving it when the howling wind sent another corpse hurtling into the branch. It landed with a wet smack beside Gabe's arm, and he jumped back just in time before it could grab his t-shirt.

"Leave the tree," I said, raising my voice above the storm. "It'll stop more from coming through." Another boom of thunder shook the walls, the crack so loud that Liv looked genuinely concerned for the first time since it had started.

Dawn watched on in disbelief, by now probably questioning why she'd ever left home.

I lunged with my hatchet to end the moaning corpse, but my aim was off, and my frustration had me hitting too hard. With one swing, I unintentionally took off its head, and it fell to the floor, rolling to a stop at Dawn's feet. She clapped her hands over her mouth and stared at me while Gabe dived in and put his knife through its temple.

"Sorry," I said, knowing it wouldn't make any difference. All she could do was ride it out.

My gaze moved around the room. Jonah's go-with-the-flow personality meant he adapted to new environments without too much trouble, and his body language gave the impression he was coping well with our shitty circumstances. The twins had been out on the road long enough to take this kind of thing in their stride, so I didn't need to worry about either of them or Liv.

My attention returned to Dawn. She wrapped her arms around herself and pulled in a deep breath, as if trying to stay calm. My eyes narrowed. After a long day with new people in strange places, she'd officially reached her limits. Liv seemed to catch onto the change in her demeanour too, because she looked at me and gave the slightest jerk of her head in Dawn's direction.

I approached her as the wind whirled around the room like a mini tornado, unsure if there was anything I could say or do to put her mind at ease. "Why don't you go back to bed and try to get some sleep?"

Dawn gave the decapitated head another glance and jerked her gaze away. "I can't."

The thunder hadn't eased off in the slightest and lightning strikes were still coming in thick and fast, some bigger and more spectacular than others. It felt like the end of days all over again, and given the ferocity, it could go on for hours. "It's under control out here. We can manage with one less person. Just leave your shoes on in

case we need to get out of here fast.”

She looked at her son and rolled her lower lip between her teeth. "I can't."

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” I promised.

“It’s not that. He’s fine— more than fine. I’m so proud of him. It’s just... I don’t want to be the weakest link." Her gaze returned to mine. "I've let the group down twice now and if I leave while all this is going on, how does that make me look?"

Guilt washed over me because I'd seen her in the same light until Liv changed my mind. Dawn stared at me with her mouth pressed into a tight line as if she expected me to confirm her suspicion, but she wouldn't get any shit from me. "We don't have any weak links here. You're the reason we have food," I reminded her as raindrops spat against my arm, "and you're the reason we'll be able to grow more of it when we find our new home."

The wind blew her hair into her eyes. She pushed it away and huffed out a breath, unconvinced.

It was true, but we also needed women to balance out the testosterone and bring all the skills to the table that men couldn't. Liv and I had seen how well all-male groups operated, Jackson's gang being the prime example. Even if they lasted for a while, egos usually ended up getting in the way and they eventually self-destructed. "We need you in general," I said, "but we don't need you right now. You can even take the bedroom closest to the lounge, so you'll be near the action if anything else happens."

I hoped nothing else happened. We’d been through enough today.

Dawn rubbed her hands down her face and scanned the room, examining the damage from the last ten minutes. She must have decided it couldn't get much worse after the

initial impact, because she forced a smile. “All right. I’ll take a mini break to get my head together and I’ll be back.”

“No hurry. There’s no chance we’re going anywhere tonight.”

Dawn smiled and squeezed my elbow. She turned away from me and had a few quiet words with Jonah, then hugged her son and left. I waited to see which room she'd take, but she bypassed the closest bedroom and headed straight for the one she'd occupied earlier.

As soon as she was out of sight, I sought Liv. She must have been watching me while I spoke to Dawn, because her eyes were already on me. Our gazes connected, and as the wind whipped through the room and another round of thunder clapped overhead, my heart thumped.

Something about her expression made me think she must have heard every word I said to Dawn. Her arms were crossed over her chest, her head tilted just a little to one side. That soft, sweet mouth of hers turned upward in the slightest of smiles, and her expressive eyes that gave away her every thought...

They were flooded with so much feeling that it hit me like a knockout punch.

Liv

“T his freaking storm just won’t let up.” I stood at the kitchen window as the weather raged on outside, rattling the house, and keeping my nerves in a permanent state of readiness. From time to time, lightning illuminated the yard and highlighted another one or two of the infected tumbling around out there. Several minutes ago, the wind had swiftly changed direction, and now they were coming at us from the rear of the house. It might have been comical if it was a scene in a movie, but this was reality, and I was too concerned they might damage our cars.

"Come away from the window, querida, "Cruz said from behind me.

I turned from the glass and faced the room. He’d taken a seat with the boys around the dining table, where they were working on the leftover food from earlier. Candlelight created moving shadows across their faces, and they chatted in such a laid back way it was as if the storm barely registered.

Dawn had been gone for about an hour, and I hoped she was sleeping in the back bedroom rather than worrying. I remembered my first full day away from home, the mental and physical exhaustion that hit the second I stopped moving. She’d been through a lot today.

I wandered past Cruz to check the situation in the living room, hoping we were seeing the worst of the weather now. We could all do with a few hours’ sleep before we set off in the morning.

The wind had extinguished the trio of candles that were originally burning on the

coffee table, and cold air swirled around the space, sending dead leaves skittering across the carpet. With the tree still a feature in the room, it felt like the outside had come inside, just as I'd feared. At least Cruz had thrown the decapitated head back where it came from, and the twins had dragged the body out the front door, dumping it and rushing inside again to avoid the rain.

I approached the sideboard that we'd shoved against the unbroken window and picked up one of the toppled photo frames to entertain myself. Lightning lit up the picture just long enough for me to see four kids at the beach, sitting near the water's edge around a lopsided sandcastle.

Going off the decorating in the farmhouse, the owners would have been older, maybe seventy or so. I figured these had to be their grandchildren. As I considered the chances of them being alive, melancholy swept over me. They reminded me of the photos of the blonde girls I'd seen in the house back in Melbourne, a family that had once looked so happy and perfect, and now no longer existed.

I picked up another frame, a couple dressed in outfits from the sixties accompanied by a handwritten note sent from husband to wife on their anniversary. I turned it toward the candlelight coming from the kitchen to read the cursive writing, a love letter detailing their special moments and what she meant to him, how he missed her whenever they were apart. It pulled at every heartstring and had me dragging in a ragged breath.

Facing the window again, I swallowed the emotion clogging my throat and blinked tears from my eyes. We'd all given up so much, our lives changed forever, and for some, extinguished way too soon.

I missed my family, my dad's strength and wisdom, my mum's wild sense of humour and love of adventure. I missed the life I might have been able to create for myself, the opportunities that would never be within my reach again. My heart ached for the losses we'd endured, my chest heavy with the weight.

Cruz came up behind me and cupped my shoulders, pulling me back against his chest. He must have sensed my mood was off because he didn't utter a word.

I returned the frame to the sideboard and looked at him over my shoulder. “Do you think about your family and friends and the way it used to be?”

A sudden gust of wind whipped through the room, flinging a doormat inside against the broken branch. Cruz urged me over to a corner to avoid the weather. He stood in front of me, positioning me with my back to the wall, no doubt a tactical move to block me from flying objects. “I try not to dwell on them being gone,” he said. “It’s easier if I just focus on the memories from when they were alive.”

“I bet you had an amazing family, all about love and food and quality time—or maybe I’m just romanticising the old life because it’s gone for good.” I leaned against the wall as laughter drifted through from the kitchen. The sound chased away some of the sadness inside me, and I gazed up at Cruz feeling hopeful that we could build a safe life for all of us, where Dawn wouldn’t feel so stressed and unsure, and Remy and Gabe could be part of a big family again.

“No, that’s... pretty accurate,” he said. “My mum was the centre of everything. She brought all the warmth and life. Without her, it wouldn't have been the same.”

I pictured all of them with dark hair, dark eyes, and gorgeous smiles. His mother would have been beautiful, wearing pretty dresses and filling their home with love. I imagined the music, and aromas drifting from the family kitchen, the free-flowing wine, and laughter. It made me ache for the past in a way I hadn’t until now because I’d never get to know that part of him. I wouldn’t see him interacting with his parents and brother; I'd never be with them at Christmastime or celebrate their birthdays. They wouldn't know my name, grow close to me, learn to love me.

Cruz and I were starting with nothing, building a life together from rubble.

“They’d be proud of you if they could see you now,” I said, pushing my feelings aside. “I’m proud of you, and we barely know each other.”

He stared at me for one long, drawn-out moment, his expression difficult to read in the too-dark room. “That’s not true, though, is it?”

“That I’m proud of you?”

He gave me a patient smile. “That we barely know each other.”

As the rain pummelled the house and the wind whipped through the trees and shook the walls, warmth grew inside me. Rarely in my life had I met a stranger and somehow already known them; these were special connections that just couldn’t be explained—and I had that with Cruz. We’d found it in a war zone.

I took hold of his wrist and placed his palm on my chest, resting it above my heart. “I feel like you’ve always been in here,” I said, “and all this time I’ve just been waiting for you to show up.”

He made a funny sound in his throat as his thumb swept over my breast. He cupped the back of my neck with his free hand and lowered his head. His lips touched mine in a brief kiss, then he pulled back and looked into my eyes. “I knew you were meant for me the second I saw you,” he said. “Before we even spoke to each other—before I saw you up close. I knew.”

My heart overflowed with love, and I reached for him.

The biggest crash I’d ever heard in my life rang through the house, and I jerked back from Cruz. Our eyes met. My heart lurched. The entire house shook on its foundations, and my gaze flicked to the doorway leading through to the hall. “That came from the bedrooms.”

When we ran for the hallway, Jonah and the twins were already on their feet. All five of us rounded the corner and stopped short at the sight. Another branch had split the roof in two, the impact taking out the hallway ceiling as well as what looked to be the bedroom next to Dawn's. I hoped it wasn't her room.

Terror took hold of me as I stared at the devastating level of damage. I clutched Cruz's arm as Jonah shouted obscenities. That wasn't even the worst of it. An ominous creaking sound followed, and more of the ceiling gave way beneath the weight of the branch.

I leaned backward through the hallway door and watched in disbelief as the kitchen fell in on itself, crushing the dining table and four of the chairs. The screech of grinding metal and snapping wood ended. Straight afterward, rain rushed into the house, soaking the interior in seconds.

If it had happened a moment earlier, all three boys would have been dead.

Panic raced through me. Dawn. Where the hell was Dawn?

I faced the damage again, my mind whirring with questions.

"Mum!" Jonah approached the fallen branch and slapped his hands against the side, standing on his toes to search for a place to climb over. Too much of the collapsed roof had been dragged inward from the sides, though, and it appeared to be blocking all access.

We all had our shoes on, our weapons on our belts. We were ready to go, and it was more obvious than ever that we needed to face the storm and get the hell out of here while we were all still breathing.

"I can't get through," Jonah shouted over the noise.

“Outside,” Cruz said. “Let’s go.” Then to me he added in a low voice, “Don’t you dare leave my sight. ”

There was no point in any of us staying inside the house. In or out, the danger appeared to be the same. I nodded quickly, my stomach clenching with fear as we readied ourselves to leave through the front door.

“Remember not to get so caught up in searching for Dawn that you forget to keep an eye out for corpses,” Cruz warned everyone.

I hadn’t heard her yelling and there was no sign of movement from the other side of the branch. None of us had a clue if she’d been knocked out by the impact or she was trying to free herself. The thought that something terrible might have happened to her nearly paralysed me.

Jonah stepped outside first, leaning into the storm to counteract the force of the wind. With his knife in hand, he looked left and right to check for danger, then raced off around the side of the house. Remy and Gabe followed, weapons at the ready, and Cruz and I brought up the rear.

The cold sting from the rain made me gasp. I shielded my eyes from the assault, and my hair and clothes were drenched in seconds.

It took more effort than I expected to stay on my feet, and Cruz manoeuvred me in front of him, gripping my belt from the back to help propel me forward.

The guys were already at the spot where the damage had occurred, and seeing the pure scale of it under the light of an almost full moon made my stomach drop. It wasn’t just a branch this time. An entire tree lay uprooted amongst the wreckage. The smell of wet earth surrounded us as Jonah scooted to the other side of the trunk, looking for the place where Dawn’s room had once been located.

I braced myself and followed with Cruz close behind, hoping to hear a cry of relief or any sound at all to indicate that she'd survived.

Lightning struck a nearby tree that was still standing, and the crack that split the air sent a jolt through me. Until now, all the chaos had been caused by the wind; now we had to worry about lightning, too. Cruz wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me with him, picking up the pace. "Come on, carino," he said. "This isn't good. We need to get moving."

We avoided the crater left behind by the tree and joined the others on the opposite side of the massive root ball. As soon as I set eyes on the state of the building, my worst fears took over.

My heart thudded double time, and I turned to catch the hard glint in Cruz's eye. He'd already made up his mind about the likelihood of Dawn surviving; to him, it was just a matter of time before we confirmed the truth.

The fallen tree stopped the wind from passing through and gave us a slight reprieve, letting us focus on more important things without worrying about me being blown away. I swallowed my fear and launched into the worst of it to help.

"Form a line!" Cruz called out.

We stowed our weapons and fell into line, spending the next ten minutes passing bulky pieces of tin and board from one person to the next—Cruz first, then me, followed by Gabe, Jonah, and Remy—keeping the area free from crowding and blocking Jonah from a close-up view of the scene. He accepted his position without argument, almost like he knew it would be an image he didn't want in his head.

Part of the bed poked out from under one of the bigger branches, and her backpack had been flattened by the trunk. When I spotted her booted foot hidden underneath in the shadows, I grabbed Cruz's elbow and pointed it out without saying a word. He

nodded and picked his way through the debris to reach her while Jonah waited behind us, none the wiser.

The rain eased off as if a higher power finally recognised our need for a break, and my eyes remained locked on Cruz, my pulse pounding in my ears.

This wouldn't be ending the way we hoped.

We were on a mission to recover a body, and the realisation had my heart breaking for Jonah.

I checked on the guys to make sure they were staying far enough back from whatever we were about to uncover. Remy was off tackling one of the infected while Gabe kept his arm around Jonah's shoulder, a show of support for someone who was still so unfamiliar to him.

We'd only known the twins for half a day, and they'd already slotted into our group like part of the family.

Tension built inside me, and I faced Cruz again, dreading when Dawn's death would become a reality. He finally revealed the bed, and I stepped through the remains of the wrecked house to see her.

She lay pinned under a branch with her chest crushed to a degree that there was just no chance of survival. Her eyes were closed, her mouth parted. To my non-expert eye, it looked like she'd died in her sleep. Part of me was desperate to believe she hadn't been scared or in pain when the roof caved in and took her life.

Cruz straightened and gave me a direct look that spoke volumes. I nodded and drew a long breath, forcing down the tears that rushed to the surface. With a swell of sympathy for Jonah, I braced myself and prayed for courage, then turned around and locked eyes with him, giving a gentle shake of my head.

Some part of him had known the second he saw the extent of the damage, but having it confirmed erased all hope that he might be wrong.

His mother was dead.

Jonah's features filled with pain, and his knees gave way beneath him. Gabe knelt beside him, and a sob tore from me. I chanced another look at Dawn—the woman I hoped would become like a sister to me, an older, wiser female for me to lean on and learn from. Another wave of emotion rose inside me, and I willed it away, telling myself to keep it together for Jonah's sake. This wasn't about me, and we were still in such a precarious position.

"We need to get out of here," Cruz said. Without waiting for an answer, he swung me into his arms and stepped through the wreckage, setting me on solid ground once we were clear. "What's left of the walls might come down in this wind," he said, turning me toward the house and pointing at an unstable piece of roof. "We can't do anything for her right now."

I understood his concern—I could see it right in front of me—but if not now, when? We couldn't leave her there. I wouldn't leave her.

The wind whipped my hair and flapped my shirt against my skin, but I barely noticed the cold. All I could think about was that Dawn had been healthy and finding her place in the group one minute... then the next, she was gone. "She died." My throat hurt, and I could barely believe the words coming out of my mouth, even though my eyes had seen the truth. "All she wanted to do was sleep through the storm so she wouldn't be scared, and she died."

A flood of tears wanted to burst from me. I choked on a sob as my heart broke for a young man who'd lost his dad months ago and now his mum. He'd spent his entire life as only child, and now he had no parents, no home. Just like me, only so much younger.

"Stay out of the wind." Cruz squeezed the back of my neck and pressed a kiss on my temple. "I need to go to him."

I sniffled and nodded as he left me. The rain was nothing more than a drizzle now, but the wind still ripped through the trees and grounds, blowing the dead around and wreaking havoc.

Remy came over to me and merely stood close rather than offering physical comfort. I appreciated the careful way he watched me in the darkness. "Man, this world just fucking sucks," he said as we faced the yard.

"Most of the time, but there are so many good parts, too." My heart filled with love as I witnessed one of them happening right in front of me. Cruz helped Jonah up from the ground and pulled him into an aggressive hug, wrapping his arms around him and offering comfort. Whatever he said to Jonah had him nodding and his shoulders shaking with emotion.

Just when I thought I couldn't love Cruz more, he cupped the back of Jonah's head and let the hug go on until Jonah was ready to pull back; protective, caring, comforting—a man who led with kindness and strength. He'd told me I was the key to our future, but we were all cogs in a machine that ran smoother when each of us was involved. We'd lost one person tonight, and it didn't feel the same anymore.

Another one of the dead shuffled toward the house, barely keeping its balance as the wind pushed it forward a couple of steps. Two more of them were several metres behind it, one losing its footing and dropping into a fast-moving roll in our direction.

"Want to help me take care of them?" I asked.

"Sure," Remy said. "Let's do something useful."

We took off with our weapons drawn, and Gabe joined us as we approached the dead.

I kept close to Remy in case the wind became too much for me, and we took care of the practical matters. The emotional ones like recovering Dawn's body would have to wait until the worst of the danger had passed.

Later, we'd extract her from the collapsed room and bury her somewhere peaceful and pretty—and once she was laid to rest, we'd depart for the final step of our journey with her son in our care.

I'd only known her for a couple of days, but as with all human connections in our post-pandemic world, it seemed like so much longer. The thought of moving on from here without her made my heart hurt—and seeing Jonah lose his mother in such a horrific way nearly broke me.

The storm eased off in the early hours of the morning, but none of us stopped working for more than a few minutes at a time, determined to keep at it until we could free Dawn and give her the burial she deserved. We were never coming back to this place, but I had a feeling it would bring Jonah a small amount of peace knowing we'd taken care of her before we left.

He and the twins were busy digging a grave in what would be a picturesque part of the yard when the sun rose in the morning, leaving Dawn forever resting beside a garden bed they'd already cleared of weeds, a place where flowers and shrubs grew while the sound of the river flowed nearby.

During the night, I went inside and searched the cupboards for sheets to wrap her in and keep her covered. Jonah hadn't gone near her body since it was discovered, and he didn't need to see her injuries when we lowered her into the grave. I wanted him to remember her the way she was when she left the lounge room that last time, with a sense of belonging and the contentment of knowing we'd take care of him while she was gone.

None of us could have imagined she wouldn't be coming back.

Cruz and I took on the task of dragging debris from the area near where she lay, clearing a path for later when we'd carry her out. We only stopped to take care of the infected that wandered onto the property, or sometimes just to breathe and share a look of exhaustion.

Morning crept in to replace the darkness, and after trying unsuccessfully to drag a piece of wall frame from the pile, I straightened and sighed, feeling the ache in my shoulders and the heaviness in my heart.

With my hands on my hips, I glimpsed Dawn's broken body from the corner of my eye, and emotion tightened my throat. When tears threatened to spill over for the first time, I looked away and met Cruz's gaze.

He stopped working to assess my expression. "Are you okay?"

On the brink of losing it, I huffed out a breath and wished we could have chosen a smaller house in town instead; a street where there were no towering trees to threaten our safety, where houses were packed in nice and tight to protect us from the brunt of the storm. Maybe then Dawn would still be with us, and I wouldn't feel this crushing weight—for the group, but mostly for a son who'd lost his mother.

I blinked and tried to smile to put Cruz's mind at ease. "I'm just worried." I kept my voice low, but the others were far enough away that I probably didn't need to bother.

"About Jonah?"

"Mostly." I moved closer to Cruz in the flattened area we'd cleared, leaving Dawn's body behind. "We don't know him well enough to have any idea how he's going to handle this, or if we should travel the rest of the way before he's had time to process what happened."

Cruz looked over my shoulder in the direction where Jonah was digging. "You

thought you'd need a few days to adjust after you lost Haruto," he pointed out, his tone gentle, "but you found a way to be ready the next morning."

Life changed too quickly these days, and it was easier to move on than it used to be—especially when there was an urgent need to get moving. We didn't have that kind of pressure here, though. "It's different when it's your mum."

He spent another minute watching the guys, no doubt taking in the smallest details. "I'll talk to him about waiting a couple of days—but I think he'll be fine if we're fine." Cruz brought his gaze back to me. "He has a talent for picking up on moods and adapting to whatever's going on around him, so if you can find a way to keep this under wraps..." He gave me a sympathetic smile and caught a stray tear rolling down my cheek. "He'll have an easier time getting through it."

Our gazes meshed as his meaning sank in. I pulled my shoulders back and scrubbed my hands down my face, sighing between my fingers. Sometimes he made way too much sense. "You're right. A slap across the face would have been just as effective, but I like your way better."

Cruz palmed my hair and pressed a kiss on my forehead. "Come on. Let's carry her out of here and give her the funeral Jonah needs."

So, as the sun peeked over the horizon, its first rays of light catching droplets of rain on the grass and turning them into glittering diamonds, I held Jonah's hand while the others lowered his mother's wrapped body into the earth. He said a few words over her grave, his strong, stoic demeanour somehow more heartrending than if he'd broken down in tears. We each tossed a handful of wildflowers in with her, and once the formalities were over, everyone took turns covering her with shovelfuls of damp, heavy dirt.

Jonah and I found some rocks to border her grave and fashioned a couple of sticks into a cross held together with a cord from an old sleeping bag I found in the linen

closet. When there was no more work to be done, and his mother's grave stood alone in the breathtaking amber light of the early autumn morning, I turned to Jonah and wrapped my arms around him.

"We're family now," I told him, holding him close, "and if you ever need to talk to someone—about your mum or anything else—you can come to me. Always."

He hugged me back as Cruz waited off to the side, watching us with sadness in his smile. Although it made my chest ache, it confirmed one thing for me, without a doubt.

As Jonah's arms loosened around me, and he stepped back with dry eyes, I knew I'd told him the truth.

We were family, and whatever happened next on this journey, each of us would do anything for the other.

Remy, Gabe, Jonah... and the man I'd come to love more than anything.

Cruz.

THE END

Thank you for continuing Liv and Cruz's story.