THE PULSE

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THE PULSE SUPER BOXSET

ALEXANDRIA CLARKE

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BLACKOUT BOOK 0- EMP POST APOCALYPTIC FICTION

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CHAPTER 1

I looked over the side of the roller coaster as it climbed to the top of the first hill with a series of loud clacks. The night was dark and cold, but the theme park was lit up with fairy lights and neon arcade games below. The nippy breeze flirted with the hems of sweaters and blew hats off the heads of unsuspecting park guests. Soon, the seasonal theme park would close, as it would be too cold to run the rides, but for now, I could enjoy the brief view of Denver from one hundred feet above the ground. Screams built around me—some scared, others excited—as the first car of the coaster crested the top of the hill. I craned my neck, savoring the liberation of the sky, even if I was strapped into a padded harness, and put my hands up. My boyfriend, Jacob, reached up and linked our fingers together.

My stomach floated as the coaster careened downward at a steep angle. I let out an involuntary whoop of joy. The wind tore through my hair, freeing it from its messy bun. The air was so cold that my eyes streamed with tears. The coaster zoomed up into the first half of a cobra roll and hurtled down the other side before taking us upside down in a big loop. Jacob's fingers tightened around mine as he brought our entwined hands down to grab the handle of his harness, a deep yell reverberating in his throat.

This was freedom, however fleeting. It was forgetting about the trivial issues in your life for ninety seconds of metal track at sixty-five miles per hour. It was letting the smell of cotton candy and turkey legs and funnel cakes rush by in quick succession to overwhelm your taste buds and make you momentarily forget about the whole unprocessed diet you so obsessively

stuck to every day of your life. It was letting the sting of the wind strip the warmth from your pores and chill the tip of your nose in a way that made you feel more alive in that minute and a half than you had since the last time you got off this ride.

And then every light in the city extinguished itself, dousing the world with an inky-black blanket. The roller coaster rushed forward, but when it leveled off on the platform that was meant to slow it down before it glided into the next drop, the automatic brakes did not engage. It thundered on, diving into the dip with such intensity that it whipped the heads of its riders unceremoniously about on their necks. My heart drummed against my chest as we plunged into the darkness at a reckless pace, the black night pressing against my pupils. I squeezed Jacob's hand in mine as the screams of pleasure turned to terror.

Earlier That Day

It was a cloudless morning, and the sky stretched out to either end of the city to blanket our little corner of the world. The end of October beckoned November in with pink cheeks, chapped lips, and leaves the color of fire. It was my favorite time of year. Summer was long gone, and winter was on its way. At dawn, I slid out of bed while Jacob was fast asleep, made a cup of coffee, wrapped a blanket around my shoulders, and sat in the creaky rocking chair on the fourth-floor balcony of our apartment. I liked Denver best first thing in the morning. The people were slow to wake, and everything was quiet and calm. The sun cast a pale pink tint across the sleepy city like something out of a neon-colored eighties movie. On a clear day, the white-capped mountains layered themselves in hues of blue in a background that almost looked fake behind the buildings of downtown. Somewhere out there, my childhood memories flitted in and out of the trees, looking for a place to touch down. My mind wandered to meet with them sometimes, but I was never alone long enough to get lost in a land of the past.

"Georgie?"

I liked Jacob's voice best first thing in the morning too. It was slow and rough with sleep. His enunciation slipped, the letters looser on his lips. It was a welcome change from his prim, polished daily manner of speaking. Jacob was born and bred into an upper-class family, and his staccato elocution was

a product of private schools and international travel. Drowsiness leveled the playing field for us, and I savored the conversations whispered between yawns and stretches.

“Morning,” I said, drawing the blanket tighter around my shoulders as the wind swept the long violet hair on the left side of my head about.

Jacob shivered as his bare toes met the cold concrete of the balcony. His fingers combed through my tangle of hair, attempting to tame the wild purple locks, before he gave up and stroked the patch of baby-fine, white-blond fuzz shaved close to my scalp on the other side of my head. The partial buzzcut and the wild color were products of an on-air dare for my talk radio show. I covered the same news stories and current events as the major networks, but the fact of the matter was that people our age, in their late twenties, needed an incentive to invest any amount of interest in politics and related matters. I hoped that the stunts I pulled on the show were enough to get listeners to tune in on their way to work or to at least check out my website later for more information. Jacob, however, wasn’t always a fan of my methods.

“It’s freezing out here,” he said, perching on the arm of the rocking chair.

I braced myself as the chair rolled backward and knocked against the sliding door. “I like it.”

“We’re both going to catch pneumonia. Come inside.”

The faintest shadow of golden scruff coated Jacob’s cheeks and chin. His dusty blond hair stood up at haphazard angles, not yet subdued by his morning ritual of mousse and gel. His eyes, the same creamy golden-brown color of my coffee, were partially hidden behind drooping lids, and his pink cheek bore an etching of the bed quilt’s lacy pattern. I smiled and cupped his face. Unrehearsed, he pressed his lips to my palm. His hand found mine, and he played with my fingers, warm from being wrapped around the hot mug of coffee.

“You’re not wearing your ring,” he said. “Where is it?”

“On the bedside table,” I told him. “I don’t wear it to sleep.”

“You don’t wear it ever.”

“That’s not true.”

“Do you not like it?” His lethargy quickly faded, and I wished there was a way to slow his route to alertness. “Is it not big enough?”

“No, no. It’s beautiful.”

I trailed my fingers down the side of his face. His ears were already pink with the cold, but his cheeks were pink with the mingling hues of pride and

insecurity. The ring in question—my engagement ring—boasted a gigantic diamond, but I had never been the kind of girl to flaunt such a display of wealth to any of my friends. Most of my friends at the radio station were guys anyway. They didn't know the difference between a real gemstone and cubic zirconia, and they didn't care. Quite frankly, neither did I, but Jacob had presented the piece of jewelry with an air of triumph when he'd proposed, and to tell him that I preferred a less expected route of matrimonial symbolism might have wiped the jubilant grin right off of his face. Jacob came from a traditional family, and he followed the traditional rules, though I suspected that his father, rather than his freelance photojournalism career, had bought the ring. As far as size went, I couldn't wait for the day I could exchange the conspicuous rock for a simple wedding band.

Jacob tilted my chin up to kiss me. "Are you sure? It's not because you're still mad about last night?"

My lips stiffened against his. I sipped my coffee instead. It had gone cold. "I'm not mad."

"Really? Because you said—"

"I know what I said."

"I just think that getting married in a church is the best way to please my parents," he went on, clearing his throat. He flattened his hair to the best of his abilities, and his day-to-day demeanor rose to the surface. "I know you aren't really religious, Georgie, but—"

The charming quiet of the morning hours had been broken, like tossing a boulder into a glass pond. I stood up from the rocking chair and went inside. "Can we not talk about this right now?"

The sliding door clicked shut as Jacob followed. I liked to keep it open to let the fresh, mountain-scented air flow in and out of the apartment, but he claimed that it was impractical to run the heat if I was going to let the warmth escape outside. In a few hours, the sun would be high enough to warm the apartment through the glass doors and windows, and it wouldn't matter anyway. I didn't understand why Jacob was so conscious of money. His father owned the building we lived in, so he didn't pay rent or utilities. He had never scrounged a day in his life. He had never clipped coupons or swiped change out of a public fountain to buy a slice of pizza at a corner store. He had never siphoned gas from a parked vehicle in the middle of the night because he couldn't afford to fill up his own tank. He also didn't know that I had done all of those things and worse at some point in my life, but I

wasn’t the one chiding the other for accidentally leaving the bathroom light on.

I put my mug in the microwave to rewarm the coffee and opened the fridge. I had a few minutes before I had to get ready to go into work, which meant I had just enough time to make myself a decent breakfast. I rifled through my materials. Eggs, spinach, tomatoes, mushrooms—

“If you’re making omelets, can you leave out the mushrooms?” Jacob asked, straightening the ever-growing stack of newspapers on the island counter. “You know I don’t like them. Do you need all of these?”

I put the mushrooms back in the fridge. “Yes, I do. Please don’t touch them.”

He peered at a yellowing page. “This one is from three weeks ago. You can probably recycle it by now.”

I snatched the newspapers out of his hands, tapped them into straight lines, and placed them at the far corner of the island beyond his reach. “I need them to reference previous articles, which I’ve told you a hundred times.”

I felt his eyes on me as I heated a skillet over the stove and cracked a few eggs. “They’re piling up. About the wedding, though, we really do need to talk about it. Mom wanted a ceremony early next year, but Pippa’s going to pop in the next month or so, and she said she doesn’t want to look fat in the pictures. You’re still going to let her be a bridesmaid, right?”

The heat from the stove rose. Despite the chilly morning, sweat beaded at my temples. My cheeks reddened, and a drip of moisture rolled down my back between my shoulder blades. “Yes, of course your sister can be a bridesmaid, but we’ve only been engaged for a few months, babe. Besides, I wanted our wedding to be in the fall.”

“That’s, like, now,” Jacob said, confused. “This isn’t a shotgun wedding.”

“I meant next year.”

“That’s forever!”

“It’s one year.” I sprinkled salt and pepper over the sizzling eggs then gave the pan an experimental shuffle in preparation for the flip. The omelet slid easily across the smooth silver. “It gives us the time to figure everything out. Why are you in such a rush anyway?”

“Because I feel like you’re going to change your mind.”

I missed the catch. The omelet landed half in, half out of the pan, splitting in the middle. The eggs splattered against the pristine white tile of the kitchen floor. A piece of hot spinach plastered itself to the top of my bare foot. I

hissed and shook it off then dumped the pan on the stove. “Fuck me. Seriously?”

Jacob blanched as he grabbed a roll of paper towels and knelt down to collect the ruined omelet. “I hate it when you swear.”

“Sorry. That’s your half, by the way. I’m late for work.”

Since there was no hope of saving the omelet, I scooped the rest of the eggs into a whole wheat tortilla, wrapped it up like a burrito, and shoved half of it into my mouth as I stripped out of my pajama pants and made a beeline for the bedroom.

“I thought Nate took over the morning show on Fridays,” Jacob called after me.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. “He usually does,” I said, juggling the burrito as I laced up my boots. “But we hired a new intern, and Nate’s not a people person. I told him that I’d be there today. We’ve got a lot to cover.”

Jacob leaned against the door of the bedroom. A piece of scrambled egg was stuck to the back of his hand. “I was thinking that we could go to the park today to spend some time together. You’ve been so busy lately, I feel like I haven’t seen you in years.”

“You see me every night.”

“You know what I mean. Come on, I promise to get on the roller coasters with you since I know how much you like them.”

I tied off my laces and shoved them under the tongue of my boot so that they were invisible. I finished off the breakfast burrito in three humongous bites then stood in front of Jacob and put my hands on his shoulders. With my boots on, I was a good inch taller than him. He was a stocky guy, well-muscled but compact. That worked for me—I didn’t have to stretch to kiss him—but he took offense whenever I wore heels around him.

“I promised Nate that I’d come in today,” I said. “But what if we go to the park later? I always like it better at night anyway. Everything looks so pretty lit up. Here.” I picked up one of his cameras from the collection on his desk. “There’s a charity run downtown today to raise awareness for cystic fibrosis. You should cover it.”

He expertly flipped off the lens cap and raised the camera to snap a picture of me. “Those are generic photos. I want danger and intrigue. I want grit and trench warfare. I want the Hells Angels as security at the Altamont Free Concert, not sweaty people in garish tracksuits.”

“Be glad you’re not photographing trench warfare,” I said. “I hear typhus sucks.”

I smacked a kiss to his cheek and sidestepped him to get to the coat closet. Then I pulled on a denim jacket, straightened out the collar, and grabbed my keys from where they hung on the inside of the door.

“So what time tonight?” Jacob asked, following me through the kitchen. Somehow, he’d managed to wipe the egg from the floor, wash the frying pan, and put the dirty spatula in the dishwasher in the same time it had taken me to change my clothes. That was another thing that set us apart. Jacob was a neat freak, while I operated best within organized chaos.

“I don’t know. I have dinner plans with Nita that I’ll have to cancel.”

His shoulders slumped. “It’s fine. We can go another day.”

I shoved my phone and wallet into a messenger bag and slung it across my shoulders. Then I snaked my arms around Jacob’s neck and pulled him close. He always smelled like cinnamon and cloves when it got cold out, compared to his citrusy summer scents. “Nita’s easygoing. She’ll understand. I’ll text you when I’m on my way home, okay? And then we’ll go ride the roller coasters until you puke.”

“Now I’m having second thoughts.”

I grinned and kissed him goodbye. “Too late. See you later.”

A FEW BLOCKS from the apartment, I realized that I had forgotten to put on my engagement ring once again. Jacob was probably in the bedroom, staring at the little ceramic cup on the bedside table that cradled my meager jewelry collection. Maybe he’d take a few photos of the ring, zoomed way in on the diamond, the focus on the gold band blurry to make the stone look as bare and lonely as possible. Or I was just being dramatic and he had already left the apartment to meet his buddies at the gym.

The radio station was about a thirty-minute walk from our building. The one thing I loved about living downtown was the lack of need for a car. I didn’t own one. Not only did I save on gas, but it was one less bill that I had to rely on Jacob’s parents to pitch in for. Offices, restaurants, bars, and gyms were all just a stroll away, and if I needed to get any farther, the bus and light rail systems worked like a charm. The city was so different from the wide-open spaces of my youth, and while I sometimes found the tall buildings and fast pace alarming, I preferred it to the alienating silence of my previous life.

A gush of warm air made my cold nose and ears tingle as I pulled open

the door to the station. It was a modest business, with just a control room, a studio, and a storeroom that doubled as our break room through the back. Nate sat at the desk in the control room, staring through the window into the studio. Kenny, our mild-mannered control technician who wore noise-canceling headphones at all times and spoke to no one ever, sat next to him. The on-air light flared red as the new intern, a girl I'd found at the local university who'd majored in broadcasting and dubbed herself Aphrodite, chattered away into the mic.

"Next we've got the new single from Walk the Moon," she announced. "And when we return, Nate and Georgie join us for a discussion on gun control. This is QRX First Watch. Stay tuned, folks."

The on-air light flickered off, and Aphrodite gave us a hesitant thumbs-up through the window. Nate returned the gesture with a smile so wide and startling that his cheeks looked as if they might crack. Then he flicked off his headphones and swiveled in his chair to look at me, his expression completely flat.

"She's boring," he declared.

"Talk-back's on."

Nate whirled around to check the button that transmitted sound from the control room to the studio. It was unlit. "That was mean."

I chuckled, shrugged out of my jacket, and draped it over the spare chair. "Give her a chance. You weren't exactly a prize when I recruited you either."

"Excuse me?" he said with faux indignation. "Whose listener count doubled when I was added to the show?"

"So you pulled in a percentage of the male market. Big whoop."

The door to the studio swung open, and Aphrodite stuck her head out. "Sorry to interrupt your little powwow, but the song's almost over. The two of you should probably get in here."

"Sure thing," Nate said. The intern retreated, and he fixed me with an incredulous stare. "She's been working here for five minutes, and she's already bossing us around. I can't deal. I know you're a feminist, but—"

I flicked the shell of his ear. "Don't even try to finish that sentence. Come on. Let's get in there before our new boss fires us."

We left Kenny to manage the controls and joined Aphrodite in the booth. Before I could sit down in front of the mic, she wrung my hand so fiercely that the bones in my wrist cracked.

"Georgie," she said. "Nice to see you again. I love the hair! I always

thought about dying mine purple, but it's already red, so I'd have to bleach it and then dye it, and it would probably be a big mess and a waste of time. Did you shave the side yourself?"

"Nate did it, actually," I told her, settling into one of the plush red rolling chairs that we kept in the studio. He caught my eye across the table and made a face. "Have a seat, Aphrodite. Kenny's got the countdown for us."

Through the window, Kenny held up five fingers and put them away one by one. When the last one joined his fist, I leaned toward the pop filter.

"Gooooood morning, Denver, and welcome back to QRX First Watch," I crooned into the mic, dropping my voice into a smoother, more personable version of its original. "I'm your host, Georgie Fitz, and joining us for today's Dirty on the Thirty is our own Nate Vega, who you know and love—"

"What's up, Denver?" Nate interjected.

"—and our new intern, Aphrodite," I went on. "Before you call in, folks, she is *not* the Greek goddess of love and beauty in disguise. I already asked."

"Sorry about that," Aphrodite chimed in.

"The subject for today's Dirty is gun control," I said. "What with the unfortunate and tragic incidents that have occurred in the recent history of this country, the question remains: Should the average American have the power to purchase these weapons? Aphrodite, why don't you start us off?"

Aphrodite cleared her throat. "Well, I'm a pacifist—"

Automatically, Nate groaned. "Here we go. There's always one hippy-dippy peacemonger who thinks we can save the world with positive energy and chakra candles."

Aphrodite pursed her lips, cocking her head and aiming a stare at Nate like a loaded gun. "If you'd let me finish. I'm a pacifist, but my motto has always been 'Do no harm. Take no shit.' That being said, gun control isn't a question of banning all firearms like most people think. People should be allowed to protect their homes and families with a modest handgun, but when it comes to semi-automatic rifles, it's a different story. The average American doesn't need high-power weapons."

"When was America ever about 'need?'" Nate countered. "We want guns, so we have them. I'd agree that the process of procuring high-power weapons is a bit lax—"

"A bit?" Aphrodite repeated.

"*But* there's no point in banning rifles entirely," Nate continued as if he

hadn’t heard her.

“No point?” Aphrodite said. “What about preventing another mass shooting?”

“People are going to get their hands on guns no matter what,” Nate said. “Even if they have to go through illegal means. There might come a time when we really do need them, and I’d rather be safe than sorry. All I’m saying is that when the zombie apocalypse rolls around, I’d want that AR-15 to blow a few faces off.”

“Okay,” I said before Aphrodite could jump in again, her face reddening with rage. “Let’s take it back to examine these points one by one. Then we’ll take a few calls from our listeners.”

I LEFT THE STATION EARLY, unable to take much more of Nate and Aphrodite’s bickering. While it was great to have representation for both sides of a debate, a lot of the useful information that I wanted to spread to the general public got lost in the heat of disagreement. Dirty on the Thirty was a segment that I’d specifically tailored for intelligent, opinionated conversations, and I didn’t want it to devolve into a verbal ping-pong match on par for drama with one of the various *Real Housewives* reality shows. Either Nate and Aphrodite needed to learn how to argue effectively, or they’d both be out of a job.

In the stairway of the apartment building, I ran into a short, olive-skinned woman with smooth black hair. I smacked my palm against my forehead. “Nita! Crap, I’m so sorry. I totally forgot to call you earlier. I have to cancel our dinner plans tonight.”

Nita was a few years younger than me, but as a first-year med student, she had more maturity and determination than most of my and Jacob’s mutual friends. She hoisted an armful of anatomy textbooks higher in her grasp and shrugged. “No big deal. I should put in some extra study time anyway. You got a hot date or something?”

“Yeah, actually,” I said. “Jacob’s got a night at the park planned.”

“Aw, are you going to share a funnel cake on the Ferris wheel?”

“Hell no. I want my own funnel cake.”

Nita laughed, dislodging a binder from her grasp. It hit the floor and spat notes down the stairs. “Damn it.”

“I got it.” I trotted down the steps to collect the papers then tucked them back into the binder. “There you go.”

“Thanks,” she said, perching her books between her torso and the wall of the stairway. “Is everything okay with you and Jacob?”

“Of course. Why?”

“The walls are thin, Georgie.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, a nervous habit from childhood that I’d yet to kick. “You heard us yelling at each other last night.”

“I think the whole floor heard you.”

“Ugh.” I slumped against the wall, the safety handrail jutting into my side. “We keep arguing about stupid stuff. Last night’s fight started because he didn’t squeeze the toothpaste to the top of the tube.”

“What an animal.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I told her. “I love him, you know? But ever since we got engaged, I keep noticing more and more of his flaws. Then I think to myself, is this really the guy I want to be with for the rest of my life?”

“Well, divorce is one in two these days, so odds are it won’t be for the rest of your life.”

I looked up at her from the step below. “Usually, I’m all for the dry humor and sarcasm, but I need some rom-com level bridesmaid enthusiasm and reassurance from you right now.”

“Right. Sorry.” She shifted her stance, perched a hand on her hip, and pursed her lips in her best impression of a duck. “It’s just nerves, Georgiana! Don’t you worry. Jacob is *such* a wonderful guy. And he’s hot. And he’s conveniently rich.”

I rolled up a page from her notes and swatted her playfully over the head. “Not helping.”

She snatched the paper back and smoothed it out. “I’m kidding. Seriously, you and Jacob are good together. You’ve told me a million times that his quirks even yours out. You fell in love with him for a reason. Try to remember why.”

I sighed as I held the door to our floor open for Nita. “You’re right. If he’s being clingy, it usually means that he thinks I’m pulling away.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess we’ll find out tonight.”

IN MY BOOK, it was a perfect night to spend at the park. The wind was chilly enough to justify the purchase of hot chocolate, but not so cold that it was

miserable. Jacob and I held hands as we strolled through the park, smiling as little kids whacked moles and raced horses at the brightly lit arcade games. Their parents stood farther back, supervising at a distance. Most of them nursed a cheap beer. Overhead, the thrilling hoots and hollers of the roller coaster riders pierced the air. The lights were too bright to see the stars, but a radiant silver sliver of the crescent moon decorated the navy sky. We rode the merry-go-round and the tilt-a-whirl, playing like middle schoolers, but when we got on the Ferris wheel and it took us above the bustling crowds where no one was watching, Jacob couldn't help but take advantage of his captive audience.

"So you want a fall wedding."

I kept my eyes trained on the horizon, trying to ignore the ominous creaking sounds that emanated from the swinging hinges of our pod. "It's my favorite time of year. We could have the reception outside."

"What is it with you and the cold?" Jacob asked, trapping my knees between his. "An outdoor wedding in October? All of our guests would freeze."

"It doesn't have to be October," I countered. "September would be nice too. Just as long as the leaves have already started to change. Those are the colors I want. And no one's going to freeze. They make space heaters for a reason."

"You want orange as your wedding color? My mother's going to die."

"This isn't your mother's wedding," I said, a sharp edge to my tone. "And I didn't say orange. I said fall colors. Hues that remind me of autumn. Red, gold, brown—"

"*Brown?*"

"Yes, brown."

The Ferris wheel jolted to a halt as our pod approached the top. We swung a little back and forth. I peered over the edge, but Jacob pushed me against the padded cushion. "Don't do that."

"Why not? It's not like I'm going to jump."

"It's dangerous."

"I laugh in the face of danger."

"Okay, Simba," Jacob countered. "But I like having you alive. Why the hell did we get on this thing? I hate heights."

"You thought it would be romantic to kiss at the top."

"I was wrong," he said. "It smells like corn dogs up here."

“Oh, sorry. That’s me.”

He cracked a grin at the joke as the Ferris wheel lurched into motion again. As it rounded the top and floated toward the other side, Jacob traced the bones of my knee through my jeans.

“So,” he said tentatively. “Are you going to invite your parents?”

My spine stiffened. “What?”

“To the wedding,” Jacob clarified. “They should be there. It’s a huge step, Georgie. Don’t you think your parents ought to be around on the most important day of your life?”

The Ferris wheel was a trap. It stopped and started to let people on and off at the bottom, the pace at which we neared the exit infinitely too slow. The rickety metal contraption wasn’t a fun romantic ride. It was a way for men to ensnare their girlfriends—sorry, *fiancées*—in order to talk about things that didn’t need to be addressed. Not now and not ever.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” I said. “I’m not in contact with my parents.”

“I haven’t even met them—”

“Because I don’t talk to them,” I told him as we bumped another space closer to the exit of the ride. “Why are you so caught up on this? Not everyone has a family like yours, Jacob.”

“I just think that this is a perfect opportunity to reach out to them,” he pressed. “Don’t you agree? It would be a gesture of decency—”

I clapped a hand over his mouth. “Stop. Okay? Just stop. I don’t speak to my parents for a reason. They will not be at our wedding. It’s not a discussion. It’s fact. Leave it alone.”

We finally bounced down to the platform below, and I jumped out so quickly that the ride attendant, a gangly boy with greasy black hair, had to steady the swinging pod so that Jacob could exit too.

“Hey.” Jacob caught me and spun me around in front of a stand selling snow cones. “I’m sorry, all right? Can we just have a nice evening for once? I feel like all we do is bicker with each other.”

“Because *you* keep bringing up things that make me want to fight with you,” I said, crossing my arms. “I don’t want to repeat myself once I’ve told you something.”

“I know,” he replied. “That’s my fault. I haven’t been listening to you.”

“No, you haven’t.”

A yell of joy echoed overhead as a roller coaster zoomed over top of us.

Jacob glanced skyward and grinned. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” I asked.

“I promised you that I’d ride the coaster until I puked.” Jacob winked and coaxed my arms out of their taut positioning. There was that charm I loved, the brazen confidence that made me fall for him in the first place. “And I don’t break my promises.”

2

My pulse raced as quickly as the coaster sped along the tracks. Something was terribly wrong. My head roared with the screams of our companions and the rumble of the wheels against the track. The power to the city was out as far as I could see, and the moon overhead wasn't enough to illuminate our path. Without light, there was no telling which way we were headed next. We blasted through a corkscrew at top speed and hit another loop, but as the coaster train headed up the next hill, gravity worked its magic. The train slowed, coasting toward the top of the hill, but at the peak, we stopped and began to roll backward.

The shrill screams increased, and I crushed my eyes shut as the coaster reversed its route. Jacob let out a yell that tugged at my heartstrings. I had practically forced him to get on the ride. He had never been a fan of roller coasters, and now it was my fault that he was experiencing the one thing that he feared the most. Thankfully, the train lost momentum at a rapid pace. It rolled up the hill that we had just come from, switched direction, and rolled forward again. As it continued to trundle back and forth, the riders stopped screaming, until we finally came to rest in the valley between the hills.

I groped for Jacob in the darkness. "Babe, are you okay?"

I wasn't the only one checking in on their loved ones. Worried murmurs broke out all along the coaster, filling the air with a buzz of concern. Some of the younger kids were crying. I strained to catch a sound from Jacob, anything that would let me know he was all right, but all I heard were the rapid, shallow breaths of hyperventilation.

“Jacob,” I said firmly. My eyes started to adjust to the pitch-black night. His ghostly fingers gripped the handles of his harness tightly enough to cut off the circulation. I pried open the hand closest to me. His fingers were freezing. “Jacob, breathe. Just breathe. Everything’s going to be okay.”

But panic had begun to set in on the train. Voices lifted into the air.

“Help! Help us!”

“We’re stuck!”

“I’m going to sue this place for everything they’re worth.”

“Don’t listen to them,” I ordered, tightening my grip on Jacob’s hand. “I’m sure it was just a fluke. The fire department will come and get us out soon, okay?” He stared straight ahead, gasping for air. “Jacob, I need you to talk to me. Look at me. *Look at me!*”

When I pinched the skin on the back of his hand between my finger and forefinger, his head jerked in my direction, and he peered over the cumbersome neon-green harness. His eyes were impossibly wide, pupils blown so big that his irises looked black.

“Good,” I breathed. “Are you okay? Are you hurt? Your neck maybe?”

He shook his head.

“Good,” I said again. “Can you talk to me?”

His lips parted. A sprinkle of powdered sugar, left over from our indulgement in funnel cakes, dusted his top lip. His voice came out in a hoarse whisper. I leaned forward, struggling against my harness to catch his question.

“What the hell is happening?” he whispered.

It was the question on everybody’s mind. The world had gone dark but not silent. Crash after crash echoed from the nearby interstate, the crunch of fenders unmistakeable. People cried and yelled and spoke over one another. Other than that, everything else was eerily quiet. The whir of the theme park attractions had died off. The arcade games quit their eerie tinkly tunes. The buzz of the street lights was noticeably absent. Phones didn’t ring and car engines didn’t turn over. Above all, the cold black night pressed in on all sides.

“I have no idea,” I whispered back.

The worst part was the waiting. The minutes ticked by, and no one came out to tell us what was happening. It was the type of situation that warranted an announcement over the ride’s audio system, but the speakers perched over the tracks remained silent. I knew enough about roller coasters to know that

we shouldn’t have stopped anywhere other than one of the block brake platforms stationed throughout the ride. The coaster was programmed to land on those platforms in case of damage or system failure. The fact that we were stuck at the bottom of the track was a bad sign. Something had completely fried the coaster’s system, and from the looks of things, it had fried the rest of Denver too. My phone was inaccessible, tucked securely into the back pocket of my jeans to keep it from flying away during the ride. In the row in front of us, another guest managed to wiggle his iPhone free, but when he pressed the home button, the screen remained blank.

“My phone’s not working,” he called out to the rest of the train.

“Mine either!”

“Same up here.”

“Does anyone have the time?” I asked, keeping a firm grip on Jacob’s hand to let him know I was still with him.

“My watch is dead,” someone called back. “Anyone else?”

“Mine’s out too.”

“It’s ten to eight,” another voice, light and young—a little boy’s maybe—floated up from the front of the train.

“Your watch works? How?”

“It was my grandfather’s,” the boy replied. “It’s old. Mechanical. No electronic components.”

No electronic components. The kid had been the first to realize it, or at least the first to say it out loud. Someone pointed into the black sky.

“Look!”

Everyone’s heads tipped upward. Behind the clouds, a white light mushroomed in the atmosphere and radiated outward. It was almost as if the heavens were opening up, the world gone dark to call attention to their presence, but in all of those stories, the angels never showed up before the ultimate destruction of everything on earth.

“It’s a solar flare!”

“It’s a bomb!”

“It’s a what?” Jacob asked, his voice trapped in an interminable whisper. The coaster had swept his golden hair away from his forehead. It stood straight up like a cartoon character’s. I would’ve giggled if the moment weren’t weighed down by the mysterious light in the sky.

“It’s not a bomb,” I said automatically, but the words felt heavy and wrong on my tongue, and a pang of guilt ricocheted across my conscience,

the same way it always did when I told a lie. “It can’t be. We would have heard it.”

And because this wasn’t a world where bombs detonated while people were enjoying a pleasant evening at a theme park. This was Denver, where the Rocky Mountains met the sky, and the crisp air staved off the smell of exhaust in the city. This was First World America, where we lived in excess of material goods and relied on the country-wide grid to function from day to day.

I didn’t know how long it took for the light to subside. It could’ve been minutes or hours. The harness rubbed against my sweater, chafing the skin of my shoulders. A prickling began in both of my legs as the deep bucket seat restricted blood flow to my lower half. I wiggled my toes and straightened my legs, trying to get everything moving again. How long had we been sitting here? Someone should have done something by now. At the very least, the employees that ran the attraction should have updated us on the situation. Restlessness set in. The other guests grew uneasy, complaining and commiserating about our terrible luck. Next to me, Jacob was hauntingly quiet.

“Still with me?” I asked him, giving his hand another squeeze.

“Mm-hmm.” The whites of his eyes reflected the moon overhead. “How long do you think we’re going to be here for?” His tone was steadier than before. He was calmer now that there was no immediate danger other than being confined to the coaster, and his claustrophobia hadn’t kicked in full blast yet.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Probably a while if the power’s out everywhere.”

But another voice shouted at us from out of sight. “Hello! Is everyone okay?”

The entire train clamored at once, shouting pleas for help. From the darkness, two park employees, dressed in silly patterned sweaters and khaki pants, approached the coaster. They were young—college students who probably worked at the park to make rent or pay tuition—and they definitely didn’t look like they had the ability to free all of us from the coaster’s locked harness system.

The first employee, a nimble young man with a scruffy ginger beard, set a ladder against the track, carefully climbed up, and stepped on the front car of the coaster so that we could all see him. He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hi, everyone. I’m Dave. This is Hayley.” He gestured to the other

employee, whose platinum blond hair served as a beacon in the moonlight as she waved. In her free hand, she held a sturdy metal bar shaped kind of like a tire iron. “We’re going to try and get you out of here.”

“What’s going on?” someone shouted.

“Where’s the fire department?” asked a deeper voice.

Dave waved his hands to settle the crowd. “We don’t know what happened either. From what we can tell, the whole city is out of power. A lot of the cars in the parking lot won’t start, so we’re guessing that the fire department can’t get here either. We don’t want to leave you in the coaster while we wait for them since we don’t know how long it will be, so we’re going to do this like a routine evacuation.”

“And we’re supposed to trust you?” Jacob asked, raising his voice for the first time since the coaster had failed.

Dave squinted toward the back row where we sat. “Sir, I can assure you that we’ve been trained to handle this sort of situation, and we routinely evacuate this ride without issue.”

“From one of the safety platforms,” I called. “What about from a random part of the track?”

“I have to admit this is a new one,” Dave acknowledged. “But it’s the same procedure. We have a tool that unlocks each row of harnesses manually, and we’re going to evacuate one row at a time. Hayley and I will help each of you down the ladder to the ground. Once we finish a row, we’ll escort those four people back to the loading area and come back for the others. It’s important that you follow our path exactly. There are a lot of dangerous components on the ground out here, and we don’t want anyone getting electrocuted if the power comes back on. There’s another train stuck at the beginning of the tracks that the other attendants are helping, so it’s just the two of us. It’s going to be slow going, folks, and I apologize in advance. Please just bear with us.”

“We’ve had word that the park’s medical team is making their rounds as quickly as possible,” Hayley added, shouting up at us from below the track. “Before we begin, does anyone on the train need emergency assistance?”

A general murmur reverberated through the crowd. I glanced over at Jacob, who now looked more aggravated at how long we had been sitting in the train than scared about the situation.

“You’re good, right?” I asked him. “You’re okay to wait?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Let the medics tend to the people who really need it. I

can stick it out."

"Are you sure?"

He tucked his chin to look at me over the bulky harness. "Georgie, I'm fine. Stop freaking out."

"I'm freaking out because *you* were freaking out," I reminded him.

"Well, stop."

I rolled my eyes. Of course we were arguing again. Even in the midst of a city-wide blackout, we managed to find the ability to bitch at each other.

"All right," Dave called. "We're going to get started with row one. Everyone sit tight."

"Like we have a choice," Jacob muttered.

There was nothing to do but wait as Hayley handed the hefty tool bar mechanism up to Dave. He balanced along the edge of the track, his sneakers between the metal piping and the bottom of the coaster, and inched toward the first row, stepping carefully between the coaster's wheels. Hayley supervised from below, moving the ladder to match his pace. The lowest part of the track was about ten feet from the ground, not high enough to cause a life-threatening injury, but if someone misstepped, it might mean a broken arm or leg. Dave seemed well aware of this. His gaze kept flickering toward the ground as if to check that Hayley was keeping up with the ladder. He leaned into the coaster as he reached the first row and bent out of sight with the tool bar.

"One, two, three," he grunted, and with a pneumatic hiss, the first row of harnesses sprang free. The four guests, two teenagers and two adults, tried to stand up at the same time, but Dave waved them back in their seats. "One at time, please. We need to do this as safely as possible. Ma'am?"

He rested the toolbar against the coaster, leaned against the train to secure his footing, and offered his hand to the first woman seated in the row. She staggered to her feet, grasping Dave's shoulder for balance. He helped her step over the lip of the coaster car and onto the waiting ladder then continued to hold her from above as Hayley coaxed her down from below. The woman's hands shook as they left Dave's shoulders.

"This is going to take forever," I mumbled, watching as Dave encouraged the next guest out of his seat.

"They already told us that," Jacob said.

"Yeah, but we could've sat in the front seat," I countered. "I wanted to. If we had, we would've been the first ones off the coaster."

“I don’t like the front,” he replied. “You have to wait longer, and it’s nerve-wracking to ride up there. The back’s better.”

I tugged the seatbelt free of the harness. It dangled uselessly between my legs, which were now completely asleep. “The back’s rougher and faster.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is, because the front of the coaster pulls the back, which means there’s less resistance when you whip around the turns.” I sucked in my stomach and wiggled around, testing the space around the harness to see if I could free myself without Dave’s assistance. “Or has the ache in your neck not set in yet from the whiplash?”

“That’s from the lack of brakes. And I didn’t know you were suddenly an expert on physics,” Jacob fired back. “Is that what you do after you finish the morning show at the station? Because you sure as hell aren’t working on the radio.”

“It’s common sense,” I snapped. “And what’s that supposed to mean? Where else would I be other than the station?”

“Can the two of you shut up?”

I looked over at the seat at the end of our row, where a teenaged girl with heavy black eyeliner and fading green hair rewarded me with a dramatic sigh. She had been quiet for the duration of the unfortunate event. If I remembered correctly, she hadn’t let out so much as a whoop of excitement during that first drop.

“Excuse me?”

“Shut up,” she repeated, enunciating the *P* sound with an emphatic pop of her lips. “God, you two bitch more than my separated parents when the mortgage bill hits. It was bad enough that I had to stand behind you in line, but this is just straight-up torture.”

Thankfully, the seat between me and the girl was empty. No one else played witness to me and Jacob being chided by a teenager.

She pointed to the ring on my finger, which I had finally remembered to put on before we left for the park. “Please tell me that’s not from him.”

Jacob strained to get a look at what the girl was referring to. I stuttered and lowered my hand, but there was nowhere to hide the incriminating diamond.

“Honey,” the girl said, her tone dripping with condescension. “He’s clearly compensating for something.”

“How old are you?” I managed, acutely aware of Jacob’s stare.

“Old enough to know when two people shouldn’t get married.”

“You don’t know us.”

She rolled her eyes. “Thank Wonder Woman for that.”

I huffed and turned away from her, only to realize that Jacob was studying me with a glare as honed as a laser pointer. I faced front, pretending to monitor Dave’s progress. He had just freed the third row. The quartet waited on the ground with Hayley as he climbed down, and the group disappeared again to return to the attraction’s loading zone. There were eight rows to the coaster. The rescue process wasn’t quite halfway through. With a groan of frustration, I jiggled the harness. It moved a fraction of an inch up and down, making more of a racket rather than helping my case.

“Are you trying to break the ride?” Jacob asked with a wry turn of his lips. “It won’t get us out any faster.”

I pushed the harness up as far as it would go and attempted to worm out. “At least I’m trying.”

“What would you even do if you managed to get out?” he went on. “Jump to the ground? It’s a good ten feet.”

“Ten feet never hurt anyone.”

“Actually—”

“I’ve jumped from higher than that before.”

“Off a diving board and into a pool—”

“*Ahem!*”

We both looked over at the teenage girl, who pointedly picked at her polished black nails.

“What happened to shutting up?” she asked.

Jacob and I fell silent. I tipped my head back against the headrest, looking up at the sky. The strange mushroom of white light had dissipated, and now that the whole city had been extinguished, the stars blinked overhead in a myriad of patterns. As Dave and Hayley returned to continue the evacuation procedure, I lost myself in the constellations. There were stories written in the sky, legends and myths that most people read about in high school. I had learned about them earlier, studying them each night through a massive telescope as they became visible in our hemisphere. I remembered my first date with Jacob years ago. We had driven out to a park to have a picnic under the stars. After, we lay out on the blanket, cuddling together to stay warm, and watched the sky together.

“Which one’s your favorite?” Jacob had asked.

I considered my options before pointing to a cluster of stars. “There. Lyra. The harp.”

Jacob squinted up at it. “How come?”

“In Greek mythology, the harp belonged to Orpheus,” I’d explained. “He used it to play love songs for Eurydice, his bride. When she died, Orpheus couldn’t stand the loneliness, so he went to the underworld to bargain with Hades to get her back. Hades was so impressed with Orpheus’s music that he agreed to let Eurydice return to Earth.”

“So it was a happy story?”

“Not quite,” I said, nuzzling beneath Jacob’s strong chin. “Hades had one condition. Orpheus had to return to the upper world without ever looking back to check if Eurydice was following. Otherwise, Hades would take her back to the underworld. At first, Orpheus could hear her footsteps behind him, but then they faded as Hades led them through a pine grove. You can imagine what happened next.”

“Hades tricked him?”

“It wasn’t a trick,” I’d replied, musing over the story. “It was more of a test of faith. Anyway, Zeus placed the harp in the sky to honor Orpheus’s music and his love for Eurydice.”

Jacob pulled me closer. “Were there any Greek myths that ended happily?”

“Not many.”

Dave’s face popped up over the edge of our row, ending my jaunt through a simpler time in my relationship. The rest of the coaster had finally been unloaded. Dave fit the toolbar into a notch underneath the seats and asked, “Everyone ready?”

“Beyond ready,” Jacob answered.

“Here we go then. Hands up, heads back.”

The three of us obliged, and Dave heaved the toolbar into position with a grunt. The harnesses released at long last, floating upward to free us. I groaned and stretched then lifted my butt from the seat to get the blood flowing again. My legs felt as though they had a thousand pins stuck in them.

Dave helped Jacob out first. Jacob’s hatred of roller coasters fueled his efficiency. He had no trouble swinging one leg, then the other, over the edge of the car and stepping out onto the ladder. When I heard the soft swish of his boots in the grass, I breathed out a sigh of relief. Dave reappeared at my level.

“Ready to go, ma’am?”

At long last, I stood up, letting out an involuntary hiss as my wobbly legs crept and itched as the blood rushed back to my limbs. I made to step over the edge of the car but misjudged the distance, and my foot caught the underside of the coaster’s decorative accents, sending me sprawling forward into the open air.

“*No!*” Jacob yelled. “Georgie!”

Dave made a wild grab as I tumbled past him, but the silky fabric of my sweater slipped from between his fingers. A panicked yell escaped from my lips as I hurtled headfirst toward the dark ground. Self-preservation instinct took over, and I tucked my chin into my chest, flipping myself as quickly as possible so that I wouldn’t land on my head. Less than a second later, I crashed into Jacob’s firm chest, his knees bent to absorb the impact, and we both fell to the grass, bruised but ultimately unharmed.

“Holy shit,” a voice said from above, and we both looked up to see the teenaged girl peering over the side of the coaster. “That was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen. Maybe you two really are meant for each other.”

Hayley knelt beside us, forgetting to hold the ladder steady. “Oh my God, are you okay?”

Jacob helped me shakily stand to my feet, running his hands along the lengths of my body to check for injuries. “Baby, is anything broken?”

Experimentally, I wiggled my fingers and toes. A sharp pang radiated through my left hand. My pinky finger jutted out at an unnatural angle. “Just a finger.”

Jacob brought my hand closer to his face for a better look. “Shit. Come on, let’s get you to First Aid.”

The teenager jumped from the last few rungs of the ladder, followed shortly by Dave, which signaled the end of the lengthy rescue mission. Dave immediately approached me. “I’m so sorry about that. It was all my fault. I should’ve had a better hand on you.”

“No, I misstepped,” I countered. “I don’t blame you at all.”

Dave patted me on the shoulder. “Even so, we should get someone to look at your finger.”

“No need.” I took a firm hold of my pinky finger with my uninjured hand, and with no more than a grimace, yanked the bone straight. I held it up for everyone to see. “All better. Just needs a splint.”

Jacob’s jaw dropped. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve broken a finger. Let’s get back.”

Hayley led us through the yard beneath the roller coaster, which loomed like a great mythical monster overhead. The teenager walked behind me, chattering away about Jacob’s heroic catch, and Dave brought up the rear. We were the last ones to climb up the rusty metal stairs to the loading platform. Everyone else had already left, and the queue house was empty. The track looked oddly vacant without a train to occupy it.

“What are we supposed to do now?” I asked.

“Go home,” Dave suggested. “There’s no point in staying. The whole park is down.” He pointed down the exit ramp of the loading platform. “Make a left out of the ride then a right at the ice cream stand. It’s a shortcut to get to the exit. We have to go help get people off of the other rides.”

We parted ways, thanking Dave and Hayley for their assistance. Then we followed the teenager out of the coaster’s queue building and into the rest of the park. Immediately, we were shunted in with the rest of the crowd heading for the exit. All around, people tapped their phones against their palms, urging them to turn on. What kind of power outage took out cells as well as landlines? I grabbed the back of Jacob’s jacket so that we wouldn’t get separated then instinctively reached for the girl.

“What are you doing?” she asked, tugging her hand free of mine.

“You shouldn’t be alone,” I said as the crowd jostled us along. “Is your mom here?”

She scoffed. “My mom? I’m not twelve. I have to go find my friends. Good luck, lady. Hope your shit works out.”

And then she disappeared into the swarm. I lost sight of her at once. In the darkness, everyone looked the same. I tightened my grip on Jacob’s jacket, pulled myself level with him, and linked my arm through his in a more secure grip. Someone bumped against me, jostling my broken finger, so I tucked it against my side as we made our way out to the parking lot.

The lot was a mess. Cars blocked the aisles, frozen in place on their way to the exit. Dads sat in the driver’s seats of their minivans with the doors open, coaxing keys into the ignition and muttering words of encouragement to the cold, silent engines, while their wives kept track of the kids. Some engines turned over, eliciting both cheers from their owners and groans from those who were less fortunate. There seemed to be a trend in which cars got started. They were all of an older variety, beaten-up clunkers driven by sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds with fresh licenses. The shiny newer cars

remained ironically taciturn, refusing to turn on as the few older cars navigated carefully around the cemetery of vehicles. However, when they reached the exit to the main road, they ran into another problem. The entire street was clogged with unmoving cars, some of which had run into each other. Drivers yelled at each other, at their phones, and at nothing at all to vent their frustration.

"I'm glad we took the bus," I muttered as we surveyed the chaos.

"Yeah, which means we're walking all the way home," Jacob pointed out.

"It's better than sitting in this traffic."

We passed the welcome sign for the theme park and resigned ourselves for the long walk back to the apartment. With the sun long gone, the temperature had dropped drastically. I leaned into Jacob, worming my way beneath his jacket, and he hugged me against his side. Our positioning made for an awkward gait, but at least we were warm. I took my phone out of my pocket and clicked the home button.

"Any luck?" Jacob asked.

"Nope. Yours?"

"Not even a flicker. What do you think it means?"

The buildings of downtown Denver materialized like rectangular titans, looming over the pandemonium in the streets. A wayward toddler wobbled toward us, waddling as fast as possible on his chubby legs. Up ahead, a teenager looked frantically through the crowd, her eyes aimed at knee level. I swept the toddler up in my arms, which prompted an immediate spit take over my shoulder, and made my way toward the teenager.

"Does he belong to you?" I asked, presenting the toddler.

The teenager slumped with relief. "Yes, thank God! I looked away for a second. Miss Stark would've killed me if I'd lost him in this mess."

I handed over the squalling child. "Be careful. The two of you should head home. It's not safe to be out right now."

"You're telling me."

The teenager and her charge escaped into a tall brick apartment building. Jacob pulled me closer again, and we continued through the city. The number of car accidents tripled at every dark stop light, but there were no ambulances or squad cars to supervise the madness. Good Samaritans assisted those in need, pulling bloodied women and children from wrecked sedans and trucks.

"This is bad," I said to Jacob. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know. Do you think it's like this everywhere?"

“God, I hope not.”

The light rail had stopped too. Transportation officials, drivers and workers alike, pried open the doors of the train manually. The reflective patches on their neon yellow vests glowed feebly under the starlight as they strained to free the people trapped on the metro.

“I should check on my parents,” Jacob said, unable to tear his eyes away from a portly man lifting a small child from a ruined minivan. “And my sister.”

“How?” I asked. “The phones are out.”

“There has to be a way.”

“Your parents are smart people,” I told him, squeezing his arm in reassurance. “And they don’t really go out on Friday nights, right? They’re probably safe at home.”

He relaxed slightly. “What about Pippa?”

“Pippa is a seventeen-year-old who’s eight months pregnant,” I reminded him. “If I know her at all, she was in the process of downing a pint of mint chocolate chip in her bedroom and calling all of her nonpregnant friends to remind them that she exists.”

“You’re probably right.”

I swallowed hard as we passed another crash, averting my eyes from the bloodstain on the asphalt. “Let’s just get home. We can buckle down and figure out what to do from there.”

3

By the time we reached our apartment block, a fixed sense of nausea had moved into my stomach with no intention of relieving itself. No matter where I looked, someone was hurt or in trouble. People cried for help, and no one answered. We had personally stopped a number of times to assist someone. Jacob had teamed up with another man to lift a fallen tree trunk off the legs of the man's wife. Farther along, I patched up a gaping gash in a ten-year-old's forehead with decrepit bandaids from the glove compartment of his mother's demolished car. He had been sitting in the front seat when the car stopped and smashed his face against the dashboard. As I stanched the blood with a roll of gauze and pinched his skin back together, his mother cried in horror over the fact that she'd let him sit up front. Twenty minutes later, Jacob shrugged off his jacket and draped it around a shivering five-year-old as she waited for her father to free another child from a car seat. In a sense, Jacob and I had gotten lucky at the theme park. I would probably never go on another roller coaster again, but at least we had escaped with minimal injuries.

When the door shut behind us, enclosing us in the lobby of our building, it muted the clamor of the outside world. I rubbed my eyes, wishing I could unsee the blood and the pain. Jacob jabbed the button for the elevator, but it stayed dark.

"Right," he muttered. "No electricity. I'm an idiot."

"No, you're not."

He rubbed his hands together. The cold had already begun to penetrate

the glass doors of the lobby. “I guess it’s the stairs then.”

We headed up, plodding along at a lazy pace. My feet ached from the miles between the park and our home. All I wanted to do was fall into bed. A few people passed by us, recognizable from the mail room and other floors. We exchanged polite exclamations about the situation and wished each other luck but didn’t linger long in the stairway. When we reached the door to our apartment, I silently thanked whoever had installed manual locks in the building, rather than the fancy expensive keycard pads that relied on electricity to let you into your home. Jacob unlocked the door and held it open for me. Out of habit, I flicked the light switch up.

“Damn it.”

“I have a feeling we’re going to be doing that a lot,” Jacob said, tossing the keys onto the kitchen counter. The apartment was chilly but not unbearable. For once, I was glad of Jacob’s anal obsession with keeping the balcony door shut. He vanished into the bedroom, reappeared wearing a cashmere sweater, and opened the fridge to look inside. “Are you hungry?”

“You should probably keep that shut,” I said. “Keep the food cold for as long as possible. Honestly, after everything that we just saw out there, I don’t think I have the stomach for dinner.”

“I’d usually agree, but I bought fillet medallions to grill for our anniversary dinner next week, and hell if I’m going to let those go bad.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and perched my chin on his shoulder as he took the package of meat from the fridge. “I’d like to take this opportunity to tell you how grateful I am that you so adamantly insisted on learning how to use a charcoal grill this year.”

“Gas grills are cheating,” he replied. “Go wash up. I’ll manage out here.”

I left him to it and headed for the bathroom, keeping one hand on the wall to lead me through the pitch blackness. When I flipped up the tap, a few drops of water trickled out before it went totally dry.

“There’s no water,” I announced in the kitchen as Jacob seasoned the medallions with a flurry of spices.

He groaned. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Don’t worry though.” I swung open the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink, revealing three big five-gallon jugs that fit into our water dispenser, along with several packages of smaller bottles. “I stocked up last week when I went to Costco. We’re good for a little while at least.”

Jacob planted an appreciative kiss on my cheek. “Bless you and your

weird doomsday tendencies."

The word "doomsday" stirred something in the pit of my stomach, but before I could lend too much thought to it, someone rapped on the door. I put my eye to the peephole and caught a glimpse of long black hair.

"It's Nita," I said, pulling the door open.

"Hey, Georgie." For once, my friend wasn't carrying an armload of books. She waved at Jacob over my shoulder. "Hi, Jake. I knocked earlier, but no one answered."

"We just got back from the park," Jacob said.

"I'm glad you made it back safely." Nita hugged me tightly. "How's it look out there?"

I rested my chin on the top of her head. "Not good. Pretty terrible actually."

She drew back, her brow knitting together. "I wish I could do something. That's the problem with med school. You read a ton of books on biology and theory and all that, but it's useless until you get into the field."

"Don't beat yourself up," Jacob said. "If the power's out to the whole city, there's only so much the hospitals can do. You're better off here with us."

"Totally," I agreed.

"I guess," Nita said. "Anyway, a bunch of us are having a party on the roof to grill all our food before it spoils. Do you guys want to join? Everyone brought whatever booze they had, so it's bound to be a good time."

"A blackout party?" Jacob asked. "I haven't been to one of those since we vacationed in Miami during hurricane season." He held up the plate of steaks. "What do you think, Georgie? Should we share the wealth?"

"I'm not so sure it's a good idea."

Jacob tilted the steaks toward him and studied the raw meat with a wistful sigh. "Yeah, I guess we only have two of them."

"Not the steaks," I said. "The party. It doesn't feel appropriate. There are people out there in the streets who are hurt and bleeding. We have no idea how far this blackout reaches. Do you really think it's wise for us to get drunk and not care while everyone else is trying to figure out what's going on?"

Nita leaned her head against my shoulder. "It's like you said. We can't do anything about it now. It's late, and it's dark out."

"I say we enjoy ourselves tonight," Jacob added. "We might as well have

some fun and then get a good night's sleep. Who knows? Maybe the power will be back on by the time we wake up in the morning."

"That's the spirit." Nita gestured for us to follow her. "Come on. I'd grab a jacket though. It's pretty windy and cold up there, even with the grills lit."

"Actually, Nita, could you do me a favor first?" I held up my left hand. My pinky finger had started to swell. "I broke my finger at the park. Think you could help me splint it?"

"Sure. You got the stuff?"

"In the bathroom."

"I'll get some things together," Jacob called after us.

Nita followed me into the bathroom, where I extracted our first aid kit from underneath the counter. Nita popped it open and rifled through the contents, pulling out a splint and medical tape.

"Finger," she requested. I held it out for her to examine. "Did you set it yourself?"

"Yup."

"Wow. Nice job. We should probably take this off." Nita wormed my engagement ring off of my third finger to make room for the splint. The gold band clinked against the countertop. "Your hand's going to swell even more, and you don't want the ring stuck on there. Believe me."

"Good looking out."

Nita trapped her bottom lip between her teeth in concentration as she positioned the splint against my finger, her face inches from my hand in the darkened bathroom, and wrapped the medical tape around my knuckles.

"Are you worried?" I asked her.

"About what?"

I nodded toward the flat black canvas of the bathroom window. "This. It doesn't feel like a normal power outage. Jacob and I saw this weird white light in the sky while we were at the park. And what's with the phones? And the cars? My dad always said—"

I cut myself off, realizing where I had been going with the sentence, but Nita didn't seem to notice, absorbed in the patchwork of my injury. She finished off the tape and patted my hand.

"All done," she said, packing the supplies back into the first aid kit. "I'm going to be real with you, Georgie. Most days, you are the most laid-back person I know, but you're a bucket of anxiety about things that most people don't bother to blink at."

I released an indignant huff. “I am not.”

“Oh, really?” Though she was just a silhouette, I could imagine her answering smirk. “What about last year when that storm hit? You knocked on my door at two o’clock in the morning because Jacob was out of town on a business trip and you didn’t want to sleep alone. I’ve never seen anyone so worked up over snow.”

“Excuse me. It was a *blizzard*.”

“This is Colorado, honey,” she replied. “It snows.”

“I did grow up here, you know.”

“Never would’ve guessed.”

Jacob popped his head in from the hallway. “You girls almost done? I’m starving, and this meat isn’t going to cook itself. I also managed to unearth a few six-packs of beer. Do you like dark brew, Nita?” He glanced at the bulky metallic splint on my finger. “Edward Scissorhands?”

I stuck my fingers together in an imitation of pincers and pinched the collar of Jacob’s sweater. He ducked and darted forward to tickle me. I dodged his attack, knocking into Nita, and the three of us tumbled into the bathtub, laughing. I landed squished between Jacob and Nita.

“Let’s not break anything else, okay?” Nita suggested.

“No promises,” Jacob said.

A faint scream from the street below ruined the lighthearted moment. Our giggles died out. Jacob’s grin vanished as he lifted himself away from our dog pile then helped first me then Nita out of the tub.

“We should go,” he said, ushering us out of the bathroom.

“My coat’s in the bedroom,” I said.

“I’ll get it.”

Nita picked up one of the six-packs and tucked it under her arm as Jacob reemerged from the bedroom and helped me thread my injured hand clumsily through the sleeve of my army-green coat. It was technically a ski jacket, but the slippery material would keep the biting wind on the roof away from my body. Jacob tugged a black knit hat over my uneven hair.

“Ready?” Nita asked, waiting by the door.

“Right behind you,” Jacob said. As Nita left, he gave me the steaks to hold, knelt beneath the kitchen island, and pulled out a package of water bottles.

I stopped him before he could follow Nita. “What are you doing?”

“I figured we should probably try to keep everyone hydrated,” he said,

hefting the package over his shoulder. “Knowing our friends, none of them thought to bring anything other than booze.”

“Leave that here.”

A mixed look of belligerence and confusion crossed his face. “Why?”

I thought of the screams on the streets below. “Because I think we’re going to need it.”

Jacob let out a quick puff through his nose, a sign that he was losing patience with me. “We’re out of power, Georgie. It’s not the end of the world.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” he insisted. “This isn’t Castro’s Cuba. We’re not going to waste away in one night. And don’t you think it’s better for us to take care of our friends than selfishly hoard all of the water for ourselves?”

“Our friends are mostly your friends,” I corrected him. “And they should have been responsible enough to buy their own water in case of emergencies. Hell, they should be responsible enough not to get wasted on a night like this.”

“Not everyone is as paranoid as you,” he shot back.

“Jacob—”

“Fine!” He slammed the package of water on the ground, picked up the other six-pack instead, and grabbed the steaks from me. “I’m leaving the water. Can we go now?”

“I’m just trying to be practical.”

“And I’m trying to make the best out of a crappy situation,” he replied, heading for the door. “Are you coming or not? I can always give the other medallion to Nita instead.”

“I’m coming.”

He didn’t wait for me to lock the door behind us, breezing by Nita so quickly on his way to the staircase that his passage ruffled her hair like a light breeze. She shot me a look.

“What was that all about?”

“Don’t ask,” I sighed, zipping up my jacket as we followed in Jacob’s wake. The staircase was cold and quiet.

Nita linked her arm in mine. “Don’t worry. This will blow over.”

“The power outage or my relationship woes?”

“Both, hopefully.”

At the top of the staircase, we pushed open the door to the roof together.

The sight was a refreshingly affectionate one. Several residents from the building huddled together in intimate groups around three different barbecue grills. Two of the grills smoked with the enticing scents of cooking food, while the third had been lit for the sake of warmth. Everyone was bundled up in hats and scarves, talking and laughing as they traded hamburgers and beers. It was like an unplanned neighborhood potluck, except that the festivities were lit by the orange burn of the charcoal coals rather than the fairy lights strung overhead. Someone had brought their guitar up to provide a soundtrack, strumming the chords to "American Pie" out of sight. A few people hummed along to the verses, but when the chorus rolled around, the voices rose to deliver the deceivingly buoyant melody to the missing moon above.

"Bye, bye Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry. Them good ole boys were drinking whiskey and rye, singin' this'll be the day that I die."

Jacob had already found his way to a grill. He was one of the few who knew the lyrics to the verses. He sang proudly as he tended to the steak, and his performance was so impressive that the others quieted down to listen.

"I didn't know Jacob sang," Nita said to me.

"Neither did I," I muttered.

The music slowed as we joined Jacob at the grill, and he turned away from the steaks to sing the last bit of the lyrics to me instead.

"In the streets, the children scream, the lovers cried, and the poets dreamed," he crooned, putting down the metal grill tongs to take my hands in his. "But not a word was spoken. The church bells all were broken." Somewhere down below, a cry rang out, but Jacob sang on. "And the three men I admire most, the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. They caught the last train for the coast the day the music died. And they were singing—"

The tempo picked up again, driven by the guitar player, and everyone joined in for the last few repetitions of the chorus, drowning out the faint sounds of struggle and discomfort in the streets. My throat tightened as I focused on the fervent request in Jacob's warm eyes to just exist in that moment with him, to revel in the humanity of it all. He drew me closer and closed out the last line of the song in complete silence, the guitar and other voices fading out to let Jacob's deep and resonant tenor echo through the night on its own.

"Singing this will be the day that I die…"

A moment of silence followed before the rooftop burst into cheers and applause. People clapped Jacob on the back and praised his impromptu gig. He thanked each of them, but his gaze remained fixed on me as I ducked my head and wiped the moisture from beneath my eyes. He waited for me to say something.

“Your steaks are burning.”

“Ah, shit.”

He whirled around to rescue the meat from the grill, giving me the time to disappear into the crowd. Someone offered me a beer, but I shook my head, bypassing each group until I reached the edge of the building. I rested my elbows on the frigid concrete and peered over. It was too dark to see anything in the streets other than the phantom outlines of cars stuck in place, but the wind whispered with tragedy. A baby cried. A dog whimpered. The shatter of breaking glass cued what probably wasn’t the first of a long list of criminal activities.

The others didn’t understand. A citywide blackout was not cause for celebration. The morning would shed light on the severity of the situation. People grew desperate very quickly. We relied so heavily on modern day accommodations that we had forgotten the basics of how to take care of ourselves without things like running water and electricity. Reality would set in soon, when everyone realized that their toilets wouldn’t flush and they had nothing to eat but peanut butter and kale chips. The grocery stores and supermarkets would get bombarded, but with no way to pay for goods, people would turn to theft and looting. The shrewd and the brutish had the best chances of survival. Everyone else would be collateral damage.

I hung my head, releasing a sigh as I stared at the speckled flecks in the concrete. Maybe Jacob and Nita were right. Maybe I was paranoid and anxious, but that was how I had been raised, with the inveterate thought of ultimate ruin fixed in the back of my brain. After all these years, I figured the real world might have dampened the lunacy I’d grown up with, but parents shaped their children, and I was the last person to deny that my father had chiseled me out of the same damn block of stubborn rock he’d been born out of.

A paper plate bearing a blackened fillet appeared beneath me.

“It might be a little overcooked,” Jacob said. “Also, no one bothered to bring any forks or knives, so—” He produced two hamburger buns, one for me and one for him. “Creative problem solving, right?”

I mustered a smile, put together my burger, and took a bite. Despite Jacob's claim, the meat was juicy and tender on the inside.

"About earlier," he said, arranging a piece of lettuce on his bun so that it sat just right. "I'm sorry. You're probably right. We should make sure we have enough supplies for ourselves before we start handing them out to everyone else."

I wiped a dribble of juice from my chin. "Have you ever noticed how often we apologize to each other?"

"I guess so—"

"Why are you guys all the way over here?" Nita asked, sidling up next to me. She handed me a styrofoam cup of instant hot chocolate. The powder hadn't entirely dissolved yet, revolving slowly on top of the drink. "Thought you could use a hot drink. We boiled water on the grill. Clever, right?"

I stirred in the rest of the chocolate and took a sip, reveling in the warmth of the beverage as it made its way down my throat and into my belly. "Thanks."

Nita nudged Jacob over my plate. "Hey, where'd you learn to sing like that?"

He took a bite of his steakburger and grinned. "Church camp."

"I didn't know you went to church camp," I said.

"Yeah, I went every summer as a kid. I never told you that?"

"No."

"Oh."

Nita cleared her throat to fill the uncomfortable silence. "It's freezing over here. You guys should come back over to the grill. We're making s'mores next. It'll be just like Girl Scouts. Come on."

"You go," I told Jacob as Nita bounded off. "I think I'm going to head to bed. It's been a long day."

"Are you sure?" he asked, polishing off his burger. "I could come with you."

"No, you should stay," I said. "Have fun while you can."

He cocked an eyebrow at my unfortunate wording but didn't comment on it. "Okay. I'm coming to check on you in an hour though."

Jacob leaned in for a kiss. His lips tasted like salt and beer, but they were soft and reassuring against mine. I pulled away and let him return to the party, ducking my chin into the front of my jacket to ward off the wind. Nita's eyes followed me as I walked across the roof to the door. I pretended

not to see her, and she wisely did not call attention to my hasty exit.

In the apartment, the silence was more profound. The usual whir of the heating unit in the bedroom was absent, along with the general hum of functioning electronics. I pulled the duvet off of the bed, wrapped it around my shoulders, and wandered into the walk-in closet that Jacob and I shared. Three-quarters of the space belonged to him. Rows of neatly pressed pants, suit jackets, dress shirts, and vests were hung equal distances apart. Beneath that, his collection of fancy leather dress shoes gleamed in the darkness. A storage compartment hid all of his casual clothes and workout gear. I knew that if I opened the top drawer, I'd find every T-shirt and muscle tank folded flat along the seams.

At the rear of the closet, my small assortment of faded jeans and practical crewneck sweaters paled in comparison to Jacob's stunning wardrobe. Shopping had never been my thing, although I had indulged in amassing an impressive array of Vans's all-weather shoe line. With the snow and the rain, it was nice to have a little variety while I kept my feet warm and dry. I sat down on the floor of the closet and shoved aside the pile of shoes, reaching way in the back beneath our hanging coats to get to what I was looking for. My fingers closed around a cold metal corner, and I drew out a fat, rusty ammunition can. Inside, encased in a smaller cardboard box, was an old antique radio. I lifted it out, closed my eyes in silent prayer, and flipped it on.

It fizzled to life, filling the closet with fuzzy static. My half-assed Faraday cage had kept it safe from whatever blast had fried the rest of the city. I fiddled with the dials, pausing on each channel to listen for signs of communication. Chances were low. The radio towers had probably felt the impact too, but if someone had managed to set up a working signal in the time since the blast, then I was determined to find it. After several passes through the white noise, I finally caught something and turned up the volume on the feeble speakers.

"If anyone's listening out there, this is Diane and Lacy from Cherry Creek," a woman's voice, distorted and imprecise, said. "We've made contact with amateur operators in the District of Columbia, who have information from government officials. From what we can tell, the entire United States and the southern part of Canada have been affected by the blackouts. Whether it was a solar flare or the result of a nuclear EMP blast, people are already claiming that the act was one driven by terrorism. Electricity is not expected to return anytime soon. We recommend that you get out of the city

before it's too late. Areas with less population density will be safer at a time like this. Ration your supplies. Make intelligent choices. Remember your humanity. And good luck out there."

An EMP blast. The white burst of light in the atmosphere. The acronym triggered a hazy memory. My father's voice echoed indistinctly, almost as if it were coming out of the radio.

"An electromagnetic pulse, George," he'd said, wire cutters working furiously to shape a cage out of layered chicken wire. He was the only person who ever called me George. I always thought it was because he'd wanted a son rather than a daughter. "It's a nuclear bomb. North Korea's got 'em, and when they detonate 'em, it's gonna take out the entire grid. Gotta be ready for anything."

"If anyone's listening out there, this is Diane and Lacy from Cherry Creek," the radio chirped again. "We've made contact with amateur operators in the District of Columbia…"

The message was prerecorded and programmed to repeat. Diane and Lacy were probably on their way out of Denver already. If this really was a terrorist attack, there was no point in sticking around. Major hubs would be the most dangerous places to be. The women on the radio were right. We needed to get out of the city.

I set the radio down and kicked myself free of the duvet, fumbling around in the dark to find the exit to the closet. When I reached the hallway of our floor, I tripped over a raised corner for the carpet, nearly twisting my ankle. Bracing myself against the wall, I forced myself to take a long, deep breath. Panic and rushed decisions weren't going to help us. I needed to be calm. Levelheaded. And just a tiny bit paranoid.

The blackout party on the roof was still in full swing. The alcohol had kicked in, and I barged into a drunken rendition of "Bohemian Rhapsody." The guitar had lost a string and dropped out of tune, but its owner played on unaware. People danced around one grill like participants in a bizarre ritual while others toasted marshmallows around another. Someone else balanced on the edge of the roof as if it were a tightrope. I rushed over and pulled the inebriated partygoer to safety by the pocket of his coat then sent him downstairs to think about what he'd done. Then I scanned the roof for Jacob and found him sharing one of the patio chairs with Nita.

"I need to talk to you," I announced, marching up to them.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Thankfully, he was sober. "I thought you

went to bed."

Nita reached out to draw me closer. "Is everything okay?"

"No, and it's going to get worse," I told them. "We need to leave."

Jacob blinked. "Leave what?"

"The city. Denver. We should get out now before the rush."

Jacob and Nita exchanged worried glances. I gusted a sigh.

"Remember the white light?" I asked them. "It was either a solar flare or an EMP attack, both of which are bad news for all of us. The entire country's black—"

"How do you know?" Jacob interrupted.

"I found a working radio. Someone was broadcasting."

"Where? If everything's toast?"

My teeth worked at my lip, trimming the skin. "I hid one in a crappy Faraday cage in our closet."

Nita squinted up at me. "What's a Faraday cage?"

"It's a shield that blocks electromagnetic fields," I explained impatiently. "I used an old-school ammunition can. Anyway, listen—"

"Hang on a second," Jacob interrupted, shifting forward in his seat. "You've been hiding some weird doomsday device in the back of our closet all this time?"

"It's not a *doomsday* device—"

"Damn it, Georgie, I thought we were past all this!" Jacob rose to his feet, kicking an empty beer can across the roof. It clattered against someone else's shoes, causing a few heads to turn in our direction. "It was cute in college, okay? All the prepper talk and bugout novels. But this is real life now. You can't hide shit and not tell me."

"You didn't tell me you went to church camp."

"My mother and father are devout Christians! *Of course I went to church camp!*"

"Guys," Nita said as the growing volume of our voices began to draw the attention of the other partygoers.

"Why can't you listen to me just once?" I demanded, stepping into Jacob's personal space. "I kept telling you that something like this was a possibility. Yeah, sure, the chances were one in a million, but guess what? Here we are! And you know what? I'm one of the only people who's going to know what to do when everyone else is scrambling like idiots trying to survive the apocalypse."

“Are you listening to yourself?” he shot back. “This isn’t the apocalypse, Georgie. It’s a blackout. We’ll wait it out here at the apartment, where it’s safe, and when the power comes back on in a few hours or a few days or however long—”

“You don’t get it, do you?” I said over him. “The power’s not coming back on, Jacob! The grid is gone. Gone! This country runs on over two thousand transformers. Do you know how long it will take to replace them all?”

“*Guys*,” Nita said again, maneuvering herself between us. She was so short that we glared at each other over her head. At this point, the entire party had gone silent to watch our flare-up. “Calm down.”

“You’re jumping to conclusions,” Jacob argued. “Just because one random person on the radio said it was an EMP or whatever doesn’t actually mean it actually is. They’re probably trying to capitalize on fear.”

“Or they’re smart enough to know it’s time to get out of town and nice enough to warn everybody else to do the same.”

“God, I can’t take this anymore,” Jacob said, running his hands through his hair. “Georgie, this is not one of your end-of-the-world books. This is not *The Walking Dead*—”

An explosion rent the air, cutting Jacob off midsentence.

4

Instinctively, everyone hit the ground. I flattened myself out on the roof between Nita and Jacob, covering my head with my hands, but the explosion settled quickly. A transformer on a nearby telephone pole had burst into flames. The wires around it fizzled with leftover electricity. The purple-white light lit up the rooftop and illuminated the sky. For one moment, I could see every horrified face around me. Then the power surge fizzled out with another loud bang, and darkness descended again.

Silence blanketed the rooftop. Then one lubricated voice uttered:

"What. The. *Fuuuuuuck*."

Jacob lowered his hands from where they cradled his skull and looked around. "Georgie. Nita. Are you guys okay?"

"I'm fine," Nita said, coming out of her tucked position too. "Georgie?"

"Oh, I'm good," I told them. "Do you believe me now?"

Jacob pushed himself to his knees. "Let's not panic. It was probably a fluke."

"It wasn't a fluke." I grabbed Jacob before he could get to his feet and pulled him closer, grasping his face between both hands. "Look at me. I know I've told you some crazy stories over the years, but just this once, I need you to believe me. I know about this kind of stuff. Please. This is not your average blackout."

I wasn't sure what helped to shift Jacob's perspective—my insistence or the exploding transformer—but I saw the change in his face. His lips parted as if he was going to say something. His brown eyes grew darker. He pressed

his mouth to my palm.

"Okay," he said against my skin.

"Okay? You believe me?"

"I believe *in* you," he modified, clutching my hand to press it against his chest. His heart thumped beneath my fingertips, adrenaline racing through his veins. "If you think we should leave the city, then we will."

"It's that easy?" I ventured.

"No," Jacob admitted. "First of all, there's no point in leaving now. We have hours until dawn, and marching around in the dark and the cold is not going to make for good attitudes. Plus, it isn't safe. We don't know who's wandering around down there. I'd rather have clear visuals."

"Agreed," I said. "We'll leave tomorrow morning."

"That's not all," Jacob went on, kneading the pads of my fingers. "I can't leave Denver without checking in on my family. I need to know that they're okay, and we should ask them if they want to go with us."

"They should come with us," I insisted. "The city won't be safe, especially for Pippa. We need to get her somewhere secure, quiet, and clean."

"Which brings me to my third point," he said. "We need a plan. We need a way to get out of the city, since cars obviously aren't an option, and we need a place to go. Any ideas?"

My teeth found my lip again. The skin split, and the familiar tang of blood touched the tip of my tongue. "I know a place," I told him. "Somewhere I used to go when I was a kid. It's up in the mountains, off the grid. If we can get there, we have a pretty decent chance of waiting this thing out."

"What about supplies?"

"We'll need a few things to get out of the city, but the place I have in mind is practically a fortress. It should be fully loaded."

Jacob worked my lip free of my teeth and blotted the dot of blood with his thumb. "If I ask you why you know a place like this, are you going to tell me a true answer?"

"Probably not."

He gave a resigned sigh. "I thought not. Nita?"

The other partygoers had begun to disperse. The explosion had put a damper on the festivities, and everyone was ready to call it a night. As they collected empty beer bottles and trash from around the grills, Nita appeared at Jacob's shoulder.

“I was listening,” she said. “You guys are leaving?”

“Yeah, and you should come with us,” I told her. “You don’t have any family here, do you?”

“Nope. They’re all in Barcelona.”

“Good.” I tugged her into a hug. “That means they’re safe. Is there anyone else you need to check in on?”

She put her hands into the pockets of my jacket to warm them. “Not really. I don’t talk to anyone at school. Everyone I know here lives in this building.”

“Speaking of which,” Jacob began. “Hey, everybody!” He climbed up on one of the patio chairs and waved his hands above his head. Those who remained on the roof turned to look at him, quieting their conversations. “This blackout’s not going to go away anytime soon. The longer you stay in Denver, the more dangerous it’s going to get. If you have the ability to leave the city, you should do so as soon as morning hits. Stock up on water and supplies. Go somewhere safe and stay inside. There’s going to be a lot of crime on the streets, and I don’t want to come back to this building a few weeks from now and find out that any of you got hurt.” He cleared his throat uncertainly. “I guess that’s all. See you later.”

Jacob jumped down from the chair and clapped shoulders with a few of his muscled friends from the gym. I was glad that he hadn’t invited them to join our escapade out of the city. More people meant more trouble. As much as I hated to admit it, bringing Jacob’s family along was going to be a challenge in and of itself. The Masons were used to luxury cars and expensive hotels. I couldn’t picture them in flannel and hiking boots as we trekked through the mountains. His parents would have to power through, but Pippa was going to present a unique problem. It wasn’t wise to put a pregnant high school senior through this kind of stress. We needed someone to look after her.

“Hey, Nita,” I said, pulling her aside. “What do you know about pregnant women?”

“Uh, I did a few rounds in obstetrics.”

“Perfect.”

Jacob finished his goodbyes and joined us, his arms laden with empty beer bottles and the empty steak package. “Ready to head to bed? We should probably try to get a decent night’s sleep.”

We followed the others into the stairway and made our way down to our

floor. Outside our apartment, Nita hesitated before moving along to her unit at the other end of the hall.

"Do you mind if I stay with you guys?" she asked. "I don't want to be alone tonight. Not in this craziness."

"Who's the scaredy cat now?" I teased.

Jacob pinched my arm. "Hush, you. Of course you can stay with us. Come on in."

We ushered the younger woman into the apartment first. Despite my mocking, the thought of Nita sleeping over comforted me. Safety in numbers and all that. Moreover, Jacob's and my unit was the best one in the building. His father had made sure of that, renovating each room until the apartment could have passed for a New York City loft. The rest of the units in the building were fit for college students and recent postgraduates rather than anyone with a plentiful salary. I'd seen Nita's apartment. It was nice, but it lacked the extra touches that we were fortunate enough to have in ours. A twinge of remorse flickered through me. Tomorrow, we would leave our homey apartment behind without concrete knowledge of whether we would ever return to it.

Jacob dumped his armload of trash into the bin. "You two can take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Oh no, I couldn't do that to you," Nita said. "You guys should both sleep in the bedroom."

Jacob flopped down the couch and pulled the throw blanket over his legs. It only covered from his waist to his shins. "Too late. I'm already asleep."

I smiled, shucked off my ski jacket, and knelt down to free a few water bottles from the plastic package that Jacob and I had argued over earlier. "It's a losing battle, Nita. Here, take these to wash up. We're going to have to make do for now."

Nita accepted the water bottles and headed down the hallway. "You're too good to me."

As the door to the bathroom clicked shut, I looked over to Jacob. He had one arm slung over his face, and his chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. I envied his ability to fall asleep so effortlessly. Every night, I tossed and turned and stared at the ceiling and let a barrage of thoughts tumble through my mind like an untuned radio. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone to sleep like a normal person. It had been this way since I was a kid, and I had learned to function on six hours instead of the prescribed eight.

“Stop staring at me,” he said suddenly.

I jumped a little. “I thought you were asleep. And I wasn’t staring.”

“Yes, you were.” He peeked out from beneath his arm. “I can feel your eyes on me. Get over here.”

I walked over to the sofa and perched myself on the edge. Jacob wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me on top of him until I was flush against his chest. My hand sank into the cushions as I propped my head up to look at him. The wind on the roof had stripped his golden hair of product. I combed my fingers through it, laying it flat across his forehead in a style he never wore. He blew upward, and the whoosh of air sent the blond strands out of his eyes.

“Everything’s going to change tomorrow, isn’t it?” he asked, taking my face in his hands.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the rough feel of his calloused palms against my cheeks. “Everything already has changed. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

His touch drifted to the hair buzzed short to my scalp. When I’d first shaved it off, he’d grimaced at the lopsided style. Now he gravitated to that side of my head, as if the soft fuzz acted as a curious comfort.

“What do you think it’s going to be like?”

“Hmm.” I rested my head against his chest, buzzed side down. “Do you remember when you told me that you wanted to go backpacking through Europe?”

He played with my long violet locks. “Yes…”

“And then when we got to the first hostel, you told me that there was no way you were going to stay in that filthy room or share a bathroom with the other travelers?”

“And then we booked a four-star hotel room in Rome,” he finished. “Which you loved. Just putting it out there.”

I poked his side, just beneath his rib cage, one of his few ticklish areas. He squirmed beneath me. “I did love it, but that’s not the point. You know what it’s going to be like? It’s going to be like that hostel but worse. At least that place had running water. This time you won’t be able to turn your nose up at the accommodations and run off to a hotel.”

“I am perfectly capable of roughing it.”

“Oh, really?” I reached past the waist of his jeans and snapped the band of his designer boxer briefs against the sensitive skin of his hips. “And what

happens when you run out of clean underwear?"

"I don't know. We'll wash them in a stream or whatever."

"Can't wait to see that."

"Hey, I read *My Side of the Mountain* in fifth grade," he argued. "I'm ready to go all Sam Gribley on your butt. And speaking of butts…"

His touch wandered south. For all the arguments and the bickering, that was one area of our relationship that never suffered. From the beginning, our connection had been based in physicality. When we'd first met at a crowded club near the University of Denver, we hadn't bothered to introduce ourselves to each other. A raw undeniable energy sparked between us as soon as we spotted each other across the bar, and a minute later, I was pressed against the wall of the club mezzanine, hands in his hair and legs around his waist. It was a fiery moment fueled by neon lights, a pulsing backbeat, and the taste of margarita salt on Jacob's tongue. That was over five years ago, and while Jacob and I had had our ups and downs—we even broke up for a while—the urgency and enthusiasm for each other's figures never wavered.

Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to take advantage of our last night in our own place, we weren't alone. The bathroom door creaked open.

"All yours!" Nita called, her footsteps padding down the hallway.

I rolled off of Jacob, dislodging his eager touch, and stood up as Nita came into the living room. She stopped short when she saw us and delivered a sly grin.

"I said I'd take the couch," she offered.

Jacob rolled over, groaning his embarrassment into the couch cushions. A blush crept up my neck and cheeks, but the darkness hid the rush of color.

"Sorry," I said to Nita.

"Don't apologize." She swept her damp hair away from her forehead. "I'd probably do the same thing if I had someone to do it with. Seriously, take the bedroom—"

"No, it's fine," Jacob said, facedown in the cushions. He wasn't the type of guy to boast about his boldness in the bedroom. He remained poised and respectful in front of other people and saved anything blue for behind closed doors. "I've already died of shame."

Nita caught my eye and mouthed, "*Smack his butt.*"

I obliged.

"*Georgiana Elizabeth Fitz!*"

Nita and I burst into laughter, and Nita tossed a throw pillow at Jacob's

head. “Relax, Jake. We get a kick out of messing with you.”

He used the throw pillow to hide his ears, which turned bright red when he was embarrassed. “I’m going to sleep now.”

“Night.” I kissed the back of his hand since his face wasn’t available then looped an arm around Nita’s shoulders and led her down the hallway. “I’m glad you’re around. We’re going to need your sense of humor during all of this. It’s a good way to stay sane.”

She leaned against the doorway of the bathroom while I washed my face with the bottled water. “You really think it’s going to get that bad?”

I dried my face and reached for my toothbrush. “I think it’s better to expect the worst. That way, either you’re prepared for whatever shit comes down the stream, or you’re pleasantly surprised by the working raft.”

“Pessimist.”

“Realist,” I rectified.

A few minutes later, after I’d retrieved the duvet from the closet and given Nita a pair of pajamas to borrow, we climbed into the king-sized bed and curled up on opposite sides. The sheets were cold and unforgiving. I curled my toes in and drew my knees up to my chest, hoping that my own body warmth would make up for the lack of heat in the room. I closed my eyes. A minute passed. Then another. Then several more. I rolled over and stared at the blank ceiling. Usually, the streetlight outside the window cast the pattern of our curtains across the white paint like a piece of abstract art. Tonight, my makeshift gallery was gone. The ceiling was dark, and the skinny moon outside wasn’t enough to penetrate the cotton fabric of the window treatments. I turned over again.

“Georgie?”

“Yeah.”

Nita flipped over to face me. “I can feel you moving.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“I wasn’t scolding you,” she said, fluffing the pillow that usually belonged to Jacob. “I just feel bad because you can’t sleep. Come here.”

“What?”

She patted the empty space between me and her. “I know I’m not Jacob, but there are studies that say sleeping close to someone reduces stress and encourages feelings of safety. It has something to do with lowering your cortisol levels and blood pressure—”

“Nita, I don’t need the rundown on the whole study,” I told her, but I

scooted closer to her side of the bed. She cuddled up behind me and draped an arm casually across my waist. “Hey, shouldn’t I be the big spoon since I’m taller than you?”

“No,” she said. “Now shut up and go to sleep.”

We fell silent again. I didn’t expect Nita’s trick to work. Sleeping next to Jacob did nothing to ease my nighttime anxiety. Then again, we tended to leave several feet of space between us since he ran hot at night. As I listened to Nita breathe, the ebb and flow of it like waves against a shore, my eyelids drooped, and I drifted off in a matter of minutes.

THE SUN WOKE US, streaming through the bedroom window with something like boastfulness. I shifted against the pillows as it glowed red behind my eyelids, forgetting for a few moments the events that had transpired the night before. Then I realized that the timer on the coffee pot in the kitchen hadn’t automatically brewed my usual Saturday morning cup—the aroma of dark roast was missing from the air—and the person sleeping next to me was small and soft. Jacob’s snores, loud enough to rouse me from the deepest of REM cycles, did not reach their customary air raid siren volume but rather traveled lightly into the bedroom from down the hallway.

Grudgingly, I opened my eyes. Nita was still asleep, huddled under the covers to keep the cold at bay. The chill had worsened overnight, but the rug was warm from the light of the sun as I stepped out of bed, tugged on another layer over my pajamas, and slipped into a pair of boots with a fuzzy inner lining.

In the kitchen, I tiptoed around, trying not to wake Jacob as I rummaged through cabinets and drawers that we rarely opened. A collection of items grew on the island counter: canteens, camping cookware, hand-crank flashlights, bug repellant, citronella candles, matches and lighters, et cetera. Jacob and I had not been camping once together—it was too reminiscent of my childhood, and Jacob wasn’t exactly an outdoorsy guy—but I hadn’t forgotten the basics.

Jacob found me out on the patio, curled up in the rocking chair and drinking coffee as if it were any other morning. He peeked into the mug. “How did you make that without a working pot?”

I pointed to the grill that we kept on the patio. “Boiled water on the grill like Nita did for the hot chocolate last night. Then I mixed in the coffee grounds and poured it through a filter. Want a sip?”

“No, thanks. I can’t drink it black.” He dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “I noticed the stuff on the counter. What’s the plan for today?”

“Pretty simple,” I said. “We pack up, head to your parents’ place, and try not to get caught up in the bullshit in the process. As soon as we pick up your family, it’s out to the Rockies.”

“But how are we supposed to get there?”

“We didn’t buy those expensive road bikes for no reason,” I reminded him. “They’re perfect for getting through the city. It’s about thirty blocks to your parents’ apartment. We could cover that in less than an hour. And Nita has a mountain bike, so she’s good too. Are you sure you don’t want some coffee? The caffeine kick might help.”

Jacob caved in, took a sip, and wrinkled his nose at the bitter taste. “I wasn’t so worried about making it across town. I was more wondering how we’re supposed to get up to this place in the mountains without a working vehicle.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, but it might come down to a good few weeks of hiking,” I told him.

A flash of panic crossed his face. “Weeks?”

“We’re taking Pippa, remember?” I looked out over the city toward the mountains, trying to ignore the clamor at street level. “She’s going to need to rest more often than the rest of us.”

“Georgie…” Jacob fiddled with a splinter in the wooden arm of the rocking chair. “I want to ask you one more time. Are you sure that getting out of the city is our best option?”

I glanced up at him. He tried to reset his expression but couldn’t mask the top layer of doubt. “You’re having second thoughts.”

“No,” he said. “Fine. Yes. I just keep envisioning all six of us trekking through the mountains like the Donner Party before someone’s cell phone rings and we all look back at the city to see every light in town on.”

“The Donner Party resorted to cannibalism to stay alive.”

“So not the point.”

“I don’t know how to convince you that this is the right thing to do,” I told him. “Do I have doubts? Yes. But when it comes down to it, my plan is the safest one. If the power comes back on when we’re halfway to the hills, then it will be a pleasant surprise. Until then, I think it’s better for us to take as many precautions as possible.”

Someone knocked on the glass door, bringing the conversation to an end,

and Nita stepped out to join us on the balcony. “Ooh, coffee! Do you mind?”

“Go for it,” I said. “There’s no cream though.”

“Please. Cream is for amateurs.” She poured herself a cup and squinted into the sunlight toward the mountains. “We’re really doing this, aren’t we?”

“Yup,” I said before Jacob could jump in. “We should try to get out of here in the next hour or so. The streets are pretty quiet. We need to take advantage of it.”

“What should I do?” Nita asked.

“Pack a bag,” I told her. “Not a suitcase. Something you can carry on your back. Make sure you bring enough stuff to keep yourself warm, but not so much that your back’s going to hurt after a few hours of walking. Meet us back here with your bike. Sound good?”

Nita saluted me. “Yes, sir. See you guys in a bit.”

She left with her coffee, leaving Jacob and me alone once more. I finished off my drink and stood up. “Let’s get started.”

OVER THE NEXT HOUR, Jacob watched as I packed up the essentials for roughing it in the woods. At first, he tried to help, but he didn’t even know to roll and arrange his clothes to fit them all in the packs that we had left over from our backpacking attempt. I quickly showed him the ropes so that we could expedite the process, but it was almost painful to watch him painstakingly roll every single Ralph Lauren sweater into perfect cylinders before attempting to stack them in his pack. I left him to it and returned to the items in the kitchen, fitting everything into my own backpack or attaching it to the outside. As I tightened up the straps, Nita knocked on the door.

“How’s it look out there?” I asked her.

“In the hallway? Pretty tame.” She propped the door open with her foot and rolled her bike in. I was glad to see that she wore a practical duffel bag strapped to her back. “I don’t think the people in this building are taking things very seriously.”

“I guess they’re mostly college students who don’t have anywhere else to go.” I hefted my backpack up and down, testing the weight. “Got everything you need? Winter jacket, snow pants, toiletries?”

“I think so,” she said, patting her bag. “That’s the good thing about going to school outside of your own country. You don’t lug a whole bunch of unnecessary crap across the ocean.”

“Good to hear.”

Jacob emerged from the bedroom, dressed head to toe in the ski gear we usually used during our Christmas ski trips out to Breckenridge. One of his cameras—a film one, not a digital one—swung from a lanyard around his neck. He balanced his pack on his back and extended his arms out. “Eh? What do you think? Prepared enough?”

“Beautiful,” I said. “But it’s not cold enough out for that jacket yet. You’re going to start sweating as soon as we start walking.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t fit it into the pack.”

“Give it to me.”

I squished Jacob’s jacket into a spare pocket of my own pack and patted it down. Then the three of us looked around the apartment for anything we could have missed.

“What about the water?” Jacob asked, nudging one of the big five-gallon tanks that I’d pulled out from underneath the counter. “We can’t carry that on a bike.”

“And once people see that we have it, they’ll go nuts,” I mused.

“I have a wagon,” Nita announced.

“A wagon?”

“Yeah, like to pull kids in,” she clarified. “I babysit for one of the ladies on the first floor for extra cash. We could tie it to the back of someone’s bike and lug the water like that.”

“And we could throw a tarp over it so no one sees it,” Jacob added. “Right, Georgie?”

“That’ll work,” I said. “As long as people don’t get too curious, we should be okay. Are we ready to go?”

We all performed one last scan of the apartment. Jacob looked forlorn, shoulders slumped, mouth tilted downward. He didn’t want to leave. Nita, on the other hand, buzzed from her coffee jolt.

“I’m good,” she said.

“I guess I’m good too,” Jacob said.

I hefted one of the five-gallon jugs over my shoulder to carry downstairs. “We can load up the wagon in the lobby. Let’s go.”

FIVE BLOCKS LATER, I realized that I had left my engagement ring on the bathroom counter. Briefly, I considered going back for it, but in the grand scheme of things, the diamond wasn’t worth it. Hopefully, Jacob wouldn’t notice its absence from my finger for a while, what with the metal splint

wrapped around the next one over. The argument was inevitable, but I filed away the thought. We had bigger things to worry about.

In one night, the streets had already been reduced to havoc. The wrecked cars had finally been abandoned by their owners, picked clean by scavengers in the night. Shop windows were no more. Shattered glass crunched beneath the tires of our bikes as we rode through the wreckage. People hopped in and out of the broken windows, emerging from the stores with bags full of nonperishable food, toiletries, and medication. Most places had already been picked clean, the shelves in the dark businesses starkly empty. In one alleyway, two mothers argued over a gallon of water, each claiming that their children needed it more. Our red plastic wagon, leashed to the back of Jacob's bike seat, bounced over the cracks in the sidewalk with the weight of the water jugs. I swallowed hard and faced front. We couldn't afford to hand out our limited supplies.

The bikes had been a good idea. While everybody else patrolled the city on foot, we whizzed quickly through conflict. We passed three street fights in two blocks, speeding by the aggravators before they had looked up from their fists. But when we proceeded through the busiest part of the city on our way to the Masons' expensive uptown apartment, where the intersections grew larger and more dangerous, we met our first bout of trouble. Without warning, Nita skidded to a stop, dropped her bike, and darted through the maze of stone cars, disappearing behind a white Mercedes with the hood bashed in.

"Nita!" I called, nearly running the front wheel of my bike into the demolished Mercedes. "Where are you going?" She didn't reply, so I swung my leg off the bike and put down the kickstand. "Stay here," I told Jacob. "Don't leave the bikes. Try not to talk to anyone. If someone asks you if you have water or food, say no."

"Georgie, you know I'm a terrible liar—"

I hopped over the hood of the Honda that had gone toe to toe with the Mercedes. "I can't leave her by herself. I'll get her back as soon as I can."

"But—"

I left him there. As a stocky guy, Jacob was less likely to get harassed in the streets, but Nita was a petite woman, and her firecracker attitude wasn't an infallible defense should someone attempt to take advantage of her.

"Nita!" I called out into the junkyard. No answer. I climbed on the hood of a delivery truck, shielded my eyes from the sun, and looked around. There.

Nita knelt on the ground a few cars over. I leapt down and slipped through the fenders to find her. “Nita, you can’t do that—oh my God.”

Tears shimmered on Nita’s olive skin as she looked down at the body of a middle-aged woman. The pavement was stained dark with blood. My stomach roiled, threatening to eject my caffeinated breakfast. I swallowed a mouthful of bile.

“I thought she was still alive,” Nita said, weeping freely. “Why is she here? Why didn’t anyone help her?”

I tried to pull Nita away from the body, but she shrugged me off. “Nita, I’m sure someone tried, but it was probably someone who had no idea what to do to save her. The paramedics wouldn’t have been able to make it out here.”

“It’s wrong.”

I knelt beside her, trying my best not to look straight at the body. “I don’t want to be the one to tell you this, but we’ll probably see more like her. We can’t stop for everyone. The more we stop, the less safe we’ll be.”

Nita fiddled with something at the back of her neck beneath her long dark hair. She unclasped a necklace, a gold chain with a matching cross, and laid it on the woman’s chest like an offering.

“Come on,” I said, lifting Nita from the ground. This time, she let me help her up. “We should keep moving.”

5

“What happened?” Jacob asked when Nita and I emerged from the pile of cars. He had been snapping photos of the debris in the streets, but when he saw the tear tracks on Nita’s face, his camera fell to bounce against his chest. He took Nita by the shoulders. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, picked up her bike, and rode a few feet away from us. Jacob turned to me with a questioning look.

“There’s a dead woman,” I said. “Nita didn’t realize. She thought—” I couldn’t finish the sentence. The image of the woman’s bloated face was etched into my memory. “Have you seen anyone?”

“A couple kids ran by, but that was it.” He studied my expression, looking for hints. “Are you going to be okay? You look pale.”

“I’ll get over it. She won’t be the last. Kids?”

“Teenagers,” he replied. “They went into the corner store, but they’re gone now. I think they came out with a few packages of donuts. Do you think we should grab some food too? I’m getting hungry.”

“Not here,” I told him, straddling my bike again. “We shouldn’t go into the stores unless we have to. It’s not safe. I’m sure your parents have something to eat.”

“Good point. Let’s keep moving.”

We continued on, catching up with Nita. She let us drift ahead of her. Jacob led the way, most familiar with the route to his childhood home. We rode in silence, unable to voice our dark thoughts aloud. Every so often, I caught sight of another unlucky soul that hadn’t made it through the night.

Each time I did, I glanced over my shoulder to check on Nita, but she kept her gaze trained on the back tire of my bike, unwilling to accept the dysphoria of the world around us. It was real now. There was a body count.

A few blocks later, we reached the radio station. Miraculously, the windows were intact. I stopped pedaling as we cruised past it then planted my feet altogether. Nita drifted to a halt beside me. Jacob looked over his shoulder, saw that he had lost us, and pulled a wide U-turn to compensate for the play wagon's poor turning radius.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I was just wondering if there's anything salvageable inside," I said. "I have my key. I can get in."

"Why would we need radio stuff?"

"No phones, remember?" I hopped off the bike. Jacob held it upright by the handlebars. "Radio's the most basic method of communication. If I can find some spare parts—" I tested the handle of the door. It was unlocked. Someone had already been here.

"Georgie, I don't think this is a good idea," Jacob said.

"Shh. I'll be right back."

I pulled the door open and peeked inside. The windows were heavily tinted, blocking out most of the sunlight. I peered through the gloom. The control room was empty. The station had evaded most of the trouble from outside, though someone had tugged the control panel free from the desk. I inched forward to look through the glass into the studio. No one there. I exhaled the breath I'd been holding.

Something shattered in the back room. I knocked into one of the rolling chairs, sending it spinning across the room. The wheels skittered across the plastic covering over the carpet. It stopped in full view of the door to the break room. I waited, feet staggered, ready to make a run for the door if I needed to.

"Who's there?" I called out.

There was a beat of silence. Then:

"Georgie! Georgie, help—!"

"Nate?"

Without thinking, I kicked open the door to the back room and barged inside. Nate cowered on the opposite side of the room, hiding beneath the shelves where we kept all the extra bits and pieces to keep the station equipment running.

“Nate! Hey, are you okay?”

“Behind you!”

His warning came a second too late. Someone stepped out from behind the door I’d just come through, and the indisputable click of a cocking handgun echoed in my right ear.

“Don’t move,” ordered a low, deep voice. Too deep, almost as if the person it belonged to was trying to sound tougher than he actually was.

I slowly raised my hands to eye level. “Okay. Take it easy. You don’t have to hurt anyone.”

“Do you work here?” asked the voice.

“Yes.”

“You know how radios work?”

“Yes.”

“I need you to build me one. Your friend”—Nate quivered across the room—“is useless. Doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground.”

That wasn’t true. I knew Nate. His knowledge of radio was immediate and unchallenged. He could’ve built a basic radio with the materials in the back room in less than five minutes. The only reason he wouldn’t have done it was if we were running low on parts and he needed them for himself. I guessed that the owner of the gun had absolutely no idea what he needed for a working radio. Even if we did hand over a crystal radio, he’d need to find or build a transmitter to reach anyone.

“Now!” shouted the voice, brandishing the gun. The weapon flashed in my periphery.

“Okay,” I said, keeping my tone level. “Just relax. I’ll do it. I’ll build you a radio.”

Several things happened in the next second. The person behind me sighed, the gun dropped a fraction of an inch toward my shoulder, Nate’s eyes widened, and I blinked before turning my head just enough to gauge the placement of the firearm.

In the following second, I reached back, grabbed the wrist that held the gun, and yanked it forward, planting my right foot. Using the gunman’s own momentum, I flipped him over my hip. He was surprisingly light. I slammed him so hard against the floor that the impact shook the walls of the break room. His breath whooshed out of his chest in a sharp gasp. The gun came up, and for one wild moment, I stared directly into the barrel. Panicked, I aimed a kick to the side of the gunman’s head. When the toe of my boot

connected with his temple, he immediately went slack, and the gun clattered to the floor as the person passed out. My chest heaved as I stared down at him.

“He’s just a kid,” I muttered, kneeling next to the unconscious teenager. He was seventeen or eighteen maybe. His long hair and dirty jeans implied that he’d seen trouble long before the blackout started.

“Is he dead?” Nate breathed.

“No!” But I checked his pulse to make sure. It beat firmly against my fingers. One blow to the head wasn’t enough to kill someone, but the kid would wake up with a roaring headache. “He won’t be out for long. We should get out of here.” I looked up at Nate, who was still frozen under the shelves. “Are you okay?”

“Give me a second. I just had a gun pointed at my face.”

“So did I.”

“Yeah, but I’m not harboring secret jiu jitsu skills,” he replied, backing up against the wall as I approached him. “Where the hell did you learn to do that?”

I held out a hand to him. “My dad taught me basic self-defense. What are you doing here anyway?”

Nate grabbed my hand and let me pull him to his feet. “Same thing you’re doing, I’d guess.” He turned to the shelves and began rummaging through the cardboard boxes of spare diodes, copper wires, capacitors, and speakers. “This shit is going to blow over in a couple of days. Phones are down, which means everyone’s totally screwed communication-wise.” He held up his handful of goodies. “Except for people who know how to work a radio.”

As he shoved the parts in a messenger bag over his shoulder, I noticed that the cardboard boxes behind him looked too empty. I grabbed his wrist. “Nate, you can’t take all of those. I need some.”

“I got here first.”

“This is my station,” I reminded him. “You’re essentially stealing from me.”

“Come on, Georgie.”

I held out my palm. “Hand it over. I’ll give you what you need to get a radio up and running. Everything else belongs to me.”

Nate stared at my outstretched hand, hiding his messenger bag behind his back. His eyes flickered toward the exit door.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warned. “You saw what I did to the kid.”

He bolted anyway, making a flying leap for the door. Unfortunately for him, I'd been anticipating the move. I slipped my foot in between his legs and hooked it around his calf. He stumbled, failed to catch himself, and hit the ground. I sat on his back and pulled his messenger bag toward me.

"Told you."

"Get off!"

"Nate, I like you, okay?" I said, fishing through the things he had taken from the station. As I'd assumed, he had taken way more than necessary. My guess was that he planned on selling the stuff he didn't need to the highest bidder. Nate wasn't exactly moral. "I told you. I'll give you what you need to get by." I placed the basics for a crystal radio by his nose as he struggled to eject me from his back. "Everything else is mine."

As I finished sorting through the materials, a glint of metal caught my eye. The teenager's gun—whether it belonged to him originally or not—had settled near the baseboards of the wall, inches from Nate's reach. Carefully, I wrapped up the radio parts in a spare bag I'd brought inside with me. Then I lifted myself off of Nate, darted across the room, and picked up the pistol before he could figure out what I was doing.

"God, Georgie." He sat up and rubbed his jaw. A red burn decorated his chin from where the skin had dragged across the gray carpet. He watched as I clicked the pistol's safety into place and tucked the gun into the back of my jeans. "You can relax. I don't need that, and I wouldn't stoop so low as to shoot you over a few radio parts."

"Sorry," I said. "You can't really trust anyone but the people closest to you in a situation like this."

"You're right about that." Nate sifted through the parts that I'd left him. "I guess this stuff will do."

"Are you staying in the city?" I asked him.

"Hell no. My granddad's got a place out in the boonies." He packed up his messenger bag and got to his feet. "You think it's something big too, don't you? I can tell by the look on your face."

"What do you mean?"

"This blackout isn't because of some thunderstorm or fluke," he said. "There was a blast."

"You saw it too?"

"That big-ass light in the sky?" Nate asked. "Yeah, I saw it. You and I both know what that is. We've talked about it on the show before."

“An EMP bomb.”

“Yup. Guess someone finally had enough of us.”

“I just didn’t think we’d ever be alive to actually see it happen,” I told him.

Nate drew his messenger bag on over his shoulder. “That’s the thing, isn’t it? We never think.” He jerked his head at the teenager on the floor. “He’s waking up. We should leave.”

As the teenager moaned, we hurried out through the exit door. In the alley behind the station, we clasped hands.

“Good luck,” I told him.

“Listen for my call sign.”

“Will do.”

When he disappeared around the corner, I snuck back into the radio station. The teenager sat against the wall, his head between his knees. When he saw me in the doorway, he waved a hand in surrender.

“I’m sorry!” he cried, his head wobbling on his shoulders as if he hadn’t fully regained control over it. “I just needed—”

“I get it,” I said. “Desperate times, desperate measures. I’m sure you had your reasons, and I have mine. Do you have an extra magazine on you?”

“What?”

“For the gun. Do you have extra bullets?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Hand it over.”

His face bunched up in anger. “No. Why should I?”

“Consider it a trade.” I set something down on the floor between us. A crystal radio that I’d made years ago when I’d first started up the radio station. Usually, it sat on my desk in the control room. “You get your radio, I get your gun.”

He eyed the device. “That’s a radio?”

“Sure is. You wanted one, right? You did hold a gun to my head for it.”

The teenager hesitated then said, “I have to find my mom. This is the only way to do it.”

“Take it,” I said, nudging the radio toward him with my foot. “You’ll have to find a working tower. I heard a broadcast last night from Cherry Creek, so you might be in luck. Be gentle though. It’s fragile.”

He stretched out along the floor to grab the radio, his eyes never leaving me as I stood over it. “Thanks.”

“Now the magazine.”

The kid reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a black rectangle, and slid it across the floor. I stopped it beneath the toe of my boot and bent down to pick it up.

“Did you ever read *Wonder Woman*?” I asked.

“Never read much at all.”

“The Amazons had a saying,” I told him. “Don’t kill if you can wound, don’t wound if you can subdue, don’t subdue if you can pacify, and don’t raise your hand at all until you’ve first extended it.” I gestured toward the crystal radio in his hand. “If you’d asked, I would’ve given it to you. Remember that for next time.”

I left before he could reply, this time heading toward the front door through the control room. Outside, Jacob had gotten off his bike to pace nervously back and forth in front of the station’s windows. Nita picked at the rust on her handlebars, staring blankly at the ground.

“Finally!” he said when I emerged. “What took you so long? I was about to come in there myself. Did you get what you needed?”

I held up the bag of trophies. “Yeah, let’s go.”

We continued on, turning onto the street that led up to the nicer block of apartment buildings in the area. The sun worked its way higher. It warmed my back, bringing a layer of sweat to the surface of my skin, but the chilly wind made me clammy and cold. My nose ran, and my eyes streamed constantly. I had to keep wiping my face on my sleeve, which grew damper and damper the farther we rode. Finally, we made it to the Masons’ building, but we had to wait for the doorman to let us into the lobby since Jacob’s spare key card had been rendered useless.

“I can’t believe you’re at work today, Frank,” Jacob said, clapping the doorman on his shoulder. “Shouldn’t you have had the day off?”

“I worked the night shift,” Frank replied as he helped Jacob steer the tricky wagon across the lobby. “I got stuck here.”

“Lucky for us,” Jacob said. “Listen, do you think you could keep our bikes and supplies in the storeroom for us? I’m not keen on the idea of lugging everything up twelve flights of stairs.”

Frank made a gruff noise of affirmation, taking mine and Nita’s bike at the same time to wheel out of sight behind the front desk. Part of me felt a twinge of insecurity. Sure, Frank had been working in the building since Jacob was a kid, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t take advantage of us. It

would be easy for him to ride off on Jacob's bike with the water and our backpacks.

"I'll stay down here," I said.

"Why?" Jacob asked. "We're going to need you. If you thought I couldn't pack a bag, wait until you see my parents. Come on. Thanks, Frank."

I had no other choice but to leave Frank with our things and follow Jacob and Nita up the stairs. It was slow going. We were all tired from the night before, and the lack of breakfast was starting to get to us. On the seventh floor, my legs started to burn while Jacob marched upward like a toy soldier, all of his time at the gym paying off. By the time we reached the twelfth floor, I felt as if my legs might turn to jelly, and if the wobble in Nita's step was any indication, she felt the same way. Jacob knocked on the door to his family's suite, which occupied the entire floor. A second later, it swung open.

"Jacob!"

My boyfriend's mother, Penny, was a tall, lean blonde with arms and legs sculpted like a Greek goddess from hours of yoga and kickboxing. She always smelled slightly of salon chemicals and Chanel Number Five. She was also a good twenty years younger than Jove, Jacob's father. When Jacob had first introduced me to his parents, I'd wondered if Penny was his real mother. Here was a woman accustomed to luxury, married off to an older guy with a lot of money to feed her shopping addiction. That had been my first impression of her, and while the details had not changed, I'd learned that there was no kinder or more giving soul.

"Oh, I'm so glad the two of you are okay!" she said, unwrapping herself from Jacob to throw a hug at me as well. She noticed Nita behind me. "And who do we have here?"

I held my breath until she let go to avoid the tidal wave of perfume then gestured for Nita to come inside. "This is our friend, Nita. She lives in our building."

"Wonderful!" Penny said, beaming. "Would you three like some breakfast? Leti is grilling on the balcony."

She ushered us through the suite. The place was so large that it could have fit four of our own apartment in it. This was where Jacob had grown up, high above the city in a suite that looked more like it belonged on the top floor of a New York City skyscraper than in Denver. It had four bedrooms and an office. Priceless artwork hung on the walls. The furniture was bright white, a sign that the family did not anticipate having to clean the pristine

fabric themselves. It was so radically different from the setting of my own upbringing that I didn't feel comfortable visiting the Masons. I didn't belong in a place like this, with its shining tile floors and sweeping ceilings, but Jacob dragged me here once a week for dinner with his family anyway.

Leti was the Masons' combined cook and maid. Like Frank, she had never made it home the night before. That was lucky for the Masons. I doubted that they had ever cooked a meal on their own. Jove, Jacob's father, supervised Leti as she flipped bacon like a pro on the gas grill. He was a large, rotund man, over six feet tall, with a head of curly white hair that blended in with a matching beard. He lived up to his name. With his holier-than-thou demeanor and quick temper, all he needed was a lightning bolt to complete the picture.

"You're going to burn it," Jove was saying to Leti.

"Mister Mason, please, the grease—"

"I'm just saying," Jove interrupted. "The bacon should come off. Ow!"

A shower of grease popped up from the frying pan on the stove and splattered across Jove's forearm. As he swiped a dish towel from Leti's shoulder to wipe the hot oil away from his skin, a tiny smile lifted her lips before she stowed it away again. I turned a laugh into a hacking cough, and Jove glanced up.

"Jacob, my boy," he said, shaking hands with his son. He completely ignored me. "You made it."

"Hi, Dad." Jacob shifted me forward. "Georgie's here too. And this is Nita, one of our friends."

"Mm-hmm. Do you want breakfast?"

"Is there enough for all of us?" Jacob asked.

"Of course there is!" Penny answered for her husband. She steered Jove inside. "Come on, honey. Have a seat at the table. I'll make your plate."

I thanked Leti as she finished up the bacon and arranged the breakfast on a ceramic plate for me, then waited for Jacob and Nita before going inside. I sure as hell wasn't going to eat breakfast with Jove alone. I maneuvered myself to put both Jacob and Nita between me and Jove. Jacob's father and I had never really gotten along, but we pushed through by avoiding each other as much as possible.

"Where's Pippa?" Jacob asked as he settled in next to me and started eating. "Shouldn't she have something to eat?"

"She's still at school," Jove replied, biting into his buttery roll and

showering the glass table with bread crumbs.

Jacob's fork clattered against his plate. "She is? Why didn't you go get her?"

"Have you been living under a rock, son? Our cars don't work, and even if they did, the traffic down there is ridiculous."

"Dad, she's pregnant!"

"Don't remind me."

Penny stepped in from the balcony with Leti, holding two plates. She placed them both on the table. "Sit down and eat, Leti. You deserve it. Jacob, honey, I'm sure Pippa is fine. Saint Mark's is probably well-prepared for something like this."

"It's a private school, not a fort, Mom," Jacob said, his bacon and eggs going cold. "We have to go find her. She could be in trouble."

"She's the one who wanted to keep going to school after all of *this*." Jove circled a hand around his own ample stomach. "If she agreed to be homeschooled like I wanted—"

"Pippa is responsible for her own decisions, Jove," Penny said.

"Yes, so she's responsible for this one," he replied. "She can wait this out at the school. When the power comes back on and the police clear off the roads, we'll go pick her up."

I swished orange juice around in my mouth, letting the tang against my taste buds wake me up. It wasn't quite cold enough, but the Masons' gigantic stainless steel fridge had at least maintained its temperature long enough to keep the juice from spoiling. "Sir, I hate to break it to you, but the power isn't going to come back on," I said to Jove. "The blackout was from an EMP."

"A what now?"

"An electromagnetic pulse—"

Jacob squeezed my thigh under the table, a silent request to stop talking.

Jove peered at me from across the table, one eye squinting more than the other. "You know, I listen to your radio show, Georgiana. It boggles my mind that you can spread such inane propaganda like that. It shouldn't be legal."

"It's not propaganda—"

"Jacob's told me all about your little doomsday prophecies," Jove went on as if I hadn't spoken at all. "He might entertain them, but I won't."

"Dad," Jacob warned. His fingers tightened on my leg, but I wished he would let go. "Stop talking."

"This is my house!"

His fist fell upon the table, causing the plates to clatter against the glass. A sausage rolled off of Nita's plate and onto her lap. Penny cleared her throat, and Jove fell silent at once. The color drained from his ruddy face as he made eye contact with his wife.

"Dear," she said. "Perhaps we might want to consider listening to what the kids have to say. You have to admit it. This is all a bit funny."

"We're leaving the city," Jacob announced. "We're heading up into the mountains where it's safe, and I want you to come with us."

Jove barked out a laugh. "Come with you? Where are you going? What supplies do you have? How are we supposed to get into the mountains without a car? Goddamn it, Jacob, I thought you were a smart kid. What the hell happened to you?"

My face burned as the unspoken answer weighed down the dining room. *I* happened to Jacob. I was the one who'd convinced him to leave town. I had agreed to stop by his parents' house. Granted, I cared more about Penny and Pippa than I did for Jove, but he was Jacob's father, so I naturally had to include him. Now Jove was being an ass, as usual, and Pippa wasn't here, further stunting our progress.

"We should go get Pippa," I said, pushing my plate away from me. I'd lost my appetite. "She needs to be with her family, especially now."

Nita rose with me as I left the table and escaped into Jacob's old bedroom. She closed the door behind her, anticipating my explosion.

"I should have known," I said, pacing between Jacob's twin-sized bed and the chin-up bar mounted to the wall. "I should have known better than to come here. That man—"

"Georgie, relax," Nita said. "How far is Pippa's school?"

"Ten blocks maybe?"

"That's not far," she assured me. "You and Jacob can go get her. I'll stay here with his parents and get them ready to go."

I flopped down onto Jacob's old bed and pressed my face into the pillows. Somehow, they still smelled like him even though he hadn't slept here in years. "They don't even want to go!"

"I'll convince them," Nita said. "Believe me, I can be very persuasive. Don't worry, okay? By the time you get back with Pippa, I'll have them ready to get out the door."

I peeked out from beneath the pillow. "Really?"

She sat down on the bed next to me. "I trust you, okay? Jacob's dad may

be boneheaded, but I'm not stupid enough to ignore the signs. We're getting out of here, and if Jove wants to stay behind, I say we let him."

Someone knocked on the door. "Georgie? Nita? It's me."

"Come in," Nita called.

Jacob slipped inside. "I'm sorry about that. My dad—he's an idiot. Just ignore him. I already told him that we're going to go get Pippa no matter what. I have to know that she's okay. Are you ready to head out?"

I got up from the bed. "Boy, am I ever."

"You coming, Nita?"

She shook her head. "I've got a mission here."

SO IT WAS JUST Jacob and I that braved the twelve flights downstairs again and headed out into the cold. We left the bikes with Frank since Pippa wouldn't be able to ride one on her own anyway. Jacob held my hand as we walked through the streets, though it was more for his comfort than mine. What Jove had said irked me, and the thought that Jacob was talking to his parents about me behind my back didn't sit well. We were engaged, for Pete's sake. Jove and Penny were going to be my in-laws. Penny, I didn't mind, but I had a feeling that Christmases with the Masons were going to be really fun with Jove around.

The streets weren't getting any better. In fact, it was getting worse. Multiple times, Jacob pulled me down behind a car or forced us to duck into an alley in order to avoid someone. People took baseball bats to car and shop windows. They fought with each other over the simplest things like hand sanitizer or a package of baby wipes. I flinched each time a punch landed against someone else's cheek. The teenager's pistol from the radio station pressed against my spine. I had to stop myself from instinctively reaching for it. No one else knew that I had it—Jacob didn't know that I could shoot a gun at all—and I wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

We kept moving through the surreal landscape. In less than a day, Denver had disintegrated into madness. I could only imagine what it would look like in a week. At this rate, the death toll would skyrocket in a matter of days. I'd seen enough death already, bodies splayed out across the hoods of their cars or slumped over the steering wheels. The stench would grow worse with each passing hour unless someone organized a removal of the corpses. I almost took my hand from Jacob's, but silent tears streamed down his cheeks as we continued up the block toward St. Mark's, so I let him squeeze the blood out

of my fingers for as long as he needed.

A few blocks ahead, the red brick building of the prestigious private school loomed, casting a shadow on the sidewalk below. I hoped Pippa had stayed put and holed up in a safe place. Knowing her, I was sure that she had. She was the sharpest seventeen-year-old I'd ever met, with a tongue to match, and she hadn't let the inconvenience of an accidental pregnancy stop her from getting an education. On the contrary, she'd written such a stunning personal statement on the judgement she received as a pregnant teenager that she had already been shortlisted for interviews at Columbia, Brown, and Dartmouth. She would have her pick of universities.

Unexpectedly, Jacob yanked me off the sidewalk and forced me down behind a stack of aluminum trash bins. I flatted out my left hand to steady myself, and the metal splint on my pinky finger scraped across the asphalt.

"What?" I demanded. Saint Mark's was so close. All I wanted to do was get inside the safety of the wrought-iron gates.

Jacob hushed me. A gaggle of voices floated through the air.

"Hey, pretty lady. Where you goin'?"

"Where's your mama?"

"You out here all alone?"

Three men. Maybe more if the others weren't as vocal. And someone else. Someone smaller and much more vulnerable.

"No." The reply was high-pitched but firm. A little girl's. "My big brother's around the corner."

"Really? Your big brother?" the first voice said. "I don't see him. What about you, boys? See a big brother anywhere?"

"Nope."

"No, big brothers here."

"You know, pretty lady," the first voice went on, "it's not polite to lie. Why don't you come with us? We'll get you home to your mama."

"Don't touch me!"

I rose from my crouch, my hand on the pistol at my waistband.

6

“What the hell are you doing?” Jacob growled.

I ignored him, emerging from our hiding place behind the trash cans. I kept the pistol behind my back as I approached the gaggle of men. There were three of them, each in their thirties or forties, and the girl at the center of their party could not have been older than twelve. She shook like a leaf as they advanced on her, eyes darting in every direction as she looked for an escape. Quick as lightning, she nailed one guy in the crotch and tried to sprint past him as he doubled over, but one of the others took hold of her arm and held her in place.

“I don’t think so, girly,” the man said. From the looks of it, he was the group’s ringleader, though he was shorter and stockier than the men who flanked either side of him. “We’re going to teach you a lesson.”

“Let her go.”

Three pairs of eyes, each more malicious than the last, turned to look at me. I squared my shoulders. The gun trembled in my fingers. Jacob drew level with me, drawing a small burst of confidence from beneath my anxiety. Jacob could be a threatening presence when he wanted to be. Even so, it was three against two.

The ringleader chuckled, tossing the girl away from him. She tripped and stumbled to the ground but automatically scrambled back to her feet. “Nothing to see here, folks,” the ringleader said, blocking the girl’s escape again. “You should be on your way.”

“I said let her go,” I repeated.

“She’s my little sister,” the man said, smirking.

“No, I’m not!” the girl shrieked, kicking out at the man’s shins. The other, who had recovered from her crotch shot, wrapped her up in a bear hug.

Jacob stepped forward, closing the distance between us and the trio. “I would do what my fiancée asks of you.”

The ringleader stepped forward too. “Or what? It’s three against one, buddy. You really think you can take all of us?”

He planted his hands against Jacob’s chest, but before he could shove him away, Jacob trapped the man’s hands against his body and yanked him forward, pulling him off of his feet. It triggered an immediate response from the other two, who sprang into action. They jumped Jacob in a flurry of fists. I drew the gun. I aimed at the sky. I fired a shot.

There was a beat of silence before screams echoed from around the block. The men disengaged from Jacob, pulling each other out of the fight. They stumbled backward, eyeing the gun in my hand.

“Take it easy, lady!” the ringleader called. “We’re leaving, all right? Take the brat. I don’t give a shit.”

“Let’s go, man. She’s nuts!”

The trio ran off, leaping over cars and trash until they disappeared down a side street. I lowered the gun and tucked it out of sight then ran over to Jacob, who was doubled over on the ground.

“Are you okay?” I asked, running my hands over his arms and chest to check for injuries. The fight had lasted for less than fifteen seconds, but the men had had enough time to paint a black eye on Jacob’s usually flawless face. “Jacob?”

“I’m fine,” he gasped, catching his breath. “Where did you get a gun?”

“At the station,” I admitted. “It’s a long story.”

“You’re full of surprises, Georgie.”

“Yeah, but that’s why you love me, right?”

He didn’t reply. His eye was beginning to swell shut. As I helped him to his feet, I noticed that the little girl watched us closely. Once Jacob was standing, I went over to her and knelt down to be on her level.

“What’s your name?”

She eyed me warily but held her ground. “Ivy.”

“Nice to meet you, Ivy. I’m Georgie. Did those men hurt you?”

“No.”

Slowly, I reached out to give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “You

were really brave to stand up to them."

A dark shadow crossed Ivy's expression. "They're not the worst I've had to deal with."

"During the blackout?"

"Ever."

I frowned, resisting the urge to hug the little girl. She was well-spoken and unusually self-aware for her age, a personality fit for someone who was forced to grow up faster than she should have. "Listen, Ivy. Those jerks won't be the only people looking for trouble out here. You should go home where it's safe."

Ivy looked down at her shoes. The white sneakers were gray with grime, and they appeared to be too small for her feet. A long, ropey scar stretched across her forehead. "I can't go home. Not yet."

"Why not?" I asked her quietly.

Her muddy brown eyes lifted to meet mine. She studied my face as if gauging whether or not to trust me. "Can you help me find something?"

I glanced over my shoulder at Jacob. He shook his head.

"What do you need us to find?" I asked Ivy. Behind me, Jacob let out a gusty sigh.

"A bottle of alcohol. It can be anything," she added hastily after reading my alarmed expression. "Rum, tequila, vodka. I can't go home without something."

"Ivy, why do you need alcohol?"

"It's for my dad."

"He sent you out to find booze?" I asked her, incredulous. "In this? Does he know how unsafe it is out here?"

She lifted her shoulders. "I'd rather be out here than with him. If I don't find something to bring back, he'll start throwing things at me again."

"Okay, you know what?" I stood up and took Ivy's hand in mine. To my surprise, she didn't resist. Her cold fingers curled around the back of my hand as if she had been starved of affection for years. "You're coming with us."

"Georgie, are you serious?" Jacob asked. Though he kept his voice to a whisper, Ivy looked up between us. "We can't take her with us. We have enough on our plates already."

"I can't leave her behind," I told him. "Don't try to argue with me."

He gaped, looking between me and Ivy, then threw his hands up in the air as he walked away. "This is fucking ridiculous."

I let him widen the gap between us then followed along with Ivy for the remaining blocks to the school.

“Is he mad?” Ivy whispered up to me.

“Yeah, but it’s not your fault,” I assured her.

Up ahead, Jacob had stopped short of the school’s gates, waiting behind a parked delivery van. Ivy and I met him there.

“What’s up?” I whispered, peeking out from behind the van.

“Looters.”

The wrought-iron gates of Saint Mark’s were chained and locked shut, but that hadn’t dissuaded a mob of frenzied people from trying to get into the school. The reasoning was sound. Saint Mark’s was a large Christian private school. They fed several hundred students each day, which meant that they probably had a ton of food in storage. In addition, the school would be a relatively safe space to buckle down as long as everybody agreed to cooperate with each other, but by the the looks of the mob outside, no one wanted to share.

“At least we know Pippa’s probably safe,” I muttered, watching as one of the looters attempted to climb the iron gate only to fall into the crowd below. “No one’s getting through that padlock.”

Jacob banged his fist on the side of the van in a perfect imitation of his father. “Goddamn it! What the hell are we supposed to do?”

“You need to get into the school?” Ivy piped up.

Jacob looked down at the little girl. “Yes. My sister’s inside.”

“Then let’s go.”

Ivy marched off, leaving Jacob and me to stare blankly at each other. Then we rushed after the preteen. Thankfully, she wasn’t joining the throng at the gates. Instead, she led us away from the chaos, slipping into a skinny alley that led us toward the back of the school.

“Um, Ivy?” I asked, squeezing between the brick buildings. “What exactly are we doing?”

“You said you had to get inside,” Ivy called over her shoulder. “Obviously, we’re not going through the front gates, so we’re going to find another way in. Here.”

She pointed to the iron rods driven into the red brick base that encircled the entire campus. One of the rods was missing, leaving an opening in the gate just large enough for a full-grown person to squeeze through. From here, we could enter the back door of the school.

“Did you already know that was there?” I asked her.

“Nope. I’m just good at looking for details.” She slipped through the space and stepped onto the perfect green grass of Saint Mark’s lawn. “You guys coming?”

I maneuvered myself through the gap and turned to help Jacob. His broad shoulders almost didn’t clear the space, and the iron rods on either side scraped against his sweatshirt, but he managed to worm his way through. Together, the three of us sprinted across the lawns toward the school. I tugged on the handle of the back door.

“It’s locked,” I said, planting my hands on my knees and panting.

“Should we knock?” Ivy suggested, not out of breath at all.

“There’s no point,” Jacob said. “The school’s on lockdown for a reason. No one in or out. It’s a safety measure. We’re screwed.”

“There’s an open window down there,” Ivy said.

We all looked. Sure enough, one of the basement windows, level with the ground, was propped open.

“It’s too small,” I said. “I won’t be able to fit through there.”

Ivy sat on the ground and dangled her feet through the window. “I can definitely fit through. Wait here. I’ll go around and open the door.”

“Ivy, no—”

But she slipped out of sight, landing with a soft thud in the school’s basement. “Be right back!” she called through the window before the pitter-patter of her sneakers faded out of earshot.

“I guess we should go wait by the door then,” I said to Jacob. He turned without a word and leaned by the back door, his arms crossed over his chest. I took a deep breath. “Is this how it’s going to be? Are you going to huff and puff because I wouldn’t leave a little girl all alone out there? She’s already been a huge help, Jacob.”

“It’s not just the kid, Georgie,” he replied.

“Then what is it?”

“You put yourself in danger to rescue a complete stranger,” Jacob said. “Now we have one more person to look after. You won’t tell me where we’re going. I’m supposed to convince my parents to leave their apartment and head to some no-name cabin in the woods because you say so.”

“I thought we were over this—”

“And you have a gun!” he went on. “The cherry on top. Not once have you ever mentioned to me that you knew how to shoot a gun. Not once! It’s

like I don’t even know you, Georgie!”

“Someone’s going to hear you if you don’t quiet down.”

He glared at me, and for once, his eyes did not exude their usual coffee-like warmth. They were cold and hard like a polluted river. “Tell me one true thing about yourself, Georgie.”

“Jacob, this is stupid.”

“Just one thing. Tell me what your parents’ names are.” When I didn’t reply immediately, he shook his head in disappointment. “I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I can marry someone who won’t share the basic details of her life with me.”

“Amos and Amelia.”

“What?”

“Those are my parents’ names,” I clarified, unable to look him in the eye. “My mother died when I was ten. She was stabbed. One night, I wanted to make cookies, but we didn’t have any eggs, so she went to the corner store to go buy a carton. While she was there, someone came in and told the cashier to give him all of the money in the register. My mother tried to reason with him. He had a knife. You don’t reason with someone who has a knife and a purpose.”

Tears threatened to fall over my eyelashes, but I refused to let them. Jacob watched me in stunned silence as I spoke, the pity obvious in the sad angle of his lips. I went on. If he wanted to know about my parents, then I would finally tell him.

“Her death ruined my father,” I said. “He pulled me out of school, stopped talking to our family, to her family. We moved out to the middle of nowhere, some piece of land that he’d inherited from his grandfather. He built a house for us. He refused to go anywhere, not even the grocery store. He knew how to hunt and fish and pickle vegetables. He learned how to reduce the amount of waste we produced. He wired a satellite dish for an Internet connection and homeschooled me himself. I didn’t see anything but the fifteen acres of our property for almost eight years. Never met anyone new either.”

“Georgie—”

“The trauma of my mother’s death made him agoraphobic, and I was too young to realize that he needed help,” I said, speaking over him. If I didn’t get this out now, it would get bottled up again. “When I told him I wanted to go to college in the city, he looked at me like I was crazy. Said he wouldn’t

let me go, that it wasn't safe. By that time, he had built a bunker underneath our house for who knows what reason. I didn't listen. I had to get out of there, so when I was eighteen, I snuck out in the middle of the night and made a break for the city. I've been here ever since, making my own way. I haven't spoken to my father in nine years."

Silence fell. The wind whispered through the blades of grass. Jacob's breath whooshed in and out of his lungs.

"Georgie," he said quietly. "I had no idea."

I was saved from having to answer when the door to the school wobbled and Ivy pushed it open from the inside.

"Come on," she whispered, waving us in.

The three of us crept inside. I had never seen the interior of a private school before, but the cold, stuffy design made me glad that I hadn't attended one. Aluminum lockers lined the hallways, creating the illusion of rows of tiny jail cells. The marble floor picked up every single sound and bounced it up to the high ceilings. No matter how lightly I stepped, the squeak of my boots across the floor echoed from the rafters like a bird's morning call. The only light came from the stained-glass windows set high above us. We moved cautiously through a kaleidoscope of colors as the saints watched us from their glass thrones.

"There's no one around," Jacob muttered.

"Or they're hiding," Ivy whispered back.

It seemed inappropriate to speak above a certain volume. The school mimicked the holy mustiness of a church. The air was thick and smelled faintly of incense. In the darkened corridors, I half expected the ghosts of past students to float in from the open doors of the adjoining classrooms.

"Let's just try to find Pippa and get out of here as quickly as possible," I said. Chills erupted on the back of my neck as we passed a dark science lab with glowing specimens in glass jars. "This place is giving me the creeps."

It was easier said than done. The school was huge. The hallways branched off in a confusing maze, which meant that we couldn't split up to hurry along the process. Jacob was the only person who knew his way around since he had also attended Saint Mark's in his younger years, so the three of us stuck together as he led the way. We checked each classroom, squinting through the gloom for any signs of life. We crept through the library, where the scent of old pages made camp in my lungs and the stacks of books seemed to watch us from their lofty shelves. We even checked the chapel in

the hopes that someone might be attempting to pray away the chaos that had rained down on us in the last day.

“Nothing,” Jacob said. He balled his hands into shaking fists as though trying to stop himself from punching a hole in the wall. I had never seen him like this before, so full of raw anger. He was usually so passive and unresponsive, quick to pacify or placate for the sake of staving off an argument.

I took one of his hands, rolled out his clenched fingers, and massaged the knots of tension in his palm. “Hey, look at me. We’re going to find her, okay?” Jacob’s eyes shone in the warped light of a glass window. “Let’s think about this. The blast hit in the evening, around seven or seven-thirty, right?” Jacob and Ivy both nodded. “That’s way past regular school hours. Did Pippa have a reason to stay here that late? Did she have something to do after class, any extracurricular activities?”

“I don’t know.” Jacob blotted his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. He never cried in front of me, and he was furiously trying to stop himself from doing so now. “She used to play field hockey, but obviously she doesn’t anymore.”

“What days does the team practice?” I asked him. “She might still go to them just for the sake of it.”

“I don’t know,” Jacob said again, his voice ricocheting off the stone walls and echoing back to us like a ghostly choir. He tore his fingers from mine to run them through his hair instead. For once, he had not had the time to tame it with gel or mousse, but the man in front of me with the tousled locks, red-rimmed eyes, and a shadowy jawline was not the same one that I woke up to every morning. “I don’t know, I don’t know! I see her once a week, Georgie. I should know this stuff!”

At a loss for what to do, I went with instinct and pinned Jacob to the wall, forcing his hands to his sides. Our chests pressed together, my heart thumping against his. His entire body tensed, and I thought he might throw me off, but I took his face between my hands and brought our foreheads together to touch. Right away, he slackened beneath me.

“You can’t do this,” I murmured. His breath tickled my lips. He smelled like peppermint, as if he had managed to sneak away to the bathroom and brush his teeth in between breakfast and heading out for the school. “You can’t panic for nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Pippa—”

“We don’t know what happened to Pippa yet,” I said, squeezing his cheeks to make him listen to me. “That doesn’t mean she’s hurt. Calm yourself down. Look at this rationally. We’ll do another sweep of the school, and if we still haven’t found her, then we’ll walk along her route home and search there. But you can’t freak out like this. It’s only going to cause us trouble.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I told him. “I understand. You’re not used to this kind of thing, but listen to me. The sooner you start letting the panic take over, the sooner we lose an advantage over everyone else. We have to stay grounded and be practical, especially under pressure. Do you understand me?”

Jacob nodded, the rough stubble of his cheeks scratching against my palms. I pressed my lips to his, and he kissed back before drawing away and opening his eyes. He looked up and down the hallway. “Where’s the kid?”

Ivy was gone. There was no sign of her in either direction.

“Ivy?” I called. No answer. “What the hell? She was just here.”

We prowled along the corridor, peeking into classrooms for a glimpse of the little girl. Around the corner, near the school’s massive entry hall, I noticed a door to a supply closet was ajar. I inched toward it and nudged it open. A shaft of light illuminated a collection of cleaning supplies, brooms, buckets, and mops. Behind a big floor polisher, I caught a glimpse of a keen brown eye.

“Ivy, what are you doing in here?” I asked, kneeling down to get a better look at the girl. “Why did you run away?”

She hugged her knees into her chest, shaking like a leaf, but she wouldn’t look at me. She kept her eyes trained on something behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Jacob standing in the door of the closet too.

“Babe, could you wait in the hallway?” I asked him. “If you hear something or someone, let me know.”

“Sure.” Jacob retreated, leaving me alone with Ivy.

I edged farther into the closet, closer to the little girl. “Does Jacob scare you?”

Another tremble rocked her small frame. She nodded.

“Because he reminds you of your dad?”

Another nod.

“He won’t hurt you,” I told her, moving a mop that blocked my path to

her. “He’s not your dad. You’re catching him on a bad day too. He isn’t usually like this, all loud and grumpy.” I shifted aside a bucket and took another step toward her. “He’s sad because he can’t find his sister, but he’s not mad at you. He’s actually really grateful that you’ve been such a big help to us so far.” I squeezed past the handle of the floor polisher, finally within reach of Ivy. “I promise he won’t hurt you. No one will. Not while you’re with us.”

I offered her my hand. She stared at it for a few moments.

“I don’t want to go back to my dad,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to,” I said. “You can stay with us.”

She placed her hand in mine, and I pulled her to her feet. Together, we made our way out of the supply closet, where Jacob waited for us in the hallway.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said to Ivy. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m really sorry.”

Ivy sniffed and wiped her nose on the ratty sleeve of her sweater. “It’s okay. Georgie told me that you’re sad about your sister. Don’t worry. We haven’t checked the whole building yet.”

Jacob knelt down to look Ivy in the eye. “Where would you hide if you got stuck in here during the blackout?”

“The cafeteria,” she said without hesitation. “We passed by it earlier. It’s in the middle of the building, so it’s safest, and there’s bound to be food and water in there.”

“Let’s go then,” Jacob said.

Ivy led the way, spurred on by Jacob’s confidence in her. He occasionally gave her directions to keep her on course as we jogged through the hallways.

“You’re good with kids,” I said to him, our elbows bumping together. “I didn’t know that.”

“I used to babysit Pippa when she was little,” he replied. “My mom and dad thought it was weird. They didn’t get why a fifteen-year-old boy wanted to look after his four-year-old sister. They wanted to hire a sitter, but I didn’t mind. I loved playing with her. Kids are just—I don’t know—so naive and unaffected. They don’t have to think about all the terrible things yet. I think talking and interacting with them resets your perspective. It definitely helps me see things in a more positive light. Left up here, Ivy.”

“So does that mean you want to have kids?” I asked as we followed Ivy around the corner.

“Yes. Don’t you?”

These were things we probably should have talked about before we got engaged. Children had never been on my to-do list. While I had no qualms with other people’s kids and even enjoyed their presence, I had no desire to produce any of my own. It had taken me years to shake off the feeling of dread that rode along on my back when I’d left my father’s property, to stop myself from thinking that every person in the pharmacy had a hidden agenda, to keep the loud, intrusive thoughts at bay. Those habits and emotions had been hammered into me by my own father. It wasn’t his fault—he was sick and confused—but the last thing I wanted was to accidentally pass on my own shortcomings to some poor undeserving baby.

“I haven’t really thought about it,” I told Jacob.

“We should talk about it.” He skidded across a slippery part of the marble floor, nearly slipped, and flailed his arms to right himself. “And we should talk about what you told me outside.”

My lungs, already working hard to keep pace with Ivy’s light-speed pace, tightened up. “We should talk about it, but let’s find Pippa first. Besides, we might not have a future at all.”

Jacob stumbled. “What do you mean?”

“Not because of us,” I clarified quickly. “We might not make it out of this blackout alive.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m being realistic.”

We jogged through the main entryway of the school, where an elegant staircase with a balustrade carved out of rich dark wood led to the second floor. Ivy raced past the three sets of elevators on the far side of the room and disappeared into a dark hallway. As Jacob and I caught up with her, she emerged out of the gloom and ran smack into us.

“Whoa!” Jacob steadied the girl. “What’s wrong? The cafeteria’s that way.”

She panted hard, scanning the massive entryway from the oak front doors to the enormous staircase. “I heard something.”

“In the hallway?”

“No, out here.”

“What did you hear?” I asked her.

“I’m not sure. Shh.”

Jacob and I fell silent as Ivy roved the room. I strained to hear something

other than Jacob's deep breathing and Ivy's gentle footsteps. Faintly, the clamor of the crowd at the gate made its way into the space beneath the illustrious domed ceiling, but other than that, I wasn't sure what Ivy was listening to. She continued to trace the outline of the entryway, taking her time as she moved along with her ear pressed to the walls.

"What are the odds we picked up some crazy little kid who hears voices?" Jacob muttered to me under his breath.

"Even if she does, I'm inclined to trust her," I whispered back. "She got us in here, remember?"

Ivy moved to the opposite wall toward the line of elevators, peering up at the needle above each lift that indicated which floor it had stopped at. The one in the middle was stuck between the one and the two. Ivy leaned against the door.

"Here!" she exclaimed, waving us over. "There's someone in the elevator!"

Jacob and I sprinted across the entryway to join Ivy. Jacob pounded on the elevator door.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Is there anybody up there?"

"Jacob?" a voice replied faintly. "Is that you?"

"Pippa!"

7

"Pippa!" Jacob thundered on the door of the elevator. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay!" she yelled back, her frustration dampened by the metal doors. Other voices overlapped with hers. She wasn't alone in the elevator. "We've been trapped in here for hours! I haven't had anything to eat or drink, it's absolutely freezing, my ankles are the size of bowling balls, and I can't even tell you how desperately I have to pee!"

"Pippa, try to stay calm," I called up. "We're going to get you out of there."

"Is that Georgie?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Thank God," Pippa said. "If there's anyone who can pop open a rogue elevator door, it's you."

I grinned at the unusual compliment. "I appreciate that, but unfortunately we don't have anything to pop it open with at the moment. I'll have to go find a crowbar or something. Who else is up there with you?"

"Jaime and Emma," Pippa answered. "Girls from my field hockey team."

"Seriously, Pip," another voice said. "How relieved are you that you're in here with us instead of Sebastian?"

"Emma, I really don't want to think about my ex-boyfriend right now."

"Sorry."

I rolled my eyes. "Girls, is anyone injured?"

"Nope," Pippa answered. "Just pissed."

"What about Jaime?" I asked. "I haven't heard from her."

“She’s paper-bagging it.”

“She’s what?”

“She’s claustrophobic,” Pippa clarified. “We’ve been trying to keep her from having a full-blown panic attack, so she’s breathing in and out of a paper bag. What the hell is going on out there? We yelled for help for hours. Why didn’t someone come earlier?”

“The whole city is out of power,” Jacob said. “Something fried the grid. Georgie thinks it was an EMP blast. Phones and cars are out too. The cops haven’t been able to get anywhere because of the road blockages.”

“Great,” Pippa said. “We’re stuck in an elevator, and it’s straight up postapocalyptic out there. I can’t wait to get out of here. How are we coming on that rescue mission, guys?”

“Working on it,” I called. I turned to Jacob and Ivy. “You stay here and keep them calm. Don’t let Jaime freak out any more than she already has. I’m going to go try to find something to pry open the doors with.”

“Can you find us some snacks too?” Pippa called down. “I’m famished. Seriously, I’m about to pass out.”

“I’ll do my best,” I told her. Then I kissed Jacob’s cheek, patted Ivy’s shoulder, and went on my way, heading down the dark hallway to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria itself was dark and creepy. The long tables had been folded up at the end of the school day yesterday and stacked against the wall. The tall figures cast strange, ominous shadows across the floor. My boots clicked against the tile as I headed for the serving counter. The food trays were clean and empty. The trash had been taken out. The kitchen staff had prepared the cafeteria for breakfast the next day. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. The school could open Monday without a hitch if the power behaved.

I jumped over the serving counter, sending a loud thud through the room, and knelt down to shuffle through the boxes beneath the counter. They were full of plastic utensils, packages of condiments, and spare lunch trays. No juice boxes or snacks. I moved on to the actual kitchen. There were no windows at all, so I lingered in the doorway to let my eyes adjust. Like the serving counter, the kitchen had been cleaned and readied for the next school day. I rummaged through a collection of industrial utensils, wondering if the metal tongs for flipping burgers would hold long enough to pry open the elevator door. I tested them against the floor, stepping on one end and pulling the other up against the sole of my boot. They bent easily in half. With a sigh,

I threw them in the garbage.

Two doors led off from the kitchen. One was simply marked with a brass plaque that read Storage. The other was made of shiny thick metal, so I assumed it led to the walk-in freezer. I picked the storage room, hoping to find some nonperishable food items to bring back to Pippa and her friends.

"Jackpot," I whispered to myself as I entered the storeroom. The shelves were lined with boxes and boxes of snack bags, juice pouches, packaged peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and canned vegetables. I reached into the one closest to me, and a ruler smacked across the back of my hand. "Ow, shit!"

A figure stepped out of the shadows, a spindly woman taller than me with black-framed glasses and a round narrow face like a barn owl's. She held the ruler at the ready. "That, young lady, does not belong to you."

"Let me guess," I said, nursing the sting on the back of my head. "You're the lunch lady."

The woman's thin shoulders broadened, and her chest puffed out as though I had ruffled her feathers. "I am Mrs. Valachovic, the headmistress of this school, and you are trespassing on private property. How did you get in here anyway? We locked the gates and barred the front doors."

"You forgot the back," I said wryly. "And there's a gap in the gate. Listen, lady, I'm not looking for trouble—"

Someone else emerged from behind the shelves, a squat man whose multiple chins spilled over the collar of his starched button-up shirt. "You heard the headmistress," he said. "You don't belong here. Get out."

"Seriously, my boyfriend—"

But the longer I protested, the more people emerged from the shadows, faculty and staff that had been stuck in the school since yesterday's blast, about ten or twelve individuals collectively. They advanced like the front line of an army, forcing me out of the storeroom and pressing me against the serving counter in the cafeteria. When my back hit the counter and I had nowhere else to go, I held my hands up in surrender. I didn't imagine this was how it would go down, at the mercy of several educators, each demanding answers from me.

"Who else did you let in?"

"What did you take?"

"What do you want?"

"Help! I want help!" I finally shouted, shoving one of the teachers away

and rolling backward over the counter. I slid under the warming lights and across the empty trays to land on the other side. The teachers rushed to find the opening at the end of the counter rather than jumping across it, which gave me time to catch my breath. “Please listen! I didn’t come here to rob the storeroom. My boyfriend’s sister goes to school here. Her name is Pippa Mason.” Jacob’s last name was the secret password. The teachers stilled their advances at once. The Masons had donated several thousand dollars to the school. Everyone here knew Jacob, Pippa, and their parents. “She’s stuck in the elevator with two of her friends,” I rushed on, taking advantage of the opening. “We just need help to get them out, and then we’ll be out of your hair. I swear.”

“Who are you again?” Mrs. Valachovic asked, squinting to see me in the dim light.

“Georgie Fitz,” I replied. “I’m dating—I’m engaged to Jacob Mason.”

“I’ve seen you before,” she said. “At Pippa’s field hockey games.”

“Yeah, I’ve been to one or two,” I confirmed. “Please, they’ve been stuck in the elevator since yesterday, and Pippa’s pregnant—”

Mrs. Valachovic snapped her fingers, and the gaggle of teachers perked up. “We have a situation,” she announced. “Does anyone here have the skills to free a trio of students from the elevator?”

A hand rose near the back of the group, and a man stepped forward. He wore pressed black pants and a white collared shirt with the Saint Mark’s logo embroidered on the pocket. Unlike the other teachers, he sported work boots rather than heels or sensible loafers.

“I can go,” he offered. “I’m the one who services the elevators anyway.”

“Excellent,” Mrs. Valachovic said, urging the man forward. “Miss Fitz, this is Jorge, one of our custodians. He would be happy to help you. Please let us know if Pippa needs medical attention. We have the school nurse here as well.”

“She’s hungry,” I replied. “And you have more than enough food here for the lot of you. I know the Masons would appreciate it if you could put together a box of nonperishable things for Pippa. Sandwiches and snacks. Things like that.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Valachovic said. Now that she knew who she was catering to, she was more than compliant. “We’ll have it ready for you by the time you finish with Jorge. Here, take some water with you.”

Someone passed up a few miniature bottles from the store room. I juggled

them in one hand and waved. “Thanks. Come on, Jorge. We shouldn’t leave them for long.”

We made our way back toward the main hall. This time, I didn’t bother to stifle my footsteps against the marble. The teachers had held down Saint Mark’s better than a small army. It was safe inside the school, at least for now.

“I need to stop by my office,” Jorge said, veering left down a hallway. “My things are there.”

“No problem,” I replied. “So how long have you been working at Saint Mark’s?”

“Since I was eighteen,” he answered, coming to a door set well away from the other classrooms. He fit a key into the lock and went inside. The office was too small. The desk alone took up most of the floor space, but by the looks of the mountain of paperwork sitting atop it, Jorge didn’t bother to sit down often.

“Do you ever get tired of it?” I asked him as Jorge disappeared behind the desk.

“I don’t mind it.” He came up holding a crowbar. “It pays the bills. Gets the kids to school.”

“Oh, do they go here?”

Jorge chuckled as he shouldered the crowbar and led me out of the office. “No, sweetie. We can’t afford it. They go to public school. Let’s see what we can do for your fiancé’s sister, okay?”

Jorge led me back to the main hall with such certainty that I was sure he could traverse Saint Mark’s in his sleep. The thought comforted me. Hopefully, he had been servicing the elevators for as long as he had been working here.

“Finally!” Jacob said when we arrived. “What took you so long? Jaime’s hyperventilating, and Pippa’s threatened to kill me eight times already.”

“Nine,” Ivy said.

“Thanks a lot, kid.”

I called up to the elevator. “Pippa, is Jaime okay?”

“She’s losing it, Georgie.” Pippa’s voice was strained, as if she was in pain and trying to hide it. “We need to get her out of here.”

“What about you?” I asked. “How are you holding up?”

“I don’t know,” she said, short of breath. “The baby’s moving a lot. The stress maybe—”

“Okay, try taking deep breaths,” I told her. “I have Jorge with me. He’s the one who keeps the elevators running. He’s going to try to get you out, okay?”

“I love Jorge!”

I drew Jacob and Ivy away from the elevator so that Jorge could do his job. He fit one end of the crowbar into the seam between the doors and pried them apart with a grunt. The doors inched open until the gap was wide enough for Jorge to fit his hands through. As he tugged the doors open the rest of the way, I noticed a problem. The lift itself was stuck between the first and second floors. The girls had managed to get the inside set of doors open themselves, but only eighteen inches or so of the actual lift had made it anywhere near the first floor. The girls were stuck at the top of the opening.

Pippa stuck her face into the gap. “Oh my God, fresh air.”

Jorge moved away, carefully avoiding the drop to the basement floor below, and looked up at the lift. “I can’t pull it down,” he said. “I don’t have the tools to do it. They’ll have to squeeze through the opening.”

Pippa drew back. “Jaime, you go first.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue with me. I’m fine. Get out of here.”

Jacob moved closer to the elevator. “Jaime, I’ll be right here to catch you.”

A pair of saddle shoes appeared in the gap as Jaime wiggled herself through the opening. Jacob leaned forward, dangerously close to the open shaft. As the high schooler slipped out, he caught her around the waist and set her down gently on the firm floor. Jaime wobbled as Jacob returned his attention to the elevator, but before I could help her, Ivy swooped in to let Jaime use her as an armrest.

“I got you,” Ivy said, helping Jaime, whose face was bright red, sit down on the intricate staircase.

“Here, Ivy,” I said, tossing her a bottle of water. “Get her to drink something. They’re probably dehydrated.”

At the elevator, Jacob and Jorge helped Emma down. She squeezed through the gap without issue, waved off my offer of water, and looked back up into the lift. “Pippa, come on! It’s your turn.”

Pippa had moved away from the opening, invisible to us. “I can’t fit.”

“Yes, you can,” Emma urged. “Just try.”

“I already know I can’t fit!”

Jacob balanced on his toes in an attempt to find his sister again, but he was too short to see to the top of the elevator. “Pippa, you have to try.”

“Stupid blackout,” she muttered from out of sight. “Stupid baby. Stupid boyfriend!”

“Pippa! Get down here!”

“Shut up, Jacob!”

“Okay, just stop,” I said, pushing Jacob away from the open shaft. “Yelling at her isn’t going to help this go any faster. She’s probably right. Jaime and Emma barely made it through that gap, and they’re not pregnant. Let’s not make things worse by making her force her way through. It could hurt the baby.”

Jacob couldn’t tear his gaze away from the doors. “What do you suggest then? We can’t leave her there!”

“No, of course not.” I turned to the custodian. “Jorge, can you open the doors on the second floor?”

“Certainly.”

“Excellent. Please go do that for me.” As Jorge jogged up the staircase, I turned back to Jacob. “I need you to give me a boost.”

“What?”

“Lift me up so I can get into the elevator.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You want to get *inside* the elevator?”

“Someone has to keep Pippa calm and help her get out,” I said. “There’s no way you’re fitting through that gap, so it has to be me. Now give me a boost.”

Grudgingly, Jacob knelt by the open door and cupped his hands together in a makeshift step. “Be careful. I don’t want to have to go down to the basement and fish your body out of the shaft.”

“It’s not that far,” I said, but I gulped as I looked into the darkness below. The drop was about ten feet, but the last time I’d been this high above the ground, I’d fallen off a roller coaster and broken my finger. I shook off the thought and placed my boot in Jacob’s hand. “Pippa? I’m coming up.”

Jacob lifted me upward, and I caught the floor of the elevator, flinching when my head bumped against the top of the door frame. Pippa sat in the far corner of the elevator, curled in on herself. Her face was red and puffy, though I wasn’t sure if it was from the cold or her emotions. I lifted myself through the gap as Jacob pushed me up from below until I was all the way in. The elevator smelled faintly of body odor, but the fruity perfume of teenaged

girls overpowered it.

“Georgie, what are you doing?”

“Helping.” I slid over to Pippa and pulled her to rest against me. The tip of her nose touched my neck, and I tried not to grimace. She was freezing. I wormed out of my sweater and maneuvered it over her head instead. It didn’t quite cover her baby bump, which had grown tremendously since I’d last seen her, but at the very least, it provided another layer over top of her thin school uniform.

“You’re going to freeze,” she mumbled, plucking at the thin cotton of my shirt.

“I’ll be okay,” I told her. “It’s you I’m worried about. Let’s get out of here, yeah? Your parents are waiting for you back home.”

“Girls?” Jorge’s voice floated through the closed doors on the second floor. “I’m getting started, okay?”

“Okay!” I called back.

A clang echoed through the shaft as Jorge fit the crowbar between the doors and levered them open. Suddenly, the elevator jerked, and Pippa shrieked as it dropped an inch.

“Pippa!” Jacob reach into the shaft from below as if he could catch the elevator should it drop the rest of the way.

“Move, Jacob!” I clutched Pippa tighter to me. Jorge had gotten the doors to open about two feet. “Jorge, is that as wide as they’ll go?”

“I’m afraid the elevator might drop even more if I try again, miss,” he replied. “I think it’s best if you try to get out now.”

Heart pounding, I unfurled Pippa’s fingers from my shirt. “Pippa? Listen, we’ve got to try and get out of here, okay? I’m going to give you a boost up to Jorge, and he’s going to pull you out.”

Pippa shook her head furiously. “If we move, this whole thing’s going down.”

“No, it isn’t,” I assured her, though I had no idea whether I was telling her the truth or not. “Even if it was, we can’t not try. We need to get you somewhere safe.”

“I’m not moving.”

“What did she say?” Jacob shouted up. “Pippa, what’s the problem?”

Pippa’s eyes flashed to the first floor at the sound of her brother’s voice, but I took her face in between my hands and made her look at me.

“Ignore him,” I told her. “Look at me. I’m in here with you, okay? You

have me. We can't stay here forever though. You have to take the boost."

Her lip trembled as she held back tears. "I'm scared."

"I know," I said. "But you're also incredibly brave. You know how I know that? Because no other seventeen-year-old would go through with an unplanned pregnancy with the same amount of finesse that you have. This is no different from you walking down the halls in maternity wear, Pip. You can do this."

She tucked her head into my chest. "I don't want to."

"You have to," I muttered into her hair. "For your baby."

She sniffed once and nodded. I stood up before she could change her mind, trying to keep my feet as level as possible. The elevator swayed but held firm. I had no idea what might've caused it to drop, but I wasn't keen on repeating the experience. I doubted two and a half floors was tall enough to pick up a dangerous speed before we hit the basement, but any kind of big jolt would be bad news for Pippa and the baby. My goal was to keep Pippa's baby inside her for as long as possible. This wasn't a world for a newborn.

"Up you get," I said to Pippa, lifting her from underneath her arms. When she was standing, I interlinked my fingers to make a step as Jacob had earlier. "All right, let's go. I'll lift you up."

She steadied herself against the wall of the elevator, one hand cradling her belly, and looked up to Jorge. "You're going to get me up there, right? It's been a while since I've done a pull-up."

Jorge smiled down at her. "I have a daughter your age. I will treat you as if you were my own."

"Wait!" Jacob called. "I should do it. I should be the one to pull her out."

"We don't have time, Jacob," I said. "Stay down there in case this goes wrong. Pippa, let's go."

"Georgie—"

"Quiet, Jacob!"

Pippa braced herself on my shoulder, planted her white Oxford shoe in my hand, and stepped up. I bent my knees and tightened my core as she wobbled unevenly, trying not to let out a strained grunt as I heaved her up toward Jorge. Even with the baby, Pippa didn't look like she could possibly weigh as much as she did. Then I remembered that prior to her pregnancy, she had been a prominent player for the field hockey team. The girl was all muscle. That was a good thing. Her back and shoulders flexed as she gripped the floor above and hauled herself up into Jorge's grasp. He wrapped his

arms around her and pulled her to safety on the second floor.

"Is she good?" Jacob asked. "Is Pippa safe?"

"She's fine," I started, leaning down to peek at Jacob through the gap. "Get back so I can slide out—"

I didn't slide out or finish my sentence because the hydraulics gave up entirely and the elevator plunged into darkness.

Jacob's horrified yell followed me down. The elevator whizzed past the first floor and headed for the basement. Time seemed to slow down and speed up all at once. I had no chance to react or access the part of my brain that might have stored away the information regarding the best way to minimize injury in a scenario like this. Was it to jump the second before the elevator hit the ground? Or were you supposed to lie flat on your back to allow the impact to spread across your entire body rather than one localized point? I remembered that a woman named Betty Lou Oliver held the Guinness World Record for the longest fall survived in an elevator. She fell seventy-five stories through the Empire State Building when some idiot flew a plane into it. If she could make it, so could I. There was nothing else to do but prepare myself for the crash, so I held onto the support rails on the sides of the elevator for dear life and lowered myself so that only my heels were touching the floor. Then I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for the boom.

It came with an atrocious earsplitting crunch of metal on concrete, ripping my grip from the elevator. The impact traveled through the soles of my boots and rattled upward until it felt as if my head might shake clean off my body. The cheap ceiling tiles rained down from above, showering me with stucco and plaster. Then everything settled. That was it. My heart pounded and my head ached, but I was otherwise no worse for wear.

Jacob's terrified shouts echoed from above, but the ringing in my ears made it difficult to hear his words. I slumped to the ruined floor, letting the surge of adrenaline run its course. It was my second freefall experience in as many days. At this rate, I was going to develop an extreme fear of heights in no time.

Minutes later, while I was checking my feet and legs for fractures, the crowbar found its way between the doors leading to the basement, and someone ripped them apart so quickly that it left a dent in the metal. I squinted into the murky darkness, the only light filtering in from the shaft above. Jacob stood there, chest heaving, crowbar in hand. There was a look on his face that I couldn't quite figure out. It was two different emotions, as if

hope and despair warred with each other to gain control over his eyes and mouth. Then I understood. He'd hoped I was alive, but he expected me to be dead.

"It was only two floors," I said.

"Georgie!" He rushed in and practically collapsed to pull me against him. I pressed my face to his neck and took a deep breath. His spicy sweet cinnamon scent had a tang of nervous sweat to it now. "Oh my God, you're alive."

"Careful." I winced as he rocked me back and forth. Something in my neck twinged. The collision had wreaked havoc on my alignment. "My whole body hurts. Is everybody okay?"

He drew away and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Yeah, everybody's fine, thanks to you. God, I thought I was going to go home with Pippa and not you."

"We're both going home," I told him. "And then we're all leaving town." I tried to get my feet under me, but my legs were shaking so much that I couldn't control them.

Jacob ducked his head under my arm and lifted me to stand. "Be careful. The basement's a mess. It looks like no one's been down here in ages."

"Maybe it's haunted," I said as he led me out of the elevator. Storage boxes lined the underground room, piled in high, precarious columns.

"Don't joke," Jacob said. "When I went to Saint Mark's, they sent kids who misbehaved down here to watch old sex ed tapes. It was torture."

"Had a lot of detention, did you?"

"No. Maybe."

"Jacob Mason, you are not who I thought you were," I joked as he carried me into the concrete stairwell.

"Neither are you."

8

In the main entryway, after everyone was done expressing their awe at my lack of injury, we planned our escape route from the school. One look through a gap in the boards on the windows showed us that the looters had yet to give up. A few of them had almost made it to the top of the gate a couple of times. Once someone finally produced a ladder, it would be easy to find a way into the school.

"It's not safe to stay here," I told Jorge when he returned from the kitchen with a care package that the other teachers had put together for us. "You can't defend the entire school. That mob outside is going to get in, and when they do, they won't care about what happens to this place or the people inside it. They'll hurt you and the others to get to that storeroom. It'll be a madhouse."

"I wasn't planning on staying anyway," Jorge replied. "I have a family to get back to."

I hugged him. "Thank you for everything, and be careful out there."

"You too," he said. "And stay out of trouble. You seem like the type of girl that goes looking for it."

"I don't," I told him as I drew away, aware of Jacob's eyes on the back of my head. "Trouble tends to find me."

"Even so," Jorge said, his voice fading as he moved toward the kitchen. "You stay safe."

I sighed as he left and turned to the rest of our party. "We shouldn't go around the front. With this many people, someone's bound to notice us, and we have a giant box full of food that screams trouble."

Emma, Pippa's friend, pointed toward the rear of the school. "I'm heading that way anyway. Don't worry about me."

"Me either," Jaime said. Now that she was free of the confines of the elevator, she appeared more sure of herself. "I live over there too."

"The two of you shouldn't go alone," I said.

Emma slung an arm across Jaime's shoulder. "We won't be. We'll have each other."

"You know what she meant," Jacob said. "I don't feel comfortable sending the two of you home alone. Why don't you come with us?"

I suppressed a ripple of agitation. We couldn't take care of everyone that Jacob or Pippa knew. Ivy was one thing—she didn't have the means to take care of herself—but Emma and Jaime had families of their own.

"I can't," Jaime said. "My parents are out of town, which means my little brother is all alone at our house. I got to go find him."

"And my parents are probably apoplectic over the fact that I haven't made it home yet," Emma added. "We'll be fine. We'll stick to the back roads. And if anyone messes with us"—she banged open one of the lockers, pulled out a field hockey stick, and brandished it about—"they'll be damn sorry about it."

"She's not kidding." Jaime smirked. "I saw her clock a guy in the shins after a game once just because he tried to hit on her."

"That pickup line was terrible," Emma said.

Jacob stepped between the two of them. "Listen, girls. Don't linger out there. Go straight home. Don't talk to anyone. Don't go into any of the stores—"

Emma saluted him. "Yes, sir, Big Brother."

Jaime threw her arms around Pippa. "I wouldn't want to be trapped in an elevator for fifteen hours with anyone but you. Be careful, okay?"

Emma joined in on the hug, and Pippa squeezed her friends tightly. "You guys be careful too. Don't hesitate to use that hockey stick on anyone."

Emma grinned savagely and swung the stick through the air with a menacing whoosh. "Oh, don't you worry."

"You're giving her too much power," Jaime muttered as she straightened out the collar of Pippa's shirt beneath my sweater.

"Let's go, Jaime!" Emma hollered, already on her way toward the rear hallway. "I'm ready to bash some heads in."

Pippa rolled her eyes and kissed Jaime on the cheek. "Go. I'll see you later."

“Hopefully.”

And then Emma and Jaime were off, the heels of their shoes clicking against the marble floors as they jogged toward home.

“Pippa, do you have a nail file?” I asked her.

“Sure.” She dug through her backpack, stamped with the Saint Mark’s crest, and produced a metal file. “What do you need it for?”

I wiggled the file into the seam of the closest locker and popped the lock out of place. “Your friends gave me an idea.”

“Stealing?” Jacob asked, his tone dry. “That’s your idea?”

The locker swung open, revealing several textbooks, general trash, and a Saint Mark’s peacoat. I drew open the coat and flapped it open. It was tiny, so I handed it to Ivy, who promptly drew it on over her ratty sweatshirt. I moved on to the next locker, where an extra-large coat had been crammed inside.

“Here,” I said, helping Pippa into the sleeves. It swamped her, hanging almost to her knees, but at least she would be warm. “Do you still disapprove, Jacob, or would you like your sister and her baby to freeze to death out there?”

Jacob was smart enough not to answer as I perused the row of lockers for anything else we could use. I found another coat for myself and a couple of apples that I shoved in the box of food that Jacob was carrying. Then I waved our group toward the exit.

We left the school the same way we came in. We locked the doors behind us, and Ivy pulled the basement window shut, just to buy the teachers inside a little more time when the mob at the front gates finally found a way through. After filing through the gap in the iron bars, we turned right toward the road behind the school rather than left toward the havoc. Pippa and I leaned heavily on one another, supporting each other’s weight. Ivy led the way as Jacob brought up the rear. She had been quiet since our talk at the school. I couldn’t help but wonder what she was thinking about. Out of all of us, she was probably the second most prepared for this sort of thing after me. If I knew anything about the lives of abused, half-homeless children, it was that they harbored a resilience like no other. Was Ivy’s silence a coping mechanism, or had the events of the day begun to wear her out already?

I didn’t have time to ask her. We turned down a dark alley, trying to find an alternate way to the street that would lead us back to the Masons’ apartment building, and a shambling shadow appeared at the opposite end.

Ivy froze in place, causing our party to come to an abrupt halt behind the little girl. The shadow paused and half turned toward us. It was tall and thin, with angled limbs that seemed to jut out at unnatural angles.

"Oh no," Ivy whispered.

The shadow lurched toward us, and as it drew closer, the clumsy but quick limbs rearranged themselves to form a man. He was not much of a human. His eyes sank deep into his skull, and his cheeks looked as though the skin had been pasted directly to the bone beneath. He reeked of booze, body odor, and vomit.

Jacob took hold of his sister and piloted her around the corner, away from the monstrous man. Without thinking, I stepped in front of Ivy, who appeared rooted to the asphalt below her feet, until the man was nearly upon us.

"*Ivy!*"

He spat her name out like a dirty word. I pushed Ivy back, concealing her completely behind the thick wool layer of my Saint Mark's coat.

"I don't know who you're talking about," I said, forcing myself to speak calmly. "My little sister's name is Amelia."

"Bullshit," the man growled. "You think I don't recognize my own daughter when I see her?"

"Judging by the alcohol on your breath and your state of being, it wouldn't exactly surprise me," I replied, taking another step toward the mouth of the alley. His stench made my eyes water. It was no wonder Ivy had chosen to roam the dangerous streets instead of returning to whatever place she called home.

"Get out of the way," he snarled, but he didn't give me the chance to respond. Without warning, he pushed me over.

I tripped over Ivy, toppling us both, and landed on top of her. My muscles seized, fresh off the trauma of the elevator crash. Ivy scrambled to get away from her father as he loomed over us, her feet kicking mercilessly at my back to dislodge me. Once she was free, she sprang to her feet, but her father was quicker. He leapt over me and caught hold of Ivy by her coat, ripping the collar. He jerked her against him, leaned down, and tipped her head back so that she was forced to listen as he whispered in her ear.

"One bottle." Spittle ran down the man's chin. "That's all I asked of you. You've been gone for hours, and all I wanted was one bottle."

"I couldn't find anything!" Ivy whimpered.

"You found yourself a new mommy, apparently," her father replied. "You

found a pretty new coat." He toyed with the torn collar. "Is this the life you wanted, you little brat? Pretty parents and a private school?"

When he twisted Ivy's neck at a dangerous angle, red-hot hatred coursed through my veins. I flipped over, ignoring the all-over pain, and drew the handgun once more. As the man tilted Ivy's head even further, drawing a yelp of pain from the girl, I fired once. Into his leg.

He dropped Ivy at once, screaming as he collapsed on the asphalt. Like before, a wave of noise washed through the blocks around us. Anyone within earshot had panicked at the sound of the gunshot, including Jacob and Pippa, who had peered around the corner to see what had happened. Blood spurted from between the man's fingers as he applied pressure to a spot above his knee.

"You bitch!" His eyes bulged out of his head as he screamed at me. "I'll kill you! I'll kill her!"

The narrow alleyway amplified the shrill threats. The man's fit would attract attention, and if anyone found us next to him, me with a gun in hand, it would raise questions and trouble. I pushed myself to my feet and grabbed Ivy's hand, but she was stunned into silence, staring at her father as he bled out on the ground.

"Let's go," Jacob shouted from the end of the alley.

"I'm trying!" I called back.

Ivy wouldn't budge. "Is he going to die?"

There was no point in lying. Her father's screams had already lost their intensity as the blood pooled around him. "Probably," I admitted. "There's a big artery in the leg there. He's losing a lot of blood, and no one's going to come and take him to a hospital."

Ivy turned her face to look up at me. "It's that easy?"

The question and the glimmer of wonder and freedom in her eyes made my stomach turn. "No, Ivy. This wasn't easy. Not for you and not for me." The man gurgled on the pavement, slumping over his ruined leg. I tugged on Ivy's hand again. "We have to go now."

"In a second." She pulled out of my grasp to lean over her father. For once, she loomed over him instead of the other way around. She pulled the collar of his shirt up so that he had to look her in the eye. "I hate you. That's all."

For a brief second before his daughter allowed him to fall again, a spark of something—remorse or realization maybe—flashed across the man's face.

Ivy didn’t look back as she fit her hand in mine and ran toward the mouth of the alley.

“Oh my God,” Jacob said as he and Pippa followed after us. We slowed down once we cleared the alley since Pippa wasn’t in the best shape to run. “Oh my God, Georgie.”

“Stop saying that,” I snapped.

“You killed him.”

“He was going to kill Ivy.”

“You don’t know that!”

“You didn’t see him!” I fired back, marching along the sidewalk without looking at him. “He was about to break her neck clean off! What would you have done?”

“She’s his daughter,” Jacob replied. “It’s none of my business.”

A bitter taste flowed across my tongue. “If you really mean that, then you’re a heartless asshole who only cares about the people who are closest to him.”

“No, I just don’t want the people closest to me to get arrested for murder!” he said. “Especially not my fiancée!”

I whirled to a stop outside the shattered windows of a pharmacy. “Look around you, Jacob! Do you see any cops? Do you? No, because guess what! They’re all doing the same thing that I’m trying to do, which is protect the people around them. I made a decision to protect Ivy. It was either her or her piece-of-shit father who can’t stay sober long enough to take care of his own daughter.”

“You shot him, Georgie,” Jacob snapped. “He’s going to die because of you. You can’t do that. Not everyone has daddy issues like you do.”

The remark was like a crisp slap to the face. “I can’t believe you just said that to me.”

“Yeah, well—”

“No,” I said. “You don’t get to use my vulnerabilities against me, especially not now. I told you about my dad because you practically begged me to. It took me a lot of time to get over what happened to my parents, and I won’t let you treat me like a joke you tell to your gym buddies just to get a laugh out of them.”

I walked off with Ivy.

“Where are you going?” he called after me.

“Back to your fucking parents’ house!” I replied. “You may be a jerk, but

that doesn't change what we have to do."

"Georgie—"

Pippa interrupted him. "Jacob, just stop. Shut up. You're making it worse."

I picked up the pace, leaving their squabbling behind. Ivy squeezed my fingers.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"No."

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you shot him."

I blew out a sigh big enough to puff out my cheeks and ruffled Ivy's oily hair. "I know that, kid, but it doesn't change what I did."

Ivy scrunched up her nose. "Why do you like Jacob?"

I checked behind me to make sure that Jacob and Pippa were still out of earshot. They were buried in discussion with each other, and by the looks of it, Pippa was reaming him out for what he said.

"It's a long story," I told Ivy. "When I met Jacob, he had everything I wanted. A place in the city, a sense of purpose, and a normal family. Everything seemed so easy for him. His life was set up for him at birth. Graduate college, work for his dad, get married. That's what normal people do, right? I wanted that. I wanted something normal."

"Normal is so boring though," Ivy said.

"Fine. I wanted something steady then," I clarified. "Something that I could count on so that I wouldn't have to keep thinking about what I left behind."

"What did you leave behind?"

"I'm probably going to find out in a couple of days—"

"Ivy!"

A middle-aged woman emerged from the remains of a walk-in clinic as we passed by, her gaze trained on the twelve-year-old at my side. I reached for the gun again but stopped myself. This woman was not like Ivy's father. She was well put together, wearing sensible boots, jeans, and several layers of sweaters. She was clean and smelled of fresh linens. A small boy peeked out from behind her waist.

"Miss Williams!" Ivy tore her hand free to sling her arms around the woman, who lifted her into the air and twirled her around before setting her down again. Ivy hugged the little boy next. "Leon, I missed you."

"We heard a gunshot," Miss Williams said. "Are you all right?"

“It’s my dad,” Ivy replied stoically. “He’s dead.”

“Oh dear.” Though she tried her best, there was absolutely no remorse in Miss Williams’s tone. She held her hand out to me. “And who do we have here?”

“Georgie,” I answered, shaking hands. “I was looking after Ivy.”

Miss Williams planted a kiss on top of Ivy’s head. “Thank you so much. She’s safe now.”

The little boy, Leon, ducked under Ivy’s Saint Mark’s coat and started laughing, his little giggles muffled by the thick wool fabric. She buttoned the front, trapping him inside with her.

“You’re going to look after her?” I asked Miss Williams, watching as the two kids stumbled aimlessly around. “I didn’t know—”

“That she had anyone else?” Miss Williams finished. “She doesn’t. She and her father lived in our building until they were evicted. She came to our unit when he got too violent. I called the cops multiple times.”

“So you know her pretty well?”

“I practically raised her,” she said. “I even asked for child services to release her into my custody a few times. I guess now we’ve got a better shot.”

A lump rose in my throat. Despite the fact that I’d known Ivy for less than half a day, the thought of parting with her unnerved me. “You should leave the city. It’s not safe here.”

“I know, dear,” Miss Williams said. She reached out and stroked my cheek. “Look at those lines on your face already, baby. You’re an old soul, aren’t you?”

The unexpected affection had an immediate effect. The tears that had been waiting to fall finally made their appearance, and Miss Williams produced a pocket-sized package of tissues. As I dabbed at my face, she squeezed my shoulders.

“You hang in there,” she ordered. “You’re a good person. You brought Ivy home when I’ve been the only one on her side for years. Don’t you forget that.”

“Are you leaving?” Ivy asked, having finally freed Leon from the confines of her new coat.

“Yeah,” I said, sniffling. “You want to stay here with Miss Williams, right?”

Ivy beamed proudly. “Yes. She’s better than a mom.”

“She is,” I agreed, kneeling down to give Ivy a hug. “You behave, okay?

Stay safe. Maybe when all of this is over, we can find each other again."

"I'd like that," she replied. "And you shouldn't let anyone boss you around. No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

I laughed and straightened up. "How does someone so young know a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt?"

"Miss Williams taught it to me."

"Smart lady."

Miss Williams ushered the children back inside the walk-in clinic, waved goodbye to me, and disappeared into the gloom. Ivy was gone, and hopefully, with Miss Williams's skills, she would be able to ride out the other effects of the EMP blast.

"Who was that?" Pippa asked.

"The woman who looks after Ivy," I told her, wiping the last bit of moisture from my cheeks. "She's going to take care of her."

"That's good, right? That means we don't have to take her with us," Jacob said. Pippa elbowed him in the ribs. "Ow!"

"Yeah, it's good," I said. "It's one less person to feed and worry about. Let's get back to the condo. This is starting to feel like the longest day of my life, and we haven't even tried to get out of the city yet."

We trudged on, sticking to the less populated side roads rather than walking up the main stretch. I wished I had my bike. It was slow going with Pippa. Though she was in good shape, she was unaccustomed to speed-walking with the weight of the baby. We had to stop a few times to let her catch her breath.

"Almost there," Jacob said, using the sleeve of his shirt to wipe sweat from his sister's forehead. "Another block maybe."

The Masons' building was visible, and the sun had climbed high enough to beat down on us again. I shrugged free of my borrowed coat and draped it over my shoulder in case I needed it for later.

"I don't know how the two of you think you're going to get me out of the city," Pippa said. "This is taking way too long."

"We do have a wagon," I offered.

"Which is currently loaded with water bottles," Jacob reminded me. "Maybe we can find a stroller. We could tie it to the back of someone else's bike. That'd be fun. Right, Pip?"

She glared at him as she got back to her feet. "Try and put me in a baby stroller, Jacob. See if you survive the experience."

“Don’t your parents own a tandem bike?” I asked. “Pippa can ride on the back of that. No stroller or wagon necessary.”

“See?” Pippa said to Jacob. “At least Georgie offers a real solution to the problem. Let’s keep moving. I’m fine now, and I bet Mom and Dad made breakfast.”

Pippa strode ahead, leaving Jacob and me to deal with the thick, palpable tension in the air between us. Our hands bumped together. I shoved mine into my pocket.

“Georgie, listen—”

“We can’t keep doing this,” I said, strolling after Pippa. Jacob hurried to catch up. “We can’t argue over stupid shit. It’s not going to turn out well for us.”

“Then let’s talk about it.” Jacob threaded his arm through mine in an attempt to get me to slow down and walk evenly with him. “Hmm?”

His grip felt too tight. I shrugged out of it. “I tried to talk to you about it. I told you about my parents like you wanted me to, and not an hour later, you threw it back in my face like it was something I had to be ashamed about.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

I whirled around to face him, forcing him to stop walking. “Yeah, but you did it. You took something that you knew would bother me and used it against me because you were mad in the moment and wanted to hurt me. That’s not right.”

“Fine, you’re right.”

“Don’t just say that because you’re trying to make this go away.”

“I’m not!” His hot reply startled a flock of birds from a nearby telephone wire. Jacob took a deep breath and tried again. “What I said was stupid, and I’m sorry, okay? But I just watched my fiancée, who I’ve known as a specific type of person since we met in college, shoot a man in the leg and leave him to bleed out and die. Georgie, every time we found a spider in the apartment, you made me trap it in a cup and carry it outside. Now, all of a sudden, you’re GI Jane.”

I scuffed the toe of my boot against the sidewalk, mindlessly filling in a crack with the dirt from an ant pile. “What you don’t understand is that I’ve always been that person. The GI Jane one that knows how to shoot at a moving target and pick locks and steal without remorse. All these years, she’s been right there, just below the surface, but I never needed her until now.” Jacob stared at where my boot worked against the ground. I lifted his chin,

his whiskers rough against the pads of my fingers. “You need her too. You need *me* to get out of this mess alive, and the faster you accept that terrible things are going to happen to us, the easier this is going to be. Can you understand that?”

“I’m trying to.”

The sun turned his brown irises gold. He was doing his best. That was true. I could see that in the puffy bags under his eyes and the lines around his mouth that seemed to have deepened since last night’s blast. Jacob was a trust-fund kid who’d been thrown into the deep end without a floatie. He wasn’t used to death and gore unless he was watching it in high definition on a gigantic television. That would all change soon. Clouds drifted across the sun, casting a chilling shadow.

Jacob pressed his forehead against mine, looking for my lips, but I drew away before he could find them. He wanted something normal to rely on, but I couldn’t give it to him. The truth, rather than the blackout, had made room for something darker to lie between us.

9

I found Pippa on the third-floor landing of the stairwell in her family's apartment building. She had stopped to catch her breath, holding the support railing with one hand and cradling her belly with the other.

"You know, I used to be in great shape," she said when she noticed me plodding up the stairs. "I was captain of the field hockey team. I ran a five-minute mile. Now a few flights of stairs have me completely whipped. It's ridiculous."

I forced a grim smile. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll go right back to your five-minute mile after you deliver the baby."

She looped her arm around my shoulders when I offered. "Did you talk to Jacob? Where is he?"

"He gave me a head start."

"So you didn't talk."

"We did," I replied as we started up the steps to the next floor. "The problem is that we can't really do anything about the things we talked about right now."

Pippa flipped her curly blond hair, the same color as Jacob's, over her shoulder to see the stairs better. "Because of the blackout?"

"Partially."

"You have to give me more than that, or I can't help you." She tugged on my bright purple locks. "I hate to break it to you, but you've always been cryptic. It's no wonder Jacob has a difficult time communicating with you. That boy is dense, like most men, but he does try."

“I know he does—”

“All I’m saying is that some guys don’t try.” She drew open the lapels of her coat to reveal her belly again. “*This* is a perfect example. When I told Sebastian that I was going to have the baby, he switched schools to get away from me.”

“Why did you?” I asked her. “Decide to have the baby, I mean.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It was such a shit show when I found out about it. Part of me wanted to own up to the responsibility of it. I made a mistake. I screwed up, so now I have to deal with the consequences.” We lugged ourselves up another flight of stairs. “Then another part of me wanted to piss everyone off. Jacob got into all kinds of trouble when he went to Saint Mark’s, but he played on the football team, and he was a straight-A student, and he was a boy, so it didn’t matter if he acted up. My parents went ballistic when I told them about this. They even said I’d have to get rid of it.”

“I thought your parents were super Christian.”

Pippa rolled her eyes. “It turns out that having a pregnant teenage daughter wasn’t their idea of how Christianity is supposed to go. They were more concerned about our family’s reputation than what God might think of me.”

“That’s shitty.”

“Yup,” Pippa agreed. As we rounded the seventh floor, her feet began to drag, so I propped more of her weight over my shoulder. “Anyway, I figured I’d have the baby and give her up for adoption. Let some couple who actually wants her get a beautiful newborn.”

“You’re not keeping her?” I asked. Jacob hadn’t mentioned that Pippa was considering adoption.

“No way,” she replied. “I’m seventeen. I don’t want a kid, not right now, at least. I want to go to school and study abroad and have a life. Could I do that with a baby on my hip?”

“Probably.”

Pippa nodded appreciatively. “That’s true, but I don’t want to. This little girl deserves more than constantly being reminded that she was a mistake. I don’t want that for her.”

“You put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?”

Her expression sobered, her mouth setting itself in a determined pout. “When I’m not studying, it’s literally all I think about.”

She missed a step and tripped. I caught her around the waist before she

could tumble down the flight of stairs, and set her gently on her feet. She grabbed my wrist, her pulse hammering against mine.

"Georgie?" Her voice was suddenly small and timid, a vast distance from her usual tone of showy confidence. "What do you think is going to happen?"

"With your baby?"

"With the world."

I considered my answer, wondering if I should tell Pippa something to make her feel better or give her my genuine opinion. She wasn't the same as Jacob, who loved tradition and normality so much that he couldn't wrap his mind around the situation at hand. She was strong and practical, and she deserved an honest answer.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "It depends on the scope of this thing. First off, who did it? My best guess is that the blast was an act of terrorism to send the United States back to the dark ages, and it worked. A lot of people are going to die in the next few weeks, Pippa."

"The hospitals aren't running either, are they?"

"No," I said. "No, they're not."

She looked down at her stomach, running a hand over the swell. "It might be you and me after all, little one."

Floors below us, a door slammed shut, echoing up the stairwell. Jacob was on his way up. The Mason family reunion was imminent, and the four of them together was like watching an avalanche in slow motion. Someone always got buried.

"Come on," I said. "It's going to be a long day. You should rest while you can."

When we finally made it to the apartment, we found Nita wrapping gauze around Jove's finger at the dining room table while Penny attempted to wrap the leftovers from breakfast in individual aluminum foil packets. Penny dropped a sausage and ran to her daughter.

"Pippa!" She hugged her tightly from the side so as to avoid Pippa's extra passenger. "What took you so long to get home?"

"I was stuck in the elevator at school."

Penny sniffed the air around Pippa's hair. "Is that why you smell funny?"

"I don't smell funny."

I left the mother-and-daughter duo to chat about the limited bathing options and walked over to Nita and Jove, eyeing Jove's injury. "What happened?"

“He burned himself on the grill,” Nita said with a quirk of her eyebrow that boasted disapproval. “He was trying to fry up more bacon after Leti left. I told him that the heat was too high.”

“I damn well know how to cook bacon,” Jove grumbled, swiping his hand away from Nita as she finished tucking the gauze against itself.

“If you’d listened—”

“This is my house.”

“So you keep reminding me,” Nita said as she stacked the rest of the first aid materials back into the box. “But ignorance lives in even the grandest of dwellings, Mr. Mason. Excuse me.”

I wiped the indulgent grin off my face at Jove’s dumbstruck expression and followed Nita out of the dining room and into Jacob’s, which Nita had claimed as her own for the time being. “I can’t believe you just said that to him.”

“Why not?” she asked, adding the first aid kit to a spare pocket in her backpack. “I’m not his daughter-in-law. You are.”

“Not yet.”

“Whatever,” she said. “I figured since you couldn’t set him straight without Jacob getting on your case, then I would have to do it for you. How’s Pippa? Did I hear she got stuck in an elevator? Is the baby okay?”

“The baby’s fine, and so is she,” I answered. “For right now, at least. Who knows what’s going to happen once we get on the road. How’s it going here? Did you get Jove and Penny to pack a bag for themselves?”

“The bacon incident derailed things,” Nita admitted. “On the upside, I convinced them to go, but Penny can’t seem to grasp the concept that we can’t carry things like a foot bath or a heating pad with us.”

“There’s no power,” I said. “Where does she think she’s going to plug those things in?”

Nita picked nervously at a hangnail on her thumb. “I have no idea. Are you sure you don’t want to hit the road just the two of us? We might have a better chance of making it out alive.”

I shot her a look. “Don’t think I didn’t consider leaving Jacob’s parents behind.”

“But that would probably cast a pall over the wedding plans,” Nita added. “I get it.”

I sank into Jacob’s rolling chair and rested my head against his desk. Someone—an adolescent Jacob or one of his immature friends—had carved a

lovely anatomically correct cartoon into a less visible section of the polished wood.

"They're going to be a pain in the ass," I warned Nita, curling my arms around my head to block out the world around me. "Jacob and I are already at odds with each other, and Jove is going to drive me up a wall. He's going to make mistakes, dangerous ones—"

Nita forced me over so that she could share the chair with me. "I'll be your buffer. I'll deal with the Masons. You focus on getting us out of Denver. Okay?"

I peeked out at her from beneath my arm fort. "Have I ever told you how glad I am that you exist?"

She flipped her dark hair over her shoulder in a show of faux superiority. "Oh, honey. You didn't have to."

I shoved her off the chair.

BY THE TIME we returned to the main living area, Jacob had arrived and already started an argument with Jove about his injury. Pippa lay on the perfectly white sofa, her back turned to her mother, who was attempting to wipe her daughter's forehead with a warm compress. A half-packed suitcase lay open in the middle of the floor, filled with things like battery-operated razors, cell phone chargers, and electric toothbrushes. The constant chatter roared in my ears like some extra-terrible form of tinnitus, cutting off any rational thought.

"You should have waited," Jacob scolded.

"I was still hungry!" Jove replied.

"Come on, honey, just let me take care of you," Penny pleaded.

"Mom, seriously, go away," Pippa ordered.

"Can everyone just shut up for a minute?"

Everyone turned to face me, surprised by my outburst. I usually excused myself when the Masons got too loud for me to handle, choosing to step out onto the balcony instead of riding out the thunderstorm. Other than Jacob, they hadn't heard me raise my voice before.

I pointed to the suitcase. "This isn't going to work. First off, we can't carry it. Everyone needs to find or rig a backpack. Second"—I reached down to toss the toothbrush, charger, and razor out of the bag—"anything that needs a battery or an outlet is useless. Use your freaking brains, people. Pack all-weather clothing and shoes, nonperishable food, camping supplies, that

kind of thing. We're not going to an all-inclusive resort. We're heading up to the woods where—guess what—you're going to have to shit in a latrine. Then at some point you're going to have to clean the latrine. Do you get my gist?"

It was clear that the Masons did not. Jove let out a dismissive grunt, though I assumed it was because someone other than him dared to say "shit" in his house. Penny looked horrified at the thought of cleaning up after her own waste. Jacob sank his face into his hands in an attempt to hide his mortification. Only Pippa seemed quiet and listening, though I suspected she had fallen asleep on the sofa. Nita, on the other hand, tried to reel in a satisfied smirk.

Now that I had the floor, I lowered my voice. "If you don't listen to me, you will not survive. Is that clear?"

Jacob was the first to reply. "Yes. Right, Dad? Mom?"

"It's clear," Penny said.

"Uh-huh," Jove added gruffly. "I still don't know what you expect us to do. Jacob told us you want to ride bikes out of the city? How are we supposed to get up the mountains on bikes?"

"We could hike," I suggested, "but I realize that's a bit of a stretch. Hiking doesn't seem like an activity the four of you ever engaged in, and it would be especially difficult for Pippa."

"Hiking sounds terrible," Pippa agreed, not asleep after all.

"We need a plan," I announced. "Here's the thing. When Jacob and I were leaving the theme park last night, we noticed that some cars were still working. They were all older models, which means that they probably didn't have electrical components. They weren't affected by the blast. Jove, don't you show a few cars at an antique show every year?"

"Yes," Jove replied. "Where is this going?"

"We're going to drive up into the mountains," I told him. "We just need a working car that's big enough to fit all of us."

"Well, it won't be one of the Spiders," Jove declared. "They took me years to rebuild, and they're worth a lot of money."

"Dad, the Spiders only seat two people apiece," Jacob said dryly. "They're out of the question anyway."

I leaned against the dining room table next to Jove. For once, we were speaking the same language. "Do you have anything bigger? Something that could make it up the inclines?"

“I have an original Humvee.”

“You do?”

Jove proudly puffed his chest out. “Yes, ma’am. We’d have to go get it. It’s in storage.”

My shoulders dropped. “In storage where?”

“I keep it in a warehouse by the airport.”

Jacob picked up Pippa’s feet, sat beneath them, and began massaging her ankles. “That’s thirty miles from here. It’ll take us three hours to get there on bikes, and it’s in the complete opposite direction of where we’re heading.”

“It’s our best shot,” I said. “We can ditch the bikes once we get the car, and we’ll get up to my dad’s property in no time. It’ll be safer too.”

“What about the roads?” Penny handed the warm compress to Jacob, who leaned over Pippa and pressed it to her forehead. “Aren’t they all blocked by the cars?”

“If we have a Humvee, it won’t be a problem,” I pointed out. “Have you seen the tires on those things? We wouldn’t be confined to pavement.”

“How about gas?” Jove said. “That thing eats it up, and the pumps won’t be working for us to refill.”

“I can siphon gas from other cars,” I told him. “If you want, I can teach you how to do it. We’ll bring extra containers and fill up as many as we can.”

Jove looked impressed by my knowledge of car tricks. “All right then.”

“So we have a plan?” Jacob asked.

“We have a plan.”

WE SPENT another hour and a half preparing for the trip. Nita managed to separate Penny from Pippa. I took Penny and Jove into their room to pick out more sensible clothing for the journey, while Nita briefed Pippa on how she should take care of herself on the road. Jacob searched the apartment for anything we might be able to use, coming up with a few ancient oil lanterns, a box of barbeque matches, and a four-man tent that the Masons had purchased ten years ago but never used. It was still in the box.

“My dad has a cabin,” I reminded him when he showed me the tent. “But you should bring it anyway in case we don’t make it there. Do you have sleeping bags?”

“Just Pippa’s old princess one,” he said, adding the tent box to the growing pile by the door. “I’ll see if I can find a few blankets to bunch up.”

Jacob, Nita, and I toted the Masons’ bike collection down the stairs and

into the lobby. Jove and Penny usually shared the tandem bike, but we decided that I would ride it with Pippa instead. That left Penny with my road cruiser and Jove with Jacob's old mountain bike. The lobby was empty. Frank was gone. He had either gone to some other floor to help another resident or finally given up on the extravagant high-rise and gone home to his family. I hoped it was the latter. Either way, we lugged the rest of our things from out of the storage room without his supervision. It was all there, including the water, though one of the packages was missing a single bottle.

"Frank got thirsty, I guess," Jacob said, tugging the wagon out from behind the counter. He set to arranging the things he had found upstairs around the water like a reality-based game of Tetris.

Jove and Penny emerged from the stairwell, flanking Pippa on either side. For once, she wasn't fighting off her parents. There was already a sheen of sweat across her forehead. My stomach plummeted. Maybe transporting Pippa wasn't the best idea. She had already been through enough in the past twenty-four hours.

"Are you all right?" I asked her once her parents had joined Jacob in his quest to strap everything to a backpack, bike, or wagon.

She waved me off. "I'm totally fine."

"Really? Because you don't look fine."

"Stop worrying, Georgie."

"I can't," I told her. "So you need to keep me updated. We have Nita with us for a reason. Mostly because she provides much-needed comic relief, but also because she's a med student. If you feel like something's going wrong, tell me. And don't pedal, okay? I'll do it."

"You sound like my mother."

"Pippa, just promise me you'll listen to me."

"Fine, I promise."

Ten minutes later, we were finally on our way. Jacob took the lead, followed by Jove, Penny, Pippa and me, and finally Nita. We looked like a line of misshapen tortoises, each of us forced to slump over the handlebars due to the weight of our backpack. Pippa, of course, was excused from carrying her own bag. I had tied it between her knees instead, out of the way of the pedals. If she wanted, she could rest her feet on the bag rather than trying to keep up with my pace. Very briefly, as Pippa dozed off against my back, I wished that I were the pregnant one. I quickly banished the thought. For now, Pippa had it easy, but it wouldn't be that way in another few weeks.

There were several challenges in riding with the Masons. One, Jacob and Jove argued constantly about the best route to the airport. Twice, they led us down the wrong road and we had to turn around. Two, Jove was horridly out of shape. His girth spilled over the skinny bike seat, and the gears groaned beneath him. After a few miles, he began to pant like an overheated dog until we had to stop long enough for him to chug a few sips of water. Three, Penny's shrill voice reached an octave that echoed throughout the entire city, which I feared would draw too much attention to us. We had already been the subject of several suspicious looks from the other people on the streets, but I kept the handgun strapped visibly against my thigh. Once everyone noticed it was there, they turned their heads away from our party.

Eventually, we made it to the interstate, which was more of a mess than I expected. Though the blast had hit after rush hour, there had been enough people traveling at high enough speeds to create enormous pileups. Without anyone to tend to the injured, both sides of the road looked like a battlefield. No one said anything. There was nothing to say.

"Pippa, are you awake?" I murmured.

"Yeah."

"Close your eyes."

"It's too late."

The stench was the worst part. The bodies had begun to decompose, and a number of hungry critters arrived to clean up the aftermath. They were also a convenience. Death drove people away. Other than the six of us, the interstate was free and clear of the living. We rode along the shoulder, which was relatively passable, and tried not to look at the horrors beside us.

The storage warehouse was off an exit ramp, so we didn't actually have to ride all the way to the airport. Even so, it took us over two hours to get to it. My stomach grumbled in protest. I hadn't eaten since abandoning my breakfast at the Masons' earlier. The sun sank below the tree line, leaving us in the brisk purple dusk. The wind dried out my lips, so I drew the collar of my sweater up over my mouth and nose. If I was struggling, my companions were too, though it shocked me that none of them had voiced their complaints aloud yet.

"How much farther, Dad?" Jacob asked, the wind carrying his voice back. He sounded hoarse, as if he was watching a cold.

"It's just over the hill," Jove answered.

I pushed ahead, pumping my legs vigorously to get Pippa and me over the

crest. When we reached the top, we nearly ran into the wagon tied behind Jacob's bike. He had stopped there to stare down at the warehouse, his expression knitting together in a frown.

I looked too. Down below, outside the warehouse door, a few fires blazed in big metal trash cans. People huddled around them, men mostly, warming their hands or frying hot dogs and beans for dinner. If that were all, it wouldn't have worried me so much, but a line of rifles decorated the side of the warehouse. This was not a group of people that I wanted to mess with.

"Who are they, do you think?" Jacob muttered.

"No one good," I said back.

"I know them," Nita chimed in, having made it up the hill after Jove and Penny. "See that mark?" She pointed to a crude crest that had been spray-painted on the side of the warehouse above the row of guns. "It's a gang. They call themselves the Silencers."

"Great," Jacob said. "I don't suppose the Silencers will let us go get the Humvee out of storage, will they?"

"I doubt it," Nita replied. "From what I've heard, they make most of their money out of chop shops. It's probably why they decided to post up here. They've got a whole warehouse full of expensive car parts."

"Parts that don't belong to them," Jacob growled. "I'm going down there."

I grabbed the back of his jacket to keep him from rolling down the hill. "No, you're not. You want to get killed?"

"I want to get out of here," he replied sharply. "What do you suggest?"

I monitored the gang's movements for another minute. There were about twenty guys down there, but they were all centered at the front door. No one moved around the back of the warehouse. "I'll go down. There's got to be a back door, right? I'll slip in unnoticed."

"And what happens when you try to drive a Humvee out of there?" Jacob challenged. "That's not exactly discreet, and I bet the Silencers would love an excuse to use those rifles."

"It's an armored car, Jacob. I'll figure it out." I swung my leg off the bike as Pippa balanced herself. "Nita, can you switch with me?"

"Sure." She set down her own bike and grabbed the tandem instead. "What are you going to do?"

I shrugged off the borrowed Saint Mark's coat and traded it for a plain black jacket that I'd packed in my bag. I zipped it up over my red sweater,

covering the brighter color, and drew the hood up. “I’m going to sneak in. If I’m not out in an hour or if they start firing, assume I got caught and get the hell out of here, okay?”

Jacob flicked the hood off of my head. “I don’t like this, Georgie. I should go down there. Not you.”

I shook him off and pulled the hood up again. “Jacob, face facts, will you? I’m a woman, okay? A decent-looking one—”

“Girl power,” Nita interjected.

“—which means that the guys down there are going to be way less willing to shoot at me than another strange man,” I finished. “That’s how society works. I have a better chance at surviving this than you do, so shut up, stay here, and make sure your family is safe. Got it?”

Jacob grabbed hold of my jacket and yanked me toward him. “I never knew that I could love and hate someone so much at the same time.”

“You’ll thank me when we turn the heat on in the Humvee,” I returned.

He crushed his lips against mine, curling his arms around me.

“Enough already,” Pippa said. “I’m going to be sick.”

I drew away from Jacob. “Go a little ways down the hill,” I told Nita and the Masons. “If they look up here, they’ll see you right away. I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

Without waiting for an answer, I darted away from the group and into the trees that bordered the road, letting gravity’s momentum draw me closer to the Silencers.

10

The trees gave me the cover I needed to get close enough to scope out the Silencers' camp. I slid to a stop behind the wide trunk of an old oak, knelt down, and peeked out from behind it. First, I checked the hill. Thankfully, the Masons had taken my advice. The fading sky lit the terrain like the backdrop of a school play. Had they not moved, their silhouettes would have been plainly visible to the gang below. I shifted my gaze to the warehouse itself.

"Listen to me, George," my father's voice rang in my head. "Those men are here for you. They want to take you away from me because you're not going to school. They'll take you back to the city, and you know what that means, right?"

I was thirteen. "I'm dead."

"That's right," my father replied. "You make a sound, you're dead. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

The bright beam of a searchlight permeated the curtains that hung on the windows of our cabin. My father forced my head down below the sill but not before I'd caught a glimpse of the police officers outside.

"They're going to come inside," he whispered. "We need to get to the safe house. Remember, George, if you make a sound—"

"I'm dead."

That was the mantra. It always ended the same way. No matter what the situation. No matter who the person outside the cabin was. Run to the safe house. The bunker. Lock yourself underground. Stay quiet. Don't make

contact.

As I studied the Silencers' camp, I half wished that I had yelled out to those cops when I was thirteen. It would've saved me a whole lot of childhood trauma. Then again, if I had done that, I would've been way less prepared for this moment. All those years of creeping around had paid off. If I wanted to make it somewhere silently, I could do it.

So when the Silencers burst into laughter simultaneously, I used the racket as cover and darted across the open space between my hiding spot and the dark side of the warehouse. I pressed myself against the cold metal wall, steadying my breath. The gang members went on with their storytelling and gesticulating. None of them had noticed the breach in their poor security measures.

"So then I said to him," a buff man with a black bandana around his neck went on with a chuckle, "'Hand over the cans, or I'll shove one up your ass.'"

The group guffawed, and I rolled my eyes at the lack of innovative threats. It was a gift to move away from them, toward the rear of the warehouse. I went slowly, rolling through each step from the heel of my boots to the toe. My father had taught me that it was the smoothest, quietest way to walk since it stopped you from stomping around like an elephant. Apparently, he had learned the skill from when he was in his college marching band, though I'd never seen him play an instrument in his life.

The Silencers' festivities took place outside the warehouse's big rolling garage doors, but I knew there had to be a few other entrances. Getting inside wasn't going to be the problem. Getting out was going to be a lot trickier. I found a side door around the back, jimmied the cheap lock, and cracked it open. After peeking inside to make sure none of the gang members was taking refuge from the wind, I snuck into the warehouse.

It was pitch black. The first thing I did was accidentally slam the top of my head against a mirror protruding from the side of an enormous pickup truck because I didn't allow for my eyes to adjust before popping out of my low crouch. I rubbed at the new lump as my eyes watered. The warehouse coalesced into a collection of shadows. It wasn't the average storage facility full of old people's junk or random odds and ends. This was a garage belonging to the wealthy. It was full of expensive vehicles from end to end, many of them priceless antiques or shiny foreign sports cars that were not meant to be driven through the thick snow that would find its way to the city in the next few months. There were Ferraris and Lamborghinis. Bugattis and

Maseratis. And a line of original combat vehicles all parked next to one another.

I approached the row of Humvees from behind. Apparently Jove wasn't the only man in Denver that had an interest in collecting them. What could a person possibly need with this many old military vehicles? It wasn't as though you could drive them comfortably around town. Hell, you couldn't drive them comfortably at all. Lack of luxury aside, I couldn't help but appreciate Jove's unbridled fascination with the Humvees. When he wasn't arguing with his son, he and I had talked about certain aspects of the vehicle. He knew all about them, which was actually helpful in the grand scheme of things.

I reached a Humvee with a Saint Mark's Student of the Month bumper sticker plastered to the back window and clambered up into the driver's seat. Jove had upgraded the interior with leather accents, a new radio, and several speakers, but the upgrades didn't hide the practicalities that made the vehicle what it was. The bad news was that there was way less room in it than I thought there would be. There were only four seats, and the rest of the cabin space was taken up by a massive center console. Thankfully, the interior opened up to the trunk space in the back. Two of us would have to ride along there. It would be uncomfortable, but we would at least make it out of the city in one piece.

Jove had handed over the key before we'd left the apartment building. I fit it into the ignition and braced myself. If the Silencers heard the engine turn over, they would be inside in a heartbeat. As soon as I turned the truck on, I'd only have a few minutes to get out of Dodge. With a deep breath, I turned the key. Nothing happened. The engine sputtered and whined. The Humvee was out of gas.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" I muttered, banging on the steering wheel. I hopped out of the Humvee and looked around. There were a ton of cars to steal gas from, but I actually needed something to siphon with.

In the bed of the same truck that had nearly given me a concussion on the way in, I found a garden hose. I pulled a knife out of the inside pocket of my jacket and flicked it open then set to work on trimming the hose to an appropriate length. The knife was yet another thing that Jacob didn't know I owned. It was the same knife I'd learned to do everything with as a kid, from gutting a fish to skinning a rabbit. I tugged the shortened length of hose free from the bed, popped open the truck's gas tank, and got to work. There were

empty gas jugs lined up against the warehouse wall. I positioned one of them where I needed it, fed one end of the hose into the truck's tank, and put the other end in my mouth. Then, trying to ignore the tangy metallic taste of the garden accessory, I sucked the gas into the hose. When I felt it surge toward my mouth, I quickly fit the hose into the jug and watched in satisfaction as the gas splattered into the plastic jug. Once it was full, I ditched the hose and hauled the jug back to the Humvee, where I dumped the stolen gas into the armored car's tank instead.

"Eat up," I muttered, patting the side of the Humvee. "Great, I'm talking to a truck."

Outside, another roar of laughter went up from the Silencers. I hoped they were drunk enough to stay put for another couple of minutes. Maybe their inebriated shenanigans would buy me more time to get out of here. I hopped up into the driver's seat again and tried the key for the second time. The Humvee engine roared to life, sending a rumbling echo through the warehouse.

"Hey!" someone shouted from outside.

"Here we go," I said. I threw the vehicle in drive and pulled it out of its tight parking space. Across the warehouse, someone rolled up the giant garage door. "Well, that was convenient."

Before the Silencers had the time to react, before any one of them even had the chance to pick up one of the rifles that rested against the warehouse, I pressed the Humvee's gas pedal to the floor and gunned it for the exit. The Silencers dove like Olympic swimmers to get out of the way. None of them were stupid enough to stand in front of the Humvee's massive grill once it was clear that I had no intention of stopping. I crashed through two of the trash can barbeques, sending sparks and hot dogs flying. As the Humvee careened up the hill, the Silencers finally sprang into action. I ducked as the quick pitter-patter of a firing rifle rang through the air. A few rounds hit the rear end of the Humvee, and I gritted my teeth at the harsh sound of metal against metal. I swerved closer to the woods, taking out the lowest level of tree branches. Night had fallen completely now, and the shadows made it difficult for the gang members to get off a clear shot. Bullets whizzed over the roof of the Humvee until I was out of range. I glanced in the mirror to check the situation behind me. The Silencers were already working on righting the barbecues and had not bothered to hop in another working vehicle to chase me. It was the smart thing to do. One stolen Humvee

wouldn’t put enough of a dent in their illegally appropriated inventory to warrant wasting resources on recovering it. Still, I wasn’t going to take any chances by slowing down.

I revved the engine as the Humvee made it over the hill and skidded to stop beside the Masons and Nita. Each of them wore a stunned expression as I unlocked the doors and rolled down the window.

“What are you all waiting for?” I asked. “Get in before they decide to follow us. Move!”

As Nita helped Pippa and Penny into the backseat, Jacob loaded the bags into the rear of the vehicle. Jove, of course, climbed into the passenger’s seat and looked over at me.

“Sure you don’t want me to drive?” he asked.

“I got it, Jove.”

Jacob appeared at my window. “What do we do with the bikes?”

“Leave them,” I told him. “We don’t have the room to bring them with us.”

He rolled the bicycles into the woods, hiding them amongst the trees. Then he and Nita climbed in to sit between the bags in the trunk.

“Everyone ready?” I asked, checking to make sure everyone that had a seat belt was strapped in. “Here we go.”

The Humvee lurched forward as I hit the gas, and everyone braced themselves. It was a rough ride, especially since we were driving on the shoulder to avoid the stagnant cars that littered the road. There was no use in returning to the interstate. It would be practically impassable in the Humvee.

“Uh, Georgie?” Jacob said, looking out of the Humvee’s rear window. “We got trouble.”

Two trucks rumbled into view behind us, close enough for me to catch a glimpse of the Silencers driving them.

“Damn it. I didn’t think they would be stupid enough to follow us.”

“Well, you did ruin their barbecue,” Nita pointed out.

“Hold on, everyone.” I raced up the hill as the trucks followed after us, aiming for the ramp that led to the interstate.

“What are you doing?” Jove demanded. “We’re going to get stuck up there, and then they’ll definitely catch us!”

“Shut up, Jove,” I growled.

He reached for the steering wheel. “I won’t let you drive my family straight into a situation that we won’t be able to get out of.”

I pulled the gun from the strap around my thigh and pointed it at Jove. Penny screamed, Pippa gasped, and Jacob yelled, “Georgie, what the hell are you doing?”

“Don’t touch me,” I said calmly to Jove. I had no intention of shooting him. The safety was still on, but he didn’t need to know that. He raised his hands above his head and shrank into his seat. When I was satisfied with his submission, I returned my attention to the road, roaring up toward the interstate. The Silencers’ trucks followed close behind.

I weaved in and out of the ruined cars, carving a quick path along the road. Occasionally, the Humvee clipped another vehicle, sending us all bumping up toward the ceiling. Jacob’s head crashed against the hard top before he took a cue from Nita and lay flat against the padding of our baggage. The Humvee’s tires stuck firmly to the pavement, no matter how hard I jerked the steering wheel around. The Silencers, on the other hand, hadn’t picked the best vehicles to chase after us in. They had to follow each other in single file, driving over the debris that the Humvee left in its wake. As I wove around the tail end of an eighteen-wheeler, the first truck lost control and ran into another sedan. The second one narrowly avoided his buddy and, in a lucky coincidence, found enough room on the road to pull up next to the Humvee.

“Georgie, the guy riding shotgun is holding a freaking shotgun!” Pippa yelled.

“Everybody duck!” I ordered.

My passengers obeyed just in time as bullets rained through the windows. Shattering glass and horrified screams split the air. Up ahead, a school bus had turned and tipped over, blocking the road. I braked hard, screaming to a stop, but the Silencers noticed the obstruction too late. The brake lights of the truck flashed red as it smashed into the underside of the school bus. I didn’t pause to take in the wreck, instead taking the nearest exit ramp to get off the interstate, then corrected my course toward the mountains, ignoring the pavement and driving across the curbs and sidewalks instead.

“Are you insane?” Jove thundered. “We could’ve died up there!”

“It was the best way to lose them,” I shot back. “We got out, didn’t we? Is everyone okay? Is anyone shot?”

“No,” Pippa replied, “but Mom has a giant piece of glass in her leg.”

I briefly looked behind me to check it out. Penny stared silently at her thigh, where a sharp pizza-shaped slice of the broken window had imbedded

itself in the muscle. She didn't yell or cry or express any sort of emotion at all.

"Jesus, Penny!" Jove released his belt to reach over the back of his seat.

"Don't touch it!" Nita ordered, slapping Jove's hand away. "As soon as you pull that thing out, she's going to start bleeding like crazy. I'll take care of it."

Jove hesitated but took Nita's advice. He tapped Penny's uninjured knee. "Penny? Penny, look at me."

But his wife continued staring at the glass. Nita worked her way up to sit on the center console, the first aid kit in her lap.

"What's wrong with her?" Jove asked.

"She's in shock," I said. "It's a reaction to the adrenaline. It'll pass. Let Nita focus."

To my utmost surprise, Jove actually listened to me and turned around in his seat to face the front again. "So where exactly are we going?"

I reached into the pocket of my jacket again. Next to the knife, there was a folded-up picture. I drew it out and handed it to Jove, who unfolded it to look at it. I had the photo committed to memory. I had taken it nine years ago before I'd left for the city. It was a picture of my father's homestead. It looked quite nice. Peaceful, even. It had been a pretty day. The sunset painted streaks of orange and pink in the sky. The neon colors reflected off a thin layer of white snow. Smoke puffed from the chimney of the cabin. A man in a red flannel coat who had broad shoulders and long legs was frozen in the action of gathering an armful of chopped firewood from our stockpile. He faced away from the camera, but the figure was unmistakable. Two seconds after I'd clicked the picture, he'd turned to face me. *George, put that damn thing away.*

"It's not far," I told Jove as he studied the picture. "A few hours up the mountain. It's self-sustaining, and no one else but me knows where it is. We'll be safe there."

Jove's fat finger tapped the red flannel. "Who's this man?"

"That's my father."

"And is he going to be okay with all of us just showing up like this?"

The answer, without a doubt, was no. "I'll talk to him."

Jove sensed that that was the end of the discussion. He handed me the photo so that I could tuck it away again. "Let me know if you get too tired to drive."

A few hours later, when we had cleared the city and the moon had risen high into the sky, I took him up on his offer. He took the front seat, Nita took the passenger seat, and I joined Jacob to lie down in the back. Pippa and Penny dozed in the middle. Nita had wrapped Penny's leg tightly enough to stop most of the bleeding, but the wound needed stitches, which we wouldn't be able to tend to until we came to flat ground. Nita and Jove discussed Penny's wound care up front, giving me and Jacob the illusion of privacy in the trunk.

He lay flat on his back, his knees pressed against the wall of the Humvee as he stared at the ceiling.

I nudged his shoulder. "What are you thinking about?"

"You, mostly."

"Nice things about me, I hope."

"You left your engagement ring in the apartment."

I wiggled my barren ring finger, jostling the splint on my pinky. The tape around the splint was beginning to peel off, gray with the dirt that had stuck to the underside. It was hard to believe that the moment of forgetfulness had happened just that morning. It felt as if years had passed since then.

"I didn't mean to leave it," I told Jacob quietly. "Nita said my finger would swell—"

"You could've put on a necklace," he interrupted. "Worn it that way."

Anger and annoyance nibbled at my conscience. "Sorry, I was a little preoccupied trying to pack up our stuff for the American apocalypse."

"It was expensive."

"Is that all you care about?" I demanded. Pippa stirred in her seat. I lowered my voice. "You're worried about the price of a damn diamond right now? It's not going to matter in a couple of months, Jacob. No one's going to be bargaining over gold and jewelry. We're going to be fighting for food and water."

"It's not just the ring," he whispered back, finally rolling over to look at me. "It's everything you've ever hidden from me. What happened to your mom, the way your father raised you. I can't believe you didn't tell me any of that."

"I didn't need to," I argued.

"It's your life, Georgie!" he said. "We were engaged! I'm supposed to know these things about you."

"Were?" I repeated. "What's with the past tense?"

Jacob's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed anxiously. "Nothing. It seems unlikely that we're going to get married now. Kinda feels like a big white wedding isn't flush with the whole end-of-the-world thing."

"That's not it, is it?" I'd known Jacob long enough to figure out when he was using half-truths to cover up what he really meant. "If you really wanted, we could march up the mountain, exchange rings that we weaved out of friggin' grass, and say our vows, but you don't want that, do you?"

"That's not a real wedding."

"It would be real enough for me," I declared.

He covered his face with his hands and groaned. "I can't do this right now."

"This is the only time we have to do this—"

"No, I meant *this*." He gestured to the space between the two of us, his expression hardening into something cold and empty.

The Humvee rolled over a ditch, and something sharp from one of the packs dug into my lower back. "You don't want to do what?"

Jacob met my eyes. "I don't know you, Georgie. I thought I did, but I watched you shoot that guy. Cold-blooded. No hesitation. There was something dark in your eyes, like you enjoyed it—"

"That's fucking ridiculous, and you know it."

"I saw it, Georgie!"

"So while I was putting myself in harm's way to save the life of an innocent little girl, you were watching and judging me," I hissed. "I did what I had to do in that moment. What would you have done? Let her go back to an abusive father?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"It would have been a death sentence," I snapped.

"I'm not doubting your reasoning," he argued, glancing toward the others. Penny and Pippa were still asleep, while Jove and Nita continued their discussion unhindered. "I'm saying that I didn't know you had that in you."

"A will to survive?" I challenged.

"The ability to kill."

"You're oversimplifying things."

He didn't reply and returned to staring at the ceiling of the truck.

"So that's it?" I asked him. "You said you can't do this anymore. What does that mean?"

"I think you know what it means, Georgie."

I stared at him in disbelief. “You’re breaking up with me. Now? While I’m taking your entire family to safety with me? I could’ve gone alone, Jacob, or just brought Nita. Do you realize that?”

He inhaled deeply and blew out the breath in a hot sigh. “I’m not saying we have to figure it out right now—”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “You want to be done? We’re done. It’s as easy as that. Sorry about your ring. I can’t promise it’ll be there when you get back.”

He turned toward me. “Georgie—”

I rolled over so that the only view he had of me was my back. I was too angry to cry, but my face burned with pent-up emotions that I couldn’t express in the confines of the back of the Humvee. It had been so quick. One challenging day had driven a wedge between him and me. If we couldn’t get through one day, how were we supposed to get through the rest of our lives? I wanted to hit something, to feel some kind of release. Instead, I balled up my hands and tucked them under my arms, hugging myself together.

AT SOME POINT in the journey, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I remembered was Nita nudging me awake. The Humvee had come to a stop in the middle of the woods, angled upward on a steep incline.

“Georgie?” Nita mumbled. “Jove needs you to give him directions. You should take my seat.”

I slipped out of the trunk. Jacob was either asleep or pretending to be asleep in order to avoid talking to me. Either way, I felt a pang of longing and resentment in my chest as the collar of the coat he was using as a blanket shifted to cover his face. Nita took my place, and I joined Jove up front with a yawn.

“Still good to drive?” I asked him as we trundled upward.

“I’m wired,” he replied. The Humvee’s lights illuminated the road that weaved through the mountains. “I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to.”

“Good, because we’re about to go off-road,” I told him. I pointed to a gap in the trees. If you didn’t know it was there, you wouldn’t have seen it. “Make a left up there.”

As I directed Jove in relative silence, the rough terrain woke up the others. Bleary-eyed, we watched the trees scratch what was left of the Humvee’s windows, occasionally dodging wayward shards of grass. Pippa held her mother’s hand over the center console. In the far back, Nita and Jacob lay on their stomachs and looked ahead. I caught Jacob’s eye in the

mirror and quickly looked away.

"We should be close," I said to Jove as we rolled up another incline. "It should be right over this hill—"

Without warning, blinding floodlights illuminated the cabin of the Humvee. I squinted through the windshield. There, where my father's property was supposed to be, was a sky-high fence with an electrified gate, flanked by a crank-up, generator-powered stadium light on either side. Behind the gate, I could make out several tents set up in neat rows, more light fixtures, and a collection of outhouses on the far side of the campground. The whole place buzzed with the rumble of several working generators.

Four burly men dressed in boots, neon vests, and ski masks stood at the gate. Each of them held a military-grade rifle, though none raised a gun to the Humvee. Instead, the tallest man stepped up to the driver's side window and peered inside.

"Evening, folks," he said, pulling the ski mask down to speak clearly. "What can we help you with?"

I leaned across Jove before he could answer. "What the hell is this place? Where's my father?"

"I don't know who you are, ma'am," the man said as he spread his arms out to indicate the land behind him, "but this is Camp Haven."

MANY THANKS to everyone who read my story!

WRITING IS the best way I know to express myself, and I'm so glad that you all have rewarded me with the opportunity to share my imagination with you. As an author, I learn and evolve from the input of others, so if you have a spare moment and you enjoyed the story, please leave a short, spoiler-free review of the book. As readers, your personal opinions are often the best references for a writer. Your commentary allows me to further provide you all with fun, engaging material.

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BLACKOUT BOOK 1-EMP POST APOCALYPTIC FICTION

1

The growl of the Humvee's powerful engine loosened rabbits and raccoons from beneath thick bushes and sent them scurrying for quieter hiding places. Headlights pointed straight ahead, toward a twenty-foot gate reinforced with steel and barbed wire. The window buzzed down. A big man with a bigger gun approached the driver's side. His gaze ran the length of the Humvee before scanning the inside. Inquisitive gray eyes scrutinized our faces. Six people packed into one truck with all of the supplies that we could carry. The overweight driver in an extra-large Ralph Lauren sweater with a supercilious sneer. The half-conscious trophy wife, her thigh wrapped in bloodstained gauze. The pregnant seventeen-year-old who was so far along that she couldn't see her own feet. The petite medical student whose pretty, angled cheekbones were more suited for a runway than an operating room. The wannabe photojournalist—my fiancé or ex-fiancé, depending on how recently you asked him—with soft brown eyes who spent too much time in the gym and not enough seeking the work he claimed to be so committed to. And me. The nobody. Who was I really? A radio persona. A talk show host. A voice without a face. The only person in the Humvee with any inclination as to what we were up against.

The man tugged his ski mask off, resting his rifle across his chest. "Evening, folks. What can we help you with?"

"What the hell is this place?" I asked. "Where's my father?"

"I don't know who you are, ma'am, but this is Camp Haven."

The first light of the morning peeked over the horizon and crept through

the trees, reaching its long arms across the stretch of land confined within the towering fence line. Nine years ago, I'd left this exact spot without looking back. I'd hiked hours across the Rockies until I made it to Denver. The busy roads and bustling coffee shops and the sheer amount of people were a far cry from the home I'd left behind, but Camp Haven wasn't home. Home was one log cabin and an underground bunker and acres upon acres of undisturbed property. Home was a fire in the hearth and wild game on the table. Home was my father without his wife, me without my mother, doing our damnedest to make the world mean something again. It was the place that I counted on to be there, no matter what befell the rest of society.

"You don't understand." I peered up at the sign above the gate. Someone had shaped thick wire into the title of the homestead, spray-painted it red, and mounted it to the top of the wall that enclosed the camp's perimeter. "This is my father's property. My property. This is my home."

The large man ducked his head to get a better look at me through the driver's window. "Camp Haven's been here for a good six or seven years, ma'am. You must be confused. Tough times like these will do that to you."

"I'm not confused!"

The man's fingers tightened on his rifle as the volume and tenacity of my voice stirred a sparrow from the nearby trees. Our driver, Jove, pushed me off of his armrest. A mere hour ago, he was my soon-to-be father-in-law. Now he was just a wealthy man with a working vehicle and a poor attitude toward me.

"Sorry about Georgie," Jove said. "She's been on edge since the blast. We're looking for a place to stay."

"Can't stay here," the man said.

"This is *my* land—" I started.

"Do you know what's going on out there?" Jove jabbed his thumb behind us, toward the city that we had left in ruins. "Do you know what Denver looks like right now?"

The man hefted his rifle to rest on his hip. "I can imagine. Most people don't know their ass from a hole in the ground. Can't fathom what an EMP bomb did to them."

"So you know," I said, nudging Jove aside. "You know what Denver—and the rest of the United States—is going through right now."

"Of course we know," the man replied. "It's our job to know. That's why we're still standing, miss. Camp Haven doesn't rely on electricity or

technology. We're off the grid."

Less than thirty-six hours ago, life as we knew it had ended. Someone—terrorists, North Korea, Russia, whatever—had detonated an atmospheric bomb over the United States. The resulting electromagnetic pulse had knocked out anything that ran on electricity, circuit boards, or batteries. The only reason our Humvee worked was because it was a military original. It didn't rely on any electronic components to run. It was by the miracle of my unusual upbringing that I'd managed to get those closest to me out of the war zone that Denver had morphed into. People were dying in droves. Emergency services either ignored or couldn't reach those who needed help. The streets were rife with looters and violence. The mountains, where people were few and far between, were safer.

The man outside the window extended his hand toward Jove. When they connected, it was like fusing the same end of two D batteries to each other. They were of the same make—each of substantial height and weight—but while Jove's girth boasted excess and gluttony, the other man's spoke of strength out of necessity.

"Let me introduce myself," the man said, pumping Jove's hand. They each squeezed so hard that the skin around their fingers turned white. "Name's Ludo. I'm the head of security here at Camp Haven. My main goal is to keep this place running as smoothly as possible, which sometimes means making difficult decisions. This is one of them. I can't let you in."

"Listen to me," I said, annoyed that this Ludo fellow was determined to speak with Jove instead of me. I was the one who'd gotten us this far. "My name is Georgiana Fitz. My father is Amos Fitz. This is his land. He built that cabin—" I pointed through a gap in the reinforced fence, where smoke plumed from the chimney of my old home "—with his bare hands. I helped him do it."

"Don't know anyone by the name of Fitz," Ludo said. "A brave man by the name of Sylvester built Camp Haven from the ground up."

"Sylvester who?"

"No matter. Can't let you in."

The trunk of the Humvee popped open, and Jacob—non-fiancé, ex-boyfriend, whatever he was now—slid out from between the duffel bags and backpacks full of our supplies. Ludo raised his gun and took a step back from the truck. Three other men were stationed at the gates to Camp Haven, and each of them lifted their rifles as Jacob rounded the Humvee. He lifted his

hands to eye level and stopped several feet from Ludo's barrel.

"My name is Jacob Mason," he said. "This is my father, Jove, and my fianceé, Georgie. My mother, Penny, is sitting in the backseat. A shard of glass went through her thigh. She needs stitches. My sister, Pippa, is eight months pregnant. She needs somewhere warm and dry to recuperate. We already have a medic, Nita, and our own supplies. All we need is a safe place to crash."

Ludo lowered his rifle a bit. "A medic, you say?"

"A med student," Nita muttered from the open trunk. I shushed her.

"I'll make you a deal," Ludo said. "Camp Haven relies on the skills and prowess of its members to stay up and running. We do everything ourselves. Cook, clean, build, hunt, et cetera. Everyone pulls their weight. If you can prove to me that each of you has something to bring to the table, I'll let you in. The medic's valuable enough, so she's good to go. Who else you got?"

"You guys got communications?" I asked at once. "Looks like a big ass camp. Five hundred acres or so, right? I imagine you need handheld radios to get messages from one end to the other."

Ludo lifted his broad shoulders. "No radios, no tower. It's old-fashioned smoke signals and bird calls here at Camp Haven."

"I could build one for you," I offered. "A tower, I mean. Radios too. It would do you a lot of good in case of emergencies. Or you can keep whistling at each other. Your choice."

Ludo considered my proposition. "Fine. Miss Fitz is in. Who's next?"

"I can do manual labor," Jacob said. I swallowed a sharp scoff. Jacob Mason, who had never lifted anything other than a weight plate at the gym in his entire life, was offering himself up for manual labor? "You said you build everything yourselves. I can help with that and whatever else you need. I'm young, fit, and strong. Put me anywhere."

"Mason Junior's in," Ludo barked. He leaned against the window of the Humvee. "What about Mason Senior?"

Jove eyed Ludo's thick forearm. "I brought the truck. I imagine it'll do you some good."

Ludo thumped his fist against the door panel of the Humvee. "Until it runs out of gas. No good. What else you got?"

Pippa, who had been quiet until now, unbuckled her seatbelt from her wide belly and popped up between the two front seats. "Excuse me, Mister Ludo—"

“Just Ludo, kid.”

“Right,” she said. “Ludo, I’ve been sitting in this terrible truck for several hours and I was stuck in an elevator overnight before that. Long story short, I really have to pee. Think of this Humvee as the Titanic. Would you deny a pregnant teenager a lifeboat? Women and children and all that, right?”

Ludo’s bushy white beard, which spilled over the collar of his thick Kevlar jacket, bristled as he tried to keep from smiling. “Smart one, aren’t you? Fine. You’re in. Next?”

“What about Penny?” I asked. Jacob’s mother was as white as a clean sheet in the backseat. She had lost a lot of blood, and if we didn’t get her leg stitched up soon, I feared she might not recover from the wound.

Ludo squinted into the backseat. “She’s not looking good. My bet is she’d be a waste of resources.”

“A waste of resources?” Jacob stepped toward Ludo, who automatically raised his weapon again. “That’s my mother you’re talking about.”

Ludo nudged Jacob with the butt of his gun. “Step back, son. I’m just doing my job. Without proper medical attention, your mother’s going to be on her way out real soon. Like I said, no point in wasting the bandages and ointment on her.”

Jacob turned red. Sensing danger, I kicked open the passenger door of the Humvee to join the party outside Camp Haven’s gates and put myself between Jacob and Ludo’s gun. “We brought our own first aid supplies. We won’t use any of your resources to tend to Penny. All she needs is a bed in your med bay.”

Ludo studied me from head to toe, taking in everything from my violet-dyed hair to my camouflage snow jacket to my all-weather boots. “You ain’t one of them.”

“Sorry?”

He stepped on the toe of my boot. I didn’t wince. “You’re dressed sensibly and affordably. Got boots that’ll keep your toes warm during a long hike. Navigated a Humvee up the Rockies. You’re the sore thumb, aren’t you? So why didn’t you just make it up here on your own?”

“This is my family. I couldn’t leave them behind.”

He chewed on his tongue, reviewing the occupants of the Humvee once more. “I like you,” he said to me. “Fiery. Quick. Loyal. You’ll be a good asset to Camp Haven. We value loyalty.”

I waited on his final decision, folding my arms across his chest.

“Fine.” Ludo waved to the three men who guarded the gate. They slung their rifles across their backs and went to work pulling the gate open. “You can all come in, but we have conditions. Number one, like I said before, everyone works. As soon as you’re up to it, you’ll get assigned a position. Number two, you will consent to an obligatory medical screening at the med bay before advancing to any other part of the camp. We do this for our own protection. Can’t have outsiders bringing in bacteria or viruses into camp. Do you agree to participate?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, answering for the group.

Ludo tapped the side of the Humvee to get Jove’s attention. “Pull through the gates and park on the left next to our vehicles. We’ll unload the truck for you, categorize your inventory, and add it to our own.”

“Hold on a minute,” Jove said, the brake lights of the Humvee flashing red. “I brought these things here. They belong to me. You won’t go giving my clothes and shoes to people I don’t know.”

“That’s the deal here,” Ludo replied. “We share everything. You want in, you agree to our conditions. Otherwise, I’m sure you can find your way back to Denver on your own.”

“What’s stopping me from driving straight through your men and into your pretty camp however I want?” Jove challenged, revving the engine.

Ludo patted his gun. “I highly suggest you do not attempt to do so, or I can assure you that will not survive this gorgeous morning.”

“Enough pissing, Jove,” I said. “Do what the man asks of you so we can get your wife and daughter somewhere safe.”

Jove glared at me but drove through the gates without further argument. Jacob and I followed Ludo on foot.

“Change of guard will be here to relieve you soon, fellas,” Ludo announced to the other men who patrolled the fence. Then he leaned closer to one of them, and I tilted my head to catch the muttered conversation. “Keep an eye on the big man. He’s going to cause trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

The gate rattled shut behind us, and we were officially inside Camp Haven. The sight made my jaw drop. My father’s land, once just a cabin in the middle of nowhere, was now a square of organized civilization. Most of the trees had been cleared for simple block buildings, log cabins, and platform tents. In the distance, a water wheel turned over the part of the river that my father and I used to fish in. People bustled about, fulfilling early

morning duties. Some mopped out the row of outhouses that bordered the far end of the camp. Others carried canvas sacks of potatoes and dried meat toward a long, low building with the laughable label *Bistro* painted in white over the doorway. Still others transported water, or lugged shovels and trowels, or shouldered compound bows as they headed toward the gate. The EMP blast had not so much as tickled the residents of Camp Haven. They went about their lives as if it were any other day.

"Unbelievable, isn't it?" Ludo said, noticing my open-mouthed stare. "Completely self-sustaining. It's amazing what we've done in a short amount of time. Even got a sewage system. It ain't pretty, but it works."

"But why?" I asked. Those who passed by observed us without shame. Camp Haven must not have seen newcomers in a while. "Why work so hard to build this place? It's not like we're living in the age of the Roman Empire."

"Aren't we though?" Ludo replied. "Look what happened to the rest of the United States in just a few short hours, Miss Fitz. Most people go crazy if they can't charge their phones or flip on a light switch. They rely too much on modern day accommodations. They don't think about the future. It's privilege, plain and simple, and privilege will get you killed. *That's* why we built this place. To disconnect from the noise down there. We're always safe here at Camp Haven, always prepared. Life might be simpler, but we're alive and well, and that's all that matters."

Jove put the Humvee into park and switched off the engine. It turned out that Camp Haven owned a few similar vehicles, but from the layer of dirt and grime on the hoods, it looked like the other trucks hadn't been in operation for quite some time. However, a collection of man-powered surrey bikes, each built with a convenient platform for hauling goods, appeared well-worn.

"Keys?" Ludo asked.

Jove tossed them over with a grimace. "Don't scratch my truck. It's a collectible."

"That's the least of your worries, Mason Senior." Ludo stopped one of the men passing by. "Eirian, do me a favor, won't you? Inventory our guests' supplies."

"Sure thing, boss."

I caught the man's—Eirian—eye as he brushed past me to get started on Ludo's request. They were bright green, the color I imagined a dragon's scales to be. He flashed me a grin, rolled up his sleeves, and got to work, the

lines of his back moving fluidly as he unloaded baggage from the Humvee.

Nita helped Pippa out of the truck, while Jacob did the same for Penny. His mother hung onto consciousness by a thread. Her pants were soaked through with blood. It dripped into the dirt as Jacob lifted Penny into his arms.

“Med bay,” Ludo ordered, pointing toward one of the block buildings at the center of camp, this one with a bright blue cross painted on the front. “Everyone. Let’s go.”

The medical bay was small but practical, more like a walk-in clinic than a hospital. It had room for ten patients at the most, a bed for each of them lined up against the concrete wall. Only two of them were occupied, one by a small boy with a plaster cast around his elevated foot and another by an elderly woman with a hacking cough. Jove directed Jacob to one of the free cots, where he lay Penny down and propped several pillows under her bleeding thigh. Pippa sank down on the bed next to her with a deep sigh.

Two women emerged from the med bay’s office. The first was shorter than Nita, five feet tall at the most, but she exercised the energy of a lioness as she stalked toward us. The second was younger, in her early thirties maybe. She wrung her hands nervously as she trailed behind her superior.

“What have we got?” the first woman barked.

“Visitors,” Jove answered. He pointed to Penny. “This one needs your immediate attention, Jax. As for everyone else, I need screenings.” He turned to our group. “This is Jax, our head of medical, and Maddy, her assistant. No one leaves here until you’ve been cleared by one of them. Understood?”

Jax didn’t bother to wait for our assent. She hip-checked Jacob to get him out of the way and unwrapped the gauze on Penny’s leg, wrinkling her nose as she checked the wound. “That’s a deep cut. It’s going to need to be flushed out and stitched up. Decent job on the wrappings though. Who did that?”

Nita raised her hand. “That would be me?”

Jax trained her laser-like gaze on Nita. “Are you an EMT or something?”

“I’m a medical student,” Nita said. “General surgery.”

Jax turned to Jove. “She’s mine. Don’t assign her anywhere else.”

“I already assumed as much, darling,” Jove replied.

“You,” Jax said, pointing at Nita. “Wash your hands and help me out. You—” She jabbed a finger at Maddy “—start the work-ups for everyone else. Let’s get through this as quickly as possible. I have other patients to tend to today.”

Maddy clapped her hands together. “Not to worry, everyone. Our medical screenings are pretty routine. Any volunteers to go first?”

I stepped forward.

I HADN’T BEEN to the doctor in years. I avoided sterile offices unless it was absolutely necessary. My father’s descent into paranoia encompassed every facet of his life, including his opinion of the medical profession.

“Quacks!” he barked at ten-year-old me. “They’re all quacks!”

We had taken care of ourselves so well on the homestead that doctor’s visits became obsolete. Things changed when I left that life behind and moved to Denver. That first winter, I fought through a raging sinus infection, refusing to go to the doctor until my lungs filled with so much fluid that bronchitis and pneumonia set in. Antibiotics were a beautiful thing. I wondered how Camp Haven managed in that respect.

Maddy examined me in a private room, going through all the motions. She listened to my heart, took my pulse, and measured my blood pressure. Then she shined a light into the back of my throat, my nose, and my ears, all while firing rapid questions at me.

“Have you had any sort of infection in the last ten weeks?”

“No.”

“Are you taking any medications?”

“No.”

“Do you have a history of diabetes, cancer, or heart disease in your family?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Are you allergic to anything?”

“Stupidity, mostly.”

“Are you sexually active?”

“Yes.”

On and on it went, until Maddy knew more about me and my personal history than Jacob did. Then she administered a “general” vaccine that was supposedly required to remain a resident of the camp, drew several vials of blood from a vein in my arm, and finished up by taping a piece of cotton to the pinprick on the inside of my elbow.

“There you go,” she said, patting my shoulder. “Make sure you drink plenty of water today. You’ll need it to help replenish the lost blood.”

“Can I ask you a question?” I flexed my arm experimentally, trapping the

dollop of cotton in the crook of my elbow. “What’s all of this for? Is it really necessary?”

Maddy taped labels to the vials of blood and stacked them neatly in a handy holder. “We screen every single person who comes into Camp Haven. We can’t risk spreading bacteria or viruses through the camp. We live in tight quarters. If one person gets sick, we all get sick. Then no one’s healthy enough to get the work done, and the whole camp suffers. It’s a vicious circle that we’d all like to avoid.”

“Sounds like you learned this from experience.”

She grimaced as she tossed the used needle in a bin marked with the biohazard symbol. “A few years ago, when we were less lax, someone returned from a trip into the city with a stomach flu. We figured it was food poisoning and let it go. A few days later, the whole camp was puking their guts up. You can’t imagine the smell.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Oh, I can.”

“Now we quarantine the sick until they’re no longer contagious,” Maddy explained. “It’s safer and more comfortable for all us.”

“Should I bother to ask what’s in that vaccine?”

“No.”

“Noted.”

“Can I give you some advice?” Maddy asked, wiping the counter and the exam table with rubbing alcohol. “Keep your head down and do your work. Camp Haven functions best when no one stands out or makes trouble. From your haircut, I assume you like to stand out.”

I rubbed the shaved portion of my head. “It’s more freedom of self-expression in my opinion.”

“We forego a lot of freedoms here to keep this place running smoothly.” She caught sight of my tight-lipped expression and gave a wry smile. “You’ll get used to it. You should consider yourself lucky. You were the first to find us after the blast. Chances are Ludo won’t be so kind to the next group of people that wants in. How’d you do it anyway?”

“Do what?”

“Find us,” she clarified. “We’re not exactly on the map, you know?”

“I used to live here,” I told her. “You built your little prepper camp on my father’s land.”

Ludo knocked on the door to the exam room before she could process my answer. “Everybody decent?” he called.

“Yes, sir,” Maddy replied.

Ludo came in. “Has she been cleared?”

“She checks off.”

“Good.” He took my camo jacket from where it hung over the back of an extra chair and handed it to me. “Hop to it, Miss Fitz. It’s time for a tour of the compound.”

I slipped my arms into the jacket and zipped it up. “What about my family?”

“Jax and your medic friend are finishing up Mrs. Mason’s leg,” Ludo reported. “Maddy needs to examine the rest of them. I’ll have someone show them around the camp once they’re cleared, but for now, I’d like to talk to you about the way we run this place.”

Maddy shot me a look. So much for flying under the radar. For whatever reason, Ludo had already singled me out. I hopped off the exam table. “All right. At your leisure.”

Jove led me through a rear exit of the med bay so that we didn’t pass by the Masons again. Part of me was grateful. I had no desire to sit by Penny’s side, or help Pippa to the bathroom, or listen to Jacob babble on about the fissures in our relationship. I wanted to know more about Camp Haven and how it had come to be. Ludo’s tour was the first step in acquiring that information, though his skills as a guide lacked eloquence.

“Mess hall,” he announced, pointing to the low building that I’d clocked on our way in. “Meals are served three times a day. Snacks are portioned out appropriately.” His finger drifted to the next structure over. “Community hall, which everyone calls DotCom.”

I shot him a look.

“Bad joke, I know,” he admitted. “Anyway, that’s where we hold any camp-wide meetings or events when it’s too cold to do it outside. You already know the med bay. Over there’s the school—”

“Do you have a lot of kids in the camp?” I asked him as we passed the one-room building that served as Camp Haven’s educational services.

“Nine,” he answered. “Ten, once your little sister delivers. We have rules concerning intercourse, but we’ll get to that later.”

“Rules—?”

“Those are the dorms,” Ludo went on, gesturing toward two block buildings separated by a simple courtyard. “One for women and one for men. We have family units and single units as well for special circumstances, but

they’re hard to come by. Hope you don’t mind sharing.”

“It’s not me you’ll hear complaints from,” I said, thinking of Jove and Jacob.

“I get complaints every day,” Ludo said. “Ain’t nothing new. Anyway, there’s a reason I wanted to talk to you, Miss Fitz.”

“Please, it’s just Georgie.”

“Georgie then,” he said. “I got a good feeling about you. Honestly, the only reason I let your folks into camp was because you were with them. You know things about this place, don’t you? About the things we do here?”

“I grew up like this,” I told him.

“And you mentioned your father earlier.”

A gust of wind bit at my cheeks. It was colder here than in the city below. “This is his land. That’s his cabin. When I left this place nine years ago, there was nothing here but that cabin and my father. Now it’s—”

“An entire community,” Ludo finished.

“What happened to him?” I asked. “You have to know. You said Camp Haven’s been around for six or seven years. Someone has to know how it started.”

Ludo led me toward the Bistro, where the residents of Camp Haven were lining up to be served breakfast. “Everyone knows how Camp Haven started. We tell the story to the kids during campfires.”

“Well, fry me up a s’more, Ludo, and clue me in.”

Ludo chuckled deep in his belly as he held open the door to the Bistro for me. We filed in after everyone else. The hall reminded me of the cafeteria at the sleepaway camp I’d attended a year or so before my mom died. The long tables and benches had been hand-crafted from felled trees. Oil lamps lined the wall at evenly spaced intervals to light the interior. A serving counter stretched from one end of the room to the other, laden with fresh and dried meats, drop biscuits, fruits and vegetables, and even pancakes. Ludo grabbed two metal trays from a stack near the door and we joined the line to be served.

“A long time ago, a lone hiker decided to take on the Rockies by himself,” Ludo said. “The story goes that he was on a quest to find the soul that the noise of the world had robbed him of.”

“A soul searcher, eh?” I muttered.

“He left everything and everyone behind,” Ludo continued as we shuffled forward. “Packed up only what he needed to survive in the wilderness and

headed into the hills without so much as a backwards glance. Didn't even say goodbye to his family or friends."

"So he was a selfish loner," I interjected. "No wonder."

"He was on a mission to cleanse himself."

"Because that always ends well."

"The point," Ludo pressed on, "is that he went. He left society behind to start anew, but he soon realized that this was harder than he anticipated."

"Color me flabbergasted."

"An unexpected blizzard hit the Rockies," Ludo said, now ignoring me completely. "It was early in the season. There shouldn't have been snow like that at all. The man was buried in an avalanche. For three days, he burrowed in the snow. Didn't know which way was up. He thought he was going to die there." All around us, the other people in line listened in to Ludo's story, as if they hadn't heard it enough times already. "But on the fourth day, the man heard a woman calling his name. He followed her voice, digging through the snow until he burst through the surface. The woman was nowhere in sight, but he emerged right below the cabin on the hill. The cabin was unoccupied, but there was food in the cupboard and a fire in the hearth. To this day, the man claims that the woman was a spirit sent to save his life. He decided to do the same for anyone who chose the path that he did, and so Camp Haven was born."

"So he's still here then?" I asked Ludo.

"He lives in the cabin on the hill," Ludo confirmed. "Camp Haven's director. His name is—"

"Sylvester."

2

Ludo and I ate breakfast inside the Bistro, joining a group of other Camp Haven residents at one of the wooden tables. They watched me eat like kittens around a lion. Apparently, Camp Haven wasn't used to visitors. I stared at my plate, shoveling eggs and bacon into my mouth without looking up. The food felt wonderful in my stomach, even if it was a bit bland. According to Ludo, spices were hard to come by, but they did grow and dry herbs to season their meals. I caught the eye of the teenaged boy sitting next to me as I ripped a piece of bacon apart. When I grinned, he tore his gaze away and scampered off with his tray.

"Is this how it's going to be?" I asked Ludo. "Is everyone going to treat us like we're interlopers?"

"Gotta look at it from their perspective." He dusted biscuit crumbs from his beard. "These people have only known each other for the last seven years. They know every single face in the compound by heart. Now, all of a sudden, there's six new ones. How would you feel?"

"So you never took in anyone new?" I said. "How'd they all get here then?"

"Sylvester brought them in," he explained. "I thought you'd already gotten the gist of this."

"I don't understand how this many people up and moved out of their heated houses to live up in the mountains with no electricity." I stacked bacon and eggs inside a biscuit like a sandwich. "Why'd you do it, Ludo? How did you end up here?"

He licked grease from his fingers and wiped them on a cloth napkin. “Funny story actually. Five and a half years ago, I was hunting with a few friends nearby. We were being stupid. Brought a shitload of beer with us, and I got drunk enough to shoot myself through the foot. My buddies thought it was hilarious, but I was bleeding out pretty bad.”

“Your friends sound swell.”

“They weren’t the best group of guys,” Ludo agreed. “So when a beautiful woman came out of the woods and told them very eloquently to fuck off, they took her word to heart.”

“Another spiritual guide?” I asked.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “It was Jax. She got me to camp and patched me right up. I knew as soon as she pulled that bullet out of my foot with her bare hands that she was the one for me.”

“You and Jax?” I smothered a snicker. “Really?”

“You can laugh, but she’s a tough cookie,” Ludo went on. “Never met a stronger woman. She convinced me to stay at Camp Haven. I used to be a cop, see, and the camp needed someone to take charge of security.”

“So they picked an inebriated cop who shot himself in the foot?”

Ludo tossed a grape across the table. It bounced off my tray and into my lap. “You got a mouth on you. Enough about me though. Tell me about yourself. How’d you end up here?”

“I told you,” I said, popping the wayward grape into my mouth and enjoying the burst of fresh juice across my tongue. “The EMP blast knocked out all the power in Denver. Staying in the city with everyone else would’ve been certain death. I knew getting up here was our best bet at surviving, but I wasn’t planning on all of you being here.”

“I didn’t mean today,” Ludo said. “I meant when you were a kid. You claim that your father built that cabin, that you lived out here off the grid, but you keep asking me why anyone would give up all that noise to come out here. Something doesn’t mesh.”

I spat out the grape seed. “The abridged version is that I had a traumatic childhood, and instead of facing our problems head on, my father ran from them. If you don’t mind, I’d rather not sink my teeth into the details.”

“I suppose that’s your prerogative.”

“Speaking of my father,” I said, “I came up here with the intention of locating him. Do you have any idea how I can find out what happened to him?”

“You can check the archives.” Ludo folded a large strip of bacon in half and consumed it in one bite. “They’re kept in DotCom. Got the names and signatures of everyone who ever set foot inside Camp Haven, starting with Sylvester.”

“Yeah, Sylvester,” I mused. “I’m quite interested in him.”

“We all are,” Ludo said. “He’s a great man.”

“When can I go to my cabin?” I asked. “I need to see if my dad left anything behind for me and—”

Ludo coughed into his cup of black coffee. “Steady there, Georgie. Ain’t no one going up to the cabin.”

I stared him down. “Why not? It’s my cabin.”

“Not anymore, ma’am,” Ludo replied. “The cabin belongs to Sylvester. No one goes in without express permission.”

I thunked my fork on the table. A few heads turned in our direction. “That cabin belongs to me.”

Ludo weaseled the fork out from beneath my fingers. “If your story’s true, I believe that nine years ago, this land and that house were yours. Times change, my dear. This is present day, and you’re a guest in our home. You can either accept that and take advantage of our hospitality, or you can continue traipsing around here with your grand declarations and high-and-mighty attitude. I can tell you right now which one’s going to get you further though.”

Before I could answer, the doors to the Bistro opened, spilling sunshine into the dimly lit. Jacob, Jove, Nita, and Penny traipsed inside, escorted by Maddy, and stamped their boots on the rug. As Maddy guided them into the breakfast line, Ludo watched me watch them.

“That’s not usually the face someone makes when they see that their family is safe and sound after a cataclysmic disaster,” Ludo said, innocently spearing another grape with his fork and popping it into his mouth.

“You don’t know my face.” I looked away from Jacob’s broad shoulders, back to Ludo. “What about Sylvester? He was the first one to arrive here, which means he most likely met my father. Can I talk to him?”

He chuckled deep in his belly. “No one talks to Sylvester.”

“Does this guy even exist?” I demanded. “Because everything you’ve told me leads up him being a fake figurehead holed up in a cabin that no one sees or talks to. Sounds like a load of shit to me.”

“He exists. I’ve spoken to him.”

“You just said—”

“No one talks to Sylvester without good reason,” he rectified. “He’s the director of Camp Haven for a reason. Most days, we get along fine within the system that he built and laid out for us. Every once in a while, something goes wrong, as things are prone to do. That’s when we go to Sylvester, when we don’t know how to solve a problem on our own. He always has the answer. He also does weddings.”

My coffee slipped, and I pushed away from the table to avoid a stain on my pants. “He does what now?”

“Weddings,” Ludo said again. “No preacher men up here at Camp Haven. We have a chapel and all, but it’s more of a spiritual thing. If a couple wants to get married, they have to appeal to Sylvester. He reviews the case, decides whether or not the couple is fit for each other, and marries them in the cabin.”

“Please tell me you realize how absurd that is,” I said. Jacob’s golden hair shone under the warm lights of the oil lamps as he shuffled through the line with his tray. “Who is this guy to decide whether or not two people are right for each other?”

“You don’t understand how Camp Haven works yet,” Ludo replied. “We don’t have time for messy relationships, drama, or fights within the community. Everything, including personal relationships, must benefit the camp.” He looked over his shoulder to where Jacob tried to stop Jove from arguing with the woman serving the food for another scoop of scrambled eggs. “I’d keep that in mind if I were you, and I say that for your sake, not the camp’s.”

“I didn’t ask for your impression of my relationship, and I sure as hell won’t ask this Sylvester guy for his blessing—”

A metal tray piled high with sausage and bacon and not much else plunked to the table as someone sat down next to me. It was the guy from earlier, with bright green eyes and wavy black hair in need of a trim that curled around his ears. He commanded the attention of the room with his height. Even sitting down, his wiry figure towered over me. When he noticed my stare, he flashed me a blinding smile equivalent to the one he’d displayed earlier.

“Morning, Ludo,” he said brightly. “I see you’ve welcomed one of our guests already. I’m Eirian, by the way.”

His grip warmed my cold fingers as we shook hands. “Eirian. Is that… Welsh?”

Eirian nodded. “Impressive deduction skills, Holmes.”

“It’s Georgie, actually.”

Specks of molten gold flickered in Eirian’s eyes when the light hit his irises just so. “Georgie. I like that.”

“Did you finish unloading that caravan?” Ludo asked him, sweeping crumbs off the table and dusting his hands off over his tray.

Eirian dug into his breakfast. “Yes, sir. I inventoried everything myself and put it all away. Quite a haul you had there.”

“Thanks,” I bit back, unable to keep the edge out of my voice.

“Don’t worry,” Eirian said. “We’re pretty well in stock for right now. Chances are, the stock workers will assign those clothes right back to you.” He turned to Ludo again. “There was a bunch of equipment in there that I wasn’t sure what to do with. Circuit boards and other little pieces. What should I—?”

I pinned Eirian’s hand to the table before he could lift his fork again. “What did you do with them?”

“Excuse me?”

“The radio parts,” I said. “That’s what that equipment was. I nearly got shot getting that stuff, so I swear if you tell me—”

“I put it all in a storage room in DotCom,” Eirian interrupted, lifting his hand free of mine. Though the movement was gentle, his forearm flexed, lifting veins from his skin. “Can’t inventory things if I don’t know what they are, right? Are we keeping that stuff, Ludo, or should I pitch it?”

Ludo must’ve seen the steam coming out of my ears because he answered quickly. “Keeping it. Georgie here has previous radio knowledge. She’s going to build a communications system for the camp.”

“Wow,” Eirian said. “That’s new for us. Are we sure that’s something we want to start relying on?”

“I’m willing to risk it,” Ludo replied. “I doubt another EMP blast is coming our way. What would be the point? The U.S. is already down for the count. We might as well take advantage of Georgie’s knowledge. Radios could save lives if we have an emergency.”

“Agreed,” Eirian said. “Georgie, do you really have the knowledge to build an entire camp-wide communications system?

“The knowledge, yes,” I said. “But I’ll need to borrow some manpower. The first order of business will be to build a signal tower for the camp, and I can’t do all the heavy lifting by myself.”

“I volunteer.” Eirian raised his hand, realized he had a sausage in it, and lowered his appendage to finish the meat. “I’ve never seen anything like that before. I’d love to learn more about it. If you’re willing to teach me, of course.”

“You’ve never seen a radio?” I asked, skeptical.

“Eirian was born on a homestead,” Ludo explained. “This is all he knows. That’s why we keep him around. Best resource we got.”

Eirian winked. “Ludo, you flatter me.”

“Shut up, kid.”

Genuine interest lifted one side of Eirian’s lips into a crooked but annoyingly attractive smile. “So what do you say, teach? Can I crash your radio party?”

“Fine,” I said. “You can help.”

“Help with what?” Jacob stood over Eirian’s shoulder, holding a tray full of food. He looked down expectantly at Eirian’s seat. “You’re sitting next to my fianceé.”

Eirian beamed up at Jacob, oblivious to the implication of Jacob’s statement. “Congratulations! Did *you* know that she can build radios out of nothing?”

“Yes,” Jacob said, straight-faced.

Eirian cleared his throat, picking up on the rough vibes. He picked up his tray and stood up. “All righty, then. I’ve got things to do. Georgie, let me know when you need me.”

“It’ll be a while,” Ludo told him. “We’ve got to get our newcomers settled in first.”

“Whenever,” Eirian said, taking his startling smile out once again. He watched as Jacob took his seat and slid so close to me that our elbows knocked together. “I’ll be here.”

As Eirian walked away, I shoved Jacob across the bench to free up some space between us. He’d broken up with me. There was no excuse for him to behave so possessively. Pippa, Jove, and Nita joined us at the table before he could protest. Jove and Pippa dove headfirst into their breakfasts—it had been hours since we’d last eaten a hot meal—but Nita was more interested in Ludo than her food.

“So what’s next?” she asked him. “Now that we’ve all been inoculated for your survival camp, where do we go from here?”

Ludo stretched, belched, and excused himself. “The first order of business

will be assigning each of you to a bunk. As I was telling Georgie, we have women and men's dormitories. It's a bit like college—"

"Hold on a minute," Jacob said. "You expect me to split up from my family and sleep with a bunch of strangers? We just met you people."

Ludo regarded Jacob over the lip of his coffee mug. "We don't do preferential treatment here, sir."

"My sister is pregnant, and my mother has twenty stitches in her leg," Jacob argued. "I'm not going to let them sleep in a room full of other people."

"I'm fine with it," Nita piped in. "Put me in a dorm."

"Easy," Ludo said, grinning at Nita. "I like you."

"I agree with my son," Jove said, his mouth so full of roasted potatoes that I strained to make out his words. "My family requires separate housing."

Ludo looked at Pippa, who leaned over the table at an extreme angle to compensate for her enormous belly. "I'll see if I can pull a few strings for your sister and your mother. Just for the first few weeks though, until you adjust to the way we do things here. After that, you give up the room to the next person who needs it, understood?"

"What about us?" Jacob asked, dropping his fork to clutch my hand. "Please, sir, we're engaged. We haven't slept apart in the last five years."

Ludo stood up, scraped his food scraps into a nearby compost bin, and stacked the tray on top for the kitchen staff to collect. "Engaged, are you? Where's the ring?"

"She lost it coming here," Jacob said.

Ludo looked down at me. I avoided his gaze. "All right, fine. I'll get you a room with two double beds."

"There's five of us," Jacob said. "We'll need an extra."

"Your mother's staying in the med bay actually," Nita said. "That gash in her leg is too big to move her right now."

"Two double beds," Ludo repeated. He zipped up his thick winter jacket and pulled on a fleece hat. "If you'll excuse me, I'm off to meet with the department heads to see who needs bodies. Meet me at DotCom after you finish your breakfast. We can talk about how each of you intends to contribute to Camp Haven."

As he walked off, Jove slid into his empty seat for no other reason than to mark his territory. "Righteous prick, isn't he?"

"I kinda like him," Nita said. "He seems like a no-nonsense kind of guy,

but he also cares about everyone in the camp."

Pippa missed her mouth, and a burnt potato landed on her stomach. "I don't know. I get weird vibes from everyone here."

As they continued to discuss Ludo's character, I pushed my empty tray away and nudged Jacob. "What the hell was that all about? With the ring?"

He wiped up bacon grease and oatmeal from his tray with a clean biscuit. "What are you talking about?"

"Telling Ludo that we're engaged," I said. "You broke up with me, Jacob, or did you forget?"

"Gee, I'm sorry," he replied, sounding not sorry at all. "I figured I was saving you from sleeping in a dorm full of fifty other people, but if you want to bunk with the masses, go right ahead."

"Maybe I will!"

He slammed his spoon against the tray, sending a spoonful of oatmeal flying. "Damn it, Georgie! Why can't you do things my way for once in your life? I'm trying to keep all of us together, for shit's sake."

Nita leaned over the table. "Guys, you're causing a scene."

Sure enough, heads turned in the Bistro. The camp residents clocked the spilled oatmeal on the table, as if they couldn't believe Jacob had wasted food for his temper tantrum.

I swallowed the frustration that rose in my throat and climbed out of the trap of the cafeteria table. With my tray in hand, I leaned over Jacob's shoulder. "I'll go along with this until we get our feet under us here, but make no mistake. We're not together anymore. I'm sleeping with Pippa. You can share a bed with Jove."

I didn't wait for him to reply. Instead, I followed Ludo's lead and cleaned off my tray before stomping out into the cold again. The sun had risen high enough to peek over the trees. The sky was clear blue for miles. The air smelled crisp and clean. Snow would be on its way soon. I turned toward the cabin on the hill, made a frame with my index fingers and thumbs, and boxed the little house in my fake viewfinder. For a moment, I was twelve years old again. Dad had just put the finishing touches on the cabin, and we lit a fire in the new hearth to celebrate. At the age, I didn't know what I was missing yet. It seemed like a gift, just the two of spending time together, but the reality was that my father, mentally ill, had hidden us away from the rest of the world.

"Nice, isn't it?" Eirian's deep voice was soothing, even if it was

interrupting my recollection. He had stripped off his thick jacket, leaving him in a tight-fitted white thermal that accentuated the lines of his torso. “I could stare at that view all day.”

I dropped my hands to gaze up at the Rockies as they overlooked the camp. “Really? It doesn’t get old after a while? Don’t you ever wonder what’s on the other side?”

Sweat beaded at his temples as he hefted part of a huge tree trunk over his shoulder. “Not really.”

“What’s the tree for?”

“Firewood,” he said. “We go through a ton of it here.”

“Right.” I smacked my head. “Duh.”

His laugh resonated like a low note on a perfectly tuned timpani. “Don’t worry about it. You’re probably exhausted. I can’t imagine what the ride was like out of the city. Smart thinking, by the way, finding a truck without electrical components to get up here. Was that your idea?”

“Yeah.”

“And you have working radio parts,” he observed. “Sounds like you know a little bit more about this kind of thing that you let on.”

“You could say that.”

A couple workers passed by, carrying armloads of wood. Eirian fell into step behind them. “Well, I can’t wait to get started on the radios,” he called to me. “Make sure you tell Ludo to sign me up for that. Don’t let anyone take my job.”

“I won’t!” I shouted back to him. Another grin, and he vanished amongst the other campers to continue his job. A smile tugged at my lips. Eirian was so light-hearted and carefree. It was a welcome break from the tension between me and the Masons.

An enormous fire pit, which had been lit while we were eating breakfast, sat in the center of the main square of buildings, surrounded by a wide circle of hand-carved benches similar to the ones in the Bistro. Girl Scouts would jump for joy at the set up. It was perfect for roasting s’mores and telling ghost stories, though I doubted Camp Haven used the sitting area for such purposes. I settled down on one of the benches to wait for the Masons to finish their breakfast, kicking the toe of my boot into the hard dirt. The ground would freeze soon, and I wondered how Camp Haven stockpiled for the harsh winters in the mountains.

Nita found me first, dusting biscuit crumbs off her fingers before winding

a scarf around her neck and joining me at the fire pit. Her thigh pressed warmly against mine, her breath condensing in the chilly wind. “How are you holding up?”

“As well as I can, I guess. You?”

“Fine,” she said. “I don’t mind all of this. I grew up with eight brothers and sisters, so sharing everything I own isn’t anything new to me.”

“I wouldn’t mind sleeping in the dorms either,” I told her. “It would be a relief, but Jacob—”

“Yeah, I kind of sensed that the two of you were on the rocks,” she said. “Anything I can do to help?”

I squeezed her hand. “Just keep being my friend.”

“I can do that.” She tucked our conjoined hands into her coat pocket. “You and me are lucky though. We’re pretty much guaranteed to get jobs that we like. You have your radio stuff, and I’m a shoo-in for the med bay. Jax even let me suture Penny’s leg. I’ve never done anything like that before in my life. I have a feeling I’m going to get more experience here than I would at any hospital. Did you know that they *make* their own Penicillin here? It’s crazy!”

Her enthusiasm brought a grin to my face. “I’m glad you’re fitting in.”

“Me too,” she said. “I worry about the Masons though.”

“Wait until Jove realizes that he has to pull his own weight,” I told her. “That’s going to be something to see.”

As if on cue, the Masons burst forth from the Bistro doors and made a beeline for the fire pit. Jove’s stomach pressed against the buttons of his coat. Apparently, he’d gotten enough scrambled eggs to expand his waistline.

“What now?” he thundered, guiding Pippa to sit down beside us. Jacob remained standing, folding his arms across his chest and tucking his chin into his collar to fend off the wind. “Are we supposed to just sit out here in the damn cold?”

“It’s not so bad by the fire, Mister Mason,” Nita said. “You should get off your feet and warm up.”

“What I’d like is to find a damn room,” Jove rumbled. “Where is that giant buffoon that pretends he’s in charge? I’ve got a bone to pick with him.”

“Right here.”

Jove jumped, his great belly jiggling, as Ludo turned up right behind him. His bushy mustache did not entirely hide his smirk at Jove’s antics.

“I’ve spoken to the head of residency,” Ludo went on. “And I have your

room assignments. Nita, you'll be in bunk thirty-nine in the women's dorm. It's pretty easy to find. They're all numbered. If you drop by DotCom, someone there will give you what we call a bug bag. It's a big canvas tote that can hold all of your belongings in case we need to evacuate the camp. Pick yours up and get comfortable in your bunk. Feel free to take a nap. I assume you guys didn't sleep a wink in that truck last night. When you're ready, report to med bay. Jax and Maddy are eager to get your training started. Clear?"

"Yes, sir." Nita saluted him then kissed my cheek. "Hang in there, buddy. I'll check on you later."

If there was anything I envied about Nita in that moment, it was her ability to separate herself from our group and blend in effortlessly with the other campers. On the other hand, I was stuck with the Masons, who drew attention to themselves like strippers at a black tie affair.

"As for the rest of you," Ludo continued, "I had a few of our boys drop your bug bags off in your room. We're heading there now. It's a bit removed from the rest of the living space. For privacy and all that. You ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Jove grumbled.

We fell in step behind Ludo as he led us past the main square of the compound and the dormitories. Out here, there were smaller cottages and tents, built between fields for growing crops. Most of the dirt was barren, but a few late-blooming patches of winter squash decorated the area with vibrant oranges and yellows. As we walked, Ludo talked.

"Out here's where most of our agriculture workers live," he said, pointing to the small cottages. "They're up earliest and they work the hardest, so they get the benefit of living close to their work instead of traipsing all the way out here from the dorms every morning. Do not bother them. Do not complain when they wake before dawn and make noise outside. If you do, I won't hesitate to revoke the privileges of a private cottage." He rifled inside the pocket of his coat and drew out a stack of laminated, color-coded squares. "These are your identification cards. They state your name, your immunization record, your job title, and your demerits. Demerits are given out if you do not perform your duties as asked or cause trouble within the camp. If you get three demerits within the timespan of a month, you will be asked to sit in front of a tribunal of five camp superiors who will then decide on an appropriate course of retributive action. Believe me, you do not want to deal with the tribunal, so take my advice and keep your noses clean. Here."

He passed out our identification cards. “I spoke to my department heads, and you have been assigned job titles according to our current needs.”

Jove stared at his brown card. “Sanitation? What the hell does that mean?”

Ludo shielded his eyes and pointed to a series of massive tanks far outside the fence line of Camp Haven. “See those beautiful pieces of machinery out there? They filter our waste. Your job is to transport waste from the outhouses to the tanks. They run on manpower, sir, so we need plenty of strong men like yourself out there to keep them operating.”

“You want me to shovel shit?” Jove shoved the identification card into Ludo’s chest. “Go to hell.”

“Someone’s gotta do it,” Ludo replied. “If you think the work’s beneath you, then feel free to see yourself out of the compound.” When Jove stood his ground, Ludo tucked the identification card into the pocket of Jove’s coat. “Glad to hear you’re on board. You start this afternoon. Any other questions?”

“Miscellaneous crew,” Jacob read off his red card. “What’s that?”

“You basically do whatever we need you to do,” Ludo explained. “Hauling, building, planting, wherever we need a hand.”

“Why can’t I do that?” Jove demanded. “Or run security?”

“Don’t worry, the crew pulls sanitation duties sometimes too,” Ludo said. “And our security officers have to pass a rigorous physical test before they’re approved for duty.” He looked Jove’s massive figure up and down. “You think you got that in you?”

An embarrassed blush crept across Jove’s face.

“Didn’t think so,” Ludo went on before turning to Jacob again. “Eirian works miscellaneous as well, son. He’ll teach you the ropes. Most of the boys enjoy it. You get to do something new every day.”

“If you say so,” Jacob replied.

“I have a question,” Pippa said, holding a card that was half-blue and half-pink. “What’s a maternity specialist? I haven’t given birth yet, and I am far from specializing in anything concerning babies.”

“Which is exactly why you’ve been assigned to that position,” Ludo said. “All of our new mothers are temporarily re-routed as maternity specialists. They take care of the kids in the compound. You’ll learn everything you need to know about raising a child.”

“How very patriarchal of you,” Pippa said dryly.

“On the contrary,” Ludo said, “half of our maternity specialists are men. We think it’s important to teach both boys and girls the value of good parenting.”

“Ninnies,” Jove muttered under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“As for you, Georgie,” Ludo said, pointing to my bright purple card. “We had to fly by the seat of our pants. We created a position for you.”

I glanced down at the card. “Communications manager? That’s a promotion, I suppose.”

“Matched the color of the card to your hair,” Ludo said with a grin. “Anyone who gets assigned to Communications will get a purple card too. You’re in charge though. I’m trusting you to build up the department. Feel free to recruit a few people to help you out. Interview some of the other campers. Let me know who your choices are. Once you get a radio tower up and running, it will be up to you to operate and maintain it. Sound good?”

“Sounds great,” I said. “You guys like morning talk shows?”

“Can’t say we’ve ever had one,” Ludo replied. “But we could all do for some entertainment. Here we are.”

Ludo stepped up to the porch of one of the block cabins. It was smaller than the rest, set deep in the recesses of the compound. It was a good thirty minute walk back to the start of the camp. Ludo gestured us inside. The one-room building was just large enough for two double beds to fit against the walls. It was barren of decoration or adornment. There was one window. On the upside, it smelled like mountain air and cinnamon sticks.

“Home sweet home,” said Ludo.

3

I could practically taste Jove's disgust. It filled the tiny room with a bitter bite to match a look of distaste that he didn't bother to disguise. I helped Pippa sit on one of the beds. The blankets were stiff but clean. Woven from sheep's wool, they carried a distinct must that Pippa wrinkled her nose at.

"This is it?" Jove thundered. "This is your grand family suite? This is ridiculous!"

"This is not a five star hotel," Ludo replied. "I'm sorry if you were ever under the impression that it was. We do what we can here. If you think you would all be more comfortable in the dormitories, then I would be happy to escort you there."

"No," Jove said, shucking off his coat. He pointed to an archaic iron furnace in the middle of the room. "How do we turn this thing on?"

"Light a fire," Ludo said, "to heat the coals."

Jove stared at him.

"Don't tell me you don't know how to start a damn fire," Ludo said.

"I can do it." I patted Ludo on the shoulder. "Thanks for everything, Ludo. I know that this has been a major imposition on you." Jove scoffed, but I pretended not to hear him. "I'll take it from here."

"Mm-hmm," Ludo said, stepping toward the porch. "Let me know if you need anything. Lunch is at noon. Take the morning to rest and get used to the place. I'd like to introduce you to your positions in the afternoon."

After he left, I sank onto the bed next to Pippa, who cast a glance between me and Jacob but was wise enough not to comment.

“How the hell are we supposed to know when noon is?” Jove grumbled as he opened the grate to the furnace and poked around in the cold coals. “There are no damn clocks.”

I kicked off my boots and massaged my feet through my thick socks. They were sore and numb from walking and running for a solid forty-eight hours. At this point, I was happy to wiggle my toes free of their prison despite the cold air.

“They probably use the sun,” I said. “Here, get out of the way.”

Camp Haven had left a fire starter kit next to the furnace, which my father had taught me how to use way back then. I struck the pieces together, which sparked and flashed until the kindling caught fire. I closed the grate and looked up to find all three of the Masons staring at me.

“What?”

“How do you know how to do all of this again?” Pippa asked.

The bug bags were under the beds. I pulled one out and unzipped it. “Pippa, it looks like this one’s yours.”

“Oh, thank God,” she said as I tossed it up on the bed. “I’m dying for a change of clothes.”

“Listen, we don’t know how laundry works around here yet, so don’t get too overzealous,” I told her. I unzipped the second bug bag and tossed it to Jacob. The third one was mine. Thankfully, the camp had been kind enough to give most of my things back to me. I was only missing a few pairs of socks. That made sense. I imagine people wore them out pretty quickly working out here in the woods. I pulled a comfortable sweater over my head and burrowed under the covers beside Pippa.

“What are you doing?” Jacob asked. Jove had already sat down on their bed to unlace his own boots.

“I’m taking a nap,” I told him, plumping the rough pillow beneath my head. The coals in the furnace had started to heat up, and I reveled in the relative warmth and comfort of the bed. “You should too. We’ve been awake for way too long, and they’re expecting us to work this afternoon.”

Jacob knelt by the bed and lowered his voice. “Don’t you think we should talk?”

I opened one eye. Jacob’s expression was unreadable. Did he actually want to talk or did he simply want me to give him an excuse not to? “Jacob, I’m tired.”

I rolled over, toward Pippa, which put an abrupt end to the conversation. I

stared through the window. From the low angle, all I could see were the peaks of higher mountains around the camp. Was my father up there somewhere? Or was he traipsing around the land that was once our home, blending in with the residents of Camp Haven, hauling water and filtering waste? He couldn't be. He hated people. Or if he didn't hate them, he mistrusted them. My entire childhood had been built upon that mistrust. It took years to overcome it, but now here I was again, dredging up old memories to make sure that we survived.

I WOKE up when the sun rose high enough to strike the warped glass of the window and fill the inside of my eyelids with a blinding red. The Masons were all asleep, including Jove, who must have been too exhausted to complain about the low thread count of Camp Haven's sheets. I slipped outside, where the rest of the camp continued their daily activities. The agricultural specialists picked the late-blooming winter squash, while others escorted bundled-up children of all ages on some kind of field trip through the camp. I smiled when a toddler wrapped up in an impossibly large parka tripped over the hem of the coat and bounced to the ground. The adult in charge didn't react immediately. Instead, she let the child pick himself up and dust himself off. In the world outside this one, a parent would have overreacted about the child's fall, but at Camp Haven, children apparently learned to care for themselves at an early age. The door to the cabin opened and closed, and Jacob sat on the porch step next to me.

"Why did you do that?" I asked him.

"Do what?"

"You told Ludo that we were together," I clarified, squinting into the sun rather than looking at Jacob. "We're not anymore. Are we?"

"Georgie, what I said to you last night was rash and hasty," he said, "but it doesn't mean that it wasn't true. I don't really know you."

"It's a simple yes or no question, Jacob," I said. "Are we together or not?"

He pondered the question for a long moment, gazing toward the main part of the camp. In the far off distance, the red cross above the med bay stood out like a beacon. "No."

I wasn't sure what answer I had expected, but I definitely hadn't anticipated the intense rush of relief that flooded my chest and let me take my first deep breath of fresh mountain air. If there was one good thing about

tragedy, it was that it made you realize certain things about yourself. Jacob and I had never been well-matched for each other. I had gone after him because he had the things that I'd always wanted. He had grown up in the city with other people and learned how to socialize and be loved by others, whereas I struggled to connect with my peers after years of only knowing my father. No matter how much I tried, I was always going to be the survival-based introvert, and being with Jacob wasn't going to change that.

"Okay," I said.

"That's it?" he asked. "That's all you're going to say after five years together?"

"I'll tell Ludo," I said, pushing myself up from the porch and dusting my hands off. "He'll want to assign me to the dorms."

"Whoa, wait a minute." Jacob leaned forward and took my hand before I could get any farther. "You don't have to do that. I meant what I said this morning. You don't have to sleep with a bunch of other people. The rest of the camp doesn't have to know we're not together anymore."

"That sounds like a recipe for disaster," I told him.

"It doesn't have to be," he said. "We've known each other for a long time, Georgie. Just because we're not getting married anymore doesn't mean we have to be strangers. For one thing, this place is not very big, and it's going to be impossible not to run into each other. We may as well be cordial."

"I wasn't planning on anything else."

"Stay here," he said, pouting with his big brown eyes like a sad puppy. "Please. We need you. Pippa loves you too, and she's going to need a friend here until she settles in."

"What about your dad?" I asked.

"What about him?" Jacob said. "He's going to have to deal with it. Whatever it is."

He still had my hand. I reclaimed it as my own. "Fine. I'll stay for now, but if things get weird or Jove is insufferable, I'm going to Ludo. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

AFTER LUNCH, Ludo dropped us off to the heads of our departments, which meant that Jove, Jacob, and Pippa all had someone new to report to. I, on the other hand, worked alone for the present, so Ludo became my temporary

Communications Assistant. The camp had set aside all of the radio parts that I'd brought with me. It wasn't much, but it would at least get us started. Ludo helped me inventory what I had then asked me what materials I would need to get started on building a freestanding radio tower. For each item I listed, he asked me for the purpose and for potential substitutes in case we couldn't find what we needed. It was engaging, creative work that challenged me to think outside of the box. Ludo didn't know much about radios to begin with, and I surprised myself with how much I enjoyed teaching him about it. We worked through the entire afternoon and into the evening, until a bell rang to signal that dinner was served at the Bistro.

"That's the day," Ludo said, clapping me on the back. "You made it through. How ya feeling?"

"Safe," I replied as we packed up our notes. We'd been working in Ludo and Jax's shared space, which was even smaller than ours. "That's all that matters."

"That's a great attitude to have," Ludo said. "I hope the rest of your family sees it the same way."

"Me too," I muttered.

"Before we head over to the Bistro, I have one more thing to show you," Ludo said, leading me out of the tiny apartment. His place, along with a few other rooms meant for married couple, occupied a building adjacent to the dormitories. DotCom was just across the way. He led me to the community building, through the empty main hall, and into a private hallway in the back. From there, rooms branched off in every direction, labeled for use. Most of them were storage, but we finally reached a door that did not have a plaque on it.

"Here we are," Ludo said, unlocking the room. "Have a look."

I peeked inside. Like the others, it was small, but instead of being full of extra food or supplies, this one was empty except for a desk.

"It looks like an office," I said. "What do you use it for?"

"We don't use it," Ludo replied. "We keep a few rooms empty in case something like this pops up. I thought you could use it as your office. If you get your tower up and running, you can broadcast to the camp from here."

"Really?" I walked into the office, running my fingers over the layer of dust on the desk. "It's going to take some time before I get everything up and running."

"Understandable."

“And we probably don’t have everything on hand to do what I really want to do,” I went on.”

“We usually send crews into the city when we desperately need something,” Ludo explained. “I was planning on sending a salvage crew in anyway, what with all the insanity. We need to take action before this goes further south, get what we can while it’s still available. That includes whatever you need to get this communications system up and running, so it’s very important that you don’t hold back. Just remember the foundations of what this camp was built on. No electricity here.”

“How do you feel about batteries?”

“They run out of juice eventually.”

“Good point,” I said. “No worries. I can make do.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Ludo replied. “Come on. Let’s go eat. By the way, did I mention that tonight is open mic night?”

It turned out that Camp Haven wasn’t all work. After dinner each night, the camp held a variety of community activities like open mic night, talent shows, s’mores nights, and ghost stories. Most days, the entire camp gathered in the center square around the massive bonfire to be with each other. If it was too cold, they relocated to DotCom. I learned quickly that “cold” to us was not “cold” to Camp Haven. They were used to the extreme mountain temperatures. When it dipped into the thirties, I expected the open mic night to be inside, but we gathered around the fire instead.

The fire had been stoked to roar higher than the tallest resident of Camp Haven. From a general guess at the number of heads, about a hundred people lived here. They all turned out for the after-dinner event, and the bonfire seemed to warm all of them. I stayed close to the roaring flame, but not so close for it to lick the seams of my winter coat. A few members of the camp had been assigned to douse the fire if it got too out of control. Camp Haven had safety precautions for everything. On one hand, it seemed like paranoia. On the other hand, they had survived out here for this long according to those precautions.

Jacob spent the first hour of the event attempting to convince everyone in the vicinity of our mutual love. He was trying too hard, holding my hand, kissing my cheek every few minutes or so. After a while, I told him that I was going to help distribute the hot cocoa, slipped away, and lost him in the crowd. I bypassed the ladies serving the cocoa, disappearing into the cold, dark night.

A few minutes later, I found myself at the base of the hill atop which my father's cabin sat. A small plume of smoke puffed out of the chimney. Someone was inside my home—Sylvester, supposedly—cooking or sleeping or whatever.

"Don't do it," a voice whispered.

I whirled around, flicking open the switchblade that I kept on my person at all times, and found myself face-to-face with Eirian, who raised his hands above his head when my knife neared his throat.

"Whoa, easy there!"

"Shit, I'm sorry." I quickly folded the blade again and stored it in the pocket of my coat. "I get anxious. New place, people I don't know. You know how it is."

"Not really, but I can take a guess," Eirian said. "Does Ludo know you have that?"

I stayed quiet.

"Thought so," he said, chuckling. "We don't allow residents to keep weapons in the camp. If someone wants to duke it out, they have to do it with their fists. Less casualties that way."

"Does that happen often?"

"Not at all," Eirian answered. "We know what we have to lose here. We need everyone in the best shape so that no one slacks on their job. Fighting is stupid. It only causes problems. I'm surprised they didn't find that knife on you when you checked in. Where did you hide it?"

Again, I didn't answer, although I did let a smug smile tug at my lips.

"Never mind," he said, catching the grin. "I don't want to know. I do, however, have to ask why you slipped away from a perfectly in-tune rendition of Britney's Toxic to come stare at Sylvester's cabin."

"How do you even know Britney?" I asked him. "If you've been living on homesteads for your whole life?"

"Top Forty haunts us all," he replied. "Although I've only heard covers, never the original. I answered your question. You answer mine. What gives?"

I sighed, looking up at the cabin again. "I used to live there."

"In the cabin?"

"My father built it," I said, wondering how many times I would have to explain this. "I helped him. I came out here to look for him and found Camp Haven instead."

"Huh."

“What?”

“It makes sense this way,” Eirian said, brushing his wavy dark hair out of his eyes. “I never bought that whole ‘Sylvester found an angel’ story. It’s more likely that he got lucky, found the cabin, and then started Camp Haven.”

“That doesn’t explain what happened to my dad,” I told him.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Nine years ago.”

“Wow,” Eirian said. “That’s a long time. How do you figure he didn’t just move on from here and go somewhere else?”

“He was agoraphobic,” I explained. “He would’ve never left this place willingly. It was perfectly set up for what he wanted. Complete seclusion.”

“Maybe he’s still here then.”

I shook my head. “No, there are too many people here. My dad was a loner. But I would like to check to make sure. Ludo mentioned earlier that Camp Haven keeps archives of every resident in DotCom. Do you know where they are?”

“Sure.”

“Do you think you could show me?” I asked him, batting my eyelashes.

He covered my eyes with one gloved hand for a brief moment. “You don’t have to do that. I don’t need convincing. Do you want to go now?”

Fighting off a flush of heat, I nodded. Thank goodness it was dark and cold outside. Otherwise I would have died of embarrassment. I wasn’t used to guys who didn’t require persuasion. Then again, I wasn’t used to guys who had never been exposed to the toxic masculinity of regular society. Eirian, raised as he had been, was a rarity.

“Follow me,” he said.

He seemed to automatically understand that I needed to be alone, so we skirted the main square where the event was still in high swing. Someone belted Aretha Franklin from the podium, accompanied by an acoustic guitar that did not fit the genre at all. Eirian hummed along as he led me behind the main the buildings until we reached the rear door of DotCom.

“I heard Ludo got you an office,” he said, lighting a lamp in the hallway with a metal Zippo. There was something carved into the side of the lighter, but he tucked it into his pocket before I could get a better look. “Which one is yours?”

I pointed to the door. “That one. It’s not much right now.”

He looked through the window. “I’m sure you’ll fix it up. Come on. The archives are this way.”

We turned the corner and reached another door, which Eirian unlocked with his own set of keys.

“Does everyone get keys?” I asked him as we went inside.

“Nope,” he replied. “High-ranking individuals only.”

“I thought this camp was built on a trust system.”

“It is,” he confirmed. “But you can only trust people so much before they want more for themselves. It’s human nature.”

I thought of Jove. “You’re telling me.”

The archives room was no grander than any other part of the camp. It was full of repurposed cardboard or metal boxes stacked on simple handmade shelves. Each one held stacks and stacks of paper. The room was organized alphabetically by subject.

“Where do you get the paper?” I asked.

“We used to buy or steal it from the city,” Eirian answered. “Now we make it ourselves. We recycle everything here to make sure there’s as little waste as possible.”

I looked through a nearby box, kneading the strangely textured paper between my finger and thumb. “That’s amazing. You guys have really thought of everything, haven’t you?”

“I like to think so.” He pointed to a shelf near the rear of the room. “I believe the archives start over there. The names aren’t alphabetical. The signatures will be organized according to the earliest date. When do you think your dad might have been here?”

I maneuvered through the shelves and peered up at the faded labels on the boxes. “Right at the beginning, I’d guess. Those are from 2008 and 2009. That’d be it, right?”

Eirian stood on his toes and stretched up to get the box. His many layers rode up, and his undershirt untucked itself from his waistband, revealing the line of one muscled hip. I quickly cleared my throat and looked away.

“Here we go,” he said, bringing the box down to the floor and popping the lid off. “What name are we looking for?”

“Amos Fitz.”

He handed me a stack of papers to look through. The pages were crisp and fragile, torn out of old school notebooks or journals. Each one boasted at least twenty signatures of those who had come to Camp Haven in the last

decade.

“I didn’t expect the archives to be this extensive,” I muttered, scanning the signatures for a glimpse of my father’s name. “There aren’t that many people here.”

“We made a lot of mistakes in the beginning,” Eirian said. “We recruited too many people. Advertised to campers and hikers. They didn’t understand what we really wanted to do here. A lot of them showed up, stayed for a week or so, realized that this wasn’t what they wanted, and went back to the city. It wreaked havoc on our system. We were wasting supplies, and our visitors were treating the compound like some kind of vacation retreat. They wouldn’t pull their weight, and they complained about everything.”

“So you stopped advertising,” I said.

“Pretty much,” Eirian replied. “We had enough people to keep the place running. We became our own community. We had plans to expand before the EMP hit. We were thinking about letting a few more couples have children—”

“Doesn’t that sound absurd to you?” I asked him. “Controlling childbirth?”

“We don’t have a choice,” he replied. “Think about it. It’s the middle of the woods. No pharmacy, no birth control. We have to manage our population wisely.”

“There’s no way everyone here is abstaining.”

Eirian grinned. “Of course not. We’re human after all. We take a lot of precautions, but we do get the occasional accidental pregnancy.”

“How many demerits is an accidental pregnancy worth?”

He shot me a confused look. “We don’t shame women for the natural state of things. If someone gets pregnant, it’s not the end of the world. They have their baby, and everyone moves on. No big deal.”

I continued scanning the papers for my father’s name.

“Are you worried about your fiancé’s sister?” Eirian asked. “I noticed how young she was.”

“Pippa can take care of herself,” I assured him. “I guess I’m just not used to how things are done around here.”

“Feel free to ask me anything,” he said. “I’m a wealth of knowledge when it comes to Camp Haven. I was actually in the first group of people to move here. Does this look like Fitz to you?”

I squinted at the cramped handwriting. “No, that says Fisk. My dad wrote

in all caps no matter what."

"Gotcha."

"So you've never lived off a homestead?" I asked him, intrigued. "How is that even possible in this day and age?"

Eirian lowered himself out of his squat to sit on the floor with a groan of relief and continued to look through his batch of signatures. "It's a long story. My real parents abandoned me when I was born. I have no idea who they were. They dumped me somewhere in the hills of Southern California. I guess they figured I'd die out there, and they wouldn't have anything to worry about anymore."

"And I thought my childhood was messed up."

He laughed, a sound that I decided I liked quite a bit. "It's not as dramatic as it sounds. I don't remember it at all. Anyway, a group of women found me up there. They called themselves the Sisters of the Wind. The Sisters grew out of the idea that we owed something to nature in return for taking care of us. That's why they lived as simply as they did. They took me in and raised me."

"What happened to them?"

"A few died," he admitted. "There were only ten of them to begin with, and some of them were already quite old. A few others assimilated into other homesteads in order to survive. That's how I ended up here. I went from the Sisters to a campground in Idaho to here in the Rockies. Wynonna, the Sister who I always regarded as a mother, actually made it here with me. She's a maternity specialist now. Fitz!"

I dropped to my knees at his exclamation, accidentally tipping over the box and scattering papers everywhere. "That's him! Amos Fitz. He was here!" I ran the pad of my finger over the capital letters, a declaration of my father's existence. "What now? That means he's here in the camp, right? I can't believe it." A muscle in Eirian's jaw twitched, and I understood that my enthusiasm was premature. "What is it?"

"I know everyone in this camp," he said. "If there was an Amos Fitz here, I'd know him."

"Then where did he go?"

"I'm not sure," Eirian replied. "There's no sign-out here, which means that if he left the compound, there's no record of it. There is one other list we can check, but…"

"But what?"

He stacked the papers neatly, put the lid back on, and returned the box to the proper shelf. “We keep a book of everyone who’s passed away at Camp Haven. I’m not saying that he’s on it, but if he is, it might give you the closure that you’re looking for.”

Somehow, it had never occurred to me that my father might actually be dead. After all, he did live in the middle of nowhere. If an emergency situation arose, he had no way of calling someone for help. For all I knew, he was dead.

“Do you want to check?” Eirian asked. “We don’t have to.”

“No, we should,” I said. “I want to know.”

He approached a different shelf and took down a different box. “Death certificates are in alphabetical order, no matter the year. Here’s the F’s.”

We sat on the floor again, leaned in at the same time, and bumped shoulders. Eirian didn’t pull away, ensconced in the search for my father’s name in the death box. I stayed put too, savoring the warmth that we shared in that small space.

“Finigan, Fisher, Fitch,” Eirian muttered, licking his finger to separate the certificates. “And then Flagler. No Amos Fitz. He’s not in here.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” I said, slamming the lid onto the box. It was made of recycled aluminum and clanged loudly. “I know this says that he was here during Camp Haven’s inauguration, but he never would have let so many people onto his land.”

“Maybe he was having trouble surviving on his own,” Eirian suggested. “He thought he might benefit from Camp Haven’s existence.”

“You don’t know my father,” I said. “He would rather suffer and die than trust someone else. I don’t get it.”

I rubbed my temples. A headache grew in the space between them, from dehydration or stress or lack of sleep. Eirian reached into his pocket and produced a small tube.

“Here,” he said, tipping the tube on its side. A few drops of liquid, smelling strongly of candy canes, plopped onto his finger, which he dabbed against my temples. “It’s peppermint oil. Natural headache relief.”

The oil chilled my skin, but the crisp scent cleared my mind. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” he said, capping the tube. “Is there anything else I can do that might set your mind at ease about your father?”

“I suppose not,” I said, shoulders slumping in disappointment. “Unless you have another suggestion.”

“None that I can think of at the moment. Come here.” He stood up and offered his hands. I took them, and he gently pulled me to my feet. “What do you say we go back outside and enjoy the rest of open mic night? It’s actually quite fun, and it’ll give you a chance to meet some of the others. Plus, I’m sure your fiancé is missing you.”

“He’s not—”

Once again, I thanked the low lighting, which covered my slip-up. I yearned to talk about my broken engagement with anyone other than Jacob. I needed that release, to work out what had gone wrong with someone other than my own self. Eirian, however, didn’t seem like the best choice. For one thing, I hardly knew him, and for another, Jacob’s behavior at the Bistro during breakfast implied that he already harbored a disliking for the Camp Haven native.

When we returned to the square, some of the event’s energy had died off. The kids had gone to bed, and the older residents of Camp Haven had retired too. The music turned to soft folk and blues rather than pop and rock songs. Jacob had, in fact, taken the podium to sing an old Lou Reed song.

“I’ll let you listen,” Eirian said, squeezing my shoulder in farewell. “Have a good night, Georgie. I’ll see you tomorrow for my first shift.”

He saluted me with two fingers before disappearing into the crowd to join a few of his friends for a drink. Nita, who’d been sitting on one of the benches around the fire to listen to Jacob, waved me over.

“What was that all about?” she asked, her eyes lingering on Eirian’s statuesque figure.

“He was helping me figure out what happened to my father,” I told her. Jacob plucked dutifully at a borrowed guitar, his voice velvety and soft in the cold night. “We looked through the archives.”

“Did you find anything?”

I leaned my head on Nita’s shoulder. “No.”

She perched her chin on top of my head. “Is everything okay?”

Jacob finished his song. The last chord lingered in the air. Then the crowd clapped politely as Jacob handed the guitar off to the next open mic participant.

“I don’t know,” I said.

4

Before I knew it, two weeks had passed at Camp Haven. I fell into step with the rest of the compound quickly. The schedule and work was familiar once I remembered how to do it. This was the way I had grown up, with candles and well water rather than a monthly electricity bill and working toilets. To me, it felt natural, so I assimilated within a few days, eliciting a number of questions from the other members of Camp Haven. After the third or fourth unprompted interview, I stopped mentioning that Sylvester's cabin used to be mine. No one was inclined to believe me, though they nodded politely to placate me. I did, however, ask every single person that I talked to about my father in the hopes that someone might recognize his name. No such luck. They all claimed ignorance about Amos Fitz, leaving me to continue to wonder about my father's fate.

The radio tower went up in about a week and half. It would have been sooner, but the camp didn't have all of the construction materials that I needed to make it work, which meant that Eirian and a few other men had to venture closer to the city to scalp industrial yards for parts. They left in makeshift combat armor, carrying rifles across their backs. To someone naive, their vehemence may have come across as paranoia, but I understood the precautions. As the days passed us by, Camp Haven went on unhindered. The people lived as they had always lived, off of the land and off of the grid. I knew that the regular population of Denver, and the rest of the United States for that matter, would not fare the same. By now, if I was right about the level of destruction, thousands of people had died from lack of care, no

access to medications, violence in the streets, and general idiocy. When Eirian and his friends returned, they confirmed my assumptions. Denver was in ruins, taken over by gangs and other crime circles. Though the camp's scavengers had not ventured far enough into the city to get into trouble, Eirian had seen enough to hollow out his eyes. As he hauled parts for the tower to the location I'd requested for it, the usual gleam of his green irises was absent.

"Are you okay?" I had asked, pulling on a pair of thick workman's gloves, the fingers of which were too long, and lifting the other end of the steel support that he'd been dragging through the compound.

"I don't want to think about it," he replied. "Let's just work."

So we did. It was the first time I'd ever been in charge of such a process. I drew up rough blueprints of what I needed from the crew, picked a place for the radio tower that was central for the entire camp in order to get the best range possible, and asked Ludo for a small team of workers that could get the tower up and running as quickly as possible. From there on out, I spent the days in a hardhat and steel-toed boots, helping as well as instructing. Eirian's desire to work suddenly made sense. The more I threw myself into the tower's construction, the less I thought about the destruction on the other side of Camp Haven's walls. It was a relief to sweat and ache from a physical standpoint rather than a mental one. Each night, exhausted as I was from the day's work, I fell asleep moments after my head hit the pillow.

The rest of our group varied in the success of their adaptations to Camp Haven. Nita did well. She was in awe of Jax's work in the med bay. Apparently, the camp had never had medical students before, and Jax was eager to teach Nita what it was like to treat patients in the middle of the wilderness without the advances of medical technology. Every time I ran into Nita, whether at the Bistro or DotCom for community events, she was always studying something. She read books on natural remedies, identifying useful herbs in nature, concocting medications in a low-level laboratory, and other curious subjects that would have never crossed her path during standard medical school.

"Did you know Jax used to be a trauma surgeon at a level one trauma center?" she babbled one night, her nose buried in yet another textbook that she had borrowed from the med bay. "And then one night, they had a giant pile up come into the emergency room, and she just couldn't take it anymore. Can you imagine? She gave up her entire career to live in the woods. Brutal,

right?”

The only thing Nita every complained about at Camp Haven was the cold. As a native of Spain, Colorado wasn’t her ideal place of residence, but it was easier to ignore the harsh winters in the heated comfort of an apartment. As November wore on, the degrees dropped off one by one, until the first of many snow flurries fell upon the compound. For the residents of Camp Haven, the snow brought more work. When I wasn’t setting up our communications system, I helped out in other areas. I dried and stored food, sewed wool lining into jackets for added insulation, and prepped the radio tower for harder weather.

Others did not take so well to the work and the cold. Jacob’s feet were freezing no matter how many layers of socks he wore. I was grateful that he and I no longer shared a bed. I certainly didn’t miss his frigid toes seeking the warmth of my calves in the middle of the night. The wind whipped at his sensitive skin, leaving his cheeks red and dry. His lips peeled from the exposure no matter how much soothing balm he smoothed over them. I did not miss kissing him either. He suffered from other complaints too. Despite his eager declaration to ensure his entrance to Camp Haven, manual labor did not sit well with Jacob. Hours upon hours at the gym, benching and squatting away in an air-conditioned room, had not prepared him for lugging wood, constructing buildings, and mucking bathroom stalls. His palms bled from the wear and tear before calluses hardened the skin. He often lay awake in bed, rolling from one side to the other in order to find a position that didn’t compromise his sore muscles. He found no energy to complain, but rather moped in dejected silence about his new way of life.

Penny, Jacob’s mother, had yet to recover from the open wound in her leg. No one said it out loud, but the signs were bad. She suffered from weakness and general fatigue, unable to stand for more than a few minutes at a time. The wound itself failed to close, which was a sign of infection. Jax administered small doses of the camp’s antibiotics, but supplies were limited and Penny wasn’t responsive to the drugs. She was the only permanent resident of the med bay, and I could tell by the whispered conversations that this was an unusual circumstance. Nevertheless, Penny remained there, existing without full awareness of her circumstances.

Pippa, weeks away from her delivery, had rejoined her mother in the med bay after Jax assigned her to bed rest. I visited her every once in a while. She resented being stuck inside on a cot all day, but I did well to remind her that

at least she was out of the cold and free of the labors that the rest of the camp pushed through. At this point, her belly had grown to such proportions that I feared she might burst like an overfilled balloon. She perched books and plates on top of it as she lay in bed as if it were a convenient table to use at her disposal. Other that her restless boredom and impending epidural-free delivery, the only thing Pippa worried about was the state of her friends back home. And the fact that Camp Haven had no access to nail polish.

"What do you think happened to them?" she asked me one morning when I delivered her breakfast to the med bay. She picked crumbs from the extra muffin I'd swiped for her. "My friends. They probably found somewhere safe, right? I'll see them when all of this blows over."

I sat down on the edge of the small cot. "Maybe one day. Sure."

Her big brown eyes were doleful. "You think they're dead, don't you?"

"No, of course not."

"I've known you long enough to tell when you're lying," she said. "It's how I know that you and Jacob aren't together anymore."

I looked down at my ring finger. A few weeks ago, Jacob and I had been fighting over my lack of dedication to the diamond engagement band. Now, we were nothing but a pair of pretenders, taking advantage of our previous relationship to pull one over the heads of Camp Haven.

"Why bother faking it?" Pippa asked. "Who cares?"

"Your brother does."

"Jacob's an idiot."

"I'm trying to make this as easy on everyone as possible," I told her. "If he wants to pretend that we're still together so he can sleep in his own room, then that's fine with me. I don't mind."

The door to the med bay opened, and a gust of wind rushed in as Eirian entered the room.

"Hi," he said, his cheeks pink from the cold and his dark hair tousled. "How ya doing, Pippa?"

"I'm fat, Eirian. What else is new?"

"That's the spirit." He stomped snow off of his boots on the mat near the door before plopping down on the cot next to Pippa's. "I have to get back to work soon, but I just wanted to know what time you needed me for Communications today, Georgie."

I checked my watch, one that I'd managed to procure from the extra storage room at DotCom. "How's four o'clock sound? Meet me at my

office?”

“Four o’clock sounds great,” Eirian said, cupping his hands around his nose to warm the pink tip of it. “Can’t wait. Hang in there, Pippa.”

“Oh, I’m hanging.”

He patted her knee, smiled at me, and left the med bay.

Pippa nudged my thigh with the toe of her foot. “Well, I know one person who might mind that you and Jacob are only pretending to be engaged.”

“Shut up. Eirian and I are just friends.”

As soon as I said it, the phrase felt like a lie. Pippa wasn’t entirely wrong. There was a natural ease between me and Eirian that had always been missing with Jacob. We could talk, really talk, about the matters at hand. We didn’t bicker or moan at each other. He had a steady hand and a steady attitude. Not to mention, he’d grown up like I had. We bonded over our similar childhoods, though I had yet to mention how mine had come about. It was easier this way, for now at least, that it had always just been me and my dad on the homestead, father and daughter learning to make it on their own. The messy details could run dry for a while.

Pippa pinched my cheek. “Just friends. Sure.”

“I have things to do,” I told her, stealing the uneaten muffin from atop her belly. “And I’m taking this back. Think of it as a tax for teasing me.”

“Rude.”

I left the med bay, muffin in mouth, thinking that I might work a few hours in the Communications office until it was time for Eirian to meet me. What with the snowfall, we had put aside assembling radios to focus on more important things, but the kitchen staff had released me of my duties that day. I figured I could at least start gathering the pieces that I needed, but that plan was derailed when a shouting match reached my ears. I gritted my teeth together as I recognized one of the voices. Jove. I veered off course from DotCom, following the argument toward the outhouses.

“I won’t do it!” Jove yelled to another man. He was, like the other sanitation workers, dressed in a gray jumpsuit that protected his clothes from the hazardous waste in the outhouses. He threw a shovel to the ground. “I’m sick of shoveling shit. Do you know who I am? Do you know how much money I have? I could *pay* someone to do this disgusting work for me.”

The other man, Jimmy, was the burly head of sanitation. A layer of blubber sat upon his entire body, hiding the muscle beneath. The result was a large man with a larger presence who spent every day knee deep in human

waste. I couldn't imagine the kind of patience a man like that preserved, but I was certainly smarter than Jove not to test it.

"Of course I know who you are. You won't stop reminding all of us." Jimmy waddled around and waved his arms in a strikingly accurate imitation of Jove. "I'm Jove Mason! CEO of Mason Property Management! I own half of Denver! Well, guess what, Mr. Mason? You ain't in Denver anymore, and here at Camp Haven, what I say goes, so pick up your damn shovel and get back to work."

Out of all the members of the group that I'd arrived at Camp Haven with, Jove was the most problematic. This wasn't the first time he'd gotten into an argument with the superior officers in the sanitation department. Not only did he fail to perform his job assignments efficiently or effectively, he also complained about everything. The food served at the Bistro was bland. The mattress in the cottage was too small for both him and Jacob, as well as far too lumpy. The events at DotCom were crass and boring. No matter how little an inconvenience, Jove made sure to let everyone within a fifty-foot proximity know that he was dissatisfied with the way the camp ran things. So it wasn't a huge surprise when he kicked the shovel with such force that it skidded across the frozen ground and bumped up against the heel of Jimmy's boot.

"I sure as hell won't," Jove declared.

Jimmy, who had already turned his back on Jove's petulant temper tantrum, looked down at the shovel. "Mr. Mason, I would like to remind you that your identification badge already bears two demerits. One for failing to show up to work on time for more than three days in a row and one for failing to complete your sanitation duties. If you do not retrieve this shovel and follow the rest of the boys out to the filtration systems, I'm afraid I'll have to add a third demerit to your collection. Do you know what that means?"

"I don't give a damn what it means."

"It means you'll sit for the tribunal," Jimmy said. "And you won't like what they have to say."

Jove closed the gap between he and Jimmy, stepping on the wooden handle of the shovel and cracking it in half, until his nose was a mere inch from the other man's. "Give me the demerit, asshole."

Jimmy looked more amused than intimidated by Jove's ridiculous show of arrogance. They were matched in height and girth, but the laugh etched on Jimmy's face gave him an edge. It infuriated Jove that he couldn't rile up his

opponent and act on the resulting emotions.

"Hand over your badge," Jimmy said.

Jove pulled the tiny card out of his pocket and flicked it at Jimmy. It bounced off Jimmy's cheekbone, close to his eye, but Jimmy refused to flinch. Instead, he stepped on top of the badge and ground it into the dirt.

"There's your third demerit," he told Jove. "See you when the tribunal gathers."

Jove waited until Jimmy was out of sight before he picked up the badge, dusted it off, and tucked it away again. He spotted me watching him.

"What?" he demanded.

"What is your problem?" I asked him. "These people didn't have to let us live here. They could have closed off the gates when we showed up here and sent us back to the city to die. The least we can do is help them to accommodate us and everyone else here."

"Do I look like a sewage worker to you?"

"Yes, actually. The jumpsuit works wonders for your complexion."

He furiously unzipped the suit, stepped out of it, and kicked it aside. "Goddamn it. I'm—"

"Jove Mason," I finished for him. I picked up the jumpsuit, flapped it around to dislodge most of the dirt and snow, then folded it neatly. "Yeah, we know, but here's a concept that you appear unable to grasp. Nobody here gives a damn about Jove Mason. You don't matter. Your money doesn't matter. All that matters is the two good hands that you aren't putting to use." I drove the point home by shoving the folded jumpsuit into his chest, nearly knocking him off balance. "So put them to use, Jove."

"This place has made you bold, hasn't it?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous. "You think you're hot shit because you don't have to clean toilets or shuck corn or whatever the hell else the people here do. You just sit in that little office of yours. Tell me, Georgie, what exactly did you do to win all of these idiots over so quickly?"

"I help out wherever I'm needed," I told him. "I don't turn my nose up at jobs that I think are beneath me. I get my shit done correctly and on time. That's how I won them over. You could take a couple pointers from me."

Jove scoffed and turned away, slinging the jumpsuit over his shoulder. "Pointers from you. That would be the day."

"You should be careful," I warned him as I turned back toward DotCom. "I hear the tribunal is strict. You might want to reassess how you behave

here, or you might find yourself on the other side of that wall."

"Tribunal, my ass."

The comment wavered a little at the end, the only hint that Jove preferred the inside of Camp Haven to the outside. I let him stew in his own guilt. It wasn't my job to keep Jove in line. That fell to Jacob, yet another thing that we argued about whenever we had the cottage alone together. I refused to take responsibility for Jacob's father. If Jove wanted to gamble his place at Camp Haven away, then that was his choice, but I wouldn't go down for his mistakes.

DotCom, which usually bustled with winter preparation activity, was slow that day. The community center—the big shared room with the low ceiling in the center of the building—was currently home to several children and their teachers. The school was in the process of being renovated ever since the leaking roof had caved in due to a snowfall. I smiled as I watched the toddlers shove handmade baby toys into their mouths while the older kids completed lessons on reusable chalkboards. The orange glow of the oil lamps staved off the wintry gray light that filtered in from outside, and the center smelled like hot tea leaves. While Jove and Jacob craved a higher level of comfort, the warmth and coziness of the community center was more than enough to relax me.

The Communications office in DotCom had become a safe haven of sorts. It was quiet, set away from the rest of the camp, and there were only three people who had the key. Me, Ludo, and Eirian. No one bothered me there as I tinkered with parts, trying to build working walkie talkies and radios with rechargeable batteries. The problem was finding an energy source to charge the batteries. The closest I'd gotten to a breakthrough was when Eirian brought me a broken solar panel from one of their salvage missions. I fixed the panel and managed to get it working, but I couldn't figure out the wiring to get it hooked up to the battery chargers. Despite the lack of development, the radios, like the labor, took my mind off of everything else going on, so I spent as much time in the Communications office as possible. When Eirian came in hours later, I was immersed with the solar panel, the battery chargers, and several half-built radios.

"How's it going?" he asked, closing the door behind him and flicking open his lighter to light a second lamp. "You shouldn't work in the dark. You'll ruin your eyesight."

My eyes watered at the sudden illumination as I hunched over my work.

“Sorry, I got a little carried away.”

“A little?” Eirian said. “How long have you been doing that?”

“About an hour.”

His hand covered mine. “Okay, take a break.”

I sat back and rubbed my eyes. They felt stiff in their sockets, like I’d forgotten to blink while I was focusing on the solar panel. Eirian moved my work to clear a space for himself to sit on the desk, something that would’ve driven me nuts if Jacob had done it. However, Eirian handled the solar panel and spare parts with such obvious care that I couldn’t get mad at him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“What makes you think anything’s wrong?”

“Because you’re holed up here in the dark with bloodshot eyes and a knife,” he reminded me. “No one’s that determined to get an old broken solar panel to work, Georgie. You’re clearly worried about something.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, slumping in the chair and covering my eyes. “What am I not worried about? Penny’s infection is getting worse, Pippa’s about to burst, Jove just got himself a meeting with the tribunal, and Jacob hasn’t looked me in the eye for two weeks. Meanwhile, my dad’s still missing, and I can’t even go look for him because I’m stuck waiting out this post-apocalypse bullshit—”

“Hold on,” Eirian said, his expression solemn. “Did you just say that Jove is going up against the tribunal?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “He got his third demerit from Jimmy today because he’s an idiot and an asshole. Honestly, it’s not my problem. Jove won’t change his attitude about this place, and I’m done trying to change it for him.”

“It’s going to be your problem,” Eirian said. “Camp Haven doesn’t take a tribunal meeting lightly, Georgie. It’s a community event. Everyone turns up to vote on the outcome, but the tribunal gets the final say. From the way Jove behaves around camp, he definitely won’t have it easy.”

“So let them smack him down a little bit,” I said with a shrug. “That’s what he needs anyway.”

“I don’t disagree,” he replied. “But I’m afraid the camp has stricter rules than that. They could kick Jove out of Camp Haven, and then you’ll have even more things to fight about with Jacob.”

I straightened up. “Wait, they would actually kick him out? I threatened him earlier about that—told him that they would—but I figured it was just a

white lie to get him to fall in line."

"They've done it before," Eirian said. "If someone's a danger or a detriment to the camp, they can't be allowed to live here. It's as simple as that."

"Yeah, but there was no EMP blast before," I argued. "Whoever got kicked out could run back to the city or find another homestead if they really wanted to. Jove doesn't have that option."

"He probably should have thought about that before he went and landed himself three demerits." He picked up the solar cell that I'd been working on to examine it. "This is going to be a mess. Tribunal meetings are crazy. They get the whole camp riled up."

"Why?"

"Why did people use to attend hangings in the town squares as if they were parties back in the old days?" he said. "It's entertainment, which, in Camp Haven, is pretty thin on the ground. People pick sides, gamble under the table, pick fights. It's nuts. We don't need that right now. We should be focused on gathering extra supplies to get us through the darker months and fortifying the camp against attacks."

"Attacks?" I repeated. "Who's attacking us?"

"No one yet," Eirian said. "But I overheard Ludo and the other security officers talking last night. Apparently, another survival camp has gone up a few miles south of here. They're not like us—they're terribly prepared and totally clueless—which means one thing. They're going to take what they can't find or make for themselves, and Camp Haven is the closest target."

He was worried about it. I could see that in the way his dark brow knitted together, casting a scrunched shadow on the rest of his face as he fiddled with the solar panel with the exact same amount of focus that I'd employed before. I wasn't the only person trying to get stuff off my mind. Eirian needed the Communications office as meditation space just as much as I did.

"Do they know we're here?" I asked him.

"Not yet, I don't think," he said. "But they'll figure it out eventually. Ludo's already on top of it. He's sending scouts to check it out tonight. I might volunteer to go, see if it's worth the fuss that security is making."

"Is that safe?" I confiscated the solar panel from him as he started bending it experimentally. "You just said yourself that the people there might be dangerous."

"From what I gathered, it's a stealth mission," Eirian explained. "We

won’t be making contact. We just want to see what kind of setup they have going on. But if there’s a tribunal, we might not have time for that kind of thing.” He dropped his head into his hands. “Ugh, this is going to be a total disaster.”

Instinctively, I rubbed his back through the thick fabric of his sweater. “How bad can it be? Look on the bright side. The other camp doesn’t know we’re here yet. That means we can buy some time. I’m sure Ludo is already working on a plan to beef up the security around Camp Haven. Don’t worry.”

For a minute or so, we sat like that, flames flickering in the lamps as I massaged the tension out of Eirian’s shoulders and neck. Eventually, he ducked out from under my touch.

“You okay?” I asked as he slid off the desk, increasing the distance between us, and fiddled with the bag he’d brought with him.

“Yeah, I think I just figured you out.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He pulled a steel water canteen from his bag and handed it to me. “You’re the type of person that worries about everybody else so that you don’t have to worry about yourself.”

I refused the canteen. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s not a bad thing.” He pried open my fingers and placed the canteen in my palm. “On one hand, it shows that you’re selfless and you care deeply about the people around you. On the other hand, it means that you’re avoiding your own problems by focusing on everyone else’s.”

“Tell me, on which homestead did you take Psychology 101?” I asked him, finally taking a sip from the canteen. “Was it here at Camp Haven?”

He gave a wry smile. “When you live as simply as we do, there are less distractions. It makes observing other people that much more interesting. You can learn a lot just by watching and listening.”

“So you’re a stalker.”

“I pay attention,” he rectified. “Like with Ludo earlier.”

“When you were eavesdropping on a private conversation?”

“Listening,” he corrected. “And you’re deflecting. I get it, but let me tell you something. As noble as it is to put everyone else before yourself, it’s no good if you’re neglecting your own care. Self-care isn’t selfish, Georgie. I get the feeling someone taught you differently when you were growing up.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Eirian stopped me.

“You don’t have to explain,” he said. “I just wanted you to know that it’s

okay to need a break from taking care of everyone else. You're allowed to focus on you every once in a while. Should we get to work?"

As simple as that, he changed the subject, turning away from me to focus his attention on the solar panel and the rough models of walkie talkies that I'd made. I watched as he studied my handwritten notes on what I could remember about wiring electronics, his nose wrinkling in concentration.

"It was my dad."

"Hmm?"

"My dad was the one who taught me that self-care was selfish," I clarified, glad that Eirian kept his eyes on his work rather than turning to face me. "Not directly. I'm sure he didn't mean it. After my mom died, he was a complete mess. He was paranoid about everything, and it caused him to have crazy mood swings. The entire world scared him. That's why we came out here."

Eirian continued playing with the solar cells and spare bits of wiring, but the pair of pliers that he'd picked up weren't moving between his fingers. He was listening to me speak but respecting the fact that I wasn't used to sharing this information with other people.

"It was just the two of us," I went on. "I was the only one who *could* take care of him, so that's what I did. He thought it was the other way around. I guess we took care of each other. He kept me alive, and I kept him sane. Or at least I did my best to keep him sane. Not sure that worked out so well."

"It sounds stressful," Eirian said. "Looking after your father at such a young age."

"It was," I agreed. "Ultimately, that's why I left. Those mood swings were bleeding into me. I'd get angry at the smallest inconvenience or cry if someone went wrong. If a tree branch tapped on the window, I had a moment when I was convinced he was right, that someone had finally come to kill us."

"God, I'm sorry." Eirian finally turned around to face me, and I wiped a few stray tears from my cheeks so that he wouldn't see them.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "That's why I got out. That's why I left him here and went into the city. It scared the shit out of me to be around that many people at first, but I did it."

"If you don't mind me asking," he said, "why is it that important for you to find your father if he treated you so poorly in the past?"

"Because I know my dad," I said, wiping my nose on the sleeve of my

shirt. “And he’s probably terrified.”

5

I lay in bed in the cottage before dinner, savoring the rare moment of alone time. Jacob was still at work and Jove was off somewhere else, no doubt causing more trouble for the camp. The sun had set already. Leftover light glinted off a fresh snow flurry as it settled on the ground. As always, I studied the view from the window. The Rockies stared back, looming over Camp Haven. Some saw their towering grace as protection. The mountains shielded us from the horrors below in the city. Sometimes, I felt the same, cocooned between the walls of rock and snow. Other times, the mountains were dark and daunting, daring me to leave Camp Haven to trek through their obstinate passes. My father's voice woke me in the middle of the night, calling to me, pleading for me to come find him. It was a haunting lullaby that I wished I could forget.

Jacob burst in, ruining my attempt at a nap. As usual, he was sweating through the layers of sweaters and jackets that he wore, having just come off a shift with the Miscellaneous crew.

"I hate this place," he groaned, shedding his outermost coat, which was covered with oil smears. "Do you know what we had to do today?"

"Something terrible, no doubt," I replied.

"We had to turn animal fat into lamp oil." He fell onto the bed opposite mine, and the metal frame creaked with his weight. "Hours of chopping up fat. I never want to see another deer in my life."

I turned over, away from Jacob, and pressed a pillow over my ears. "That's how things are done here."

“I know,” he snapped. “You don’t have to remind me.”

“Then stop bitching about it.”

“What’s your problem?”

I pulled the blanket over my head. “Five minutes, Jacob. I wanted five minutes of peace and quiet before the dinner bell rang, and here you are.”

“I live here too, you know.”

“Then live here quietly.”

The mattress groaned as he rolled over with a scoff. His frustration radiated off of him like a heat wave, spreading across the small room to fill me with annoyance. This was what it had come to. Jacob’s mere presence irked me. Sharing a room with him and Jove painted a target on my back. Most of the compound respected me, but they had reservations about my relationship with the Masons, especially since they all still thought that Jacob and I were engaged.

Just as my eyes started to drift shut again, a roar of noise echoed into the cottage from outside. The thwack of a fist meeting a face tore me out of bed. I ignored the boots and stormed outside. Jacob followed, a little slower on the uptake, and we found Jove going head to head with one of the other sanitation workers. The two men were locked together in a vicious fistfight. The other guy, a younger man in his thirties, proved to have the upper hand. He gripped Jove around the neck with one arm and used the other to punch Jacob’s father repeatedly in the face. A crowd had gathered around them, but it was mostly women and children who didn’t want to intervene.

“Stop, stop, stop!” I ordered, pushing through the circle of spectators and catching hold of the other man’s arm before he could land yet another punch to Jove’s demolished nose. “You’re going to kill him!”

The man’s temper faded as soon as I interrupted his barrage of attacks. He dropped Jove in the dirt and tried to step away, but Jacob took him up by the coat collar. The other man, who was taller than Jacob, automatically lashed out. Jacob ducked, tackled the man around the midriff, and they both sprawled to the ground.

“Jacob, don’t!” I said, unable to break up the new fight while Jove lay unconscious on the ground. His nose was beyond help, and his airways were filling up with blood. “We need to get Jove to the med bay. He can’t breathe.”

Within minutes, someone produced the sheet off their bed, which we rolled Jove into. Jacob released Jove’s opponent to help carry his father

across the compound to the med bay. To my surprise, the man Jove had been fighting helped too. One of his eyes bore a hefty bruise.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Mitchell."

"He hit you first, didn't he?" I said. Jacob's shoulders rose toward his ears. He was listening in.

"Yup," Mitchell said. "I'm sorry about all of this. I totally lost it. This guy's been a pain in my ass ever since he got assigned to Sanitation. Won't do the work. Thinks he's all high and mighty. He slows the rest of us down. A few nights ago, I missed dinner because I had to fix this jerk's mistake. I had enough. I said something nasty to him, and he snapped. That's when the first hit landed."

"I've been on the other end of Jove's comments," I assured Mitchell. "I can understand wanting to punch the guy."

"That's my father you're talking about," Jacob said over his shoulder as we continued lugging Jove toward the med bay. He stirred in the sheet, mumbling incoherently. Blood gurgled at the corner of his lips.

"It's no secret that your father's an ass," I reminded him. "Do you remember what he said when we told him that we were engaged?"

"No."

"He looked at me from head to toe and then turned to you and asked you if you'd found me on the discount rack," I said, gritting my teeth at the memory. "I'll never forget that."

"Wow," Mitchell said as we approached the med bay.

Jacob declined to comment and kicked open the door of the bay. As we maneuvered Jove inside and rested him gently on one of the cots, Pippa looked on in a mixture of horror and astonishment.

"What did he do this time?" she asked.

"Punched me in the face," Mitchell answered, pointing to his black eye.

"Damn it, is anyone here?" Jacob jogged to the end of the med bay and pounded on the door of Jax's office. "Hello! We need help!"

Nita emerged from one of the exam rooms, textbook in hand. "Jacob. Hey, what's going on? Holy shit, what happened to Jove?"

He took her by the arm and led her to Jove's bedside. "Please, I don't think he can breathe. You have to do something."

Nita jumped into action, tipping Jove's head back to assess the damage. She produced a strange instrument from a nearby drawer and bent over

Jacob's father. "Of course this happens as soon as Jax takes a break. Christ."

Jacob and Nita crowded Jove, so I stepped away to give them space. Mitchell ran his fingers through his long dusty hair, pacing from cot to cot. When his repetitions made me dizzy, I caught him by the shoulder and sat him down.

"What if he dies?" he asked me. "What if I punched him so hard that he dies? They're going to kick me out of the camp! I don't want to leave. This is my home."

"He's not going to die," I assured him. "He's got a broken nose, and at worse, a concussion. Once Nita clears his airways and resets his nose, he'll be fine."

"That doesn't mean I won't get a demerit for this," Mitchell said. "Oh, man, is this bad enough to call a tribunal for?"

I offered Mitchell my water canteen. "I have news for you. Jove is already waiting on a meeting with the tribunal. He's in deep shit for all the trouble he's caused in the past few weeks. I highly doubt they'll even bother with you."

Mitchell relaxed as he sipped from the canteen. "A tribunal's already been called? Wow, we haven't had one in years."

"Dad's in trouble?" Pippa chimed in from the next bed over. "What's going to happen to him?"

"We don't know yet," I told her. "Don't worry about it right now."

Nita and Jacob continued working on Jove. Nita had managed to clear the blood from his throat. He was breathing on his own again. As he slowly regained consciousness, the pain became harder for him to ignore. He let out a noise somewhere between a moan and a yell.

"Jove," Nita said, steadying the big man's shoulders against the hospital bed. "Your nose is pretty badly broken. I'm going to have to reset it, and it's going to hurt like hell."

"Painkillers," Jove begged, his voice garbled. His fingers twisted in the bed sheets. "Please, Nita."

"I can't give you anything," she told him as he whimpered. "We have a limited supply of painkillers, and I'm on strict orders not to give them out unless completely necessary. Get ready, Jove. Here we go."

Jacob held Jove against the mattress as Nita took Jove's nose between her hands. With a disgusting crunch, she moved the bone back into place. Jove howled in pain, bucking against Jacob's hold.

“That’s it!” Nita said. “You’re done. All I have to do now is tape it up. All you have to do is take care of it and not cause any more trouble. Do you think you can manage that?”

“Doubtful,” I muttered, but Jove nodded.

Nita left Jove’s bedside to fetch the things she needed to splint his nose, but she paused before passing me. “Listen, Georgie. I’m obligated to record everything that happens in the med bay so that we can inventory supplies. That means I have to report this to Jax.”

“Go ahead,” I told her.

She looked over at Jacob and Jove. “It’s not looking good for Jove, and I’m not talking about his face. The whole camp hates him.”

“I’m aware.”

“I’ve already heard rumors that they’re going to kick him out,” she said, keeping her voice low.

“I’m not sure those are just rumors anymore,” I told her.

“Aren’t you worried?” she asked. “About what this could do to Penny, Pippa, and Jacob?”

My stomach rolled over, either out of hunger or increasing vexation. “I told Jacob. I told him over and over that Jove needed to toe the line. It’s all we’ve been arguing about for the past few weeks. I did what I could. The rest is up to Jove and the tribunal.”

I stormed out of the med bay, leaving Nita to patch up Jove with the company of Jacob and Mitchell. The fight had made us miss the dinner bell. The Bistro teemed with campers enjoying a hot stew and fresh bread rolls. The delicious scent of marinated meat and broth tickled my nose, but as much as I wanted a hot meal, the last thing I wanted was to be around that many people. I settled for lurking around the Bistro’s back door, the one that led to the kitchen, and hoping that someone would magically emerge with a bowl of stew to offer. The chances were thin. No one ate out here in the snow and the cold. Except Eirian apparently.

He shouldered the door open, still wrapped up in his big coat and scarf. The fluffy neck piece was bright purple, which brought out the pretty pale tones of his skin.

“That’s a good color on you,” I said.

He started, surprised to see me loitering in the bushes, but regained his composure in a flash. “I’ll have you know that purple is the color of royalty among other things.”

“I wasn’t kidding,” I said, bumping his shoulder. “It brings out your eyes.”

“Why, thank you.” He looked around at the empty campground then back at me. “What are you doing out here alone? Where’s Jacob?”

“In the med bay.”

Eirian’s eyes widened. “What happened to him? Is he okay?”

I waved away his concerns, eyeing the bowl of soup that he balanced between his gloved palms. “He’s fine. It’s Jove. He picked a fight with someone and got his nose broken.”

“This is going to keep escalating, isn’t it?” Eirian sighed. He noticed my laser sharp focus and lifted the bowl of stew. “You want to share this? You look like you could use a pick me up.”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

He sat down on the top of the compost lid and patted the space next to him. “Remember what I said earlier about not taking care of yourself? Refusing to eat definitely falls into that category. Come on, they served me way too much anyway.”

He waved the spoon at me until I snatched it out of his hand and took a bite of stew. It warmed me all the way down, and I moaned in relief.

“Hold this,” he said, offering me the bowl as he dug in his coat pocket. “I have something else for you.”

I lifted the bowl, letting the steam warm my frozen nose. “Honestly, I don’t need much else.”

A metal flask glinted in the moonlight. I traded Eirian the bowl for the flask, uncapped it, and took a whiff.

“Is this moonshine?”

Eirian beamed proudly. “My own recipe. That’s the last of it though. We won’t have any more maize or barley until the spring.”

“I can’t believe Camp Haven allows that,” I said. “Doesn’t seem like something they would want in the compound.”

“They don’t,” Eirian said. “But it’s also unrealistic to keep the camp totally dry.”

“Does Ludo know you make that?”

“He buys it from me.”

“No kidding!”

“Have a sip,” he offered. “It’s a decent remedy for a cold night. Keeps you warm.”

I tipped the flask to my lips. The smell alone was sharp, but the taste was even more potent. I coughed as the homemade whiskey burned my throat but relished the flood of warmth through my bones.

"Thanks," I said. "I needed that. The stew too."

"I figured." He finished off what was left of the meal, tipping the bowl to drink the leftover broth. "Listen, I've been thinking about your father. You still want to find him, right?"

"Of course I do."

"It's kind of a long shot, but there is one person who might know something about where he went," Eirian said.

"Who?"

"Sylvester."

I slumped against the wall of the Bistro. "It's no good. I asked Ludo about Sylvester weeks ago. He told me that no one gets to talk to Sylvester face-to-face."

"That's mostly true," Eirian said. "Actually, I don't think anyone has ever seen him in person, but you can request a meeting in the cabin with him. It's a long list. Plenty of people want his advice, and most of them get denied the privilege, but you could at least try."

"How do I request a meeting?"

"There's a box in one of the offices at DotCom," he replied. "Just write your name down and put it in the box."

"Really? It's that simple?"

"Like I said, it's a long shot," he said. "We could go now if you want."

I hopped off my seat on the compost bin, took one more sip from the flask, and handed the moonshine back to him. "I'm down."

I waited for Eirian to return the bowl to the Bistro, then the two of us headed into DotCom. The night's event, a trivia contest, hadn't started yet. Everyone was still eating dinner. We found the office with Sylvester's box. It was nondescript, an old ammunitions tin with a slot drilled in the side. I'd seen in a few times without knowing what it was. Now, I jotted my name down on a small slip of paper, folded it in half, and jimmied it through the opening in the box.

"That's that," I said. Outside the office, DotCom began to fill up with those who wanted to participate in the trivia contest. "What now?"

"Now we wait to see if your request gets approved," Eirian said. "In the meantime, what do you say to a round of trivia? We could team up. I'm

hopeless at pop culture."

"Whoa, I can't have an amateur dragging me down," I joked, leading him out of the office and down the hall toward the main room.

"Excuse me, but there is an entire category on scat, and I don't know if you know this, but I am the master of—"

"Shit?" I finished for him. "You're the master of shit. Yeah, you're really selling me on this whole trivia partner thing."

"You know what?" He dove forward, tickling me around the waist. I laughed and tried to bat him away. "That's what you get. Who's the trivia master now? Huh?"

"Still me!" I gasped, grinning from ear to ear. "You're forgetting that I grew up in the woods too."

Eirian's fingers danced playfully at my sides. "You've wounded my ego. I can't go on like this."

"Oh, shut up!"

Someone cleared their throat, and we both looked up from our playful tussle to see Jacob standing in the doorway to the main hall. At once, Eirian dropped his hands from my waist and took a step away. I straightened the hem of my sweater and smoothed out my ruffled hair.

"I just came to tell you that Dad's doing better," Jacob said, though his eyes remained on Eirian. All of his muscles were pulled taut, the tendons in his neck standing out against the skin. "Nita splinted his nose, and he's sleeping now. Jax checked on him too. She said he got lucky. No concussion."

"I should let the two of you talk," Eirian said, trying to pass Jacob in the doorway. "I'm glad your dad's all right, Jacob."

Jacob didn't move, blocking Eirian's exit. He stared up into the taller man's face. "Are you?"

Eirian, confused, replied, "Of course."

"Let him go," I told Jacob. "He's supposed to be helping with the trivia contest."

Jacob finally stepped aside to let Eirian pass, but Eirian lingered a moment longer before exiting to the main hall.

"Let me know if you need anything," he told me, glancing at Jacob with a worried tilt to his lips.

"I will."

When Eirian left, Jacob folded his arms across his chest and stared at me

from across the hall. “The two of you seem awfully friendly.”

“Yeah, because we’re *friends*,” I said coolly. “Am I not allowed to make any at Camp Haven?”

“Like you’ve had any trouble in that department,” he returned. “Do you ever get tired of pandering to these weirdos? The only reason they’ve survived this long is because they’re just like your father. Paranoid and probably a little sick in the head.”

“I’m not pandering to them.” My hands began to shake, not from the cold, so I balled them up and shoved them into my pockets. “And you have no right to talk about my father.”

“Why not?” Jacob challenged. “You talk about mine.”

“Yours is *here*,” I told him. “And he’s causing trouble. If Jove calmed down and started acting like a civilized human being, I wouldn’t have to talk about him.”

Before Jacob could reply, the door opened again, and Ludo butted into the hallway. “Hey, folks. Eirian said you were back here. Aren’t you coming to play trivia?”

Jacob rolled his eyes. “Oh, *Eirian* sent you back to check on us, huh? No, I don’t want to play any damn trivia—”

“I do,” I said, raising my hand. “Want to be partners, Ludo? I bet we could kick some ass together.”

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” Ludo said, “but before we head out there, I wanted to clue the two of you in. Jax reported your father’s fight, Jacob. Originally, we were going to call the tribunal next week since this camp a few miles over looks like they might be on the hunt for supplies soon, but we can’t ignore your father’s behavior. The situation has escalated too far. He’s causing harm to himself and others, and that’s one thing that Camp Haven does not condone. We moved the tribunal meeting up.”

“For when?” Jacob asked.

“Tomorrow.”

THE WORD of Jove’s tribunal meeting spread like wildfire through the camp. People talked about it all day long, discussing Jove’s misgivings at length while they worked around the compound. Storytime was cancelled that evening in order to leave DotCom free for the event. Children were not allowed to attend. Apparently, the camp had witnessed some pretty violent reactions to the tribunal’s orders in the past. The tribunal itself was a bit of a

mystery. Ludo admitted that he had used to have a seat in the panel, but after a particular grueling meeting, he gave it up to another high-ranking member of the camp. After working with several different department heads within Camp Haven, I could guess which ones were involved with the tribunal, but I would have to wait until the actual event to see if I was right.

I tried to avoid Jacob as much as possible during the day. Ludo had excused him from his miscellaneous duties to sit with Jove in the med bay and prepare his father for what might happen during the tribunal meeting. I wasn't sure what Ludo expected Jacob to do. He didn't have any knowledge of the camp's judicial system either. No matter what, I had no plans to join them. At this point, the entire Mason family was holed up in the med bay, and playing pretend engagement with Jacob was getting tiring, but of course, while I was working at the Bistro, the servers asked me to bring lunch trays to the med bay.

"Food," I announced to the Mason family as I entered the room with a stack of trays. "Where do you want it?"

"I'm not hungry," Jove said. His face looked nasty. His nose had swollen to the size of a tomato, and Nita's splint looked ineffective compared to the damage. "Can barely eat anyway with this damn thing on my face."

Jacob relieved me of the trays and placed one each on Jove, Penny, and Pippa's beds. "You need to eat, Dad. We don't know what's going to happen tonight."

"Bah!" Jove knocked the lid off of a steel camping bowl. "Stew again! God, do these people know how to make anything else?"

"It's leftovers from last night," I told him. "No waste, remember?"

"It's garbage," Jove spat. "Leftovers are for rats and homeless people."

"And on that note, I'm out of here," I announced. I stopped by Pippa's bed. She, unlike Jove, did not complain about the food that was delivered to her. "How are you doing, kid?"

"As good as I can, I guess," she said, slurping broth off of her spoon. "Have you heard anything?"

"About your dad? Not really?"

"What about Mom?" Pippa looked over at Penny, who was asleep once again. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her awake and alert. Penny's lunch tray lay untouched at the foot of her cot. "She's barely coherent, Georgie. Nita won't tell me anything. I know that's not good."

"I'll ask Nita about it when I get the chance," I promised her. "For right

now, you should focus on yourself. Keep your stress levels down. That baby's coming soon."

"Thirty-eight weeks," she grumbled. "I wish he would move it along. I'm beyond uncomfortable, and this place is boring as hell. At this point, I'd rather clean the toilets than spend another hour in the med bay."

I grinned and patted her shoulder. "Be glad you're assigned to work with the kids. You don't want to know what your dad smelled like when he got out of work each day."

I SPENT the rest of the day toying with the solar panels and walkie talkies. Eirian was busy setting up DotCom for the tribunal meeting, so he couldn't make it to Communications for his usual lesson in handmade, solar-powered electronics. I fell asleep on the desk, my cheek pressed to a coil of copper wire. When I woke up, night had fallen, and a cyclical imprint decorated my cheek like a poorly cut doily pattern. As I rubbed my face to restart the circulation, voices carried down the hall from the main room. I stood up, grabbing my coat on the way out.

"What's going on?" I asked when I found Eirian, Ludo, and a few other camp members talking animatedly in DotCom's vast meeting room. "Has something happened?"

"The tribunal wants to meet outside," Eirian announced. "By the bonfire."

"It's freezing outside," I said. "Why did they move it?"

"They're anticipating trouble," Ludo explained. "They're expecting the whole camp to turn up. If Mason gets too belligerent, it could encourage unfavorable behavior. The tribunal figures that if we hold it outside, the cold will subdue some of the campers. Less people will show up."

"Camp Haven has its shit together in every area," I said. "You're telling me it turns into a riot as soon as someone sits in front of the tribunal?"

"It's the nature of the event," Eirian replied. "That's just the way it is."

I sighed and threaded my arms through the sleeves of my coat. "Outside it is. What time are we starting? Do you need help?"

"It starts in ten minutes," Eirian said. "And you can carry one of these warmers out to the square for me if you don't mind."

I accepted the free-standing warming lamp from Eirian's grasp. They were an invention of the camp's, made to burn coals at about shoulder height to heat the air around us. Together, Ludo, Eirian, and I lugged a few of them to the square. The bonfire had already been lit, and a crowd gathered, craning

their necks for a look at the small group of people hidden behind a room divider in the corner of the main square. Six chairs had been placed on the stage that the camp usually used for outdoor events. Five of them were arranged in a semicircle, facing the sixth. The sixth was alone.

We stationed the warming lamps and got them lit. I shivered in the moonlight anyway, though I think the chill was more from anticipation than the biting mountain air. Eirian rubbed my shoulders to warm me up.

“Need a shot of moonshine?” he asked in a low, teasing voice.

“More like five,” I replied.

A roar went up from the crowd as the tribunal emerged from behind the room divider, stepped onto the stage, and took their seats in the five chairs. I had worked in so many departments of the camp that I recognized each member of the panel. Jax sat on the far left. Next to her was Helen, the strong-armed woman who ran the kitchens. In the middle sat Randall, Ludo’s second-in-command for security. To his right were Todd and Terri, who were brother and sister. They were amongst the oldest living members of Camp Haven, and so were considered the wisest.

Jax stood and the crowd cheered again. She waved at them to be quiet and cleared her throat. “This tribunal has been called together to question the behavior and intent of one Jove Mason. Bring him out, please!”

The doors to the med bay opened and two of Ludo’s men escorted Jove to the stage. The crowd jeered as he passed by, making faces and calling names. I spotted Mitchell, the man that Jove had punched yesterday, standing quietly away from the others. Jove yelled back at the crowd, spittle flying from his lips as his face turned bright red. Little did he know that he was giving the crowd the exact scene that they wanted. Jacob followed behind his father, his head bowed to avoid the glares of the campers. Pippa, blessedly, remained inside.

“This is barbaric,” I muttered to Eirian as we watched Ludo’s men heave Jove into the final seat on the stage.

“I agree,” he said. “If it were me, these tribunal meetings would be held in private, but they allow the campers to vote on the outcome.”

“The campers decide what happens?” I asked him.

“In a way,” Eirian explained. “The tribunal takes their concerns into account, but Sylvester has the final say.”

“Jove Mason,” Jax said, facing Jove from her chair. “You have been called here today because your integrity has been challenged. Randall will

read you the list of complaints set against you. Randall?"

Randall cleared his throat and unfurled a short piece of paper to read off of. "Mr. Mason has been accused of the following: failure to arrive to work in a timely manner, failure to complete obligatory tasks assigned to him, failure to comply with Camp Haven's regulated safety standards, failure to resolve personal disagreements without physically harming the other party, and failure to respect those who make Camp Haven's mission possible. Mr. Mason, do you admit guilt to these accusations?"

"Go to hell," Jove snarled.

"We'll take that as a yes," Randall said. "Now we'll hear from members of the camp on their opinion of Mr. Mason. We have Jacob Mason to speak for his father and a number of campers to speak against him. Let's get started."

The proceedings were lengthy. There was a long line of people who wished to express complaints about Jove's behavior. Each of them was allowed two minutes to make their case, during which the tribunal took notes. In a manner of weeks, Jove had managed to offend nearly a fourth of the entire camp, and they had not taken kindly to his attacks. Jacob was the last to speak. When he did so, his voice wavered as the night swallowed it.

"I know that my father has not been the most helpful addition to Camp Haven," he began, immediately eliciting boos and hisses from the crowd. He ignored them, focusing on the tribunal instead. "I implore you to remember that we come from a different world than this one. It's been difficult for my father to adjust, but I think we can come to a compromise that would be agreeable to everyone."

"What kind of compromise?" Jax asked.

"Move my father out of the sanitation department," Jacob suggested, and once more, the crowd roared with displeasure. Jacob raised his voice. "He can work elsewhere. Anywhere."

"Mr. Mason Junior," Jax said, peering over the top of her glasses at Jacob. "If we allowed every person to switch jobs simply because they didn't like it, we would have chaos on our hands."

"I understand that—"

"Do you have anything to say about your father's character?" Jax asked him. "Have you discussed possible solutions to these issues?"

"He's a good man," Jacob said. "He's spent the last thirty years contributing to society. He should have a chance."

“Unfortunately, we’re not concerned with any society outside this one,” Jax replied, “to which your father has refused to contribute, I might add. That’s two minutes. Please step down from the stage.”

“But—”

Jacob was interrupted as Ludo’s security men took him by either arm and attempted to lead him away from Jove’s chair. He shook them off and stepped off the stage himself.

“Mr. Mason,” Jax said, raising her voice as she addressed Jove. “You now have two minutes to defend yourself. Is there anything you wish to say? Please keep in mind that derogatory remarks and defamation will immediately serve as reason to strip you of the privilege of these two minutes.”

“Privilege?” Jove snorted like an angry bull. “You call two minutes privilege? This whole thing—this tribunal—is a farce. What could you do to me, eh? What’s the punishment? Muck more toilets? Clean more shit? I will not stand for this treatment. Just wait until I can get in contact with my lawyer…”

On and on he went for the allotted time. The tribunal let him speak, watching him with amused smirks as the crowd egged on Jove’s temper. Two minutes felt like two hours, until Jax finally held up a hand to stop Jove from talking.

“That will be all,” she said over him as he continued on about his lawyer in Denver. “Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard both sides of the argument. It’s now time to vote. The matter at hand stands as follows: Jove Mason has proven himself a detriment to this compound. Your decision is this. Shall we allow Mr. Mason to remain here as a member of Camp Haven under the assumption that he will work to change his ways or shall we expel Mr. Mason from the security of our compound in order to protect the people within it?”

Jacob’s face fell. This was it. Either Jove stayed or went, and I had a feeling I knew which way the crowd was leaning.

“All in favor of giving Mr. Mason another chance?” Jax called. A few scattered hands went up. “All opposed?”

A sea of fingers reached toward the sky, accompanied by another roar of noise. For the first time, Jove looked worried. Sweat beaded on his red forehead and dripped down his temple as he looked out at the crowd as they condemned him.

“The tribunal will confer,” Jax announced.

The five members on stage put their heads together. For the longest minute of my life, they murmured their opinions to one another. The crowd was dead silent, as if hoping that the tribunal’s voices might carry on the wind. There was no need. Jax stood up once again.

“Unless Sylvester decides otherwise,” she began, “Jove Mason is no longer a member of this compound. He shall be banished from the premises as soon as we see fit.”

6

The crowd cheered with mass approval, but when I saw the look of horror on Jacob's face, I wondered if I had given the people of Camp Haven too much credit before. Before the EMP blast, Jove would have considered being expelled from the compound a blessing. He would have fired up his Humvee and driven it down the mountain back into the city without a glance over his shoulder at what he'd left behind. Things were different now. There was nothing to go back to in Denver except for disastrous trouble. Jove had never been camping a day in his life. I doubted he even knew how to get a fire started without a blow torch, let alone set up a shelter for himself or find food. The animals were starting to burrow away in preparation for the incoming snow storms. It was rare to find one out and about these days, but if a rabbit did stick its head out of its cubby hole, Jove wasn't keen enough to catch it. Camp Haven had all but condemned Jove to death.

"No," Jacob shouted over the crowd. Ludo's security guards kept the onlookers from climbing the stage. Jove, whose hands were bound to the chair, rocked to and fro in an attempt to free himself from the restraints. "You can't do this!"

"Silence!" Jax said, and the crowd fell quiet. "The decision will be taken to Sylvester for the final review. In the meantime, I cannot condone this behavior while we wait for his confirmation. Please disperse. Return to your dormitories."

The people of Camp Haven erupted into loud complaints. This was the event of the season, and Jax was cutting it short. I was grateful. The jeering

crowd was making all of this worse. Jacob grew more tense with every shout. The whites of Jove's eyes shone in the dark night as he yelled at the tribunal to cut the ropes around his hands. Jax put two fingers in her mouth and let out an earsplitting whistle.

"This camp will come to order!" she boomed. "Now! Unless you all want a demerit?"

The residents of the compound recognized that she was not bluffing, and the throng finally began to disperse. I slipped in with a group of people heading back to the dormitories, but Jacob leapt off the stage, bullied his way through, and caught me by my coat.

"What are you doing?" I asked, tugging free.

"Me?" he said. "What about you? You brought us here, Georgie! To keep us safe, you claimed. Did you hear what they said? They're kicking him out. He won't survive out there. He doesn't know how."

"I don't know what you expect me to do about it," I told him.

"You have pull with people here," Jacob said, pleading with his eyes. "Everyone likes you. You could talk to Ludo or Jax. Tell them that he didn't mean it. Tell them that we'll make sure he toes the line from now on."

Behind Jacob, Jove argued with the tribunal from his chair. Jax and Helen attempted to reason with him, but the other three members of the panel pointedly ignored him. The full extent of what expulsion meant to Jove was finally setting in. There was a note of panic in his deep voice, which carried to where Jacob and I were standing.

"This is all just a terrible mistake," he was saying. I recognized that oily tone. It was the one he used when he was trying to close a business deal. "It's the stress, you see? Once I become accustomed to the camp's ways, I'll be better. I swear."

"You've had weeks to assimilate, Mr. Mason," Jax said wryly. "And you failed to make that argument moments ago when we asked you to defend your place here in the compound."

"I can't lie to them," I told Jacob. "I know your father, Jacob. If he gets a second chance, he'll use it to weasel his way in and take advantage of every person here."

Jacob fixed me with a withering stare. "He's going to die out there, Georgie."

"He should have thought of that before he decided to be an ass." I tried to walk away, but Jacob seized me again and pulled me into the shadows

between the Bistro and DotCom.

“This is what it’s come to?” he asked, whirling me around so that we were face to face. I hadn’t been this close to him in weeks, close enough to see the sparkling embers of anger in his light brown eyes. “Are you that angry at me for breaking up with you? Because this is really petty, Georgie, even for you.”

“Are you serious right now?” All of my frustration with Jacob that I’d kept inside during the five years of our relationship began bubbling to the surface. “That’s what you think this is about?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of,” Jacob shot back. “You won’t help him. You’re forcing him out of the compound.”

“*I’m* not doing anything,” I said loudly, catching the attention of a few passers-by. “Don’t you dare try to make this my fault. Jove made his own bed. His behavior is his own responsibility. Besides, I have problems of my own.”

“Oh, problems of your own?” Jacob challenged, throwing his hands up. “What could those possibly be?” He leveled up the pitch of his voice to mock mine. “Learn how to pluck a chicken, build working radios with golden boy Eirian?”

“Eirian does whatever he has to in order to keep this place running.” My face grew warm as I defended the other man, and I hoped that the lamps around the bonfire weren’t bright enough for Jacob to see the red in my cheeks. “And for your information, I do have other problems. My father—”

“Not this again,” he said. “Your father isn’t here, Georgie. That means one of two things. One, he left because he figured you would never come back to him, or two, he’s dead. I’m betting on the latter, if the things you told me about your father are true.”

The anger boiled over. I shoved Jacob backward, and he stumbled over the uneven ground. He caught himself against the wall of DotCom, but it took him a second longer to rearrange his countenance. He stared at me, mouth open in shock that I’d laid hands on him.

“How dare you?” I whispered, advancing toward him like a tiger stalking its prey. “I brought you here to keep you safe, even when I knew that you and I were never going to work. Your mother and sister are alive because of me, but *my* family is gone, Jacob. I’m not a part of yours, remember? The thought of my father is the only thing I have left, and I will not let you take that from me.”

Jacob didn’t back down. “Be realistic,” he said. “It’s been weeks since we got to Camp Haven, and there’s been no sign of your father. No one’s heard of him, Georgie. You need to face facts. He’s gone.”

“You don’t know that,” I said, “and I won’t stop looking for him until I’ve exhausted every single possibility.”

“What other possibilities are there?”

“Sylvester.”

For the first time since the argument began, Jacob paused to consider my reply before jumping in with a hurtful comeback. “Sylvester? What are you talking about?”

“I applied for a meeting with him,” I told him, more to prove that he was wrong about my father. Jacob didn’t need to know how slim my chances were of actually procuring the meeting. “If anyone knows what happened to my father, it’s him.”

“This is perfect.” He half-smiled as he turned around to check on Jove, who was still making a case for himself on stage with the tribunal. Jacob laughed, picked me up, and swung me around.

I thumped on his shoulder. “Put me down!”

He obliged, setting me on my feet. “Georgie, why didn’t you say something before? This is amazing. You can ask Sylvester to give my dad another chance.”

A coldness swept through my body, one that didn’t have anything to do with the chilly nighttime air. “Jacob, I’m not asking Sylvester about Jove.”

The happiness slid off of Jacob’s face in less than a second. “What are you talking about? Why not?”

“The tribunal already decided,” I reminded him. “Jove’s out. I need to find out about my father, and I’m not going to waste time fighting a losing battle.”

“Damn it, Georgie! You are so selfish!”

Eirian appeared behind Jacob, towering over my ex-fiancé. “Everything okay over here?”

Jacob started and whirled around to face the other man. “None of your damn business. Jesus, you’re everywhere, aren’t you? I’m starting to think you have a thing for my fianceé.”

“I’m not your—” I began.

“I just came over to tell you that the tribunal heard back from Sylvester,” Eirian said, holding his hands up in a gesture of innocence. “You seemed too

busy arguing with Georgie to notice that they're taking your father to the gates."

Jacob spun around toward the stage. The tribunal and Jove were gone, and other members of the camp lugged the six chairs off the lifted platform to put them away. Jacob scanned the campground. Ludo's security team dragged Jove, hands still tied behind his back, toward the massive gates that kept the riffraff out of Camp Haven. Jacob sprinted toward them, and I followed after him.

"It's no use," Eirian said to me. His legs were so long that he took one stride for every two of mine. "Once Sylvester decides that someone's out, they're out for good. Georgie." He took my hand before I could catch up with Jacob fully, pulling me to a stop. "Listen to me. Defending Jove isn't going to help anyone. If anything, it's just going to ruin the positive relationships that you've worked so hard to build here."

Ludo's men worked together to operate the massive locking mechanism that kept the steel gates sealed. All the while, Jacob pleaded with them to stop. Jove had given up. His enormous form slumped over, his knees resting against the dirt, head bowed to his chest. For once, I actually pitied him.

"Can you talk to them?" I asked Eirian, clutching the front of his coat. "Please? I don't give a damn about Jove, but he has a wife and a daughter here, both of whom are stuck in the med bay. I really don't want to be the one that has to tell them that he's been kicked out."

"I already tried talking to Ludo and Jax."

"You did?"

He unfurled my fingers from his coat collar and covered them with his gloved hands. "Of course I did. I know what kind of trouble this is going to cause between you and Jacob's family. I did my best, Georgie, but once the tribunal gets confirmation from Sylvester, the decision is set in stone. I'm so sorry."

Without thinking, I threw my arms around him, burying my face in the warmth of his coat. After a moment's hesitation, he returned the gesture, resting his chin on the top of my head. I watched the gates from the circle of Eirian's arms. The security team had pulled them open just enough for Jove to fit through, but they couldn't get the man off the ground. Jacob knelt beside his father, hands clasped together, begging the other men to let Jove stay. Two of Ludo's team dragged Jacob roughly away from Jove. Tears streamed down Jacob's face, but Jove remained impassive, as if his expulsion

had numbed all emotion. It took three additional men to lift Jove far enough from the ground to haul him across the camp's border. Once he was outside the gate, they cut his hands free from the ropes. Jacob ripped free of his handlers and made a break for the doorway, but it was too late. The enormous gate slammed shut, and the team moved the locking mechanism back into place. Jove was officially no longer a member of Camp Haven.

The security team dispersed, leaving Jacob at the gates. He yanked at the mechanism, but it took more than one man to move it out of place. Fruitlessly, Jacob pounded on the gate. There was no answer from the other side.

"Should I—" I began, pulling slightly away from Eirian.

"It's probably better not to."

He was right. After several minutes, Jacob finally gave up. He straightened his coat, wiped his eyes, and turned from the gate. I drew away from Eirian, but not before Jacob spotted our embrace. When he stopped in front of me, his nose inches from mine, Eirian shifted his stance into a more defensive one, but Jacob only had a message for me.

"I'll never forgive you for this."

THE NEXT SEVERAL days were torture. I slept on the floor of my office in DotCom, unbeknownst to Ludo or any of the other campers. I couldn't stand the thought of sharing that tiny cottage with Jacob, not after everything that had happened. He ignored me entirely. If we passed each other at the Bistro, he pretended not to see me. If that was my only punishment for not coming to Jove's defense, I would have been able to handle it. Unfortunately, Penny and Pippa had heard word of my actions. Pippa had asked that I stay away from the med bay, as she no longer had any desire to see my face. Penny, during her limited waking hours, sobbed into her pillow. If I had to drop off supplies to the med bay or run an errand for Jax, I did not go inside. Nita met me around back and finished off the errands for me. Even my friend was being short with me. She had only gotten one side of the story, the side that made me look like the villain.

Alternately, the rest of the camp was displeased with me simply because I was related to the Masons. No matter what department I worked with, I couldn't escape judgmental stares and whispered accusations. It was easier when Jove was around for me to publicly denounce his poor behavior. Now that he was gone, people seemed to forget that I'd never been a huge fan of

his in the first place. I stopped asking where I was needed. I stopped offering to lend a hand to different departments. Instead, I holed up in my office and worked on my equipment for hours on end, emerging only for meals and to update Ludo on my process.

Eirian was one of the few campers that still spoke to me as if I wasn't a leper. The more I kept to myself, the more he made himself available to work in Communications. He brought food from the Bistro and moonshine from his personal stash, and we hunkered down to get the radios and solar panel working. Occasionally, the moonshine was too effective as a remedy. More than once, we found ourselves tipsy and laughing over some inane joke rather than working. It was a good thing that Eirian was so well thought of in Camp Haven. Otherwise, I'm sure we would have received a demerit each for wasting time in the communications office.

A week after Jove's expulsion, Ludo found the two of us at DotCom. Thankfully, we were actually working rather than shooting moonshine.

"Bad news, Georgie," he said, examining the bits and bobs on the desk that were supposed to make working radios.

"Ludo, I'm not sure I can take any more bad news," I replied, accidentally clipping a piece of wire too short. "What is it this time?"

"Your request to meet Sylvester has been denied."

I dropped my wire cutters. "Why?"

"He doesn't give a reason," Eirian explained. "He doesn't need to."

"I want a reason!" I said hotly.

Ludo rested a heavy hand on my shoulder, preventing me from rising out of my seat. "If he denied your meeting, chances are that he doesn't have anything to say on the subject. I'm sorry, Georgie."

"It's fine," I said, though clearly it was not fine. I picked up the wire cutters again and went to work on a new strand. "I have work to do, Ludo, if you don't mind."

THAT NIGHT, I lay on the floor of my office wrapped in the blankets from the cottage, staring up at the ceiling. The rest of the camp had gone to sleep hours ago, but I was wide awake. I heard every rustle of the breeze through the crunchy leaves outside, every scrape of trees' dead branches against the roof. An owl hooted into the lonely night, calling out with its melancholy voice. I rolled over, squeezing my eyes shut in an attempt to trick myself into slumber, but it was no use.

Who was this Sylvester anyway? The origin of Camp Haven felt little beyond magical realism. There had to be a different truth to the camp's birth, to the real identity of the man who supposedly founded it. Why was he such a recluse anyway? Why isolate himself from the people who claimed to have been saved by him? It was high time to find out. I kicked aside the blankets and slid my feet into my boots, then pulled on my coat and hat. If Sylvester refused to take a meeting with me, I would make one myself. Quietly, though DotCom was devoid of other campers at this hour, I snuck into the hallway and out of the building.

It was colder than the deck of the Titanic on that fateful night. A pristine inch of snow covered everything like a white cotton blanket. The crunch of my boot tread sounded impossibly loud as I crept into the dark. The lamps were extinguished, so as to not waste oil, and I traversed the camp by the light of the full moon. It sparkled off the snow, beautiful in all its silvery shades. I wished I could appreciate it more, but the shadow of the cabin looming on the hill drew my attention from everything else.

The outside of my childhood home had not changed, I realized as I started up the hill. The log structure had remained firm, though a few patches indicated spots where repairs had been made. The curtains in the window, red with white flowers, were the ones that my father had brought from the house that we had lived in before my mother died. I wondered if the inside had remained as unchanged, if Sylvester slept in my father's bed, if he cooked in my kitchen, if he sat on the armchair with the claw marks from our old cat. The closer I got, the faster my heart pounded. I peered into the front window, reaching for the door handle.

"Georgie."

I spun around, my hand to my chest to stop my heart from leaping out of its rightful place. Eirian stood below the hill, looking up at me, his pretty green eyes reflecting the moonlight.

"God, you scared me," I whispered.

"What are you doing up there?"

"I need to talk to Sylvester."

He waved me down with a gloved hand. "That won't work. Do you want to get kicked out of camp too?"

I hesitated, contemplating my options. I was a step away from meeting Sylvester in person. All I had to do was open the door and walk inside the cabin. It was my home in the first place. I had a right to return to it. However,

Eirian had a point. This was no longer the place where I had grown up with my father. It belonged to other people with different rules, people who were not fond of those who refused to follow the rules. I drifted away from the front door of the cabin, staring wistfully at the threshold.

"That's it," Eirian encouraged. "Come here."

At the bottom of the hill, he collected me in a one-armed hug, leaving enough space between us to make clear a lack of romantic interest. It had been like this ever since Jacob had seen us hugging at the campfire. Though Eirian's unfailing positivity had not wavered and our camaraderie went on uninterrupted, he made a point to keep a fair amount of distance between us.

"Let's get you back to your room." He tugged me in the direction of the cottage where Jacob slept, but I planted my feet. "What's wrong?"

"I've been sleeping at the office," I admitted, dipping my head to avoid Eirian's eyes.

"Why?"

"You heard Jacob," I said. "He won't forgive me for the part I played in Jove's expulsion. He hates me."

Eirian instinctively squeezed me tighter. "I'm sure he doesn't hate you."

"Believe me, he does."

He sighed and switched direction, leading us toward DotCom instead. "I'm so sorry, Georgie. Maybe if you talk to him—Move!"

The command was issued in a hushed urgent whisper as Eirian practically lifted me from the ground, rushed us into the shadows of DotCom, and pressed me up against the wall. His body enveloped mine, and heat rushed through me from my head to my toes, but when a set of footsteps that did not belong to either one of us turned the corner, my skin went cold again. Eirian dipped his head and pressed his lips to the pulse pounding in my neck. My eyes fluttered shut, getting lost momentarily in his touch until I realized what he was doing. A lamp light flickered on.

"Having fun?" a low voice drawled.

Eirian sprang away, shielding his eyes against the light, and the cold rushed in to meet my body again. Ludo smirked from behind the lamp.

"Boss!" Eirian said with feigned surprise. "What are you doing out here?"

"Funny," Ludo replied. "I could ask the two of you the same thing."

"We were just—" I started.

"Taking a walk," Eirian finished.

Ludo raised an eyebrow. "I see that. Eirian, you should know better.

Curfew is ten o'clock. I could give you both a demerit for this. We have these rules for your safety."

Eirian stepped in front of me. "Please, sir, don't blame Georgie. This was all my idea. It's just that—well, you know, it's been rough between her and Jacob—and we couldn't—we haven't—If you have to give out a demerit, it should be to me."

"Eirian, no," I whispered, trying to shove him aside so that I could speak to Ludo truthfully.

"Slow down, kid," Ludo said. "I get it. Things change. But you know how we do things around here. No drama. Solve your problems. Get back to your bunk, the ones that were *assigned* to you. And Georgie?"

"Yes, sir?"

"We'll talk about the cottage tomorrow," he said. "Other families need the space. You and Jacob will need to bunk somewhere else."

"Of course, sir."

"All right," Ludo said, fixing us with one more warning look like a principal scolding misbehaved students. "Get out of there."

"Thank you, sir," Eirian said, taking my hand and leading me around the other side of DotCom. Once we were out of Ludo's earshot, he abruptly let go. "I am so sorry. That was a complete invasion of your privacy, but Ludo is ridiculously strict about curfew. The only thing that softens him up is a good romantic subplot."

"It's fine," I said, trying not to shiver as I remembered the feeling of Eirian's firm body against mine. "But I can't go back to the cottage."

"I have a single," Eirian offered. "You can take the bed. I'll sleep on the floor."

"And what happens when the whole camp sees us come out of the same room in the morning?" I asked him.

"Right."

"I just want to go back to the office," I told him. "It's warm there, and I can work if I can't sleep."

"You've been working through the night?" he asked. "No wonder you've looked so tired these days. Come on. Let's get you back."

He peeked around the corner of the building to make sure that Ludo had gone on his way. Then we snuck into DotCom and returned to the communications office. Eirian looked at the pile of blankets on the floor.

"This isn't right," he said. "You should have a real bed."

“It’s fine. Besides, I’m talking to Ludo about it tomorrow, remember?”

“You better,” he replied. “Otherwise, we’re switching rooms.”

I shook off my coat and shoes. “Hit the lights on your way out, will you?”

The joke was a feeble one, but it still made him chuckle. “Good night, Georgie.”

“Night, Eirian.”

THE NEXT DAY was a rough one. I woke with a kink in my neck due to the distinct lack of pillows in the communications office. I was late to breakfast, which meant that I had missed out on the eggs and bacon and got stuck with cold oatmeal. To make matters worse, Ludo cornered me in the Bistro with Jacob at his side. He pulled us both into his office at DotCom to talk to us about the sleeping situation.

“As I’m sure you’re both aware, the camp’s bed numbers are limited,” Ludo began as Jacob and I stood awkwardly shoulder-to-shoulder in the cramped office. “The cottage you’re currently staying at is needed for a couple with a newborn. As such, we plan to reassign both of you to different bunks. For now, you’ll each have a bed in the dormitories, but you can apply for a private room together.” His gaze drifted toward me, but I kept my eyes on the floor. “Would you like me to put your names on the waiting list?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jacob said. “Georgie and I are no longer engaged.”

A mixture of shock and relief flooded through me. He’d said it out loud. We were broken up. There was no “we” anymore. I was Georgie Fitz, and he was Jacob Mason, and we were entirely separate entities.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ludo said. “Will there be any problems regarding this split or was it amicable?”

“I wouldn’t say it was amicable,” Jacob replied.

“But we won’t cause any issues for you or the camp,” I added quickly. “If you don’t mind, I’m running behind on my work, Ludo. Can we move this along?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Georgie, you’ve been assigned bunk twenty-five in the women’s dorms. Jacob, you have bunk nineteen in the men’s. Please move your stuff from the cottage to your new lodgings by the end of the day.”

We left Ludo’s office, standing in the hallway of DotCom.

“What now?” I said.

“Nothing,” he replied, buttoning up his coat in an indifferent manner. “I’ll see you around, Georgie.”

When he had gone, I stood for a moment longer in the hallway, wondering if I should feel something deeper than I actually did. The only thing that was lost to me was the idea of normalcy that I’d been nursing since I was nineteen, but the EMP blast had destroyed that long before Jacob and I arrived at Camp Haven. Things would be better this way. There was no more pretending, no more walking on eggshells to keep secrets that didn’t seem to matter anyway.

I found Eirian in the Communications office, already tinkering with radio parts. He had folded my blankets into neat squares and stacked them out of the way.

“Good morning,” he said, glancing up before returning to the gadget in his hand. “Is everything okay?”

“Let’s just get to work.”

The communications office was starting to feel like a joke. The radio tower stood in the middle of camp like a giant symbol of my failure to build a working radio. For some reason, I just couldn’t figure out how to wire one with the components that were available to me, no matter how many hours I spent hunched over the desk. Eirian’s patience was helpful and irritating at the same time. He continued to show up and listen to me babble about the history of radio while we worked. I was letting him down, along with the rest of the camp. I’d promised them camp-wide communications, the possibility of reaching out to other survivors, and a morning talk show. So far, I’d failed to deliver on all three.

That day, though, something was different. My mind felt clearer than it had since the EMP blast went off. The radios were a puzzle that I had always loved. I started fresh, fitting together the pieces one by one. At some point, Eirian stopped his own work to watch me. He didn’t interrupt or ask questions. He simply studied my hands as they wrapped wire and connected pieces together until I had completed an entire unit. Then I hooked up the solar panel to the battery charger in a new pattern.

“Moment of truth,” I said. “Let’s go outside and see if it works.”

We stood behind DotCom with the radio and panel in hand, waiting for the sun to hit the panel at the right angle. Eirian blew air into his hands to warm them up as I fiddled with the panel. The light on the battery charger turned on, flashing red to indicate that the batteries were almost dead.

“Panel’s good,” I said, trying to contain the excitement building in my chest. The working charger meant nothing if the radios themselves didn’t work. I popped the battery out of the charger and into the radio, then turned the dial. The rugged piece of technology sprang to life, sputtering static from the salvaged speaker.

“Is that—?” Eirian began.

“It works!” I said.

I leapt into Eirian’s arms, and we both laughed as he swung me around. The static of the radio buzzed in my ear like a happy bumblebee. When Eirian set me down again, grinning widely, I stretched up on the tips of my toes and kissed him. He kissed back, his lips warm against mine, before pulling away.

“I’m sorry,” he said, breathless.

“What are you apologizing for?”

“You’re engaged,” he said. “We shouldn’t be doing this. Last night—”

“We broke up,” I told him. “Eirian, we’ve been broken up for a while. We just thought it would be easier to stick together for a while, but everyone knows now. Ludo assigned us to the dormitories. We’re not together anymore.”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

His smile returned, and he pressed his lips to mine eagerly, the radio trapped between our chests. “Whoops,” he said, pulling away as it crackled. “We should be careful with that.”

“Let’s see if we can hook up a microphone and get it broadcasting,” I said, trying to catch my breath. Between finally making a breakthrough and the energy between me and Eirian, I felt more motivated that I had in weeks.

7

We were so excited to have discovered a working prototype for the radios that we stayed in the Communications office most of the day to build as many as we possibly could with the limited parts that we had. We left the building twice, once to get food from the Bistro and once to stand on opposite sides of Camp Haven to test out the range of our brand new walkie talkies. They stood up rather well to the camp's broad area. Finally, the radio tower that had been standing for weeks without purpose was actually good for something. We made plans to distribute radios and walkies to the heads of each department, then spoke about the possibility of salvaging more equipment from the city. We worked well into the night tinkering with our new toys until we both fell asleep on the floor of the office, curled up around each other like nestling birds. Unfortunately, the satisfaction of the day's triumphs and our dreamless sleep didn't last long.

I stirred beside Eirian. He slept peacefully, stretched out from one end of the office to the other, oblivious to whatever had woken me. I sat up, careful not to uncover him from the blankets, and listened. Silence. I rubbed my tired eyes. Whatever I had heard in my slumber was probably just the wind outside. I lay beside Eirian again.

A door slammed. Eirian jolted upward, ready and alert, and noticed that I was already awake. He pressed a finger to his lips.

"Who could that be?" I whispered.

"It's probably Ludo," he whispered back. "He's the only one that trolls the camp at night. If he finds us out of the dorms again, he'll definitely give

us demerits."

I captured his lips with mine. "Then be quiet."

We kissed silently for a minute, smiling against each other's mouths, but broke apart when a much closer door opened and shut. Footsteps scuttled down the hall, toward the communications office.

"That's more than one set of footsteps," I muttered, disentangling myself from the blankets and creeping over to the door.

"Georgie, get down," Eirian said as I inched toward the window.

I peeked into the hallway. It was pitch black. None of the hanging lamps were lit, nor did anyone carry a handheld oil lantern. And then the bright white beam of an LED flashlight, something that Camp Haven certainly did not keep on hand, illuminated the small window in the door of the communications office.

"Shit!" I ducked down as the beam haphazardly shone in and out of the room. "Eirian, those are not campers."

Keeping low, he crept across the floor and joined me at the door. When the beam passed again, he chanced a look outside.

"Damn it," he growled, his expression darkening.

"Who is it?"

"Camp Havoc."

"What?"

He lowered himself to the floor again, and we both pressed our backs to the door, as if barricading it might keep the intruders from searching the office.

"That's what we've been calling the other camp," Eirian said. "Shit, I knew this was going to happen!"

"Shh! They'll hear us."

"We should have taken more security precautions," he went on in a hushed voice. "I told Ludo! I told him that they would find us and try to get in. Damn!"

He slammed his fist against the floor. I pinned it down. "Eirian, stop. Calm down. Everything's going to be okay. We'll just hole up in here until they leave."

"They're here for our supplies," he said. "We have a limited amount of things to get us through the winter. If they take even a fraction of it, it will put the rest of us in danger. We can't let them steal from us."

He surged to his feet. When he stepped into his boots, I had no choice but

to mimic his actions, but when he pulled a handgun out of the pocket of his jacket and loaded it, I stopped in my tracks.

"You have a gun?"

"It's officially issued," he said. "Don't tell anyone. I carry it for everyone's protection, not just mine. It's moments like this that justify it." He paused to consider the weapon in his grip. "Does it scare you?"

"No. Actually, I came into the camp with one before they confiscated it. I wish I had it back. My dad taught me how to shoot."

"Are you any good?"

"I don't like to brag."

Eirian grinned. "I knew I liked you from the second I met you."

Together, we looked through the window, Eirian's chin stacked on top of my head so that we both had a decent view. From what I could see, there were two intruders in DotCom. They wore all black, their faces covered with ski masks. They prowled the hallway, checking each door to see which ones were unlocked. Thankfully, Ludo was thorough when it came to the camp's internal security. The only supplies they found at their disposal were the extra cloth napkins and dishware from the Bistro.

"They're armed," Eirian muttered. "Or at least the point man is. Right coat pocket hanging low."

I squinted into the dark hallway, marveling at Eirian's keen eyesight. Sure enough, there was an outline of a pistol pressed against the coat of the figure closest to us in the hallway.

"What's the plan?" I asked as they moved closer to the communications office.

"You stay here—"

"Oh, please."

"It was worth a shot," Eirian said. "But I have a better idea."

He whispered his plan into my ear, all while the flashlights swept closer and closer to our hiding spot. I nodded to Eirian, mouthing a silent affirmation. Then Eirian pressed himself against the wall behind the door. The intruders were nearly level with the communications office. With a deep breath, I unlocked the door then joined Eirian against the wall.

A flashlight beam shone directly into the window, illuminating the radios, walkie talkies, and spare parts strewn across the desk. I held my breath and grasped Eirian's hand. He squeezed tightly.

"Hey, boss," a deep voice mumbled outside the door. "I think we got

something in here.”

A second flashlight joined the first, dangerously close to sweeping across the shadows where me and Eirian hid.

“Looks like solar-powered radios or something,” a second voice said. “We could use those, especially when we run out of battery power.”

“Try the door.”

The handle jiggled and turned, setting my heart racing.

“Get ready,” Eirian whispered.

“It’s open,” the first voice said.

“Let’s check it out.”

The intruders entered slowly, so focused on the radios that they failed to notice us standing stock still behind the door. Each of them carried a duffel bag, presumably full of whatever supplies they had stolen from Camp Haven. They moved farther into the room, their backs to us as they examined the parts on the desk.

“Jackpot,” the second man muttered, rifling through my things.

“Hey, boss,” said the first man, nudging the blankets on the floor with his boot. “I don’t think we’re alone.”

“Now!” Eirian said.

We leapt into action, attacking the two men from behind. I aimed a swift kick at the back of the first man’s knee, which buckled quickly. He dropped his flashlight as he sank to his knees with a yelp, and I moved into position quickly, locking his head at an uncomfortable angle in the crook of my arm. Eirian disabled the other man just as effectively. He reached into the man’s pocket, drew out the pistol, unloaded it, and threw it across the small room. Then he put his own gun to the man’s head.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” he pleaded, his hands raised in the air.

“How the hell did you get in here?” Eirian snarled, twisting the man’s arm behind his back. “We have security posted at every entrance.”

“Your security team isn’t very bright,” the man said. “We set a fire a mile or so away from your front gate, and all but one of them set off to check it out. We snuck past the last guy.”

“You couldn’t have opened the gate on your own,” Eirian replied.

“We didn’t. We went over it.”

“How many of there are you?”

“Just the two of us, I swear!”

“Don’t move.” With the gun still aimed at the second man’s head, Eirian

rifled through the duffel bags that the intruders had brought with them. He found a length of rope in each and tossed it to the men. “Tie yourselves to those chairs.”

“Look, we aren’t trying to cause trouble—” the leader started.

“Shut up!” Eirian ordered, brandishing the gun. “Tie yourselves up!”

“Okay, okay!”

The leader slowly reached for the rope, sat in the chair, and began looping the rope around his ankles. I slammed the other man into the opposite chair, twisted his hands behind his back, and started binding him up as well.

“Check the first one,” Eirian told me. “We can’t let them go.”

As expected, the leader had left the ropes loose around his wrists so that he could escape as soon as we left the room. I fastened them securely with a tricky knot that I’d learned from my father years ago. Then I picked up the pistol that the leader had brought with him and reloaded it.

“What now?” I asked Eirian.

“I don’t believe for a second that the two of them are alone,” he replied. “We’ve been watching Camp Havoc for weeks. They’ve been planning this raid for a while. There have to be more of them.”

“Look, man,” the leader said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. There’s no one else here. Just let us go. We’ll give you your stuff back. No harm, no foul.”

“Nice try,” I said, kicking the leader’s shins.

“Let’s find Ludo,” Eirian suggested. “He can alert the rest of the security team. They’ll sweep the camp for anyone else that doesn’t belong here.”

“And these two?” I asked.

Eirian dangled his key to the communications office. “We’ll lock them in. Then the tribunal and Sylvester can decide what to do with them.”

We took their flashlights, then left the intruders in the office, locked up, and crept down the hallway toward the main room of DotCom. The building was empty.

“Still think they were lying?” I muttered to Eirian, shining the blinding white light around the eerie community room. I had become so accustomed to the soft yellow lights of the camp’s lanterns that the flashlight’s beams made my eyes water.

“Yes,” he replied. “Keep your eyes peeled for movement. Let’s get to Ludo’s.”

Ludo and Jax shared a room in another resident building near the

dormitories. We turned off the flashlights as we crossed the camp, lest we draw unwanted attention, and knocked softly on the door to Ludo's room. He answered with bleary eyes and rumpled hair.

"Didn't I warn the two of you not to get caught outside your bunks after curfew again?" he growled.

"There's been a security breach, sir," Eirian reported in a low whisper.

"Yeah, you two," Ludo shot back. "I'm off duty. Talk to Peters. If Jax wakes up—"

"Camp Havoc is already inside, sir," Eirian pressed. "They tricked the security team out front, including Peters. We caught two of their men in DotCom, scouring for supplies."

Ludo slammed the door shut in Eirian's face. We looked at each other in consternation, but the door opened again to reveal Ludo in boots and a fleece jacket to cover his thermal pajamas. He carried a shotgun in hand.

"Let's go," he ordered, joining us in the hallway. "Where are the intruders now?"

"We locked them in the communications office," I told him as the three of us headed back outside. "They said they were the only ones here."

"What a crock of shit," Ludo said, visually combing the camp.

"That's what I said," Eirian agreed.

"Let's get to the front gate." Ludo broke into a light jog. "We need to find Peters and assemble the rest of the security team to sweep the camp. When do you plan on distributing those radios, Georgie? They would have come in handy tonight."

"We just got them working yesterday, sir," I told him. "We planned on distributing them to security and the department heads this morning."

Ludo shook his head. "Figures."

I pulled ahead of Ludo and Eirian, lighter and faster on my feet, but as we passed through the main square of the camp, Ludo yanked on the hood of my jacket and tugged me to a stop.

"Wait!" he hissed, breathing hard. He jerked the muzzle of the shotgun toward the med bay. "You two see what I see?"

I watched the building closely. There, in the windows of the left side of the building where the medical supplies were kept in the offices, were a series of silhouettes.

"They're robbing first aid," Eirian muttered.

"Pippa's still in there," I breathed. "And so is Penny. If they hurt them—"

“Let’s move,” Ludo said.

“Shouldn’t we get the rest of the security team?” I asked him. “We don’t know how many there are.”

“There’s no time,” Eirian said as we fell into a triangle formation behind Ludo. “The camp has lockdown procedures, but we can’t start them without alerting the intruders to our presence. They’d be out of here with our stash before we even had a chance of assembling a team.”

“Here’s the plan,” Ludo said. “Eirian, you take the back door. Georgie, you’re with me in the front. We’ll corner them in Jax’s office. Don’t let any of them leave, understand?”

We nodded. As we approached the building, Eirian turned to split off from me and Ludo. I grabbed his hand before he could roam too far. Our eyes met. A few weeks, a month maybe, I’d known him, and yet the thought of losing him was far too painful to consider.

“I’ll be careful,” he promised, giving me a quick kiss.

We parted, and he disappeared into the night. I fell into step behind Ludo, and we entered the med bay through the main doors. Immediately, the sounds of the intruders rummaging through the supplies in the back room reached my ears. Pippa was wide awake, her back turned to the offices, the blankets pulled up over her head as if she were pretending to be asleep. The whites of her eyes gleamed in the darkness. When she saw me, she mouthed my name, but I pressed a finger to my lips to keep her quiet. We inched by. A few beds down, Pippa and Jacob’s mother lay still and oblivious, asleep or unconscious.

In the hallway to the offices, LED lights flashed against the walls. There were way more than two intruders in the med bay. Camp Havoc was obviously more interested in our medical supplies than the random assortment of things we kept in DotCom.

“Five or six of them, I’d guess,” Ludo whispered to me, his shotgun wedged against his shoulder, aimed outward, as we crept closer. “We’re outnumbered. Try to keep them in the office. Eirian will catch any that get out the back.”

I raised my borrowed weapon. “Yes, sir.”

The plan was shot to hell before we could begin to enact it. Without warning, one of the intruders stepped out of the office and into the hallway, shining his light directly into our faces. As my eyes watered, Ludo backed up, stepping on the toe of my boot and causing us both to trip. I lost my grip

on the pistol, and it clattered across the floor out of my reach, rupturing the thick silence inside the med bay.

“We got company!” the intruder roared, and he lifted a rifle.

Ludo and I dove in opposite directions. He took cover in one of the exam rooms while I hid behind a wall as bullets ripped by and ricocheted off of the metal bed frames in the bay. Pippa shrieked and rolled out of bed. With adrenaline-infused strength, she flipped the metal cot on its side and used it as cover from the rain of gunfire. Penny, on the other hand, was completely exposed, unable to move herself to safety. We had to force the intruders back somehow.

When the intruder stopped firing to reload, Ludo and I both took advantage. I slid across the floor and grabbed the pistol. Ludo leaned out of the doorway and fired the shotgun. The blast sent the intruder flying backward through the rear exit door of the med bay. Eirian stared at the bloody body then leapt over it to make his way inside. At the same time, Ludo and I converged on the intruders who remained in the office, but we weren’t fast enough. Five more men emerged from the office, each carrying a bag full of medical supplies. Two of them were armed with guns while the others carried hunting knives. They opened fire, once again sending Ludo and I running for cover, and sprinted out through the back exit. One of them fired a handgun at Eirian’s leg, who immediately dropped to the ground and covered his head with his hands. Then the five intruders sprinted out into the night, leaving the body of their comrade for us to deal with.

“Eirian!” I said, dropping beside him. Blood darkened the leg of his jeans.

“Go after them!” He shoved me away, encouraging me to follow Ludo as he charged behind the intruders. “Georgie, go!”

I surged to my feet, grabbed the rifle off of the intruder’s dead body, and ran after Ludo. Lamps and lanterns flickered on as I sprinted through camp. The gunfire had woken many of the residents, and they emerged from the dormitories to see what was happening. Some of the off-duty guys who ran security joined the race once they saw Ludo running by with his gun.

“What’s happening?” one of them, Kirsch, shouted as he fell in step beside me.

“Camp Havoc!” I answered. “They stole our medical supplies!”

Gunfire echoed ahead, near the perimeter of the camp. I slowed down as we drew closer. Other men in black had joined the group from the med bay until there were roughly twenty intruders charging toward the wall that was

supposed to keep Camp Haven safe from this exact scenario. Ludo had taken cover behind a nearby building. He fired shot after shot, but it was no use against so many trespassers. But why weren't the intruders running toward the front gate?

"Stop!" I yelled, digging my heels in the dirt and flinging my arms out to either side to prevent Camp Haven's off-duty security team from getting any closer to the trespassers. "Don't go any closer!"

As the command left my mouth, a section of the camp wall exploded. The intruders waited just long enough for some of the debris to clear, then escaped through the massive hole. Within seconds, all twenty of them were gone, invisible beneath the shadows of the trees, leaving the rest of us to stare open-mouthed at the wreckage.

"THEY COMPLETELY CLEANED us out of antibiotics," Nita reported. She and I had been assigned to assess the damage the intruders had done in the med bay. I tried not to look at the streaks of blood in the hallway. The body had been disposed of, but the remnants of the event remained. "No bandages or wraps. Nothing topical. They took everything. Jesus, there's nothing left!"

"Try to calm down," I said, despite my own panicked pulse. "Some of the campers were wounded in the blast, and we have to find a way to treat them. Let's think outside the box. What else can we use to wrap injuries?"

Camp Haven had never faced this kind of disaster before. According to Ludo, the worst challenge they had ever encountered was a particularly nasty winter a few years ago. They had run out of food, and the campers were close to starving. Then, Ludo had been able to send a team into the city to shop for groceries as a last resort. We weren't so lucky now.

"I don't know," Nita said, slamming a cabinet door shut with unnecessary force. She kicked over a trash can. "I don't know!"

"What about the extra cloth napkins that we keep in DotCom?" I asked her. "They're clean. They should work, right?"

She combed her fingers through her hair. "Yeah. Yes, that should work. I'll go get them. Tell Jax I'll be right back."

When she left, I headed back into the bay. There were bullet holes in the concrete block walls. I kicked aside some of the shell casings that littered the floor. A few more beds in the bay were occupied now. Eirian lay in one, Ludo in another. Three of the security guys had caught some shrapnel in the blast, but thankfully we were far enough away from the explosion that their

wounds were superficial. Ludo wasn't so lucky. A bullet had gone right through his shoulder. Nevertheless, he was still giving orders.

"I want a twenty-four watch on that hole in the wall," he was yelling to Peters as Jax did her best to stem the flow of blood from his arm with a sheet from one of the empty beds. "Get the miscellaneous crew out there too. We need to rebuild as quickly as possible or we risk them coming back for more." He spotted me walking toward him. "Georgie! Tell me something good."

"Sorry, Ludo," I said. "It's bad news. Camp Havoc completely screwed us over. No meds. The Bistro got hit too. They cleaned out the dried meats."

Ludo swore, and a fresh wave of blood gushed from the hole in his arm.

"Lie still," Jax snapped at her husband, forcing him against the pillow. "Unless you want to die of blood loss." She tied a makeshift tourniquet around Ludo's arm as she addressed me. "Would you check on the others? This one came out of it with the worst, and he won't be happy when I pluck this bullet out of his arm without any painkillers."

I wandered away from Ludo's bed to do as asked, stopping by Eirian's cot next. He was propped up against the pillows, his leg elevated on a cardboard box. The thigh had been crudely covered with a cotton pad that the camp usually kept on hand for menstruating women. He frowned as he surveyed the ruined bay.

"How are you holding up?" I asked him, lifting the napkin to check the wound. Thankfully, the bullet had grazed the skin rather than going through his leg. It would scab over in a few days, and Eirian would be no worse for wear. Even so, he needed better bandaging if he was going to avoid infection.

"I hate this," he said, teeth clenched. "I want to help, but Jax won't let me get up. There's still blood in the damn hallway! It needs to be sanitized. What did they do with the body? What about the two intruders that we locked in the communications office? Who's out there watching the wall—?"

"Eirian, relax," I said, resting my palm against his chest. "We're taking care of it. The security team moved the trespassers to a different room in DotCom until we figure out what to do with them, and Ludo's assigning the miscellaneous crew to watch and rebuild the wall."

"I can help—"

"Not right now," I told him. "You need to stay here until we can flush that wound out and bandage it properly."

He let out a sigh and rubbed his eyes. "They took everything,

didn’t they?”

“Yeah. The medical stuff at least. And some food.”

“This is bad,” he muttered. “This is really bad. I don’t know how we’re supposed to make it through the rest of the season.”

I smoothed his sweaty curls away from his forehead. “I’m sure the department heads are coming up with a solid plan as we speak.”

“Hey!”

I jerked my hand away from Eirian as Jacob’s voice echoed through the med bay. He marched through the door, bee lining for us, but his step faltered when he noticed the bloodied security boys.

“You should be at the wall,” Ludo barked at him from his bed. “Miscellaneous crew members—”

“My sister and my mother are here,” Jacob said. “And no one bothered to tell me that the freaking med bay got shot up. What the hell, Georgie? I heard you were here when it happened. You couldn’t take five seconds to come get me?”

“I’ve been a little busy,” I snapped.

“Yeah, playing house with your boyfriend,” he replied, sneering at Eirian. “Meanwhile, my family—”

“Your family is safe,” Eirian told him. “The first thing Georgie did was make sure that your mother and sister were okay.”

“They’re asleep now,” I said, pointing to where we had moved Pippa and Penny out of the way of those who needed immediate treatment. “You can wake them if you want, but I wouldn’t suggest it. Pippa was pretty stressed out. She needs the rest, especially now that her baby’s overdue.”

Jacob’s temper flared out as he watched his little sister’s baby bump rise and fall with the sound of her breath. “What about Mom?”

“No change,” I told him. “She’s been in and out of consciousness.”

“That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“It’s not good.”

As he studied his family, I noticed how much of him had changed in the weeks that we’d spent at Camp Haven. The designer clothes were gone, replaced with practical flannel and fleece layers. He’d grown out his beard rather than learn how to shave with a straight razor. He was skinnier now, having lost some of the muscle tone that came from lifting heavy at the gym. Now his physical was honed to complete whatever jobs that Ludo needed done. He looked like a completely different man than the one I had met in

college all those years ago.

"I should go," he said. "You heard Ludo. I should be at the wall." He backed away from Pippa's bed and bumped into another cot behind him. "Can you let me know if anything changes, Georgie?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

As Jacob left, Eirian patted my hand. "You really care about him, don't you?"

"We were together for five years," I said. "He took care of me, and vice versa. You don't just forget about that."

"I understand."

"Besides, his mom and his sister were always good to me," I added. "They deserve my care and attention."

"Fitz!" Jax said from Ludo's bed. "I thought I asked you to check on *all* of the patients."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, drawing away from Eirian. "Right away."

I moved to the other beds, picking shrapnel and debris out of skin with a pair of tweezers sanitized with moonshine. When Nita returned with the napkins from Dotcom, we worked together to rinse and bandage wounds. After we had finished, Nita turned to me.

"Did you know that there's a massive gash above your eye?" she asked.

I reached up and prodded my forehead. Sure enough, the skin was tender, covered in a layer of crunchy dried blood. "I didn't even notice."

"I figured as much." Nita took my hand and made me sit down on an empty cot. "Let me clean it out for you."

She went to work, scrubbing off the blood that had dried to my forehead and cheek. I couldn't remember what had happened to cause the wound, but I imagined that it had happened during the blast. Nita flushed it out with water so cold that it made me shiver.

"Sorry," she said, catching the rivulets that ran down my neck with a towel.

"It's fine."

She examined the divot in my skin. "Looks like you caught a rock or some debris to the face. It's not too deep. Shouldn't leave a scar or anything."

"I'm not really worried about a tiny scar on my face." I looked up at her. Her mouth was set in a worried frown. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

“You already said that.”

“No, not for the water,” she replied. “I’ve been avoiding you lately because of what happened to Jove, and for the way I thought you were treating Jacob. I picked sides, and I shouldn’t have.”

Suddenly, exhaustion swamped me, as if the adrenaline from the night’s events had finally worn off. “It’s okay, Nita.”

“No, it’s not.” She mixed up an herbal paste and applied it to the cut. “I should have known that there were two sides to the story. This whole invasion has made me realize what an idiot I’ve been. We need to support each other. We’re all each other has.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.”

We smiled at each other in a rare moment of peace as she rinsed her hands of the herbal mixture.

Kirsch, who lay in the next bed over, leaned toward us. “Excuse me, ladies? That woman in the corner looks far too pale for comfort.”

We looked to where he was pointing. Penny’s hand had slipped over the edge of her mattress, limp and lifeless. Her face was completely white with a purplish tint. I leapt off the bed, knocking the herbal paste to the floor, where the ceramic bowl shattered, and ran to Penny’s side. I pressed my fingers against her neck.

“She doesn’t have a pulse!”

I flattened Penny out against the mattress, pressed my hands against her chest, and began pumping her heart, but Nita and Jax soon pushed me out of the way to tend to her themselves. I looked on, pacing back and forth in front of Penny’s bed. Pippa slept through the resuscitation attempt.

“She can’t die,” I said. “Please, she can’t die. Jacob and Pippa will be devastated.”

“It’s no good,” Nita said.

“Move!” Jax ordered.

Nita cleared the way. Jax lifted her fist into the air and slammed it down on Penny’s chest, directly over her heart. Then she checked her pulse again.

“We got her back,” she said. “It’s weak, but she’s here.”

Relief surged through me. “That actually *worked*?”

“Don’t get too excited,” Jax said, rearranging Penny’s limbs in a more comfortable position. She unwrapped the bandage around Penny’s leg.

“Oh God.” I covered up my nose with the hem of my shirt. “What the hell is that awful stench?”

“It’s her leg,” Jax replied, peeling the bandage back to show me the damage. The skin was a disgusting blend of sickly green and purple, and the wound leaked yellow pus. “We never got rid of the infection. It’s killing her.”

8

Penny was running out of time. She had been ever since that glass shard had pierced her leg on our way to Camp Haven. We were too blind to pay attention to her injuries. I had been so desperate to cater to Ludo, Jax, and the other department heads that I neglected to check in on Penny as much as I should have, but when I expressed this thought to Eirian, he didn't agree.

"You can't place the blame for this on yourself," he said. Jax discharged him from the med bay as soon as Nita had managed to wrap his leg securely. "There were a lot of people involved in this. Jax was the one that decided our antibiotics wouldn't be able to keep the infection at bay. To use them would have been a waste of our resources."

"Don't tell that to Jacob," I said, helping Eirian test his weight on his leg so that we could leave the med bay. Nita had sent someone to bring Jacob to his mother, and I didn't want to be here when he returned. "He won't understand why we didn't exhaust every possibility to save her."

"Sometimes, you have to make sacrifices for the good of the many." Eirian's leg held firm. There was no damage to the muscle. "That's how it works here."

"You forget that not everyone was raised like this," I reminded him. "That idea is relatively foreign to somehow who grew up having everything."

"I guess he's going to learn the hard way then."

"I guess. We should go."

As we were leaving, I spotted Jacob hurrying toward the med bay. I ducked behind a row of bushes, tugging Eirian down too. We watched as

Jacob, already covered in dirt and sweat from working at the wall, rushed into the building.

Eirian poked the worry lines around my mouth. “You’re going to have to face him eventually.”

“His mother is dying,” I said, pulling Eirian out of the bushes. “He needs some time to himself.”

An anguished yell echoed from the med bay. Jacob. My throat closed up at the thought of him in there with Pippa, both of them crying over their mother, unable to help her.

“Go,” Eirian said, nudging me toward the front door. “You should be with them.”

“I should get you to your room first.”

He waved off my offer. “My leg is fine, see?” He bounced up and down a couple of times. “Besides, I’m not going to my room. I’m going to see what I can do to help the camp regroup.”

“You should rest,” I scolded him, cringing as another cry went up from the med bay. “You’re no use to us if you get sick too.”

“I’ll take it easy,” he promised. “Go inside. I’ll check on you in an hour or so.”

He waved and, limping slightly, headed for the breach in the wall. The thought of returning to the med bay haunted me. I could just as easily leave Jacob and Pippa to their mourning and return to the communications office. The radios and walkie talkies were waiting to be assigned to department heads for a trial run. I could bury myself in work and avoid facing the people that, not long ago, were meant to become my family.

I went to the communications office and sat in relative silence, staring at the units that Eirian and I had assembled together. After several minutes of contemplation, I pulled one of the radios toward me, turned it on, and started broadcasting as far as the signal would reach.

“This is Georgie Fitz,” I began. I had no idea who might be listening, but I hoped that someone else in the area would have the information that I wanted. “I’m currently located in the Rocky Mountains, northwest of Denver, Colorado. We have an emergency situation that requires a high dosage of antibiotics. I repeat, we have an emergency situation that requires a high dosage of antibiotics. If anyone’s listening, we need help.”

I waited for a reply, any reply, but none came. I fiddled with the dials on the radio and tried again. For over an hour, I repeated the same message until

my throat was dry. I slouched over the desk and rested my head between the walkie talkies. The crude devices mocked me from either side, reveling in my failure.

And then my radio crackled to life.

“Miss Fitz?”

I snatched the radio up. “Hello? Yes, this is Georgie Fitz.”

“If you’re looking for antibiotics, there’s a hospital at the edge of the city that wasn’t hit as hard as the rest,” the voice, female and tired, said. “We stocked up there just last week. Be careful though. It’s dangerous out there. Lots of gang members and addicts in the area.”

“Thank you so much,” I said

“No problem. Over and out.”

The static returned as the anonymous caller disappeared. I took a few seconds to collect myself, reining in a sob of relief, then left the office to return to the med bay. I found Jacob and Pippa asleep there. Jacob had dragged Pippa’s bed next to their mother’s so that it formed one big queen bed instead. Jacob sat on the floor next to his mother, her limp hand clutched in his. His cheek pressed against the quilt, and his mouth was slightly open. I gently shook his shoulder.

“Jacob, wake up.”

He came to, blinking languidly. He lifted his head from the quilt, wiped a droplet of drool from his chin, and looked around. His lips quivered when his gaze landed on his unconscious mother and sleeping sister.

“I almost forgot,” he said. “For a second, I thought we were back home in the apartment, and everything was okay.” He squeezed his mother’s hand. “But it’s not, is it?”

“Jacob, there’s a hospital at the edge of the city that might still have enough medication to save Penny,” I told him. “We can send a salvage team in to get it.”

Jax, who was sitting with Ludo a few beds over, perked up. “Excuse me? What did you just say?”

“We could get antibiotics from the city,” I repeated, announcing it to the rest of the patients and workers in the med bay. “That way, we can treat everyone and save Penny.”

The bay broke out in excited murmurs, but Jax planted her hands on her hips. “Who exactly do you think you are, Miss Fitz?”

“Sorry?”

“You are not a department head,” Jax continued as the room fell silent to allow her to speak.

Ludo took his wife’s hand. “Honey—”

“You have no power to authorize a salvage trip into dangerous territory,” Jax said. “Therefore, you have no right to instill false hope in our patients.”

I stood from Jacob’s side. “Are you kidding me? Penny is dying! She needs treatment. Why wouldn’t we take this opportunity?”

“How do you figure that any hospital within walking distance is still stocked with medication?” she challenged.

“I called on the radio,” I said. “Someone answered. They told me—”

“Whoever it was isn’t a reliable source,” Jax said. “Besides, most liquid antibiotics have to be refrigerated.”

“It’s the only chance we have,” I argued.

“It’s not worth putting our salvage team at risk,” she fired back.

“Fine, then I’ll go!”

Stunned, Jax finally backed off. “You want to trek into the city by yourself to look for medication that might not even be there for a woman that will most likely be dead by the time you return?”

“Yes.”

Jacob got to his feet. “She won’t be by herself. I’ll go with her.”

“Jacob, no,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied firmly. “I won’t let you go into the city alone. You need at least one other person to back you. Besides, it’s my mother we’re talking about here.”

“You should stay here, Jacob,” another voice said. It was Eirian, who had appeared in the med bay from the hallway that led to the offices. He’d been listening in to the entire conversation without me realizing it. “You should be with your family in case something happens. I’ll go with Georgie.”

The fact that I didn’t immediately feel the need to tell Eirian that he should stay in Camp Haven made me realize that I didn’t *want* to go into the city alone. I wanted someone to come with me, someone who knew the mountains, could hold his own during the trip, and could keep a level head if things took a turn for the worst. Eirian was the best fit for the job, but it still wasn’t his responsibility to take care of the Masons.

“Eirian—”

“Don’t argue with me, Georgie,” he said. “If Jax doesn’t want to send a salvage team, and you’re determined to go, then I’m going with you. My leg

is fine, and you know that I'm the best person to have with you. No offense, Jacob."

"None taken," Jacob said. "Georgie, listen to him. I think he's right. I've seen the two of you work together. If anyone can get to the hospital and back in one piece, it's you and him."

Jax cleared her throat and crossed her arms. "You still need approval from a department head to leave the camp, which you'll find difficult to acquire considering this harebrained scheme."

"I approve," Ludo chimed in. His wife leveled him with a withering stare, but he held firm. "Face facts, Jax. We're heading into winter with no medication and no first aid kits. If it stays like that, I can guarantee that more people will die. We have two options. First, send a team to Camp Havoc to regain what was taken from us, which would result in casualties on both sides. Second, send Georgie and Eirian into the city to salvage what they can. That's the safer route."

"And what if there's nothing to salvage?" Jax challenged.

Ludo looked at me and Eirian. "Then we go to plan B."

THERE WAS no time to waste. Penny was deteriorating by the minute. Eirian and I prepared for our trip in little under an hour. We packed hiking bags, layered up in clothes and boots that would protect us from whatever harsh weather we might encounter, and gathered supplies that would help us survive in the woods. Then Ludo's second in command assigned us each a rifle to take with us in case things got nasty. I hoped I would never have to use it.

Jacob took a break from watching over his mother to see me and Eirian off into the woods. As the security team went to work opening the gates, he adjusted the straps on my backpack so that it rested more securely on my shoulders. Eirian pretended to help open the gate so that we could have a moment alone.

"You don't have to do this," Jacob said. "It's my mother. I should be the one to put myself in danger to save her. You don't owe us anything."

"Jacob, if the situation were reversed, would you sit around and do nothing when you had the opportunity to help?"

"No, of course not."

"Then it's settled," I said. "Stay with Penny and Pippa. They need you now more than ever. I'll be back as soon as possible."

I kissed Jacob's cheek and joined Eirian at the gate. The locking mechanism squeaked as the men pulled the massive door open. Outside Camp Haven, the mountain woods stretched on and on unbroken. I took a deep breath and squeezed Eirian's hand. Together, we stepped beyond the wall.

"That wasn't so bad," I said, advancing into the woods.

The gate behind us slammed shut. We were officially locked out until we returned from the city. Doubt in my own survival abilities rose in the back of my throat like stomach bile. I swallowed it down. Eirian looked equally spooked.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"For now," he replied. We walked down the mountain, following the guidance of a handheld compass. "I've been outside Camp Haven a number of times since we arrived here. Sometimes, the miscellaneous crew gets assigned to salvage. This is different though. It's one thing to comb through a couple of warehouses that fell out of use. It's a whole different story walking into a city of dead people. The last time—"

Eirian had been out to Denver with the salvage team shortly after the EMP blast, when they combed the calmer parts of the city for materials to build the radio tower. That alone had scared him, but it would be even worse now that weeks had passed. I wondered how many people had actually survived in the city.

"We'll be okay," I assured him. "Let's just get in and out as quickly as possible."

It would take us roughly a day and a half to reach the city on foot. We jogged lightly most of the way, trying to shave a few minutes off the total time, but when twilight fell, we had not even reached the bottom of the mountain. We stopped to camp for the night, eating a dinner of beef jerky and lighting a fire to keep warm. The city was visible from our campsite, but instead of the usual bright lights and bustling automobiles, the buildings were all dark and brooding.

"Tell me something," Eirian said as he stretched out in his sleeping bag and chomped on another strip of jerky. "Why go this far to help Jacob's mom? It's one thing to comfort Jacob and Pippa like I suggested, but you didn't have to risk your life for hers. You and Jacob aren't engaged anymore, so technically you don't even have ties to Penny."

"That may be true," I agreed, "but if I let Penny die without trying to do

anything about it, that means losing a part of my humanity that I'm not ready to let go of yet. This whole EMP blast has been terrible, but if we forget who we are, it could be a lot worse. We got lucky at Camp Haven. It's a group of people who already understood how to work together to survive before it became a necessity instead of an option. Sure, I could just say fuck it and leave Jacob to deal with his mother's death on his own, but what kind of person would I be if I did?"

"You're very moral."

"It's common decency," I said. "Besides, the camp needs these supplies anyway."

"Jax would've eventually realized that when people started getting sick," Eirian said, finishing off his jerky and rolling onto his back to gaze up at the stars through the trees. "She would have sent a salvage team them."

"How long would that have taken though?" I asked. "It could have been weeks or months, by which time the hospital might very well have been ransacked. As it is, we don't actually know if it has the supplies we need now."

"We'll find them," Eirian promised, his eyelids drifting shut. "Get some sleep. We'll need our strength for tomorrow."

AT DAWN, we were woken by a terrible inhuman scream. The birds that had yet to migrate south took flight from the trees, scared out of the branches. The sun was blood red on the horizon, like an omen of impending doom. The screams continued, one after the next in terrifying succession. Eirian and I tore through the forest, trying our best to follow the yells as they bounced off the trees from every direction. I slipped down a patch of icy dirt and fell, bruising my tailbone, but the pain was nothing in comparison to whatever excruciating torture elicited the screams of terror. Eirian helped me to my feet, and we skidded to a stop at the edge of a small clearing to find a bloody scene. A gray wolf had its muzzle buried deep in the abdomen of a large man.

"Oh my god," I said. "It's Jove."

Eirian fired his rifle into the air above the wolf's head. The animal, unconcerned, withdrew from Jove's mauled stomach, its gray fur stained red, and stalked toward us. Eirian fired again, this time clipping the wolf's pelt. It yelped and bolted away, and I rushed to Jove's side. He'd stopped screaming at long last. Shock had set in.

"Jove," I said, lightly smacking the man's cheek. "Hey, look at me. It's

Georgie.”

Eirian knelt beside me, examining Jove’s injuries. The wolf had done too much damage. Jove’s intestines were spilling out of his torso. Blood seeped into the damp cold ground at an alarming rate.

“He’s as good as dead,” Eirian muttered close to my ear so that Jove wouldn’t hear. I had a feeling it wouldn’t matter anyway. Jove was hardly present with us. His eyes darted back and forth, never focusing on anything.

“I’m surprised he made it this long,” I said.

“Georgie!” Jove gasped suddenly. He seized the front of my coat and pulled me closer. Warm blood dripped onto my hands. “Georgie.”

“Yes, Mr. Mason. It’s me.”

“Jacob.” Blood bubbled at the corners of his mouth. “Pippa.”

“They’re okay,” I replied, wanting more than anything for him to let go of me. “They’re safe at Camp Haven.”

“Penny?”

I hesitated, looking across at Eirian. He shook his head. “She’s fine too, Jove. Your family is safe. It’s okay.”

His grip on my coat loosened until his hands fell limply to his sides. “Thank you.”

Then his mouth went slack, and his head lolled back on his neck. He was dead. I scrambled away from the fresh corpse, scrubbing the blood off my hands with the hem of my shirt. It was everywhere, on the ground, on my shirt, on my hands.

“Hey,” Eirian said, as I rubbed my hands until the skin was red and raw. “Georgie, stop.”

“He’s dead,” I muttered, unable to tear my gaze from Jove’s ruined body. “He’s dead. Oh God, he’s dead.”

“Hey!” Eirian snapped his fingers in front of my nose, redirecting my attention to him. “Look at me. Listen to me. We can’t let this slow us down. I know that sounds crass, but it’s the truth. Jacob’s dad is dead. We need to make sure that his mother doesn’t meet the same fate. At least not anytime soon.”

His level-headed speech permeated my panic, filling my brain with practical plans instead. I closed my eyes, trying to expel the image of Jove’s ruined body from my memory. “You’re right. Let’s go. We need to go.”

Eirian turned me around by the shoulders before I opened my eyes again, and we left the bloody clearing behind us to return to our camp. It occurred to

me that we should have given Jove some sort of send-off. We should have said something nice or crossed his arms over his chest or laid flowers for him. But all the flowers were dead, and I couldn't form words to say much at all.

We picked up our belongings at camp, scattered the ashes of the campfire, and proceeded along our route in silence. The trees began to clear as we neared the bottom of the mountain, where the roads were asphalt instead of dirt. It was quieter closer to the city. No birds chirped. No wind blew. No dogs barked. The absence of sound played with my voice of reason.

"There's the hospital," Eirian said, pointing. The building rose from the wreckage of the city, a few miles away from our lookout spot. A section of it had been burned down, but the rest remained standing.

"Let's go."

We held our rifles at the ready as we emerged from the woods and onto the roads of the city. Denver was deserted, or so it seemed. It was a dead city, full of dead bodies and dead hopes. The stench of rotting corpses had yet to clear. I doubted it would take several months or years before I forgot that smell completely. It was the scent of despair and grief. It was the end of the modern world as we knew it.

A loud crash startled us both as we crept through an alleyway near the hospital, looking for the safest way in. We both swung around, aiming the nose of our rifles toward the noise, but it was only a tin trash can that had fallen over. It rolled across the alley, spewing putrid garbage across the street. I lifted my sweater to cover my nose and looked up to the burned side of the hospital, which was the obvious way in.

"Too dangerous," Eirian muttered, reading my thoughts. This section of the building was a maze of demolished hallways. "The floor's probably unstable. Let's keep looking."

We circled around, keeping our eyes peeled for an alternate entrance as well as for anyone else in the vicinity. We made our way to the back side of the hospital, where the road opened up to let the ambulances drive in and out as quickly as possible. Giant sliding doors led from the dock to the emergency room, but they were automated. No good without electricity.

"Maybe we can push them open," Eirian suggested. We each took hold of a door and tried to force them apart to no avail. Eirian wiped his forehead. "Damn it."

"Got a window over here," I said, wandering farther away from the ER bay. I peered inside. "Looks like some kind of office. The door's open to the

hallway. Looks like this is our way in."

I slammed the butt of the rifle against the window. The glass cracked. I hit it again, and the window shattered. Eirian used one of his thick gloves to clear the rest of the jagged pieces from the opening.

"Ladies first," he said.

I maneuvered the gun through the window first then climbed in after it, careful not to cut myself on any of the glass shards. Eirian followed suit. We brushed glass from our coats, regripped the rifles, and left the small office.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Eirian asked as we crept through the first floor hallways."

"Storage rooms, nurse's carts, that sort of thing," I replied. "Cabinets or refrigerators that might have medication in them."

He nudged open a door to a room marked Hospital Staff Open and peered inside. "Here's storage. Looks like this place has already been hit though."

I took a look. The room had been ransacked. There was nothing left, other than a few bedpans and a couple trampled boxes of safety gloves. We moved on, sweeping the entire floor for anything that we could use.

"Damn it!" Eirian turned over yet another empty rolling cart in the emergency room. "Still nothing. Georgie, what if this trip is a total bust?"

"Relax, Eirian." I found an unopened package of gauze and shoved it into my bag. "We're only on the first floor."

We moved upstairs, searching level after level. Here and there, I found something useful like unsoiled blankets or wholesale boxes of Band-Aids. I even found topical antibiotics for small cuts and bruises.

"Too bad we can't smear this all over Penny's leg," I said, holding up the little yellow tube for Eirian to see.

"If only it were that easy."

In the operating rooms, we stole scalpels and clamps and other medical instruments that we didn't know the names of. Jax could no doubt make use of them. In the patients' rooms—some of which still housed those who were unable to move themselves from the hospital when the EMP blast went off—we collected clean sheets, blankets, clothes, and simple medications like ibuprofen and acetaminophen. Still, there were no signs of anything that could help save Penny. We had one more floor to search. Then we had to face facts and return to Camp Haven with what little we had. We took the stairway up to the top floor, but Eirian, who had taken point, stopped short when he looked through the window into the last hallway.

“What is it?” I whispered, my pulse quickening.

“People.”

“Survivors?”

“Of sorts. Addicts.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because they’re all hanging out near a drug cart,” he said in a hushed voice, eyes fixed on the hallway. “And they’ve got track marks on their arms.”

“How many are there?”

“Three by my count.”

I climbed the last few steps and joined him at the door. Sure enough, a trio of two men and one woman loitered in the hallway, slumped against the wall. The only reason I could tell that they weren’t already dead was because their chests rose and fell with their breath.

“I think we have a pretty good shot of sneaking past them,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We inched open the door and snuck into the hallway. The trio did not stir, even when our boots squeaked across the linoleum flooring.

“Must be good, whatever they’re on,” Eirian muttered as he stepped over one of the men’s legs.

“Let’s see if we can find some of it,” I said, opening the door to the drug cart. It was by far the fullest stocked one we had found so far. I pulled out vials of morphine, epinephrine, atropine, and a few others with names that I didn’t recognize. I carefully loaded it all into my bag.

“There’s a fridge in here,” Eirian announced, sliding into one of the rooms that branched off of the main hallway. I followed him in, where he opened the fridge and extracted a vial. “Penicillin. That’s what we need, right?”

“Yes!” I took the bottle from him, studied the label, then pumped my fist in triumph. “Oh, thank goodness.”

“Don’t drop it,” Eirian warned, rifling through the rest of the fridge. “That’s all there is.”

“It’ll be enough.”

“Who the hell are you?”

We whirled around to face the owner of the slurred speech and found ourselves face to face with one of the men who had been sleeping in the hallway. He had yellow teeth and drooping eyelids, and he held a standard-

issued Glock that didn't match his wayward, careless appearance, as if he'd stolen the weapon from an unlucky police officer. I tucked the vial of antibiotics safely into my pocket then lifted my rifle toward the man.

"Easy," Eirian warned, aiming his own gun. "We're not here to hurt anyone."

The man's sleepy eyes flickered to our loaded bags. "You took all the drugs, didn't you? The morphine? I need that, man!"

"No, you don't," Eirian replied. "You just think you do."

"Don't mess with me, man." He stumbled forward, and the Glock flopped wildly in his grip. Eirian and I both stepped away from each other. The man looked from me to him and back again. "There's two of you?"

"Sheesh," Eirian muttered under his breath. "He can't even see straight. Let's get past him and get out of here."

"Easier said than done," I replied. "An addict with a gun is even less predictable than a cop with one."

"Are you talking about me?" the man sputtered. "I don't appreciate that. Give me the morphine, or I'll shoot!"

He didn't give us a chance to consider his ultimatum. Without preamble, he fired the Glock. The bullet whizzed so close to my ear that I heard it go by. I reacted instinctively and pulled the trigger of the rifle. The gun hammered against my shoulder. The man with the Glock fell to the floor. I stopped firing and stared at the man, the rifle drifting out of position to hang loosely at my side.

"Georgie?" Eirian said.

I checked my pocket to make sure that the penicillin had survived the ambush. "I can't think about it, Eirian. Let's go."

We stepped over the body to leave the room. I refused to look down, but it was impossible not to catch sight of the man riddled through with bullet holes in my peripheral vision. I had killed him. It was the second time that someone had died at my hands for the sake of my own survival. I knew I'd never get used to the feeling of emptiness that taking someone else's life left in my soul.

"Are you okay?" Eirian asked as we headed down the stairs to the main floor. "You had to do that, Georgie. He was aiming for your head, but I know it's hard—"

"You're not scared of me?"

Confused, he looked back at me. "Why would I be scared of you?"

“I just killed someone.”

He stopped on the next landing and took my hands in his. “This isn’t real life, Georgie. This isn’t how things are supposed to go. That means we have to do a lot of things that we wouldn’t normally do. It was either him or you. I’m glad it was him.”

We spoke nothing more of it, but I was grateful that Eirian reacted rationally. It helped clear my mind. We made it out of the hospital without meeting anyone else, and when we left the city and climbed back into the mountains, the trees welcomed us back into the relative safety of their shadows. We trekked upward in silence, heavier than we had been on the way down, both in physicality and in spirits. When the sun sank below the horizon and the moon lifted itself into the sky, Eirian turned back to make sure I was still following him.

“Should we stop for the night?” he asked.

“Do you mind if we keep going?” I said. “I know I won’t be able to sleep if we stop, and I figure we might as well get back to the camp as soon as possible.”

So on we went through the night. We arrived at Camp Haven hours later, shoulders slumped and feet aching. The night watch security team was thin. A few of them had been reassigned to the breach in the wall. One of them, Peters, held up a lantern to illuminate our faces.

“You made it back,” he said, not bothering to hide his note of surprise.

“Sure did,” Eirian said. “Can you open the gate?”

“You got it,” Peters replied, using hand gestures to communicate the order to his troops. “Did you find what you needed?”

“Yeah.”

“Glad to hear it,” Peters said. “It’s only getting worse. You two haven’t heard, have you?”

“Heard what?” I asked him.

“The Masons’ daughter. What’s her name? She went into labor a few hours ago.”

9

We ran to the med bay despite our aching feet, but Pippa, Jacob, and Penny were nowhere to be seen. Most of the guys who had been hit by the explosion near the wall were gone, having recovered from their injuries enough to get back to work. Kirsch was the only one left. He lay upside down on his cot, his feet propped up against the wall as he tossed a rubber band ball into the air and caught it again.

"Kirsch!" I said, snatching the ball out of the air to get his attention. "Where's Pippa and Penny?"

He pointed down the hallway to the exam rooms. At the same time, someone let loose a shrill scream.

"Stay here," I told Eirian. I wrestled the penicillin from my bag and ran into the back. I found Jacob, Pippa, and Nita in the first exam room. Pippa squeezed Jacob's hand so tightly that his fingers were white and his eyes threatened to pop out of his skull.

"Another contraction," Nita said, wiping the sweat off Pippa's forehead with a damp rag. "You're doing great, sweetie."

"Don't tell me how I'm doing!"

Jacob caught sight of me in the doorway and pulled his hand free of Pippa's to meet me. "You're back! Thank God." He threw his arms around me and hugged tightly. "Did you find the medication?"

I held up the vial.

His face fell. "Is that it?"

"It's better than nothing. Where's your mom?"

“In the next room over,” he said. “Jax is trying to keep her alive. We’ve had to resuscitate her twice since you’ve been gone.”

“And she’s still hanging on?” I asked in disbelief.

“Go!” Jacob said. “We’ll take care of Pippa.”

I left Pippa’s room and headed to the next one over. Penny already looked dead. Her skin was pale green and covered in sweat. Thankfully, the wound on her leg was covered, though the stench now permeated every corner of the room. Jax sat by the woman’s side, her head in her hands, but she looked up when I entered.

“Did you get it?”

“Yes.”

“And a syringe?”

I emptied my bag onto the counter, spilling medical supplies all over. “Take your pick.”

Jax leapt into action, choosing her tools from the options on the counter. I handed her the vial of penicillin. She inserted the needle into the bottle and drew the antibiotic into the syringe. Then she turned to Penny, found a vein in her arm, and inserted the needle. As she pushed the plunger down and the medication entered Penny’s bloodstream, I let out a sigh of relief.

“Nice job,” Jax said, throwing the used syringe into the biohazard bin to be sterilized. “I didn’t think you’d get back in time.”

“Will she be okay now?” I asked her. There was no immediate change in Penny’s state, though I wasn’t sure why I had expected one. “She’s going to make it through, right?”

“I don’t know,” Jax answered, observing her patient. “She’s got a major infection. She’s probably septic. One dose of penicillin might not be enough to fight it all off. We’ll watch her overnight, but if she doesn’t improve, there isn’t much else we can do about it.”

A violent gurgle interrupted our conversation. Penny’s eyes flew open. She clutched her throat, her back arching off the exam table.

“She can’t breathe!”

“Damn it,” Jax growled, returning to where my hospital haul was strewn across the counter. “She’s allergic to penicillin. Please tell me you found some epinephrine in that godforsaken city.”

“Yes, it’s there somewhere!” I held down Penny’s hands and looked into her wild eyes. “Penny? Hey, it’s me. It’s Georgie. Just try to relax. We’re going to fix this.”

Jax prepared a second syringe and jabbed it into Penny's arm. A few seconds later, Penny's airways opened up, and she took a huge, gasping breath. A drop of water splattered against the exam table. I wiped my eyes. I hadn't realized I'd been crying. Penny's eyes fluttered shut again as she dropped back into unconsciousness, but at least she was still breathing.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Now we wait."

THE HOURS PASSED IN AGONY. We sat and waited with Penny, hoping for some kind of visible improvement. Camp Haven had no heart rate monitors or other equipment that needed electricity to run, which meant we had to track Penny's status largely by guesswork. We took her pulse every few minutes, but there was nothing much else we could do but wait. The main problem was that Penny's body had rejected the penicillin, and I could tell by the look on Jax's face that she didn't expect Penny to make it through the night.

Sometimes later, Nita rushed in from the next room over. "Jax? Pippa's just about ready. I've never done this before. What do I do?"

"I'll help," Jax said. "You okay in here, Georgie?"

Though I didn't like the idea of being alone with a half-dead woman, I nodded. Pippa needed Jax more than I did. After all, she had a better chance of surviving than her mother. Jax and Nita left the exam room. Not long after, Jacob knocked quietly and entered.

"Hey," I said softly. "You're not staying with Pippa?"

"She kicked me out." He stared at his mother, who looked more zombie than human at this stage. "God, she looks awful. Did you give her the medication?"

"We did." I rubbed my eyes. When was the last time I'd slept? "But it turns out she's allergic to penicillin. Did you know that?"

Jacob began to shake his head before a look of realization crossed his features. "Yes, I did. She used to wear a medical bracelet for it."

"What happened to the bracelet?"

"She stopped wearing it because she thought it was ugly." He groaned, leaned against the wall, and sank to the floor. "Oh, God. I can't believe I forgot!"

"It's not your fault," I told him. "It's not like we thought we were going to facing this anytime soon."

“But I should have known—”

I knelt on the floor and took his hands away from his face. “Jacob, stop. If there’s one thing I’ve learned since that damn EMP went off, it’s that you can’t keep blaming yourself for every single mistake you’ve ever made. Learn from the experience and move on. Better yourself. That’s our only option.”

We locked eyes. He leaned in, his lips nearing mine, but I bowed my head and pulled away.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

He covered his eyes again. “No, no. You’re not the one who needs to apologize. I am. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry for putting you in that position. Old habits, you know? It just felt normal.”

“I get it.”

“You’re with Eirian now. Aren’t you?”

I sat next to him, wrapped my arms around my legs, and rested my chin on my knees. “We haven’t talked about it in so many words yet.”

“I’ve seen the two of you around camp,” Jacob said, stretching out his legs along the floor. “You fit together so well. It pissed me off at first because you and I were never like that. It was never easy for us. I didn’t realize that until now.”

“I think we were both too busy convincing ourselves that our relationship would eventually work out,” I said. “We weren’t paying attention to the things that were keeping us apart.”

“Yeah.” Jacob sighed. “I just feel like we could have done better. Any word on your dad?”

“Not even a whisper,” I replied. “I even tried to sneak into Sylvester’s cabin.”

“You did? What happened?”

“Ludo caught me,” I told him. “I guess it’s a good thing he did. Otherwise, I might have gone the same way as your—”

I cut myself off before I could finish the thought. I’d just remembered that Jacob had no idea that his father had died in the woods, mauled by a wild animal.

“Like my dad,” he finished. He tipped his head back against the wall and blew his hair out of his eyes. “What do you think happened to him? Do you think he’s still alive?”

I remained quiet, pretending to study my fingernails as I tried to think of

something to say. Jacob nudged me.

"Georgie? Hello?" He waved in front of my face. "You still in there?"

"Jacob, listen," I said, deciding that Jacob and I had lied to each other enough for one lifetime. "We saw your father in the woods."

His expression brightened. "You did? How was he? What did he say?"

"No, you don't understand." I swallowed hard. "We found him —he was—"

"He was dead, wasn't he?" Jacob asked, his voice hollow.

"Not quite," I said. "He'd been attacked by a wolf. There was nothing we could do. If I could have saved him, I would have."

He tucked his head between his knees. "What did you do with him?"

"Sorry?"

"The body. What happened to him?"

"We had to leave him," I told him. "We didn't have a choice."

"Where?"

"Down the mountain a ways," I replied. "Looked like he might have been walking back toward the city."

"I'll have to find him," Jacob said. "He'll need some kind of proper burial."

"Jacob, there won't be much left to find."

"I don't care." He shot up from the floor, as if he suddenly couldn't stand being in such close proximity to me. "You don't get it. He was a Christian. This would have mattered to him."

Before I could argue further about the dangers of going into the woods alone just to give Jove a funeral, two things happened at once. First, Pippa screamed next door. It ripped through the walls and pierced my eardrums. Second, Penny's body began to seize uncontrollably on the exam table. Jacob caught her as she rolled toward the edge of the table, eyes rolling so far back in her head that I could only see the whites of her eyes.

"Help me!" he yelled, bracing his bucking mother against his torso.

I took hold of Penny's ankles, and we lowered her onto the floor. "Turn her on her side. Gently!"

Together, we rolled her over. Jacob pinned her arms to the ground, trying to quell her movements, but I swatted him away.

"Georgie!"

"You're not supposed to hold her down," I snapped, putting myself between Jacob and his mother. "You could hurt her even more."

The seizure subsided as quickly as it had come on, but another problem soon arose. I pressed two fingers to Penny's wrist, panic rising in my throat. Once again, she had no pulse. I started CPR.

"Get Jax!" I ordered Jacob.

He flew out of the room, but from the way Pippa was yelling, I had a feeling I knew which patient that Jax was going to prioritize. Seconds felt like hours as I pumped Penny's heart for her. My mind worked in layers. The first was focused on saving Penny's life. The second warred with the idea of losing yet another one of Jacob's family members. The third listened to the heated conversation that filtered into the exam room from next door.

"Jax, my mother's heart stopped again," Jacob was shouting over Pippa's anguished groans.

Jax's reply was muffled and agitated. "In case you haven't noticed, I kind of have my hands full at the moment. Push, girl!"

Pippa released another bloodcurdling scream.

"Please, Jax," Jacob begged. "She's dying."

Beneath my palms, Penny's heart did nothing to contradict Jacob's statement.

"Nita, go!" Jax ordered. "See what you can do for her."

Moments later, Nita and Jacob returned to help me. Nita rifled through the vials on the counter, filled a syringe, and dropped to her knees beside me and Penny.

"Keep going," she encouraged, pushing the needle into Penny's arm.

My arms were giving out, but I repeatedly pushed on Penny's chest with the last of my strength. Nita held Penny's wrist with two fingers, searching for a pulse. Jacob paced from one end of the tiny exam room to the other, threading his fingers through his hair.

"God, not Mom too." He looked up the ceiling and pressed his hands together. "Please God, don't take her too. What am I supposed to tell Pippa?"

I had never heard him pray before. He was at the end of his line, but so was everybody else.

"One last big push!" Jax yelled next door. "Go, baby, go!"

Pippa screamed her loudest yet, a prolonged, determined yell that shook the walls of the med bay, followed promptly by an intense cry of relief. My arms buckled, the muscles no longer able to keep up the work. Nita took my place. As I backed away from Penny, I already knew that our efforts were pointless. Penny stared blankly at the ceiling with cold, empty eyes.

“Give me more epinephrine!” Nita shouted.

I moved toward the counter to obey, but someone grabbed me from behind. It was Jax, her hands wrapped in clean towels.

“Don’t waste it,” she said, looking down at Jacob’s mother. “She’s gone.”

“No!” Jacob shoved me out of the way and scattered the vials across the counter. His eyes bulged as he studied each label for the right one. “No, we can’t let her die. Nita, what are you doing?”

Nita had stopped pumping Penny’s heart and sat back on her heels. She looked up at Jacob. Her long, dark hair was askew, and her pretty olive skin flushed red with stress and grief. “I’m sorry, Jacob.”

“No, she can’t be dead!”

Everyone in the room cringed as he swept the vials from the counter in a fit of rage. They scattered everywhere, bouncing off the floor and rolling away. One shattered, spraying some kind of drug across the walls of the exam room. Jax gripped Jacob under one arm, and with an astonishing show of strength for such a small woman, yanked him out into the hallway.

“Get yourself together,” she ordered, pinning Jacob to the wall. “This is the end of our world, kid. Shit happens. People die. But my job is to make sure we prevent as many people from dying as possible, and I can’t do that if you’re throwing the only supplies we have all over my med bay.”

Jacob struggled against her grip, his face growing redder as her fist pressed against his windpipe. He appeared deaf to her words. She smacked him hotly across the face. Nita and I both jumped at the sound of skin against skin, but Jacob’s eyes cleared. He stared into Jax’s face, and his chin began to tremble. Then he collapsed altogether.

“It’s okay,” Jax said, lowering Jacob gently to the floor as he sobbed in her arms. “Everything’s going to be okay. Girls, get out of that room and shut the door. He doesn’t need to see her.”

I didn’t need further coaxing. Nita and I hurried out, leaving Penny and the fallen medication. I didn’t look back as I shut the door. It wasn’t something I wanted to see either.

“Nita, can you check on Pippa and the baby?” Jax asked, still holding Jacob. “They were okay when I left them. Georgie, maybe you should come here.”

I sat on the floor as Nita went into Pippa’s room. Jacob was completely sprawled out. Jax wiggled out from underneath him, and I took her place. He rested his head in my lap, and I threaded my fingers through his hair,

combing out the tangles. We stayed like that until he fell asleep, out of exhaustion or grief. Jax and Nita helped me get him into one of the cots. Afterward, I left the med bay, found a quiet spot away from everyone else, and cried. If I never had to see the inside of that exam room again, it would be fine with me.

WEEKS LATER, things began to go back to normal, or at least as normal as they could be in Camp Haven. Penny's body was cremated. There was no ceremony. Jacob went back to work, throwing himself into the efforts for rebuilding the camp's ruined wall. He worked dawn until dusk, drowning his grief in manual labor. I only ever saw him in the Bistro at mealtimes. Part of me was fine with that. His empty expressions were difficult to look at, and our limited conversation was falsely nonchalant. Pippa was finally able to leave the med bay for the first time in over a month. Her newborn, a little girl that she had yet to name, was doing well. The problem was with Pippa herself. Like Jacob, she had not taken the news of her parents' deaths well. On her first day out of the med bay, she left her baby with the other people who looked after the children and disappeared for hours on end. When night fell, Jax organized a search party to look for her with no luck. I finally found her holed up in a hollowed-out tree near the edge of camp. She didn't say a word, but merely picked up her baby and walked back to her bunk in silence. The situation repeated itself each day. She dropped off the newborn, vanished to a different hiding place, and reappeared in the evening to collect the child. After a while, we stopped looking for her. One day, I found Ludo and Jacob at odds with each other outside of the med bay. The baby lay swaddled in Jacob's arms, screaming as the two men yelled over her.

"This is more than postpartum depression, Mason!" Ludo was saying. "She hasn't been pulling her weight. You of all people should know what that means."

"You're seriously going to hold a tribunal for a seventeen-year-old girl?" Jacob challenged. "Our parents are dead, Ludo!"

"Okay," I said, ducking between the two to scoop the baby from Jacob's arms. "Have either of you noticed that this pretty little girl is upset?" I fixed the blanket around the newborn's face. "They're so noisy, aren't they, pretty?"

"He wants to kick Pippa out," Jacob said, fuming.

"I don't want to do anything," Ludo growled. "But she isn't giving us

much of a choice."

"Ludo, is this really necessary?" I asked him, swaying back and forth in an attempt to soothe the squalling child. "Pippa's had it pretty rough. Like Jacob said, she just lost both of her parents. And she's taking care of a child that she never intended to keep to begin with."

"That's the problem though," Ludo replied. "She *isn't* taking care of her. She disappears all day. Doesn't help out in maternity. Doesn't help out anywhere else. I don't even see her at the Bistro. I mean, does she even eat these days?"

I decided not to mention that I had been bringing Pippa breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day. For now, I was the only one she allowed near her. Sometimes, she even hid out in the communications office with Eirian and me.

"She needs more time," Jacob argued. "She'll get better."

"Not unless she lets someone help her," Ludo said. "We have therapists here. There are people that she can talk to."

"She doesn't need a shrink," Jacob replied.

"Lucky for her, no one here ever got a degree in psychology," said Ludo. "Listen up, Mason. I'll give her another week to pull herself together. She needs to meet with our camp counselor. If she blows it off or she disappears again, that's it. I'm calling a tribunal to figure out what to do with her."

The week passed without change. Pippa continued her absent streak, except she stopped cluing me into her hiding places once I suggested that she should consider attending the meeting with the counselor. She seemed wholly unconcerned about the prospect of a tribunal, which made me worry for her even more. Clearly, the events of the recent past had had a traumatic effect on her. She wasn't thinking straight. It wasn't her fault, but the rest of the camp couldn't understand that. Ludo officially put in a request to gather the tribunal, but this wasn't the piece of news that really surprised me that day.

"I got a meeting with Sylvester," Jacob announced over lunch at the Bistro. It was a rare occasion that we sat together. Usually, he avoided me, but Eirian was working through lunch, and so I was much easier to approach.

"You did?" I missed my mouth, and a piece of beef plopped from my spoon back into the bowl of stew. It didn't entirely concern me. Food was thin on the ground, which meant that each meal grew more and more difficult to stomach. "You mean it was actually approved?"

Jacob nodded, powering through his own lunch without complaint. He

tore a piece of bread in half and wiped broth from the edge of his bowl. “I’m going to ask him to get Ludo to drop the tribunal. The camp’s rules should include a bylaw for mental illness in situations like this. It’s not fair to Pippa. Don’t you think?”

“I totally agree.” I pushed the stew away in favor of my own roll of bread. It was easier to eat that than the tough meat in the bowl. “I find it hard to believe that no one at this camp has ever suffered from depression before. They’re treating her like this is a choice.”

“That’s how it is though, isn’t it?” Jacob asked. “It’s an invisible disease. People would rather pretend like it doesn’t exist.”

“They don’t get it,” I added. “She needs time. I would love to help her. I actually think she would benefit from meeting with the camp counselor, but *she* has to be the one that decides that she wants to go. That’s the hard part.”

“She listens to you,” Jacob said. “She likes your advice. Don’t you remember? Before all of this, she used to call my phone and ask for you when she had trouble at school or whatever. Don’t give up on her, Georgie. Please. I might be able to buy her a little more time, but I think you’re the one who’s eventually going to get through to her.”

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “I’ll do my best. When is your meeting with Sylvester?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Well, good luck.”

AFTER LUNCH, I picked up the baby from the childcare building and stopped by the breach in the wall to look for Eirian. Most days, he didn’t have much time to spend working communications with me. I’d seen him less and less since Camp Havoc had broken in. I spent a lot of time by myself, but the sight of the new barrier the construction crews had erected to fill the gap in our defense helped to set my mind at ease.

Eirian was busy hammering together a new section of the barrier. When he bent down to find another nail, he caught sight of me lingering just outside of the construction zone and jogged over.

“Hey there,” he said, grinning down at the baby tucked into the sling in the front of my coat. “I see you brought company.”

“I thought she could use a little fresh air.” I stood on my toes to kiss him, and a few of the other guys whistled and catcalled while they continued their work. “Oh, shut up!”

He took off his work gloves and tapped his fingers against the baby's lips. She hummed, spit bubbling as she gummed Eirian's fingers. "Any word on Mom?"

"Ludo wants to hold a tribunal for her," I reported. "Jacob's pissed. He has a meeting with Sylvester tomorrow to ask him to postpone it."

Eirian raised his eyebrows. "Really? That's surprising. Is he going to ask about your dad too?"

"I didn't ask him to," I replied, rocking the baby side to side. "It's too much. Besides, back when I requested a meeting with Sylvester, I flat out told Jacob that I wouldn't bother to mention Jove. Why should he go the extra mile for me?"

"A lot has happened since then," he said. "The two of you are in better spirits now."

"I guess."

The baby wrapped her tiny hands around one of Eirian's fingers, and he smiled widely. "She still doesn't have a name, huh?"

"Nope," I said. "Pippa hasn't picked one yet."

"Sounds like she's not going to," he said. "A pretty girl should have a pretty name."

"Or a badass name," I said. "After all, she was born into this insanity. She'll have to be a badass in order to survive it all."

"Like what?"

I pondered the question, looking down at the little girl in my arms. She would grow up in a completely different world than the one the rest of us had known. She would never know the United States as it was before the EMP blast. She would grow up similarly to Eirian, on a homestead, watching the country rebuild itself from the ground up.

"Athena," I decided.

"Goddess of wisdom and war," Eirian added, nodding in agreement. "Got a thing for the Greeks, I see." He smoothed out the tuft of hair on Athena's forehead. "It's perfect."

"It's temporary," I reminded him. "We can't really name Pippa's baby."

"Until then," he said, "she remains a tiny goddess."

"Eirian!" Ludo trotted across the construction site to catch up with us. "What are you doing right now?"

"Sorry, boss," Eirian replied. "Just saying hi to the kid."

Ludo waved away his excuse. "I'm not worried about that. I need to

speak with you. I've been sending scouts out to Camp Havoc ever since the breach. So far, they haven't picked up any useful information."

"Okay. So?"

"Kirsch and Peters headed out last night," Ludo said. "They were supposed to return by lunchtime today, but no one's heard hide nor hair of them."

"Did they take a radio with them?" I asked.

"They did," Ludo replied. "But we can't reach them. Either the signal doesn't reach that far, or they aren't able to answer."

"So what happened to them?" Eirian said.

"I'm thinking that Camp Havoc got a hold of them." Ludo planted his hands on his hips with a grimace. "I want a second team out there ASAP to figure out what those idiots are planning."

10

There was nothing to do but watch as Ludo sent out a second group of scouts, heavily armed, to check if Camp Havoc had appropriated the first security team. The night was tense. A pall hung over the compound. Even the children were quiet. It was as if everyone knew that something wasn't quite right. Dinner at the Bistro, usually a chatty occasion, was a hushed affair, and the community event was canceled on account of lack of interest. We were all waiting to hear back from the scouts. When they didn't reappear by curfew, Ludo ordered the camp to bed, and we trudged to the dormitories on worried, wearied feet.

The morning brought no news, which in any other circumstance, I would have considered good news, but times were changing, and to hear nothing from our comrades was a sure sign of trouble. Ludo felt it too, but he hid it beneath his usual gruffness as he went about his scheduled business of assigning jobs for the day. It was a smart move on his part. If Ludo panicked, the whole camp would panic, and that was the last thing we needed. I went to the Communications office as usual to pass out radios and walkie talkies for the day. After that was through, I started scanning the waves for signs of other operators outside of Camp Haven.

At lunchtime, I took my stew, the portions of which seemed to be growing smaller with each passing day, and ate around the back side of Dotcom since the tension in the Bistro was so smothering. As I fished through the gravy for the vegetables, I caught sight of Jacob heading up the hill to Sylvester's cabin. His meeting about Pippa was today. I shifted

sideways to get a better view as he approached the front door and knocked. When one of Ludo's security boys answered the door, I rolled my eyes. Of course Sylvester himself couldn't be bothered to receive guests at his own house.

It wasn't long—fifteen or twenty minutes—before Jacob reappeared. He waved in thanks to the security guard who saw him out then trotted down the hill. He was smiling. When he saw me sitting on the bins behind DotCom, he walked over.

"Looks like good news," I said.

"It is," he replied. "Pippa's tribunal is going to be put on hold indefinitely."

I set down the nearly empty bowl of stew to hug him. "Jacob, that's great! I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks," he said. "That Sylvester guy is a trip though."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What was he like? Who is he really?"

"I never actually saw him." Jacob sat down on the bins next to me. "We spoke through the door of his bedroom."

"You're kidding."

Jacob shook his head. "His voice is weird too, like he's changing it to sound less like himself. I couldn't get a read on him at all. Kyle, the security guard up there, says that Sylvester's the most paranoid out of all the campers. That's why he quarantines himself."

"Sounds like my dad, but at least he went outside," I said. "So what happened then? You were only in there for a few minutes. I can't believe it was so easy for you to convince him."

"All I had to do was explain the situation." Jacob pulled his gloves from the pocket of his coat and put them on. "I told him everything. That we're new to the camp, that we lost both of our parents, that Pippa has been having a hard time adjusting. As soon as I mentioned that she was having trouble with depression, he agreed to postpone her tribunal right away."

"I'm so glad."

"Listen, while I was up there, I had the chance to look around a bit." Jacob unzipped his coat and reached into its inside pocket. "Georgie, it was like looking into your childhood photo albums. If I had to guess, Sylvester didn't touch anything in that cabin other than whatever's in the bedroom. It looks like a damn shrine."

My rib cage tightened around my lungs. Suddenly, the air felt too cold to

breathe. As the months passed me by in Camp Haven, I had dwelt less and less about the time I'd spent on this land before the EMP blast went off. Now, it all came back in full force. This place was the home that my father had made for me. Why had he left it so suddenly?

"I found this," Jacob said. Something small and sparkly glinted in the palm of his hand. A gold wedding band. "Look familiar?"

Gingerly, I took it from him. "This was my mother's."

"I guess as much," he said. "I figured you should have it."

Once more, I linked my arms around Jacob's shoulders and pulled him close. "Thank you so much."

"Don't mention it."

Boots scuffled through the dirt and snow, and Eirian skidded around the corner of the building, heaving for breath. "Georgie!"

Jacob immediately released me. "It was just a hug, man. I swear."

"No, it's not that," Eirian said. "It's Camp Havoc. They're at the gates. Actually, they're all around. It's bad, guys. Really bad."

I caught Eirian's forearms and made him sit on the bins. "Slow down, Eirian. What are you talking about?"

"Ludo's scout team never came back," Eirian said, pushing his fingers through his curls in an effort to get them away from his eyes. "Not the first or the second. I was working security at the front gates just now. We saw them coming up the hill. There's hundreds of them, more than we could feed here at Camp Haven. And they're all armed. We couldn't have stopped them. We had to come inside."

"Holy shit," Jacob muttered. "They're storming the camp. What are we going to do?"

"There's nothing much we can do," Eirian said. "Other than buckle down and try to defend the place. Ludo wants the miscellaneous crew to meet in the square with the other security guards. He's redirecting anyone able to work with security. Are you two in?"

"Hell yes," I said. "There's no way I'm letting those idiots take down all of our hard work. Jacob?"

"I'm in too," he said. "Pippa's safe here. That's all that matters. Let's go."

But we didn't even make it around to the front of DotCom when a series of four explosions rocked the entire camp. They came from different directions, one from each corner of the camp.

"No," Eirian whispered.

There was one moment of silence. Then the camp exploded in chaos. Camp Havoc had blown the wall in four different places. Their people poured in from all sides, dressed in crude combat gear and armed with homemade weapons. They threw our campers to the ground, where they were trampled by more invaders or others trying to flee. The trespassers tossed firebombs into the windows of the buildings, where they exploded amidst screams of terror. Camp Havoc didn't just want our supplies. They wanted to bring the compound to the ground. Eirian dragged Jacob and me between DotCom and the Bistro, which the invaders had yet to discover.

"I have to get to Pippa!" Jacob yelled, his eyes bulging out of his skull. "I can't lose her! I can't!"

"She's at the med bay with the baby for a checkup," Eirian said. He grabbed Jacob's coat to keep him from running out of the alley. "I can get you to her, but you have to calm down and think rationally. Follow my lead. Don't get ahead of me. Do you understand?"

Jacob nodded furiously. Eirian pulled his gun from its hiding place and cocked it. I followed his lead. Ludo had assigned me a weapon once he considered me trustworthy enough to handle it. With Jacob between us, we dove into the melee.

The camp was already trashed. Fires burned in nearly every window. People ran to and fro. Some of them screamed for mercy. Others had found weapons of their own to fight back with. Gunfire and explosives filled the mountain air as our trio scuttled along the front of DotCom toward the med bay. Bullets from an automatic rifle lodged themselves in the concrete block of the building right above my head. I crouched lower, my thighs aching in protest, and darted after Eirian and Jacob. As we passed a fallen body, I grabbed the high caliber rifle from its still hands for my own use.

The med bay had barricaded its doors, following the lockdown procedures, so we climbed through a shattered window instead. On the other side, I coughed debris and dust from my lungs only to find Nita pointing a gun at me through the haze.

"Nita, it's me!" I said, putting my hands up.

"Georgie!" She lowered the gun and hugged me fiercely, then embraced Eirian and Jacob as well. "Thank God the three of you are all right."

"Where's Pippa?" Jacob demanded.

"In the back," Nita said, pointing toward the exam rooms. "Room two. I told her to hide with the baby."

Jacob ran to find his sister, navigating through the devastated bay. The place was a disaster, but the patients from the last attack had finally healed, so the cots were empty. Nita had piled them up near both of the exit doors.

"How are you still alive?" Eirian asked, taking in the state of the bay.

"I heard the bastards coming." Nita wiped sweat from her brow. "So I barricaded the doors and took cover behind one of those cots. I shot at anyone who tried to come through the window."

"Thanks for hesitating when we came in," I said. "Where's Jax?"

"No idea. It was a slow morning, so she was running errands for Ludo."

I wandered over to one of the shattered windows and chanced a look outside. Bodies littered the ground, but plenty more were still actively tearing Camp Haven to shreds. "They're raiding the Bistro and DotCom. Why haven't they come here yet?"

"They probably think they nabbed all our medical supplies during the last visit," Eirian said. "Get away from the window, Georgie."

I joined them at the center of the room again. Jacob emerged from the back room with Pippa in tow. They had fashioned a baby harness out of a spare sheet so that Athena could rest safely against Pippa's chest while keeping Pippa's arms free. I hugged Pippa and kissed the top of her head.

"What do we do now?" Jacob asked, flinching when another bullet hit a window pane and sent glass flying everywhere.

"I say we hole up here," Nita offered. "Nowhere else is safe. They're destroying everything, but they've spared the med bay. Our best bet is to stay here and defend the place. It's worked for me so far."

Eirian stared out of the windows. "But everyone else—"

I took him aside, away from the others. "You want to go out there, don't you?"

"Ludo's out there," he said. "And so are a bunch of other guys that I know."

"Yeah, and they're most likely going to die," I replied. "Eirian, it's you against all of Camp Havoc, and in case you haven't noticed, there are a lot more of them than there are of us. If you go out there, you'll get hit in less than a minute."

"I can't let my people suffer without trying to help them."

"You won't be able to help them anyway if you're bleeding from multiple gunshot wounds," I said, smoothing down his wild hair. "I can't tell you to stay here. It's not my place. But I also can't bear to lose you. Please stay.

Buckle down with us. When all of this is over, we can comb the camp for survivors. They'll need you, Eirian. I need you."

He rested his forehead against mine, breathing evenly in and out, but he winced when another explosion went off outside. "Okay. I'll stay."

"Get over here, you guys!" Nita shouted. She had tipped more cots on their sides, forming a square of relative safety in the rear corner of the med bay. Jacob was already crouched beside Pippa, his little sister and her baby safe within the circle of his arms. Eirian and I stepped over the cots to join them. We knelt next to Nita, who had her gun propped up on a metal leg of the bed, aimed at the window. As soon as I got comfortable, a man in dirty combat pants shoved his boot through the last remaining window and climbed into the med bay.

"Hey, we got live ones!" he shouted outside, setting eyes on our meager bunker. With a grin, he raised his gun, but he didn't get a chance to fire. Nita, Eirian, and I all pulled our triggers at the same time. The man fell to the ground, dead and gone.

"Call your shots," Eirian said. "So we don't waste ammo like that again."

Another man crawled through an open window.

"Mine," I said, and shot him through the leg.

We held our own for some time, but the battle outside didn't die down. The ground shook with new explosions as Camp Havoc wreaked destruction on years' worth of our campers' dedication and hard work. We popped each and every person that tried to enter the med bay, but I feared that we were the only people who had managed to set up a relative safe space to duck and cover. Who would be left after all of this was done?

"I'm running out of bullets," Eirian said, checking his pockets for spare ammunition.

"I'm already out," Nita replied as she lowered her rifle. "Shit."

Another trespasser barreled inside. I fired once. The bullet hit the man's arm. He dropped his gun and looked up from his wound to find all of us staring at him. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled something out.

"It's a fucking grenade!" I yelled, pulling the trigger of my rifle. It clicked pointlessly. I was out of bullets too. The man pulled the pin on the grenade and tossed it mercilessly in our direction.

Suddenly, Jacob was at my side. "Georgie," he said, his eyes dark with an unreadable emotion. "Please. For me. Save Pippa." And then he leapt over

the barrier of cots and flattened himself out over the live grenade.

"No!"

The grenade exploded. It took out half the med bay, showering us with debris. I ran to Pippa and covered both her and the baby with as much of my own body as I could. Tears threatened to fall over the edge of my lashes, but I kept them at bay. Jacob was gone, but there was no time to mourn the loss. The grenade had blown a hole in the side of the med bay, and some of the invaders had noticed our hiding place. We were exposed. We couldn't stay here anymore.

"Out the back!" Nita shouted, shoving aside the cots to make an escape route. "Go, go, go!"

I heaved Pippa up from the floor and shoved her in front of me. We ran single file down the hallway and through the back door. When we burst outside, I turned around to count heads. Eirian was directly behind us. Nita was missing.

"Nita," I gasped, still holding Pippa upright. "Where's Nita?"

Eirian shifted aside, clearing the view of the hallway behind him. Nita lay across the floor, open eyes staring blankly, her med coat perforated with bullet holes.

"We have to keep moving," Eirian said as the man who was responsible for Nita's death appeared in my line of sight. "Georgie, let's go."

I listened to him, but not before I picked a handgun off another body outside and fired at the man in the med bay. He dropped to the floor, cradling his throat as blood gushed out of his carotid artery. Eirian pushed me and Pippa through the camp, using his keen instinct to keep us out of the line of fire. We sprinted in short bursts toward the hole in the wall on the north side of camp, taking cover when we needed to. Once we cleared the rubble and escaped into the woods, the trees muffled the sounds of terror at Camp Haven. Eirian kept us moving, until the leaves overhead were so thick that the gray sky above was no longer visible. When we finally slowed, Pippa's legs gave out, and she began to fall over.

"Whoa," I said, catching the girl beneath her arms and lowering her slowly to lean against a tree trunk. I knelt in front of her, but she stared past me, unseeing. "Pippa? Hey, are you all right?"

"She's in shock," Eirian said, scouting the woods for signs of movement. "Check on Athena."

I pulled the makeshift sling aside to look at the baby. She slept peacefully

against Pippa's chest, completely unaware of the mayhem that she had just survived.

"God, I wish I was that age again," I mumbled.

Eirian remained standing, facing Camp Haven. Smoke spiraled through the forest, while the orange glow of the fires burned on. Not many people would survive the raid.

"I can't believe it," Eirian said. "Dead. They're all going to be dead."

"And so are you."

We whirled around. An entire truckload of Camp Havoc members had snuck up on us. They were covered in mud and dirt. They must have been camouflaged on the ground, waiting for us to come closer. It was fifteen against three. We didn't stand a chance.

"Run!" Eirian shouted.

I heaved Pippa up and followed his lead, but Eirian's legs were longer than mine. I lost him in the trees as the invaders ran after me and Pippa. Half of the group split off to follow Eirian. Pippa tripped over a rock and tumbled toward the ground, tucking herself around Athena to protect her from harm. I skidded to a stop, turned back, and tried to pull her to her feet, but the Camp Havoc intruders had caught up with us. I fought them over Pippa, punching noses and pinching pressure points as hands closed in around us. I wrapped my fingers in Pippa's coat, but the intruders ripped us apart, the fabric tearing away as we were separated. I fought against my captors as they dragged me from Jacob's little sister.

"Stop!" I yelled, kicking my feet to get them off of me. Pippa was hardly visible through the trespassers who tried to subdue her. "She has a baby! Leave her alone!"

"Shut up!"

Someone aimed a kick to the side of my head. A boot connected with my temple, knocking the world out of place. My vision blacked out for a few seconds. The returning image was blurry and dense, as if I was staring at the scene from underwater. Eirian and Pippa were nowhere to be found. The woods were thick with the stench of Camp Havoc's men.

"What are you doing?" one of them asked. "Kill them."

"No," a second voice said. "I recognize this one from last time. She runs the radios. We could use her. And that other girl has a kid. We can't kill a baby."

"So kill the girl."

“And do what with the baby?”

“Good point. Did you find the guy?”

“Alan’s got him,” the second voice confirmed. “They’re taking him back to camp. He’s in good shape. We can use him for labor.”

“Have you heard from anyone else?”

“Logan’s just got here from the attack,” the voice said. “We completely trampled the place. Barely any survivors. We got what we needed. Come on, let’s get out of here. I’m starving.”

Someone took hold of my coat and began dragging me across the ground. Sticks and rocks ripped through my clothes, scraping against my skin.

“Why?” I forced out.

“Hey, boss. She just said something.”

One of the intruders leaned over me. A black scarf protected his nose and mouth from the cold, but his black eyes were shrewd and calculating. “What do you want?”

“Why?” I said again, the words rasping against my windpipe. “You have your own camp. Why would you trash ours?”

The man’s scarf lifted upward, as if he were grinning beneath it. “I don’t know what hippie dippie shit you were practicing at your little kumbaya compound back there, but I can assure you that it won’t fly at Base One.”

“Base One?”

“Yeah,” he went on. “We got different rules, little girl. It’s every man for himself out there, or in this case, every base for itself. We take what we need, and we don’t feel guilty about it. Your camp was a threat to ours. You were using up the resources in the area. We have more people to take care of. We need those resources.”

“You killed them all.”

“Let bygones be bygones,” he said. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you a cozy bed at Base One. I’m sure there’s an old bunker we can lock you up in.”

His buddies laughed and thumped him on the back as he stood up, but their camaraderie was short-lived. Out of nowhere, a crossbow bolt whizzed through the air and thunked straight into the heart of the raid party’s leader. He looked down at the bolt sticking out of his chest.

“Shit,” he said and fell to the ground.

The rest of them panicked. They cocked their guns, aiming wildly into the forest.

“What do we do? What do we do?”

“Where did it come from?”

Another bolt found its home, taking down another trespasser. There were three left.

“Run!”

The trio scattered, taking off in different directions. Only one of them was lucky enough to make it far enough to escape the bow’s deadly force. The other two were hit in the back. When the forest was clear of enemies, I lay still, hoping that the owner of the bow was finished firing, or if he wasn’t, that I looked dead enough not to be considered a threat. Footsteps neared my position. I felt them rather than heard them. These feet were trained not to make a noise in the woods. This person knew where to step to avoid cracking branches. An immense shadow came over me. I slowed my breathing. I was dead. Dead.

The person nudged my side. “Up you get, George. We got work to do.”

My eyes flew open at the familiar voice, a voice that I had not heard in over nine years.

“Dad?”

BLACKOUT: BOOK 2- EMP POST APOCALYPTIC FICTION

1

I stared at the dead man. Ten seconds ago, he was alive and well, ready to drag me all the way to his own survivalist camp, where the residents there would use my knowledge for their own needs. Now the man had a crossbow bolt through his eye. His legs had crumpled beneath him when the bolt punctured his brain. They lay folded beneath his limp body at sinister angles. His remaining eye was still open wide, as if his abrupt end was such a surprise that he carried the shock with him into the afterlife. The other men, or most of them anyway, were dead too. The ones that had gotten away from the crossbow's deadly fire didn't deserve it. They had taken my friends. Eirian, a man who meant more to me than most everyone else even though we'd only known each other a few short months, and Pippa, the seventeen-year-old sister of my now-dead ex-fiancé, were gone, and there was a damn good chance I was never going to see them again.

Another man stood above me, the crossbow resting over his shoulder. Layers of fur made him seem larger than he actually was, but underneath all the coats, I knew that his frame was lean and strong. His face had hardly changed over the last nine years. He bore the same downward tilt to his lips, the same steely eyes with their steady gaze, and the same aura of a man who was not quite flush with the rest of humanity. Flat on my back in the snow, I gazed up at my father. Nine years. It had been nine years since I'd seen him last. I was at a loss for words. He, much to my surprise, was not.

"What the hell have you done to your hair?"

My hat had blown off in the fight. I brushed my fingers through my hair. I

hadn’t seen myself in a mirror in months, but there was no doubt I looked ridiculous. I could tell from my dry split ends that the violet dye had faded, leaving a blotchy lilac tint in its wake. The side shave grew out in uneven patches. Under my father’s scrutiny, I suddenly felt unbalanced. I plucked my hat from the ground, brushed the snow off, and jammed it on over my cold ears.

“It was a dare for my radio show,” I explained, ignoring his outstretched hand and pushing myself up from the damp, cold ground. The dead man’s good eye watched me as I left him to rejoin the living.

“One hell of dare,” my father—Amos—said.

“Are we really going to talk about my hair right now?” I asked, eager to put a few paces between me and the dead man. “You just took out half a platoon with a crossbow, my home is gone, and my friends have been captured by a rather shitty branch of the military. This doesn’t seem the time to discuss my stylistic choices.”

My boot slipped in the snow. Automatically, he reached out to steady me by the shoulders but left his hands there after I’d regained my balance. We were almost the same height now. Our eyelines were nearly level. The sad lines around his eyes and mouth trapped my attention. He *had* changed, but I couldn’t put my finger on the difference between this man and the one that had raised me to fear everyone and everything. I had left him. Nine years ago, I had left him alone in the woods because I thought I knew better. What did he think of me now?

He pulled me into a rough hug, my cheek against the soft furs of the hand-sewn coat over his shoulders. Raccoon pelts. The gray and black hairs tickled my nose, and I convinced myself that they were the reason for the moisture collecting at the corners of my eyes.

“I’m so damn glad to see you, George,” my father said.

The tears leaked over and dropped onto his wild coat. “You too, Dad.”

Our emotional reunion didn’t last long. My father pushed me out of his embrace, grabbed the front of my winter jacket, and yanked me behind the wide berth of a nearby tree trunk.

“Get down on the ground,” he hissed, peeking out from behind the tree to aim his crossbow again. From what I could see, it was the only weapon that he had on him.

A flurry of footsteps crunched through the snow, on our way toward us. More men from the camp that had destroyed mine. My father couldn’t take

all of them alone. I left my cover and darted across the snow.

"George!"

I pried the rifle from the dead man's stiffening fingers, stole the extra ammunition from his utility belt, and shoulder-rolled to the cover of a tree opposite my father's, where I gave him the thumbs-up. Not a moment later, the owners of the footsteps marched into view. There were five of them, all dressed in military grade tactical gear, each touting a slightly outdated weapon. They came from the direction of Camp Haven, the compound that I'd called home for the last few months before these men had set fire to it.

"Damn, that was too easy," one of them said. "I almost feel bad."

"Don't," said another. "Remember the motto. Base One comes first. They were hoarding a ton of supplies. We had to do that in order to survive."

"I know, but—shit!"

The footsteps shuffled to an abrupt halt. I chanced a look around the tree. The men had discovered the bodies of their dead comrades.

The one who'd touted the motto used the barrel of his gun to nudge the dead man with the crossbow bolt through his eye. "It's Stiles."

"And Andrews," one of his comrades, tall and skinny with bright orange hair, added as he eyed another body. "And Hogan and Klein and Killips. Holy shit, this guy with the crossbow nailed everyone. We shouldn't have split up. Buddy's going to be pissed."

The motto man grabbed his friend by the straps of his body armor and pulled him down to his own height. "Listen up, Kalupa. When we get back to Base One, you don't say a damn word to Buddy about this. We never saw these guys out here, understand?"

Kalupa shook free of the other man's grasp. "He's gonna find out, Wood. He takes attendance before and after every raid, remember?"

"And when Stiles and Andrews and the rest of these guys don't answer, you're going to keep your mouth shut," Wood replied. He looked around at the other three men in their group. "Here's the story, boys. We got separated from the rest of the unit during the raid and stayed behind at Camp Crap to make sure that everything was taken care of. We figured we'd meet up with everyone else back at Base One. We had no idea that they were killed in the woods. If any of you so much as lets slip the fact that we purposely fell behind, I'll make sure Buddy has your guts for garters."

"It was your idea," Kalupa muttered.

Quick as a flash, Wood jammed his rifle up under Kalupa's jaw and

clicked off the safety. “Say again, Private?”

My father stepped out from behind his tree and fired the crossbow. The bolt landed at the base of Wood’s skull before he could even hope to pull his trigger on Kalupa. As he dropped to the ground, joining those amongst the afterlife, the four other men panicked. Three of them raised their weapons as they spotted us behind the trees, firing at random. A bullet ripped through the sleeve of my coat, and the cold seeped in. I switched shoulders, looked out from the opposite side of the tree, and picked off a guy at the kneecaps. My father didn’t play by mercy rules. The other two soldiers went down like the first, each with a bolt in the brain. Kalupa was the only one left, cowering behind a dead bush, his rifle slung pointlessly over his shoulder. He watched as my father and I emerged from our cover, hands lifted over his head.

“Please,” he said, lips trembling. “I have a little brother. Our parents both died in the blast. I’m all he has left now.”

“You killed my people,” my father said.

“I didn’t,” Kalupa replied. “I swear I didn’t. I don’t have it in me. You can check my gun. I haven’t fired it once.”

My father’s crossbow remained prepared to fire. His finger neared the trigger.

“Dad, don’t shoot.”

“George, now is not the time for pity.”

“He’s telling the truth,” I said, lowering my rifle as I watched Kalupa shiver in the snow. “And I know how he feels. Most of the people that I care about are dead too. You do what you have to do in order to keep the rest of them alive. In his case, it’s marching around with these idiots. Am I right?”

Kalupa nodded furiously.

“Go,” I told him. “Don’t tell anyone else that you saw us out here, but you damn well better remember my face. I saved your life today. If there comes a time when mine needs saving, I expect you to pull through, no matter the consequences.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kalupa scrambled up and stumbled away from us. “I promise. Thank you so much.”

He disappeared through the dry, dormant trees, his clumsy, panicked footsteps fading as the snow swallowed his noisy retreat. Dad finally shouldered his crossbow.

“You can’t do that, George,” he said. He lowered himself to a crouch and patted the pockets of the nearest dead private. “You can’t feel bad for the

enemy just because he's got a sob story. Everyone's got a sob story."

"If I killed everyone on sight, I would be a shell of a human being," I told him. "Besides, that's not the only reason I kept him alive. I needed someone to track back to Camp Havoc—Base One—whatever they call it."

Dad paused in his search of the dead man. "Excuse me?"

"They took my friends," I said, taking stock of my current state. My head throbbed from the blow I'd received when one of the soldiers had attacked me. My camo winter coat, the one that I'd had ever since an ill-fated ski trip with my ex-fiancé's family, was torn to shreds. Getting dragged across rough terrain was the easiest way to wear out a good coat. "The man and the girl that I was with before you found me. Those assholes took them back to their camp. I have to find them." I shook off my ruined outer layer, then peeled the tactical coat off of the man with the bolt through his eye, rolling him over to his arms from the sleeves. "Sorry, buddy. This belongs to me now."

My father pocketed a few packets of freeze-dried snacks that he'd found on one of the bodies. "You can't be serious."

"Don't tell me you're opposed to stealing from a dead man," I said, sweeping my long hair out from under the collar of my new jacket. The sleeves were slightly too long, but the heavy-duty Kevlar patches on the front and back would do me some good if I got into a spot of trouble. For good measure, I took another man's balaclava—one that wasn't stained with blood—and wormed it on over my head.

"Not the jacket," Dad clarified. "I can't let you go to Base One."

I paused in swapping the empty magazine in my new rifle for a full one. "Excuse me?"

"George, I just got you back," he said, finally abandoning his search of the fight's casualties. "Base One isn't some little camp that you can sneak into in the middle of the night to rescue your friends. If you try, you will die."

"They're the only people I have left," I told him. "I can't leave them there."

"Yes, you can."

"Jesus, you haven't changed, have you?" In the silence of the woods, my voice was louder than I meant it to be. I took a deep breath and tried again. "Ever since that fucking explosion went off, I have been trying my hardest to keep the people I love safe. Most of them are dead now. Only two are left, three if you count a baby that deserves to grow up in a world that's better than this one. Now I didn't ask you to come with me. You have no obligation

to me. You haven't for a long time. You can go back to whatever hole you've been hiding in, scared shitless, for the last decade, but I refuse to let those assholes get the better of me. I'm going to Base One whether you like it or not."

I zipped up the tactical jacket, swung the rifle over my shoulder, and headed in the same direction as Kalupa's footprints.

"Is that what you think of me?" my father called. "That I don't care about anyone but myself? That I'm still holding on to the fear that your mother's death instilled in me? Camp Haven is gone, George. Gone! And I feel the loss of every single one of those people as if they were my own family. I can't lose you too."

I paused and turned around. "What do you know about Camp Haven?"

"What do you mean?"

I marched across the snow toward him. "I mean that I've been looking for you for months. No one at Camp Haven knows who you are. No one knows you even exist. I thought you were dead or, at best, long gone from the Rockies, so what the hell do you know about Camp Haven?"

"George," he said softly. "I built Camp Haven."

"What?"

He sighed and gestured for me to follow him. I trailed after him out of sheer curiosity. We could always come back to the bodies and Kalupa's trail to Base One later.

"Did they ever tell you the story of how Camp Haven came to be?" Dad asked, clearing aside dead branches as the trees gathered closer together.

"Yeah, they fed me some bullshit about a guy named Sylvester," I said. "According to Ludo—he's dead too by the way—Sylvester got caught in a snowstorm and almost died. Then a woman, an angel or whatever, came to him in his dreams and led him to our cabin. He built Camp Haven from there."

"That's bullshit."

"Well, I called that from the start."

The ground sloped upward, and my father easily lifted himself onto a rock ledge carved into the side of the mountain. He grabbed my hand and hauled me up after him. Then we continued on our way. Where we were going, other than up, I had no idea.

"Here's the truth," he said, his breath puffing out in clouds of condensation. "After you left, I was crushed. Don't give me that face. I

understand why you did it. Back then, I tried to convince myself that you had gotten lost in the woods. I spent weeks combing the mountains for you, ignoring the signs that you'd gone to the city. I thought about going after you. I even got halfway to Denver a few times before turning back. Every time I got close enough to see the lights in the city, anxiety took over me. I couldn't do it. I couldn't go back there, not after what happened to your mother in that terrible place."

"Dad—"

"No, let me finish." He climbed on, never looking back to check if I was following. "I hated myself for never going to rescue you, but after a few years, I had to accept that you had either made it to the city safely or you had died trying. Either way, it was enough of an excuse for me to stop looking. I continued living at the cabin alone."

Snowflakes began to drift down from above. I pulled the thief's balaclava up over my mouth and nose to warm my breathing air. The higher we climbed, the colder it got.

"One day, in the wintertime, I was out looking for whatever game might have braved the weather," my father continued. "I heard something rustling in a snowbank. Thought I'd gotten lucky and stumbled across a rabbit. I almost shot at it. Good thing I didn't. It turned out to be a kid."

My boot slipped over a tree root hidden beneath the snow. "What?"

"It was a kid," he repeated, finally looking behind him to check on me. I got to my feet by myself. "He was about eight or nine years old, covered head to toe in snow and completely blue in the face. I thought I was too late. He was practically dead of hypothermia, but I pulled him out of the snowbank and rushed him back to the cabin. A few days later, he was back to normal and chatting my ear off."

"I'm totally lost," I said, shaking my head in disbelief. "You found a kid in a snowstorm? Where did he come from?"

"Denver," my father answered matter-of-factly. "He had run away from home. He was a foster kid. Both of his parents died when he was young, and his foster parents abused him. He told me that he couldn't go back, so he ran into the mountains, hoping for something better. I told myself that after he recovered, I would take him back to the city, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. He had bruises all over. Old ones, new ones. Scrapes and scars. I didn't have the heart to send him back to that."

"So you kept him," I guessed.

“I did,” he confirmed. “He reminded me of you at that age. Sharp, witty, resourceful. And he had a mouth like a sailor on him. I taught him everything that I taught you. After a while, Sylvester and I were the best kind of team.”

I froze in my tracks, taking hold of a sturdy branch to steady myself on the slippery rocks of the mountain face. “What did you say his name was?”

“Sylvester.”

“Sylvester,” I said. “As in the director of Camp Haven?”

My father unfurled my fingers from the branch, clapped his arm around my shoulders, and led me up the rocks. “Sylvester was never the director of Camp Haven, George. I was. Up you get.”

He gave me a leg up over another steep rock face. As I cleared the ledge, I let out a small gasp. The land flattened out in a small clearing, the far side of which looked out over the side of the mountain. A small house, erected from stone and wood, occupied the far corner of the clearing. Wisps of smoke spiraled up from the chimney, leftover from a hastily extinguished fire. I got to my feet, dusted snow from my knees, and approached the far edge. The ruins of Camp Haven were visible below. It was all ash and debris now, flattened by Base One’s ruthless attack.

“You’ve been up here all this time,” I said. “You’ve been watching the camp, haven’t you?”

“The rest of the story that Ludo told you is somewhat true,” Dad said as he joined me on the ridge. “I figured there were more people like Sylvester out there, people who wanted something different than what Denver and the rest of the world had to offer them. So I started to build Camp Haven, but when the first campers arrived, I couldn’t face them. My fear of others held me back. I left Sylvester to judge the best of them—unbeknownst to them, of course—and I appointed leaders as he saw fit. Unintentionally, I made him the mysterious figurehead of the camp. He split his time between here and the cabin at Camp Haven, relaying news and messages to me from the residents.”

“I knew something was up with Sylvester. No one had ever seen him before. God, I can’t believe it’s been some kid living in my old house this entire time.” I kneaded the bridge of my nose between my fingers. “Wait a second. You knew, didn’t you? If Sylvester tells you everything that goes on at the camp, you would have heard about me showing up. Well?”

Dad bowed his head. “He did tell me. Georgie Fitz shows up at Camp Haven’s gates with five other people. I would be lying if I said that I never hoped you would return here after the EMP hit. I knew you would be

safe here."

"I asked for a meeting with Sylvester," I remembered. "To ask him about you. He denied it."

"Ah, yes, I'm afraid that was my fault as well," he replied. "I told myself that it was because I couldn't risk blowing my cover, but the truth is that I wasn't ready to face you quite yet. Not after everything that had happened between us. I was simply happy that you had returned to where you belonged."

"Where I belonged?" I scoffed and crossed my arms over the bulky vest of the tactical jacket. "Dad, you practically held me hostage here. Don't you remember what it was like?" I deepened my tone in my best impression of my father's voice. "Always be prepared, George! Get in the bunker, George! Don't make a sound, George! If you do, you're dead. You hear me? Dead!"

The word hung in the air between us, spoiling the brisk freshness of the falling snow. My father, stunned, studied my eyes, the only part of my face that was still visible from beneath the balaclava. I shoved my hands in my pockets and turned away from him.

"Georgianna," Dad began. My full name sounded foreign to me. No one had called me that since my mother had died. "Is that really what I was like?"

"You don't remember?"

"I remember being vigilant," he replied. "I remember doing my absolute best to make sure that you were always safe. I remember teaching you how to survive on your own."

"But you don't remember the yelling and the terrifying life lessons. Of course not."

"I know I was strict with you," he said. "But I never had any idea how it was affecting you. Is that why you left?"

"I left because I was eighteen, and I wanted to go to college. I wanted to see a part of the world that wasn't the inside of that damn cabin." I scuffed the toe of my boot in the snow, sending a flurry of white plummeting over the ridge's edge. "And you told me that if I went into the city, I would get murdered just like my mother."

"Jesus, George." His chin trembled, and he covered his mouth to hide it. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. You have to understand what it was like for me back then. Your mother's death—"

"I understand now," I said. "I thought about it—what my disappearance must have done to you—every single day that I wasn't up here in the

mountains. And I'm sorry too. I was selfish back then. You needed help, and I never showed up to give it to you."

"It's a father's job to take care of his daughter, not the other way around."

"You take care of the people who take care of you," I corrected. "It doesn't matter who they are. I should have done a better job taking care of you."

Silence fell as we returned to gazing out over the ridge. Once again, the burning embers of Camp Haven drew my eye. Darkness clenched around my heart and squeezed tightly. That land was home to a thousand stories, only a fraction of which belonged to me. Some of them belonged to Eirian, who was probably on his way to dead at Base One by now. Other stories belonged to Jacob and Nita and Ludo and Penny. Their stories all had one thing in common. They had all died at Camp Haven.

"This is what's left," Dad murmured, following the black smoke as it rose into the sky. "Years upon years of hard work and dedication. Years of protecting a group of good people. All gone in the blink of an eye."

"You should understand why I have to go to Base one then," I said. "Some of your people are still alive. *My* people are still alive. We have to find them."

"Have you seen Base One?"

"No."

"It's an old abandoned military base," my father said. "I found it long before the EMP hit, before those idiots took up residence there. The place is a ghost town. It's like whoever was assigned there up and left for no reason. There were still cans of food in the storage closets when I checked it out. The thing is it's a ghost town in a fucking fortress. If you thought Camp Haven was hard to get into, you have no idea what you're up against."

"Base One brought down Camp Haven with a couple of souped-up cherry bombs," I reminded him.

"Exactly," he said. "I'll regret not taking that threat as seriously as I should have for the rest of my life, but my point is that they made flattening Camp Haven look easy. And the guy who runs the place is a ruthless motherfucker."

"Buddy?"

"Yeah. Sergeant Major Buddy Arnold."

"Dad, no one named Buddy can ever be as intimidating as they want to be."

“Believe me,” he said. “This guy can. You don’t want to take a shot at bringing him down.”

“I’m not trying to bring him down,” I argued. “All I want to do is get my friends back. Eirian and Pippa and Pippa’s baby are there. I have to go, and I can’t do it alone. Please come with me. Please help me.”

He refused to look at me. “I can’t do that.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because Sylvester was in the cabin when Base One attacked Camp Haven,” Dad said. “And I have to go find out if he’s still alive.”

2

There was no point in going anywhere or doing anything in the state that we were in. Besides, we couldn't come to an agreement on a course of action anyway. Both of us wanted to conduct rescue missions of sorts, but what was a rescue mission when you didn't know if your targets were alive or dead? The blow to the side of my head was catching up to me. I swayed at the edge of the cliff side, taking hold of a skinny tree to steady myself. My vision swam, and the sight of Camp Haven, ashy and barren below, blurred into abstract shapes of fire and ash. I stumbled forward, dangerously close to the edge. My father caught the back of my new jacket, took my arm over his shoulder, and led me to the little stone house in the clearing. Though it was smaller than the cabin we lived in before Camp Haven existed, it had the familiar touches of the place I used to call home. One of the perks of living off the grid was an excessive amount of free time. Dad had spent his decorating his home with hand-sewn rugs and blankets, crafts carved out of wood or deer antlers, and books that he appeared to have bound himself. There were two beds, each with a fluffy fur comforter, as well as a living space and a tiny kitchen complete with a tap for running water. Dad set me down on the smaller bed and went to tend to the fire. The embers crackled and hissed as he prodded them with a steel poker. He added kindling, and without striking any kind of kit, managed to get the blaze going strong once more. When he stood up, he flinched, groaned, and put a hand to his back.

"Getting old, are you?" I asked.

"I keep in decent shape." He peeled off his raccoon-pelt coat and hung it

on a hook behind the door of the house. Beneath, he wore the familiar plain garments that I'd grown used to seeing at Camp Haven, another reminder that he was always closer than I'd imagined him to me. He lifted his shirt, twisting around to see his back. "One of those goons clubbed me with his gun when everything was in chaos. How's it look?"

A solid purple bruise stretched across the lower middle part of his back. I tried not to wince. The injury wasn't a small one. If I'd been hit like that, I would have already been in bed.

"It looks like it could be a kidney injury," I told him. "Are you feeling okay?"

He waved aside my worried look. "I'm fine. Just sore. You hungry?"

I was, but food was the last thing on my mind. I lay back on the bed, running my fingers through the thick furs. This must have been where Sylvester slept when he wasn't working in Camp Haven. My father had adopted a surrogate son while I was away. I wondered if Dad's second child appreciated him more than the first.

"How old is Sylvester now?" I asked him.

"Sixteen."

He busied himself in the kitchen. I heard the faucet run and reminded myself to check out his plumbing system later. His house even had a stove with two burners. He lit them from below, and flames licked the bottom of the pot of water.

"Chicken or fish?" he asked.

"Fish."

"Good call." He put a hat on and pulled on a sweater. "I'll be right back. The ice box is outside. You know, in the ice."

When the door closed behind him, I rolled off the makeshift mattress and stood up to admire my father's handiwork. It was amazing what he could do with limited resources. The house and everything in it was proof of that. I ran my fingers across the rough stone walls, studying the stucco he had mixed to cement everything together. I turned the faucet in the kitchen on and off then ducked under the sink to check the pipes, which appeared to have been appropriated from the salvage at Camp Haven. They led through the stone wall and outside, and I was sure if I followed them, I would find a water tank nearby. Dad had honed his survival skills to a sharp point. He was completely self-sufficient, more so than he had been when he raised me in the woods as a child. Back then, we fetched water from the river in buckets and boiled it

over the fire to purify it. Now, my father had his own damn plumbing system.

"It's decent, isn't it?" he said, having returned from his mission outside. He held two fresh trout. How he had found them in this climate, I didn't know. Then again, I knew better than to question my father's proficiency in the woods.

"It's pretty damn impressive," I told him. "How do the pipes work?"

"Gravity."

"Funny."

"It's true," he said. "Gravity and pressure. Took me a while to figure it out. I swore a lot and threw some things, but I got it eventually. I never realized how much I missed indoor plumbing until I saw that faucet flow for the first time."

"Got toilets that flush too out here?"

"Afraid not." Dad chuckled as he began preparing the fish, expertly slicing through the belly and pulling out the entrails. He pointed through the window above the kitchen sink with his knife. "The outhouse is several paces into the woods that way if you need it."

"I'm good."

He continued working, deftly dismantling the trout. He heated another pan, tossed some kind of oil into the bottom, and threw the fish in. The pan hissed and sizzled as Dad took a container from a wood cabinet.

"You still like tea, right?" he asked, peering into the container. "Or did Denver turn you into a Starbucks coffee kind of girl?"

"Tea's fine."

"Oh, good." He scooped a mixture of leaves and herbs from the container, transferred them to the pot of water, and began to stir. The aromas of cinnamon and cloves filled the cabin. "I grew this stuff myself. Did you know you have to wait until a tea plant is three years old before you can harvest the leaves?"

"Yeah, I was there when you planted the first one, remember?"

"Right."

I wandered over to the mantel above the fireplace. Two pictures, each housed in a handmade wooden frame, rested on either end. I picked up the first. It was faded and worn, the colors bleached by the sun that found its way inside through the window, but I recognized it anyway. It was taken a few weeks before my mother's murder. The three of us—Mom, Dad, and me—stood in front of Denver's Downtown Aquarium. It was the last trip that we

ever took as a family. I brought the photo closer, squinting at my mother's features, wishing that the picture wasn't so washed out. After all these years without her, I'd forgotten what she looked like. Dad had abandoned all of our photo albums when we'd left the city, as if he didn't want the reminders of his wife's tragic end. Now I saw that my mother and I shared the same oval face shape, arched eyebrows, and inquisitive lips. Other than my purple hair, I was a mirror image of the woman in the photo. No wonder Dad looked at me like he was seeing a ghost. To him, the two dead women of his family had come back to haunt him all at once.

The next picture over was newer, less affected by the sun. It was a Polaroid—strange considering my father had never owned the camera. In it, my father posed next to a young boy who was about ten years old. The boy was tall for his age and impossibly thin, as if he'd hit a growth spurt the second before the photo was taken. He had dark olive skin, deep brown eyes, and curly black hair. He wore cargo shorts and a threadbare T-shirt with sleeves that hung past his elbows. I recognized the shirt, a Big Dogs graphic tee with the slogan "If you can't run with the big dogs, stay off the porch!" printed on the back. Originally, it belonged to my father.

"Is this him?" I asked Dad, brandishing the picture. "Is this Sylvester?"

He wiped his hands and tossed the dish towel over his shoulder. "That's him."

"He doesn't really look like a Sylvester."

"Yeah, I named him that," Dad said, jimmying the fish pan over the burner so that the trout slid back and forth. "He wouldn't tell me his real one. Said he didn't want to be that boy anymore. And Sylvester—"

"Comes from the Latin adjective for 'wild,'" I finished. "I remember. Years ago, you told me that's what you would have named me if I had been a boy."

"Much to your mother's chagrin."

I carried the picture over to him and placed it on the counter next to the stove, right in the line of Dad's eyesight. "Tell me something. If you care so much about this kid, why are you up here filleting trout instead of down there looking for him?"

The lines around his mouth deepened into a frown, but he kept his gaze peeled on the fish. "Don't start, George."

"We're wasting time. They could be dying. Sylvester, Eirian, Pippa—"

"And we'll be dead too if we don't rest before we go down there," Dad

said. “Look at you. You nearly fainted outside a few minutes ago. That was one hell of a crack that you took to the head. And when was the last time you slept? By the looks of it, you haven’t gotten much shut eye in the past several days.”

He was right. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept for more than a couple fitful hours at a time. At this point, I was running on pure determination.

“Take a nap,” he said, nodding at the bed. “The food will be ready when you wake up. Then we can come up with a plan. Being tired and hungry isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

As he said it, my eyes watered and burned from exhaustion. Each blink grew heavier than the last. I drifted toward the bed. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I am right.”

I sat down on the fur blankets, kicked off my boots, and cozied up. “Just an hour or two. Then we go look for them. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

THE HOUSE WAS DARK, except for the fire in the hearth, when I woke up. Night had fallen. The stove burners had been extinguished. A single cooked trout waited for someone to eat it on the counter next to the sink, along with a mug of tea that I assumed was now cold. I looked at the next bed over. Dad was dead asleep, ensconced beneath the blankets. He had not woken me when dinner was ready, and while I felt more rested than I had in several days, resentment left a bitter taste on my tongue. He had never intended to rush out of his cozy campsite to check on the people that we’d abandoned after the attack. Once again, his own fears stopped him from being a decent person.

I slipped out from under the covers, grabbed my boots, and tiptoed across the room. As I passed the coat hooks, I grabbed my tactical jacket and balaclava, gently collected the rifle, and snuck out through the front door. The hinges creaked, but Dad snoozed on. I sat on the stoop and laced up my boots before my toes could freeze together and fall off. The snow kept falling, as if it magically never stopped in this section of the mountains. When I was all wrapped up, I shouldered the rifle, checked the compass on my watch, and started on my way down. No matter what Dad said, it was my duty to check out Base One for myself.

It was slow going, especially without a flashlight or a torch. The light of

the moon led the way, glistening off of the snow. Most of the ground was untouched. The rabbits, raccoons, and other woodland creatures were all holed up out of the cold. The farther I walked, the more I wished to be back in my father's stone home, warm and safe beneath the blankets. Out here, as I navigated the sharp rock ledges, I was more likely to break an ankle or catch pneumonia. I mis-stepped, skidding over the edge of a rock face and landing flat on my back several feet below. The snow did nothing to cushion the fall, which knocked the wind out of me.

"I am an idiot," I muttered to no one in particular as I groaned, rolled over, and pushed myself up to my feet again. "Watch where you step, Georgie. You're no good dead."

Great. Now I was starting to sound exactly like my paranoid father.

As I continued on, I realized I had made another rookie mistake. When my father had led me up the mountain to his home, I wasn't paying attention to our route. I had no idea where Base One was in relation to my position anymore. Every tree looked the same. Every rock was a copy of the one I'd just passed ten minutes ago. Base One was south of here, west of Camp Haven. That was all I had to go.

I wandered on through the woods, this time clocking my path so that I would remember how to make it back to my father's camp. After an hour or so, with no sign of Base One in sight, I turned around to look at the trail of footsteps that I'd left. Maybe it was safer to go back. Getting lost in an unfamiliar part of the forest was one of the easiest ways to get dead.

"Ten more minutes," I told myself. "You get ten more minutes, and if you haven't found any clues by then, swallow your pride and go back to Dad."

I trekked onward, squinting through the darkness for a hint of humanity. Just as I was about to give up and turn around, a dark spot in the snow caught my attention. I leaned closer. It was a fresh droplet of blood. And up ahead. Another few drops. I followed the trail, all of my senses now at attention, until the smell of burning wood tickled my nose. A small fire burned in a clearing up ahead. I approached as close as I dared before ducking behind a cluster of holly bushes, peering through the leaves for a better look.

It was one of Base One's soldiers, a man with blond hair and red cheeks that I didn't recognize. He had cleared the snow from a patch of ground around the fire to sit down. His bloodied pant legs were rolled up to reveal an open wound in the back of his calf. From the looks of it, he'd caught a bullet in the muscle there. As I watched, he bit down on a stripped stick that had

fallen from one of the trees, doused the wound with what I assumed was some kind of drinking alcohol, and reached into the bullet hole with his bare fingers. A mangled yell made its way past his clenched teeth, but the pain was justified. He fished the bloody bullet out in a matter of seconds and flicked it across the snow with an air of disgust. Then, to further impress me, he took a needle and surgical thread from his nearby bag and began to stitch up the hole in his leg.

From what I could see, he had two weapons on his person. The first was a big ass tactical knife that lay open beside his first aid kit. The blade was covered in blood, like he'd used it to cut away the ruined parts of his flesh. The second was a handgun in a thigh holster, which he had unbuckled from his pants in order to tend to the wound. The gun now rested on the flat stump of a fallen tree, within arm's reach of the soldier. I retreated from my hiding place, circled the camp until I was behind the man, and advanced again. The crackling fire and the soldier's muttered swear words covered up the sound of my footsteps through the snow. When I was close enough, I grabbed the gun from the stump and shook it free of the holster.

"What the hell—?" the man said, but before he could look my way, I locked my arm around his neck, tipped his chin up, and pressed the handgun to his jaw. "Ow! Go easy on me, would you?"

"You didn't tense," I said, noting the relaxed set of the soldier's shoulders. Anyone else in such a precarious position would have panicked.

"That's because I'm about to do *this*," he said, and reached up over his head to grab the back of my jacket. Before I could react, he hauled me over his shoulder and slammed me down in front of him, right into the fire. Sparks scattered everywhere as I rolled free and patted the smoking fabric of my jacket. A metallic click echoed through the clearing. Somehow, without ever leaving his seat on the ground, the soldier had gotten the gun from me during his little trick.

"That wasn't very nice." He leveled the gun at my foot instead of my head. We were mere feet apart. He could blow me apart if he wanted to. Instead, he just observed me with mischievous, navy blue eyes. "Do you mind tell me why you jumped an innocent man camping in the woods."

"Innocent?" I threw a handful of frozen dirt at him. It bounced off the insignia on his jacket, but he didn't bat a single eyelash. "Innocent, my ass. You're from Base One."

Realization opened up his expression. "You're one of them, aren't you?

From Camp Haven?”

“Yeah, one of the only ones that survived.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me!”

He lifted his gun a little higher as my voice echoed through the trees. “Be quiet.”

“That little pistol won’t do much against my rifle,” I said.

“You’d have to get it off your back first,” he pointed out. “By the time you do that, I could already have fired two kill shots. One through your head and one through your chest. I really don’t want to do that. If you would just let me explain—”

“Explain what?” I challenged. “How Base One decided that their people were more important and valuable than ours? How you marched into a peaceful camp that probably would have *shared* our supplies with you if you had only had the decency to ask? How you murdered innocent men, women, and children for no reason other than to show off an unnecessary amount of power?”

“I didn’t murder anyone!” His chin quivered, as if a flood of emotions threatened to spill forth from between his lips. He set the gun in the snow and kicked it over to me with his good leg. “There. Does that help? Will you listen to me now?”

“The knife too.”

He folded the blade into its sheath and tossed it over the fire. I caught it one-handed then sat down across from him.

“I used to be a Marine,” he said, returning to his leg. He tore open a sterile bandage, positioned it over the stitched wound, and taped it down. I wondered where he’d gotten the medical supplies in his first aid kit. “Before all of this shit hit the fan. Got an honorable discharge a few years ago, but I never really got back to a normal life. I was always a bit of a loner, so when that damn EMP went off, I didn’t have anyone to look after. I decided my best bet was to get out of the city, head up into the mountains. I found a few of my old unit buddies along the way who had the same idea. They said they’d heard a rumor about an old base up in the Rockies that the Army was using for emergency purposes. They were recruiting able men and women to join them.”

“Sounds sketchy,” I said as I turned my palms inward to warm them up over the fire.

“It was,” the man agreed. “But at the time, I didn’t really have too many other choices. We headed up to Base One, got cleared, and joined the ranks. If I had known about the Sergeant Major before then, I never would have set foot in that place.”

“Buddy Arnold.”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Only in passing. Keep talking.”

“Buddy’s unhinged,” he said, rolling his pant legs back down to cover the bandaged wound. He zipped up his jacket. “Talk about a man drunk on power. He runs Base One like a damn prison. The civilians that live there are scared shitless of him. A lot of the soldiers are too.”

“So why stay?”

“Because the other option was certain death.”

“I want to know why he wanted to attack Camp Haven,” I said. “We hadn’t done anything wrong. We weren’t interfering with Base One. Why kill everyone there?”

“Were you there for the first raid too?” he asked. “At the med bay?”

“Yeah.”

“Base One was ill-prepared for this sort of thing,” the man went on. “Buddy was so focused on gathering weapons and other defensive supplies that he didn’t think about much else. Like sickness. Someone came in with a bug. Next thing you know, we were all half-dead from it. Camp Haven was the closest source for medical supplies, and you’ve probably already guessed that Buddy doesn’t like to share.”

“How many people are there at Base One?”

“Five hundred, give or take.”

I let out a low whistle. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah, so it gets kind of hard to keep everyone happy,” he said. “When Buddy suggested we take down Camp Haven in its entirety, I outright refused. I was one of very few. Most of the guys wouldn’t dare to stand up to him.”

“And yet you still have a bullet hole in your leg,” I reminded him. “How did you manage that if you didn’t storm Camp Haven with the rest of your friends?”

“Buddy shot me,” he answered, gritting his teeth. “As punishment for defying him. Then he told our medical team to leave the bullet in my leg as a reminder of my mistakes. That was the last straw for me. I snuck out when

the night guards switched shifts, climbed up here, made camp, and now here we are."

"What happened to being afraid of dying out in the wilderness?" I asked.

"I figure I'll take my chances," he replied. "I served my country already. I did my part. Buddy is the worst kind of military guy. I knew guys like him in my own unit. They take pleasure in torturing others, all while they hide behind a mask of patriotism. It's bullshit, and I refuse to be a part of it." He pulled a can of Vienna sausages from his pack and popped the lid off the tin. "You want one?"

"I'll pass."

"Suit yourself," he said, fishing the first sausage out of the preservatives with his fingers. "So what's your story? You made it out of Camp Haven alive and out of Base One's hands. From what I know, that makes you and me the only free people out here."

My pulse pounded faster. "You've seen other survivors?"

"Yeah, I was in the hospital at Base One when they brought everyone in," he replied. "They didn't look great, that's for sure—"

"Did you see a tall man with dark curly hair and bright green eyes?" I interrupted. "He's about six foot three. Wiry build. He was wearing a dark gray sweater and a black coat."

He chewed thoughtfully on his canned sausages. "I'm not sure. They brought a lot of guys in."

"What about a teenaged girl?" I pressed. "Blonde hair, brown eyes. She would have had a newborn baby with her."

"Oh, I remember her!" He brightened, strangely happy to have information to offer to a woman that had just held him at gunpoint mere minutes ago. "She was a feisty one. Told the C.O. that she'd chop his balls off if he so much as got near her baby."

"That's Pippa," I said. "She's like my little sister. Is she okay? What's going to happen to her?"

"She seemed fine." The soldier took another bite out of a sausage, spraying juice across his chin. "Got a couple of scrapes on her face that our med guys cleaned up. The baby was deemed healthy too, once she finally let someone take a look at him."

"Her. The baby's a girl."

"My apologies. Anyway, I'm sure she'll be fine. Base One is a lot gentler with the ladies," he said. "They'll give her a job in camp, like washing

laundry or something. As long as she keeps her nose down, she'll be okay."

I heaved a sigh. "That's the problem. Pippa isn't the type of girl to keep her nose anywhere but as high in the air as she possibly can. What about the men? What happens to them?"

"Two options," he said, holding up his peace fingers. "First, if you're lucky, you impress them. They'll make you a private, bottom of the barrel. Then you go through an expedited training process before joining the ranks. Or second, you don't impress them or you make trouble. In that case, it's the worst kind of grunt work for you. And believe me, you don't want to have to be the person that cleans out Buddy's personal shitter for him. You just don't."

"Where's Base One in relation to us?"

He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Back that way a few miles." He looked up from his sausages. "Oh, no. Is that what you're doing out here all alone? You're looking for Base One. Honey, take my word for it. You don't want to find it."

"My friends are there."

"And there they'll stay," he said. "You're better off out here on your own if you can survive it. Stay away from Base One."

"Why are you still protecting it?" I demanded. "I thought you hated the place."

"I do," he insisted, finally setting the sausage tin down to speak to me over the fire. "Honestly, I don't give a damn what happens to Buddy and those other assholes. For all I care, you could call in an airstrike to blow the place apart, but I got the feeling you don't have that happy power. Listen to me, lady. If you want to survive, you'll do the smart thing and turn around. Forget about your friends. Save yourself."

"I can't do that. I can't leave them there. They're all I have left."

He sighed, leaned against the fallen log behind him, and plucked the last sausage out of the can. "I figured as much. The guards switch shifts every six hours. That's your best bet of getting in. Go through the main gates. They don't use them often because they think it's too obvious. And if you see a guy with a shaved head, biceps like the devil's, and a voice like a can opener, run in the opposite direction."

"Buddy Arnold?"

"Buddy Arnold."

"Thanks." I stood up, dusting dirt from the seat of my pants. I hesitated

then returned his gun and knife to him. “That way, right?”

He nodded. “Good luck out there. I hope you find your friends. You seem like a decent person, even if you did hold a gun to my head.”

I shook his outstretched hand. “You’re not so bad yourself. What’s your name?”

“Aaron.”

“Nice to meet you, Aaron,” I said, walking about from his campfire. “I hope to see you around.”

“Whoa, wait a second.” He twisted around to watch me go. “You’re not going to tell me your name?”

I walked backward through the woods to keep an eye on him. “I’ll make you a deal. If we meet again, I’ll tell you my name.”

“Oh, we’ll meet again.”

I grinned and waved, leaving the soldier at his camp. It was reassuring to know that not everyone at Base One ran on power-hungry bullshit, but I couldn’t let my guard down. Not until Buddy Arnold had been taken care of.

I followed Aaron’s directions toward Base One. This time, I found plenty of hints that I was heading along the right route. Trails of footsteps crisscrossed in the snow. Smeared bloody handprints decorated some of the bark on the trees, as if an injured hostage needed a shoulder to lean on and was never offered one. Farther along, I found the remnants of my father’s crossbow victims from earlier that day. The bodies had been collected from the woods. There were marks in the earth from where the living soldiers had dragged their dead comrades to whatever fate Buddy Arnold deemed appropriate for them. I followed the tracks down the incline of the mountain until the ground leveled out. A stone platform jutted out from the trees, beyond which a line of lights illuminated the night sky. I flattened out on my stomach, crawled toward the platform’s edge, and looked out.

“Holy shit,” I whispered

Neither Dad nor Aaron had exaggerated the sheer size of Base One. It was a stone fortress built in a small valley between the higher walls of the mountain, stretching at least half a mile in each direction. Guards walked along the top of the ramparts, guns at the ready to fire at anything that moved, but the interior of the camp was quiet and still. Everyone—including Buddy Arnold, I hoped—was asleep in bed, but as soon as I made to shift away from the edge, a hand came down on my shoulder.

3

Aaron's knife was still in my pocket. I whipped it free and whirled around, but my attacker knocked the blade out of my grip with frustrating ease. I scrambled across the snow for the weapon, all too aware that I didn't have time to bring the rifle into a decent position to defend myself.

"George, stop! It's me. It's Dad. Amos."

I rolled to a halt. Sure enough, my father stood in the clearing with me, armed once again with his crossbow. "Dad? Shit, you scared me to death! I thought you were someone from Base One."

"If I was, you would already be dead," he said, sitting next to me. He looked out at Base One, his nose wrinkled as if he had caught a whiff of something mightily unpleasant. "I should have known that you would come out here the first chance you got. You're still the same kid, never thinking about the risks."

"Except I'm not a kid anymore."

"You sure are acting like one," he replied. "Leaving in the middle of the night. Heading into the dark alone and unprepared."

"I brought my rifle."

"And you couldn't raise it quickly enough to defend yourself against me or that lonely soldier you found back there in the clearing."

"You followed me?" I asked, incredulous. "You know, Dad, this is one of the reasons I left you up here in the first place. It isn't normal—"

"You got lucky with that guy," he said, adjusting his seat on the ground to get a better look at Base One's enormity. "He could have killed you if he

wanted to."

"Not everyone wants to kill me."

"No, but you can't blindly trust strangers in the woods either." He picked up the knife from where I'd dropped it and handed it back to me. "Call me paranoid. That's fine. But now we're in a situation where paranoia could save your life, so for once, just once, could you please listen to me?"

I tucked the knife into one of the pockets of the tactical jacket. If it weren't for my father's presence, I probably would have tried to return it to Aaron. Dad had plenty of knives to choose from, and I'd accidentally taken an important survival weapon from the repentant soldier. But if I mentioned the internal guilt to Dad, he would accuse me of being soft once more.

"Are you convinced now?" he asked.

"Of what?"

He gestured to Base One, sweeping his hand wide across his chest to emphasize the sheer size of the rival compound. "That your run-of-the-mill rescue ideas won't fly in a place like this. You're heard it from multiple people now, one of which has had firsthand experience with Buddy Arnold."

The thing that irked me most was that he was right. The scale of Base One was too massive for me to tackle alone. I had no intel, no team, and no way to get inside. Sheer determination wouldn't cut it for this mission. I needed some kind of edge, and I had no idea how to get one.

Dad lightly bumped my shoulder. "George, I know how much these people mean to you. I know you feel like you can't leave them at Base One in good conscience, but think of it this way. They're safe for now. They have a place to sleep, food to eat, and clean clothes to wear. Who knows? Maybe Base One isn't so bad after all."

"Weren't you eavesdropping on my conversation with Aaron back there?" I asked him. "He said the civilians there are treated like crap. He left because he couldn't stand to live there anymore. He would rather be alone in the woods."

"That's what he said anyway."

"You think he was lying?"

"I saw a soldier in the woods with a serious injury and a gun to his head," Dad replied. "He would have said anything to placate you as long as you didn't shoot him."

"I thought you said I didn't have a shot."

He huffed and squinted up, suddenly interested in the moon's position. "It

could have gone either way." He caught the look on my face. "Don't smirk at me. Do you want my help or not?"

The snow crunched beneath my boots as I sat back on my heels in surprise. "You're going to help me?"

"Like I said, you haven't changed." Dad pulled a scope from a bag over his shoulder, mounted it onto his crossbow, and lifted it to eye level, scanning Base One from one end to the other. "I know that if I don't help you, you'll come up with some harebrained scheme of your own to get in, which will probably not go the way you planned it to, and you'll end up hurt or dead, alone without your friends."

"Wow. Such faith you have in me."

"On the contrary, I have the utmost faith in you," he said. "I don't doubt your abilities. After all, I taught them to you, though I am slightly surprised you didn't brain dump all of that information when you left the mountains for the city. Proud of you, George."

My cheeks and neck grew warm. I cleared my throat, grateful that the cover of night hid my pink color. I had grown accustomed to living without parental approval. I'd even tricked myself into thinking that I didn't need it, considering I didn't have parents around for most of my life, but the moment invoked memories I'd forgotten about, ones from happier times before my mother died.

"Here's the deal," Dad said, lowering the crossbow and returning his gaze to me. "First things first, we need to go back to Camp Haven. Weigh the circumstances for me, would you? You know that your friends are at least alive. I have no idea if Sylvester made it out of there. Besides, there could be other survivors that the Base One soldiers overlooked. My responsibility, first and foremost, has to do with taking care of Camp Haven. Can you understand that?"

I looked my father over. Even in the dim light of the moon, I could make out his genuine concern. It was etched into every line on his weathered face. Maybe I'd been wrong before. Maybe he had changed. After all, he had built an entire compound to take care of a group of people that he considered similar to himself. He cared about them, and the fact that so many of them had been lost to such an act of violence was sure to be hurting him on the inside.

"Fine," I agreed. "We'll go back to Camp Haven. We'll find Sylvester. Then what?"

“Then we can deal with Base One,” Dad replied. “Three heads are better than one anyway. Maybe Sylvester will have a few ideas about how to get an advantage over these guys.”

“You think a sixteen-year-old could take down a military fortress?”

“Don’t underestimate him. He’s a savvy kid,” he said, packing up the scope again. He patted me on the back. “Remember what you were like when you were sixteen? He’s ten times worse.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Come on, George. Let’s get back to the house. We hit Camp Haven at daybreak.”

AT FIRST LIGHT, after a sturdy breakfast of leftover trout and dried fruits, we layered up, armed ourselves, and headed out. This time I paid attention to the terrain, noting our path down the mountain just in case I ever had to make it back up on my own. It was a decent use of my time considering my father and I ran out of safe conversation topics within five minutes of our departure. There was plenty to talk about. The problem was that anything and everything dredged up moments from the past that we weren’t keen to acknowledge.

“Cold up here, isn’t it?” Dad grunted as he hopped down from a rock ledge. “I always forget how cold it gets every winter.”

I jumped down and landed with my knees bent. “Freezing.”

Dad tugged on a lock of lilac hair that had escaped my hat. “So tell me about this hair. I’m curious.”

“Like I said, it was a dare,” I replied, repositioning my hat so that it covered more of my ears. “I hosted a talk radio show in the city. You have to find some way to get listeners to tune in. We were trying to raise awareness and cash for a campaign that focuses on treating mental illness.” We hiked on together, our boots crunching through the snow in unison. “So we came up with this plan. For a donation, listeners could dare us to do whatever they wanted. The amount of the donation matched the severity of the dare. Once the dare was complete, the listener donated the cash. I got a hundred bucks for the head shave and another thirty for dyeing it purple. Then I kept the crazy style because I liked it.”

Dad chuckled and ran his hand over the short buzz cut that he maintained himself with a straight razor. “I gotta hand it to you, George. You always knew how to get a conversation started. A radio show, eh? What did you talk

about?”

“Everything,” I said. “But mostly I wanted to inform other people my age. My generation isn’t the type to turn on the news or read the papers. We like to be entertained and informed, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I talked about politics, current events, elections at every level, and a little bit about whatever was happening in Hollywood at the time to keep everybody on their toes.”

“Hollywood,” my dad muttered. “How do you think all those famous actors and actresses are faring now?”

I stepped over a large, loose root that protruded from the snow. “I’m sure some of them had bunkers somewhere. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Did you ever talk about something like this on your show?” He made a controlled slide down a steep but short hill, landing on his feet at the bottom. “What to do in the event of an apocalypse?”

“Once or twice.” I slid after him, using one gloved hand to keep myself on course as I slipped across the snow at top speed. “Most listeners weren’t interested in it. Our numbers dropped during those shows. We don’t have a whole lot of preppers tuning in. I guess most people like to ignore the possibility of this sort of thing actually happening. We all figure that it won’t during our lifetime.”

My father swept ice from the back of my jacket, shaking his head. “Ignorance.”

“Blissful,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, until the whole world has gone dark, and you’re out here in the wilderness all alone without the faintest idea of how to get a fire started.”

“Not everybody thinks the way you do, Dad.”

“I thought the city might have changed you,” he said, his shoulder bumping against mine as we continued our hike. “I thought you might have intentionally forgotten the things that I taught you. When the EMP hit, my first thought was you. I thought you’d be dead.”

“Still kicking.”

“You made it up here on your own,” Dad said. “And you brought five other people with you to safety. That’s an impressive feat.”

My mind wandered to those five people. Four of them were dead from one calamity or another. It made me all the more eager to rescue the remaining fifth.

Dad cleared his throat. “So… were any of those people particularly, er,

special to you?”

“Uh.” I side-eyed him, but he kept his gaze forward. “You mean like romantically special?”

Even with a scarf and a hat and the collar of his coat turned up, his blush was visible. “Well, I mean, sure, if that’s what it was, but you know, special in the general sense of the word too.” He wiped his brow and heaved a sigh. “I’m just interested in what you got up to during these past several years, but if you don’t feel like telling me, I guess that’s your right.”

His stooped shoulders encouraged me to share. He just wanted to know what his daughter had been doing with her life for the nine years that he’d missed.

“Jacob Mason,” I said. The name already had a weight to it. He was gone now, leaving only his name for people to remember him. “We met in college. We were never quite right for each other—we came from different worlds—but we were together long enough to get engaged.”

“You’re engaged?”

“Not anymore,” I replied, scratching my left finger out of habit. I’d left the ring behind in our apartment in the city. Now, I wished I still had it, if only to commemorate Jacob. “The stress of getting out of the city was too much for us. Jacob saw me shoot a man, and he realized that he didn’t know about a huge chunk of my life. It disintegrated from there. By the time we made it to Camp Haven, we had already broken up.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay.” I kicked a mound of snow and watched it splatter everywhere with a simple sense of satisfaction. “It was hard at first. We were both mad at each other, but I think we were actually kind of friends toward the end there.”

“Were?”

“He died,” I said, trying not to picture that moment in my head. “He jumped on a grenade during the attack to protect us. Next thing I knew, he was just gone.”

There was a moment of silence. Dad didn’t say he was sorry for my loss. I was glad for that. If he apologized for every person that I’d lost in the last few months, the word would lose all meaning.

“The other people were Jacob’s mother, father, and little sister,” I rushed on. I ticked their names off on the fingers of my gloves. “Penny, Jove, and Pippa. And my friend Nita. Pippa and her baby were the only ones that survived the attack.”

Dad ducked under a tree branch but didn't quite clear it. It dumped a load of snow down the back of his jacket. "You mentioned Eirian too, but he was already a member of Camp Haven when you arrived here."

"He was one of the first people that I met here," I explained. "I liked him right away. You know when someone simply has good vibes? It was like that. He was always working hard but never lost his positive attitude. He made me laugh, and he helped me build the radio tower for the camp without knowing anything about it."

"Seems like a good guy."

"He was—is," I corrected myself, remembering that I hadn't lost everyone in the attack on Camp Haven. "That's why I can't leave him at Base One. He's too important to me. Pippa too. I have to get her back for Jacob."

I stopped short when another glance through the trees offered me a look at the charred remains of Camp Haven. The thick barrier that protected the compound had been blasted apart. Most of the buildings were torched. The Bistro and DotCom had survived the worst of it, most likely because Base One hadn't wanted to ruin the supplies stored there. The med bay, where I'd witnessed most of the attack, had a huge hole in the side where the grenade had gone off. The entire camp was littered with rubble and bodies. The dead wore expressions of shock and terror.

I emptied my stomach off to the side. My father waited patiently several feet away, and when I'd finished, he pretended not to know what I'd been doing. He did, however, hand me his canteen. I took a swig of water, rinsed my mouth, and spat on the ground.

"Good to go?" he asked.

"Let's do this."

We stepped over what was left of Camp Haven's outer wall and into the compound itself. I forced myself to look at each face that lay on the ground. They defended each other as best as they could, and they deserved recognition for that sacrifice. I took down their names in a small notepad that I'd borrowed from my father's house. If there were bodies missing, the survivors might still be out there somewhere, whether at Base One or in the surrounding woods. Wherever they were, I was determined to find them.

"I haven't been down here since we first started welcoming other people in," Dad murmured, turning over a collection of roof shingles with the toe of his boot to check beneath them. "Back then, the only buildings here were the cabin and the Bistro, which also doubled as the community center. Everyone

slept in tents they had brought with them from the city. It was breathtaking to see them build this place from the ground up. Sylvester brought me all of the plans for approval. Every time they proposed something new, I doubted that we could find the material to get another building up, but they always managed to make it happen." His eyes glistened with trapped emotions. "I knew them all from afar, through Sylvester's stories. They were my family, my responsibility, and I allowed this travesty to happen."

"You didn't know," I said, kneeling beside a woman to check her pulse. Nothing. I moved on. "Base One didn't have any reason to attack us like that. It was a power play by a mad man. You couldn't have predicted that."

"I should have put more security measures in place," Dad said. "I should have suggested that they build a reinforcement barrier alongside the outer wall. I should have—"

"Dad."

"George, I'm at fault—"

"No, it's not that," I whispered, yanking him behind one of the walls of the women's dormitory that was still standing. "I think I heard something."

Both of us went still, hardly breathing as we peeked around the wall, Dad's head stacked on top of mine. There, near the doors of the med bay, two Base One soldiers poked around in the mess.

"God damn it," Dad growled. "These bastards are everywhere."

"What are they still doing here?" I said. A bubble of rage inflated in my chest as one of the soldiers flipped up the shirt of a woman on the ground and made a rude gesture. His friend's raucous laughter echoed eerily through the demolished campground. "Shouldn't they be back at Base One by now?"

"I guess Buddy Arnold wanted to make sure no one slipped through the cracks," Dad replied. "Maybe he doesn't want people like you out here looking for revenge."

"Too damn bad," I muttered.

Dad brought his crossbow up. "Say goodbye, boys."

"Wait!" I hissed.

He lowered the bow an inch. "What?"

"Is this who we are now?" I asked him. "Are we going to kill everyone that crosses our path?"

"George, are you seeing these guys?" he said. "They're out here picking through our remains, disrespecting the dead. They murdered our people."

"Yeah, they suck," I agreed. "But if we kill them point blank, then we're

just as bad as they are."

Dad ground his teeth together. "Fine. You have a point. Let's get close enough to take them out… gently. But they're damn lucky that you have a finer conscience than me. Ready?"

"Ready."

At the same time, we darted out from behind the wall to run to the next bit of cover, splitting up. Dad went right, and I went left, but when I crouched behind a fallen support beam, I knew that something was wrong. I glanced around the beam. The two men weren't standing near the med bay anymore.

"No visual," I whispered to Dad. "You?"

He checked. "Nope. Stay alert."

A gun cocked near my ear. "Hello, darling."

It was the soldier that had mimicked violating the dead woman. He had managed to sneak up on me and now stood with his feet planted on either side of my figure as though to make sure I had the perfect view of his crotch. His friend stood over Dad, the nose of his rifle against my father's ear.

"Little tip," he said. "Next time you're planning to ambush someone, don't discuss tactics within earshot. Your voices carried."

"This one's old," the second soldier said as he prodded my father with the gun. "Buddy won't want him. We should just kill them both."

The first soldier leaned down and took my chin. "And waste such a pretty face?"

"Do whatever you want with her," said the second soldier. "But I call dibs on this guy's crossbow."

The first soldier's head snapped up. "If he has a crossbow, he's got to be the guy that killed the unit in the woods. Oh, this is too good." He looked down at me again. "Don't worry, honey. I'll be gentle."

"Little tip," I said. "Don't stand with your weakest parts exposed."

I drove my foot up between his legs. The soldier dropped his gun and crumpled to the ground with a groan, but the dirty hit wouldn't keep him down for long. I grabbed a piece of concrete from the rubble and slammed it into his temple. He immediately blacked out.

"Don't move!" the second soldier shouted, still aiming his gun at Dad. "Don't come any closer, or I'll shoot him!"

I raised my hands above my head, showing him that my gun was not at my disposal. "Come on, man. It's two against one now. Let him go, and run back to Base One before Buddy realizes that you're missing."

The soldier’s mouth went slack. “How did you know—?”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. Dad grabbed the nose of his gun and yanked him forward. The soldier lost his footing, and Dad easily flipped him onto his back. Then he took a cue from my book and knocked the soldier out with a piece of rubble. He dusted his hands off and sat back on his heels.

“Thanks for distracting him,” he said. “I wouldn’t have made it if I was out here on my own.”

“Thanks for not killing him.”

“You asked nicely. Let’s keep moving.”

We combed through the buildings, on the hunt for trapped survivors, but found nothing but more death. I recognized every face. Ludo and Jax had left this world hand in hand, both of them splayed out near DotCom. Nita’s body still rested in the hallway of the med bay, where a shooter had taken her out from behind. If she had been positioned a little bit off center, the gunner would have taken me out instead. I closed her eyes before catching up with Dad.

“We need to clean this place up if we’re ever going to rebuild it,” I said, wiping moisture from my eyes. “All of these bodies are going to poison the ground and the water supply.”

“Let’s focus on what’s in front of us for now,” Dad said, leading the way out of the med bay. Outside, he gazed up at the cabin on the hill. Unlike the other buildings, it had survived mostly intact, with the exception of a few bullet holes that ripped splinters from the logs.

We walked up the hill with heavy feet and low expectations. I had not yet returned to my childhood home despite living mere inches from it for the past few months. I wished that Dad’s charade with Sylvester hadn’t kept me from exploring it again. The front door was bashed in. Base One had raided the place. The handmade furniture was overturned, the cabinets were open and barren, and the linens had been stripped from the beds. Dad searched every corner of the place, but there was no sign that a sixteen-year-old boy had been here during the attack.

“Damn!” Dad said. “Where are you, Sylvester?”

“What about the bunker?” I asked him. “Camp Haven never used it, but if you raised Sylvester like you raised me, he would have known it was there. He could have waited out the attacks there.”

A glimmer of hope crossed Dad’s face. “Genius. Let’s go check.”

The entrance to the bunker was at the bottom of the hill, across from DotCom, but a large wooden support beam, charred at either end, lay across the doors. If someone was inside, they wouldn't be able to get out on their own. Dad grunted as he tried to shift the beam himself.

"Give me a hand, George?"

I took the other end of the beam and lifted it up. Together, we hauled it away from the bunker's entrance. Dad brushed snow from the metal ring that served as a handle and yanked the rusty door upward. It creaked open, and we peered into the darkness below.

"Got a flashlight?" I asked Dad, stepping inside. "I'll go check for him."

He handed over a hand crank lantern. "Be careful."

The bunker was the stuff of nightmares. There was nothing down here. It was all gray reinforced concrete that could probably survive a trench war. I shuddered as I lifted the lantern and squinted into the gloom. This place brought back claustrophobic memories.

"Sylvester?" I called, my voice echoing off the walls. "Are you in here? It's Georgie, Amos's daughter."

I reached the opposite end of the bunker, but there was no sign of another living, breathing human being there. I jogged back toward the square of light at the entrance and climbed out.

"He's not down there," I told Dad, breathing hard as I slammed the doors shut. If I never had to go in the bunker again, it would be okay with me.

"Did you check all the way in the back?" Dad pressed.

"Yes. He's not there."

"Damn it!" Dad slammed his fist against a crumbling wall, sending it tumbling over. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

"Dad, calm down," I said. "There's no sign of his body, so that's a good thing, right? Maybe he got out of here before Base One could get to him."

"Or he's buried under a pile of rubble somewhere."

"Possibly."

I pulled the balaclava off my mouth and nose to take an unfiltered breath of air. The fabric bunched around my neck, pressing against my throat like a tightening noose. I took it off entirely and shoved it into my backpack. As I zipped the pack up again, something on the ground caught my eye.

"Hey, Dad. Look."

It was an unlit match, the red head of it bright against the white snow. A few feet away, another crimson dot stood out against the terrain.

“It’s a trail.”

4

The matches were spaced at roughly five-foot intervals, leading through the wreckage of Camp Haven, past the demolished front gate, and into the woods below. We paused where Camp Haven ended and the tree line began. As far as the eye could see, the matches continued down the mountain.

"Do you think it's Sylvester?" I asked Dad, shielding my eyes from the sun as it pierced through the clouds.

"It could be," he said. "But I don't understand why he would go down the mountain instead of up. Why didn't he just return to the house?"

"Maybe it wasn't safe to do so," I suggested. "What's the plan?"

Dad shrugged his shoulders so that his backpack rested more comfortably. "I guess we follow the matches. Even if it isn't Sylvester, someone laid them out for a reason. We might as well see if we can help them."

Without looking back, we started down the mountain, picking up the matches to use for ourselves as we went. The trail wound through the trees in a zigzag pattern to make up for the steep elevation. As we followed it farther into the woods, the distance between each match began to lengthen, as if the person dropping them had started to run out of trail markers. Eventually, the trees began to thin out and the ground leveled off. Dad stopped short, though there were still a few matches ahead of us.

"I don't like this," he said. "We're nearly to the bottom of the mountain, too close to the city. Sylvester would never have come down here. It's too dangerous."

From our position, I could see the buildings at the edge of Denver, looming toward the horizon. Like Dad, I had no desire to return there. There was too much strife and devastation to behold. I preferred the quiet safety of the mountains, but my curiosity prodded me forward.

“There are only a few more matches,” I said. “We’ve come this far. There’s no point in turning back now. Besides, what if it is Sylvester, and he’s hurt out here, and we don’t bother to look for him? We can’t risk that.”

Dad rubbed his fingers against each other, like wiping dirt off of them, in a nervous tic. The fabric of his gloves whispered together. “I suppose you’re right. We should try and pick up the trail where it left off.”

“Good. We’re agreed.” I walked forward, picking up the remaining matches out of the snow save for the very last one. It lay right at the edge of the tree line. Beyond that, there were no signs of the person who had dropped it.

“No footsteps,” Dad said, examining the surrounding snow. “No other tracks.”

I had to step out of the shadows in order to reach the final match, but as soon as I did, I knew that I had made a mistake.

Something shifted and clicked beneath my boot. A loop of rope, masked by the snow, caught around my ankle and tightened. I was yanked off my feet as the trap’s counterweight dropped, and I dangled upside down, fifteen feet above the ground.

“George!” My father checked the rest of the area for other traps before looking up at me. “Are you okay?”

“A little woozy,” I replied as the blood rushed to my head. The rifle slipped from my grasp and landed in the snow below. My backpack hung heavily around my neck. “Otherwise, I’m fine.”

Dad checked the counterweight, a large sack of sand tied to the opposite end of the rope, and chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded, but it was difficult to sound authoritative while I swayed back and forth from the rope with a burning red face.

“Oh, I’m just having a laugh at you,” Dad said, fiddling with the knot that attached the rope to the counterweight. “If you had taken my advice, you wouldn’t have stepped into that trap.”

“And we wouldn’t have a lead on Sylvester either,” I shot back. “Can you hurry up? I feel like my head’s going to explode.”

As Dad whipped out a knife to make quicker work of the rope, I revolved slowly on the spot, turning toward the city then toward the woods then back to the city again. When Dad was in my sights again, his back to the city as he sliced at the rope, my breath caught in my throat.

“Dad, look out!”

It was a moment too late. A wooden baseball bat crashed across Dad’s head, dropping him instantly to the ground. A group of five individuals, all wearing solid black from head to toe, had snuck up on us from the city. One of them took up Dad’s position at the counterweight, peering up at me as he worked the rope free. In an instant, I plummeted toward the ground and landed in the snow. The fall knocked the breath out of my lungs. Before I could scramble to my feet, I was surrounded.

“She’s definitely one of us,” one of the cloaked people said.

“And the man?”

“They’re traveling together,” said the first. “It would be a gesture of good faith to bring them both in. She’ll be more accepting of us that way.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, staring up at the masked faces. “Who are you?”

I received no answer, but rather got a blow to the back of the head with the same baseball bat that had taken out my father.

THE ACHE at the base of my skull disrupted my unintentional slumber, and my surroundings slowly swam into view. I lay in a fold-out metal cot with a thin mattress and scratchy blankets. The pillow beneath my head stank of goose feathers that had gotten wet and never dried out properly. The room was small and had no windows, more like a place for storing cleaning supplies than a bedroom. The outer wall was made of weathered gray stones, which meant the building was older than most of the others in Denver.

I touched my fingers to the bruise on my skull and winced. Whoever had swung the bat had gotten a nice piece of me. The skin was tender to the touch, and it hurt to look in either direction.

“You know, for once, a good ‘please’ might be nice,” I grumbled as I sat up. “Instead of a head bashing.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” another voice said from outside the door. There was a small window with no pane through which the voice spoke. “Unfortunately, others here feel that we need to take certain precautions to keep ourselves as safe as possible.”

“Who are you?” I asked, experimentally rolling my neck out to

either side.

The door opened, and a tall woman around my age entered the room. She had short dark hair and wore thick black glasses. She wasn't armed, and as far as I could tell, she didn't have any weapons on her person. I guess she wasn't expecting me to attack her in my current state, but even so, I found it ballsy that she didn't arm herself in these uncertain times. For good measure, I checked the room for my own weapons, but they had been confiscated from me while I was unconscious.

"My name is Caroline," the woman said, extending her hand to shake mine. "You're safe here."

I batted her hand away. "I was already safe before you nutcases came along and hit me over the head. Where's my father?"

"In the next room," she replied. "He, too, is recovering from his head wound, but he hasn't woken up yet."

"Well, did you check if he has a concussion?" I asked. "If he's still unconscious, you could have hurt him a lot worse than you hurt me."

"Our medical expert has examined both of you and declared that your wounds are superficial."

My head throbbed again. "Superficial, my ass. Where the hell are we?"

"You're in a church in Denver," Caroline said. "It's our safe house."

"And who exactly do you belong to?"

A man poked his head into the room. Like Caroline, he appeared to be a normal civilian. "Hey, Caroline? If she's awake, Marco wants to see both of them in the main hall."

"Thanks, Max," Caroline replied. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

Max took note of my aggravated expression. "Do you need some help?"

"No, I got it. Thanks."

"Alrighty." Max disappeared, leaving me and Caroline alone again.

"Okay, you need to fill me in," I said to her, attempting to stand. She rushed to my side and helped me up. "What the hell is going on here? Why did you bring me here?"

"I wasn't a part of the hunting party," Caroline said, looping my arm over her shoulder. "And as far as who we are, I can't tell you. That's for Marco to fill you in."

"Who's Marco?"

"You'll meet him in a few minutes."

The corridor outside my temporary bedroom was made of the same gray

stone. Stained glass windows lined one side of the hallway, but each one was boarded up with two-by-fours and other pieces of scrap wood. My father emerged, supported by Max, from the next doorway. His eyes were a little cloudy, but he brightened when he saw me.

"George! You're alive."

"Of course she's alive," Caroline said. "We're not murderers."

"Could have fooled me," Dad muttered.

"Marco will explain everything," Max said.

"*Who's Marco?*"

Neither one of them answered. Instead, they continued to haul us down the corridor until we reached the door at the end. We pushed through to the other side, navigated a small passage, and emerged on the stage in the belly of the church. A group of thirty to or so people gathered in the pews below, each wearing an eager expression. The church itself had not been altered much, though it had been stripped of any religious affiliations, like the drapings over the altar, that were easily removable.

"What the hell…?" I muttered, looking out at the sea of faces as Caroline led me to a pair of chairs in the center of the stage. "This isn't some kind of ritual sacrifice, is it?"

"No, silly," Caroline said, sitting me down. "Sit tight. We're going to start in a few minutes."

Max helped my father into the chair next to mine. They didn't tie us down or secure our hands like I expected them to. If I wanted, I could spring up from my seat and make a run for it. Chances were I wouldn't get very far. The throbbing bump on the back of my head and the crowd below would probably stop me before I could reach the exit doors. I exchanged a glance with my father and saw the same truth in his eyes. We were going to have to wait out the madness for now.

A middle-aged man separated himself from the crowd and stepped up onto the stage. He was shorter than average, with wispy black hair swept back from a deep widow's peak. Like the others, he wore sensible clothing for the scenario outside: heavy duty cargo pants, an athletic sweatshirt, and black work boots. There was nothing to set him apart from the others besides the obvious respect that the rest of the crowd had for him. They fell silent as he approached us, as if waiting for him to approve of our presence.

"Welcome," he said, spreading his arms wide. "My name is Marco Coats. Please introduce yourselves to my family."

“Uh,” I said. “I’m Georgie Fitz.”

“And I’m her father, Amos,” Dad finished. “Do you mind telling us exactly what’s going on here?”

“Certainly,” Marco answered. “We’ve rescued you.”

“I don’t think bashing us both in the head and taking us to an unfamiliar part of the city counts as rescuing us,” I pointed out. “In fact, we were doing just fine. We have people of our own to get back to, so if you could just point us in the right direction—”

“It’s not safe,” Marco interrupted. “Outside these walls is a wasteland. Denver is in ruins, as is the rest of the world. I hope you will accept my apology for your injuries. It was important for us to relocate you without cluing you in on our location, just in case things don’t work out.”

“What things might that be?” Dad asked.

“Let me back up for a moment,” Marco said. “It might be easier if I explain things from the beginning. You see, we are the Denver Legacies.”

The crowd chattered as he announced their title. Some people even let out little whoops of enthusiasm.

“I’m sorry, the who now?” I asked.

“We are the few and far between who survived the destruction of the United States,” Marco clarified. “We are the sons and daughters of the new world. We are the ones who were chosen to restart humanity.”

Silence fell as he finished declaring the group’s purpose. I let out an involuntary snigger. “Chosen by whom exactly?”

Marco lifted his palms to face upward, as if calling down a higher power from above. “By fate. By destiny. And you are one of us.”

“What a load of bullshit,” Dad said, rolling his eyes. “You do realize that you aren’t the only group of people who survived out there, right? Humanity doesn’t need to be rebuilt. It’s still out there.”

Marco’s attention on me wavered, and he shifted his focus to my father. “Are you not a believer, sir?”

“A believer of what?” Dad said. “Whatever crap you’ve come up with to make yourselves feel better about the end of the world? No, I’m not.”

“That’s all right,” Marco replied. “Many of our number were skeptical when they joined us. Once you recognize the advantages of being a Legacy, you will begin to understand our way.”

“What exactly is your way?” I asked, wishing more and more that I hadn’t been stripped of my weapons on the way in. If I had my rifle, Dad and

I would already be out of here. “I’m a little confused.”

“We are a community,” Marco said. “We care for each other. We provide for each other. We carry the weight of this burden for each other. We search for survivors on the outside and bring them to the safety of our home.”

When he put it that way, the Legacies didn’t sound much different from Camp Haven. They were a group of people that had banded together in order to survive the effects of the EMP blast. They relied on each other, just as the members of Camp Haven had. The only strange part was this whole “chosen by fate” gag that Marco was spinning.

“Marco, no offense, but we have our own community,” I said, trying to keep my voice as level as possible. “And we desperately need to return to it.”

“Shh,” Marco said as he put a finger to his lips. “There is no need to make up stories. We accept you here. You’re one of us. We would like you to sit for the togetherness ritual.”

“The what? Listen, Coats, is it?” I wasn’t in the mood to play nice with this guy. I reserved first name basis for people I actually respected. “I’m not making up any stories. There are other survivors out there, people that I care about, and I can’t hole up all nice and cozy in your church just because you think you’re some kind of chosen one.”

The entire congregation shifted forward as I stood up from my chair. I swayed, still groggy from the head injury, and Marco took the opportunity to plant me in a seated position again.

“You’re confused.” Marco traced my the outline of my cheek with his fingertip. “We are the only ones left on earth. You must stay here and become a Legacy like the rest of us.”

“Don’t touch her,” Dad warned him.

“Perhaps you have misunderstood our intention,” Marco continued as if he hadn’t heard him. “We are not here to harm you. We are here to help you. Once we perform the togetherness ritual, you will be free to go about your business here as you see fit. You will have access to our food and clothing stores and a warm bed to sleep in. You will be a part of our family.”

“We don’t want to be a part of your damn family,” Dad said.

“Wait a second,” I cut in. “If we participate in this ritual, then we can do whatever we want?”

“As long as it benefits the Legacies,” Marco said. “But yes. This isn’t a prison. You are a free member of society.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m in.”

“George!” Dad threw me a shocked look. “What are you doing?”

“You heard him,” I replied. “We’re safe here. We would be provided for. Come on, Dad. Warm food, a bed to sleep in at night. Sounds pretty good, right? We didn’t have any of that out there in the woods.”

Dad finally caught on to my scheme. It would be easier to hatch an escape plan from the Legacies’ hideout once they trusted that we were a part of their group. Otherwise, they would be anticipating our rebellion. Dad gave me a slight nod.

“You have a point,” he said, for Marco’s benefit rather than mine. “It would be nice to stay warm for a while.”

“See?” Marco smiled widely, displaying straight, white teeth that would make any post-apocalyptic dentist proud. “You’re already beginning to understand what the Legacies do for one another. Shall we perform the ritual?”

“Er, what exactly does this ritual entail? Not that I’m necessarily against it,” I added hastily at the look on Marco’s face. “It’s just that I’m a little hesitant to perform blood bonds or something like that, what with the state of the world at the moment. You understand, right?”

Marco’s chuckle echoed through the church. “My dear girl, you continue to think us barbaric. The ritual is more of a welcoming ceremony. It’s a simple linking of the hands, and once you complete our circle with us, then you are a Legacy yourself. No blood bonds required.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”

“Are you quite ready then?”

Caroline and Max took the stage again to help us out of the chairs and down the stage steps. The other members of the Legacies spread out, forming a loose circle. Marco stood to our left, Caroline and Max to our right.

“Let us join hands to welcome Georgie and Amos Fitz to the Legacies,” Marco announced, and he extended his right hand across his body to grasp the left hand of the member next to him. One by one, the Legacies linked themselves together, working their way around the circle toward us. Max reached for Caroline’s hand, Caroline reached for Dad, and Dad reached for mine. Once Dad and I were connected, Marco offered his free hand to me. His palm was smooth and cool. When I took it, he loaned me what he might have thought was a warm smile, but his brilliant teeth made the expression look more lethal than welcoming.

“We are one,” he said to the crowd.

“We are the Legacies,” everyone replied.

Then, hands still linked, everyone lifted their arms and flipped around to face the outside of the circle. Once everybody’s arms were uncrossed, we were permitted to drop each other’s hands and roam free of the group.

“Congratulations,” Marco said to us, patting first Dad then me on the back. “We’re happy to have you here. If you like, Caroline would be happy to take you on a tour of our home. She can also find you extra sweaters if you like. It gets quite drafty in here.”

As he drifted away to talk to the other Legacies, Dad leaned in and muttered in my ear, “Now what? We’re no closer to finding Sylvester.”

“Now we take the tour,” I whispered back, “and figure out what the best way is to get the hell out of here.”

Caroline approached us with a smile. “You ready for the tour?”

Dad pasted on a similar expression. “As we’ll ever be.”

THE CHURCH WAS A LARGE CATHEDRAL, complete with rectory and attached school. The Legacies only used bits and pieces of it for themselves. The place had room for several more people to move in. Each member of the group had a choice between their own bedroom and bunking in the group dormitory that was once meant for teenagers on religious retreats. Dad and I chose to stay in the rooms that we were assigned in, since the main hallway had an exit door at the end of it. Like Camp Haven, the church had been broken up according to usage. Caroline showed us the kitchen, where a few of the Legacies prepared lunch for the group, the community center, where several others played games or read books to keep themselves busy, and the storage rooms, where we picked new sweaters to replace the ones that we had ruined during our hike in the woods. Thankfully, my tactical jacket was still intact.

“Can I ask where you put our weapons?” I said to Caroline. “Those are incredibly important to us.”

“You won’t need them here,” she replied. “We don’t allow weapons on the premises. We have a no-violence policy.”

“Unfortunately, policies don’t always keep violence from happening,” Dad chimed in. “I’d feel a lot safer with my crossbow in hand.”

“Guns make people nervous,” Caroline replied. “And you are safe here. Once you get to know the others, you’ll realize that we’re all just trying to protect one another.” We arrived back at our rooms. “Do you have any other questions for me?”

“Nope,” I said. “Thanks for the tour, Caroline.”

She checked her watch. “Lunch will be served in the community center in a few minutes. You’re welcome to eat there or pick up your food and eat elsewhere. See you then.”

“Thanks,” Dad added.

As soon as she turned the corner toward the community center, I faced my father. “All right, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“What about my crossbow?” he asked as I ushered him toward the exit door at the end of the corridor. “It’s not like those things are just lying around. We can’t go out there unarmed.”

“I recognize this church,” I told him. “It’s toward the edge of the city, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a sporting goods store around the corner.”

“That place will be completely cleaned out, you know that.”

I peeked in the window of each door as we passed it, hoping that we might happen upon wherever the Legacies hid the rest of our things. “Do you want to find Sylvester or not? We have to get out of here as soon as possible. That means sacrificing our weapons. All we have to do is make it out of the city alive. Then we can go back up to Camp Haven and raid the stockroom there. I’m sure we can find a few leftover rifles.”

“If Base One didn’t raid the weapon stash too,” Dad said.

The exit door was only a few paces away. “Guess we’re taking our chances—whoa!”

Dad grabbed the back of my jacket and yanked me away from the door that I’d just pushed open. I caught my breath and took another look at the outside, wondering if I’d been seeing things correctly. Sure enough, there was a massive pit, at least ten feet deep, directly beyond the doorstep. At the bottom, jagged pipes and debris promised a painful landing. If Dad hadn’t pulled me back, I would have strolled right into the hole.

“That’s not intentional, right?” I said, trying to slow my panicked breathing. “I mean, it probably happened because of the EMP, don’t you think?”

“EMPs don’t cause big holes to open up in the ground,” Dad said. “This was definitely intentional. No wonder all of the Legacies are so buddy-buddy. They don’t have an option. Marco Coats has trapped them here.”

5

I spent the rest of the day checking every exit in the building. It was a difficult feat, trying to avoid the Legacies who freely roamed the church, but I managed to make it to each door by dinner time. Every single one of them was inaccessible. Either they were boarded up or there was some kind of booby trap on the opposite side. Rationally, I knew that this might be the Legacies' way of protecting the church from potential threats, but what with the cult mindset that Marco inspired, I was more inclined to believe Dad's point of view. Marco Coats was trying to keep the Legacies from getting out.

I skipped lunch, but when dinner rolled around, I figured it was best to keep myself fed. Not to mention, I was curious to see what kind of meals that the Legacies came up with. Back at Camp Haven, we spent months gathering wild game and other food sources to make sure that we were prepared for winter. Were the Legacies on par with Camp Haven's talents?

In the community center, I joined the short line of people waiting to be served and looked out at the tables. Dad was already working on making friends. He sat at a table with a few Legacies that were closer to his own age, looking quite at home as he scooped soup from his bowl. This was our plan now, to blend in as best as we could in order to get information from the people around us. I just didn't expect Dad to be the one to pull it off so quickly. He had suffered from agoraphobia for half of my life, but if he was a stranger to me, I never would have known. He chatted lightheartedly with the others. The only evidence of his discomfort was the way he rapidly tapped the heel of one boot beneath the table, restlessly jiggling his leg up and down.

The food was canned. I could tell by the mushy texture of the noodles in the soup, as well as the dull color of the green beans. The Legacies weren't quite like Camp Haven then. They got their food from somewhere else, which meant that they would eventually run out of it.

With my tray in hand, I looked around the community center for a place to sit. Half of me wanted to join my father at his table, but I knew I wouldn't fit in with older crowd of Legacies. I spotted Caroline sitting on her own at a table in the corner, her face buried in a book. I headed toward her.

"Mind if I sit here?" I asked.

She glanced up. "Not at all."

I pulled out the chair opposite her and got comfortable. She immediately returned to her book, brow furrowed in concentration. "What are you reading?"

She lifted the book so that I could read the title. It was Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut.

"That's seems appropriate," I said. "Isn't that book about a made-up religion and the end of the world?"

Her eyes lifted from the page. "The Legacies haven't made up their own religion."

"You guys made camp in a church."

Caroline sighed, bent the corner of her page to mark it, and closed the book. "Look, I know this place seems weird, okay? I thought the exact same thing when they brought me in, but in my opinion, it's better to be alive and weird than normal and dead. Wouldn't you agree?"

I lifted a spoonful of soup like a toast to her words. "I guess you have a point. How long have you been a part of the Legacies?"

"About a month," she replied. "I was nearly dying of hypothermia a few blocks from here. If it weren't for them, I would have been just another body on the street."

"So do you believe in all of this stuff?" I asked her, blowing cool air across the surface of the soup. "Do you really think that the Legacies were chosen by some higher power to repopulate the earth?"

She made a face. "I have no urge to help repopulate the earth with any of the people here, but I'm happy to go along with whatever Marco believes if it means I get food to eat and a warm, safe space to sleep at night."

"So you don't believe it?"

Caroline looked around to make sure that no one else was within earshot.

“No one says this out loud, but most of us don’t buy into all that chosen ones stuff. Some do—the older folks mostly—but I think that’s because it’s easier to have something to believe in at the end of the world rather than constantly reminding yourself that nothing really matters. If I have to call myself a Legacy and participate in silly group meetings to earn my place here, then I’m okay with that.”

“That’s a relief,” I said. “I’m glad someone here had the same idea that I did. My dad and I have been living in the mountains ever since the EMP hit, but our camp got trashed and we ran out of supplies.”

“So you came into the city to look for more?”

“Not exactly.” I let the noodles on my spoon splash back into the bowl and fished out a piece of chicken instead. “Hey, I couldn’t help but notice that all the exits are blocked off here. What’s up with that?”

“Marco says it’s to protect us from people trying to get in from outside.” She broke a piece of cornbread in half and offered it to me. “Here, eat this. It’s more appetizing than the soup.”

“Thanks. Do you believe Marco?”

“To a point,” she replied. “Honestly, I have no desire to go outside—there’s a protected courtyard here if I want to get some sun—so it doesn’t bother me much. Besides, I don’t see a reason why Marco would want to keep us in here.”

“Maybe he likes feeling powerful,” I suggested.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“So if no one goes outside the church, where does this food come from?” I tried a bite of the cornbread. As promised, it was much easier to stomach than the bland, sodium-laden soup.

“Some of it was already here in the church’s cache,” she replied. “I guess the rest of it comes from outside.”

“So between foraging for expired cans of food and looking for other survivors to add to your number, there are certain members of the Legacies that are allowed outside?” I asked, pretending to be absorbed in the chemical makeup of my cornbread. “How exactly do they make it in and out of the church without jumping into one of those pits that Marco’s dug outside every door?”

Caroline picked up her book again and hid behind it. “I don’t really know. I don’t ask questions. I just live here.”

I licked my spoon clean and used it to lower the book a few inches so that

I could see Carolina clearly again. “That was a lie.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m good at reading people.” I leaned across the table and lowered my voice. “Listen, Caroline. You seem like you have a decent head on your shoulders. Can I share something personal with you?”

She perched the book on the edge of her lunch tray, still angled so it looked like she was reading it, and nodded.

“When I said that my dad and I have been living in the mountains, I meant that we were staying at a self-sustaining compound home to about a hundred other people,” I told her. “A few days ago, a rival camp stormed the place. Most of my friends are dead, and the others are missing. We followed a trail to Denver, hoping to locate one of them, but the Legacies took us before we could find him. He’s a sixteen-year-old boy by the name of Sylvester. Have you seen or heard of him?”

She shook her head. “I usually keep to myself. I only helped bring you in because there aren’t a lot of women here my age. If they brought a kid in, I haven’t seen him.”

“I just find it suspicious that the trail we were following ended right where the Legacies set up an overhead trap,” I said, leaning back in my chair with a sigh. “Any thoughts on that? If the Legacies are so altruistic, why are they setting snares to collect more people?”

“How do you figure it was the Legacies?” she asked. “Someone else probably set that trap, and the Legacies saved you from it.”

“Their heroic appearance was a little too coincidental for me,” I replied. “Can you be straight with me? How do the Legacies get in and out of the building?”

Caroline fixed me with a hard stare. “I can’t mess up here. Marco isn’t all hugs and kisses. I’ve seen him kick people out of the church before for not adhering to the Legacies’ standards.”

“I won’t tell a soul that you helped me,” I promised.

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

“Fine.” She closed her book. “There’s a group of Marco’s closest friends that go out at night. My guess is they scour the city for extra food and supplies. They’re damn good at it too. So far, we haven’t run out of anything. From what I’ve witnessed, the exit is on the second floor of the rectory.”

“The second floor?”

She shrugged and polished off the rest of her cornbread in one bite. “My room is on the first floor. I hear them go up there, and then it’s just silence until they come back. A second floor exit is the only thing that would explain it.”

“Where’s your room?”

“On the east side of the building,” she replied. “The main staircase is blocked off though. Marco tells everyone that the wood steps are rotting.”

“So there’s another way up then?” I pressed.

“Yeah,” she replied. “But you’re not going to like where it is.”

“Try me.”

“It’s just a guess,” she said, “but I think they go up through the bell tower, the entrance of which is next door to Marco’s bedroom.”

Of course. The bell tower was situated in the worst place for sneakiness. I’d noticed the entrance near the back of the church during the welcoming ceremony, but hadn’t thought much of it.

“I don’t suppose Marco joins the other Legacies outside for their evening jaunts?” I asked.

“Nope. He waits for them to get back.”

“Great,” I muttered. “So I’ll have to distract Marco somehow, follow his team up into the bell tower, get out of the church without being noticed—”

Caroline put her fingers in her ears. “Can you stop? I don’t want to know how you plan to break the most basic of the Legacies’ rules. That way, if they question me about it, I can honestly say I have no idea.”

I put the last quarter of my cornbread on her tray before standing up with my own. “You’ve earned that back. Thanks for the tips.”

I scraped my dishes clean and stacked the lunch tray on top of the others near the trash can. Then I passed by the table where my father sat, where he and his new friends guffawed over one joke or another.

“George!” he said, clapping me on the back. “I want you to meet some of these fine folks. This is Jeffrey, Bing, and—wait for it—his name is George too!”

The other George, a muscular man with fading tattoos and a motorcycle gang-style beard, grinned and winked at me. “Your dad’s a kick, sweetheart! You know he hasn’t watched a football game in over fifteen years? We’re catching him up on the odds. I’m thinking it’s the Patriots again this year. God, I hate those bastards.”

“Too bad the EMP put the NFL out of business,” I said. “I don’t think the

Superbowl is going to happen anytime soon."

It was the wrong thing to say. Clearly, the older men at this table were living in an augmented version of reality. They preferred to believe that everything would go back to normal in a few weeks or months rather than face the truth of living in this church, eating canned food, with Marco Coats as their leader for however long it took to rebuild the city.

I cleared my throat. "But what the hell do I know? Dad, can I borrow you for a minute? I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure." Dad collected his tray, which he had polished clean of food. Somehow, he had managed to choke down all of his soup. "See you around, fellas."

"Find us for dinner, Amos," the other George said. "I'd like to hear more of your survivor tales. It's like a reality TV show."

"Will do, George."

I ushered Dad away from the others. We were among the first to leave the community center after lunch. Apparently, the Legacies were so starved for interaction with the outside world that they supplemented it with each other's presence instead. Just in case, I pulled Dad into a storage closet to keep our impending conversation from wayward ears.

"Did you find out anything from those guys?" I asked.

"Not yet," he replied. "I was buttering them up. All I figured out was that the three of them were part of the first group of Legacies, the ones that supported Marco from the start."

"That's good!" I said. "I'll know who to follow tonight."

"Tonight?" Dad bumped up against a broom and knocked it over. It ricocheted loudly off the storage room's door. "What's going on tonight? Who are you following?"

"Caroline told me that a group of Legacies goes out every night to look for food and supplies," I explained. "Apparently, they leave in and out through the bell tower and an exit on the second floor. I'm going to spy on them tonight. There's something fishy about this place. Denver is totally wrecked. I find it hard to believe that they've found enough food to feed everyone here without running into any trouble."

"I thought we were trying to get out of here," Dad said. "Not debunk the mystery of the Legacies' storeroom."

"We are," I agreed. "But I like to know what type of people I'm breaking bread with."

“Hang on,” Dad said. “Isn’t the entrance to the bell tower right near Marco’s room?”

“Yeah, that’s what I need you for.”

WE PLAYED it safe for the rest of the day, engaging with the other Legacies as they went about their business at the church. Most of the time, they simply tried to keep busy. They worked far less to keep their compound running than we had in Camp Haven. What with all the canned food, there was hardly a kitchen to maintain. They didn’t dry and store fresh meats or vegetables. Everyone cleaned their own space, and the Legacies kept a schedule of whose turn it was to clean out the toilets at the end of every day to avoid arguments. In their downtime, the Legacies played cards, read books, organized group sports or games in the courtyard outside, or hung out in the community center to drink tea and instant coffee. All in all, I had a hard time fathoming how laid back this group of people was about the current state of the world, but I also envied how easily they lived in comparison to those outside the church.

When dinner rolled around, a delicious meal of fried Spam and canned peas, I found Caroline in her corner, reading again. She was one of the few people who kept to herself at the church. When I sat down at her table without asking, she raised one eyebrow as she peered at me over the book cover.

“This is going to become a habit of yours, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Hey, I thought you wanted friends,” I said. “You were the one who told me that there weren’t a lot of women here your age. I’m just trying to fit in.”

“What’s the point?” But she set her book down next to her tray of nearly finished food anyway. “You’re leaving as soon as you can, aren’t you?”

I pushed the cubed Spam around the tray, trying to convince myself to eat it. “I thought you didn’t want to know.”

“I don’t.”

She fell silent. Without conversation to occupy my mouth, there was no avoiding the Spam. With a wrinkled nose, I brought a cube of meat up to my lips and bit down. Shockingly, it wasn’t as terrible as I thought it would be. In fact, it tasted like the bacon I used to mix into my omelets when I still had access to fresh eggs and a working stove.

“If you’re going tonight, you should be extra careful,” Caroline said.

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s a new moon.”

I speared another cube of Spam. “So? What, are the Legacies reverse werewolves or something?”

“No, but I think they take advantage of the darkness,” Caroline explained in a low voice. “They always come back with more supplies after a new moon.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Maybe for the rest of us,” she said. “But the last few times those guys have come back from a new moon night, they had blood on their hands.”

I missed my mouth with the fork, and the Spam splashed into the mushy peas. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

WHEN DARKNESS FELL and most of the Legacies had retired to their rooms, I crouched in my bedroom with my ear against the door, listening for any sign of movement out in the corridor. Around midnight, the sound of footsteps justified my aching knees. I peeked through the window. A group of five men, some of which I recognized from lunch that day, trotted past my room toward the main part of the church. They wore crude riot gear—chest plates, gauntlets, and helmets—made from whatever materials they had on hand, and each of them carried a gun in a holster around their waist. To finish off the strange look, each man wore a pair of black goggles around their neck.

“Night vision,” I muttered. “Where the hell did they get those?”

I counted to thirty once the men had passed my door. Then I knocked a pattern against the adjacent wall that separated my room from my father’s. Thankfully, it was made of plywood and particle board rather than the stones of the outer wall. A few moments later, my father knocked back, and I heard the door to his room creak open. I met him in the hallway.

“Look what I found,” he said, handing over a nine millimeter handgun.

“Where did you get that?”

“From the other George,” he replied, chuckling. “It was almost too easy. At dinner, I told him that I was always a gun guy. He showed me right to the room where they keep all of the weapons. He thought we were bonding. I couldn’t swipe your rifle or my crossbow without getting noticed though. This is all I got.”

“Is it loaded?”

He produced two clips from his pocket. “Here. Use it wisely.”

I loaded the gun, ditched the empty clip, and slipped the spare one into my back pocket. “Thanks, Dad. This makes me feel a whole lot safer.”

“I still don’t like the idea of you going out there alone.”

“What choice do we have? Are you ready? We’re going to lose track of the Legacies if we don’t hurry.”

“Give me five minutes,” he whispered, continuing down the hall. “As soon as you hear the diversion, make a run for the bell tower.”

“What’s the diversion?”

“You’ll know it when you hear it.”

He disappeared into the shadows at the end of the corridor, and I hid in the doorway of my room to wait. The next few minutes were excruciating. Every creak and or groan from the old building sent another shot of adrenaline rushing through my veins. I had no idea what I was doing here, or what would happen if and when I made it all the way up the bell tower and out of the church. All I knew was that I had to get out of the Legacies’ compound before Marco Coats found a way to keep me and Dad here forever.

A sharp series of small explosions interrupted my train of thought. I ran down the corridor and ducked into an empty room close to the church’s main hall. Marco’s room and the bell tower were a little farther along, but the sounds were loud enough to rouse the Legacies from their beds, and I didn’t want to draw attention to myself once they left their rooms. Sure enough, sleepy faces began to emerge from the hall to look around for the source of the noise.

“What is that?”

“Is that a bomb?”

Marco Coats himself ran right past my hiding spot, down the corridor toward his charges. “Everyone back to your rooms, please! There appears to be a disturbance in the courtyard. Remain inside.”

As the Legacies took the advice of their leader, I ducked out of the empty room with a chuckle. Marco wasn’t as quick on the uptake as everyone thought he was. I could tell from the poppy explosions that Dad hadn’t done anything too dangerous. He’d simply rigged a couple of cherry bombs, which were completely harmless unless you got too close.

The entrance to the bell tower was locked from the opposite side. I rolled my eyes, checked that the hallway was clear, and aimed a massive kick at the door. The lock popped free, and the door sprang open. I stepped inside, closed the door behind me, and looked up. A rickety set of stairs wound around the inside of the cylindrical tower. At the very top, the church bells

rested silently. It was a long way up.

“Ugh, please tell me I don’t have to make it all the way to the top,” I mumbled as I took the stairs two at a time. A few flights later, it became obvious that there was no entrance to the second floor from this area. Either Caroline was lying or misinformed. I continued all the way up, my legs aching in protest, and looked out of the first of four windows that allowed the bells’ solemn tones to reach the rest of the city. From this height, it was easy to orient myself. The church was a few miles from the edge of the city. It wouldn’t take long to reach the woods once we found a way out of the Legacies’ grasp.

The drop from here to the ground was too far for the Legacies to jump. Rappelling down the bell tower was pretty much their only option, and I was relatively sure that the Legacies weren’t doing that every night. I checked the next window, the one closest to the roof of the building.

“Bingo.”

A rope ladder hung from the window, leading back down to the lower eaves of the church. Carefully, I lowered myself through the window and hooked my feet through the first rung of the ladder.

“Don’t look down, don’t look down,” I muttered as I began to climb down the ladder. I glanced at my boots to check the position of the next rung and accidentally got a glimpse of the space between me and the ground. I jerked my eyes back up. “Shit, I looked down.”

When my feet landed firmly on the roof of the rectory, I let out a big breath. From here, I could see the parking lot of the church. Five people jogged across it. The Legacies’ salvage party. If I didn’t hurry, I would lose them.

The window directly beneath me was open. I lowered myself over the edge of the roof, dangling from the shingles, and kicked my legs back and forth to swing toward the window. Once I had enough momentum, I let go of the roof and jumped into the open window, rolling to a stop in the hallway. I got to my feet and followed the corridor to the opposite end. Another window. Another ladder.

“Here we go again,” I said. Thankfully, this was the last leg of my escape. The ladder led into the parking lot. I sprinted across it, trying to catch up with the rest of the Legacies while keeping light on my feet. Caroline had been right about the new moon. The city was beyond dark. My eyes struggled to see the ground in front of me. I carried a flashlight on my belt, but I feared

the light might expose me if I turned it on. No wonder the Legacies carried night vision goggles. As I cleared the church's property, I had to slow down or risk tripping over something in the dark. I paused, listening for the Legacies instead of looking for them. A tin can tinkled in the alley ahead.

"Way to go, Jeff," the first man said. I recognized his voice. It was the other George, Dad's new friend from lunch.

"It's just a soda can."

"Lock it down, will you? Let's keep moving."

I followed the voices, catching sight of the Legacies' silhouettes as they crept through the alley. It was slow going. I had to keep hidden, which meant trailing the group at a safe distance. I lost them once or twice in the shadows of the streets. The farther we traveled from the church, the more I wished I'd put a little more thought into my plan.

"There."

The Legacies stopped so suddenly that I almost knocked over a garbage can in my haste to find another hiding spot behind them. I crouched behind the can, listening to their whispered conversation.

"I see three," the other George muttered. I had no idea what they were looking at. The only thing in the area was an old gas station with all of its windows bashed in. "Anyone else?"

"No, boss."

"Let's go."

The other George and his team crept toward the gas station. They spread out, two to the left, two to the right, and one in the center. I slipped from my garbage can cover and snuck to their last position to watch. George silently counted down on his fingers. Each Legacy drew his gun. When George put his last finger down, they burst into action.

"Go, go, go!"

The team leapt through the windows of the gas station. Inside, three people sprang up from where they had been sleeping on the floor.

"Put your hands up!" Jeff ordered, brandishing his gun. "Hands up!"

The three people, two men and a woman if my limited vision wasn't deceiving me, obeyed. The other Legacies looted the gas station, tearing it apart until they found a small stash of non-perishable foods hidden beneath the register.

"Got it, boss!"

"Please." The woman's wavering voice carried out to my hiding spot.

“Please, don’t take our food. That’s all we have left.”

George shrugged. “Sorry, lady. We got people to feed too. You know what it’s like. Every man for himself out here.”

“You son of a bitch,” one of the woman’s companions snarled in George’s face. He lowered his hands and stepped into George’s personal space. “Who the hell are you to come in here and steal our food? Get the hell out!”

“I don’t think so.”

The man seized George by the throat. A second later, a gunshot went off. I flinched, and the woman screamed as the man crumpled to the floor. He was dead. George lifted his gun.

“Anyone else?”

The second man stepped forward, putting himself between George and the sobbing woman. George aimed at his head.

“Stop!” I yelled, springing up from my hiding place and sprinting toward the gas station. I leapt through one of the windows, grabbed the barrel of George’s gun, and ripped the weapon out of his hands. “Stop, stop! They’re innocent people!”

In the next second, the other Legacies aimed their own guns at me. I lifted the other George’s weapon level with his head. Stalemate. He raised his hands.

“You’re Amos’s daughter,” he said. “We just brought you in yesterday. What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Stopping you from killing anyone else,” I replied, breathing hard. “These people are in the same boat that we are. They’re trying to survive, and you’re taking what little supplies they have for your own comfort. It’s wrong.”

“That’s life,” the other George snapped. “Give me back my gun.”

“No.”

One of the other Legacies aimed a sharp kick to my hamstring from behind. The muscle cramped, and my knee gave way. George pried his gun from my grip and patted me down. He found the nine millimeter in my belt, along with the spare clip.

“I told Marco that you were going to be trouble,” he said, sliding my gun into a spare holster. He grabbed me by the arm and hauled me to stand. “Get up. We’re going back to the church. I love being right. Fellas, get the rest of the food and head out. We’re going to have to call it an early night.”

He pushed aside the survivors of the raid, who were too stunned by the violent robbery to do anything but watch as the Legacies dragged me outside. The church's bell tower loomed in the distance. My teeth clenched together as the other George pushed me through a mound of trash. I thought about climbing the numerous ladders of the church with the Legacies' supervision.

"Great," I muttered. "This should be a grand old time."

6

Getting back into the church was not a pleasant experience. George watched my every step, often grabbing me by the scruff of the neck or the back of my jacket to remind me that he was the one in control here. If the circumstances were different—if Dad weren't still inside the church—I would have figured out a way to knock George unconscious for his rough touch. As it was, I could only spit petty insults at my new bodyguards as they hauled me back to Legacy territory.

"Where's Marco?" Jeff asked when we reached the bottom of the bell tower. "He's usually waiting for us here."

George shook me by the collar of my coat. "Well? Answer the question!"

"How should I know, you bilge rat?" I said. "He wasn't here when I left to follow you morons."

George tightened his fingers around my throat. "Marco's always here. Tell me where he is before I strangle you right here and leave you in your father's bed for him to wake up next to in the morning."

"Fine," I gasped, eyes watering as they bulged out of my head. George released me, and I massaged my bruised throat. "We set off a diversion in the courtyard. He's probably out there cleaning it all up."

George hauled me down the corridor. Before we could reach the courtyard, Marco himself came jogging in from outside.

"George!" he said, his eyes darting from the leader of the salvage group to me at their center. "What on earth? You should still be outside! Why do you have the girl with you?"

George kicked me down and deposited me at Marco's feet. "She followed us. Saw what we were doing."

"Oh, dear."

"You're full of shit," I said to Marco, forcing my aching legs to stand. "You preach all this crap about how the Legacies are the chosen ones, and then you send your men out there to kill innocent people and steal their supplies. Tell me, Marco, what makes those people matter less than the ones you've collected here?"

I didn't bother to keep my voice level. It rose and wavered, drawing the sleeping Legacies from their rooms for the second time that night. My father emerged from his bedroom as if he had been sleeping there all this time.

"What's going on?" he said, stepping between me and Marco. "What have you done to my daughter?"

"Nothing yet," George said. "But she broke the rules. That means she has to be punished."

I sidestepped my father to confront Marco again. "I want an answer, Coats. Why save some and condemn others? What criteria do you judge your survivors on?"

"You're delusional," Marco said calmly. "We are the only ones left. We are lucky to have—"

"Luck has nothing to do with it," I replied. "I watched your men go out and kill someone over a few cans of food. Do the rest of the Legacies know how you're feeding them?"

From the expressions on the faces that lined the hallway, I assumed that the answer was no. Marco's serene smile slipped.

"Not every person is fit for membership with the Legacies," he said. "They are chosen based on their ability to rebuild humanity."

"So you admit it then," I challenged. "*You're* the one choosing these people, not some bullshit version of fate or destiny. I bet you wished like hell that you hadn't chosen me."

Marco's eyes never left mine. "Gentlemen? Would you be so kind as to escort Miss Fitz to the main hall. I'm afraid George is right. She must accept the consequences of her actions. The Legacies do not tolerate disbelievers or insubordination."

"I don't think so," I said, and I drove my elbow up behind me, catching the other George under the chin. His teeth cracked together, and he dropped his gun to cradle his jaw. At the same time, my father aimed a blow to Jeff's

solar plexus. Jeff doubled over, and Dad relieved him of his weapon as well. We fired in unison as the other Legacies attempted to restrain us. I caught Marco in the foot and another bodyguard in the leg as I sprinted down the corridor.

“Stop them!” Marco screamed, cradling his bleeding foot on the ground.

The Legacies closed in, chasing after us in their pajamas. We raced for the exit door at the other end of the corridor.

“What about the giant pit on the other side?” I yelled to Dad.

“Get ready to jump!”

He reached the exit first and swung the door open. I readied myself to leap off the edge, but it turned out that I didn’t need to. Someone had laid wooden planks across the gap in the ground, creating a safe bridge from one end to the other. I ran across it.

“Dad, come on!”

When my father was clear, I yanked the wooden planks out of place so that they fell into the pit below. The Legacies piled up at the door, trapped in the church by their own doing. We left them there to stare at our backs as we ran away.

“This way,” I said, gesturing around the back end of the church. “We need to get back to the mountains.”

“Well, that was a kick,” Dad huffed as we jogged through the alleys. I flipped on my stolen flashlight since we weren’t lucky enough to have night vision goggles. “Though I kind of wish you’d given me a heads up. I’m not exactly dressed for hiking.” He was wearing pajamas and boots, though he’d had the sense to steal a jacket from one of the Legacies on the way out.

“What a waste of time,” I said. “That place was useless. I can’t believe we got stuck in there for an entire day.”

“I can’t believe we made it out,” my father said. “I’ll be honest, I didn’t think we were going to make that jump. It’s lucky someone laid those boards over that pit.”

“Yeah, lucky,” I mused. “Either that, or someone else knew that we needed an alternate exit strategy.”

“You think you made an ally in there?”

I thought of Caroline, quiet but stalwart. “Maybe. This way.”

While Dad could find his way through the woods in a heartbeat, he wasn’t the best at navigating the city. I led the way through the dark alleys and trash piles. Denver wasn’t improving. It was stuck in its mourning

process. It had been a few months since the EMP had taken out the country's entire electrical grid. I would have thought that recovery teams might have made it out to the major cities by now, but walking through Denver was like picking through a wasteland. It was less chaotic than it had been a few weeks ago. Either that, or we were close enough to the borders not to run into anyone too violent. Not many people had survived in the city. Those who had were smart enough to stay far away from others. We gave the few survivors that we collided with a wide berth, and they afforded us the same courtesy. Behind a dumpster, I found a stash of men's clothes that were about Dad's size. The pants were too long and dragged beneath the heels of Dad's boots, but they were better than the flannel pajama bottoms that he had left the church with. As he dressed and put his new gun away, he let go of a gusty sigh.

"I'm really going to miss that crossbow."

"Dad, it seems unhealthy to mourn a weapon," I said, peeking around the next corner. The trees were visible from here. We were getting closer and closer to home. Funny that I considered a camp in the woods my safe space now. It was like going back in time.

The space between the buildings gradually widened until there were no structures left between us and the wilderness. Once we reached the trees, we walked along the woods' border to look for the last match. I also kept my eyes peeled for other hidden traps. We didn't have the time to waste escaping it. It had snowed since the last time we were here, and the match had long since been covered up. Dad's nervous tic—rubbing his fingers together as if there were something stuck to the tips of them—came back in full force.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know how much Sylvester means to you, but we need to get higher and make camp. We don't know if the Legacies are following us or not."

"You're right." He nodded, hiding his face from me. My father rarely cried. When I was young, he told me that crying was a display of weakness. Even now, upset as he was over Sylvester's continued absence, he didn't allow his waiting tears to fall.

As we headed for higher ground, uneasiness washed over me, an instinctual feeling that someone else's eyes were trained on my back. I scanned the area around us, sweeping the beam of the flashlight back and forth through the trees. The woods were quiet. The animals were gone, having migrated south or hibernating. The moon was absent, and the barren

branches of the trees reached out like the fingers of inhuman nightmares. Nothing moved at all, so I tried to convince myself that the feeling of being watched was all in my head.

Our strength waned halfway to the ruins of Camp Haven. We cleared a spot of snow, started a fire, and hunkered down for the night. We found fresh water at a half-frozen river nearby, but we had no food and no blankets to keep ourselves warm, so we huddled together and kept close to the fire. My toes felt like icicles in my boots and I wished for the warmth of Dad's stone house high above, but I eventually dozed off out of sheer exhaustion.

A few hours later, I woke up to the sound of a loud splash in the distance. The river's steady gurgle floated through the trees, but it was punctuated by faint cries of help. I shook my father awake.

"What?" He shot up from his prone position and looked around with bleary, wild eyes. "What is it?"

"Someone's out there," I whispered. "Near the river."

We listened for a moment. Another stressed whimper made its way into our campsite. Dad stood up, shook off the snow that had settled on his coat, and drew his gun. I followed suit, and we jogged silently through the trees toward the river, following the cries downstream.

The water came into view, gray and icy as it rushed down the mountain. The current was strong enough to float large chucks of ice along like miniature icebergs. I swept the beam of the flashlight along the river, but the cries had stopped, and there were no signs of the person who had made them. Then, out of nowhere, a dark-haired boy broke through the surface of the water a mere five feet from where we stood on the bank. He drew in a desperate gasp of air before the current overtook him again.

"It's Sylvester!"

We broke into a sprint, following Sylvester as the river swept him swiftly downstream. The current was so rough that he struggled to keep his head above the water. Occasionally, a block of ice slowed his descent, but we weren't fast enough to pluck him from the river. Each time we got close, he disappeared, and we lost track of him again.

"We need to get ahead of him," I called to Dad, who ran alongside his surrogate son and shouted encouraging words. I looked downstream. Sylvester was rapidly approaching a drop in the river up ahead. It was a short fall, but the rocks in the water below would make for a rough landing. A massive tree had fallen over right before the river dropped off, its trunk

propped over the water. “Stay with him!”

“George, where are you going?”

I sprinted along the bank as fast as I could, scrambling over large rocks and squeezing between the trees that lined the river. I ripped through the dead branches of a low bush, drew ahead of Sylvester, and put on a final burst of speed. When I reached the fallen tree, I pulled myself up by its roots to the makeshift bridge over the water. Then I flattened out on my stomach, the bark rough through my clothes, and dangled my hand over the river. Sylvester was heading right toward me at a breakneck pace.

“Grab my hand!” I shouted.

Sylvester reached out. For one heart-stopping second, I thought that the river would rush him right past me and over the rocks, but my adrenaline kicked in. I seized Sylvester’s wrist, and he took mine, locking our hands together as the current tried to drag him off. With all of my upper body strength, I hauled him out of the river and dragged him onto the log by the back of his sopping sweater. He trembled violently as I half-carried him off of the tree and laid him down on the bank.

Dad caught up with us and knelt beside the teenager. “Sylvester!”

The kid’s lips were blue, and his face was so drained of color that the veins beneath his eyes were visible. “D-D-Dad?”

My stomach plummeted at the word. This kid had been calling my father his for the past several years. I wondered if he had had a more pleasant upbringing than my own.

“You’re alive,” Dad gasped, catching the boy up in a hug. “Oh, thank God. I thought you were dead. I thought you didn’t make it out of Camp Haven.”

Sylvester tried to reply, but his chattering teeth made it impossible for him to form full sentences. “S-s-still h-h-ere.”

“We need to get him back to camp,” I said. “He’s freezing.”

Dad picked Sylvester up from the ground and carried him through the woods in his arms. Sylvester’s long limbs, which he had not yet grown into, dangled from Dad’s grasp, as though he didn’t have the strength to control them. At the camp, I hurriedly stoked the fire to encourage a bigger flame. We got Sylvester out of his damp clothes, laid them out to dry, and dressed him in Dad’s spare pajamas from the church. Even so, he shivered so much that he looked like he was trying to vibrate into a different dimension.

“His pulse is racing,” I muttered, pressing two fingers against the inside

of his wrist. I picked up his hand. The tips of his fingers were turning blue. “Dad, he’s hypothermic. We have to find a way to warm him up and fast.”

Dad held Sylvester closer, using his own body heat to warm his son, and stared up the incline of the mountain. “The house is too far away. We’ll never make it up there in time.”

“The city’s closer,” I said. “I can run back in and find supplies.”

“No.” Dad rocked Sylvester back and forth like an oversized child. “It’s too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“I have to,” I said. “Do you want him to die?”

“N-not d-d-dying,” Sylvester muttered.

“I hate to break it to you, kid, but you will be if we don’t get your temperature up as quickly as possible,” I told him.

“What makes you think you’ll be able to find anything useful in the city?” Dad challenged. “The place has been picked clean. You would have to raid someone else’s camp, and that’s asking for trouble. Even then, you’d have to find a camp to raid first.”

“But we already know of one,” I reminded him. “The Legacies.”

IT SEEMED counterintuitive to return to the group of people that we had just spat in the face of in order to ask for help, but Sylvester’s condition left me with no other option. I couldn’t let the kid die. It would bury my father. As I traversed the city, following the same path in that we had taken out, I kept a lookout for anything I could make use of. Unfortunately, all I could find were a few pages of old newspaper, good for bunching up to use as personal insulation, but not the best for warding off hypothermia. The church loomed ahead. Candlelight glowed in one or two of the windows, but the rest of the building was dark. After the excitement of our escape, I hoped that Marco Coats and his minions had taken the rest of the night off.

I circled the church to look for the best way in. The bell tower was off limits. There was no way I could take a shot at getting past Marco’s bedroom twice in one night. Ultimately, I decided on the door that we had used for our own hasty exit. The wooden planks that someone had so kindly dropped for our escape plan were still there, propped up against the edge of the pit. All I had to do was haul them out of the hole and position them across the top of it again. I tiptoed across the rickety boards and pressed my ear against the door. There were no sounds on the other side, so I cautiously entered the building.

The hallway was deserted. Marco hadn’t bothered to station guards

anywhere. Perhaps the bullet hole in his foot had distracted him from his leadership abilities. Either that, or he had lost all of the competent ones in the fight. Smears of blood stained the floors and walls. The majority of it had been mopped up, but the Legacies couldn't entirely erase the losses they had suffered that night. Maybe it would make them think twice before killing other people for their own benefit. I doubted it.

I crept down the hallway, keeping light on my toes, and knocked on a door that was a few rooms away from my temporary bedroom. A face peeked out through the window. Caroline's eyes widened. She drew the door open, grabbed the front of my jacket, and yanked me inside.

"What the hell are you doing back here?" she whispered. "Are you insane? If Marco finds out that you stuck around, he'll kill you!"

"I'm pretty sure Marco was a dentist in his former life, so I don't think he has the stuff for murder."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Caroline said.

"He's got a bullet hole in his foot," I reminded her. "He wouldn't be able to catch me anyway. I need your help."

She let out a small laugh. "You need *my* help? No way. My reputation is already on the rocks here. If they figure out that I was the one who told you about the salvage group and the bell tower, I'm dead meat. Not happening."

"But it was you, wasn't it?" I asked her. "You were the one who set the planks down over the pit outside the exit door. You knew that we would need another way to get out of the church."

Caroline paced back and forth, but the room was so small that she had to change direction after every three steps. "Fine. Yes, it was me."

"So you've already helped me once," I said. "You're not one of them, Caroline. You're not really a Legacy. You put someone else before yourself because you saw that they were in trouble and needed help. That's an amazing quality to have, and it would be great if you could access that quality again."

"What do you need anyway?" she asked. "I thought you would be halfway up the mountains by now."

"We were," I told her. "And then we found the person that we came down here to look for. The only problem is that he fell into a freezing cold river and now he's dying of hypothermia. We need supplies. Clothes, food, warming blankets if you have them. Oh, and our weapons back. My dad loves that stupid crossbow."

Caroline stopped pacing to cross her arms and fix me with a steady stare, as though she was trying to figure out if helping me again would be worth the hassle.

“Please, Caroline. The kid’s only sixteen. He doesn’t deserve to die out there in the cold.”

She slid her feet into a pair of slippers and drew a coat on over her pajamas. “Fine. Follow me. And be quiet, for Pete’s sake.”

“Thank you so much,” I whispered.

We snuck out of the room and hurried up the hallway. Caroline’s slippers were silent against the stone floors, but the thump of my boots echoed if I moved too quickly. She shushed me multiple times, but we made it to the storage rooms near the community center. Caroline moved swiftly, searching through cardboard boxes full of spare clothes. She stuffed everything into an empty duffel bag.

“We don’t have warming blankets,” she muttered, as she rolled up a wool comforter and added it to the duffel bag. “But we do have a ton of those disposable hand warmers. If you use enough of them, you should be able to get his body temperature back up.” She located the box of said warmers and dumped them into the duffel.

“Did I mention how grateful I am to you right now?”

“Yeah, yeah. Keep moving.”

She led me to the kitchens next, where she plucked cans and boxes from the shelves. We couldn’t take too much. Otherwise, Marco and the others would notice that someone had stolen from them. After the kitchen, I followed Caroline to another room with a locked door. She knelt down and picked the lock with a hair pin from her pocket then twisted the handle free. It was the weapons room, stocked full of stolen guns and other explosives.

“I didn’t peg you for a lock picker,” I said, searching the room for Dad’s crossbow and my rifle. There were rows upon rows of pistols, rifles, grenades, and body armor. No weapons, my ass.

“I got kicked out of military school a while back,” she replied. “But not before I learned a few useful skills.”

“What did you do to get kicked out of military school?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Aha!” I grinned in triumph as I extricated Dad’s crossbow and bolt quiver from the other weapons on the wall. My rifle was nearby as well. I loaded it with the ammunition from the Legacies’ stash. Then I slung the

crossbow across one shoulder, the bursting duffel over the other, keeping my hands free to aim the rifle if need be.

“Got everything?” Caroline said. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Easier said than done. Marco, his foot wrapped in several layers of bandages, waited for us on the other side of the door with a gun in hand.

“Heard your door open, Caroline,” Marco said, glaring at her. “We’ll talk about the punishment for your treason later.”

On a whim, I locked my elbow around Caroline’s neck and dragged her away from the door to the armory. She struggled against my grip, clawing at my arm, as I placed the rifle against her temple.

“Relax, the safety’s on,” I muttered to her under my breath. Then I spoke to Marco and his cohorts in a clearer tone. “Don’t blame her. I forced her to show me to the storage rooms. I threatened to kill her. Unless you want another dead Legacy on your hands, I’d back the fuck up and let me out of this hellhole.”

Marco hesitated, his eyes darting between my cold expression and Caroline’s terrible face. I had to give him credit. He obviously cared about her. Otherwise, he would have already taken the shot. I backed slowly toward the hallway that led to the safest exit. Marco, leaning heavily on his good foot, limped after me, his gun trained on my head. I grinned as I moved swiftly into the next corridor. He couldn’t keep up with me.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one awake. I failed to check the next hallway for danger and ran straight into the chest of another Legacy. The man was massive. The top of my head didn’t even draw level with his chin.

“Oh shit.”

“Stop her!” Marco yelled. “She’s stolen from us!”

I released Caroline and ducked under the monstrous man’s outstretched arms before they could close around me. That was the best thing about fighting an opponent that was larger than you. It took them a lot longer to move their bulk around. I darted around to the man’s left, but he stuck his foot out at the last second. My boot caught, and I went flying, landing face first on the stone. I heard rather than felt my nose break. There was no time to contemplate the stars flashing in front of my eyes or the blood streaming down my chin. I scrambled to my feet and rushed for the door, but Marco had caught up with me. He yanked on the duffel bag, the strap of which tightened around my neck. I choked against it, then whirled around and aimed a punch down the center of Marco’s face. Another crack echoed against the stone

walls, and the skin of my knuckles split as they made contact with Marco's nose and teeth. He released his hold on me and doubled over with a groan.

"You broke my nose, I break yours," I said, spraying him with blood. "Guess that makes us square." I paused at the exit door to look back at Caroline, who had convinced the other Legacy not to follow me. "You're better than this place. If you ever want to get out of here, come find me."

With that, I leapt over Marco's quivering form, kicked open the exit door, and escaped into the black night with my haul.

7

By the time I made it back to the campsite, Sylvester was bundled up in the rest of Dad's clothes, and Dad was down to his long underwear. The fire roared dangerously bright. If anyone else was camping nearby, they definitely would have spotted us. It was a risk that Dad was willing to take to save Sylvester's life. When I stepped into the clearing, he raised the handgun.

"Dad, it's me!"

"Jesus, George. Your nose!" He dropped the gun and wrapped his arm around Sylvester again. The kid's eyes were hardly open, like he couldn't make sense of the world around him. "Did you find anything?"

"As a matter of fact…" I dropped the duffel to the ground, along with the rifle and the crossbow. "I did."

"My crossbow!" Dad said. "How did you get all of this?"

"With a little help from the same person that got us out of there in the first place." I ripped open the duffel back and threw a pair of snow pants and a jacket to Dad. "Put those on. How's he doing?"

"He's hanging in there," Dad said, only moving from Sylvester once I had come to take his place. "But his body temperature is still too low."

I ripped open a packet of hand warmers and placed them at even intervals over Sylvester's body. Then I wrapped him in the wool comforter and tucked it in until he looked like a gray, oversized human burrito. I stuck another warmer into a knit hat and pulled it on over Sylvester's head.

"There we go," I said, rubbing the kid's arms to help get the blood flowing. "We'll get you warmed up soon, kid. Don't worry."

“Come here, George,” Dad said. “Let’s have a look at that nose.”

I left Sylvester’s side to let the hand warmers do their work and joined Dad near the fire. He doused the corner of a spare T-shirt with water from the canteen we had filled at the river and began dabbing at my nose. The blood had dried up and caked around my nostrils and chin. Dad worked to clean it off, trying to avoid jostling the break.

“It’s not too bad, but we’re going to have to set it if you want to breathe properly for the rest of your life,” Dad said, rinsing the blood off the T-shirt for the third time. “You ready?”

“No.”

He took my face in his hands and placed his thumbs on either side of my nose. “Counting down from three. Three, two—”

He shoved upward before he got to one, and my face felt like it might explode from the pressure, but when the bone popped back into place, I felt immediate relief.

“Ow.”

Dad examined his handiwork. “Sorry. It’ll have to do for now.”

“I’m okay with that.” I dug through the duffel bag and tossed him a can of Spaghettios. “Eat that. You look pale.”

He punctured the top of the can with his knife and slurped the mushy noodles out of the roughly cut opening. I opened my own can and tapped it against his.

“Here’s to a disgusting breakfast and a beautiful sunrise,” I said, lifting the can up. The sky was just beginning to lighten, and the horizon was a beautiful lilac color.

“Here’s to you,” Dad added. “I can’t believe you pulled that off. I’m assuming that Marco was the one that gifted you with the broken nose?”

“One of his big, dumb Legacy bros, actually,” I said. “Don’t worry. I made sure Marco and I had matching wounds before I left.”

Dad chuckled. “Good. He deserves it. Thank you.”

I fished a wayward piece of pasta from the lip of my can. “For what?”

“For risking your life to save Sylvester’s,” Dad said. “You don’t know him at all, and you willingly put yourself in danger to make sure that he was all right. Twice. First at the river, then at the church.”

“Well, I know how much he means to you,” I muttered. “Found family is just as important, sometimes more, as the people who you’re related to by blood.” I checked on the kid again, relieved that he had finally stopped

shivering. “The important thing is that we got Sylvester back. One down, two and a half to go.”

“And a half?”

“Pippa’s baby.”

“Ah.” He took another chug of pasta.

“You’re having second thoughts, aren’t you?” I asked him.

“About what?”

“About figuring out how to get my friends out of Base One.”

“George—”

I plunked my half-empty can into the dirt. “I knew it. I knew I couldn’t count on you for something like this. I held up my end of the bargain, Dad. I put off rescuing my friends so that we could go back to Camp Haven and find Sylvester. Well, we found him, and he’s safe, so now it’s your turn to help me for once in your goddamn life.”

Dad wrapped another coat around himself. “George, I’m doing my best here, okay? I’m trying to be realistic.”

“You promised!”

Sylvester stirred. “Dad?”

Dad wasted no time in taking the opportunity to put off our conversation. He rushed to Sylvester’s side. “Hey, buddy. You had us scared shitless for a while there. How are you feeling?”

“Hot,” the kid muttered. Thankfully, his lips were beginning to pink up again. He rolled side to side, his arms trapped beneath the blanket. “Why am I wrapped up like a crazy person in a psych ward?”

“You were hypothermic,” I told him, untucking the corners of the blanket to free his arms. “We were trying to get your body temperature back up to normal.”

Sylvester grasped my hand in his, and I was grateful to note that his skin was warm against mine. “You saved me. You’re the one that pulled me out of the river.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Do me a favor though? Avoid any half-frozen bodies of water from here on out, okay?”

“You got it.”

“What happened out there, Sylvester?” Dad asked. “When did you get out of Camp Haven? Were you the one that left the trail of matches down to the city?”

Sylvester took the can of Spaghettios from Dad and swallowed a

mouthful. “Slow down, Dad. My brain’s still thawing out. I left the cabin and got into the bunker as soon as the explosions went off. I probably should have tried to find a way to save a few of the others, but I was honestly too freakin’ scared. I waited down there until the explosions and the screaming stopped. When I finally came out, Camp Haven was a graveyard.” His eyes glazed over as he stared into the fire, and I knew that he was watching his memories rather than the flames. “I didn’t know what to do. The soldiers had taken the survivors north, toward your house. I couldn’t make it up to you without them noticing me. And I couldn’t stay in Camp Haven either. I figured the only way to survive would be to find supplies in the city, so I headed down. I dropped the matches in case something went wrong. You’d know where to find me.”

“Except you weren’t there,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, I ran into some trouble,” he said. “Someone had set up a trap. I noticed it before I walked into it. The person who set it didn’t like that. They chased me away from the city, but I lost them in the woods.”

“The Legacies,” Dad muttered, rolling his eyes. “What happened next?”

“Got lost,” Sylvester said. “I spent the day trying and failing to retrace my footsteps. Then I heard your voices in the woods. The only problem was that you were on the opposite side of the river. I had to try and cross it somehow.”

Dad flicked Sylvester’s ear.

“Ow!”

“That was stupid,” Dad said, wagging his pointer finger in Sylvester’s face. “I can’t believe you willingly jumped into a half-frozen river. Don’t ever do that again.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Sylvester rubbed his ear and looked up at me. “Who are you exactly? You look familiar.”

I exchanged a look with Dad, who shrugged before returning to the campfire with a new can of food.

“I’m Georgie,” I told Sylvester. “I’m *his* daughter.”

Sylvester’s brown eyes widened in surprise. “The one that got lost in the woods when she was eighteen. I thought you were dead!”

“Is that what he told you?”

“No, I just—” He faltered, glancing between me and my father’s broad back. “Wow, you’re really pretty.”

That got a laugh out of me. “Nice deflection, kid.”

“What happened to your nose?”

“I lost a fight with the floor. On your behalf, I might add.”

Sylvester winced. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t sweat it.” I looked at my father again, who ate quietly near the fire, and lowered my voice. “Listen, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Anything,” Sylvester said. “You saved my life.”

“You know the people who attacked Camp Haven?” I asked him. He nodded. “They were from another camp, a military operation that the soldiers call Base One. They took the Camp Haven survivors back to their compound, and now two of my friends are trapped there.”

Sylvester’s brow wrinkled with concern. “That’s terrible.”

“I agree,” I said. “I want to get them out, but Base One is practically impenetrable. I can’t get in there alone. Dad promised to help me, but now he’s going back on his word.”

Sylvester finished the last bite of pasta and then tossed the empty can across the camp. It hit my father’s back, bounced off, and rolled away across the dirt. I flinched. Apparently, subtlety wasn’t Sylvester’s thing.

“Hey!” Dad scolded, turning round to face us. “What was that for?”

“Is it true?” Sylvester demanded.

“Is what true?”

“Did you promise her that you would help save her friends?”

Dad’s face grew red. “Sylvester, you don’t understand the risks involved—”

“Life out here is all risks,” Sylvester said. “Especially since the EMP went off. That doesn’t mean that we back down from helping our friends. In fact, it should inspire us to do the exact opposite. If there are people from Camp Haven trapped at this Base One place, then I want to get them out.”

“Sylvester—”

“That’s our family, Dad,” the teenager pushed on. “We introduced each and every one of those people to Camp Haven. I watched them build the compound from the ground up. They’re our responsibility. We can’t leave them there.”

“I understand that,” Dad said with the air of a man placating a child. “But there’s too much at risk. Besides, if we rescued all of the Camp Haven survivors, what would we do with them? Camp Haven is gone, and I certainly can’t fit all of you in my house.”

“So we’ll rebuild,” Sylvester suggested.

“It took years to make Camp Haven what it was,” Dad reminded him.

“And it’s the middle of winter. We don’t have the supplies to keep everyone safe. Right now, they’re better off at Base One.”

“I don’t believe that,” I said. “Everything I’ve heard about Base One has been negative. The man I met in the woods earlier—Aaron—he told me that Buddy Arnold runs that place like a prison. The civilians *and* the soldiers are terrified of him. We can’t let our people live in fear.”

“See?” Sylvester said. He had started shivering again. I tugged the wool comforter up to his chin. “Come on, Dad. We have to go save them. You promised.”

“All right, fine!” Dad threw his hands up in defeat, accidentally tossing canned pasta into the air. “We’ll go to Base One to look. *Just* to look. If we can figure out a safe way to get in to talk to someone, I’ll consider following through with it.”

“I guess that’s all I can ask for,” I said.

DAD and I took turns keeping watch as we slept through the morning. Sylvester was determined to get moving, but we persuaded him to catch a few more hours of shuteye. He was a hardy kid. His brush with hypothermia hadn’t dampened his spirits, and we continually had to remind him to take it easy. When the sun was high enough in the sky to warm the tops of our heads, we packed up our things, scattered the remains of the fire, and headed up the mountain. We bypassed Camp Haven, taking the long way around to avoid seeing the destruction of our home again. It was agreed that we needed to return to Dad’s house before we proceeded to Base One in order to eat something other than canned noodles, make sure that Sylvester was in good health, and prepare ourselves for what we might find at the military camp below.

Sylvester, despite his gusto, fell into his bed as soon as we arrived home, pulled the covers over his head, and immediately began to snore. I sat on the floor and tugged my boots off, flexing my toes. They were cold and sore from walking all day. As I massaged the soles of my feet through my socks, Dad lugged a bucket of water to the stove.

“I’m going to warm this if you want to wash up,” he said. “How’s your nose?”

“Holding steady.”

Dad lit the fire beneath the stove burner, flicked out the match, and glanced at Sylvester. “He likes you.”

“He isn’t very difficult to please.”

Dad chuckled lightly. “This is true. His outlook on people varies greatly from mine. He thinks that everyone deserves kindness and respect until they prove that they don’t.”

“That’s very noble of him.”

“I don’t know where he got it from,” he replied. “I certainly didn’t teach him that.”

“No, of course not,” I said. “The classic Fitz way is blatant mistrust from introductions.”

I meant it as a joke, but Dad didn’t smile or laugh.

“You can take the bed,” he said, dipping a soft washcloth into the warm pot of water to wipe the dirt and grime off of his arms. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Dad, I didn’t mean it like that—”

“It’s fine.”

He shut himself off, his expression neutral and nonchalant as he continued to go about his business. Despite our reunion, there were things from the past that haunted us both. It would take a lot more time than a few days to rebuild a relationship that was never rock steady in the first place. It was doubtful that we would ever fully put our family drama aside, but second chances didn’t come around often.

“It’s hard for me,” I admitted. I kept my voice low, telling myself that it was because I didn’t want to wake Sylvester. In truth, I didn’t know how to say these things to my father out loud. “Seeing you with Sylvester. You’re warm and fatherly. You weren’t like that when I was a kid. I see that you’ve changed, and I’m proud of you, but there’s a part of me that’s jealous of Sylvester for getting what I always wanted.” Dad stopped moving but remained silent, leaning over the kitchen counter as if he needed it for moral support. “I’m trying to get used to the new you,” I went on. “It’s going to take some time. I’ll do better tomorrow. And you can have the bed. I know your back bothers you sometimes.”

I took the spare blankets that I had stolen from the Legacies and layered them on the floor next to Sylvester’s bed. Then I hunkered down and pulled the covers around me in a tight hug. I was almost asleep when my father finally responded.

“I love you, George. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. I know, Dad.”

THE NEXT MORNING, we pretended that the previous evening's conversation had never occurred. Dad made breakfast—dried berries, mashed tubers, and sizzling rabbit meat—for the three of us. We ate around the fireplace and drank Dad's homemade tea. Sylvester kept us entertained with all sorts of stories from his years with Dad. As we laughed at his impressions of my father, I almost forgot about the problems that lay beyond our campsite. It was so refreshing to spend time with family—since Sylvester already felt like a brother—that I dreaded returning to reality. Eventually, when our plates were clean and the fire smoldered lower and lower, we had to face the challenge ahead.

We prepared ourselves for every possible outcome, arming ourselves with weapons from Dad's shed. He had collected lost gear—hunting rifles, knives, and the like—from unlucky hikers over the years. I dressed in multiple layers, unwilling to get caught out in the cold again, and pulled the tactical jacket on last. The Kevlar patches were still intact, even after the jacket had taken a few beatings. If Base One started shooting at us, I had a little padding.

To my surprise, Dad didn't argue when Sylvester announced that he would be accompanying us. After yesterday's strife, I had expected Dad to tell the teenager that he wasn't well enough, or that approaching Base One was too dangerous.

"There's no point," Dad muttered to me as we watched Sylvester pocket a handful of snacks. "It's useless arguing with him."

"I can hear you!" Sylvester said.

"Get a move on, kid," I told him. "We have places to be."

We made it to the outlook over Base One in record time. The snowfall had let up momentarily, and it was warmer that it had been yesterday. I pulled off my hat as we surveyed Base One's gargantuan territory, enjoying the crisp breeze that played with my hair.

"Holy shit," Sylvester said, scanning Base One from one side to the other.

Dad cuffed him over the head. "Language."

"Sorry, but holy shit."

"Yeah, it's big," I said.

"Big is an understatement," Sylvester replied. "You didn't tell me that Base One was the size of Jupiter."

"You scared?"

"No!"

“Kids, stop fighting,” Dad said dryly. “This was your idea, so what’s the plan?”

“Well, we obviously can’t lay siege to the place.” I studied the base’s structure, taking note of each man stationed at the entrances. The main entrance—the one that Aaron had advised I use if I wanted to go inside—was at the far side, opposite of our position. “We would never make it out alive.”

“Three against five hundred are not encouraging odds,” Dad agreed. “Not to mention, this place is built like a fortress. We could never sneak in.”

“No, we couldn’t.”

“So we’re agreed?” Dad asked. “There’s no point in risking our lives here?”

“I said we couldn’t sneak in,” I replied. “I never said that I couldn’t walk in through the main gates.”

Dad and Sylvester, on either side of me, turned to stare at my face as if to check if I was serious or not.

“You’re kidding, right?” Sylvester said. “You want to hand yourself over to them?”

“Absolutely not,” Dad said.

“We need intel from the inside,” I argued. “The only way to get it is if we have someone *inside* Base One. If I give myself up, I can walk right into Buddy Arnold’s camp without a problem.”

“And what happens if they shoot you on sight?” Dad challenged.

“They won’t,” I said. “I heard them talking about me after the Camp Haven attack. They know who I am. They know that I can use the radios. They need me.”

Dad rested his hand on my shoulder. “There’s no way I’m letting you walk in there alone.”

I shook him off. “You can’t stop me. I’m going in, whether you like it or not. Now you can either stick around and help me or you can pretend that I don’t exist.”

Dad and I stared at each, locked in a silent argument. Sylvester’s eyes darted between the two of us as though he were watching a particularly entertaining ping pong match. He elbowed Dad in the side.

“Uh, Dad?” he said. “No offense, but you’re a dick if you don’t agree to help her.”

“Language!” My father and I said at the same time.

Sylvester raised his hands innocently. “If you don’t help her, I will.”

“Sylvester, that’s not necessary—” I began.

“Fine,” Dad said.

I looked at him in shock. “Fine? You mean…?”

“Like I said, I can’t let you do this alone,” Dad said. “I assume you’ve been working on this idea for a few days now. What do you need me to do?”

I grinned, pulled a fully functioning two-way radio from out of my bag, and handed it to Dad. “Listen for my signal.”

8

I circled around Base One through the woods, wanting to stay hidden until the last possible second. I'd left my weapons with Dad and Sylvester. There was no point in bringing them when the soldiers would confiscate them as soon as I set foot in their camp. Additionally, I'd shed a few layers beneath the Kevlar coat. It was all part of the plan. The fortified walls of Base One were taller up close. They towered over the land, casting long shadows far across the ground. I watched the main entrance from the trees, my heart pumping loudly against my rib cage. Six men patrolled this entrance alone, the one that Aaron claimed was loosely guarded. There was nothing else to do but present myself. I just had to gather to courage to do it. With a deep breath, I stepped out of the forest and began walking toward the front gate as slowly as possible. It wasn't long before the first guard noticed my black jacket against the stark white landscape.

"Twelve o'clock," he called to his cohorts, raising his gun at a ready position.

I lifted my hands above my head as the other guards converged. "Please," I said, forcing my voice to tremble. "I need help. I have no food or water. I'm hurt. Please help me."

To really sell it, I sank to my knees before the soldiers could reach me. The first one stopped a few feet short, and I looked up at him through damp eyelashes.

"Jesus, your face," he said. "What the hell happened to your nose?"

"A rock fell while I was hiking this way," I lied. "I couldn't move out of

the way in time. Do you have a medical team here?"

"Yeah," the soldier said, lowering his gun a little. "They can fix you up."

"Wait a second, Galt!" Another soldier approached us from the main gate. "I recognize her. She's from Camp Haven."

"So what?" Galt asked. "We took in the other survivors. Why not her?"

"I'm not saying we don't take her in," the second soldier said. "The bitch got away from us the first time. I'm saying we take her straight to Buddy. Pat her down. Make sure she doesn't have anything sharp or explosive on her."

"Take it easy, Douche."

"For the hundredth time, it's Deutsch!"

"Whatever." Galt let his rifle rest against his hip, helped me up from the ground, and checked me over. "Sorry about this," he muttered, running his hands up my inner thighs. "It's protocol. She's clear!"

Galt and Deutsch took me by either arm, but while Galt was gentle in escorting me inside, his partner squeezed so tightly I thought I might lose circulation. The massive gates rolled open to allow us entrance, and we walked right into Base One.

Despite the size of the compound, it felt crowded. Soldiers and civilians alike rushed from place to place in a frenzy of activity. The buildings were blocky and gray, built from old architectural plans. The outer walls made every point in the camp seem claustrophobic. No matter where you stood, they closed in on you from above, trapping you in place. Base One was not like Camp Haven. There was an aura of fear in the air, a bitter tang that you could taste on the tip of your tongue. As the soldiers ushered me along, I couldn't help but notice the wide-eyed stares pointed in my direction. The civilians' expressions seemed to warn me of issues to come.

I was shunted into one of the boring gray buildings, where the inside was no better than the exterior. The walls were painted sterile white, and each door was marked with bold capital letters. Galt and Deutsch pushed me through one labeled "Processing." More soldiers waited in the next room, which was completely empty save for a showerhead mounted to the wall.

"This is going to suck," Galt said to me under his breath. "I'm sorry in advance, but after this, it's not so bad."

"What are you talking about?" I asked him.

He didn't get the opportunity to answer. Without my consent, three female soldiers stepped forward and began stripping me out of my clothes. I didn't protest until they reached the last layer, but they pinned my hands

down and relieved me of even my underwear. Goosebumps erupted across my skin as one of the women physically examined me from head to toe.

"Bend over and cough," she ordered.

Aaron was right. This place was like prison.

Once the soldiers had finished their preliminary inspection, they turned on the showerhead and shoved me under the battering stream of water. I coughed and spluttered as they scrubbed me raw with a bar of awful-smelling soap, roughly washed the oil and dirt from my hair, and rinsed me off. After drying off, Galt returned with a neatly folded pile of clothes. He averted his eyes from my body as he handed them to me.

"I guessed the sizes," he said. "You're almost out of the woods. We're heading to the medical unit next. Hopefully they can do something about your nose."

Shivering, I shook out the clothes. They had provided me with a pair of loose gray cargo pants and a matching button up shirt. Most of the civilians wore similar outfits topped with a puffy winter jacket. I got dressed as quickly as possible, grateful for any kind of defense against the soldiers' probing gazes. Once I had finished, Deutsch reached out to take me by the arm again, but Galt stepped in.

"I got it," he said, taking my elbow gently. "You can stay here. She's had enough of you gawking at her."

As Deutsch glared at us, Galt escorted me from the room and down the hall. The medical unit was through a different door, but it was no warmer than the previous room. Everything was white and sterile. A soldier with bright orange hair examined a file behind the front desk, his feet propped up on another chair.

"Whaddaya got?" he asked carelessly, popping bubble gum between his teeth. He glanced over the file. His boots fell off the desk and hit the floor. "It's you!"

"Kalupa?" I said in disbelief. Sure enough, it was the tall, gangly soldier that I'd spared in the woods a few days ago. I was glad to see that he hadn't suffered at the hands of Buddy Arnold for being the only survivor in his unit.

"Wait a second," Galt said. "You guys know each other?"

"No," Kalupa answered, too quickly for it to be considered the truth. He cleared his throat, straightening the already neat files on his desk. "I mean, not really. She—uh—"

"I saved his ass," I replied for him.

"*This* is the chick you saw in the woods?" Galt asked Kalupa, laughing deep in his belly. "Dude, she's tiny! I thought you said she took out an entire team on her own."

"She did!" he insisted. Apparently, he hadn't told the rest of them about my father's presence in the forest that day.

Galt shook his head, still laughing, and knocked Kalupa over the head. "Oh, Kalupa. You're a riot. She needs vaccinations. Oh, and can you have a look at her nose? It's pretty fucked up."

When Kalupa stood up, the top of his head nearly brushed against the low ceiling. Out of habit, he hunched over to avoid making contact. He opened a nearby cabinet to take out latex gloves and a syringe of clear liquid.

"Roll up your shirt sleeve," he said, fixing a needle to the syringe.

"Hang on a minute," I replied. "Camp Haven gave us vaccinations too. What if yours and theirs are contraindicated?"

"We administered this vaccine to all of the Camp Haven survivors," Kalupa said. "None of them had any problems with it."

"What's it for?"

He pulled the cap off of the needle with his teeth and spat it out. "Typhoid."

"*Typhoid?*"

"Relax," Galt said. "We mostly have it under control."

"*Mostly?*"

Kalupa wiped my arm with a cotton swab. "Can you hold still please?"

The needle punctured my skin, and Kalupa pushed the plunger down. He tossed the syringe into the trash can and patted my arm.

"All done."

I inspected the prick in my skin. "Where did you guys get all of this stuff?"

"Here and there," Galt answered.

I glared at him. "You don't have to be coy. Base One burned my home to the ground in order to steal our supplies. I guess you did the same thing to other compounds, right?"

Kalupa took my face with surprisingly gentle hands to inspect my nose. "Base One had a few things on hand when we got here. I wasn't a part of any other raids. Did you set this yourself?"

"Yes."

"Nice job," he said, impressed. "It's mostly just swollen. I can splint it so

that it stays in place and give you some painkillers."

"Don't waste them," I replied. "The pain doesn't bother me."

"Whatever you say, hard ass." Kalupa rifled through another drawer of the cabinet to look for the nose splint. Under his breath, he asked Galt, "Hey, uh, does Buddy know she's here yet?"

Galt took a fresh set of paperwork from a file cabinet and began filling it out. "Probably. Deutsch was on guard with me when she came in. He seemed pretty adamant about delivering her straight to Buddy."

"Great," Kalupa muttered. "Questioning is going to be a bear."

"What's your name, honey?" Galt asked me.

"Georgie Fitz."

He scribbled it across the top of the paperwork. "And what exactly did you do to piss off our beloved comrade?"

The scene from the night that Camp Haven went up in flames replayed in my mind. Eirian, Pippa, and I had made it out of there and into the woods alive, only to be chased by a group of Base One's soldiers. They had separated us from each other, and four or five guys had kicked me to the ground. My father showed up with his crossbow then, mercilessly taking out the soldiers around me. Only one of them escaped. Deutsch's black hair and beady eyes were suddenly familiar to me.

"I embarrassed him," I answered.

"Good," Kalupa said, gently setting the splint across the bridge of my nose. "He's an ass. You're better off avoiding him if you can. Now, listen. Mostly everybody here is a jackass. You've probably figured that out already. It's Buddy's doing. At Base One, you either prove that you're ready for anything or you fall to the bottom of the pile."

"Where are you at?" I asked him.

"Somewhere between rock bottom and too useful to treat like absolute dirt," Kalupa replied as he taped the splint down. "I'm one of the only people who showed up to Base One with any kind of medical experience. Buddy knows he can't mess with me, but after that fiasco a few days ago, I'm definitely on his shit list. Stick around Galt. He'll keep you out of trouble. Somehow, he's got Buddy in his back pocket."

Galt grinned, dug into the cargo pockets of his pants, and pulled out a Snickers bar. "It's only because I found a truckload of these on the way up to Base One. They're Buddy's favorite." He tossed the candy bar to me and raised a finger to his lips. "Shh. Don't tell anyone where you got that."

I unwrapped the Snickers bar and took a savage bite out of it. It had been months since I'd had real chocolate. My taste buds had grown used to the organic, home-grown food we had at Camp Haven, and the candy was too sweet. I wrinkled my nose and inspected the wrapper.

"Not good?" Galt asked.

"Too sweet," I said, handing it back to him. He chomped down on the leftovers and shrugged.

"Galt, can you not?"

"Sorry."

"As I was saying," Kalua went on, examining his handiwork as I wiped caramel off my chin, "Buddy's an ass, and so are his cohorts. They're going to want to question you. Deutsch is probably on his way to pick you up right now."

"Question me about what?"

"About what happened after you and your friend shot up my entire unit."

"Oh." I pasted on a sheepish expression. "Yeah, sorry about that."

Kalupa tossed the extra first aid supplies back into the cabinet. "Don't apologize. You did what you had to do. But I highly recommend that you don't tell Buddy that you weren't working alone. Paint it like you were scared for your life. You killed those men because you thought that they would kill you first if you didn't. That's your story. Stick to it. Otherwise, you'll be detained in some tiny room for however long we're stuck in this hellhole."

A barrage of knocks hammered on the door to the medical unit, and Deutsch let himself in before Galt or Kalupa could grant him access. His black hair, usually greased against his scalp, was disheveled and sweaty, as if he had run across the base and back again.

"Oy," he said, taking me by the arm. "You idiots have had her long enough. She's wanted in questioning."

"I'm coming with," Galt said.

Deutsch put his hand on Galt's chest to stop him. "No, you're not. I brought her in. She's mine."

"She's not a piece of property." Galt swiped Deutsch's hand away with a little too much force. Deutsch tried not to wince. "And for the record, I was the one who picked her up in my sights first, *Douche*. Get the hell out of my way."

Glowering, Deutsch finally backed down, rubbing the new welt on his

hand. Galt led me from the room with a gentle hand on my back, keeping himself between me and the other soldier. I waved to Kalupa, who waved back with a sad look on his face. If Base One had more guys around like Kalupa and Galt, maybe it wouldn't be such a terrible thing to be stuck here after all.

"Listen," Galt muttered close to my ear so that Deutsch couldn't eavesdrop on us. "Chances are, questioning is going to suck. Stay calm. I'm going to be there the entire time."

Galt and Deutsch escorted me down the long, white corridor, through a back door, and into another building that was no warmer than the last two.

"Jesus, this whole place is a maze," I murmured.

"It's so intruders can't find their way around," Deutsch announced.

"I don't suppose you could get lost, could you, Douche?" Galt asked.

"I swear to God, if you call me that in front of Buddy—"

Galt whirled around and grabbed Deutsch by the collar of his uniform. "Buddy's coming to questioning? Why didn't you bother to tell me this before?"

Deutsch scrabbled to free himself. "Get off me! She killed an entire unit. Of course, he'd want to see her!"

"You know what happens to the women that Buddy interviews," Galt snarled, his face inches away from his adversary's. "They're practically falling apart at the seams by the time he's through with them."

"I won't fall apart," I said.

"See?" Deutsch finally wrestled out of Galt's grip. "She's totally fine with it."

"For now."

The third building seemed to be full of offices. I peeked into a few of the open doors as we passed by them and caught sight of soldiers working at their desks or goofing off instead. Most of them glanced up at me, intrigued by the newcomer. In that sense, Base One was similar to Camp Haven. It got boring to live the same life day after day. Any kind of news broke up the monotony, even if it was only for a couple of seconds.

"Hiya, Galt," one of the soldiers called through the doorway, craning his neck for a better look at me. "Did you find a stray?"

Galt kept his gaze straight forward. "Sure did. See you later, Kips." When we were clear of that particular office, Galt whispered in my ear. "Remember that guy's face. Don't interact with him. He's one of Buddy's favorites."

“Let me get this straight,” I whispered back, keeping an eye on Deutsch to make sure he kept his back turned to us. “I should only make friends with the guys that Buddy hates?”

“Basically.”

“Kalupa said Buddy likes you.”

“I’m the exception to the rule. Eyes front, Deutsch!” he barked to the other soldier, who had looked over his shoulder as our muttered conversation reached his ears. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Just because you outrank me doesn’t mean I can’t make your life a living hell,” Deutsch challenged.

“I’d like you see you try,” Galt said. We reached a new door, this one closed and locked. Galt fiddled with a ring of keys on his belt. “Come on. In here.”

The interrogation room, for lack of a better title, was the least welcoming out of all of Base One’s interiors, and that was saying something. It was bare except for one small table and a rickety chair. The far wall had a black mirror set into it, one of those windows that people could hide behind while they studied you unabashedly. I glared at my reflection, wondering if Buddy Arnold was standing on the other side, and fought the urge to raise my middle finger to the glass.

“Keep a cool head,” Galt said, leading me to the chair. He unhooked a water canteen from a loop on his cargo pants and set it down on the table in front of me. “Everything goes a whole lot smoother if no one yells.”

“How many people start yelling?” I muttered.

The door opened again to allow someone else entrance to the room, a man so tall and muscular that I couldn’t collect his appearance all at once in the tiny interrogation room. Galt and Deutsch backed up against the wall, each snapping to attention, shoulders back and hands flat against their thighs like wind-up toy soldiers. I looked the man up and down, from boots the size of small barges to the crown of his shiny bald head. He had rolled the sleeves of his uniform up to emphasize the bulge of his biceps. Each of his long legs were about as thick as the tree trunks in the forest outside. When my gaze reached his face, I found a permanent sneer across his mouth, a jaw so boxy and square that it could have been shipped through the postal service, and a raised, ropey scar that cut diagonally from the middle of his forehead, across the lid of one piercing green eye, and down the rest of his cheek. This had to be Buddy Arnold.

9

Buddy Arnold's breath smelled like tinned anchovies, as if he had popped open a can just prior to his entrance and snacked on the tiny fish for the sheer pleasure of feeling the bones crunch between his teeth. The stench alone was enough to incite an intense sense of displeasure at Buddy's presence, but the sparkle in his eyes as he recognized me made my blood run cold. He smiled with only half of his mouth, as if the nerves in the other half had been destroyed by some unfortunate incident. I tried to square my shoulders and keep his gaze, but as his crooked smirk grew wider, my fight or flight response told me to flee as fast as possible. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option.

"You," he said. That was it. He remained standing, shoulders back, his hands loose and easy at his sides. This was a man who did not fear opposition. He invoked too much unease in those around him, and no one dared to test his show of strength.

"What about me?" I replied. Dry. Empty.

"Oh, ho!" Buddy spread his arms, looking first to Galt then to Deutsch. "She's a feisty one! Tell me, which one of you brought her in?"

"I did, sir," Galt and Deutsch replied at the same time. Galt rolled his eyes as Deutsch, too eager, bounced on the balls of his feet.

Buddy snapped his fingers. "Deutsch. Out."

Deutsch immediately stopped bouncing. "But, sir—"

"Out!"

The soldier didn't dare refuse a direct order from his superior, but as he

followed Buddy's finger to the door, he grumbled under his breath about the lack of respect at Base One.

"What did you say?" Buddy challenged.

"Nothing, sir!" Deutsch slipped out of the interrogation room, but I doubted that he would return to his post outside the front gates of Base One. Presumably, he would join whoever else was watching the interrogation from the other side of the reflective window.

Once Deutsch was gone, Galt spoke up. "Sir, Deutsch was out in the field during the incident."

"Yeah, yeah," Buddy said, digging a finger into his ear and flicking away whatever came out on the tip of it. "But Deutsch is a blithering, ass-kissing idiot. Besides, I assume he's already told you his account of what happened in the woods that day?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we're squared away." Buddy planted one hand on the table beside me, his enormous palm flattening out against the metal surface. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Sergeant Major Buddy Arnold."

"I know who you are," I told him. "And I would appreciate it if you respected my personal space." To emphasize my point, I jabbed at the pressure point on the inside of his elbow. His reflexes were too quick for me to make contact, but it got him out of my immediate area. Galt hissed, and when I caught his eye, he shook his head once to either side.

Buddy, who had taken a step back from the table to evade my unprovoked attack, nursed a pretty sneer, but when I challenged him with a stare, the expression morphed into his signature lopsided simper.

"From my understanding," he began, "you have come to Base One to take advantage of our hospitality. Were I in your position, I might afford my hosts a little more respect."

"Can we cut the shit?" I said. "We both know that Base One isn't as reputable as it claims to be."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if your operation was officially approved by the United States government, it would have been more obvious," I replied. "I'm not blind, *Buddy*. This whole place is outdated, from the equipment to the uniforms. Your guys are dressed in gear from the eighties. If this place were legit, the Army would have figured out a way to deliver updated accommodations to you."

“Perhaps you haven’t noticed,” Buddy said, “but we’re in the middle of a national crisis, and in the Army, we use what we have on hand.”

“Really? And what would the Army think about you and your soldiers marching into a camp of innocent civilians and burning the place to the ground to steal their supplies and eliminate competition in the surrounding area?”

Buddy glared at me. “Camp Haven was an accident.”

“Bullshit.”

“Speaking of which,” he continued, unbothered by my accusation, “we have you in this room for a reason. You could be tried for murder considering you killed several Base One soldiers that night.”

“Out of self-defense,” I replied. “If you want to talk about death, go back to Camp Haven. The place is a graveyard. Bodies everywhere.” I rose from the chair, unable to remain seated any longer in this man’s abominable presence. In the corner, Galt shifted his stance, unsure what to do, but Buddy lifted a hand to keep him at bay. “You killed my family, my friends, the only people I had left in my life. When your soldiers tried to capture me, I believed that no good could come of it. It was my life or theirs.”

Buddy crossed his arms and studied me, his eyes roaming up and down my body as if he were trying to figure out how one woman from the city in her late twenties had managed to take down multiple trained soldiers. “We never had any intention of killing you, Miss Fitz.”

I cocked my head. “You know my name?”

“I’ve been watching Camp Haven since the blast went off,” he said. “I thought we could learn from their ways. They got along well, but the place was practically Amish. Then you showed up, and I watched as you convinced those bozos to set up a working radio tower. That was when I knew I needed you at Base One.”

“You want me to build you a radio tower?” I asked, confused.

“Base One already has a tower,” Buddy said, “but it’s been out of service for quite some time now. I need you to get it working so that we can contact the authorities in DC.”

“What makes you think I would do anything for you?”

Buddy stepped into my personal space, looming over me. His crossed arms brushed against my chest. “Because I know how women like you operate. Base One isn’t just home to a bunch of soldiers who murdered your people. There are innocent civilians here, civilians who I’m sure you care

about." He examined a fleck of dirt beneath his fingernail. "You have one week to get the radio tower up and running. If you can't manage that, I'll pick one civilian a day to torture on your behalf. Is that understood?"

There it was. Buddy's lack of humanity. Everyone had warned me about it, from Kalupa to Galt to the soldier in the woods a few days ago, but it had taken a good five minutes for Buddy to pull it out of his back pocket and put it to use. Buddy was a corrupt man, drunk on power and fear mongering, which made the place that he commanded, Base One, a corrupt establishment. The people here were no safer than on their own in the woods, and I was the only one who could do anything about it.

"It's unrealistic to expect me to fix the tower in a week," I said, keeping my voice low so as to not anger Buddy further. "I don't even know what's wrong with it, or if Base One has the supplies I'll need to repair it."

"One week," Buddy repeated. "Perhaps my incentive will encourage you to work as diligently as you did at Camp Haven."

"Incentive? It's a threat!"

"Semantics." He snapped his fingers. "Galt! Show Miss Fitz to the tower so that she can examine it. Your week doesn't start until tomorrow morning," he added to me. "Eat something and get a decent night's sleep. Then you can start working. See? I can be reasonable."

"Reasonable, my ass," I growled, taking a step toward Buddy with clenched fists. Galt grabbed me around the waist before I could do anything stupid.

"All right then!" he said as he escorted me away from Buddy. "Let's get moving, Miss Fitz. I'll give you a tour of the compound." He steered me into the hallway and out of the building through a back door.

I squinted as my eyes adjusted from the dim oil lamps indoors to the bright natural light of the sun. A gust of wind turned up the collar of my new uniform. "So that's Buddy Arnold?" I asked Galt as he pointed us toward the center of the camp.

"That's him."

"I can't wait to punch him in the face."

I SPENT the remainder of the day with Galt. We inspected the radio tower first. It sat in the direct center of Base One, and the control panel was at the very top. We had to climb up a rusted rickety ladder built into the side of the tower to get up to it. The control room was tiny, and the windows had been

busted out, either by weather or vandals, long ago. There wasn't much to stop you from tumbling over the edge of the tower if you happened to trip. The view was amazing, so long as I didn't look directly toward the ground. Up here, I could almost pretend that I lived in the sky with the birds. I was level with the tops of the highest trees and could see all the way to the smoky ruins of the city. In addition, from this height, I could map out all of Base One. I scanned the grounds, trying to commit the layout of the compound to memory as quickly as possible. The knowledge would undoubtedly come in handy later.

The tower itself, thankfully, wasn't beyond repair. It had mostly been sabotaged by exposure to the elements. The equipment was outdated, but I could make it work. Little did Buddy know that I needed a functional radio as much as he did. It was the basis of my rescue plan, and Buddy had given me exactly what I needed to bring him down once and for all.

"Can you fix it?" Galt asked. "Please tell me you can fix it."

"Oh, yeah," I said, examining a control panel. "I can totally salvage this piece of crap."

Galt, it turned out, was quite useful. He was the best soldier I could have asked for to get me around Base One on my first day. He pointed out important buildings—like Buddy's quarters—and shortcuts from one end of the compound to the other. He introduced me to soldiers like himself and Kalupa, men who had been shanghaied by Buddy to complete his deeds for a shot at survival in a post-apocalyptic world. I memorized their faces. These were the men who I could go to for help once shit hit the fan. At the end of the day, after Galt had taken me to the mess hall for dinner, he led me to the women's barracks.

"It's not much," he said, leading me through the rows of bunk beds. Every single one was occupied. Women and children alike stayed here, some of them sharing mattresses to make room for others. Their eyes followed us as Galt showed me to a top bunk at the very end of the room. "Buddy freed this one up for you."

"What do you mean, he freed it up?"

"Don't ask. Lights out is in twenty minutes. I'll see you tomorrow."

Galt left, and I was alone with the other female civilians of Base One. I climbed up into the top bunk and sat against the wall, dangling my feet off the edge of the bed. Every face was turned toward mine. I scanned each one, hoping to see someone, anyone, who had made it out of Camp Haven alive.

The women averted their eyes as soon as I met their gaze, but once I moved on to look at the next face, I felt their stares again. I didn't recognize anyone. Pippa wasn't here either. I leaned over the bed to address my bunk mate, a woman in her thirties with short dark hair and thick shoulders.

"Hey," I said. "I'm Georgie."

The woman glanced up from a book she was reading and smacked my outstretched hand like a fraternity brother greeting his friends. "Addison. Nice to meet you."

"What happened to the woman who had my bunk before?"

"We prefer to remain ignorant on that front." She set her book aside and looked up at me. "How'd you get here?"

"I walked in," I replied, unwilling to share the entire answer. "Is this the only dormitory for women, or are there others? And where do the men sleep?"

Addison pulled the sleeves of her thermal over her hands to keep them warm in the drafty bunk. "You didn't see outside? There are about ten barrack buildings, four for women, six for men. Why?"

"I'm looking for someone," I said. "Two someones, actually. A seventeen-year-old girl named Pippa and a tall Welsh guy named Eirian. Sound familiar?"

"All the guys look the same to me," she replied. "I can't help you there. There's a Pippa staying in the medical unit with a baby. Is that her?"

Relief rushed through me. "Yes. Is she okay? How do you know her?"

"I work there," she said. "I used to be an EMT before all of this garbage happened. She's hanging in there. Stress plus postpartum depression is screwing with her. That's why she stays there."

"Can I see her?"

"She's off-limits," Addison said. "No visitors."

"Of course," I grumbled. "Can't you get me in?"

"No offense, but I don't know you," she said. "And I'm not about to break protocol to get you in to see some random girl. Sorry about that."

She returned to her book, and I knew that the conversation was over. Nobody at Base One wanted to be associated with a rule breaker. It might bring Buddy's wrath down on them. I rolled over and stared at the ceiling, where someone had carved their initials into the plaster.

"Lights out!" someone shouted from outside the barracks.

All at once, the women blew out the oil lamps near their bunks, and the

barracks plunged into darkness. The lamp above my bed remained lit. Addison kicked my mattress from below.

"Put that shit out," she whispered.

I blew on the flame, extinguishing the last bit of light in the room. Then I waited. In a matter of minutes, the women stopped rustling around to get comfortable as they fell to sleep one by one. Mismatched breathing patterns filled the barracks like a light whispering wind, occasionally punctuated by a snore or mumble. Wide awake, I looked out of the window that was level with my bed. Base One's guards remained on duty, patrolling the top of the wall, but the grounds themselves were empty. Silently, I slipped out from beneath my rough blankets and leapt down from the bunk, landing in a low crouch on the floor. As I pulled on one of my boots, Addison stirred and sat up.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"Go back to sleep."

She snatched my other boot away from me before I could get it on the other foot. "Whatever you're thinking of doing, stop right now. If you get caught out there, they'll take you to Buddy Arnold. Believe me, you don't want to meet Buddy Arnold."

"I've already met Buddy Arnold," I told her. "And he doesn't scare me. Now give me my boot back."

She held it behind her back. "No."

"Listen, if I get caught out there, you're going to be the first person they ask if you know anything," I said. "Do you want to know what I'm doing to tell them or would you rather pretend that you were asleep this entire time and this conversation never happened?"

Addison hesitated then reluctantly handed the boot over. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Never."

Once I had both shoes on, I snuck out of the window above my bunk and dropped to the ground outside. The snow was black and icy, and I was grateful that Base One had let me keep my own boots rather than issue the shitty ones that everyone else here had to wear. I never would have been able to quietly navigate the compound in the flat-footed soles of the camp-issued footwear.

I stole from dormitory to dormitory, peeking in through the windows to get a look at the people inside them. The first three next to mine housed the

rest of the women. I skipped quickly over those and continued to the men's buildings. Here, I spent a little more time, pressing my face to the windows to scan each bed for the person I was looking for. Finally, in the last barrack, I caught sight of a tuft of wavy black hair. I rapped lightly on the window nearest. The person rolled over, dislodging the blanket from his face.

"Eirian," I breathed. He wasn't entirely awake yet. I checked to make sure that no guards had snuck up behind me and knocked on the window again. This time, Eirian blearily opened his eyes and looked up. I waved and grinned. He scrambled out of bed and shoved the window open.

"Georgie!" He cupped my face and peppered kisses across my mouth and cheeks. "You're alive!"

"Shh." I could help but smile as I leaned into his warmth. "Don't wake the others."

"But how did you—? Where have you been? Why are you here?"

"It's a long story," I told him, holding his hands between mine. "Did you think I was going to leave you in here?"

"I didn't know what to think," Eirian replied. "Pippa's in the medical unit. They won't let me see her—"

"I know."

"Jesus, Georgie." He leaned his forehead against mine. "I know it's only been a few days, but I missed you so much. What are we going to do?"

"You're not going to do anything," I said. "Keep your head down. Pretend you don't know me. I've got this under control."

Eirian gave me a wry look. "What exactly are you planning?"

"You'll see."

OVER THE COURSE of the week, I did everything in my power to get the radio tower up and running. I spent almost every minute from dawn until dusk in the open air of the control room, wiring circuit boards and toying with my limited supplies. Galt supervised me each day, but he often grew tired of the unfailing cold by midmorning and kept watch from the ground instead. This suited me just fine. The control room felt crowded when Galt's gun was present, even though I knew it would take an uncontrollable circumstance for him to feel compelled to use it. I worked diligently, sending Galt on errands through the camp when I needed some tool or piece of equipment. Each night, I reported to Buddy Arnold, and each night, I lied about my progress. My goal was to get the tower operational as soon as possible, but I had no

plans to update Buddy with the reality of my progression. I pretended that the tower was too far gone for me to repair it in a week, allowing my voice to waver and my eyes to fill a little more with each report. Buddy grew more and more agitated with every notification, and he reminded me on a daily basis of what would happen if I did not succeed by the end of the week.

When I wasn't in the tower, I gave Galt the slip to roam Base One on my own. After the first three times, Galt stopped scolding me for my behavior. We entered into a silent agreement. He didn't ask, and I didn't lie. During my outings, I trailed the higher ranked members of Base One, skulking around corners and hiding in the shadows as I listened to their conversations. Most of the time, all I heard were lamentations about the food in the mess hall or the lack of beautiful women on base, but one evening, I gathered a piece of information that I could actually use to my advantage.

Halfway through the week, after I had finally gotten one of the control panels to respond to my work, I celebrated by stealing a muffin from the mess hall and hiding in the pantry as a pair of soldiers raided a stash of MREs. The first one, Kips, was the man that Galt had warned me about when I'd first arrived at Base One. The second, a skinny guy with a rat face whose last name was Rios, I had rarely seen without Kips by his side. They were two peas in a pod, and both of them worshipped Buddy like he was a god. As I munched silently on my muffin, crouched behind several massive bags of white rice in the pantry, I listened to their conversation, which they didn't bother to keep quiet, and watched them through the slits in the pantry door.

"So what's Buddy's deal with the radio tower?" Rios asked Kips as they dug through the neatly stacked MREs with no regard to organization. "Why does he want to get it working so bad?"

Kips examined a label on one of the meals before tossing the package over his shoulder. "He says he wants to contact one of his old superiors. The guy's apparently been stationed in DC for the last couple of years."

"So Buddy thinks he can get help for us out here?"

"I don't think it's help that Buddy's interested in."

Rios paused in his demolition of the MRE pile. "What do you mean?"

"I've known Buddy for years," Kips said, ripping open one of the meals. He took one thing from inside and tossed the rest in the garbage. "We were in basic training together. He moved up the ranks fast. Always the perfect soldier. Then one day something fucking snapped in him."

"And?"

“And he killed one of our guys when we were out on a mission,” Kips said. My stomach dropped. Suddenly, the muffin didn’t taste so good. “Shot him right in the back and kept shooting until the rest of us pinned him down. He was dishonorably discharged, but before they could do anything else, he disappeared.”

“If he was dishonorably discharged, how is he the Sergeant Major of Base One?” Rios asked. Kips shot him a look, and realization crossed Rios’s face. “Oh. No one here knows that he was discharged, do they?”

“Nope, and if you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.” Kips voice was light, but the threat was real. “Buddy’s a fucking nutcase, but let me tell you, I was glad to see him out here. No one else would have made it this far. No one else would have gotten this place running again. My guess is he wants to get ahold of our old unit leader and get him to change his story about the shooting. Otherwise, Buddy’s going to be arrested as soon as the legit guys find this place.”

“Yeah, but what are the chances that’s going to happen anytime soon?” Rios said, finally locating an MRE that he was satisfied with and setting it aside to eat later. “The entire United States is down for the count.”

“Buckley Air Force Base is up and running,” Kips said. He opened a package of cereal and ate a handful straight from the box. He spat the soggy wheat pieces onto the floor. “Ugh. Stale. Anyway, Buddy’s patrols found out that the guys at Buckley are working their way through Denver. Eventually, they’ll make it into the mountains, and when they do, they aren’t going to be pleased to find Buddy at the helm of Base One. Buddy has no intention of turning this base to Buckley’s control. He likes being in charge.”

“Sheesh,” Rios said. “And I thought *you* had problems.”

Kips threw the box of cereal at Rios’s head. “Shut the fuck up.”

THREE DAYS LATER, my week was up. The day was coming to an end. It was now or never. With Galt on the ground, I had privacy up in the control tower. I’d already been informed that Buddy was on his way to inspect my handiwork. I’d managed to get the radio functioning, but damned if I was going to let Buddy send out the first message. I sat up in the tower, freezing and alone, and broadcast as far as I could. I kept my voice low as I repeated my message over and over again, as many times as I dared, hoping that it would get picked up by its intended recipient. Thankfully, the wind carried my voice away from the camp below. Galt and the other soldiers remained oblivious to my success with the radio.

A loud metallic creak warned me of Buddy's imminent arrival as he and Galt climbed the ladder to the control room. Quickly, I set aside the mouthpiece and ripped a wire out of place so that the broadcasting feature was disabled, but the radio itself still picked up frequencies. Buddy climbed into the control room, head bowed so that he wouldn't bump it on the low ceiling.

"Well?" he demanded. "Your one week is up. Is the radio working or shall I draw names out of a hat to determine who to waterboard first?"

I turned up the volume on the speakers so that Buddy could hear the static coming through them. "We're up and running. All I need to do is wire the mic so that you can broadcast."

"And why haven't you done that yet?"

I lifted the frayed wire. "Because I'm working with shit. Get me a new wire, and you can send your broadcast to DC stat."

Buddy narrowed his eyes and snatched the wire from my hand to examine it. Then, without another word, he marched toward the ladder to leave the tower. I let out a sigh of relief. It would take them hours to find another coil of wire. I'd hidden all of it that I could find inside the mattress on my bunk. We were safe from Buddy's outgoing message, and hopefully, the mic issue would buy enough time for what I needed to happen. Suddenly, the radio speakers crackled and a voice rang through the control room.

"This is Senior Airman Hogan of Buckley Air Force Base responding to your S.O.S. call," the voice said. "Do you copy?"

For the longest minute of my life, Buddy and I stared at each other from across the tiny control room, listening to the Airman repeat his message as he waited for us to reply. Slowly, he walked back to me, his steps precise and controlled. He looked at the radio speakers, then back to me, then to the busted wire of the microphone.

"What the hell have you done?" he said calmly, and then he grabbed me by the front of my shirt and launched me out of the tower's shattered window.

10

The first thing I felt upon waking up was a shooting pain up the side of my torso and through my shoulder. When I opened my eyes, everything was a blurred at the edges. White walls trapped me against a hard, lumpy mattress. I tried to sit up, but my head throbbed and pulsed with every beat of my heart.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I turned my head to follow the familiar voice, hardly daring to believe it, but there was Pippa Mason, in all her glory, sitting in the bed next to me. She rocked a small bundle of blankets that rested in the cradle of her crossed legs. Like everyone else, Pippa had changed a great deal over the past several months. Not long ago, she was an average high school senior at a private Catholic high school, captain of her field hockey team and bound for the Ivy Leagues once she delivered her unexpected baby and handed her over to a family that was ready to raise a child. Pippa had been the epitome of blonde and preppy, never seen without makeup or a manicure. Now, there were dark shadows beneath her eyes, her fingernails were short and dirty, and she had cut her hair short to her chin—with a knife, if the jagged edges were any indication—to keep it out of her face. To top it off, there was no family around to raise her baby. The newborn was solely Pippa's responsibility.

"I would hug you," I croaked, "but I'm having trouble remembering which of my limbs are which."

"You look like hell too," Pippa said.

"What happened? Did you see?"

She looked over her shoulder, checking the medical unit for other people.

“I thought you were dead when they brought you in. Blood everywhere. Your shoulder was swinging out of its socket. It was gross.”

That explained the makeshift sling that trapped my arm close to my body. Talking to Pippa helped clear my mind. I took note of my injuries, checking on the extent of the damage. I wiggled my fingers and toes. One fractured pinky, but otherwise all right. My torso had taken the extent of it all. My ribs ached in protest with the smallest movement, sending shooting pains through my lungs and making it hard to breathe, and my shoulder, which someone had popped back into place, felt like it might make another attempt at escape.

“I didn’t even know you were here,” Pippa said. “What the hell happened out there? How’s the rest of Camp Haven?”

“It’s gone,” I said. “Everyone’s dead or trapped here. I came for you and Eirian, but I think this has all spiraled out of control. Have you seen Buddy?”

“Buddy Arnold? The guy who runs the camp? I don’t even know what he looks like. Why would he ever set foot in the medical bay?”

“Because he’s the one who pushed me out of the radio tower,” I growled, ripping an IV needle out of my arm. I didn’t trust Base One’s drugs at all. “I’ve been here all week. Buddy made a deal with me to get the radio working, but he wasn’t pleased when he realized what I did with it.”

“What did you do?”

Before I could answer, an ancient speakerphone mounted in the corner of the room buzzed to life. “Attention, Base One civilians,” a voice announced. “This compound is now on lockdown. Our security has been compromised. Please do not panic. As long as you follow the lockdown protocol, no harm will come to you.”

A wide grin spread across my face. “That,” I told Pippa. “That’s what I did.”

Pippa stared at me like I was crazy. “Georgie, what’s going on?”

“We’re getting out of here,” I declared, throwing the sheets off of my legs and using all of my willpower to pull my aching limbs out of the bed. My clothes were folded neatly on a nearby chair. I shed the medical unit’s gown and got dressed. “How long was I out for?”

“Several hours.”

“We need to go.” I tossed her my tactical jacket. “Put that on and tuck Athena inside. It’s big and warm enough for the both of you.”

Pippa looked down at her baby, who gripped her mother’s index finger with her whole hand. “Athena?”

“That’s what I call her,” I said. “Did you change the name?”

She shook her head. “I like Athena. It’s strong.”

“I agree. Come on. Let’s get moving.”

It was easier said than done. Every step I took was punctuated by a sharp stab in the chest as my broken ribs reminded me of the trauma my body had been through earlier that day. I needed to be in bed, to let myself heal, but the window of time to get out of Base One was too small to waste. I had to know what was going on outside. I ushered Pippa toward the door of the medical unit, but it flew open and nearly smacked me in the face as Buddy Arnold entered from the other side.

Immediately, I put myself between Buddy and Pippa, forcing the younger girl away from the monstrous man. He strode forward, took me by the collar of my shirt, just as he had when he had thrown over the edge of the tower, and shook me until my brain rattled against my skull.

“What have you done?” he demanded, spittle flying from his mouth and spraying my face. “Base One is surrounded. You’ve put all of my people at risk?”

“Surrounded by who?” I challenged. “Real military men?”

He threw me against a cot, and I yelped in pain. Buddy wasn’t done. He stood over me and leaned down. “I’m going to make you wish you’d never been born, Georgie Fitz.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Pippa said, and she smashed an oil lamp over the back of Buddy’s head.

The blow hardly fazed him, as enormous and hard-headed as he was, but it gave me enough time to scramble beyond Buddy’s reach. He thundered after me as I overturned cots and bedside tables to put more obstacles between me and him, but his powerful legs crushed the furniture beneath his boots. He caught up with me as we rounded the door to the medical unit again, dragging me up from the floor as Pippa watched in horror from the other side of the wrecked room.

I dug my nails into Buddy’s hands as they enclosed around my throat and squeezed, but it was no use. My airway closed off, my eyes bulged and watered, and my toes left the ground as Buddy lifted me into the air by my neck. Bright spots of light danced in front of my eyes as the rest of my vision blackened. Was this it? Was this the end? Had I done enough to save the people of Base One from Buddy’s wrath, or would I die in vain?

When the pressure around my neck suddenly vanished, I slumped to the

floor and gasped for air, massaging the bruises at my throat. A loud *thwack* caught my attention, and I looked up just in time to see Eirian land a savage uppercut to Buddy's chin. He didn't stop there though. He threw punch after punch in vicious combinations, his fists flying so quickly that my brain didn't process where they landed until after Buddy's reactions. He had caught Buddy by surprise. It was the only reason that he'd managed to gain the upper hand in the fight. Eirian aimed one last jab to Buddy's jaw. The larger man spun around like a top, lost his footing, and crumpled to the floor.

"Move," Eirian ordered, picking me up from the floor. His knuckles were covered in Buddy's blood. "Pippa, get Athena and let's go!"

As Buddy rolled over, groaning, the four of us escaped from the medical unit. Outside, Base One was unrecognizable. Men and women in real military uniforms flooded the entire compound. Half of them rounded up Base One's counterfeit soldiers, who would face the consequences for posing as members of the Army. I spotted Kips and Rios lined up with the others, their hands bound with zip ties behind their backs. The rest of the military officers directed Base One civilians toward evacuation routes that led out of the compound.

"What is all this?" Pippa asked, staring around in wonder.

"It's a rescue mission," I replied, beaming with pride.

"You're doing, I'd guess?" Eirian said, grasping my hand in his as we joined the line to leave Base One. "I figured there was a reason Buddy pushed you out of the radio tower."

"What can I say?" I grimaced as my ribs protested our steady walk, but nothing could stop me from grinning at each real soldier we passed by. "I told you I'd get you guys out of here."

"How did you do it?" Pippa said.

"Sent out a couple of broadcasts while I had the chance," I replied. "I knew that there was a legitimate Air Force base nearby that was helping Denver out. I figured it might be worth a shot to get ahold of them."

"You're a damn genius."

We shuffled through the gates of Base One. In the woods, the Air Force base had set up an organizational checkpoint, alphabetically by last name, for all of the survivors.

"Pippa, go get yourself and Athena checked in," I told the younger girl, pointing to the Airman who was taking note of those with last names starting with M. "Then come find me."

“What about you?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said, waving her off. “Go, go.” I kept a smile on my face until she left, then immediately crumpled. “I need to sit down.”

Eirian helped me to the ground, propping me up against a tree trunk that was out of the way of the Air Force’s process. The day’s ordeal had taken everything out of me. I was exhausted, and I didn’t think I would make it one more step on my own.

“I’ll get you some water,” Eirian said. “Stay right here. Don’t move.”

“Like I could if I wanted to.”

He disappeared into the crowd, and I stretched out to watch the organizational attempt from afar. After the civilians checked themselves in, they piled into a convoy of working Humvees, which led away from the looming walls of Base One and down the mountain face. A deep sense of satisfaction stole through me, momentarily easing the discomfort of my injuries. It had been mere days since everyone and their brother had told me that I had no hope of infiltrating Base One. No one had believed that I could do it, not even my father, and yet here we were. Not only had I gotten Eirian, Pippa, and Athena out, but I had brought Base One to the attention of people who could really help the civilians.

“Georgie?”

I turned around at the sound of my name and broke out a smile. My father had found his way down to the evacuation site. A pair of binoculars dangled around his neck. He had been watching this entire time. If I knew him like I think I did, he’d been watching Base One ever since I arrived here the week prior.

“Hi, Dad.”

He rushed forward and dropped to his knees to hug me, but stopped himself when he got a better look at my injuries. “Jesus, kid. What did you do to yourself?”

“I’ll heal,” I said, patting his shoulder. “I did it though. I saved them.”

“I know. I’m so proud of you.”

“Where’s Sylvester?”

“At home,” Dad said. “I wasn’t sure what the situation was going to be like out here, but you’ve certainly outdone yourself. Where are they taking everybody?”

Another truck—old enough to have evaded the effects of the EMP—drove off with another load of survivors.

“No idea,” I said, letting my eyes flutter shut. I was so tired. All I wanted was a real bed and a decent night’s sleep. “But it’s better than Base One. Better than having Buddy Arnold looming over their shoulders every minute of every day.”

And then there was Buddy’s face, beaten and bruised, looming over my father’s shoulder with all of his teeth bared. Somehow, he had gotten out of Base One unnoticed. He yanked my father’s crossbow out of his grip and launched it through the trees. Before Dad could react, Buddy drew a long hunting knife out of its sheath and pressed it against Dad’s throat. A droplet of blood welled up beneath the blade.

“Don’t!” I cried, struggling to stand and failing to do so.

Buddy backed up as I crawled toward him, taking my father with him. “So this is the guy that murdered all of my men in the woods that night, is it? What perfect justice, Miss Fitz, that he happens to be your father. Poetic even.”

“I swear, if you touch him—”

“You’ll what?” Buddy asked with a laugh. “You can barely move. What are you going to do? Drown me in your tears?”

“I’ll kill you.”

Buddy’s lips tilted up in that lopsided smirk that I hated so much. “Oh, Miss Fitz. I’d like to see you try.”

And then he drew the blade across my father’s neck.

“No!” I yelled. Dad’s eyes widened as blood spurted from his neck. Buddy dropped him, and he fell to his knees in the mushy snow. I crawled over to him and pressed my hands to the gash, but there was too much blood. In a few seconds, it coated my hands like thick red paint. “Help!” I screamed, tearing through my vocal chords. “Help us!”

“See, Georgie?” Buddy said, wiping my father’s blood off of his blade. “If there’s one thing you’ll learn from all of this, it’s that life isn’t fair. Get used to it.”

I launched myself at Buddy, forgetting that I was injured from head to toe, that he was a massive man trained in several different forms of combat and that I was a radio host that just happened to have a few extra survival skills. Nevertheless, it took him by surprise. I raked my nails down his face, opening a new wound parallel to his old scar. He growled and threw me to the ground next to my father, where I fought to catch my breath. Buddy raised his foot, his boot poised over my skull as if he mean to stomp it into

the ground as his final stand.

And then a bullet lodged itself in the direct center of Buddy's forehead. Pippa—Athena in one hand and a revolver in the other—stood on the opposite side of the clearing. She didn't lower the gun until Buddy's body landed splay-legged on the forest floor with a resounding crash. He was dead, but I didn't care. All I cared about was my father, bleeding out from the wound in his neck.

"Georgie," he rasped, taking my hand and pressing it to his heart. "I'm so sorry for everything, but I want you to know. You have to know. I love—" He gasped as another gush of blood spilled from his neck. "I l-love…"

He never finished his sentence.

FIVE YEARS LATER

Pippa stood on the riverbank alone, watching the icy water pass her by. The current was sluggish and slow here. During the summers, this was where we spent the sunniest of days, swimming in the chilly water to cool off. But it was winter again, and winter always brought a few painful memories along with it. Pippa drew a lighter from her pocket, flicked it on, and lit a candle. Then she knelt down by the river's edge and set the candle in the water. It floated on the surface, buoyed up by a small balloon of Pippa's making, and sailed down the river like a ghost into the purple dusk.

I stepped up to Pippa's side. "You okay?"

"It's the anniversary," she said, keeping her eye on the candlelight as it drifted down river. "Of their deaths."

"I know."

She leaned her head against my shoulder, and I put an arm around her. "Do you ever think about it?"

"All the time."

She lifted her head to gaze up at me. "Do you ever feel bad about the people that you killed to stay alive? We considered them the enemy, but someone else could be burning candles from them."

"If I didn't feel any remorse, I would wonder if I was human at all anymore." I swept her blonde hair away from her face. Usually, we didn't talk about these things. The past was in the past, and we were all keen to move on from it. And as far as I knew, there was only one person that Pippa had ever killed. "Do you regret shooting Buddy? Is that what this is about?"

"I don't regret it," she said. "He killed my brother."

The memory of Jacob flitted in and out of focus in my mind's eye. Pippa was the only surviving member of the Masons. That was our world now. We had fractured bits and pieces of other people's families, and we tried to fit the jagged edges together to form a new unit, like taping the broken glass of a picture frame back together.

"Hey, you know what else today is?" I asked Pippa, anxious to get away from the more morose subjects. "It's your daughter's fifth birthday, and she's impatiently waiting for you to get back to the homestead so that she can open her presents and eat some cake."

Pippa smiled. "All right. Let's go."

After Base One had been evacuated, we had decided not to accompany the rest of the survivors to the Air Force base. Instead, we returned to the ruins of our home. Camp Haven was nothing like it used to be. We had safely and respectfully disposed of the bodies. Then it had taken us months to clear out the debris. When we began to rebuild, we started out small. Eventually, Camp Haven was reborn, this time with new and improved features. Not only did we rebuild the cabin with a larger floor plan, but we wired it with electricity and indoor plumbing on our own. The process was slow, and it involved a plethora of foul language, but now Camp Haven had running water and light switches, which was more than enough to make up for our trouble.

Denver recovered from the EMP at an infinitesimal pace. Slowly but surely, the United States was trying to get back to normal. A few of the blown transformers had been replaced with new ones. Hospitals and emergency services were up and running. Giant grocery stores had been replaced by modest daily markets, where local farmers and other small businesses sold their homemade goods to those less crafty. We visited these markets often. Camp Haven's soil was perfect for growing organic fruits and vegetables, and we couldn't possibly eat all that we produced on our own. We traded our wares for things we couldn't get up in the mountains, like first aid supplies and gasoline for our generators. It was a new way of life, but after everything settled down, I began to realize that I was okay with this slower, more organic version of living. It made me focus on the things that were really important.

"Mama!"

A tiny blur collided with Pippa's knees, and Pippa leaned down to pick

up her daughter and swing her around in wide circles. Athena was the epitome of the Mason family's genetics. She had bright blonde hair and inquisitive brown eyes, and while she resembled Pippa around the nose and mouth, the shape of her face belonged to her late Uncle Jacob. Like the rest of us, Athena had found herself part of a family that was not necessarily related by blood, but by mutual love instead.

Eirian jogged across the homestead, his boots crunching in the fresh layer of snow that had fallen in the dark hours of that morning. "Sorry," he said with a grin. "She got away from me."

I kissed him hello. "Thwarted by a five-year-old, were you?"

"To be completely fair, she's got really long legs for a five-year-old."

"Uncle Eirian's slow," Athena declared, head lolling about on her shoulders as she recovered from the dizziness induced by Pippa's wide arcs. "He doesn't pick up his feet."

Eirian pinched Athena's pink cheek. "I let you win, kid."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Uh-huh!"

"All right, separate, you two," Pippa said, setting her daughter on the ground. "I swear, Eirian. Sometimes I wonder if you're five years old too."

Eirian proudly squared his shoulders. "They say to never lose your inner child."

"Mama, I want to open my presents!" Athena said, tugging on Pippa's hand. "Please? Pretty please? Pretty please with Uncle Eirian's dignity on top?"

"Okay, she's way too advanced for a five-year-old," Eirian muttered. "Who's teaching her this stuff?"

Pippa finally gave in. "Okay, okay! Your presents are in the cabin, and so is your cake. Do you want some cake too?"

Athena jumped up and down with joy. "I love cake!"

"Who doesn't?" Eirian said. He took Athena's other hand. "Let's go stuff our faces, lovebug."

I chuckled as Eirian and Pippa swung Athena between them, her feet rarely touching the ground. Together, we went up to the cabin, where smoke puffed out of the chimney and floated across the clear blue sky. The inside was toasty and warm. We stamped the snow out of our boots and shed our jackets near the door. Athena made a beeline for the kitchen, where a pile of presents sat on the table next to a homemade cake. She reached for the first

one, but someone jumped out from behind the kitchen wall, scaring Athena away from the table.

"Rah!" Sylvester roared, holding his hands up like a monster's claws. "I am the guardian of the birthday presents! You shall not pass!"

Athena recovered from her fright, giggled, and threw a fake punch at Sylvester's mid-thigh, the highest part of his body that she could reach. "They're my presents, you beast!"

Sylvester pretended to double over in pain, moaning dramatically. "Oh, gods of thunder and lightning! Why have you forsaken me? I am vanquished!"

He lay on the floor and flopped over, tongue sticking out of his mouth. Athena propped one foot on his hip and struck a power pose, only for Sylvester to flip over and tackle her.

"All right, all right!" Dad emerged from the adjacent room, carrying more presents under one arm. Sylvester and Athena froze as he frowned down at them, one hand perched on his hip. "How many times do I have to tell you two? No tussling in the house!"

"Sorry, Grandpa Amos."

"Yeah, sorry, *Grandpa*," Sylvester added, untangling himself from the five-year-old.

Dad smacked his surrogate son over the head. As he stepped into the sunshine streaming in through the open window to set the rest of the presents on the table, the light reflected off the shiny scar across his throat. Five years later, and I still couldn't believe that he had survived Buddy's murder attempt. Sometimes, I wondered if something stronger than luck and science had brought him back from his near-death experience.

"So, Athena," he said, leaning down to look the little girl in the eye. "Which present do you want to open first?"

She pointed to the biggest one on the pile. "That one!"

"That one's from me," I told her. "I hope you like it."

Athena ripped away the brown paper to reveal a bow that I had made by hand and a quiver of arrows. The weapon was fit to her size. It would teach her the basics of handling a compound bow in the future, but she couldn't do any real damage with it.

"Cool!" she exclaimed, tugging experimentally on the string.

"Really?" Pippa said to me. "A freaking bow?"

"What?" I replied innocently. "She's a Greek goddess. She needs a

weapon. Besides, the arrow tips are padded."

"Open mine next," Eirian said, sliding a present across the table toward Athena.

Sylvester shoved Eirian out of the way. "No, do mine! It's better than Uncle Eirian's, I promise."

"Everyone relax," Dad said, raising his hands to command silence. "Everyone's presents are awesome… but you all know that Athena's going to like what I got her the best."

The table exploded in a roar of playful arguments. I grinned, leaning into Eirian as he made his case, and watched my found family duke it out, each catering to a five-year-old who had them all wrapped around her little finger. Life wasn't perfect. All of us had lost people and things that were important to us, but we pushed through. We made it out of the foggy depression together, and the chorus of laughs stitched together the frayed pieces of our mending hearts.

Many thanks to everyone who read my story!

Writing is the best way I know to express myself, and I'm so glad that you all have rewarded me with the opportunity to share my imagination with you. As an author, I learn and evolve from the input of others, so if you have a spare moment and you enjoyed the story, please leave a short, spoiler-free review of the book. As readers, your personal opinions are often the best references for a writer. Your commentary allows me to further provide you all with fun, engaging material.

I would love if you could leave a review: Click Here to Review!

STATIC: AN EMP THRILLER

1

CHAPTER 1

Office workers bustled between cubicles, the floor noisy with phones and printers, the hurried conversations between co-workers, and the echo of construction from the renovation of the floor above. The corner office on the thirtieth floor of Gaines, Shirp, and Mott offered a beautiful view of the spectacular architecture of the Chicago skyline.

Sunlight filtered through the floor-to-ceiling glass office windows that overlooked the busy streets of downtown, shining on the office's simple, modern, and sparse furniture, which encompassed: a desk, a large drawing table, and a bookshelf that stretched just as wide and tall as the wall behind it.

A jacket hung lazily over the back of a chair behind the desk, which was stacked with piles of magazines, books, papers, and photographs, arranged in hazardous attempts at organization. The desk phone had been removed from its perch, the cord wrapped around the device, and was tucked neatly in the corner next to a pair of black heels.

Wren Burton stood in her white blouse, pencil skirt, and stockings, hunched over the drawing table, pencil in her right hand while her left gripped an engineering scale, both working seamlessly together over the trace paper. Her hands stroked the lines and curves effortlessly, every motion breathing life into her creation, challenging the skill and knowledge of those that had come before her, as she offered her own monument that would stand the test of time.

A single strand of hair broke loose from her ponytail, and she brushed it back, the smudges on her fingertips staining her pale skin with the silver grey

of her pencil. She took a step back then circled the sketch, a master examining her work with an unyielding gaze, examining every angle, every inch, to ensure its perfection. She returned to the front of the drawing table and gave an approving nod. *It's finished.*

A deep vibration rattled her desk, shaking loose a few pieces of paper stacked too high, which floated gracefully to the floor. Wren wiped her fingers on a napkin, transferring the smudges of lead from her skin to the white of the half crumpled paper, and checked the name on the caller ID of her cell phone. She curled her slender fingers over the device, dulling the incessant buzz, hesitant to answer, before finally succumbing to the caller's persistence. "Hey."

"Did you forget?" The voice's tone on the other end of the phone was irritable and short.

Wren wedged the phone between her cheek and shoulder, quickly reaching for the sketches and filing them hastily into her bag in the seat of her chair. "You know I didn't forget."

"It's not that you forget to pick them up, it's just you usually forget to pick them up on time." The tone switched from irritated to superior, as if the words were meant to enlighten her of her own flaws.

Wren leaned on the edge of the desk, her head tucked low between her shoulder, her patience tested with an irritating itch she desperately wanted to scratch, but she did her best to keep her tone amiable. "I'm leaving now. Is that on time enough for you?"

An exhausted sigh whispered through the phone's speaker. "Look, I've got to go. There's a call coming in. Are we still going to talk tomorrow morning when I get home?"

Wren pulled on her jacket. "Yeah."

"All right. Tell the girls I love them."

"I will." Wren ended the call and tossed the phone back on her desk more forcefully than she intended. She scratched the thin, circular tan line on her left ring finger then opened her desk drawer. Amidst the chaos of sticky notes and pens rested a diamond ring. She pinched the silver band between her fingers then twirled it around her thumb and index finger, the gemstone catching the sunlight. After a few turns, she clamped the ring in her fist then shoved it in her jacket pocket.

Wren slid on her bag's shoulder strap, and one of the documents sticking through the opened compartment brushed her elbow. When she looked down,

the words “Petition for Divorce” glared back at her. She forcefully shoved the papers deeper into her bag then zipped it shut.

Once she arrived at the elevator doors, Wren tapped her foot impatiently, checking the time on her phone, when an unwelcome hand grazed her hip. “Wanna grab those drinks tonight?” Dan asked, his fingertips trailing around her waist as he circled her, his lips grazing her strands of hair. “Then maybe head back to my place?”

Wren wrenched her body away and twisted Dan’s wrist hard enough for him to wince. “No. And touch me like that again, and I’ll make sure it’s me who gets fired for aggressive advances.” The elevator doors pinged open, and Wren flung Dan’s arm away, leaving him red-faced and rubbing his wrist.

The stifling heat of the elevator only fanned the flames of anger, and when she made it to her car in the parking garage, she violently flung her bag in the trunk then slammed it shut. Her knuckles flashed white from the grip on the steering wheel, and she screamed, all of the frustrations bellowing out in the quiet of her sedan until she deflated, her forehead touching the crest of the steering wheel. She reached for the inside of her jacket pocket, removed the wedding ring, then twisted it back over the pale circle of flesh.

Traffic was heavy but not standstill. Wren drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as the clock on the dash flashed three thirty. She cursed under her breath then slammed her foot on the brake at another red light.

The parent pickup lane was empty upon Wren’s arrival at Lakeside Elementary, and her daughters were the only kids left. Addison was entranced by the video recorder she’d received for her birthday, while her younger sibling, Chloe, twirled and danced next to her. The chaperone grabbed their attention and opened the rear passenger car door, Chloe climbing in first, with her sister close behind.

Wren rolled down the window, and the chaperone hunched down to meet her. “Thanks for staying with them, Mary.”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Burton. Enjoy the weekend.”

Addison helped Chloe buckle her seat belt then turned back to her camera, her small fingers fiddling with the buttons on the side. The device caught Wren’s eye in the rearview mirror as she pulled out of the school and back into the thickening rush-hour traffic. “Making another movie, sweetheart?”

“It’s an assignment for school,” Addison answered, not looking up. She fumbled the device awkwardly in her hands. The camera was much larger

than she was equipped to handle.

Wren shifted lanes and turned her attention to her youngest daughter. “And how was your day, Chloe?”

“Fine.” Chloe’s sharp blue eyes absorbed the world outside, watching the cars and buildings pass, her young mind discovering new things, and always enthralled with the experiences.

Another traffic light flashed red as the car’s Bluetooth signaled a call, and a massive semi-truck blocked her view of the traffic ahead. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Burton?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Guidance Counselor Janet Fringe at University High School. Your son, Zack, was paired with me at the beginning of the school year. I just wanted to let you know that any future absences will require a doctor’s note.”

Wren disengaged the hands-free device and picked up her phone. “I don’t understand. Zack hasn’t missed school at all this year.”

A pause lingered on the other end. “I see. Well, I have at least ten notes here dismissing him from class with your signature.”

Wren nearly dropped the phone. “Ten?” *I’m going to wring his neck.* “And Zack is not in class now?”

“No, Mrs. Burton. Today’s note simply stated that he wasn’t feeling well.”

Wren knocked her head into the driver side window, her eyes shut and nostrils flaring. She gritted her teeth then tried to regain her composure with a soft exhale. “Thank you, Ms. Fringe. I’ll be sure to provide the proper documentation moving forward.” When the call ended, Wren slammed the phone into the passenger seat. “God dammit!” Chloe’s lowered head caught Wren’s glance in the rearview mirror, and she turned around, gently shaking Chloe’s foot. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

“Are you mad at Daddy again?” Chloe asked, those piercing blue eyes wide and watering. She understood more than a mind of five years old should comprehend.

“No, that’s not what this is about. And that’s not something you should be worried about, okay?”

“You guys fight all the time,” Addison said, her tone indifferent to the situation, as she played with the camera. “Are you getting a divorce like Brittany’s parents?”

A horn blared, shifting Wren’s attention to the green light and open road.

She accelerated, searching for the right words to explain the complexities that accompanied a marriage to a pair of children. “Your father and I, we… sometimes we don’t tell each other everything. But it’s something that we’re working on. And it’s definitely not anything the two of you should be thinking about.” Wren eyed Addison in the rearview mirror. “No matter what Brittany says.” The speedometer pushed fifty, and Wren’s mind wandered to every place except the driver’s seat. *Eighteen years together; all of those memories. How did this happen?*

Tires screeched, and a horn blared. The collision from the minivan jarred the entire car and thrashed Wren about in her seat. The sedan spun, and Wren’s hands flung from the steering wheel as the air bags exploded, her seat belt digging into her chest and shoulder, keeping her from ejection. Tiny pellets of shattered glass scraped her skin and whirled around her head.

Just when the spinning stopped, with Wren’s head swimming in confusion, another neck-snapping jolt knocked the car backward. Her limbs flew forward, and her forehead smacked the steering wheel, a knife like pain thrust into her skull.

Sheet metal crinkled like tin foil, and the bits of glass clinked along the hood, roof, and pavement as the jarring motions finally ended. Through the sharp, high-pitched whine in her ears, she heard more horns blaring in all directions along with the thunderous collisions of metals echoing down both sides of the road.

Wren slowly lifted her head from the steering wheel, her vision doubled, a warm trickle running down her cheek. She gently tapped her forehead at the source of the pain, wincing at the touch. She squinted at her fingertips, wiggling them back and forth, a crimson shimmer flashing in the light.

Wren maneuvered her arms aimlessly, her lack of coordination reaping fruitless action. Her fingers fumbled over the seat belt buckle, her arms and shoulder scraping against the now-deflated airbags.

A breeze gusted through the open space where the windshield once rested. She squinted, her vision fuzzy and strained as she examined a lump on the hood of her car. The longer she stared, the more the lifeless form took shape. When the bloodied head came into view her heart skipped a beat. The top of the victim’s head had caved in, and his limbs were twisted awkwardly where he lay.

The sight of the carnage snapped Wren from the confused haze, her body stiff and irritable as she turned around to check the backseat, a sharp pain

radiating from her left shoulder upon movement. “Chloe? Addison? Are you guys okay?”

Addison came into view first, her eldest daughter brushing bits of glass from her hair. “I feel dizzy.”

“It’s okay, baby. Mommy’s going to get you out.” The steering wheel pinned her legs. She shimmied and squirmed, finally freeing herself. “Chloe?” Her gaze shifted to her youngest daughter who lay motionless. Blood ran down the side of her cheek. “Chloe!”

Wren shouldered her door, which obstructed her escape after only clearing six inches of space. She looked out the broken window to the twisted metal that had warped along the side, which barred her exit. She pushed herself over the steering wheel and through the broken front windshield.

The hood buckled under the weight of Wren’s hands and knees, glass bits jumping up from the ripple of metal and the corpse offering a mummer’s attempt at life. All around, people stumbled from their cars, some quiet, others screaming, but everyone bewildered. Wren leaned against what was left of her twisted car frame for support as she clawed toward the rear driver-side door. “Chloe!”

Wren yanked the handle, but the door offered the same resistance as her own, the hinges warped and twisted beyond function. She fought through the pain and planted one foot against the side of the car, both hands on the door handle, and pulled. The door hinges squeaked, the metal creaking along with her joints. Her face reddened, and her hands ached from the stress. She offered one last tug just as her arms felt like they would pop from their sockets, and she fell backward, the door relinquishing its seal.

Wren scrambled from the pavement, half crawling and jumping toward her daughter. “Chloe, can you hear me?” She gently patted her daughter’s cheek, careful not to try to move her. She placed her palm under Chloe’s nose and felt the light flow of air. Addison had tears running down her flushed red cheeks as she stared at her bloodied sister. Wren reached for her arm. “Addy, can you unbuckle your seat belt?”

Addison nodded stiffly. “I think so.” Her fingertips scraped against the metal as more glass fell from her shoulders. After a few failed attempts, she finally freed herself then scooted closer to Chloe, her sobs increasing the nearer she drew to her sister.

Wren patted her pockets, looking for her phone, her concentration wavering between her daughter and the erupting chaos of angered shouts and

curses that carried on the wind.

A passenger from the van that had collided with the front of Wren's car stumbled out, her eyes glued to the man's body on the hood. "Jason!" she screamed, her sobs so powerful, they pulsated her body as she wavered left and right, her coordination affected by either injury or grief. She collapsed onto the hood, her hands groping the man's shirt as he lay unresponsive, screaming his name over and over.

All around, similar scenes unfolded, and the entire highway was blocked with wrecks stretching as far as Wren could see, none of the traffic signals working. She spotted her phone on the pavement and retrieved it with a shaky hand. Her finger wavered over the numbers on the screen, struggling with the simple task of dialing 9-1-1.

Wren crouched by Chloe, checking her daughter's breathing again. A few rings, and the number beeped a busy signal. "Come on." She hung up and redialed but was offered the same result. "Shit!" She punched the side of the car, and a knifelike stab rippled through her shoulder.

Suddenly, Chloe stirred, her eyelids fluttering open and closed as she rolled her head from side to side. Wren dropped the phone and the screen cracked against the pavement. "Chloe, can you hear me? Sweetheart?"

"Mommy!" Addison shrieked, thrusting her finger at the bloodied corpse on the hood, her eyes wide and her small chest heaving up and down in labored breaths.

Wren quickly grabbed Addison's cheeks, forcing her daughter to look at her. "Addison, it's okay, sweetheart. Don't look at it. It's all just pretend. I need you to be brave for me, okay? I need you to be brave for your sister. She needs our help." Addison nodded, and Wren stroked her hair then reached for her phone once more, scraping the grainy asphalt off it and checking for a signal but to no avail.

A sudden fear washed over Wren, the uncertainty in the surrounding chaos pulling her toward a darkness that she couldn't see, couldn't feel, and couldn't hear. And then, just before the fear reached a fever pitch, red-and-blue lights flashed to her left, where an ambulance struggled to push through the traffic.

2

Addison wrapped her arms tightly around Wren's neck as they followed the paramedics into the emergency room. Even with the added sixty pounds hanging from her neck, Wren kept pace with the stretcher, the paramedics barking information at the nurses.

"We need to get this girl an MRI scan immediately. Possible concussion and fractured radius, breathing but unresponsive." The paramedic passed Chloe off to the nurse, who helped lift the stretcher onto another bed.

"What's your daughter's name, ma'am?" the nurse asked.

"Chloe." The entire ER was bursting with new admittances. Everywhere she looked, someone screamed, someone bled, and voices dripped with helplessness.

The nurse guided a needle into Chloe's arm then tore her shirt open and placed circular white stickers across her chest that ran wires to a machine that beeped with the vertical rise and fall of her daughter's pulse. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave while we run some tests."

Another nurse gripped Wren's arm and pulled her backward. Addison clung tighter to her neck. "What tests? No, I need to be here when she wakes up." Wren strained against the bodies removing her from the room. She looked to Chloe, still motionless on the cot, and the team of doctors surrounding her.

The doors were shut and locked, and Wren was forced to watch behind the thick glass of a window until one of the nurses pulled a curtain, engirding the staff in privacy. Addison cried into Wren's shoulder, and she cradled her

daughter's head, rocking her back and forth. "It's all right, sweetheart. Your sister is going to be fine."

One of the nurses escorted Wren to the trauma waiting room, away from the mayhem of the ER. The waiting area was small, chairs lining the walls. The seats were filled with nervous friends and family members, anxiety etched on their faces as they stared at the floor with blank eyes, bounced their knees, and fidgeted their fingers.

Wren found that she wasn't immune to the apprehensive pathology as she paced back and forth, constantly glancing down the halls. Her stomach twisted in a knot every time one of the nurses walked by. Lost in her own worry, she felt a light tug on her shirtsleeve, and Addison looked up at her. "Mom, I'm hungry."

A vending machine hummed just outside the room, and Wren grabbed a bag of chips. Addison munched noisily as Wren took a seat. The television bolted to the ceiling in the corner of the room was turned on, but only the emergency broadcast signal played on its screen. The high-pitched whine of the signal was just as constant as the bright, multicolored lines on the monitor.

Wren pulled her phone out, and her heart leapt as one of the signal bars appeared on the screen. She immediately dialed her son, but the call went straight to voicemail. Then she tried her husband and received the same outcome. She went back and forth, dialing each of them over and over, their voicemails repeating the monotonous message in her ear. The din of the emergency signal in the background grew louder. More voicemails. *Pick up your phone.* She clenched the phone tighter then dialed again. *Voicemail.* The television's constant din tipped her anxiety over the edge until it finally burst from her lips. "*Can someone turn that off?*"

Every head in the room turned. Addison cowered in her chair, discarding the bag of chips. Wren massaged her temples, her nerves frayed and the frustration of the unknown slowly taking control of her reason. Her son was missing, Chloe was unconscious, and she couldn't get a hold of their father.

A sudden quiet overtook Wren's mind, and she realized the television's ringing had ceased. The multicolored scrambles had been replaced with a news anchor flipping through notes on his desk. He looked to his left. "We're on?" He stacked the notes together and cleared his throat. "Good afternoon. I'm Rick Cousins, and this is a Channel 4 News special update. The Chicago city power grid has been down for the past thirty minutes, affecting

transportation and communication efforts across the metropolis area. We've received reports of activity at the power plant just south of the city, but we have yet to receive any confirmation about the cause of the outage."

Wren shifted in her seat, leaning toward the monitor. *If the power is out across the entire city, then Doug is most likely out on calls.*

"Emergency services have been overwhelmed with an influx of callers, and we've learned that Mayor Chalmers has declared a state of emergency, seeking federal assistance through the National Guard as well as state aid." The anchor placed his finger to his ear. "I'm being told that we have some video feed coming from one of our traffic helicopters. Tom? What do you see up there?"

The screen cut to an aerial view of the city. The once-flowing veins of life that were the city's roads and highways had frozen like rivers of ice. The camera zoomed in on specific pileups and the struggling emergency vehicles attempting to navigate through the chaos. People poured out of stores and shops, the crowds wandering the streets in dazed confusion. "As you can see, traffic is shut down. Hardly any movement along the roads here as authorities scramble to try to restore order, and—wait. Go back there. Did you see that?"

The camera jerked sharply, the operator zooming in and out, the pixelated image blurring out of focus. The pilot and cameraman whispered to one another, and the picture suddenly returned to the news anchor. "With all of the confusion on the ground, I'm sure it's been difficult for police and rescue personnel, and we here at Channel 4 would urge everyone to remain calm."

Every face in the waiting room was glued to the television, the sheer size of the chaos around the city too much to fathom. *Zack is out there somewhere.* She jumped from her seat and turned to Addison. "I need you to stay here for a second, okay sweetheart?"

Addison protruded her lower lip. "Where are you going?"

Wren kissed the top of her head. "Just stay put. I'll be right back. I promise." She stepped out into the hallway, the right leading back into the emergency room where the double doors swung back and forth as staff members shuttled patients down the hall, while her left led toward the trauma and operating units where Chloe was being tended to.

Noise spouted over the intercom with requests for doctors and nurses. Wren dodged out of the way of speeding paramedics, the hall densely trafficked with the sick and wounded. The emergency lighting had kicked in, offering the hallway an eerie glow from the hospital's backup generators.

Finally, she arrived at the nurses' station. "Excuse me."

Piles of papers were stacked high, engulfing the nurse in small towers. She kept her head down, the two phones on her left blinking with calls as she scribbled notes, oblivious to anything beyond the paper under her nose. Wren waved her hand under the nurse's face, which triggered an agitated sigh, and the nurse finally looked up. "Can I help you?"

"I need to get in contact with Doug Burton. He's a paramedic with station —" The nurse held up her finger then answered the phone. The thin wire of patience holding Wren's civility frayed then snapped as she reached across the counter and yanked the phone from the nurse's ear and slammed it back onto the receiver. "My son is missing, and I need to speak with the police."

The nurse angrily picked the phone back up. "Ma'am, you can have a seat, and I'll speak to you when I'm done."

Wren slammed her fist on the counter, knocking over a pen holder and spilling them to the floor. "No! You'll speak to me now!" Wren's voice silenced the noisy hallway, her outburst drawing the attention of everyone within earshot. "Now, I know you can contact dispatch, so what I need you to do is pull your head out of your ass and do something that actually matters!"

"Mrs. Burton?" The touch that accompanied the words was as light as the voice. "Your daughter is awake. You can see her now if you'd like."

The anger fled from Wren's mind as quickly as her disappearance from the nurse's station as she followed the other staff member into the recovery rooms, where she found Chloe propped up on a cot with a cluster of pillows. Her daughter's head was wrapped in a white bandage, her left forearm was in a cast, and her lips and mouth were stained purple from the popsicle dripping down her right hand. "Hi, Mommy."

Wren gently pressed Chloe's head to her chest. A doctor hovered close by with a clipboard in his hands and a stethoscope hung over his neck. He extended his hand. "Mrs. Burton?"

Wren reached over to greet him. "Is she going to be all right?

The doctor smiled. "Well, as long as she cuts back on her diet of popsicles, I think she'll pull through."

"No way," Chloe said, taking a big lick up the side.

While her daughter enjoyed the playfulness, Wren's mind still wandered the dark corners of fear she'd been worrying about since the wreck. "So sh—"

"She's fine." The doctor smiled, the tone in his voice oddly reassuring.

“A minor laceration to the head, which we stitched up. No concussion. She had a fractured radius, so the cast will have to stay on for at least six weeks. Other than that, she’s healthy as an ox.” He gently brushed Chloe’s hair back. “And from the look of that popsicle, she eats like one too.”

Chloe flashed another grin, her teeth stained the same harsh purple as her treat. Wren let out a sigh, the tension slowly melting away.

“I’ll be back to check on her in another hour,” the doctor said. “If you need anything, just flag down one of the staff, and they’ll be able to help you.”

“Thank you.” Wren shook his hand then was left alone. She knelt beside the bed, stroking Chloe’s hair as she finished her popsicle and pointed to the cast on her arm. “You know, we could get people to sign that.”

The idea perked Chloe up. “Really? Can I draw on it too?”

A welcome laugh escaped Wren’s lips as the corner of her eyes crinkled. “Sure, we can do that.” She kissed Chloe on the cheek. “I’m going to get your sister. She can be the first to sign it.”

Chloe frowned. “Okay, but do I have to share my popsicle with her?” She batted those blue eyes, pulling the treat closer to her.

“No,” Wren answered. “That’s all yours.” Wren left Chloe to her snack then found a nurse just outside the hall. “Could you watch my daughter for a moment while I go and get her sister?” The nurse obliged and Wren took another look at her daughter propped up on pillows, the popsicle juices draining down her hands, before leaving.

The hallways were even busier than before, the rooms she passed so full that some of the injured were forced to seek treatment in the hallways. Wren did her best to keep her gaze away from the moaning, screaming patients that lined the halls.

When Wren turned into the waiting room, she found that all the seats were empty, save for Addison in the corner. Everyone else was huddled around the television, which still aired the news broadcaster from earlier. She watched the crowd curiously, as they were seemingly entranced by the images on screen.

Addison looked up from her seat, the tiny lines on her face forming the worried look reserved for mothers and others far beyond her age. “Is Chloe okay?”

“She’s fine,” Wren answered. “Do you want to go and say hi?” Addison nodded, and Wren scooped her up, heading for the door. But just before she

left, the panicked tone of the broadcaster stopped her dead in her tracks.

"I repeat, anyone in the downtown area of the city, please lock yourselves inside your homes, and do not venture into the street. We have eyewitness accounts as well as footage from our traffic chopper of masked individuals roaming the streets, armed with assault rifles, targeting anyone in their path. Police have warned that these individuals are incredibly dangerous and highly unstable. And— Wait. We have some new footage coming in from our traffic chopper. Tom, what are you looking at?"

Wren inched closer, her shoulders brushing against the tightly packed group, all of them drawing in a collective breath.

"Rick, a group of the terrorists are making their way down Roosevelt. People are running, we're seeing— Oh my god, did you get that?" The camera zoomed in on three individuals circling around an elderly woman on her knees. One of them placed the tip of their gun to the back of her head and squeezed the trigger.

Wren gasped and shuddered with the rest of the huddled masses, using one hand to cover her mouth and the other to keep Addison's face away from the images.

"Tom, do the authorities know what these people want?" the news anchor asked.

"No. I've radioed with a few of the police choppers in the area, helping keep an eye on things for the law enforcement on the ground, and they haven't received an explanation as to who these people are or their demands."

Another shot of the chaos in the streets flashed, and Wren found herself drawn in to take a closer look. The background images on screen were oddly familiar. A tingling sensation crawled up the back of her spine as her mind returned to the words the traffic pilot uttered. *Roosevelt.* The next image on the screen revealed a building close to the hospital, and Wren realized where the terrorists were heading. *The medical district.*

3

Wren quickly backpedaled out of the waiting room, still carrying Addison on the way, and made a beeline for Chloe's room. They needed to get out of the hospital. *We need to get out of the city.*

The rest of the people in the waiting room were frozen in place like the traffic outside, but if the murderers on the television were looking for a place for mass casualties, then there wasn't any better location than the hospitals that comprised the medical district. Wren hastened her pace, her shoulders smacking into unsuspecting hospital staff members on her way to Chloe.

The nurse Wren left to keep Chloe company had her daughter giggling when she skidded through the door, her voice catching in her throat as she struggled to breathe. "We need to go. Now." Wren reached for her daughter's hand, pulling her from the cot as the nurse stepped aside, confused.

"Mrs. Burton, the doctor said he'd like to keep her under observation for the next twenty-four hours." She positioned herself by the door, blocking Wren's exit. "We just want to make sure Chloe is okay."

Wren set Addison on the floor next to her sister then took a quick step forward, the nurse recoiling from the speed. "You need to put this facility on lockdown. Immediately."

Chloe and Addison clutched Wren's legs, burying their faces into her skirt. The nurse placed a hand on Wren's shoulder. "Mrs. Burton, you've been through a lot. Why don't I have Doctor Avers come have a look at you?" Her fingers went to the bandage on Wren's forehead. "You've had some head trauma yourself."

Before the nurse had a chance to try anything else, Wren shoved her aside into the doorframe, wiggling past with Addison and Chloe in tow. She hurried down the hallway, the nurse shouting after her. “Mrs. Burton, stop!”

Wren ignored the stares, the shouts, and the staff members she passed who tried reaching out a hand to stop her, which she swatted away. While some of the staff tried to intercept, amidst the chaos of the bustling hospital, one more patient leaving opened up time and resources.

The nurse finally ended her chase, and Wren followed the exit signs that led her back to the emergency room, but she stopped at the nurses’ station attached to the main hallway. She realized she had no car and, with the city in its current condition, no other transportation.

The phones on the nurses’ desk blinked, and Wren looked around to see if anyone was watching. When she determined that the coast was clear, she pushed through the small double-door barriers and looked for the unit codes to get in contact with Doug. She shuffled through the papers, looking for the notebook she knew rested somewhere under the piles of junk.

Three quick, sharp pops sounded down the hall, and the noise stopped everyone in their tracks. Wren’s heart froze as she stepped around the station’s corner, the busy ER hallway becoming eerily quiet, like the calm before a storm. She shoved Chloe and Addison behind her, her pulse racing and her breaths cutting themselves short.

Machine-gunfire erupted, and screams broke through the dam of silence. The ER doors burst open, bringing a flood of people and the deafening sound of gunshots with it.

Wren scooped up both girls, trying to stay ahead of the masses spilling into the hallway, turning into a tidal wave of bodies careening around the corridors. She stumbled twice, the heels of the stampede smashing her feet, but she kept her balance even with the added pounds of her daughters swaying her center of gravity.

Patients and staff ducked into nearby rooms, slamming doors behind them, no doubt locking them, but she knew the standard hospital locks could easily be bypassed. She needed to find another place. Something more secure.

Wren’s left leg cramped, and she saw others passing her. More gunshots thundered, and Wren flinched in reflex, ducking her head, the noise too close for comfort.

The next gunshot brought down a man to her left, and Wren felt a warm

sprinkle of liquid hit her cheek as the man collapsed, but she didn't stop. She only kept eyeing the corner up ahead. *Just keep moving.*

The cramp in her leg loosened a bit, and Wren dug her heels into the tile, the gunfire popping like fireworks now. She turned the corner, hoping to find an exit, but the hallway only led her to an interlocking maze of more hallways. She tried a few of the first doors on her left as she passed, but they were locked. The only signage led her back into the path of the armed terrorists.

Addison and Chloe trembled in Wren's arms, their bodies vibrating in fear and shock. The back of Addison's head had bits of red speckled into her strands of black hair. Wren's heart wrenched, her concentration scattered across her mind, which raced with the tenacity of a sports car.

People rushed past, their faces showing no coherent thoughts other than *Run*. As Wren stood there, gripped by the same icy fear that had consumed her girls, she shut her eyes, a shudder running through her at the sound of more gunfire. *Where do I go?*

The memory of a long night at work illuminated the dark recesses of her mind, and Wren snapped her eyes open, rushing toward signage down the hall on her right. She frantically scanned the labels, shifting her weight from side to side impatiently. *Where are you?* And then she saw it, nearly at the bottom, in white uppercase lettering. The ICU.

Wren turned on her heel, ricocheting against the flow of bodies that cursed and violently slammed into her, trying to shake loose her grip on the girls. "No, you're going the wrong way! Follow me!"

But Wren's voice was cut off by gunshots. She twisted her body around just in time to see one of the terrorists stepping into the hallway, firing into the crowd running in the opposite direction.

A lightness overtook Wren's body as she broke into a sprint, a few of the people around catching wind of her flight, although she wasn't sure if they meant to follower her or simply reacted to the gunfire. Regardless, when they came upon the next hallway, she pointed and veered, ten of the fleeing victims breaking off with her. "Hurry, just down here!"

The ICU was up ahead, and Wren felt a well of hope rise within her at the sight of the steel-reinforced doors she knew could withstand a heavy assault. She skidded to a stop and reached for the handle to pull them open, and the brief ray of hope quickly withered away as the door remained locked. "No, no, no."

The girls suddenly turned to lead in Wren's arms, dragging her down. The people that followed pounded on the doors in a flurry of arms and fists, screaming to be let inside. An electronic badge lock rested on the adjacent wall, close to a small nurses' station. Wren pushed past the panicked group and set the girls down, searching for any key card that would let them inside.

Wren ripped the desk apart, her fingers scouring every square inch until more gunshots echoed down the hallway, freezing her movements. The people clamoring at the doors quickly turned around as well, two of them sprinting back down the hallway in hopes of escaping the gunman, while three others collapsed to the floor, crying. The remaining five continued to pound the steel with their fists, their voices cracking from their piercing screams.

A jacket rested on the back of the chair, and Wren ripped it off, searching the pockets. Her finger grazed the thin edge of plastic, and she yanked it from the white coat. Wren glanced at the picture but not long enough to examine it thoroughly, just hoping the badge would work.

Wren seized Chloe and Addison by the hand and pulled them from behind the desk just as another bout of gunfire blanketed their hallway. The vicious echo triggered Wren to thrust Chloe and Addison back behind cover as she watched two of the people that followed her get gunned down. The others quickly jumped over their dead bodies, huddling behind the small cove of the desk.

All nine bodies shivered in one collective unit as the hallway grew silent. Wren was in the front and watched the blood slowly drain from the bodies on the floor, staining the bleached-white tile red.

"*Yuhzir!*" an angry voice shouted, his words bouncing down the hallway as violently as the bullets from his rifle. The light thump of boots sounded, followed by the click of metal. "*Al khuruj kamu jahat mamamatik!*" The voice kept the same virulent tone from before as the proximity of his words drew closer.

Wren eyed the keypad. She had no way of knowing whether the badge clutched in her hands would work, and the moment she stepped out from the cover of the wall, she'd be shot down. She looked back down to her girls, both of them sobbing silently and clutching her legs as they huddled close, their tiny bodies trembling over one another.

Wren kissed the tops of their heads, looking each of them in the eye as she said, "I love you both. So very much." She grabbed the arm of the only

person in the huddle who didn’t wear an expression that looked as if it would shatter into hysteria. “I’m going to make a run for the key pad. The moment you hear it beep, take my girls and run inside, got it?”

The young man couldn’t have been older than her Zack. She noticed that he wore jeans with scrubs as his top. He took the badge from her hand, and for a moment she thought he was going to take her place, but he simply examined the plastic and handed it back to her. “It’s an ICU badge. It’ll work.”

The badge lingered in the air between them before she took it, along with the fate she knew would follow. She crouched to the edge of the wall before her nerves got the better of her, and took one last look at her girls. She did her best to take in all of their features—the curves of their cheeks, the different-colored strands of their hair. She froze that image in her mind then sprinted to the keypad.

It all happened so quickly. The moment Wren made it around the corner, the access pad looked closer than before, and Wren stretched out her arm, the terrorist’s shouts quick and unintelligible.

Two steps into her leap, Wren heard the gunshot. When her outstretched arm made contact with the access lock, she felt her body go limp. She collapsed, her face smacking against the floor. She wasn’t sure if the badge had worked until she saw feet hurry past her line of sight.

Gunshots and screams filled the air, and Wren was afraid to look up. She was afraid to see one of her children join her on the tile, but she had to know before it was too late. She strained her neck as she lifted her cheek from the cold tile. Two more bodies joined her on the ground, but the figures were big—too big to be either Addison or Chloe.

And that was when Wren saw the two of them, carried by the man she’d left them with. She saw them only for the flash of a moment, their cheeks streaked with tears, looking down at her, their small arms and hands reaching out in desperation. Wren placed her cheek back down on the tile and smiled, knowing that her children were safe. Knowing that she’d done what she could. The cool of the floor was oddly soothing, and with her body numb, she closed her eyes.

The screams and gunshots sounded distant, and she felt herself drifting off to sleep, her fatigued mind swimming in a pool of apathy. But something kept prodding her, preventing her from submerging herself in the welcoming basin. The light tug turned to pain, and Wren became aware of her shoulder

aching, followed quickly by a splitting pang in her head. A warm sensation filled her mouth, and suddenly she was awake, the taste of blood on her tongue.

A blinding white light hovered directly in front of her, and Wren knew she was lying down, her eyes squinting from the brightness. Shadowed figures penetrated her line of sight, and she heard their mumbled questions, but the piercing pain ringing through her body vanquished any attempts at answering.

Wren's body shifted and moved, though not by her own actions. Hands ran along her body, there were sharp pinches in her arms, her blouse was ripped open, and cold dots were placed on her chest. Voices drifted in and out of her consciousness, and Wren struggled to stay afloat in the churning sea of her mind.

They were shouting at her now, and Wren desperately wanted to tell them to leave her be, to let her die in peace. She wanted to go back to sleep, drift off into nothing. She was so close, so close to warmth and rest. She hadn't realized how much she needed it until now. *Just let me go.*

But then a pair of names reached her, and the names were accompanied by faces she recognized. Blue and hazel eyes shone through the darkness of her fatigue. She knew them. She… loved them.

"Ma'am, I need you to stay with me."

The voice penetrated Wren's thoughts but didn't match the eyes in her mind. They were children. They were her children. *Chloe. Addison.* The names struck her consciousness like lightning, and the wave of darkness was eradicated by the light of the room, but with it came pain—more pain than she'd ever felt in her life.

"Just hang on, Wren!"

Wren nodded, but suddenly she felt tired again. Except this fatigue was different. Her eyes shut, her dreams filled with memories of her daughters. Memories that she clung onto for dear life.

4

A dull ache in Wren's left arm disrupted her sleep. When she moved, it was as if every cell in her arm were slowly being ripped apart. A knife-like pain split her skull, and the same white light she remembered seeing before flooded her senses with brightness. She brought her right hand up to block the light and found a clamp on her index finger, a wire running from the end.

Confused, Wren examined the rest of her body and saw that her clothes had been removed and replaced with a hospital gown and that her left arm was cradled in a sling. She ripped the clamp from her finger and tossed it aside, triggering a loud beeping from a machine. She flung her legs over the side of the cot, her feet dangling as she struggled to balance on the edge.

Two hospital staff members burst into the room before Wren could stand and quickly ended the machine's rant. One of them placed a hand on Wren's shoulder. "Mrs. Burton, you need to rest."

Wren's mind felt heavy, as though her thoughts were forced to walk through thick piles of mud. "I need…" she started but lost the thought. She felt dizzy, the pain in her left arm subduing her speech.

"Mrs. Burton, do you know where you are?"

The question was asked innocently, but Wren couldn't help but notice a hint of condescension. She shook her head, steamrolling through the grogginess. "The hospital." She slid from the side of the bed, her legs wobbling and the wires attached to her chest under the hospital gown pulling her back. "My children." Wren yanked the wires out from the suction pads on her skin and stumbled to the door despite the nurses trying to restrain her.

“Addison! Chloe!” She frantically spun in circles, the surroundings unfamiliar.

“Mommy!”

The voices came from Wren’s left, and when she saw Addison and Chloe running to her, she collapsed to her knees, hugging both of them with her one good arm and ignoring the searing pain her body roared in defiance. Tears slid from the corners of her eyes unexpectedly, and she kissed both her girls feverishly.

Chloe gently touched the fabric of Wren’s sling. “Did you hurt your arm too?”

“I did.” Wren smiled, positioning her sling next to Chloe’s cast. “Now we match.”

“Not really,” Chloe said, frowning. “Mine’s all hard. Yours is soft.”

“Sounds like you have a future doctor in the family.”

Wren turned around and saw a man in a white coat hovering over them. He was tall, his hair thinning and showing streaks of grey and white intermixed with what stubborn brown refused to age. He knelt down beside the girls. “Hey, your mommy and I need to talk, so why don’t you go play with Nurse Malla for a little bit?”

The nurse appeared, gently taking both girls by the hand. Both of them offered Wren one last hug, and she watched them disappear down the hall until they turned the corner out of view.

The doctor led Wren back to the bed, where she required help to climb back on the thin mattress. Whatever energy propelled her to leave her bed had evaporated, leaving her drained and hungry for rest.

“How are you feeling, Mrs. Burton?” the doctor asked, flipping through a few pieces of paper on a clipboard.

“Hurt.” Wren laid her head back on the pillow, closing her eyes, but a gunshot wakened her. A brief rush of adrenaline surged through her, and everything came flooding back. The masked men. The blood. The bullets. Carrying her children through the stampede in the hallways until they ended at the ICU doors.

“It’s okay.” The doctor put his hand on her shoulder, easing her back down on her pillow. “Those men are still in the hospital, but we’re safe here. The doors are reinforced steel. And that key card you found was the only one missing from our inventory after we locked the doors.” He returned his attention to the clipboard. “It was smart making a run for it here. You’ve

worked in hospitals before?”

“No,” Wren answered, shaking her head. “I designed one in college.” She cleared her throat. “I’m an architect.” Although the pain in her arm made her wish she’d remembered the security procedures for a hospital lockdown sooner. “Federal guidelines require that all hospitals constructed after 2010 have security features built into all of their critically weak departments in case of contamination or terrorist activities.” She looked at her arm. “I was shot?

“Yes. The bullet nicked your humeral shaft, but it went straight through.” He aimed his pen at her head. “You smacked your head pretty good, though.” He gingerly opened her eyelids, shining a light in each of them. “You have a concussion.”

Wren eyed the badge hanging from the front of his coat, and she squinted to read it. “Dr. Reyes, what’s going on out there? Have you heard anything? Have the police arrived?”

“You don’t need to worry, Mrs. Burton.” The doctor’s tone was dismissive. “We have protocols in place for things like this. The authorities are doing what is necessary. In the meantime, you and your girls are safe. Now, get some rest, and I’ll be back to check on you in a little bit.”

Before Wren had a chance to put in another word, Reyes was gone, and she was too tired to try to shout after him. Her mind raced with worry, but fatigue soon took over, and she drifted off to sleep.

WHEN WREN WOKE, her body still ached, but her mind had regained its plasticity. She flagged down one of the hospital staff and managed to change from the hospital gown into a spare T-shirt and pants one of the nurses had in her bag. Once dressed, she went in search of her daughters.

Wren found her girls tucked away in one of the empty patient rooms, busy entertaining themselves. Chloe had stumbled upon a few of the toys the ICU staff kept for the children of any parents they treated, and Addison was fiddling with her camera, filming anyone that granted her access.

The past few hours had seen the excitement of the hospital decrease

dramatically. After the initial onslaught from the terrorists, most of the screams had ended, and only every twenty minutes or so was there another gunshot, the sound dulled by the tons of concrete and steel between Wren and her children. A chill ran through her as considered what those shots meant.

The ICU had a few doctors and nurses on staff, some of them already in hiding. Doctor Reyes, who had been in surgery, hadn't even heard the screams and gunshots until one of the staff came and told him. With his hands trying to save a man's life, he told them to lock the unit down.

Of the original ten that had followed Wren, only four remained alive: the man who'd carried Addison and Chloe inside, a middle-aged woman with dried blood still on her face who refused to speak, a young woman, and an older gentlemen with no hair except for the ring of white that stretched around the back of his head from ear to ear. Most of their eyes still held the same hollow emptiness, the shock of the attack fresh in their minds, torturing what shreds of sanity they had left.

Once Wren was up and about, she heard arguments between small groups of people about wanting to leave, while others were hell-bent on staying put. Most of the staff felt it was their duty to stay with the patients to make sure they were properly cared for. Most everyone who wasn't staff wanted out.

Wren walked to the main ICU doors, keeping away from the windows on her approach in case any of the terrorists were stationed nearby. The closer she drew to the entrance, the slower her steps became. Each door had a strip of thick-paned glass built in. She placed her finger on the cracked glass, the surface still smooth despite the thousands of tiny fault lines the bullets had inflicted.

It was nearly six o'clock, which meant she and the girls had been inside that hospital for nearly three hours. Despite Dr. Reyes's assurance that help was coming, she thought it would have happened by now. And if the roads were still blocked as they'd been before, there wasn't any guarantee the terrorists wouldn't find a way into the ICU before help arrived. *We can't stay here.*

Wren found Dr. Reyes with one of the nurses, knowing it was his counsel the staff had listened to in the first place. "Could I speak to you for a moment?" Specks of blood still dotted the doctor's coat and pants along with a few larger blobs on his chest. She wasn't sure why he hadn't changed.

"What is it?" Reyes's clipped his short as he sipped from a Styrofoam cup. Dark circles imprinted themselves under his eyes, which she hadn't

noticed before.

“I understand your need to stay with your patients, but there are some of us here who need to leave. My son—”

“Mrs. Burton, I assure you we are safe.” Reyes pointed to the front of the ICU, where the entrance had been redecorated with bullets. “The only way we go out those doors is when the police arrive.”

“Doctor, I don’t think you know what’s going on out there. The city is gridlocked; I barely managed to get my daughter here in an ambulance. There isn’t a guarantee the police will come, and if these people want some type of ransom, then—”

“Help is coming. Whatever’s happening in the city will blow over. There are procedures that we have to follow.” Reyes showered his wisdom like he was speaking to a child, the arrogance thick in his tone.

It could have been the doctor’s words, the way he said them, the events that had unfolded over the past few hours, or the fact that she hadn’t eaten anything all day, but she shoved the doctor as hard as she could, despite only being able to do so with one arm. “Those men shot at me and my *daughters*. They put to slaughter everyone in the emergency room. I will not sit here and wait for some person five hundred miles away to give an order about a situation they know nothing about! These people aren’t taking hostages. They’re spreading a holocaust.”

Reyes chucked his coffee cup against the wall, the cold, brown liquid splattering against the blue paint. “Lady, there are thirty patients in this facility who are in critical, life-threatening condition and need attention and observation around the clock. I need my staff to perform at one hundred percent, and given the fact that you and your girls don’t have the prospect of being in danger in the foreseeable future, I would have to tell you that I don’t give a shit about what you do or do not feel, or what you think or do not think. We’re safe where we are.”

Wren noticed a crowd had gathered, drawn by the raised volume of their voices. “We’re at the gallows waiting for the executioner to give the signal. We are *not* safe.” She walked away, leaving the doctor fuming, and brushed past the hospital staff wordlessly. She didn’t care what she had to do. She was getting her girls out of that building before it was too late.

“Hey.”

The whisper came from a room on her right, and Wren saw the young man who had taken her girls inside the ICU. He motioned for her to step in,

and she complied. He led her into a small room where one of the ICU patients lay unconscious, machines she'd never even seen before hooked up to the woman's body.

"You don't think anyone is coming?" He kept his voice low, even in the privacy of the room. He was shorter than Wren, and the fact that he stood with a hunch only lowered his stature.

"No. I don't." One of the machines beeped, and the nurse hushed her, waiting to see if anyone would come. But no one did. "And I don't think whoever has control of this place is going to let anyone live. What happened in the ER, I…" Sudden flashes of bullets, blood, and screams pulsated like a strobe light in her mind. "No one is coming."

"I told the doctor the same thing. But he's not all wrong. There *are* procedures for lockdown that we have in place, and we do have a procedure for hostage situations."

"This isn't a hostage situation."

"Yeah, I was getting that feeling too." The nurse paced back and forth, cradling his chin in his hand, rubbing his skin raw.

Wren looked at the woman lying in the hospital bed, her head shaved, needles and wires stuck in her arm and tubes shoved down her nose and mouth. From the looks of her, she couldn't have been much older than Wren, but with her skin so pallid and her body thin from whatever disease inflicted her, it was hard to be certain. The woman looked so still and quiet, almost as if she were already dead.

"The moment I open those doors, Doctor Reyes will trigger a quarantine lockdown, and once that happens, no one is going anywhere. But there might be a work-around."

"Then hurry," Wren replied. "I'm not sure how much time we have left."

The nurse headed for the door, but before he was out of earshot, she called to him. "Do you know what happened to her?" She stared at the patient, unsure of what would kill her first: the disease or the madmen in control of the hospital.

"No."

"Can she even hear anything? Does she know we're here?"

"I'm not sure. I never worked in the ICU before. I only graduated nursing school a few months ago. This is my first week at this hospital."

Wren wondered if she had family, a husband, or friends that came to see her. If she did, she imagined the only reason they weren't here was because

of the power failure. With emergency vehicles barely able to navigate through traffic, she doubted any non-emergency personnel would be able to move through that mess. Her mind suddenly drifted to Doug and the divorce papers. She knew he was out in the chaos, on a call, trying to save someone's life—perhaps a woman just like herself, trapped somewhere. But all of those calls, all of those long nights, had taken a toll on both of them.

Wren finally left, leaving the woman in peace and to whatever fate awaited her. She remained quiet on the walk back to the front of the ICU. She turned the corner to the main hallway, where the entrance doors were located, and saw Addison near the windows. Her first instinct was to scream, but she bit her tongue, afraid the noise would draw attention. She broke out into a hobbled, pain-filled sprint.

Addison was fiddling with her camera when Wren yanked her away from the doors in a panicked hurry, keeping the two of them low as her daughter dangled from her one good arm. "Mom! What are you doing?" Addison squirmed and fidgeted, clutching the camera in her hands.

"Addison, listen to me. You don't *ever* go near that door." Wren shook her daughter's shoulders. "You scared me half to death."

Addison lowered her head. "I'm sorry." She opened the camera and extended it to Wren. "I heard people outside the hallway, so I went to see them. I thought if I could get them on camera doing something bad like they do on TV, then it would help."

Wren's expression softened. She couldn't fault her daughter for trying. "That was very brave of you, but you have to be careful. These people will hurt you if they see you, so you have to stay hidden." She took the camera and rewound the playback.

The picture was shaky, Addison fumbling the device in her hands. Most of the footage was of the door, but when Addison lifted the camera high above her head, Wren saw two terrorists, one of them carrying a bag. The two were speaking quickly, their motions hurried.

Wren squinted at the tiny screen, trying to figure out what they were pulling from the pack, but the screen kept wavering back and forth. She paused the film then rewound it again and zoomed in for a closer look.

The devices were small, brick-like, and she had to watch it a few times before she realized what she was looking at. Once it struck her, she slammed the camera shut and dragged Addison back to Nurse Malla, who was still watching Chloe.

“There you are, Addison,” Malla said. “We wondered where you ran off to.”

“Keep the girls here,” Wren said, ignoring the nurse’s apologies, then turned to both of her daughters. “You two do *not* move. You hear me?” Wren kept her tone strict, and both of them nodded.

Wren clutched the camera tightly, searching the hallways for Doctor Reyes and the nurse she spoke with earlier. She found the doctor in one of the patient rooms, a cluster of nurses around him, all of them casting disapproving glares at her presence. “We have to get everyone out of here now.”

Reyes didn’t look up from his clipboard, scribbling down notes. “I told you before, Mrs. Burton, we have procedures in place for things like this. Everything will be resolved soon.”

“I know. In fact, the people that shot up the hospital are taking care of that right now. And we need to get out of here before they decide to detonate the bombs they’re placing in the hallways.”

5

Wren tore apart the desks on the nurses' stations, looking for as many pieces of paper as she could tuck under her good arm along with a few pens then rushed to the conference room where Reyes had gathered the ICU staff.

While she spread the papers out over the table , her mind was already sketching the outline of the building from what she remembered of her entrance. "I need to know every staircase that you know of on this floor, where it leads to, and any other security doors that will be locked."

Wren stabilized the elbow of her wounded arm then drew perfectly straight lines without the aided effort of a ruler. The basic building structure took shape, and she noticed the quiet. Wren brought the pen in her hand to rest and looked to the strained faces, half of them pale and frozen, the others confused in disbelief, and none more so than Reyes. The shock from the video had stripped them all of the invisible shields of protocols and procedures. "Doctor."

Beads of sweat rolled down Reyes's temple as he stepped forward and knuckled his fists into the table. The same tremor in his arms also shook his voice. "The first available right turn out of the ICU doors is a hallway that leads to a corridor where the hospital's cardiac center is located. There won't be any security restrictions there."

"How many rooms?" Wren asked, offering a rough sketch of the unit and marking notes in the corner of the paper.

"Twenty-one," the doctor answered.

"Twenty-five." One of the nurses stepped forward, her voice no louder

than a mouse's squeak. "I used to work that rotation before I was moved to the ICU. Twelve rooms on the left, and thirteen on the right. The stairway at the end of the hall will be locked, though."

"Keyless entry?" Wren asked.

The nurse shook her head, and Wren tightened her grip on the pen. Any door with a function beyond the doctor's ID card was useless. Wren finished the sketch, scribbling dead end over the unit. "That's good. What about the rest of the corridor?"

The doctor rubbed his forehead till his skin turned raw and pink, an exhausted sigh escaping his lips. "Everything leads back to the front of the hospital near the ER. It takes up nearly all of the first level. There's a staircase on the corner, but it's blocked off because of construction. The only way out is the way you came in."

Wren slammed her pen onto the table. Anger and adrenaline rocketed her thoughts into overdrive, and she ran through every possible design that an architect would have used for the hospital. And while she wrestled with the logistics of how to escape, the rumble of panic spread through the others like wildfire.

"They're just going to blow us up?"

"Somebody has to be doing something, right?"

"We need to get out of here. I can't die here. I won't die here!"

Every shrill outcry only compounded the next person's despair. Wren shut her eyes, turning every stone in her mind over for anything that could aid in their escape. The groans of despair rumbled louder, reaching a crescendo.

"Enough!" Wren's cheeks flushed red, and her roar rolled over the room, casting everyone in silence. "This is what they want." She pointed beyond the halls of the locked ICU doors. "We let fear take control of us, and we lose whatever reason we have left. They want…" *The bombs.* Wren pushed past the nurses and cleared a path back to her sketches. "We need to go down."

"Down?" Reyes asked. "We're on the first floor."

"I know." Wren extended her sketch below the ER, creating another level and stretching the staircases underneath the building. "We're going below it."

Everyone gathered closer, all of them clinging to the floating raft that was Wren's mind, watching her deft hands bring the paper underneath her palm to life. She sketched notes in different corners, labeling utilities and their functions, creating a path that would lead them to safety. She dropped the pen and smoothed the paper over the table. "Whenever a building is set for

demolition, the goal is to have the building implode on itself, and a part of that strategy involves the foundation."

"So, what? These guys are looking to detonate the building safely?" Reyes asked.

"No, not with the placement of devices I saw in the hallway," Wren answered. "It's sporadic, flashy. If they do bring the building down, it won't be pretty. But"—she pointed to the subterranean level on her sketch—"this hospital has utility functions below the main floor. A friend of mine worked on this place, and he designed it to give the hospital more of a streamlined appearance in functionality. And every floor is required to have an emergency exit, even below ground. We get to the utilities room, and we have our way out."

"I've been in the staircases," one of the staff members said. "I haven't seen one that goes below the ER."

"Well, one of them does." Wren leaned back over the table, examining her sketch. "And we have to figure out which one."

With at least a chance of escape, the group exhaled a cloud of anxiety-ridden relief. Wren finished her sketches after a few quick interviews with the staff to add to her drawings then duplicated the maps by the number of staircases that they needed to investigate.

The cluster of radios at the nurses' station were checked for a charge then distributed among the six groups of five. "Make sure you're on channel six. The moment you get to the lower level, you let the rest of us know. Keep it short, and make it quick. If the terrorists are listening in, they'll know what we know." She looked back to her girls, still huddled by the desk, Addison stroking her sister's hair. "Surgical instruments." Wren looked back to the group. "We need something to protect ourselves."

A nurse separated himself from the group. "I'll take a look in the supply closet." The weapons were distributed to every group member, and as Wren went over everyone's route and role one last time, she noticed the tremor in every hand white-knuckled over the silver of surgical instruments.

"Wren." Reyes snuck up behind her, flanked by three nurses. For a moment, Wren thought he would try to stop her, and she wedged the knife between herself and the doctor. "We've chosen to stay behind."

The knife dipped in Wren's hand. "What? Doctor, I told you that whatever procedures you think—"

"It's not about procedures," the doctor interrupted. "I took an oath. There

are still sick people in this unit, and I won't abandon them. Not when there's still a possibility of rescue."

"Doctor, these people, they—"

"I know." Reyes adjusted his glasses, straightening the bloodstained white coat, which he wore more like a suit of armor. The finality in the doctor's words marked his own grave, but Wren didn't push the subject any further. Whatever duty Reyes still felt he owed was his to fulfill, just as her duty propelled her to keep her children safe.

The groups quickly gathered by the door, and Wren cupped her one good hand around Addison's and Chloe's, keeping the knife gripped painfully in her left. "We're going to get out of here, okay girls? But when we leave, we have to be very quiet. We can't talk at all, and you always need to hold on to one another and stay with me. I know this is scary, but we have to be brave." She offered their hands a reassuring squeeze, their soft skin warm against the palm of her hand. "Let's go."

Wren's knuckles whitened over the blade's handle, and she struggled to keep a lighter grip on the girl's wrists. She peered through the small sliver of window the ICU doors offered and checked the hallway, the heat from her breath reflecting off the door and back onto her lips.

Blood and bodies lined the floor of the hallway, but the living were nowhere in sight. Wren shouldered the door open and kept low, pushing both Addison and Chloe's faces into her pants legs, trying to spare her daughters any more trauma. "Keep your eyes shut, girls."

Wren guided the three of them around the puddles of blood and outstretched arms and legs sprawled in every direction. The odor from the bodies on the floor mingled with the sterile stench of hospital disinfectant, and Wren tucked her nose into the crook of her shoulder.

Once they arrived at the corridor, the groups split, each heading in their own direction, huddling close to one another, silent through the halls save for the light shuffle of feet.

The body count only grew the closer Wren moved to the ER. Some lay face down, but the ones that faced up still had their eyes open, gazing into the false white light flickering above. Wren shuddered at the sight of them, and she felt the same warm spray of blood from the man who was shot in front of her. She involuntarily wiped her cheek on the sleeve in the crook of her elbow as though bugs had crawled on her face, their small legs tickling her skin.

A faint echo of voices froze Wren in her tracks, and she shoved the girls behind her and against the wall. Shifting the blade to her good arm, she aimed toward the sound's origins. Her breathing grew labored, and she looked behind her, debating whether to turn back. The hallway was door-free, leaving her completely exposed, with nothing but the gritty texture of the walls to claw.

Then, slowly, the voices faded, and the hammering in her chest subsided. Wren dropped her arm, and both Addison and Chloe sobbed quietly into her stomach, flinging their arms around her waist. "Shh. It's okay, girls." She kept her voice a whisper. "We need to keep moving." The girls offered little protest as Wren pulled them to the end of the hallway, where they passed more bodies and bombs.

Wren crouched low before she poked her head around the corner, quickly looking in both directions of the hallway's intersection. The trail of bodies grew thicker toward the ER entrance, where the door to the staircase just so happened to be positioned on the left. She turned back to the girls, both of them still huddled close to her leg, their little bodies trembling. She gently peeled their faces off her shirt, now sticking with sweat and tears. "Addison, do you remember that scary movie you saw over the summer that you watched at your friend Katie's house?"

Addison nodded, sniffling. "You said you didn't want me to watch it, but her parents said that I could."

Wren wiped a tear from her daughter's cheek. "And you remember how everything you saw was just pretend? It wasn't real?" Again she nodded. "I need you to do that again. Whatever you see, just know that's it pretend, okay? You don't need to be scared." Wren turned to Chloe. "And that goes for you too. Everything is pretend. Now, stay close, and remember to keep quiet."

Wren wrapped her fingers around their thin wrists, coaxing them around the corner, her glance shifting between the staircase door and the girls. They both kept their eyes glued on her as Wren maneuvered them around the outstretched legs and arms of the dead. Chloe tripped over a hand, but Wren caught her, and when her daughter glanced down at the arm attached to it, soundless tears burst from her eyes.

The staircase door was only a few feet away but was blocked by a body with a smeared bloody handprint that stretched from the handle to the floor. Wren huddled the girls together next to the wall, and they clutched onto one

another tightly, hiding their faces in each other's shoulders.

With her right arm, Wren grabbed the fallen nurse by the wrist, dragging him from the doorway. She strained against the heavy body, a trail of fresh blood smearing the floor with each pull. With the doorway finally clear, she reached for the handle just as harsh, foreign voices echoed from behind the ER doors.

In her panic, Wren let loose the door, and it clanged shut with a bang. She grabbed both girls by the hand, yanking them down the hall, jiggling the door handles along the way, each one of them locked. She tripped over a leg in her haste, twisting her ankle, and nearly fell but caught her balance with an outstretched arm. Her fingers grazed a door handle that gave way to her pull, and she ducked inside, shutting the door just before the masked men burst into the hallway.

The room was dark, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but when they did, Wren found they were alone. She hurried Addison and Chloe under the empty patient bed, covering them with whatever she could find as harsh, hasty-tongued words flooded the hallway.

"Stay quiet. And don't move. No matter what." Wren crawled to the door, locking it, still clutching the knife in her hand. She huddled herself in the corner, her fingers flexing against the handle. She pushed herself from the floor, the back of her shirt sliding against the wall. *Keep walking. Just pass by.*

The mumbled jargon stopped right outside the door, and Wren's eyes locked on the handle. She reached for it instinctively, locking her arm in place, raising the tip of the blade high above her head, every fiber of her muscles strung tight as a steel cable. A jerk rattled the steel handle, and her skin burst with sweat, the handle now warm and slick under her palm.

Wren tensed her shoulder and arm, shouldering the door to offer more resistance. The handle shook violently as more jargon spewed through the door cracks along the frame, until finally Wren felt the handle loosen, the grip on the other side given up. The muffled voices moved farther down the hall, and Wren slowly uncurled her shaking fingers from the levered piece of steel.

The two bumps that were Addison and Chloe underneath the blankets of the hospital bed poked out their heads then scooted hurriedly to their mother's aid. She grabbed both of them, squeezing them tight, and felt the hot burst of water seep from the corners of her closed eyes. She took slow

breaths, forcing herself to regain control. It wasn't over until they were out of the building.

The radio in Wren's pocket crackled, followed by a faint voice. "Staircase three does not have a level below the first floor."

The small rock of hope that Wren stood upon fractured slightly at the news, but it refocused her will. She kissed both girls then rose, keeping her daughters behind her as she opened the door, checking the hallway.

With their path clear in all directions, she hurried down the hallway back to the staircase door, leaping over the corpses in the hallway and pulling the girls with her. Their feet scurried down the steps in the staircase. Wren looked up through the narrow shaft between the banisters that circled all the way to the top of the building but saw none of the masked terrorists.

Wren's heart rate returned to the jackhammer-like pace from before as they neared the bottom of the stairwell, her feet finding the steps faster the closer they moved. *Let it be here. Please.* When she pivoted left, her heart leapt as the staircase continued, leading down into the utilities level. She fumbled for the radio, pulling the girls down the steps. "I found it. Staircase two."

Static flooded from the speaker when Wren removed her hand from the talk button, and the acoustics of the staircase bounced the harsh tones around the walls. She quickly lowered the volume, and a quivering voice replaced the harsh static. "*Help.*"

Wren stopped, listening to the same words repeat over and over like a parrot. "Please. Help. Help me. Please. *Someone's coming*."

Just before the last transmission ended, Wren heard the same foreign tongues from earlier. *Turn off the radio. Be quiet. Stay hidden.* But Wren's thoughts fell on deaf ears as the broadcaster continued their bumbling rant, heightening their hysteria with the growing voices of the subversives. "God, no, please, I don't want to die!"

The transmission ended with the ring of a gunshot, and Wren froze, the staircase echoing with the gunfire. She glanced back up the staircase to the doorway into the ER. The door swung open and was slammed into the wall by three rifle-wielding terrorists in masks, and the moment their eyes found Wren, she sprinted through the utilities staircase door.

Both girls struggled to keep pace with Wren, their tiny legs too short for her long strides. She stopped, lowering herself so they could both wrap their arms around her neck. "Hang on tight!" When she lifted them off the ground,

her left arm felt as though it would snap in half, but the growing voices of the terrorists in pursuit offered her the resolve to push on.

Wren pounded her heels into the floor, her arms and legs growing numb from the rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins. The heat from the equipment quickly soaked her in sweat as she weaved in and out of the large water heaters, humming generators, and buzzing electrical boxes.

Gunshots rang out, but the terrorist's foreign shouts failed to penetrate the raucous noise of the utilities. Emergency signs glowed on the walls, guiding her to salvation. More gunshots ripped through the air, and Wren shuddered with every percussive blast ricocheting off the heavy machinery.

Wren turned a corner, and the exit was in sight, a straight shot from her current location, less than twenty yards. The muscles in her legs burned as she used what energy remained to push herself the final stretch, giving it everything she had, her lungs on fire. Sparks flashed to her left in time with the sound of another gunshot, and she flinched, clutching Chloe tighter. She pivoted her hips, shifting her shoulder into the door's exit bar.

More bullets peppered the doorframe as sunlight flooded the utility room. Wren squinted from the brightness but refused to let up her pace and stumbled forward blindly. More shouts and bullets thundered behind her as her eyes adjusted to the light outside, the landscape slowly taking shape. She dashed behind cars in a parking lot, and for the first time looked behind her. The masked men had stopped at the door, screamed and fired into the air, then rushed back inside.

Wren collapsed to the pavement, Addison and Chloe falling with her, the flash of strength and stamina depleted. Both girls crawled over her, but Wren's mind was so fogged with exhaustion that their words were incomprehensible. She rested her head back against the hot metal of a sedan's door, feeling the heat of the sun beat upon her face. But the quiet was short-lived.

Explosives detonated in the building, splintering steel and concrete and shattering the glass windows, which transformed to shards of deadly rain. Wren grabbed both girls tight once more, feeling the rocking percussions shake the earth as if the very depths of hell had opened up. The explosions erupted quickly, like firecrackers. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!

A high-pitched whine filled Wren's ears as she choked on the thin layer of dust that rained over her and the girls. She wiped her face with her shoulder but only smeared the dust around. She glanced back at the hospital,

which was scarred and cracked from the detonations.

Smoke billowed from the broken windows, whose glass reflected the sun from the pavement. Fault lines ran up and down the side of the building like spider webs, some thick enough to lie inside. And then the building moaned, the cry bellowing from its core, and Wren knew it was coming down. “Girls, run!” Like the building, her voice cracked and faltered as the girls sprinted with her through the parking lot.

Thousands of tons of concrete and steel deteriorated to nothing but ash in a matter of seconds, the once-proud structure unleashing a cloud of dust that consumed cars, trees, and bushes. Wren glanced behind her, both Addison’s and Chloe’s arms stretched as she dragged them behind her, their short legs struggling to keep up with her pace. “Cover your mouths, and shut your eyes!” Wren kept her eyes on both girls as the dust cloud consumed them till she saw nothing but darkness. The only confirmation her girls were still with her was the touch of their hands.

6

Sirens. Screams. Shattering glass. Crying. Horns. Grinding metal. Confusion. Fear. All of it was too surreal. Whatever thin layer of order that kept the city from slipping into chaos had dissolved. Everywhere Wren looked, people were scrambling, running, hiding, looking for a safe place to wait it out.

Wren shook her hair, bits of dust from the hospital remains swirling from her head and shoulders to the ground. She walked down back streets, avoiding the chaos that was the main roads, her hand still clutching the small surgical knife. She caught a broken reflection of them passing an electronics store that had been looted, the shelves inside bare save for a few cords and smaller items.

She, Addison, Chloe were covered from head to toe in a layer of greyish-brown dust. They stumbled forward like ghosts in a dying city. Both her daughters hung their heads, their feet shuffling against the pavement, their small bodies exhausted and stretched beyond their limits.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” Chloe said.

“I’m tired,” Addison added.

“I know, but we have to keep moving.” *But to where?* They’d walked ten blocks since the hospital collapsed, and she hadn’t seen anyone resembling authority, only roaming crowds looking for safety they all hoped still existed.

The afternoon sky swarmed with helicopters above, the thump of their blades pestering Wren’s ears like mosquitoes in the summer. She looked up, and their small figures dotted the blue sky like flies on paper.

Wren brought the girls to a stop at a street corner, where remnants of car wrecks littered the roads, some of which still blocked traffic. Everywhere she looked, the power was still out. No street lights, no signs, no televisions—anything that was plugged into the grid was shut down. She checked her phone, praying for a message from either her son or her husband, but the signal on her phone had died. She snapped it shut, cursing under her breath. *Think.*

Intersection signs rested just above Wren's head, and she took a step back to get a better look, squinting from the glare of the sun. *West Fifteenth and South Throop Street.* Less than half a block, and they'd run into South Blue Island Avenue. A fire station was just up that road, where her husband spent his first three years in the department. With everything crumbling around her, she figured that was as safe a place as any to start.

Wren approached the station wearily. Both bay doors were open, their spaces void of the massive rescue vehicles that usually rested inside. Attached to the bay garages were the living quarters, a two-story brick building with Station No. 18 engraved in gold lettering across the front.

Wren brought the girls inside the bay doors, praying that someone was still here. She reached for the doorknob that led from the garage to the living quarters, but it was locked. She pounded the door with her palm, dust shaking from her sleeve with every strike. "Hello! I need help! Please! Hello!"

Every unanswered smack and scream only heightened Wren's desperation. It was as though she were slowly being lowered into icy water, paralyzed and unable to swim. The water was inching up her chest, its frozen needles pricking the tender flesh of her neck, now gliding up her chin, touching her lips, freezing her tongue, filling her nose and lungs, the ability to breathe slipping away.

The lock on the other side of the door clicked, and the door swung open, and Wren felt herself pulled from the icy waters. "Wren?" A heavyset, mustached, middle-aged man stood in the width of the doorway. "Is that you?"

Wren fumbled for words, but when they escaped her, she simply flung herself onto Nathan's chest and squeezed tight. When she finally pulled herself back, the girls were still huddled behind her, staring up at the large man. Wren shook her head, trying to compose herself. "Nathan, I'm sorry, it's just… I didn't have anywhere else to go."

Nathan stepped aside. "Are you guys all right?" He gingerly examined

the sling on Wren's arm as Wren trailed dusty footprints into the station.

Wren looked down at her arm, nearly forgetting the sling was there. "Yeah, I was at the hospital." The events blurred together in her mind. "We had a car accident when the power went out." The girls stuck close to her legs, and she tried peeling them off, but neither would budge. "My phone hasn't had any service, and it's… just been crazy out there."

Nathan took a seat next to the radio station. The sounds of emergency operators flooded through the speakers, and he turned the volume down. "Yeah, it's definitely been busy. I had to turn on the generators when the power went out. It's like that across the entire city, even stretching out into the suburbs."

So even if I went home, there still wouldn't be any power. Addison tugged at Wren's pant leg, more dust falling to the carpet. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Addison gestured for her to bend down then cupped her hand and whispered into Wren's ear. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Wren looked around as Nathan barked codes through his receiver, and spotted the stalls down the hallway. "Okay, go on, sweetie." She pointed Addison in the direction and sat Chloe on the couch, while she went into the kitchen and wet a cluster of paper towels. "Close your eyes, baby."

The paper towels only smeared the dust around, but after a few minutes Chloe's cheeks returned to the soft, puffy white flesh that Wren recognized. "There, that's better."

"I'm still dirty," Chloe said, looking down at her clothes and rubbing her hands up and down the front of her shirt. "When can we go home?"

Wren stroked Chloe's hair back behind her ears, little smears of dust still streaking down her forehead. "Soon, baby." It was a lie she desperately wanted to be true, but if there were more of whoever assaulted the hospital, she wasn't sure if there would be a home to return to or not.

Wren found a blanket and tucked both of them on the couch together, their eyelids fluttering open and closed. "You two stay here while I talk to Nathan, okay? I'll just be right over there." Two sleepy yawns and nods later, and the girls were passed out on the couch.

Nathan smiled as Wren walked over. "How old are they now?"

"Nine and five." Wren took a seat in the second chair next to the radio equipment, fiddling with her hands. "I haven't been able to reach Doug. Can you—"

"I've tried." Nathan twitched his mustache upon answering. He swiveled

in his chair, grabbing a notebook out of the drawer next to him. “But that doesn’t mean he’s not okay. It’s been crazy out there, and even the city’s backup generators have been wonky lately. I’m surprised the ones we had here started up.” He flipped through the pages of the notebook, and Wren leaned over to get a closer look.

Hundreds of lines of small-four digit numbers lined the paper in columns, followed by texts explaining what each of them meant. Nathan flushed a bashful grin. “I’m not the normal dispatcher here. I’m still just volunteering. Heck, I haven’t been called in since Doug worked here.”

“Do you know what’s going on out there? Have you heard anything?” Wren’s first-hand experiences had tainted her viewpoint. For all she knew, the masked men who’d destroyed the hospital were the only terrorists left in the city.

“It’s not good.” Nathan’s mustache lowered with his frown. He inched closer, the chair squeaking lightly under his girth. He hunched over and kept his voice down. “I have a friend who lives outside the city, who I met through my CB radio, and he says that whoever is doing this has been planning it for a while.” A grin crept up the side of his cheek, and he pulled a map from behind him. “Here, look. Every circle you see is a report of shootings where paramedics have been sent. Look at the sights.”

The red circles overlapped one another and nearly turned the entire map a shade of crimson. “Christ.” She traced her finger over the wrinkled fold lines, examining each location. “Industrial district. Transformer stations. Water pressure lines.” She looked up. “They’re all public utilities.”

“Exactly.” The fire volunteer poked his pudgy forefinger into the map. “You think this is some ragtag team of gangs and thugs?” He wagged his finger and shook his head. “And whatever they have planned next will be even worse.”

Wren collapsed back into the chair, her shoulders sagging, her mind racing through all of the possibilities. She shifted her gaze to her girls, asleep on the couch. “This is impossible.”

Nathan shrugged, returning to his work at the dispatch. “Oh, it’s entirely possible. And I’d bet my last dollar that all this is just a smokescreen for something bigger.”

Wren jolted, her pocket vibrating from her phone. She fumbled her fingers inside and quickly pulled the mobile out. Texts from her son pinged in, one after another, only one signal bar on her phone. She flipped through

them, reading them hurriedly.

"*Mom, help.*" "*I'm stuck.*" "*Can't move.*" "*An explosion.*" "*Please. Help me.*"

Wren covered her mouth, tears cresting at the bottom of her eyes. She answered quickly before her signal was lost again. "*Where are you?*" She gripped the phone with both hands, her eyes locked on the screen as she waited for any type of reply. The one signal bar on her phone disappeared, and with it, her son. "No." The cold waters of panic flowed through her once again. She rushed around the station, holding her phone, cursing, praying, thrusting the device in different directions in hopes of finding the signal once more. But after exhausting the area, her hands fell to her sides. *My son.*

Flashes of atrocities she'd only seen in her nightmares harassed her mind. Had the group that caused all of this taken him? Was he hurt? *Stop it.* The texts meant he was still alive, and she had to find him. She rushed over to Nathan, who was still busy relaying updated information to units out in the field. "You guys can lock in on cellular signals, right?"

"Um, yeah." His neck wiggled back and forth in rhythm with his uncertainty. "I mean, it depends if the phone is on and how many of the towers are still operational."

"I need you to find a phone for me. The number is four, seven, nine, eight, three, nine, one."

Nathan hesitated, the radio buzzing with chatter. "Wren, I'm sure Doug is fine, and I don't know if I'm even authorized to do this, and it's getting pretty busy—"

"Nathan, it's Zack. He's in trouble. He's stuck out there alone in all this." Wren gripped Nathan's arm. "*Please.* I have to find him."

More radio chatter blared from the speakers, and Nathan's expression softened as he reached for a pen and paper, jotting down the first three digits of her son's cell. "What was the last part again?"

Wren's eyes glistened wetly, and she repeated it while she white-knuckled the back of Nathan's chair, nearly tearing through the cloth with her nails. Once the numbers were punched in his computer system, the screen lit up with pings on a gridded map of the city. "It'll take a minute to hone in, and like I said, that's only if all of the towers are still operational." He smudged a fat fingerprint on the screen. "See there? That one is down. And this one."

Wren drew in a breath. *Let me find him.* The computer pinged but then

flashed an error message, and Wren's heart sank to the pit of her stomach. "What happened?" The words escaped her mouth like the final wish of an inmate on death row.

Nathan clicked the message, enlarging a portion of the map. "Well, it looks like we have a general location, but the program is having trouble locking it down."

A ray of light broke through the wall of cemented fear surrounding Wren's mind. She pushed Nathan aside, examining the location then finding the area on the map, and her brief moment of hope was crushed by a wave of realization. "Oh god."

Wren backed away from the screen, the map slipping from her fingers and falling to the floor. Nathan rolled forward, picking up the map, making the connection between the computer's coordinates and the red circles. Zack was in the industrial district.

7

Wren tucked the girls into Nathan's cot, the two of them still holding on to each other tightly, neither letting the other out of their sight. She kissed their foreheads gently. "I love you. You two will be safe here. I promise."

"Mommy, don't go," Chloe said, pulling the sheet up snug against her face.

Wren brushed the bangs out of her eyes and felt her heart crack at those words. "I have to, baby." She gave Chloe's arm a reassuring squeeze. "But I will come back for you."

"With Daddy?" Addison asked, mimicking the same motions as her younger sister.

Wren nodded and kissed them once more, catching the lump in her throat before it shook the confidence in her voice. "I love the two of you more than anything. Now, be good for Uncle Nathan, okay?"

"We will," they said, then huddled close to one another. Wren turned off the light on her way out and left a slight crack in the door.

Nathan waited for her in the kitchen, still shaking his head in disapproval. "This isn't a good idea, Wren. Let me send someone out there to check."

Wren snatched the truck keys from the counter and tucked them in her pocket then picked up the box of medical supplies Nathan had put together. "You've been trying for the past thirty minutes. I'm not going to sit around and wait for someone to go and get my son when I know where he is."

"But you *don't* know where he is." Nathan pointed back to his dispatcher equipment, frowning. "That area is three square miles. You think you can

find him in all of this? With what's happening out there? You've heard the calls I'm dealing with; it's Armageddon out there!"

"I have to try!" Wren slapped the words in Nathan's face so hard that he took a step back. Heat flushed off Wren's cheeks, and she felt her entire body grow hot. She gritted her teeth, gnawing the sour anger in her mouth. "I will not leave him out there alone. He's scared. He's hurt. He needs help." The resolve broke, and grief twisted Wren's face. "I have to try."

Nathan hugged her, rubbing her back. "I know." He looked down at her and grinned. "Just remember that whatever you do to the truck, I'm liable for."

Wren wiped the sorrow from her eyes and smiled. "Yeah, I'll try to bring it back with a full tank too." Nathan helped her out to the EMS vehicle parked behind the station and loaded the medical kit in the back. "Thank you, Nathan."

"I'll keep trying Doug." He opened the driver door and picked up the receiver on the radio, adjusting the dial. "I'm going to put you on channel nine so you can listen to what's happening out there. If I'm able to get a unit over to your son's location, I'll let you know through here." He placed the receiver in her palm and closed her fingers around it. "Be careful out there."

"I will." And with that, Wren climbed inside and put the fire station in her rearview, her eyes flitting to it long after it could no longer be seen. She kept off the main roads, following the path that Nathan suggested, and quickly discovered that the sight of the emergency vehicle painted a target on her back for anyone she passed. She kept the accelerator floored, only breaking for turns or traffic congestion. She twisted the grip around the steering wheel, the leather creaking back and forth. Her concentration split between the road and the radio, the chatter buzzing mechanically in their codes and emergency service nomenclature.

The deeper into the outskirts of the city she drove, the more decrepit her surroundings became. Mobs beat one another, and the random pop of gunshots jolted her with every unsuspecting explosion. All around the city was crumbling.

Wren cut hard on the next left, tires screeching as she refused to slow her pace on the final stretch to the outskirts of where the computer program had located Zack. She weaved around broken and abandoned cars, mounting the sidewalk, her arms and shoulders shaking from the vibrations of the tumultuous ride.

The broken houses she passed slowly faded into industrial complexes, many of which had been abandoned or shut down. Columns of smoke rose farther down the road, the faint glimmer of flashing red lights fought against the bright afternoon sun, and she hastened her pace.

Streams of water blasted from fire hoses onto rising flames that flickered and waved as high as skyscrapers. The hoses did little to calm the raging inferno as one of the smaller structures to the left collapsed. The flames reflected in Wren's eyes as she moved past the carnage. *Zack wasn't in there. He wasn't in there.*

"Wren." The radio under the dash crackled. "Wren, can you hear me?"

Wren fumbled with the receiver, dropping it on the floorboard before scooping it back up. "Nathan? I'm here." Her fingers clutched the radio like a footing on the side of cliff, her one lifeline as she dangled on the rocks, clinging for dear life.

"One of the cell towers came back online, and I've got a better read on Zack's location. Keep heading north on the road you're on, and look for a company called Mining Limited. It was shut down a few years ago, but the leasing information says it's currently empty. That's where the software narrowed its search."

"Thank you." Wren floored the gas pedal, the engine roaring. Her eyes scanned the signage running along fences on the side of the street until she spotted the mining company. The tires screeched to a halt as Wren mounted the curb of the sidewalk. She had half her body already out the door when she remembered the medical bag Nathan had packed. She snatched it from the backseat and sprinted blindly for the old factory's entrance, which was encased with a rusted fence.

"Zackary!" Wren scaled the old fence, struggling with only one good arm, the metal wiring rough and coarse against her skin, her hands and feet finding what holes they could on her way over, the medical bag slung over her shoulder. She twisted over the top fence railing then landed awkwardly on the cracked parking lot pavement and broke out into a sprint toward the building. Her feet pounded against the concrete, her mind and body pushing beyond the fatigue of the day, past her own limits. She skidded to a stop at the first pair of factory doors she saw, which were chained shut. She pulled, pushed, punched, and kicked but did nothing more than rattle the rusted gatekeeper refusing her entry. She pulled her hair back in frustration, digging her nails into the hard flesh over her skull. "Zaaaaaaaaack!"

The scream was bloodcurdling, Wren's throat raw and cracked. She looked up to the broken windows, too high for her to scale. She sprinted to the side, running down the shadowed portion of the building that blocked the hot summer sun, each door she passed locked with steel chains. "Zack!"

"Mom."

Wren stopped, her feet sliding in the loose, broken gravel. She clutched the chained doors, her ears pressed close to the crack in the middle. "Zack, honey, where are you? Zack!" She patted the walls with her palms, the brick of the building cool from the lack of sun. She jogged to the next pair of doors. Those were locked as well, but the chains sagging around the door handles offered some give. She slid the medical bag in first. She gripped the handle firmly, pulling backward with her right arm, the crack between the two doors widening with each strained pull. She thrust her left shoulder inside, ducking under the chains pulled tight across the narrow opening. Her stomach and back scraped against the sides of the door, and she drew in a breath, her face reddening from the tight space, and with one final push leapt inside, her wounded left arm smacking against the pavement, sending a thousand tiny knives through her body. Wren forced herself off the cold, dirty floor, shoving her pain aside.

"Zack?" The acoustics of the building echoed Wren's voice high into the ceiling. She squinted into the darkness and stumbled forward, groping for the medical bag. Her fingers found the cloth then the zipper, and she rummaged with her hand to the bottom until she found the flashlight.

One click illuminated the darkness. Wren drifted the oblong orb across the space inside, which revealed large cylinder vats, rusted tables, and overturned chairs. "Zack, where are you?"

"Mom."

Wren pivoted left, the cast of light following her. She hurried forward, sifting through the darkness, repeating her son's name over and over. Each time he answered, he sounded weak, tired. She rounded one of the large vats and saw that two had collapsed on each other, their rusted steel twisted, bent in angles that jutted out in every direction. She shined the light underneath, trying to find a way through. "Zack!"

"I'm here."

The light reflected off a shoe to Wren's left. She sprinted farther around, seeing an outstretched hand, fingers wiggling in the flashlight's beam. Wren dropped to the floor, smooshing her cheeks against the dirtied concrete,

shining the light on Zack's squinting face. Zack's face, hair, and clothes were covered in dust, the whites of his eyes shining back at her brightly. Wren ran the light down his body and saw his leg was pinned behind him under a load of steel. It looked broken, but he was alive. "Are you hurt?"

"I can't move my right leg." Tears formed in his eyes. "Mom, my friends are under there, and I can't hear them." His words grew thick toward the end, and tears burst from the corners of his eyes, darkening the dust on his cheeks as he rested his head on the floor, sobbing.

Wren shifted the light to the wreckage behind her son, knowing that anyone underneath the tons of steel was already gone. "It's okay. Let's just focus on trying to get you out first, okay? One thing at a time. I'm going to take a look at the damage. I'll be right back."

Both vats had collapsed in on themselves, and the cylindrical structures weren't as much of a problem as the supporting beams that had twisted and tangled underneath, forming a jungle gym of rusty, broken steel. Toward the back, she saw a puddle of blood seeping out from under the heart of the collapse.

"Mom?" Zack asked, his voice still thickly coated with the glaze of fear.

"I'm here, Zack." Wren shut her eyes, fighting the cold shiver running down her back. *Just get him out.* Her spine stiffened, and she shined the light on every portion of the wreckage that she could spy. It was a mess. Any time she thought she would be able to move a piece of steel to give Zack the space he needed to crawl out, she found another bar tangled with it that she knew, if moved, would only worsen her son's predicament. *So don't remove it.* She shined the light on a path to Zack's leg. It was tight, but she could reach it.

Wren flattened herself against the floor, Zack squinting into the light. "I'm gonna get you out of here, honey. Just hang tight. I'm going to be right back."

"Mom, hurry." Zack's words were strained, the panic of the situation finally settling in. "I don't want to die."

"I won't let that happen." Wren grabbed his hand, her son clutching back like he did when he was boy. "I'm getting you out." She gave a squeeze then exited the building, barely wedging through the chained door, and sprinted for the truck.

The flames down the street still roared, with the firefighters doing their best to keep the inferno from spreading. She flung the trunk of the SUV open and peeled off the floor cover, exposing a spare tire, tire iron, and jack. She

ripped the jack from its casing, leaving the trunk open in her haste.

Wren was squeezing through the doors when she saw a group of trucks and SUVs speeding down the roadway. She squinted, expecting the flashing lights of police and emergency vehicles, but saw none. Instead, the closer the caravan approached, the more she could make out some of the men in the back of the truck, wielding rifles and wearing black masks.

Wren disappeared inside the factory, the jack clanking against the concrete as she flopped to the floor next to it, the doors swinging shut behind her. Her fingers fumbled over the cool chunk of iron and she tucked it under her arm, the flashlight jerking in all directions as she sprinted back to where Zack lay trapped.

“Hang on, baby.” Wren’s hands shook as she set the flashlight down, angling it to illuminate her path along the metal death trap. She lifted her leg, stepping over the first beam, then was forced to immediately duck below a second. When her foot hit the floor, she had to twist her ankle awkwardly as the jack tucked under her right arm knocked against one of the mangled beams.

The trek was slow going, Wren’s body contorting in the same extreme angles as the twisted wreckage. The cloth of her pants and shirt tore on the sharper edges, and more than once she felt the sharp pinch of tearing flesh, quickly followed by a warm trickle of blood.

Zack’s leg was finally within reach, along with the beam that pinned it down. Wren’s legs trembled as she struggled to keep the strength to steady herself while shoving the jack under the beam. “Zack, once I get this up and off of you, crawl forward as fast as you can.” She looked to the thick beams that crisscrossed all around her, praying that her calculation of the shift in weight wouldn’t bring the entire structure down upon her head.

Wren flattened the jack as low as it would allow her and rolled it under the beam, the two pieces of metal scraping against one another, each offering their own whining disdain of the other. She gave the jack a few more good shoves, making sure it was secure, then twisted the handle into place and pumped.

The iron handle could only move a few inches up and down in the narrow space, smacking against the metal bars, Wren banging her knuckles bloody with each hastened pump. But slowly, the steel beam lifted off her son’s leg.

Zack moaned, and Wren wasn’t sure if it was from pain or release. The beams cast shadows all around her from the flashlight, and it was hard to see

the extent of the wound as the steel lifted, but once it was high enough, she watched the mangled leg wiggle forward and heard the scrape of Zack's clothes and body against the floor. "I'm out!"

The beams around Wren gave a dissatisfied creak, and she quickly slithered through the narrow openings and harshly angled gaps, feeling the shift of the unstable metals around her. The first steel beam gave way toward the middle, a sharp din ringing through the factory when she was only a few feet away from escape. Her hands clawed at the beams around her for support, her feet frantically slipping off of the angled steel, her elbows, knees, and head smacking against the metals on her manic escape.

The harsh din of collapse echoed louder, and through the ringing collision of steel, she heard Zack screaming, telling her to hurry. The beams shifted, but safety was less than a foot away now. Just as one of the steel rods to her right jerked sharply toward her head but stopped less than an inch from her eye, she used what strength was left in her legs through the opening, a sharp tear opening on her right thigh as she collapsed to safety on the floor next to the flashlight, which illuminated the mangled structure's destruction.

Wren lay back on the ground, her right hand fingering the warm blood fresh on her thigh. Any movement triggered a hot burn that rippled through her leg, but she forced herself to stand. "Zack?" She grabbed the flashlight and saw her son, red-faced, dirty, sweating, and staring at the mangled carnage that was his shin.

She collapsed to the floor next to Zack, each of them squeezing one another tightly, their light sobs echoing off one another. When she pulled his head back, her anger toward his situation returned. "What were you doing here? Do you know what's happening?"

"I'm sorry, Mom. We used to come here all the time to hang out. I didn't know this was going to happen. None of us did. I'm sorry." Zack leaned his wet, sobbing face into her shoulder. "I'm so sorry." He clawed at her arm, his body shaking with every wave of grief that ran through him.

Wren brushed her fingers through his hair, hushing him, glad for the simple fact that he was alive. "It's okay. But we need to get out of here and get your leg taken care of." Wren had never excelled in her biology classes but knew that they needed to take care of the injury quickly. He could be bleeding internally or god knew what else. Priority one was getting him out of there.

Zack lifted his arm over Wren's shoulder and let out a cry as they pushed

him off the floor together, his right leg dangling limply between them. Her son was taller than she was now and had a good thirty pounds on her, and with her own leg still dripping blood, each step forward forced her to extend what little energy remained in her body.

The flashlight wobbled back and forth in her hand with the sling, the shaky spotlight guiding them back to the doors she had managed to squeeze through.

"Wait, wait, wait." Zack stopped them. "Where are we going?"

Wren motioned the light over to the doors. "Out of here."

Zack gestured behind them. "There's already an open door in the back. It's covered up by some old equipment, but it's there."

The pair of doors that were chained together rattled loudly, sunlight breaking through the cracks and flooding the factory floor, accompanied by the thick foreign tongue that Wren had heard at the hospital.

Wren flicked the light off, casting the two of them back into darkness. "We need to move. Hurry!" She kept her voice a whisper. She turned them around and limped forward as fast as they could move together.

"Mom, what's going on? Who is that?" The panic in Zack's voice returned, and the banging doors and rattling chains grew louder with every step.

"Just keep moving, baby. And keep quiet." Wren found the wall, and they used it to guide them to the rear of the building where Zack and his friends had snuck in. *His friends. And what's left of them will rot under that steel. Their parents will never see them again, never hear them speak, never feel the warmth of their faces.*

A loud clang sounded, and Wren turned around to see sunlight penetrating the dark facility. Two shadowed figures stepped inside, one of them barking at the other like a dog. Wren hastened her son's pace, practically dragging him deeper into the darkness.

"Right here," Zack whispered, pointing to a faintly darker rectangle.

The voices of the terrorists echoed louder, and when Wren fumbled for the door, the lights from their flashlights kicked up, sweeping the factory's landscape. She shouldered the door open, quickly getting both of them inside. "Where now?" The room was pitch black, and Wren feared moving too quickly and triggering a noise that would give away their position.

"Just keep going straight," Zack said, his voice still a wheezy whisper.

Light shone through the cracks in the doorframe as they shuffled toward

freedom. “Hurry, Zack.” They double-timed it, limping forward faster and faster, Wren’s heart beating out of her chest, her mind aware of every pain radiating in her body. *Just keep going.*

They thudded against the door Zack described, and Wren thrust it open, sunlight blinding both of them. Zack stopped to catch his breath, but Wren pushed him forward. “We can’t stop, baby. Let’s go.”

But when Wren’s vision adjusted to the light, she saw just how bad Zack’s injury was. The jeans were soaked and darkened around the area where the beam had pinned him, and while Zack could bend the knee, she noticed his foot hung loosely from the ankle and that his shin shifted slightly to the left. She looked to his face and could see the pained effort as he gritted his teeth with every step.

Wren stopped at the corner of the factory, knowing they’d have to pass by the exposed doors the terrorists had entered, and made sure the coast was clear. Gunshots sounded toward the emergency vehicles where the fire still raged, but her vehicle remained parked and unharmed.

They were forced to go all the way around the gated entrance, Zack too weak to climb the fence where she had entered. The moment her hand touched the passenger-side handle of the EMS vehicle, a scream pierced the open air behind them.

Wren turned to the sight of two masked men sprinting in their direction. “Hurry, Zack!” She opened the door and threw her son inside. She slammed the door shut, running around the front of the vehicle as gunshots thundered behind her. She jumped inside and started the car, slammed the shifter into drive, and floored the gas pedal as bullets thrummed against the vehicle, shattering the back passenger-side windows. Wren thrust her son’s head down, keeping one hand on the wheel and ducking herself.

Another round of gunfire shattered the rear window, and Wren did her best to keep both eyes on the road, swerving left and right to avoid the machine-gunfire. She blew past stop signs and intersections, the wind whipping through the shattered window, flinging her hair in all directions. The speedometer pushed sixty, but she didn’t slow her pace, putting as much distance as she could between her and the blazing hell behind her.

8

The radio in the truck spit sporadic crackles and pops as Wren twisted the dial, trying every channel to get back in touch with Nathan, or anyone. “Hello? Nathan, can you hear me?” But every time she took her hand off the receiver, all that answered was the steady buzz of static.

Wren viciously slammed the receiver against the dashboard and punched the steering wheel as Zack winced from shifting in his seat. She looked from the empty fuel gauge glaring back at her over to her son, who brushed glass from the shattered window off of his lap, and gave his hand a squeeze.

Zack laid his head against the headrest, closing his eyes. His face was slick with sweat, and Wren worried that he may have had a fever, or perhaps he was just delirious with pain. He needed a doctor, and with the seven circles of hell surrounding them, she wasn’t sure if that help could be found.

“Can’t we just go to the hospital?” Zack asked.

“It’s gone, Zack.” Wren wasn’t sure why she told him, but she hoped that he was old enough to take the news, as she was desperate to share the burdens of the world with someone. “What’s happening out there is bad. Your sisters are with Nathan at a fire station, and no one knows when this is all going to be over.”

Zack glanced down at his leg, a quietness overtaking his eyes, his body consumed with stillness, and Wren watched his eyes as he processed her words. She gently grabbed his arm. “Right now there isn’t anywhere that’s safe. I know it’s hard, but you need to understand what’s happening out there. You need to know what we could face. There is nothing more important to

me right now than protecting our family, but we have to be smart while we're out here, okay?"

Zack gave a quick nod. "Yeah. Okay."

"W—n." The radio crackled spontaneously, spraying a rush of static then incomprehensible chatter. "Wre- -r- -ou th-re?"

Wren reached for the receiver. "Nathan? Yes, I'm here. Can you hear me? Nathan? Are the girls okay?" She lifted her finger off the receiver, both she and Zack leaning closer to the device, waiting. Listening.

"Yeah, it's me," Nathan replied. "The girls are fine. Are you all right? Did you get Zack?"

Wren exhaled, smiling. "Yes, I found him, but his leg is broken. I need to get him to a doctor." And as if on cue, Zack winced. "He's in pretty bad shape."

"Let me see what I can find."

"Hurry." Wren set the receiver down and glanced out the empty space where the passenger-side window once rested. She had pulled off onto a random highway when the truck sputtered to a stop. She knew she was south of the city, and judging from the worn-down houses and open fields, it was farm country.

"Mom?" Zack asked, snapping Wren back to reality.

"What is it?"

"I know I shouldn't have been out there. I shouldn't have left school. I'm sorry."

"Absent ten times this semester?" Wren shook her head, her voice exasperated. "What the hell were you even doing out there? It's dangerous any day, let alone one like this. What is going on with you? You never talk to your father and me, and you've been elusive and defensive when we try to communicate with you. I know a lot of it is hormones, but you've got to let us in a little bit."

Zack kept his head down, his eyes on the floorboard. "I know you and Dad are getting a divorce."

Wren shook her head, floored at how her son could even know something like that. "What are you talking about?" She'd spoken to no one except her lawyer about it. She hadn't told her parents or her sister. It was something she'd kept to herself for the past three months.

"You guys don't talk to each other anymore. I can see it at the dinner table and how late you stay at work. You guys are barely ever in the house

together.” Zack looked up from his feet. “Why?”

Wren was on her heels, unsure of how to proceed, her mind drifting to the divorce papers she’d planned on giving Doug later that night, before all of this. Before the world went to shit. “I didn’t realize you’d been paying that close attention.”

“Addy and Chloe know something is up too. They don’t talk to you about it, but they talk to me.” Zack shifted uncomfortably, the lines on his face accentuated by the dirt and soot smeared on his cheeks. “Is it true?”

The hazel eyes staring back at Wren were wide, and though Zack was almost fully grown, easing into his father’s features and shoe size, he looked at her like Addison and Chloe had in the hospital. “Zack, your father and I—”

“Wren, are you still there? Wren?”

Wren snatched the receiver back up and offered a relieved sigh, thankful for the interruption. “Yeah, I’m here.” Zack sank back into his chair and looked away.

“I’ve found Doug. He just finished up with a fire at the downtown circle. He’s bringing an ambulance to you with a paramedic team to work on Zack’s leg. Then he’s going to come and get the girls.”

Zack turned back to the radio at the mention of his father, and the news brought a mixture of anxiety and relief for Wren. “Thanks, Nathan. For everything.”

“Just hang tight. He has your GPS coordinates and should be there in fifteen minutes, assuming he doesn’t have any problems getting to you. I’ll be on here if you need anything.”

The signal ended, and Wren set the receiver back on the hook. She looked at Zack, who still had his eyebrows raised, wanting his question answered. “Zack, your father and I have had some problems lately. He knows that, and so do I. We never meant for that to have an effect on you and the girls, although at some point I think we both knew it was going to happen.”

Wren rubbed her brow, bits of dirt and grime falling. She felt the grainy particles on her fingertips, and the frustration at the forefront of her thoughts pounded her mind like a hammer on an anvil. “Your father and I have a lot to talk about.” She kept her voice low but firm. “And that will be a decision between the two of us. But regardless of what happens with that, I promise you that nothing will stop us from loving you and your sisters. Nothing.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Zack rested his head back, reabsorbing himself into the cone of adolescence that he’d become so accustomed to in such times,

ignoring everything around him.

Wren fell against the back of her seat, closing her eyes, but found them opened every few seconds to check the clock on the dash, which seemed to be frozen as the minutes crawled by.

After the thousandth glance at the clock, she saw running headlights on a vehicle up the road. Zack tried getting out of the car but stopped once the pain from his leg thrust him back into his seat. Wren placed her hand over his chest. “Stay here.”

Wren climbed out of the car, making her way around the engine and to the side of the road to get a better look. She squinted, the heat coming off the road giving the vehicle heading toward them a hazy, wavering image. *It could be anyone.* Her mind drifted back to the masked men she saw in the SUVs and trucks, armed to the teeth.

But when the flashing lights flickered on top of the vehicle, all of the tension coiled up in her body released. *Doug.* She waved her arms, moving down the side of the road to grab the ambulance’s attention. It slowed to a crawl and pulled in right behind the EMS truck.

The back doors of the ambulance burst open before it came to a stop, and Doug jogged over, his clothes dirtied and dark with sweat, a breathlessness in his voice when he spoke. “Are you guys all right?” He stopped at Zack, clutching his son in both arms, Zack squeezing back just as hard.

Wren walked to him, hesitant, the coldness of their last interaction still fresh in her mind. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, in the end glad he was here and glad he was alive.

“Nathan said he’d been trying to reach me all day, but the damn radios have been so shoddy that we’ve barely been able to keep in touch with our own people.” Doug stepped aside as two other paramedics wheeled a stretcher over and started inspecting Zack’s leg.

“Doug,” one of the paramedics asked, “mind giving me a hand here?”

“Sure.” Doug helped Zack up with one easy lift under his son’s shoulder, transferring him over to the gurney. Zack yelped in pain, but Doug made the move quickly. He gripped his son firmly, his tone a blend of father and firefighter. “We’re going to have to cut the pants open and take a look.”

Zack nodded, his breathing accelerated. One of the paramedics brought a blade up from the hem of the pant leg to the knee, splitting the jeans in two and exposing the black-and-blue skin, the bone of his shin dented and leg oozing blood. Zack looked away immediately, and Doug slid on a glove.

“We need to link an IV and set the bone.” Doug ran his fingers up and down Zack’s leg with a light touch, applying pressure along the joint to check for any other fractures. Every wince from Zack told Doug all he needed to know. “Feels like a clean break.”

The other paramedic gathered the necessary devices, cleaning Zack’s arm for the IV needle. A fresh round of sweat burst from Zack’s face, his breathing accelerated. “Dad, I—”

“You can do this, Zack,” Doug said, taking the brace and adjusting it to fit his son’s leg. “It’s going to hurt, but only for a little bit. We need to stabilize it so there isn’t any more damage to your tissue. I’m going to do it on three, okay? One.” But before Doug reached two, he snapped the bone back into place. Zack wailed in pain, falling back onto the stretcher, and passed out.

Wren rushed to her son’s aid, gripping the gurney’s railing. “Christ, Doug, you could’ve—”

“The sooner it happened, the better,” Doug snapped, wrapping Zack’s leg in the brace. He stopped and let the paramedic take over, brushing the hair that had matted on his son’s forehead. Zack’s head lolled back and forth in a pain-induced haze. He looked back to Wren, his features softening. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine.” Wren offered a weak smile, taking Zack’s hand, giving it a kiss, and holding it all the way to the ambulance, where the three climbed inside. The second paramedic rode in the passenger seat and the other drove.

The ride back into the city felt long, the ambulance swaying back and forth. It was the first time they’d been in the same room for longer than two minutes for more than a month. “Nathan tell you about the girls?”

Doug nodded, his eyes still on Zack, twirling the gold band on his left ring finger around the dirty, greasy stains. “Yeah, he told me.”

“And you know what happened with the hospitals? With everything that his friend told him?”

Doug laughed, shaking his head. “Christ, Wren, you don’t actually believe him, do you? His theories? His crazy-ass friends that live out in the middle of nowhere with their… whatever the hell they have? Everything I’ve heard so far said that this is limited to Chicago. There haven’t been any reports anywhere else around the country of similar events happening. This will blow over.”

Wren nodded, trying to shake loose the thoughts that had consumed her

since the moment she saw those men at the hospital. The way they killed without hesitation or explanation. While she hoped that Doug was right, she knew that Nathan had one thing nailed down: whoever these people were had been planning this for a very long time. “Where are we going?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“Since the hospital’s collapse, the medical unit downtown has been relocating to smaller hospitals. We’re heading to one of the Shriners on the east side of the city. From what we’ve heard on the radio, it’s still standing. We’re going to pick up the girls on the way, along with Steve’s wife and son.” He gestured to the driver.

“Shouldn’t we get him to a hospital first?” Wren asked, taking Zack’s limp hand.

“He’s stable for now, and Nathan’s station is on the way. It won’t take long.” Doug let go of the gold band around his finger and hung his head. “So, you still want to talk?” He glanced up, the stoic expression offering no hint of what *he* wanted.

“Not now, Doug.” Wren rubbed her eyes, trying to ease the rising pressure in her skull. The last thing on her mind was her marriage. “We get the girls, we get him patched up, and then we go home. We can talk then.”

“Sounds like the same record I’ve heard before.”

Wren leaned forward, her face flushed red and her words a harsh whisper. “Well, I’m sorry that I don’t want to talk about our marriage problems with our son passed out with a broken leg and our youngest daughter with a broken arm, huddled in a fire station with her sister while the entire city burns around us.” She cocked her head to the side, nodding sarcastically. “Yeah, I think I’d like to skip that.”

“Then when?” Doug matched her tone and resentment, his fingers curling to fists. “Every time I bring it up, you shut me down, so when?” He tossed his hands in the air, exasperated. “I can’t keep going on like this. You know what the first thing I felt when I saw you on the side of the road was? Anxiety. It wasn’t relief, it wasn’t happiness, it was anxiousness. I saw you and thought, ‘God, I wonder if she’ll even acknowledge that I’m here. I wonder if she’ll even be glad I showed up!’” Doug raised his voice then slammed his back into the wall behind him, crossing his arms, retreating within himself.

Wren held back the tears that demanded to be shown. She wasn’t going to let him have that. Not here, and not now. She spoke her words slowly, meticulously. “Well, I’m sorry I made you *uncomfortable*. And I’m sorry that

my presence caused your delicate constitution to fall under added stress. I have been in a car wreck, shot at, and watched all three of my children nearly die at the hands of madmen, but by all means, let me make you feel *better*." She spit the last words with a sting of venom and leaned back, wanting to escape through the walls behind her. The rest of the trip was silent, and Wren's mind was splintered with the stress of the day along with how her marriage had become so jaded, pinpointing the moment when she stopped loving her husband.

9

Wren's head jerked up from her shoulder, where it had drifted off to rest, her body taking advantage of the lull in activity to shut down, doing its best to try to recover her nerves.

"Doug," Steve said, the ambulance squeaking to a stop. "We might have a problem here.

Wren squeezed past Doug, investigating the cause of their delay. But whatever she could have imagined in her nightmares paled in comparison to Chicago's skyline. Columns of smoke rose into the sky, glows of fire battling the sun for attention as the beautiful architecture she'd fallen in love with as a college student burned to nothing. A distant explosion caused all of them to jolt and she looked back to Zack who still lay unconscious.

Doug reached for the radio, scanning the channels. "Nathan, can you hear me? Nathan, this is Doug. Come back." Only the rush of white noise answered.

Traffic was roadblocked in all outbound directions from the city, people laying on horns on the highway and overpasses, anger and desperation reaching a crescendo as everyone clamored over one another to escape the chaos of Chicago. Wren clutched Zack's arm, feeling the warmth of her child as he lay still on the cot. She drew in a breath, a glimmer of strength returning with it. "How far are we from the station?"

Ken, the second paramedic in the passenger seat spoke up. "Ten miles, at least." His gaze was locked on the chaos in their path.

"We don't stop," Wren said. "For anything. You turn the sirens and lights

on, and you keep driving. Whatever you have to do."

"I'd buckle up back there. And make sure Zack is secure." Steve shifted into drive, flipping on the lights. Doug climbed back with Wren, helping strap Zack down. The sirens wailed from the roof, and Steve jolted them forward.

Wren white-knuckled the railing on Zack's stretcher, Steve maneuvering the ambulance in and out of traffic. She heard him try the radio one more time, but the efforts were fruitless. Wren forced her concentration on the fire station. The girls were still alive. She could feel it. *I know they're alive.*

"Hang on!" Steve swerved the ambulance hard right, swinging everyone inside. Wren lifted from her seat as they mounted the curb. Smacks and pops echoed through the ambulance wall at her back, and Wren squinted her eyes shut, hoping that whatever they hit wasn't living.

By the time they arrived at the fire station, Wren had to peel her fingers off the railing of Zack's stretcher one by one. She was the first out of the back doors, rushing to the station's entrance. "Addison! Chloe!" Nathan stepped out of the door in the garage, and two small faces poked out behind him.

Tears burst from Wren's eyes as she stumbled the rest of the way and squeezed them so tight she thought they might burst. She kissed their cheeks, running her hands through her hair. "Thank god you two are all right."

Doug came running up behind her, and the moment the girls saw him, they rushed to their father. "Daddy!" they screamed collectively, and he engulfed them in his arms, showering them with kisses. "We missed you!"

"I missed you too." Doug carried them back over to the door and set them down inside.

"How's your arm, Chloe?"

Chloe lifted her cast, examining the hard plaster around her arm, and shrugged. "I can't really feel anything anymore."

Nathan stepped forward, between Doug and Wren. "The equipment went out about an hour ago." His face was covered in sweat, and dark blotches spotted his chest and underarms. "I haven't been able to hear from anyone. I wasn't sure what to do, I trie—"

Wren touched his arm, and his rambling stopped. "Thank you for watching our girls." The words relaxed him, his shoulders sagging. She stepped out of the garage, the bustle of the city roaring in defiance of the abuse it was enduring.

The thin veil of protection and civility had been ripped to shreds. A hot wind brushed Wren's face and brought with it the din of car alarms, the crash of windows, the echoed terror of gunshots and screams. She turned back to Doug, Nathan, and the girls. "We have to get out of here."

Doug looked to the girls. "You two go inside while Mommy and I talk, okay?"

Addison quickly wrapped herself around her father's leg, clinging on for dear life. "You're not going to leave again, are you?" Chloe immediately mimicked her sister, compelled by the same anxiety, clutching Doug's other leg.

Doug knelt, gently peeling both the girls off him. "You two listen to me. I'm not going anywhere." He kissed both of their foreheads. "Now, go inside so the adults can talk." He gave them a push through the door, and Nathan, Wren, and Doug circled together. "So, what do you have in mind, Wren?"

"We fuel up and head west," Wren answered. "Aurora, Rockford, as far as we can get without stopping." She looked back over to the ambulance. "Or the first working hospital we see to get Zack's leg looked at."

"What about Steve's wife and son?" Doug asked. "They're not west."

"We split up, then. He goes and gets his kids with one of the trucks, and we take the ambulance."

"Wren, we can't just leave him," Doug said.

"He'll have a vehicle, and it'll be fueled; what more do you want us to give him, Doug? I understand him needing to go and get his family, but I'm not taking ours deeper into that madness than we already have." Wren paced back and forth, convincing herself that this was what needed to be done, regardless of how anyone perceived it. "He'll understand that."

"Doug!" Steve stepped out of the back of the ambulance and jogged over. "Zack's awake. He's asking for you guys."

Doug eyed Wren, and she saw his hesitation. He didn't want to leave the man behind and let him risk going it alone, but he promised his girls. *He promised.*

"Thanks." Doug placed his hand on Steve's shoulder. "Hey, let me talk to you for a second."

"No, it's okay," Steve said. "I heard what Wren said. She's right. I won't make you guys follow me back into the city. It's too dangerous." He nodded to the trucks in the back. "I'll take one of the truck's. I'll be all right. You take care of your family, Doug."

“Thank you,” Wren said. “For everything.” She kissed his cheek then made her way to the ambulance, where Zack had propped himself up on the pillows. “Hey, how are you feeling?” She moved to his side, wiping the sweaty bangs from his forehead. His skin felt clammy to the touch, and his face was pale.

“My leg,” Zack said, his face wincing in pain. “It’s really sore.” His words left his mouth in a hoarse whisper, his mind groggy and his body fatigued. He swayed his head back and forth lazily, unable to hold it up on his own.

“I know, sweetheart,” Wren said, answering assuredly. “We’re going to get you some help. Just hang in there.”

DOUG AND NATHAN immediately started loading whatever supplies they could: medicine, blankets, medical gear, clothes, food, anything that would fit in the ambulance. The station had a fuel depot on sight, and once everything and everyone was loaded up, the goodbyes were said.

“Take care of yourself, Steve,” Doug said, wrapping his friend in a hug. “If the radios come back on, you call me and let me know the moment you and your family are in the clear. You hear me?”

“You’ll be the first to know.” Steve smiled then hugged Wren. “You take care of yourself, Wren. And your family.” Steve left first, the sun sinking lower into the horizon, Wren watching the truck disappear into the city. *What kind of fate have I damned him to?*

“Wren!” Doug said, shouting from the ambulance already on the edge of the street. “Let’s go!”

Wren climbed in the back, slamming the rear doors shut behind her. She found a seat next to Chloe on the right, while Addison sat with her father on the left, with Zack still on the stretcher between them.

The second paramedic that Doug had brought with him, Ken, drove, while Nathan rode shotgun. “I’ll take as many back roads as I can until we can get onto Interstate 86. The traffic was backed up on the way out, but it looked clear past Oak Brook.” They kept the sirens off, not wanting to draw any more attention to themselves than necessary.

Everyone’s heads bounced like bobblehead dolls, the ambulance speeding down streets, weaving in and out of the obstacles that dotted the roads: abandoned cars, downed power lines, fallen signs. Looted trash flowed from broken shop windows and into the street. The city was being torn apart at the

seams.

"Oh, shit!" Ken screamed.

The ambulance skidded to a halt, slamming everyone forward along with any loose gear they couldn't tie down. Wren's shoulder collided with the wall, and the pain that followed faded her vision to black for a few seconds. When she regained control, she checked Chloe and clawed her way to the gap between the passenger and driver seat. When she saw what had stopped them, her jaw dropped. "Oh my god."

A blockade of burning cars cast flickering flames on at least a dozen masked men, all armed with rifles, marching slowly down the street. "Hang on!" Ken shifted into reverse, the tires screeching from the sudden force.

Wren ducked back into the rear of the ambulance, using her body to cover Chloe as gunshots filled the air. She felt the percussion of each bullet connecting with the ambulance reverberate through the seat, and she placed her hands over Chloe's ears to shield her from the gunfire and Addison's screams.

Time stood still as the engine revved, and Wren felt her center of gravity shift, slowly rotating along with her sense of reference. Gear tumbled back and forth, and a violent force slammed her against her seat belt. Her grip around Chloe loosened from the violent motion and the inside of the ambulance whirled in a blur. Cracks, pops, and the deafening twist of metal suddenly thundered all around her.

One of the medical kits flew into the twirling vortex and smacked the bandage on Wren's head, the sharp sting ringing through her skull and a dull sensation overtaking her limbs. When the motion finally ended, Wren's head still spun in place, her body struggling to find the coordination to move. When she opened her eyes she shook her head, confused. Doug and Addison were below her, and it took her a moment to realize that she was dangling from the seat belt around her waist. The ambulance had flipped to its side, leaving her on top.

CHLOE DANGLED NEXT TO HER, crying, her face red and her arms and legs swinging from the seat belt clung tight around her waist. Wren reached for the buckle, trying to free her. "Hang on, sweetie." She could only graze it with her fingertips. "Doug." He stirred below, his head lolling back and forth as Addison lay unconscious. "Doug!" The scream worked, and he pushed a pile of boxes off himself, first checking on Addison, who groaned, then

reaching for Chloe.

Wren rotated her jaw, trying to wedge free the high-pitched din stuck in her eardrums. She shook her head, thinking it was only in her mind, but as the whine faded from her ears, she heard it again. It was quiet but growing steadily. “What is that?”

Doug stopped and turned to look out the window, his jaw dropping. “Jesus Christ.” He turned back, his hands and fingers fumbling quickly to free their daughter. “We need to move. Now.”

The buckle clicked open, and Doug caught Chloe before she hit the ground. Wren rushed over to Zack, who was awake, and clutched at his leg. The brace had broken, and whatever stabilization it offered the leg had busted with it. “Zack, we have to go.” She kept one eye on her son and the other on the growing size of the marching army heading straight for them.

“Uuugghhh.” The moan came from the front seat, and Doug stumbled past Wren, pulling Nathan from the passenger seat, scrapes covering his forehead and cheeks. Doug carefully laid him on the floor, checking his pulse and his breathing and opening his eyes. “Nathan, can you hear me?” Nathan stirred but offered no coherent speech.

Wren gathered the girls and sat them at the rear doors. Both were now awake but barely conscious, Addison unable to stand. “You girls stay right here. I need to get your brother.”

Doug and Wren worked together on Zack’s straps, their son moaning, reaching for his leg, which looked in worse shape than before. But the growing chants outside of the ambulance erased any alternative course of action. They propped him up between their shoulders and made for the rear doors.

“Look for any cover we can run to.” Doug panted between breaths, looking up over the black tuft of curls of their son’s head. “The closer, the better.” He looked down to Addison. “Sweetie, can you stand up?”

Addison frowned, anguish etched upon her tiny face as she cradled her head in her hands. “I don’t feel good.”

Wren stumbled to the front of the ambulance, trying to get a better look at their surroundings. The driver, Ken, was unconscious in the driver’s seat, his head cocked at a ninety-degree angle. But an even more disturbing sight grew in the distance. The mob of terrorists chanted and fired their rifles into the air as they passed buildings and broken down cars, setting to blaze anything in their path.

Quickly, Wren hustled back to the rear of the ambulance, reached for Addison's hand, and pulled her daughter up forcefully. "Chloe," she ordered, "take your father's hand."

Chloe marched obediently to her father's side. The two of them both glanced at Nathan, who lay unconscious, but she knew what Doug was already thinking. "We can come back for him once we get the girls to safety." She spit the lie, her gut wrenching the moment it left her lips.

Doug and Wren each threw one of Zack's arms over their shoulders, wedging him in between. Glass shook from the rear doors as Wren and Doug pulled their family onto the pavement. Wren frantically tried to keep up with Doug's pace, the two seeing the same open shop door, shifting Zack and the girls in the same direction.

Wren turned to look behind them and caught the edge of the mob out of the corner of her eye, the masked men aiming their rifles toward them. Her heart leapt from her chest, a feeling of weightlessness overtaking her as she dug her heels into the pavement, pushing harder, faster, beyond her body's capacity.

Bullets peppered the side of the building, drowning out the girls' screaming. The world passed in slow motion. Bullets impacted the doorway to her right just inches from her head. With one foot inside the building a sudden jerk on her right shoulder pulled her down.

Zack slipped from Wren's hold, and Addison tripped, the entire family smacking against the tiled floor. A sharp crack sounded as Wren managed to get one palm under her, and the pain shot like lightning from her wrist all the way to her shoulder.

More bullets shattered what was left of the store window as Wren became deaf to the world, all of her energy focused on dragging Zack and Addison deeper into the store, crawling forward on the tile, shards of glass and broken electronics digging into her fleshy palms.

Wren looked to her right and saw that Doug was in the same position, dragging Chloe along the floor with him. The shadows of the mob in the street flickered from the surrounding fires as she pulled Zack to his feet. They all chanted, repeating the same words over and over again on their march.

Wren pushed her way through a cracked door, spilling inside, all of them losing their footing in the hurried panic, and crashed to the floor. Wren heeled the door shut, and the room went pitch black. She fumbled for her cell phone in her pocket, using the light to check on Addison, Chloe, and Zack.

Chloe squinted from the brightness, holding her hands up to block the light, her palms red and cut from the fall, but she was otherwise unharmed. Addison threw up spontaneously in the corner, and Wren held her daughter's hair as she lay on the ground, moaning.

"I think she has a concussion," Doug said, short of breath and keeping his voice low.

Wren stroked Addison's hair then crawled to Zack, whose face was scrunched up in pain. She quickly locked the door and pushed as much junk in front of it as she could muster, piling boxes, shelves, and chairs in hopes of keeping the masked men in the streets away from her family. She looked around for a weapon, anything she could use to try and protect them.

"Wren," Doug said, his voice soft.

Wren shuffled around the small storage room, the light from her phone illuminating a bottle of bleach, some mop heads, scrubs, and brushes, but nothing sharp, nothing that they could use.

"Wren," Doug repeated.

"Doug, we need to get—" She turned around and the phone's light shone on Doug's face. He was propped up against a mop bucket, his complexion white as a ghost. He was panting heavily and clutching his stomach, where black blotches stained his clothes, and patches of red shimmered on his fingers as he peeled them off the wound.

Wren dropped to her knees, crawling over to him and cradling his head. His body was slick with sweat, and he leaned his face into her shoulder, his eyes wandering deliriously. "I don't… You need to get the kids out of the city."

"Doug, tell me what to do." Wren lifted his chin, giving his head a stern shake, trying to bring his concentration back. "How do I help you?"

Doug lifted his hands, revealing a sticky crimson stain that covered most of his paramedic's uniform. He took a hard, dry swallow then gently placed his hands back down, the gold band of his wedding ring covered in blood. "The bullet went all the way through. I think it may have hit my liver, maybe my kidneys. I'm losing too much blood." He closed his eyes, shaking his head.

"The ambulance—there must be something still there?" Wren couldn't let him die, not now, not here. She held his face firmly between her hands. "Tell me, Doug."

He took a few panting breaths, and Wren saw him trying to stand on what

resolve remained to him. “The trauma bag. We need to”—he took another dry swallow—“stop the bleeding. Clotting powder and an IV. A blue bag, a red cross on each side.”

“Got it.” Wren laid him down, and when she turned, Chloe was right behind her, her eyes big, staring at the wound in her father’s stomach.

Doug saw her and tried to flash a smile. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Daddy?” Chloe’s lips collapsed in grief, her lower lip protruded, and her eyes watered.

“I’m fine, Chloe.” Doug gestured back to Addison, who still lay on the floor, curled up in a ball.

“I think your sister needs your help. Why don’t you go and make sure she’s okay? Could you do that for me?”

Chloe nodded and then leaned in to give her dad a kiss on the cheek. Wren kissed the top of her head and then took one of the broomsticks, shoved the handle end in the bottom corner of the room, and then slammed her foot down over the middle, snapping it in half. She knelt and put one of the jagged, splintered ends into Zack’s palm. It was the best she could do. “Zack.” Her son opened his eyes, his fingers gripped lightly around the wood. “Anyone comes through that door, you stick this inside of him, you got it?”

Zack’s fingers tightened around the wood, and he gave a stiff nod. Wren kissed his forehead and took the other end of the broken broomstick. She shoved the junk she stacked in front of the door, and stepped out into the store. The chants of the masked men was now nothing but a faint echo in the distance.

Aside from the massive clouds of smoke that filtered through the air and debris in the streets, it looked clear. Wren held the makeshift spear tightly, keeping her eyes about her on the way to the ambulance, which was still mangled and flipped to its side, some of the gear spilling from the back like guts from a wound.

Wren sifted through the wreckage, looking for the pack Doug had described, when a faint moan came from inside the ambulance. *Nathan. He can help.* She jumped inside, the vehicle creaking in the same distressed manner as the volunteer firefighter, his head lolling back and forth, the blood on his face shimmering with ever shake. “Nathan,” she said, shaking him. She looked behind her at the open doors, then through the broken windshield, making sure no one was close. “Nathan, wake up!”

Nathan blinked, shifting his arms and legs around on the floor. “What

happened?”

“Nathan, I need to find the trauma bag. Where is it?” Wren grabbed his collar. “Doug’s been shot. I need to find the bag!” She screamed the words louder than she intended, but the intensity reignited Nathan’s coherence as he shifted his large body to the side, planting four wobbling limbs underneath his body as he pushed himself up.

“I packed it up here.” Nathan staggered, stretching his arms. He tossed a handful of clothes and bandages aside, and there underneath rested the blue bag with the red crosses etched on either side.

Wren snatched it from Nathan’s hand then yanked him along. “Hurry!” Each pull and jerk, dragging Nathan with her, felt as though her arm would snap in half. She burst through the door, the delicate bundle of junk still blocking her path sent crashing to the floor.

Doug lay unconscious, his hands fallen from his stomach. Chloe was crying in the corner, and Zack could do little more than drop the broken broomstick in his hand upon their entrance. Wren collapsed next to Doug, clutching his hand in her own. His fingers were sticky with blood and deathly cold.

Nathan knelt on the other side, pressing his pudgy hands onto Doug’s neck, then pressed his ear to Doug’s mouth. “It’s faint, but he still has a pulse, and he’s breathing.” He ripped the trauma bag open and pulled out a small baggie, tearing the top off, and then ripped the front of Doug’s shirt open with a short blade. He dumped the clotting powder in the wound and started rotating Doug to his back. “Help me get him on his side.”

Wren let go of Doug’s hand and pushed. Nathan finished pulling the shirt off Doug, dumping the same material in the wound on his lower back. “We need to get some fluids in him. Hand me that light.”

Wren extended her cell to Nathan, the movement shifting the shadows in the room, when suddenly it went out, casting a veil of darkness over their eyes. Wren pulled the phone back, tapping the screen and the power button, but nothing worked. “It’s not...” She shook it in her hands, her fingers digging into the case. “It had a full battery.” She groped for her son in the darkness. “Zack, give me your phone, quickly.” They fumbled the exchange awkwardly in the dark, but Zack’s phone offered the same result as her own. “*Shit!*” Wren’s muscles tensed. Chloe’s whimpers grew louder, and Wren felt the last shred of sanity slip through her fingers. “What is *happening*?”

Wren felt a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness

somewhat, and when she looked up, she saw Nathan's shape. "Wren, we have to go."

"*Where*, Nathan?" She pulled her hair backward, her nails digging into her scalp. She looked to her husband, only the outline of his shape visible in the darkness, then back to her daughters, and then to Zack on floor. The world had crumbled around her. She felt her heart accelerate along with her breathing, but the quick breaths suffocated her. The overwhelming sense of finality took hold, and she shook her head violently.

Nathan knelt and gently pulled her hand from her hair, holding it in his own. "Wren, the power's not coming back on any time soon. And depending on the range of the device, it may be a while before we run into anything electronic that's able to function."

She heard, but she didn't understand. The words bounced around her head like a foreign tongue, the same jargon that the masked men had spit in their chants. "What… what are you talking about? What device?"

Nathan leaned in closer, his features becoming clearer in the darkness. "An EMP."

STATIC: FADE TO GRAY

1

CHAPTER 1

Ash fell from the sky. On the horizon, the downtown Chicago skyline burned, crumbling the once-proud architecture she had loved so much. The empyrean blue of the atmosphere grew congested and poisoned with black, virulent plumes of pollution.

The combined heat of sun and fires burned the streets clogged with broken-down vehicles, half of them wrecked in twisted piles and the other half abandoned, their owners fleeing on foot. Along the roads, what stores hadn't caught fire were looted. Any goods the criminals left behind were scattered on the sidewalks amidst shards of broken glass. The city had turned to chaos, and Wren Burton was anchored in the eye of the storm.

Wren limped forward, ignoring the pain radiating from her right thigh. She swung her right arm awkwardly, compensating for its companion on the left, which lay wounded in a sling. Dried blood was caked on her right pant leg, and every pound of pressure she laid upon it with her hobbled steps brought forth a fresh coat of crimson that added to the flaking crust already in place.

The sections of the borrowed shirt and pants she wore that weren't covered in bodily fluids were dirtied with grime. Her pale skin was darkened with the ashes of the burning city, and her black hair was greyed from soot and dust. Her foot kicked away debris scattered in the street: a broken bottle, crumpled papers, shattered glass. She fumbled her fingers over car doors, yanking at their handles fruitlessly, all of them locked, and not even trying the wrecked vehicles stacked in pileups that dotted the roads.

After a few dozen tries, success. Wren flung the door open wildly, sliding into the driver's seat, probing her hand in search of the keys, which the owner had left in the ignition in their haste to flee the burning city. But when Wren turned the engine over, she heard nothing but a click. "No!" She flicked the key again, frustrated, but each try only returned the same impotent noise. She slammed her fist into the wheel and then pulled herself out. She sprinted to the next car, slid into the driver's seat, then punched the dash after the second failed attempt to start the engine.

Wren looked back to the looted electronics store where the overturned ambulance lay twisted and mangled. No working car meant no escape. No escape meant death. What did Nathan say? An older car. Find an older car. She passed the newer models, their paint still fresh and bright, their innards sophisticated with the comforts of technology and efficiency.

The searing pain in the cut on Wren's thigh forced her to stop and grip the rusted pole of a street sign for support. Her legs shook. Her breath was labored. She eyed the small strip mall parking lot to her left, a rusted minivan catching her attention. She pushed herself from the pole, using the momentum to press forward.

Wren patted the side of the rusted van until she arrived at the driver's door. The handle squeaked when pulled, but refused her entry. She thrust her good arm through the cracked window and reached for the lock at the window's base. The lock grazed against her fingertips, and the window dug painfully under her arm as she stretched to position for a better grip. With her face smashed against the door frame and her arm extended as far as it would go, she plucked the lock up and swung the door open.

Bits of rust fell from the hinges as she climbed into the driver's seat. The ignition was empty, but a purse lay over the torn fabric of the passenger seat. She dumped the contents out hurriedly. She pushed past lipstick and napkins, credit cards and IDs until she felt the rigid metal of keys scrape against her fingers.

Wren thrust the key into the ignition, the gaudy key chains jingling together. She closed her eyes, her wrist poised to start the van. Please. Work. The engine choked and stammered. Wren leaned her foot on the gas as the engine struggled to catch its spark. She pumped the pedal. C'mon! Finally, the cylinders kicked into gear, and the old rust bucket took its first breath of life.

"Yes!" Wren slammed the door shut and shifted into drive. The car

squealed as she pulled out of the parking space, maneuvering through the minefield of busted vehicles and overturned lampposts, trash cans, and street signs.

The brakes screeched as the car came to a stop next to the overturned ambulance, and Wren left the engine running as she passed by the dead paramedic, half his body hanging out of the front windshield, his head bloodied and the rest of his body limp.

The inside of the electronics store was in no better shape than its exterior, and Wren kicked aside broken boxes and packages on her way to the storage closet. “Nathan! I have one!” Before she reached for the handle, the door swung open, and a large, heavyset man with his belly falling over the front of his jeans stepped out. The mustache under his nose was thick and bristled, and he stroked it nervously as he nodded.

“We need to get Doug in first,” Nathan said, disappearing back into the closet.

The moment Wren set foot in the room, her leg was attacked by her youngest daughter, Chloe. The hardened cast around her left arm smacked the cut on Wren’s right thigh, and Wren winced from the pressure. “Mommy, I want to go home.”

Wren knelt down while Nathan propped Doug up against the wall. “Honey, we can’t go home. Not right now. We need to get your dad and brother help.” She looked past Chloe to her eldest daughter, Addison, curled up in the corner, cradling her head. “And I need you to take care of your big sister, okay? We need to get her to the van out front. Can you help me with that?” The five-year-old puffed out her lower lip and nodded.

“Wren,” Nathan said. “I need some help moving him.”

“Mom.” The cry came from behind her, where her eldest child and only son, Zack, lay propped up against the wall. Even in the darkness, his face was pale, and Wren saw the beads of sweat rolling off him. His right leg lay mangled and bloodied under his ripped jeans, the shin completely snapped in half, the remnants of the makeshift brace his father had constructed barely holding it together after the ambulance wrecked. The involuntary spasms of pain his muscles offered betrayed the hardened look of courage the fifteen-year-old had etched on his face.

Wren clutched his hand as she walked past. “We’re taking you to get help. Just hang on for a little bit longer.” She kissed the top of his head, fisting a cluster of black curls that rested on his scalp. But what kind of help

will we find?

Wren tossed Doug's arm over her shoulder, and together she and Nathan lifted him off the floor. Though his weight was spread between the two of them, she still struggled to keep him upright. And the added pressure only increased the agitation of her thigh. "There." Wren gestured to the van, the heat from the city and the stress triggering a burst of sweat from her brow and neck.

"We'll get his torso inside first," Nathan replied, opening the back doors. "On three. One, two, three!"

Both of them grunted in the coordinated lift, and the back of the van lowered on its rusty shocks as Doug's body thumped on the floorboard. Wren gave him a shove forward but stopped once she saw the streaks of blood smear the van's dirtied carpet.

"The clotting powder will only hold for so long," Nathan said. "We need to get him to a doctor. He's lost too much blood, and he'll most likely need a transfusion. Do you remember his blood type?"

"AB positive," Wren answered, looking at the gritty material covering the hole in his stomach. She grabbed his hand. She shivered; his skin was an unearthly cold. She quickly released his finger and limped back inside to retrieve Zack. "Let's get everyone else loaded—"

An explosion sounded in the north, and Wren and Nathan ducked, grabbing whatever they could for support as the blast rocked the pavement. Wren danced on shaking legs into the center of the street. A fresh column of smoke snaked its way into the sky, and the sharp pierce of the initial explosion faded into a dull roar.

"Wren!" Nathan said.

Wren forced her attention back to the van and hastened her pace. We have to get out of the city. Nathan helped Zack outside, her son spitting groans through gritted teeth, while she carried Addison with her one good arm with Chloe trailing closely behind.

Nathan piled Zack next to his father in the back, and Wren strapped the girls in the second row. Addison rolled her head back and forth, her neck loose as a noodle. She cradled her daughter's cheek, worried about the effects of the concussion, and double-checked her seatbelt. Once everyone was secure, Wren climbed in the passenger seat. "Do you know any hospitals in the south?"

Nathan shifted into drive, shaking his head. "None that'll have any

power, and judging by what we've seen so far, they'll be targets as well."

"Right," Wren added absentmindedly. She caught her reflection in the side mirror and didn't recognize the face staring back at her. Dust covered most of her head, and her hair was ragged, her cheeks hollow and dirty. She reached down and touched the cut on her thigh, grimacing, then gently rubbed the dull ache of her left arm in its sling.

"Zack!" Nathan yelled, narrowly missing a ten-car pileup as he veered around the edge. "I need you to check your dad's breathing every few minutes. Just place your hand under his nose and leave it there, make sure there's still an air flow."

Wren turned and watched her son place a shaky hand under Doug's nostrils. The van bounced over a pothole, and he nodded. "Yeah. It's faint, but he's still breathing."

"Good. Just keep checking, Zack." Nathan jerked the wheel side to side. The tires screeched with every harsh maneuver. Stand-still traffic congested the outbound lanes.

"Stay off the highways," Wren said, clutching her seat belt. "If we're one of the only working cars in the city, then I'd rather not advertise it."

"Me either," Nathan answered.

City buildings slowly morphed to the industrial district the farther they drove. A few miles beyond that, they saw the backs of the lines of people who'd left their disabled cars behind, exiting the city. Their heads perked up at the sound of the vehicle.

The greater the distance that separated them from the city limits, the thicker the crowds of pedestrians grew. It wasn't long before Nathan was forced to slow their pace as they came upon a cluster of broken-down police cars. Wren gripped the armrest tight, hoping none of them were desperate enough to try and stop them. But while she drew in her breath, the herd's attention was focused elsewhere. A massive Red Cross station had been erected, composed of flapping tents and folding tables.

Stacks of food and water were unloaded from trucks and distributed to outstretched arms and hands clamoring for help. Police officers formed a human barrier between the workers and the crowd, the hordes growing increasingly bold as the officers struggled to keep the masses at bay. A cluster of soldiers intermixed with the police kept their hands on their rifles, one of them barking orders to the crowd, which only exacerbated the people's defiance.

The line finally broke on the far left side, and the crowd swarmed through the hole like water in a sinking ship. They toppled tables and trampled workers, discarding what decency remained and satisfying the impulsive need of survival. Wren scooted away from her passenger-side window, watching the eyes follow their vehicle with the same lustful intentions they cast on the rations. She clutched Nate's arm. "Don't stop."

Nathan pointed to some of the medical tents. "Wren, this could be the only available medical staff for miles. I don't know how much longer Doug is going to last."

Gunshots rippled through the air, and Wren turned just in time to watch the masses shift like waves in a tide, pulling apart like cotton candy. "Go!" But by the time Nathan tried to accelerate, the masses swarmed the van like locusts, smacking into the doors and windows, climbing on top of the roof and clinging to the hood. Screams flooded in from the left, cut short by more gunfire. Wren squinted through the fleeing crowds, and her heart dropped at the sight of masked men tearing through the masses. They wore the same black cloth as the terrorists that attacked the hospital. "Nathan, go, now!"

The engine revved, and Wren felt the thump of bodies collide against the van as Nathan pushed through the sea of people scrambling to get out of their path. Nate laid on the horn, and horrified faces gazed through the windows as Wren peered over the heads of the crowd to the skirmish between the authorities and terrorists. One by one the men in masks fell, and as the crowd cleared, only one remained, bloodied and on his knees, reaching for a device at his belt.

The explosion blinded Wren just as much as it deafened her. The van rattled, and the heat from the blast melted through the windows and doors. The harsh, high-pitched whine slowly faded, and as she opened her eyes, she saw the road had cleared and the van had picked up speed.

Wren turned to look back. The tents and tables had been wiped away, the windows in the surrounding buildings shattered, and a small crater rested in the earth where the masked man had knelt. On the outskirts of the blast, what was left of the crowd was scattered in pieces. Random body parts stretched for at least thirty yards. Those who'd survived the blast sprinted in whatever direction led them away from the carnage.

Chloe and Addison huddled on the seat, their limbs twisted around one another with their heads down. Doug still lay unconscious, while Zack looked out the back window in the same direction as his mother. When he finally

turned around, she watched his pale cheeks turn a light shade of green. “Girls, don’t look out the windows for a little while. Just keep your heads down.”

Nathan gripped the wheel tightly, keeping his gaze straight ahead. His eyes watered, but no tears fell. “We shouldn’t stop until we can’t see the skyline anymore.” His voice caught in his throat, and he shifted uneasily in his seat, glancing in the rearview mirror to Zack. “Your dad still breathing?”

The van was silent for a moment before Zack answered with a yes, and Wren felt her mind grow heavy and tired. She reclined her seat as the landscape outside her window shifted from buildings to open fields. The sky cleared the farther south they drove, and only a few sporadic vehicles were left in their path. What people they passed were too few and exhausted to cause any trouble. Wren brought a shaky hand up and rubbed her eyes, trying to rid herself of the fatigue as much as the images of body parts.

“Mom!”

The fog lifted from Wren’s mind at the panicked shout, and she turned around to see Zack with his ear to Doug’s nose. “He’s not breathing.” Her son hyperventilated, looking from his father to his mother, uncertain of what to do.

“You’ll have to give him CPR, Zack,” Nathan said, his eyes scanning the road for any signs for a doctor’s office or medical facility. “You need to tilt his head back by lifting his chin to open his airway.”

Zack shook his head, tears streaming down his face. “I-I can’t. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Nathan pulled off to the side of the road, unbuckling his seat belt in the process, and jumped from the driver’s seat and into the back. “You drive.”

Wren climbed behind the wheel and shifted the car back into drive, peeling out in the grass and gravel as she floored the accelerator. She flitted her eyes between the rearview, where Nathan pumped his hands over Doug’s chest, and the road, searching for any sign of help. Suddenly, the horizon offered the small outline of buildings. “We’ve got a town coming up!”

“We’ll have to stop there,” Nathan said, puffing another breath into Doug’s lungs. “He’s not going to last with me working on him like this.”

The speedometer tipped eighty. Adrenaline raced through her veins with the same high-octane intensity as the fuel in the van. The town’s welcome sign passed in a blur as the first few buildings came into view. She slowed, looking for any signage for the hospital, but soon discovered the town was

nothing more than a small strip of buildings on either side of the road.

A white building with a black sign out front toward the end of the row of stores caught her attention. She slammed on the brakes, veering off the road. “I’ve got something!” She thrust the van into park and helped Nathan pull Doug out of the back doors. Nathan scooped Doug in his arms, sprinted past the veterinary sign, and made a beeline for the door.

Wren flung the side door open. “C’mon, girls.” Wren held out her hand, and her daughters sheepishly crawled from their seats. She scooped up Addison, who still couldn’t stand up right, and Chloe huddled around her legs. She looked to her son. “I’ll come back for you once I get them inside.”

Zack nodded, and Wren guided the girls up the steps and inside the office. A series of bewildered faces glanced at her once inside, along with howls and screeches from a handful of animals, some of them caged, others held by their owners. Nathan burst through a door down a hallway. “Wren! Back here!”

Wren placed the girls in two vacant chairs in the waiting room. “You two stay right here and do not move.” She kissed their foreheads and sprinted toward Nate. His massive body blocked the doorway, and she tried to peer past him, but the small openings offered no view of Doug.

“Wren.” Nathan placed a heavy hand on her shoulder, and she felt her body sink. “He’s not sure he can do anything.”

Wren shoved Nate aside and stepped into the room. “Watch the girls.” Doug lay on a steel table, a light above him, and a shrew-looking man with thinning hair, glasses, and a white coat far too large for his petite frame standing next to him. She thrust a finger at the doctor and then to Doug. “Help him.”

The doctor took a step back, shrugging, his hands spread out in a desperate plea. “Miss, I’m only a veterinarian. The wounds he’s sustained, the amount of blood loss—”

“You need blood?” With her left arm pinned in the sling, Wren awkwardly rolled up the sleeve of her right arm, exposing the pale, soft, dirtied flesh underneath. “Take it. He’s a universal receiver.”

“Ma’am, I—”

“Take it!” Wren’s voice shrilled, her cheeks and neck flushed hot red. She stepped forward, her arm jutted out, the lines and curves of her face shifting between tremors of rage and fear. “Try. Please.”

The doctor hesitated, wiggling his fingers back and forth. Wren’s arm

shook the longer the silence between them grew. “Okay.” The doctor pulled out a tray of instruments, the metal objects clanging against each other. He thrust an oddly shaped oxygen mask over Doug’s face and ripped the fabric of his shirt.

Wren lowered her arm, slowly walking toward her husband on the table. He’s not gone. Not yet. She reached for his hand. His finger was cold to the touch. The doctor grabbed her arm, and she felt the cold prick of steel pierce her skin.

“There’s no guarantee he’ll survive.” Blood drained from the veins in Wren’s arm, oozing through the tube and into Doug, warming the point of entrance on his skin. “You should prepare for the worst.”

Wren watched her blood drain, feeling dizzy and lightheaded. “I already have.”

2

Addison and Chloe lay asleep in Wren's lap. She felt the steady rise and fall of their chests, and she stroked their hair. Her sleeve was still rolled up, and a bandage had been placed over the puncture wound. The paleness of her complexion only accentuated the dark circles that had formed under her eyes, dragging her downward.

The doctor worked on Doug for an hour, and while his pulse returned, his consciousness did not. And now that he was stabilized, the veterinarian shifted his work to Zack. Her son screamed when the doctor reset the bone, but since then, it'd been nothing but the barking of dogs and the hiss of cats.

The waiting room in the veterinarian's office was dark, save for the sunlight coming through the windows. The EMP had stretched well beyond Chicago's city limits, and she heard the rumblings of the town's citizens in regard to the sudden malfunction of their vehicles, phones, and other devices. A few candles were set out and slowly became the main source of light as the sun touched the horizon in the west.

Nathan stepped around the corner of the hallway, Doug's dried blood caked over his shirt and arms. His shoulders sagged as he leaned against the wall, examining his attire. "The doctor's done with Zack. He's resting now."

"And Doug?" The past hour had seen her mind race down every nightmarish avenue she could imagine, wondering what she would do or say if Doug didn't survive, or if he did.

"He's still passed out. The doctor is checking on him now."

Wren nodded, her gaze cast down to her girls in her lap, then she rested

her head against the wall. She closed her eyes, her head swimming. She was surprised that her mind was still dizzy from the doctor draining her blood. I'm just tired.

"Wren." Nathan's bearlike palm engulfed her shoulder. "We need to get out of here. I know of a place that we can go."

The scrape on Wren's leg roared its irritation, and a hot flush ran through her. "We're out of the city, Nathan. We're safe."

"For now." Nathan looked around suspiciously then inched closer. "Wren, if this town was affected by the EMP blast, then we have to assume the entire country was as well. And if that's the case, this power outage is going to last a very long time. What we saw in Chicago was just the beginning."

Wren forced the dizzy spell into submission, gently shifting the girls off her lap. "It's too soon to talk of something like that. We don't know if it's the entire country. We can't base our decisions off our fears, Nathan." She rested the two of them across the chairs, and they fidgeted lightly from the interruption. "Watch the girls for a second. I'm going to go check on Zack."

The first few steps were difficult, her knees buckling twice, and she had to grip the wall for support. But once she fell into a rhythm, a portion of her strength returned. The doctor had just come out of Doug's room when she made it to Zack's door. He'd removed his coat, revealing the true thinness of his frame. His clothes were covered and stained with dark blotches, and his arms were red from fingertips to elbows. "Thank you."

The doctor shook his head, his eyes focused on the blood on his hands. "I didn't do anything. There's still no guarantee that he'll survive. He's alive, but barely."

"You did enough." Wren smiled then stepped inside Zack's room.

Her son lay asleep with his left leg in a cast from knee to foot. An IV bag hung above him, offering what nourishment it could to his young, battered body. She pulled up a chair and sat next to him, her fingers lacing between his. "We're okay." She kissed his palm. "We're going to be okay."

THE SUN HAD COMPLETELY DISAPPEARED below the horizon, and with the power out the night cast a darkness Wren had never seen before. She rotated her shoulder that hung in the sling from the hospital, stiff from sitting in the van, as she scanned the radio channels for any news, anywhere. But just like her phone, the airwaves remained quiet.

A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead, stinging her eye on its way. She felt the heat radiate from her body, and her mind was dizzy. I just need to rest. Sleep had been in short supply, her mind too busy contemplating their next move. It offered a distraction from worrying about whether Doug would survive.

Indiana was an option if they headed east. Wren's parents still lived just outside of Indianapolis, but if what Nate was telling her were true, then she wasn't sure if their circumstances would improve. While Nathan's option of his secret camp loomed in her mind, she refused to bring her family to people she didn't know or trust, no matter how many times he brought it up.

"Wren," Nathan said, slinking through the dark. "You need to come, quick."

Wren stumbled getting out of the van, which they'd moved into the veterinary's garage to keep out of view from the rest of the town. Having a working vehicle had its advantages, and she wanted to make sure those advantages stayed in their possession.

The candles that replaced the faulty lights down the hallway exaggerated the menacing shadows in the dark. She followed Nathan to Doug's room, where he lay still, the vet hovering over him. At first glance, Wren thought Doug had awoken; his head lolled back and forth lazily, and she heard the murmurs of his voice. But the closer she looked, she realized that his eyes remained closed, and his words were nonsense. The light from the candles illuminated the slick sheen of sweat covering his skin.

"He has a fever," the veterinary said, removing a thermometer from Doug's mouth. "His temperature has spiked three degrees in the past hour. He's burning up."

Before Wren even touched Doug's forehead, she felt the heat coming off him. The bloodied bandage around Doug's stomach was damp with sweat, and the IV was running low. "Can't you give him something?" Wren removed her hand, her palm scorching hot.

"I don't have the antibiotics he needs." The vet gestured to the wound. "If he has an infection, he won't last more than a few days. His organs will

slowly shut down. He needs more help than I can give him."

"You have to have something." Wren paced across the shelves in the large animal operating room that were lined with hundreds of different bottles and boxes. "One of these has to be able to help him."

"There's nothing here!" The vet's voice screeched like a scratch in a record. His small body trembled from the exertion, and Wren wasn't sure if the meager man was more afraid of his words, or how she would react to them. He rubbed his brow, and his glasses slid down the bridge of his nose. "What he needs now, I can't help with." He stomped over to the shelves, pulling down boxes hastily. "I know every single pill and powder in my inventory. I have medicine for horses, pigs, sheep, dogs, cats, birds, and snakes, but none of them can fight what he has." He emptied the box, the bottles rolling across the tile, then slammed the empty cardboard to the floor. "I. Can't. Help!" Steam fumed from the vet's ears, and he clenched his small hands into fists.

Wren took a breath, letting her thoughts gather and the vet's temper cool. "Then what does he need?"

"Cefepime, ceftazidime, and ceftriaxone sodium." The vet listed them off slowly, rubbing his eyes. "They're used to fight infections in the organs, bones, and skin. He'll need a steady six-week regimen to eradicate the bacteria."

"You're sure he's infected?" Wren placed a hand on Doug's table. His face was still dripping with sweat.

"If his fever hasn't broken by morning, then it's a one hundred percent certainty."

Wren nodded, her gaze shifting from Doug, who lay motionless on the table, to Nathan. "Then we wait until we know for sure."

"Wren, if we wai—"

"We wait. Until we know for sure." Wren stomped away, her head spinning once more. She wasn't going to let someone else dictate what was best for her family. She'd seen too much. Her family had felt the burden of the chaos in Chicago. She wouldn't be pushed around, not here.

Wren found the girls asleep in one of the rooms, and she leaned against the doorway, lingering at the precipice of entry. The two of them were balled up tight in blankets, their hair tangled and messy. She'd never seen anything so peaceful in her life.

"Wren." The whisper was accompanied by a tap on her shoulder, and

when she turned around, Nathan clasped his hands together, pleading. “You need to listen to me.”

Wren grabbed his arm, pulling them both away from the girls. “I already told you, Nathan, we wait until morning. The doctor’s not one hundred percent sure.”

“He’s also not a medical doctor,” Nathan replied harshly. “He’s a veterinarian.”

“All the more reason to stay put.” The waves of exhaustion beat their way against her, eroding her patience. The harder Wren fought, the quicker she drowned in her fatigue. She loosened the collar of her shirt, suddenly feeling warm.

“And if the vet is right, it might be too late by morning.”

A sudden shock of icy cold mixed with heat cut through Wren like a freight train. She put her hand against the wall for support. The cut along her leg ached. The white bandages the vet had wrapped around the wound upon their arrival already needed to be changed. She shook her head. “How far is it to this camp?” The wound burned like hot coals. She shut her eyes and felt the tiles under her feet shift, as if they were rolling waves on the ocean.

“From here, it’s at least a three-hour drive,” Nathan answered. “And that’s if we don’t run into any trouble. Hell, we may not even have enough fuel to get us there.”

Wren stepped away from the light; the sight of the flame dancing in the dark hallway only compounded the illusion of the shifting ground. “We’ll check for gas in the morning.” She backtracked down the hallway, retreating toward the van. “I’m going to go and catch some shut-eye. Wake me up if anything changes.”

Nathan agreed, and Wren focused on putting one foot in front of the other on her slow walk down the hall. By the time she arrived at the van, it was all she could do to pull herself inside, collapsing onto the backseat. Her skin flashed from hot to cold, and she found a blanket in the back, which she pulled tight to her chin, fighting off the shivers running up and down her body.

But whatever peace Wren hoped to find in her sleep was disfigured by shifting nightmares. The gunshots at the hospital in Chicago thundered through her mind like a hurricane, rolling her back and forth in the chaos she tried so desperately to escape. She felt the warm splash of blood from the dead as one by one patients fell around her. She ran through hallways of

shrieking screams and bloodcurdling cries of the dying. The wicked foreign tongue of the killers barked in her ears. “Yuhzir! Alkhuruj wamuajahat mammatik!” The wailing cries of her daughters shook loose the gripping fear the terrorists’ voices had instilled. She sprinted toward the sound of their cries through the hallways, stepping over and around the slain bodies that were spread across the tiles. And it wasn’t but a few moments later that she found herself covered in dust, the hospital behind her nothing but rubble, and she was alone. Her girls had disappeared, and when she cried out to them, another voice echoed back to her. Zack. Her son’s voice was muffled under the mangled concrete and twisted steel which grew taller the closer she moved. Her son’s voice shrank with the growing heap of rubble. She flung rocks and rebar from the pile, digging deeper and deeper into the collapsed mountain until she finally came upon him, broken and unconscious. She scooped her son up in her arms as the unstable structure around her shifted and moaned above them. A searing pain ripped through her right thigh. And just as the rubble tumbled down upon both of them, she awoke.

Wren ripped the blanket off her and clutched her leg. Her entire body was slick with sweat, the blanket damp and her clothes soaked. Her hair clung to her forehead in greasy, matted sheets. The muscles along her thigh felt like they were melting off and she rolled off the seat and onto the floorboard.

With a shaking arm, she pulled down her pants. Every inch was excruciating, and when she peeled back the top portion of her bandage, she gagged. The cut had grown a bright red, and a small amount of pus oozed from the side of the gash. Infected. She pulled her pants back up, gingerly, and lay still on the floor.

A ray of light broke through the high window of the garage, signaling that it was dawn. She rubbed her eyes and pushed herself to an upright position. Fear gripped her as she realized what morning meant. Doug.

Wren crawled forward awkwardly over the seats, doing her best to keep pressure off her wounded limbs. She collapsed out of the van and limped forward, forcing all of her weight on her left leg. The hallway was quiet, no sign of anyone awake. She used the walls for support on her way to Doug’s room. When she opened the door, both Nathan and the veterinarian looked at her as if she’d grown a second head. “His fever,” Wren said, the words escaping her lips in hoarse rasps. “Is it gone?” Against her will, she slid to the floor, struggling to keep her eyes open. She felt a hand on her forehead.

“Christ, she’s burning up.”

Wren swatted the hand away. She opened her eyes. Her vision was blurred. Both the veterinarian and Nathan were nothing more than hazy images. “Doug, is he—”

“His fever has gone up,” the vet answered. “We’re trying to cool him down, but it’s only a temporary fix. He’ll still need the antibiotics if you want him to live.” He left Doug’s side and knelt down with Nathan, popping a thermometer into her mouth. “And he’s not the only one in need.” He peeled back the bandages on her thigh and shook his head. “It’s in the early stages of infection, but it’ll get worse if it goes untreated.” He retrieved one of the compresses from Doug’s table and applied it to her forehead.

“It was just a scratch,” Wren said. The cool pack broke through the heat melting her mind, and Wren felt the instant relief. It spread down the back of her skull, through her arms, and gradually made its way to her leg. But the relief was short lived, as the heat from her body quickly melted whatever cool the pack provided. She tried to connect her thoughts before they disappeared into the heat of her mind. “We have to… Doug needs…” But each time she got close, they melted away, dripping into the abyss.

“Wren, listen to me.” Nathan gently cradled her head. “We need to go to the camp. They have medicine there that will help Doug, and you. It’s safe. I promise.”

I promise. Promises weren’t strong enough to bet her life on, or her family’s. Hell, it wasn’t even strong enough to save her marriage. She shook her head. “Somewhere else. A hospital.” She swallowed hard, the lack of spit making the motion rough.

“The closest hospital that’s not in Chicago is farther than the camp,” Nathan explained. “Wren, if we don’t leave now, then you are going to die. Doug will die.”

With the searing pain pulsing through her body, death sounded like a welcome reprieve. But then her children would be orphaned, and she would not let her own blood wander the rest of their lives alone. Not with the world crumbling around them. “Okay.” Wren nodded. “We’ll go.”

3

Wren watched the fields and bushes fly by her window in a blur. She focused all of her strength on keeping her eyes open, but despite her protest, her mind drifted off to sleep, her unconscious filled with more of the same nightmares as before. She awoke, dripping in sweat, and reached for the bottled water in the cup holder they'd taken from the vet's office now in their rearview mirror.

The water was nearly as warm as Wren, but the liquid helped quench her thirst regardless. She drained half the bottle and took a moment to catch her breath as her body still quivered from dehydration. She pushed herself higher in the seat, the water providing a brief moment of clarity. The landscape had transformed from fields to trees. "Where are we?"

"We're close," Nathan replied.

Wren reached for her leg and nearly fainted from the lightest touch of her fingers. She gripped the armrests for support until the pain passed then shifted uneasily in her seat, turning back around to Zack and the girls. "Hey, guys."

Chloe and Addison offered a weak smile while Zack simply rolled his head to the side, away from Wren's view. "Where are we going, Mom?" It was Chloe who spoke, her blue eyes flashing in the passing light between the trees on the side of the road.

"Your dad needs some help. And Uncle Nate is taking us to a place where we can get some." And hopefully for me as well. Wren forced Nathan to keep her infection from them, even Zack. The kids had enough on their plate as

it was.

The van squeaked to a stop, beckoning attention. “We’re here.” Nathan thrust the car into park, and the engine hummed irritably, as if the very prospect of having to start moving again was too much to bear. “I’ll be right back.”

The structure in front of them was impressive, especially considering the surrounding area. The front gate was at least ten feet high and twenty feet wide and made of reinforced steel. A catwalk stood on top of the entrance, where two guards were stationed, armed with rifles. But after the twenty feet of steel, either side of the fence transformed from metal to wood and stretched farther than she could see, blending into the forest.

At the gate, voices were raised and tempers flared. Nathan thrust his arms angrily at the two men with guns on the top walkway. Once the exchange was complete, Nathan stomped back to the van, and the gate opened, making a gap in the middle as the two doors swung outward. The flustered look on Nathan’s face matched his tone as he shifted the vehicle back into drive. “You’ll have to meet with the council before they’ll administer any medicine to Doug.”

The van lurched forward, and Wren shook her head, wondering if the fever had affected her hearing as they passed through the gate. “The council?”

“They’re in charge. It’s protocol for any member bringing someone from the outside.” Nathan kept the van at a slow pace on the way through the camp, which so far was nothing more than trees and a dirt road. “I wasn’t supposed to bring anyone that wasn’t on my list.”

The trees inside the camp were thick, the terrain rockier than she’d expected. The dirt road dipped and wound through the forest, and Wren caught herself looking upward. She wasn’t sure if it was the fever or the fact that the last time she was in the wilderness she was with her father as a young girl, but there was something comforting about the canopies above. The rays of sunlight passed between the leaves and branches and into the dirtied windows of the van, and while she was already burning up, it was a different type of warmth from the hellish fever engulfing her. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she could almost hear the sound of her children laughing on a spring day in the park. The car jerked to a stop, along with the brief glimpse of a past Wren wasn’t sure would ever be in her future again.

Much of the forest in this area had been cleared and replaced with

buildings and open fields. Most were built from the same wood as the trees that once stood in their lots, but one particular building on the back side of the camp held the distinct glare of concrete in the sun. Nathan pounded on the van's hood and motioned for her to get out.

Wren turned back to her children and reached for Zack's hand, which felt oddly cool compared to her blazing-hot ones. "If anything happens, you get your sisters out of here." He offered a light nod, and Wren gave his hand a squeeze, which he didn't reciprocate.

Nathan helped her to one of the larger buildings, and every step forward, she felt the pain from her leg weaken the rest of her body. She examined the eyes staring back at her and the hands that carried logs, crates, cases, and weapons. Despite the heat, everyone dressed in thick, layered clothing, and their expressions looked as heavy as the woven fabric on their backs. A foul stench graced her nostrils, and she wrinkled her face in revulsion.

"They'll ask you questions," Nathan said. "Who you are, how you know me, your family, but the only thing that matters is your job."

"Am I on trial?"

The words were meant in jest, but Nathan stopped the two of them just before the steps to the building. "Yes. And if the council votes to kick you out…" Nathan gripped her shoulders tight. "Everyone was invited and chosen to be in this community. You can too. Your skills as an architect are valuable, and you're a gifted engineer."

"Structural engineer," Wren said, correcting him. "Nathan, what happens if they don't want me and my kids here? We came here because you said we could get help."

"And help doesn't come free," Nathan answered. "Let's go."

Nathan held out a hand to help her up the steps, but Wren shoved him aside. She gripped the railing and pulled herself up by her own steam. It was painful, but the rage and frustration over the situation displaced the symptoms of her fever. Panting by the time she made the ten short steps up, she pushed through the front doors with her head up.

Inside, the building was more akin to a town hall. Backless benches lined either side of a narrow path that fed into an open floor and a raised platform with five seats arranged in an arc pattern. The floors were dusty, and the air inside smelled of the maple and oak that comprised the rafters. There were no windows, and when the door closed behind her, Wren found herself alone and cast into darkness. She stopped halfway down the narrow path to the

front platform. “Hello?”

The building’s acoustics that echoed back her words were the only answer she received. She shuffled a few steps forward but stopped at the creak of a door opening in the back of the building and saw the light it cast from outside. Footsteps followed, and the glow of candlelight moved behind the platform.

One, two, three, four, then five people stepped onto the platform, each finding their seats, each with their own candle. Two women and three men from what Wren could tell, and while most of their features were masked in the candlelight, she noticed the distinct scarring on the man who sat in the middle. The candlelight that flickered across his face highlighted the disfigurement, and while he looked only slightly older than herself, the dark eyes that stared down upon her looked ancient.

“Come forward,” the man with dark eyes said, his voice booming low and deep. The others kept silent, and despite the man’s commanding voice, she did not sway. He leaned forward, the shadows on his face shifting with him. “I do not have time for your cowardice. Step forward, or you will not be afforded an opportunity like this again.”

Zack, Addison, Chloe. And Doug. For them. Wren forced herself forward. The faces on the platform grew taller the closer she moved. For the moment, her adrenaline had returned, vanquishing the symptoms of her leg, but the sweating only worsened. By the time she reached the front, she was drenched. All five of them looked down at her as though they were dissecting an insect, determining whether to let her scurry by or end her existence with the heels of their boots.

“You were brought here by Nathan Heiss, yes?” The woman on the far left spoke softly, calmly, a far cry from the hellish looks her peers cast. From what Wren could tell, the woman was older, close to her fifties, but in the dim lighting, it was hard to tell if the strands of hair were silver grey or a vibrant blond.

“Yes.” Wren forced her voice to steady despite the nerves running rampant through her body. “Along with my three children and their father.”

“Your husband?” The man next to the older woman asked, raising his eyebrow. His lips remained motionless when he spoke, hidden under a thick mustache, which was as bushy as the caterpillars of his eyebrows that stretched over the shadows of his eyes.

“I was told I needed to speak with you in order to secure my family’s

acceptance into this community," Wren said, ignoring the man's question. "Tell me what you need of me, and I will do it."

"Need?" The man in the center drawled the word for a moment before he let it end. He tilted his head to the side. The dark eyes sucked up the dull light from the candle, and Wren found herself trying to look away, as if staring at the pools of black in his face for too long would suck the life from her. "We have no business for need here. This community was not established for the sole purpose of harboring those who need help. Only those who earn their keep." He thrust his finger at the doors behind her. "Your cities and your government have failed you, and now you come to us with your hands cupped like a beggar's bowl!" He slammed his fist on the table, and the deafening crack wavered the flames of the candles that rested upon it.

Two of the dark-eyed councilman's colleagues curved a smile up the side of their hollowed cheeks, while the other two sank back in their seats. The woman to the dark-eyed councilman's left leaned close to his arm, while the second man remained nothing more than a bystander in the proceedings. "I come with no bowl. I was an architect at a firm in Chicago, where I've been practicing my craft for the past six years. I'm an accomplished structural engineer, and there isn't a building technique or material that I'm not familiar with. There is no one better at blending design and functionality when it comes to erecting a structure from this earth." While her words ignited the interest of Dark Eyes, Wren felt a sudden emptiness at the thought of the city that was her home. The way she left it, she wasn't sure if she'd ever get the chance to see it again.

The two closest to the dark-eyed councilman leaned in to whisper in his ear, and all the while he never took his gaze off Wren. There was something unnerving in his glare, and it wasn't the darkness; she knew the light could play tricks. The councilman's pupils took on a hard callus, as if he could leave his eyelids open in a sandstorm and walk away with his vision unscathed.

Once the two on either side of Dark Eyes had spoken whatever thoughts they deemed necessary, the councilman rose from his seat, and the others followed suit. He made his way down from the platform and stopped only inches from Wren. The scars on his face were sharper, more defined up close, and his scowl only intensified the disfigurement. His height and broad shoulders further compounded his commanding presence. "Come with me." The other council members brushed past quickly, and Wren struggled to

keep up.

Outside, she shielded her eyes from the sunlight. She looked for Nathan and the van, but neither was in sight. The lack of familiarity irritated the aches and pains in her body, but she forced herself to the front of the pack, ignoring the stares from those she passed on the way. She yanked the dark-eyed councilman's arm and spun him around. "Where is my family?"

If the man's features were bad in the dark, then in the sunlight they were abhorrent. Four scars covered the majority of his cheeks and neck. One ran along his left jawline, the second from the corner of his lower lip to his chin, the third across the meaty part of his right cheek, and the last from under his chin down beneath his shirt to the collarbone. While the wounds had long since healed, they left canyons on his skin that would never afford him a normal complexion. He pointed behind him to the fence. "We have a wall around our entire encampment, with guards patrolling twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You tell me how you would get through, and I'll let you stay."

"Tell you? Or the council?" Wren turned to eye the others; the man and woman that seemed cozier with Dark Eyes than the other two had their arms crossed.

"You don't have any bargaining chips on the table, so I suggest you tell me quickly before I change my mind."

Wren shouldered past the councilman, toward the far side of the compound. While the front gate had looked formidable, the same quality had not been replicated for the rest of the fence. She examined the wall, running her hand over the bumpy logs that rose from the earth like medieval spikes around a castle. "The wood's dry." She peeled off a few splinters and snapped them between her fingers. "A little bit of gas and a lighter, and you'd be engulfed in a ring of fire." She walked farther down, noticing a lean in a large portion of the fence. "You didn't reinforce the foundation. When winter comes around, that portion of the fence will cave after the first heavy snowfall." She turned around to look him in the eye. "But that's not your biggest problem."

"No? And what is?"

"You think you've used the natural landscape to your advantage, sucking up the resources around you to help reinforce your buildings and walls, but you've built your compound on low ground." Wren walked around him, taking in the infrastructure of the community. "If you're planning to live here

for the long haul, you'll find you'll have a problem with sewage and plumbing after the first hard rain. It'll flood, and those crops will mix with waste you let build up and then wash away into your soil." Wren limped forward one step. "That's what I'm smelling, right? I'm guessing this is the first time all of these people have been here at the same time for this long. But you don't have to take my word for it. The first outbreak of dysentery should speak for itself. Of course, by then, it'll be too late to stop it from happening."

The councilman clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes. Wren knew he understood that she was right, but whether or not it was enough to admit her entrance to the camp was a different story. After a pause, he turned back to confer with the rest of the council. They spoke in hushed tones, glancing back at Wren, pointing to the flaws she mentioned then pointing to one another. After a few minutes, Dark Eyes made his way back over to her. "Much of your family is in need of medical care?"

"My husband needs antibiotics, and my girls need to be looked at by a doctor." Wren palmed the side of her wounded thigh where the cut had worsened but kept it to herself, not knowing how much value her skillset would afford her.

"Your family will be treated." He thrust a finger in her face. "But I will tell you this. You try and double-cross me on this, and I promise you the last thing you'll be worried about is your children seeing a doctor." He stomped away, two of the council members following, while two stayed behind.

"You'll have to excuse Edric. He takes some getting used to." In the sunlight, Wren could make out both of them more clearly. The woman had defined age lines carved across her face, and daylight revealed her hair to be grey, but her eyes and smile were a natural complement to the rest of her features. "My name is Iris. This is Ben."

The gentleman with the thick mustache and eyebrows extended a hand as thick as his facial hair. "Pleasure to have you on board, miss."

Iris gestured to where Edric and the other two councilmen exited. "The other two councilmen with Edric were Jan and Ted. You'll rarely find that those three have any differences of opinion."

"My family, where—"

"Nathan already has them with the doctor; he's looking over them now," Iris replied then smiled, adding, "You really didn't think we'd turn you away in the condition you were in, did you? Edric just likes to play hard to get."

It looks as though he enjoys playing a lot more than that. The architecture world wasn’t one many women ventured into, and in her experience, she had noted that not all of her male counterparts shared her belief that she belonged. It was a trait she learned to recognize quickly, and it was one she saw in Edric.

4

The bunk was small, but Wren was grateful to have a bed. It was a huge improvement over the van, and when she woke, she still felt tired and hot, but the dizziness from the previous day had ceased. There were four cots in the small room, with Doug and Zack each having their own, but Doug's remained empty, as he was still under the doctor's supervision. The girls shared one, and Wren had her own, although in the middle of the night, she felt Addison climb into bed with her.

Wren planted two bare feet onto the worn wooden floor and tried applying pressure to her wounded leg. The pain was still there, but it had diminished some, although the same could not be said for her arm, which was furious with her after she had allowed Addison to fall asleep on it.

She let Zack and the girls rest a while longer and hobbled from the bedroom into the living room, which was bare save for the necessities, and even that was stretching it. A few chairs surrounded a table, and a large cast-iron heater sat in the middle of the living room. Other than the main room and the bedroom where Wren's family slept, there was only one other room in the cabin, which belonged to Nathan.

The community didn't have any extra housing, and Nathan had offered to put them up until Wren could build their own place. She burst out laughing at the suggestion but soon realized that Nathan wasn't joking. He, along with the rest of the community, believed that the effects of the EMP weren't going to end. Everyone here was in it for the long haul.

With no one awake, and dawn barely breaking over the horizon, Wren

decided to have a look around. The morning was surprisingly cool, and the surrounding woods were quiet. The only noise that filled her ears was the soft crunch of earth underneath her feet.

A mist floated through the air that was so fine she couldn't feel it on her skin. She looked north, half expecting to still see the plumes of smoke and fire of Chicago, but they were too far from the city now. The only view on the horizon were a few clouds that floated above the trees.

Since she was admitted into the camp based off of her career choice, she decided to get a better look at the camp to see where any improvements could be made, but kept a path toward the fence. Along the way, she passed a few people who had already woken, busy about their morning tasks. She watched people hoe their gardens, fill water buckets from a well in the center of the camp, inventory jars of food stacked in crates, and a few clean rifles and pistols.

The reactions to her presence were as mixed as the council when she first arrived. Some offered a smile and a wave, others a grimace, and the rest ignored her completely. Not that she cared. She knew nothing of these people, and they knew nothing of her. All that mattered now was making sure Zack and the girls remained healthy, and that Doug stayed alive.

The deeper Wren followed the fence, the thicker the forest around her became. She looked back a few times, making sure she could still see the majority of the compound from her position. From what she could tell, the community was centered specifically in the clearing behind her. The fence itself grew more decrepit the farther she walked, and more than once she stumbled upon portions of the wooden logs that had been splintered. When she dug her fingers into the cracked wood, her fingers grazed the smoothness of metal. At first she thought it was a nail, but the deeper she dug the more she recognized the thickness of the bullet.

A branch rustled to Wren's left, and the sudden commotion made her heart leap, but it was nothing but a squirrel leaping onto a tree trunk. She backed up against the fence for support, and gently massaged the wounded leg, careful not to get too close to the cut.

"What are you doing here?"

Wren jumped and screamed, covering her mouth as she backed away from the fence. She tripped over her feet and fell to the forest floor, her back scraping against the rocks that littered the ground. "Who's there?"

The voice echoed from beyond the fence, and through the cracks between

logs, she saw a body pace back and forth. Portions of eyes, a mouth, and cheeks flitted between, looking at Wren on the ground. “I saw you come in.” The man’s voice was hoarse, as if he’d screamed his whole life and now could only bark haggard words. “You’re not welcome in there.”

“The council said I could stay. Whoever you are, you can’t overthrow their decisions.” At least I don’t think you can. From what she’d experienced the previous day, she was under the impression that the council’s word was law.

“Hmph. The council.” The voice spit the words out as though they were poison on his tongue. “You tell me you trust them? Can’t trust them as far as you can throw them.”

“And who can I trust, then? You? It seems you’re on the wrong side of the fence.” Wren pushed herself off the slab of leaves and rocks and took a few careful steps toward the voice, wondering if it was this man who’d caused some of the bullets to be lodged in the wood.

“That’s where you’re wrong, woman. This forest is full of wolves. More so now than ever.”

Gunshots blared to the south, and Wren involuntarily ducked. Her adrenaline heightened, along with her heart rate. She clutched her chest and stumbled backward. Her body broke out in a cold sweat, and flashbacks of the gunfire in Chicago terrorized her mind. She squinted her eyes shut, trying to rid herself of the throbbing visions of the terrorists. Are they here? They couldn’t have followed us. Was that man one of them?

Wren rushed to the fence, her nails digging into the wood as she desperately clawed over the posts, peering through the cracks in search of the voice, but her investigations revealed nothing but daylight and trees. More gunshots thundered toward the front of the camp, and she shuddered. The kids.

Wren sprinted as fast as her legs allowed, using the perimeter to guide her back. Shouts from the camp bounced through the thick trees. When the clearing finally came into view, Wren watched people dash between houses. All of them carried weapons, and once armed, they headed in the same direction. By the time Wren made it within arm’s reach of a woman clutching her child, her mouth was so dry that she couldn’t form the words to speak. After the third try, she managed to croak out words. “What’s happening?”

“An attack on the front gate.” The woman’s voice hid the fear which her eyes betrayed. “Everyone is going to want what we have.” She turned and

gave Wren a look that suggested she was a part of the attack, then returned to her cabin with her young boy, bolting the door shut behind her.

The herds of people funneled toward the front gate, and Wren followed. The sight reminded her of an old western. The community members wielded rifles and pistols, a coldness in their gaze that would kill anything that meant to harm them.

With the majority of the crowd gathered by the gate by the time Wren arrived, most of the gunfire had stopped. The guards on duty had their weapons aimed downward toward the outer portion of the fence and were shouting at whoever was on the other end of their rifles. “Turn around, and do not come back here. You’re not welcome. This is private property.”

Wren weaseled her way to the side of the crowd and discovered that she was the only person not armed, and what was more, their side of the front gate had sliding doors built into the steel. Every person stationed at one looked poised to slide it open and squeeze off a few rounds. She moved left, toward the wooden portion of the fence, and squinted through the cracks.

“What do you have?” Edric climbed to the top of the gate, and one of the guards whispered in his ear. Even from a distance, Wren could still make out the scars. He nodded then bellowed down to the unknown persons. “You have sixty seconds to remove yourself from this gate, or we will kill you.”

Wren could only see fragments of the people between the wooden posts, but she was able to make out three cars, all of them old, rusted and worn. Only the driver and passenger of the lead vehicle were outside the protection of their car. “Please, we’ve tried everywhere, but it’s all the same thing. No power, running low on food, water, and medicine.” He pointed a shaky hand to the car behind him. “We have people who are diabetic. We’ll do whatever we have to. Please, just let us in!”

More footsteps thudded toward the gate, and Wren peeled her gaze from the cracks in the fence to watch the remainder of the council march up the front gate’s steps. Iris and Ben were armed, but didn’t add their weapons to the arsenal of rifles aimed at the people below like Jan and Ted.

“Wren,” Nathan said, pulling her away from the fence. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Who are those people?” Wren slid out from Nathan’s hands and repositioned herself back at the fence. A few more had stepped out of their cars. Their faces looked familiar, and she saw a dog in the back seat of the middle vehicle.

Nathan gripped her good arm, yanking her backward. “I don’t know. But they shouldn’t be here.” He was more forceful this time, but Wren refused to leave, and she added a shove into Nathan’s soft chest in defiance.

“Like me?” The retort came out angrier than she’d intended but afforded her the distance to stay out of Nathan’s reach until he was summoned by a few of the other community members.

The driver had moved to the front of his car now, his arms spread wide. “Please, we won’t cause any trouble.”

“You already have!” It was Edric’s voice that boomed down at him as he aimed the barrel of his rifle at the intruder’s head. Nearly everyone else mimicked his actions, with the exception of Iris, Ben, and a few others on the ground.

Wren watched out of the corner of her eye as Iris pulled Edric back, a grimace on her face with every hushed word that escaped her lips, until her whispers roared above the crowd and she shoved the barrel of his weapon down. “Edric, this isn’t the way!” But before Edric could retort, Wren watched another passenger in the front car step out, holding something in his hands, and before she saw what it was, shouts broke out.

“Gun! Gun! Gun!”

Gunfire erupted in the quiet morning air, and Wren covered the back of her head with her hands, flattening herself against the dirt, but her eyes were still glued to the small spaces between the fence that offered fragmented glimpses of the carnage beyond the wall.

The front car was turned to Swiss cheese while the second tried to reverse, but the windshield shattered like ice after the first volley of bullets, and the car veered off the dirt path and crashed into a tree. The passengers in the backseat of the wrecked car fled but only made it four steps before they were dropped by a hail of lead. Each gunshot, each pained final scream, caused Wren to dig her nails deeper into the back of her skull.

Shouts and curses spread through the camp as Wren watched the dust of the third car trail into the sky as it sped down the road, bullets chasing after it, the driver recklessly taking the curves and turns at high speeds, and jumping divots to avoid the deadly gunshots.

“Help.” A bloodied hand followed the weak voice and covered the view from Wren’s position. She jolted backward, and she smacked her wounded arm on the compacted earth in the process. Moans and heavy breaths accompanied the light pawing from the dying man. And before Wren had a

chance to see his face, another gunshot dropped the man's hand. Smoke wafted from the tip of Edric's rifle as he smiled.

Two hands pulled Wren up, and Nathan dusted some of the leaves off her back. "Are you all right?"

"Those people," Wren said, turning back to the fence, where just on the other side she knew rested a field of corpses. "Were they from the town we stopped at?"

Wren saw the heavy doubt cloud Nathan's face as he answered. "I don't know."

"You!" Edric leapt the twelve feet from the top of the gate's walkway and shook the earth upon landing. The crowd parted to make way for him as he beelined toward Wren and Nathan. "They followed you here. They came from the same town you did." The scars along Edric's face curved and twisted with his rage, which reached a crescendo when he aimed his rifle at Wren's head. "You've been here for less than a day, and you've already compromised our camp!"

Nathan wedged himself between the rifle and Wren. "Edric, we didn't have anything to do with that."

"Shut up!" Edric flung Nathan aside with one quick, easy swing of his arm. With the barrel of a gun once again close to her head, Wren felt the sudden familiarity of death creep up her spine. A crowd was gathered around them now, and judging from their expressions, most of them agreed with their head councilman.

"Edric!" Iris shoved her way through the crowd, Ben following close behind. She knocked the barrel of the rifle away, and while the woman stood at least a foot shorter than Edric, you wouldn't have known it by the look in her eye. "You know better than to point a gun at a community member."

Edric ground his teeth. "She's not a member, Iris. She's a leech that Nathan dragged in with him."

"She is a member of this community now. We voted her in yesterday, or is that thick skull of yours suffering from memory loss?" Iris refused to let up, mocking the man in front of nearly half the community. And while her methods were blunt, they were effective. "And you know the laws of drawing a weapon on a member."

Wren found herself staring at the spot on the fence where the man's bloodied hand had blocked her vision. Iris's verbal assault distracted Edric long enough for Wren to creep toward the fence. She crouched to the same

spot as before and peered through the thin cracks of wood. A bloodied arm sprawled out on the ground. Both cars were smoking, their engines shut off. Bodies spilled from both wrecks, the cars riddled with bullet holes and their windows smashed. And there, just a few feet beyond the open and bullet-ridden rear passenger door of the car, was the man who the others had shouted held a gun. But as Wren looked closer at the outstretched hand of the man who'd fallen, she saw no gun, no knife, no weapon of any kind. In place of the pistol they'd believed he pulled, she saw a black phone. It was small and now speckled with the man's own blood.

"Hey!" Edric pulled Wren from the fence and slammed her on the ground. She scurried backward, and Edric stomped after her, the rifle swinging from his arm. "I'm not done with you!"

"It wasn't a gun!" Wren blurted the words, and Edric froze. "It was a cellphone. Go. Look for yourself."

Murmurs spread through the crowd, and Edric's concrete stance suddenly shifted on quaking sand. Iris stepped forward, and she and Nathan helped Wren up. "Take her inside, Nathan."

"You can't—"

Iris held up her hand, silencing Edric. "The laws of leading others here are clear. There will be a trial." Iris turned to Wren, her mouth downturned. "She will give her defense, and the community will hear her words." She turned back to Edric. "But in the meantime, I want our people cleaning up this mess. I'm sure it's something you can handle?"

Edric's cheeks blushed red. "I want a four-man team tracking down the escaped car. It took heavy fire, and one of the wheels was damaged. They won't get far." He brushed past Iris and wedged himself right between Nathan and Wren. "Whatever speech you have planned won't save you. This is my community, and I'll be damned if I let you be the one to bring it to its knees." He stormed off, a cluster of the community breaking off with him, along with Councilwoman Jan. Though, just before Councilman Ted turned, Wren caught him staring at her. His gaze lingered just long enough for her to notice before he quickly joined Edric and the others.

"It's going to be fine, Wren. You didn't do anything. We didn't do anything." Nathan offered a pat on her shoulder, but Wren's mind was far from the present moment. She drifted back to just before the gunshots erupted, back to when the man from beyond the fence told her about the wolves of the forest, and she began to believe that there might be some inside

the walls already.

5

Wren pushed her finger through the clumped dirt on the wooden floorboard as she sat against the rear wall of her “room,” which it didn’t pass for. It was no bigger than a closet and wasn’t long enough for her to lie all the way flat in width or length. The only luxury that was afforded to her was the small window that let her know if it was day or night outside. A comfort she didn’t appreciate until after the second day.

The designs in the dirt next to her were nothing more than simple drawings that her youngest, Chloe, would interpret as houses. It was all she could do to pass the time, waiting for the trial. After the events at the gate, there was a lot of talk about what to do with her and where to keep her. While she wasn’t a part of the discussion that put her here, she was betting her last dollar that she had Edric to thank for her current accommodations.

No news had been brought to her of either Doug, Zack, or her girls since her imprisonment. The only visitor she received was the guard stationed outside her door, who opened the food slot to shove in a tray of rations twice a day, which barely passed as edible. The worst part of the entire ordeal was the smell of her own waste that lingered in a bucket only a few feet away. After the first night she couldn’t hold it any longer and was forced to use the makeshift latrine. The stench filled the small space quickly and by the next day, with the sun cooking the cell, it had festered into something inhuman. While she finished her breakfast, it quickly evacuated her stomach, which only added to the foul stench.

Even now, a day later, Wren’s nose had yet to numb against the wretched

waste that was so pungent it permeated the walls along with her clothes and skin. But as bad as the heat, the smell, the pain, the fatigue, the hunger, and the thirst became, she still couldn't help but wonder about her family. Every drawing etched in the dirt under her finger brought with it a pillar of strength that she clung to, rising above the filth around her. For them.

The lock on the door ground against a key and opened, bringing a burst of sunlight and a shadowed figure that nearly took up the width of the door. "Wren." Nathan knelt in front of her, his face scrunched as he did his best to hide the obvious disgust at the room's stench. "Your trial is set for tomorrow."

"The girls, Zack, are they—"

"They're okay," Nathan answered, covering his nose with his shirt. "But they've stopped giving Doug his medications for the infection."

"What?" Wren attempted to push herself up but found that sitting down in the cramped space for the past two days had left her legs weak. "If he goes off the regimen—"

"I know." Nathan dropped the portion of his shirt covering his face and nose and grabbed her hand, massaging it in his own. "I'm doing what I can, but there are a lot of people here that don't trust you."

"One is more like it." The distaste she held for Edric was almost as potent as the room's stench. "What am I supposed to do tomorrow? Tell them I'm sorry for something I had nothing to do with? Beg their forgiveness?" Wren shook her head. "I don't know how you came into league with these people, Nate."

"These people are the only reason you're still alive right now." Nathan took a step back, and Wren knew she'd offended him. "These people worked hard for what they have here, and with everything that's happening, they have a right to be skeptical of anyone that tries to take it from them." He thrust his thick finger into his chest. "I'm one of these people, Wren. I brought you here."

"I'm sorry." She rested her head against the back wall, her anger dissipating. "I know you're trying to help. What are they accusing me of?"

"Treason."

Wren couldn't hold back the laugh. "Treason? Am I standing on some sovereign land that no one told me about? I don't remember getting my passport stamped."

"Wren, this isn't a joke."

“Then why is it so fucking funny?” Wren slapped her palm against the floor, the boards underneath offering nothing more than a dull whimper. She clawed her hand into a fist, scraping up dirt, and squeezed until her knuckles flashed white. “These people have my family.”

“Then make sure you tell them that tomorrow.” Nate brought his large paw over and engulfed her fist with his own. He gave it a gentle pat and rose, grabbing the waste bucket on the way out.

“Nate,” she called out after him, the sight of his leaving overflowing the desperate need to speak with another person. “I don’t know what to tell them. I don’t know what they’re looking for. I don’t understand these people or the world they live in.”

Nate gave a light shrug, tilting his head to the side. “They’re just people, Wren. You’ve done what you’ve had to do to keep your family safe. That’s all we’re trying to do here. It’s that simple.” He smiled, and the door shut behind him, and with it went the light that offered her warmth.

With the cell cast back into darkness save for the small window above her, Wren deflated. Done whatever I had to do. Did Nate know? How could he, when he was unconscious in the ambulance after the wreck. I left him to save my children. Left him to die. A stab of guilt knifed its way through the memory of yelling at Doug to abandon Nate as the terrorists marched down the street. She half expected him to be dead when she came back outside, but there he was, still breathing in the back of the ambulance, his face cut and scraped. But alive.

That’s the same thing Edric did at the gate. Was this how it was now? Was this how she was meant to live? Had survival ascended above morality, above laws and ethics? Or had it always been like this, just in a different form? However Wren tried to spin it, one thing became abundantly clear: whoever these people were didn’t matter. They held her children’s lives in their hands. And for better or worse, her husband’s life. The infected wound on her right thigh throbbed, and she placed a gentle hand over the cut. And my life. She would have to make them listen. She would have to make them let her stay.

THE GAVEL SMACKED against the table, and Wren did her best to hide her shudder. The town hall had transformed itself since the last time Wren had visited. While her first encounter had the space empty and hollow, now it was brimming with the entire community. Everyone had come, even people's children. During her entrance, she'd spied the girls and Zack sitting with Nate. She kept that image glued to the front of her mind as the council presided over her, with Edric in the middle, tossing the gavel aside as the room finally quieted.

"Five days ago, power and circuitry went down around the country, and upon such news, we as a community enacted our emergency plans." Edric addressed the crowd behind Wren, who stood alone before the raised platform, isolated. "Four days ago, one of our own came to us, bringing with him five others. Five. And not one of them was on his roster of personnel. The day after their arrival, our camp was discovered by a party seeking refuge from the very threat that brought us here ourselves." He finally glanced down at Wren with a pause, letting his icy stare linger until she felt a chill run up her spine. "This community and its survival is all that stands between us and the chaos beyond our fences. In the coming days and weeks, people will grow desperate, more so than we've already seen. What we do now will affect our world, our families, and our lives. Today marks our first trial of not just this woman's fate, but everyone's."

Iris and Ben, who flanked Edric on opposite ends of the long platform, exchanged a look while Jan smiled and Ted retained his stoic expression. Out of the four of them, Iris spoke first, her voice as calm as the steady hand that gripped her pen. "We will hear your defense, Wren Burton, as the accusations that stand against you are conspiracy for treason against the citizens of this community as well as its leaders."

"But first we will hear from the community," Ben said, his voice scratchy as if the words leaving his throat fought his tongue before being shoved from his lips. "Here, everyone has a right to voice their thoughts." His gaze lingered upon her before one of Edric's goons pulled Wren aside and the first community member showed themselves.

All of the testimonies blurred together, as well as most of their faces. Wren listened, but most of the message was the same. We don't know her. We don't trust her. She shouldn't be here. I'm doing this for my family. And what am I doing for my family?

"I know all of you are scared." Wren looked up from the dusty, worn

floorboards and saw Nathan standing, addressing the crowd behind him as much as the council. “It’s a fear we all share, and rightfully so. Not all of us saw the crumbling of the cities we came from, and some were worse than others, but all I can tell you about are the events that happened to me.”

Wren’s stomach tightened, and she felt the churn of guilt. I left him to die. She shifted uncomfortably on the stiff bench, where her guard had kept a close watch.

“When we escaped the city, it was chaos,” Nate said. “The terrorists who caused the power outage were everywhere. Fires, gunshots, mobs, panic, all of it swirling together in this terrible storm of fear. It wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen.” Nate pointed a chubby finger to Wren. “Her family was separated, scattered across the broken city with no way of getting to one another. But the odds didn’t stop her. She went into a war zone to get her son. She kept her girls safe. She made the tough decisions. She saved my life.”

The gut-wrenching knife burrowed deeper into Wren’s stomach as Nathan looked her way. She could tell his words were reaching some of them. The lines of judgment across their faces slowly softened. But when Wren looked to the council, she saw that Edric remained unmoved.

“Those people that came to the gates overheard my conversation with Wren,” Nathan said, continuing his defense. “I am just as guilty as she is.” His spine stiffened, and he lifted his chin. “And whatever her fate is, I will share.”

The silenced crowd erupted after Nathan’s words, and Edric smacked the gavel to return order to the hall. Nathan smiled as he found his seat, and Wren sank deeper into herself. A few more community members spoke, some of them swayed by Nathan’s speech, while the others had determined her fate long before the trial, either too stubborn or too afraid to venture out into a world larger than themselves.

Finally, after the last member had said their piece, Edric turned to Wren then nodded to the guard, who yanked her to her feet. “We will now hear from the defendant. Wren Burton, present yourself to this council and community, and tell us in your own words why this council should grant you pardon.”

Treason. It was a word Edric had enjoyed repeating. It was a word familiar to everyone in the room, and it was a word that encouraged complacency and obedience. And judging from the smile curving up the corners of his mouth, those two attributes were exactly what Edric wanted

from his subordinates.

Every eye shifted to Wren as she took center stage. The rope binding her wrists together was coarse, rough, and tight against her skin, and she spasmed uncomfortably in the spotlight. Her new environment was a far cry from the drawing board where she felt so at ease, where she could build anything. This was a world she didn't understand. This was their home. And she was an unwelcome guest.

"Everyone here serves a purpose." Wren took a swallow of what spit she found in her throat to stop her voice from cracking and then raised her volume. "Everything you've built has been made from sacrifice and dedication. And those are two words I know well." The drawing board, she thought. My sketches, my profession, my passion and love. My family. "Those people that came to the gate a few days ago, the ones who were gunned down, they came here because of the same reason I did. Because of the reasons so many of you have given yourselves. There is life here. And Edric is right. People will become more desperate. People will seek out that beacon of life and want to take it for themselves. I've seen it. And I've done it myself."

Out of all the faces Wren watched twist in affirmation of their fears and bigotry, it was Nate's she found first. She saw his confusion, underlined with the fear of knowing that he put his neck out on the line for her, as he had done so many times already since she'd arrived. But she wouldn't leave him behind this time. She wouldn't leave him bloodied and to the wolves once more.

"Nathan, my link to all of you, spoke some very kind words tonight." She smiled at him, her eyes watering. "But unfortunately he doesn't have the entire truth. And neither do all of you." She shut her eyes, forcing the tears back into the wells of grief, finding her grit to continue. "We were in an ambulance, trying to escape the city. I'd finally collected all of my family. But my son, Zack, he was still hurt. Many of you know that his leg was broken." She shook her head. "Is broken. My daughters were tired and scared. My nerves and patience had dissolved." Wren rubbed the coarse fibers of the rope, which suddenly felt tighter, around her wrist. "The terrorists who caused all of this, or whoever they were, had blocked the road on our attempt to escape the city. They opened fire, and the paramedic who was driving the ambulance was shot and lost control. We flipped, the driver was killed, my son's leg had worsened, and my daughters were hurt. There

just wasn't any time." She found that she was talking to herself more than the community now. "Doug and I grabbed the kids. I went to the front and saw the driver was dead." She found Nathan's gaze in the crowd once more, and the silence of the hall was quieter than anything she'd ever heard in her life. "I thought you were dead too." She wanted to look away. She wanted to stop. She wanted to tell the people what they wanted to hear, but that wasn't the way. That wasn't her way. "It was Doug who wanted to take you. But you were unconscious. The terrorists were marching closer, and I knew that if we hesitated, we'd die. I'd seen the way those animals cut down everyone and anything. There was no discrimination in who they killed. And I was not going to let them take my family. Or me. Not after everything that we'd been through. Not when we were so close."

Nathan shook his head, his expression failing to comprehend her words. But the crowd around him understood. She saw the disgust in their eyes. It was the same reflection she would have given herself if she'd had a mirror. "I left you, Nate. I chose my family over your life. Once we were safe in the store, I came back, but it wasn't for you. It was for the pack to stop Doug's bleeding. You must have stayed unconscious as the terrorists marched past. They probably thought you were already dead too."

Wren turned back to Edric and the council. If they'd made up their minds, they refused that answer to her through the stoic walls upon their faces. All except for Edric. She saw the finality in his eyes as he gripped the gavel. She pictured his face in an executioner's mask, much like the ones she'd seen the terrorists wear. While she'd never actually seen their faces, she imagined that they shared the same look as Edric wore now right before sentencing their victims to death. But Wren wouldn't let that fate befall her. Not when her children would share the same fate.

"But you're not dead, Nathan." Wren turned back to the crowd. She took a few steps forward, heading toward the center aisle, looking each of them in the eye as she passed, forcing them to see her. "And neither are you, or you, or you." She continued until she made it all the way to the end then circled back, every head turned to watch her, save for one. "Your families are not dead. Nor will they be, because we will not let harm befall them. We are stronger together because I know, just as well as you do, that my family's survival depends on yours." Wren spread her palms open in submission. "I know nothing of growing food, or shooting weapons, or healing broken bones. But I graduated from one of the most prestigious architectural schools

in the country. And I worked for the premier architectural firm in Chicago. I have designed buildings that have never been seen before or are likely to be seen again. And while that knowledge may seem useless, I can apply it to making sure that the next group that comes knocking on that gate won't be able to get inside. No matter what weapons they have."

Wren faced the council now, her back to the crowd, and while she couldn't see it, she felt the weight of every pair of eyes on her back, her words entrapping them in their own snare. They wanted to survive, and someone who could help them do that was valuable. Edric's cocky gaze was replaced with the grimace of disgust he wore the first time they met. The scars turned uglier in his distaste of her. "And just as Edric said, those people will come back. They will return in greater numbers, more desperate, hungrier, and dangerous. They will want what you have." She turned back around to the community. The mood in the room had palpably shifted in her favor. "I will help you protect it. I can make it to where no intruder will ever get inside. I will strengthen the homes and structures you've built to survive the harshest winters and the most dangerous storms. I will keep your families safe, because that will keep mine safe. There isn't anyone in this room that should doubt what I will do to protect my family." Wren found Nate's eyes in the crowd. While she might have reached the minds and reason of the mob around her, she'd just lost her closest ally.

"Mrs. Burton," Iris said, the first to break the silence of the hall. "Your testimony has… shown your resolve." She looked down the row to the rest of the council. "You will be escorted from the building and called upon once our decision has been reached. Thank you for your words. And your honesty."

Wren was shoved roughly from the hall and thrown back into her cell, locked in the darkness and foul stench that she'd wallowed in for the past two days. "Wait," she called after the guard, "my wrists." But he only slammed the door in her face.

The moment of courage—or lunacy, the more Wren pondered her speech—evaporated into thin air. She paced the cell impatiently. If she failed to convince those people that they were better off with her inside the walls than outside, then she knew Doug was as good as dead. And even if they let Zack, Addison, and Chloe stay, she didn't think Nathan would keep them, not after what she'd said.

Wren punched the wall, and her fist ached the moment her knuckles

smacked the wood, her dry skin ripping from her hand, leaving bits of blood on the wall. She collapsed to the floor. The rot, the smell, the pain—all of it was in her now. She looked up to the bloodied fist print. And now I'm a part of it. Her leg bounced nervously as she lost track of time. All she knew when the guard returned to bring her back to the hall was that it was still night, or early morning.

The hall was empty except for the council, who looked to have remained frozen in their positions since her departure. The guard brought her front and center, looking to the giants on the platform, her fate in their hands once more.

"We have reached a decision, Mrs. Burton," Iris said. "But before we tell you what we and the community have chosen, do you have any final words for us that you wish to say?"

"My children," Wren said, finding it odd that it was Iris who spoke, and not Edric, who sat stone-faced in the middle with a fire in his eyes meant to set Wren ablaze. "They are innocent in all of this. And so are my husband and Nathan. Let them live. Keep them safe for as long as these walls will stand."

Iris raised one eyebrow. "Nothing else? Nothing you wish to impart to us in these final moments?" She leaned closer, edging herself over the precipice. "Nothing you wish to… recant?"

"Everything I told you was the truth," Wren answered. "I find it better to let that decide my fate than a farcical show of begging. You cannot wish a building to stand, nor can you make it rise from the earth with false tales. There is life in truth, and I found that I never benefitted from lies in my professional life or my personal one."

"Very well," Iris replied, leaning back into her chair. "Wren Burton, this council finds you innocent of treason. You will be returned to your family, and your husband and son's medical treatment will resume immediately. Tomorrow you will begin your new post with engineering." Up until then, Wren had never seen Iris offer any look of coldness, but before she spoke her next words, it was as if vengeance itself had taken human form. "And I hope that your speeches are as effective as your professional skills."

Wren wasn't sure what to say once the gavel was smacked, but luckily the council dispersed before she even had a chance to speak. The guard begrudgingly removed the ropes, and Wren gently rubbed the tender flesh. "Wait, where is my family?"

But her only answer was the slam of the town hall door, leaving her with only the light of a few flickering candles the council had left on the platform. Nathan. They're probably still at Nathan's. She started for the door, and she found her feet shifting from a stumbled walk to a sprint as she ignored the pain in her leg.

"Wren!" The voice echoed through the empty hall, and Wren skidded to a stop. When she turned to look behind her, it was Iris standing there, her body half cast in light and darkness. She took a few steps down the hall but stopped once she was out of reach of the flickering glow of the candles. "It was a dangerous play you pulled tonight. There wasn't any guarantee the community would budge."

"There was no play, Iris. My intention was never to manipulate."

"It wasn't?" Iris asked, taking a few steps closer in the darkness of the hall. "You could have fooled me."

In the darkness, Wren couldn't tell Iris's age, and her voice offered the illusion of youth. She hadn't noticed just how poignant her words were until now. "Is there something you needed from me, councilwoman? From what I heard of your decision, I have been freed from any crimes."

"You have," Iris acknowledged, stepping around Wren until she was side by side with her. "But there are those that lack conviction in their decision. And there are those that don't."

Edric. Wren had never doubted that he'd been one of the council members that voted to exile her, or kill her, or vote for whatever the punishment would have been. But she wondered which of his two dogs had voted to keep her. Jan had never portrayed anything but an icy distrust for her, and Ted had never even spoken a word. "My family is waiting for me. Are they still at Nathan's?"

Iris paused before finally answering, "Yes." And then she disappeared back down to the platform, exiting the same way she entered. Wren lingered in the hall for a few minutes longer, waiting until the flame from Iris's candle had disappeared with her. Wolves. The mysterious voice the day of the attack on the gate returned for reasons unknown. Right now she couldn't tell friend from foe, but she was valuable so long as she delivered on her promises of strengthening their defenses. Weeding out the wolves would have to wait for now.

6

Wren ran her fingers through Addison's hair. Chloe was huddled up next to her big sister, both of them breathing softly. Wren had gently lay down next to her girls, careful to not disturb them. She closed her eyes and felt the warmth from their bodies, the lumpy mattress a welcomed comfort that she'd never take for granted again. She watched the steady rise and fall of their chests as the morning sun rose through the windows behind her. With everything that happened, she was happy with the peace and quiet of the morning. She knew the girls would be excited to see her, though that couldn't be said for everyone.

When she met Nathan at the cabin after she was released, it was like trying to speak to a ghost. He went to his room without a word, offering no hint to his thoughts. Though the cold shoulder was evidence enough that it would be a long time before he trusted her again.

Zack was the first to wake, and when he saw her, his sleepy eyes burst into silent tears. Wren's heart melted at the sight, and at first she thought he was simply overwhelmed, but when she reached out her arms, he violently knocked them away. The angered glare that accompanied the swing stung more painfully than the motion itself. He huddled in the corner of his cot with his back to her.

With no idea of what he was upset about, and too exhausted to investigate, Wren found her cot and pulled the coarse blanket over her body. It was easy for her to fall asleep. Her eyes were so heavy she didn't think she'd ever be able to open them again. How long the rest lasted, she couldn't

be sure, but the call of her name pierced the bubble of her dreamless sleep. She struggled to wake, her eyes snapping shut after every attempt to open them. She rolled lazily to her side, pulling the blanket over her head, hoping to shield herself from any more disruptions, but failed. The sheet was ripped from her grip, and the light dispersed the darkness from under the covers. The three cots were empty, Zack and the girls gone, and Nathan hovered over her. “You’re late for work.” The words were clipped and short, and he disappeared before Wren had a chance to speak.

“Hey!” Wren stumbled from bed, her muscles uncoordinated and shaky. Every flex of her right thigh sent a thousand needles digging into her skin, and the first shot of pain collapsed her to the floor. She grunted, pushed herself up, and limped after Nate. The farther she walked, the more she numbed to the pain, and she caught up to Nate at the well, where she leaned against the stone brick, catching her breath. “Nate,” she panted between breaths, “about last night—”

“You should head down to the front gate.” Nate pulled the well’s rope, lifting the bucket from the center of the walled stone. He kept his eyes on his task, refusing to look her in the eye. “Iris and Ben are waiting for you. Best not have them linger there without you for too long.”

“Right.” Wren limped away, unsure of what she expected from him. From the very first moment they ran into each other in Chicago, all Nathan had tried to do was help, and she’d repaid him with betrayal during his moment of need. He didn’t have any reason to forgive her. All that was left now was to try and make their situation amiable.

By the time she arrived at the gate, both Iris and Ben’s expressions signaled they’d reached the end of their patience. Iris was particularly wroth. “I don’t suppose this is how you’ll be starting all of your days with us?”

Wren rubbed her thigh and felt the sweat of fever as she had the day before. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead. “I’m sorry.” She turned back to where she’d left Nate at the well, then back to Iris. “It won’t happen again.”

“Good.” Iris waved up toward one of the guards on duty, and the front gate opened. Along with Ben and Iris, two guards joined the escort, everyone armed except for Wren.

Wren’s first step beyond the wall was planted in a dried patch of blood. The fluid had lost its crimson shimmer but retained the distinct hue associated with claret. She remained frozen in that first step, and her eyes fell

upon the other stains that dotted the dirt road. The wreckage of the vehicles had been removed, along with the bodies, and what remains were left behind had been scavenged by animals. All that was left of their lives were the stains on the forest floor.

“Wren,” Iris said, looking back at her, the rest of the group stopping alongside.

“Sorry.” She limped forward, leaving her footprint on the dead, stained leaves. With no idea of where she was being taken, Wren followed the herd as they kept tight to the community’s walled perimeter. Every few hundred feet, Iris and Ben would whisper to one another, but Wren was so concentrated on staying upright that she couldn’t hear what they were saying. But before her mind wandered down the twisted corridors of speculation, Iris and Ben stopped. Wren leaned against the fence, her body drenched in sweat and her lips so raw they felt like pieces of flint.

“You said that you could improve our defenses,” Iris said, walking through the tall grass that had overgrown next to the fence. “What do you see here?”

Wren examined her surroundings. The trees, rocks, thick grass, the surrounding hills, and the rotten wood that composed the nearest portion of the fence. “That lumber needs to be replaced.” She fingered the brittle bark that flecked away at the lightest touch, then kicked the weeds that came up to her knees. “And you’ll want to push this grass back, keep it maintained around the entire perimeter. That’ll help keep the integrity of the fence and keep any pests from nesting too close. The biggest problem you’ll have with wood is rot.” She pointed to a cluster of tall oaks a few dozen yards into the forest. “Oak holds up well against that; it’s strong, and I’ve seen plenty of trees to provide the resources we need.” She pointed out the more obvious signs of rot and then to a few showing the early stages. “Eventually we’ll want to upgrade to any steel we can salvage from the towns, or what we have on hand, and use it as brace materials. So to start, we reestablish the foundation of the fence and make sure it can’t be toppled over by a stiff breeze, as I’ve seen in some parts.” The explanation sucked the wind from her, and she struggled to catch her breath.

“Ben and I took a risk bringing you on board,” Iris said. “Your words were inspiring, but what you do with them will decide your fate. Remember that you’re only as valuable as what you bring to the table. Once that disappears, so do you.”

Wren nodded, triggering a dizzy spell. She fought against the desire to collapse. If she needed to show strength, then now was the time to do it. “Then I’ll need a team to help get me started. How many carpenters do you have in the community?” They started the walk back to the front gate, Wren doing her best to not stumble in the tall grass along the way.

“We have three,” Iris answered.

“And two blacksmiths,” Ben added from behind them.

“That’s good,” Wren replied. “There’s no guarantee that the materials we’ll be able to salvage will be of high quality, so they’ll need to know how to get the most from what we find.” The heat from the sun sapped her strength as she walked. The cut along her thigh burned. She stumbled, and Iris caught her arm. She turned her head away from everyone’s gaze to hide the pain etched along her face.

“Wren, are you all right?” Ben asked, coming up from behind her.

“Yeah,” Wren answered, trying to straighten her leg. “The past few nights were a little rough, that’s all.” She forced a half smile, but it was cut short by another searing burn in her thigh. She stiffened her back, avoiding collapse, but the ground started to spin.

“Wren?” Iris asked, the tone in her voice shifting to concern. “What’s wrong?”

“I just…” Before she finished, she collapsed to her knees, her leg numb from the fall. And just as quickly as she’d fallen face-first into the grass, she felt her body lift from the ground, her eyes opening and closing, the pattern of the canopy of trees changing each time. “I’m fine.”

Suddenly the view of the sky shifted to the wooden beams of a ceiling. Wren lolled her head back and forth. The faces that hovered above her shifted and changed. All of them spoke, but she waved her arm at them. “I’m fine. I just need to lie down.” She repeated the words like a prayer. Her whole body ached, and her last bits of coherency melted away.

Every once in a while, a jolt of discomfort ran through her, but her mind and body were so exhausted that her reactions were little more than a soft shudder and mumble. She became lost, wandering in pain, and suddenly she was back in Chicago. Fires circled her, the heat from the flames licking her skin. She saw Zack and the girls beyond the inferno, crying out to her, pleading for her to save them.

But Wren’s every attempt to reach them was met with failure. The flames roared in defiance and tossed her back into the middle of the fire. Screaming,

she watched her family catch fire. Her throat grew raw from smoke and heat. Wren wrestled the flames, stretching out her arms, the heat so intense she felt herself catch fire. And that was how she slept, burning with her family.

"WREN."

The voice was faint, nothing more than a tickle in her unconscious mind. She stirred as the voice grew louder, repeating her name over and over. The voice echoed louder, ringing through her ears until she finally opened her eyes. "Doug?" She squinted and for a moment believed that she was back in the hospital in Chicago. She reached her hand up to the arm where she'd been shot and felt the same sling that was given to her after the surgery. But the movement brought to light another pain in her leg. And while the ache had dulled, it still lingered. She ran her palm down to her thigh, and the infected flesh was replaced with a bandage that ran from hip to knee.

"Wren," Nathan repeated once more. "Can you hear me all right?"

Her vision cleared, and the outlines of bodies appeared. She lifted her head from the pillow to get a better look, but the exertion was too much for her neck to bear, and she collapsed back onto the cushion. "What happened?"

"The infection on your leg spread," Nathan answered. "If it had gone any farther, we would have had to amputate. Why didn't you say it was getting worse?"

"Where's Zack and the girls?" Wren lightly fingered the bandage on her leg, the cloth soft under her fingertips.

"They're fine," a voice said.

"We wanted to send them away before you woke up," Nate said. "To make sure you were okay before they saw you. Yesterday was your worst day."

"Yesterday?" Wren asked, confused. "How long have I been in here?"

"Three days," a voice said.

The voice sounded familiar but tired. She couldn't place it, though, and she lifted her head, forcing herself to locate the source. She propped her arms underneath her body to get a better look, and that's when she saw him.

Doug sat at an angle, supported by a dozen different cushions on a cot, and had an IV stuck into his arm. His shirt was removed, and his entire midsection was wrapped in bandages. Dark caverns etched themselves under his eyes, and his face had grown hollow and thin. In all their time together, she'd never seen him so weak. "The girls are back at Nate's place. Zack's been watching them."

Wren nodded then rested her head back on the pillow. Her body ached, and her mind was barely strong enough to formulate more than a few words. "How long have I been in here?"

"Nearly three days," Nathan answered. "You had a fever of one hundred and four. We did what we could to keep you cool. You're on an antibiotic regimen for the infection. Same as Doug."

Wren flinched. "Three days?"

Iris stepped forward. "Your husband will be joining Nathan's cabin once he's able to walk around himself. When the doctor says the two of you are healthy enough to return to work, you will do so immediately. So I suggest you rest quickly and often." Iris left with a few people Wren didn't recognize, leaving only Nathan and Doug at her side.

"We'll bring in some food from the mess hall," Nathan said, taking a look at the IV drip hooked up to her arm. "You'll need to eat quite a bit to help you recover." He rattled a bottle of pills and placed it next to the bedside table. "You need to take these three times a day, with food, until they're gone."

Wren wanted to thank him, apologize, explain, but there were too many words she needed that she didn't have access to at the moment. All she managed to express was a smile, which Nate returned in kind. It could have been out of pity or regret, but either way, she took it as a step in the right direction. Nathan left, leaving Wren and Doug alone in the infirmary. The glow of the sunlight coming through the windows hinted at sunset, and she closed her eyes, hoping to drift off to sleep before either of them had a chance to speak. But Doug had other plans.

"The girls came by to see you the other day. They seemed okay, though I think they were just pretending to keep a brave face. Zack took it hard, though."

Wren kept her eyes closed, her hand running up and down the bandage on her thigh. There was a slight indentation underneath the gauze, and she wondered how much flesh they'd had to remove to save the leg.

“Nate told me what you did,” Doug said.

She shifted to her side to look him in the eye. He kept his head down, and his arms hung limp like noodles from his shoulders. “And what did he say?” She remembered the look of betrayal Nate gave her during the trial after her omission. It was a look she never wanted to see again.

“He’s not mad at you, Wren,” Doug replied. “Not anymore, at least. He knows why you did it. But it was a lot for anyone to process. Especially in the setting you chose to do it.”

“There’s never a good time to give someone bad news,” Wren answered, hoping that Doug would catch her meaning as she spoke. “Did he also tell you what I promised to give these people?”

“Yeah. He told me.”

Wren’s strength faded, and she closed her eyes once more, repositioning her head on the pillow to get comfortable. “These people will only keep us here for as long as they need us.” She yawned, her eyelids turning into heavy pieces of lead dropping over her eyes. “They’ll want to have me finish as quickly as I can. I need to… figure… something out.” She pulled one of the blankets tight to her chin, and she thought she heard Doug mumble something, but she didn’t hear it. Her last thoughts were the howls of wolves. Though she couldn’t be sure if they were real or just the beginning of a nightmare.

7

ONE MONTH LATER

“We need all that material cleared before the afternoon. It’s rained like clockwork all week, and I don’t want to lose the trench to another slide before we can fill it.” Wren walked the line of at least a dozen workers ripping logs from the earth and tossing them aside, replacing them with some of the forged-steel braces she had instructed the blacksmiths to mold. She rotated her left shoulder, still not used to the sling’s absence, though glad to be rid of it. All that remained of the bullet wound in her arm was a small scar under the worn T-shirt sleeve.

Wren moved quickly up and down the line, one hand clutching the plans she’d drawn up to reinforce the wall. Nearly half of the fence was reconstructed. She replaced old wooden beams and reinforced the weaker ones with iron studs sunk deep into the ground. Massive braces on the interior of the fence stiffened the wood, adding to its defense. She also raised the wall’s height. The surrounding trees were cleared to provide the material for the extension, and every dozen yards contained a small window concealed with a sliding piece of steel. If they were attacked, it would allow patrols to shoot through the fence and to spy on any enemy while safely behind cover. The additions provided the fence with a more formidable presence. And judging by the looks of the council and the community, everyone was starting to believe they’d made the right decision in allowing her to stay.

“Mrs. Burton!” The foreman of the crew, Tom, waved from farther down the fence, where tomorrow’s project lay. He was a large man, nearly six and a half feet. He’d spent most of his life in construction, and out of everyone

Wren spoke with, he was the only one who understood the plans she created. “I would have done it myself, ma’am, if I had the background,” he’d told her. He constructed the first version of the wall, and his acceptance of her work only helped bring the rest of the crew in line. Through his respect of her, the others followed without question.

Tom stood near a thirty-foot section of the fence that had been set ablaze the night before, staining the wood black. If the logs weren’t as damp as they were from the week’s rain, it could have been much worse. “The second patch of burned wood is another hundred yards down,” Tom said, gesturing his massive hand to the north, then pointed to where black and charred bark had ended in a decidedly straight and geometric line. “Looks like the retardant worked. It’s a good thing we started applying it when you said.”

Before they began any heavy construction, Wren looked for anyone with a chemistry background, and she found it in the form of a retired science teacher. The retardant was a simple varnish, but with the lack of materials at their disposal, she was afraid the substance wouldn’t hold up. For once, she was glad she was wrong. “That’s the third time in the past week they’ve tried torching it.” Wren ran her fingers between the dead and healthy wood. She looked to the group of guards patrolling the forest behind her. A security detail escorted the crew every day. But since most of them were Edric’s men, she wasn’t sure if they were for protection or reconnaissance.

“We could have some of the men start applying the resin to the rest of the fence this afternoon,” Tom suggested.

Wren shook her head. “Whoever keeps trying to raid us knows they can’t get through by trying to burn us out, not with the rains still this heavy. And I don’t want to risk diverting manpower on sections we’ll have to replace anyway. We’ll just have to tell the council to continue doubling the guard patrols until we’re finished.” The manpower involved in fortifying the structures was more than most of the community wanted to invest, but two weeks after the first incident at the front gates that had put Wren on trial, others came knocking. And those people had guns.

A heavy hand tilted her shoulder down, and Wren looked up to see the tall giant smiling. “You’re doing great, Mrs. Burton. There isn’t a person inside those walls that doesn’t appreciate it. Me included.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

Wren stayed with the crewmen all day, as she did on most days. When the sun sank low in the sky, Wren called it quits. After working on the wall

for nearly three weeks, their return to the front gate grew longer every day. She wanted to install another entrance at a different intersection of the fence but knew that would cause a security risk and required materials she didn't have.

At the front gate, one of the guards on the catwalk eyed her all the way through while the others passed unmolested. One of Edric's men. While there was still a schism in the community, most of the people took to Wren once they saw how easily the fence was defended with the upgrades. But even with the fence's success, some still found fault with her.

"Burton!" Edric's sidearm hung from his hip, black and the brightest feature of his ensemble. "You didn't coat the remainder of the fence with the resin?"

"We're going to have to replace most of the fence we coated anyway. The rain will keep the wood damp until that happens. I didn't want to waste the manpower."

"You seem content with taking your time on your upgrades while my guards pull double shifts on patrol." He stepped forward, his hounds remaining close by. "Those men and women on my wall stand between you and the bullets meant to kill you when those raiders decide to attack again. They've tried burning their way in here three times already. What makes you think they won't do it again?"

"Because they've failed three times." The long day and hot sun had dried up all of her patience, and she looked to the darkening clouds above. Everything she did left a sour taste in his mouth. But with the fence proving its worth so far against the attacks, she'd seen her value substantiated. "And tell your 'guards' that I don't need them giving me the once-over every time I walk through the gate." She turned on her heel, leaving Edric fuming as she headed for the mess hall.

Every home had their own personal rations, but every family was required by community laws to contribute to a massive stockpile of food, which everyone shared in eating their three square meals a day. At first, it seemed excessive to have an entire building just meant for cooking, but there was a very important aspect of the hall she overlooked, one that Ben pointed out to her after her first week.

"Community." He smiled, his mustache hiding the creases and lines around his mouth. "People weren't meant to live alone in hovels, Wren. We're stronger in groups. It's how we've survived for thousands of years.

And what better way to share and commune with one another than through meals?" And he'd been right. Every meal the hall was filled with chatter and smiling faces. She'd find her place on the long benches, wedged between her girls, and listen to them go on about their day. In that setting even she had to admit the place felt like home. Out of all the laws the community offered, this was one she enjoyed. The meal house provided a renewable resource for everyone: hope.

Wren slid into the food line behind one of the fence workers and filled her bowl with rice and stew. Most of the concoctions were crockpot-style meals. They were easily made and mass produced. The hall could fill and feed the entire community all at once.

Addison and Chloe were already sitting down with Zack, and she was surprised when she saw Doug at the table, gingerly bringing a spoon full of meat from bowl to mouth. "Hey, Mom!" Chloe waved, grinning and holding a freshly fallen tooth from her mouth. "Look what I have!" She held out her palm, thrusting her small molar into the sky.

Wren picked it up, smiling. "Well, would you look at that. When did it come out?"

"She pulled it out," Addison said, rolling her eyes. "I told her to wait, and that it would hurt, but she didn't listen. She had that little kid Brent yank it out, and she started crying."

Chloe offered a sheepish smile. "It hurt more than I thought it would."

Wren returned the tooth to her daughter and wiggled between them. Doug still looked down into his soup, and Zack mimicked his father's posture. She shoveled the rice and pot roast into her mouth, savoring each bite as Chloe showed her the new signatures on her cast and Addison complained how much her sister's arm smelled since Chloe had never washed it. But despite the lighthearted laughter between the girls, Zack never so much as cracked a smile.

Her son's disdain and cold mood hadn't changed since they'd arrived at the camp. Dark circles had formed under his eyes, and when he wasn't at school he spent his time lying on his cot, dead to the world. Ever since she was released after her trial, he hadn't said more than three words to her, half of them mumbled grunts. She'd tried multiple times to get him to open up but had failed. "How was your day, Zack? Are you liking the school?"

"He doesn't say much in class," Chloe said, scooping a big spoonful of meat. "I don't think he likes it."

“I’m the oldest kid in the class by four years,” Zack said, stirring his spoon in his soup aimlessly. “Everything they’re learning, I already know. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid,” Chloe said defensively.

“All right, that’s enough,” Wren said, trying to end the argument before it started. Chloe frowned, furrowing her eyebrows, and returned to her soup, while Zack shoved his away. Wren looked from the bowl to her son. “You need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Zack, there is only so much food here—”

“I’m not hungry!” Zack slammed his fist on the table, and his outburst echoed through the hall’s high ceiling, quieting the rest of the crowd as every face turned to them.

Wren leaned forward over the table, the steam from her bowl heating her throat, which was already flushed red. “You do not raise your voice to me like that.” Any meaning that may have been misconstrued in her tone was made clear with her eyes. “Finish. Your. Dinner.”

Addison and Chloe shrank behind her, but Zack refused to relinquish any ground. He reached for one of his crutches and pushed himself off the bench. He knocked his food over before he left then slammed the door on his way out.

Once Zack was gone, the frozen stares cast toward her family thawed, save for the occasional dirty glance. No words were said, but Wren read the disappointment and judgement etched on every parent in the room, clear as day. She can’t keep her family together, so how is she supposed to keep a wall together? You’d never see my son act that way. She doesn’t know what she’s doing.

But, unlike her son, the wall lacked emotions or thoughts. It bent and molded to whatever form she commanded. Her son was another matter entirely. Wren looked from the steaming pile of rice and meat Zack had left behind to Doug. “You’re just going to let him walk away like that?”

“You’re the one who wants to leave.” Doug blew lightly on the spoonful hovering close to his lips, then sipped.

Wren withheld the sudden urge to fling her bowl in his face right then and there. Instead, she reached over and knocked his chin up with the end of her finger. “I need to speak with you. Outside.” She looked down at the girls and told them to stay put. Wren was already out the door by the time Doug finally

got to his feet, and she paced the dirt. Whatever their differences had been over the past few years, they'd always agreed on one thing: the kids wouldn't be affected. She'd lost track of the number of times she'd bit her tongue, holding back a verbal lash in front of the children that she knew would cut him. By the time Doug stumbled outside, she was fuming to the point of combustion. "What the hell is the matter with you? Is this funny? Is this some sort of game to you?"

"It's good to see you too," Doug said, his voice calmer than she expected it to be. Like their son, he walked on crutches, his body thin from healing from the gunshot wound in his abdomen. He'd lost at least twenty pounds.

"You do not get to speak to me in front of our children that way. Do you understand me? Never." Wren thrust her finger into his face, and his neck was so thin she could have wrapped her entire hand around it.

"You don't even know what's going on, Wren. I thought that this would be a fresh start for us. I thought there was no way that you could value your work more than your family at a time like this, but it looks like you proved me wrong."

"More than my family?" Wren snapped, and she felt hot rage flood her veins, her voice shrieking to the point of hysteria. "Everything I've done has been for my family! I haven't stopped working for my family since we left Chicago, or while we were in Chicago!" She shoved him in the chest, and he stumbled backward, nearly falling to the ground, but she didn't care. She didn't care about his gunshot wound. She didn't care about his feelings. She didn't care about his life. "You're the one who stepped out, Doug. You're the one who didn't make enough money for us to get out of that shitty neighborhood. You're the one who couldn't hack it in school. You're the one who cheated on me! So don't fucking stand there and tell me I'm the one to blame. You're just a ball-less shell of a human who can't take care of himself or his family." Spit flew from Wren's mouth on her last words, and Doug turned his cheek. If he cried, she couldn't see, but she hoped he was. "You're not a father. You're not a man. You are nothing."

Shame rolled down his cheeks. "You and I both know there was more to it than that. I tried everything I could to reach out to you, but you wouldn't listen." He straightened his spine, exposing his true height to her. "I know I hurt you. I know what I did hurt our family. But this blame isn't all on me."

"Yes it is!" Wren spit it back in his face, refusing to let him twist her words, to try and make her feel like shit. "You say what our family needed

was a run-down house in the slums? You think what our kids needed was a bad school that pushed more kids onto the street than kept them off?" Wren stepped back, walking away. "You sit behind your wall of excuses, hiding behind your family. That's a coward's way out. And that might be acceptable for you, but not for me."

Doug leaned forward. "I'm no coward. Call me whatever you want, but not that." He swung his crutches forward, slowly and awkwardly. The sky was a swirl of dark blues, blacks, and oranges as the sun sank under the horizon and Wren lost sight of him in the night.

Just as she was about to call after him, the food hall started to empty as families, finished with their meals, walked home. Wren found Ben bringing the girls out, their smiles returned as he gripped their hands in each of his. "I made sure they finished their vegetables before I brought them out."

"No, you didn't." Chloe giggled. "You said we didn't have to!" She spun around in his hand, and Ben looked down at her, shocked.

"Well, you're not supposed to tell your mother that," Ben replied, smiling.

Wren did her best to let the boiled rage and stress cool down, but she wasn't sure if it worked when she felt Addison flinch when she took her hand. "Thanks, Ben." He offered a smile and polite nod, and Wren led her girls back to Nathan's cabin before the rest of the crowd poured out. She wasn't in any mood to try and fake pleasantries.

"Burton."

And just when Wren thought the hell storm of the evening had ended, Edric marched toward her, flanked by Councilwoman Jan and Councilman Ted. "What is it now?"

For a change, the scars on his face tilted upward in what she assumed was an attempt at a smile. "I trust your family issues won't affect your work performance moving forward? It would be a shame if the community's confidence in your fortitude wavered."

Jan stepped forward. She was nearly as tall as Edric but slender. Her hair was cropped short but thick and black as the night around them. The only redeeming quality of her face were her eyes, but the angular cuts of her cheek and chin gave them a sinister tone. "Keeping your family together is what matters most in these times, Mrs. Burton." She curled her fingers around Edric's arm lightly. "Or do you prefer your maiden name?"

Wren ignored the jape, taking both her girls in hand. "My family," she

said, looking at Jan, “and my job”—she turned to Edric—“require no inquiries from anyone in this community. The wall will be finished on time. And my family will be fine.” She brushed past them before they retorted, pulling her girls with her. Halfway to Nate’s cabin she felt a tug on her sleeve.

“Mommy?” Chloe asked. “Are you okay?”

Wren knelt down to meet both her girls at eye level. “Of course, sweetheart. I’m fine. Are you okay?” Chloe nodded, but Addison kept her head down. “Addy?” Wren brushed her cheek, but Addison twisted out of her grip.

“You say that we’re okay all the time, but I don’t feel okay.” Addison retreated into the darkness, her voice crackling as tears broke free from her eyes. “It’s never going to be fine.”

Wren reached for her daughter, but the sudden burst of gunshots drew her attention to the wall. She clutched Chloe’s hand tighter in a knee-jerk reaction and heard her daughter squeal from the pressure. The peaceful exit from the hall turned into a stampede as everyone either rushed toward or away from the gunfire. She looked through the crowds, trying to find her daughter. “Addison!” She lifted Chloe to her chest. “Addison!” Desperation dripped from her lips as she shouldered through the hurried flow of bodies as the pops of gunfire grew more frequent in the night air.

“Wren!” Ben’s face appeared in the crowds, and he held Addison in his arms. She rushed toward them against the flow of the crowd. “I saw Edric take a unit toward the south portion of the wall. I’ll help you get the girls back to the house.”

Wren and Ben joined the exodus and retreated to their homes. When they arrived at Nathan’s, he was already loading a magazine into his AR, and he met them at the door on his way out. Wren clutched his arm before he left, her nails digging into his shirt. “Did Zack make it back?”

“I haven’t seen him.” And with that, Nathan disappeared into the night.

Wren set Chloe down in the bedroom, hoping to find Zack already there, but the room was empty. The noise outside grew louder, and she brought both girls to the panic room underneath the living room floor. “You two just stay right here, okay?” She kissed their heads, and they huddled close to one another, familiar with the drill when the wall was attacked. “You guys know what to do if you hear someone come in the house that doesn’t live here, right?”

The girls nodded, then at the same time added, “Stay quiet and follow the tunnel.”

“That’s right.” Wren kissed each of them one more time then rushed into the living room, where Doug hobbled inside on his crutches, his face dripping with sweat. “The girls are already downstairs. Make sure they stay there.” She brushed past him, giving him neither time nor comfort.

“What about Zack?” he shouted after her.

“I’ll find him!” Outside, the night air had grown alive with screams and gunshots. She watched the lights diminish in each house she passed, per protocol during an attack. The guards had use of night vision, and they wanted to decrease any advantages the intruders might have. Ben kept up as best he could, but Wren’s strength had nearly returned to normal, and she sprinted through the community faster than he could keep up. “Zack!” She looked everywhere—the mess hall, the community hall, the school, the infirmary—but every place turned up empty.

Each gunshot that blasted the night air only increased her panic. Flashbacks of Chicago and the factory where he was trapped struck her mind like flashes of lightning. Ben finally caught up with her, and she clutched his arm. “I don’t… I can’t find him.”

“I’m sure he’s back at the house by now,” Ben said, catching his breath. He reached into his pocket then grabbed her wrist. “Take this.”

Before Wren could protest, she felt the bulky metal of a pistol grip in her hand. It felt oddly heavy as Ben wrapped her fingers around it, forcing the weapon into her palm. “Does Edric know about this?” She’d requested a weapon before but was denied. Since they brought no weapons, and with Edric’s rhetoric of her lack of trustworthiness, it was decided that she and the rest of her family would go unarmed. It was a victory he dangled over her in the council’s decisions.

“Just take it.” And with that, Ben disappeared.

Wren gripped the pistol in her hand awkwardly, and while she no longer ducked in a knee-jerk reaction to the gunshots, she couldn’t stop the light shudder running up her spine. She kept the pistol close to her side, avoiding waving it around to attract as little attention as possible. She doubled back to Nate’s house, hoping that in the time she was gone Zack had returned, but when she opened the cellar doors, she saw only Addison, Chloe, and Doug, their eyes glued to the pistol in her hand. “He hasn’t come back?”

A fiery ball erupted into the night sky near the unfinished south portion of

the wall, accompanied by a percussive blast that hummed through her body. The flash of light quickly dissipated after the magnificent bloom of colors, leaving only a faint burn of embers in its stead.

For a few moments, the air was quiet. No screams. No gunfire. Nothing but the silence of the night air, but the reprieve from the murderous sounds of death was short lived, as a single scream pierced her eardrums. And it wasn't long before the screams multiplied, spreading like a virus attacking a host.

Wren walked slowly toward the sounds, the painful tones familiar. She'd heard the same pleas on the streets of Chicago during the car wreck that sent her daughter to the hospital. She'd heard them in the ER from desperate friends and families of the sick and dying. She'd heard them from her son, from her daughters, from people yearning for security. And now they were here. In a place she was told was safe. Safe.

"Mom!" Zack's voice snapped her out of the flashback as she watched her son hop forward on his crutches from the direction of the blast site. She involuntarily dropped the pistol from her hand as she clutched him in her arms, violently clawing his back in the relief that he was alive and the rage that had caused her to worry. "Mom, they're inside." Zack's pronounced Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he looked back to the source of death slithering inside the camp. "They shot two people. I don't know how many of them there are."

"C'mon." Wren grabbed his collar and pulled him as fast as his crutches would keep up but screeched to a halt once she realized her hands were empty of the pistol. She hurried back to the spot where she'd dropped it. She groped the grass and dirt with her fingers, hoping to find it, but struggled in the dark. She was about to pull back when her fingertips grazed a chunk of metal, and she snatched the gun, sprinting to Zack. "Let's go!"

Gunfire mixed with the pounding of feet and pulse as they headed for Nate's. The community was well over one hundred strong, over two-thirds of that population adults, and from what she'd seen, unlike herself, all of them competent with a weapon. Unless they were swarmed with greater numbers and skill than their own, she didn't think they'd be overrun, but she wasn't going to leave her family's fate to chance.

Nate's house was close to the south end, where the explosion occurred, and when Wren pulled the hidden doors open in the floor and tossed Zack inside, the gunfire grew excessively worse. Doug helped Zack down. Before she shut the doors, Doug thrust his hand up to stop her. "What are you

doing?” His gaze shifted between her face and the pistol in her hand.

“I don’t know how many of them are out there.” She looked to the gun and did her best to steady the light tremor in her hand. Unable to cease the shaking, she moved her hand and pistol out of view. “If they can’t be stopped, then you’ll need to take the kids back into town. But you’ll have to do it fast. If I’m not back in the next twenty minutes, you’ll know it’s bad. Follow the tunnel underneath, and it’ll take you to the garage. Take one of the cars they have stored there. You’ll have to break the lock on the key box. Don’t stop until you run out of gas.”

“Wren, you can’t—”

She slammed the doors shut and pulled the mat to cover the hidden compartment’s entrance. She stopped at the doorframe of the house as a man hurried by, wielding a shotgun. She raised her pistol and fired, her shot missing its target wide left, sending up a spray of dirt. The recoil from the gun knocked the pistol from her hand, and she dove to the floor after it, ducking out of the way of the shotgun blast that sprayed a cluster of lead balls through the wood.

Wren reached for the pistol’s barrel, burning her fingertips as she mistakenly grabbed the searing barrel. She cursed and fumbled the gun in her hands. Her body trembled with adrenaline. She huddled close to the doorframe on the inside of the cabin and slowly poked her head around the corner, only to duck back behind it at the sight of the twelve-gauge staring her down.

The blast splintered the doorframe as Wren rolled to her right, the slivers of wood from the door falling off her shoulders. She aimed the pistol toward the door, both hands on the grip this time and her finger on the trigger. She saw the man take a quick step inside, and she squeezed, the recoil jolting her arms and shoulders, but the pistol remained in her palms.

Bullets redecorated the inside of Nathan’s house, and while she emptied the clip, missing her target, the shots were enough to send the intruder running. But even after the clip had been emptied and the intruder was gone, Wren continued to squeeze the trigger. Click, click, click. The hammer knocked against the firing pin until the weight of the pistol grew too heavy to keep lifted, and the pistol thudded against the floor as it fell from her hand.

Wren couldn’t tell how much time had passed while she was on the floor, but after a while, the gunfire outside ended. Then, Doug, Zack, and the girls were standing above her, looking at her as though she were a ghost, feeling as

cold as one.

But it was Nathan who helped her up, his shirt sweaty and stained with blood and dirt. “C’mon, Wren. You’re okay.” She watched him pick up the emptied pistol on the floor and tuck it in his belt. He set her on the couch, checked her heart rate, and flashed a light in her eyes to check her pupils. “Wren, do you know where you are?”

“I’m…” She squinted her eyes shut and forced herself back into reality. She pushed herself up from the couch, making her way to the door. “What portion of the wall was hit?” She clung to the life that was her work, and the livelihood of her mind, using it to shift her out of the chaos.

Doug remained quiet for a moment before he answered, slowly. “It was yesterday’s work. Just before the south wall.”

Wren cursed under her breath, and as if on cue, Edric appeared at the door, flanked by his personal goon squad. His face was drenched in sweat and covered with soot. His arms bulged from his shirt, and his rifle strap clung tight to his chest. “Come with me. Now.”

One of the goons grabbed her arm forcefully, and before she even had a chance to wrench herself free, she was out of the house and being marched toward the south fence, where the explosion took place. In the dark, it was difficult to see, but once she was close enough, she managed to make out a lumped shape in the middle of the grass. And the body wasn’t alone.

Wren passed dozens of fallen bodies, all of them sprawled out in the dark grass, their limbs twisted awkwardly where they fell, their clothes and the ground around them stained with a dark liquid she knew could only be blood.

Edric’s goons brought her to the site of the blast, where only bits and pieces of the fence remained. An entire section at least ten feet wide had been blown apart, leaving nothing but a crater in its wake. To the left of the crater, there was a group of people on their knees, their hands tied behind their backs and guns aimed at the back of their skulls. Edric walked over to the first captive within reach and yanked his face up so Wren could get a good look. “You know who this is?” He thrust the man’s head down forcefully, the scars on his face twisted in what light the lanterns offered. “I ask because it seems to me that these people had some inside information. Attacking a portion of the fence that you rebuilt.” He turned around to the gathering crowd, the stench of fear and anger thick in the air. “After all,” he said, raising his voice, “you said that nothing would break through your designs. You said you could keep us safe. You call this safe?”

“The walls were meant to withstand scaling, gunfire, and battery,” Wren said. “We don’t have the materials to build something to withstand a bomb.”

“You said you could do anything,” Edric said, throwing her own words back in her face. “You said that you would do whatever it took to make sure that our families were protected.” Edric pointed to one of the bodies on the ground. “What about Steve’s family? Are they safer now that he’s dead?” He walked to another body, this one face up, with blood still leaking from the hole in her head. “Or how about Martha’s children? Her husband died years ago, and now she has two sons who are parentless. They’re nine and twelve. Are they supposed to look after themselves now?”

The dissent in the crowd fed off of Edric’s words, every one of them growing hungrier, angrier, the pain in their veins clamoring to escape, begging to punish someone. Wren looked at each of the fallen in turn, doing her best to not fall into the trap of words that Edric was hoping she’d slip into. “Everything I have done, everything the team I was charged with have tried to accomplish, has been for the good of this community, for everyone.”

“Has it?” Edric asked, looking down at her then back to the line of captives on the ground. “And you said you would do everything you could to protect not just your family, but everyone’s?”

Wren felt the edge of the snare, the final blow Edric was seeking to deliver, but with the growing crowd around her and its palpable anger, her options were slim. “Whatever I can do to help.” She spit the words out reluctantly, trying her best to keep her voice calm.

“Good.” Edric stomped over to the farthest captive and wrenched him up by the collar, dragging him to Wren’s feet, where he rolled onto his side. Edric removed his rifle from his shoulder and extended it to Wren. “Shoot him.”

Wren looked down at the captive. He was a boy, no older than Zack. The whites of his eyes were prominent in the darkness, the rest of his face dirty. She took a step back, shaking her head. “He’s a kid.”

“A kid who shot and killed one of our own. A kid who orphaned children. A kid who meant to take what we have and kill anyone who stood in his way.” Edric thrust the rifle into her arms, forcing her to grab it, then stepped around her, positioning the rifle under the crook of her arm and aiming the barrel at the boy’s head, then whispered in her ear, “A kid who sought to kill your family.” He stepped away, leaving Wren with the gun pointed at the captive. “Well? You want to protect this community? Here’s your chance.”

Wren watched the others, looking everywhere except the face of the boy on the ground. “This isn’t who we are,” she said, the strength in her voice surprising her. “We don’t murder children. We don’t kill in cold blood.”

“This isn’t murder!” Edric snapped back at her. “This is justice.”

“Edric, enough!” Iris burst through the crowd, Nathan and Ben close behind her. “You have no right to give such an order. Any sentencing must be done through consultation with the community and then approved through the council. You know our laws.”

“Our people don’t need laws! They need action!” Edric pulled his sidearm, aiming it at Iris’s head. “And you will bite your tongue before you try and interrupt me again.” He wavered his aim between the three of them as the rest of Edric’s goons raised their rifles. He shifted the pistol’s barrel to Wren. “Shoot him. Show us who you value more. Us. Or them.”

The boy quivered on the ground, spewing unintelligible pleas, his fellow captives glaring at her with the same look of death in their eyes as half the community around her. Wren raised the sight of the rifle to her eye, positioning her finger on the trigger, and the boy cast his head down, his shoulders shaking violently. For my family.

But the thought struck a chord. Somewhere, the boy at the end of the barrel had a mother and a father. He had once been a child like Addison and Chloe. She looked to the other captives tied up on the ground. All of them have family. All of them were someone. Wren lowered the rifle.

Edric flicked the safety off his weapon and took a step forward, shortening the space between the tip of his pistol and Wren by half. “Shoot him.”

Wren tossed the rifle on the ground. “No.”

The scars on Edric’s face twisted in the same rage she’d seen before, and her eyes wandered quickly over the faces in the dark and the flickering light of the lanterns to see their reactions, and the expressions were mixed. “You pick these people over the community that took you in? The community that gave you food and water? Who helped keep your husband and children alive?” Edric shook his head. “Now we know where your loyalties reside.” He tilted the gun down at the boy’s head and squeezed the trigger, spraying his blood across Wren’s legs.

8

It was abnormally cold just before the sun broke over the horizon. Goose bumps rose on Wren's arm as she sat on the front steps of Nathan's porch, alone except for the nearly empty bottle of whiskey to her left. She'd found it in the cellar where Addison, Chloe, Zack, and Doug were hidden. She didn't remember much of returning to the cabin, but the gunshots from Edric's pistol still rang as clearly as they had nearly ten hours ago.

Wren curled her fingers around the bottle's neck and lifted the rim to her lips, the brown liquid sloshing back and forth inside then sliding down her throat. The whiskey's burn had numbed her senses and slowed her mind. But the one thing it hadn't done was blur the vision of the young man who was killed at her feet, nor the screams from the fellow captives right before Edric's men silenced them as well.

Murderers. They came here to kill your family. But even as Wren repeated the mantra that Edric had used to justify the deaths of the captives, she couldn't rid herself of the trembling boy at her feet, his eyes wide with fear just moments before his death. There was no trial, no talk of their reasons, no explanation of who shot first. Justice. That wasn't justice. It was revenge.

Wren circled the rim of the whiskey bottle with her finger, the glass warm from the heat of her lips. If there was one thing that came out of the altercation from the night before, it was Edric making a point of who was really in charge of the community. While he was gunning down the enemy, Iris and Ben were held to little more than a few words before Edric

disappeared with his goons.

A shudder ran through her at the thought of his little army, his disciples that he'd trained so well. They'd listen to anything he said and would follow through with anything they told him. The only question was how much of the rest of the community would? Her wall failed, the people in the community saw her refuse an order from a man they either feared or respected, or both. Whatever little headway she'd made disappeared the moment she lowered her weapon.

A part of her wanted to do it. That much she was sure of, or else the shame from last night would have worn off hours ago, before the bottle between her knees was drained. She'd tried to find a way to justify killing the boy, but no matter what excuse she set in front of herself, she came back to the same conclusion: all those people wanted was help. They asked for it before, and we turned them away. We never even considered working with them.

The community's policy of isolation was one that was well accepted, and if it weren't for Nathan, she and her family would have been in the same boat. She thought about everything she did to keep her family safe back in Chicago, never stopping to think about the repercussions. That's all they did. They were just trying to stay alive.

The first rays of daylight broke through the trees, and Wren squinted into the early sunrise. She grabbed the bottle lazily and pushed herself off the porch, but before she was able to stand fully, she collapsed backward, the world spinning with her. She lay on her back, the wooden planks lumpy and stiff underneath, and rested her head on the porch, her mind wavering back and forth like a ship caught in a storm at sea.

She chuckled, the booze flooding her senses. She hadn't felt this drunk since high school. She shimmied to her side, pressing her palms flat against the wooden planks, and used her two shaky arms to push up from the floor. She used the porch railing for support and stood still for a few moments once she finally straightened.

Her first step forward was misplaced, and she caught herself on the doorframe just before she fell, her fingers cutting into the grooves of the bullet holes. The worries and pain that had plagued her mind the entire night were immediately washed away and replaced with the dizzy sensation that accompanied draining a fifth of whiskey. She made her way to the only piece of furniture in the living room, which was the dining table, and sat

awkwardly on the edge of one of the chairs, avoiding the bedroom and risking waking up the kids in her drunken stupor.

She rested her elbows on the table and cradled her face with both hands, trying to steady herself and the room swirling around her. Carefully, she laid her face down on the table, the wood cool against her flushed cheek, and the world went black. When she felt a nudge on her shoulder, she grunted, and when the intrusion refused to relinquish its assault, she knocked it away with her hand, only to have it return with greater force.

“Wren, wake up.”

A sudden wave of heat washed over her, and she lifted her cheek from the table, the skin peeling off like Velcro. Her body was covered in sweat, and she smelled the booze squeezing through her pores. She wiped her face. The flavor in her mouth was something akin to what she expected a rotten animal to taste like. The window on the far side of the room showed the day had gone well into the afternoon, which jolted her awake. “Christ.” Wren jumped from her chair, wobbling on two legs toward the front door, where she was forced to stop and catch her breath. Whatever aches plagued her body failed in comparison to the pounding in her head. Her brain throbbed against her skull with such a force she slid back down to the floor, pressing her palm into her forehead as if she could press the hammering into submission.

“Are you all right?”

She felt hands on her, warm, thin hands, yet oddly familiar. She shook her head, her eyes still squinted shut. “I feel like was hit by a freight train.”

“Whiskey never agreed with you.”

Wren opened her eyes and saw Doug kneeling down beside her, his crutches on the floor. Despite the hangover, her rage sifted through the impaired thoughts and memories that clung tightly to their last encounter. “Whiskey wasn’t the only one.” She rolled to her left, using the doorframe to climb back to her feet, while Doug remained on the floor. “Why didn’t anyone wake me?”

“They tried,” Doug answered, reaching for his crutches and pushing himself up awkwardly, taking considerably longer than Wren. “You were blacked out. Dead to the world.”

Wren squinted into the sunlight. “With the heat of hell beating down outside, who’s to say I’m not?” She wobbled back to the porch. The whiskey bottle was knocked to its side, and she scooped it up then headed back inside.

“Iris and Ben came by earlier. They wanted to talk to you about last

night.”

Wren set the empty bottle on the counter in the corner that was attached to what passed for their kitchen, which was no more than a few cupboards where they stored some of their perishable items to snack on between meals. “I’m sure they do.” She leaned her head against the wall. The floor shifted under her feet.

“Wren, they told me what happened.”

“And?” She wasn’t surprised at the news. Gossip spread like wildfire through the camp. Since they had no real entertainment, she’d taken up the mantle as the community’s most desperate housewife.

“And… they’re worried about you.” Doug paused. “I’m worried about you.”

Wren chuckled, peeling her forehead off the rough wooden walls of the cabin, a red mark placed on her forehead where she’d applied the pressure. “You’re worried? About me?” The laughter rolled drunkenly off her tongue, her head swimming in a delirium of fatigue, pain, and anger. “You have to be kidding me.”

“Wren, I know we haven’t been on the same page about a lot of things, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still care about you.”

“We haven’t even been in the same book, Doug.”

“I still love—”

Wren snatched the empty whiskey bottle on her spin, thrust it high above her head, and smashed it on the ground. The glass erupted into thousands of pieces that flew in every direction, the thundering crash silencing Doug’s next word. “You have no right to say that. No right! I don’t love you, Doug. Not anymore.” The alcohol-induced wrath came down on him like a fiery hell storm. Every step she took forward, every verbal dig she cut his way thrust him backward. “You wanna know what I wanted to talk to you about? Before the shit storm in Chicago? I wanted a divorce. I’d spoken to the lawyers; I already had all of the paperwork drawn up. I was going to leave you.” The weight she’d carried with that on her shoulders lifted the moment the words left her lips, but something else replaced that burden, something she didn’t expect. Anger.

Doug remained quiet for a moment. The sunlight caught the back of him, casting his front in shadow, making it hard for Wren to see his reaction. “I didn’t realize...” He slumped low between his crutches. “I didn’t know I’d hurt you that badly.”

“You didn’t hurt me, Doug.” Wren stepped over the broken glass, the bits crunching under the soles of her boots until they stopped just before knocking into Doug. “I didn’t care about you enough for that to happen.” Wren was close enough to see his reaction that time, and the wounds across his face were all she needed to see to know the cost of her attack.

Without a word, Doug turned, his crutches thudding against the floor and his head hung low until he was out the door and out of sight. Wren uncurled her fists; she hadn’t realized how tightly she’d been clenching them. She walked back to the table, kicking the glass from her path along the way. She collapsed in a chair, but with her body still numb from the alcohol, she didn’t feel the impact. How did I get here?

Wren lay with her head on the table for only a few more moments before the needs of food and water compelled her body to seek nourishment. She headed toward the mess hall in hopes of finding some water and any leftover lunch. There were a few people walking about, but Wren kept her eyes forward, not wanting the trouble of having to explain herself to anyone. Not now. Not yet.

By the time she arrived at the mess hall, the doors were locked, and she tugged against them fruitlessly. The walk had only worsened the dryness in her mouth, and when she wiped her brow, she saw that salt had crusted on her skin. I don’t even have any water left in me.

“Mrs. Burton?”

The voice was sheepish, and for a second Wren thought she’d imagined it until it repeated, and she turned to the sight of three people huddled closely together. An older man stood in the front, someone she’d seen before but never learned his name. The two behind him were his wife and daughter. Ella and Mary, if she remembered correctly. “Yes?”

The old man fiddled with his hands nervously, rubbing the liver spots on his skin hard enough to scrub them off. “We have some leftovers in our cabin if you’re hungry. Water too.” He offered a half smile, and the girls behind him nodded in agreement.

The offer took Wren aback. Did Edric convince them to do this? But her stomach grumbled, and her tongue scratched the dry patch in her mouth. In the end, her body’s desires overrode her concern for an ambush and she followed them to their home, keeping her distance from the old man and an eye out for any of Edric’s goons. But they arrived at the old man’s door with little incident.

The inside of the cabin was even smaller than Nathan's but more adequately furnished. The walls were decorated with pictures and a few paintings. Wren stopped to examine one as the old man offered her a glass of water. He gestured to the picture, smiling. "My little Ella did that when she was only five." He turned back to his daughter, who blushed. "She was always so talented."

Wren nearly drained the glass in one gulp. Even at room temperature, the water felt cool against the hot desert that was her mouth. She turned from the painting and back to the old man. "I'm sorry, I never learned your name."

"Edison," he answered, smiling. "But I know who you are, Mrs. Burton." He gestured to the sofa and took her glass from her, looking to his wife to refill it. The couch was small, and the proximity both of them were forced into was cozier than Wren would have liked, but the old man did his best to keep his distance at a respectable measure. "How are you feeling?"

The past eighteen hours had left Wren jaded to the sincerity of the people around her, and if she hadn't seen the old man's genuine expression firsthand, she would have waved it off as a slight. She took the refilled glass of water and gave it a raise. "Better now."

"What you did last night. It was brave."

Mary offered her a small plate of jerky, and Wren tore at it hungrily, the water whetting her appetite. "The boy still died. It would have been braver for me to take the bullet myself." Half the plate disappeared in two handfuls as she stuffed her mouth. After a few bites, she forced herself to slow, making sure to chew instead of swallowing the pieces whole.

"If you had taken the bullet yourself, then your children would have been left motherless." Edison reached his hand over and gently touched her forearm. "And we wouldn't have a chance to talk."

Wren looked up to see both Mary and Ella standing over them on the couch. She slowly set the plate of jerky down on the coffee table, her eyes moving wearily between the three of them. "And what would you want to speak with me about?"

"Edric." Edison said the name firmly, and the two women nodded their heads in agreement. "This isn't the first time he's gone beyond the laws of our community. This place is not a castle, and he is not a king. He can't be allowed to do whatever he sees fit."

"Apparently he can." Wren stood up. She neither wanted nor needed a lecture. "If you wanted to stand up to him, then you should have done it last

night. He wasn't the only one that was armed. If you wanted to make a statement, then you missed your chance." She headed for the door, her stomach irritated at the abandonment of the jerky.

"He wants to dissolve the council," Ella blurted out.

Whether it was the desperation in the girl's voice or the hatred Wren had for Edric, she stopped at the door. "What are you talking about?"

"It's okay, Ella," Edison said, encouraging her. "You can tell her."

The woman was young, her hair a light blond. She was thin, but the wiry muscles along her arms and legs revealed a strength in her frame. Wren noticed the muscles in her hands as well, a side effect of someone who always had a pen or a brush in their hand. It was a side effect Wren was familiar with herself after spending hours at a drawing board. "How do you know that?"

"I was… talking, to one of the men in his guard unit. David," Ella answered quietly.

Sleeping with the guard was more like it. "Go on," Wren said.

"Edric pulled him aside when we were together, and I didn't mean to listen, but their voices were loud. They were angry with each other over something. And when David came back, he told me that Edric had been trying to eliminate the council to streamline the decision-making process. But David told him that it was a bad idea, that the only way to keep us all together was maintaining a balance in the community."

"Did he say how he was going to do this?" Wren asked.

Ella shook her head. "When I tried to talk to David about it more, he told me I shouldn't probe into it. That it didn't concern me. But after last night…"

"If Edric thinks he can kill anyone on a whim, then I think it's obvious what he'll do," Edison replied.

Wren let out an exhausted sigh. "Why didn't you bring Ben and Iris in on this? If he's going to dissolve the council, then those two will be the first to go."

"They did." Iris stepped through the door first, followed closely by Ben, who shut the door behind him, locking all six of them crammed in the small living room. "Wren, we need to talk."

9

The effects of the alcohol wore off by evening, but Wren's head still swam with confusion. She sat silently in Edison's living room, the orange glow of the setting sun shading the drawn curtains a beautiful orange. Iris and Ben waited for her response, but Wren had no idea where to even start. "You realize that this idea is ludicrous, right?"

"We have to make a move, and we have to do it soon," Iris answered. The soft, kind features Wren remembered on their first day together hardened to stone. The councilwoman had made up her mind, and Ben was with her. "Edric won't waste any more time. He has the numbers."

"And guns," Wren added. "And bullets, and training, and a raging thirst for power that doesn't seem to be satisfied in his current role." Wren jumped from the couch, needing to move around. "You saw what happened last night, Iris. You all did. If Edric wants to take control of this camp, he doesn't need to do it in secret meetings. He controls the guards. He has access to the garrison. All he has to do is say the word, and the camp is his. You think going to him with a resolution telling him that he will be kicked off the council will persuade him?" She laughed. "The world beyond those walls is providing him with everything he needs to scare the people here into doing whatever he wants them to. They want security, and he's already convinced them that he can keep them safe."

"He's not the only one," Ben replied.

"The fence didn't work." Wren paced around, her arms flailing about in animation that she'd normally reserved for arguments with Doug. Christ.

Doug, the girls, Zack. Edric will kill every single one of them the moment he thinks I'm planning something against him.

"You're right," Iris said, her voice low and solemn. "But what you did last night proved that you're not afraid of him. It showed the people here that he can be stopped." Iris moved closer, her small frame growing larger with every word. "Do you know how many people came to me after what they watched him do last night? Nearly half of the community. Half. If that isn't cause for a call to action, then I don't know what is."

Wren grunted in frustration. "Then where are they now? Edric doesn't talk. He shoots. And anyone that disagrees with him will get a bullet to the head. That's what your people saw. And that's what will keep them in line. Edric knows it. You know it. I know it." She waved them all off, having reached her fill of foolishness, and headed for the door.

"You cut off the head, and the body dies," Iris said, just as Wren's hand was on the handle. "And we could kill him without ever having to squeeze the trigger. All we have to do is catch him off guard."

Wren released the door handle and turned around. Everyone was standing now, all of them gathering around Iris. Wren lingered at the door, entertaining the thought. "He's always armed. And it would be foolish to think he doesn't keep himself protected at night. You'd never get close to him in here."

"That's why we're not going to do it in here." Iris pointed south, to where the explosion the night before had destroyed a large section of the wall. "You go to him and tell him that you want to take a team out to scavenge for more material. Tell him you need to make the wall stronger, and that the only way is to get better material. Steel, iron, concrete, whatever you have to do to convince him that we can't get the materials from the forest."

"I've been saying that since day one," Wren answered.

"Exactly. Despite his looks and brute force, he's smart. Anything out of the ordinary, and he'll smell it. But you coming to him, wanting to try and make amends for the failed wall…" Iris raised her eyebrows. "Now that's something he'll believe."

"But he'd have no reason to go," Wren replied.

Iris looked to Ella, who quickly turned her head down. "It's all right, Ella. Tell her what you told me."

The girl stepped forward, and though she must have been twenty, the way she twiddled her hands and twisted her ankles made her look no older than

Addison. “Edric said… He told David that…” But the girl stuttered, unable to spit out her knowledge.

“Edric wants to kill you, Wren,” Iris said, finishing the girl’s words. “That’s why he’ll go with you.”

And suddenly Wren realized why they’d chosen her in the first place. Why Iris was betting all her chips. “You want to use me as bait. Draw him away from his protection, away from any prying eyes.”

“A lot of things can happen on a supply run these days.” Iris shrugged. “With all the attacks that have happened over the past few weeks on our camp, what’s to say we don’t run into trouble?”

It was amazing to Wren how innocently the words left Iris’s mouth. She’d heard the same strategies and talk at board meetings at her company, though the end goals were building acquisitions, not murder. “It’s some sort of game for you, isn’t it?”

“This is no game, Wren,” Ben said, stepping around Iris. “This could be our only shot at successfully getting rid of this man. Iris said before it’s only a matter of time before he finally makes his move, and with the events of last night, he has more reason than ever to finally take control. This has to be done quickly.”

There was no denying that having Edric gone would be a burden lifted from her shoulders and a reason for her to stop looking behind her everywhere she walked. “When are you planning on having this… run?”

The mood in the room shifted from anxious to relieved, and Iris walked her through the plan. “Ben and I have a meeting with him tonight. It’s a regular affair, so he won’t suspect anything. I’ll bring up the proposal for the run, saying it was your suggestion. Edric already knows how close we are, so it would be natural for you to come to me about it. Once he agrees, I’ll make sure to stack enough of our people on the run to give us a chance. Then… we’ll kill him.”

“And the men he brings with him?” Wren asked. “You know he’ll be sure to take his own people.”

“He’s the head,” Iris reminded her. “I don’t think they’ll put up much of a fight once he’s gone.”

“Right.” It was dark now, and Wren knew that her girls would be worried about her. As for Zack and Doug, they probably wouldn’t mind Edric getting away with whatever he had planned to kill her. “Let me know how it goes.”

Once outside, Wren suddenly felt tired. Her legs, arms, and body were

sore. She couldn’t figure out why, until she remembered her alcoholic adventures from the night before. After wasting away the day still reeking of whiskey, she was surprised she’d forgotten. But she forgave herself due to the casual conversation regarding her planned murder by a cold-blooded lunatic.

Wren kept on a path to Nate’s away from most of the buildings. The fewer people she ran into at that moment, the better off she’d be. Compared to the night before, the forest surrounding them was disturbingly peaceful.

With Nate’s house only a few dozen yards from the thick of the trees behind the main buildings, Wren turned back toward the main portion of the camp. Her foot snapped a twig, and a rustle in the bushes to her left caused her to freeze. She squinted in the darkness, trying to make out any further movement or shapes, but the dense trees made it difficult. Maybe another member of the raiders? They could have easily snuck through now, with the majority of the guards focused on the massive gap in their defenses.

The rustles grew louder, and Wren coiled her body, reaching for a rock on the ground to defend herself with, but the body that stumbled out from behind the bushes walked on three legs. She dropped the rock in her hand and let out a sigh. “Christ, Zack, what are you doing out here like that?” But her son ignored her, keeping his head down as he changed his direction toward the cabin. Wren caught up to him easily and stepped right in his path. “Zack, what are you doing?”

Zack tried sidestepping her, but any attempt was too slow with the massive cast around his broken leg. “Mom, get out of my way.” His voice was irritated and pathetic, sounding like nothing more than a sniveling toddler on the verge of a tantrum.

“No, not until you talk to me. You’ve hardly said more than a few sentences to me since we’ve arrived here, and the times where we do speak to one another are cold and nasty.” Wren waited for a reply but received none. “Zack, I can help.”

“You can’t!” Zack’s throat cracked at the sudden burst of volume in his voice, his scream just as shocking and violent as the explosion she’d heard the night before. The outburst sapped his strength as he hung from the two crutches like a lifeboat. “They’re dead,” he said between sobs. “They’re dead because of me.”

Wren placed a gentle hand on the back of her son’s head. “Zack, what happened last night isn’t your fault, it’s—”

“No,” he said, sniffling. “It’s not from last night. My friends. In Chicago.” He looked up, and even in the darkness, Wren saw the tears running down his cheeks. “My friends are dead because of me.” He collapsed forward, leaning all of his weight into Wren, who was caught off balance by the sudden fall.

Wren pulled his head up, wiping the tears from his eyes. Her heart broke in two as she watched her eldest fall apart in her arms. She helped him over to a log, where the two sat down, his head leaning against her shoulder as she gently stroked his hair. They’d never spoke about what happened at the abandoned factory she pulled him out of before they escaped the city. “What happened at the factory, Zack?”

He took a few deep breaths, trying to force his composure, but struggled with finding any strength in his voice. “It wasn’t the first time,” he started, pulling up from her shoulder, wiping his nose with his shirt sleeve. “We’d gone there before. The place was shut down a long time ago.” He shook his head. “It was stupid, I know. The day of the attacks, we had talked about going, but some of my friends had a test they said they didn’t want to miss. They wanted to stay. But I made them go. I told them that the class was a waste of time, that one test wouldn’t flunk them out. So they went. We took Jesse’s car, since he was the only one with a driver’s license. When we got there, everything was fine. We were just hanging out, joking around like we always did. It was getting later in the afternoon, and they wanted to get going, since school was letting out soon, but I told them to lighten up.” Zack grimaced, the tears returning unabashedly. “And then the explosions went off. It was like bombs were dropping all around us, and I knew it was down the street, but the building and the equipment inside were so old that I guess all it took was a light tremor to bring most of it down. Everyone was screaming, running, trying to get away. I turned around and saw them reach out their hands for help just before the vats crushed them, then my leg.” Zack uttered a few more words, but he was so distraught that Wren couldn’t decipher what he said.

Wren cupped her son’s face in her hands, pulling him up from the despair he was sinking into. “I want you to listen to me very carefully. What happened in Chicago was not your fault. Your friends being with you in that warehouse was not your fault. Some sick people with a twisted agenda killed them.” She lifted his chin, looking him directly in the eye. “Your friends did not die because you skipped school, or because you convinced them to come

with you, or because you told them to stay. They died because of murderous thugs. You had nothing to do with it. Nothing."

Zack nearly broke down again then and there. He nodded quickly, trying to hold tightly to the pillar of strength she offered him. He wiped his eyes and his nose. "I still have nightmares about them. About that day. I can see them. I hear them. Every night. No matter what. They always find me."

Wren heard the torment in her son's voice as he gazed off into the night, looking as though the ghosts of his friends would pop out from behind the trees. She thought about all of the death she'd seen and looked down to the bloodstained pants she still wore from the night before. She wondered if the boy's face would haunt her tonight. "It will get better, Zack. It's just going to take time. And you're going to have to talk about it. The more you keep it bottled up, the more you're afraid to talk about it, the more it will control you." She placed her hand on his back. "There is no shame in being the survivor. God knows I'm glad you are."

Zack offered another light nod, accompanied by a sniffle. "Yeah, I know." He reached for his crutches, and Wren helped him off the log. "I'm sorry, Mom. For, well, me."

"It's all right." Wren took him in her arms, thankful he had finally let her inside. "Remember that I love you. And I will always love you no matter what. Never think you can't talk to me about what you're going through. No matter how bad or evil you think it is, okay?"

"Thanks, Mom."

Just the sound of his voice was enough to lift her spirits, let alone the thank you. She squeezed him tightly one more time and threw her arm around his shoulder as they walked back to Nate's cabin. "Did you eat anything today?"

"I had some lunch."

Wren patted his back. "We'll head back over to the mess hall, see if there's anything left from dinner." They had just stepped out of the thickest portion of the forest when Edric blocked their path. Wren instinctively stepped in front of her son, spreading her arms out to cover as much of him as she could. She looked for a weapon on him, but it was hard to see in the darkness. He said nothing at first, just stood there, silent, menacing. Does he mean to do it here? Kill me in front of my own son?

"I need to speak with you," Edric said, his voice as deadly quiet as the woods behind them. "Send your son to the house. It's a conversation I wish

to have in private."

Wren looked around to see if any of his goons had followed him, but when she saw nothing in the clearing before them but Nate's house, she nodded to Zack. "Go on. I'll only be a minute." The two of them remained quiet as Zack hobbled away, and it wasn't until her son was in the house that Edric finally broke his silence.

"I just had an interesting meeting with the council." Edric stepped around her, keeping his hands behind his back. "Was the death toll last night not enough for you? Do you wish for more of our community members to die, risking their lives only to make another pathetic wall?"

"The wall I inherited was already pathetic," Wren said. "I did what I could with what I had." She took an aggressive step forward. "If you want to keep the community safe, then I know what we have to do. And taking the risk to find better materials to reinforce our defenses is the only way it can be done."

Edric studied her in the darkness for a long time. And while she couldn't see his eyes, she felt the cold rush his gaze cast over her body. And despite Wren's attempt at courage, in that moment she knew he could see her tremble in the night air. "You are right about one thing, Burton. It is the only way it can be done. I suggest you get a good night's rest. We leave first thing in the morning." He turned swiftly on his heel and disappeared.

Wren exhaled and made her way back to the cabin. But despite Edric's advice, she knew that tonight's sleep would be just as restless as the one before it.

10

Wren spent most of her morning staring at the girls as they slept under their blankets. She wanted to wake them, pull them from bed, and squeeze them tight until they pushed her away. But in the morning light, they looked so peaceful she couldn't bring herself to disturb their slumber.

Zack was awake by the time she left, and she nearly broke down when he told her he loved her, but forced back the tears. None of them knew what she was being sent out to accomplish, and if the plan worked, none of them ever would. She didn't see Doug, but after their exchange the other day, she found herself disappointed with how they separated. Whatever their marriage used to be, it saddened her to know it was no longer worth saving, to either of them. But as morose as the outcome was, the closure offered her some peace.

Before the teams chosen for the run departed, Iris made sure to point out which of the scouts were on their side. The numbers were at least even between Iris's people and Edric's, though she found it odd that Councilwoman Jan was staying behind. Lately, the two had been inseparable. And Councilman Ted was nowhere to be found. Though Wren was thankful to have some familiarity in Tom, her foreman on the wall. Iris offered a hug before Wren joined the rest of the team in the back of the truck and whispered in her ear, "Tom will give the signal when it's time. When he says 'it's getting late,' that's when it'll start."

They took two vehicles, the mixture of Iris's men and Edric's men spread out between the trucks evenly. The ride in the back of the truck was rough, and for each dip and bump, Wren's knuckles flashed white against the black

rifle in her hands. The weapon felt thick and bulky, but she kept the rifle tight against her body. She rode in the same truck as Edric, something she couldn't avoid, as he didn't pick a vehicle until she had already chosen hers. She kept a watchful eye on him from her position, but he offered no movement or hint as to his actions. Whenever a moment of doubt or fear crept into Wren's mind, she clung to the consequences of her failure. If Edric survived, then her family would be the first to die. She knew the bastard would do it out of spite, maybe even drag her along to watch if she was still alive afterward.

Another path came into view up the road, and the lead truck veered onto it. When Wren felt them slow and follow, and the icy grip of panic took hold of her heart. "What's going on? The town is to the east. That'll take us north."

Tom banged on the window to the truck's cab, and Edric turned around, sliding the dirty glass window open. "Where are we going? The town's in the other direction."

"A little detour," Edric yelled above the howl of wind and the hum of the truck's engine. "We're stopping at one of the food caches. With the increased number of the attacks over the past few weeks, we didn't want to risk missing an opportunity to grab it." He looked to Wren. "Better safe than sorry." He slammed the window shut, and Wren jolted from another bump in the road.

They traveled for another twenty minutes. When the truck came to a stop, she jumped out eagerly, the butt of her rifle pulled tight in the crook of her arm. She watched Edric exit the truck, but he never even looked her way, and neither did his men. Wren tugged on Tom's sleeve as they hung back. "Is there really a food cache out here?"

"Yeah," Tom answered. He shook his head uneasily, his motions as angular as the square jaw that encased his face. "But I don't like the change in plans."

Some of the men carried shovels, and Wren watched Edric examine the trees, leaning in close to their trunks, looking for something. "All right. Should be just… about… here." He stopped, looking straight down, smiling. "Jackpot." His men dug up the earth where he planted his foot, and the crater grew deep quickly.

Wren watched Edric carefully. She watched his eyes, his hands, his feet, arms, legs, neck. She looked for any inkling or the slightest hint of trickery. But the one time he locked eyes with Wren, all he offered was a smile.

One of the diggers struck a crate, and the men lifted the sealed boxes and

bags of food to the edge of the hole until the pile stood as tall as Wren and six feet wide. Everyone grabbed a box and loaded the truck, piling the rations in the bed.

When the last box was shoved into place, everyone dusted off their hands and tossed the shovels in with their bounty. Edric looked into the sky, smearing some of the dirt from his hand onto his forehead as he wiped his brow, and when he looked Wren in the eyes, the same rush of cold that she felt upon their first encounter shivered up her spine. A smile burst onto Edric's lips as the next words from his mouth sounded like he spoke them in slow motion. "Looks like it's getting late."

It took Wren half a second too long for the words to process, and by the time she realized what happened, gunfire erupted. She raised her rifle, nearly dropping the weapon in the process as she shuffled her feet backward. Her shaking finger found the trigger and squeezed. Her eyes shut involuntarily from the rifle's kickback, and she had no idea of the projection of her bullet. Her back slammed against a tree, and she grasped the trunk, pulling herself behind it for cover. She tilted her head out from behind the grooved bark and saw both sides had separated, and Edric's men had the trucks.

Bullets struck the tree, and Wren jerked back behind the safety of the thick trunk. The rifle rattled in her shaky arms, and though she wanted to shut her eyes again, she forced them open. Her breath was labored and quick as she looked left and saw one of Iris's guys a few trees down. The sight of allies caused her to grow bolder. She wasn't alone. Not yet.

"Wren!" Tom waved his arms from behind a small embankment between a cluster of trees to get her attention. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Wren gripped the rifle a little more firmly as the beacon of strength in her voice spread to the rest of her body. She tucked the weapon's stock back under her arm, the thunder of gunshots no longer causing her to flinch.

Tom ducked from a round of bullets that sent a spray of dirt over his back. "Just stay there!" He jumped to his feet, shell casings ejecting from the rifle as he returned fire, then pressed forward.

Wren inched her way around the trunk, the gun in her hands poised to shoot. She felt her muscles coil and harden with every step. Just before she completely removed herself from the cover of the tree, she paused, and her heart rate spiked, the muscles along her face twitching with adrenaline. If I die, then my family dies. She clung to that thought like a war cry and jumped

from behind the tree, firing into a cluster of Edric's men near the tailgate of one of the trucks.

Combat washed over her in a blur. All Wren felt was the steady thump of the rifle's butt against her shoulder and the smooth, hot metal of the trigger against her fingertip. Her legs and feet numbed to the ground beneath her, and after the first round of gunshot blasts all she heard was a high-pitched din that silenced the sounds of death filling the afternoon air.

Edric's men scattered from the truck, and despite the vulnerability of her position in open space, she continued to push forward. The fear in the pit of her stomach churned into rage with every squeeze of the trigger. The heat from the rifle flushed hot against her arm, and she felt her cheeks redden from the mixture of sun, adrenaline, and fury.

Wren glanced to her right. Only a few of Tom's men remained in pursuit. The gunfire thickened, and Wren sprinted to a cluster of rocks on her left for cover. The dead foliage was still slick from the previous day's rains. She slipped on the rock and smacked her elbow hard on a stone upon landing. The pain numbed her limb all the way to her shoulder, but the ricochet of bullets on the other side of the rock offered the incentive to push through the pain.

One of Tom's guys had sought cover behind the rocks as well, but found no such asylum as Wren shoved the corpse aside to make room for herself. She turned to fire, but the magazine was empty. She threw it on the ground, grabbing the dead man's rifle to replace her own. The high-pitched din had faded, and in its place the screams of dying men filled her ears. She crawled to the top of the rock cluster to get a better view, but when she crested the top, the landscape had grown still and quiet. No bullets. No screams. Nothing, except:

"Wren!" Edric's voice roared louder than any of the previous gunshots, shattering the ice-like calm that had descended on their battle. "Give it up. It's no use trying to win this. You'll just make things worse."

Wren's voice caught in her throat as she looked to the facedown man next to her and the bloody gunshot exit wound on the back of his skull. She swallowed hard, her palms fused to the rifle. "The only thing that'll make my life worse is one more second of you being alive, Edric." She shimmied along the rocks, doing her best to stay low and quiet.

"I have two of your men," Edric replied. "The rest are dead. You want these two to live, you come out right now. I'm only going to offer this once."

Wren slowly lifted her head above the rocks for a better view. Tom and

another one of their guys were on their knees with their hands on their heads. “Let them go!”

“Only if you give yourself up quietly.” Edric placed the barrel of his pistol on the back of the man kneeling next to Tom. “And quickly.”

“Don’t do it, Wren!” Tom yelled. “He’ll just kill you too!”

“Shut up!” Eric said, pistol whipping Tom. “No more games, Burton! You come out now.”

“The moment I step out, yo—” Wren ducked involuntarily from the gunshot, and her body trembled long after the ringing in her ears subsided.

“That’s one dead,” Edric said. “You want more blood on your hands?”

Wren peered through a crack in the rocks and saw Tom still on his knees with his dead comrade facedown in the dirt on his left. She looked around, searching for anything or anyone that could help, but she was on an island, alone. Tom was right, the moment she gave herself up she’d be dead, and Tom with her. And if she died, her family wouldn’t be far behind. Her veins boiled with rage, and she smacked the back of her head against one of the rocks in frustration. “You won’t win, Edric. You hear me? This will solve noth—”

The gunshot silenced Wren’s voice, the forest, and everyone around her. It shook loose the sanity in her mind. Her grip loosened on the firm foundation of reality, and she felt herself slowly drift into chaos. Possessed by nothing more than the urge to kill, she jumped from the rocks, firing wildly into Edric’s men. Two quickly went down as she sprinted forward, her finger glued to the trigger. She didn’t stop running when the magazine emptied, nor did she stop thrashing against one of Edric’s men when he slammed her up against the truck. The rage in her blood boiled so hot that she was deaf to her own screams, which she was only aware of because of the hoarse pain in her throat. The next few minutes were nothing but a white-hot flash of anger, but when it finally subsided, she found herself in the back of a truck, her wrists and ankles bound together, and Edric sitting directly across from her.

“You trusted the wrong people, Burton,” Edric said, his body wobbling back and forth with the turn of each bend on the dirt road. “If you had just done what you were told in the beginning, listened to me, then all of this blood wouldn’t be on your hands.”

“I wasn’t the one who pulled the trigger on a defenseless boy,” Wren retorted.

Edric laughed. “Don’t travel the high road with me, Burton. I know what you were planning today. I just beat you to the punch. It’s amazing what you hear over pillow talk.”

Ella. The foolish girl must have told her boyfriend what they had planned. That’s how Edric knew. “The plan isn’t over yet.” Wren narrowed her eyes, knowing that she had nothing up her sleeve. But any shadows of doubt she could stir in the back of his mind was reason enough to keep prodding. “What do you think is going to happen when you head back to camp? They’ll know what you did. Whatever control you think you have will disappear the moment the community sees you walk in with half the group missing.”

Edric leaned forward, and grazed the scars on his face, his fingers digging into the grooves and divots that ran along his cheeks and jawline. “The same people who gave me these tried something like you did. Although, as you can see, their plan was slightly more effective than yours.” He reached for his belt and plucked a grenade. He held it out between the two of them, cradling it gently in his hands. “Have you ever been hit with shrapnel from an explosive, Burton?” He tapped the side of the grenade against his cheek. “It’s nasty business. The metal comes flying at you with a velocity faster than a bullet, tiny shards tearing through your flesh like a disease burrowing itself into your body until you bleed out.” He pointed to his scars. “Transport detail. Afghanistan. Roadside car bombs had become the weapon of choice for the enemy, and any suspicious vehicles were thoroughly inspected. It was my second tour, so I had a pretty good intuition when it came to spotting something meant to kill me. A skill I still use today.” He pulled the pin on the grenade, clutching the lever tightly in his fist, and Wren drew in a breath as he waved the grenade around like a conductor’s wand. “The enemy was a master of deception. You could never be entirely sure if the man in the robes walking down the street had a pack of C-4 strapped to his chest, or if the woman in the burka to your right had a machine gun underneath her garb.” He frowned. “Every person there looked like they wanted to kill us. No matter what we tried to do about it.”

The truck smacked into a large divot, and Wren’s heart jumped as Edric’s fist wobbled, but the grenade clung tightly to his palm. Her worry broke out in the beads of sweat along her face and neck. “And that’s how you see everyone now? Your enemy? How long before that enemy turns into the kids at the community? Or someone who says something you don’t like?”

“You know why we lost so many men in that war, Burton?” Edric leaned

forward, but her eyes were still glued to the explosive in his fist. “We couldn’t fight the battles the way we needed to in order to win. The administration was so caught up in red tape and public opinion that we couldn’t kill them the way we needed to kill them. I’m not going to let that same bureaucratic nonsense destroy what I’ve built here.”

“So that’s why you’ve planned your little coup?” Wren asked. “You think the community is better off living in fear of you?”

“I think the community is better off living.” Edric slammed his back against the side of the truck, stretching his legs. He tilted his head to the side. “You know, I heard you speaking with your husband that night.” He leaned forward, then gave her a look up and down, the same look she’d seen from catcallers since she was a teenager. “It’s a shame you couldn’t pick a man to handle your spirit.”

“Well, real men have been in short supply lately.” Wren’s nostrils flared, and she grimaced at Edric’s stench. “But I’ll let you know when I find one.”

Edric grabbed her throat, choking the life out of her with his left hand. The pressure compounded in her head with every second he kept hold. “I’ve thought about the different ways I could kill you. I wanted to see how long I could draw it out. You people, in your cities, standing atop your ivory towers, you have no idea what it’s like for the individuals whose backs you stand on. You have no idea of the sacrifices it takes to keep security.” He pulled her closer, Wren’s face shifting from red to purple. “But you will.” He shoved her back forcefully, releasing his grip.

Wren collapsed to her side, gulping in giant breaths of air, hacking and coughing, her throat sore and raw. Her head rattled against the truck bed, and with her hands bound, she struggled to push herself to an upright position as she watched Edric place the pin back into the grenade. “You’re not protecting people, Edric. You’re nothing more than a prison warden now.”

The truck came to a stop, and Wren suddenly realized that the forest had disappeared behind them as they pulled into an abandoned parking lot on the outskirts of town. “In a few minutes,” Edric said, “you’ll be wishing you had some bars of your own to keep you safe.”

Two of his goons grabbed her roughly and flung her to the pavement. Her shoulders and arms smacked against the concrete, a portion of her face scraping against the grainy gravel, and she felt the warm burst of blood trickle down her cheek. More arms scooped her off the ground, the air stinging the fresh wounds.

They'd stopped at the town she could only guess was their original destination. Edric walked over to her while the rest of his men unloaded some of their food. "I just want you to know that I will not pass judgment on the rest of your family for your crimes. Unless they defy me, no harm will come to them." Those scars formed another wicked smile. "And besides... by the time your two girls come of age, women will have their uses. And if they share your looks, then I know I'll enjoy them."

Wren spit in his face, thrashing against her captors. "You fucking bastard! You lay one hand on them, and I will find you. You hear me? I will fucking kill you!" She kicked, screamed, and flailed her arms, but no matter how hard she fought, she couldn't break free.

The outburst depleted what was left of Wren's strength, and she hung limply from the hold of one of the guards. Her mind raced through the horrors her family would encounter back at the camp. I've failed them. I've given them up to this monster. She fought back the desperation welling up in the corners of her eyes. She would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

"Sir, we have movement. Three o'clock."

Wren perked up at the noise, a brief flash of hope that it was someone from camp. Maybe Iris had another team. A backup. But when she looked, all she saw were a few men she didn't recognize slithering out from behind an old lumber warehouse. They held rusty pipes and tire irons. Their faces were thick with scruff, their clothes dirty, and their hair as wild as the overgrowth creeping in from the patches of grass along the streets.

"You're late," Edric said as he approached the three men, his tone as rough as his peers. No handshakes were given, and no smiles were cast. "Where's the rest of your men?"

"Where they can see you, but you can't see them." The man who spoke had yellow-stained teeth, and she smelled the sour stench coming off him from ten yards away. When they made eye contact, he flashed a wicked smile. "That her?"

"Yes." Edric led the self-appointed leader over, while his other two henchmen stayed put, patting the ends of their rusted weapons in the palms of their hands.

The man with the stained teeth stopped just inches from Wren's body as the guard holding her still stiffened her back, standing her up straight. He stroked her hair then moved his hand down to her chest, where he fondled her

right breast, smiling. “She’ll do just fine.”

“And two weeks’ worth of rations. Just like we agreed upon.” Edric motioned to a pair of his men, who dumped half of the sacks and crates of the food cache. “We have a deal?”

The man released Wren’s breast, and she felt a shudder run through her body as he nodded. “My men will not attack your compound for the next month. After that, should your contributions prove… worthwhile”—he glanced over to Wren—“we will come up with a new arrangement.”

Wren watched the bastards shake hands as if she were a product to be sold, and her new captor summoned his own goons. “We’ll have some fun with you,” he said as Wren was dragged against her will. She watched the trucks drive away, leaving nothing but dust in their wake, and she felt foreign hands dig into her flesh. She jammed the front of her forehead into her captor’s jaw, knocking loose his grip but leaving her head ringing. “Hey!” But before his partner could interfere, Wren slammed her heel into the toe of his left foot then drove her knee into his crotch, sending him to the ground with his friend.

Wren sprinted. Her arms were tucked tight behind her from the restraints, but less than ten feet into her escape, she tripped and violently smacked onto the concrete. The pavement was hot and coarse against her body, and she lay there, moaning from the impact.

“Dammit, Coolgan! Can’t you keep hold of one woman?” The voice lashed the words harshly, and when Wren looked up, she saw Stained Teeth glancing back down at her. “Look what you did. Her face is all fucked up.”

Wren spit out a wad of blood, her cheeks on fire and a sharp pain cutting up the left side of her back. The man jerked her up and gripped her throat, forcing her to choke on her own spit. “You listen to me, bitch. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. There are at least thirty men here who haven’t fucked anything but their own hand in over a month, and you’re their prize for behaving so well. So are you gonna play nice?” Wren answered, but the man’s grip was so tight that her words gargled incomprehensibly from her lips. The man leaned closer. “What was that?”

“Go fuck yourself.” Wren strained the words through her throat and spit a wad of blood in the man’s face. She received a backhand for the comment that sent her to the ground once more, the world spinning underneath.

“Wrong move, bitch.”

11

The chants and screams from the men watching Wren as she was paraded through the camp were frenzied and tilted off the edge of lunacy. The vulgar taunts paired with a few choice words told her everything she needed to expect from her stay. But when the man with the yellow-stained teeth led her inside a dimly lit room with nothing more than a few candles burning in the corner, something felt wrong.

"Boss gets to have you first when he gets back." Yellow Teeth prowled around room, sniffing at her, flashing his stained smile. "But don't you worry. When he's done with you, I'll get my turn. And I'll make sure you get everything you need, baby." He blew her a kiss, and hysterical laughter trailed behind him as he slammed the door shut on his exit, the rush of wind blowing out the few candles inside, sentencing her to darkness.

Wren pushed herself to her feet, running for the door he'd just closed, and wiggled the handle in a fruitless effort to escape. Outside, the chants and echoes of the men permeated the walls of her cell, all of them relishing in whatever sick fantasies they hoped to use her for. The thought forced her to swallow a retch of vomit, and she collapsed against the wall for support. She slowly slid to the floor, her dignity and courage falling with her as she sobbed silently in the quiet of her own solitude.

The salty tears stung the cuts on her face, but it didn't deter the tears from falling. She curled up into a defenseless ball, clutching her legs close to her chest, letting the fear run its course. She wanted to get it out now. She wouldn't cry when they raped her. She wouldn't give them anything but cold,

stoic indifference.

When the wells of her grief ran dry, she pushed herself up from the floor, forcing herself to sit upright. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness a little more, and the shapelessness of the room cleared. All of the walls were barren, and from what she saw, there wasn't a single piece of furniture in the room. Nothing she could fashion into a weapon, nothing to help her escape.

I can't die here. I can't let Edric hurt my family. Wren shuddered at Edric's last words, knowing full well that he wasn't the type of man to offer empty threats. She had to escape. Wren leapt to her feet as quickly as her bruised body allowed and pressed her hands against the wall, running them across the grainy surface until she found the candles, nothing but small nubs, the pooled wax around the shafts still warm to the touch. But they sat on no holders of any kind, and the mushy wax itself offered no defense against what she would have to fight.

Think, Wren. She shut her eyes, trying to drown out the hum of voices beyond the walls, which had grown louder. With her ear tilted to the side, she inched closer to the back wall, the chants building in volume with every step. She crouched low, running her hands against the bottom of the wall until they stumbled upon a vent.

Wren nearly screamed in elation but managed to keep her calm. The vents of the lumber yard were large to help with ventilation from the sawdust. If she could crawl inside, she would be able to find a way out. She fumbled her hands to the corners of the vent where the screws protruded. She squeezed her fingers around them, trying to twist them free. Her skin pinched against the rusted metal, and she felt flakes of rust fall from the screws with every attempt.

After a few tries, blood dripped from Wren's fingertips and rolled down the back of her hand. Every droplet that splashed into the growing pool of dark crimson beneath the air vent sent tiny droplets onto her pant leg. Each turn of the screw shredded her skin. Her fingers ached, and the screw she struggled with rusted with defiance as it neared the end of its length. With a shaky hand, she palmed the metal, where it sat stained in blood, and then placed it in her pocket. She peeled the free corner back, but it wasn't enough to make room for her to maneuver inside.

Wren winced in anticipation of the pain to come as her raw fingertips touched the next screw. Sweat rolled down her forehead, cheeks, and neck. It collected under her arms and rolled down the sides of her ribs underneath her

shirt. She turned the stubborn metal fervently, but despite the effort, it withdrew painfully slowly. She smacked her forehead into the wall. Fatigue and frustration were catching up with her. She felt her grip on reality loosen, and each laugh and cheer that echoed through the walls from the dozens of men outside only slickened her fingertips as she dangled over the edge.

Wren punched the concrete wall, the only reaction from the room a dull thud that was quickly lost in the chants outside. She brought her left hand to the screw, its fingertips not as raw and bloody as her right, but her grip not as strong. She focused on returning to Addison and Chloe. She thought of her only son, alone and broken, and what that madman would try to do to him. She gritted her teeth and heard the rusted screw squeak on its turn. Her entire arm shook from the pressure, but she pushed through the pain as fresh skin tore from her fingertips and clustered in the screw head's grooves, spouting a fresh well of blood that stained her hands and the metal underneath.

Every tenth of an inch the screw protruded, Wren felt her heart race. So close. She looked back to the door behind her and the menacing intentions that lay beyond. The pain reached a crescendo on the last turn as the screw clanked against the floor. Wren took hold of the opened side and pulled backward with all of her might, the old metal vent straining against her will. With a final yank, the metal bent ninety degrees and opened a path large enough for her to wiggle through. The weight under her bloodied palms caused the metal to buckle, and with it a noise loud enough to pierce the celebrations outside.

Wren froze, slowly turning to the door behind her, waiting for it to burst open with the men who meant to rape her. But no one entered. She turned back to the vent, crawling, feeling her way through. The space was tighter than she anticipated, and her shoulders scraped against the sides while her stomach slid across the bottom. She ducked her head, and her legs stuck out straight behind her. Each movement forward was as slow as pulling the screws from the wall.

Built-up sawdust, dirt, and grime smeared across her body and limbs as she pressed forward. If the room was dark, the vent was as void of light as a black hole. Twice she smacked her head against a wall as the vent reached a dead end, forcing her to go left or right. And with no schematics to the facility, every turn through the airshafts was a gamble. She had no idea where she would end up, but with no option other than forward, she pressed on.

Finally, the glow of firelight through one of the vents offered the first

look at freedom, but along with the light came the grunts and voices of the men who'd captured her. She approached cautiously, doing her best to avoid the loud bumps and pops of the sheet metal that comprised the airshaft as she crawled forward.

The yellow-and-orange light flickered through the vent's open grates on her left. When she peered through the narrow slits, she saw the large fire that was the source of the flames. Six men sat and circled the inferno, all of them with bottle of liquor in their hand, save for one, whose face remained hidden on the far side by the fire.

"This deal is temporary, and it shows just how desperate they are. They truly believe they are safe behind those walls. It's only a matter of time. We're gaining more men along with the weapons to arm them. The food they bartered with us will be put in reserves for when we need it." The hidden voice spoke with an elegance that contradicted the Neanderthal-like faces that surrounded him.

"And the girl?" one of the men asked and spilled some of the liquid from his bottle as he sloshed his arm drunkenly back and forth. "The men are waiting for your word. They want you to have her first."

Wren held a curse under her breath, and for a while the only sound from the scene below was the crackle of the fire. Every face around the flames looked to the man she could not see. She tried moving to the right, reaching as far as the grate would allow her, and for a moment she saw a sliver of his profile. Unlike most of the men, the man's right cheek was smooth and shaven, his hair combed and slicked back. "I care nothing for the woman. But if it lifts the men's spirits, tell them to have their fun. They could use a distraction. A reward for their loyalty."

The men around the fire sniggered, and Wren had to keep the bile in her stomach from spewing through her mouth and nose. They spoke of her like an object to be used and disposed of, and they did so with candor. As the others departed, Wren lingered behind to see who their leader was, but he remained seated behind the fire.

Knowing her escape would soon be known, Wren pressed on. She crawled quickly, her heart racing, the adrenaline coursing through her body numbing the pain in her fingers and hands. After two more turns, the glow from the fire through the vent had disappeared, eclipsing her in darkness once more. She knew there was an exit point, but each grate she peered into revealed nothing more than a dark room, and she couldn't risk dropping

herself into a locked room like the one that acted as her cell. Suddenly, angered shouts echoed through the long shaft behind her. She was running out of time.

Wren double-timed it, her knees and elbows smacking against the sides of the shaft. She abandoned her attempts at a quiet escape as she raced against her captors now in full chase. The air grew hotter, and she noticed a faint glow down the shaft. It wasn't the orange-and-red flames of a fire, but something softer. Moonlight.

Wren gripped the sides of the vent, which led to her freedom outside. The ground was at least twelve feet below her, and she smacked the vent violently, savagely, desperately as the men's voices grew louder. The top right corner of the vent broke loose, the small screw falling to the dirt below. Wren palmed the corner, leveraging the vent down, the weak and rusted metal crumbling from the pressure until the other screws snapped off and the vent crashed to the ground.

Wren squeezed through the tight opening, a wave of vertigo washing over her as half her body dangled twelve feet in the air, trying to grip the sides of the vent running along the building with her fingertips. The rusted corners of the side tore the fabric of her pants as she pulled her legs out, her entire body dangling from the side of the vent. She looked down, making sure the ground was clear of debris before she dropped, but as she did, the air vent buckled under the strain of her weight, shaking her loose, and she tumbled to the dirt, her limbs flailing awkwardly.

Her back smacked against the packed earth, knocking the wind out of her. She gasped for air and for a moment received nothing but the smother of suffocation. She rolled to her side, the muscles along her lower back spasming in defiance from the fall, and finally she sucked in air, filling her lungs greedily as she clawed the dirt. Angry shouts exploded into the night air, and Wren made a beeline for the woods, sprinting as fast and far away from the town as her legs would take her.

While the moon was out, the lighting it provided was poor as she shuffled through the trees and brush, her clothes snagging and tearing in the thick branches. Dogs howled behind her, and their eerie din sent a chill up her spine and added a spring to her step.

Wren searched desperately in the darkness for anywhere she could run, anyplace where she could hide. The barking grew louder, and the flames of torches flickered between the thick tree trunks as she glanced behind her. She

reached into her pocket and pulled out the bloodied screws she'd removed from the vent. She palmed one of them, the end sharp enough to puncture skin.

An ache roared in her stomach, and her breath grew shorter the farther she ran, the howl of the dogs still fresh on her tail. She removed her shirt, fumbling with the buttons awkwardly on the sprint. She tore the blouse from her body and balled it up and flung it away from the trail, hoping to divert the dogs from her scent long enough for her to put some distance between her and the madmen in pursuit.

With her shirt gone, the night air felt cool against her sweat-stained body, and the chill coupled with the adrenaline that pushed her forward into the night air. Her feet and ankles bent awkwardly on the rocky, uneven ground, and more than once she stumbled to her hands and knees, the earth scraping her skin with every fall.

But the farther she ran into the woods, the slower her pace grew, and with her lethargic crawl, the men and hounds grew louder. She ducked behind the largest tree she could find, knowing that she couldn't outrun them any longer, and with the dogs tracking her, she couldn't hide. All that was left now was to fight.

Wren pinched the screw head between her fingers. The coarse bark of the tree scraped against her bare skin as she crouched low. She slowed her breathing, quieting herself as much as possible. Branches and leaves rustled nearby, and she raised her fist high, ready to strike. Luckily, the first man around the tree didn't have one of the dogs, only a spiked baseball bat. Taking him by the arm, Wren jammed the tip of the screw into the side of his neck repeatedly, each blow covering her in a fresh coat of warm blood on her face, shoulders, arms, and chest. The man gargled, choking on his own fluid. The dogs barked wildly at the scent. He clawed at her arms as the life drained from him and he slowly collapsed to the dirt. She ripped the homemade mace from his grip just as another man rounded the corner.

With a backhanded blow, Wren brought the mace's spikes into the man's cheek as both he and the hound howled at the sight of their prey. When she yanked the bat free, he dropped the dog's leash, and the beast lunged at her, jaws snapping viciously as she fell backward. The hound sank its teeth deep into her left forearm, and her mind blurred with pain. In a panicked flurry, Wren brought the side of the mace to the dog's ribcage, and the beast whimpered, letting loose her arm and limping away with its tail between

its legs.

When the dog fled, the mace was yanked from her grip, and Wren was left defenseless as a swarm of arms snatched her up. She fought, clawing, kicking, screaming, and cursing as they dragged her backward. Their hands slipped on her sweaty and bloodied skin. She thrashed wildly and broke free of their hold, smacking hard against the ground. She clawed forward with her good right hand, the other arm too mangled and hurt to perform any function.

The men laughed at her on her hands and knees, her body so drained of energy it was all she could do to crawl. “Look, Jim, the bitch already started taking her clothes off.”

Wren listened to his friend snigger back. “What’s the matter, honey? Weren’t getting enough loving at home?” They both thundered with laughter, the dog continuing its barking until she heard the smack of a boot against the hound, and the snarl transformed into a helpless yap. “I say we take her now before the others ruin her.”

The man’s partner agreed, and Wren felt her legs tugged backward, her belly scraping against the dirt, roots, and rocks as she kicked in defiance with what was left of her strength. She tried to hold back the hot burst of tears in her eyes, but the more she struggled, the more they fought to pin her down. She felt their foreign hands tuck under her bra and slide her pants down to her ankles.

“Hold her still, Jim.” Wren looked up to see one of them with his pants down, his manhood tucked firmly in his hand. “Flip her over. I like to ride ’em like a cowboy.”

Wren slammed her fist into the man’s groin, and the man let go of her shoulders, but her outburst was retaliated against quickly as the man grabbed the back of her neck and punched her nose. The warm, metallic taste of blood rolled onto her lips and tongue, and her thoughts clustered together like a traffic jam. “You stupid bitch!”

“C’mon, Randy, quit screwin’ around.”

Once again, they grabbed her by the legs and flipped her over to her stomach as she choked on the taste of her own blood. The ground shifted unevenly, and she felt fingers pull the waistline of her underwear down. She offered another feeble kick, and then her face was slammed into the ground, dirt running up her nostrils and mouth, adding a gritty texture to the liquid swarming around her tongue.

A gunshot rang out, and she felt a body collapse on top of her, followed

by the manic howls of the hound. She was too weak to push the body off of her, but with her cheek pressed into the earth, she saw a pair of boots shuffle through the grass and heard the pleas of the second man who'd punched her. "No, please, listen. I don't want any trouble. Look, you want her? Go ahead, take a turn. I don't care. I don—"

A second gunshot rang out, the dog barking wildly now, then a third silenced the forest, leaving nothing but a ringing in her ears. She felt her heart pound against her chest and then back into the dirt underneath. A brief surge of adrenaline pumped through her as she pushed up from the ground, and the man on top of her fell clumsily to the side. He landed faceup, a hole through the front of his skull, his eyes cross-eyed and lifeless.

Wren looked up to a man towering above her, and she was suddenly aware of the nakedness of her own body. She trembled despite her protest, and crawled backward, shaking her head. "No." She wanted to say more, but it was the only word that escaped her lips. "No. No. No."

The man followed, his steps methodical. Ragged and soiled clothing hung loosely from his body. His face was thick with beard, and his eyes were hidden under the shadow of his cap. He gripped a rifle in his right hand. "I told you there was wolves."

Shouts from the fallen men's comrades echoed through the woods, and Wren saw at least a dozen more torches. She flipped to all fours, trying to push forward, but her limbs refused to cooperate, and she fell face-first back into the dirt. When she turned around, she put a hand up as the man raised the butt of his rifle and smacked it against her forehead, turning the world around her black.

12

It was the pungent smell that woke her, but it was the throbbing in her head that kept her awake. She gently cradled her forehead and felt the rough stitching of cloth around her head. Her vision was blurred, but when it came into focus, she noticed that her raw fingertips were wrapped as well, bits of dried blood staining the fabric a ruddy tinge, along with her right forearm.

Wren forced herself up, the room spinning as she noticed the bed underneath her and the foreign clothes draped over her body, far too large for her frame. She squinted from the sunlight piercing through an open window, and judging from the color, they were the first rays of a new day. But which day? She tried retracing the events, but pain roared so loudly in her mind that she lay back down against the lumpy mattress.

Again the smell grazed her nostrils and forced her awake, but when she opened her eyes this time, a bearded, crazy-haired man stared back at her. She screamed and crawled backward until she slammed against the wall. The face brought back flashes of the men in the small town, the air ducts, and running through the woods. “What do you want?”

“To live.” He drawled the words lazily but gruffly. He eased back into a wooden chair next to the bed and brought a pipe to his mouth, which he puffed from greedily then blew rings of smoke from his lips. But while he maintained the leisurely aura of a retired grandfather, his eyes betrayed him with the look of wild intelligence.

His voice. I’ve heard it before. Wren leaned forward, her curiosity slowly overtaking the fear of the unfamiliar and the throbbing pain in her head. “It

was you that spoke to me my first day by the wall at the community. You said there were…" She furrowed her brow, trying to remember his words. "Wolves," she remembered suddenly. "You said it last night." Last night. Wren shuddered and curled her legs to her chest.

"I didn't touch you," he said, knocking loose the old tobacco in his pipe that spilled onto the floor. "Can't say as to what happened before I got there, though." He pushed himself out of his chair, and his heavy feet thudded against the straining floorboards. "But from what I could tell, I shot the pecker head who was about to stick you before it happened." He opened a wax casing and pulled out some more tobacco, stuffing it into his pipe.

The small cabin was roughly furnished. What chairs and tables Wren saw looked homemade, fashioned from the very trees of the forest that surrounded them. On the far wall, a cluster of rifles lay stacked neatly on a rack, and a table full of pistols and knives lay underneath. She eyed the rifles and then found the grizzly-bearded man staring her down as smoke puffed from the pipe. "You could try and get your hands on one of them guns. But I doubt you'd be able to shoot me before I'd gun you down. I may have saved you, but I don't mean to die by your hand."

Wren brought her feet from under the blanket and placed them on the floor, every muscle in her body sore and irritated from the movement. "And am I your guest, or your prisoner?"

"Depends on how long you expect to stay, and what your plans are after you leave." He narrowed his eyes, taking another long drag from the pipe.

"The community where you first saw me. Do you know those people?"

The man grunted. "I know 'em. They think they're out here surviving. The bastards don't know shit about livin' and even less about the land they sat their plump asses on." He gave her a look up and down. "Still can't figure out what you were doing there."

"They have my family." Wren stood, her legs wobbled, and she leaned back against the mattress for support. "My children. They're going to hurt them. I have to get them back." She wasn't sure what the man would say, but he stayed quiet for a long time, taking puffs from his pipe, the sunlight from the window illuminating the worn fabric of his long-sleeved shirt with different-colored patches over the holes, with the same patchwork over his knees on his pant legs. From what she'd seen so far, the man could handle himself, and whatever honor he possessed stayed intact, as he could have done whatever he wanted to her after he'd taken her. "All I need is for you to

point me in the right direction.”

The man set the pipe down and strode across the floor to where his rifles lay. He plucked one from the rack and opened a drawer, pulling out a magazine of ammunition that he clicked into place. His hands moved effortlessly with the weapon, and before she could blink, the barrel was aimed right at her. He took a few slow, methodical steps, his left eye shut as he stared down the sight of the rifle with his right, and he didn’t stop until the barrel was less than an inch from her face.

“If you’re going to kill me, then do it. But if not, get the fuck out of my way.” Wren stood her ground, not relinquishing an inch.

The man finally lowered the weapon and extended it to her. “I believe I will.”

STATIC: BLACKOUT

1

CHAPTER 1

Wren peeled back the bandage on her right index finger. Tiny fibers clung to the dried blood as she pulled the fabric to expose the wound. The flesh underneath was still pink and raw, and the fresh air only heightened the sting of her shredded fingertips. She frowned, then rewrapped the bandage. She shifted uncomfortably on the bed, which rattled the chain that tethered her ankle to the wall.

Two sleepless nights had passed since she woke up in this place. And what little sleep she did manage to catch was tormented with nightmares. Every time she closed her eyes, Edric appeared alongside Chloe and Addison. Each instance was different. Sometimes there was a gun or knife, but no matter what he used or what he did, she awoke drenched in sweat and with her heart beating out of her chest.

The door burst open with a crack, and the hermit stomped inside. Rabbits and squirrels swayed from his belt. Dirt and time weathered his thick clothes. Noticeable patchwork lined his shirt, pants, and jacket, which he never removed. Wild brown hair protruded from beneath a wool cap, and his face fared no better, with a beard that covered his cheeks from ear to ear and rested in long tangled mats down to his chest.

“You have to let me go.” Wren crawled to the edge of the bed, and the chain pulled tight, stopping her right at the edge. “My family—”

“Enough.” The hermit dumped the dead game onto his workstation in the corner along with his rifle and the ammunition and rations he always carried with him. “You’re lucky to be alive. And you’re in no shape to go prancing

through the woods. Or do you not remember your last trip?" Dirt caked the portions of his face that weren't covered in beard, and at first glance he always looked as though he meant to kill you, but his eyes betrayed the effort of malice.

"I can give you food, water, whatever supplies you need. The camp has plenty." Wren clasped her hands together. "You help me get my family back, and you can help yourself to as much as you like. Please, Reuben." It'd been an uphill battle to earn his trust since she arrived. It'd taken her a day just to learn his name.

The hermit lifted one of the rabbits by its ears, his massive fist dwarfing the animal. "I have food. I have water. I don't need your help." He spit on the floor, adding to the filth that smeared the wooden boards in a greasy film.

Wren rattled her arm as violently as she could, which shook the very bed she lay upon. "You have no right to keep me here!"

"Shut up!" Reuben's voice cracked like thunder. He marched toward her, his steps shaking the walls and floors like an earthquake. "If your family is still back at that camp, then they're dead. I know those people. Take it from me and let them go."

Wren turned her head away from the hermit's rank breath as he drew closer, her body shaking in anger. "Just let me go. They're not dead. I know it."

"No, you don't!" He stomped his foot, sending another tremor through the floorboards. His expression softened. "I'm doing you a favor. Trust me. They're dead. Move on. If someone would have—" He stopped himself, shaking his head. He plucked the game from his belt and headed outside, slamming the door behind him.

Wren deflated. She leaned against the wall the bed bordered, the wood grainy and coarse against her shirt. A part of her believed the hermit's words. Edric had no reason to keep her children alive. But despite the reason and logic she relied on so much, she still felt them. *They're alive.* She shifted her eyes to the rifles locked in the case on the far side of the cabin.

When she wasn't thinking of the ways to kill Edric, she spent her energy trying to find a way to free herself and get one of the hermit's guns. The rifle he handed her on their first encounter wasn't loaded, and the moment she turned the weapon on him the chains came out. It was a test she failed, and she'd been trying to free herself ever since.

The splinters she peeled from the wall by the bed had yet to offer the

strength needed to pick the lock on the shackle around her wrist, but it wasn't for lack of effort. Wren picked at the wall, but the bandages around her fingers had diminished her dexterity. Still, the thousands of hours at the drawing board, sketching buildings, had made her hands strong, and it didn't take long before she had a fresh piece of oak between her fingers. She found the lock and inserted the pointed edge inside. She guided the splinter like a blind man's cane, fumbling in the dark recess inside the lock.

The door had remained open, and Wren kept an eye out for Reuben. A breeze drifted inside, and with it came a light jingle of cans. She perked up at the noise, the metallic clanking an unnatural sound in the forest. Reuben suddenly burst through the door and she dropped the splinter. He snatched a rifle from the cupboard and loaded the ammunition. "They're coming." He opened a drawer and pulled out a ring of keys. "They're roughly one hundred yards away right now."

"What? Who?" Wren watched him scurry through the cabin, gathering weapons, shoving them in his belt, pulling packs from shelves stored close to the ceiling, mumbling to himself.

"The gang from town," he said. "Doesn't sound like more than three or four." He pulled a knife from the sheath on his belt, the steel cleaner than any part of him, and brought the tip of the blade only inches from Wren's eye. "How bad do you want to see your family again?"

Wren froze. Her gaze shifted from the sharpened tip to the hermit's eyes. "I'll do whatever it takes."

Reuben lowered the knife, then shoved a key into the lock at her ankle. One quick twist, and she felt the metal relieve its pressure. He flipped the end of the blade around, shoving the handle toward her. "It's you they want," he said. "I'd take it." Wren curled her fingers around the knife, and before she even had a chance to consider using it against him she was staring down the barrel of a rifle. The hermit kept the weapon steady, and spoke calmly. "You have two options. Kill me, and run as fast as you can, with no idea where to go, and hope those scouts don't catch you, but I promise they will. Or help me kill them."

Wren slid from the bed and planted her bare feet on the floor. Even when she was standing up, Rueben had a good half a foot on her. She lowered the knife and tucked it in her belt.

"All right, then." Reuben flipped the rifle around and handed her the stock. "You know how to use one of these?"

The weapon looked more sinister than what she was given at the camp. She ran her fingers down the bulky metal until she found the grips. “Nothing like this.”

The hermit snatched the rifle back as quickly as he’d given it to her. His hands worked over the weapon deftly, and she tried to keep up with the instructions. “Trigger. Safety. Magazine ejection when you’re empty. The slide will open here when you’re out of ammunition.” He removed the magazine, showing her the empty chamber. “You reload in the same position, and—” A gunshot sounded. “Fifty yards,” Reuben whispered to himself. He finished loading the rifle without explanation, shoved it back into Wren’s arms, then rushed outside.

Wren fumbled with the rifle awkwardly. It was heavier than the previous weapons she’d held. She took a few careful steps toward the door. Another single gunshot froze her in her tracks. Her knuckles flashed white against the rifle’s midnight-black stock. She steadied her hands and brought the tip of her finger to the trigger. The curved metal felt awkward under the bulky fabric of her bandage, but she forced herself into familiarity with the weapon. The wound from the dog bite on her left forearm weakened the grip on her left hand, causing her to cradle the rifle like an infant. She remained quiet and hidden at the cabin’s entrance, looking into the woods for the enemy that had come to kill her, or worse.

Wren fell backward as Reuben sprinted back into the house, sealing the door shut behind him. He smashed the front window with the butt of his rifle and scraped away any remaining jagged pieces. “There’s only five of them. One on horseback in the rear. A scout team, just like I thought.” He stomped to the opposite side and broke the second window. “No rifles from what I could see, and the bastards have the stealth of an elephant.” He kicked the glass on floor away with his boot and turned back to Wren. “You shoot anything that’s not me that steps within twenty yards of this cabin. Understand?”

Wren looked from the rifle to the hermit, who stood defenseless right in the line of fire from her weapon. The air stiffened between them, and all Wren had to do was squeeze the trigger. *I could make it if I ran.* But once in the forest, she wouldn’t know where to run. Without him, she wouldn’t be able to return to her children. “All right.”

Reuben positioned himself at the front window, while Wren watched the rear. The smaller bits of glass he didn’t clear away pressed into the naked

sole of her foot, but her adrenaline numbed what would have normally been uncomfortable. Outside, the forest was still and quiet. All Wren heard was the sound of her own breaths, and all she felt was the warmth of the rifle's metal against her cheek as she eyed the scope. The tunneled view through the scope magnified the world and divided it into small, round segments. Details once lost in the forest became clear.

Wren jolted at Reuben's first gunshot, shaking her from the concentration of her post. She looked back and watched the discharged shell roll across the floor and come to rest against the thick leather of his boot. She returned her attention to the crosshairs and maneuvered her aim through the thick trees. An odd branch stopped her sweep, the scope blurring in and out of focus. When the lens finally focused, the branch transformed into the rounded shoulder of a man. She lined the crosshairs over the target and drew in a breath.

One quick pull of the trigger and the recoil of the gunshot disrupted her aim. The bullet missed the shoulder and splintered tree bark. She cursed under her breath, and just before she realigned her aim, a hail of gunfire descended upon the cabin.

Wren ducked, covering the back of her head with her hands, as she felt the vibration of every gunshot transfer through the thick oak of the cabin walls. She looked over to Reuben, who was in the same position, a slow rainfall of dust shaken loose from the walls by every gunshot, slowly covering his head and back. Upon eye contact, he motioned for her to stay low.

After a while the thunder of gunshots ended, and the storm was replaced with silence. Wren slowly lifted her head and reached for the rifle. She looked to Reuben who moved his lips softly as though he were whispering a prayer. When his eyes opened, he gave a firm nod and leapt to the window, firing wildly into the forest.

Wren joined the assault, thrusting her rifle's barrel through the broken window. She peered through the scope and watched two bodies sprint between trees. They moved to fast for her aim, and she watched bullet after bullet miss, hitting everything but the flesh of her targets.

The enemy returned fire and Wren ducked. The heavy din of gunfire filled her ears, and she felt splintered pieces of oak fall over her body. She clamped her hands tight over her ears. But with each gunshot, she felt the foundation of her conscious mind crack. Fear and apprehension escaped from

the deepest caverns of her mind, bringing to life the nightmares that had tormented her the previous nights. She watched Chloe cry as she was cut, she heard Addison scream with a man on top of her, and she watched the tip of a barrel press against Zack's head and his body go limp at the sound of a gunshot. The images replayed over and over in her mind. Wren hyperventilated. The gunfire reached a crescendo. Her grip on reality slipped away. She couldn't take it anymore. She rose from behind the window, the sunlight warming her face, and she closed her eyes.

A body crashed into her and she was driven to the floor. The violent blow shook the evils from her mind, restoring her senses. When she opened her eyes Reuben stared down at her, his face scrunched in bewilderment, the stink of his body flooding her senses. "What's the matter with you?" He pushed himself off her and returned to the front window, shooting anything that moved.

Wren caught her breath, and reached for the rifle she dropped. Her skin felt clammy, and despite the blazing heat, a shiver chilled her spine. But she tightened her grip on the rifle and the heat from the weapon warmed her. She huddled below the windowsill, and the moment there was a lull in gunfire, she rejoined the fight.

The constant discharge of ammunition filled the cabin with a smoky haze. The acrid cloud stung her eyes, but Wren forced them to remain open. She drifted the tunneled vision of the scope and crosshairs through the forest and stopped once she saw flesh. Before she fired, the gunman zigzagged on a path toward the cabin.

Wren kept her stance in the open window, her finger over the trigger. She took a deep breath, calmed herself. *If you don't kill him, they'll kill you.* She guided the crosshairs along the man's path, then glided ahead of him to anticipate his next steps. She followed the pattern, and then just before the gunman veered left, she aimed the scope into his path and fired.

A fine red mist spewed into the air nearly simultaneously as she pulled the trigger. The man's hurried sprint ended, and the bullet's velocity knocked him backward. He rolled lazily back and forth in the dirt, the bloodstain on his chest growing larger with every motion. More than once he tried to stand, but each attempt was met with the same defeated collapse.

Wren remained motionless, watching the man die like the animal he was. He raised the rifle in his hand and squeezed off one last round in defiance. Blood foamed at the corners of his mouth, and Wren lowered her weapon,

refusing to put him out of his misery. *Let the bastard suffer*.

Finally, his head collapsed and his body lay motionless. But while her victim's body was still, Wren's trembled in excitement, adrenaline, fear, and anger. She'd killed men before, but this was different. Every other time had been quick, in the heat of the moment. This was calculated, this took patience. The beast that awakened inside licked the lust dripping from her heart. And what frightened her most was that it craved more.

"Hey." Wren jolted backward at the touch of Reuben's hand, aiming the rifle at him in a knee-jerk reaction. He held up his hands in defense. "Take it easy." He extended a slow but steady hand and pulled the rifle from her grip. She watched her hands tremble then clenched them into fists.

Wren followed the hermit outside and squinted into the sunlight. Her first step onto the ground reminded her that she was barefoot, and the dirt felt soft and cool under her feet. The forest was quiet now, and she looked to the bodies that had been silenced.

The man she'd shot lay by a cluster of trees. The earth around him was stained a crimson red, his eyes still open. Blood dripped from his chin and the back of his jaw. She knelt by his side and examined the wound over his chest. She stretched her hand and felt the warmth of the blood on his shirt. Just before her fingers grazed the wound, Reuben's heavy footsteps caused her to jerk her hand back.

He panted and pointed between the trees. "Their partner on the horse took off as soon as the shots were fired. If we're lucky, he'll get some weather to slow him down, but it won't be long before he comes back. And with more men. I can't stay here anymore. This location is compromised."

Reuben didn't wait for an answer from Wren, nor did she try and give him one. Some of the man's blood had collected on the leaves and rolled toward the tip of her large toe. Just before the blood touched, she withdrew her foot. *Everything is compromised now.*

2

By the time Wren stepped back inside the cabin, Reuben nearly had the entire place packed. She stood in the cabin's center, watching him shove a pack of MREs into a bag. "You can't leave." He ignored her and continued his manic pace. When her words failed, she reached for one of the rifles and aimed for his head. "Hey!"

The hermit stopped, staring down the rifle's barrel with the same indifference he'd treated her with since her arrival. "Put that down before you hurt yourself." His tone was strict, like a father addressing a child.

"I'm not letting you leave until you help me get my children back." Wren moved her finger to the trigger and took a step forward. She noticed that her arms had stopped trembling. "I need you to take me to the camp. I know you know where it is."

Reuben squinted. The kindness she'd seen in his eyes since her arrival was suddenly gone. He leaned closer to the tip of the barrel. "I'm not taking you anywhere."

Wren aimed the tip of the rifle at Reuben's arm and squeezed the trigger without hesitation. But the thundering crack of gunfire was replaced with the light click of the hammer snapping against the firing pin. She looked down at the weapon, and the moment her eyes were off him, he snatched the gun from her hands, flipped the end of the barrel into her face, and flicked off the safety. Wren thrust her hands up defensively as Reuben took an aggressive step forward, and she took one back.

"You think you can use my own gun to kill me?" He walked both of them

out the door with only the length of the rifle between them. “I don’t take kindly to threats, woman.” He spit on the ground and continued to press them deeper into the trees.

Wren dug her heels into the dirt. “Stop!” She thrust her hand in front of her, the tip of the rifle just out of reach, and Reuben grimaced. “I didn’t…” She searched for the words, but when she looked to her left all she found was one of the dead bodies that still littered the ground. “I don’t have a lot of options right now. What you’ve done for me, I’m truly grateful. I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you.”

“No,” Reuben agreed. “You wouldn’t.” He lowered the weapon and cradled the rifle over his shoulder. “I can’t help your family. What’s coming I won’t be able to stop, and you can barely fight yourself. If your family is still back at that camp, then they’re as good as dead. If you thought your fate would have been cruel staying in town, it’ll only be worse if you head back to that community. I warned you that first day. I told you there were wolves. Well, now they’re hungry, and the scent of blood is in the air.” He turned and headed back inside, leaving Wren barefoot in the trees.

Wren followed him inside and she stopped once she saw him staring into the rifle case. From the angle she couldn’t see what had caught his attention. He went to reach for it, but stopped himself. He slammed the cabinet doors shut and zipped up his bag, everything he planned on taking with him strapped to his back. Before he walked out she stepped in his path, blocking his way. “I lived in that camp for over a month. I know what it looks like. I helped reinforce most of the defenses, and I know where they’re vulnerable.”

Reuben shoved her aside, heading around the cabin, the very top of the pack teetering back and forth high above his head. “The world you want back is gone. Make do with what you have. If you choose to live, then you will. That’s all there is now.”

Wren stepped in his path and shoved him hard in the chest, but the force barely moved his massive frame. “I’m not leaving my family to die in that hellhole. You want to know why the world is shit now? It’s not because of some attack, but people like you! You sit behind your walls, or hide in your forests, and tuck yourselves away thinking of nothing but yourself!”

“And what have you done?” Reuben thrust a dirty finger in her face and stepped closer. “The world was always like this. The only difference now is that thin veil of protection that you treated like a trash can was torn down, and you got a taste of what really goes on in people’s minds. You sat in your

homes, in your cities, thinking of nothing but what was right in front of your faces." He took a step back. "Look at you. What did you do before all of this, huh? Sit behind some desk, watch the world pass out some open window while your eyes were glued to the faint glow of a computer screen? Yeah, you look the type. What'd you do, sweetheart? Marry rich? You got a grit that tells me you didn't come from money, but that fair skin, that air of superiority when you turn your nose up to me, yeah, I know who you are, you stuck-up bitch."

Wren flung her hand back in an attempt to slap him, but the hermit caught her wrist faster than she could swing. She stood frozen, her hand curled into a fist thrust toward the sky, trying with all of her might to free herself from his grip. "Is that what you did to your family? Did you just leave them because it got too hard?"

Reuben thrust her arm backward with a hard shove, and she landed with her back in the dirt. She clawed her bandaged fingers into the earth and flung a lump of the cool soil at his body. His retaliation was shoving the tip of the rifle's barrel in her face. "You ever speak to me like that again, and I'll replace the brain matter in your head with lead. Do I make myself clear?"

The hermit's eyes were bloodshot as Wren lay on her back. "Yes." She lay frozen on the ground with him staring her down, his finger on the trigger. The anger pulsated through his shaking arms, and the reddening of his cheeks. It took a moment for the realization of his words to work its way past her own anger. "So you did have a family." Reuben pulled the barrel of his rifle away and marched past. She scrambled to her feet, chasing after him. "If you've lost someone you cared about, then you know what I'm going through. You know how much—"

"How much it hurts?" Reuben stopped dead in his tracks. "I'm not going to get into an argument with you about who has dealt with more pain. We all go through trials. We all have demons that torment us in our sleep. There isn't one that's worse than the other. They're all bad. And they all end up killing you if you let them. Your family is gone. The sooner you can come to grips with that reality, the better off you'll be." He shoulder checked her on his way past, and this time Wren stayed. Whatever pain the man spoke of had broken him. He wouldn't help her. He wasn't coming back.

A trail of footprints was all that followed Wren back to the cabin. She glanced at the bodies that still lay lifeless near the trees. Shadows hovered around the corpses, and she looked up to the vultures circling overhead.

Nature pitied nothing, and life always moved on. But she wasn't ready to do the same. Once at the cabin, she rummaged through what the hermit left behind and found a few cans of food, a knife, and a compass that no longer worked. Aside from the furniture, the cabin was empty.

A few shelves lined the cupboard that Reuben had stored the rifles in, and she removed the longer pieces. The first shelf she pulled out dislodged a piece of paper that drifted to the floor. Wren knelt down and picked it up. It was a picture. The faded colors and thick layer of dust told its age. When she brushed the dust off, a woman and two young girls were revealed. All three of them were crouched low, looking at something, unaware that the picture was even being taken. Wren looked out the broken window in the direction that Reuben had disappeared, but she couldn't see him anymore. She set the photo down on the windowsill then returned to her search for supplies.

Wren knew that Edric would keep the camp well guarded, but she also knew he'd kill anyone who wasn't loyal, which meant his numbers would dwindle. And unless he'd managed to recruit more people into the camp while she'd been gone, the patrols around the camp would be sporadic. Even still, she knew she'd need a weapon, and since Reuben took all of his guns, she'd need to fashion her own.

Wren took the long planks from the cabinet and used the knife to sharpen the ends. The bandages around her fingers fumbled the plank awkwardly, but she kept them on since her fingers were still healing. The shavings from the wood collected at her feet as she sat on the steps of the cabin, sharpening the ends of the boards into spikes. She looked up periodically, making sure she was alone. She kept the supplies close at hand in case she needed to run, though she still wasn't sure which direction she should flee.

With the sun nearing its highest crest in the sky, signaling midday, and the pile of shavings nearly up to her ankles, Wren picked up the crude spear she'd fashioned and grabbed the cluster of nails she pried from the furniture inside. The metal was rusty, and most of their points had dulled over time, but she knew she wouldn't need much force to puncture the neck or eyes.

Wren took one last inventory, spreading the supplies on the steps. Aside from the clothes on her back, all she had was the spear, six nails, four cans of cooked meat, a spool of gauze, and the sheet on the bed that Reuben left behind. The food would hold her over until she made it to camp, and the spear would offer her some form of protection if anyone or anything moved too close, but then what?

Her parents' house in Indiana was still an option, but it was almost two hundred miles away, which wasn't a distance she thought the girls could walk. Once they were on the road they'd need food, water, and shelter, all of which were in short supply, save for the camp. She could steal a car once she made it back to the community, but that only complicated the escape.

"Dammit!" Wren slammed her fist into the cabin's front steps, running her fingers through her hair, remembering the antibiotics that Zack and Doug still needed for their wounds. The only way around the problem she faced was to retake the community, but she'd need more firepower than the feeble stick at her side to accomplish that. And that was if she could ever even find the camp. Every tree looked the same, and she had no idea how far away from the community she'd strayed.

Maybe I should have gone with Reuben. Maybe he's right. The realization unsettled her mind just as much as her stomach. *No. I can't give up. I won't abandon them.*

Wren combed through the cabin one last time and found she'd overlooked another can of food that had rolled beneath the bed along with a half-used box of shotgun shells. If anything, she could use them to barter later on down the road. She eyed the picture she'd left on the windowsill, unsure of taking it with her. She knew Reuben had seen it, and he'd left it behind on purpose. In the end, she tucked it in with the rest of the gear and bundled everything save for the spear and her knife into the sheet from the bed and picked a direction from the cabin.

When she took that first step into the unknown, she wasn't sure if she'd live or die, or even find the camp. But she knew that if she didn't attempt to retrieve her family, it would haunt her for the rest of her life. There wouldn't be a night where she didn't see their faces, and there wouldn't be a single moment she didn't spend tormenting herself. The choice was as clear as the skies above her. Get to her family, or die trying.

The first few miles were easy enough, but as the sun sank lower into the sky, Wren felt the fatigue of the rocky terrain. Her mouth grew dry even though the temperature had cooled as the sun faded. She needed to find water. Every few minutes she stopped, remaining still in hopes of hearing the rush of a stream or river, but only gusts of wind greeted her ears.

By nightfall her lips were chapped, and she stopped to rest under the large cavern of a tree that remained partially uprooted. She kicked a few rocks inside to make sure it wasn't already occupied, and once it was determined

the coast was clear, she crawled inside. She sprawled her exhausted body against the dirt, which was cool from the tree's daylong shade. Her stomach grumbled and she clutched it tenderly. But despite the fatigue and hunger, her thirst rose above all else. She knew the canned meats would have liquid inside them, but she resisted the urge to open them, in fear of running out of food. She'd already eaten that day, and while she knew her body wouldn't object to the calories, there was no telling how long her hike would last.

The night grew cool, chillier than Wren had expected. It was a restless sleep, shivering underneath the cover of the thick roots that twisted and turned overhead. She wondered what had caused the massive trunk to fall. Age, weather, storm, it didn't matter, because when the night sky thundered rain, she was glad for its protection. And as the first beads of water pelted the ground beyond the small cavern, Wren realized what caused the tree to topple. *The foundation grew weak.*

Some of the traits that make a good architect include studying topography. The earth beneath the building is just as important as the material that's used to construct it. The architect that ignores the natural environment that surrounds their structure will not last long.

It was a subject that many of her peers in school had ignored, though in all most of her peers didn't put in a fifth of the effort she did. Wren was surrounded by students who already had a job waiting for them the moment they graduated, regardless of their schoolwork. It didn't matter how hard they studied or what grades they received so long as they passed. And once that sheet of parchment was handed to them, they'd run to their daddy's office, hang the diploma on their new corner office, and be given a team of those less fortunate enough to not have a father with his own firm.

For ten months Wren searched, but there wasn't a single firm in Chicago that was hiring. When she tried looking beyond the limits of her own city, she was met with obstacle after obstacle of trying to relocate her family. The one firm that offered her a position was stationed in Los Angeles, but it was only a low paying intership, and they wouldn't provide any relocation funds for uprooting her family and traveling across the country.

After another month of nothing, she tried talking to Doug about the position in L.A., but he brushed it off. He was born in Chicago, his job was in Chicago, and the kids' schools were in Chicago. He wasn't going to budge. But in the end it didn't matter. When she tried calling them back, the position had been filled, so the matter was settled.

Wren's first year out of school was one of the hardest years of her life. It was harder than balancing work, school, and the kids, it was harder than her childhood, and it was harder than finding out about Doug's affair. But she knew the alternative if she failed.

The deferment period on her loans had ended, credit card companies were calling, the bank was calling, they were behind on their mortgage, the power bill, the water bill, and it wasn't uncommon for them to go a few days without any heat or AC in the house. With a diploma and zero job offers, Wren had to face the fact that the dream she chased in school was never going to be real. She returned to her old job at the telemarketing firm and thought she'd live out the rest of her life in that dimly lit office, packed like sardines in a can with eighty other people, selling products to clients who didn't want them.

But in that darkest hour, a ray of hope broke through the clouded distress. After an exceptionally difficult day, she came home to a message on their answering machine, which had been restored the day before along with their power and water after paying two months' worth of backlogged bills.

One of the first firms she interviewed with nearly a year before had reached out to her with an opening at one of their smaller locations. She went in for the interview the next day, took the job offer on the spot, quit the telemarketing firm immediately, and never looked back.

It was one of the proudest moments she'd ever had in her life. She was beaming when she came home that day and had picked up a pizza for the kids for dinner and hired a sitter so she and Doug could go and celebrate. But when she told Doug the news, his reaction lacked the excitement she thought he'd have. He wasn't angry or upset, just… shocked. He looked at her as though she had been replaced by someone he didn't know. And what was supposed to be a night of celebration turned into their first of many fights. *That's where I lost him.*

Doug never handled being the secondary breadwinner well, nor did he take kindly to the fact that it was Wren whose name was on the mortgage to the new house, or the paperwork for the cars, or the kids' schools. All she wanted to do was bring him up with her, take them both to a place they'd always talked about. But it was apparent that in those conversations they had during their first years of marriage, it was supposed to be Doug who provided them the funds for a better life. Except he didn't. He never even tried. And when Wren grew too tired of waiting, he became resentful.

With her mind lost in memories, Wren almost didn't feel the sudden burst of warmth from the first rays of light. She crawled out from under the tree, the collapsing behemoth clinging as tightly as it could to the earth. *Foundations.* She'd always believed that hers was the same as Doug's, but it wasn't. She rose on granite, while he sank in sand.

"Rough night?"

Wren jumped, thrusting the spear in the direction of the voice, but lowered it when she saw Reuben, his big body blocking the sunrise. "What are you doing here?"

The massive pack on his back shrugged in the same motion as his shoulders, and he looked beyond her to the small cove where she'd slept. "Must have been cold in there without any insulation. You didn't sleep at all, did you?"

"Sleep's a luxury I don't get anymore." She took a step forward. "And you didn't answer my question."

Reuben looked down to his feet then paced back and forth in the same rut. "My second location was looted. Someone stumbled across it and took everything. It's compromised. All that I have left now is the cabin." He looked back into the direction Wren came. "If you're trying to find the camp, you're heading the wrong way." He pointed. "That's where you'll want to go."

"That would have been helpful before you left." She started walking, unsure of why he'd chosen to find her again.

"I have a proposal for you!" Reuben shouted. Wren stopped and turned. A brief surge of hope rose amid the hopelessness of her own fears and limitations. He took a few steps forward. "But first I need something from you."

3

The march back to the cabin seemed infinitely quicker than when she left. They returned before sunset, which afforded them more time to prepare. Reuben set his pack on the ground at the cabin's front steps. "They know where we are, and they already know the layout of the land." He pulled item after item from his pack, and Wren wondered how he managed to carry all of the gear in the first place. "What they don't know are the resources we have. They know we have rifles, but they don't know how much ammunition." He stacked box after box of bullets on the table until the sack was completely empty and their bounty lay in front of them. "From what I've seen in town, the group is only thirty large. We should have enough bullets to kill them, so long as we choose our shots wisely."

"You're sure they'll come back?" Wren asked, opening one of the ammunition boxes. She picked up one of the empty magazines and started loading.

"They will."

"When I escaped, I saw a few of them speaking with a man. I think it was their leader. I didn't get to see his face, but from what I heard, he sounded… different." Her mind flashed to the voice hidden behind the fire.

"Different isn't how I'd describe him. I saw him once. It was years ago, before all of this. I was tracking a deer, followed it for nearly four miles before I lost it. He was standing in the middle of the forest, dressed from head to toe in a suit. I'd never seen anything more out of place in my life. It was a few moments before he spotted me, and when he did, he just smiled." Reuben

shook his head. “I’ve seen some things that have sent shivers down my back, things I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, but when he looked at me, I felt my blood run cold.”

Wren nodded. She’d experienced the same sensation when she heard him speaking to the gang. His words glided through the air with a sweet, poignant stench. She could understand how he’d pulled together so many people: he was a wordsmith.

Every spare magazine was loaded, and once they were stacked and distributed evenly between the two of them, Reuben pushed his way out the door and gestured for Wren to follow, a rifle in his hand. He stopped just before the clearing where his cabin stood and extended the gun to her. “You can’t shoot worth a damn.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Wren replied, falling in line behind him.

Reuben set up a few targets, ranging from rocks and old cans to leaves on branches. Each target offered a different shape and was positioned to provide a specific difficulty in aim. Wren raised the tip of the rifle and lowered her head to the scope. She lined the black crosshairs over the old soup can, but the weapon grew heavy in her hands. By the time she squeezed the trigger, her arms were shaking so badly that the bullet skipped wide right. She let loose a defeated sigh, and the barrel of the rifle fell to her feet.

“You’re not giving the weapon enough support,” Reuben said, lifting the rifle back up and tucking it firmly between her shoulder and arm. “You’re letting your arms do all of the work. Let your shoulder stabilize it for you, and never bring your head down to the scope, always raise the sight to your eye. Widen your stance and try again.”

Wren adjusted her body and rifle to the correct positions. She lined the crosshairs over the rock and placed her finger on the trigger. She fired, and the bullet nicked the left side of the target.

“Better, but your trigger action is jerky. Squeeze,” Reuben said, flexing his hand into a fist. “Don’t pull. You want to keep your motions fluid so your aim stays true. Now, do it again.”

Wren brought the sight to her eye once more. The rifle felt sturdier in her grip, and when she squeezed the trigger, the rock fell from its perch.

“Good,” Reuben said, clapping her on the shoulder. “Now, let’s see if you can hit a moving target.” Reuben put Wren through every scenario he could think of. And after the tenth rock Reuben thrust into the sky, she finally shot

a moving target. With her confidence in the weapon improved, Reuben moved on to self-defense techniques. It wasn't flashy, but it was effective. "You want to aim for the soft spots," Reuben said. "Eyes, neck, and groin. Gouge, squeeze, and twist anything in those areas and then run. You won't be able to overpower these guys, no matter what I try and show you, so keep it simple. If you can, shoot them once they're incapacitated."

Wren practiced a few times, gently, on Reuben as he put her in different holds and she did her best to squirm away. It was easier than she thought, and it didn't take long for her to feel comfortable with the maneuvers. When finished, Reuben brought her inside. "They'll have more numbers than we can deal with, so we have to make them play by our rules. If we can make them come to us, then we'll have a good shot."

"A good shot at what?"

Reuben removed a stack of brick-like explosives and set them on the table along with wires and placed them neatly together. "We'll only get one shot at using these. This is our last stand."

Wren reached for one of the bricks. It was small but heavy, the metal around the claymore thick. Reuben emptied the remaining portions of his pack and started arming them on the perimeter's outskirts. Wren watched him carefully, forcing Reuben to go through the process six more times even after she was sure she understood the steps.

They engirded the entire cabin with wires, hiding them under rocks and next to trees, and covered them with clumps of dirt and leaves. Once it was finished, there were enough explosives to blow apart anyone that came close twenty times over. Reuben clapped the dirt from his hands and motioned toward the cabin. "C'mon, let's get back inside."

Wren lingered outside a moment, her eyes scanning the forest, wondering when they'd arrive and how many there would be. She never really saw the full scope of their numbers when they held her captive, but however many there were didn't matter. They had a plan. They had weapons. And she wasn't going to let them take her again. That gang was the only thing standing between her and saving her family, and she wasn't going to let them stop her.

"Wren," Reuben said, calling from the doorway. "Let's go."

Once inside and the preparations completed, Reuben set the fuse detonators in the middle of the room, so either of them could reach should they need to enact their final blow. Wren looked over the device carefully,

the wires protruding from the detonator like weeds in grass. “Once we use the explosives, that’s it?”

“If we time it right, we can use it to wipe most of them out,” Reuben answered, pushing aside some of the glass from the day before when they were attacked by the small scout team. “The blasts will cause a lot of confusion. And we have the high ground, so we shouldn’t need to use them until after we’ve already killed a few.” He handed Wren a cluster of magazines and gave her a quick rundown of which worked in the three rifles she had laid out. “They all work the same way I showed you with the one in practice. The rifle on the far left is slightly heavier than the rest, but they’ll all have the same kickback when you squeeze the trigger.”

Wren nodded and chose to start with the one she’d used training with Reuben. The steady tremor in her hands subsided once she felt the familiarity of the weapon. The cabin grew quiet as they waited and waited. And waited. After a while, the adrenaline subsided, and she felt her eyes grow tired. The sleepless night on the ground had caught up with her, and she felt fatigue take hold. “What’d you do before all this? Before you moved here?”

Reuben stayed quiet for a moment, and for a second she didn’t think he’d answer, but a few grumbles later he finally spit it out. “My brother and I owned a hunting lodge. He kept the books, and I found the game.”

“Sounds right up your alley.” She turned to see if Reuben was listening, but his gaze remained out the window, looking into the forest. “What brought you out here?”

“Another story for another day,” Reuben answered.

“I may not get another day.” Wren shifted on the floor, positioning herself where she could see Reuben but still keep an eye on the forest. “You mentioned you had a family before.” Her mind drifted to the picture in her pocket, the one he’d left behind.

Reuben remained quiet for a while, and Wren didn’t think he’d speak. “I’ve lived in this cabin for twelve years, eight months, twenty-two days, fourteen hours, and seventeen minutes.”

“So why’d you move out here?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

A stab of guilt ran through her as she remembered the verbal lashing before he left, and her expression softened. “I find it difficult to believe someone like you would just up and leave your family without any reason.”

“I didn’t leave my family. They died.” Reuben spit the words out

robotically.

Wren remained quiet for a moment, searching for the right words. “I’m sorry for your loss. Were they—”

“It was Labor Day weekend. My great-uncle left me a cabin on Lake Michigan when he passed twenty years ago. My wife and kids loved it, but with the girls getting older, I wasn’t sure how much longer that would last, so I took them every chance I got. I remember we left later in the day than we usually did when we drove up there. My wife was tired from working her shift at the hospital. She was a nurse and pulled a lot of overnighters. She slept in the backseat of our van, and the girls took the middle row. We were playing some kind of game; I Spy, I think. My youngest wanted to ride up front and sit with me to get a better view of the road.” Reuben paused, and the whites of his eyes grew red and glistened. “The woman that hit us was drunk. Didn’t slow down coming out of her turn. Didn’t even look. Savannah was thrown from the car through the front windshield. She died on impact. My oldest, Rebecca, made it to the hospital with a broken back and a busted blood vessel in her brain. She died in surgery. My wife held on the longest. Two weeks in the ICU before her body finally gave out. I can’t even remember what the last words I said to her were.” He shook his head. “It was probably something stupid. Something about bills or work. I know we had an argument the day before about something like that. And that’s how she left me.” A tear rolled down the corner of his left eye and into the thicket of his beard. “That’s how they all left me. I didn’t get to say good-bye. To any of them.”

Wren remained quiet for a long moment before she gathered the courage to speak. “I can’t even begin to imagine what that’s like. If I lost my kids…” She wondered if she would slip into the same madness that cast Reuben into solitude if she discovered her children dead. “I’m so sorry, Reuben.”

A hysterical chuckle erupted from his lips, and he wiped the few tears that had run down his cheeks and hidden in his beard. “You know what the kicker is? The woman walked away with a couple of scratches. That was it. Fucking scratches. She was leaving a bar and heading to some party when she hit us.” He buried his eyes in the palm of his hand. “A fucking party.” His shoulders sagged and then shook violently as sobs escaped him.

Wren reached into her pocket and pulled out the folded picture she found earlier. She extended it to Reuben, who eyed it with the same red eyes he had telling the story. “It’s important to hang on to the memories that made us who

we are.”

Reuben stretched out his hand and gently took the paper from Wren. He looked at it for a long time, neither crying nor smiling, then when he was done he folded the paper up and tucked it into the front pocket of his jacket. A while passed before he spoke, and when he did, he acted like nothing had happened. “If things turn south quickly, you’ll want to head east.” Reuben pointed to her left through the window and into a thicket of trees. “That’s where your camp is. You might be able to make it there before these goons catch you. If you do, then keep quiet. Don’t go in guns blazing. You’ll die before you even get to see your kids’ faces.”

“We’re not going to run.” Wren’s voice had an edge to it as she scanned the trees. “The only way my children live is if I get them out from under Edric’s thumb, and I can’t do that without your help.” She turned back to him. “So don’t go running off and trying something stupid.”

The cabin and the woods were quiet, and the only signals of the passage of time were the moving shadows cast by the sun. Wren watched them grow along the forest floor, shifting and waning as the sun descended. Wren rested her cheek against the rifle’s cool metal, watching a squirrel climb a tree. He ascended gracefully and quickly. But the squirrel, along with the rest of the forest, was suddenly interrupted by the mechanical thunder of gunfire.

4

Puffs of sawdust sprayed from the logged walls. Dust covered Wren's head and shoulders as she fumbled her fingers nervously for another magazine. The bullets cracking against the cabin roared like cicadas in the summer, a never-ending background noise that refused to quiet. She felt the vibrations of each bullet through the thick slabs of oak. The magazine clicked into place and she jumped from behind her cover. The crosshairs of the scope scanned the horizon, searching for her next target.

"I count twelve on my side!" Gunfire burst between Reuben's words. He squeezed off the rounds methodically, his feet surrounded by a field of empty shells. "How many do you have?"

"Three so far!" She spied an arm sticking out from behind the thick trunk of a tree, but her bullet only splintered the bark as the body shrank back behind its cover. *Shit.* A series of return fire forced her back under the window, and despite the number of gunfights she'd found herself in over the past month, she still flinched with every bullet fired.

"They probably have more on the sides where we can't see," Reuben said. "Make sure you keep an eye on your peripherals. We don't need any surprises right now."

They'd barricaded the door with enough furniture and nailed enough planks across it to give a rhino trouble breaking inside. Wren swiveled to the far corners of her window, looking down the side of the cabin for anyone crouching close, but so far the space was clear. She looked back to the center of the floor, where the explosives' detonators rested, now covered in sawdust

from the rain of lead hammering the cabin. Empty shells rolled along the floor. The barrage of lead was relentless in every direction, and Wren felt the overwhelming finality of their situation. They were outnumbered and outgunned.

Wren leapt from the cover of the window, thrusting her rifle through the open gap. She stiffened her back and widened her stance. Bullets missed her by only inches, but she stood her ground, finding the shooter to her left, crouched low in the brush. She exhaled and lined the crosshairs over the center of his skull and squeezed. Through the tunneled vision of the scope, she watched the man's head fling backward and then collapse in the dirt, his body lifeless. But the moment of triumph was short lived as another series of bullets ricocheted off the wall to her right. She quickly redirected her aim and found him sprinting toward her, pistol in hand and firing wildly.

Wren aimed and squeezed the trigger, this time barely feeling the recoil of the gunshot. And just as her shoulder had numbed from the repeated gunfire, so had her reaction to the deaths by her own hand. A coldness accompanied the sensation, and she moved on quickly, looking for her next target, but suddenly realized through the high-pitched whine in her ears that the gunfire had ended. She turned around, and even Reuben had quit shooting. "What's going on?" She ducked back behind the wall, one eye on Reuben while the other scanned the forest.

"They pulled back," Reuben answered, though the tone in his voice was just as skeptical as the grimace on his face. "There's no way we scared them off this quickly." He raised his rifle back up to the opened window, his finger on the trigger, and scanned the horizon with the fluidness of water.

"Hello!" A voice boomed through the trees and the cabin walls. It was loud, but Wren recognized the smooth calm in the brief introduction, and she knew it was the man she saw hidden behind the flames. The leader of the gang in town. "I think we can agree there has been enough bloodshed today."

"The only blood shed has been from your men!" Reuben said. "And if you don't turn back around and leave us be, there will be more of it before the sun sets."

The man's voice echoed in all directions. Wren looked out her window, though the view offered nothing but trees. She slunk back from her position and crawled along the wall to see if Reuben's window offered a better vantage point, but he waved her away.

"I'm hoping it won't come to that," the leader said. "But it will if we

must. I know what you want, my friend. You want to be left alone. You want the quiet of the forest that you've lived in for so long. You came here to find peace, and we've disrupted that tranquility. I only come for the woman. Give her to us now, and we'll leave you to return to that endeavor."

Wren watched Reuben's face, looking for any sign that he'd betray her. He'd done more than anyone else would have in his position. She wouldn't blame him for calling it quits. He owed her nothing.

"So she can be made a slave?" Reuben asked, shouting back. "The only deal is you leave, or you die."

Wren searched the forest, looking for any movement, but only came across the fallen men she'd already killed. *If he's trying to bargain, then he thinks there's a chance he could lose. Or at least lose more than he wants.* The thought hardened her resolve.

"That's disappointing." The leader's voice seemed to travel from every direction. "Perhaps there's something you'd be willing to trade for her? Something you need? Or want? If it's companionship, I can bring you a new girl, something more akin to your personal tastes. I'm sure it gets cold at night. Nothing wrong with a little warmth in your bed."

Reuben's gunshot was his only reply, silencing the man's voice. Quiet filled the forest air, and Wren drew in a breath, the steady ringing in her ears from the gunfire yet to subside. And just when she thought the fight had ended, a storm of gunfire blew through the trees and collided with the cabin like a never-ending hurricane of hail.

The walls opposite the open windows turned into Swiss cheese as the bullets chipped away at the barricade and interior. She looked up from the floor and saw Reuben ducked low by the window, his eyes glued to the detonators in the middle of the room, the film of sawdust growing thicker with every bullet that eroded their sanctuary.

Wren crawled forward but froze when she saw him shake his head then mouth, *Wait*. He slid on his stomach toward the back wall and pushed off the floor just high enough to see through the window at his angled position then quickly ducked back down. He screamed something at her, but Wren couldn't decipher the words through the gunfire. He repeated it a few times, but it was just noise.

Wren used the wall closest to her vantage point to prop herself up once the lead storm had softened. She poked her head around the edge, hoping to find a cluster of easy targets for her to bring down, but was offered no such

luck. Her jerky movements were too fast to catch anything, and she was forced to inch her nose close to the window's pane to get a better look.

Gun smoke had left a hazy fog that circled the cabin and the surrounding forest. Wren peered through the mist-like clouds, squinting to home in on any movement. Gunshots fired to her left, and she swung the rifle in that direction, holding back her shot and waiting for a clear view of the target she watched sprint through the grey smog.

The enemy fired at will, but his sprint hindered his aim, and he missed wide left and right. Wren's eyes grew dry and tired, but she kept steady. The target fell between her crosshairs, and she watched the bullet slice through the man's chest as though it were a freight train. A burst of red cut through the gray haze, and before the body hit the ground, Wren had another target in sight.

The gunman hid behind a cluster of thick, low-lying branches. She caught him in the arm, and though wounded, he managed to scramble back behind a tree before Wren could finish the job. She followed the blood trail and fired off three more rounds, but he was too well hidden. Heavy gunfire from her left forced her from the window and back behind the cover of the wall.

Reuben was still at his post, relentless in his assault. His screams intermixed with his gunshots, though Wren couldn't tell which was louder. The cloth along his left shoulder was ripped, and she saw the damp trace of blood shimmer off the light through the window. She wasn't sure if he'd been shot or if it was a ricochet, but the wound didn't hinder his offensive.

Wren rejoined the fight, nearly catching her own wound in the process. The smoke had worsened, and so had the number of targets. They had sprouted from nowhere, and what had been two or three had transformed into at least a dozen.

All of them hovered close to the bottom of the small hill that gave the cabin its high ground. The uphill climb was free from cover for at least twenty yards and would offer Wren an easy shot for anyone who ventured within its range. But the gang continued to fire from the safety of the tree line. She shot anything that moved, keeping the bandits from advancing, but suddenly stopped. *They're waiting for something.*

Wren pulled her weapon back, but it was too late. The rifle jerked forward and pulled left, jarring her elbows and shoulder. Hands gripped the weapon's barrel, and she squeezed the trigger, which shook loose her assailant's hold. She fell backward, pulling the gun with her. Her vision

blacked upon impact but returned in time to see the face and pistol that peered down at her, and instinct kicked in.

Even though she could barely see, her numbed and clumsy fingers found the rifle's trigger and squeezed. The bullet connected with his chest, but still he aimed his shaking arm. She fired again, the second shot opening a hole through his shoulder, which caused him to drop the pistol. Blood dripped from his mouth. He tried to speak, but all that came out were wheezed gasps. He kept his eyes on her the entire time as he slipped away, until there was nothing staring back at her except finality.

Reuben shouted, catching Wren's attention, but in the frenzied gunfire, she couldn't hear. She shook her head, trying to make sense of the motion of his lips. A brief lapse in gunshots finally allowed his voice to break through. "Shove him out of the window!"

Wren leapt to her feet and shouldered the body off of the windowpane. Three bullets pierced the dead flesh before the opening was finally clear, and she quickly turned from the window before she shared the same fate. Blood covered her hands, the fluid warm and slick against her fingers. The rifle slipped from her grip when she picked it up, but the second effort steadied the weapon. *Keep pushing.*

Wren pivoted on her toes, dropping herself to one knee in the process, and used the windowpane to support the rifle. All that protruded from the opening now was the top of her head. The crouched position made it harder to shoot, but it also made her harder to hit.

The gang's shots grew more frantic as she picked off her targets under the cover of trees, rocks, bushes, and branches. Most of the shots only wounded them, but a few were killed. And while they sat there bleeding, struggling to keep themselves alive, it provided one less bullet meant to kill her. "They've stopped at the clearing!" Wren said, shouting over to Reuben, who shoved a cluster of empty shells away from his foot. She looked down to the stack of magazines on the floor, growing scarcer with every bullet she fired.

"Mine too!" Reuben's voice and rifle thundered together, as if they were one and the same. He dropped the empty magazine and reloaded a new one effortlessly in the same motion. "They don't have anything bigger than their guns, or they would have used it by now." He looked her in the eyes. "We're gonna make it."

And for the first time since she was thrust into this world, Wren believed it. She had to believe it. The alternative wasn't an option. She chose her shots

more carefully now, only shooting when the enemy grew bold enough to venture from their cover. The sharp edge of their assault had been filed down and dulled, the wind sucked from their sails. It was a waiting game now, to see who would grow more impatient first and make the wrong move.

With the adrenaline of battle subsiding in the stagnant climate, her fatigue returned. Her hands ached, and her back had stiffened. Her joints cracked and popped like rusting metal. Her concentration grew hazy as she sat in the same frozen stance at the windowpane, the end of her rifle wavering back and forth.

"You can't win this." The voice sounded as if it came from Wren's side of the cabin, and with the words came a surge of adrenaline. She scanned the forest but only saw the same faces she'd seen for the past hour. *He's out there somewhere.* And as if she were in the cabin with her, some of Iris's last words came to mind. *Cut off the head, and the body dies.*

"You will eventually need food and water," the voice said, the echo giving him an omnipresence. "We will outlast you."

"You'll need medical attention before we need food," Wren replied, her voice hoarse from the smoke. She peered through the scope and saw some of the men squirm from her words. "And I can tell you right now that I already had a big breakfast."

A light laughter was carried on the wind. "You're just making it harder on yourself. The longer you try and fight here, the more your family will suffer."

Wren's heart dropped, and she felt her skin grow cold. *How could he even know that? Did Edric tell him? Was her family part of whatever deal they made with one another?* She tightened her grip on the rifle, the dull ache in her hands replaced with anger. "You're bluffing."

"Addison, Chloe, Zack." At each name the voice rattled off, Wren felt her stomach flip and her cold blood boil. Wren swiveled the rifle to one of the men clustered behind the rocks and opened fire. Puffs of dust and granules of rock exploded as she squeezed round after round into the granite, hitting nothing but rock. She pushed herself up from her knees, her gunshots and screams overpowering the man's voice. She pulled the trigger until the magazine emptied, and she panted heavily, her body just as empty as her weapon.

A bullet splintered the wooden log to the left of her head, and Wren spun out of the way then slid down with her back against the wall. She knew

Reuben was watching her, but all she could focus on were the names the madman in the woods rattled off. *How does he know?*

"Wasteful," the voice said, a chipper bite to his tone. "Whatever atrocities you think could befall your children would be prevented should you cooperate. Look around you! I have more men. More guns. More bullets. You are on your last stand. You will not win this fight. You will lose. You hear me? You will *lose*!"

Wren eyed the detonator in the middle of the floor then looked to Reuben. The crooked lines on his face exposed his feelings about the idea, and he shook his head. But if this man knew her children's names, then he knew where they were, and if she let him get away now, there wasn't any guarantee that they'd survive. "All right!"

"Wren." Reuben barked in harsh whispers. "Don't do this."

"I come out and give myself up peacefully, and you keep your end of the deal," Wren said, her voice growing breathless as her adrenaline once again returned. "No harm comes to my friend here, and no harm comes to my children. Agreed?"

The silence that followed was almost more than Wren could bear. Perhaps she'd pushed too hard then given up too easily, but with her children's lives hanging in the balance, she didn't have time to contemplate the decision.

"Agreed," the voice finally echoed back. "Come out with your hands on the top of your head. If your friend shoots, or even breathes too loudly, you're dead, and he'll be next along with your kids."

Reuben scurried across the floor, blocking her path to the door. "This is suicide. They're not going to let your children go. You're only feeding them exactly what they want!"

"I'll stop halfway to the bombs. Wait until they cluster, then hit the detonator." Wren grabbed hold of Reuben's large, dirtied fist and squeezed tight. "If I don't make it find my children. I know you've seen them. Get them out of that community and make sure that psycho doesn't touch them." She touched the pocket where he'd hidden the picture of his family. "There are still people you can help."

Most of the barricade was nothing more than dust after the gunfire, and Wren had to do little more than yank at the top board for the rest to crumble. Before Reuben stopped her, she burst from the door, the sunlight of the evening warming her face as she squinted. She held her hands above her

head, and one by one the gang emerged from the depths of the forest, their rifles aimed at both her and the cabin. She looked for their leader, but as her eyes fell upon the lurking shadows, none of them held the demeanor and sophistication that she had seen on display behind the fire. Wren stopped in the middle of the clearing, with the circle of explosives only a few feet away.

The gang mimicked her motions, freezing in their positions as she stopped. They looked to one another questioningly, and then one of the filthier members, his arms and legs covered in soil, opened his mouth. “You come to us.”

They were too far out of range for the explosives to be useful. Wren looked to her left and right, the rest of the goons slowly stepping out from behind their cover, all of their rifles and pistols aimed at either her or the cabin. She stepped forward, slowly. Her pulse quickened, and she felt the nervous beads of sweat roll down her back and neck.

The explosives were only five feet from her now, but the goons had moved closer as well. *Just a little further.* She looked to her left and saw the gang’s boldness grow with very step. Only three feet separated her now from the explosives. Two feet. *What’s he waiting for?* The circle of goons had nearly engulfed the cabin now. Her foot grazed one of the explosives, and she shuddered. *This is it.*

“Wren, run!” Reuben’s voice thundered from inside the cabin, and she turned on her heel and sprinted back toward the door. A brief series of gunshots filled the air, cut short by the explosives. The ground rumbled and shifted under Wren’s feet, and she felt a hot blast of heat brush her back, coupled with a force that thrust her face-first into the dirt, and she felt the warm taste of blood upon impact.

The roar of the explosion was deafening, and as Wren lay in the compacted earth, she heard nothing but a high-pitched din. She brought her finger to her left ear and cupped it gingerly, a splitting pain running up the side of her head. Her ear felt wet, and when she examined her fingers, they shimmered red with blood in the sunlight.

Wren looked around at the bodies spread out on the forest floor, some of them twitching, some lifeless, and some of them in more than one piece. Wren looked to the cabin and saw Reuben rushing outside, rifle in hand, firing into the bodies on the ground. He seemed to find her without ever even looking down. She felt his massive hand yank her up by her collar and drag her inside, his one free arm still firing. Reuben flung her onto the cabin floor,

and when he pointed down to her she watched his mouth move but still heard nothing. She collapsed to her back, her body hot and achy. She clawed the floor, dragging her body to the rifle next to the window where she'd left it. She glanced behind her to the open door. The ground was lumpy and uneven at the points of explosion.

Wren wrapped her fingers around the rifle, but when she tried to stand, she collapsed. The cabin spun along with her brain. She released the rifle and squinted her eyes shut, trying to hold back the brewing volcano in her stomach, but failed. Vomit spewed from her mouth. Her throat burned from the bile, and the foul, pungent stench filled her nostrils, adding to the sour taste that lingered on her tongue.

The second attempt at standing resulted in a more vicious bout of gagging, and Wren was reduced to standing on all fours, watching the puddle of puke beneath her grow larger with every heave. With her arms shaking and the contents of her stomach emptied, she collapsed to her side, the ceiling above her shifting from side to side. She wasn't sure how long she lay there, but after a while she felt the thump of footsteps shake the floorboards. This was her end. Lying on the floor, surrounded by her own retch, the thoughts in her shaken mind adrift like a small boat in the vastness of an ocean.

Hands grabbed her by the arms and pulled her backward. Any thoughts of trying to fight back were useless, as she no longer had the use of her limbs. She felt her body be leaned up against the cabin walls, and just when she thought her time had come, it was Reuben's face that greeted her. She squinted at him like he was something out of a dream. "What?" She felt herself mouth the words, but couldn't hear her own voice. Panic gripped her at the thought of deafness.

Reuben shook her by the shoulders, his face highly animated, reddening from raising his voice to a scream. But no matter how much he yelled, Wren just shook her head. She buried her face in her hands, the fear of the disability taking hold of her senses, of her reason. Her palms grew wet with tears, and her shoulders trembled with Reuben's continued agitation.

"We have to go!"

The words were dulled and muffled, but she perked up at the noise. "What?" she heard herself ask.

"We have to go, Wren! Now!" Reuben lifted her off the floor with ease, and she managed to keep her legs under her, even though the floor still felt tilted. Reuben hurried around the cabin, more mumbles escaping his mouth as

Wren moved her jaw and shook her head as if water blocked her ears.

By the time the spinning subsided, Reuben was already out the door with the remainder of their gear, and she stumbled forward. She felt her heartbeat thump in her chest, vibrating like a bass drum. She looked down at the bodies littered in the clearing, the few survivors of the explosions dead with a bullet lodged in their heads, bleeding the soil red. She hurried after Reuben, struggling to keep up, not knowing whether they were running from someone or after someone.

5

The longer they ran, the more Wren's hearing sharpened. She brushed past a branch and heard the light snap of wood, followed quickly by the angered hush of Reuben in front of her. Out of the two of them, he'd remained stealthy, tracking the few men who'd escaped after the explosions. She did her best to remain silent, but her feet had the stealth of bricks, and her coordination was still warped from the blast.

"Wait." Wren stopped, her breathing labored as she bent over and rested her hands on her knees. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, her chapped lips scratching the dirty skin. She shook her head and felt the dried, crusty blood in her left ear. She pawed it nervously. While her right ear had returned to normal, her left had not.

Reuben glanced up ahead and walked over to a branch, bits of blood staining the leaves. He rubbed the liquid between her fingers. "It's still wet. They're close."

Wren forced herself to stand. The exertion had sapped her strength and left her body drenched in sweat. She ran her tongue over her upper lip and rolled some of the salty moisture back into her own dry, cracked mouth. "How many?" She tucked the rifle under her arm. The quicker they ended this, the quicker she could get her children back.

Reuben bent down, running his fingers over the prints in the soil. "Three. One of them is walking with a limp." When he turned to look at her, it was the first time she had really seen his face since the cabin. Specks of blood dotted his cheeks and beard. The red tinge provided him with a more sinister

appeal in the sunlight, but his eyes still remained the calm pools she remembered seeing upon their first meeting.

“You should have let me die,” Wren said.

Reuben remained stoic. “It’s hard to find life in a place like this. And when I recognize it, I do my best to keep it alive.”

Wren watched him press forward a little farther before she followed. They tracked for what felt like hours, though she knew that was false due to the setting sun. She wasn’t sure what would happen if they didn’t find the men before nightfall, or what would happen if they found the men at all, or if Reuben could even track them in the dark. Lost in her thoughts, she slammed into Reuben’s back, stumbling them both forward a few steps. “Sorry.”

The sun set, and the forest blurred in the darkness. With her left ear still deaf to the world, Wren panicked at what was left of her diminishing senses. She kept her eyes focused on Reuben’s silhouette, stopping when he stopped, turning where he turned, placing her feet in his footsteps.

A gunshot broke the silence of the night, and both Reuben and Wren hit the ground. She lifted her head from the dirt and waited for Reuben to move, but he remained still. When no other shots were fired he crawled backward on his stomach until he was side by side with Wren. He leaned in close enough for her to feel his hot breath in her one good ear. “The shot missed far left. They can’t see us.”

“Can we see them?” Wren asked.

Reuben gestured left. “I saw the muzzle flash in that direction. About one hundred yards out. They must have heard us coming. We’ll follow the trail for a little while longer, but we’ll have to stay low. They’ll be actively looking for us now. Just do exactly as I do.”

They pressed on, hunched over, which Wren found difficult with her center of gravity tilted from the explosive. She was amazed at Reuben’s stamina. He never tired, no matter how far they walked, while her body clung together with duct tape and gum.

They continued in silence for another hour, their movements slower. Every once in a while Reuben would tell her to wait, then move ahead alone. She wasn’t sure what he was doing but knew better than to try and follow. He’d had multiple opportunities to leave if he wanted, and now wasn’t the time to question his methods. This was his world out here, and Wren was merely a spectator.

Reuben came to an abrupt halt and gunfire erupted ahead. Wren crashed

into the bushes on her right and she crawled through the sharp twigs and branches until she burst out of the other side, her face and arms stinging with fresh cuts. In the darkness, white flashes burst from the enemy's barrels with each gunshot. When she tried to shoot, she realized she'd dropped the rifle and she scrambled back through the bush, searching for the rifle.

Reuben returned fire, and Wren tried to keep one eye on his movements, but after a few moments, she lost him in the darkness. Her foot smacked against something hard, and she reached down through a thicket of brush and felt hardened steel.

"Wren!" Reuben burst through the trees on her left, and she nearly shot him on sight. "C'mon, stay with me." All she saw were the whites of his eyes and then the back of his head as he quickly returned to chase their prey.

Wren struggled to keep up. Every step numbed her legs, sending a tingling sensation up her back. Gunfire was exchanged on both sides, and more than once Wren and Reuben were forced to stop. But with every two steps forward, they managed to gain a half step on the enemy. Reuben maneuvered through the forest as if it were broad daylight. He came alive on the hunt, and as she followed, Wren couldn't help but feel a certain adoration for the man. She'd never been a violent person, and if she'd seen this a month ago, man hunting man, it would have made her stomach turn. But here, in the wild, in the dark, she knew she was witnessing a man who'd mastered his craft. And from her countless hours at the drawing board mastering her own, it was something she admired.

A brief lull in the chase provided Wren time to catch her breath. She leaned up against a tree while Reuben changed out his magazine and then dropped his pack. For the first time since they departed, she heard him out of breath. "I'm going ahead a little bit on my own. Their gait's shortened. They're tiring. Probably looking for a place to make their last stand."

"Do you know where we are?" Wren asked, trying to rub the feeling back into her thighs. "Is there someplace here where they could find shelter? Did they lead us back to town?"

Reuben shook his head. "They started in that direction but then veered off about a mile back. I don't know where they're going now." He pulled a new magazine from the pack and tucked it into the waist of his pants. "Don't venture far."

Wren propped herself up against a tree. Her muscles ached with fatigue. The rest only worsened the desire to close her eyes. But she forced the rifle

under her arm, staving off the weariness, and focused on scanning the different sections of the woods around her in case she needed to move quickly.

The trees were shorter here, with the majority of the greenery consisting of shrubs and bushes. The terrain was rockier and the soil loose and silky, almost like clay. It was a peculiar patch of forestry for the area, and Wren wondered how much farther the small biosphere would stretch.

“Wren!”

Gunfire erupted, and she pushed herself up in what felt like slow motion and sprinted toward the firefight. Her ankles and feet wobbled unevenly over rocks and pebbles, and twice she felt her right ankle buckle, but she managed to stay upright.

Reuben hadn’t ventured very far, and he saw her before she saw him. In fact, she nearly stepped on him on her way past. He yanked her down behind the cover of a rocky shelf as bullets ricocheted and echoed off stony earth. “They’ve cornered themselves. The bastards thought they could lose me on the rocks. They’ve got nowhere else to go.”

Wren stuck her neck out to get a better look, then ducked. The bullet that nearly killed her originated from a dark portion of the rocks, a cave carved by millennia of rain, wind, and eroding earth. “How do we get them out?”

“They weren’t carrying any supplies, so unless they stumbled into a cave with running water, which I know they didn’t, they’ll have to come out for water.” Reuben pointed to a small clearing of trees. “We’ll keep watch there. It’ll offer a good view of the cave, and the trees will provide us cover. We’ll take shifts. My guess is they’ll try and make a run before morning.”

Reuben started a fire and, once it was blazing, handed Wren a container of water. “Sip it. But make sure you drink till it’s gone.” Wren cradled the canteen as if it were made of gold. The water rushed over her chapped lips and wet her tongue. She fought the urge to drain it in one gulp, heeding Reuben’s advice, and sloshed the liquid back and forth in her mouth, savoring every drop.

After the water and a bit of jerky in her stomach, Wren inched closer to the fire. The night air had cooled quickly, and she was thankful for the flames’ warmth. She shut her eyes, trying to picture her children’s faces, to hear their voices, afraid their memory would fade from her own.

“How’s the ear?” Reuben kept his gaze on the cave’s entrance.

“What?” The tone in her voice caught his attention, and she smiled at her

own joke, which he reciprocated. “The right ear’s fine, but I don’t think the left is coming back.” She poked at it half-heartedly, hoping to prove herself wrong.

“One’s better than none,” Reuben replied. He paused a moment before he added, “It was stupid, what you did. You’re no good to your children dead.”

“And my children are no good dead to me,” Wren spit back. “I’m not a soldier, Reuben. I’m not a fighter or survivalist. I’m an architect from Chicago and a mother of three. And the latter is all that matters to me. I’m not going to let my kids die. No matter what the cost.”

Reuben returned his gaze to the cave’s entrance. “I’ll take the first watch. You get some rest.”

Wren didn’t object, and she used a portion of his pack as a pillow. The moment her eyes closed, she drifted to sleep. When Reuben prodded her awake for her shift, it felt as though she’d just lain down, but the plummet in temperature and the bags under Reuben’s eyes told a different story. She kept the rifle close and tried to get comfortable for her watch.

Flames glowed from inside the cave’s depths. No doubt the gang had someone on watch as well. Two pairs of hidden eyes peering through the darkness, each of them locked onto one another in a stalemate of wills. She raised the rifle’s scope to her eye and peered through the magnified lens. Her vision ascended to the pinpoint accuracy of crosshairs, and she saw the faintest outline of a man’s silhouette at the edge of the cave. She placed her finger on the trigger, her arms surprisingly calm. *End it now.*

But before she squeezed the trigger, another gunshot rang out, this one coming from inside the cave. Wren ducked, trying to elude the bullet meant to kill her, but as a second shot thundered, she realized she wasn’t the target. Reuben was already at her side, gun in hand, staring into the same darkness as she was. “Did you shoot?”

“No,” Wren answered. After the two gunshots, only silence and the shadows of fire filled the night air. She wanted to investigate, but with Reuben frozen like a statue, she stayed put.

“Don’t shoot!” The voice echoed from the cave, and a silhouette appeared at the entrance. “I’ve chosen to give myself up. And if you take me alive, I can help get your children back, Wren.”

Wren peered through the scope to get a better look, but the man had stopped at the edge of the shadows. She recognized the smooth, casual voice of the leader, but in the darkness his features still eluded her. Reuben, who

remained in the same position, with the rifle's stock tucked closer to his shoulder, stared down the tipped sight of his rifle, but Wren placed her hand over the barrel and lowered it. "I want him alive."

"Could be a trick," Reuben answered.

"He shot his partners," Wren interjected.

"He fired his weapon. We don't know if he shot anyone."

The voice responded as if he had heard their whispered conversation. "Come check the bodies if you'd like. I've placed the weapons in the opening a few feet from the cave. I'm unarmed."

Reuben rose from behind their cover, still peering through his rifle's scope. "Step out of the cave, slowly. Keep your hands up and walk toward me." Wren popped up beside him, and the two walked toward their new captive in sync. The weapons he spoke of were right where he said they would be, but he remained in the shadows of the cave. "Show yourself. Now." Reuben and Wren both had their rifles aimed at the silhouette, only visible from the waist down in what little moonlight the night provided.

Wren watched him step out slowly, the line of moonlight traveling up from his waist, to his chest, his raised palms level with his shoulders, neck, and finally... "Ted?"

The councilman curved the left corner of his lips up in a smile. "Hello, Wren."

6

Reuben gathered the weapons Ted had discarded and, after a thorough pat down, made him drag the bodies of the two men he'd shot from the cave to confirm his story. The first victim took a bullet to the back of the head, which was caved in and hollow from the sudden expulsion of bone and brain matter. The second victim received his through the neck, choking to death on his own blood.

Ted stacked the bodies on top of one another and dusted his hands as though he'd just taken out the trash. "Unfortunate. They were good men. Loyal." He nodded in affirmation then looked to Wren. "It's good to see you again."

"Did Edric put you up to this?" Of all the people Wren expected to see, he was the last. In camp, she'd never even heard him speak. He was nothing more than a placeholder in the background, one of Edric's silent cronies that followed him around like a lost puppy.

But when Wren brought up his name, she watched Ted's face grimace. "The toy soldier?" He scoffed, taking a step around the bodies and closer to Wren. "He doesn't even know I'm here."

Wren found a seat on one of the larger rocks and sat before she collapsed. "Why? You sided with the man with all the power at camp. If you had just stayed there, you'd have everything you needed. Why risk turning Edric into an enemy?" The rifle rested on her side now, but Reuben kept his aimed, refusing to give Ted any opportunities to make a move.

She watched an unearthly calm wash over Ted in the darkness. The day it

took to travel to Reuben's cabin had replaced his smooth cheeks with a stubble that ran across his neck and jaw. His hair was disheveled, and she noticed the tears and unkempt clothes he wore. It was the first time she'd seen him look so disordered. "Have you ever been anything more than just yourself, Wren?" He paced back and forth like a professor during a lecture, the tips of his fingers lining up with one another as he slowly became lost in his own thoughts. "Have you ever imagined what the world could be if we stopped getting in our own way? If we set aside our egos, our pride, our unstable emotions? What if we acted on what needed to be done for the betterment of our future, not as an individual, but as a whole?" He looked up into the night sky, his eyes closed, and smiling.

"Whatever end goal you think you're going to find won't do you any good with a bullet to your head." Wren pushed herself off the rock, aimed, and flicked the safety off. "I don't have time for whatever twisted fantasy you've created for yourself. Are you still working for Edric? Where are my girls? Where's Zack?" She took an aggressive step forward. She thrust the weapon into his cheek, and it rattled from her adrenaline-filled arms. "Tell me!"

Ted kept his hands up and took a step backward, separating his cheek from Wren's rifle. The barrel left a circular dot on his skin that smoothed quickly after he smiled. "I'm not working for Edric. Last I saw, your girls were with their father, your husband, in case you've forgotten." He twisted the lines on his face into an overexaggerated look of sympathy. "Though I did hear about that ugly outbreak the two of you had before the explosion at the camp. I can't imagine what that's like, especially now, in a time like this. All alone, the entire weight of your family on your shoulders, only adding to the pressures the camp offered." He clucked his tongue lightly. "That's something you should have never had to bear. I can help you with that. Edric still thinks I'm working with him. I can get you on the inside. I can get you close to your children. I can help you save them." He whispered with the hiss of a snake, a hypnotic cadence with his words.

Wren shoved the rifle back into his face. "No more games, Ted."

"I'm not—"

Wren aimed the rifle left and fired into the open air, only inches from Ted's head. But despite the proximity, he didn't flinch. The only sign of irritation he offered was the closing of his eyes. She returned the end of the rifle to his cheek, and he flinched his head back to avoid the burn of the

smoking barrel.

“Determined,” Ted replied, glaring down at the rifle as he spoke. “I should have spent more time recruiting you, although I hoped you would have gotten the message after the trial. You needed at least three votes. Iris and Ben were the obvious two, and you know Edric would never side with you, which left only me and Councilwoman Jan.”

The cold rush of realization rushed through Wren’s veins, and the rifle dipped slowly from Ted’s face. She’d always wondered who it was, knowing it had to be Ted or Jan. “You? Why?”

Ted smiled. “I wanted to see what you would do. We had a common enemy, and I had never seen anyone get under Edric’s skin the way you did.”

“Why would you risk everything you helped build at the camp?” The questions tore through Wren’s mind like a freight train. “You had everything you needed. Food. Water. What more did you want?”

“The camp?” The laughter that rolled from his tongue was stressed and hurried, as though he were a young child who’d just discovered the art of crude humor. “That little outpost in the middle of nowhere guarded by a few dozen country boys? If I had a part in building the camp, then it would have been a much more formidable endeavor.” His amusement slowly subsided, the hysterics fading. “The only resource I offered that camp was false counsel. Whatever negligent advice spewed from my lips was meant to weaken it, not strengthen it.”

Wren dropped the rifle and took a step back. She retraced the moments upon her arrival, the bullets in the fence, the random torchings when they tried to rebuild, how the assailants always knew exactly where to attack the weak points, how the guards on patrol always seemed to miss the raiders. As one of Edric’s confidants, Ted had access to all of the knowledge regarding their defenses. “You planned all those attacks on the camp. It was you who helped place the bomb. You wanted everyone behind those walls to die.” Her pulse quickened. *My family was behind those walls.*

In the time it took for the rifle to drop from Wren’s hands, she had already landed her fist into Ted’s mouth twice. Her mind didn’t even process the assault. All she felt was the harsh knock of her knuckles on Ted’s jaw. Each blow sent a ripple of pain through her arm that shook her entire body. The hot burst of rage seared through her muscles. Her cheeks flushed red from boiling blood.

Wren mounted Ted on the ground, beating his face senseless. He offered

no resistance, only laughter. All of the pain and frustration and fear and uncertainty had unleashed a raging beast from its cage. For the first time since she could remember, she felt the unbridled power of certainty. She knew exactly what she wanted. *Kill him.* But before Wren could realize her prophetic vision, hands and arms pulled her backward. “NO! He did this! He did this to my family!” Her shrieks pierced the sky and puffed a chill into the night air. She kicked and flailed her arms, but Reuben finally managed to subdue her rage.

Ted gargled blood as he laughed, and the claret dripped from his nose and mouth. His right cheek was swollen and red, and his clothes and hair soiled from the dirt where he landed. Ted never took his eyes off her as Reuben dragged him to the nearest tree and tied him up. “You would have done well, Wren.” He spit a wad of blood. “You have the makings of greatness and a foundation of stone. I didn’t think you’d crack, no matter what Edric threw at you.” He grinned, and the black space of a missing tooth where his back molar used to sit disrupted the coy smile he had sported earlier.

Reuben knelt in front of her and gently grabbed her by the chin. He examined her face then her knuckles. “Hell of a jab, Wren.” He wiped the blood from her skin, and she winced from the pressure.

The adrenaline had worn off, and the repercussions of her outburst set in. “You should have let me kill him.” She offered the same defiant glare to Reuben as she had to Edric and Ted. But his response differed from theirs.

“I know.” Reuben removed some gauze from his pack and wrapped her hand, his massive fingers surprisingly gentle and nimble. “But if I let you kill him now, we wouldn’t know what he knows. And if we’re going to get your family back, we’ll need all the help we can get.”

Wren cocked her head to the side. “What changed your mind?”

Reuben concentrated on wrapping her wounds, keeping his voice casual. “I was always going to help you. I don’t think I realized it until now though.” He looked up at her, his eyes glowing under the night sky, surrounded by dirtied cheeks and the mangled beard that covered most of his face. “You remind me of someone.”

At school, Wren had studied and graduated with some of the brightest minds in her field. She’d been a part of meetings with men who commanded respect and awe from their peers and subordinates. But never had she seen anyone dwarf them until now. “Thank you.”

Once the bandages were wrapped, Wren took a step back. She allowed

her mind to regain its footing in reason before she slipped back into chaos. She and Reuben approached Ted together, the blood from his nose and lip crusted dry onto his face and shirt. “Who are you?”

“A question many have asked themselves upon my introduction,” Ted answered. He straightened himself as best he could with his arms bound. “But one that you should know the answer to by now, Wren. After all, you’ve met so many of my friends.”

Wren furrowed her brow. “I doubt that.”

“No? But you spoke of them so fervently at your trial and so openly with anyone that would listen back at the camp.”

Reuben backhanded Ted, and a fresh spout of blood erupted from Ted’s lip, and he spit another wad of crimson into the earth. Wren stepped backward, and a cold shiver crawled up her back. *It can’t be.* “You’re… You’re… with *them*?”

“What are you talking about, Wren?” Reuben asked, holding Ted up by his shirt as he howled in excitement at her realization. “Wren!”

The events in Chicago flooded her mind, drenching her memories and thoughts in fear and despair until she was soaked to the bone. The car wreck, the hospital, the factory, the riot in the city, the march of death that consumed everything she had ever known. The black masks that concealed the enemy, casting the true nature of their intentions under a veil of secrecy. But here it was unmasked, bloodied, and psychotic. “You’re one of the terrorists.”

“I am,” Ted replied. “I helped destroy your city. I helped detonate the EMP. I’m responsible for your family’s misfortunes. And I am the only person that can retrieve your children in one piece. So I suggest you take these ropes off me before it’s too late.”

Reuben released his grip on Ted’s collar, dropping him to the ground with a thud. Wren watched the confusion spread across the hermit’s face. “Wren, what is he talking about?”

It was almost too much for her to comprehend, but all of the information was there. She just refused to connect the dots. “You wanted me because you knew I could help bring down Edric. Because anyone that’s not on your side is the enemy. Anyone that’s still alive you mean to kill.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Once the EMP was detonated, we knew pockets of resistance would form around the country, so we started the long process of recruitment to our side long before the device was detonated. We’re everywhere, Wren.” Some of the crusted blood from Ted’s face flaked

off his upper lip as he smiled. “And I don’t mean to just kill the camp, no. I mean to purge this entire country of its useless bodies, its backward thinking that has limited our potential for the past three generations.” Ted leaned forward, the fresh cut under his lip dripping new blood. “Edric may be a Neanderthal, but he is well stocked with weapons and men. I don’t have any doubts he managed to secure the compound after exchanging you for the false peace my men promised. You don’t have the resources to take him down. You don’t have the bullets. You need my help. Take me back to town, and I will tell my men to attack the camp.”

“Wren.” Reuben tugged on her sleeve, pulling her out of earshot from Ted. “You can’t trust him. He’ll do whatever he needs to get out of those ropes. We take him back to the town, and he’ll double-cross us.”

“We’re not taking him back to town.” Wren pushed past Reuben and marched toward Ted, their eyes locked on one another. “You don’t care about my family. You don’t care about me. But I know one thing that you hold above everything else. Even your sick ideals. And that’s your life.” She leaned closer. “You didn’t kill your comrades to try and buy some favor with me. You did it because you knew there was only one way out of that cave. So I’ll make *you* a deal. I’m going to take you to Edric in exchange for my children. You keep your mouth shut, maybe you can weasel a pardon with him after I’m gone. You talk before I have my kids, I put a bullet through your head.”

The charismatic indifference vanished from his face. An uneasy tingling stirred in the back of her mind. But despite the icy fear gripping her heart, she didn’t break. Ted leaned forward as far as the restraints would allow, until the two were nearly nose to nose, and then he smiled. “Now you’re talking like one of us.”

7

Wren allowed Reuben to handle Ted on their trek back to the community, though she didn't expect a problem from him with a gun to his head and his hands tied behind his back. When she wasn't watching her footing over the terrain hidden by the cover of night, she stared at the back of Ted's head like a hawk. More than once she had to remind herself that he was of more use to her alive than dead. While she and Reuben kept quiet, Ted was nothing short of chatty on their journey, only stopping his mouth to catch his breath.

"It's a missed opportunity." Ted stepped over a fallen log, balancing awkwardly with this hands tied. "For both of you. I don't think you understand the influence I have with the organization."

Reuben smacked the back of Ted's knee, and he stumbled, but caught himself after a few steps forward. "I said enough." He bared his teeth like an angry dog. Ted's incessant chatter had tested his patience since he opened his mouth.

"No reason to get nasty," Ted replied, shaking the leg Reuben had struck. He looked back at him. "You know, I still remember you from that day in the woods."

Reuben grabbed Ted by the back of the neck and slammed him against the nearest tree. He pulled a knife and pressed it against Ted's cheek. "It might work out better for us if he can't talk. I can take out his tongue now and save us the trouble of wondering when he'll give us up to Edric to save his own skin."

"Reuben, enough." Wren caught up to him and saw that the blade had

drawn blood. In the dark of night, the fluid ran black down his skin. “I’m sure we could come up with something more creative than that.”

Ted moaned as Reuben released him. “The lady has my thanks.”

“I don’t want it.” The longer they walked, the more her legs turned to lead. Never in her life did she want a bed to lie down on, but the thought of her children fueled the fire within. And the more time she spent in the forest was more time Edric had to breathe.

Ted remained quiet for a short time, but the compulsion to listen to his own voice overrode his fear of the rod. “I’m surprised you haven’t asked more about what I’m trying to do. About my organization.”

“That’s because I don’t want to know.” Wren tried to keep the energy in her voice high, but even she tasted the dullness on her tongue.

“I think you’d fit in more than you think.” Ted looked back at her then to Reuben, who brought his free hand to the hilt of his knife tucked in his belt. “Though I’m not sure about him.” He gave Reuben a look up and down. “Too much of an idealist in him. But you,” he said, turning back to Wren, “you’re pragmatic. You do what’s needed to survive. And with the number of my men that you’ve killed, I could use a little more pragmatism.”

“You don’t know a goddamn thing about me.” Wren shook off his words, which triggered the nightmares and horrors that she committed to keep her family safe. The mirage of blood flashed on her hands. She felt the warm, sticky, metallic feel of the lives she’d taken on her fingers. And those she’d left to die.

“I know you’re determined. Who else could have convinced this behemoth to help you?” Ted shook his head. “No way he would have joined my cause, unless maybe you were to persuade him yourself. Throw in a little something extra.” He gave an obnoxious wink, and Reuben knocked him in the back of the head with the butt of his rifle, though Wren caught him blushing at Ted’s words.

“Right now I’m just wishing that the explosive had taken the hearing in both of my ears.”

“Although I have to commend you,” Ted continued, ignoring Wren. “It seems that you’ve managed to sway your large friend here with nothing but your stunning personality. Though no one would blame you for trying other avenues. You wouldn’t be the first woman to use what’s between your legs to get what you want.”

The next blow from Reuben knocked Ted out cold, and the man collapsed

to the dirt. Wren rushed over and sagged her shoulders in exhaustion. “I hope you know that I’m not carrying him.”

Reuben refused to look her in the eye, casting his gaze anywhere but her. The redness in his cheeks only worsened as he kept his head down. “We should kill him. I know you think he’ll help you get your kids back, but he won’t.” He finally turned to look at her, the features along his face hidden in oddly shaped shadows. “He’ll just end up killing your children out of spite.”

“You don’t think that hasn’t been running through my mind?” Wren threw up her hands in exasperation. “I don’t know if he’ll be able to help us. I don’t know if Edric will even want to trade for him. I don’t even know if my kids are alive!” A few birds took flight, awoken by the boom in her voice. “I have no idea what I’m doing! All I know is that I have to do *something*. I have to keep moving. I have to try, Reuben.” She pointed to Ted’s lifeless body. “And if there is a chance we can use him to get my children back, no matter what else it might cost me, then I’m going to take it. That’s my absolute. That’s my compass. And I will follow it until my last breath.” Wren panted, her fists clenched. The cool night air calmed the hot sweat on her skin.

Reuben remained quiet, his eyes darting back and forth between Wren and the ground. Without a word, he scooped Ted up and threw him over his shoulder then continued his trek toward the camp.

Wren followed silently, though her brain was loud with chatter. Her outburst had brought back the blaring doubt that she hoped to have rid herself of, and reminded her how little control she truly had. It was nothing more than a façade, a veil pulled back to reveal the strings on her arms and legs, some puppet master telling her where to go. *Helplessness.*

The word soured her mouth, and she spit to rid herself of the taste. She’d devoted her entire life to the destruction of that word. It was a hate that burned deep in her bones. It was the same hate that fueled her to go back to school. It kept her awake into the early hours of the morning as she finished her assignments then caught a few hours of sleep before the start of her shift at work. The hate provided a warmth and a fire she desperately needed.

She wondered if Ted had that same hate. When he’d spoken of her drive, their similarities, it had angered her because a part of her knew it was true. Not everyone had that switch in their mind. She could turn it off and on when needed, though she understood how taxing it was to live a life in those extremes. Yet, still, she persevered. She’d made it farther than anyone

thought she would, even her own husband.

Doug had told her that she had tunnel vision, and he was right. She loved her job. She loved that she was good at it. She loved the fact that she was responsible for pulling their family out of financial ruin. And even though she saw Doug slipping away, she never reached out a hand to help him. All she focused on was the endgame, and it didn't matter what was lost along the way. If she had given her marriage that same burning devotion, then maybe he wouldn't have cheated on her, and maybe they wouldn't hate being in a room with each other. *Maybe, maybe, maybe.* She shook the doubts from her mind. *I'm not like him. I'm not like any of them.*

She watched Ted's unconscious body swing lifelessly on Reuben's back as he huffed and puffed through the forest, unsure of how long he'd be able to carry the man. While Ted wasn't big, he was by no means small. He was nearly as tall as Reuben but slimmer, more toned and agile. She just hoped the hermit would have enough in the tank to help her once they reached the camp. "How much longer?"

Reuben panted heavily between words. "Shouldn't be… more than… six or seven miles. Should get there… before sunrise."

"Seven miles?" Wren jogged up and fell in line with Reuben's long strides. "Reuben, you won't be able to carry him for that long. You'll pass out before we arrive."

"I've had worse." Reuben wheezed, his feet thumping heavily under Ted's added weight. Sweat collected on his forehead and glistened under the moonlight. His shoulders sagged, and his back started to hunch and curl like a cane. But Wren let him walk. There was no sense in trying to hurt his pride.

The rest of the journey, Wren kept to herself. She stayed a few feet behind Reuben, every once in a while checking on Ted to see if he was still unconscious, but after a while she fell into another haze of fatigue. Most of her energy was focused on putting one foot in front of the other, doing her best to stay upright. *Addison. Chloe. Zack.* She repeated the names to herself like a mantra. Keeping them alive in her thoughts, the fuel driving her forward. *Just hang on. I'm coming.*

A sudden thud cleared the fog from Wren's mind, and the two shadows that were Ted and Reuben rolled over rocks and tree branches, a dark storm of limbs flailing about. Wren raised her rifle, but the bodies were too close to one another. She couldn't hit Ted without risking Reuben's own life. And if she wanted to trade Ted to Edric for her children, then she'd need him alive.

Ted slammed his shoulder into Reuben's gut, causing the hermit to release his grip, and Ted sprinted into the cover of the forest. Wren followed suit, rushing past Reuben, who struggled to rise from the ground. Wren rounded the cover of the large trunk that Ted had disappeared behind and saw nothing but the light shake of leaves.

Wren squeezed the rifle as if she meant to bend the steel and iron out of frustration and continued to scan the horizon. "Come out, Ted!" She took a step forward, her eyes straining to identify anything human in the darkness. "You've got nowhere to go."

"Actually, I have everywhere to go." Ted's voice bounced around the trees, its origins as numerous as the leaves on branches. "You're the one who has only one path to follow."

Reuben appeared on her left, rifle in hand, scanning the trees as she was. She looked to him for any guidance, any sign of where Ted might have gone, but the hermit was still catching his breath. It looked as though the day had finally caught up with him. Once his breathing steadied, Wren followed him into the darkness. "Give it up now, and I promise Reuben won't hurt you."

"I'm afraid that's a promise you won't be able to keep." Again Ted's voice ricocheted through the forest, providing the same illusion of omnipresence she remembered at the cabin. "Though I don't know if it'll be much of a challenge now. It's harder to beat a man into submission when his hands aren't tied behind his back."

Wren shivered. There was no way he got loose. "But it's still easy enough to shoot him." Reuben motioned forward, and Wren followed. "We've tracked you before. We'll be able to do it again."

"Who says I'm running?"

His voice solidified to the right, and Reuben and Wren both aimed their rifles in the same direction, their sights landing upon the trunk of a thick oak. Wren curved her finger over the trigger, and she stiffened her shoulder and arm, forcing the rifle to steady. She went right, and Reuben went left, circling around the tree, her feet pushing aside dirt and grass. She paused just before rounding the final turn, her heart caught in her throat, and the quickened beat of her pulse pounded like a jackhammer.

She sprinted the last few steps and came to an abrupt halt as she stared down the end of Reuben's rifle. She dropped her arms and looked around. She peered into the darkness, looking for any sign of where Ted had disappeared.

“Wren,” Reuben said, kneeling down into the grass. He grabbed something and held it up for her to see. *The rope.* “If he’s free, then he’ll be able to move more quickly.” Reuben tucked the rope back into one of his pockets and searched the ground for tracks.

Shit. Wren gritted her teeth and followed Reuben. She kept most of her visual resources to the left, since she couldn’t hear anything on that side, and relied heavily on her right ear to pick up anything that meant to kill her.

“You’re wasting your time, Wren.” Ted’s voice sounded as if it were cascading down from the sky. “You’re in over your head. It’s too much for you and your hound to stop. Even if you manage to kill me, others will come. I’m nothing more than the small tip of an iceberg, jutting from the ocean’s surface.”

Motion blurred to Wren’s far left, and she swung the rifle’s barrel quickly. She fired, the bullet exploding the tree bark as she and Reuben took chase. She poured her remaining energy into the run, but her body stiffened in slow motion. Her legs filled with lead. Her lungs wheezed with every breath. Her body was crumbling right before her eyes.

They stopped where her bullet disfigured the tree, but Ted was nowhere to be seen. Wren maneuvered the rifle hastily in her grip, swinging it from side to side. “Dammit!” Spit flew from her lips and dribbled down her chin as her frustration spewed through the fault lines of her soul. She squeezed the trigger, the bullet thundering randomly and chaotically into the night air.

“Wren!” Reuben called after her.

She ignored him, pivoting to her right and firing again. The recoil of the shot smacked against her shoulder. She aimed left and squeezed the trigger once more. The hot shell that ejected smacked her cheek, the searing metal burning her skin before it fell to the ground. She pulled the trigger repeatedly, screaming until her throat was on fire and her lungs were about to burst.

“Wren!” Reuben took the rifle from her hands, and she collapsed to the ground, her chest heaving up and down with every breath. He slung his own rifle over his shoulder, his head on a swivel as she sat there dead to the world, then checked the magazine she nearly emptied.

“I’m not like him. I’m not like him.” Wren rocked back and forth, repeating the words to herself like an inmate in an insane asylum. She clutched her legs to her chest, shaking her head. “I’m not like him.”

“No, you’re not,” Reuben said, pulling her up with one hand. “But right now I need you to get a grip on whatever ledge you’re dangling from.”

Wren shut her eyes. “Yeah.” Her shaky voice didn’t evoke the confidence she would have liked, but it was a step back from the abyss. She took the rifle back from Reuben and gave a stiff nod, but whatever foundation she thought she stood upon slowly crumbled at the sound of the slow cackle that whispered through the trees.

“Ha-Ha-HA-Ha-HA-HA!” It lingered on the light breeze that brushed Wren’s face, and she aimed the shaking barrel in what she thought was the direction the ominous clamor originated. “You’re starting to see it, aren’t you, Wren?”

The voice echoed to her right, and Reuben fired at the shadowed figure that darted between the trees. But while Reuben stepped forward, Wren remained frozen in place, paralyzed.

“You and I are two sides of the same coin. You justify your choices with the protection of your children, and I justify mine with the salvation of the world.” Another chuckle followed. “We’re the saviors of the world, Wren.”

Reuben followed the voice, which circled all around them. He spun, rifle in hand, trying to pinpoint Ted’s location. It was like being haunted by a ghost. Wren took a step forward and whispered to herself, her voice as shaky as the legs beneath her. “I’m not like you.” The ominous laughter grew more boisterous, echoing louder and louder every time Wren repeated the words to herself. Her mind flooded with the nightmares that had plagued her restless sleep, encroaching on the sacred ground that was her waking consciousness. “I’m not like you!”

The vein in Wren’s neck pulsed, and the forest grew quiet. The wind no longer carried Ted’s manic laughter. She jumped as Reuben touched her shoulder. He said nothing but pointed toward a cluster of low-hanging branches, swaying and scratching the earth in the breeze.

Wren nodded, her rifle raised, and the two approached slowly, carefully. She squinted into the circle of trees, searching for any movement. Her palms grew slick as they burst with sweat the closer she moved to the branches. Only a few steps away, she drew in a breath. The tip of her rifle penetrated the first few leaves, and she entered the waterfall of branches head first.

“AHH!”

The shout and gunshot came from the other side, and Wren sprinted toward the commotion. She skidded to a stop at the sight of Ted with Reuben in a choke hold, the edge of a knife to the hermit’s jugular. “Drop it.” Ted raised his eyebrows, the air of sophistication he touted replaced with

savagery. He applied a small amount of pressure, and the blade drew a trickle of blood. “Do it, or I gut him right here and now.”

“Shoot him!” Reuben said, his words choked by Ted’s vice grip.

Wren kept the rifle aimed at Ted, but with Reuben so close she was just as likely to hit him. “Let him go.” She took a step forward, and Ted dragged himself and Reuben one step back, the knife still wedged into Reuben’s neck.

“You shoot me, and I kill him,” Ted replied. “Drop it, or I do it anyway, and the only person you have left to guide you back to camp is me.” His face reddened with stress and rage, the once-childlike playfulness turned vicious. “You know I will.”

Wren placed her finger on the trigger. When she looked down the sight, all she could focus on was the knife point digging into Reuben’s neck. Ted’s words repeated in her mind like a broken record. All of her justifications, all of her reasoning, all of it made her more like him, more like the very people she condemned in Chicago, and the people like Edric back at camp. She saw Reuben’s decision in his eyes. He wanted her to do it. They both did.

Wren lowered the rifle, and she watched Reuben deflate as she set the gun down and put her hands in the air. Ted shoved Reuben to the ground, giving him a kick in the ribs, laughing while the hermit groaned in pain. “You’re one stupid bitch, you know that?”

Once they’d been frisked and stripped of their weapons, Ted kept one gun aimed at her while he restrained Reuben’s wrists. Once the hermit was secure, he walked over to her, circling her like a shark that had just caught the fresh scent of blood. He knelt down and brushed her hair over the back of her ear. “My men will be glad you’ve decided to come back.” His words were hot and soft against her ear and lingered long after he’d distanced himself.

But as they marched back toward the town, with their own weapons used against them, Wren held on to one thought. *I’m not like him.*

8

Wren tried getting Reuben's attention more than once, but the hermit wouldn't even look her way. He kept his vision straight in front of him, his head tilted up, and walked with a limp. She looked back at Ted a few times, and each instance was met with a nudge from the end of her own rifle.

"Too late to turn back now, sweetheart," Ted said, finally breaking the silence of the past twenty minutes. "I'd stop to let you get some rest so you're refreshed for your big debut, but I know the boys are eager to see you again."

Reuben suddenly flung himself toward Ted, but with his hands tied behind his back, it was a cumbersome sight. Ted knocked him down with the rifle before he even got close. Wren stopped and tried to help him up, but Reuben pushed her away. When he lifted his face, his cheek was scratched and his beard was bloodied. When he rose to his knees, Ted kicked him in the back once more, and he tumbled forward, rolling over a few times before landing on his back. Dirt caked into the gash on his face, and the bloodred tinge was replaced with grey.

Ted laughed, but Wren charged him. "Enough!" While she didn't manage to hit him, her attempt ended his hysterics. He simply smiled, pressed the end of his rifle against her forehead, and placed his finger on the trigger.

"It's not polite to shout, dear." He shoved her head back with the weapon's barrel, and Wren felt the hard scrape of the metal run across her forehead. "Now, let's move."

Wren complied, and she helped Reuben up, who continued his silence. Whatever psychological wound had opened in him wasn't one that she was

prepared to fix at the moment. The only thing that mattered now was making sure they didn't return to the town. But with Reuben injured, no weapons, and her barely able to keep up the pace Ted had set them, she didn't know how. She looked to Reuben, casting her eyes down to his gait, the limp in his left leg glaringly apparent. "We need to stop," she said, calling back to Ted.

"We're not stopping. I want to make it back to town before sunrise."

Wren gestured to Reuben. "He won't make it at this pace. He's hurt. Let me take a look at him." It was all she could think of to do. If she could get close to him, then maybe they could come up with something.

"Learned some new tricks, did you?" Ted asked.

"A few." Wren wasn't sure if Reuben planned it, but the moment the words left her mouth, he stumbled to his knees. She stopped, stepping between Ted and Reuben. "We'll make better time if you let me look at him."

Ted paused, examining her like a rancher purchasing cattle at auction. Once finished, he moved close enough for her to smell the stench of his breath. "Make a move, and you'll have to crawl your way back to town." He gestured toward Reuben then backed off.

Wren helped Reuben to a rock, Ted close behind, the gun on them the entire time. Just before he sat down, they exchanged a look. She set him down easily on the rock, and he cradled his ribs with his arm protectively, sucking in short, quick breaths. She placed her hand over the same area, and he shook his head. She furrowed her brow, trying to make sense of the request. She glided her hands to his shoulder, and again he shook his head.

"My hip," Reuben said, the words coming out like a whisper. "It hurts on my hip."

She fumbled her fingers over his hip and felt something hard over his waist, but when she lifted his shirt, she only saw a belt.

"Yeah," Reuben said, nodding. "Right there."

She ran her fingers over the area but felt nothing but the stiff leather.

"No, lower." Reuben grimaced, doing his best to sell the ruse.

Wren glided her nails under the belt, and Reuben nodded, grunting. She felt a small bump, and when she picked it with her nail, she felt something give way. It was no bigger than her thumb, and she quickly concealed it in her fist, hoping Ted hadn't seen.

"Well?" Ted asked, tapping his boot impatiently. "What's the diagnosis, doctor?" He spewed the words condescendingly, complementing them with a light chuckle.

Wren stood. “Nothing feels dislocated.” She looked Reuben in the eye. “But we need to slow the pace so it doesn’t worsen.” She tucked the small object between the coarse rope and the tender flesh of her wrist before she turned around and was met with the stare of a rifle barrel.

Ted eyed her through the sight. “From this range, there wouldn’t be anything left of the top of your head. It’d be blown clean off, splattered all over your friend.” He twitched his finger over the trigger and made a fake gunshot noise with his mouth.

Wren’s mouth went dry as she tried to swallow. “I’m sure the boys back in town would be disappointed.” She remained rigid, a sudden itch begging to be scratched under the rope on her left wrist.

Ted cracked a smile and lowered the rifle. “I know they would.”

Once they started their journey again, Reuben returned to his isolation, ignoring her, but keeping up the limp. She knew he really was hurt, and didn’t think he’d be able to do much when she made her move. She kept her hands low and out of sight as best as she could. She practiced wiggling the piece she’d taken from Reuben’s belt down the flesh of her wrist and into her palm. She examined it in quick glances, doing her best to not draw attention to herself. One of the edges of the square piece opened and revealed a small razor blade, only about half the size of her pinky. The way it was tucked into his belt, she understood why Ted didn’t find it during his search. She gently touched the tip of the pointed edge with her finger, and even with the lightest pressure, she drew blood. A few stabs at the neck, and he’d be dead.

After a while, the quick glances Wren cast to Reuben transformed into long stares the farther they walked. And with the grey of dawn lighting the sky, and judging by the distance they’d covered, she knew they had to be close to the town. But not once did Reuben stop, nor did Ted lower the rifle. He kept it tucked under his shoulder, his aim switching between the two of them.

They ascended a small hill. Ahead was a cluster of trees on either side, the only way through a narrow path that would force them into a single-file line. Reuben slowed his pace and fell in behind Wren. Her boots crunched loudly on twigs, dead leaves, and dirt, but the only thing she heard was the steady thump of her pulse. She uncurled her fingers from the small blade, gripping it between some of the calluses that had sprouted on her hands since she’d left Chicago. The hands holding the weapon no longer felt like her own. They’d grown tan and rough and more accustomed to holding a gun

than a pen.

Once they reached the path's narrowest point, Ted complained of Reuben's pace. She glanced behind her and saw the hermit hunched over on his knees, groaning and wheezing. If he was faking it, Wren couldn't tell.

"Hey!" Ted said, pointing the rifle at her. "I don't need you trying to run off anywhere."

Reuben looked up from his knees, the same cold hardness in his eyes from when they first met stared back at her. Then, without a word, Reuben flung himself backward, knocking into Ted and sending both of them to the ground. Ted and Reuben grappled over dirt and rocks, but with the hermit's injuries, he did little more than sit down, and Ted easily knocked him aside.

In the same instant, Wren sprinted forward, her fingers tight around the blade. The fatigue caused the ground underneath to swallow her legs like quicksand. Wren raised her fists together, bound in rope, the tiny tip of the blade aimed for the vein pulsing on Ted's neck, but as she brought the weight of all her force down, Ted blocked her blow with the rifle's barrel, her arms clanging against the weapon's iron. One quick swipe and the rifle's smacked across her face, knocking her to the dirt and the blade from her hand. She scrambled to all fours, disoriented from the blow, searching the dirt for the weapon. A sudden crack smacked under her chin and popped her head up, knocking loose a tooth and filling her mouth with blood. The world spun, and her vision blacked in and out and then fell into shades of grey.

"You stupid bitch!"

A pair of hands wrapped around the back of her neck and twisted her violently to her side. A sudden jab of pain connected with her ribs and rippled through her body, knocking the breath from her lungs. She gasped for air as another blow struck her lower back. She flailed her arms and legs flimsily in a poor attempt at retaliation, but her strikes did little to lessen her attacker's blows.

Dizzied with pain, Wren rolled to her back and watched Ted tie Reuben to the tree, his face covered with a fresh coat of blood. She pushed herself from the ground but collapsed. She shut her eyes, trying to control her breathing, which only worsened the pain in her chest. Hands gripped her once more, and she opened her eyes.

Ted flung her against a tree trunk, the jagged bark digging into her back, and the knifelike pain in her stomach intensified. "That was easily one of the dumbest mistakes you've ever made." Ted slapped his hand across the right

side of her face, knocking Wren's head hastily to the side. The red print of his palm formed on her cheek and burned like fire. "The boys aren't gonna be happy with me after this, but you know what?" He paused, leaning in closer. "They're so depraved, they'll fuck anything I toss them so long as it's still alive."

The next punch connected with her eye. The force of the blow slammed the back of her skull into the tree, and she collapsed. She raised her hands in a poor attempt to defend herself, but two more shots to the face, and the strength in her arms gave out. She felt the next few hits, but after that everything went numb. Suddenly she became aware of Reuben, still tied to the tree. He was screaming, his throat raw, fighting against the ropes binding him to the tree like a madman. And then the world went black.

9

It started with a dull ache, slowly waking her from the restless coma. But once the dullness had passed, the pain grew sharper and spread. Everywhere. The swelling had ballooned her face, nearly making her unrecognizable. When she grazed her cheek, she winced. It even hurt to blink. But when she looked down at her hands, she suddenly realized they were no longer bound. Though the pain coursing through her veins was just as paralyzing.

She pushed herself up from the concrete and leaned against the wall. Her spine and joints cracked. The simple movement left her exhausted. She looked down at her clothes and scrunched her face in confusion at the light-green sundress with a floral pattern around the bottom hem. The fabric was weightless and revealing. Her shoulders and back were bare, save for the bruises and scratches. What was meant to entice lust only revealed the abuse she'd sustained.

The unfamiliarity of her surroundings triggered panic. She rose to her feet, driving her heels into the floor, and what felt like shards of broken glass shredded her insides. The pain pulled her back to the concrete. She tried again, making it a few inches farther before falling once more.

"I know it's painful."

Wren jerked her head to the right. A man stood by a door, his face blurred beyond recognition. But the voice. The voice sounded familiar.

"You shouldn't have angered me like that." The blurred figure stepped forward. "You shouldn't have tried to escape."

Lightning struck Wren's mind. The forest. The knife. Ted. The pain. The

fear. Reuben. Another stab tore through her as she gasped. *Reuben.*

"My goodness, you look even worse up close." Ted crouched to meet her at eye level then pulled his collar down and exposed his neck. "I didn't escape without my scars either. You nearly ripped out my jugular, and Reuben did the same." Her flinch betrayed her thoughts, and Ted answered the very question running through her mind. "He's not here, Wren. But don't worry. You'll see him soon."

Wren attempted to speak, but the words were choked from her before they had a chance to be heard. Her jaw was swollen and stiff with the rest of her, but after she gathered some strength, she cracked the corner of her mouth open. "Let him go."

Ted laughed. "The two of you are quite the dynamic. You know he said the same thing about you when we got here?" He gently pinched the end of her dress, rubbing the fabric between his fingers. "You should have heard him scream when I beat you. It was like I was hitting him. I didn't realize you two were that close." Ted rose, stalking around Wren slowly. "He's big, but he doesn't seem your type, though to be fair, I actually don't know your type. Perhaps you don't even know yourself. Stemming from the divorce you were planning on dragging your husband through, I would say that would be a valid point." He gently rubbed the scratch on his neck, stretching his jaw, flexing the wound.

As Wren's vision cleared, Ted's features crystallized. The soiled clothes had been exchanged for a new button-up shirt and pants, complemented with a pair of dress shoes that clacked loudly as he walked, and he had combed his hair.

He caught her examining his clothes, and he spread his arms and smiled. "You like it? I never found the wear of tactical clothing stylish, nor did I believe that the end of the world meant I needed to sacrifice some of the finer things in life. And of course today was a special occasion, what with your grand return." He looked past her thoughtfully at the closed door. "The men were so excited to see you. But don't worry," he added quickly, "I didn't let them lay a hand on you."

The left dress strap on her shoulder fell halfway down her arm, and Ted knelt and dangled it from his index finger. "Though I did have to give them something. I wasn't sure if they were more excited to see you with or without the dress on."

His laugh triggered shudders through her body, and she looked away,

grinding her teeth, using the pain as a distraction from the nightmares to come. With her body broken, she felt the slow dissolve of her will.

"Wren, Wren, Wren, Wren." Ted repeated her name as though he were speaking to a child. "I know the end is difficult to bear." He nodded, the affirmation akin to a principal counseling a student. "But we are broken down and rebuilt to return stronger than before. It's something I've done to all of the men that work for me. And I can tell you none of them were half as difficult to break as you've proved to be. I hope that's some comfort to you."

Wren watched him smile, the missing tooth she'd knocked out the only missing element in his otherwise perfect ensemble. "If you keep me alive…" She took a hard swallow, her belly growing full of her own blood as she forced her jaw open wider. "I will kill you."

The smile vanished from Ted's face. "And I promise you that by the time my men have had their fun, you won't be able to sit for a week." He yanked her up by the back of her hair, her body spasming in defiance as he dragged her through the room then out the door, where she was blinded by sunlight.

Dust flew from the ground as Ted dragged her across the gravel. Wren choked on the dirt and grit that filled her nose and mouth. When he finally released her, her head smacked against the ground, sending another stab of pain that ran from the base of her skull and crept down her spine. She rolled to her right, her ear catching the sound of raucous shouting. At first she thought the maddened hysteria was for her. But when she lifted her head, she saw that the men's attention was elsewhere.

"C'mon," Ted said. "Let's go see how your boyfriend is faring." He forced her up, and Wren hobbled forward, wincing with every step. Every breath felt like stabs of glass shards. Ted forced his way into the circle, the men giving way.

The half-dozen men that remained in Ted's gang leered at Wren as she passed. The massacre at the cabin Reuben and she had unleashed had depleted his forces. And if she had it her way, the rest of them wouldn't be around for much longer either. Wren shifted and turned, ineffectively fending off their hands as they reached for whatever part of her they desired. As much pain as her face and body were in, none of it compared to the screaming madness that was her dignity. The bodies of men finally ended, and Wren had a front-row seat to the source of the chaos.

Reuben lay on his back, panting, heaving his chest up and down. His arms and legs lay spread out, and his entire body was covered in dust. Flashes

of red glimmered when he moved, and fresh blood gushed from the cuts along his face, offering a glaring contrast to the black and grey that covered the majority of his clothes. He rolled to his side, and Wren wasn't even sure if he saw her or not, but he stumbled to his feet, much to the crowd's chagrin.

The man who was in the ring with Reuben threw his hands up in defeat. The contender bowed out and was replaced with another man from the circle. He raised his fists, dancing around Reuben, who couldn't even raise his own hands to defend himself. The fighter taunted Reuben, sending light jabs into his stomach and face, Reuben's delayed reactions too slow to dodge the attacks.

Wren tried to step forward in the ring, but Ted pulled her back by the thick of her hair. "You'll get your turn soon enough."

The fighter ended the taunts and landed a vicious blow to Reuben's right cheek, knocking the big man to the ground. Wren's stomach tightened as he watched his arms and legs spasm in the dirt. *Stay down.* But her heart sank as she watched Reuben push himself to his knees, the dirt caked around his mouth so thickly that with every exhale a fine cloud of dust erupted from his lips, then spit a fresh wad of blood. Just before Reuben had a leg under him, the fighter drove the tip of his boot under Reuben's chin, and the crack of bone broke through the thunderous roar of the crowd.

Wren shuddered, and she looked away, thinking that Reuben's jaw had shattered. But the clamoring ruckus soon turned to laughter as the fighter who'd kicked Reuben's jaw bounced awkwardly on one foot, cursing as he hopped out of the ring.

Ted slapped her back, and she jolted forward. "I have to say, even I'm impressed. The man is built like a tank. You know he's been in that ring for the past two hours? The moment we stepped into town, I let the boys have him. I can't believe he's lasted this long. Though he does have some powerful motivation. Hell, the guys could get tired before he does!"

Just lie down, Reuben. Don't do this to yourself anymore. But Reuben rolled to his stomach, his arms trembling as he pushed himself from the dirt, blood drooling from his mouth. Wren spun around and gripped Ted by the shoulders. She forced her mouth open, every syllable spoken a challenge. "Please. Let him go."

"I'm afraid I can't do that. I made a deal with him, and despite what you may think of me, I'm a man who honors commitment." Ted removed her hands and turned her back to the scene as another fighter stepped in. But this

time Reuben lingered on the ground. She listened to the pain-induced gasps wheezing with every breath. He looked over to her direction, and for the first time since she arrived, they made eye contact. She shook her head, trying to tell him to stop. But Reuben looked away, pushed himself off the ground, and faced yet another opponent.

Wren cringed with every blow. The crack of bone against bone thundered between applause and chants. All of them egged on the new fighter to end it, all of them wishing for victory and the hermit's death.

"Do you want to know the deal I made with him before he stepped into that bloodbath?" Ted asked, whispering into her ear. "I told him that as long as he fights in that ring, the men won't be able to touch you. It's quite admirable, really. I certainly wouldn't have let myself be pummeled to death for your sake. Hell, I probably would have joined in on the fun."

Wren's blood ran colder with every blow Reuben received. Every hit he took, she felt in her bones. *He doesn't have to do this. Not for me.* A fist landed against Reuben's ribcage, and Wren tightened her stomach. The next combination rocked his head left to right, then right to left, and Wren's head ached. An uppercut struck him on the chin, flinging him to his back, and Wren's body numbed.

A cheer erupted from the crowd. "The men are particularly riled up after a fight," Ted said, keeping the distance between them as intimate as he could without touching her. "I hope you're ready for what's coming."

The hot madness simmered through the crowd as Reuben lay motionless. For a moment, Wren couldn't see his chest rise and fall, and her knees buckled. A second later, a gasp erupted from his mouth, then he drew in a ragged breath, shifting to his side before he choked on his own blood.

"C'mon! Finish him!"

"Yeah, he's done!"

"Get it over with!"

The jeers and madness reached a crescendo. Everyone smelled the stench of death that hovered over Reuben like a cloud. Blood dripped from his lower lip, puffed from the vicious blows he'd taken, and he found her in the crowd. The stoic calm and righteousness she remembered from their first encounter was replaced with pain and fear.

"Stay down!" Wren added her own voice to the growing chorus but couldn't be heard through the tumult of the crowd. The tears she struggled to hold back as a show of strength burst shamelessly from her eyes. She felt the

warm liquid run down her cheeks, the salty tears stinging the cuts along her face and neck as Reuben pushed himself to his knees, his face lifted toward the sky, his body caked in earth and blood.

The ruckus reached a fever pitch. The contender in the ring circled Reuben, the scent of victory in the air. He fisted the top of Reuben's mangled and matted hair and raised his fist.

"Once he's dead," Ted whispered in her ear as she gazed upon Reuben's final moments, "you'll wish it had been you who died in that ring. Bitch."

A gunshot silenced the crowd, and the fighter in the ring dropped to the ground with a bullet lodged in his skull. Confusion lingered, the men's faces left expressionless at the sudden death. The air grew intensely quiet, and then chaos erupted. Every man screamed and sprinted in frenzied directions at the sound of more gunfire.

Before Wren could reach for Reuben, Ted yanked her backward, and she lost sight of him in the chaos of dust and bodies. The gunfire echoed in all directions as she was dragged through the dirt, the thin fabric of her dress tearing from rocks and sticks. Ted held her by the wrist, and Wren dug her nails into his skin, clawing as hard as she could until she felt blood burst upon breaking skin. He backhanded her but loosened his grip in the process just enough for her to yank her arm away and stumble on all fours toward the nearest building.

Every motion forward throbbed pain through Wren's body. Her face pulsated, and her cheeks felt as if they would explode with every step. She glanced behind her, afraid that Ted was close, but all she saw were trails of dust. She stopped, suddenly alone, and looked for Reuben. Sporadic gunshots echoed in every direction, and Wren squinted under the glaring sun. And there she saw him, lying next to the dead gang member, his body lifeless. She sprinted back into the chaos, her eyes peeled for any of Ted's men, or whoever had descended upon the town. With the growing desperation of people since the EMP it could have been anyone, but all she focused on was the large body covered in blood and dust on the ground.

"Reuben." Wren skidded on her knees, her skin breaking upon contact with the pebbles and rocks in the dirt, her dress riding up her dirty thighs. His face was beaten and swollen almost beyond recognition. She cradled his head in her lap, the tears dripping from her face and landing on his dust-covered cheek.

Reuben gargled, and Wren gripped him tighter. Blood and spit spewed

from his mouth as he lifted his head up and rolled to his side, clawing the dirt and gasping for air. Wren quickly helped him sit up, and the sound of more gunshots sharpened both their senses. “C’mon. We need to go.”

Wren acted as little more than a cane for the large man as she struggled to bear his weight. She aimed for the nearest building and kept her eyes open for any pursuers and found two heading right for them. She hastened her pace, pulling Reuben with her. “Hurry.”

Reuben lowered his shoulder and heaved his body weight, and the force was enough to burst through the door of the abandoned building. He collapsed after the quick exertion, and Wren barricaded the entrance. She hit the floor just as bullets punctured the structure’s decrepit wood. She crawled along the grimy floorboards, the dress covering her stomach catching exposed nail heads. She looked and saw Reuben had collapsed to his side and lay still as death.

The desk and chairs she’d thrown against the door buckled with every thud that their pursuers thrust against it. “I know you’re in there, bitch! Don’t think you can hide from us!”

Wren opened old drawers and padded through the darkness, trying to feel for anything that could pass as a weapon. Her head throbbed, and the pains and aches along her body were no longer subdued by the rush of adrenaline. Every pulse-pounding beat from her heart triggered an agitated roar from her body. Her arms and legs shook uncontrollably, whether from fear or fatigue she wasn’t sure.

Bullets exploded through the door, turning the old wood into Swiss cheese. Round after round penetrated, making the hole grow large enough to fit a hand through. Wren felt the cool of metal and wrapped her fingers around a pair of scissors. The door cracked open, and Wren hid in the corner, keeping her body in front of Reuben’s unconscious one. She wasn’t going to let him suffer any more because of her. If he died, she died.

The snarling face of one of the shooters appeared in the crack. He hooted raucously at the sight of her and vigorously beat against the door, widening the opening with every smack. Finally, he squeezed through, rifle first. “Well, well, look at this.” The gunman’s clothes were soiled and grimy, and the body that wore them wasn’t any better. He flashed a grin, his teeth caked in plaque and turning yellow. His wild hair added to the ensemble of insanity. “The big man can’t give you lovin’ anymore, sweetheart. But why don’t you let me give it a try?”

The gunman's friend slithered in next, flashing a similar grin, though his had far fewer teeth. He lunged forward, yipping and howling in excitement. Wren kept the scissors open and jutted out at arm's length. She mirrored their actions, jerking side to side as they each took turns taking a swing, laughing in the process.

"She's still got some fight left in her." The first gunman set the rifle down, raising his fists playfully. "Your man lasted a while in the ring. Let's see how long you fare."

"Don't mess up her face any more. It's swollen enough as it is." The two hyenas bobbed up and down, the second gunman keeping his rifle aimed at her while the first gunman swiped his hand a few times as Wren fended him off with the scissors.

"You know, you're lucky we'd rather fuck you than shoot you. It'd make this whole process a lot easier if you wasn't breathing." He sprinted forward, trying to barrel into Wren, but she sidestepped, slashing the scissors' open blades across the goon's forearm. He cursed and clutched his arm. "Fucking bitch!"

Wren smacked into a chair as she shuffled backward, aiming the blade between the two thugs. The first gunman she'd wounded grimaced, then lunged forward. Wren drove the tip of the scissors into his path. She felt the tear of metal on flesh, but the brute kept coming, wrapping his arms around her neck. He squeezed, choking the life out of her, and she felt the scissors drop from her hand as she struggled for air. Her head throbbed, and the room started to fade to black, but through the pain she felt the hot tickle of the man's breath against her ear as he whispered, "I'm going to enjoy this."

Another crash at the door turned the gunman's attention to the intrusion, and before the second gunman could shoot, his body was riddled with lead. The goon on top of Wren loosened his grip, and she wriggled free, picked the scissors up from the floor and rammed the tip of the blades into the man's ribs. She felt the metal scrape bone and catch on the wiry muscle. She kept her eyes on her attacker's face as she pulled the scissors from his side and rammed them into him again and again, each blow triggering a scream until the man could no longer stand on his own feet. He collapsed, gargling blood and clutching his side.

Wren hovered over him until his very last breaths. Blood dripped from the tip of the scissors in a slow, steady drizzle onto the floor. Her knuckles flashed white over the grip, and it wasn't until he lay completely still, the

blood, breath, and life drained from his body, that Wren dropped it from her hand.

"Wren."

At first she thought it was Reuben, but when she turned, she saw that the man behind the rifle was Nathan, the thick mustache under his nose wiggling tirelessly from his heavy breaths. Her gaze lingered on him for a moment, but she was so hysterical with delirium that the words she yearned to speak were lost on their way to her mouth.

Nathan stumbled forward, the rifle in his hands falling across his chest, the strap clinging tight to his body. "My god, are you all right?" He looked behind him, screaming out the door. "I found her!"

"He needs help." The words left Wren's throat scratchy and raw. Nate looked at her, confused, and she lifted a shaky hand to Reuben in the corner. "Save him." The room started to spin, and she stumbled forward a few steps, her center of gravity shifting from side to side.

"Easy, Wren." Nathan gently grabbed her waist, stabilizing her for the moment, then helped her to the ground next to Reuben while Ben examined her face. "What did they do to you?"

They beat me. Groped me. Cut me. Whatever they wanted to do to me. But she was too weak to speak. It was all she could do to keep her concentration on Reuben's face, and though he lay unconscious, she felt her spirits lift as she noticed the slight rise and fall of his chest.

10

Iris and Ben screamed at one another, but Wren couldn't decipher their words. She barely felt Nathan prod at the cuts on her face. Every once in a while, a light sting would detract from her concentration, but for the most part all she could focus on was Reuben.

Nathan and the others had tried to convince her to let the doctor work on him alone, but their requests fell on deaf ears. They didn't know. None of them understood. Everything was paid in blood now. Nothing else mattered but the people who took care of you, and who you took care of in turn.

"We need to gather what supplies we have here and head back to the camp." Iris's voice had reached a crescendo. Her flushed cheeks revealed the hours of frustration she and Ben had exchanged since their arrival. "Every second we wait here is one more we give Edric to regroup and strengthen his defenses."

"You heard what Wren said, Iris." Ben dug his heels in, thrusting a heavy hand in her face. "It was Ted that was running the goons here in town. He'd been attacking us. And we don't know if he was working with Edric or not. If he was, then he could be telling Edric exactly what we've done. They'll know we're coming!"

"He doesn't know." Wren turned her head to the conversation, and the room went quiet. Nathan ceased his work on her cut lip. Her voice lacked animation and enthusiasm, but even she felt the sharpness of her words. "Ted is playing both sides. He was a member of the terrorists that caused all of this. I don't know if he'll go back, but if he does, he'll keep Edric in the dark

about what he's doing." She looked back to Reuben. His eyes were closed, and his breaths were sharp and quick. The doctor had washed away most of the blood and dirt, leaving nothing but the cuts, bumps, and bruises that mapped his face. "He'll tell Edric whatever he has to in order for them to kill us. And then he'll destroy the camp." It was the silence that finally forced her to shift her gaze from Reuben to Ben and Iris. Everyone in the room was looking at her, and she read the uncertainty on their faces. "This isn't politics anymore. There is no council. There is no order. We need to kill them all. Anyone who steps in our way." She pushed herself up. Nathan offered his hand, but she knocked it away. "The moment the doctor is done with Reuben, I'm heading back there to get my children. And I don't give a damn if you all decide to come or stay. It's your lives."

Wren limped out of the room and took a few steps onto the cracked pavement of the sidewalk outside the abandoned lawyer's office they'd taken shelter in. The group of thirty that had defected with Iris and Ben were gathered outside. The moment they realized it was her, they stood. She wasn't sure if they'd expected a speech, or advice, or an update on what Ben and Iris had decided, but she didn't care. Every one of them had abandoned her children, and she didn't give two shits about how she was supposed to make *them* feel.

The windows Wren passed were shattered or cracked. All of the stores that had offered anything of value were stripped bare. Nothing but shelves and dirty floors remained. They were empty. The town was empty. She was empty.

An old park rested on the town's outskirts. It was overgrown with weeds, and a rusted playground was falling apart in the center. A pair of swings drifted forward and back in a lazy cadence until she stopped their aimless purpose. She sat and kicked her legs, and the rusted chains squeaked with each pump. As she swung, she tried to imagine the park before the EMP went off. She tried to listen for the squealing laughter of children but heard nothing. She tried to picture the small hands and arms swinging from the monkey bars, the short legs pushing off the teeter-totter, but couldn't see beyond the rusted steel and motionless toys.

Nathan took a seat in the empty swing next to her, the support beams groaning louder from the added weight. He kicked in time with her own strides, no sounds between them save for the whine of the chains. It wasn't until Wren stood from the swing that Nate finally spoke. "We tried to get

them out, Wren."

Her face and jaw were still swollen, but she could open the left side of her mouth more easily now that the doctor had given her some anti-inflammatory meds. Though she still sounded like she had a mouth full of gauze. "You tried? What the fuck does that even mean? People usually *try* to pay their taxes, or *try* to do well at their job. Tell me just how much you *tried*, Nathan."

"About as much as you tried to help me in that ambulance in Chicago!" He thrust himself up from the swing, the seat dancing wildly upon his exit.

The verbal slap was more than Wren had expected, though she knew it wasn't out of line. "How long have you been holding that in?" She sat on one of the steps of the jungle gym and carefully rubbed her temples. While the swelling had reduced, the pain hadn't.

"I'm sorry." Nate kept his back to her, his head down. A puff of grey dirt clouded the air around his ankles as he kicked the ground aimlessly. "I know you did it to save the kids. I was too much of a liability." He turned around, the anger wiped from his face and replaced with despair. "Wren, Edric had the girls and Zack under lock and key. We would have lost everyone that tried to get them out."

"I'm going to get them back, Nate. I'll go by myself if I have to. And if Ted's there—" She clenched her fists, cracking her knuckles. The thought of that animal anywhere near her girls was warrant for murder.

"You won't have to go alone." Nathan grabbed her fists, and she loosened her grip. "I can promise you that. Iris and Ben need you, though. The people that came, a lot of them came because of you."

"Me?"

"That night when you stood up to Edric after the attack on the fence, it was all anyone could talk about." Nathan pointed back to the main portion of town, where she'd passed their group. "Those people saw you as something more than what they were offered. They respect you. They'll follow you."

"I don't want anyone dying for me. It's not my place to ask them. I'm not the leader they think I am." *I'm not a leader at all.* Reuben's broken body flashed in her mind, and she shuddered to think what would happen to the rest of those people if they followed her. The knowledge that he'd endured so much savagery for her well-being had tipped her over the ledge of sanity. "I'm not going through that again."

Wren left Nathan at the playground and returned to the cluster of people

who'd defected from the camp. She was short of breath by the time she arrived, and once again everyone stood, looking to her, wanting to hear what she'd say. "I'm not the person you think I am. All I've done, all I've ever done, has driven the people around me to pain." She felt blood collecting in her mouth as she forced her jaw open wider, projecting her voice. "That man inside? He followed me. He tried to help me. And he nearly died for it. Save yourselves. Save your family. There still might be someplace that's safe, and if you leave now, you'll be able to find it."

"We're not going anywhere." Iris stepped out of the building with Ben in tow. She circled Wren, and the crowd drew nearer. "You think those people are going to risk their lives just for you?" She shook her head. "Edric drove us from our homes. He took everything that we had worked so hard to build. There is more at stake than just your children. The camp was designed to keep us alive. It's our future."

"You said that we needed to save our families?" Nate asked, stepping through the crowd. "We are. You are our family, Wren. You kept your word more than Edric and the rest of those back at camp. We're not going because of you. We're going because we *are* you."

Everyone nodded, their decisions made. Iris and Ben stood on either side of her, and Iris thrust her rifle into the air. "We will not fail!"

Every rifle, pistol, knife, and fist lifted into the air, joining Iris's symbol of perseverance. And in the center, with both hands by her side, stood Wren, engirded with her own military. But if she was going to extract her children without Edric hurting them, she'd need more than brute strength on her side.

THE TABLE WAS CLEARED. Nothing but the Frankenstein-like pieces of paper taped together in an oddly shaped mass rested over the old wood. Wren had to grip the pencil tightly, or she found that her lines would slant. Every muscle burned, but it felt good to return to a familiar post. "I doubt Edric managed to rebuild the gap in the wall since I left, which means he has a back door he's forced to guard, with even fewer men to do it."

Wren constructed the entire compound from memory, save for some of

the details Iris and Ben provided. They revealed two important secrets no one outside the council knew: Edric didn't have all of the lock combinations to the individual weapons vaults in the garrison, and an underground fuselage on the east side of the camp.

"Now, the ammunition and weapons in Edric's and Jan's vaults are well stocked, and we have to assume that Ted has joined up with them by now, adding his arsenal." Iris pointed to the only concrete structure in the camp, which acted as their garrison. "Ben and I had been pulling ammunition and weapons out in secret for the past week in anticipation of Edric's behavior."

"You're sure Edric can't access your vaults?" Nathan asked.

"No, he can," Ben answered. "But it'll take some time for him to break his way inside. And it may not even be something he'll try. But regardless, as of right now, they do have more weaponry than us."

A burning fatigue cramped Wren's shoulder as she hovered over a few of the previous sketches, doing her best not to smear the lines. She took a step back and rested her arm. She massaged her hand. While the grip of the pencil felt good, not all of her dexterity had returned, which was evident in the schematic. "It's done." Wren cocked her head to the side. "For better or worse." She planted her finger on the gaping hole in the fence. "I don't think Edric will have any guards on that portion of the fence. He'll keep it open and booby trapped for anyone that comes through."

"We have to go in at night. It's our best chance of surprise," Ben said.

"Agreed." Iris looked to Wren, the others following her lead. "I doubt Edric will have your girls far from his side. Especially if Ted regrouped with him and told him you're in the mix. Wren, I don't know what he'll do once he smells the ambush."

"I do." Wren glanced down at the portion of the sketch that outlined Edric's house. "I'll need to go in first. And I'll need a distraction big enough to make the whole camp turn into chaos." She dragged her finger across the map to the underground fuel tank. "There's enough gas in that tank to wake up the entire state of Illinois. It'll be big, it'll draw attention and confusion, but it will give me enough time to get my kids and you guys a jump start on the offense. We'll need teams at different points of entry. The more we can use the chaos of the explosion to our advantage, the better. Once that blast goes off, we'll have a good ten minutes before Edric has a chance to reestablish any kind of order. That's where we can even the odds."

"Nathan, Jim." Iris pointed, and the two stepped forward. "You start

assigning teams. Then start dividing up the ammunition and explosives we have. Make sure everyone has what they need. Now's not the time to ration."

"Got it. All right, guys." Nathan clapped his hands together, raising his voice, and started breaking everyone into teams.

Iris pulled Wren aside, and she and Ben cornered her out of earshot of everyone else. "I don't want you going in alone. You'll have your own team, a few people to watch your back."

Wren shook her head. "No, I'll be able to move quieter by myself, and it'll be easier to stay hidden if I need to." *And I won't have anyone else's blood on my hands.*

"It's not a good idea, Wren," Ben said. "At least head in with the explosives team, and then you can break off while they rig the fuel tank."

In the end, Wren reluctantly agreed, then left Iris and Ben to hammer out the details with the rest of their people. *Their people. Not my people.* She found her feet guiding her back to the lawyer's office where they'd let Reuben rest. When it was all said and done, the doctor said the hermit had four broken ribs, a collapsed lung, a broken cheekbone, and more lacerations than he had fingers and toes.

Wren stepped in the room quietly as a ghost, gliding across the floor. The doctor didn't even see her until she was standing right next to Reuben's cot. "How is he?" She gently grabbed his thumb, which was large enough for her to wrap her entire hand around.

"If he makes it through the night, he should be okay, but that's his first big test." The way the doctor spoke was as if Reuben and she were lovers. The doctor excused himself, and Wren chuckled at the thought but wondered if he'd felt the same way.

Reuben had been beaten to within an inch of his life, all to keep her from being raped. "Why did you do that?" Her face reddened with anger as Reuben remained silent. She let go of his hand. "I never asked you to do that. It was stupid." A tear broke through the pain, and she leaned closer to his face, the thick musk of his beard piercing her nostrils. "You should have stayed at your cabin. You should have left me in the woods." More tears cascaded down her swollen cheeks. Was this what drove Doug to cheat? Had she always knocked away every outstretched hand? "I'm sorry." Reuben and Doug blurred together in the distress of her mind as the admission escaped her lips. "I didn't want this to happen." She hunched over, her back curved like the handle of a cane, and wept.

All of the pain, fear, apprehension, and unknowns that had plagued her consciousness flooded from her soul, escaping through the ducts of her eyes. She let herself feel the weakness, let it soak her bones until they dissolved. The walls within crumbled with every tremble of her body. She was exposed, naked and vulnerable. She stayed in the room with Reuben until her sorrow had run its course, and then she left.

Outside, Nathan waited for her. He gripped two rifles, one in each hand, and extended her the assault rifle. “Everyone’s set. We’re going to leave a few behind here to keep an eye on Reuben and make sure the town remains secure in case we need it later.”

The rifle sagged in her arms. It was heavier than she remembered, taking what remained of her strength just to keep the weapon upright. “We won’t.” The fatigue in her body betrayed the confidence in her voice as the rifle slipped from her grip and smacked to the ground. She knelt to retrieve it, and Nathan lowered with her.

“You know you don’t have to do this. You’ve been through enough, Wren. We can get your kids out.”

“No.” Wren raised the rifle and tucked it back under her arm. “They’re my children. It’s my job.”

Nate sighed and gave a reluctant nod. “Go and get something to eat before we take off. Ben’s handing out the rations now. We leave in twenty.”

“Okay.” It’d take them all night to make it back to the camp, and her muscles whined at the mere thought of the long trek. When she found Ben handing out the rations, she made it a point to grab an extra pack for the journey.

THE SMALL TEAMS of three and four huddled closely in the dark, everyone as quiet as the trees around them. When people spoke, it was in hurried whispers, which were few and far between. It was an eerie sight, all of those bodies moving soundlessly through the forest. They moved like the undead toward the last beacon of life in the world, ready to consume it for themselves. Wren didn’t object to the silence. Even though she was

surrounded by nearly two dozen others, she might as well have been walking through the forest alone. It was a needed solitude, time to prepare herself for what could happen. From the moment Iris showed up, Wren had been a nervous wreck, knowing that only Doug was there with the children, if he was even still alive. And if he was, he wasn't in any shape to keep them safe. He could barely walk.

She slowly processed all of the atrocities that Ted and Edric could inflict on her children. She forced herself down every dark alleyway of her mind, overturning every stone, peeking through every crevice. She needed to see it. She needed to prepare herself. By the time they stopped a few hundred yards from the compound, she couldn't stop herself from shaking.

"Hey." Nathan placed his hand on her shoulder. "You all right?"

Wren nodded quickly. Sweat broke out on her forehead, and she wiped it off with her sleeve before it stung her eyes. She'd forgotten about the swelling in her cheeks and pressed too hard with her forearm. The pain swelled her adrenaline. "Where's our point of entrance?"

"We'll head east, circle around the front gate, and head sixty yards before we make the jump. John and I will head for the fuel depot and start digging. You find your kids and wait for the explosion, and then you head out the same way you came in. We'll spread out the fighting between the north, south, and west corners."

Wren closed her eyes and whispered the only prayer that mattered. *Let my children live.*

"Wren?" Nathan asked. "You don't have to do this if you're not ready. We can—"

"I'm ready." With her assault rifle and the extra magazine of ammunition, Wren followed Nathan and John through the trees. Every few yards, she glanced toward the wall, the proximity to her children enough to drive her mad.

After ten minutes Nathan held up his hand, freezing all three of them in place. Wren drew in a breath, every muscle hissing pain. She kept her good ear toward the fence, her eyes peeled, and slowly exhaled when Nathan motioned them forward.

The roots that penetrated from the earth were slick with the morning's rain, and Wren slipped twice, catching herself with her right arm and cursing under her breath. Her feet dug into the moist dirt, flicking patches of soil behind her with each hurried step. The beating from the previous day had

taken its toll, as she panted for breath by the time they reached the fence.

The section of the wall they'd chosen hadn't been completed before Wren's exile. It was weakly reinforced, and most of the wood had rotted away, but more importantly, it was short. She'd never added the height extension like the other sides, though it was something Edric knew as well.

Nathan walked slowly along the walls, keeping low, while John and Wren hung back, waiting for the signal that it was clear. Wren's heart caught in her throat, each thick beat sending a shiver down her spine. Beyond the fence, her children were scared and alone. She dug her fingers into the rifle's grip. The knuckles in her hands cracked. *I'm coming.*

John patted her on the shoulder, and the two bounded soundlessly over the wet earth to Nathan's location. It was Wren who went over first, her belly sliding against the moldy bark. The skin between her fingers pinched in the crevices between poles. Her arms shook violently as she lifted her legs over the side, and she smacked her cheek on her way over the top. The pain numbed her limbs, and she slipped from the top, crashing into the dirt with a dull thud.

Wren clawed at the ground, the first few seconds of breathless gasps heightening the adrenaline-induced panic. The first breath wheezed into her lungs as Nathan landed next to her. "Are you all right?" She nodded and pushed herself up. John lowered himself next as she brushed dirt from the front of her shirt and pants.

"Let's go." Nathan led the pack, careening through the trees inside the compound. The heightened risk elevated everyone's awareness, and Wren felt her mind come alive in the darkness. Her vision grew clearer. The pain in her body faded, and she felt the strength of the moment. Her rage that had gathered in her veins finally hardened. Her muscles flexed in fluent coordination with her commands. The compound had become her drawing board, and the rifle in her hands the pen.

The first buildings came into view. John and Nathan broke off to the north while Wren slowed. She knelt by one of the last trees before the clearing and peered through the scope. The crosshairs focused on two guards, and she nestled closer to the base of the tree, with only the black of the rifle visible around the trunk's corner.

The sentries moved silently, cloaked in darkness. Wren knew they had night vision. She'd seen them use it against the raiders that had come before. The moment she stepped from behind her cover, she'd be caught. Never had

she cursed her deafness more than now.

Patience grew thin with the knowledge that her children were so close, and seconds turned into hours. With the rope holding her back fraying, she pivoted slowly, creeping around the edge of the trunk, lifting her scope. She exhaled. Nothing but empty space.

With the guards past, Wren hurried to the first building. She hugged the back side of the house, knowing Edric's residency was close. She hastened her speed, with nothing ahead but open ground. If she was caught here, her cover was blown.

The late hour had tucked most of the residents to bed for the night, but even still, Wren was mindful between the houses, knowing that anyone could wake in the night. When Edric's home finally came into view, she slowed.

A cluster of trees thrust itself inconveniently from the clearing, challenging the open space the camp had inflicted upon the forest. Wren smiled at nature's defiant act, knowing it had been a point of contention with Edric.

Wren lingered a few dozen yards from the house, waiting for any sign of motion, scanning every corner and crevice before her first step. She'd only get one shot at this, and if she was wrong, or if she was caught, her children were dead.

Once she'd double-checked her surroundings, she planted her right foot forward then froze. She looked from side to side. Another step. And another. She kept the methodical, steady pace until she arrived at the window and crouched low.

Slowly, Wren craned her neck to the window's corner. At first, nothing but darkness stared back at her. She blinked away the emptiness a few times, and the room took shape. A dresser appeared on the far wall. With a point of reference, she slowly mapped the room in her mind, her search catching the shape of a doorknob, a bedpost, and a pair of shoes.

Wren kept her eyes on the bedpost and craned her neck to try and get a better look at who slept, but all she managed to catch a glimpse of was the ruffle of sheets. She glued her back to the cabin's wall and looked to the east, where the fuel deposit rested. *What is taking them so long?*

The cabin itself was raised slightly off the ground, and Wren positioned herself by the front door and started digging. She burrowed out a hole and slithered underneath, her lips grainy with soil as she nestled inside. The space was so narrow that she could barely lift her head. Every breath squeezed her

harder against the confined space, and she fought against the growing claustrophobic panic. She focused on slowing her heart rate, and inhaled slowly through her nose and exhaled out her mouth.

Wren positioned herself to face east, and she kept her eyes glued to the sky, waiting for the plume of fire and smoke that would wake the entire forest. She tucked the rifle close to her body, and she stiffened as time passed. She stretched her neck a quarter inch to the right and half as much to the left. It was all the movement the space afforded. And just when her impatience tipped to the edge of action, she felt the ground rumble under her belly. A sudden burst of fire and earth greeted her gaze to the east, the plume rising for only a split second before extinguishing into the night.

Pounding feet thundered on the floor overhead, and Wren recognized Edric's voice as he shouted to someone inside. The words were muffled and indecipherable, but the panicked and hurried tone told her all she needed to hear.

The door burst open, and Wren watched Edric's legs sprint toward the sight of the explosion. Shouts erupted in the night as the quiet of the camp ended with every confused order barked from the lips of Edric's men. She lingered under the building a minute longer, looking to her left and right, waiting for the rest of his goons to flock to the explosion.

With the coast clear all around, Wren wriggled her way to the front of the building. She brought her hands from under the bottom of the house, digging her fingertips into the siding to pull herself out, when the door burst open again. She jerked back underneath, frozen in the hopes that whoever left hadn't seen her. She watched feet hurry across the grass and waited until they were out of sight.

Wren exhaled and returned to her escape. Her stomach scraped along the house's undercarriage, and she rolled across the dirt with her final heave from the cramped coffin. She knocked the dirt from her rifle and stepped inside the house. She squinted into the darkness, every motion a knee-jerk reaction in her heightened state of awareness.

"Chloe! Addison!" She whispered their names, her voice barely rising above the creak of the floorboards. *Please let them be here.* She smacked her knee on the corner of a table, and a crash followed the sharp curse as she limped forward. "Zack! Chloe!"

Scratches sounded to her right. She froze, silencing the creak of the floorboard. She lowered her weapon and saw the outline of a door. She pulled

the handle. *Locked.* The scratching intensified, and Wren rattled the doorknob viciously. “Chloe? Addison? Can you hear me?” Again, nothing but scratches answered, and Wren stepped back. She thrust her heel into the door, and the joints along her leg jarred painfully as the wood did nothing more than slightly bend.

Wren raised the butt of her rifle and smacked it against the knob. The wood around the lock splintered, and she quickly struck it again. The third blow broke it free, and she shoved the door open, her heart sinking as she saw Doug bound and gagged in the small closet space. “Oh my god.” She pulled him out, his body limp, his breathing labored, and his clothes and skin soaked with sweat. She tore the gag from his mouth, and he let out a gasp. “Where are the girls? Where’s Zack?”

Doug shook his head. “I don’t know.” He coughed violently, wheezing between breaths. “I haven’t seen them since you left.” His neck gave out, and he rolled his head, exhausted from the interaction. “I thought you were dead.”

Wren hyperventilated. She clutched her chest. A tingle ran down her left arm, and her shoulder ached. “Fuck.” She pulled her hair. “Jesus fucking Christ.” If the girls weren’t here, then she didn’t have enough time to find them now. She gripped Doug’s shoulders and dug her nails into his shirt, pinching his flesh. “Think, Doug. Where was the last time you saw them? You must have heard something Edric said. *Anything.*”

“I-I don’t know. I don’t remember him saying anything.” Doug shut his eyes. He shook his head, drips of sweat flying in every direction. “H-He mentioned more guards someplace. It sounded important.”

“Where?” She pulled him closer and tightened her grip, hoping she could force him to hold onto the thought on the tip of his tongue.

“The infirmary.” Doug opened his eyes wide. “I think he’s keeping the kids at the infirmary.”

Without another word, Wren sprinted out of the cabin, shoulder checking the door open. The muscles along her legs burned, but she kept long strides, and her body whined from the exertion.

Gunfire grew louder in its orchestrated chorus in the night air the farther she ran. The rhythm of bullets beat in time with her steps, and she raised the rifle to her shoulder, her finger on the trigger. A shadow darted from the side of a building, and Wren aimed but hesitated, unsure of whether it was friend or foe. But the bullets fired in her direction answered the unknown.

Wren returned fire and glided right, her aim sloppy from her movement.

Dirt flew up with every bullet that skipped left and right, short and long. The two grew closer, and Wren planted her foot, dropping to one knee, and steadied her aim. The outlined figure centered in the crosshairs, and Wren squeezed. A cry rang out, and the shadow dropped to the ground. The farther she ran, the more shadows appeared, attempting to take her deeper into the darkness.

Flashes burst from Wren's muzzle and lit up the night with every hurried squeeze of the trigger. She felt the rifle mold to her body, become an extension of her arm as she sprinted through the hail of gunfire. Two figures guarded the infirmary's flank, and Wren brought the first down easily, but the second caused her to roll left behind the cover of one of the houses.

Wren caught her breath and hocked the thick phlegm that had collected in the swollen pockets of her cheeks. The tip of the muzzle wafted smoke, and she flattened herself to the dirt. She saw the man's feet frozen in place, no doubt waiting for her to show on either side of the house. But she burrowed forward underneath, shoving aside dirt, grass, and cobwebs as she crawled toward the last obstacle between her and her children. The cramped space made it difficult to position the weapon, but she managed to raise the barrel high enough to get the needed projection, and by the time the sentry realized where she'd gone, he had two bullets in his chest.

Wren squeezed herself from under the house, her eyes never leaving the sight of the infirmary. A wave of dirt trailed her after the final push, and she sprinted toward the door, rifle up, every cell in her body in overdrive as she burst inside. The scene upon her entrance overwhelmed her, but she kept her rifle up. Her finger itched carefully over the trigger, and her whole body tensed. "Let them go!"

Both Zack and Addison were tied up in the corner by their ankles and wrists, with gags over their mouths. Ted held Chloe by the scruff of her neck, shielding himself with her body, the gun in his hand aimed at her youngest daughter's head. "Oh, I don't think you're in a position to be bargaining." Chloe's head tilted at an angle from the pressure of the gun.

Wren glanced behind her then shut the door with her foot, providing her back with a barrier. She took a step forward, but it only caused Ted to press the gun harder into Chloe's cheek, which was red and wet with tears. "Take the gun off of my daughter. *Now.*"

"Or what? You'll shoot me?" Ted pulled Chloe closer, covering more of his body. "You don't have the skill to shoot me without the risk of killing

your daughter. We both know that. But...” He repositioned the gun under Chloe’s chin. “You have three kids. So I could easily plow through two of them and still have a bargaining chip to get whatever I want. You want this one to live? Put down the rifle, Wren.”

Wren’s eyes flitted between Chloe and Zack and Addison tied up on the floor. She shifted her weight side to side. The shouts and gunfire had grown increasingly hectic outside, adding to the screaming match in her head. “You’ll kill them out of spite.”

Ted threw his head back, his maniacal laughter flooding the infirmary. “You’ve learned so much. But even still, you’re out of cards to play. You don’t have any move left but to put the gun down. I’ve seen you in fights. You don’t pull the trigger. You don’t have the training. You don’t have the grit. And you don’t have the nerve.” A few drops of spit landed on top of Chloe’s head as she continued to cry in his arms.

Wren sidestepped to her right, her eye glued to the scope. The crosshairs wavered between Ted and Chloe’s head. Wherever she moved the barrel of her gun, he moved Chloe. Her muscles caught fire, but she steadied her arms, forcing them as still as the metal gripped in her hands. *I can’t let him win.* Her right arm spasmed involuntarily, and the steady confidence she’d accumulated vanished.

“I’m running out of patience, Wren.” Ted’s voice dropped an octave, the playful laughter erased from his face. “You won’t be able to win this. You and I both know that. Your distraction is wearing off, and Edric’s men will beat back whatever resistance they come across. Time’s up.”

Wren shut her eyes, focusing on nothing but her breathing. Her heart rate slowed. Her muscles relaxed. The shaky tremor in her right shoulder disappeared, and she felt her body steady. She opened her eyes, and the world through the view of the scope passed in slow motion. The point of the crosshairs lined up perfectly with Ted’s left eye, and she felt her right hand squeeze the trigger.

The blast of the gunshot and Ted dropping to the floor flashed faster than the blink of an eye. Wren dropped the rifle and sprinted toward her daughter, her piercing cries eclipsing the gunfire outside. She scooped Chloe in her arms and scrambled on her knees to Zack and Addison. Clutching her youngest daughter to her shoulder, she ripped the gags from her other two children, and they scrunched their faces in grief. She squeezed all three of them in her arms, and she could have stayed there holding them forever, but

the thunder of gunshots beckoned the return of her senses. She set Chloe down and pulled a knife from her pocket. She sawed through the restraints, tossing them aside. Zack grabbed his crutches, and Addison clung to her leg. “Zack, here.” She handed him the knife and scooped the rifle up, keeping Chloe in her right arm. “You three stay with me, and do not stop moving for anyone or anything. Got it?”

Three nods answered in unison, and Wren led them out the front door. She kept Zack and Addison in front, scanning behind them to make sure no one ambushed their rear. Shudders accompanied every gunshot, but Wren marched them forward. “Don’t stop!” They sprinted into the forest, heading for the fence. The farther they ran, the more the gunfire faded, and it was soon replaced with Chloe’s steady crying.

11

Zack slammed up against the tree's trunk, wheezing and panting for breath. "I can't… I need to stop." Wren hadn't let them rest for twenty minutes, putting as much distance between her and the camp as possible.

Wren stopped, Chloe still clinging to her neck, and looked back for the first time. "All right. Just for a little bit." Wren peeled Chloe off and set her down next to Addison, and the two huddled close to her legs. Wren unloaded the empty magazine from the rifle and replaced it with her spare. Sporadic gunfire continued to disrupt the stretches of quiet, and Wren peered through the tunneled view of the scope. Only trees and darkness fell across her gaze, and she lowered the weapon. "How's the leg holding up?"

Zack regained control of his breathing, but his face and body glistened with sweat under the moonlight. "The leg's okay. I haven't moved this much since it was broken." He lowered his head, drawing in a long breath.

Wren tilted his head up. "You're doing great." She kissed his cheek and ran her fingers through his hair. "We need to find the others." She stepped over a few of the roots, looking into the darkness, hoping Nate or Iris and Ben would return soon.

"Mom, what about Daddy?" Addison let go of her sister and walked to Wren. "Is he coming with us?"

Wren knelt and tucked Addison's hair behind her ears. "Dad wanted to make sure you got out safe. He's helping keep the bad guys from getting to us." She kissed her forehead. "He loves you so much." Her voice caught in her throat, and she wondered how long her answer would satisfy her

daughter’s worry.

A twig snapped in the darkness. Wren pivoted toward the sound’s origin. Zack and the girls cowered backward. Leaves rustled, and she took a step forward. Shadows moved, and Wren placed her finger on the trigger just before a pair of hands thrust themselves into the air.

“Wren?” Ben’s figure withdrew from the darkness. Blood splattered his shirt and arms, with some smaller speckles on his cheeks. “Thank god.” He let out a breath and wrapped her in a hug. “I’m glad you made it out.” He turned to the kids, palming the top of Chloe’s head in his hand. “And I’m glad you’re safe too, young lady.”

“What happened?”

The answer spread across his face before the words left his mouth. “Edric pushed us back after the attack. We didn’t have the manpower to finish him. But Iris managed to retrieve some of our gear from the vaults before we retreated. We’re going to mount another offensive at dawn.”

Wren paced wearily. She bit her lower lip until she tasted blood. She couldn’t risk keeping the kids around for that. She needed to get them as far away from the camp as possible. “I need someone to take Zack and the girls back to the town.”

Ben shook his head. “Wren, we don’t have that kind of time. We need to hit Edric hard again before he has a chance to come after us. We have to stay on the offensive.”

“I just pulled them out of a warzone. I’m not going to keep them around for another confrontation like that.” Wren thrust her finger into Ben’s chest. “They go. Or I disappear before you can rally the troops behind my figure.”

“Wren—”

“It’s not a discussion, Ben.” She stood her ground as Ben wavered back and forth.

The gunshots in the distance broke the monotony of silence until Ben finally spoke. “All right, but we can’t afford more than one man to go back. We’ll need everyone to bring him down.”

“Then it’s your best man.” Wren walked away but caught Zack’s glance as she turned to the fading sounds of battle. He hobbled around until he completely blocked her view. Even in the darkness, she saw the distressed lines across his face. “You need to be strong for the girls.” She gripped the back of his neck and pulled him close, squeezing him tight. “If something happens to me or your father, you need to take care of them, okay?”

“Don’t go back.” Zack’s words were nothing more than a whisper against her ear. “I know what he did. I know he cheated on you. You don’t have to go back for him.”

Wren forced his eyes to hers. “He’s your father. No matter what he’s done to me, he has always loved you. And you’re stronger than he is. He knows it, and so do I.” She kissed his cheek then embraced him in another hug. “I love you so much.”

The rendezvous point was only a mile away, and Ben helped round up the girls as they trekked through the forest. By the time they arrived at their destination, the gunfire had ended, and most of the survivors had returned. The number of casualties for their group were a quarter of their total. Iris and her team were some of the last to return, though what they brought with them raised the group’s spirits.

“Ammunition. Knives. Explosives. Rations. And NVDs that were stored in my faraday cage.” Iris dumped the loot in the center of the group who’d circled. The booty was distributed evenly, and Wren made sure to take one of the grenade belts. She wasn’t sure if she could be as accurate on this round as her previous shots.

Ben pulled Iris to the side, telling her about Wren’s demands. When the conversation ended, Iris simply looked Wren’s way and gave a soft nod. When she walked by, neither of them exchanged any words.

Once the children’s escort was chosen, Wren pulled them aside, away from the ears and mouths of the group. “You guys are going on a trip with Mommy’s friend Donny. He’s going to take care of you and make sure you’re safe, okay?”

“You’re not coming with us?” Chloe’s eyes widened. She puffed out her lower lip.

“I’ll only be gone for a little while longer.” Wren stroked her cheek, but Chloe jerked away.

“You just came back, and you’re leaving again?” Addison thrust her arms out animatedly. “You can’t do that! You can’t leave us! You promised!” Her voice shrieked. “You promised!” Her face reddened, and tears burst from her eyes as she stomped her feet and kicked the dirt and leaves.

Zack reached her before Wren could and scooped her up. “Hey, listen. It’s not Mom’s fault that she has to leave. She’s going to get Dad. She’s trying to help, and you’re not making the situation any better. You need to be brave. Like Mom.”

Addison buried her face into her brother's shoulder, and the tantrum ended. Zack rocked her back and forth, using the tree next to him for support. A tear broke through the wall holding them back and rolled down her cheek. Chloe tugged on Wren's pants, and when she knelt down she squeezed her youngest daughter tight, hoping the night concealed the tears.

Before they left, Wren pulled Zack aside, making sure the girls couldn't hear. "When you get to town, there will be a man in the care of a doctor. If he's awake, tell him who you are and that I told him to take you to the cabin. If I don't make it back, you stay with him. He'll keep you and your sisters safe."

"Mom, you shouldn't talk like that."

"Promise you'll listen to what he says." Wren kept her voice stern and grabbed his shoulders. "Promise me." After a pause, he agreed, and Wren hugged him. "I'm so proud of you. And I love you so much."

Wren kissed all of them as many times as she could before Don led them through the woods. Her heart was pulled with them, and she kept her eyes on them until they disappeared into the trees. She lingered on the last spot she saw them and didn't look away until Iris placed her hand on her shoulder.

"They give you something to fight for," Iris said. "Let them be your fuel. You don't stop until they're out of harm's way."

"And when does that happen?" Wren looked back to the empty forest. "The world doesn't stop being dangerous just because I want it to. It's never listened to me before. There's no reason for it to start now." She walked away, leaving Iris and the group. She didn't need to be lectured. She needed to be alone.

A fallen tree provided the quietness Wren needed, and she felt the weight of the past few days fall on her. She rested the rifle across her lap, and the soreness and pain returned in full force. She gingerly stretched her body, every muscle irritated. She poked her cheeks and was reminded of the swollenness in her face. Her eyes felt heavy, pulling her downward. All she wanted was to lie down and sleep.

Wren wrestled with the thoughts in her head, wondering if the driving force behind her return was for Doug's rescue or Edric's death, and whether her motives even mattered. Her broken body didn't have much left in the tank. And while she knew she couldn't rid the world of every evil meant to harm her children, she knew that she had to try and cleanse it of this one horror in her own backyard.

Footsteps triggered a reach for the rifle, but when she saw Nate emerge from the darkness, she lowered the weapon. “I could have shot you.”

“It wouldn’t have been the first time you tried to kill me.”

Wren couldn’t help but chuckle as he took a seat next to her. “This one would have been more deliberate.”

“But just as fatal.” Nate rested the rifle against the log and folded his hands, resting them on his gut, which had shrunk over the past month. “You did good getting those kids out of there. Doug would have done the same thing.”

“I know.”

“I’m just saying if he were in the same position—”

“Nathan, I know.” She clipped her words, cutting him off. “Just because our marriage fell apart doesn’t mean our commitment to our children did. He knows why I didn’t come back for him, and by now he knows that they got away.” She picked at the dirt under her fingernails. “I don’t know if he’s even still alive.”

“And what if he isn’t?” Nate elbowed her arm. “Could you handle that?”

Wren exhaled, her body collapsing within itself as she did. “One thing at a time, Nate.” She rubbed her palms together, feeling the calluses that had grown over the skin. Every fiber of her being had either broken or hardened. She wasn’t the woman she used to be. And she wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. “Reuben. The hermit who saved me. I want him to stay with my kids if I don’t make it. I’m going to tell that to everyone before we leave.”

“You don’t have to do this, Wren. You don’t have anything else to prove. Let me talk to Iris and Ben. They’ll understand.”

“No. I’m not going back because of the deal I made with them. I’m going to kill Edric. One way or the other, this will be finished for me.” She looked him in the eye. “And I’m not leaving anyone else behind. No matter what.”

Nathan nodded. “All right. You need anything?”

“I’m just gonna sit here for a while. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Okay.” Nathan squeezed her hand and disappeared.

Once his footsteps faded, Wren was left in quiet. She closed her eyes and listened to the light breeze rustle the leaves overhead. She felt her muscles relax, and while the pain in her body lingered, she was able to block it out. The world around her felt like a graveyard, and she was nothing more than a ghost floating through the headstones.

It was a feeling she’d never experienced before, and she found a level of

euphoria in the moment, and a peace that she hadn't known since before the events in Chicago. Home had never felt so close and yet so out of reach. Her thoughts drifted to the terrorists, and Ted, and she wondered how many more of them were left. How deep did their network go?

Wren tucked her rifle under her arm and returned to the group. Upon her arrival, Ben and Iris already had everyone huddled together. All of their faces stretched long. Everyone was fatigued, and the slouched shoulders and low-hanging heads lacked the confidence she knew they needed. "We're not dead." Heads perked up at the sound of her voice. The group sat a little straighter, and she felt the light burst of energy rush through them. "Not yet." A few smiles cracked over the stoic faces. "Edric has hurt all of us. And the camp he occupies is everything you've worked for to stay alive. You put your blood and sweat into that place. And now it's calling for more." Heads nodded, and Wren circled the group. "He won't give it back willingly. He's a fearmonger. Some warlord sitting high on his chair."

Iris rose, followed by Ben, and they both stood next to Wren. Iris placed her arm on her shoulder. "Edric has no right to what we've built. We've sacrificed too much. That's our future he holds. And we're not going to let him take it!" She thrust her hand into the air, and the group erupted. Fists and rifles were raised. The anger spread like an airborne pathogen, and Wren felt her blood boil.

12

The sky lightened just before dawn, and beyond the gaping hole Ted's people had blown in the fence, Wren and the rest of Iris's people waited in the trees. They'd arrived an hour earlier, and with the aid of the night vision goggles Iris confiscated after last night's attack, they didn't find any traps set in the fence's opening. They'd determined that the majority of Edric's men were not on the wall. And with the forest bare of any tracks, it told them that Edric had stacked all of his chips in a concentrated effort within the community, most likely the garrison.

The fatigue that had plagued Wren the majority of the early morning had vanished. A steady alertness had replaced the weariness in her eyes, and she felt a slow and steady burn of fuel course through her veins. She looked left, and Nathan held up his hand, signaling the continued order to hold. It wasn't until the first rays of light peeked over the horizon that they were to strike.

Wren glanced behind her and felt her pulse accelerate. The sun had nearly reached the horizon, the clear morning sky now a light pink. Her muscles tensed, and she drew in a breath as the first ray of light broke through the trees. Before she even looked to Nathan, he was already on the move. Wren sprinted into action. She kept the rifle tucked close and her eyes peeled on her way toward the gap in the fence.

Wren stopped at the fence's edge, her shoulder rubbing up against the broken and charred logs that composed the gap's edges. The dozens of bodies that survived the initial onslaught during the first assault hurried through the fence's weak point, the steady thump of boots breaking the monotony of the

silent morning air. Wren peered around the corner, looking, listening, waiting, and soon the thump of boots was replaced with gunshots. After the first bullet rang through the crisp morning air, all hell broke loose. Edric's forces burst from their homes. Gunfire exchanged, screams echoing between the pop of rifles. But Wren silenced all of it, focused on locating Edric. He was all that mattered. *Cut off the head, and the snake dies.*

Bullets connected with earth and flesh everywhere Wren looked. She watched one of their own fall with a bullet to the head, body limp and limbs tangled awkwardly on the ground. Wren passed a house, and a woman burst through the front door wielding a rifle. Before she raised it to fire, Wren felt the recoil of two shots smack her shoulder, the bullets penetrating the woman's chest, and she collapsed in a bloodied pile on the steps of her home. Through the scope of the rifle she examined and filtered every detail of the camp, her mind processing the heightened speed of battle. She moved with a fluidity she'd never experienced. No disconnect existed between her mind and muscles. The stakes of life and death elevated her performance.

"Wren!" Nathan pointed over her shoulder, and Wren dropped to a knee, pivoting in the same direction as Nate's finger. A man opened fire, his aim off by less than a foot. Wren brought the shooter between her crosshairs and killed him before he squeezed off another round. When she pushed herself from the ground, she felt the whine in her body return, the protective armor of adrenaline was slowly fading.

The water well up ahead signaled the center of camp, and three of Edric's men grouped in formation appeared from behind the side of the well's nearest house. Wren skidded to a stop, her boots sliding in the dirt and leaves. The slip caused her to hesitate on her aim, and the enemy fired before she could. A wall of lead forced her to roll behind the stone walls of the well, her back and hips cracking from the sudden motion.

With her back against the rocks, she felt the vibrations of bullets through the stones on the opposite side. She dropped her rifle and reached for the cluster of grenades at her belt. She plucked one and pulled the pin, squeezing the lever tight. She peered over the top and saw all three shooters clustered together. She released the lever, paused, and then jumped from behind the well, aiming the grenade at their feet.

One of the assailants managed to squeeze off a round before the explosion, but Wren ducked back behind the wall, and the bullet ricocheted off the stone. She smacked hard on her stomach and felt the ground rumble

after the grenade's detonation. The explosion returned the ringing in her good ear, and the thud of gunfire dulled as she reached for the rifle in the dirt. Feet and legs hurried past, leaving behind a wake of bloodied footprints. She pushed herself up, rifle raised, and rejoined the fight.

The view was the same everywhere she looked, and through the rifle's scope, Wren watched the carnage unfold. Bullets dropped bodies. Screams intermixed with the echo of gunfire. Blood spilled. Hearts stopped. Final breaths were drawn, and one by one the field of war grew smaller. It was hard to tell who was winning. For every one of Edric's men that fell, so did one of theirs.

A spray of dust blew over Wren's feet from a missed bullet aimed for her leg. Wren turned in the direction of gunfire and stared down the barrel of a rifle with Jan behind the trigger. The mess hall was the nearest building, and Wren sprinted toward it. The thump of bullets trailed her as she circled the structure, hoping to flank Jan in the rear. But when she turned the corner near the mess hall's back doors, there was nothing but open space.

Wren lowered her weapon and took a step forward. But before she lifted her foot gunfire erupted from inside the mess hall. Wren jolted forward as the back doors splintered with a dozen bullets. Through one of the windows, Wren caught the back of Jan's head, and she fired. Glass shattered, and Jan burst through the broken doors, tumbling to the ground, the rifle in her hands slipping from her grip.

Wren aimed for Jan's head, but the councilwoman pulled a dagger from her belt, and with one flick of her arm, Wren was on the defense, using the rifle to deflect the blade as Jan sprinted toward her and tackled both of them to the dirt.

Arms and legs flailed wildly through the clouds of dust kicked up by the altercation. Wren felt every roll, punch, pull, and squeeze, her previous wounds clamoring for protection. Hands wrapped around Wren's throat, and fingers choked the air from her lungs. Her vision blurred, but she could still make out the snarl etched on Jan's face, which was accentuated by her angular cheekbones. Wren thrashed on the ground, but the harder she fought, the harder Jan's vice locked down on her neck.

"You should have quit while you were ahead, stupid bitch!" Jan's face reddened. Sweat dripped from her chin. "I've wanted to do this for a long time." Her grip tightened, and black spots clustered over Wren's vision.

Wren kicked, punched, writhed her body on the ground, bucking her hips,

but nothing worked. She felt the strength in her arms subside and numb. Her arms fell lazily to the side and scraped across the dirt. A sharp point grazed her forearm, and she fumbled her fingers in the grass. *The knife*. Wren curled her fingers around the hilt of the blade that Jan had thrown and rammed the tip into Jan's chest.

The blade scraped Jan's breastbone, and she wailed, releasing her grip on Wren's throat. Wren gasped for air, clawing at the dirt, her cheeks red and a pounding in her head as snot and spit drooled from her nose and mouth. She looked over and saw Jan pulling the blade from her chest. Blood spurted from the wound, and before the blade was completely removed, Wren punched Jan across the jaw. The hit roared a dull ache in Wren's right hand, and a tooth flew from Jan's mouth. Wren straddled her on the ground, shoving the knife deeper into her chest.

Jan screamed, clawing her nails and drawing blood with vicious strikes across Wren's cheek. Blood foamed at the corners of Jan's mouth, and the clawing ended. Jan heaved her chest up and down with her last breaths, and Wren felt the body go still.

Wren's knuckles flashed white as she kept her grip on the blade's handle. With dead eyes staring back at her, she finally uncurled her fingers from the hilt and collapsed next to Jan's dead body. She gently grazed her neck, which was tender from the dead woman's grip.

Gunshots returned Wren's attention to the fight, and she scooped her rifle from the dirt and left the blade lodged in Jan's corpse. Her fingers grew sticky the longer Jan's blood lingered on her skin. Every time she flexed her hand, they peeled off the rifle like Velcro.

"Wren!" Nathan fell in beside her, his shirt bloodied and his arm wrapped in a bandage. What wasn't covered in blood was drenched in sweat. "We've pushed them back to the garrison. Edric's there with Doug. C'mon."

Before Nathan took off, Wren was already ahead of him. Weightlessness overtook her, and she sprinted toward Iris and Ben at one of the houses near the garrison. A line of prisoners sat with their hands tied behind their back and rifles aimed at their head. Most of them kept their faces cast toward the dirt, but the few that looked up at Wren held an expression she didn't expect to see: relief.

The sun had risen higher into the sky now, and the light shimmered off the only concrete structure in the camp. It was a fortress, and Edric had barricaded himself and locked the door.

“His men have surrendered,” Iris said, rubbing her thigh. “But he won’t let us get close.”

“He started shooting anyone that fled the garrison,” Ben said, his thick mustache blowing under his heavy breaths. “He’s alone in there. All he has left as a hostage is Doug.”

Wren examined the building, squinting in the sunlight. The black spots from Jan’s attempted murder had yet to fully disappear. She’d studied the structure before. Only one door inside. No windows, and the only structure in the entire community with a concrete foundation. Edric had picked a hell of a spot for his last stand. Wren backtracked to the rear of the house and slithered up the opposite side, hoping for a better perspective but finding none. It only offered a better view of the dead bodies near the garrison’s locked door.

“There has to be some way to get him out.” Ben slammed his hand against the house’s wall. “Does he plan to live in there for the rest of his life?”

“No,” Wren answered, gazing at the fortified compound. “He expects to die there.” She knew Edric wasn’t one to play games. He was a purist. He only dealt in absolutes. There was win or lose, but there was never compromise. She’d learned at least that much from her time with him. “We have to give him what he wants.”

Iris scoffed. “We’re not giving up the compound. Not now. He’s beaten!”

“Me.” Wren kept her eyes on the garrison. “I’m his link to all of his failures. He thinks I’m the reason he lost control of the camp. That’s why he still has Doug.”

Iris and the others remained quiet for a long time. It was Nathan who finally spoke, breaking the silence. “Wren, he’ll kill you.”

“All he has to do is let me inside.” Wren’s hand drifted to the grenades around her waist. “He does that, I can take care of the rest.” She found herself praying that Reuben was still alive. She knew he would keep her children safe. She stepped forward, and Nathan pulled her back.

“No. Wren, you can’t do this!” Nathan’s cheeks flushed red. The sweat and blood on his shirt clung tightly to his chest and arms. “What about Zack and the girls? What about Doug?”

Wren placed a gentle hand over Nathan’s and delicately peeled his fingers off. She slowly removed the grenades from the belt until there was only one left. “Those walls are at least two feet thick of concrete. The only weak point in that structure is the door. The length of the building is one hundred feet. I

drop the grenade by the door then sprint to the back. The moment you see smoke, you ride in with the cavalry." With the one grenade still on the belt, she strapped it around her waist, hiding the belt underneath her shirt with the grenade hidden in the back.

Nathan shook his head. "You don't have the right to do this." He picked up one of the grenades on the ground. "You go. I go."

"He wants me, Nate. I already told you I'm not going to let anyone else die for me." She edged herself to the corner, and the others held Nate back. She looked to Iris, knowing full well she'd understand. "This is your chance. Don't miss it."

Iris nodded. "We won't."

Wren shut her eyes and stepped around the corner of the building slowly, her hands held high. "Edric!" Her voice cracked through the calm morning air, echoing through the compound. "Let Doug go! You do that, and you can have me!" She continued to inch forward carefully. She glanced behind her and saw Iris and the others poised behind the house. Nothing but the tips of their rifles inching around the sides.

The garrison door cracked open, but no one stepped outside. Wren froze in place, peering into the dark void that was the sliver of an opening. She felt her muscles twitch anxiously.

"You come to us!" The voice shouted through the crack in the door.

Wren tilted her head to the side. "I want to see Doug first! Show me that he's alive!"

Nothing but deafening silence answered back for the next few minutes. Just when Wren was about to take a step back, Doug's face was suddenly thrust through the crack in the door. Duct tape covered his mouth, and dried blotches of blood were spread over his face in crimson patches. And just as quickly as he was shown, he was pulled from view. "He goes out when you come in!"

Wren stepped over and around the fallen bodies. Their faces were frozen in the last expressions of fear, their eyes lifeless, and they stained the ground red where they fell. She looked to the door that remained cracked, her arms still raised and surprisingly still. She took one last look behind her and the sight of at least a dozen rifles aimed at her direction. She felt the stiffness of concrete under her foot as she neared the garrison's door, and she closed her eyes one last time, whispering a prayer. *Keep them safe for me. Like they were your own.*

A hand snapped at her arm like a snake bite and yanked her inside. She hit the ground hard, and she heard the slam of the door shut behind her. Inside, the garrison was only a single hallway with locked doors on either side, a few of them opened with their contents spilled into the hall, crowding the already narrow space. When Wren turned to face Edric, she stared down the barrel of his rifle, and Doug was still bound by ankles and wrists in the corner by the door.

“I’m impressed you came yourself.” Edric was covered in sweat and the blood of his former subordinates. The red veins in his eyes were more prominent from the strain of battle and gave off an ominous bloody tinge. “I didn’t think you’d have it in you. But then again, you have been pretty fucking stupid.”

Wren kept her arms raised, and with her back on the ground she felt the grenade digging into her spine. She slowly moved to her knees, her eyes locked onto Edric’s. “It’s over, Edric. The fight is done.”

“It’s never done!” Edric’s voice thundered through the hall, and he jammed the barrel of his rifle against her cheek, and she felt a tooth knock loose. “I’m not dead yet. I’ll take this whole fucking place down with me if I have to!” His face reddened in his madness. “Those people don’t know what needs to be done.”

Wren slowly backed her head away from the barrel of the rifle, pushing herself to her feet, moving at a snail’s pace. “No. But you do. Don’t you?” In her peripheral she saw Doug in the corner, silently struggling to push himself up. “You’ve always known what’s needed to be done. That’s why you tried to get rid of me. Because you knew I was weak.”

Edric nodded quickly, his eyes wide like that of a child. “I did everything I was supposed to.” Tears streamed down his face, and he tightened his grip on the rifle, his arms trembling from the pressure. “Everything! But you fucked it all up. You fucking cunt! We were fine until you showed up. We were safe. I kept them safe!” Spit flew from his mouth, and the roar sent a blast of hot breath in Wren’s face.

Wren’s pulse quickened as she saw Doug push himself against the wall, straightening himself. She felt the sting of sweat in her eyes, and the moment Doug lunged forward, the world turned to slow motion. Edric shifted his gaze from her to Doug, and she sprinted forward, her hands reaching for the gun. And when her fingertips grazed the barrel the slow motion ended, and time shifted into a breakneck pace.

Doug could do little more than use his body weight to slam Edric against the wall, and once he hit the floor it was unlikely he'd be able to make it back up. Wren pinned the length of the rifle against Edric's neck, using the momentum Doug had provided to loosen his grip on the weapon. She yanked it free, and before her finger reached the trigger, Edric barreled into her, slamming both of them against the wall then onto the floor.

The rifle landed out of reach from both of them, and she watched Doug scoot toward the weapon. She tried reaching for the grenade, but with Edric on top of her she couldn't squeeze her hand underneath her back to grab the explosive.

Edric punched her cheek, the blow numbing her already swollen face, immunizing her to the next vicious hit. He grabbed her collar, lifting her up, and she saw two faces circling around in her field of vision. "You're a dead woman." He shoved her back down, and her head slammed against the concrete. He kicked the end of Doug's chin and knocked him away before he could reach the rifle. Edric picked it up and tucked it under his arm. "And once I kill you and your husband, I'm going to hunt down your kids. I'm not going to rest until I've erased every last shred of your family from this earth."

Wren lifted her head, rolling to her side, and brought her hands to her back, looking as though she was cradling the pain Edric had inflicted, but her hand wrapped around the lump at her waist. She looked to Doug, whose mouth bled, and the two made eye contact.

"And when I kill them, I'll be sure to let them know that it was their mother that let this happen to them." Edric aimed the rifle at Wren, his finger on the trigger. "I can't wait to see the look on their faces."

"You won't get the chance."

Doug lunged at Edric once more, and he spun around, shooting Doug in the head. The distraction lasted only a few seconds, but it was enough to give Wren time to pull the pin on the grenade. She released the lever and tossed it toward Edric and then scrambled in the opposite direction. She heard him shout something, but in her frantic pace she couldn't decipher it. She made it two steps when the sounds of the gunshots suddenly intermixed with a pain in her back, and she felt her body run cold as she collapsed to the ground. The adrenaline subsided, and the last thing Wren remembered hearing was the explosion that ripped Edric to pieces.

13

ONE MONTH LATER

Iris paced the floor restlessly. Ben sat in the corner, frozen. Nathan drummed his fingers nervously on the table's surface. All three of them had the same anxiety etched on their faces, though the roots of their apprehension differed.

"I don't like it." Iris stopped, saying the words aloud to the room as much as herself. "I don't like the idea at all. It's too soon for something like this."

"Everybody's for it," Ben replied. "It's what she would have wanted." The mustache on his upper lip curved downward. "And if we're going to do it, then we need to start now."

"Ben's right," Nathan replied, chiming in, ceasing the percussive drumming. "We haven't had any contact from anyone on the outside since Edric was killed. We don't know who's out there, and we need to find out. We need to start establishing a connection."

"And what happens when people want what we have?" Iris raised her eyebrows. The grey in her hair had whitened, and the age lines across her face had grown more prominent. "We've just got this place back on its feet."

"All the more reason to start now." Nathan stood. "We're stronger than we were before. We can help."

"It's what she would have wanted," Ben said.

Iris lowered her head. "I know." She rubbed the creases on her forehead, the loose skin rolling between her fingers. "All right." She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We'll start sending scouts to look for people. But we do not make contact until we've observed them. I don't want us

taking any chances with anyone until they've been fully vetted."

"Agreed," Nathan said.

Ben nodded and softly repeated to himself that it was what she would have wanted. The three of them left their chambers and stepped back out into the town hall. Their population was less than half of what it was when they arrived, but the fence had been finished, supplies had been recalculated, and they still had more than enough to last for a few years.

Iris smacked her gavel, calling everyone to order. "We have listened to and heard everyone's opinion. And based off of the community's voice, we shall start looking for others to bring to the camp. Anyone that comes to us will be given asylum, but thoroughly vetted and closely monitored." She reached for the gavel but hesitated. She twirled it in her hands then set it down. "I know many of you were moved by what Wren Burton did for this community. By all she sacrificed. Humanity should never be something that's lost in times of crisis. It should only be strengthened. Our actions shape us. How we conduct ourselves will shape the future. And though she is gone, we will keep her spirit within all of us." She lowered her head, a smile gracing her lips at Wren's memory, then smacked the gavel.

REUBEN CRACKED his knuckles then turned the spit outside the cabin. The four rabbits crackled, and the grease from the meat sizzled into the fire below. Chloe sat on his right, while Addison was on his left. "Should be done soon."

"I'm starving." Chloe threw her head back and overexaggerated the throwing of her arms. "It smells so good." She leaned closer, but Reuben pulled her back.

"Easy now. We don't want to cook you." Reuben patted her on the back and reached for the spit, slowly, still recovering from his fight back in town. He tore into the charred flesh, and determined with a satisfied grunt that it was done. "All right. Time to eat. Zack!"

A log split in two, the axe wedged right in the middle. Zack looked over from the logs of firewood and limped over, his leg still acclimating to the

freedom from his cast, not all of his strength completely returned. “Smells good.” He took a seat next to Addison, wiping his hands on his jeans, then playfully wiped them on Addison’s hair, which triggered a squeal and a giggle.

“All right. That’s enough, you two,” Reuben said. “Chloe, why don’t you run inside and get the rest of the party, huh?”

“Okay.” Chloe jumped to her feet and sprinted as fast as her tiny legs allowed. Before she went inside, she ran her fingers over the old bullet holes in the cabin walls and then pushed the door open. The cabin had grown even smaller from the sudden increase in occupants, but never had it felt more like a home. “Mom, food’s ready.”

Wren looked up from the pistol on the table and smiled. “I’ll be out in a minute.” Chloe disappeared back outside, and Wren tucked the pistol in her holster and pushed up from the chair gingerly. Bandages protruded from the collar of her shirt and she walked slowly, the effort of breathing still difficult from the gunshot wounds.

Outside, Wren found a seat next to Zack. The girls split one of the rabbits, while Reuben, Zack, and she had their own. She closed her eyes as she bit into the meat and cleaned every last morsel off the bones. Once they were done, the kids played, and Zack returned to the firewood. “If you get tired, sit down. Don’t push it too hard.”

“I know, Mom.”

“He’ll be okay,” Reuben said, tossing the bones into a pile. “You’re sure you still want to go tomorrow?” He raised his eyebrows. The wounds on his face had mostly healed, and the beard helped cover up what hadn’t.

“Yeah. It’s time.” After the attack on the camp and Edric’s death, she awoke in the infirmary with her kids surrounding her and Reuben sitting in the corner. It was nearly an hour before all the tears had dried. Once Doug was buried, they left the community and returned to Reuben’s cabin. Though Iris and the others were more than supportive of having them stay, she couldn’t. It was a part of her life she needed closed. And with Reuben’s help and a large supply crate from the community, they had everything they needed. And even if they didn’t, the community was only a day’s journey. “We’ll start with some of the smaller towns. See what we find there.”

“It’s risky. We don’t know what it’s like out there anymore.”

Wren watched the girls play, chasing after one another with sticks, then looked to Zack splitting wood. Everything had changed. But they needed to

move forward. “It doesn’t matter what we’ll find. Whatever it is, we’ll be okay. If it’s broken, we’ll rebuild it.” She turned to Reuben and smiled. “It’s time to start putting the pieces back together.”

Many thanks to everyone who read my story!

WRITING IS the best way I know to express myself, and I’m so glad that you all have rewarded me with the opportunity to share my imagination with you. As an author, I learn and evolve from the input of others, so if you have a spare moment and you enjoyed the story, please leave a short, spoiler-free review of the book. As readers, your personal opinions are often the best references for a writer. Your commentary allows me to further provide you all with fun, engaging material.

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SURVIVING THE COLLAPSE: BOOK 0

1

CHAPTER 1

Dozens of knobs, buttons and lights lined the roof of the Boeing 737 cockpit just inches above Captain Kate Hillman's head. The view beyond the windshield was gloomy. The aircraft rumbled through the grey skies spitting patches of sleet, snow, and heavy winds.

"New York has a funny way of welcoming you home." First Officer Dan Martin shook his head, keeping his hand steady on the flight stick. "My brother said it's going to get down to ten degrees tonight."

The headphones that both pilots wore crackled with air traffic control's voice. "Bravo one-eight-five-six, this is tower, we've got a roadblock down here because of the weather."

"Timeline for the delay?" Kate asked.

"Twenty minutes. Redirect heading to one-one-nine."

"Copy that, tower," Dan relayed. "Redirecting heading to one-one-nine." The navigation screen tilted toward the new coordinates, the big bird turning slow and steady. Once adjusted, Dan looked over to Kate and raised his eyebrows. "Did you hear me? Less than—"

"Ten degrees," Kate said, reaching for the flight plan that she had been given prior to takeoff. She flipped through the pages quickly, scanning the data. "We should have been ahead of this weather." Kate flipped the "fasten your seatbelt" sign and then picked up the phone to address the passengers. "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain in your seats. The weather has caused a slight delay, but we'll land as soon as possible. Thank you."

The inside of the cockpit rumbled, and the muscles along Dan's forearms

tensed. Kate hung up and noted Dan's white knuckles. "First storm?"

"Yeah," Dan answered.

"Easy on the stick. She'll do most of the work. Just keep it steady. Radar has the storm passing in a few minutes."

Another burst of icy sleet smacked the windshield, and the jet rumbled in discontent. Kate shook her head, clicking on her radio. "Tower, this is Bravo one-eight-five-six, requesting an ascent. We're getting tossed around pretty bad up here."

"Copy that, Bravo. Request granted. Ascend to thirty-five thousand feet."

"Ascending to thirty-five thousand feet," Dan replied, pulling back on the stick.

The jet climbed higher, the nose pointed up as it broke through the worst of the clouds. Kate watched the altimeter. "Twenty-five thousand." It ticked upward. "Thirty thousand."

The plane jolted and tossed both Kate and Dan in their seats. The notebook in Kate's lap crashed to the floor, and the altimeter's gauge dropped one hundred feet in the blink of an eye. The straps over Kate's shoulders dug deep and tight into her flesh. When the inertia of the fall ended, the warning beacon on the port engine blinked.

Kate shook off the disorientation and checked the engine status. "One is rolling back."

Dan looked at her sharply then at the display screen.

"Two is holding." Kate flipped channels to the control tower. "Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is Bravo one-eight-five-six. We have lost thrust on our port engine, requesting immediate emergency landing."

"Copy that, Bravo one-eight-five-six."

Kate took control of her stick. "My aircraft."

"Your aircraft," Dan said, letting go of the controls.

"Get out the QRA," Kate said, the stick stiff in her hands.

"Bravo one-eight-five-six," tower said. "Redirect toward LaGuardia, heading two-two-zero. Runway one is clear."

"Heading two-two-zero. Copy on runway one." Kate placed her right hand on the ignition key. "Restarting engine." A twist. Nothing.

The big 737 groaned as Kate steered through the clouds, the jet struggling to maintain altitude with only one engine.

Dan scanned the Quick Response Action checklist. "Master on or off?"

Kate glanced toward the display. "Off." She tilted the stick to the left,

adjusting the aircraft to the new heading toward LaGuardia. “Gears down.”

“Gears down.” Dan reached for the lever and pulled it down. The mechanical drone of the wheels descending from the plane’s belly ended with a clank.

Kate checked the heading, altimeter, and speed. The weather provided poor visibility on approach. But she trusted the instruments to do their job, along with the coordination from air traffic control.

“Bravo one-eight-five-six, you are on course,” tower said. “Watch your speed.”

“Give me flaps,” Kate said.

“Flaps extended,” Dan echoed.

The gears in the wings ground as Dan adjusted for the landing, helping to steady the big bird on its approach.

The 737 broke through the clouds and the worst of the storm, and Kate finally had a glimpse of runway lights, and the sprawling airport and surrounding borough of Queens.

The computer’s automated alert system kicked into gear once they cleared fifteen hundred feet, lights flashing in coordination with beeps and its robotic voice. “Warning, pull up. Obstruction. Warning, pull up.”

“Two hundred feet,” Dan said, his voice shaking from the steady rumble of the aircraft.

The big jet tilted left, then right, then back to left as Kate struggled to keep it steady. She knew the storm had slicked the runway with ice and rain, so she’d have to keep the plane as level as possible to avoid a spin. She measured all the inputs, all the variables, letting the instruments help guide her path.

“Fifty feet.” Dan extended his arm to brace for landing.

The computer’s warnings blared again, and after twenty feet, it recited the elevation countdown. Kate tilted the nose up slightly just before impact, and the hulking jet’s wheels squealed and screeched onto the runway. The plane started to spin, but Kate pulled back on the thrusters, and the aircraft slowed to a crawl.

Dan exhaled, leaning back into his chair. “Nice job, Captain.”

Kate’s muscles slowly relaxed as she leaned back into her seat. Beyond the cockpit’s door, the muffled excitement and relief of applause broke the cabin’s silence.

“Bravo one-eight-five-six, please taxi toward gate twenty-one. We will

have emergency operations on standby."

"Copy that, tower."

Once docked at the gate, Kate and Dan stepped out of the cockpit and triggered another round of applause. Dan immediately pointed to Kate, and she smiled curtly but waved off the adoration. As the passengers were escorted from the plane, one by one, they offered their thanks and gratitude.

With the plane empty of passengers and crew, Kate grabbed her overnight bag, jacket, and flight cap and followed Dan through the gate.

"So what happens now?" Dan asked.

"We'll be interviewed separately by the NTSB," Kate answered, her pace brisk as she removed her phone and powered it on. "Then an investigation will review the cause of the engine failure. So long as there wasn't any negligence on our part, we'll be back in the air."

Dan hurried ahead of her and then blocked her path. His cheeks were suddenly white. "There wasn't any negligence, right? I-I mean, I followed protocols to the T."

"We'll be fine, Dan. We did everything right. So far as I could tell from the cockpit." Kate stepped around him, and when they exited the tunnel, members of the NTSB were already there to greet them, along with a union rep and airport security.

The interview was quick, mechanical, and efficient. Kate answered the questions honestly and candidly. She offered no fault to her first officer, crew, or herself. The board members thanked her for her time, and once they were gone, the union rep pulled her aside.

"The review shouldn't take longer than a few weeks, but until you're cleared, you're grounded," he said. "I'll contact you when we know more."

Kate nodded and then sat in the quiet of the conference room. Alone, the moments replayed in her head. It had happened so fast, it almost felt like a dream. She'd only been through one engine failure scenario before, five years prior. It was a malfunction in the master computer caused by inclement weather. She assumed this was a similar error.

Still alone, Kate took a few slow breaths. She lifted her hand, keeping it level in midair. Despite the rush of adrenaline, it didn't shake, steady as a rock. Repeated vibrations drummed against her thigh in her pocket, notifications of the texts and calls she missed while she was in the air.

The most recent call was from Mark, but the other ten were from her lawyer, who had also sent her a text marked urgent that simply read,

“Call me.”

Kate’s stomach tightened, but she forced herself to dial. It rang twice before he answered.

“Kate, where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to get ahold of you all morning.”

“I had a flight,” Kate answered. “What happened?”

Dave paused and then exhaled as though he were holding in his breath. “The parole hearing was moved up today. Can you make it?”

Kate hunched forward and rubbed her forehead in exasperation. “Shit. I don’t know. They still have my statement on file. Do I really have to be there?”

“It always makes a more formidable show of resolve when you’re there personally,” Dave said. “It sends a message to the parole board that he shouldn’t be let out. You—”

“All right,” Kate said. “I’ll find a way to make it up there.”

“Good. Meeting is scheduled for five. See you then.”

The call ended, and Kate collapsed backward in her chair, slouching. She glanced down at the wings still pinned on her uniform. She’d been flying for more than twenty years. She’d just managed to land a Boeing 737 with a port engine failure safely through a storm of sleet, snow, and wind. But when Kate lifted her hand again and brought it to eye level, she couldn’t keep it steady.

She grabbed her bag and left.

Terminal D was packed with tourists heading toward gates with flights to all over the world. Los Angeles, London, Miami, Toronto, Tokyo, Hawaii, Paris, Madrid, Moscow. To Kate, airports were the ultimate melting pots. Millions of people, all from different backgrounds and geographical locations, passed through them on a daily basis. And while her main route was from New York to Chicago, she’d done her fair share of travel to different parts of the world.

She missed those far-off places sometimes, but she had requested the new route personally. The fact that her family had moved eight times in the past seven years had taken its toll. An ultimatum was given, and Kate didn’t hesitate to choose her family over work. With her tenure at the airline and her excellence as a pilot, her bosses didn’t hesitate in their approval.

Just before the airport’s exit, Kate spotted the customer service desk. She weaved through the masses funneling outside and noticed the weather had

cleared up. She flagged down one of the employees. A young girl came over, and when she noticed the wings on Kate's shirt, her face lit up brightly.

"Captain! What can I do for you?"

"I normally fly into JFK, and I need to know the quickest way to get into Manhattan from here. My apartment is on the south end of Central Park."

"Taxi will be the most comfortable, but with the weather and traffic, it'll take you hours to get into the city." She leaned over the counter and pointed past the doors and down the street. "So long as you don't mind the cold, there's a train station two blocks south. The N will get you to Grand Central. From there you can hop on an uptown train."

Kate nodded her thanks, but before she got away, the girl called out to her.

"I'm in flight school," she said proudly. "Got any tips?"

Kate kept walking but turned back toward the girl. "I'll tell you what my flight instructor told me." The electric doors opened, and cold blasted Kate's body. "Don't crash." The girl laughed and flashed a thumbs-up. Kate waved back, and the electric doors closed.

Outside, Queens greeted Kate with a cold, dirty whoosh of city air. She skipped the line for taxis and zipped her coat up to her collar.

Tiny puddles of frigid water filled divots and potholes along the sidewalk and roads. Everywhere Kate looked, there were people. People walking, people driving, people running, people talking, people, people, people.

Horns blared in sporadic patterns and acted in coordination with the steady buzz of voices as the official New York City soundtrack. Up until six months ago, she never would have pictured herself living here permanently. But while the city was congested and dirty and overpopulated, there was always something to see and do.

Crates of fruit and vegetables sat out in front of a grocery, a few customers browsing the goods with skeptical eyes. Kate stopped in front of the fruit and wondered if they needed anything at home. She examined an apple and reached for her phone.

Kate scrolled through to Mark's name when she suddenly remembered the voicemail he'd left her. She quickly pressed play.

"Hey, you're probably still in the air, but I wanted to let you know that Holly came down with a fever this morning. Mrs. Dunny is going to keep an eye on her until you get home, but you might want to get her some cold medicine on the way. Love you and can't wait to see you tonight."

Kate immediately turned from the fruit, dropping the apple into the crate as she dialed her daughter. It rang five times and then went to voicemail. She redialed. Five more rings. Voicemail. She left a message.

“Hey, Holly, it’s Mom. I’m on my way home. Dad told me you were sick, and I just wanted to see if there was anything you wanted from the store. Text or call me. Love you.”

She hung up and pocketed the phone, confident that her daughter wouldn’t call her back. Over the past year, their interaction together had dropped significantly. She might as well have been invisible. Mark had chalked it up to preteen angst, but Holly didn’t act the same way with him.

And while the ultimatum for stability had come from her husband, Kate had really done it for her daughter. The constant moves, the days at a time away from home, had created a barrier between Kate and her little girl. A resentment had built up. And after six months of stability and the repeated promise that they would no longer have to move, Kate hadn’t made much progress. Mark reassured her that it would just take time, but as the days continued to roll past with their relationship unchanged, the resolve of that statement began to crack.

At the corner of the sidewalk, Kate broke away from the steady flow of pedestrians and climbed the stairs to one of the N train’s elevated platforms. She reached for her metro card and swiped it, making her way topside, shoulders brushing against the huddling masses trying to stay warm. She leaned against one of the posts and checked her phone again. Still no response.

She pocketed the device and flipped the collar of her jacket to guard herself against the stiff wind. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her of the skipped breakfast.

The thump of the train against the tracks triggered the eager eyes of passengers desperate to get warm. As the train slowed, everyone huddled near the platform’s edge, hands rubbing together vigorously and toes tapping impatiently.

The doors swooshed open, and a mash of people collided into one another, fighting for the warmth of the train car, as if this were the last train in existence into the city.

Once the bulk of the people had boarded, Kate wedged herself into a small space in the back corner of the train car between an old woman in a bright-pink sweater and a man in a black trench coat.

The doors whooshed shut, cutting out the cold air, and Kate's cheeks warmed from the heat pumping in through the vents. Bodies swayed back and forth as the train jolted forward.

Kate closed her eyes and leaned against the corner wall, her right hand still wrapped around the pole to keep her steady and her left clutching the phone. She wasn't sure how Mark would take the news of the parole hearing being moved up to today. He hated her going almost as much as she did.

The phone buzzed, and Kate smiled as she read the text.

Hey, mom, sorry I didn't answer. Throat hurts bad. Could you get me some popsicles on the way home?

Kate typed a reply, but before she hit send, the train jerked to a stop and flung her into a cluster of bystanders. The wheels screeched loudly, the grinding metal matched only by the screams and gasps of fear, confusion, and pain as bodies were slammed into walls, the floor, and each other.

Kate let go of the phone and thrust her arms out to brace for the fall. Her palms struck the floor hard, and a sharp pain flashed in her elbows and shoulders. The same momentum hurled her luggage forward and slammed it against her back. Finally, the screeching of wheels ended, and the metro stopped.

Groans, heavy breaths, and screams pierced the air in random jabs. Kate lifted her head and saw that she lay on top of the legs of the man in the black trench coat she had stood next to, who quickly stood, heeling Kate in the chin. She gritted her teeth through the pain and rubbed it vigorously.

Dozens of other bodies slowly lifted their heads, looking up in confusion.

"What's going on?" A voice filtered through the air. "Why did we stop?"

Another chimed in. "Did the power go out?"

Panic escaped worried lips, and once it caught the surrounding ears it spread like wildfire.

"What happened?"

"Is someone coming?"

"I have to get home!"

"I have to get to work!"

"Please… help."

The last plea was nothing more than a whisper, and Kate turned around, still rubbing the red mark on her chin. The elderly woman in the pink sweater sat on the floor, her back flush against the wall and blood dripping down her forehead.

Kate rushed to the woman's side, and the old woman lifted a shaky hand and grabbed Kate's arm. Her grip was weak, her hand cold as ice. "I-I can't get myself up."

"It's all right," Kate said, trying to find the source of the gash beneath thick curls of grey and white. "You have a cut on your head. Does anything else hurt?"

"No," the old woman answered, her voice shaking.

"Can you remember your name?" Kate removed her jacket and placed it around the old woman.

"Grace." She closed her eyes and swallowed. "Grace Nettles."

"Okay, Grace, I'm gonna try and sit you up. Is that all right?"

Grace nodded, and Kate turned and smacked the calf of the man who'd kicked her. "Hey, help me get her into the seat."

Trench Coat spun around, his hair disheveled with tiny wisps of what looked like a toupee sprouting wildly into the air. He blinked in annoyance at Kate and Grace and reluctantly dropped a knee and grabbed Grace's left arm.

"On three," Kate said. "One, two, three!" The pair lifted Grace in coordination, and she clung to Kate's shoulder as they guided her to an open seat. She collapsed into the chair, her frail hand immediately searching for the tender spot on her head, then grimaced when she found it.

Grace retracted her finger quickly and examined the blood on it. "Oh, my."

"It's okay," Kate said, trying to see if the woman's eyes were dilated. "We're going to get you some help." She grabbed Trench Coat's attention. "Hey, look after her while I find the metro worker on board and see what's going on."

Trench Coat jerked his arm from Kate's hold and stepped back. "Listen, lady, she's not my responsibility. I've got my own problems." He took one step before Kate pulled him back.

"There isn't anywhere you can go right now." Kate squeezed his arm tighter. "Stay with her. Make sure she doesn't pass out, fall, and hurt herself again. Got it?"

The man lowered his eyes to the wings on Kate's pilot uniform. When he lifted them, the tension in his body relaxed, but he still jerked his arm away in defiance. "Yeah, all right."

When Kate turned to face the car, the majority of the crowd was already focused on her, watching what she'd done with the old woman. She glanced

down at her appearance, wondering if she had blood on herself, but then slowly realized she was the only person on board with a uniform. She was a pilot, and despite the times, that still garnered respect.

Kate cleared her throat. “Do we have a nurse or doctor on board?”

A black hand rose above the heads in the very back, and it was followed by a high-pitched voice. “I’m a nurse.”

Kate waved her forward. “All right, everyone, let her through.”

With the old woman in better hands, Kate trudged toward the front of the train but then stopped after she instinctively reached for her phone, finding it missing out of her pocket. She spun on her heel, searching the ground for where she’d dropped it, and spotted it under one of the subway seats. She bent down to get it and pressed the home button, but the screen remained black.

Kate frowned in confusion and pressed it repeatedly, but nothing happened. The crowd around her began examining their own phones in the same frustration. All their devices showed the same black screen.

The back door to the train car was forced open, and a metro worker stepped through. His girth made him open the manual doors as wide as they could go, and even then he had to sidestep to get inside. “Ladies and gentlemen, please remain calm!” He huffed a labored breath. “Is anyone in need of immediate medical attention?”

“We have a woman with a concussion.” The nurse stood, a bloodied napkin in her hand. “She needs to be taken to the hospital.”

“I’m fine, really,” Grace said.

The metro worker eyed the blood, and a thick gleam of sweat broke out on his forehead. “God. Um, okay. Is there anyone on the train that’s a nurse or a doctor?”

“She is,” Kate said, pointing to the nurse in scrubs who had just addressed him. “Do you have any communication with the other trains?”

“Um.” The metro worker licked his lips, the beads of sweat on his face worsening, and then looked back to the eager crowd. “No.”

The crowd erupted in a series of gasps, groans, and curses. Hands were tossed in the air, and cheeks reddened from anger and the growing cold. The metro worker’s double chin wiggled as he struggled to find his voice among the angered crowd.

“HEY!” Kate shouted at the top of her lungs. “HEY! LISTEN UP!” The fervor died down, and Kate pushed her way next to the nearest chair where

she lifted herself above the crowd. “There isn’t any reason to panic. They have procedures for things like this.” At least she hoped so.

“My phone isn’t working.” A young man lifted his device high above the heads of the crowd. “Like, it’s not even turning on, and it was working fine before the train stopped.”

A series of grunted agreements echoed back, and Kate raised her hands to quiet the growing panic. “Mine isn’t working either. I don’t know why, but—”

The train car rattled violently, and a bright burst of fire and light plumed into the northern sky. Gasps erupted in simultaneous spurts as heads turned toward the explosion. The blast rumbled in Kate’s chest worse than the turbulence in the jet. Kate knew the blast’s origin. It was around LaGuardia.

2

The elevated tracks rumbled from the explosion. Every face on the train stared at the rising plume of smoke that blended into the grey clouds that had again begun to spit snow. Once the rumble from the blast subsided, the growing dissent of panic took its place.

Trench Coat was the first to step through the crowd. He shouldered people aside, his eyes fixated on the metro worker. “Let me off this train, now!” He thrust his gloved finger at the ground, his mouth tightening into a straight line.

The crowd on the train latched onto the man’s dissent, waving their broken phones in the air, demanding the same action. The hulking mob circled the metro worker and shoved Kate aside, squeezing her up against the walls with the old woman and the nurse who’d stepped up to help.

Kate pushed back against the hysteria. “Enough!” The attention turned from the metro worker and back toward her, and she noticed the puffs of icy air from her labored breaths. With the power off, the heat on the train had stopped as well. The cold was already biting through her coat and gloves. “He’s doing everything he can, and he knows just as much as we do.”

“So what?” Trench Coat flapped his arms at his sides in exasperation. “We’re just supposed to sit and wait for someone to come and get us off this thing?” He pointed toward the explosion. “That was at LaGuardia, which means it was a terrorist attack.”

The car drew in a simultaneous breath at the word.

“The power, our phones?” Trench Coat stepped toward Kate, the crowd

parting in his path. “It’s all a part of the attack. They’re taking out transportation hubs.” He spread his arms and gestured around them. “What do you think they’re going to hit next?”

Affirmations of the man’s words rang on the train like bell peals, the tides of consciousness shifting toward madness. Fear brought people toward the edge, inching their toes off the side. It wouldn’t take anything more than a stiff wind to knock them over.

“You might be right,” Kate said, keeping her voice calm but her volume loud. “But panicking and bickering with each other isn’t going to get us off this train any quicker.”

Trench Coat stepped backward, and the crowd deflated. Kate pointed toward the window, the faces in the crowd following her finger. “There’s a platform with a railing. It looks wide enough to walk on, and we can follow it down to the station.” She looked to the metro worker for confirmation.

The big man nodded quickly. “Yeah.” He wiped the snot leaking onto his upper lip and gestured toward the narrow path. “We use it for maintenance. It should be safe.”

A woman peeled her face off the window, and she tapped the glass, stealing everyone’s attention. “All the cars are stopped. Nothing’s moving down there!”

The outburst triggered another series of teeth-chattering discord, but Kate clapped her hands together. “Hey! Let’s focus on what happens next, all right? And that’s getting off the metro.”

Kate stepped from the seat, and the crowd parted as she walked to the metro worker. She pulled him to the side and kept her voice low and the worker close. “Can we open the doors without the power on?”

“Yeah.” He nodded aggressively. “There are override latches on all the exits. And the electricity in the rails won’t be live since we’re not moving, so we shouldn’t have to worry about anyone getting hurt if they fall.”

“Except for a broken leg,” Kate muttered to herself and then turned back toward the crowd, their attention split between the scene outside and the back of Kate’s head. “All right, listen up, folks! There are emergency latches on the doors that—” She turned to the metro worker. “What’s your name?”

“Bud.”

Kate refaced the crowd. “That Bud is going to show us how to open. The rails won’t be live with electricity, but I still want everyone to act like they are. Anyone who’s sick or hurt is going out first.” She eyed Trench Coat,

who had hidden himself back in the crowd. “And anyone healthy enough to assist those people should.”

Trench Coat rolled his eyes.

For the moment, the tension thawed. Bud started at the front of the train, letting people off, and then worked his way back. Once Bud had left, the Grace tugged at Kate’s hand.

“Good job, Captain.”

Kate smiled. “Thanks. How are you feeling?”

Grace sighed. “Wishing that I hadn’t lost my license.”

The pair laughed, and the nurse stepped close. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The nurse made sure to tuck them into a corner and kept her voice low as they huddled close. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What is it?” Kate asked.

“If the roads are blocked, that means emergency services are going to have a hell of a time trying to get anywhere, and that means anyone on board that’s hurt beyond minor cuts and scratches might be in real danger.”

Kate looked to Grace, who had rested her head back on the glass, gently holding the rag up to her head where she’d been hit. She bit her lip and then looked down to the streets below, which were clogged with stalled traffic. “All right. So what do we do?”

“If this is a terrorist attack, and from what it looks like, it’s a big one, then that means the National Guard and the Red Cross will be called to help assist. I volunteered for the Red Cross when I first got out of nursing school. Their protocol is to coordinate with emergency services to figure out where they’re needed most. If we can get any of the sick or injured to a police station, we’ll be able to track them down.”

“There’s a police station on 21st and 35th Ave.” A young man, earbuds still in even though the phone in his hand no longer produced any music, leaned into their conversation and then stepped back when Kate and the nurse glared at him. “Sorry.” He lifted his hands passively. “Didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Kate said, taking a step toward him. “How far of a walk is the station from here?”

The kid couldn’t have been older than twenty, but he had dark, puffy blotches beneath his eyes. It reminded Kate of scratches on a new car. “Less than a mile.”

“All right.” Kate turned to the nurse. “We need a count of everyone that needs hospital attention. We’ll make sure those folks have priority off the train and get them to the police station quickly.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“I can help.” The kid finally removed his earbuds and pocketed the phone in his jacket. “Just tell me what you need.”

“You run up and tell Bud to send anyone down with high-priority injuries or illnesses. Then collect any able-bodied people that can help. Tell them where we’re going. And try to get big guys. We might need the muscle to carry people.”

“Got it.” The young man darted off through the open car doors and wove his way through the crowded aisles. Kate smiled as he parted. The kid had a good heart. He reminded her of Luke.

The sudden thought of her son made her worry. Were the attacks isolated to just New York? Then she thought of Holly in the city, stuck in their apartment, alone with Mrs. Dunny. She needed to get home. She needed to make sure her family was safe.

“Captain!” The kid called her from the second car, slightly out of breath as he jogged to the door. “We’ve got a pregnant woman up front who thinks she might be going into labor and one diabetic that’ll need his insulin shot in about an hour. He doesn’t have any on him, but he has some at home.”

“Where does he live?”

The kid sighed. “New Jersey.”

Kate turned to the nurse. “Will the police station have any medical supplies like insulin?”

The nurse grimaced. “Maybe, but probably not. The Red Cross will.”

Kate returned to the kid. “Get the diabetic down here, and the pregnant lady if she can move.” She turned back to the nurse. “You go with the kid and see if she’s actually going into labor. If she is, we’ll need to find a wheelchair if the contractions worsen.”

“Can you watch her?” The nurse said, handing Kate the bandage she was using for Grace.

“Sure.” Kate sat next to the woman, who was concentrating very hard on the floor between her feet. She placed a hand on the old woman’s shoulder. “How are you?”

Grace closed her eyes. “A little dizzy is all.” She swallowed and then slowly leaned back. “Feels like I just went on a merry-go-round.” She

chuckled. “Haven’t been on one of those since nineteen fifty-six.” She turned to Kate, still smiling. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I’m not from anywhere really.”

“I imagine you travel a lot,” Grace said, gesturing toward the pilot wings.

“I do.” It was one of the reasons Kate had become a pilot in the first place. As a young girl, she had dreamed of traveling around the world. Meeting new people, experiencing different cultures, living a life with nothing to her name but a backpack full of clothes and a map. But reality didn’t match up with those dreams.

The parole meeting suddenly penetrated her thoughts, and Kate shuddered. She pictured Dennis, sitting in that chair in the middle of the room, looking at her. He was always chained by the wrists and ankles, but that never stopped her skin from crawling. Youth had a way of making you pay dearly for your mistakes, and Kate had paid in spades.

“Dear, are you all right?” Grace asked.

“Huh?” Kate looked over, slack-jawed, then tried to hide it with a smile. “I’m fine.”

Grace took hold of Kate’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Thinking of your family? Well, don’t worry. By the time you get back to them, this will all be over.”

Bud returned from the other train, raising his hands to address the crowd. “We’ve already got people moving. The platform is two blocks to our south. Everyone keep in a single-file line, and move slowly and carefully. No pushing, no running, and make sure you give enough space for the person in front of you.” He walked to Kate and Grace, extending his hand to the elderly woman. “Okay, ma’am. Let’s get you some help.”

The nurse and the kid returned with the diabetic and the pregnant woman, who cradled her stomach as she waddled through the doors.

A foot of space separated the metro from the emergency railing, and when Kate brought Grace to the precipice, she wavered. “Sorry. Another dizzy spell.”

“I’ll go over first.” The kid jumped the gap with ease and held out his arm to help Grace cross. Kate handled her gently, but the kid practically lifted Grace on his own and landed her safely on the emergency walkway.

“Keep her steady,” Kate said then turned to the pregnant woman. “You’re next.”

The woman waddled forward, belly exposed, and her hand gripped Kate’s

arm like a vise. She breathed in quick, short bursts, and despite the frigid air a sheen of sweat covered her face and neck. “God, it’s getting worse.”

“Just breathe,” Kate said, wincing from the grip on her arm. “Kid, a hand?”

The boy made sure Grace was safe on the railing before he reached out his arm. “Okay. Got her.”

“On three,” Kate said. “One, two, three!” Kate pushed and the kid pulled, and the pregnant woman landed breathlessly on the other side and winced from another contraction.

The diabetic got over without much help, and with the three of their sick and wounded across, Kate went next along with the nurse. Kate turned back and saw the line of people already on the railing from the other cars. They had all waited just as the metro worker had told them to. And Kate noticed that all of them were looking to her.

“Everybody keep a slow and steady pace.” Kate stole a glance to the long fall to the road below, and she quickly grabbed the railing for support. “No need to rush it.”

Kate shuffled forward, while the kid helped Grace and the nurse guided the pregnant lady right behind them.

The commotion below continued to pull Kate’s attention away from the emergency walkway. People had walked out of stores, and car doors stood open and abandoned. There were shouts of panic and fear. Most of the heads were turned north toward the pillar of smoke. Kate’s eyes were pulled toward it, and when she watched the column twist and then meld into the grey skies, another explosion erupted and rattled the train tracks.

Instinctively, everyone ducked. Kate turned to the east, toward the sound of the explosion. A few seconds of silence passed before another column of smoke rose into the sky, and the mood on the ground below transformed from mild anxiety to full-blown panic.

The same reaction spread to the crowd on the rails, and Kate watched the man in the black trench coat shove people aside and sprint up the railway, his feet teetering close to the edge. “Out of my way!” He waved his arms angrily and left a trail of dazed and confused bystanders in his wake.

“Stop!” Kate thrust her arms out, but the man continued his bulldoze down the platform. He swayed right a little, and the people he passed followed suit as the orderly line was wrinkled by chaos. “Stop!” But it was too late.

Kate yanked Grace and the kid forward, pulling them away from the stampede. When the old woman couldn't keep pace the kid scooped her up in his arms. Kate kept an eye on the nurse, who pushed the pregnant woman forward as fast as the woman's legs could waddle, but she couldn't see the diabetic man.

A shriek pierced the air, and Kate turned in just enough time to watch a woman fall from the safety of the emergency walk. She screamed all the way down, her voice ripping into the air. A thump sounded, the scream ended, and Kate looked away, tears forming in her eyes.

Kate reached the platform first, and she spun around and pulled the old woman and the kid toward the wall, away from the structure's edge. The nurse did the same for the pregnant woman, but the diabetic man led the charge down the steps and onto the street with the rest of the train passengers.

When the platform cleared, Kate hunched over and placed her hands on her knees, with her backside up against the wall on a poster for some band playing at a local bar. She stared at the tips of her shoes, and after a moment, and with a shaking hand, she wiped the snot from her upper lip and straightened herself out.

At first glance, everyone was still in one piece, though the pregnant woman looked one contraction away from spilling the baby right onto the dirty platform.

"How bad are the contractions?" Kate asked.

"Fucking bad! GAHHH!" The woman's cheeks reddened, and her whole body spasmed as she shut her eyes tight and waited for the pain to pass.

"She has maybe another hour before the baby comes," the nurse said. "But it's hard to tell."

"Another hour?" The woman slapped her hand onto the wall for support. "Mary, mother of Christ."

Kate turned to the kid. "All right, hero. You lead the way to the police station. I'll take care of your lovely lady." She took Grace's hand and followed the kid down the subway steps, past the turnstiles, and to the street level.

People sprinted and screamed in terror, unsure of where to run or what to do. The kid brought them out of the street and away from the worst of the maddening crowd. They clustered at the corner of a coffee shop, and the kid gestured down the street. "Two blocks that way."

Kate followed, her eyes surveying the blank traffic signals overhead. A

dog sprinted past her, causing both Grace and Kate to jump. The animal barked randomly on its run, then disappeared down an alleyway. They passed an apartment building, and Kate saw the pillar of smoke that belonged to the LaGuardia explosion still drifting up toward the sky.

A cold blast of wind knocked a stack of newspapers over the sidewalk in front of them like an accordion. One of them flattened against Kate's shin, and she ripped it off.

"It's just around here," the kid said, separating himself from the group. "It's right—" The kid turned the corner and stopped in his tracks.

Kate followed, her hand still gripped tightly in Grace's, but when she saw the police station, she let go. "Oh my god."

Hundreds of people poured off the front steps of the precinct, the sidewalk jammed with more pedestrians than it could hold. They clambered over one another, fighting to get inside, fighting for answers, fighting because they had no idea of what to do next.

A few people stood on the outskirts, blood dripping down their faces. One man lay on the concrete off to the side. He was motionless.

The nurse bumped into Kate with the pregnant woman, and all five of them stood in shock on the street corner. "What the hell is going on?"

Kate spun around, gripping the nurse by the shoulders. "Is there another hospital nearby? Another place where the Red Cross might show up?"

The nurse gawked at the hordes in front of the station. "I… I…" She shook her head, her eyes reddening. "I don't know." She let go of the pregnant woman's hands and backed away. "I have to get out of here. I have to go home."

Kate shook her head, following the nurse step for step as the pregnant woman leaned against the building for support. "No, we need you." She pointed back to the woman. "She's going into labor."

"I can't help her." The nurse backed up more quickly now. "I'm sorry." She spun around and sprinted away.

"Wait!" Kate took a handful of quick steps but ended the pursuit as the nurse vanished into the panicked masses. She held the sides of her head, the atmosphere too overwhelming. There were no sirens in the distance signaling help. She saw no police on the street, no signs of authority anywhere.

"Hey." The touch of a hand on her shoulder accompanied the voice, and Kate spun around to find the kid standing there. His eyes were wide, his nose red from the cold. He gestured back to what was left of their group. "What do

we do?”

The pregnant woman shut her eyes, both hands over her stomach, grimacing in pain between short, quick breaths. Grace was next to her, her weathered hand brushing the sweaty strands of hair off the pregnant woman’s forehead.

“Hospital,” Kate said. “I don’t know if anything will be working there when we show up, but it’s the best shot we have.” She looked to the kid. “Do you know one that’s close?”

“Ah, maybe?” He shut his eyes to think. “There might be a small one off 30th Ave.” He opened his eyes, nodding. “Yeah. That’s the closest one.”

“We need to hurry.” Kate relayed the plans to their two other companions and departed the chaotic scene of the police station. And just as they turned back down the street away from the precinct, gunshots fired.

3

Broken-down ambulances and police cars dotted the roads leading to the hospital. Behind one of the emergency vehicles were two paramedics lifting a man out on a gurney. He was bloodied, the cold already causing the claret to crust and grow brittle. The paramedics wore the same bloody stains over the chest of their uniforms.

The hospital's entrance wasn't as hectic as the police station, but there were still dozens of people that passed in and out of the ER's now permanently open sliding glass doors.

Inside, the cold stench of bleach and antiseptic blasted Kate's senses, but it was a small price to pay for the relief from the cold. A faint glow of warmth still lingered, either from the number of bodies or from the heat still trapped inside from before the power failure.

Hospital staff scurried back and forth. Cries of pain and pleas for help echoed down the darkened halls. Two nurses sat behind the ER station, their bodies shaking with adrenaline as they searched for files in darkness. One of them held a lighter, examining a sheet with medication doses.

"Room twenty needs their antibiotics bag, and eighteen needs their pills." The nurse, husky with short-cropped hair and a tattoo that crawled up the side of her neck and out of the collar of her scrubs, slapped the folder into the chest of another nurse.

"But all of the equipment is on the second floor, and the elevators aren't working." The second nurse was a mouse compared to the husky woman. "I can't even see what I'm doing up there!"

The husky nurse opened the mousy woman's hand, shoved the lighter into it, then closed her fist. "There. Now go." The bark was accompanied by a shooing hand, and Ms. Mouse scurried away.

Kate rushed to the station, grabbing the husky woman's shoulder just before she was out of arm's reach. "Excuse me, I have a woman—"

"Little busy, sweetheart." Husky Nurse easily removed Kate's hand and flung it away, moving quickly toward the double doors that had a sign with the letters "ICU" etched over the top.

"Hey!" Kate sprinted after her, sliding in front of the woman and blocking her path. She thrust a finger into the nurse's face, and the woman wrinkled her nose in annoyance. "I've got a pregnant woman in labor and an elderly woman with a possible concussion. They both need help." She gestured to the kid, who had one arm out for each of their patients to grab onto.

Husky Nurse turned to look and then pinched her fingers in her mouth and whistled, high and loud. "I need a wheelchair and a doctor, now!"

An orderly brought the wheelchair and slid it under the pregnant woman's backside then looked to the nurse for direction.

"Get her down to room seven. I'll meet you there." She clapped the orderly on the back, and the woman was whisked away, panting heavily.

Just before the pregnant woman passed through the double doors, she looked back at Kate, the kid, and Grace and smiled, her cheeks a bright cherry red and covered in sweat. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome!" Kate waved back, but the woman had already disappeared.

"Your mother can take a seat here, and we'll get to her when we can," the husky nurse said.

"Oh no, she's not—" But the nurse was gone. Kate returned to the kid and took Grace's hand. "She said someone will come out in a second." But as Kate examined the ER's lobby, she wasn't sure how long that would take.

While they waited, more and more people poured inside. Some were bloodied, some were scared, most were both. Another twenty minutes of this steady influx, and it would be the police station all over again. "We should leave."

"What? Why?" The kid asked. "This is probably the safest place to be right now."

"No generators," Kate said, talking to herself. She looked to the

emergency exit signs. They should have been glowing, alerting people to their presence, but none of them worked. “Hospitals have generators as backups in case of power outages to keep the equipment running.” She shook her head. “None of them are working here.”

The kid let go of the old woman’s hand. “S-so what are you saying? Everyone here is going to die?” He shouted the last words, and Kate hushed him.

“I don’t know.” Kate pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. “I need to get home.”

“Go.” Grace’s voice was soft and weak. She shifted in the plastic chair, and folded both hands in her lap. “You’ve done enough.”

Kate joined her in the empty seat to her left. “Listen, it’s only going to get worse. You can’t—”

“I’m seventy-nine years old.” Grace smiled and gently patted Kate’s hand. The gesture was similar to the one that Kate’s grandmother had done whenever she had a story to tell. It was reassuring. It was safe. “I’ll be fine. It might look bad now, but things will turn around.” She leaned in close. “But we’ll need people like you out there.” Then she pointed to herself. “To help more people like me.” She looked to the kid. “They’ll need people like both of you.” She placed her weathered hand against Kate’s cheek. “Go. Be with your family. It won’t be long before I’ll be with mine.”

What was surely meant to be comforting instead filled Kate with a sadness that swelled in her chest. It was the way the old woman spoke and the double meaning of her words. But Grace was right. She needed to go home. She needed to be with her daughter and husband. And she needed to get in contact with her son. “All right. But if someone doesn’t come by to check on you in five minutes, then I want you to raise hell.”

Grace laughed. “Oh, I will.” She turned to the kid and extended her hand, which he took gently. “You know, I have a granddaughter about your age. She’s very pretty.” She leaned in close and raised her eyebrows with a coy smile. “I’ll put in a good word for you. She’s crazy about me.”

“Thanks.” The kid smiled, blushed, and then let the old woman’s hand go.

Grace returned Kate’s jacket, and then Kate and the kid walked toward the exit, and both turned back one last time once they reached the door. They each raised a hand to Grace, sitting in that plastic chair, bundled up in her pink sweater, and a kind smile over her face.

Grace waved back. They never saw her again.

4

Around every corner, down every street, in every neighborhood they passed, the scene was all the same. People scurrying around, afraid, confused, panicked. Anything that sat on the sidewalk in front of stores was either broken or looted.

Kate shook her head, numb with disbelief. “I can’t believe people sometimes.” She looked to the columns of smoke that had faded somewhat against the greying sky. The clouds had darkened. It wouldn’t be long before they started spitting snow again.

“People do weird stuff when they’re scared,” the kid said, his eyes always looking, always scanning. “My uncle was an alcoholic, and he used to beat up my cousin when he was good and drunk. It went on like that for a long time. He’s a little older than me, and he still can’t be around drunk people. You try and get him close to a bar and he freezes up. Can’t speak, can’t move. He goes catatonic.” He stopped and gestured down a street. “If we turn here, we can make it to the Lincoln Tunnel to get back into the city.”

“Tunnel?” Kate raised her eyebrows. “No. We haven’t seen any traffic moving for the past six blocks. Everything’s dead in the water, including the tunnel. I’m not going into a concrete tube buried under the river with all of this happening.” She gestured ahead. “Let’s take the bridge.”

“The closest bridge to us right now is Williamsburg.” The kid glanced back down the street. “That’ll take me longer to get home.” He looked back to Kate. “My mom’s sick.” He tapped the side of his head. “Kind of a mental thing. Has a hard time keeping track of stuff. The longer it takes me to get

home, the more she's at risk of wandering out into all of this and getting herself hurt."

Kate studied the worried lines on the kid's face and was suddenly reminded of how young he was and that she didn't even know his name. "Hey, listen—What's your name?"

"Doug."

"Doug, take it from a mother who has a son about your age. The only thing your mom would be concerned about is you getting home safe in one piece. The bridge is safer, and we'll have better line of sight into the city. And trust me, when you're heading into a storm, line of sight can save your life."

Doug nodded but offered a final longing glance toward the direction of the tunnel. When he faced Kate again, that steady assurance had returned. "Yeah, that makes sense." He pointed down the road they'd been traveling on. "But I need to hurry."

Kate did her best to keep up with Doug's jog. While she would have preferred to keep a steady speed walk, she didn't want to hold the kid up any longer than she had to. And she didn't want to lose him. Not because she didn't think he couldn't take care of himself or that she couldn't find her own way into the city but because of something inexplicably simple. She didn't want to be alone.

In the maddening storm that swirled around them, they were each other's lifeboats, and they needed one another to stay afloat, lest someone else come along and try to drag them down into the dark abyss of the cold waters.

Intermittent screams and the crash of glass had replaced the city's bustling motorists and honking horns. Destruction had replaced production, and Kate still hadn't seen a single authority figure since they'd left the police station. Had they all gone home? Had they all been absorbed into the mob?

After fifteen minutes on the run Kate winced and clutched her side, slowing to a walk. "Doug!" She stretched out her hand and then leaned up against a storefront, the sign on its door flipped to "closed." "It's just a cramp. Give me a minute."

Hesitantly, Doug slowed and then jogged back toward her. Kate lifted her arms into the air, doing her best to draw in long, deep breaths. The knives digging into her sides had lessened, and she paced in a tight circle. "Don't get much cardio anymore." She smiled, but Doug wasn't paying attention. She was slowing him down.

“You sure you’re all right to keep going?” Doug asked.

“Yeah,” Kate answered, the tip of the knives still prodding her ribs. “I’m fine.” She turned away from Doug to hide the pain, and when she did she noticed the name of the storefront where she’d stopped. It was a pharmacy. She pressed her face against the dark glass, unable to see anything inside.

“What are you doing?” Doug asked.

“My daughter’s sick.” Kate peeled her face away from the cold glass. “And you said your mother needs medication, right? We should look inside. See what they have.”

Doug snickered. “I doubt they’re open.”

A bell at the top of the door chimed when Kate pushed it open. Inside, like the rest of the city, the power was out, and the only light provided was what shone through the tinted windows at the storefront. The back of the store and half the aisles were covered in darkness.

The pump of the shotgun froze both of them in their tracks.

“Who’s there?” The voice shouted from the darkness.

Kate lifted her hands, squinting into the darkness. “We need medicine.”

The man with the gun remained hidden in the shadows. “You some junkies looking for a high?”

“We’re not junkies,” Kate said, hands still raised and her eyes focused on the barrel of the shotgun. “My daughter’s sick.” She tried to swallow but couldn’t. “I just need some things for her. I can pay.”

The man grunted. “Pay? With what? Credit Card? Debit? There aren’t any machines working. No electricity.” He finally emerged from the shadows. Sunlight revealed a weathered face, cheeks wrinkling and sagging. Liver spots dotted his bald head, but his blue eyes were still vibrant as they stared down the shotgun’s sight. “Go.”

Doug tugged at Kate’s shoulder. “C’mon. It’s not worth it.”

But Kate stood her ground. “I’m not leaving until I have medicine for my little girl.”

The old man didn’t waver, didn’t move, didn’t flinch. “What’s she sick with?”

“Sore throat, fever,” Kate said. “I think she has the flu.”

The old man lowered the shotgun, and Kate and Doug exhaled. He walked past them toward the front door and flipped the lock. “Won’t be long before they start breaking glass to get in here. Damn animals. C’mon. Let’s get your little girl some medicine.”

A few candles glowed behind the counter of the pharmacy, where most of the prescription drugs were stored. “I’ll give you a few general antibiotics in case that flu turns out to be something bacterial.” He snagged a few bags off the aisle and then shoved them into Kate’s arms. “You can grab some over-the-counter pills on your way out. Aisle three.”

“Thank you,” Kate said, stuffing the pills inside her jacket. “Thank you so much.”

“Do you have any SSRI medications?” Doug asked, eyeing the rows of medicine.

The old man grunted. “Probably gonna be a lot of people down on their luck after all of this.” He stepped backward farther down the aisle. “A particular brand you’re looking for?”

“Celexa, if you have it,” Doug answered.

“Here.” The old man tossed a bag at Doug. “Now get out.”

They retreated down the aisles, and Kate stole a variety of cold medicines and throat lozenges and added them to her stash of antibiotics.

Once outside, Doug took a few steps then stopped. He stared at the medicine clutched in his hand. His expression glowered contempt, and the corner of his eye twitched. It could have been the cold, but his eyes reddened in the anticipation of tears.

“What’s SSRI stand for?” Kate asked.

“Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors,” Doug answered. “It’s for depression.” He looked at her, almost as if he were waiting for her to make a joke at his mother’s expense. “That’s what’s wrong with my mom.”

“I’m sorry.” Kate gave a soft touch to his shoulder. “I can imagine that’s hard.”

“Harder when you’re alone with her.” The tears fell, and Doug turned his head away, wiping at the corner of his eyes quickly. “I’m fine.” He stuffed the medicine into his jacket pocket. “We need to get moving.” Without looking at her, he broke into another jog.

Kate’s body groaned, but she caught up to him easily enough. The knives returned to her side for a moment but didn’t linger as long.

The pair cut through neighborhoods, staying off the main streets where most of the looting and chaos was taking place. But the houses and apartments they passed were calmer, more stable. Kate assumed home had that effect on people. Though there were a few exceptions.

“Danny!” A young woman stepped from a small house, cradling a crying

baby in her arms. “Danny!” She had been screaming that name since they’d turned down her street, her voice shrill and panicked. “Danny, come back!”

“Shut it, lady! Danny ain’t here!” The angered voice was thrown from a window in one of the apartment buildings. Kate looked to see where it came from, but the coward had already ducked back inside.

“Oh, god,” the woman said, and the baby let out a high-pitched shriek. She gave her a soothing bounce and kissed the top of her head. “It’s all right, Liddy. Everything is going to be okay.”

Kate locked eyes with the mother briefly as she continued her search for Danny’s whereabouts. Kate assumed it was her husband or boyfriend. She was a young woman, not much older than Doug.

A few hours ago, if the woman had wanted to talk to Danny, all she would have had to do was call his cell phone. It was so easy to talk to people now, and it could be done at any time, from anywhere in the world.

The sight of the woman made Kate grab her phone, but the blank screen was a reminder of just how easily all of that could be taken away. In the blink of an eye Kate, and the rest of the people in the city, had been cast into the stone age. No cars. No phones. No power. And then Kate stopped, a terrible thought freezing her in place.

“What is it?” Doug asked. Then, noticing the phone in Kate’s hand, he lunged forward excitedly. “Did you get it working?”

“If the power went off, how does that affect our phones? They have batteries in them.” Kate lifted her head and saw that the woman with the baby who was screaming for Danny had gone back inside. “And the cars. They’ve all stopped working too.” She frowned. “How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. Some type of wireless computer virus maybe?” Doug shrugged, shaking his head from the lack of conviction in his own answer. “Everything has computers in it now, right? Or at least some component.”

“Yeah,” Kate answered. “Maybe.” She tucked the phone back in her pocket and then zipped her jacket all the way to her chin. The first few flecks of snow fell and dotted the sidewalk. “Bridge isn’t much farther, right?”

“No,” Doug answered. “One more street, and then it’s down on the right. We’re almost there.”

Kate took the lead the rest of the way. On her run, the mother’s cries of ‘Danny’ replayed in her mind. How many other people were screaming for their loved ones? How many people didn’t know the condition of their friends and family? She looked up to the grey clouds that blanketed the sky.

The snow thickened, and she squinted to avoid the snowflakes stinging her eyes. She never wanted to be that woman on the street. She never wanted to have that fear of the unknown.

But the closer they got to the bridge and the more people Kate saw on the street, funneling out of the city and into the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, she also had another thought. How many of these people were leaving friends and family behind? How many of them gave in to the fear and instinct of survival? She'd seen enough of it on the train to guess that those numbers were higher than they should be. The mob mentality had taken control. And despite Grace's plea that there needed to be more people like her and Doug, Kate had her doubts about how many of those "good people" were still hanging around the city.

5

Thousands of people crammed onto the small sidewalk of the Williamsburg bridge, funneling themselves off the island and onto the mainland, desperately trying to get out of the city. Every face carried an expression of hastened panic, and hands clawed forward, people shoving one another aside.

"Looks like we're the only ones trying to get back in," Doug said then shook his head. "Power must be out in the city too." He spun around, unsure of what he was even looking for. "God, how far does this thing go?"

Kate eyed the pedestrian walkways that lined either side of the bridge. Not an inch of space remained. She looked to the road and saw that many people had chosen to climb over the stalled cars that clogged the bridge. "We'll have to go over the cars."

"Yeah," Doug replied, nodding nervously.

Two women passed, clutching one another, muttering to themselves loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. "God, who were those people? Why would they do that?"

Kate reached for the woman's shoulder. "What people?"

The woman spun around, snarling like a rabid dog. "Don't touch me!" She lunged as she barked, and Kate stepped back with her hands in the air.

The second woman calmed her friend. "We saw one of the attacks."

"Attacks?" Doug and Kate asked simultaneously.

"You're talking about the blasts?" Doug asked.

"No. The people with the guns. They came out of nowhere. We were near Times Square when it happened." She cast her gaze to the ground, and her

lips quivered.

“Terrorists,” the other woman blurted out, her expression still rabid. “They’re animals!”

“C’mon, Mary.” The friend pulled the woman forward, but Kate still heard her screaming as they disappeared into the crowds.

“Animals! Rabid animals!”

Kate followed the back of the woman’s head until she couldn’t see her anymore.

“Looks like we can get on the road there.” Doug pointed between a black truck and a red Mercedes sedan. “It’ll be hard crossing all the way over though. Especially with so many people leaving.”

“We’ll just watch our footing.” And just as Kate spoke, she watched a woman fall from the hood of a car, twisting her ankle as a friend tried to help her up before she was smashed to a pulp by the stampede of people behind her. The sight triggered the image of the woman who had fallen off the walkway of the elevated train tracks and the resounding splat that ended her screams.

“Kate,” Doug said, snapping her out of the daze. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” Kate followed, the pair pushing through the hordes streaming off the bridge. Most looked like they didn’t even know where they were going. They were simply lost and aimlessly following the masses.

The crowd and its madness thickened the closer Doug and Kate got to the road on the bridge. The pair squeezed through, Kate’s shoulders knocking into arms and chests and stomachs as they pushed closer.

Doug glanced behind him twice to make sure Kate was close, but she had latched onto the back of his jacket without him even knowing. That same impulse from before flooded through Kate’s veins. She didn’t want to lose him, a kid she had met less than an hour ago. A kid that she never would have even spoken to had the train not stopped. A kid that was the only person who stepped forward to help when things got bad. A kid who stayed when everyone else ran.

They reached a truck, and Doug climbed into the bed. He turned and offered his hand, which Kate grabbed hold of. Elevated by the truck bed, Kate had a better view of the carnage clogging the bridge and the steady stream of people still trying to escape.

“Holy shit,” Doug said.

Every car on the bridge was wrecked. Piles of metal and tires formed like

anthills. And through the wreckage, she saw the lifeless bodies of those still inside, unnoticed by the people that passed over their metal tombs.

“Look at this,” Doug said, sweeping his hand over the chaos. “No cops. No authority anywhere. How the hell are people supposed to get any help?”

“They’re not.” Kate thought about what the pair of women had said about the terrorists with the guns. An old rhyme entered her mind. Like shooting fish in a barrel. “C’mon.”

Hoods and roofs buckled underneath their feet, and more than once Kate was forced to crawl then slide down over the fresh snow that melted against her pants and jacket. After the first dozen cars, her joints ached.

“Holding up okay?” Doug shouted back to her, pausing on the hood of a Chrysler as a fresh wave of New Yorkers passed them on their way to Brooklyn.

“Yeah.” Kate hopped off the front bumper of a jeep and landed on the first open patch of concrete she had seen on the bridge since they had started walking. “Just need a break for a second.” She squatted, letting her muscles stretch, and then stood.

The cold and the exertion chipped away at Kate’s stamina. The skipped breakfast didn’t help either. And despite the cold, she began to sweat. “Do you have any water?”

“Yeah, I think I have some left.” Doug swung his pack around and opened the largest compartment. He rummaged through while Kate glanced to the south.

The Brooklyn Bridge sat on the horizon, the suspension bridge larger than the one Kate currently found herself on. She had taken Holly there the first week they moved. She remembered all the bike locks that people attached on some of the support cables of the walkway. One of them was hanging out all the way over the center of the road, which meant the daredevil who had put it there dangled twenty feet in the air over traffic.

Kate wasn’t sure of the tradition’s origin, but it was one of those small things that made big cities feel like home. And she’d been to enough of them to know New York was unique.

An explosion plumed over the Brooklyn Bridge, tearing apart Kate’s memory as the blast echoed over the river. Kate jerked away from the sound, turning her face as if the blast was close enough to hurt her. Another explosion rumbled in the distance, and this one pulled her attention back to the bridge.

A second plume of smoke rose on the opposite end of the bridge, and Kate watched brick and concrete collapse into the East River, dragging cars and people with it.

The crowd on the Williamsburg Bridge froze at the sight of the horror unfolding to the south. And then, slowly at first and then all at once, screams and the stampede of footsteps replaced shock.

In the explosion of panic, Kate watched three people disappear beneath churning legs and feet. Heavy footfalls stomped over the vehicles like a tidal wave.

People slipped on the slick surfaces fresh with snow and landed hard, shattering windows and denting metal. Everyone clawed and scrambled forward, fleeing toward safety.

“Kate, run!”

Doug’s voice snapped Kate out of the stupor, but she lost him in the crowd. She rocketed herself into the growing projectile of human bodies that fled toward safety. Another explosion rocked the Manhattan Bridge toward the north, two more blasts jettisoned debris into the air, and the bridge joined the Brooklyn in its collapse into the East River.

Kate’s heart hammered wildly. Adrenaline washed over the pain radiating from her knees and hips, and she grew numb against the bodies that rushed past her.

The end of the bridge drew closer, and it was clogged with people sprinting from the city. They came from everywhere, bottlenecking at the bridge. Another blast rumbled, and this one shook the ground beneath her feet. Kate lost her balanced and tumbled forward over the hood of a truck.

Screams replaced the monotonous whine of the blast. Two pairs of feet scurried past Kate’s line of sight, and she pushed herself up, her chest still vibrating in a low hum from the blast. She wobbled once she was upright and sloppily placed one foot in front of the other as she restarted her escape.

Others joined in Kate’s retreat, and then another blast thundered on the bridge, this one closer than before. A wave of heat warmed Kate’s backside, but she didn’t turn around.

The ground suddenly buckled, and the foundation of the bridge gave way. Kate kept her pace, the muscles along her legs wobbling like jelly, and she didn’t stop until she tripped and skidded to the pavement, her gloves tearing on the concrete.

Kate heaved for breath and fought the urge to vomit. She turned behind

her and saw nothing but grey dust where the bridge once stood. It was like a smog of destruction, and every once in a while, someone ran into the fog, and then someone ran out.

“Doug!” Kate’s voice cracked. It was dry and tired. “Doug!”

Figures darted around Kate as the fog spread, swallowing her up with everything else. Visibility dropped to less than a few feet in front of her face. She clawed at the dust, searching for Doug, but she couldn’t see him. A million thoughts raced through her mind. Had he been trampled? Was he caught in the explosion? Did he fall into the river?

Gunfire broke Kate’s stream of consciousness and jumpstarted her pulse. The gunshots fired in the same hastened rhythm as her heart. Blanketed by grey haze, they seemed to come from every direction. The gunfire chased screams as the slow, huddled masses of people escaping the bridge suddenly returned to their frenzied pace.

Kate finally jumped into the rat race and kept her head low. Gunfire blared to her left. She shuddered and ducked lower. She veered from the road, choosing to head for the cover of buildings, and as she did, she saw them. They were nothing but silhouettes, their arms lengthened by the rifles in their hands. She wasn’t sure if they could see her, but she darted to the corner of a store to escape execution.

Fear clawed the back of her neck, traveling down her spine and invading every cell of her body. The gunfire, the smoke, the screams—it all funneled that primal emotion of survival through her veins. The ability of higher thought ended, and everything was replaced with a single message: run.

Dust trailed off her as she sprinted. Like an extended blur, it followed her until her legs tired and her lungs exploded in her chest. The snowfall lightened, but it had already covered her tracks with fresh powder.

The farther she ran, the more she noticed the faces in the windows of the stores she passed. In turn, they watched her through the glass, clutching their broken and useless phones like some kind of life support.

Kate caught her reflection in the glass, and at first glance, she didn’t recognize herself. The dust-covered monster couldn’t have been her. What she saw now was a frightened animal.

Adrenaline propelled her forward, and the more ground her boots chewed up, the faster those sounds of gunshots and the sight of the ruins of the Williamsburg bridge faded. She made it ten blocks before she stopped. She hunched over, wheezing, then hacked and coughed, spitting snot and saliva

onto the pavement.

With her motion ended, pain returned. Feet, hips, knees, everything ached. After the stop, she could only limp. And she traveled the next thirty blocks to the street where her apartment building was, fighting the urge to collapse.

Like Queens, Manhattan was in chaos. Screams bellowed from subway entrances. More gunshots thundered to the west. Glass shattered to her east. And while most people had sought shelter, thousands still roamed the streets.

The more she separated herself from the bridge and the fighting, the stranger the expressions became on the people she passed. She had been touched by the madness that had descended on the city, and people recoiled from her. They hadn't seen the horror yet. They hadn't experienced the real fear. But once they did, they'd change. It was inevitable.

A city of nine million people would fight. And if this was happening elsewhere in the country, which Kate was beginning to have the sinking suspicion that it was, that meant they could go a long time without receiving any aid.

And as those realizations washed over her and she saw more confused people with their red, cold noses pressed up against the windows of shops and apartments and houses that she passed, Kate knew she had to get off the island. She had to get her family away from the teeming masses that would do anything to survive.

It was like Grace had said: there weren't enough good people in the city, and even if Kate was able to round up all of them, they'd still be outnumbered one thousand to one. Those were odds that she wasn't willing to put her family against.

6

Thirty stories up, New York looked different. The roads that pumped life and movement into the city had suddenly clotted without warning. Rodney Klatt examined the streets below in a sort of stunned silence from his apartment window.

Vibrations from the explosions around the city had ended, but from his location, they were barely more than a rumble of thunder. He had gone to the roof to see where they'd hit, and his mouth dropped as he watched bridge after bridge collapse into the river.

Manhattan was isolated now, cut off from the mainland. There were the tunnels, of course, but that was only if the people doing this hadn't flooded them, and Rodney's souring gut was telling him that they had.

He moved to his couch, sitting down slowly. He eyed the bags he'd pulled from the closet that were already prepared for a quick escape. Food, water, medical supplies, clothes, knives. He had a gun. It was a .38 revolver. He owned it illegally, of course, and its only purpose was for reassurance. Never did he expect to ever use it.

But the gunfire on the streets had prompted him to remove it from its case. And here he sat, in the dark of his apartment, his supplies bagged and sitting by the door, with his .38 clutched tightly in his hand. He wanted to get used to holding it before he went out. At least that was what he was telling himself.

He'd prepared for stuff like this, but up until now, it had only been practice in preparation for a worst-case scenario. And now shit had hit the

fan, and it was time for the rubber to meet the road. But for some reason he couldn't pull the trigger.

A part of it was the people he heard in the hall. His neighbors, some of them friends. People had knocked on his door, yelling his name to see if he was home, but Rodney had kept quiet. He was scared to confront them, scared to pass them in the hallway with his backpacks and his gun.

In all his planning and drills, he'd always done things alone. He thought it'd be better that way. No one to hold him back, no one to slow him down. And it would lessen the amount of supplies he'd need to bring. But in all of his planning, Rodney Klatt forgot the one element in a true crisis situation: fear.

Violence had erupted on the streets. People had gone crazy, and the only thing they could focus on was their own survival. They were all scrambling, searching for what Rodney had in those packs and what he possessed in the cabin up north. It was arrogant to do everything alone, to keep his thoughts and his fears to himself.

There was safety in numbers. It was one of the reasons he'd lived in New York for so long. Here he was nothing more than a tree lost in the massive forest. In a city of nine million people, no one even noticed him.

Three more knocks pounded on his door. "Hey, Rodney! Are you home, man? We think that there might have been an attack. Everyone is meeting on the twentieth floor to talk about it. Starts in ten minutes."

The knocking ended, and Rodney turned away from the door and back toward the window. He pressed his palm against the glass. It was cold and frozen, like the world below. His hand left a greasy print as he removed it and then returned to the couch.

The cushions smooshed beneath his weight, the support of the couch nonexistent. He'd been saving up for a new couch for the past four months. One more paycheck and he would have had enough money for the La-Z-Boy he wanted.

But there wouldn't be any more paychecks. His job at the utility company no longer existed. Nothing was going to be the same. Everything had changed in the blink of an eye, the flick of a switch.

Rodney released the revolver and set it down on the cushion next to him. He ran his palms up and down his thighs. His jeans were cold like the window. The weather was already seeping into the building. It wouldn't be much longer until it was just as cold inside as it was outside. Night would be

worse.

He knew the bulk of people would stay in their homes, telling themselves the power would come back on. But Rodney knew better. The combination of the power, his phone not working, and the broken cars below all told the same story. An EMP had gone off. Everything with a computer processor in it was fried. No more utilities. No more transportation. No more food and water coming into a city that depended on it every day.

Nine million people. The number was too staggering, too unreal. It would take another couple of days before people started to become really violent, maybe even less considering the frozen tundra that New York was about to transform into. He had to get out. And he had to get out now.

Rodney sprang from the couch and donned the backpacks at the door. He rechecked his inventory in the bags. It was enough for the journey north and then some. He swung the straps of the pack over his shoulders and then reached for the revolver. He lingered a moment, looking at it before he placed it in its holster. He placed his hand on the doorknob of his front door but then froze.

The meeting. All those people I know, friends I've made since moving here, they have no idea what's happening. They have no idea what's going on, and that's not going to change anytime soon. It's not like the six o'clock news will be airing tonight, and they can't get online to research.

But was that his problem? Was it his fault they'd chosen not to be prepared, informed? No, it wasn't. So why couldn't he leave?

Rodney let go of the doorknob and leaned up against the wall. His stomach twisted into knots. That nauseating feeling he associated with bad Thai food and roller coasters spread through his body. He shut his eyes, shaking his head. "Shit. Shit-shit-shit-shit!"

Quickly, and before he changed his mind, Rodney opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, beelining it toward the stairwell. His feet fell quietly against the steps, the floor numbers descending numerically on his way down.

The bannister was cold against the palm of his hand, the metal smooth as he glided down. He passed the twenty-eighth floor, then the twenty-seventh. The twenty-sixth, twenty-fifth…by the time he reached the twenty-fourth, he found himself slowing a little. He passed a woman he didn't know in the stairs on the twenty-third, who was frantically running upward. He frowned at her as they passed, though she didn't pay him any attention. She was

covered in dust and snow, her eyes wide and focused on nothing but the steps in front of her.

Rodney knew she was one of millions following the same instinct. Get home, get to family, find my friends. What he had observed from his window on the thirtieth floor wasn't chaos at all, simply a reorganizing of value within the city. And right now, that value was people. People who knew things, people who understood what would happen next. People like him.

Rodney stopped on the twentieth floor and stared at the exit door. He glanced toward the stairs leading downward. And then, just as quickly as he'd left his apartment, he exited onto the twentieth floor. He couldn't save everyone. But he might be able to save a few.

BY THE TIME Kate reached the thirty-fifth floor of the apartment building, the muscles in her legs were jelly. Gasping for breath, she shouldered open the exit door from the stairwell and clawed at the wall to pull herself toward their apartment.

The weather had frozen her stiff, and every step forward was jerky and spastic, akin to the walking dead. Some of the apartment doors she passed were open, the residents inside peeking out to watch her pass. If they spoke to her, she didn't hear them. Only two thoughts consumed her mind. Get to her family. Get them out of the city.

Kate found their apartment door open, and when she stepped inside, the fatigue in her muscles and the pain in her joints vanished. "Holly!" She sprinted into the apartment and found her daughter on the couch with Mrs. Dunny on the chair across from her. Kate exhaled. "Thank god."

"Mom?" Holly pinched her eyebrows together, sitting up from her position on the couch, the blanket falling from her chest.

"Mrs. Hillman!" Mrs. Dunny jumped from her chair as quickly as her old bones would allow, her jaw slack as she gawked at Kate. "My god, what happened?"

Kate cried, squeezing Holly tight. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"Kate?"

She spun around and saw Mark exiting the bedroom, his tie undone, hanging loosely around his neck. After a moment's pause, Kate flung herself into his arms.

"Jesus." Mark squeezed back, his hands gently prodding her body, trying to make sure that she wasn't injured. "Where did you come from?"

Kate finally pulled back, wiping away tears that smudged the snow and dirt against her cheek. "I was on the train when everything shut down. And I saw the explosions." She cleared her throat. "I got your message that Holly was sick before my phone died, and I just… I just… had to get home."

Mark cupped his hands on her cheeks. "You were out there?" His expression retained worry but showed signs of relief as he pulled her close. "Thank god you're all right."

"Mrs. Hillman, what is going on out there?" Mrs. Dunny asked. "What were those explosions?" Her eyes grew large and fearful, and she clasped her hands together in front of her sagging bosom as if she were praying.

Kate stepped back from Mark and took a seat on the couch with her daughter. Her body groaned in thanks for the rest, and she leaned into the soft cushions. Heat still lingered in the apartment, and her face thawed. "Nothing is working. Cars, phones, no power anywhere in the city."

"Yeah, it was like that on my way home from work." Mark took a seat on the armrest. "Once everything shut down at the office, I came straight home. They wanted me to stay, but with Holly sick and me not being able to get ahold of you, I couldn't stay."

Kate placed a hand on his knee, and Mark rested his hand on top of hers. She smiled. "I'm glad you came home." She looked at Holly and suddenly remembered the medicine in her jacket. "I stopped at a pharmacy on the way here."

"They were open?" Mark asked.

"Not exactly." Kate unzipped her jacket, and out spilled the medicine and antibiotics. She handed Holly the cough syrup and then gathered up the rest and placed them on the coffee table. "The bridges are gone, at least the ones across the East River."

Mark ran his fingers through his hair and stood, pacing back and forth in tight circles. "If the bridges are down, then that means they'll have to use the ferries to bring help over."

"I didn't see any boats working on the river either," Kate said, removing her jacket and flinging dust and snow to the side. "There isn't any way off the

island except for the tunnels, which I didn't want to chance coming through on the way here. Not with those people—"

"What people?" Mark asked.

"You didn't see them?" Kate asked.

"No. As soon as the power went off, I came here. I told you that."

Kate recoiled from the bite in Mark's answer. She frowned, and he flapped his arms at his sides, sighing.

"I'm sorry." He returned to his seat on the armrest. "It was hard being in the dark. I didn't know where you were, Holly was here alone, and—" He slouched and rubbed his face. When he peeled his hands from his cheeks, they were a bright red. "I thought I'd lost you."

Kate grabbed his hand. "Me too." She turned to Holly and held her hand, which was warm with fever. A sick child in a world with no hospitals and no doctors.

"Listen, we need to get out of the city," Kate said. Strength returned and steadied her voice. "It's bad out there right now, but it's only going to get worse."

"What about the Hudson River bridges?" Mrs. Dunny asked. "Are they still up?"

"I don't know," Kate answered. "But after what we saw out there, I doubt it."

"We saw?" Mark asked.

"Huh?" Kate replied, turning to him.

"You said 'we saw.'"

"Oh. There was this kid on the train. He helped me with an older woman and got her some help." Kate's voice grew distant. "We stuck together until we got to the Williamsburg Bridge. We were on it when it collapsed. I don't know if he made it. There was so much gunfire."

Mark shot out of his seat. "Christ, this is like 9/11 on crack!" His cheeks reddened further, and the vein along the side of his neck throbbed. "You're right, we need to get out of the city." He spun around, facing Kate. "Did you see what they looked like? Where were you when they started shooting? Did they follow you here?" He arched his eyebrows on that last question.

Kate stood. "I don't know who they are, what they want, or where they are right now." She pulled Mark out of earshot of Holly and Mrs. Dunny. "We shouldn't be talking about this in front of Holly. It's not anything she needs to hear."

“So what do we do?” Mark asked. “We try and go to the tunnels? How are we supposed to move her when she’s sick? What if she gets worse? What if we have to stop? What if we run into those people on the streets?”

“One problem at a time,” Kate answered.

“We should go to the meeting on the twentieth,” Mrs. Dunny said.

“What meeting?” Kate asked.

“I heard some of the neighbors talking about it.” Mrs. Dunny opened her purse and rummaged inside until she removed a stick of gum. “Management wanted to get everyone together, see what people knew.” She popped the gum into her mouth, her attitude rather nonchalant about the whole idea. “Personally, I think it’s just to keep people from going crazy.”

Kate nodded. “We should go.” She turned to Mark. “Can you stay here with Holly?”

“Me?” Mark gestured to Kate’s appearance. “You show up like that and people will think the world is ending.”

“Isn’t it?” Kate asked.

“I’ll stay with Holly,” Mrs. Dunny said. “I don’t need to hear a bunch of people hooting and hollering about stuff they don’t know anything about. It’s all just speculation. This thing will blow over. It always does.”

The old woman spoke in a frame of mind that Kate found most of the elderly did during times of crisis, and she had noticed that in New York, the habit was twice as bad.

Kate knelt by Holly’s side. “We’ll only be gone a minute, but we’ll be right back, okay?”

Holly immediately looked past Kate and to her father. “Dad, do you have to go?”

Kate’s heart fractured at the words, and she let go of her daughter’s hand as Holly reached for her father.

“We’ll only be gone a little bit.” Mark kissed her forehead, and Kate forced a smile. “Promise.”

Kate turned toward the door, but Mark grabbed her wrist. She spun around. “What?”

He looked her up and down and then grimaced. “Might want to change.”

Kate examined herself. “I’ll make it quick.” A trail of dust and snow followed her into the bedroom, and she wiped her face as best she could with what water remained in the pipes, which was ice cold and burned her skin.

A few smears of dust and frost lingered on her neck and ears, but she

looked more like herself again and less like the ghost woman she had seen in the reflection of the shop windows she'd passed. She closed her eyes and gripped the granite of the sink's counter, fighting against the trembling and fatigue of her muscles.

All right, Kate. You've got to go into this thing with both eyes open and figure out how to get your family off the island. That is the priority. After that, it's finding a safe place for Holly and Mark to stay until whatever is happening is over. Then it's off to get Luke.

Kate opened her eyes, and nodded at her plan of action. And then, as if to test herself, she slowly lifted her hand and held it out flat, concentrating on keeping it steady. But it wouldn't stop shaking, no matter how long she stared at it.

7

When Rodney opened the door to the common area, he slammed the edge into a man standing nearby. The commotion triggered every head in the room to turn.

"Sorry," Rodney said, squeezing through, his backpack smacking into a woman's shoulder as he closed the door behind him. It clicked shut, and he sidestepped toward the back behind the crowds.

The manager shook off the disturbance, clearing his throat. "As I was saying, the power is out in the entire building."

"Cell phones aren't working either!" a voice shouted among the crowd.

"Nothing's working!" another added, and so began the low rumble of dissent.

Rodney kept quiet, wanting to see, wanting to hear how they'd react. While he hadn't left yet, that didn't mean he wanted to die here, and there still might be someone useful he could take along. He had what everyone wanted: a way out.

"Everyone, please!" the manager shouted, arms extended high and over people's heads. "I understand everyone's frustration, but the purpose of this meeting is to unearth the facts of what we know and don't know."

The door opened again, and this time Rodney's was one of the heads turning to see who entered. It was a woman and man, presumably husband and wife. The man was fairly put together, but the woman had flecks of dirt and snow littered in her hair. He thought about the explosions and then furrowed his brow. Had she seen what happened?

“If anyone has any information about what is going on, please, now is the time to let your voice be heard.”

Rodney watched the woman and the man whisper to one another. Then the man nudged the woman forward, and she slowly raised her hand.

“I was out there,” she said, shouting above the murmur of the crowd. Again, heads turned, and the room went silent.

The manager up front motioned her toward him. “Let her through, let her come up here.”

The crowd stepped aside, and the woman moved past. Her steps were slow but deliberate, as if she was biding her time and thinking of what to say. She looked nervous, due either to the crowd or to what she’d seen outside.

By the time she reached the front of the room, the murmur had started up again, but it shushed itself when she stepped up on the chair, hovering above the crowd. She kept her fists balled at her sides, and she cleared her throat.

“My name is Kate Hillman. I live on the thirty-fifth floor with my husband and daughter.” She swallowed, scanning the crowd, and she finally relaxed her hands. “I’m a pilot with Nova Airlines, and I landed at LaGuardia this morning before the attack.”

Rodney squinted at her but remained silent as everyone else whispered.

“I don’t know much, but I can tell you what I’ve seen!” She raised her voice, taking command of the room. “Transportation is down. Cars, metro, buses, planes, trains, boats, all out of commission. Whoever is doing this has also blown up every bridge over the East River.”

“What!” The comment triggered a general outrage that flooded through the crowd like a virus. “All the bridges are out!” “How are we supposed to leave?” “How are we supposed to get help?”

Half of the people bickered among themselves while the other half barked at Kate.

“Everyone, please, calm down!” She waited for the crowd’s roar to quiet then drew in a breath. “The bridges over the East River are gone. And while I didn’t witness it firsthand, it’s probably safe to say the bridges over the Hudson have been destroyed as well. The people responsible for all of this are still in the streets. I don’t have any proof that all of this relates to the phones, cars, and power not working, but I think it might.”

Rodney looked to his left and to his right. The mood in the room shifted. Everyone was calmer. And it was because of her.

“Police, emergency services, anyone that you think can help you already

has their hands full," Kate said. "And I think if there is a way to get off the island, then we need to do it and go quickly."

"But how?" a woman shrieked. "The bridges are down, and you said the boats aren't working."

"Power boats aren't working," Kate replied.

Rodney smirked. She was smart. He looked to Kate's husband. He'd have to come, most likely, and the daughter too. No way she'd leave them behind. But if she'd already seen what they were up against, he'd have a better chance of making it out the other side.

"So what?" a man asked, flapping his arms at his sides in exasperation. "We're supposed to swim across? That water is freezing!"

"I don't know how we cross." Kate shut her eyes, and her forehead creased. "Rowboats, paddleboards maybe, anything that can float and we can move by hand. But if we go, we should go together, and we should go soon. Trust me."

Kate looked to the manager and then stepped down. The crowd parted again as she walked back to her husband, but this time she was stopped and questioned along the way. Rodney couldn't hear what they were asking her, but everyone was ignoring whatever the manager was saying. He was old news. He hadn't seen the shit. She had. And Rodney wanted to take her with him.

IT ALL HAPPENED SO QUICKLY that when Kate tried to recall what she'd said and what people were asking, it was nothing but a haze. But despite her words, no one offered any suggestions. No one had a solution. People started to trickle out, and Kate grabbed Mark's hand. "C'mon. Let's go."

A few heads turned to watch her leave, and Kate made a beeline for the stairwell the moment she was in the hallway. She reached for the door handle but paused as she stretched out her hand.

A slight tremor rattled her hand back and forth. Kate pulled her hand toward her, examining the vibration. She slowly turned her hand palm up, watching all the muscles twitching simultaneously. She was exhausted,

stretched beyond her means.

"You okay?" Mark asked, gently coming up behind her.

"Yeah." Kate balled her hand into a fist and then turned toward him. She slouched, exhausted. "I don't know how we're going to get out of here."

"I might be able to help with that."

Kate and Mark turned toward the voice. It belonged to a young man. He was about Mark's height and maybe only a couple years older than her own son. He was bundled in a jacket with a hiking backpack strapped securely to his body.

The man kept his distance and a casual stance. "Getting out of the city is only going to become harder the longer people stay. You're right in wanting to get out now."

Kate squinted at him. He spoke like a person who had a secret key that could unlock everything. It made him come off as arrogant. She didn't like that. "Do you know what's going on?"

"I have a few theories."

"Care to share?" Mark asked.

"What you did in there was impressive," he said, ignoring their questions. "People looked up to you. That's valuable now."

"I don't have time for this." Kate turned to leave, and Mark followed.

"I can get you and your family off the island," he said.

Kate stopped. She turned. "How?"

"I have a boat," he answered. "A sailboat. It's docked on the west side of the city."

"How far?"

"The George Washington Bridge." He shrugged. "If that's even still there anymore."

Kate paced in a circle, biting a lip that had already started to blister from the cold and dehydration. She stopped, then arched an eyebrow. "Why didn't you say anything in the meeting?"

"You saw what happened in there." The man inched forward, keeping his voice low, and then checked behind him to make sure they were still alone in the hall. "People are scared. And fear makes people irrational. You really want to risk going out there with people that don't have their shit together?"

"And do you really want the death of the people you leave behind on your conscience?" Kate asked.

The man stepped back, grimacing. "Listen, I came out here with an offer,

and if you—”

“You didn’t come out here with an offer,” Kate said. “You came out here with an ultimatum.” She looked him up and down, taking in the cargo pants, boots, gloves, and backpack. He was prepared, and she was betting that he had even more supplies waiting for him on the boat. “You want to go, but you don’t want to go alone. Is that it? Afraid of what might happen when you’re stuck out there on your own?”

“This was a mistake.” The man shuffled past her toward the hallway door.

Kate turned and followed him inside the stairwell, upset by the fact that he was leaving, upset over the fact that she may have missed her one chance to get her family to safety. “So you can live with that? Letting these people die?”

“It’s not my fault they’re not ready,” he said, descending the staircase.

“Then help them!” Kate curled her body forward, and the heightened scream stopped him in his tracks. He turned to look up at her, and she frantically ran her fingers through her hair. “I don’t… I don’t know what to do. My daughter is sick. I don’t know if I should move her. I don’t know where to go.” As badly as they wanted to come, she denied the tears their fall. “If you know what’s going on, then tell people. If you have a way to save people, then save them.” She gripped the railing for support, fatigue suddenly catching up with her again. “A world where you’re by yourself isn’t much of a world to live in, is it?”

The man looked at his feet and shut his eyes. After a minute, the tension in his body relaxed, and he looked back up at her, his expression softened. “I guess not.” He stepped to the stair just below her so they met at eye level. “But you should know that the more people we take, the longer it will take us to get to the boat.” He pointed toward the hall. “And if everyone decides to come, I won’t be able to fit them on the boat in one trip. Time is an ally that we don’t have right now.”

“We give people the option,” Kate said. “If they want to come, we explain what’ll happen. If they don’t, well…”

“If they don’t, they’ll be wishing that they did.”

Kate nodded. “You’re probably right.”

“I’m Rodney.” He extended his hand, and Kate shook it.

“Nice to meet you.”

The pair lingered, and before they ascended the staircase, Rodney cleared

his throat. “If we’re all about being up front, then there’s something else I should tell you.” He wouldn’t look at her as he spoke. “After we get across the river, there still won’t be any help on the other side. What’s happened here is more than likely happening all over the country.”

“How is that even possible?” Mark asked. “Was it a bomb or something?”

“Kind of,” Rodney answered. “It’s a piece of a bomb, a nuclear bomb actually.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “We were nuked?”

“It was an EMP,” Rodney answered. “It’s a device that fries and renders anything with a circuit board useless, and in today’s world, that pretty much means everything. Cars, phones, computers, utility companies, they all run off computer circuits. The terrorist group responsible knew what they were doing.”

“How long?” Kate asked.

Rodney shook his head in confusion. “How long what?”

“How long until things get up and running again?”

Rodney chuckled to himself, and then the smile melted, and in its place was a hollowness that Kate had never seen in someone before. “Every decision that you make right now, that anyone makes now, will have ripple effects that extend for years.”

Kate reached for her wedding band. The metal was cold, almost freezing to the touch. “Then I guess we better make some good decisions.”

8

The emotions in the room rolled up and down like turbulence on a bad flight. Kate let Rodney take the lead, and she jumped in to help corral the masses when he couldn't reel them in. He told them exactly what he had told her and stressed the importance of leaving.

Kate watched the varied expressions of the people in the crowd. They ranged from fear to skepticism, from uncertainty to disbelief.

"So you're saying that the power is never coming back on?" a woman asked.

"I'm saying it's going to be a long time before we're back to anything normal," Rodney answered.

"But those terrorists in the streets," a man said. "They're just killing people. How are we supposed to fight that? They have guns."

A general murmur of agreement flooded through the room, and Kate noticed that Rodney was getting frustrated. She stepped in before he made a tense situation worse.

"Listen, everyone," Kate said, and the room hushed. "You know everything we do. We're not holding any details back. Leaving is a risk, but staying might be a bigger one. We don't know what's across the river and what we'll face, but we know what's here, and it's only going to become more dangerous." She looked to Rodney then back to the crowd. "My family is going with him, and he's leaving within the hour. If you want to come, then raise your hand. But we need to know now."

The room shifted and swayed. Hands fidgeted, lips were bitten, and

tongues whispered in ears. At first, no one moved. Groupthink had taken over in the form of hesitation. And then, finally, a hand rose in the back, which Kate was quick to point out.

“That’s one. Anybody else?”

More glances between people, more whispers, and then another hand shot up on the left. Two more on the right. Three in the middle. Then one in the front. Kate waited until the division in the room grew uncomfortable.

“All right then,” Rodney said. “Everyone who raised their hands, please come up front.”

The door opened in the back, and a slow leak drained the room of everyone that was staying at the complex. Kate watched them go, pairs talking to one another. She saw mouthed expressions of “they’re crazy to go out in that” and “it can’t really get much worse” and “they’ll get shot the moment they step out of the building.”

With so many people staying and so few coming with them, Kate questioned her decision. Wasn’t the best course of action in a survival situation to stay put and wait for rescue? Everything she was doing now was against her flight training in a crash-land situation.

But there was no black box for this, no hidden beacon switch that she could flip to notify the Coast Guard. This was all instinct, and despite the walkout, after everyone had gone and she saw the eight people that had stayed, she felt calmed.

“Don’t bring anything perishable, not unless you’re going to eat it today,” Rodney said. “Water bottles, blankets, any medicines that you have should come with. But you don’t want to overpack. Remember that everything you bring you must carry. Overpacking can slow you down and hurt you in the long haul. And we can probably forage for food along the way.”

“Forage? What are we, Yogi Bear looking for a picnic basket?” the middle-aged man with a receding hair line scoffed. He turned to the rest of the group, the gold necklace dangling from his black turtleneck swaying with his movements. He had thick eyebrows and a pronounced brow, most likely from Eastern European ancestry.

“What he means is stealing.” A young woman spoke up. Short blond hair styled in a pixie cut framed a pretty face. She had blue eyes, and even with the gloomy winter weather that had plagued the city for the past month, she still had the remnants of a tan.

Rodney held up his hands. “That’s not—”

“Of course that’s what you’re suggesting.” The Eastern European man crossed his arms. “If we are going out there, it’s best to use plain English. We’re not going to have time for subtext or feelings when shit hits the fan.”

Kate stepped in, but Rodney stopped her, nodding. “He’s right.” He addressed the crowd, and everyone stiffened. “We’re all going to have to get used to doing things we don’t want to do. Things that before the EMP went off may have been considered illegal.” He looked at the man who’d made the comment. “But when it comes down between us staying alive and someone else, we need to understand that it’s us.”

“But not at all costs,” Kate said, uncrossing her arms. “We lose ourselves, and we’re no different than the people tearing apart the city.” She leveled Rodney with a mother’s gaze. “We help who we can.”

“And what if someone decides to help themselves to her?” Rodney pointed at the young woman with the pixie cut, and she jumped. “You want her blood on your hands? I know I don’t.” He dropped his hand and addressed the small crowd. “I want to make one thing very clear: My main goal is to survive. I could have left, and I almost did, but I stayed to find people to join me. I recognize that there is strength in numbers, but other people will have that strength too. And when push comes to shove, I will act to protect my interests and the interests of the people around me.” He turned back to Kate. “Anyone who has a problem with that should stay behind.”

Kate opened her mouth, but she felt Mark’s familiar hand on her wrist, and she turned back to him. He gently shook his head. And as he did, she pulled away from him, crossing her arms, but remained silent.

“All right then.” Rodney finished addressing the crowd and instructed them to head toward their apartments, gather the supplies he had spoken about, and meet back here in thirty minutes.

“How do we know how long thirty minutes is?” the girl with the pixie cut asked, holding up her dead phone. “Nothing’s working, remember?”

“Good point,” Rodney said, exhaling, tapping his foot. “Um, I don’t know, just—”

“Give us your apartment numbers,” Kate said. “We’ll swing by to get everyone on our way down. Just make sure you pack everything quickly. And that way we can have Rodney scan your apartment to see if there was anything he might think would be useful that we missed.”

“Yeah,” Rodney said. “Good idea.”

Kate used a scrap sheet of paper and pen from a desk drawer in the

corner. A business center was tucked away in the rec room's corner, which basically boiled down to nothing more than a computer and a printer, not that either of them had worked before the EMP.

EMP, Kate thought. It felt ridiculous to say, but from Rodney's description, it was anything but funny. Some invisible blast wave had brought the whole country to its knees. It really was like flipping a switch. Only the switch flipped one way.

The crowd dispersed, mumbling, after Kate collected the apartment numbers, but she noticed the air of hopefulness in their words. She even saw a smile crack over the blond girl's face at something the old man had said.

"I need to go back to my apartment," Rodney said. "I'm willing to bet not everyone will have a suitable pack to carry their supplies. I know I've got at least one spare I can loan out."

"We're apartment 3563," Kate said. "Come up when you're done, and we'll start working our way down. We'll try and pack quickly."

"Yeah. Okay."

And with that, Rodney left, leaving Kate and Mark alone in the rec room. Mark kept his gaze on the tips of his shoes, shuffling his feet like a kid in trouble. "Don't be mad."

"Be mad about what?" Kate asked, shrugging exaggeratedly. "Over the fact that you don't seem to mind going to whatever lengths are necessary?"

"To keep us alive," Mark answered, finally tilting his face up toward hers. He pointed toward her clothes and her face and her hair. "Look at you! Look at what happened on your way here! People just left you to die!" He spun in a half circle and paced away, shaking his head. "If it comes down to picking between strangers or my family, then I pick family every time."

"And you think I wouldn't?" Kate asked. "Mark, I would do anything for you and Holly and Luke. But if we walk out there thinking that everyone we see is out to get us, then we're not going to make it down the block!" Her voice thundered in the room, and Mark flinched. "How long until we turn on each other? How long until we sacrifice somebody we know to save ourselves? I saw people do that on the way here, and I know you think you can use that as an excuse to do that in return, but that doesn't make it right." The tension in her body slackened, and she leaned back against the table that had been set up in the front of the room. The manager had set out bottled water for people to drink. Not a single person had taken a bottle when they left. She grabbed one and gave it a squeeze. "They really don't know how

bad it’s going to get.”

“What?” Mark asked. “Honey, I can’t hear you.”

Kate walked to her husband and ran her hands through his hair. “I wouldn’t have made it here without help, and we need to remember that. I don’t want us to get lost out there. Right now there are too many people that are.”

Mark kissed her lips. When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers, both their eyes still closed. “We won’t. I promise.”

IT TOOK Rodney five seconds to find the extra pack that he kept in his closet, but he found himself returning to the window where he’d watched the city descend into chaos. The snow hadn’t let up, and the weather blocked his view of the ground below. He remembered the last weather forecast he had heard before the power went out. He checked it every morning for both the city and upstate New York.

A blizzard was on its way down from the northwest. It’d arrive in two days, and it brought with it a projected snowfall of ten to twelve feet. It would make roads impassable and bury anything that was caught in it. He had to get to the cabin before that happened. But with the number of people now hitched to his wagon, it would slow him down.

Kate’s words lingered in his mind. In a perfect world, he knew that she was right, but what had descended on them was anything but a perfect world. It was cold, and vicious, and it would take without asking from them, so why should they grant any leniency in return?

Rodney kicked the leg of his sofa and grunted. He should have just left when he had the chance. For him, the meeting had been nothing but a showing of weakness. And he wasn’t sure if it was worth it. The woman was clever, sure, and he could always use the added muscle of manpower. Except for the old man, there were now four added men in their group, all of whom looked healthy.

There was still a chance for him to leave. He could dart down the staircase before anyone was the wiser. After all, they were waiting on him.

And it wasn’t like he couldn’t get the boat together by himself. He’d already run through this drill a hundred times.

But every time he got close to leaving, every time he was on the verge of forsaking the people in their moment of need, he stopped. A well-worn line had formed in the carpet as he paced nervously.

The spare backpack slouched lazily by the front door. Rodney stared at it then looked back out the window. Nothing but a sheet of white and grey outside now. The buildings next door were barely visible. If he was going to lead these people through the city, then that meant he was responsible for their well-being. That weighed on him more than anything else. If they died, then their blood was on his hands.

And could he wash it off after it had been spilled? Could he handle that heavy a burden? Doubt crept into his mind. It nagged at him, pulling him toward the door. *Leave,* it whispered. *You don’t need these people. They’re only going to slow you down. And you need to move fast.*

“But they’ll die if they don’t get out of the city,” Rodney said, not even noticing he was speaking aloud.

And what about the supplies at the cabin? You have enough to last years, but only by yourself. The more people show up, the more they’ll consume. If everyone survives the journey, you won’t last a year. And do you really think that all of this is going to get sorted out in a year?

“No.” Rodney rubbed his eyes, a hot swell of panic rising inside him. The conflict pulled him harshly in both directions. The whispers grew louder, more violent, more panicked.

Just go! Run! Leave them! You want to live? Then go, go, go!

“AHH!” Rodney slammed his fist against the wall, which rattled and knocked a picture frame to the hardwood, face down. A harsh crack sounded as it made contact, and Rodney muttered a curse as he shook his hand in fatigue.

When he turned the picture over, bits of glass lingered on the floor. Rodney carefully brushed away the glass and then removed the picture from inside.

It was the only photo in the entire apartment, and looking at it now, he felt guilty that he hadn’t even considered bringing it with him.

The picture consisted of an eight-year-old Rodney and his father. Both were decked out in fishing gear, covered in matching rubber suspenders used for fly fishing, compliments of his mother.

The little boy in the picture smiled from ear to ear, struggling to hold the trout with both hands. It was his first fish, and his father gave a big thumbs up, laughing. Whenever he thought of his dad, he could never picture him not laughing. He was a big man with a big heart.

But sometimes it was too big.

His father had owned a construction company, and while he did good work, he was too lenient with his accounts receivable. People brought their sob stories to him, and he would cut them slack every time. That pattern had bankrupted his company and nearly put his family on the streets.

At the time, Rodney was too little to really understand what was happening. His mother told him the details years later but said never to mention it to his father. He was ashamed of what had happened, well, more embarrassed than ashamed.

A few years ago, Rodney had finally racked up the courage to ask. He and his father were on one of their fishing trips, and they'd returned to the cabin with a string of trout. It was a quiet evening, and the sunset had painted the sky a magnificent array of blues and oranges. Mountains and treetops greeted the sky on the horizon, and a cool breeze offered enough chill in the air to make it cold.

"You never told me we were almost homeless." Rodney had blurted it out, just like that, and his father froze in mid-scaling of one of his trout.

"It's not something I like to talk about, son." He kept his head down, concentrating on his fish, finished it, then picked up another one.

"You're always telling me that there are ways to learn from failure," Rodney said, doing his best not to try and sound like he was mocking his father. He noticed the muscle around his father's jaw twitching from annoyance. "So what happened?"

His father laughed, flicking off a spray of scales that speckled the front porch. "What happened was people didn't do what they said they were going to do." He worked the fish more vigorously. "People will say anything to get off the hook. The parasites will suck you dry if you let them." He turned, pointing the knife toward his son. "You hear me?" His voice thundered, and Rodney flinched, recoiling into his seat.

"Yeah, Dad," Rodney answered.

His father's anger was something Rodney had seen only a handful of times over the course of his life. Most of them were reserved for when Rodney had done something bad. But after a minute, his father's expression

softened, and he dropped the knife and the fish back into the bucket. He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head.

"The older you get, the less you can see the world in black and white." His father looked out toward the forest as he spoke. "For a long time, I thought that doing the right thing meant doing the right thing for everybody. But if you do that, it'll drain you, and you'll have nothing left for the stuff that really matters." He turned to Rodney. "Like family."

"You're a good dad," Rodney said. "Best one I've ever had." He grinned, and his father belted out one of his boisterous chuckles.

The smile lingered, though his voice didn't match his expression. "There's nothing wrong with helping people, Rodney. In fact, it can be one of the best feelings in the world. But you should get to a point where you can recognize the difference between someone who really needs help and someone who's using you." The smile was gone now. "It was something I never learned how to do."

They were words Rodney had remembered well, and it was a lesson he took to heart. But after a long pause, his father added more.

"You have to take care of yourself first. Because if you can't do that, then you sure as hell can't take care of anyone else. And once you have a family, you take care of them next, and then you widen that circle to friends, and then strangers." He rubbed together hands that had grown knobby with arthritis, though at the time there was another invisible enemy attacking his father from the inside. "But don't be cynical. I lost a lot of money, but most of the people that I helped really did need it, and one of them even helped me find a job after it was over. Keep the faith, Rodney. Don't lose hope."

A tear splattered on the trout in the picture, and Rodney wiped at his eyes before another fell. He collapsed back onto his couch and sobbed silently. Six weeks later, his father had been gone. Cancer. It had gotten into his blood marrow and spread like wildfire. It was quick enough that he didn't feel much pain at the end but not so quick that he escaped all of it.

His father had always been a big man, but by the time he passed, he'd lost nearly one hundred pounds. Nothing but bones and skin and sullen, sunken eyes. Six months later, his mom passed. Heart failure. Both of them wanted to be cremated, and Rodney spread their ashes at the cabin.

With no siblings and no other real family to speak of (Rodney's dad had a brother who had some children over in Colorado, but he'd met them only twice), Rodney was left on his own. He'd sold his parents' house but kept the

cabin and then used the money that they'd left him to live comfortably on his own in New York. But now people needed help. He was prepared with more than he needed.

Rodney folded the photo and shoved it into his pocket, where he felt the cool of a metal. He tugged a chain, the silver retreating from his pocket in a thin line until it removed a pocket watch. It had belonged to his father.

The front of the watch had an engraving. *Be better.*

It was his father's creed. He used it to challenge himself, to challenge the people around him, and to challenge his son. Rodney pocketed the watch, and then checked his face in the mirror and waited until his eyes were no longer red then grabbed the spare backpack as he shut the door on his way out.

MARK WAS busy helping Holly pack while Kate sifted through the cupboards. They didn't have much in the way of canned goods, but she found some trail mix and protein bars that she added to their food pile. Hopefully it was enough to keep them fed until they got to… well, wherever the hell they were going.

Kate had thought about that a lot since the meeting. They had a way to cross the river, but after that, then what? If this was as widespread as Rodney believed it was, then how was she supposed to get in contact with Luke?

"All right," Mark said, stepping out of Holly's bedroom. "I think I've packed up everything she needs, so I'm going to put a bag together for us. You think we should try and take the rolling luggage?"

Kate picked up one of the protein bars and then dropped it. "I don't know." She leaned against the counter, staring at the food. "What are we going to do when we cross?" She looked up. "What if it really is the whole country?"

"I think Rodney is just exaggerating," Mark answered. "There's no way these people could have done this to everyone, right?" He walked toward her and kissed her. "Let's not jump to conclusions."

"Yeah," Kate replied, exhaling. "You're right."

"And I'm sure that Luke is fine." Mark rubbed her arms. "I know that

you’re worried about him. But he’s a smart kid.”

“Yeah.” Kate pulled back, biting her lower lip. “First thing we do when we cross the river is find a working phone.”

A knock at the door made them both jump, and Mark answered it. Rodney stepped inside, his pack already strapped to his back and the extra bag in his hand.

“You guys ready?” he asked. “The weather’s getting worse by the minute, and it’s going to be hard getting the boat across in this.”

“Just finishing up.” Mark disappeared into the room, and Kate rummaged through the rest of the cabinets.

“Everything I found I put on the counter,” Kate said, her back to Rodney as she pushed aside a bag of rice. “Anything you’d recommend bringing?” He didn’t answer, and she turned around, finding him at the counter, staring at her. She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Rodney answered. “Something that I held back when I was talking to the group.”

Kate crossed her arms. “What is it?”

“After we cross the river, I’m not staying anywhere near the city.” Rodney spoke slowly. “I have a cabin in upstate New York. I’ve outfitted it with enough supplies to last me years on my own. I have access to fresh water and good hunting and fishing. I also have medical supplies and enough space to fit six others.”

Kate shook her head slightly in disbelief. “What are you saying? You’re going up there to hide?”

“I’m going up there to survive. And anyone who is interested in doing that is more than welcome.”

“You’re acting like the world is ending.”

“That’s because it is,” Rodney said. “It could take years for the country to rebuild.”

“Why are you assuming the worst?”

“Why are you not?” Rodney stepped around the counter. “You saw what’s out there. You’ve seen what people are like when they panic, and the panic isn’t over. Highly populated areas are going to be the worst. Look, we don’t have to stay at the cabin forever, but for at least a month until things settle down. Then we poke our heads out and see what’s happening.”

Kate’s stomach soured, and she felt a warm sensation crawl up her throat. “This can’t be happening.” Before, it had all been just talk, but now somehow

it felt more real, more violent, deadlier. “You really think it will be that bad?”

“Not *will be*, Kate,” Rodney said. “*Is*.”

The young man had seemed to age a decade in the time that had passed since their last conversation. Mark reappeared from their room with his rolling luggage, and when Kate looked at him, he let go of the handle.

“What’s wrong?” Mark asked.

Rodney looked down to the roller in his hands and tossed him the spare pack. “Use that instead.” He paused. “You’ll want to have your hands free.”

9

Kate kept close to Mark and Holly on their descent. Every few floors, they stopped and collected the rest of their group. Rodney checked their supplies, scanned their rooms, and they moved on. It was quick, efficient, calculated.

One personal item, that was all anyone was able to take. Whatever held the most value and could be stashed away in their pack. The rest was food, water, and medicine. The advice was met with groans, eye rolls, and pleading, but in the end, everyone listened. Partly because Kate had backed him up.

Kate's experience on the street, combined with her career as a pilot, had given her clout with the group. Leadership had been thrust upon Rodney and Kate equally, and nothing passed without their approval. Whenever Rodney suggested something, everyone looked to Kate to confirm and vice versa.

Once the group was collected and all the gear and supplies were sorted out, they descended to the first floor. Beyond the walls of the building, the winter winds howled with a ferocity that sent a shiver down everyone's back.

A ball of anxiety grew in Kate's belly. It rumbled and protested with every step down, but she pushed past it.

Rodney stopped at the door at the bottom of the stairwell and then turned to the huffing and puffing crowd behind him. "All right. You keep your eyes on me." He reached into his pack and handed out the rope that they'd all be tied to. It was a method that mountain climbers used to keep each other safe and accounted for. "And you keep at my pace. You move where I move. You run when I run. And you stop when I stop. You're my shadows, got it?"

Everyone nodded, the group scattered in a broken line. Glen, the old man with liver spots on his head, and Laura, the girl with the blond pixie haircut, were directly behind Rodney, followed by Barry, the Eastern Europe man. Then it was an older couple from the tenth floor, Stephen and Jen, followed by a young married couple from the nineteenth, Kit and Sarah. And then Holly, Mark, and Kate brought up the caboose.

"I have a few alternate routes in case we run into trouble," Rodney continued. "It'll take us longer, but it'll keep us safe." He held up the rope once everyone was secure. "I cannot stress this enough: do not deviate from the group. You try and pull us one way when I'm going another, and we fall. And if we fall out there, we might not get back up."

Holly sneezed and then coughed, and Kate instinctively reached up and pressed the back of her hand to her daughter's forehead. The girl was burning up.

"Everyone ready?" Rodney asked.

Nervous nods responded in answer.

"All right then," Rodney said, turning toward the stairwell door. "Let's go."

The door opened, and they passed through the lobby in a blur. A crowd was huddled inside to weather the storm, all of them people who didn't live in their building but were seeking a place to hide. Kate didn't see their faces as she passed, but she felt their stares as they left.

Outside, the air froze Kate's lungs, and she'd forgotten how bitterly cold it was. The chill ran through everyone, even stiffening the rope.

A blanket of white cascaded from the sky, and Rodney was forced to slow his pace to a crawl as wind whipped from the left, forcing Kate to shield her eyes from the heavy flurries with her arm.

Visibility dropped to less than a few feet, but Kate recognized some of the street signs they passed. There were even people still in their cars, waiting out the weather. Kate locked eyes with a woman in a passenger seat, holding a little boy. A man, presumably her husband, sat in the driver's seat. She only got a glimpse of the woman's face as they passed before the snow blocked them from view, but she saw envy in the woman's eyes. Envy of her movement, envy of the sight of action, envy because they looked like a group who knew where to go in the middle of a city that had no idea how to react.

Except for Rodney, most of the group kept their heads down on their march uptown. Rodney had warned them that it would take a few hours, but

none of them, Kate included, had really understood just how far and how strenuous that trek would be in the cold. It took less than twenty minutes before they were forced to stop.

“I’m sorry!” Glen yelled above the howl of the wind as he leaned against the side of a building. Snot had frozen to his upper lip, and he kept coughing. “It’s my lungs. Used to be a smoker.” The parts of his cheeks that weren’t covered with frost were cherry red.

“It’s important not to overdo it,” Rodney said, shouting at the group over another whistling howl. “Once you stretch yourself beyond the point of fatigue, you’re doing more harm than good.” He glanced around and then turned back to the group. “But if we have to stop every twenty minutes like this, it’s going to take until nightfall to reach the docks, and we’ll freeze to death by then.”

Glen nodded, taking the hint, and pushed himself off the side of the building. “All right. I think I’m better now.”

And so they trudged on against the winter storm. Kate kept checking on Holly, though she couldn’t see her daughter’s face beneath the cover of the ski goggles and the scarf.

“You all right, sweetie?” Kate asked, no longer able to feel her nose anymore.

“Yeah,” Holly answered, her voice muffled through the scarf. She kept hold of her father’s hand, and she looked up at him. “Dad, if I get tired, will you carry me?”

“Of course, baby.”

A vicious crack thundered through the air, more metallic than the natural howl of the wind, and they stopped.

“What was that?” Mark asked.

Kate shook her head, her eyes never leaving the back of Rodney’s head. “I don’t know! It sounded like—”

Gunfire exploded to her left, and a harsh tug at Kate’s waist yanked her feet from beneath her. She smacked hard onto the concrete, the contact made worse by the harsh cold.

Shock rippled through Kate’s body, a sharp pain radiating from her left hip where she’d landed. She gasped breathlessly, her view from the ground nothing but white sheets of snow. Before she had time to think or check on Mark and Holly, another vicious tug from the rope pulled her backward, and Kate flailed her arms against the concrete to try and gain any traction.

The scream came from up front, and Kate saw nothing but the flailing arms and limbs of their poor conga line, her eyes glued to the back of Mark's head.

Kate crawled toward her family, but a gust of wind blasted snow on her right side and knocked her off balance. Her heart pounded wildly, and she blinked away the snowflakes collecting in her lashes, which melted and stung her eyes. She wiped her cheeks and scrambled to her hands and knees. The tips of her boots and her gloved hands slipped wildly over the sidewalk as she reached for Mark and Holly, who squirmed on the ground.

Kate screamed and clutched Holly's arm as Mark floundered on his back. A million scenarios raced through her mind. Mark was shot. Holly was shot. They were bleeding, they'd broken something, they were dying.

"Holly! Holly, are you all right?" Kate cupped her daughter's face, still unable to hear her own words. She pulled down the scarf that covered her daughter's mouth and saw that she was screaming something, but her lips were moving too fast. "What?"

A hand jerked Kate's shoulder. She jumped and saw Mark propping himself up on his side. She looked ahead to their group that looked like nothing more than huddled clumps of white struggling to get up. But she saw one person remain on the ground.

A woman hovered over the body. She shook it violently, but the individual didn't respond. More people gathered around them. One of them was Rodney. He was pointing somewhere, trying to pull the woman away from the person on the ground. *The body on the ground*, Kate thought.

Muted thuds echoed in the distance, and everyone shuddered. But Kate couldn't take her eyes off the man on the ground and, more importantly, the woman who wouldn't leave his side. Rodney was suddenly by Kate's side, shaking her shoulders. She looked up at him, the howl of the wind creeping back into her ears along with his mute screaming.

"Kate, we have to go!" He pulled her up and cut her rope.

As they passed, Kate heard the woman's hysterical screaming. Heads turned to look down at the scene, and Kate noticed the patches of crimson mixed with the snow.

It was Kit and Sarah. A red slush had formed around Kit's head, which was slowly being covered by new snowfall. Sarah howled, her shrieks matching the high-pitched ferocity of the wind. Kate kept her head turned behind her as Rodney and Mark led her away from the scene, and she

watched Sarah lay her head on her husband’s stomach until their figures disappeared amongst the sheets of white.

But long after they had separated themselves from the scene, and long after in the years of recovery, Kate would still hear that woman’s screams whenever there was a harsh wind. It was a warning, a bleeding memory that left a scar she’d always carry.

10

Rodney pressed forward, pulling what remained of his team of survivors through the storm. It had been several blocks since he'd heard gunfire, and while some of the group might have kept their eyes behind them, Rodney kept his eyes forward. He had to. If he didn't, then they'd all die.

The shooters were everywhere. Rodney chalked up the man's death to a freak accident, a stray bullet. It wasn't his fault. And he'd warned them it would be dangerous. He hadn't forced any of them to come. No, it wasn't his fault. It wasn't—

"Rodney, stop!" Kate grabbed hold of his shoulder and spun him around. The others were behind her, huffing and puffing breaths of icy air. "I've been calling you for the past block."

Rodney noted the haggard looks on everyone's faces. He could see them better now. The snowfall had stopped, but the residual frost on everyone's face told the story of the powerful storm.

"We need a break," Kate said, gesturing toward the group. "Just a few minutes to thaw."

"The storm's over," Rodney said. "Now's the time to gain some ground."

"And we'll gain more ground if people can move without wanting to collapse every five seconds," Kate said. "Don't push past the point of fatigue, remember?"

Rodney looked back to the group. They swayed back and forth like trees ready to be felled. It would only take another chop of an axe to knock them down. Rest wasn't a bad idea.

“All right,” Rodney said. “But only for a few minutes. I don’t want us to get caught in that bad weather again.” He glanced down the streets, noting the lack of people outside. “Of either variety.” He wasn’t sure if the rest of the group grasped what he meant, but Kate understood.

A Thai restaurant was the first door that opened, and inside they found three Asian women huddled in the back. Rodney lifted his hand in an attempt at a friendly wave, and after a moment’s hesitation, they reciprocated.

The shortest girl approached as they all took seats at the tables near the window. Even though the power was off, it was noticeably warmer than outside.

“Nothing’s working, but…” The girl twisted her hands together nervously. She couldn’t have been older than twenty. “We have water and drinks. Cold drinks, obviously.”

“Water would be great,” Rodney said. “Thank you.” They held eye contact for just a half second longer than normal, and then she smiled and spun around quickly. And for a moment he tried to catch his reflection in the mirror to see what he looked like.

“Rodney.” Kate nudged him again and then pulled him a few steps away from the rest of the group, who’d already collapsed in their chairs. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “How much farther to the docks?”

Rodney wiped his face, flicking off bits of snow and frost. “If we keep at the pace we were and the weather continues to agree with us, it shouldn’t take longer than forty minutes.”

Kate nodded, but her lips twitched.

“What?” Rodney asked.

“Now might be a good time to talk about the cabin and a plan for what happens after we cross the river,” Kate answered. “Especially after what happened with…” She trailed off, shutting her eyes. “Oh my god, I don’t even remember their names.”

“Kit,” Rodney said. “And Sarah.”

“Right.” Kate sighed and dropped her shoulders.

The young Asian woman returned with bottled water and handed them out to the group. She smiled at Rodney again as she passed, and this time Rodney watched her leave.

“Hey,” Kate said, smacking his chest. “You can get her number another time.”

“That’s not likely,” Rodney muttered under his breath.

“C’mon.” Kate pulled them back over to the group, and she rejoined her family.

Rodney noticed that Kate’s daughter was shivering. She sipped water and wheezed between gulps. Her father handed her a pill, and she swallowed it reluctantly. Her lips were blistered with fever.

“Listen up,” Rodney said.

Heads rose halfheartedly.

“We need to talk about our next steps,” Rodney said. “After we get to the dock—”

“We just left them,” Laura said, her lip quivering as she quickly covered her mouth to muffle the light gasp.

Glen reached over and patted her shoulder. “It’s all right, young lady.”

Laura shrugged off his hand and threw her arms down by her sides in defiance. “No, it’s not all right!” She stood, trembling as she stared Rodney down. “You said it was better to leave. You said it was safer.”

“I also told you there would be risks,” Rodney said, a harsher bite to his tone than he had intended, then turned to what remained of their group. “I didn’t force anyone to come with me. In fact, I had planned on going alone.” He snarled and clenched his fists. “I thought I was helping people. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought… I thought…” His anger deflated, and he collapsed into the nearest chair. “If you want to blame me for what happened, then go ahead.”

“No one is blaming you,” Kate said, rising to his defense. “We all made the decision to leave.”

Laura lowered her head and sheepishly retreated to her chair. She pulled a napkin from the dispenser on her table. She wiped her nose and then crinkled the napkin into her fist. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” Rodney said, an air of petulance in his voice that he tried to mask with a smile that looked more annoyed than friendly. “Really.” He thumbed his nose and then leaned forward at the table. “What I’m about to tell you I already told Kate at the apartments before we left.”

Eyes widened and heads nodded aimlessly as Rodney told them everything. The cabin, the supplies, and how long he thought it would take before the rest of the country managed to pull themselves up by the bootstraps.

“Help isn’t going to come,” Rodney said. “Once we cross the river, we head north. It’s going to be a little cramped, but I can promise you it’s going

to be better than staying anywhere close to the city."

"We should go," Kate said, backing Rodney up again. "After everything we've seen and everything that's happened, it's a good idea."

Glen nodded. "I agree. And who is to say that the effects of this…" He turned to Rodney to make sure he was saying it correctly. "EMP? Didn't manage to travel that far north." He smiled. "We might be on our way to the Garden of Eden."

"Yeah," Rodney said. "If the Garden of Eden got to three below at night." He stood. "We have two days to get to the cabin before a bad northwestern storm dumps twelve feet of snow, because once it does it'll make finding the cabin like looking for a needle in haystack."

Everyone nodded, finished their waters, and chomped down on a quick snack of protein bars. As his group did that—he stopped to think about that for a moment. His group. It was even wilder than he could have imagined. He walked to the back of the restaurant, where he found the waitress who had served them.

"You guys are leaving?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thank you for the water though." And for some reason, Rodney gently took the girl's hands in his own. "If you can, you need to get out of the city. It's only going to get worse." He gestured to his group. "The bridges are gone, but you can come with us. I have a boat that can get across the river."

She looked at Rodney confused, and pulled her hands back. "I-I can't. My mother, she's at home. I can't leave her."

Rodney nodded. "The power isn't coming back on, if that's what you guys were waiting for." He backed away. "I don't know if it'll ever come back on." He spoke the words more to himself as he distanced himself from her. "The tunnels might be open, but it'll be risky to use them. Be careful."

"Wait." The waitress followed a few steps as Rodney reached the door. "Where are you going? Why don't you think the power is coming back on? Who are you?"

Rodney stopped at the door, feeling the frigid blast of the weather outside. A tiny bell jingled. He looked back at the girl, and for the first time in his life since he had moved to the city, he found himself desperately wishing to remember a face in a sea of the faceless.

Six months from now, he wanted to find this little Thai shop and get a table and have her be his waitress. She'd laugh, he'd laugh, they'd get dinner and they'd date, and they'd be happy.

“Gather as much nonperishable food and water as you can,” Rodney said, and then he was out the door, gathering his group together for the last portion of their trek to the boats.

The sun was trying to peek out from behind the grey clouds above, and for a moment the whole city was peaceful, blanketed under a sheet of white as though it had been put to bed and tucked in for the night.

But it wouldn’t be peaceful for much longer. Violence would come like the storm lingering in the northwest with an unforgiving force that would do everything in its power to crush them into dust.

Rodney thought of the girl and her smile, and suddenly that only made the foreboding worse.

KATE KEPT her head on a swivel for the rest of the journey. Every once in a while, a high-pitched whine filled her ears, and she’d wince in pain. Residual noise from the gunshots that she hoped wasn’t permanent.

Walking around the city that had just been blanketed with snow made it less intimidating. All of the cracks and dirt and trash that normally littered the ground were covered with a cleansing whiteness. But every once in a while, there would be a scream or a shatter of glass or a gunshot, and that façade of safety would crumble.

It was all some type of joke, a sick, cruel joke with a punch line that only the terrorists who did this understood. The type of joke whispered at secret meetings. It was the type of joke that was told by no one with a sense of humor and left people joyless.

“Unbelievable,” Kate muttered to herself. She stared down at her boots as she shuffled through the slush. Every step disrupted the fresh white powder and churned up the black dirt underneath. Their group left lines of grey and black in the snow, like snails on a sidewalk leaving behind their slime.

Slime like the parasites responsible for all of this. Kate imagined pouring salt on them, watching them wither into nothing. How many had already died because of them? How many more would die because of them?

Luke suddenly flooded her thoughts, and Kate tightened her grip on the

backpack straps. Her son was down in Virginia at school, alone, and if this problem in New York had really become a nationwide epidemic, then she just couldn't leave him down there alone. She had to make sure he was safe. But Rodney's plan pulled her in the opposite direction.

Kate racked her brain for a solution, but aside from walking down there herself, she had nothing. And it would take a week to travel that far on foot in this weather. If she could just find a car, any car that would work, she could—

A memory prickled in the back of her head. Last spring, before she had requested to be relocated to New York, she had been running a flight from Miami to Newark. It was a one-off, but the trip consisted of a two-day stay in New Jersey before she could fly home to Atlanta. The hotel concierge noticed Kate's wings when she checked in and told her about an airshow happening in a small town to the west of the city.

With a free day to kill, Kate decided to check it out and was blown away by what she saw. Apparently, it was the biggest airshow in the northeast. Planes and jets from all over the world converged for the event, and Kate couldn't help but admire all of the aviation history that had come before her.

And while there were plenty of modern jets and military craft at the event, there were even more older planes. Old prop engines that had flown for sixty or seventy years. Planes that were stripped of modern aviation equipment that the EMP had rendered useless.

If Rodney was right about the EMP and the computer chips, then all she needed to do was find a plane with hydraulic controls. She could make the trip down to Virginia in a few hours, then fly up and meet Mark and Holly at Rodney's cabin with Luke in tow. It was a long shot, but it was something.

Mark slowed his pace and sidled up next to Kate. "I think her temperature is getting worse."

Kate touched Holly's forehead. It was hot as a stovetop. "Yeah."

"Her body's like a little furnace. She's actually making me sweat."

"Should we wake her up and give her some more medicine?"

"No, let her rest. I gave her a dose before we left the restaurant."

Kate nodded and then looked toward what remained of their group. Rodney was up ahead in the lead, guiding them to the docks.

"Listen, when we cross, I'm going to an airfield," Kate said.

Mark stopped. "What?"

Kate pulled him back into stride with her. "I think Rodney is right. I think

that this… EMP has affected the entire country."

"You don't know that."

"Just listen." Kate placed her finger to her lips, and the pair tilted their ears toward the sky. "You hear that?"

"No," Mark answered.

"Exactly. No planes, no helicopters, nothing. It's been, what? Five or six hours since everything stopped working? If this was limited to New York, then there would be helicopters coming to the hospitals with supplies or to help evacuate critical patients. The Air Force would be sending jets over the city on patrol. But there's nothing."

"If you know that there aren't any planes working, then why the hell would you even try and go to the airfield?"

"If I can find a plane old enough, without any computer components, it might work."

Mark shook his head. "I don't like it, Kate. We need to stick together. Without any lines of communication, how are we supposed to keep track of one another?"

"I can have Rodney give me the coordinates of the cabin. Once I have Luke, I can meet up with you guys later."

Mark kept quiet. Whenever he shut down like that, she knew he was getting upset. The only way to get him out of that funk was to let him be, and so that's what she did.

And while her husband stewed, Kate reexamined her plan from every angle. She tried to recall the types of planes at the show and the owners who stored them in the hangars at the airfield. Fuel could be a problem, or at least retrieving it could be. Without power, the pumps were useless. She could siphon it so long as she could find some tubes to work with.

"Stop." Rodney spun around, arm extended like a crossing guard, and the group froze in their tracks. Then, after a minute, he gathered everyone close. "The docks are just down this road, but there is a big group of people there."

"How many?" Kate asked.

Rodney locked eyes with her. "More than we can take."

"So what do we do?" Mark asked, adjusting Holly on his shoulder. "The moment they see we have a working boat, they're going to be pissed."

"It looks like there's still a guard on duty, and they've kept the docks locked up." Rodney smiled in disbelief. "Who'd have thought of all the organizations, the New York Port Authority would have their shit together."

Angered chants drifted from the mob at the docks. “We move through them quickly. Don’t stop for anything.”

Nervous nods answered in response, but Kate kept her eyes glued to the people searching for escape. They were no different than herself.

“If they charge, there is enough of them to bust down the gates,” Rodney said. “If that happens, run. I’m the last slip on the dock. I’m going to move quickly, so you have to keep up.” He paused. “We can’t wait on anyone. Got it?”

More nervous nods, and then they walked to the city.

11

The chants grew louder on their approach to the docks, and Kate was suddenly reminded of the metro, the expressions of confusion, pain, and anger. She remembered the woman who'd fallen from the rail and smacked against the pavement—the sound had been so dull and ominous, and the unsettling silence that followed after her scream was cut short.

The crowd numbered around twenty. They huddled at the gated entrance and latched onto the chain-link fence, which swayed back and forth from the crowd's weight. The posts shook, but the fence held.

Everyone followed close behind as Rodney approached the dead center of the mob outside the gated entryway. Kate's heart rate quickened as they all shouldered their way through, and the deeper they penetrated the group, the more stares bored into the back of her head.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

Because she was in the back, the shout drew closest to Kate, but she kept her eyes forward like Rodney had instructed. They were stopped now, and while the chanting had died down when they first arrived, the angered murmuring hadn't.

The guard at the post approached the gate, reaching for his keys, and bodies were suddenly pressed into Kate's back, shoving her forward and smashing her into Mark.

"Hey, they're letting them in!"

"Give us a ride across!"

"Help us! Please!"

Kate's feet were driven forward against her own will, and she saw Holly awake on her father's shoulder. She was squeezing him tight, tears leaking from her eyes. Kate reached for her daughter's hand. "It's all right, Holly. We're okay."

"Let us in! Let us in!"

The mob pinned them against the gate, and Holly screamed.

"Stop it!" Kate rammed an elbow into a gut behind her, and for a moment, the pressure of the bodies slamming against her subsided. She spun around, shoving people back, but the mob didn't let up.

The gate swung open, and Rodney jumped onto the docks. Mark grabbed Kate and pulled her through the opening, and Kate watched as the mob flooded after her, filling the empty space where she had stood. The gate swung closed just as the bodies smashed against the mesh.

Fingers prodded through the holes, and the fence buckled from the mob's weight. Faces and bodies were mashed against the metal. Everyone's expressions faded from anger to desperation.

"Please!" Lips and mouths pleaded. "Help us."

Kate was pulled along the dock but kept her eyes on the faces she was leaving behind. Faces of those who wanted to survive. And then she heard the scream of an infant.

"Wait!" Kate yanked her arm free and stepped toward the fence.

"Kate, what are you doing?" Mark asked. "We have to go!"

"I heard something," Kate said, her eyes glued to the bodies on the fence. "I thought I heard—" And then she saw it. A woman was gently rocking a bundle in her arms. Her face was the only one not focused on their group. Like a mother, her attention was on the baby.

"Rodney!" Kate sprinted across the dock, the wooden boards groaning beneath her feet, then splintering as she skidded to a stop. She pressed her hands against Rodney's chest. "They have a baby."

"Kate, we don't have room." He tried to sidestep her, but she blocked him.

"We can't leave those people here," Kate said. "We have to help them."

"How?" Rodney asked. "How in the hell are we supposed to do that?" He pointed to the sailboat. "We can't fit more than ten at a time, and the moment we let those people through the gates, they'll sink us." Every word puffed another breath of icy air.

Kate looked up to the sky and then to Rodney. "The weather is holding.

We have enough time to make two trips, and two should be enough to get everyone across."

Rodney finally turned back to the fence and the bodies pressed against it. Kate couldn't see his face, but when he turned back around to face her, the hardened expression softened into something more akin to despair. "Kate, we can't save everyone."

"I know," Kate said and then stepped closer. "But let's save the ones we can."

Rodney sighed with exhaustion and looked back to the people behind the fence. After a moment, he nodded. "All right, listen up!"

The plan was simple. The guard would let the people inside at a trickle, with the understanding that the kids go first. Each kid would have one parent escort, and after Rodney was on the other side of the river, he'd come back for everyone else.

"It's important everyone understand what that means," Rodney said. "It means that anyone who doesn't have a child stays on this side, and even if you do, the parents decide who goes with the kid." He turned to Kate and Mark. "You guys let me know who's staying."

Rodney disappeared to the front gate, and after he arrived, the angered murmurs slowly morphed into cries of thanks and relief.

"You should go with her," Mark said, leaning close, his voice a whisper. "Rodney will probably want your help on the boat anyway."

"No, Daddy!" Holly clutched her father tight. "I want you to come with me."

Kate stood there like an outsider to her own family. Her daughter latched onto her father's shoulder, and no amount of prodding or persuasion was able to pull her off.

"Holly, sweetheart, it's okay."

"Please, don't leave me, Daddy." The plea had turned into sobs, and Holly shook her head, rubbing her face deeper into the shoulder of her father's coat. "Please, don't let me go."

"It's all right," Kate said. She gently placed her hand on Holly's back. "Daddy's gonna stay with you." She tossed Mark a glare before he could protest. "It's fine. I'll be fine." Kate kissed Mark's cheek and then went to help Rodney at the gate.

"It's all right, Frank," Rodney said. "I'm taking them on my boat."

"But what if they start to jump on the other vessels?" Frank asked, his

gaze switching between Rodney and the now-quiet mob at the front gate. “What happens—”

“We won’t touch anything.” The voice came from a man with his hands gripped through the chain mesh. “We just want to put our kids on the boat, get them out of here.” Stubble covered his chin and cheeks and looked as rough as his voice sounded. “C’mon, pal. My boy, he’s only six.”

The guard looked away, fiddling with the keys in his hand, and then stepped between Kate and Rodney and unlocked the gate then returned to his post without a word.

“I’m at the end,” Rodney said, gesturing the group to follow. “Kate, get me a head count.”

Kate nodded, silently prodding the air in the direction of the heads that passed. Twenty-three for the group, nine for the kids. It would be a crowded two trips.

There were a handful of people without children, and Kate made sure to keep an eye on them. They were more fidgety than the rest, and she didn’t want to have any unexpected accidents while everyone was getting on board.

The hull of Rodney’s vessel squeaked against the dock as the river water lapped lazily against it. It was like the water itself was so cold that it too had given way to any quick movement. The boat was small, and Kate understood why Rodney had been hesitant to take so many.

Goodbyes were said, and children were peeled away from mothers and fathers, crying, all save for one. Kate’s daughter was already nestled safely into the boat with Mark, her face tucked into his shoulder. Not once did she cry for her mother.

“Kate,” Rodney said, stepping off and pulling her aside. “Listen, a lot could change between now and the time I come back.” He handed her a pair of binoculars. “So you can keep an eye on us as we cross.”

Kate took them and then looked past Rodney to Mark, who was helping Holly protect her face from the wind. “How long will it take?”

“With this wind?” Rodney asked, looking to the sky. “Twenty or thirty minutes. But, hey.” He grabbed her arm and forced her attention back to him. “If the terrorists show up again and the dock is compromised, you need to take everyone farther north.” He looked up toward the shoreline. “There’s another dock about three blocks up. It’s private but easy to get to. The name of the building that it sits behind is the Regency.” He turned back toward her. “Take everyone there if things turn south here. If I come back and you’re not

here, I'll know where to go." He grabbed her other free hand and then covertly shoved a revolver into her palm. "In case things get bad."

Kate quickly hid the gun from sight, her body suddenly humming with nerves. "And what if the private dock doesn't work out?"

A smile crept over Rodney's face. "I could just toss these people in the river, and we could go across now." He held up his hands defensively. "If you want to, of course."

Kate couldn't hide the snicker and punched him in the shoulder. He reminded her of the younger brother she'd never had. "Be safe. All right?"

"You too."

The ropes were untied, and Kate and a few of the other parents helped shove off. Mark raised his arm and waved, though Holly kept herself tucked into a ball in his lap. Kate blew a kiss that he caught, and smiled.

The others had gathered at the end of the dock as well, arms waving back and forth, a desperation clinging to the cold winter air. It was a desperation lined with the hope of return, the hope of another chance, the hope of one more embrace.

But as the sails opened and caught the breeze, taking the small vessel across the icy waters of the Hudson, Kate heard loud claps in the city behind her. They were distant but ominous.

"Was that thunder?" a man asked, turning toward the sound.

Kate stepped forward, separating herself from the pack. She shook her head. "It's gunfire." And while the noise sounded far off, as time passed and the boat grew smaller, the gunfire became louder. Kate removed the small revolver, hoping she wouldn't have to use it.

12

Twenty-five minutes had passed since the boat left, and Rodney had nearly reached the other side. Which meant she had about that much time until they came back. And while there was relief at the fact that her family was away from danger, Kate couldn't shake the fear of being alone on this side of the river.

Of course there were the people still here, and while they all shared the same desire for safety and to be with their families, she didn't know them.

It was almost funny. Kate had lived in New York for six months, and over the course of the past eight hours, she had spoken to more strangers than she had the entire time she'd been here. And for a pilot who flew strangers around the world, that was saying a lot.

"Hey, thanks."

Kate turned at the nudging of her arm. She turned to find the woman she had let borrow the binoculars. "You're welcome."

The woman smiled sadly and then hugged herself, trying to stay warm. She was an older woman, probably in her mid-fifties. She had faded red hair that flowed long down her back, wound tightly into springy curls. Wrinkles and freckles covered her face in patterns that had somehow made her more attractive.

"How old is your son?" Kate asked, trying not to wince at the sound of the growing gunfire.

The woman looked toward the sound of the gunshots, then answered with her gaze lingering in the same direction. "Nine." She looked back to Kate.

“And your daughter?”

“She’ll be eleven next month,” Kate answered.

“Has she started the preteen phase yet?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Last week she said she was going to the movies with friends, and the way she said it, you would have thought she was going to ask to use my car to take them.”

Both women laughed, and it caught the attention of the others on the dock. Slowly, they gravitated toward the pair, and after a moment’s pause and awkward silence, Kate introduced herself. Putting names to faces always helped bring down walls.

The fifteen people that remained on the dock varied in age and sex. A little more than half were men, most of them the fathers of the children who had gone across. Three were women. Kate did her best to remember their names, but after their interaction, she only remembered a handful of them. The woman with the red hair stood out the most. She reminded Kate of a girl she had known in college.

It was the freckles and the hair and the way that she smiled. Kate’s friend had been sweet, smart, and reserved but also outlandishly crass upon occasion. Kate remembered one night during her sophomore year when the pair had streaked across their apartment complex with Halloween masks to hide their faces. They got quite a few honks and cheers out the window and more than one invitation for a sleepover. They circled back to their building and then dashed into the dorm. Of course that was before Luke was born. Before Dennis.

Kate had told Mark the story once, and she nearly spit out her wine when he asked if she wanted to do that with him. Which they did. On their honeymoon.

After college, Kate drifted apart from her red-haired, freckled friend. But today, somewhere beyond Manhattan, her friend was out there, wondering what the hell was going on. Maybe she was scared, maybe she was hurt, but Kate hoped that she wasn’t. She hoped that she was making the best of the situation just like she had always done. But above all, Kate hoped that she was safe.

A gunshot thundered, this one too close for comfort. The group stepped backward, the wood dock groaning under the mass retreat. People turned back to the river, searching in desperation for the boat.

“How much longer is he going to take before he gets back?”

“Can’t he go any faster?”

“They’re getting closer.”

Kate stepped in front of the group, holding up her hands. “He’s moving as fast and as safely as possible. But as a precaution, we should stand by the gate. If the terrorists arrive before Rodney returns, we’ll head to the second location.”

Exhalations followed Kate’s orders, and while everyone nodded in agreement, she tensed in preparation for the knife she was sure someone would stick in her back. And what was to stop them? They were strangers. Despite their good intentions, deep down, Kate started to feel the truth of what Rodney had warned.

Kate scanned the alleys between the buildings in front of the docks. The views only offered narrow glimpses into the streets. In a way, it was good, because the docks were kept hidden. It was why there were only a few dozen people at the gates instead of a few thousand.

Three more gunshots sounded, these slower than the automatic fire they’d heard before. Were there people fighting back? Kate latched onto the mesh of the chain-link fence.

People sprinted past the alleyways on the other side of the buildings, the gunfire reaching some crescendo, unintelligible screams echoing between blasts. Voices barked loudly in a language Kate didn’t understand. She turned back toward the river. Rodney had just turned the boat around.

“We don’t have enough time,” Kate whispered to herself.

The group of people in her charge kept their faces glued toward the screams and gunfire. Kate’s heart thumped quickly, and she grabbed their shoulders, pulling them toward her.

“Listen! We’re going to move to the secondary location,” Kate said.

“Are you crazy?” One of the men in the back shoved his way to the front. “Those people are out there, and they’re going to kill us!”

“If we stay on the docks, we’re sitting ducks,” Kate said, her tone sharp.

“Maybe they won’t see us?” a woman asked, a hint of skepticism to her voice. “Maybe they’ll just pass right by.”

“We can’t risk that.” Kate turned back toward the alleyway. People were heading north, which meant the gunmen were still to the south. “We need to go.”

“And why the hell is it your decision?” The voice accompanied a harsh shove, and Kate bounced into the fence, the wire mesh buckling and cradling

her as she looked at the big man staring her down. “Who put you in charge?”

“Hey, knock it off!” A woman and two other men stepped between the pair, but if the big man was nervous, he didn’t show it.

“No,” Kate said, pushing herself off the fence and adjusting her coat. “He’s right. I’m not in charge. I don’t have any real authority. But I can tell you that Rodney won’t let any of you get on board if he doesn’t see me.” She eyed the big man. “So if you want across that river, then I’d suggest you shut your trap and start moving, because I’m leaving.”

Kate reached for the gated door and swung it open, slipping down the fence as another round of gunfire spat into the evening air. It cracked loudly, echoing down the alleyways. Kate turned toward the sound just in time to watch the body collapse.

The distance and winter clothes made it hard to tell if it was a man or a woman. They wallowed on the ground, and their last gurgling breaths of life traveled down the alleyway.

Another person appeared, this one with a rifle tucked under their arm and a ski mask over their face. It aimed the weapon at the wounded person. Another gunshot. A yelp sounded behind Kate, and she turned to see one of the women covering her mouth, every group member looking on in horror.

The gunman shouted into the alley, and then three more armed terrorists were at his side.

“Run!” Kate sprinted just as the gunfire started. Her feet pounded the pavement, and adrenaline helped mask the fatigue and stiffness. She traversed the slick patches of pavement carefully, stealing glanced behind her to the group that followed. But with her eyes off the road, Kate landed on an ice patch and slipped.

A dull thud sounded as her ass greeted the pavement, and a sharp pain ran from her tailbone to the base of her neck. The cold numbed it quickly though, and the hot flash of pain dulled to a throbbing ache as she tried to stand. Then hands were suddenly on her shoulder and her arms, helping her off the ground.

“Are you all right?” The voice came from the red-haired woman.

“Yeah,” Kate answered, not the least bit convincingly, as she frowned and grimaced from the pain in her back. She stole a glance behind her as the others caught up, and her eyes widened in terror as she saw the three gunmen exit the alleyway near the docks. “We need to move!”

Kate hobbled forward, her speed half of what it had been prior to the fall,

and the herd of people shuffled forward. Gunfire chased them, and Kate refused to look back. Even when a cry bellowed to her right and she saw a body collapse in the periphery, Kate kept her eyes forward.

Wind numbed her face, and Kate tasted the snot dripping from her nose. Everyone was screaming, crying, running. No one stopped. The primal instinct of survival guided them now.

Bullets zipped past, and a window shattered in an apartment complex to their right, the glass collapsing like a broken ice shelf that plummeted into the snow. And despite the cold, the pain, the heightened sense of danger, everything seemed to pass in slow motion. Kate looked to her left and saw strands of hair bouncing on a woman's face as she ran. She looked right and saw the muscles on a man's face twitch in fear at the sight behind him.

Finally, she looked back. The gunmen were still in pursuit. They were closer. And she saw the three casualties of their group from the gunfire.

Kate spun back around, looking for any place they could hide, anywhere they could run, and she thrust her arm out to a back door of a building that she prayed was open. "There!" She veered from the group, but not everyone followed.

The rest sprinted ahead, and when her hand curled around the handle of the door and she pulled it open, she caught only a glimpse of the fate of those that had gone straight, and it was of their bodies hitting the floor after a spray of gunfire.

Kate waited until everyone entered and caught one final glimpse of the gunmen before she slammed the door shut, still having the presence of mind to lock it, sealing them in darkness.

Bullets thumped against the door and exterior, and Kate hunched over, still pressing forward. "Go! Go! Go!" She shoved against the bodies in front of her, pushing everyone ahead blindly as more bullets ricocheted off of the door behind them.

The narrow hallway ended and opened into a lobby. Light drifted in through the front windows and revealed the huddled shapes of bodies on the floor. Frightened expressions covered everyone's faces, and before Kate could speak a word, another series of gunshots thundered from the back entrance, and the harsh crack of the door opening propelled her toward the front exit. "Get out! Everyone get out now!"

But the gunfire had already triggered the beginning of the stampede, and Kate was hurled in the middle of it. The herd carried her out of the doors like

a wave, and suddenly the gunshots multiplied. They thundered like hail on a roof, and that same wave of bodies collapsed, and Kate was suddenly flattened to the sidewalk outside.

Kate thrust her hands out to try and catch herself, but the weight of the people behind her buckled her elbows, and she smacked the concrete hard. A bright white light flashed in her vision, and then suddenly things went dark as more bodies piled on top of her.

The screams suddenly faded, and the gunfire stopped. Kate lay still beneath the bodies, her visions limited to a small space between two bodies above her. But while she heard the thick, foreign accent of the gunmen as he drew closer, almost as if they were standing right next to her. Their tone was angered and hurried. And then, as she felt a pressure applied to her left ankle, she suddenly realized that they weren't next to her: they were on top of her.

The pressure from the boot heel drove a flurry of pain up the side of her leg, and she muffled a crying gasp. The heel ground into the tender joints of the ankle, but Kate neither screamed nor moved. Either meant death.

Finally, the pressure was relieved, and it took the same amount of concentration to keep herself from crying out in relief. Soundless puffs of breath passed through her nose, and then she dared herself to lift her eyes toward the small hole of light that broke between a shoulder and elbow that lay across from one another, forming a buttress of support that kept the bodies to her left slightly elevated.

An ear and then a shoulder passed overhead, and a sudden striking fear pulsed through her veins as the eye of the shooter appeared. She looked away quickly, still feeling the eye on her even after she did. There was more talk between them, and then another boot pressed into Kate's back through the body on top of her.

Kate bit her lip hard, drawing blood. She scrunched her eyes shut. A gunshot rang out, and a burst of warmth splattered her cheek as blood trickled down to her chin. She jumped from the sudden blast, but the body next to her jumped as well.

She froze, positive that she'd been discovered underneath the pile of bodies. She braced for the inevitable gunshot. Her thoughts ran to her children. Luke and Holly smiled at her. She thought of Mark, and she thought of her career, and then the flashes stopped as the terrorist's voices drifted away along with the gunshots.

Kate wasn't sure how long she lay there, but after a while, she wiggled

underneath the bodies, shifting beneath the corpses. She grunted, pushing herself off the pavement, the dead rising with her. Her arms trembled from the weight of the bodies, but she finally burst from the mound. She gasped for breath as she quickly scurried back into the apartment building and into the safety of the lobby, which was empty save for the bodies of those that hadn't made it out in time.

A few bloodstains crept from beneath the corpses, but in the cold weather, the blood quickly congealed. Whatever warmth the building had once possessed before the power went out was gone. Death had taken its place and curled its icy fingers around everything.

Kate half collapsed, half lowered herself to the floor. She sat in the middle of the lobby, rocking back and forth. Her eyes darted between the bodies in the lobby and the bodies out front. The door was still open, propped by the foot of a man wearing black boots with bright neon laces. They caught the eye vividly and greedily.

As Kate rocked back and forth, shivering from both the cold and the brush with death, she couldn't take her eyes off those laces. And as she stared at them, she thought of all the people that had died, all the people that had followed her, and when she remembered the kids on the other side of the river, waiting for their parents, their mommies and daddies, she broke down.

The sobs rolled her shoulders, and she clutched her knees to her chest. The grief poured out of her, the tears stinging her cheeks as they froze from the cold.

They had followed her, and they had died. It was a realization that would haunt her for the rest of her life. But another thought broke through the cold of her mind, thawing her frozen body.

On the other side of that river was a child that still had a parent and a husband who still had a wife. And if she didn't get to that boat, she was sure that she'd never see them again.

"Get up," Kate said, her voice shaking as she forced the command from her lips. She pressed her gloved hand against the concrete and pushed, rising to a sitting position. Her boots scraped the lobby tile as she stood, her back hunched in pain.

When she finally straightened, she took shallow breaths, the cold like an anesthetic to help numb the pain. Slowly, she straightened again and this time avoided the sharp spasm in her back. Her ankle was tender as she broke into the rhythm of walking, and while her body clamored for her to stop, anger

caused her to grit her teeth and press forward.

With her destination burned into her mind with a fresh determination, Kate limped forward, hobbling out the back, away from the bodies, away from the light, casting herself into the darkness of the hallway from which she had emerged.

The back door was cracked open from where the terrorists had entered, and the handle had disappeared, a ring of bullet holes around it. She pulled it open and squinted against the burst of light. She hobbled along, thinking of only getting to the docks.

Absentmindedly she reached for the revolver, forgetting she even had it. She gripped it firmly and glanced out to the river. She spied Rodney's boat making its way upstream. There was still time. The sight propelled her limp into a hobbled run, her movements more exaggerated by her arms as she used their momentum to swing herself forward.

But the wind had picked up, and when Kate looked out to the river, the boat had already sailed past. "No," she whispered. She attempted to hasten her pace but failed, her body too broken to follow her demands for speed.

Sweat trickled from her armpits, and her cheeks flushed from exertion. She couldn't miss that boat. She *wouldn't* miss that boat.

Up ahead, Kate saw the sign for the Regency through a pair of trees. Almost there.

Kate turned down the side of the building and immediately saw the docks. Hope swelled in her chest as she saw Rodney approach.

"Hey!" Kate shouted, but all that came out was crackled static. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Hey!"

Rodney waved.

Kate smiled and waved back excitedly. He had seen her. He would wait. She was going to make it. She was going to see her family again. And the more she centered her thoughts around that hope on her Frankenstein-like hobble toward her escape, the more real it felt. It solidified like concrete, and suddenly that was the only outcome. Everything else became fantasy.

Gunshots echoed to her left, and Kate stopped, her boots sliding against the slushy pavement. Flashes from the rifle muzzles were less than two blocks west of her. They chased a group of people sprinting in her direction. The impulse to flee, to live, triggered her face to look away and back toward Rodney and the boat.

But in that turn, her eyes caught a flash of something colorful. Afterward,

Kate would reflect on the fact that if the sun hadn't appeared on the horizon, breaking through the clouds in that exact moment, she probably wouldn't have seen it. But it just so happened that she did, and that recognizable flash of red hair caught her eye.

Kate spun, this time her boots catching against solid ground, and saw a portion of the group that had run with her sprinting back.

They had a good lead on the gunmen, but they were closing fast. Kate stepped forward, gun raised. They were screaming, and Kate waved them forward. "Come on! Come on!" She finally intercepted them a quarter of the way down the alley. Bodies passed by her in a blur, and once they were clear, Kate squeezed the trigger.

The first shot missed wildly, and she had closed her eyes at the sound of the gunshot and the jerk of the pistol. But when she opened her eyes again, she saw the gunmen had stopped at the alleyway entrance, using the building walls for cover.

Kate fired again, her body adjusting to the recoil of the pistol, and though her eyelids fluttered, they didn't close. The bullet ricocheted off the right corner the alleyway, pushing one of the terrorists farther back. She fired again, taking a step closer, standing in the middle of the alley and void of cover. She squeezed and screamed, the reverberations from the gunshots issuing a throbbing ache in her forearm, and then suddenly everything stopped at the click of the hammer.

"Kate!"

She turned around, her arm still rigid and outstretched. She saw red hair and eyes wide with terror.

"RUN!"

Kate's joints stiffened, and even adrenaline couldn't ease the pain. Bullets pinged and bounced along the pavement and brick walls, the gunmen's retaliation more verbose and violent than anything Kate had thrust at them.

Bullets chased Kate all the way to the end of the alleyway, and the red-haired woman thrust out her hand, Kate reached for it, and one final yank pulled her from the clutches of danger.

Kate wrapped her arms tight around the woman, squeezing her firmly. "Thank God." She lifted her face from the woman's shoulder. There were five of them left. She smiled and nearly burst into tears.

More gunfire ended the reunion, and the red-haired woman pulled her toward the docks. "C'mon!"

Kate did her best to keep up, but fatigue had forced her to do little more than latch her hand around the red-haired woman's arm and hang on for dear life.

Out on the docks, the building provided cover from the gunshots. Kate tried to step over the high rails of the boat, but her body refused to cooperate. "I'm sorry." She stopped, trying to catch her breath. "I can't move."

"Help me." The red-haired woman motioned for a man, and he came and lifted Kate in his arms.

Kate smiled drunkenly, the solid ground suddenly shifting, and she swayed left and right, rocking with the boat. They set her down in a chair, and Kate's body sighed with relief. Her head lolled lazily on her shoulder, and she closed her eyes.

More shouts. More thunder. Suddenly everyone was in a hurry, and Rodney was screaming to shove off. But Kate didn't move. She finally felt warm, which was odd, because the river only made things colder. But here she was, closing her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

The boat rocked, and the wind rippled against the sails. Rodney was screaming for everyone to duck, but Kate just slouched lower in her chair. She was tired, but she was on the boat. And she was on her way to see her family.

13

A sharp pain woke Kate, her whole body screaming in protest. She blinked away the blurred vision and sat up, trying to get a grasp on her surroundings.

"Kate? Oh, thank god."

The words were followed by gentle hands, and Kate immediately leaned into their warmth. They were hands she knew, hands she remembered.

"How are you feeling?" Mark asked, crouched low by her side.

"Half dead," Kate answered, and then she suddenly sparked to life. "Holly? Where—"

"She's fine," Mark replied, gently pushing her back down on the cot. "The fever is still there, but it hasn't gone up. It seems like the medicine is helping."

Kate relaxed on her pillow, careful not to agitate her body any more than needed.

"There was a doctor over on this side, thank god," Mark said. "Aside from a few bumps and bruises and exhaustion, he said you're all right. He's been looking at everyone here."

Kate frowned, trying to figure out where "here" was, and then the events prior to her slumber flooded back. The boat, the docks, the gunfire, the shooters, the bodies, buried alive under all those corpses. Kate propped herself up, fighting past the pain that wanted to shove her back down. "How many made it back?"

Shadows engulfed Mark's face as he turned away. "We don't have to talk about that now."

But Kate couldn’t stop thinking about it. She tried to recall the number of people that she had seen with the redheaded woman, but every time she tried, a terrible headache descended upon her and sent her back down to the pillow.

“They said they wouldn’t have made it without you,” Mark said. “The people that came back.”

“And what about the kids with parents that didn’t come back?” Kate lifted her head slightly and caught Mark’s glare. “What about our group?”

“Glen and Laura made it,” Mark answered.

The absence of the other names told her their fates. Kate nodded, staring blankly at a pile of blankets in the tent’s corner.

“Holly was asking for you,” Mark said. “Want me to get her?”

“Yes.” Kate’s answer was breathless, and her eyes immediately teared. Mark left and quickly returned with their daughter.

“Hey, Mom.” Holly smiled.

“Hey, baby.” Kate kissed the top of Holly’s head and then squeezed her tight. There was a hunger in her arms, the same hunger that longed for her son, to hold him again like this and to make sure he was okay. “How are you feeling?”

“Still a little tired.” Holly cast her face down but remained snuggled tightly against Kate. “My throat hurts.”

“The medicine will help.” Kate kissed her again and smiled. “I’m so happy to see you.” She wrapped her daughter in a hug and shut her eyes, tears leaking from the corners. “So happy.”

“You two should get some rest,” Mark said. “Rodney wants to leave first thing in the morning. And he wanted to make sure everyone got a clean bill of health before we start the trip.”

“Smart,” Kate said, starting to drift off. Holly was putting off a lot of heat, and Kate yawned. “What time is it now?”

“Almost ten,” Mark answered.

A sleeping bag lay to Kate’s left, and Mark crawled inside it, the sound of his legs swooshing against the fabric as he positioned himself comfortably. Kate closed her eyes and kissed the back of Holly’s head one more time.

During the night, the pain returned in flares and spasms, but they paled in comparison to the nightmares. The events of the day replayed in her head, blood and gore splashed liberally across every scene.

It started with the people on the metro train. When the power had gone out, their first reactions had been anger. It was nothing more than an

accidental bump of a shoulder that ignited the whole car into a flurry of fists and boots and teeth.

After that it was the bridge, but instead of escaping safely to the other side, Kate plummeted into the icy waters, where she breathed lungful after lungful of icy river water. Other people fell with her, but while she could still breathe, they clawed for the surface, choking.

Halfway down into the water, Kate suddenly stopped, and there she was suspended, frozen, watching bodies rain all around her and delve deeper into the black abyss of the East River.

One quick yank and she was back at the docks, the gunmen spotting them from the alleyway. And while she hadn't gotten a very good look at them during the day, in her nightmare, they were wild, twisted things. Fangs jutted from mouths that dripped with saliva the color of blood.

Kate had tried to run from them, but her feet were cemented to the ground, and no matter how many times she tried to lift them, they wouldn't budge. The group of people that followed her suddenly stopped with her, looking for guidance.

"What do we do?"

"Where do we go?"

"Help us, Kate! Save us!"

But the moment Kate tried to open her mouth, she was choked with silence. She clawed at her lips as the people around her looked on with desperation and confusion. She kept pointing for them to run, but they only repeated the same questions, and then Kate watched each of them die with a bullet to the head, their brains and bones spraying out across the dock.

Once they were all dead, the hungry wolves circled around Kate, drooling at the scent of more carnage. When they lunged, their jaws snapping, Kate was thrust to the final nightmare chamber, a place she hadn't been to in a very long time.

It was eighteen years ago. Kate lay in her bed in her studio apartment. Luke, barely six months old, lay sound asleep in the crib next to her bed. She was looking at him, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. He had been a great baby. Never fussy, slept through the night, and Kate was young and naïve enough to believe that's how all babies were. It wasn't until she'd had Holly that she realized how lucky she was.

She had just turned twenty-one a few months ago, and the crummy apartment was the best she could afford after she was forced to leave the

college dorms once Luke was born. How Luke slept through the neighbors' shouting match every night, Kate didn't know. But as she watched Luke and listened to Kent and Kara's (yes, those were their real names) arguments about who Kara was sleeping with when Kent wasn't around, she had no idea how she could love something so instantly with every fiber of her being.

But then a vicious knock sounded at Kate's door. It startled her and woke Luke. Three more hits against the door rattled the walls, and Luke belted out a shrieking scream.

"Shhh, it's okay, baby." Kate picked Luke out of the crib and rocked him on her way to the door. Her heart pounded just as loud as the door itself, and when she checked the peephole to see who was outside, she quickly stepped back. "Go away, Dennis! You're not supposed to be here!"

"Open this door, Kate!" The voice was angry and violent, and his words shook louder than the pounding of his fists. "Open it right fucking now!"

"No!" Kate screamed, but at the same time, her face twisted in preparation of tears. Luke continued to scream, and Kate hushed again.

The door buckled as Dennis rammed it repeatedly, and Kate retreated all the way to her bed. She held Luke tight, trying to soothe his tears while her own flowed freely from her eyes. "It's okay, Luke. Everything's going to be fine."

If she could have afforded a phone, she would have called the police, but she was barely making enough money at the diner to afford rent and power and diapers.

The door frame cracked, and one more blow knocked it inward. Kate screamed and trembled on the bed as Dennis stomped toward her. The muscles on his arms bulged from the sleeveless shirt that had a greasy brown stain on the chest. His face was covered in coarse black stubble, and his breath stank of whisky. He had a shotgun in one hand and a bag in the other.

"I told you to open the fucking door!"

Kate didn't respond, she simply kept her body between him and Luke.

Dennis dropped the bag, and she saw that the zipper was half open. A stack of cash poked out. He aimed the shotgun at Kate and then pumped it. "I want my kid, Kate."

"He's not yours."

"I fucked you, and then nine months later, that little cum stain popped out." He smiled. "He's mine all right. You haven't even been with anyone else."

It was a harsh truth and a mistake that Kate wished for the rest of her life that she could take back. “The courts said you can’t be around me or him. Now go before I call the police.”

“You don’t have a phone,” Dennis snarled. “I checked.” He lunged an arm for Luke, and Kate fended him off. “Give him to me!”

“NO!” Kate ripped herself free and then sprinted for the door. She was almost there when meaty fingers pulled her back. “Stop it! HELP! HELP ME!”

Dennis backhanded her and drew blood from her lip. The blow was more to keep her quiet than to hurt her, but she still wobbled on two legs after the crack. Then he wrapped his big hand around her throat and squeezed, moving her around the apartment like a ragdoll. “Give me my son!”

Kate used what concentration and strength remained to her to keep Luke in her arms, to protect him, to keep him from the madman that refused to leave her alone.

Dennis finally slugged a fist at Kate’s cheek, and the blow knocked her to the ground. In the same motion, he ripped Luke from her arms, the boy’s little cheeks red as he squealed at the top of his lungs. “There’s my little insurance policy.” He laughed and then reached for the bag with his money.

The ground rolled unevenly as Kate tried to stand. “Stop. You can’t take him. You can’t…” But the blow had knocked the fight from her, and what was meant to sound threatening came out only as a plea. “Let him go.”

Dennis laughed, malice in his dark eyes as he forced Luke’s little hand into a wave as her son screamed at the top of his lungs. “Say bye to Mommy.”

“NO!” Kate forced herself up and tried to follow but crashed back onto the floor. Dennis disappeared with Luke into the darkness down the hallway, his voice echoing playfully amid Luke’s screams. Kate veered into the hallway, and then as she screamed, she jolted awake.

Dawn had broken on the horizon, and Kate found herself covered in sweat. She looked down to Mark and Holly, who had climbed down to sleep with her father in the middle of the night, and she burst into tears.

She knew why that terrible memory had invaded her dreams tonight. It was because of the parole hearing, the one her lawyer had called her about before the EMP. Dennis Smith was Luke’s father and a convicted murderer. It was that same night he came for Luke that he murdered a police officer who found him with the baby at a truck stop.

It took thirty-six hours for authorities to find Dennis and thirty-seven hours before Kate finally had Luke back in her arms. Dennis was sentenced to life but was eligible for parole after ten years. It was Kate's letter to the parole board that kept him in jail, a piece of information that she was sure Dennis knew.

And so every year around this time, Kate would go and speak to the parole board in upstate New York to make sure that the animal who had abducted her son to use as a hostage after his bank robbery remained behind bars.

Dennis was the culmination of a reckless moment in her youth, and while it had given her one of the best things in her life, Luke, it had also been the source of pain and loss.

After that incident, Kate made a promise to herself, a vow that she would never let her son be in harm's way again. No matter what, she would always find him. And as she stared at Mark and Holly as they slept, she knew that she wouldn't be joining them on their trip north to the cabin. She was going to the airfield. She was going to get her son.

WHILE MOST OF the camp slept in a mixture of sleeping bags and cots that had been pilfered from a camping store nearby, Rodney lay awake in his own bag. He had a spot near the river, where he watched the island of Manhattan sit glumly in the dark.

The water carried with it not just the chilling winds of cold but also random gunshots laced with screams. He didn't know what those people wanted, but he did know they would kill as many people as they could before any type of resistance formed to fight back. He figured that there would be pockets of terrorists scattered around the country, using the exact same guerilla tactics. But he doubted they'd find many in upstate New York. And while they might not find any terrorists wielding AK-47s, there would be other people. People who wanted what Rodney had. And after a while, they'd do anything necessary to have it.

A ripping snore broke through one of the tents, and Rodney turned just as

it ended. There was another, but then it stopped. He turned back to the self-destructing city, knowing that he wouldn't be able to take everyone he'd ferried across the river to his cabin. There were just too many.

He hoped that Kate wouldn't make a fuss about it when she woke, not that she was in any shape to do much fussing. She would slow them down, but with the old man in their group, he'd already factored in a slow pace. Another gunshot crossed the river. The distance turned it into nothing more than a faint pop of a firecracker, but it didn't lessen its lethalness.

Another body had fallen. More red slush was mixed up with the dirty grey of New York's finest pavement of Italian Ice. He rubbed his eyes and lay down, his eyes closed but his mind open and awake. He'd give them another hour. Then they'd have to start moving. It was going to be a long trip, and even when they got to the cabin, there wasn't a guarantee of survival. Winters had a way of weeding out the herd, and all the forecasts called for a bone-chilling season.

THE RESTLESS SLEEP had provided some relief from Kate's wounds, but not much. Despite Mark's protest, she hobbled around on her own, collecting their supplies and what they'd need. She still hadn't told him about her separate mission. He'd be upset, but she knew he'd let her go. It was her son.

"All right, folks, remember to top off your bottles and grab any of those protein bars at the main table," Rodney said, gesturing over to the "breakfast buffet" that had been set up for those that had stuck around. "We leave in five."

Rodney turned, and Kate hobbled to him. "Hey, you got a second?"

When he looked at her, Kate noticed that something in his face had changed. The lines that had set on his stoic expression had become defined overnight. He looked older. She expected they'd all be older when this was done.

Kate pulled him away from the others and kept her voice low. "Do you have the coordinates for your cabin?"

"Yeah," Rodney answered. "Why?"

“I’m not going with you,” Kate said. “I’m going to get my son down in Virginia and then bring him back with me.”

Rodney ran his palm across his face and shook his head like a disappointed father. “Kate, that’s not a good idea. It’ll take too long on foot.”

“I’m not walking,” Kate said. “I’m flying.”

Rodney bellowed laughter, which he quickly reined in. “You plan on flapping your arms really hard? That’s quite the workout.”

“You said yourself that the EMP only affects computer chips, right?”

“Yeah,” Rodney answered.

“There’s an airfield a few miles southwest of here,” Kate said. “They do an airshow every spring, and a lot of old pilots show up there to do tricks and whatnot, show off their planes—shit.” A shot of pain radiated from her hip, and she bit her lip. She massaged the point of pain, and it seemed to help a little. When she lifted her face, Rodney greeted her with a “told you so” grin. “I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh,” Rodney said.

“Listen, a lot of those guys keep their old planes in storage at that airfield,” Kate said. “I might find one old enough to have hydraulic gears. If I do, I can fly it down to get my son and then fly back up to the coordinates of the cabin. Or at least get close.”

“It’s risky, Kate,” Rodney said. “And your family will want to go with you.”

“My family stays with you. That’s nonnegotiable. It’ll be safer away from populated areas.” Without realizing it, she turned her gaze toward the city, which looked dead in the early morning light. Frozen like the icy waters of the river, immune to the warmth of the sun. “I’m going, Rodney. Now give me the damn coordinates.”

Rodney hesitated a moment but eventually acceded to Kate’s request. She folded the paper with the cabin’s coordinates neatly into her pocket, making sure that it was secure behind the zipper, and muttered the numbers in her head to commit them to memory in case she lost the paper.

“Hey,” Mark said, coming over as Rodney left. “What’s going on?”

Spit disappeared from Kate’s mouth, and she found herself just as tongue-tied as in her dream. But she wasn’t going to let any more of her family be in harm’s way, not when she had the ability to do something about it. “I’m going to get Luke.”

“No.” Mark shook his head, his flag firmly planted. “No way in hell

you’re going off somewhere alone in the condition you’re in.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Kate said.

“Oh, no?” Mark barely shoved her shoulder, and the bad ankle folded and she started to fall, but Mark caught her. “You can barely walk, Kate.” There was a bite to his tone, and the cold morning only made it worse.

“I’m not leaving him down there,” Kate said, grumbling as Mark helped her up.

“Then we’re coming with you,” Mark said.

“No.”

“Kate, you can’t—”

“I’m not taking Holly back into that!” Kate thrust her arm out toward the city. “Not after what we saw, not after everything we went through to get out.”

“But you’re willing to put yourself back in it?”

“To get my son? Yes.”

Mark spun in frustration. “For Christ’s sakes, Kate, he’s a man. He’s been living on his own for the past year and a half. He can take care of himself, and when this blows over, we’ll be able to call him when the power comes back on.”

“You heard Rodney. That could take months!”

“It’s suicide!”

“He’s my son!” Her scream pierced the camp, and heads turned toward her, and she bowed her head, regaining her composure. When she faced Mark again, she couldn’t hide the tears on her face anymore. “And I thought he was yours too.”

“That’s not fair, Kate.” Mark stepped back. “You know I love him.”

“Like he was your own?” Kate asked, and the moment the words left her lips and she saw the pain etched over his face, the anger deflated. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“It’s fine.” Mark waved a dismissive hand. “It’s…” He walked toward her. “I love you. I love Luke. You are both important to me, just as important to me as Holly.” He kissed her forehead. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Kate hugged him, squeezing as hard as she could until her back hurt. “I know. But it’ll be safer for Holly this way. Plus I can get there faster.”

“Only if that plane idea of yours works.” He sighed. “You want me to tell Holly?”

“No. I’ll do it.”

Kate found her daughter still sleeping in her father's sack, and she gently brushed Holly's hair back behind her ear and gave it a warm kiss. "Time to get up, baby."

Holly groaned and rolled away.

Kate reached for her daughter's shoulder and pulled her back. "Hey, listen, I need to tell you something."

Holly opened her eyes and rubbed them sleepily. "Can we go home yet?"

"No, not yet." Kate grabbed hold of Holly's leg, which she could still wrap her whole hand around. She remembered when she could still do that to Luke. "Daddy is going to take you someplace safe, but I'm going to get your brother and meet up with you guys later."

"Why can't Luke just meet us at the cabin?" Holly asked.

"Because he doesn't know where it is," Kate answered. "But Mommy is going to get him and bring him back, and we can all be together again. Just like it was at Christmas."

Holly smiled. "I liked Christmas."

"Me too."

The smile faded, and Holly picked at her blanket, her eyes cast down. "You promise you're coming back?"

Another round of tears appeared in her eyes, and Kate leaned forward and kissed Holly's cheek, inching her mouth close to Holly's ear. "I promise. And I love you so much. You know that, right? How much I love you?"

"I know," Holly said softly.

Kate pulled back but then bent down and kissed her again. She wiped her nose and then patted Holly's back. "I'll see you later, sweetheart."

And as she said her goodbyes, she tried to bury the lie that she'd told Mark. Even if there weren't planes, she wasn't coming back. Not without Luke. No matter what.

Kate forced her gaze to keep straight ahead, knowing that if she looked back, she might lose the grit to keep going. And while the first hundred yards were hard, it wasn't long before the cold and the pain of her body offered a distraction.

Winter bellowed its challenge with every frigid gust. It made the miles ahead stretch longer than their distance. Every step gained was one closer to her son—and farther away from her husband and daughter. Whatever direction she chose, it meant the loss of family. But she would come back to them. She would make her family whole.

SURVIVING THE COLLAPSE: BOOK 1

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1

YESTERDAY

The daily banter beyond the walls of the eight by four prison cell had already begun. It was all part of the morning routine between Renniger's insane guests and the correctional officers who "administered" their medicine.

Screams of resistance preceded the heavy thuds of contact between a baton and a body. It was a symphony that would last for the next few hours. And while the violence of the medical staff traversed the halls of one of New York's finest federal prisons, inmate 0946 in cell number 283 would be escorted past the crazies and into a small room where the next year of his life would be decided.

Dennis Smith lay on his side on his cot, dressed in his bright orange jumpsuit, his shoes on his feet. He always slept in his shoes. It was a habit he picked up when he was a kid. It was the fastest way to escape a beating from his father, who would come home in the middle of the night, drunk and looking for someone to wale on. It was either him or his mother, and Dennis wasn't taking a beating for that sour-faced bitch.

And it was a habit that had turned useful even into his adult years. It was rare he was caught with his pants down. Ever since that first car he boosted when he was sixteen, Dennis had lived a life of violence. It was a path that eventually led him here, tucked away in the far northern wilderness in the middle of BFE, New York, kept under lock and key.

Lock and key was just an expression, of course. Renniger was a state-of-the-art facility, run by sophisticated magnetized locks and security software.

It was all digital and completely foolproof so long as the pistol-toting fat asses that ran this place were at the helm of the computers in the control room.

When the screams beyond his cell ended and the crazies had been sedated for yet another day, Dennis opened his eyes. They were a rich, dark brown, so dark that they almost blended into the black of his pupils. He frowned, the thin eyebrows accentuating his expression as he wiped his hand down his face and through the light-brown beard.

His joints groaned in pain as he stretched on the cot then grimaced. “Piece of shit.” He propped himself up with his arms and examined the tiny living quarters where he had spent the last eighteen years of his life. He circled that thought for a moment. *Eighteen years.*

Time passed differently in prison. It was slower, painstakingly slower. The first few years were the worst. But eventually, time ceased to matter. Days bled into years, and years bled into decades, and the only thing that mattered was the survival of routine until one of two things happened: parole or death.

Dennis, like every other resident in Renniger, was a lifer. There wasn’t a convict inside that didn’t have multiple murder or rape charges. Dennis was tagged on six homicides, two of them cops. And if there was one thing the judicial system didn’t like, it was cop killers. Prison guards weren’t fond of them either.

For the first three years of Dennis’s life sentence, the guards beat him within an inch of his life. Then, once he was healed, the beating was repeated, and so began his life cycle on the inside. But out of all the beatings and rapes and the struggle to maintain his sanity within his concrete coffin, it was today that he hated most. It had come every year for the past thirteen years. It was the day that hope was flaunted in front of him and then snatched away. It was parole-hearing day.

The springs of the cot groaned from Dennis’s weight as he rolled over, resting his head on the flat pillow that was more cardboard than cushion, and faced the wall. He pressed down on the mattress to reveal a space on the wall near his pillow.

A name was etched into the concrete, one that had been retraced repeatedly over the past eighteen years. A flicker of rage brought the tip of his finger toward the carving. He traced the name slowly, mouthing it silently with his lips. *Kate.* Then, he punched it.

Bone and concrete offered little more than a dull thud, but the pain radiated from his knuckles all the way to his shoulder. His hand throbbed, and Dennis rolled to his back, shutting his eyes. If it weren't for that bitch, then he would have been out of here thirteen years ago. But she'd tricked him. She'd lied to him.

One of the stipulations of his conviction stated that he wasn't eligible for parole for five years after his sentencing, and it also prompted him to meet with a shrink once a month for "rehabilitation and observation." It took him a year to figure out that what the shrink wrote down on that fucking yellow notepad actually mattered.

That number-two-pencil-toting smug motherfucker had the ability to sway the parole board once he was eligible. So Dennis told the Poindexter what he wanted to hear. His father beat him, his mother wasn't around, blah, blah, blah.

But what he didn't tell them about was the bug stuck in his head. And how every now and then it burrowed through his brain, eroding his reason and control, driving him into violence and madness. It fed him, made him come alive. He loved it.

And after all of the sessions, all of the therapy, did he really change? No. It was all for show, and the long con was a struggle. He was more of a see it, want it, take it kind of person. But he pretended. Every day. For five years.

And when those five long, painfully slow years finally ended, the shrinks were in his pocket. He even had a written statement from the warden, commending him for his lack of "violent incidents." But there was one testimony that could put him over the edge. And it was from the very same woman whose name he had cursed since the day he was arrested.

Dennis wrote Kate once a month for two years prior to that first parole hearing. And just when he thought that she wasn't going to do anything, she finally replied. But what was more, the letter she wrote him back stated that she'd give him a favorable testimony.

When the day of that first parole hearing arrived, Dennis couldn't wipe the smile from his face. It would be a day he'd never forget. And like the name carved on the wall, he retraced it in his mind every single day.

"Mr. Smith, have a seat."

The voice of the chairman of the parole board echoed just as loudly in his thoughts as the rattles from the chains around his ankles and wrists. Back then, the parole hearings were performed in a room with a window, which

granted a limited picture of the world beyond the walls and barbed-wire fence. It was sunny and beautiful outside.

“The board has reviewed your files as well as your written and audible testimony from both the trial and the team of psychologists that have been working with you here at the facility.” The chairman lifted his eyes, his pupils magnified by thick lenses. “The board has already reached a decision regarding your case, but we wanted to offer you the opportunity to give a personal statement, in your own words, for the record.”

Sweat broke under Dennis’s shirt and beaded on his forehead. The chains rattled as he shifted in his chair. He cleared his throat, doing his best to keep the bug under control. “I committed a crime as a young man that is inexcusable. And I know the lives I changed, including my own, will never regain what they’ve lost.” He dropped his hands, hunching slightly. “A man is dead because of me. He lost his life, and I lost my freedom.” He took a dry swallow. “But I have a son who doesn’t know me.” He lifted his gaze, just like he’d practiced, and produced a single tear that ran down his cheek. “He’ll be six next month. That’s a long time for a boy to go without seeing his father.” He wiped away the tear and cleared his throat, which had grown thick with phlegm. “I just want a second chance. I just want to prove to society and my family that I’ve changed. I think I deserve that chance. I hope you think so too.” He sat down, the bug squirming and begging to be released, but he hung tight. He was close. He just needed to wait a little longer.

The committee leaned into each other’s ears and whispered. And while they deliberated, Dennis searched the room for Kate.

At first he’d thought that he’d missed her when he entered. But now he was sure she wasn’t here. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably at her absence. Had she come earlier and already given her testimony? Two knocks interrupted the parole board’s deliberation, and Dennis turned to see Kate standing in the doorway. He smiled coyly. The dumb bitch decided to come.

“Sorry.” Kate’s voice was breathless and soft. She appeared in Dennis’s peripheral vision, and she only brought her glance to his once. It was quick, dismissive.

“Mrs. Hillman,” the chairman said. “We appreciate your attendance.”

“I ran into some traffic on the way here,” Kate said, keeping her eyes focused on the parole members. “Am I too late?”

“We’ve already received your written statement, but we haven’t vocalized

our decision," the chairman answered. "But seeing as you're here, would you like to speak on behalf of Mr. Smith?"

Kate opened her mouth, but after a long pause, she shook her head. "No."

Dennis's stomach soured, and the bug started to wiggle loose.

"Very well," the chairman said. "Let the record state that the parole for inmate 0946, Mr. Dennis Smith, is denied."

It took a few seconds for the chairman's words to register, and by the time they did, the correctional officers were already removing him from the room. "No, wait!" Dennis pivoted toward Kate, who kept her eyes on her shoes. "What did you tell them?" A sliver of malice snaked through the mask he'd practiced wearing. "What did you tell them, you bitch?"

Rough hands removed him from the room, and Dennis's bug broke free as he kicked and screamed and hollered all the way back to his cell. His elbow caught the cheek of one of the guards, and it cost him a week in isolation.

To this day, Dennis didn't know what Kate told the board. Those records were denied to him. But he was convinced that whatever she had told them was the reason for his continued incarceration. And so every year since that first parole meeting, for the past thirteen years, Kate arrived at his parole hearing, and he was denied release.

And so today would be another year of the same.

Dennis lay still on the cot and traced Kate's name. He imagined killing her. Then he imagined fucking her. He did both often. And then his manhood hardened, and he reached down to relieve himself. But before he could finish, the click of boots echoed outside his door, and a buzzer sounded, releasing the mechanical locks inside the six-inch steel door.

Dennis jumped from his bed, still erect, and placed his palms flat against the back of the wall, head down.

The hinges of the steel door groaned as it swung inward, and three pairs of boots echoed methodically inside until the guards were so close that Dennis felt their hot breath tickle his neck.

"Inmate 0946, turn around!" The orders were barked with a mechanical efficiency born from years of repetition.

Slowly, Dennis complied, the lack of vigor noted by the snarl on the sergeant's face, which quickly turned to a smirk at the sight of the erection. "Inmate 0946, did we catch you at a bad time?"

Dennis kept his lips tight. He wasn't in the mood for an ass kicking, not

today, and especially not with a hard-on, though he suspected a beating would be the quickest way to get rid of it.

The sergeant stepped forward, still smirking. “Want us to bring you a friend in here to take care of that? Maybe one of the skinny Latin boys the fags like so much?” The other two officers snickered, the leather of their boots groaning as they swayed their weight from side to side.

“No, sir,” Dennis answered. “But you’re free to try.” He looked the sergeant in the eye, smiling. “I wouldn’t mind your wife in here, either.”

The sergeant’s smirk faded, and the two correctional officers behind him stepped forward as if they were going to beat the shit out of him, but the sergeant held up his hand, and they stopped. Instead, the sergeant removed his baton and then slapped it down hard on Dennis’s erection.

The contact sent a shock of pain through him that was so immense that he simply collapsed to the floor, gasping for air and spasming. It wasn’t until the tip of a guard’s steel-toed boots connected with his stomach that he started to grunt in pain.

“Not his face!” the sergeant yelled. “I don’t want the parole board feeling sorry for him.”

After the kicking was finished, the sergeant spit on Dennis and then gestured for his men. “Chain him up.”

Steel was clamped tight around Dennis’s ankles and then his wrists, the chains stealing his mobility and slowly cutting the circulation to his hands and feet. It took less than a minute for them to throb and swell. Once the guards got him to his feet, his body screaming in pain, a hard jab to the back shoved him out of the cell.

The restraints and the beating made the long walk through the prison halls awkward and painful. He was sure that his dick was broken, and a few ribs weren’t out of the question either. Before they entered the room with the parole board, the sergeant wiped the spit from Dennis’s cheek and checked to make sure there weren’t any physical signs of abuse. Once he was satisfied, Dennis was ushered in.

The parole board ended their idle chatter and focused their attention to Dennis’s file. “All right.” The parole chairman was young but just as dismissive as his predecessors. Dennis had been through a lot of parole chairmen during his tenure. “Mr. Smith, do you have anything to state for the record before this committee reads its decision?”

“No.” The answer came out no louder than a whisper, and Dennis found

that it hurt to speak.

"What was that, Mr. Smith?" the chairman asked.

Dennis gritted his teeth with seething anger. "I said, go fuck yourself."

"Very well." The chairman cleared his throat. "Mr. Smith, this committee does not grant you release in the form of parole. Your case for parole will be reexamined one year from now." The gavel banged, and just like that, the correctional officers collected him and dragged him from the room. The entire proceeding took less than two minutes.

Once he was back in the cell, the restraints were removed and Mr. Big Dick Sergeant smiled at Dennis, revealing a corn-yellow canine. "You're never getting out of here, asshole. Never."

"Never is a long time, Shit Breath."

The sergeant turned and took a step but then swung around, leading with his fist, which landed with a dull thud against Dennis's stomach.

Air exploded from Dennis's lungs as he dropped to his knees and tightly hugged his stomach. He leaned forward until his forehead touched the cool of the concrete floor, then he listened to the laughter and the click of boots until the steel door shut and the locks were reengaged.

Dennis rolled to his side, sipping gulps of air as the previous points of pain lit up his body like a Christmas tree. Once the pain subsided, he flicked a middle finger to the door then flashed another bird at the camera in the top left corner of the cell. The eye in the sky was everywhere. He couldn't take a shit without someone watching.

Slowly, Dennis pushed himself up, and as he sat on the edge of his cot, the halogen lights in his cell shut off, casting him in darkness.

Dennis sat still for a moment, unsure of what happened. It was barely past morning, and lights out didn't happen until eight o'clock. But this darkness was different from curfew. It was all-encompassing. All-shrouding.

The mattress squeaked as Dennis stood, and he limped toward the front of his cell and peered through the tiny rectangular window of his door. The darkness in the hall matched the same one in his cell. Had the power gone out?

A silhouette darted past the window, and Dennis jerked away in surprise. Suddenly, another shadow darted past, and another, and then a gunshot echoed down the hallway. He pressed his nose against the glass and realized they were inmates running in the halls, out of their cells.

Dennis pressed his hands against the door, feeling his way toward the

cracks and the absence of a handle. He wedged his fingernails between door and the frame, his muscles tense, and then pulled.

He expected resistance, and the fantasy would end and he'd collapse back onto the cot and wait for the ache in his groin to disappear. But there was no resistance. The door opened. It was unlocked.

Even in the dark, the bright orange of the federal jumpsuits glowed, a stampede of inmates bolting toward the exit doors and out of the prison halls.

Another gunshot fired, and the stampede froze from the flash of a gun's muzzle, but after a quick scream and three more bullets, the shooter was suddenly silenced, swarmed by a mountain of shadows in the dark.

Dennis's legs unconsciously thrust him into the rat race. He sprinted through the darkness, the men in front of him guiding the way.

Shoulders and arms smacked into one another, and Dennis burst through the first set of double doors that led into the mess hall. The rush of men descended the staircase like water cascading down a mountain, and Dennis let himself be caught in the river's flow.

From the mess hall, they burst into the visitors' center, where the stream crashed into the dam of correctional officers that had barricaded the exit doors.

Daylight shone through the windows, and the officers had flipped the tables in the visiting room to be used as shields. They fired at random, shooting anyone that attempted the sprint from the mess hall toward the exit.

Dennis sidled up next to a group near the door. The herd of inmates behind was growing, along with the eagerness to escape.

An inmate broke from the pack, darting through the middle of the room, screaming. The officers opened fire, dropping him onto the growing pile of bodies.

"Fucking pricks!" an inmate close to Dennis screamed but then tucked himself back behind the safety of the walls. "Goddamn motherfuckers!"

Another lone wolf broke from the pack. Three gunshots, and he hit the floor.

Dennis elbowed the men around him, pulling their attention away from the guards. Faces turned in the darkness, some of them viewable, most of them not. "You shit stains wanna get out of this place?"

"And miss mystery-meat Tuesday next week? You're out of your mind."

The words eased the tension, and a few chuckles escaped tight lips, Dennis's among them. "If we all rush the doors, we can overwhelm them."

“And who do you expect to go first?” a voice asked. “A dead man isn’t a free man.”

Dennis looked toward the pile of corpses. “We use the bodies as shields. Let the dead guys take the bullets.”

A few heads nodded, and Dennis echoed his orders up to the front. Inmates reached for the closest legs and feet and pulled them back behind the walls, blood smearing the floor.

Dennis worked his way up to the front, a few of the guys in the back following him. He grabbed hold of one of the bodies with another inmate and looked to the eager faces around him. “On three!”

The group tensed, everyone inching forward, the bodies in the back acting like a pressure cooker ready to blow. “One!”

The officers on the other side braced for the rush. “Get ready to fire!”

“Two!” A pulse of energy jolted everyone forward a step, the number of inmates joining the rush growing with every breath.

“Three!”

The momentum from behind thrust Dennis forward, forcing his legs into a sprint, and he made good use of the dead man that he and another inmate carried.

“Open fire!”

Bullets vibrated against the body in Dennis’s hands, and he peeked over the corpse’s arm just in time to see the table come into view. A crash of orange jumpsuits broke the line of tables, and bodies rocketed forward like human missiles.

The collision caused a crescendo of screams and gunshots, and when Dennis dropped the corpse, he found himself staring down the barrel of a nine-millimeter. He smacked at the hand just before the officer pulled the trigger then tackled the guard to the floor, deafened by a high-pitched ringing.

The pair grappled, Dennis immediately reaching for the pistol. Two quick jabs to the officer’s ribs loosened his grip, and Dennis yanked the gun free. He fired once, striking the officer’s chest, but Kevlar kept the bullet from its lethal purpose. The air was knocked from the officer’s lungs, and he lay stunned on the floor.

Dennis aimed for the head then fired again, sending the officer’s brains out the back of his head and across the white tiled floor. He stood, pistol still gripped in his hand, and shouldered his way through the mass exodus of

flailing arms and elbows.

The exertion and adrenaline had turned his legs to jelly, and each step over the bodies being trampled on the floor nearly sent him down to join the dead. But when Dennis crossed the threshold of the exit doors, the warmth of the sunlight was immediately knocked away by winter's icy grip.

Dennis froze, the cold overwhelming and shocking as he surveyed the snow-covered trees beyond the prison's fences. It wasn't until an inmate rammed into his back that Dennis trudged forward, his movements stiff and slow.

A few dozen men ran along the narrow corridor of chain-link fences, everyone less than fifty yards from freedom. The last barrier was the chained gate. The inmate next to Dennis turned and smiled at him, puffing wheezing breaths of icy air.

"You see that? We're gonna make it! We're gonna—"

A gunshot rang out, the man collapsed, and blood splattered against Dennis's cheek. He looked up and to the right, seeing two guards in the tower with sniper rifles. Men screamed as more gunshots thundered, producing the deadly hail of bullets. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Bodies in orange jumpsuits buckled against the chain mesh of the fence, and the first few inmates against the locked gate were shot in the back or the head.

More and more men tugged at the gate, flinging their bodies against it, as the guards picked them off one by one. When Dennis reached the back of the pack, he forced his way through the huddled masses, waving his pistol above his head. "Let me through! Let me through!" Bodies gave way, and once he was at the front, he aimed for the lock.

It took three bullets to shoot it off, and after that, the gates burst open, and a sea of orange flooded the snow-covered trees. Gunshots echoed through the forest, cracking the icy air. But after a few minutes of running, and as the sound of gunfire faded, Dennis glanced back at the prison.

There were still no sirens. No deployment of vehicles. And from what he could tell, they still hadn't plugged the dam as more and more orange flooded the forest.

Dennis didn't know why it happened or how it happened, but the deeper he cast himself into the forest, the more he didn't care. His mind was already circling the name he scribed on the walls of his prison cell.

2

PRESENT DAY

The highway had become a graveyard of abandoned vehicles. The snow that had fallen since the EMP detonated yesterday covered the hoods and roofs, creating tiny mounds of white for as far as the eye could see. And it wasn't just cars that stopped working.

Grey skies spit snow onto a world that had ceased to function. No power. No communication. No modern conveniences that so many relied on for food and water and shelter. The world had changed in the blink of an eye, and as it came to a standstill, the masses had worked themselves into panicked frenzies.

Cities were tearing themselves apart, either from the people fighting amongst themselves or from the terrorist group responsible for the EMP's detonation. The world had regressed to that primal function of survival; it had also become more dangerous.

Kate Hillman pulled her scarf tighter around her neck and face and flipped her jacket's collar up to help shield herself from the cold. She was covered from head to toe, only her eyes visible from beneath her winter clothes. But despite the layers she wore, the cold still seeped into her bones. It was unavoidable, and it was only going to get worse.

Snot crusted Kate's upper lip, frozen stiff, and her nose and cheeks were a bright cherry red beneath the cloth. She glanced behind her to the trail of footprints that stretched to the horizon. Somewhere to the north of Kate, her husband and daughter were traveling to the wilderness of upstate New York. She had fought so hard to find them in New York, but their reunion was cut

short by her decision to head south.

Kate needed to get to Fairfax, Virginia. Her son, Luke, attended George Mason University, which sat on the outskirts of Washington, DC. And if the nation's capital was anything like New York City, then she needed to get him as far away from that place as she could.

Both her husband and Rodney had advised her against leaving, but she wouldn't abandon her son to a terrible fate. And she didn't plan on walking the whole way, either. She had a plan. It was a long shot, but it was still a plan. But first she had to get to the airfield.

The wind howled and kicked up snow that blasted Kate's face, stinging her eyes. Shivers rippled through her body as the cold continued to gnaw at her resolve. But the clock was running, and she didn't know how much time remained.

A trip that would have taken less than an hour had transformed into six, which was generous considering her slow pace. And right now, time wasn't something she could afford to lose. The only positive that she had been able to find in the situation was that the cold and movement had numbed the pain in her hip and ankle.

After everything that happened, she knew there had to be millions, maybe even hundreds of millions, of people just like her, trying to reunite with their loved ones. The internet and cell phones had made it so easy to connect to anyone, anywhere in the world. But the EMP stole that privilege in less than a second.

Kate squeezed her hands, pumping blood into them to keep them from getting stiff, but it did little help. She adjusted the pack on her shoulders, which grew heavier with every step. She had loaded herself down with as much gear as she could find at the camping store a mile back, and while Rodney had given her a list of supplies, she wasn't able to check off everything on the list. Not that she was complaining—the pack on her back already weighed close to sixty pounds.

After a few more miles were chewed up beneath her boots, the weather cleared up a bit. She looked up to find the sun trying to break through. She lowered the scarf, closing her eyes as she basked in the sun's warmth.

But more than the warmth, she was thankful for the light. It made the trip feel less dreary and lonesome. Since her departure from the little makeshift camp on the New Jersey side of the Hudson, she hadn't seen a single soul.

Another mile passed, Kate keeping track by the markers on the side of the

highway, and shortly after, she spotted the exit for the airfield and smiled in relief. Excited, she reached for the map to check the remaining distance and then paused to drink some water. Despite the cold, the exertion of the walk had caused her to soak her undershirt with sweat.

The snow crunched beneath her feet, and her steps were slow and close together coming down the icy turnoff. Twice, she skidded half a foot before catching her balance, her muscles burning and her pulse racing. Any injury now could turn deadly. There was no 911 to call, no rescue team that could be summoned to find her frozen and broken body. She was on her own.

The curve of the off-ramp ended, and Kate veered along the shoulder of the road that would lead her through a small town and then to the New Jersey Scarborough Airfield, home of the annual Scarborough Air Stunt Spectacular.

Kate had gone to it once a few years back. She'd had a layover in New Jersey and a day to kill before her flight home. And despite the campy fare and homemade signs that acted as the event's advertisement, she had been glad she did.

They'd had planes of every size and shape from every era she could remember. She had walked through the airfield like a kid in a candy store, her jaw slack as she'd ran her fingertips down the welded metal of the fuselages of the planes that had flown for decades—DH-4 Biplanes, A-20 bombers, P-38's, and a slew of commercial planes.

The fact that people had done so much with instruments so basic in the early years of aviation was always an inspiration for her. History was riddled with talented pilots, some of whom had reached the status of legend, such as the likes of Earhart, Doolittle, and Wien. When she had been at the airfield and saw those planes that they'd piloted, it had been as if she was walking in those legends' footsteps. And now, like the greats that had come before her, Kate would need to rely on those early tried-and-true methods of aviation.

All of the electronics that she had grown accustomed to in her big 727s were gone. Along with the control towers, and runway crews, and mechanics to ensure that everything was running properly. It would be the plane, a compass, and a map. But that was really all a good pilot needed.

Still, she had never flown anything older than a nineties Gulf Stream. And the relics she would have to find without any onboard computers to run them were much older than that. But she'd have to figure it out. There wasn't any other option. Her son was two hundred miles south, and the time it would take to get to him on foot wasn't a luxury that she was afforded.

Kate carefully stepped through an icy patch, her arms thrust out as she kept her balance. She glanced up at the sky, hoping to still find the sliver of sun, but it had once again been swallowed up by the grey clouds that spit a light snowfall.

The road off the highway offered more of the same view. Broken down cars with their fenders and bumpers smashed into each other. It was hard to imagine so many graveyards like this across the country. Millions of vehicles left impotent from the EMP blast, and Kate wasn't sure if they were ever going to drive again.

"Hey!"

Kate skidded a few inches due to her abrupt stop. She turned, finding an outline of a man through the haze of snowfall. He had his hands in his pockets, a big black jacket zipped all the way to his chin, with a matching beanie covering the top of his head and ears.

As he grew closer, Kate stepped back. He removed his hands from his pockets and held them up passively.

"Whoa, hey, take it easy." Icy clouds puffed from his lips with each syllable. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I was under the overpass, and I saw you walk by. Haven't seen anyone around in a while." He glanced to his left and to his right quickly.

Kate's thoughts went to the gun tucked in her waistband at her back, and she suddenly felt foolish for not keeping it in a more convenient spot to reach. "I'm meeting up with a group." She blurted out the words, the cold and adrenaline forcing her voice to quiver.

The man smiled, taking quick steps closer to her. "Mind if I join you?"

As he neared, his features clarified. A short, unkempt beard was covered in snow, and his exposed hands were weathered and rough. The smile revealed yellow and crooked teeth.

"What do you say?" the man asked.

"No, I don't feel comfortable with that."

The man's eyes betrayed the forced smile as they darted quickly to Kate's left and then to her right. Before she had a chance to move, two pairs of hands grabbed her by the arms and threw her against the side of a car.

The force of the impact triggered a snowfall from the roof, and Kate hit the ground on her hip. She tried to stand, but before she could catch her breath, more hands lifted her off the pavement, pinning her against the car.

Kate shook and thrashed her body as hard as she could, but she couldn't

overpower the two men. A cold sharpness pressed against her throat, and Kate stopped. She saw the handle of the blade in her peripheral vision, held by the man with yellow, crooked teeth.

“Out here all by yourself,” he said, his breath as rotten as the rest of him. He smiled, looking her up and down as he pressed his body into her. “Such a pretty thing.”

Kate thrust her knee up quickly and connected with his groin. The knife fell from his hand as he hobbled backward, cupping his balls.

“Goddamn! Fucking bitch!” A strand of spit dangled from his lips, and he smeared it across the sleeve of his jacket. His friends snickered as he leaned against another car, groaning.

“Don’t have your cup?” the man on Kate’s left asked.

“Fuck you, Mitch.”

Kate focused her strength and gave another burst of thrashing.

“Hey, now, whoa, let’s calm down, little lady.” Both men moved closer, pinning her arms at her sides and pressing their bodies against her until she couldn’t move. “All that aggression is only going to make it harder.”

“And make us harder,” the man on her right said, spurts of squealing laughter blasting into her ear.

“Yeah,” Mitch replied, straightening himself out, a smile returning to his face. “Real hard.”

The pressure from the car made the gun in Kate’s waistband dig into her back. All she needed to do was get one hand free.

Mitch wrapped his hand around her throat and thrust her head back harshly, barking to the two guys on either side of her. “Find a car with a big backseat. I don’t want to fuck her in the snow.”

“Afraid it might get even smaller?” Kate asked, grunting through her teeth.

The two men snickered, but Mitch brought the tip of his blade to Kate’s jugular. “Find one, now!” They disappeared, tugging at door handles that were locked.

Mitch applied pressure to the blade, Kate’s skin so cold it was numb to the metal’s touch, but she felt the warm trickle of blood roll down her throat.

“You know, you’re the second woman we ran into today,” Mitch said, smiling. “The first one wasn’t as pretty as you.” He leaned close to her ear, whispering like an angry lover. “I’m glad I get to go first.”

Kate flinched from the tickle of his hot breath. All her thoughts ran to the

pistol. A car door opened.

“Hey, Mitch! I think I’ve got one!”

Mitch laughed, turning his focus to the other rapists, which removed the edge of the blade from her neck, and Kate quickly jerked left, her back scraping against the car she was pinned against, her right hand reaching for the pistol behind her back.

Mitch’s meaty hands grabbed her left arm, tugging hard at the sleeve. But she had the pistol in her hand now, and she aimed, her finger inching over the trigger. Mitch’s eyes widened at the sight of the gun, and he immediately let her go, but it was too late.

Kate fired. The pistol jerked wildly in her hand, and the bullet missed, skimming to the left. Mitch ran, but Kate used her left hand to help steady the weapon. She lined up her second shot and fired again.

Sparks popped on the hood of a BMW as the bullet chased Mitch through the traffic lanes as he fled with his tail between his legs. Kate still lay on the snow, arms thrust out stiffly with her finger on the trigger as she scanned for the remaining two men. She spotted the tops of their heads passing behind a truck two lanes over. She fired, shattering the truck’s window.

A slew of curses filtered through the air, and the pair followed their ringleader back toward the overpass. They were well out of range, and Kate’s aim was too poor to hit them even if they were closer, but she squeezed the trigger again for good measure but only shattered another car window.

Kate panted heavily, the cold and the adrenaline fraying her nerves. She didn’t move from the ground until she couldn’t see the men in the distance anymore. Only then did she lower the weapon and then stand.

Exhausted, she leaned against the same car that they had pinned her against. With a shaky hand, she grazed the cut on her neck and found the blood already dried in the cold. She leaned her head back, lifting her gaze to the grey skies.

Memories from the city flashed in her mind. She had fled New York to escape the madness and the clamoring of people doing whatever they needed for survival. But in the chaos and the collapse of law and order, she had discovered something worse than people who wanted to survive. People who wanted to take.

Kate shut her eyes, letting her pulse slow, gathering her strength. After a minute passed, she pushed off the car. Her boots crunched through the snow, and she shuffled forward toward the airfield. She kept the gun in her hand,

her eyes alert for any more people she might run into. And without realizing it, she placed her finger on the trigger.

3

The added layers of clothes didn't do much. The cold ate through everything. The grey skies were bursting at the seams, dying to release their flurries of snow. And even farther north was a storm that would make this weather seem like a walk in the park. But they still had time. So long as they kept pace.

Rodney Klatt glanced behind him at the four travelers that had hitched their wagon to his cart. Each of them had their heads down, feet shuffling through the snow. He reached into his pocket and removed a silver pocket watch that dangled from a thin chain. He cradled it carefully then checked the time. They'd only been walking for three hours. He snapped it shut and then gently ran his gloved thumb over the engraving on the top. *Be better.*

It had been almost four years since his dad passed. The watch in his pocket and the cabin up north were the only things that were left of him. And the moment the EMP went off, he was thankful for both.

Rodney clapped his hands, his attempt at motivation. "We've got less than two days to make it to the cabin." He glanced back toward the northwestern skies, where that blizzard was gaining steam.

Yesterday morning, before the EMP went off, Rodney had checked the three-day weather forecast, just as he did every morning. Meteorologists were tracking a massive storm coming down from Canada. Some had predicted ten to twelve feet of snow by Monday along with hail and sleet. It wasn't something Rodney wanted to be caught in, but with the miles yet to travel, they were already cutting it close.

The quick crunch of boots on snow was followed by a hand on Rodney's shoulder. He turned to find Mark, huffing from the short run. "Hey, we need to take a break."

Rodney looked past Mark to find Glen leaning up against a sedan, his head flung back with an expression of pain etched on his face. Glen was pushing seventy. A young woman, Laura, walked over to him, her short blond hair completely tucked beneath her purple knit beanie. She was small but pretty. And in the middle of the road, resting on a sled they picked off a van in the northbound lane, was Mark's sick daughter, Holly.

"We can't afford to stop before nightfall." Rodney sidestepped Mark as if that was the end of it, but the man followed, blocking him again.

"It's like fifteen degrees outside. I can't feel my toes, and Glen looks like he's about to have a heart attack."

"We can't stop every time someone gets tired. We're on a tight schedule. The storm's coming."

"Five minutes," Mark said. "That's all we need."

Rodney shook his head and grunted. "Fine. Five minutes."

"Thanks." Mark returned to Glen and Laura, giving them the good news, and then checked on his little girl, bringing a bottle of water to her lips. His daughter had been sick when they left New York. It was dangerous moving her like this, out in the cold. But survival had a tendency to outweigh common sense, and after what they'd seen in New York, Rodney knew why they wanted to come.

Cities had once been a beacon of civilization, but now that beacon had turned into a blazing fire that burned anything and everything within its domain. Anywhere with large and isolated portions of people had transformed into the most dangerous and violent areas in the country. So Rodney and his motley crew were heading north, into the wilderness, as far away from cities as they could get.

The cabin had enough supplies to last them for a long time, because Rodney had been preparing for a long time. But even after all of that preparation, watching the world unravel still didn't seem real.

Rodney leaned up against a sedan. He turned and glanced inside and then snickered. It was nice, one of the luxury cars. He bet that whoever owned that Beemer would trade every penny they had for a warm fire and some food in their belly. Money, retirement accounts, investments—none of that stuff held any value anymore.

He set his pack down and reached for the canteen bottle. He took a few swigs, the water so cold it burned his tongue and throat. He fought the urge to drain the rest of it, knowing it'd have to last. Clean water wouldn't be a problem once they made it to the cabin, but there wasn't any guarantee they'd find fresh, drinkable water on their journey. The farther north they trekked, the fewer towns and homes they'd come across to scavenge.

He was glad to see that everyone was taking his advice, staying hydrated. The cold was deceptive when it came to exertion, but just because the temperature dropped didn't mean you stopped sweating. He reached for the pocket watch and checked the time. "All right. Break's over!"

"Just a few more minutes," Mark said, still knelt down by Holly.

Rodney pocketed his father's watch and adjusted the pack on his back, making his way over to the group. He moved quickly, but his haste did little to stir the group. "We need to get moving."

Glen winced as he stood from leaning on the car, and Laura helped steady him. "How much farther is it?"

"Far," Rodney answered, slightly annoyed.

Mark fiddled with the straps on Holly's sled, whispering something to her that Rodney couldn't hear.

"Mark," Rodney said. "Let's go."

"Just a minute," Mark said, struggling with the sled's straps.

Rodney exhaled. "We don't have time for this. We need to—"

"Just hang on!"

Laura jumped, and Rodney took a step back in surprise from the outburst, but just as quickly as the anger appeared, it subsided.

Mark slouched. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"How long can a person without water?" Rodney asked, arching his eyebrows. "Or food? Anyone know?" He looked to each of them in turn. "What about freezing to death? Anyone know how long that'll take?"

Mark stood, wiping his palms on his legs. "All right, Rodney, you've made your—"

"The nights up here will dip below zero," Rodney said, looking at Mark. "At negative ten degrees, with only ten miles per hour of wind, exposed skin will be frostbitten in less than twenty minutes." He pointed to Holly. "You want her caught in that?" He gestured to the rest of the group. "We'll freeze to death if we don't get north before that storm. And it won't matter how many layers we put on. We'll be buried in snow. Visibility will be cut down

to nothing more than a few inches in front of your face. You can't even see where you're stepping. A twisted an ankle, a broken leg, and your dead out here. Now, you might not like the pace I'm setting, but I think you'll like the alternative even less."

Heads lowered, all but Mark's. He nodded and reached for the rope attached to Holly's sled. "All right, Rodney. You're the boss." He tugged the sled behind him, and Laura and Glen slowly followed his lead, leaving Rodney alone and in the back of the pack.

Rodney shut his eyes, releasing the tension in his hands and body, exhaling. He didn't ask for this. All he was trying to do was the right thing. The road ahead would be tough, but they needed to be tougher. He knew they didn't like it. He knew they resented him. But he also knew that they'd be dead without him.

Rodney fished out the pocket watch, reading the engraved words one more time. *Be better.* He closed his fist around the silver case and started forward. He wanted to carry it for a little while, hold it. It made it feel as though his dad were with him when he did that. Tough love ran in his family. And that watch helped remind him of his own.

DESPITE THE FRIGID COLD, Holly's body had transformed into a tiny furnace. Every couple of minutes, she groaned, rolling from side to side on the sled.

"It's okay, baby," Mark said, the rope pulled taut over his shoulder. "Just hang on." But the medicine he'd given her didn't seem to be helping. If anything, he thought her condition had grown worse. His eyes flashed toward the back of Rodney's head. He was barely older than Luke, and while Mark didn't like being led by the nose by a twentysomething, he liked the thought of his daughter freezing to death even less.

The thought of Luke quickly shifted his mind toward Kate on her journey south to pick up her son. He shook his head. *Our son.* A pain of guilt flooded through him at having to say it to himself.

Luke was a good boy who had come out of a bad situation. And Kate was a good mother who'd done the same. It wasn't until after they'd married that

Kate finally told him what happened. And it made him sick to his stomach.

But it explained a lot about the restlessness of the woman Mark had fallen in love with. She always needed to be on the move, almost as if she was afraid to stay in one place. He suspected it was one of the reasons why she'd taken to the life of a pilot. Always moving, seeing new places—there was a romantic notion to it.

But the constant moving, the school changes for the kids, him being forced to find work every couple of years, starting over again and again and again—it was daunting. So when he finally convinced to settle in one spot, Mark was ecstatic. But none of that mattered anymore.

He wondered if she had made it to the airfield and wondered more if she'd found a plane that actually worked. He didn't like the idea of her flying through the air by herself in little more than a tin box, but when she set her mind to something, it was nearly impossible to convince her otherwise. But she was a damned good pilot. And that was what he held onto to make himself feel better.

Mark remembered the first time she took him flying. It was a little prop plane that she owned but sold a few years back. Aside from Luke, he was the first man that wasn't a copilot to go up with her.

It was a beautiful day outside, but despite the view, he couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked so at ease in the sky, and it was amazing to see her in her natural element. He nearly pissed himself when the engine failed, though. It wasn't until he was screaming for his mother and she was laughing her ass off that she revealed she had cut the fuel. It took a long time for him to live that down.

After they landed, Kate kept fiddling with her shirt the way she did when she was nervous. He immediately thought it was because of the few choice words he'd said in the air when he thought they were going to die, but when he started to apologize, Kate kissed him hard on the lips. When she pulled back, she was crying. Before he asked what was wrong, she blurted out that she loved him for the first time.

Mark had already told her those words three months before, and it was the longest three months of his life. He knew about her past and how difficult it was to trust again, so when she finally said those three words, he didn't take it lightly. He proposed six months later.

It took some coaxing before Kate agreed to having another child. The scars that Dennis left behind had healed, but weren't forgotten. He knew

she'd never forget.

Holly coughed, her chest rattling with phlegm, then sniffled and pulled the blanket closer to her chin.

"Glen, will you get the medicine out of my pack?" Mark asked. He couldn't reach himself without stopping, and he wasn't in the mood for another lecture from their fearless leader.

"Is this it?" Glen asked, thrusting the bottle at Mark's face.

"Yeah," Mark answered. "Go ahead and give her one pill."

Mark didn't like the fact that the medicine wasn't helping. He didn't like the fact that his wife was heading hundreds of miles in the opposite direction. And he sure as shit didn't like the fact that he was being led by a guy who, up until yesterday, he barely knew.

"She's not getting better?" Glen asked, appearing at Mark's side and pretending not to wince with every step.

"I don't think so, but it's hard to tell," Mark answered.

"It's not too late to turn back," Glen said, a hint of hope in his voice. "We could be back at the camp before nightfall."

The "camp" Glen referred to was a makeshift shantytown with a few tents set up and run by a doctor. There was zero organization and enough food and water to last everyone a few more days. The doctor running it was betting on help showing up before that happened. But after what Mark had seen in the city, he knew help arriving was a long shot.

"If we change the plan now, then it messes with Kate's return." Which Mark hoped would be sooner rather than later. "Rodney's been right about a lot of things so far. Not that he needs reminding of it."

Glen chuckled. "He's a young man but a good one." He rubbed his knobby, arthritic hands. "He could have left us to die, but he chose to take us with him. That's not a man I mind following."

Laura appeared on Mark's other side, her head down, and she wiped her nose, which had turned a bright cherry red. "He doesn't have to be so angry all the time, though, does he?"

"He's just inexperienced as a leader," Glen answered, keeping his voice low. Rodney had a good lead on them, but the quiet of the road made their voices feel louder. "He'll get better as he learns."

"Well, he could learn to say please every now and then." Laura kept her head down and gently prodded her lips. "It's so cold I can't feel anything."

"We just need to keep moving," Mark said, addressing them both. "The

quicker we get to the cabin, the quicker we can put our feet up for a while and wait for all of this to blow over."

"You really think that?" Laura asked. "That this will blow over?"

"The country's been through tough times before," Glen answered, still limping along. "The Civil War, the Great Depression, both world wars. We've persevered through it all. We can get through this."

"But nothing's working!" Laura said, flipping off her hoodie and exposing the blond pixie haircut underneath. "No phones, no cars, no power. It's never been *this* bad."

"It has," Rodney said, still walking ahead of them, though the distance between them was shorter now. Without realizing it, Mark had caught up to him. "We didn't have power until the late nineteenth century. Technology still exists. It's just not what most people are used to." He turned around, stopping. "Over two thousand years ago, the Greeks had running water and sewage systems in their cities. They had specialized farming techniques and grew into one of the world's most powerful empires."

"So what?" Laura said. "We're supposed to be excited over the fact that we'll be dressing in togas in the summer?"

"I'm saying that people have ingenuity. Glen is right. People always find a way to survive. And plus, we have something the Greeks, the Romans, and the Aztecs didn't have."

"And what's that?" Laura asked.

"Knowledge. We have everything we need to start over, to rebuild. It's all just sitting around us in books, waiting to be relearned." Rodney looked at each of them in turn. "We're going to live. But if you don't believe that, then there isn't anything I can do for you."

Rodney turned and restarted his march north. The rest of them lingered for a moment, and it was Glen who spoke first.

"The boy's right," he said firmly, accentuating the affirmation with a hearty grunt. "It doesn't mean a damn what happens to us if we don't believe we can make it." He adjusted his pack and started forward. "We march on!"

Mark smiled at the sight of the old man and adjusted the rope on his shoulder. He looked back at Holly, who'd fallen asleep. He glanced over at Laura. "What do you say? You think we can make it?"

Laura shrugged then flipped up her hood. "I just want to get out of the cold." She stomped forward, her shoes crunching in the snow.

"Me too, kid," Mark said under his breath, following. "Me too."

4

The soles of her feet ached as Kate limped down the road. She still held the pistol, but like her feet, her fingers had gone numb around the weapon. Fatigue forced her head down, and it wasn't until she heard the murmur of voices on the horizon that she looked up.

The airfield was up ahead. Planes and jets dotted the sprawling fields, which had become whitewashed with snow. Thousands of people wandered aimlessly between the useless aircraft. And the closer Kate grew, the more those murmurs turned into dissent.

A plane wreck smoldered up on her left, and two more blanketed the field on her right. Nothing but shreds of metal were left, the aircraft, and presumably its passengers, smashed to smithereens. Car wrecks thickened the road the closer she moved toward the airfield's entrance, and so did the crowd.

With all the eyes watching, Kate tucked the pistol back inside her coat. She darted through the crowd, weaving her way deeper into the hangars on the field.

Whatever security the airfield possessed was no longer in place. Luggage and cars were parked right next to planes, and a line of jets was being pulled by ropes. Pilots and mechanics were hunched over open engine covers, tools on the ground, and the hands meant to use them were instead scratching heads.

Families huddled together in cars, children staring at the blank screens of phones. Empty oil drums had been placed along the airfield, billowing smoke

from orange flames as people gathered around them for warmth.

A fight broke out past the fuel tanks, two men ramming fists into one another while their respective groups tried to pull them apart. Kate noted the red gas cans that each group held, and then scurried past before she was sucked into a brawl.

Tension and frustration had reached the boiling point. Fear was guiding people's decisions now. And Kate didn't want to be anywhere near here when those primal instincts surfaced. She'd seen enough of that in the city.

Kate slipped past unnoticed and headed for the south end of the field, away from the modern jets and planes that required circuit boards and digital navigation displays to pilot the skies. Judging by the way everyone was still standing around, it looked as though no one had thought of trying older planes as she had. Either that, or the old planes were already gone.

The silver hangar where she remembered that the old planes were stored was the last hangar on the left. The closer she drew to it, the faster she ran, and with only a few dozen yards left, she broke into a sprint, drawing attention be damned.

Shadows kept the inside of the hangar hidden, and it wasn't until Kate stepped inside and her vision adjusted to the darkness that her heart sank.

Empty. Not a single prop plane left. Canvas tarps littered the floor, and Kate lifted one up as if she could find one of the planes still hidden beneath. She dropped the tarp and then collapsed to the floor with it.

This was her chance, her one idea to get her son back. Walking wasn't an option, and neither was driving. She could find a bicycle maybe, but that would still take too long. Flying was her best chance, and now that had disappeared.

A heavy clang echoed outside the hangar walls, followed by an angry voice that muttered a flurry of curses. Kate arched an eyebrow and pushed herself off the cold concrete. She ventured out of the hangar and stepped around the side, following the random curses and clanks, which grew louder the closer she moved.

When Kate rounded the corner of the hangar's wall, a propeller came into view. The engine hatch was open, and Kate recognized the red-and-blue coloring of the rest of the plane. She'd seen it in the air show last spring.

It was a 1946 Commonwealth Skyranger 185. It was a single-pilot aircraft but could transport two people and had a range of around six hundred miles with a cruising speed of around one hundred miles per hour. Fairfax,

Virginia, was around two hundred and twenty miles from the airfield. She could fly there and back before nightfall, with just enough fuel to make it to the cabin. Which was good, because it didn't look like the fuel pumps were working either.

Kate's eyes drifted to the gas cans near the tail of the plane then darted toward the cabin when she heard another sputtering curse as a pair of legs dangled out of the cockpit, kicking angrily.

"Damned machine!" The legs wiggled ferociously yet impotently, as they couldn't yet touch the ground. "Help!"

Kate darted over, grabbed hold of the pair of legs, and guided the man down, revealing an old man with snow-white hair sticking straight up, a pair of glasses sitting crookedly on his face. His cheeks were a cherry red, and a few stray whiskers protruded from his chin. He flattened his shirt, which had ridden up his stomach and chest, and then adjusted his glasses.

"Thank you," he said, still panting heavily. "I just don't seem to get in and out of there as easy as I used to." He glanced up at the plane and then gave it a few hearty pats. He was shorter than Kate, barely over five feet. "The old gal can be more stubborn than my late wife." He laughed at the joke, and Kate smiled. He extended his hand. "Roger Haywell."

"Kate Hillman." After they shook, she tried not to eyeball the craft too obviously. "Mr. Haywell, I'd like to buy your plane from you."

Roger laughed. "It's not for sale." He walked toward the tail and wiped his hands with an old rag.

Kate followed him. "Then I'd like to rent it from you for the next few hours."

Roger sighed, dropped the rag, and then placed his hands on his hips. "Young lady, you seem smarter than all of those other buffoons standing next to those jets, wondering why in the sam hell they're not working, so I'd like you to extend to me the same courtesy." He raised his thick white eyebrows when she didn't answer. "You and I both know that if I give you this plane, I'm not getting it back."

For a brief second, Kate thought of the pistol at her back in her waistband. All she had to do was shoot the man and then hop in the plane. She was close enough now to see that the gas cans were empty, which meant that the plane was fueled. And the old Skyranger was close enough to the field for her to wheel it over by herself. The more time she spent bickering with this old man was less time she had to get Luke.

And then she frowned, her cheeks reddening with shame. She stepped back from the old man, shaking her head. So she'd just take what she wanted because she could? If she did that, then she was no better than the men who attacked her on the road.

A sudden pain split through her head, and the past twenty-four hours caught up with her. She lowered her hand from her temple. "I need to get to Fairfax, Virginia."

"Virginia?" Roger asked, surprised. "Sweetheart, you don't want to go down there. It's a goddamn war zone."

"What?" Flashes of Luke lying in rubble, bloodied and dead, played in her mind. She gripped the old man by the shoulders, unaware of how hard she was squeezing him. "What's happened?"

Roger gently lifted his hands and removed Kate's arms from his shoulders. "There was a national guard unit that was stationed up here that marched through yesterday evening. Said they were ordered to go down and reinforce the capital. Whoever started all of this means to finish it."

The color drained from Kate's face, and she wobbled unsteadily on her feet, using the plane to keep herself from falling.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

Kate swallowed, trying to steady her voice. "My son is down there." Tears were on the cusp of pouring down her cheeks, but she drew in a breath and fought them back. "Do you have children, Roger?"

"I do," he answered solemnly. "Three. They're all on the west coast." He chuckled and then looked off into the distance. "Got as far away from me as they possibly could, I suppose."

"Then help me," Kate said, pulling Roger's attention back to her.

Roger crossed his arms. "So you want to just take my plane and fly down into a war zone and try and find your son, who you have no way of contacting to see if he's even still there?" Roger gave a gut-busting burst of laughter and stepped back from Kate, shaking his head. "You know, I used to think my first ex-wife was the craziest woman to ever walk the earth, but she'll be glad to know I was wrong." He passed her and returned to the door to the cockpit. He paused and then tossed a glare back at Kate. "I assume you know how to fly."

"I've flown everything from seaplanes to 747s," Kate said, looking past Roger and to the Skyranger. "But none of them were this long in the tooth."

"Well, you're never too old to learn new things," Roger said, stepping

inside the cabin. “I’ll show you the controls.”

Kate pulled on his shoulder. “You’re letting me take it?”

“Listen, crazy woman, don’t let me second-guess myself here, all right? And besides,” he said, turning back toward the cabin door. “I wouldn’t want you to shoot me with that .38 special in the back of your waistband.”

Kate frowned and then reached back toward the weapon to make sure it was still there. “How’d you know I was carrying a gun?”

“I was a cop for thirty-five years,” Roger said, focusing on the screwdriver in his hand, placing the control panel over the gauges. “And from the smell of things, it sounds like you’ve already had to use it today.” He cast her a side-eye. “I suppose I should be thankful that action wasn’t repeated on me.”

“It was self-defense,” Kate said. “I didn’t want to add to the noise unless I had to.”

Roger smiled. “I suppose I could be giving my plane away to someone less worthy.” He finished screwing the cover back over the console. “She’s pretty stubborn, so don’t be afraid to knock her around a bit.” Roger rattled the stick around like a concrete stirrer. “But she’ll bite you back if you push it too hard. Just fiddle around with it for a bit while you’re up there, and I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it.”

“Right,” Kate said.

The rest of the controls were basic and self-explanatory as Roger went over them. Fuel, altimeter, airspeed indicator, turn and bank indicator, vertical speed indicator, artificial horizon, heading indicator. All completely analog, along with its engine.

“And you’re sure it starts?” Kate asked. “I mean, have you tried it yet?”

“And grab the attention of those nut jobs down there? No.” Roger opened his side door and nearly fell out before he managed to steady himself on the edge of the plane. Once he safely had both feet on the ground, Kate stepped out.

“So how do you know it’ll work?” Kate asked.

“The same reason you were looking for one of these old planes, sweetheart.” Roger tapped the engine casing. “Everything that has stopped working has a computer chip in it. My neighbor has an old 1959 Chevy, and while his wife’s new Malibu wouldn’t start, his fired up just fine. Whatever those people did was meant to wipe out our modern conveniences.” He paused and then stared down the growing hordes of people arriving at the

private airfield, hoping for a ride. “I heard people willing to pay all sorts of things for a ride out of here or to go and pick up family. Houses, investment fortunes, savings accounts—all of them were willing to empty everything for a chance to see someone that just yesterday they could have called on the phone.”

Kate followed the old man’s gaze and knew that the moment the engine started, they’d be swarmed. Having a plane that worked was akin to having a target strapped to her back, something she’d have to remember once she landed in Fairfax. “We’ll need to push it over to the strip. And we’ll need to do it quickly.” She turned back to the old man. “It’s already fueled, right?”

“Topped it off when I got here,” Roger answered. “She should make it the full six hundred miles of range, but she’s been prone to leakage lately, so I wouldn’t push her past five hundred.”

Kate bit her lip. That was pushing it. She ran the calculations through her head again. “It’ll get me close enough.” She climbed inside the cockpit and got a feel for the stick. “Walk me through the ignition sequence.”

It only took her one try to get it down, and then she loaded her pack into the storage compartment and kicked off the blocks in front of the wheels. “You take the left wing, and I’ll take the right.”

They pushed the plane out to the field, and the moment they emerged from hiding, Kate looked toward the huddled masses and the graveyard of dead planes. They were far enough away to where she couldn’t see the detail of their faces, but still she felt their stares.

Once on the stretch of field she’d use as a runway, Kate retreated toward the tail. “All right, let’s straighten it out.”

Snow broke free from the sky in lazy drifts, and once they had a clear path on the runway, Roger plugged in a starter for the engine. “Make sure you pump the primer three times. Any more, and she’ll flood. Any less, and you’ll have to use another starter.”

Kate flashed a thumbs-up from the cockpit and pushed the rubber bulge three times. “Primer set!” She watched the old man reach for the prop to pull down, and just beyond him, a crowd had gathered along the field. They were pointing at her.

Roger pulled down on the prop hard, a series of firework-like pops belted from the engine, and the propeller spun wildly in front of her windshield, slightly distorting the field of view. She glanced over to Roger, who pointed up and to the left of the airfield and then wildly gestured for her to take off.

Hundreds more had gathered at the field's edge, and then a dozen men burst from the sideline, each of their hands holding something. It wasn't until she heard the first gunshot that she realized they were guns.

Roger banged on the door, making Kate jump, screaming at her to take off. She reached for the throttle and shoved it forward.

The plane's speed ticked up slowly, and the snow fell in heavier drifts. Kate bounced around the inside of the cockpit as the plane tumbled down the grassy runway. The gunmen drew closer, closing the gap, their weapons aimed, their screams muted by the engine.

The old Skyranger hopped, gaining some lift as the speed increased, but then thumped back onto grass and snow. A gust of wind vibrated the plane fiercely from the east and lifted the left side up. It flew up three feet before Kate corrected with the foot pedals and the stick, leaning her body into the turn that leveled the craft back to the ground.

Another gunshot fired, and Kate saw the gunmen were directly parallel with her now and close enough for her to see their expressions of panic. Their faces were filled with the same wild fear she had seen on the people in New York on the metro train, and then the bridge, and finally the docks where she barely escaped with her family and her life.

The Skyranger lifted again, this time with a steadier angle, and Kate jerked back hard on the stick. The engine whined in frustration from the steep climb, but between the gunmen and the end of the runway, Kate was out of time.

Another gunshot sounded, and a harsh thump immediately reverberated through the cabin, but it didn't matter. Kate glanced down at her altimeter, which climbed to twenty feet, then fifty feet, then ninety feet as she continued her angle toward the sky. She was off the ground. She was flying.

5

The cold was a relentless bitch. It curled its icy grip around everything it touched and numbed the mind and body. It clouded thoughts and judgment and made you slow and cumbersome, and Dennis wasn't sure how much more of it he could take.

Sleep had evaded him the night before, but by the time he awoke in the backseat of the Mercedes he found abandoned on the highway, the sun had been up for a long time. He groaned from the ache in his bones as he reached for the bottle of water he found in the backseat. It was half drunk, but it did the job of keeping him alive. He still hadn't found any food other than chips and crackers. He had walked all day yesterday, stealing what he could find to keep warm and alive.

The water had nearly frozen in the night, and Dennis felt the few chunks of ice that floated through the bottle's mouth and down his throat. He drained it and chucked it on the floorboard.

The windows of the sedan were frosted over, blocking his view to the outside. He wasn't sure how many other inmates were still here.

After the escape from the prison, anyone in an orange jumpsuit huddled together, everyone weaving their way through the forest. But once they reached the road, people started to break apart. No one understood what had happened, and even if they did, they were too cold to care.

It was like the world had stopped. No matter where they turned, nothing worked. No phones. No cars. Nothing.

The freezing masses of inmates had a string of theories that worked their

way through the ranks: aliens, invasion, some kind of super virus, the second coming, the final apocalypse. But while the bulk of the inmates chattered like schoolgirls, Dennis noticed a common thread—computers.

At first he thought it might have been just limited to the prison, but after seeing the cars and the phones and computers that he found left behind and broken. And the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. The prison was run on computers, and so were most cars nowadays. Hell, everything had some type of computer component to it, right?

Power plants, water treatment facilities, planes, every major consumer good or convenience were all attached to a grid that was run by software. But who had done it and why didn't matter. Hell, this was a godsend.

A fist knocked on the window, snapping Dennis out of his stupor. "Hey! You up?"

Dennis forced himself to an upright position, but the door opened before he could even reach it. A head poked inside, covered in a frost-thickened beard, dark circles beneath a pair of angry blue eyes. "What the fuck are you doing? Everyone's freezing their asses off out here. We going or what?"

Dennis kicked the door with his foot, flinging Jimmy back with it. "Yeah, we're fucking going." He grunted on his exit from the car and squinted back behind him to the sight of a few dozen men wrapped in whatever jackets they could find, but nearly everyone still in their orange jumpsuits underneath. Dennis included.

Jimmy stepped forward, those blue eyes as sharp as the bits of ice that formed in his beard. He was a wiry, energetic man, and the moment everyone started talking when they exited the forest, Jimmy was the first to point out that Dennis had a gun and that he had been the one to suggest using the dead bodies to rush the guards.

It was a thin thread to leadership, but the dumbasses behind him figured that it was enough to follow him. Over the course of yesterday and last night, almost half of the group they'd started with had disappeared. They slipped away in ones, twos, and threes, leaving without a word or cause.

One of the men behind him, a big man with a beard that stretched down to his chest, snuffed out the cigarette he was puffing and broke from the group of guys he was chatting up. He was really the only reason the majority of the people had stayed. John Mulls was Dennis's one friend in prison, and the pair had formed a strong relationship over the years. He was an older guy, and Dennis supposed that he looked at him like a son of sorts. But all Dennis

cared about was the fact that after Mulls became his friend, the raping stopped. That was the only sign of friendship he needed.

“We rounded up as much food as we could get from the cars like you said.” Mulls heaved a pillowcase onto the Mercedes’s trunk. “Wasn’t much. We need to find a place to recharge, or these guys aren’t gonna hang around for much longer.”

Dennis rummaged through the pillowcase with the hand that wasn’t holding the gun. “I don’t know why we need them at all.”

“Hey!” Mulls stepped close, gritting his teeth. “We don’t know what the hell is going on, and we’ve got a better chance of survival if we stick together.” He frowned, looking Dennis up and down. “You’d have known that if you had any type of loyalty on the inside.”

Dennis pulled out a Slim Jim and snapped into it greedily. “You were the only friend I needed, Mulls.” He forced a smile then waved everyone forward. “C’mon, fellas! Breakfast is ready!”

The group limped forward like a zombie horde, rummaging through the sack of chips, crackers, dried meats, and nuts.

While the rest of the men ate, Mulls pulled Dennis to the side. “So where are we heading? We’ve got to be coming up to a town somewhere soon, right?”

Dennis practically swallowed the last few bites of his Slim Jim whole. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a map. “I found this in the glove box. I had to check a dozen cars just to find one.” With most cars coming with GPS, maps had gone the way of the dodo. He spread the old New York map across the Mercedes hood, shivering from the cold as he did. “Twelve miles south, we run into Duluth. It looks small, but we’ll find something better than the backseat of a frozen car.”

Mulls exhaled, an icy puff of air forming around his lips. “Christ, I miss the South. It never snowed in New Orleans.”

Once breakfast was finished, Dennis led the slow stumble down the highway toward Duluth. Most of the men only nodded when he told them the plan, but a few still looked in high spirits. Dennis was sure the road ahead and the continued cold would take care of that, though.

And so they walked. What they were walking toward or why they were walking, Dennis still didn’t know, but he had an itch to see people again, preferably a woman. But even aside from the itch of getting laid was the itch to see what the world had become, regardless of its momentary pause. He

hadn’t been outside that prison for eighteen years. Just from what he’d seen with some of the cars on the road, he could tell things had changed, and he wanted to see more.

And maybe old Mulls was right. The men at his back numbered close to forty, and a quarter of them were armed, stealing weapons off the dead guards on their way out. It was more than enough to handle any trouble up here.

Mile after mile passed, and the longer they trudged, the quieter the group became. A blast of icy wind froze Dennis in his tracks, and it wasn’t until the gust ended that he started up again.

His feet had grown numb in the paper-thin material of his prison-issued shoes. Bits of ice formed over the thin orange pants, and everything below the waist was numb. Dennis grabbed his crotch, his fingers fumbling over his member, and prayed that frostbite take anything but that.

His lips quivered and turned blue. After a while, he wasn’t cold anymore, and he knew that was a bad sign. Hypothermia was setting in, and if they didn’t find a warm place soon, he might drop dead on the asphalt.

An elbow nudged Dennis, and he looked over to find Mulls pointing up ahead. “Hey, what’s that?”

Dennis squinted, finding a green exit sign. The name of the town below it read Duluth, and next to it was another blue sign with the symbols for food, gas, and lodging.

A murmur rippled through the men, heads lifting at the sight of civilization. The cars thickened around the exit, and Dennis felt a jolt of adrenaline thrust him toward it, the same chemical imbalance propelling the inmates to follow him.

The embankment of the turn-off was clogged with cars, all of them abandoned. Ice and snow made the slope slick, and Dennis used the cars to help guide him safely toward the two-lane road that led off the highway.

He reached into his jacket, removing the map. He unfurled it quickly, like an eager child opening a present. “Shit! Which way is east?”

“That way,” Mulls pointed, huffing and puffing as he joined Dennis on the road, more and more men following in their path.

“Less than a mile,” Dennis said, smiling. “Hear that, boys? Party in Duluth tonight!”

The icy grip of winter was shattered as cheers erupted and fists thrust into the afternoon sky. The pack sensed prey, and they were ready to feast. And

Dennis prayed that what they found in Duluth was worth their while, because he wasn't sure how much longer this pack was going to stick together.

GLASS SHATTERED THEN FELL to the carpet inside the house. Rodney had banged on the door for a solid minute, and when no one answered, he decided that no one was home. He knocked away the shards alongside the paneling and then thrust his hand through and grabbed hold of the lock. It clicked when he turned it, and he gently swung the door open.

Mark, Glen, and Laura stood behind Rodney, Mark carrying his daughter on his shoulder.

"Hello?" Rodney's voice echoed in the darkness, but like the knocks on the door, his question remained unanswered. "I think it's clear."

The others followed him inside, and Rodney did a quick sweep of the house while everyone piled into the living room. From what he gathered, it was a vacation home, seeing as how most of the cabinets were bare and there weren't many decorations on the wall.

After his quick sweep, Rodney returned to the living room and found everyone huddled by the fireplace. Mark was already stacking some logs in it, and both Glen and Laura stared at it longingly, as though they could wish a fire into existence. Mark wiped his nose and then extended his hand to Rodney.

"Matches?" Mark asked.

"And what makes you think I have matches?"

Mark dropped his head but kept his hand extended. "C'mon, man. Just give me the matches."

But instead, Rodney bypassed Mark, leaving him hanging, and knelt in front of the fire himself. "I don't want to have you waste the whole packet before we actually get a fire started." He picked up the logs, rearranging them into a cube-like structure. He rose and then headed toward the door. "I'm gonna go find some tinder."

Despite Rodney's eyes adjusting to the darkness, he was still amazed at how black night had become now that the power was off. After he'd spent so

much time in New York City, his eyes had become polluted from the constant stream of lights and activity.

He glanced down the darkened road that they'd used to turn off the highway. He'd picked the spot knowing that housing was sparse and what homes were out here had a lot of space between them. They'd made good time today, but he still would have preferred to be farther north.

For most people, it was a natural instinct to want to gather, cluster up in towns and groups. And while Rodney might have indulged that instinct a fair amount with the group he acquired getting out of the city, he wasn't willing to add any more travelers to his destination.

Most of the trees in the surrounding lots were dead, and he managed to find a few dry twigs that he snapped off to use for kindling and then scooped up some dead leaves, making sure to leave the damp ones in the snow. After he had what he thought was enough, he trudged back into the house.

Inside, his companions rubbed their hands together quickly in anticipation of the warmth to come. All of them were huddled close behind him, eager for the flames, but Rodney didn't rush it. Only when he had a good foundation and made sure the chimney vents were open did he strike a match.

The leaves went up quickly, and Rodney made sure to breathe air into the fire, stoking it until the kindling caught. From there, the logs grew warm, and then caught fire.

A sigh of relief echoed from nearly every mouth, and the five of them huddled next to the glow of the flames, as their ancestors had done for thousands of years before electricity.

With the exception of Mark's daughter, everyone was awake, though Glen looked to be fading quickly. Rodney reached into his pack and passed around some jerky. "Make it last. We still have at least another full day of hard walking ahead."

Hands reached for the food carefully.

"How much farther?" Laura asked, chewing little pieces of the jerky and staring into the fire.

"Forty miles, probably a little less. Longer if that storm catches us."

"You think we'll make it?" Glen asked, rubbing his eyes.

"If we hustle, yeah. But we can't have any slowdowns." Rodney locked eyes with Glen. "No matter how tired we get." He addressed the rest of the group. "We can rest when we get to the cabin. We all saw what happened in New York."

“We know, Rodney,” Mark said, the fire flicking light on only the left side of his face. “No need for scare tactics.”

“I’m not trying to scare anyone.” Rodney got up. “But the truth sounds like that to some people.” He looked at the rest of the group. “Get some rest. Morning will come early.” He gestured to the couch in the room. “Holly can sleep there unless I find a mattress.”

He left the group in the living room and found two twin beds in a bedroom in the rear of the house. He picked one of the mattresses off the frame and then dragged it from the room. He passed the kitchen and saw the glow of the fire spilling out of the living room when he stopped. They were whispering to one another.

Curiosity forced Rodney to put the mattress down slowly and then creep to the end of the hall. He leaned as close as he could, being mindful of his shadow. He closed his eyes and concentrated on their voices.

“Why can’t we stay here?” Laura asked. “I mean, we hardly know him.”

“And he hardly knows us,” Mark answered. “Glen is right. He helped get us out of the city, and he’s gotten us this far. He might be hard, but he’s got a lot of pressure on him right now.”

“What pressure?” Laura asked.

“Keeping us alive.”

Rodney quietly retreated toward the mattress and sat down. He wiped the tears forming in his eyes before they could fall. Slow, deep breaths calmed him down, but he gave himself a minute to make sure his eyes didn’t stay red.

Despite his preparation, he’d never truly been in this type of situation before. They were scared. He was scared. And what Mark had said was true. It wasn’t as though he wanted to be the bad guy. But he didn’t want anyone to die. Not on his watch.

Rodney gave himself another minute and then lifted the mattress and dragged it back into the living room. The whispers ended by the time he returned, and he plopped the mattress just behind Laura. “There’s another one in the room back there. You and Glen can take them, and Holly can take the sofa. Me and Mark will take the floor.” He looked over at Mark. “Didn’t think you’d mind.”

“At least it’ll be warm.” Mark pushed himself off the floor. “I’ll give you a hand.”

Rodney led him to the room, and as they positioned themselves on either end of the bed, Mark paused before they lifted it off the frame. “You’re doing

a good job. Despite my complaints."

Rodney felt the tears coming again and was thankful for the darkness. He knew Mark couldn't see his face, but just to be sure, he kept his head down. "I appreciate that."

"I'm serious."

Rodney looked up.

"You saved my family in that city. For that, I owe you everything."

"Well," Rodney said, starting to feel uncomfortable, "what was I supposed to do?" He cleared his throat and then gripped his end of the mattress. "We should get this moved."

They brought it into the living room, and it didn't take but thirty seconds for everyone to pass out. But while the others slept, Rodney lay restless. For most of his life, he'd stayed behind the walls he'd built for himself. He was safe behind those walls, protected. But now he had ventured from their safety, and he was with people he didn't know, in a world that wasn't recognizable. And no matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't go back behind those walls anymore. They were gone. And just before exhaustion finally took hold, Rodney whispered a little prayer to not screw it up.

6

The temperature inside the cockpit had dropped dramatically once night fell. The bitter cold ate through the layers and gnawed at Kate's bones. The altitude only made the cold worse. She had shivered for the past two hours. But recently that had stopped, and it wasn't because she was suddenly warmer.

Hypothermia wasn't a welcome passenger, not if she wanted to land this plane safely. She looked at the small wind-up watch she found beneath the dashboard after she was in the air to check her progress. Based off her speed, it was another twenty minutes before she was in Fairfax.

The trip had taken longer than expected because she adjusted her flight path to avoid the DC airspace. After what Roger had said about the capital being a war zone, she didn't want to risk making herself a target for either the terrorists or the United States military. But everything she'd experienced so far told her that she was alone in the sky.

There was no radio chatter, no other planes. And when she peered toward the ground, it was blanketed with darkness, which was going to provide trouble when it came time to land. But the weather had held out, and despite the cold and loneliness, it was a beautiful night to fly.

Kate wiggled in her seat, trying to get the blood pumping again, and her thoughts drifted to Mark and Holly. She wondered how close they were to the cabin. She wondered if Holly was feeling better. She wondered if they were even still alive.

Stop it.

Of course they were still alive. Rodney knew what he was doing. They'd all still be fighting for their lives in the city if it weren't for him. The shivers returned after a few minutes of moving around, and she exhaled relief. She wasn't freezing to death. Not yet, at least.

It had been a while since she was up in the air like this, alone. At least six years. She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed it. There was something intimate about flying a two-seater by yourself.

She remembered her first solo flight at night. It was cross country. No flight instructor to help her prepare the aircraft, just her and the plane.

She had flown from Atlanta to Phoenix, and it was the first of many hours logged that she needed to acquire for her pilot's license. It was the worst mixture of excitement and nerves that she'd ever experienced. Earlier that day, she had dropped Luke off at the house of a friend whom she used frequently to watch him while she was attending school. He was two at the time and going through that "terrible" phase so popular among toddlers.

But that day when Kate dropped him off, he called for her just when she was at the door. Kate stopped, turned, and watched Luke sprint over on his chubby little legs, and he flung his arms around her knees.

"I love you, Mom." He raised his head and smiled. "Fly good."

Kate scooped him up off the floor and kissed him until he squealed. And that was all it took for the nerves to disappear. Because as much as she enjoyed flying and for as long as she had wanted to be a pilot, there was a different purpose to her flight education once Luke was born. She was flying so she could make sure her kid had food and clothes and shelter.

The flight had gone off without a hitch, and she landed safely in Phoenix, finishing her required solo trip with ease. The next week, she took her pilot's exam and passed with flying colors. It was the beginning of something great for her and her son. And for the first time in a long time, she didn't have to look back on the past and dwell on it. The higher she flew, the farther she separated herself from her past mistakes. And even after all the years since, she was still flying for her son.

Kate descended to fifteen hundred feet so she had a better view of the ground. Her eyes had slowly adjusted to the dark, but it was still difficult to find a suitable landing site. After ten minutes, she saw a field break the monotony of trees. It was more box than rectangle, but it was still doable.

She practiced her approach twice, making sure that she had the timing down. With no lights, no tower, and in a plane that was older than her

grandfather, she couldn’t afford a mistake. And then, knowing it was as good as it could get, Kate began her final approach and descent.

The altimeter wound down, and Kate used it until the last four hundred feet, and then she eyeballed it, making sure she had clearance of the trees. The stick rumbled defiantly in her hands, but she kept the plane steady. The nose dipped twice, the engine waning and waxing due to the wobbly descent. She cleared the tree line on the field’s edge and then dropped quickly, knowing her runway was short.

Kate pulled on the stick to level out, and the cockpit rumbled as the wheels made contact. She pulled back on the throttle quickly, hitting the brakes before she ran out of field, exhaling as she slowed to a stop.

Kate cut the engine, peeling her fingers off the stick. Stiff from the cold, she groaned as she exited the aircraft and landed awkwardly on her feet. Her back hurt, and a spasm from her hip made her wince on impact, but she was alive. She’d made it.

With the plane’s engine cut, and the roar of the wind gone, the night was dead quiet. No cars, no people, no bugs, just silence. And in this kind of quiet, anyone within twenty miles would have heard her plane landing, and that was attention she could do without.

Kate searched the edge of the woods and found a small clearing in the trees. With some strained effort, she managed to push the Skyranger into it. Between the darkness, trees, and the branches she found, the plane was fairly well hidden.

One final sweep of the cockpit provided her with the map and her pack, and she checked the remaining bullets in her revolver. Only three shots left. She snapped the barrel shut and prayed that she wouldn’t have to use any of them then limped into the forest.

The woods that surrounded the field were thick. Clusters of branches and bushes clawed at her arms and legs, doing their best to trap her in the wilderness. And despite her efforts to be quiet, each stomp of her boot and snap of a twig gave away her position for anyone within a mile’s range.

The darkness and quiet of the woods put Kate on edge. Any gust of wind or rustle of leaves caused her to freeze in terror. She’d scan the forest with her eyes focused down the barrel of the gun and wait until she was sure she was alone, and then she would trudge forward.

Eventually, trees gave way to an embankment that led up to a road. Like the roads to the north, this one was littered with broken-down vehicles on

both sides of the highway.

Kate walked a few hundred feet south in the direction of Fairfax and the campus and double-checked the road sign she found to make sure she was on the right path. Once she confirmed her heading, Kate broke into a jog. It took a few minutes to shake off the rust and push past the staleness of her muscles, but eventually she fell into a stride.

Every step toward the college brought with it anxiousness and excitement. She followed the exit sign off the highway that led her to Fairfax's main road, which led straight to George Mason's campus.

The graveyard of cars along the roads spilled onto the sidewalks, and it grew so thick that Kate was forced to walk, not that she was moving much quicker than that anymore.

Kate passed stores with broken windows, and her boots crunched on trash and snow. It was just as quiet in the town as it was in the forest. She kept a tight grip on her revolver, and her eyes alert in the darkness. Something felt off here.

A barrage of gunshots suddenly broke the night's silence, and Kate ducked behind the hood of a truck. The gunfire was distant, but it was quickly disrupted by a thunderous boom. Slowly, Kate lifted her head, the gunfire growing more sporadic, and another boom erupted on the horizon. It was coming from the direction of the capital.

With her focus on the sounds of war, Kate didn't hear the footsteps following her, and a massive weight tackled her to the pavement.

Kate whimpered just before her face planted into the pavement, thankful for the layer of snow that helped break her fall.

"Don't move, and keep your hands behind your back."

The voice was authoritative, male, and robotic.

Kate's arms were pinned, and a sharp pinch squeezed both wrists. She gasped and then tasted the blood dripping from her nose.

"Hostile secure, Sergeant Renly."

And then, just as quickly as she was slammed to the ground, pairs of hands lifted her off the pavement and held her upright.

Kate blinked, the pain from the fall lingering in the cold, but as her eyes adjusted, she saw four men surrounding her, all of them armed with rifles and decked out in camouflage. It wasn't until one of them started speaking to her that she realized they were soldiers. American soldiers.

"What's your name?" The man who spoke was tall and clean shaven and

had a square jaw. The straps of his helmet that circled around his pointed chin moved the helmet as he spoke.

Kate stared at him in disbelief while the soldiers next to him kept their guns aimed at the surrounding area, keeping watch. A soldier who held her patted down her back side, inside her jacket, and then down her legs, taking the revolver off her.

The soldier handed the revolver to Sergeant Renly, who examined the weapon. “A .38, makes for a good concealed weapon.” He handed the weapon off to another one of his men. “I’ll ask you again. What’s your name?”

“Kate. Kate Hillman.”

“What are you doing out past curfew, Kate Hillman?” Renly asked.

“Curfew?” Kate asked. “I came down to get my son. He’s enrolled at George Mason.” Kate gestured down the road toward the campus’s main entrance.

“Where are you from?” Renly asked.

“New York.”

“New York?” Renly echoed the words like a surprised parrot. “How the hell did you get down here?”

“I flew.”

Every head turned toward her, and one of the soldiers chuckled.

“Bullshit,” he said. “What’d you do? Flap your ears like Dumbo?”

“I came down in a 1946 Commonwealth Skyranger,” Kate answered. “Couldn’t find an elephant.”

“How the hell did you get a plane working?” Renly asked. “We don’t have any coms or transportation.”

“I didn’t have to fix it. It was already working.” Kate looked at them in turn and realized that they didn’t know what happened. “It was an EMP blast that took everything out. At least that’s what I was told.”

“You were told that?” Renly asked.

“She must be some kind of terrorist spy,” a soldier said.

“Finest-looking spy I’ve seen,” another soldier answered, smacking on some gum.

“Really, Parcy?” One of the other soldiers turned to him, raising his eyebrows.

“Shut it! All of you!” Renly barked, and the banter ended. “If she’s a terrorist cell member, then I’m the goddamn queen of England. Take the

cuffs off."

"Sarge, do you think—"

"I said take them off!"

The pressure around Kate's wrists ended, and she rubbed them in relief. "Thanks."

"Your face is all scratched to hell," Renly said. "We'll get you some medical attention back at the campus."

"I'm fine," Kate said. "What happened here?"

"Once the fighting started, our superior officer declared martial law," Renly answered. "We set a curfew for safety and gathered everyone in the town and shoved them down at the university. It was the easiest way to keep track of everyone."

"Yeah, and to make sure those rag heads don't get the drop on us," one of the soldiers said.

"Your son goes to George Mason?" Renly asked.

"Yeah," Kate answered.

"We'll escort you over," Renly said. "We have a team set up there as a FOB. Parcy, you're on point!"

"Yes, sir."

The unit moved forward, the sergeant and Kate in the middle of the pack as they traversed the sidewalk in the darkness. Boots scuffed snow and pavement, and the gear strapped to their bodies clanked in time with their steps.

"What happened in DC?" Kate asked.

"We're not sure. The last orders we received were to move to the university and secure the town. We were supposed to be a way station for troops coming to reinforce the capital. It's been over a day now, and we still haven't had anyone come through."

"Or heard shit from Command," Parcy said, barking from up front.

"How bad is it?" Kate asked.

"Bad," Renly answered. "Everything's fried. But we're working on getting an old Morris code transmitter we found in the college's engineering basement up and running." He regarded Kate again and then shook his head. "You really flew down here?"

"Yeah."

The sergeant laughed. "Goddamn."

The soldiers grew more relaxed the closer they moved to the campus, and

once they passed a security checkpoint manned by a dozen soldiers, Kate started to relax. It was the first semblance of security that she'd felt since the EMP went off. It was hard to believe it'd only been a day since she left New York.

"Do you know what dorm your son was staying in?" the sergeant asked.

"The Commons," Kate answered.

"I'll have one of my guys take you over. You'll need the escort to get through the doors. If he's there, when you're done, one of my men will accompany you to the auditorium. I think we still have some bunks open there. Parcy!"

"I don't plan on staying, Sergeant. I'm taking my son and leaving."

"This campus is the safest place to be right now," Renly said. "And you should be thankful that we chose to take you in at all." And before she could make a rebuttal, the sergeant was gone.

As Kate was escorted through the campus, she noted how different everything looked. Darkness and silence had replaced the bustling grounds, soldiers marching instead of students learning.

Two guards were stationed at the door to Luke's dorm, and despite her military escort both soldiers raised their rifles.

"Got a mom who came to get her boy," Parcy said.

"I bet he's going to love that." The soldier smirked but stepped aside.

"I'll wait for you here," Parcy said. "Don't be long."

Kate was handed a flashlight to help guide her path inside. She found the stairwell and climbed to the third floor. Her nerves twisted her gut into knots on the way up, and by the time she exited the stairwell, she had to fight the urge to sprint toward Luke's room.

The old wooden floors in the hallway groaned with each step toward Luke's room. When she reached his door, Kate raised her fist and lightly knocked three times. She waited a moment, listening for any movement inside. When she heard nothing, Kate gripped the doorknob and turned it. It was unlocked.

The door cracked open, and Kate poked her head inside. "Luke?" she whispered, her eyes falling to his bed, where a massive lump lay under the covers with his back turned. But she recognized that mop of hair, and before she realized it, she was at his side. "Luke!" She shook his shoulder, and he groaned. He turned to face her, eyes blinking, and just when Kate's smile grew the widest, she finally noticed that he wasn't in bed alone.

“Holy shit, Mom!”

The girl next to him stirred and then jumped and screamed. Kate quickly retreated toward the door as the girl covered herself up. Luke’s roommate jolted upright in his bed and then rolled off the mattress and hit the floor with a thud.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said.

Doors opened in the hallway, and the sleepy students voiced their displeasure.

“Shut up in there!”

“We’re trying to get some sleep!”

“Knock it off!”

Luke jumped out of bed, thankfully wearing gym shorts, and then quickly shut the door. “Mom, what the hell are you doing here?”

“*Mom?*” The girl in the bed stared in horror, the sheet still clutched high on her chest, and then she let it drop, Kate thankfully noting that she was also clothed. “Oh my god.” She slid out of bed and then quickly grabbed her shoes and a coat. “I have to go.”

“Claire, no, wait.” Luke tried to stop her, but the girl squeezed past Kate and disappeared down the hall. Luke slouched in defeat as he watched her leave then spun to face his mother. “Mom, *what* are you doing here? And how did you even *get* here?”

Kate knew he was mad and embarrassed, but seeing him standing there, alive, after everything she’d seen, after everything that she’d been through, she broke down in tears and threw her arms around him. “Thank God you’re all right.”

Luke’s tone softened, and he returned the embrace. “Of course I’m all right.” He broke off the embrace and walked the two of them to the edge of his bed, where he quickly moved a bra, and his cheeks reddened as he tossed it in the corner out of sight.

“Um...” Luke’s roommate grabbed a shirt and got up from the floor. “I think I’ll just wait outside.” He left, his footsteps creaking down the hall.

Kate took Luke’s hand. “Your father and I weren’t sure how to get in contact with you after the power went out. We were so worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” Luke kept his voice calm. “Classes have been cancelled since… well, since whatever this is happened.”

Kate hugged him again and kissed his cheek and then wiped her eyes, hoping he couldn’t see her crying again in the dark. “And you’re sure you’re

okay?" She gently prodded his face and shoulders.

Luke removed her hands, holding them in his own. "I'm fine, Mom." And then he frowned. "How did you get down here? The military hasn't been able to get anything working, let alone a car."

"I flew," Kate said.

"What?"

Kate stood and pulled Luke up off the bed with her. "We have to go. C'mon."

Luke removed his arm from her grip. "What? I can't leave."

"It's not safe here, Luke. We need to go, and we need to do it quickly."

"I'm not leaving Claire."

"Who's Claire?" And then Kate remembered the girl, and the bra, and Luke's cheeks reddened again. "Luke, now isn't the time to be romantic."

"We're surrounded by soldiers. This is the safest place I could be."

"If there are soldiers here, then that means there will be fighting here." Kate stiffened. "You're coming with me. And you're coming now."

"No." The defiance was short, stern, and immovable. "I'm not."

"We don't have time for this!" Kate's voice thundered in the room, but Luke just stood there, the threat from his mother neither intimidating nor effective.

Kate growled in frustration and then paced in a circle. She kept her eyes glued to the floor, fighting the urge to treat Luke like the child she believed he was acting like. "I know you think you really like this girl, and I know you think staying behind is the right thing, but it's not." She looked up to him. "Family is the most important thing right now, and your family needs you." She stepped toward him. "I need you."

Luke relaxed, his posture less standoffish, but he kept his distance. "I'm sorry, Mom. I am. But I can't leave."

The moment was surreal, worse than a nightmare. She had found Luke alive and well, but she recognized that stubborn tone in his voice. It sounded a lot like her own.

"We'll sleep on it," Kate said, and she suddenly felt exhausted. "They have a bed for me in the auditorium. There's a soldier waiting for me downstairs."

"I'll walk with you." Luke put on a shirt and shoes and then grabbed a coat.

Parcy followed behind them as Luke guided Kate toward the auditorium,

and Luke put his arm around his mom as they walked. The quiet of the night was only interrupted by their footfalls crunching snow and the occasional gust of wind.

“I’m sorry about the girl,” Luke said, almost blurting it out. “She’s really nice, Mom. And I don’t want you to think that just because—”

“It’s fine, Luke,” Kate said. “Really. I’m just glad that both of you were clothed.”

Luke laughed. “That makes two of us.”

Another silence fell between them, and it wasn’t broken until they reached the gymnasium. Luke pocketed his hands and rocked back and forth on his feet nervously. “I love her. And I know all of the things that you’ll tell me, that I’ve never really been in love, that we’re both young, and that it won’t work out.” He broke eye contact and stared down at his feet. “And you might be right. But if this is a mistake, then you should let me make it. Just like you made yours.”

Luke sheepishly lifted his gaze back toward Kate’s, and while she wanted to confirm everything he said, she chose not to. Instead she pressed her hand against his cheek, feeling the rough stubble of hair growing. He wasn’t a boy anymore. He had become a man when she wasn’t paying attention. She dropped her hand and then kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Mom.”

Kate lingered outside the gymnasium while she watched her son return to his dorm room. She wondered if the girl would come back or if he would go and find her, and then she quickly pushed that thought out of her head. She wasn’t sure how she was going to convince Luke to come back with her, but she knew he couldn’t stay here. Whatever enemy was attacking the capital didn’t have plans to rest on their laurels. And if the soldiers she spoke to were correct, then the fighting could break out here at any moment. And she wanted her son to be as far away from that as possible.

7

Thirty-five convicts huddled in the trees behind Main Street in the town of Duluth. Fingers twitched anxiously, and knees bounced with nervous energy. Icy breaths escaped snarls surrounded by beards. The wolf pack was hungry and restless.

They had waited until night fall, scoping out the town to see if they were armed, and what supplies they had. But now everyone was asleep. Now was the time to strike.

“Christ, my balls are about to freeze off.” Snow drifted off Jimmy’s body as he rubbed his arms for warmth. “What the hell is taking them so long?”

Dennis examined the Glock in his hand then racked the slide back and stared at the bullet in the chamber. “I told them to be thorough.”

“Well, I want my own bed,” Jimmy said. “And a nice warm woman to go with it.”

“Just remember not to hit her too hard before you drag her back to your cave,” Mulls said. “Unless you want to be fucking a corpse.”

“She’d only have to be warm for a minute.” Jimmy wheezed laughter, his teeth chattering from the cold.

“We do this right,” Dennis said, “and we can have whatever we want down there, and for as long as we want it.”

Branches rustled to Dennis’s right, followed by quick footfalls, and all three of them turned their weapons toward two men with scruffy beards and long, matted hair.

“Put those things down before you kill one of us.” Martin waved his big

hand and collapsed next to Dennis and tried to catch his breath as his brother, Billy, followed suit. Both brothers had been freelance killers before the FBI got ahold of them. Their skill sets also made them excellent trackers. They'd been part of Mulls's crew on the inside.

"Well?" Dennis asked.

"Eighty-plus people," Martin answered, clearing his throat, still huffing. The man's prime had ended more than a decade past. But his mind remained sharp. "Mostly vacationers up here for skiing. A few of the locals look like they had weapons, but no more than a dozen."

"Pigs?" Mulls asked.

"A sheriff and six deputies," Billy answered. The age gap between the brothers was enough that Billy could pass as Martin's son. "They've got two on watch, keeping their eyes on the only road into town, which is mostly asleep."

"We should hit them now," Mulls said. "We go in quick, round them up, and show 'em who's boss." He turned to Dennis. "They can't call anyone, can't drive anywhere, right?"

"Give me the rundown of the buildings," Dennis said.

Martin and Billy recited everything they'd seen, and Dennis was glad for the details. They'd counted the number of entrances and exits for every building in the town, which numbered at twelve. Once they finished, Dennis turned to Mulls.

"We take out the deputies first," he said. "And we do it quietly. We put three men to a building. All twelve groups need to have a gun and a point man. We funnel everyone out and take them—" He turned back to Martin. "You mentioned a town hall, where is it?"

"East end of the town."

"We corral them there," Dennis said. "We'll have to deal with a few hotheads, but once we take care of them, the rest of the sheep will fall into line. Won't take more than a few bullets to start flying before everyone shits their pants and just wants it to stop."

"And then we get to do whatever we want, right?" Jimmy's eyes grew wide, like a kid's on Christmas morning.

"You take what you want," Dennis answered. "Everybody gets a piece."

"I just want a piece of ass," Jimmy said then turned to Martin and Billy with longing in his eyes. "Women down there?"

"Yeah." A wide grin spread over Martin's face. "Plenty of them."

“Get everyone in position,” Dennis said. “No one moves until the first gunshot.”

Word spread, and all those twitching hands and bouncing knees exploded into action. The groups of three departed from the woods quietly and beelined toward their assigned buildings. It wasn’t until everyone had left that Dennis, Mulls, and Jimmy snaked their way toward the sheriff’s station.

The familiar surge of adrenaline that accompanied a heist returned, and Dennis had forgotten how much he’d missed it. Once a man had a taste of it, he never wanted anything else. There was rebellious freedom to it, violence that awakened the most primal human instincts. Every man in an orange jumpsuit knew that freedom. Crime was the worst kind of addiction, and every man was eager to have that needle prick their arms again.

Dennis and his group approached the back side of the sheriff’s station. He peered down the alley and heard the voices of the two deputies on watch. He held out his palm, and Mulls handed him a knife. He curled his stiff and frozen fingers around it and crept down the alley, Mulls disappearing to the other side. Jimmy went in through the back door, taking care of the cops that slept.

With his feet frozen, it was nearly impossible for Dennis to keep his footfalls quiet, and each step was met with a cringe as he waited for his cover to be blown. But he grew nearer, and the banter between the cops at the front never broke.

Dennis glued himself to the building’s wall, slithering toward the flickering glow of the candles the deputies had set out. He stopped just before the wall’s end, knife poised to strike. He peered around the edge and saw the pair of deputies in the street, rifles hoisted over their shoulders, staring out into the darkness of the road.

Mulls appeared on the other side and locked eyes with Dennis. Both men nodded then crept from the shadows toward their victims.

Dennis had the knife raised high, his body stiff from cold and concentration, and when he was two steps from the deputy’s throat, his shadow betrayed him, casting into the deputy’s line of sight. The man spun, and Dennis led with the knife, metal digging into flesh just as the deputy squeezed the trigger, breaking the night’s silence.

Blood splattered Dennis’s face as the deputy clawed at Dennis’s arm. He yanked the blade from the deputy’s throat, blood dripping from the knife’s tip. Crimson stained the snow, and he glanced over to find Mulls standing

over the second deputy with his blood-soaked knife.

What took only seconds felt like an eternity. And Dennis barely had time to notice the shouts inside the sheriff's station before the entire town erupted with gunfire and screams. The inmates hooted and hollered, bloodlust taking control of their senses.

Frightened and confused townspeople were flung out into the cold, shivering in their pajamas, plucked from the warmth of their beds. One inmate held a young woman dressed in a lacy teddy, gripping her by the hair. Another prisoner came out holding her man at gunpoint.

"Oh, she's gonna warm me up real good!" He laughed, and the woman screamed.

"You don't fucking touch her!" But the man's threat fell empty as he was kicked to the ground, and the prisoner with the gun to his head pumped the shotgun.

The man froze at the sound and remained on his knees as he lifted his hands in the air. His woman looked back at him, crying, struggling against the inmate who would rape her. Dennis expected a lot of that for the next couple of nights. That and killing.

"Not here," Dennis said, icy clouds forming from his excited and labored breaths. "We wait until we've got everyone." He looked at the woman and then her husband. "Then the fun begins."

A gunshot thundered up ahead, and glass shattered, and Dennis caught the blur of an orange jumpsuit that was flung outside. The barrel of a rifle penetrated the open door, and then a bullet was fired into the prisoner's gut.

The door then slammed shut quickly, and Dennis joined the other inmates that swarmed the rebellious shooter, a smile on his face. They had a fighter on their hands.

Dennis, Jimmy, and Mulls paused at the door. Dennis peered through the broken window, the boards of the front porch groaning as he did. A gunshot thundered inside, and Dennis ducked out of the way of the bullet screaming into the street.

"Son of a bitch!" Mulls said, growling.

"He's heading out the back!" Jimmy said, staring down the side of the house.

Dennis led the pursuit, and the small backyard quickly gave way to a cluster of trees, spying to figures fleeing through the forest.

Deeper into the woods, the snow on the ground thickened, and both

parties were forced to little more than a crawl. But Dennis raised his gun, bringing the man's back into his crosshairs. He forced his arm steady, and he squeezed the trigger.

The man flung his arms wildly as he plummeted face-first into the snow. The rifle flew from his hands, and the woman shrieked, dropping to her man's side, too hysterical to reach for the rifle in the snow.

"Drake, get up! *Get up!*" The woman flung her body over the dead man's, her face turned up toward Dennis, staring down the barrel of the pistol. "*What did you do?*"

"Sorry, sweetheart," Dennis said, catching his breath but smiling as Jimmy and Mulls caught up with him. He motioned to Mulls. "Take her back with the others."

The woman burst into sobbing wails and flopped back over the man. It took both Mulls and Jimmy to drag her back, the woman's cries echoing all the way back into town.

Dennis lingered behind for a moment, staring down at the dead man. He saw the glint of metal on the man's left ring finger. A wedding band, the gold shining brightly against the backdrop of the white snow that wasn't covered with the man's blood, melting it into a red slush.

It had been a long time since Dennis had seen blood spilled. It twinkled in his eyes like fire, and his grin stretched from ear to ear. He bent down and poked his finger in it, swirling the blood and ice in little circles.

The metallic scent of the blood filled his nostrils, and he inhaled it, lifting his head and closing his eyes. It was intoxicating. And it was a smell he missed.

Dennis reached for the dead man's left hand and then removed the wedding ring and pocketed the gold. "Thanks for the wife." He laughed and left the corpse to rot in the snow.

Back on Main Street, he saw the lines of people being shuttled into the auditorium.

Dennis approached Jimmy and Mulls, who still held the wife of the man he killed, and ran his bloodstained finger from her chin up along her jawline. "Get her a good seat up front." She turned away, making the smear worse, and that bug started to burrow.

A low murmuring anxiety had filled the massive town hall, which echoed from the high ceilings and tiled floors. Dennis remained in the back, looking at the huddled masses shivering and clutching their pajamas and robes.

The inmates circled around the group like a wolf pack, baring their teeth with their smiles and dripping saliva. There was a fair amount of women inside. Most of the inmates hadn't even smelled a woman in over a decade.

"Quiet!" Dennis said, his voice booming and triggering a faint shriek from the group, then everyone fell silent. He cut through the middle, forcing the huddled masses to part for him. Dennis liked that. Once he reached the front of the group, he spun around, smiling. "Good evening, Duluth! My name is Inmate 0946." He gestured to the rest of the prisoners. "And these are a few of my closest friends."

The inmates chuckled, a few of them pointing to different women in the group. No doubt choosing their favorites.

"My friends and I want a little taste of what you all have here." Dennis opened his arms, spreading them wide and welcoming. "We've been deprived of such luxuries for so long we thought we'd try and take a few from you here."

"You're criminals!" a man on his knees shouted. Red blotches covered his face, and his lips quivered uncontrollably like the rest of him. He glanced around accusingly. "You belong back behind bars!"

Two of the inmates made a move for the man, but Dennis held up his hands, and they stopped. He looked at the woman of the man he'd killed out in the snow. To her credit, she didn't look away when they made eye contact.

"Criminals?" Dennis spoke the question with his eyes still locked onto the woman then finally broke off and set his gaze upon that trembling man. "We're only criminals because society labeled us that way. But look at society now."

The people around the man who'd spoken up started to separate themselves from him. All but the woman next to him who clutched his arm nervously.

Dennis knelt when he reached the man, and he placed the end of his pistol against the man's left temple. "I could blow your brains out, and you know what would happen? You would die, and then I would let those two guys over there fuck your wife."

The woman whimpered, and the husband protectively tucked his wife behind him. "You can't do this. It's against—"

"The law?" Dennis asked. "What law?" He removed the pistol and then pointed it down toward the sheriff's office. "We killed the deputies and the sheriff. The law is dead." He leaned closer to the dead man's ear and dropped

his voice to a whisper. “We’re in charge now.”

Dennis stood and then placed the end of his pistol’s barrel against the man’s forehead.

“Please,” the woman said, poking out from behind her husband. “Please, don’t do this. We’ll cooperate. We’ll do whatever you want.”

“Did you hear that, fellas?” Dennis shouted. “She said they’ll do whatever we want!”

Laughter and a few howls and cheers erupted from the inmates, more violence and anger than joy and excitement.

Dennis looked back at the woman, laughing as well. “You might regret saying that, lady.” He squeezed the trigger, the ring of the gunshot cut short by the screams that filled the auditorium. Dennis returned to the front of the hall, stopping at the woman, and he gently ran his hands through her hair. It was soft. Softer than anything he’d felt in a long time. She jerked away after a few seconds, and then he grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her to her feet.

“This is our town now!” Dennis said. “We do what we want, to who we want, wherever we want. The more you fight it, the worse it’ll be.” He looked at the inmates, who were practically salivating. “Have fun, boys.”

8

Morning came quickly, and it only brought trouble with it. Mark rolled to his side, his entire body as stiff as a board from his night on the floor, and found Holly on her stomach, drawing in gargled and raspy breaths.

"Holly?" Mark hurried to her side and gently rolled her to her back. Her face was slick with sweat, and the heat pouring off her was tremendous. "Christ, Holly, can you hear me?"

Only raspy breaths answered, and everyone else began to rise from their slumber. Rodney was up first, and he rolled over, concern on his face. "What happened?"

"I-I don't know!" Mark propped Holly up, but the raspy breaths continued.

"Did you give her medicine last night?" Rodney asked, his voice on the edge of calm.

"Of course I did!"

Glen and Laura roused, rubbing their eyes sleepily at the commotion.

"What's wrong?" Glen asked.

"Can't we just sleep a little longer?" Laura asked longingly.

"Holly's getting worse," Rodney answered, pausing briefly at the foot of their cushions where they slept, and then darted out the door.

"Oh my god," Laura said, flinging off the quilt that she'd used the night before, and she quickly knelt down by Mark's side. "What happened?"

"Her breathing is really bad," Mark said, rocking Holly in his arms as she wheezed for air.

“Did you give her the antibiotics?” Laura asked.

“Yeah. They’re not working.” Mark brushed back the wet and matted hair on Holly’s forehead. In addition to the fever, the sweating, and the wheezing, Holly had grown incredibly pale. All the color from her face was drained, and his daughter looked more dead than alive.

And where was he supposed to take her? He couldn’t call a doctor or drive to a hospital. He couldn’t get online and search WebMD. He was alone with his daughter in a place he’d never been before, in the middle of winter, with no power and no transportation.

Glen and Laura kept quiet and close. Every once in a while, one of them would offer water or food from their pack.

Holly wouldn’t take the food, but Mark forced water down her throat. She had to be dehydrated from sweating so much. He thought about taking her jacket off and stripping her down to her underwear but knew that she’d freeze the moment they stepped outside.

Mark had to concentrate to keep the tears from falling. Never in his life had he felt more helpless than he did at that moment. A father was supposed to protect his daughter, shield her from the horrors of the world, and he could do nothing.

The door burst open, and Rodney appeared, bringing with him the light of daybreak. He held a rope and pulled the sled behind him. “Help me get her outside.”

“What?” Mark asked, pulling his daughter out of Rodney’s reach. “We can’t move her. She’ll freeze out there!”

“Her lungs are filled with liquid. She’s choking to death,” Rodney answered, his breath labored as he hunched over with his hands on his knees. “There is hospital ten miles west of us. If we’re lucky, then there still might be some staff that stayed behind after the EMP was triggered. I don’t know if they’ll be able to help, but I can promise you that if we stay here, she will die.”

It wasn’t the words that scared Mark. It was the confidence with which Rodney had spoken them. “All right.” He carried Holly to the sled, setting her down gently, but Holly drew in another harsh rasp. She hacked and coughed, spitting green fluid over the front of her jacket.

Laura gasped, and Glen let out a throaty groan as if he were experiencing the same pain.

“It’s all right, Holly,” Mark said, shushing her whimpering cries.

“Everything is going to be okay.”

Holly’s eyelids fluttered, and they cracked open. Her mouth turned down before she began to shed tears. “I want to go home.”

Mark kissed her forehead while Rodney finished securing the sled’s straps. “I know, baby. I know you do.”

Laura rushed back inside and then returned with a pillow. “Here. For her head.”

“Thanks.” Mark jimmied the pillow into place, resting Holly’s head down just as gently. And despite the fever and at Rodney’s urging, they covered her with another blanket.

“Even with the fever, she could still freeze,” Rodney said then turned to the others. “We’ll need to move quickly, but it’ll be hard since we’re cutting through the woods to save time. The snow will be thick.” He spoke to the group, but his eyes were on Glen.

“We won’t slow you down,” Glen said.

“We promise,” Laura said, looking down at Holly.

“Let’s go!”

Both Rodney and Mark pulled the sled, with Laura and Glen bringing up the rear. Holly’s limp body rocked back and forth over the snow and hills as they weaved through the forest.

Every few feet, Mark looked back, and Holly would cough, spewing more fluid onto her chest. He churned his legs faster through the snow. She was running out of time.

IT WAS WELL past dawn when Kate awoke in the auditorium. Almost everyone else was already awake, chatting amongst themselves, a few holding Styrofoam cups that piped steam. Kate stared at the sight, unsure if she was dreaming.

“Fresh off the fire.” The voice accompanied a similar piping-hot cup thrust into the path of her gawking eyes. Kate followed the arm to a smiling face of a young man with shoulder-length hair and scruff over his face.

Kate wasn’t sure how long she stared but knew that it was too long based

off the man’s nervous laughter.

“It’s not poison.” He leaned closer, dropping his voice to a whisper. “At least yours isn’t.” He gestured to a couple chatting nearby. “Never really liked those two.” Kate’s expression didn’t break, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I’m joking, of course.”

“Right.” Kate shook her head and then took the coffee. She pressed both palms against its warmth. It was the first warm thing she’d held since the EMP went off two days ago. She lingered on that last thought. Had it really been two days?

“I’m Rick.” He extended his free hand, the smile returned to his face.

“Kate.” She took it, and his grip was firm. She examined the cup. “I forgot you could heat things up without power.”

Rick took a seat on her cot, though he kept his distance. “The military may be a drag when it comes to wanting to go where you want to go, but they did bring a lot of rations with them.” He raised the cup then sipped and grimaced. “Not very good, though. But a lot of it.”

Kate sipped, burning her tongue, but found that he was right. The black sludge was more of a distant cousin to coffee than the legitimate heir.

“Told you.”

Kate set the coffee down and then stood. “I’m sorry, but I have to go and see my son.”

“You have a kid here?”

“Yes,” Kate answered, exhausted. “Now if you’ll excuse me.” She left him with his shitty coffee on the cot. She didn’t glance behind her, afraid that he’d follow, but she eventually snuck a peek once she was outside. Thankfully, he wasn’t there.

A group of armed soldiers walked past, and Kate flagged one of them down. “Excuse me, do you know where The Commons House is?”

“No, but all of the dormitories have been escorted to the cafeteria,” he said then pointed behind her. “It’s that big grey building. You’ll see the line out front.”

“Thank you—” But when she turned, the soldiers were already up ahead, chatting amongst themselves and adjusting the rifles on their shoulders.

When she’d arrived in the night, the darkness had concealed the number of soldiers, but in the light of day she saw the place was crawling with them.

Kate walked over to the cafeteria, racking her brain for a way to convince Luke to come back with her. She longed for the days when she could just

pick him up and carry him. That would have made things much simpler.

She found the line for breakfast and bypassed it. Nerves and the desire to get out of here as soon as possible had replaced hunger. She prayed the plane was still in that field.

Inside, hundreds of people had already found their way to the tables, most of them shoveling the food around on their trays instead of eating it. And while it didn't look appetizing, the smell started to bring the hunger out.

"Mom!"

Kate's heart stopped, and she turned toward Luke's voice. He stood with his hand in the air, waving, and to her surprise, smiling. Once he knew that she'd seen him, he plopped back down into his seat, and Kate noticed the same girl from the night before sitting next to him, her head down, buried in a bowl of oatmeal.

"Scoot over, guys." Luke shooed some of his friends down the long bench seats but then stopped when he noticed Kate didn't have a tray in her hands. "You're not hungry?"

"No, I'm fine." Kate smiled politely at the others, not recognizing any of them.

"Everyone, this is my mom," Luke said. "Mom, this is Doug, Barry, Kit, Mace, and, um..." He cleared his throat and blushed. "This is Claire."

The young girl stood at the sound of her name, springing up like a fresh daisy that had longed for springtime. She thrust out her hand, her cheeks red. "It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Hillman."

"It's very nice to meet you, Claire." Kate let go of the girl's hand and whispered into Luke's ear. "I need to talk to you for a minute."

Claire sat down, and Luke nodded.

Once they were a safe distance away from any ears, Kate spoke. "Luke, we have to leave." Her son stood there, towering six inches above her, the features of his face set like hard granite. She took his hand. "I know you don't want to leave, but—"

"I'm not leaving Claire behind, Mom." He didn't remove his hand from hers, and instead he squeezed them tighter. "I wasn't just blowing smoke at you last night. I love her. I'm staying."

Kate cupped Luke's face, desperation clinging to her like morning dew. "Son, I can't leave you here. You don't know what's going on out there. You don't— Even the military doesn't really know what's happening." She glanced around, making sure there weren't any soldiers nearby. "The power

isn’t coming back on, and we need to get out of any highly populated areas. If the fighting is as bad in the capital as I’ve heard, then it won’t be long before the fighting comes here. And if we try to leave then, it’ll be too late.”

She waited for Luke to say something, anything, but he just stared at her, almost mockingly. But he had the good sense to stifle any smirks.

“Mom, we’re surrounded by soldiers.” He released her hands. “We have food, water, and shelter. This is the safest place we could possibly be.”

Kate steeled herself, and her expression caused Luke’s boyish features to return. A mother’s scorn had that effect. “You think it’s a good idea to keep you and your girlfriend in a circle of guns? What happens when those guns are used? What happens when the small semblance of order here falls?”

Luke laughed. “Mom, I don’t—”

“No, you don’t!” Kate raised her volume and pulled a few heads in their direction. “People have died, Luke. Killed by their neighbors, by strangers, by the terrorists responsible for all of this. The moment this place is under attack, law and order go out the window. Those men with the guns will fight for themselves, and you’ll be stuck in the crosshairs.” Her voice cracked. “I won’t let you die here.”

The tears flowed despite Kate’s resistance, and Luke hugged her. It was a pitying embrace but one that she still welcomed.

“Mom, I’m not—”

Gunshots thundered. They were far enough away to be dulled by distance and the cafeteria’s walls but close enough to end the senseless chatter as heads turned toward the commotion.

Soldiers shouted and sprinted past the windows. Kate stepped around her son, watching the soldiers rush toward the source of the gunfire. More of it thundered. It grew closer. She turned around and reached for Luke’s hand.

“We have to go. Now.” Her tone was hurried and frightened, but Luke just stared into the distance, past the windows and the soldiers, his eyes blank, his expression devoid of understanding.

An explosion erupted near one of the buildings. A plume of fire jettisoned into the morning sky, burning bright and hot. The cafeteria rumbled in coordination with the blast, and that stunned silence was quickly replaced by gasps of surprise, ducking heads, and panic.

Trays of food were flung in haste as people sprinted for the exits. Kate grabbed hold of Luke’s hand, but he lunged back toward the table for Claire, who struggled to make her way through the crowd.

“Claire!” Luke clawed through the bodies, gunshots silencing the chorus of screams inside the mess hall.

Kate tried to stop him, but it was all she could do to simply hang on for the ride. Shoulders and arms bumped into her as Luke grabbed hold of Claire’s hand and then pulled both of them toward the nearest door, which happened to be the one closest to the gunshots.

Outside, the cold air blasted Kate’s face, and Luke turned north, away from the cluster of soldiers that had crouched behind the cover on the building closest to the explosion.

Kate caught only a glimpse of the fight as Luke yanked both her and Claire away from the danger.

She wasn’t sure how long she sprinted, but Kate was the first to run out of gas. She gave Luke’s arm a tug, and they jerked to a stop. She gasped for breath, her muscles turned to jelly.

“What do we do?” Claire asked.

A group of soldiers hurried past, and Luke grabbed hold of one of them, his hand clamped tight around his arm. “Where are they coming from?”

The soldier snarled and yanked his arm free then jogged to rejoin his men. “Fucking everywhere!”

Another explosion sounded, and both Kate and Claire stepped toward Luke. The blast was farther away than the first, toward the west side of the campus, but more ferocious gunfire followed it.

“Mom, how far is the plane?” Luke asked.

“A few miles.” Kate looked around, trying to get her bearings. “We need to get back onto the main road that leads into the campus. I should be able to retrace my steps from there.”

The trio sprinted off, Luke leading the way through the campus. They passed more soldiers, and every few seconds, they flinched from gunfire, but they never stopped running.

“There’s the road.” Luke pointed. “Now, where?”

Kate took the lead, though the pace she set was slower. They weaved between the vehicles on the highway, Kate glancing everywhere, her eyes peeled on the woods to her left and the open field to her right. With all of the abandoned vehicles, there were so many places for people to hide.

Every step forward, Kate couldn’t help but think of what lay beyond. One of those terrorists with a gun, ready to plow the three of them down. Memories of New York flashed in her head. The bodies, the bullets, the

blood and screams.

Kate stopped and steadied herself against the side of a truck. She gasped for breath, hyperventilating. She was suddenly beneath all of those bodies, the terrorists standing on top of her. The heat coming off them was like the heat from a dying fire.

“Mom, are you all right?” Luke asked, taking hold of her arm.

Kate shut her eyes and nodded, trying to reel herself back to the present. “I’m fine.” She popped her eyes open and saw worried expressions on both Luke and Claire. “We need to keep moving.”

After her little episode, Kate pulled them closer to the forest line, where they had a clearer path. Her eyes darted to the side more than they stayed in front of her as she searched for an enemy that wasn’t there.

“How much farther?” Luke asked.

Kate squinted through the trees. She had no idea. “Should be just up ahead.”

Leaves and snow crunched underfoot, and a breeze rustled dead branches and fallen leaves. Kate stopped, and Luke and Claire stopped with her.

“What?” Luke asked. “Mom, what—”

Kate waved at him angrily, hushing him. She perked her ear toward the direction of the voices carried through the trees, and Kate immediately pulled Luke down, with Claire following suit.

Her heart pounded wildly in her chest, her eyes scanning for the source of the noise, and then she spotted three men between the trees, each of them armed with rifles, dressed in long robes that concealed their faces, save for their eyes.

Kate turned to Luke and Claire, pressing her finger to her lips, and the terrorists grew louder, closer. When she turned back, she saw the trio had diverted their path toward them. Kate motioned Luke and Claire to follow, and they crawled through the snow.

Every creak of her joints, every crunch of her knees and hands into the snowfall brought with it a cringe. Kate kept a bead on the terrorists to her left. She stopped when they stopped. And so did Luke and Claire.

Once they were out of the terrorists’ path, Kate stopped, hunched behind a dead tree, and waited for them to pass. It wasn’t until they were out of sight and she could no longer hear their foreign tongue that she gave a long exhalation.

“Thank God,” Kate said.

“Who are those people?” Luke asked, his eyes still trained on their footprints. “Are they the ones attacking us?”

“Yeah,” Kate answered, turning back to where they disappeared.

“Who are they?” Claire asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” Kate stood and brushed the snow and leaves off of her. “We need to go.” She stepped from the cover of the tree and froze when the barrel of a rifle bore down on her face.

“*Tawaquf!*” The words were shouted through the cloth covering the man’s mouth. He shoved the end of his rifle into Kate’s face. “*Ealaa Rakbatayk!*”

Kate kept her hands in the air and stepped back. Luke jumped to her side, throwing his body in front of hers, which she quickly peeled away. “No, don’t!”

The soldier repeated his screams, shaking the rifle at them like a stick. After a minute, foreign voices returned the lone soldier’s cries. Kate turned in horror to see the other fighters making their return. They were at least one hundred yards away, but they moved quickly.

The terrorist jammed the end of his rifle barrel into Kate’s shoulder and shoved her backward, slamming her into Luke and Claire.

“Hey!” Luke reached for the rifle, and in the same instant, Kate heard a gunshot.

Claire screamed, and Kate watched the color drain from Luke’s face as he collapsed into the snow. She dropped to his side, Claire falling with him. Kate’s hands found the wound on the left side of his chest, and she applied pressure.

“Mom?” Luke’s voice was little more than a whisper. He was suddenly pale and sweaty.

“It’s all right, Luke.” Kate steadied her voice, trying to remain focused, trying to hold it all together. “Shh, it’s all right.” Kate flicked her eyes up, and through the trees, she saw the terrorists sprinting toward her.

Kate’s head tilted forward, the rifle barrel pressed hard into the back of her skull. Her eyes met the eyes of Claire, who was crying and on the edge of hysteria.

More blood oozed from Luke’s bullet wound, warming Kate’s hand and then spilling onto the snow. His eyes fluttered closed, and he stopped shaking.

Kate shut her eyes, adrenaline fueling the rage bubbling to the precipice

of action, and then exploded upward, turning and swinging both arms, knocking the rifle to the side. The gun fired, and the terrorist stumbled backward, eyes wide with surprise.

Kate snatched at the rifle, the steel cold against her grip. Another gunshot fired into the trees, vibrating her arms and hands, but she didn't let go.

The rifle's stock pressed into her throat, and Kate's airflow tightened. Her breaths transformed into raspy gasps, and the pressure increased.

Claire flung herself on the terrorist's back in an effort to help, and Kate wrestled the rifle from his grip. She flipped it around in her hands, her finger finding the trigger, and squeezed.

A red mark stained the terrorist's chest, spreading over the cloth as he was flung backward, crashing into the snow next to her son.

The terrorist's comrades screamed and sprinted faster through the woods at the sight of their fallen brother.

Kate took hold of Luke's left arm and tucked the rifle under her right shoulder. "Claire, grab his other hand!" The girl did as she was told, though she sobbed through the whole ordeal. "We need to pull him. C'mon!"

Luke's body jerked forward with a jolt, and a red smear trailed through the white snow, his back scraping against the rocks and roots beneath. He groaned. Kate stopped.

"We need to get him up." Kate dropped to Luke's side and looked up at Claire, who was glancing back toward the terrorists. "Claire, c'mon!"

Claire stepped away from Luke. "I'm sorry. I can't do this. I can't."

"Claire, don't!" Kate watched Claire disappear into the woods and then saw one of the terrorists break from his group to chase her down.

Kate squatted low and hooked her arms beneath Luke's pits. Her boots scraped the frozen ground, and she dragged him four feet before she tripped over a rock and collapsed backward.

Claire screamed, and Kate shuddered when she heard the gunshot that silenced it. She found the two terrorists chasing her had cut the distance between them in half. Kate forced herself up and yanked Luke forward, a wild panic to her retreat. She wasn't going to let them die here, not after coming so far.

Kate pushed through a cluster of branches and high bushes, and then she saw it. Less than fifty feet away was the plane she stashed next to the clearing. She turned back toward the woods, the terrorists fifty yards away.

Kate propped Luke up against the plane and then opened the cabin door.

She wrapped her arms around his stomach and then heaved him onto the seat. His legs dangled from the cabin door, and she awkwardly folded them inside.

Once Luke was inside the cockpit, Kate snatched one of the ignition starters, then pumped the primer three times, and pushed the aircraft from the tree line and onto the field.

A gunshot burst from the forest, and Kate jumped as she shoved the ignition starter into place. She reached high with both arms and pulled the propeller down with all her might. Her fatigued muscles strained from the effort, but they provided enough power to start the old Skyranger, and the terrorists' shouts were drowned out by the engine's throttling.

Kate jumped into the cockpit, frantically running through the prestart, her hands sticky with Luke's blood, and then released the brake and hit the throttle. The engine whined, but as loud as it was, she still heard the terrorist's gunfire.

The contact of the bullets vibrated through the cockpit, and Kate white-knuckled the throttle. As the speedometer ticked upward, the engine's roar drowned out the rest of the gunshots.

Kate pulled back on the stick. "C'mon, baby. C'mon!" The cockpit rattled, and the plane jumped with lift and then landed hard on its wheels. The end of the field was closing in, and Kate pushed the throttle down further, pulling back on the stick with all her might. "*Gaaahhh!*"

The Skyranger's nose lifted, and the wheels separated from the field. The top of the trees disappeared as Kate continued her strained pull on the stick, and the wheels scuffed the tip of a conifer just before clearing.

Kate's muscles relaxed, and she laughed in triumph. "*YES!*" She leveled the plane out a bit so the engine wouldn't stall and then turned to her son, who still lay unconscious in the seat. "Luke? Can you hear me?" She patted his cheeks, and when he groaned in response, she smiled. "Good boy." She pulled a first aid kid out of from behind her seat, her gloved fingers fumbling it open awkwardly, and then applied gauze over the wound. "Just hang on, Luke."

The plane tilted to the left, and Kate was forced to grab hold of the stick. She couldn't keep one hand on the stick and the other on her son. She found tape and strapped the gauze over the wound and prayed it would hold for the trip.

Luke groaned again, and Kate retook the stick. She looked back at Luke, sunlight reflecting on his bloody chest, and a tear broke free from her eye.

She looked down at the fuel gauge, which hovered well below half a tank. She was short on time and fuel.

9

Mark and Rodney stomped through the forest, leaving a trail of churned up snow on their hastened trip toward the hospital. The cold burned Mark's lungs, and his muscles twitched and spasmed in protest, but he pushed through it. He glanced over at Rodney, who held the other rope attached to the sled that Holly rested on.

Ice formed in little bits along his eyebrows and the scruff of his face. His breathing was labored, but his pace was steady. He kept his eyes forward, the snow around his shins piling to the sides with every step.

Glen and Laura had fallen behind. It was mainly Glen, but Laura stayed with him to make sure he didn't collapse in the snow with a heart attack. Mark couldn't see them anymore through the trees.

"There it is," Rodney said with breathless relief.

Mark turned quickly and saw the large grey building. "Thank god." He turned back to Holly, whose wheezes and rasps had worsened.

The pair pulled Holly toward the ER doors, where two ambulances were parked with their back doors swung open. Mark glanced around, surprised at how vacant the outside looked. Compared to what he'd seen in New York, this was a ghost town.

The inside of the ER was dark, but there was a woman stationed at the desk, bundled up in a jacket and rubbing her hands together, looking down at something on the desk.

"Hey!" Mark said, still dragging the rope and the sled inside with Rodney's help. "My daughter's sick!"

The woman didn’t move. She just kept huddled at her desk, shivering, staring down.

“Hello!” Mark grew more agitated, and then he dropped the rope and went over to the desk. “Hey, I said—”

The woman looked up and hissed, flashing yellowed teeth.

“Christ!” Mark jumped backward, and the woman looked back down at whatever she’d been staring at before.

A woman wearing blue scrubs stepped through two swinging double doors, holding a candle.

“Can I help you?” The woman wore earmuffs and gloves but no jacket. And before Mark answered, she saw the woman at the station and beelined toward her. “Cara! How did you get out?” The woman hissed again, but the nurse ignored it and grabbed the woman by the arm. “Let’s get you back to your room.” She turned to Mark. “I’m sorry—”

“My daughter’s needs help,” Mark said. “She’s—”

“Mark!”

The alarm in Rodney’s voice caused both Mark and the nurse to spin around at the summons.

“She’s not breathing!”

“Oh my god,” the nurse said.

Mark sprinted over, sliding on his knees as Rodney untied the straps holding Holly down. “Holly!” Mark lifted his daughter in his arms, her lips blue as the nurse rushed to his side.

“Follow me. We’ll get her to a room.”

Mark sprinted after the nurse, bursting through the double doors and into the darkened hallway. The candle in the nurse’s hand provided the only light, and its glow didn’t cast farther than the nurse herself. “Hang on, sweetheart.”

“In here.” The nurse opened the door and gestured to a table in the middle of the room. “Put her there.”

The table was on wheels, and it jerked away from Mark as he set Holly down. The nurse was already at his side, putting over Holly’s face a plastic mask that was attached to a small ball that the nurse squeezed to pump air into her lungs.

“What happened?” the nurse asked, pumping air and checking Holly’s pulse.

Mark stammered, trying to put his thoughts together in an orderly fashion but failing. “She had a cold, and we’ve been giving her medicine, but

it’s not—”

“What do we have?” a doctor appeared, his white jacket trailing him and then wrapping around his legs when he came to a stop at Holly’s side.

“She’s not breathing,” Mark answered. “She’d been wheezing a lot and coughing.”

The doctor leaned down and pressed his ear to Holly’s chest then straightened up. “Her lungs are full of liquid. She’s choking herself to death. Stacy, take the mask off.” The doctor whirled around, producing a massive needle and syringe. He positioned the needle at Holly’s chest, and Mark reached out his hand to stop him from inserting the monstrous thing into his daughter’s body.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mark asked.

“We need to get the liquid from her lungs,” the doctor answered.

“She’s still awake,” Mark replied. “Shouldn’t she get some anesthesia or—”

“We don’t have anything for her.” The doctor’s voice was calmer than the expression on his face. “You either let me do this, or she dies on this table.”

Mark examined Holly’s pale complexion and her blue lips and then removed his arm.

“Get her shirt off, and sterilize the area,” the doctor said.

The nurse complied, and the doctor inserted the needle through Holly’s chest. It disappeared, deeper and deeper until Mark thought the damned thing was going to come out the other side.

The doctor slowly pulled back the pump, and greenish-yellow liquid filled the glass. Once it was full, he removed the tube. “Give her another pump with the mask.”

The nurse complied, and Holly’s chest expanded with the mask’s compression. The doctor moved the nurse’s hand away and leaned his ear down to Holly’s nose. He lingered for a few seconds and then grabbed the mask himself, giving another pump. “C’mon, sweetheart.” He removed the mask again and lowered his ear to her nose, listening for breath. He shook his head and repositioned the tube. “I’ll have to get more of the liquid out.”

“How much?” Mark asked.

“All of it.” Holly’s body spasmed. “Keep her still. If she thrashes too much, I might damage her lungs.”

Mark dropped her daughter’s hand and used his strength to keep her still as the bottle filled with more of the greenish liquid. Halfway through, Holly

opened her eyes and started to cry. “Shh, it’s okay, baby. Everything’s fine.”

“Keep her still!” the doctor shouted.

But when Mark tried to end his daughter’s thrashing, she suddenly lay still. The doctor snatched Holly’s wrist as quick as a snakebite. After a moment, he dropped her arm and removed the needle, tossing it with the bottle of liquid it collected on a table. He shooed the nurse and Mark away. He placed his hands over Holly’s sternum and pressed down hard, a loud crunch echoing through the room like ice breaking.

“*What are you doing?*” Mark lunged, but Rodney held him back, pulling him from the room. He struggled against Rodney’s hold, fighting to be at his daughter’s side. “Holly!” He thrashed. “Let me go!”

“You need to let the doctor do his job, Mark.” Rodney’s voice trembled due to the concentrated effort to keep Mark in place. “You can’t do anything in there for her.”

“She’s my daughter!”

“She knows that!” Rodney spit back. “But you can’t save her, Mark.” The fight started to slip out of Mark after that comment. Rodney’s voice softened. “You did what you could do.”

Slowly, Rodney let him go, and Mark slid to the floor, sobbing. He shook his head. And while Rodney attempted to offer words, they fell on deaf ears. It was a father’s job to be prepared, to protect his family against the world. But the world dealt a hand that Mark couldn’t beat. If Holly died, so did he.

DENNIS STOOD NAKED by the window, looking out onto the street from the second story of the house he’d commandeered as his. It cost well into the seven figures, maybe even eight considering the location in the mountains and all of the amenities.

Of course, most of those amenities no longer worked. He would have killed to get that Jacuzzi going. But it would sit outside beneath the awning, unused, at least until he could get the power going. He puffed a cigarette, taking a slow, deep drag.

He’d raided the local convenience store last night and picked up a few

luxuries before the rest of the inmates got wise and started hoarding. He hadn't had a decent drink or a smoke since he'd been on the inside. And here he had both. He smiled. It was good to be king.

He'd been awake since before dawn but only recently moved himself from beneath the sheets. It was warm there and cold by the window. But he needed to wake up. He needed to think. The frigid air and the cigarette were better than a double espresso.

A scream echoed outside, loud enough to penetrate the walls of the house next door and the walls of his place. He frowned, knowing the raping was going to have to be dealt with soon, but then chuckled. He was already thinking like a fucking politician.

He flicked the cigarette on the carpet and then stomped it out with his bare heel, smearing a black stain into the beige floor. He looked back at the bed. The woman was still asleep, with both hands cuffed to the headboard. The restraints were more for necessity than pleasure, at least for her.

The drugs he slipped her last night would wear off soon. It wasn't until after he had his way with her and she lay naked and passed out on the sheets that he thought maybe he'd given her too much. But she was still breathing, and he made sure that she slept on her stomach so she wouldn't vomit and then choke on her own puke.

He turned back to the window and looked down to the wedding ring that belonged to the woman's husband he'd killed. There was some blood on it, but instead of scrubbing it off, he let it be. He liked it bloody.

Dennis got dressed, and before he left, he paused at the door, leaning back inside the room. "Bye, baby. Time to make the donuts."

Downstairs, spread out over the kitchen table was a map. He'd found it when he raided the convenience store. It was of the surrounding area, and the longer Dennis stared at that map, the more that bug started to burrow. He snatched the map off the table and walked outside.

The temperature had dropped, made even worse by a stiff wind. Dennis glanced up at the clouds, which already looked dark. It looked like the makings of a bad blizzard.

"Hey, Dennis." Mulls took a swig from a nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels, his voice gruff and scratchy like the stubble on his face. "Have a good night?" He chuckled and took another drink.

"Hell, we all had a good night!" Jimmy appeared, then punched Mulls playfully, his voice high pitched and quick like an excited teenager. But the

playfulness made Mulls spill his drink, and the big man landed a hard hook into Jimmy's stomach that buckled him at the waist.

"You need to stop fucking around so much, Jimmy," Mulls said, wiping his mouth. "Shit's not funny."

But Jimmy straightened out quickly and bounced excitedly on his toes. "Aw, it's a little funny." He coughed, rubbed his stomach, and then gave another playful shadow box routine to a still unamused Mulls, who was too slow to stop him.

"Knock it off," Dennis said, and Jimmy dropped the act. "We've got work to do. Round all the guys up, and tell them to come to the hall."

"What do you want me to tell them?" John asked, cocking one eyebrow up.

"Tell them I said so." Dennis turned and left Jimmy and Mulls to their task. This was the first test. He hoped that after a night of fucking and drinking they'd be in a good mood. If even most of the guys showed up, then he was in good shape. If it was anything less than half, then he would hit the road and move on. The inmates he knew hoarded together like locusts. So long as the majority agreed, the rest went along for the ride. But he wasn't about to be the outsider looking in.

It took less than twenty minutes before the hall was filled with sleepy, drunk, and hungover prisoners from Renniger Penitentiary. And every single prick that had stayed in this town was up like morning wood. Reporting to him.

"I don't know about you fuckers," Dennis said, raising his voice to a loud boom. "But my dick is rubbed raw!"

Laughter echoed the response, and a few of the guys raised beers they'd brought with them in a salute.

Dennis paced the platform at the front hall. "We've been locked away for a long time, boys. We've sat behind bars while the rest of the world ate, drank, and fucked! Well, now it's our turn." Another round of cheers erupted, and Dennis felt the first swells of power flood through him. They were listening to him, they believed him, and now it was time to find out if they would follow him. "We have a good thing going here, fellas." He stopped walking, finding the center of the hall's platform. "But if we don't take measures, it won't last."

The cheer died down, some of the men grunting in confusion.

"If we don't stake our claim, then someone else will! The more time goes

on, and people start figuring out whatever the hell happened, the more others will start to gather their strength. And when that happens, it'll be harder for us to get what we want." He hopped off the stage and into the group of inmates. "But if we strike now, while everyone is still disoriented, we can make sure we have enough to last us the rest of our lives." He found each of their eyes, and noticed the twinkle of lust as he ticked off everything that they could have. "Booze. Drugs. Food. Women. Houses. Gold. Whatever the fuck we want." He whirled toward Mulls. "You want a waterfront beach property? It's yours."

Laughter echoed in the hall, and Mulls clapped his hands together greedily. "Nothing like a little sand and surf!"

Dennis turned and pointed toward Jimmy. "You want a Lamborghini? It's sitting out on the highway."

Jimmy grabbed hold of an imaginary wheel, and turned it sharply left and right, spitting over his shirt because of the engine noises he made in coordination with his erratic driving.

The group of inmates turned to follow Dennis as he cut through the crowd, and he waited until there was a small uproar of cheers behind him before he turned with a smile on his face, unfurling the map that he'd been holding. "There are five other towns within ten square miles, just like this one. Outside of those towns is nothing but trees and mountains for forty miles. We control this hub, and we have ourselves a nice little setup." He rolled the map back up. "Now, some of these towns will have authorities in them. Others won't. But if we strike now... if we hit them when they're still fumbling around and trying to figure out what happened... then the easier it'll be to push them out."

"So what do we do?" The question was shouted by a man in the back.

"I want to send out scouting parties," Dennis answered. "I want to know everything that's around us, and then I want us to take it. And we need to figure out how to get some heat going in this place."

"I did some electrician trade schooling in the pen." A man stepped forward, shirtless despite the cold. Tattoos crawled over his stomach and chest and up both sides of his neck. "I might be able to take a look around, see what's going on."

"Good. I like that," Dennis said. "Anyone else with trade schooling?"

A few more hands shot up in the air, and Dennis couldn't help but smile at the irony. All of those rehabilitation programs that taxpayers had funded

were finally coming full circle to further screw over those same taxpayers.

Dennis turned to Mulls. “Let’s get a list going of everyone’s skills. And make the rounds for everyone that’s still alive. See what we can squeeze from them.”

It took less than an hour to get everyone organized, and by the time it was over, Dennis received a roaring round of applause. The scouts were sent out in groups of two, and Dennis smiled as he watched them leave.

To celebrate, he walked down to the liquor store and grabbed a fresh bottle of Jack Daniels and a two-liter liter of Coke then returned to his house. He stopped in the driveway and looked up at the two-story cabin that reached toward the sky. In all his life, Dennis never lived in something so huge. He’d grown up in a trailer park in northern New Jersey.

It was a shit childhood, and it was a shit way to grow up. Dennis twisted the cap off the Jack Daniels bottle and took a swig then wiped his mouth as he stifled a cough with the back of his hand. The liquor instantly warmed his innards and spread to his hands and feet. He walked into the house, leaving the thoughts of the trailer park out on the driveway. He wasn’t going back to that life. No way in hell. He was a king now. He was the one giving orders. And he wasn’t going to let anyone take it away from him. No fucking way.

10

Kate balanced between keeping both hands on the stick and then reaching over to check Luke's pulse as he lay unconscious. She trembled each time she pressed her fingers onto the cold skin of his neck. The idea of her son dying right next to her on the plane was more than she wanted to think about. But each time she checked, she exhaled in relief at the bump of his pulse.

The blood looked as if it was clotting over the wound, but it had taken a while. Kate reached for the map, her gloved hands still covered in blood, which stuck to the paper. She peeled her fingers off and flattened out the map.

She was close to the cabin, only thirty or thirty-five miles away. Kate unfolded the scratch piece of paper that Rodney had written the coordinates on. She rechecked her calculations, adjusting for the head wind she'd run into and the time. It was all ballpark figures, but they lined up correctly with what she was seeing on the map.

The clouds had worsened, and snow was far off on the horizon. She knew it was that storm Rodney was worried about. She looked at Luke, praying that the cabin had good medical supplies. She hadn't the first clue what he needed, besides a doctor, and Kate was betting the chances of one being on hand close by were slim.

Her eyes drifted to the control panel, and the needle in the fuel gauge hovered on empty. A lot of chances were slim.

Kate had saved time by flying directly over DC on her way north. It was an area that she'd wanted to avoid going down, but she knew she didn't have

the fuel to go around it on the way back. She kept as high as she could, but even so, she still heard the thundering booms from the fights below.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she tilted the plane to the side to get a better look at the capital. But most of what she saw from the air was nothing but blackened rubble.

There was movement below, huddles of men scattered about in small groups. The only recognizable building that was still standing that Kate could see was the White House. But it was thoroughly barricaded, with the bulk of the city's resources and forces stationed around it.

Kate had worried that the sight and sound of her plane would cause attention, but with everything going on down below, she was the least of everyone's worries. But even from her position high in the sky, Kate could still plainly see that the capital was plagued with the same problems that she had seen everywhere else. No lights. No power.

If the people who did this could cause so much trouble to her country, to a nation that was believed untouchable, then where would they stop? Kate shivered at the thought of this epidemic spread across the globe. It was a virus without a cure. Or at least that was what it felt like.

The present had suddenly become the most important aspect of everyone's lives. There was no time to dwell on the past, no hope to think of the future. Everything had shifted to right here and right now. She glanced over at Luke.

Kate knew that his future would never be the same. No more college, no more schooling. With them thrust back into the Stone Age with zero law and order, his future was one of survival. It was a future that Kate's entire family shared.

Phlegm formed in the back of her throat in the preparation of tears, but Kate forced them back. She had to stay focused. "One problem at a time, Kate." She sniffled, wiping the cold snot from her upper lip.

Another fifteen minutes passed, and Kate knew she was close. She dropped her altitude and searched for a place to land, but she didn't have many options. What wasn't covered in snow was covered with trees.

She circled, scanning the terrain, her hopes wildly high that she would spot the cabin and there would be a clearing nearby. But the more she circled, the more those hopes sank.

Kate reached over and checked Luke's pulse again, feeling the faint thump of her heart when the engine sputtered.

The old Skyranger jerked forward, the engine bucking the plane a few times before it finally died. The loud hum of the motor was replaced by the howl of the wind, and the propeller spun a few more rotations before gliding to a stop.

Kate gripped both hands around the stick, doing her best to keep the craft level, though it cost her every bit of her strength to do it. She scanned the ground, searching for any place that she could land, but still saw nothing but trees and snow.

The altimeter spun downward, the elevation dropping dramatically, and with the low visibility and the rolling hills of the terrain, the situation was growing from bad to worse.

Kate tilted the stick hard to the right, slamming her foot on the steering pedals, but the old bird whined in defiance. Her eyes glanced between the fast-approaching ground, the instruments that spiraled backward, and Luke.

The altimeter dropped to fourteen thousand feet, then thirteen thousand, twelve thousand, ticking downward faster and faster. Kate continued her frantic search for any suitable landing spot but still saw nothing that gave them a chance at survival.

And then, just at the altimeter dropped below nine thousand, she saw it in the top right-hand corner of her windshield. There was a straight cut through the trees. It was a road.

Kate straightened the stick, the plane wobbling left and right, her entire body shaking due to the growing turbulence and rough controls. She reached across to Luke’s seat and tightened the straps over his chest and waist, making sure he was secure. She wished she could have done something about his head and neck. The landing was going to be rough.

The tips of the trees and the ground grew closer. Kate leaned left, muscling the plane toward the highway. And when Kate finally had a good look at her approach, her stomach soured.

Abandoned cars, covered in snow, lined the highway, leaving zero gaps of flat land. She checked the altimeter—twenty-five hundred feet. She was out of options.

Kate tightened the straps on her belts and then let the flaps down on the plane as far as they would go to give her more control. She gripped the stick with both hands, the plane wobbling left and right despite her forced control.

“C’mon,” Kate said, whispering to herself.

Sweat broke out on her forehead, and her body flushed with heat. She

tensed once the altimeter dropped below five hundred feet, and she could make out the models of the cars on the road.

Kate kept the nose up and pulled the stick back hard. She took one quick glance over at the altimeter, the numbers rolling into the double digits. Kate stiffened her arms and then looked at her son just before impact.

The pair jerked wildly in the cockpit, and the moment the wheels hit the top of the first car, Kate lost control.

The stick flew out of her hand, and the plane spun ninety degrees to the left. Both Kate and Luke were suspended in the air for a moment as the plane's belly skipped between the roof of two cars, then it jolted down hard on the top of a van, and the thin metal sheeting ripped like a sheet of aluminum foil. Kate thrashed wildly in her chair, the cockpit a whirlwind of turbulence.

The pressure from the straps dug into Kate's coat, and Luke's left arm smacked her forehead as the right wing of the plane tilted and wedged itself between a front and back bumper before the pressure and speed of the craft snapped it off, and the plane finally jerked to a halt where the fuselage lay on its right side.

Kate's vision blurred, and she shut her eyes, waiting for her head and stomach to catch up with the rest of her body in the cockpit, then looked to her son.

Luke's head lolled to the right, the straps of the belt still snug over his shoulders and chest. Kate gingerly unbuckled herself and reached her fingers over to him.

"Luke?" Kate asked. "Luke, can you hear me?"

She didn't think he'd answer, but the questions came out regardless of the likelihood of his response. His skin was still cold to the touch, but when she pressed against the artery on his neck, her own heart stalled.

Nothing. No pulse. Kate frantically inched closer, crawling over to Luke, and quickly unstrapped the belts. "Luke!" Her voice grew more frantic when she saw the fresh blood oozing from the gunshot. It had torn open during the vicious landing.

Kate grabbed the old bloody gauze, brittle and sticky from the cold, and pressed it hard into the reopened wound. Blood oozed over her gloved fingers, and the tears froze to her cheeks as they fell from her eyes.

"Stay with me, Luke," Kate said, reaching for his neck again to check his pulse. "Please, hang on."

A thump pressed against her finger.

Kate's eyes widened with hope, and she steadied her hand where she felt another light bump. She sobbed and kissed Luke's forehead, his skin icy against her lips. He was alive, but she'd need to move quickly if she wanted him to stay that way.

Kate unbuckled Luke from his seatbelt, then reached for the door handle on his side, but with the way the plane landed, it jammed against the hood of a car, preventing escape. Kate turned, looking back toward her door, and climbed upward.

Kate protruded from the cabin of the busted Skyranger and was smacked with the frigid cold of the north. She heaved herself out of the cabin and nearly tumbled down the other side before catching herself on the plane.

Kate planted one foot on either side of the open door, and then squatted, reaching her arms into the cabin and grabbing hold of Luke's arm, then pulled.

The first tug barely budged Luke from his seat. Kate repositioned her grip then tried again, exploding upward with enough force to thrust Luke's torso from the plane before she lost her grip and tumbled backward into the snow.

Kate landed hard on her ass, but the snow was deep enough to cushion her landing. She wallowed to the left and right before she finally got her legs beneath her, and then she climbed back up to the plane's cabin door.

She removed the rest of Luke carefully from the cabin as he dangled over the side. Despite the thick cushion of snow, she lowered him down gently, making sure that she didn't break his neck.

Kate nearly had Luke all the way down when she heard a rustle in the woods behind her. She jerked sharply at the noise and then quickly leapt off the plane's side.

Voices drifted onto the road, followed by heavy panting.

"It was over here," a man said. "Damn thing fell right out of the sky."

"I thought everything was broken." A second man's voice drifted toward her, gruffer but just as breathless. "How the hell did someone get a plane working?"

Kate grabbed Luke beneath his arms and pulled him, staying as low as she could. She made it a few feet before she realized she was leaving a trail in the snow. They'd be able to follow it right to her. She scanned the area and spotted a van two cars down. She pulled Luke toward it and prayed that it was unlocked.

Kate tugged at the handle, and she breathed a sigh of relief when it opened. She lifted Luke inside, her legs shaking from the exertion, and he landed with a dull thud. Quietly, she shut the door then erased the tracks that led to it from the plane.

"There! See? I told you I saw a plane!"

The voice was closer now, and Kate's heart thumped wildly in her throat. She darted in the opposite direction of the van, her footsteps leading whoever those people were away from Luke. She kept low behind the cars but stopped when she heard the hurried crunch of boots in the snow.

"Shit! You see that?" The man's voice squeaked in excitement.

"Would you *shut up*?" The second man hushed him angrily. "You want to give our position away?"

Kate lifted her head to the rear driver side window of a sedan and peered through the frosted glass. The two men passed, and it was here that she saw the rifles in each of their hands.

"Get your gun up," the second man said. "We don't know if they're still alive."

"Well, they won't be for long." The first man giggled in the same high-pitched tone as before.

Kate quietly ducked beneath the window and waited for them to pass. She darted a few more car lengths away from them but then stopped at a truck near the edge of the road and waited. She wanted to make sure they took the bait and followed her tracks.

The distance caused their voices to muffle, but from her vantage point, she could see them circling the plane. The cramped space between the cars offered only glimpses, but Kate did see one of their heads fall to the ground, the man pointing to what had to be her footprints.

But then, just when the loudmouth took a step to follow, the man's friend pulled him back to the path that Kate had tried to cover up, and her heart sank like a stone into her stomach as they began to follow it.

Kate began to stand but then thought better of it. She stared at the car door in front of her and cocked her arm back, curling her fingers into a fist. She punched the door, and a dull thud rang out. She looked through the icy window and saw both men turn at the noise. She punched the door again, and this time both men started back toward her.

Kate kept low, shuffling backward, banging on doors every few cars that she passed, leading the gunmen away from her son. She kept it up until they

broke out into a jog, and then Kate darted for the forest.

"Hey! I see 'em!"

Snow and branches smacked Kate's face and body. The snow deepened the farther she traversed into the forest, slowing her pace. She glanced behind her, watching the fragmented images of the men chasing her between the trees. Then she lowered her eyes to the trail she'd cut in the snow. A trail that they could follow right to her.

"Through here!" The voice huffed loudly, and Kate saw the man pointing down at her tracks.

She slowed her pace, trying to let her brain catch up with her body. She shut her eyes hard, breathing, panicking. She turned left, then right, looking for solid ground.

"C'mon!" the voice said excitedly. "She couldn't have gone far!"

"Slow down, you asshat! Hey, stop!"

And at that command, Kate darted behind a tree, peering around the side until she saw the second man walking to catch up. They were close, but with the thick tree cover and the cold, any distance was made three times as long.

"We're supposed to be scouting for that town, not running through the woods."

"That's what we're doing!" the high-pitched voice complained.

"You're just chasing ass." The man gripped his friend by the collar. "And I'm not gonna freeze my ass off out here just so you can go and chase through the woods some woman who doesn't want anything to do with your dick."

"But all we have to do is follow—"

A heavy thud preceded a groan, and Kate saw the high-pitched wailing man buckle at the hips, hunched over and clutching his stomach.

"Enough fucking around!" the big man roared, his cheeks reddening. "I don't want to be out in this frozen shitstorm longer than I have to! Dennis wants us back soon!"

Kate furrowed her brow at the name, and hollowness carved out her innards. She was lightheaded, and she pressed her back against the rough bark and slid down into the snow with a soft crunch. She shook her head.

"That's impossible." Kate whispered to herself, her eyes searching the blinding whiteness of the snow. Dennis was in prison. And that was where he was going to stay for the rest of his life. He couldn't have gotten out. Could he?

The parole hearing was scheduled for what, yesterday? Two days ago? Kate's eyes widened. It was the day of the EMP.

Institutions were failing, and basic services were cut off. She had flown over the capital herself and seen the fighting and destruction that ravaged the city. Plus, she was in the northern New York wilderness, close to Dennis's prison. It was possible he was out. But that didn't mean he was coming for her.

Kate relaxed. Of course he wasn't coming for her. He had no idea where she was. If anything, he'd go to New York and discover the chaos that she'd escaped from. She peered from behind the tree trunk, finding both men gone.

Clumps of snow fell from her legs and back as she carefully and slowly approached the road. She kept her eyes peeled. The men could have been talking as a trick. But the closer she moved to the forest's edge, the more confident she grew that they were really gone.

Kate hurried back to the van where she'd left Luke, praying that he was still alive. She ripped open the doors and struggled to pull his body closer to her. She checked his pulse. She sighed in relief at the light thump. But it was faint. Too faint. It was only a ghost of a heartbeat.

She hurried back to the wreckage and found the map but was unable to locate the coordinates that she'd written down. It didn't matter, though. She knew them by heart. She used the nearest mile marker on the highway to check her location on the map. She was close. Only ten or twelve miles.

Yeah, ten or twelve miles through snow and hills with a one hundred and sixty pound kid to carry. Kate leaned forward, her body and mind exhausted. She lifted her head and looked to the north. The storm clouds were growing closer. She wouldn't be able to move him fast enough by herself. She couldn't carry him farther than ten feet before collapsing.

Kate stuffed the map inside her jacket and searched the vehicles on the road, praying she'd find one sooner or later. She figured that most of the people were traveling up here on vacation, hitting the slopes, which meant—"Yes!"

Kate found a sled, a pair of skis, and poles in the back of a van. She grabbed the gear and dragged it back over to Luke. She strapped her son to the sled, found some rope and cord in the van where she'd stashed him, and then slipped into her skis.

She tied the rope around her waist. She had to be quick. She had to get to the cabin. She planted one of the poles firmly in the ground and then glided

her left foot forward.

It was slow going at first, but once she had some momentum, she was cruising. She kept to the shoulder of the highway, which was mainly clear of any obstacles. She pushed through the burn of her muscles, and past the fatigue, and fell into a rhythm. She was almost there. She was so close to the finish line.

11

The sounds that echoed through the dark hospital hallways were dreadful, hopeless noises. If it wasn't someone crying, it was someone screaming. Pleas and prayers intermixed with the wailing cries of those who had survived longer than their loved ones, but after a while, they became nothing but background noise.

Mark kept his hands clasped together tightly. He had gotten up from his seat in the hallway and paced the floor repeatedly. But after a time, the strength had disappeared from his legs, and he collapsed into a chair.

Rodney had remained seated once Mark calmed down, but Mark noticed the light bounce of the young man's knee.

Footsteps inside Holly's room triggered both men to look toward the door, and Mark stood as the doctor finally emerged. It was a second, maybe less before the doctor spoke, but Mark watched the man's face carefully, studying the doctor's stoic expression. The moment dragged on for an eternity, and Mark's entire body ached with distress he'd never experienced.

"She's alive," The doctor said.

"Thank god," Rodney said, exhaling and then collapsing back in his seat.

But Mark just stood there, frozen. He wanted to speak but continued to watch the doctor's face. Despite the good news, he still looked worried. "What else?" He stepped closer, prompting the doctor to take a step back. "What's wrong?"

"Your daughter's infection is quite severe," the doctor answered. "I've got most of the fluid out of her lungs, but if they fill up like that again, and

her condition doesn't improve, I'm not sure that her body will be able to go through that kind of procedure again."

Mark lost his balance, staggering sideways until he hit the wall. His gaze drifted away from the doctor's, and he struggled to focus on anything. The doctor continued to speak, but Mark didn't hear him. "What?"

"I said your daughter will need to stay here for a while."

Rodney appeared at Mark's side, shaking his head. "Doc, there's a storm coming, and if we don't get moving soon, we'll be snowed in."

"I'm sorry, but there really isn't anything else we can do except keep an eye on her and pray that the new strain of antibiotics we're giving her through the IV will knock out the infection. Some of her ribs were bruised during CPR, but I've wrapped them tight. If she needs any pain relief just flag down one of the nurses." He stepped away from the two men. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to make my rounds."

Mark and Rodney watched the doctor disappear into the darkness of the hallway, his shadow lingering behind him because of the flickering candles that provided light.

"Mark," Rodney said, his voice soft. "I know the doctor wants us to stay—"

"I'm not moving her," Mark said, his eyes still lingering on where the doctor had disappeared. "I'm not going to risk making her sick again."

"If we stay, we'll have bigger problems than your daughter's infection." Rodney stepped directly in front of Mark, blocking his view of the dark hallway. "This place is running on fumes. They're running out of food, they're running out of medicine, and once that storm hits and snows everyone in, this place is going to explode in a powder keg."

"What am I supposed to do?" Mark spun around, asking the question more to himself than Rodney.

"We let her rest for another hour to see if the new medicine is working, and if it is, then we take enough to run it out of her system, and then we leave." Rodney held both of his hands up and together in front him as if he were praying. "It's our best chance."

"She almost died!" Mark lunged at him, thrusting his finger toward the room where Holly still lay, fighting for her life. "You don't have kids, so I don't expect you to understand, but that girl is everything to me." His words lingered in the air for a minute, and once the flash of anger subsided, he sat down. He rubbed his face, feeling the growing stubble along his cheeks and

chin and neck. “I know that she would already be dead if it wasn’t for you.” He looked at Rodney. “You saved her life.”

“I just got her here,” Rodney said, taking a seat next to Mark. “The doctor saved her life.”

“No,” Mark replied. “It was you.” He leaned back, exhaling. “You’ve saved our asses so many times since New York that I’ve lost count. And Glen and Laura are alive because of you too.” He watched the back of Rodney’s head as the boy leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I owe you my life ten times over.”

Rodney shook his head. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“Why not?” Mark asked. “It’s true.”

Rodney turned to face him, and even in the dark, Mark saw the redness in his eyes. “I almost left you guys. Back in the city. I made it halfway down the stairwell before I turned around. I didn’t want to take you, and the only reason I did was the hope that one of you would have a skill set that I didn’t.”

“Well, you struck out there.” Mark smiled, and Rodney laughed, wiping his nose. “Look, it doesn’t matter what you *thought* about doing.” He rested his hand on Rodney’s shoulder. “It’s what you *did*.”

Rodney nodded. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” Mark patted the boy on the back and then stood, his knees and hips popping, making him a decade older. The hiking was catching up with him. So was the cold. He could see his breath even inside the hospital. He walked to the entrance of Holly’s room and watched her from the hallway.

“When you have kids, you want to protect them from everything,” Mark said. “It’s a duty that you wear like a badge of honor. When you first hold them in your arms, you have such high hopes. You want to give them everything you didn’t have, and you want them to surpass everything you’ve become.” He focused on the light rise and fall of her chest then watched her little hand twitch as she slept. He looked up at one of the plastic casings that housed the halogen lights that no longer worked. “So what are they supposed to do now in a world like this?”

“Survive,” Rodney said. “That’s what they’ll do.” He stood. “That’s what we’ll all do.”

“Yeah.” Mark followed the needle of the IV that ran into Holly’s arm up to the bag that slowly dripped the medicine into her body. “One hour. We can leave then.”

Rodney's eyes widened. "You're sure?"

"You've been right about everything so far. Despite me not wanting you to be." He turned to Rodney with a sad smile. "You really think that right now our best chance is to head to the cabin?"

"Yes."

There was no hesitation in the young man's voice, and Mark rubbed his eyes. "Then we go."

"I'll tell Glen and Laura then track down that doctor to get some more medicine."

After Rodney left, Mark just stared at Holly from the doorway. He was hesitant to enter, afraid that his presence inside might somehow disturb her rest. Two voices caught Mark's attention, and he turned and found two nurses chatting with one another, both of them wearing expressions of worry.

"I told you I already checked."

"And you're sure?"

"Yes, less than two cases are left."

The shorter of the pair of nurses placed her hand on her forehead as they passed Mark, and he turned to follow their conversation.

"That's not enough water. That's nowhere near enough."

"I know. I don't know what we're going to do!"

The pair disappeared into the darkness, and sourness formed in the pit of his stomach. He thought of the powder keg that Rodney had mentioned, and he ticked another tally on the young man's side of the scoreboard.

Outside, the wind had started to howl, drowning out some of the crying from the other rooms. It was a wicked, harrowing sound. Almost worse than the woman screaming for the doctors to give her child back to her.

THE MAP WAS SPREAD over the kitchen table, the corners weighted down with half-filled liquor bottles. Dennis stood over the map, arms crossed, tapping a black marker against his shoulder. Everyone but Mulls and Jimmy had returned. They stood behind him, still knocking the ice and snow from their clothes and onto the authentic wood flooring of the house.

Numbers were written near each of the dots that represented the nearby towns: 39, 86, 309, and 55 respectively. He stared at those dots with hunger drilled into the pit of his stomach.

“You’re sure there weren’t any cops?” Dennis asked, his eyes still glued to the map.

“Nah, we didn’t see anything.”

“Nope.”

“No stations at least, but we couldn’t check the whole town without looking suspicious.”

Dennis nodded to himself. He set the marker down and turned to the inmates. Looking at them standing there, waiting for him to speak, he suddenly felt the ludicrous idea that he was their warden. He repressed the smile, and they parted as he stepped between them.

A desk with rifles and handguns was behind them, and Dennis had his eyes on the shotgun. It was a twelve-gauge pump action with a pistol grip for better ease of use. He picked it up and opened the chamber. It was loaded. “And they’re all still scrambling to try and figure out what’s going on?”

“There were a few people in the town that we scouted that were trying to form a committee.”

“Yeah, ours too.”

“We didn’t hear anything in ours.”

“There were a couple people talking about how to get the power back on.”

Dennis nodded, smiling to himself, and then slammed the chamber of the weapon closed. He turned, shotgun still in hand, and eyed the men that had returned to him. “We need to move quickly then. The more time we give them to prepare or get a grip on things, the harder it will be for us to take what we want.” He stepped through the inmates again, heading back to the map, this time pulling the inmates with him toward the table. “The closest power station is fifty miles to the south. The odds of getting that back up and running, or even getting to it at all, are slim. Anyone dumb enough to make the trip will die before they get there.” He picked up the marker, flicking off the cap with his thumb, and kept the shotgun gripped in his other hand. He marked three spots on the map. “Hardware store, sporting goods store, and grocery. That’s where we’ll find what we need.” He turned to everyone. “Get a piece of paper and something to write with. Everyone’s making a list.”

The group looked at each other confusedly for a moment but slowly

dispersed in search of the equipment while Dennis eyed the map. He'd used some of the local flyers down at the police station and town welcome center to learn the location of those stores. And it turned out that the sweet thing he kept upstairs was a local girl. All it took was the promise of being left alone for a night to get her to spill the beans. He still hadn't decided if he was going to keep good on that promise, though.

The inmates returned with their paper and writing utensils, which ranged from pens to crayons. Dennis leaned the shotgun against his shoulder and rested his ass against the table. "Generators, skis, gas cans, fuel, hunting knives, fishing gear, bows and arrows…" He rattled off dozens of other items, trying to be as specific as possible so that the simple-minded, narrow-viewed cretins could handle it. "As far as food goes, anything canned or packaged is what you want. The sporting goods store might have some survivalist meals. If it says MRE on it, then take it."

All heads were down as the inmates tried their best to keep up with his instructions. He couldn't imagine what the spelling on those lists looked like. Once he was finished, he repeated the list again, and just as much writing happened as the first round. But he hammered home a few of the more big-ticket items like diesel generators, fuel, and power cords. If he could just get a few houses running with heat, they'd be in a good spot.

"And the last item on the list, which I don't think needs to even be written down, are guns." Dennis tilted the shotgun off his shoulder, and it landed in his right palm with a smack. "Guns and ammo, as much as you can find. Eventually, other people are going to be doing what we're doing, and if they come knocking on our door, I want to make sure we have enough bullets to kill them ten times over."

Chuckles and nods greeted Dennis as the inmates looked up from their lists.

"We do have one roadblock now, and it could be a big one." Dennis smacked his finger on a small location off the highway. "There's a state trooper station ten miles to the north of us. I doubt they'll be making their way to our sleepy little corner anytime soon, but I don't want to take any chances. Our next order of business after we get the supplies we're looking for and take those towns is to take out those pigs."

"*Yeah!*" Fists thrust into the air and then pounded cabinets and walls.

Dennis waited for the ruckus to die down before he spoke but didn't do anything to hurry them along. He wanted them to remain angry. He wanted

them focused. So long as he kept feeding into that hate, they'd love him, and he needed that to stay in control.

"We kill all of them," Dennis said. "No surviv—"

The door burst open, and Mulls and Jimmy burst inside, bringing a gust of cold wind with them as they shook off the snow. They stomped out the frost and snow on their legs and brushed it from their arms.

"Christ's dick, it's cold outside," Jimmy said, squealing. "Looks like there's a bad storm coming down this way. Did you guys—"

"What'd you find?" Dennis asked, his voice cold like the weather the two men had brought back with them.

Mulls stepped in front of Jimmy before he could open his mouth. "The town wasn't more than a few buildings. Whoever had been there was gone. We did find something useful, though."

"What?" Dennis asked.

"A hospital," Jimmy answered, poking his head up from behind Mulls.

"It's a small one, but it's close by." Mulls walked to the map and pointed it out off the highway. "Right there."

Medicine was just as valuable as food now. And Dennis imagined it would be a good bartering tool in the days to come. He didn't want to pass the opportunity up.

Dennis clapped Mulls on the shoulder and nodded toward Jimmy. "Good work." He turned to the rest of the group. "I want everyone ready to roll out in the next twenty minutes. We can get to the hospital and back before dark. Gather up as many sacks and boxes as you can carry." He circled the spot on the map where Mulls had pointed. "We're going to do a little shopping."

12

The wind kicked up, and the sky darkened with a more sinister blanket of dark-grey clouds. Kate planted the ski pole in her left hand shakily in the ground. The cord tied around her waist that connected her to Luke's sled was taut. The momentum from the beginning of her trip had ended once she was forced to turn off the main highway and travel the backroads to the cabin.

Kate hunched over, using the poles to keep herself from face-planting into the snow. She turned back to Luke and saw that her son was covered in a layer of fresh snow. He lay there lifeless, and she was unsure if he was still breathing.

The thought of dragging her son's lifeless carcass triggered an involuntary scream that quickly cut out and transformed into a sob. She collapsed to her knees, gulping deep breaths of icy air that burned her lungs.

Kate shut her eyes. He was alive. She knew he was. She just had to get him to the cabin before the storm worsened. She took a deep breath and then pushed herself up from the snow. Her legs trembled in the skis. She pulled herself forward then planted the pole in her left hand into the ground then repeated the action with the right one.

She had already followed the road off the highway as far as it would go, and now she trekked through the woods, in search of a cabin that was somewhere in the wilderness of upstate New York where she had never been.

More and more thoughts of Holly and Mark filled her head, and Kate focused on them to distract herself from the cold. The strands of hair that protruded from her beanie were frozen stiff. And while she couldn't see

herself, she was convinced that she had turned a shade of blue.

Holly's laughter drifted through her mind, and she smiled as she watched Mark lift her off the ground. Her daughter was four, and they had taken a trip to the beach. Kate had a rare few days off, so they rented a beach house. It was the start of summer, so Luke wasn't in school, though he was nervous and anxious about going back. He was about to start high school.

It was three days of nothing but beautiful weather on the golden coast, and Kate remembered thinking that they could live there. She even so much as brought it up to Mark on the second day.

"Really?" he asked, his tone laced with a mixture of surprise, excitement, and skepticism. "You think you could get a permanent gig here with the airline?"

"It's possible," Kate answered, watching Holly bury Luke in the sand. She leaned into him, and even in the frigid winds of the north, she remembered the warmth of the sun on his skin. "I think it would be good for the kids. I know Luke's tired of having to switch schools every couple years, and it might actually give him a chance to make friends in high school."

"I think that would be great," Mark said. "You really want to give it a try?"

"Yeah," Kate answered, lifting her face toward his. "Let's do it."

But the memory faded, and suddenly, all those good feelings disappeared with it. When Kate went to make the request, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Kate had moved around so much because she felt a lingering restlessness about what happened with Dennis. And back then she still hadn't rid herself of his memory. It wasn't until a few years ago that the nightmares finally stopped.

And now those men back on that road had mentioned a man named Dennis. They looked shady enough to be from prison. And she was in Dennis's territory. Could he be here? Could he find—

Kate stopped. She blinked a few times, staring straight ahead. She slid forward on one of the skis to get a better look. It was a wall. It was the side of a cabin.

Her legs and arms flailed wildly and in poor coordination as she struggled to pull Luke the last few yards. A smile creased her face, and she waved her arms as if her family were outside waiting for her. "Holly! Mark!" She dug into the snow with ferocity and enthusiasm that her body wasn't willing to

match.

The snow thickened and deepened the closer she grew to the cabin, and twice, Luke's sled was stuck. Less than ten yards from the front door, Kate abandoned the skis and untied the cord around her waist. Her legs sank into the thick drifts of snow. She lifted her knees high, struggling in the drifts until her foot landed on the old wood of the front porch.

"Hello!" Kate lunged for the doorknob, and it offered the resistance of a locked door. She pounded her fists against the wood. "Mark! Rodney!" She rushed to the frosted windows, pressing her face against the cold glass.

Nothing but darkness and haze was visible from the outside, and Kate pushed off the wall in a fit of rage. She clawed at her head and then turned back to where she'd left Luke in the snow. She checked his vitals. He was still breathing. Still alive. She sprinted around to the back door and gave it a tug. Locked. She looked around, searching for anything. She found a nice-sized stick and thrust it at the window.

Glass shattered, and Kate waved the stick around, moving the shards away. She climbed inside, wiggling her way over the ledge of the broken window. She landed on hardwood and groaned as she sat up.

Silhouettes of furniture and cabinets lay spread out in an open floor plan, the only doors inside leading to bedrooms or closets. She rushed to the front door, unlocked it, and then dragged Luke inside.

A fireplace was on the south end of the house in what she considered the living room. There was a pile of wood and a few starter logs next to it. She piled them into the chimney, then her feet thumped against the floor as she scoured the kitchen in search of a lighter.

She found her prize in the fifth cabinet and then ripped up an old newspaper as she made her way back to the fireplace.

The lighter sparked a flame on the first flick of her thumb, and she held the piece of paper to it until it caught, then tossed it beneath the wood.

Smoke billowed up but then was pushed back in, and Kate realized the vents were closed. She held her breath and reached for the lever up inside the chimney and opened them, clearing the airways. She stepped back, coughing, as the first few flames caught the starter log. She heaved Luke close to the fire and sat there, rocking with him. "Okay, Luke. Time to get warm."

The pair sat in the living room, the fire growing along with the warmth, and Kate felt her body thaw. It felt so good it was almost painful. A few minutes later, the fire was raging. Kate reached for a pillow on the couch and

gently laid it beneath Luke's head.

She pulled open kitchen cabinets, bypassing the canned foods, though her stomach growled at the sight of them. She reached for a closet door and finally found the stacks of bottled water she was looking for. They were cold.

Kate forced the water down Luke's throat, and much to her surprise, he drank it. His lips worked against the streaming current of water, though half the bottle ended up on the front of his shirt.

The wind howled outside, and a gust blew snow and frost through the back window, over the glass she'd broken to enter. With the storm coming, she'd need to cover it up, or the fire wouldn't do much good to keep them warm when they were sleeping in snow.

But even with that, there was a more pressing matter, and that was the bullet still currently lodged in her son's chest. The bloody bandages that she had used from the first aid kit on the Skyranger were now hard and crusted. They broke off in pieces as she peeled them back. She didn't know much about first aid, but she knew that the wound needed to be cleaned.

After another few minutes of searching, Kate found a bunch of gauze and bandages with other medical supplies, and she pushed past the bottles with names she didn't recognize until she found the hydrogen peroxide.

Armed with a mountain of gauze, the antiseptic, and a package of water bottles, Kate hesitated as she knelt by Luke's side. She feared what lay beneath those last strips of bandages. There was so much blood already, and while she had seen gunshot wounds on television and in movies, she had never seen a real one up close.

Finally, Kate gritted her teeth and pulled the old, dirty bandages back. She winced, squinting with only one eye at the wound, but once the bandage was off, she discovered that it was little more than old, crusted blood.

Kate poured water over it and scrubbed some of the frozen, stubborn slabs of blood. Luke moaned in pain in his unconscious stupor. She tried to move quickly, unsure of the exact procedure, and halfway through her cleaning, she realized that she should have sterilized her hands before touching him. She doused her fingers with the peroxide, hoping she wasn't too late, and went back to work.

Once she was finished, the flesh around the bullet wound on Luke's shoulder was light pink. She saw the entrance wound and the tiny bits of jagged, hanging flesh that surrounded the tiny crater. Kate lifted the lip of the bottle of peroxide near the wound and slowly tilted the bottle over.

Luke’s body gave an involuntary spasm as she poured, but she kept going until she felt as if it was enough. He grew still when she stopped, and then Kate quickly wrapped the wound with the fresh bandages, making them snug but not overly tight. She remembered training from her early aircraft-safety days that told her to keep the blood flow pumping, so long as bleeding had stopped, which it had.

A thick sheen of sweat covered Kate’s face as she finished, and she leaned back into the couch and sighed. Luke continued to lie still, and when she checked his pulse it was still weak.

Kate collected all of the old, dirty gauze and bandages and piled them in a trash bag that she set by the back door, where she was reminded of the broken window. She found some blue tarp in the same closet as the medical supplies and then found a hammer and nails.

The patch of blue tarp was stretched taut over the window. It was crude, but it kept the snow out—for now. Then she scraped up the glass shards and placed them in the sack with the medical waste.

After the cleanup, Kate’s stomach growled. She searched the cabinets and plucked out two cans of tomato soup and poured them into pot that she sat next to the fire.

While it warmed, Kate fed Luke another bottle of water, of which he managed to drain three quarters. The fact that he was drinking and his skin was warming helped to ease her worries.

The shelter, warmth, water, and food were drastic improvements from an hour ago. She checked the soup and fished a spoonful out. It was lukewarm, but she nearly lifted the pot to her lips and drained it all.

Kate forced herself to eat slowly, savoring each bite. She ate half of it then tried feeding some to Luke. He ate a quarter, and then Kate polished off the rest. After that she rummaged for snacks and found some crackers that she munched on.

Luke’s face glowed due to the flames, the fire offering a crackle and pop as if in challenge to the growing winds of the storm outside.

The longer she sat in that cabin by herself, the more she wondered what had happened to Mark and Holly. They had more than a day’s head start on her. She tried to avoid traveling down all of the horrific scenarios that could have occurred, but there wasn’t much else for her to do.

A thousand things could have happened. But she tried to rationalize. Holly’s condition could have worsened, and maybe they stayed somewhere

until she was better. After all, Mark probably wouldn't have wanted to move her if the flu worsened, though she knew that Rodney wouldn't have been happy about it.

But even if that was the case, or one of the other few positive scenarios, Rodney's whole concern was to have gotten to the cabin before that big storm blew through. What did he say? Trying to wade through the snow and find the cabin after twenty feet of powder dropped would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Kate walked to the front window. She clasped her hands together tightly, staring out into the growing storm. The snowfall had thickened, and the wind had picked up. A branch snapped off a tree and crashed into the powder, kicking up more white into an already growing blizzard. It wouldn't be long until she couldn't see anything beyond the front porch.

But Kate stood there, waiting, hoping, wishing to see a few bodies pushing their way through the storm. She'd run out to greet them then help them to the fire. They'd joke about the cold, and then Rodney would be able to do something about Luke's wound. And everything would turn out just fine. She could live with that.

What she couldn't stand was being here alone with Luke, whom she no longer knew how to heal. What she couldn't stand was not knowing what was going to happen next. She was still flying blind.

13

Rodney paced nervously, checking the pocket watch every few seconds to see if the hour was up. It was only another five minutes, but Rodney was careful not push Mark too quickly. He could see it in the man's eyes that he was struggling with the decision to leave.

"How's she doing?" Rodney asked, still keeping his distance.

Mark hovered over her, his upper back hunched as he held her hand and gently stroked her hair. Her breathing was labored, but the wheezing hadn't returned, which was a good sign. "I don't know. It's hard to tell. She looks so tired."

The candle flames flickered and moved the shadows over Mark's face. They made him look older, hollowed. It was almost as if they were at a funeral home instead of a hospital. And with the number of sheet-covered bodies that Rodney had seen, it wasn't a far stretch.

Rodney checked the pocket watch again—two more minutes until the end of the hour. He stepped out of the room and into the hall. Even inside, the howl of the wind had picked up, and Rodney knew that it was the big storm from the northwest. They had to get going. Now.

"Mark, it's been an hour." Rodney stepped inside the room, finding Mark in the exact same position. "We need to get going. Laura and Glen are waiting on us." He hoped that the fact that there were other lives at stake would provide the needed clout to go, but Mark didn't budge.

Rodney sidled up alongside Mark, looking down at Holly from his point of view. "She's stronger than you think. And I've been listening since our

talk. She hasn't wheezed once." He pointed to the medicine. "It's working, and I have more packed with our gear. I've got the supplies needed at the cabin to set up an IV, but our window is closing fast. It's now or never, Mark."

Another howl of winter wind penetrated the walls, and Mark finally nodded. "All right."

Before Mark could change his mind, Rodney carefully removed the IV from Holly's arm and helped bundle the girl up as Mark scooped her up off the table.

"Glen and Laura are with the sled." Rodney led while Mark carried Holly, staying close behind. The trio weaved through the darkened halls, and a weight lifted from him.

They passed the open doors of the other rooms. Some of the rooms were dark and empty, others filled with the grief of sobbing survivors.

Rodney propped open the stairwell door, and they passed some doctors and nurses hurrying upstairs, carrying what looked like a packet of blood, which also covered their scrubs. Light penetrated the cracks of the first-floor door, and Rodney quickly reached for the bar and pushed it open.

The first floor was busier than the second, and Rodney and Mark had to dart between the scurrying bodies of staff and patients. Patches of conversations flooded Rodney's ears as he hurried toward the ER lobby.

"What do you mean you're out of water?"

"I need the doctor to check on my son."

"I don't know. He's not breathing anymore!"

Tones ranged from fear and confusion, to fury and anger. It was already happening. The boiling point had been reached.

Rodney shoulder-checked the double doors open and immediately spotted Laura, who shot up out of her seat and quickly patted Glen, who'd fallen asleep, on his shoulder. Rodney smiled, and she smiled, and with less than fifteen yards between Rodney and Laura, a shimmer of black caught Rodney's peripherals. He looked to his right just in time to see four men enter, all armed with shotguns, rifles, and pistols. And then they opened fire.

A brief roar of screams erupted before the cacophony of gunshots cut them short, and Rodney had just enough time to duck behind a row of chairs before the bullets started flying toward him.

He landed hard on the tile, the impact made worse by the cold, though he was so flooded with adrenaline that he barely felt it. He army-crawled farther

behind the chairs and seats but then stopped himself, looking for Mark and Holly. He spotted Mark on the floor behind the next row of chairs, his body curled up around Holly, shielding her from gunfire.

"Mark!" His voice was barely audible over the gunfire and screams and… laughter? Was that what he was hearing? "Mark!"

Mark finally looked over, and Rodney pointed toward the wall, gesturing for him to follow and keep low. Rodney waited for Mark to nod in compliance, and then they started their trek toward the wall.

Rodney watched the shuffling and scattering of feet from beneath the chairs. When he and Mark reached the wall, they tucked themselves behind the chairs, curled up in balls, and Rodney held a finger to his lips for quiet.

"They runnin' for hell or high water! *Hah!*" The voice was high pitched, and despite the gunfire, there was still the shrill of laughter.

"Spread out! If you can't fuck it or it isn't a doctor, then shoot it." The second voice was low and angry. "You two stay and watch the exit!"

They grunted in annoyance but obeyed.

From his position against the wall, Rodney saw carnage in the lobby. Bodies littered the floor, and blood seeped onto the white tile. He tried to crane his neck to see the fates of Laura and Glen, but the wall that led up to the ER's exit doors blocked them from view.

More screams and random gunshots echoed in the hallways, and when a woman came sprinting through the double doors and into the lobby, shrieking, one of the men on guard shot her before she had a chance to stop and turn around.

"Now what the hell did you do that for?" one of the sentries asked.

"You heard Mulls. She was too ugly."

Rodney's heart hammered in his chest. He stared down the end of his aisle. He had a clear view of the woman who'd been shot. Her head had turned toward him as she fell. Her mouth twitched, the last bits of life draining from her as their eyes locked onto each other. She moved her arm along the tile and stretched her fingers toward him. And then she was still.

It took everything Rodney had not to scream or jump up and run at those bastards at full steam, screaming his fury until they shot him dead like that nurse. But he buried that urge, knowing that he'd have to be smart.

He waited until his heart rate calmed, and then caught Mark's attention. Luckily for both of them, Holly was so tired that she was practically sedated. Rodney gestured for Mark to follow him, and they crawled toward the wall

next to the exit doors.

Once there, Rodney whispered into Mark's ear.

"I'm going to jump the guard nearest to us. I can kill him, but I don't know if I'll have time to get the friend. If I can't, you jump him when he comes over to get me. Then you take Holly and run as fast and as far as you can into the woods. Try and get to the cabin, but don't stop moving."

When Rodney pulled away, Mark was frantically shaking his head. But there wasn't any other play. They had to act, and they had to do it fast. There was no telling how many more of those people were around.

Rodney coiled his body in preparation. His muscles tensed, and he focused every bit of willpower on the sliver of an arm that he had in his view. A thousand different scenarios of what could happen ran through his mind. He lunged for the arm and wrestled the weapon away from the shooter, wrapping his hand around a cold, meaty arm.

At the same moment, someone shouted, and the man tried to yank free, but Rodney already had his other arm around the man's throat, spinning him around and using him as a human shield. From behind his human shield, he saw the barrel of a gun pointed at him. But that wasn't what caught his attention first.

Although Glen was lying on the ground, covered in blood, Rodney was still able to recognize his bald head immediately. But even more recognizable was the tuft of Laura's blond hair. Blood pooled from beneath her stomach, and while Glen's face was turned away from him, Laura's pretty blue eyes stared right through him.

Something shifted inside Rodney when he saw that. He stepped away from himself and inched closer to something primal, almost evil. He turned his gaze back to the man with the rifle. "Put it down. Or I kill him." The voice that escaped Rodney's lips wasn't one that he recognized. It was cold and feral.

The man in Rodney's choke hold squirmed, and he groaned something through his teeth that sounded like "Do it!"

Rodney added pressure to the blade, causing his hostage to stiffen. The partner grimaced, looked at the doors his friends had disappeared through, and then finally lowered the weapon.

"Toss it on the ground, and then kick it toward me."

"Shit." The inmate did as he was told, and the rifle skidded over the tile to Rodney's feet.

“Good.”

Rodney ran the blade across his hostage’s throat quickly, and a warm gush of blood rushed over his fingers. The man gargled and then collapsed to the ground, choking, both hands around his neck as he bled out.

“What the fuck!” The thug stared down at his friend in shock and then looked at Rodney, his face flashing anger. “You fucking prick—”

Rodney squeezed the trigger of the rifle he’d picked up off the floor, and the man buckled forward due to the bullet that entered his gut. He dropped to his knees and looked up at Rodney, blood dripping from his mouth. “What the—”

Rodney squeezed the trigger again, putting a bullet through his skull. Everything was quiet for a minute, nothing but the ringing of the gunshot in his ears.

“Rodney?” Mark stood behind him, clutching Holly close to his chest. “Rodney, are you all right?”

He heard the question, but he didn’t respond. His eyes fell to Glen and Laura, and he walked to them, stepping through the blood and tracking footprints on the tile. He knelt by Laura’s side. He felt himself take another step away from himself as he gently closed her eyes.

“Rodney, we have to go!”

“I know.” Rodney kept his eyes on Laura’s body. And then, after another pause, he stood, turning to Mark, who recoiled once Rodney faced him.

More shouts echoed from the behind the double doors that led deeper into the hospital. The hallway doors burst open, and three more men flooded into the ER lobby. For a brief moment, nothing happened. They simply stared at one another, and then when Rodney raised his rifle, the one in the middle screamed for his men to shoot, and the bullets started flying.

Rodney squeezed off two shots before he joined Mark’s retreat into the cold. Wind and snow whipped their faces, the storm immediately slowing their escape.

Shouts and gunfire carried on the wind, and Rodney kept hold of Mark’s arm as he held Holly close to his chest. Their shins kicked up piles of white, and they struggled against the sudden steep pitch of the terrain.

Snow concealed the rocks and boulders that tripped them and sent them tumbling into snowdrifts. With the howling wind, and subzero temperatures, Rodney knew they couldn’t survive the storm. He forced Mark to stop. “We need to find shelter! We’ll freeze before we get to the cabin!”

Mark nodded, his body shaking as he kept Holly's face buried against the front of his jacket. "So where do we go?" Their words were snatched quickly by the wind and muffled to obscurity.

Rodney gestured to the northeast, up a steep incline. "We'll follow the rocky terrain! A cave is our best bet!"

Mark shook his head. "I don't think I can make it that far!" He lifted Holly. "Not with her!"

"We have to try! C'mon!"

Rodney placed one sturdy foot on rock beneath the snow and pushed himself up, offering a hand to Mark, who took it to steady himself. It was painstakingly slow, but they pressed on.

Halfway up, Rodney turned to see if the hospital was still visible, but he couldn't even see the trees ten feet from his position. He patted Mark on the back as he climbed. "We're almost there!"

They spotted a cave between two big boulders, and Rodney steered Mark inside. Rodney produced a small hand-cranked light from the inside of his jacket and peered inside. It was deep. Deep enough to protect them from the storm. He motioned for Mark to come up. "C'mon!"

The three of them entered the cave, Rodney's light leading the way, and he checked the back for animals, following it as far as he could before the space grew too small. It was clear. He traveled back to Mark, who sat and leaned up against the wall.

"How are you doing?" Rodney knelt by him and took stock of what limited supplies remained on his person, but his fingers had frozen stiff, and it took nearly a minute of focus and practice to form a fist.

A few tools, a lighter, iodine tablets, a miniature first aid kit with bandages, needle, and string. A few small packs of dried fruits and nuts, along with some jerky. But no water. And no wood. Rodney, shivering himself, looked at Mark, who couldn't stop shaking either, rocking Holly in his arms. "We need a fire, or we won't last the storm."

He stood, hunched over because of the short ceiling, and Mark grabbed him before he was gone. "You'll freeze out there."

"I'll be back before that happens."

"What if one of those people finds you?"

It was a tone that Rodney hadn't heard in a long time. The concern, the fear, the touch of anger. It was the voice of a father.

"I'll be fine," Rodney said, having to peel Mark's hand off him. "Just try

and keep her warm.”

The wind and cold stopped him dead in his tracks the moment he left the protection of the cave. His body and even his mind screamed for him to go back inside. But he knew that if he didn’t find wood, then all three of them wouldn’t last the night.

Frozen stiff by the time he reached the bottom, Rodney found the nearest tree and reached up for the closest dead branches that he could feel. He tugged gently, seeing which would give way, and after three tries, one snapped off with ease. He made sure to keep his back toward the cliff, knowing how easy it would be to get lost in the sea of white.

Rodney bundled the sticks he found and then turned, the steep incline of rocks nowhere to be seen. He stumbled forward, hoping it was just the lack of visibility, but still there was nothing. His heart rate quickened, and his breathing grew so labored that he gasped for breath.

He pushed forward, holding on to the sticks that he’d gathered, looking for the rocks that led up to the cavern in a world that was nothing but a white backdrop. “Mark!” He felt the scream’s vibrations along his throat, but he could barely hear himself above the whine of the wind.

But despite the fear, despite the confusion, Rodney stayed true to the path, and he exhaled relief when he saw the familiar cropping of the rock formation above. He was careful with this footing on his ascent, balancing the wood and himself so he wouldn’t fall. If he fell here, he wouldn’t get back up.

Rodney dropped the sticks into the cave and shook off the snow. He found Mark and Holly in the same positions as when he left, and he started knocking the snow from the wood before it melted and wet the sticks.

He was forced to throw out a few that were too damp from the snow, but he had a decent pile ready, and enough to keep it burning, hopefully, through the night. He gripped the lighter and reached for one of the little strips of paper that he stored with it to act as tinder and set it ablaze.

Both Mark and Rodney stared at the flame as if it were a godsend. With shaking hands and holding his breath, Rodney brought the strip to the shavings. Smoke filtered up, and he carefully lifted the burning pile toward the larger branches. He continued to feed it shavings until flames flickered, and once the other sticks burned, the tension in his body relaxed.

“God, I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy to see fire,” Mark said, keeping Holly in his arms as she shivered. He stared at her. “We don’t have

the medicine."

"I know." Rodney stared into the flames and then looked toward the front of the cave and the blizzard outside. "We can't chance going back now." He turned to Mark. "Maybe in the morning."

"Yeah." But Mark looked at Holly. "Morning."

Both men understood what the night would tell them. Every howl of wind and flurry of snow that gusted into the cave's entrance reminded them of it. Morning would reveal them alive or dead.

But even if they survived until the morning, the likelihood of finding the cabin was limited. The roads would be snowed over and so deep that the cars would be buried, so long as the weatherman who'd predicted the storm was accurate.

The fire flickered, and Rodney and Mark inched closer to the flames.

"I'll take the first watch," Rodney said. "I'll wake you up in a few hours."

"Yeah," Mark said. "Rest would be good."

But despite their rotation, neither men would get any rest. They just took turns staring at the fire and into the storm, making sure that Holly was still breathing all right. After all of Rodney's preparation and all of his planning, it felt as if everything had come down to this one night.

Survive, Rodney thought. *Just survive.*

14

A blanket of fresh white snow covered the northernmost portion of New York State. The blizzard that blew through the day before and bellowed well into the next morning had finally passed. And aside from the ten feet of snow it dropped, nearly swallowing the cabin whole, it also brought the clearest blue skies that Kate had ever seen.

She planted the shovel firmly in the snow and wiped the sweat from her brow, glancing at the path she'd had to dig from the front porch. A narrow gulley was etched deep into the snow that sloped downward toward the door.

It had taken nearly an hour to get through all of it, but she was glad to have the activity. In the brief twenty-four hours that she'd been inside that cabin, she had already gone stir crazy.

Kate glanced at the horizon and the landscape, which looked just as pristine as the sky above. She bit her lip anxiously, hoping that at any moment she'd see Mark and Holly coming up over the snow. She lingered out there, feeling the burn of the sun despite the cold, watching and waiting.

"Mom?"

Kate turned back to the cabin and immediately descended the freshly shoveled snow path. Luke had awoken during the storm. He wasn't very coherent, but he was hungry, which she took as a good sign. Then he'd passed out again and slept, until now.

Luke lay on the couch, his head propped up on pillows, looking at her with a sleepy, pain-riddled stare. Kate knelt by his side, smiling, and removed the glove from her hand to touch his face. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

“Water?” Luke asked, pinching his eyebrows together, his voice scratchy and dry.

Kate reached for one of the half-drunk bottles on the floor and started to tip the bottle toward his mouth before he stopped her.

“No,” Luke said. “I need to try.” He shakily held the bottle, his grip barely strong enough to squeeze the plastic, but he drank it by himself. “Thanks.”

Kate touched his forehead. He was sweating quite a bit, though she wasn’t sure if it was because of the fire and blankets or something else. She reached for some of the wool quilts. “We’ll take a few of these off, see if it helps cool you off.” She made a mental note to check his bandage and clean it again now that he was awake.

Luke jolted upright quickly, his eyes frantic and wide. “Claire.” He winced when he tried to turn, and the pain and fatigue dragged him back down. “Mom, where is she?”

For a second, Kate forgot that name. It had taken a backseat to the events since leaving the college. In all the time she had by herself, she hadn’t spent a single second of it thinking of what to tell him, or how to tell him, what happened.

“Mom?” Luke’s expression showed that he was on the verge of tears.

“She didn’t come with us,” Kate answered. “After you were shot, she helped me carry you to the plane, and there wasn’t enough room for both of you.” Kate tried to smile, but it felt false on her face. “She stayed behind to save you.”

“What?” Luke’s lip quivered. “You left her?” He shied away from her.

Kate reached for her hand, but he knocked it away. “The people who shot you were chasing us. We didn’t have time to think it through. It was the best decision. She helped lead them away from you.”

“How do you know that?” The words pricked like poisoned darts.

“There wasn’t another choice—”

“There’s always another choice!” Luke roared, his pallid cheeks flushing color. But the outburst sapped what little strength he had, and he collapsed back onto his pillow.

“Luke—” Kate buttoned her lips, unable to tell him the truth, because it would hurt him worse to know that Claire had discarded him the moment her own life was in danger. But in her lie, Kate could ease the burden of heartbreak.

Kate walked to one of the bedrooms, the mattress still covered in plastic. It crinkled as she collapsed onto it, curling up with the pillow, which was devoid of any cover. And so, even with her son awake, she was still alone.

She had to fight the repeated urges to march out there and tell him the truth, but she won out each time, knowing that he was hurting but that pain would heal. It would leave a scar, but it would heal, and life would go on.

But the more she thought about it, the less she believed that statement was true. Life hadn't gone on. It had stopped. The terrorists and their EMP had made sure of that. She balled her hands into fists and grimaced, feeling the hot tears roll down her cheeks.

What had they done it for? Some selfish idealism? Some sacrifice for their God so they'd get their virgins in heaven? Millions were suffering. Maybe even millions had died. Families had been torn apart, and Kate Hillman was one of the casualties.

Hadn't she been through enough? Hadn't she already paid for whatever sins she committed? The recklessness of her youth and the danger it had put her son in had haunted her for years. But now it had come full circle.

The tears eventually gave way to fatigue, and Kate's eyes fluttered closed. She drifted in that suspended animation between full sleep and being awake, but when she heard the voice, it was hard for her to determine if it was real.

Was it from a dream? Or could it be—

"Kate?"

She snapped her head up off the pillow, her mind foggy and her body heavy from the dazing nap. She wiggled herself off the mattress, the plastic crinkling madly from her wild, uncoordinated movements.

"Kate!"

The voice was closer now. It was heavy and out of breath, and Kate's knees buckled when her feet hit the floorboards. She sprinted from the bedroom, through the kitchen, and past Luke, who had propped his head up and tried looking out the door.

The snow brightened and whitewashed the landscape as Kate slipped up the slope she'd carved out earlier. She clawed with her hands, hunched over, and squinted as she broke the surface. "Mark!" Kate spun around, looking for him, but saw only the snow and the mountains. "Mark!"

"Oh my god, Kate!"

Kate spun around, following the voice. And when her head finally

stopped spinning, she saw Mark and Rodney, pulling a sled behind them. Kate sprinted toward them, and Mark untied the cord around his belt, dropping it hastily into the snow.

They collided with a muffled smack due to their bulky coats and squeezed each other hungrily. Kate shut her eyes, clawing at his back as Mark lifted her up. “Thank God. Oh, thank God.” She kissed his cheek, his cold skin stinging her lips. “Holly?”

“She got worse, but she’s okay.” He turned back to Rodney, who was still pulling the sled with their daughter. “That’s what took us so long.”

But as the sight of Rodney alone with her daughter started to sink in, Kate frowned, shaking her head. “Where are Glen and Laura?”

Mark lowered his head. “They didn’t make it.”

Kate pressed her hands to the sides of her head, taking a step back. “Christ.”

But Mark reached for her and pulled her close, looking toward the house. “Is Luke inside?”

“He is, but...” Kate answered, reaching up to his face. “He needs a doctor.”

It took a few minutes for each of them to get caught up, but on the way back to the cabin, and even when they were inside, Kate didn’t leave Holly’s side. Their daughter was still unconscious, and though Luke was still upset, he was glad to see Mark, and vice versa.

Aside from a quick hello, Rodney had said nothing upon his arrival. His silence wasn’t noticeable at first, not when Kate was so consumed with her family, but once they were caught up, Kate knew something was wrong.

“Rodney?” Kate asked, slowly approaching him from behind as he stood at the living room window, which was caked with snow.

“We’ll need to clear as much of the powder away from the front of the house as possible,” Rodney answered, keeping his face toward the window. “It’ll be a while before it melts, but I want to make sure we have at least two exits open in case we need to leave quickly.”

“Rodney, are you all right?” Kate sidled up next to him, and he turned his face away, swiping at his eyes.

“Fine.” Rodney cleared his throat, and then, after another pause, he finally turned to face Kate, the remnants of his tears almost invisible. “We’ll take stock of our provisions, and then tomorrow, I’ll go and see if we can find some materials back at the hospital to get the bullet out of Luke’s shoulder. I

have some medical books here on operating, and I might be able—”

Kate touched his shoulder, and Rodney seized up. “What happened at the hospital wasn’t your fault. You did what you could.”

“We should have left sooner. If I had just—”

“You did exactly what you should have done.” Kate stepped closer, and the stoic façade that was Rodney’s expression cracked as he twisted the corner of his mouth. “Take it from someone whose job it was to be prepared for every outcome when they were a pilot. There wasn’t any way of knowing that those people would show up. And if you didn’t go there and you didn’t wait for the medicine to work on Holly, then my daughter would be dead.” She hugged him, and his arms hung limp at his sides. “You saved people. Even when you didn’t have to. Laura knew that. Glen knew that. And they wouldn’t blame you, either.”

Rodney sniffled and whimpered at the sound of their names and then slowly lifted his arms and wrapped them around Kate, squeezing tightly. When he pulled away, he exhaled a shaky breath and then wiped his eyes. “We do need to get ready. Set up the rooms, check the provisions.”

“I’ve gone through the closets already,” Kate said. “Everything looks fully stocked.”

“We still need to check the caches,” Rodney said.

“What?” Kate asked.

“Around the cabin,” Rodney answered. “I’ve got supplies buried all around the property. And we need to get our water system set up. C’mon, I’ll show you where the lake is.”

Kate followed Rodney to a bedroom, but Mark stopped her just before she entered.

“Hey, I need to talk to you.” Mark eyed Rodney. “It’ll just be a minute.” Mark led them to another room, the same one where Kate had been sleeping. He took her hand as they sat on the plastic mattress covering, staring at her knees. “There’s something I need to tell you. Something that I’m still not sure I really saw.”

Kate frowned. “What?” Mark’s apprehension was making her nervous. Out of the two of them in their relationship, he was the one who was always forthright, the one willing to talk about anything. Seeing him with a tight lip wasn’t a common occurrence.

“It was at the hospital, right before we left, right before Rodney killed—”

“What?” Kate gasped but kept her volume low. “Rodney killed

somebody?”

Mark shook his head. “It’s not what you think. It was after they’d killed Glen and Laura. And if he hadn’t, then Holly and I would be dead.”

“Christ, you didn’t tell me that,” Kate said, reclaiming her hands and twisting her fingers nervously.

“I didn’t want to bring it up in front of Rodney, but listen.” Mark inched closer. “The people who attacked the hospital, they weren’t terrorists. I think they were inmates.”

Color drained from Kate’s face, and she thought of the pair of men that she’d seen on the road. Could it have been the same people?

“When we were making a run for it, I saw someone chasing us,” Mark said, and he looked away, almost as if he was trying to convince himself that the memory wasn’t true. “I only got a glimpse of him. And I wasn’t completely sure until I heard the others say a name.”

Kate stood, walking like a ghost to the wall in the room. Her mind was back on the highway, ducked behind those trees in the snow. She spoke his name before Mark had a chance. “Dennis.”

It was quiet for a long time, and then Mark finally stood and walked to Kate, gently gripping her elbows.

Kate maintained a stoic expression; only the tears streaming down her face gave away the truth of her fear. She told Mark what she’d seen on the road, what happened with the inmates who chased her into the woods. She had tossed it aside as a trick of her mind, or that there were millions of others with the same name. But it was real.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Mark said. “He doesn’t know where we are. It may not have even been him. I could have just been seeing things. We were moving so quickly, and there was so much adrenaline that I—”

“It was him,” Kate said, her voice an octave lower than it normally would have been. She raised her eyes to meet Mark’s. “I know it’s him.”

“We’ll be fine,” Mark said. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. He won’t get us. He can’t get us.”

“That’s what I told myself after Luke was born,” Kate said, stepping away from Mark and moving toward the door, where she could see Luke watching over Holly in the living room. “But I was wrong.”

DESPITE THE COLD, the stink of the bodies was overwhelming. And it wasn't just the dead. Plumbing had stopped working, and shit was starting to flood the halls. The storm had trapped them inside. It was like being locked up all over again. Except it was snow that kept them inside instead of iron bars.

"Dennis!" The scream bellowed down the dark hallways flickering with candlelight. "Dennis, where the fuck are you?"

Dennis rubbed his temples and slowly rose from the cot in the room he'd picked out on the first floor. It was the only one he could find that didn't have any dead people in it. He recognized the voice screaming his name, and he knew what the fat man wanted. It was the same thing everyone else wanted.

When Dennis stepped into the hallway, he spied the bulbous shadow that Carl's body cast due to the flickering candles. He was flanked by two other men, Tim and Vic, though they didn't share Carl's vigor and satisfaction in finding their leader.

"You said it was a better idea to stay!" Carl pointed his fat finger in Dennis's face, his breath reeking from a good five feet away, though that could have just been the shit. When it came to Carl's breath, it was hard to tell the difference. "How much longer we have to be stuck in here?"

"You're free to leave whenever you want," Dennis answered. "I'm sure that fat ass of yours will keep you nice and warm." He smiled, and Tim and Vic snickered.

Carl's face flushed red. "You think you're fucking funny?" He removed the pistol from his waistband at the front and pointed it at Dennis's forehead, his finger on the trigger. "Well, I don't think it's fucking funny!" His voice thundered, and the two men beside him took a step backward.

Dennis stared down the pistol's barrel, and his smile slowly faded. "No. It's not." He raised his hand, which held no pistol, and snapped his fingers. In the quiet of the hall, the faint snap echoed loudly, and it took less than ten seconds for a dozen men to appear from the shadows of the hall behind Dennis.

All of the men that appeared were armed, and all of their guns were pointed at Carl. Dennis walked forward until his forehead rested against the end of Carl's pistol. The man frowned in confusion.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Carl asked, visibly shaking now. "Are you crazy?"

“I’m not the one with a dozen guns trained on me,” Dennis answered. “You’re the only crazy one I see around here.” He quickly grabbed hold of Carl’s thick wrists, and he felt the shock run through the fat man’s body. “Go on, Carl. You’re the big man on campus, right? The one with everything figured out? So get on with it.”

Carl shifted his gaze between Dennis and the guns aimed at him. And when he tried to remove the pistol, Dennis tightened his grip so Carl couldn’t move.

“What the hell?” Carl panicked, jerking wildly to try and free his arms. “Let go, man!” Carl dropped the pistol, and it clanged against the floor, but Dennis kept hold of Carl’s hands. “I said let go!” He yanked his arms back hard, and that was when Dennis finally released his grip.

Carl tumbled backward, smacking against the floor with a thud, both Tim and Vic stepping away from him and merging with the crew behind Dennis.

Dennis towered over Carl who crawled backward, cowering.

“I-I’m sorry, Dennis. Hey, you know me, right? I’ve got a big fucking mouth and a hot temper, but I’m not a troublemaker. You know that, right?” Carl awkwardly wallowed from side to side, his weight making it difficult to stand, and when he finally did, he remained hunched in a cowering position. “Please. Dennis, it’s just that we’ve been stuck in here for—”

“Less than a day,” Dennis said then lowered his eyes to the pistol that Carl had dropped. He bent down and picked it up with casual effort that would have been appropriate for someone picking up a sock or some trash. He gave the pistol a shake up and down, feeling the weight of it.

“Dennis, look I—*Gah!*” Carl shot his hands up in the air and looked away as Dennis pointed the gun at him. “P-Please. Don’t do this.”

Even with the limited light from the candles, Dennis could still see the sweat dripping from Carl’s face. He liked that look. It was the look of a broken dog, a beast that recognized its inferiority. But like all bad dogs, it was time to put this one down.

The pistol jerked Dennis’s hand back as he fired, and the bullet went straight through Carl’s skull. The man dropped dead, collapsing into a worthless meat sack in less than the blink of an eye. Dennis tossed the pistol onto the man’s stomach, which jiggled when it landed, and the visual made him laugh. “Fat shit.”

When he turned, he saw that Tim and Vic were the only ones not laughing. They kept their heads down, and when the rest of Dennis’s men

parted to let him through, Vic whimpered.

“You went along with him?” Dennis asked.

“No.” Tim looked Dennis in the eye, the effort causing his neck to strain. “We didn’t know he was going to do that.”

“We just wanted to get out of here. There isn’t any food or water left.” Vic kept his head down, his shoulders shaking like leaves in the wind.

Dennis grabbed each of their shoulders. “We all want to get out of here.” He craned his neck back at Carl. He laughed then clapped Vic and Tim on the back and walked past them. He snapped his fingers, and the hallway lit up with gunfire.

It took less than an hour to shovel their way out of the ER lobby, but when Dennis felt the sun on his face, he took a deep breath of cold mountain air. “Now this is more like it.” He looked back at the men penetrating the surface of the hole they had dug, and the imagery of convicts tunneling from prison forced Dennis to laugh again.

“Mulls!” Dennis hollered for the man the moment he was out, catching him in the middle of stretching his back.

The big man sauntered over, gasping for breath. “Yeah?”

“Those people we saw escape yesterday. You think Martin and Billy can track them?”

Mulls gazed out into the sweeping landscape of white. “I doubt they made it far in the storm. They probably found a place someplace close and waited until it passed. If we can find where they laid up, then they might be able to.”

Dennis grunted. Those bastards had killed two of his men. And while he didn’t share any fondness for the rapists and murders he’d assembled, he was trying to build a reputation in this new world. And if there was one thing that would break him faster than anything with the group of men he surrounded himself with, it was looking weak.

“Do it,” Dennis said. “But if it takes you longer than two hours, come back to town.” He turned to see the medical supplies being lifted from the snow. “I’d come with you myself, but I want to make sure none of these former junkies lift any of the good stuff. Which reminds me...” He turned back to Mulls. “If you do find the tracks, come and get me before you hunt those little pricks down. I’d like to be there and shoot them myself.”

“All right,” Mulls said, and without another word, the old inmate snatched up two men and waddled into the woods in search of the murderers.

Dennis watched them disappear into the vastness of the white forest and

thought of the face of one of the men who'd run from them yesterday. It was only for a second, and he could be remembering it wrong, but the man looked as if he was surprised to see him.

And it wasn't a surprise of fear—it was more the way someone would look when they recognized a person they hadn't seen in a long time. But what had been driving Dennis mad was the fact that he didn't know who that man was. Hopefully, Martin and Billy would find their little hideout, and Dennis would be able to scratch that itch.

But until then, he had business to attend to. There were another forty men waiting for his orders back at the town, and five more settlements to take over. But if he wanted to expand he needed to recruit. "Jimmy!"

The skinny, wiry stalk of muscle bounced close. "Yeah, boss?"

"I want you to take a trip back upstate," Dennis answered. "Look for any more inmates that are wandering around, and tell them what we have, what we're doing."

Jimmy smiled. "Yeah, sure boss."

"Pack up when we get back to town." Dennis patted Jimmy on the back and then stepped out into the snow. It was a brave new world. And soon it would be all his.

SURVIVING THE COLLAPSE: BOOK 2

1

Morning had arrived three hours earlier, and the sun shone brightly on the picturesque ski village below. Pitched snow-covered roofs of cabins and small inns dotted the main street with a few shops sprinkled between.

The highway that fed into the small town was clogged with broken-down vehicles buried beneath the blizzard that had blown through the day before. Only roofs and antennas protruded through the snow. The cars were abandoned without a second thought as people fled, seeking the safety and refuge of shelter.

Dennis Smith stood on a ridge that over looked the town. Frost and blood covered his face, mixing to produce a shimmering red beneath the sun. On either side of him stretched fifteen men, all of them armed, all of them sporting the same frosty red glower.

Tongues ran over cracked lips, appetites eager for the taste of chaos and death. Adrenaline pulsed wildly through their veins. They turned toward Dennis. They waited for him. The man who had brought them here, the man who had quenched their thirst for blood and women and booze. There was more of it down there, just waiting for someone strong enough to take it.

A cold, stiff wind blew from behind them, casting their scent toward the unsuspecting victims below. They were nothing more than sheep ready for slaughter. The wolves had arrived. The wolves were hungry. The breeze died. Dennis nodded.

The escaped inmates swarmed the town like locusts. Houses were searched, one by one, people cowering and hiding beneath beds and in

closets. No one was spared, and no one was left behind. Rebellion was dealt with swiftly, the remnants of defiance staining the white snow with crimson.

Wives and children cried as they passed their slain husbands and fathers, shoved along by men who laughed and howled and reveled in their pain. Dennis smiled from his perch on the ridge.

Mulls, Dennis's right-hand man, ascended the ridge when it was finished. His gut hung over the belt at his waist, and he puffed labored breaths as he crested the top, icy clouds spitting from his mouth like dragon's breath. "We've rounded all of them up." He gestured to the bodies and bloodstained patches below. "They don't have a town hall like the others, but one of the inns has a big lobby. That's where we put them."

Dennis kept his gaze fixed on the town below. He waited for the inevitable. Movement flickered in his left peripheral. Five people sprinted from the back of a house, weaving through the thick snow beneath the cover of trees. "Not all of them." He turned his dark eyes on Mulls, and with a flick of his head, he gestured toward the fleeing townspeople. "Bring them back."

"Shit." Mulls hurried back down the ridge, triggering small avalanches on his descent.

Dennis knelt in the snow and reached inside his jacket. He removed the folded map that detailed their small section of upstate New York, and smoothed out the creases over the snow.

The map revealed six small towns within twenty square miles. Two of them had *X*s crossed over them. Dennis reached into his pocket and removed a black marker, plucked the cap off, added a third *X* to the map, and smiled.

A square box stood out among the circles, and Dennis stared at it for a half second longer than the other marks on the map. It was a highway patrol station, and it represented the one obstacle and hazard that could upend all of Dennis's work. He needed to wipe those pigs off the map before they decided to organize. But he wanted to make sure he had a good foothold in the area before that happened. Their time would come. And he would kill them all.

With the same care with which someone would handle an infant, Dennis refolded the map, paying attention to the original creases, and returned the compacted little square inside his jacket along with the pen. He stood, wiping the snow from his knees, and then descended the hill.

Broken glass and blood littered the snow along Main Street. Dennis passed the open front doors of businesses, houses, and hotels. He maintained a leisurely pace, hands folded behind his back. He'd enjoyed taking his time

outdoors since his escape from prison. For eighteen years, he was held to a regimented schedule. He had his own schedule now. He was in charge. He was the warden.

Dennis veered toward the middle of the street, and his boots sank into the red slush that circled the dead. Limbs and heads extended from the mound of corpses, and he stopped to examine the bulbous nose of a man near the bottom. Dennis stared into the pair of lifeless eyes and slowly touched the tip of the deceased's enormous beak. He smiled, chuckling to himself, and then proceeded toward the inn.

Inside the lobby Dennis saw the group of men, women, and children that shivered on their knees, heads down. Quiet sobs and whispers of reassurance between loved ones drifted from the huddled prisoners.

"Good morning." Dennis smiled widely, his tone cordial. He tracked bloody boot prints inside as he circled the cowering cluster. "I know you're scared. I know you're confused." Faces remained tilted down as he slowly circled, his steps rhythmic and hypnotic. "You don't know why the power is off. You don't know why your phones aren't working, and you don't know why there has been no one to come and help you."

Dennis stopped, the sound of his steps replaced by those quiet sobs and nervous breaths. He spread his arms wide and smiled, exposing his yellowed teeth. "You're safe now." He spoke with a warm, soothing tone, his eyes scanning the group in search of the ones he'd seen at the hospital who'd killed two of his men. Billy and Martin's attempt to track them after the storm had passed had failed. And the fact that there were people out there who could escape him drove that little bug inside of his head mad. "The worst is over, so long as everyone here does exactly as they're told." His gaze focused on a middle-aged woman who clutched two young children to her sides. She kept her head down, shivering, but the little boy to her left looked up at Dennis, his expression more curious than afraid. "You just have to follow the rules." Dennis dropped to one knee and ruffled the little boy's hair. "You're good at following rules, aren't you?"

The woman shuddered and pulled her boy closer. Dennis grabbed her chin and tilted her face toward his. Tears streaked down her cheeks, her face haggard and fatigued. He dropped his tone an octave, his expression stoic save for a few spasms of anger that erupted in little twitches around his eyes and mouth. "The rules are simple. Do what we say, when we say it." His eyes drifted toward the little boy. "And no one gets hurt."

Jake Stows jogged in through the front door, covered in snow up to his waist. He panted and leaned against the wall to keep himself upright, his tongue lolling like a tired dog. “I couldn’t—” Spit rained from his mouth as he coughed. He wiped his mouth, straightening himself out. “The ones that ran off, I couldn’t get them. The snow in the forest is too high.”

Dennis turned to Mulls on his right. “That’s the man you sent?”

Mulls nodded.

Dennis pinched the bridge of his nose, nodding, that bug burrowing through his mind. It tunneled quickly, scrambling reason and control, and Dennis felt his grip on restraint slip. “They escaped?”

“They ran like fucking rabbits,” Jake answered, triggering a laugh from a few of the men.

Dennis joined in the laughter then slowly stepped around the huddled mass of the shivering cattle and grabbed hold of Jake’s shoulder. “Like rabbits, huh?” He kept hold of Jake and turned to the group, his laughter growing more hysterical, that bug in his head burrowing faster and faster. Tears squeezed from the corners of his eyes, and he let go of Jake’s shoulder to wipe them away. “Like rabbits!” Another burst of high-pitched squeals escaped his lips, and the laughter of the men faded until it was only Dennis.

Jake shifted uneasily, and Dennis’s delirium ended.

“Oh, that’s funny.” Dennis smiled and gave three quick pats on his shoulder. “That’s too bad.”

One swift motion of the hand, and Dennis aimed his pistol at Jake’s forehead then squeezed.

Gasps and screams erupted with the gunshot, and Jake’s head jolted backward, blood and bone spraying in a trail due to the bullet’s exit from the back of the skull, and Jake collapsed to the floor.

Smoke drifted from the end of the pistol’s barrel, and Dennis lowered it to his side. He turned an angry glare to the rest of his men. “We are fucking wolves!” He stomped his foot, his knuckles flashing white against the pistol’s black grip.

Dennis paced the room, turning his gaze to each and every one of his men until their eyes dropped to the tips of their boots. “If you cannot hunt, then you cannot kill, and if you cannot kill, then you will be killed!” Spittle dripped from Dennis’s mouth and landed on the brown, matted beard that covered his chin and cheeks. He looked back down to the woman with the two children, and the little boy who was staring up at him, wide-eyed, his

cheeks white as snow. “Remember that, boy.”

Dennis ran his hand through his hair, the bug in his head finally resting. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. “Okay.” He opened his eyes, his stature more relaxed. He examined the cowering prisoners and then gestured to his men. “Make it quick.”

The inmates broke into a frenzy as Dennis stepped over Jake’s body on his exit. Screams and pleas of mercy erupted behind him as the men fought over the prettiest women in the group. Outside, the frigid mountain air cooled the rage. He closed his eyes and lifted his head toward the sky, basking in the howls from his pack and the screams from their victims. He reached for his map. Only three towns left.

2

The fresh powder from the blizzard had covered the landscape with a sheet of white that sparkled beneath the sunlight, which made the forest look alive.

Kate held the shovel but remained motionless as she stared at the mountains on the horizon that climbed high until it looked as though they touched the sky itself. It was one of the most beautiful sights she'd ever seen. But the view had come at a cost.

She lowered her gaze and saw the two rifles leaning up against a tree trunk, snapping her back to reality. The past three days had been an education for Kate and her family in the harsh realities of their new lives. They had no power, no phones, no transportation. The EMP stole every modern convenience, leaving millions ill prepared to survive the aftermath.

"Hey!" Rodney shoveled a scoop of snow and added it to the growing pile beside the hole. "C'mon, this is the last one. And we still need to do our water run." The snow crunched as he scooped another shovelful and tossed it aside.

Kate wiped the sweat from her brow and then started digging. "Why the hell did you bury all of this stuff?"

"If something is easy to find, then it's easy to steal."

Kate conceded the point. Rodney had been one of the few who were ready. Up until the EMP, she didn't even know that Rodney Klatt existed. But over the past few days, he had become the little brother she'd never had. And while he was barely older than her nineteen-year-old son, he carried himself like a man in his forties.

Twenty minutes later, Kate's shovel vibrated from a heavy clunk in the ground. "Finally." Both dropped their shovels and cleared off the frozen soil. When the box was finally unearthed, they stood on either side, each gripping a handle.

"On three," Rodney said. "One, two, three!"

Kate's muscles drew taut, and her back strained as she lifted the heavy stash. The metal box scraped the side of the hole, and it hit the ground with a thud as Kate and Rodney dropped it. She rotated her shoulder, wincing. "Did you bury rocks?"

The inside was lined with plastic, and when Rodney peeled away the layers of clear sheets, she saw three letters stamped in large bold letters on matching bags: MRE.

Kate plucked one from the box and read the back. "Steak and garlic mashed potatoes." She arched her eyebrows, flashing the pack to Rodney. "Just add water." She tossed it back with the others as Rodney pulled a piece of paper and a pen from the container's side.

"Let's get an inventory, and then we'll bring it back to the cabin."

With this being the fourth box of supplies they'd dug up, Kate and Rodney fell into their practiced rhythm easily.

Once finished, Kate and Rodney slung their rifles over their shoulders then picked up the box. None of them went outside without a gun, per Rodney's request. But Kate didn't object. She understood the need for weapons now. They had supplies that people would kill to take. And she didn't plan on leaving her family with nothing.

The pair kicked their way through the tall drifts of snow, Kate dragging the shovel behind her, the pointed tip cutting a fine line through the soft powder. She lifted her knees high, the pair of snowshoes feeling more like a hindrance than a help.

"How long will the snow be this deep?" Kate asked.

"Until spring," Rodney answered. "The roads are near impassible now unless you've got the right gear." He gestured to their feet. "I know they're a pain, but it'd be a lot worse without them. Trust me."

Kate lifted her foot, and snow smacked her face. "I can't imagine."

The view of the back of the cabin brought with it the harsh whack of wood that echoed from the front and formed a methodical rhythm as Kate rounded the corner and saw Mark near the front porch, his back to the high walls of snow that boxed him into a rectangle-shaped crater.

Mark stood just over six feet, and the white walls behind him stretched four feet taller. The blizzard had buried the cabin, and they reclaimed it from the snowy earth one shovelful at a time.

Mark rested the head of the axe on the chopping block, his chest heaving up and down beneath his bulky coat. “I’ve already got two piles done. You said we want at least three per day, right?”

“Yeah,” Rodney answered. “Three per day for the next four months.”

Kate bumped Mark’s arm on the way past. “Just don’t chop your hand off.”

Mark removed his left arm from behind his back. He’d worked his coat sleeve over his hand to make it look like it was amputated. “Too late.”

Kate snorted and dropped the container of goods they’d carried from their cache. She kicked the snow from the large contraptions around her feet then peeled them off, chucking them in the corner with Rodney’s.

“We’ll need to match up what we found with my master list,” Rodney said. “It’s in the kitchen pantry. C’mon.” He removed his gloves as he stepped inside, but before Kate followed, she turned back to Mark.

“Luke come out?” she asked.

“No,” Mark answered, the playfulness gone as he pulled back his sleeve and picked up the axe. “I’ll go and check on him in a minute. You finish up with Rodney. I know you still have the water run.” He heaved the axe high again and split a log in two.

“Thanks,” Kate said then mouthed, “I love you,” and Mark did the same.

Rodney was already at the pantry, a binder in his hands that was three inches thick. “All we have left to do is make sure the numbers from the caches match up with the ones here.”

Kate uncrumpled the list she’d balled into her pocket. The redundancies that Rodney had in place reminded her of the preflight checklists for the airlines—something she wasn’t sure if she’d ever get the chance to do again.

“Mom?”

Kate turned, finding Holly in the entrance of the galley-style kitchen. “Hey, sweetheart. What’s wrong?”

“Can I go outside?”

It was a request that had been repeated numerous times over the past few days, and Kate was reluctant to grant it. She knew that they were in the middle of nowhere, and she had rationalized their situation repeatedly. Still, she couldn’t shake the danger of this new world.

There were no more police, no more ambulances, no justice system. The country's technological clock and been wound back one hundred years. Holly had nearly died from infection a few days ago, and the bruising around her ribs hadn't fully healed. But she knew that she couldn't keep her daughter locked inside the cabin as if it were an ivory tower.

"It's pretty cold out there," Kate answered, wrinkling her nose. "You might freeze."

"I can put on an extra coat," Holly said, stepping forward as she clasped her hands together, her movements still slow and restricted from the bandages around her ribs. "Please, Mom? Please, please, pleeeeease?"

With Holly batting those long eyelashes and puffing her lip, Kate caved. "All right, but put your gloves on, okay?"

"Yes!" Holly hugged Kate's legs. "Thanks, Mom!"

Kate smiled and smoothed the unruly hairs that broke free from Holly's ponytail. "You're welcome." She watched Holly grab her coat and sprint out the door. She stepped forward, extending her hand as if she could reach her daughter from twenty feet away. "And stay where your father can see you!"

Giggles answered back, and Holly squealed as she burst outside.

Kate smiled. It was good to be on speaking terms with her daughter again. In fact, it was the only good thing that she had been able to salvage from the situation. Her life as a pilot had given her wonderful opportunities, but it had also kept her away from home. Gone days at a time, she had missed a lot of Holly growing up, and that had strained their relationship. But it was slowly starting to turn around. But she had traded one child's indifference for another.

"All right," Rodney said. "We're all set here. Let's go to the lake."

Rodney stepped out first, and Kate lingered behind, staring at the closed door to Luke's room. It had stayed like that upon arrival. Her son had refused to come out, refused to talk to anyone, and wouldn't even look Kate in the eyes.

Luke's bitterness was Kate's own doing. She had fed him a lie to spare him pain, and from that lie was borne an inevitable anger. But she knew the truth would hurt him worse. All that mattered now was that he was alive. And even though her family was finally all together, it still didn't feel whole.

Outside, Kate found Mark and Holly engaged in a snowball fight. She smiled, donning her snowshoes, as small clusters of white exploded on their jackets. Holly ducked behind the piles of wood for cover then resurfaced,

flinging a snowball that missed her father and smacked Rodney in the face.

Holly covered her mouth, freezing in place like a child who knew she'd done something wrong. But when Kate burst into laughter, Holly squealed with excitement.

Rodney spit out bits of snow and wiped his face, trying to hide his smile. "How about a little warning next time?"

"Sorry," Holly answered, giggling.

"I'll get her back for you, Rodney," Mark said, packing another snowball that sent Holly running.

Kate helped Rodney carry the pump and turned back as Mark chased after their daughter. "Don't go easy on him, Holl!"

"I won't!" Holly answered, laughing as Mark chased her around the side of the cabin.

The lake's close proximity to the cabin made water retrieval slightly easier, but it was far from convenient. Most of it was frozen, and every day, they were forced to chop away at the six inches of ice before they struck water.

The embankment to the lake's edge was steep, and Kate's knees groaned about the harsh decline, but she didn't stop until she felt the hard surface of ice. They set the pump down, and Rodney lifted the sledgehammer high then slammed it down hard.

Ice splintered, spreading spiderweb cracks from the point of contact. Rodney whacked again, the cracks multiplying, sending bits of ice shavings against the front of his pants. Six heavy hits later, and water bubbled up. Breathless, Rodney squeezed his hands, the cold wearing on his joints.

Kate slid the tube into the hole and then siphoned water until the twelve-gallon tank was full. It was enough for them to drink, cook, and bathe for one day. Though "bathe" was a loose term. With the freezing temperatures, they had done little more than just splash water under their arms and over their faces.

"All right," Rodney said, pulling the pump's tube from the lake. "We should be good."

"Weather's been holding up pretty well," Kate said, dismantling the pump to make it easier to carry.

Rodney glanced up toward the sky and nodded. "That blizzard probably took a lot of the bad weather with it." He wiped the snot dripping from his nose, and Kate mimed the motion.

“I think we should take advantage of it,” Kate said. “Before things turn bad again.”

Rodney paused. With one arm propped against a bent knee, he turned toward her. “Kate, I told you that we need to keep our heads down.” He stood and grabbed the pump from her hands.

“But we don’t know what’s out there,” Kate said. “What if we need help? What if we need—”

“Why would we need help?” Rodney spread his arms wide and turned in a circle. “We have everything we need right here. Food, water, shelter.”

Kate glanced around at the frozen tundra, the dead and barren trees covered in snow. “Yeah, it’s a real paradise.”

“It’s better if we stay put,” Rodney said, grabbing the left handle of their water tank, as if that meant the discussion was over. But Kate pressed on.

“Luke has a bullet lodged in his chest,” Kate said. “He needs a doctor.”

“Mark and I told you what happened to the hospital,” Rodney said. “I’ll have to fish the bullet out myself.”

Kate knocked the pump’s tubing from Rodney’s hand and stepped closer. “And you think you can get close without striking an artery near his heart? Well, I don’t. You’re skilled, Rodney, but you’re not a surgeon.”

“Kate, we don’t—”

“And what if those people you saw at the hospital come back?” Kate felt herself tremble beneath the bulky winter clothes. “What if they find us? From the numbers you saw, they could—”

Footfalls echoed to the east, and Rodney and Kate both reached for their rifles. Rodney aimed with his finger on the trigger before Kate could even get into position.

Rodney placed a finger to his lips and then slowly crested the slope, his feet soundless with each step, while their intruders stumbled loudly.

Kate followed, staying to Rodney’s right. The sights of her rifle wavered, her muscles twitching with a mixture of adrenaline and fear. She couldn’t rid herself of the thoughts of finding Dennis at the top of that slope, those dark eyes smiling at her.

After another minute, breathless voices were paired with the crunch of feet in snow. And while Kate couldn’t hear what they were saying, she recognized the tone. It was a tone of panic.

“Don’t move!” Rodney barked the order at the top of the embankment, rifle aimed, his composure still and calm. “Hands up where I can see them.

Nice and slow.”

Kate crested the top next. She saw their hands first and then their reddened cheeks and shivering bodies. But what caught her eyes the most was the shimmer of blood.

There were five of them, all underdressed for the freezing temperatures. It hadn’t gotten above twelve degrees all morning, but they were in nothing more than flannel pajamas, with boots on their feet. They wore no gloves, no hats, and from what Kate saw, they carried no weapons.

An older man stood in the center. He was flanked by two older women on his left and a middle-aged woman around Kate’s age on his right, who cradled a boy in her arms. The mother stepped forward, sobbing.

“Please,” she said, her voice hysterical. “My son.” She glanced at the boy in her arms. “He’s hurt.” She stepped forward quickly.

“Stay where you are,” Rodney said, his tone stern, but remaining calm.

“Please,” the old man said, his glasses halfway down his nose, and shivering. “I’m a physician.” He gestured to the mother and son. “He was shot as we were trying to escape. If you have shelter, I can—”

“He’s dying!” The woman shrieked, unable to control her heaving sobs, adjusting the boy in her arms, separating herself from the others until she stood halfway between her group and Rodney with his rifle. “Help us!”

Kate lowered her rifle. “Rodney. They’re not here to hurt us. Look at what they’re wearing, for Christ’s sake.”

The seven of them stood like frozen statues, and the mother in no man’s land dropped to her knees. Tears had frozen to her cheeks, shimmering like the blood that covered her body. Her son’s blood. Kate reached for Rodney’s arm and for a moment felt his muscles stiffen beneath her grip.

But the moment passed, and Rodney finally lowered the rifle, and the torn and tattered survivors lowered their arms.

“Follow me,” Rodney said.

3

Holly had collapsed into the snow, her arms and legs thrust out in straight, rigid lines for her third attempt at a snow angel. Mark watched from the chopping block, smiling as he split another log.

"Okay! I'm done!"

Mark wedged the axe's head into the stump and walked over, yanking Holly from the snow. He spun her around so she could see. "Looks like third time is the charm."

"I messed up on the wings a little bit," Holly said, frowning, and then turned to her dad, a tiny smirk creeping through the frown. "I think I need to try it again."

"Well, I think you need to go inside and warm up." Mark directed her toward the cabin door, and she gave a little *humph* as he patted her bottom and ushered her forward. "We'll see how your brother is doing. I need to check his bandages anyway."

Holly reluctantly sat by the fire, defiantly crossing her arms as Mark made his way toward the kitchen. "Are you hungry?"

"No." Holly kept her face toward the fire, away from her father.

Mark reached for a can of chicken soup, which was her favorite food. When she was little, she'd pretended to be sick on several occasions just to have it. And it wasn't until Mark and Kate explained to her that she didn't have to be sick to eat chicken soup that she finally ended the charade.

"No?" Mark asked, his voice curiously high. "Not even for a little, oh, I don't know." He quickly slammed the can onto the counter in a dramatic

fashion, and the commotion made Holly turn around. “Chicken soup?”

Holly smiled, the anger melting away. “Okay.”

“Come here and get it ready. I need to check on your brother.” Mark kissed the top of Holly’s head and moved past her toward the bedrooms.

The cabin was a good size, having four bedrooms. Three were clustered on one side, the kitchen and living room in the middle, and on the other end was the master bedroom where Rodney slept. The three bedrooms behind the kitchen were smaller, more closet than bedroom, and the beds were uncomfortable, but the fireplace kept everything warm.

Mark gently tapped on Luke’s door, his mouth a breath away from the old wood. “Luke?” He grabbed the cold bronze of the doorknob and slowly pushed it open. The hinges groaned, and the sliver of space between the door and the frame widened as Mark squeezed his way into the gap. “Luke?”

His son was asleep on the bed, with the sheets up to his chin. His head lolled lazily to the left, revealing the growing scruff on his cheeks. Mark involuntarily reached for his own cheek, finding the start of a beard. It was dark brown and thicker than Luke’s, coarse from age and the cold. He could break off a hair like an icicle if he wanted to.

Mark pressed his hand against the boy’s forehead. Luke’s head was like a stovetop, and Mark immediately ripped the covers off him and tried to stir him awake. “Luke? Can you hear me?”

Luke groaned. “I don’t want to go. You can’t leave her. I won’t— Can’t go. Don’t go. Claire.” The words faded like a whisper, and Luke’s eyelids fluttered.

Mark hurried into the kitchen and opened the pantry, where his fingers tore open the nearest plastic case of water. He ripped the bottle out and grabbed Holly’s arm. “Go outside and scream for your mom to come back.”

“What’s wrong?” Holly asked, her voice trembling with fear.

And before Mark could explain, he saw figures dart past the widows, Kate leading a crying woman in boots and pajamas that carried a bloodied boy inside, followed by three others dressed in similar garb. Rodney followed suit, shutting the door.

Kate cleared off the round kitchen table, and the woman gently laid the injured boy down, and Mark noted how still the boy looked.

Rodney hurried past Mark in the galley, forcing him flush against the counter and cabinets, and then he snatched a bag from the pantry and brought it to the table, where an old man hovered over the boy.

“I’ll need to sterilize the wound,” the old man said, rolling up his sleeves, exposing frost, dirt, and blood. Rodney handed him a bottle of peroxide, and he doused his arms with it, the excess spilling onto the table and floor.

“Scissors.” The old man held out his hand, and Rodney handed him the silver-plated tool. He cut the boy’s shirt from the collar straight down the middle and flung the tattered remnants aside.

What small patches of the boy’s stomach and chest weren’t covered in blood were pale shapes of white flesh. A gruesome wound rested to the left-hand side of the boy’s navel, oozing fresh blood. The old man snatched a handful of gauze and pressed it hard against the exposed wound.

“I need a hand, quickly.” The doctor’s orders were frantic but mechanically efficient. Rodney offered his hand for assistance but was knocked away. “No, I need you to keep handing me the tools. You.” He pointed at Kate, who stepped up. The old man grabbed her hand and placed it over the wound. “Press hard.”

“O-Okay, I got it,” Kate said.

Mark watched as the old man frantically gathered the tools from Rodney’s bag, smearing blood over the clean silver of the instruments. And though his arms and hands trembled from the cold, they moved with skill.

The woman who carried the boy inside kept hold of his hand, pressing it tight against her lips, and then whispered prayers and pleaded to God the way only a mother could.

“Move the gauze.” The old man waved Kate out of the way and then plunged small metal tweezers into the boy’s gut, which triggered the first signs of life.

“*Ahhhh!*” The boy bucked wildly on the table, and the tweezers were thrown to the floor at Mark’s feet.

“Hold him down! Keep him still!” the old man said.

Kate, Rodney, and the mother placed their hands on the boy’s shoulders, arms, and legs. The screams curdled the blood in Mark’s veins, and he couldn’t take his eyes off the boy’s kicking legs, the blood, the—

“Mark!” Kate said, whipping her head back at him, then gestured to the floor. “The tweezers!”

Mark stared at the bloodied piece of silver circled by scattered blood droplets at his toes. He picked it up and then put it in the doctor’s extended hand.

“Give me the peroxide.” The old man poured more of the liquid over the

tweezers, and Mark lingered close by and watched him plunge the tweezers back into the wound, which produced another eardrum-shattering scream. But after a few seconds, the scream died as the boy passed out, his head lolling limply to the side.

"Chris!" The boy's mother reached for his face, pulling it toward her.

"Got it." The old man removed the tweezers and dropped the nine-millimeter bullet on the table, where it rolled off and clanked against the floor. He then stuck his fingers in the hole, examining the rest of the wound. "I can't tell if any organs were struck." He removed his finger and pressed around the abdomen. "Needle and thread. I need to sew this up quickly."

Rodney handed the old man the requested supplies, but the mother stepped in the old man's way, her eyes frantic and wide. She was a frightened animal, a creature unsure of any future. She reminded Mark of Kate when she first arrived at their apartment in New York after the EMP.

"Is he going to live?" the mother asked.

The words hung in the air, and when the doctor remained silent, she gasped, stepping backward until she hit the wall and collapsed.

The old man ran the needle and thread through the boy's skin, pulling the wound closed, until there was nothing there but blood and lines of thread. "We need to get him to a bed, and we need fluids in him."

"I have an IV bag," Rodney said, getting his arms beneath the boy. "Kate, you know where they are." He lifted the boy off the table and carried him to Holly's room, the mother trailing behind.

Mark stood motionless in the kitchen amid the flurry of action. He stared at the fresh blood on the table and the floor. Crimson droplets hit the floor in slow, methodical drops at the table's edge. He saw the bullet near one of the table's legs, and he picked it up. He rolled the metal between his fingers. It was still warm from the boy's gut.

Kate stepped out of the room and staggered a little bit, unsure of her footing. She clamped her hand around Mark's arm and snapped his attention away from the bullet. "Are you all right?"

Mark peered into her concerned eyes and then looked back at the bullet. "Luke is sick. I think he has an infection."

"What? He was fine last night." Kate walked toward Luke's room and disappeared inside. Mark was still staring down at the bullet when she rushed past Mark and retrieved the old man, dragging him to Luke's room. There was silence for a minute, and then Kate was screaming.

“Help him!”

His wife’s hysteria triggered Mark back into action, and he joined Rodney in the room. Kate stood at the head of Luke’s bed, the veins in her neck throbbing and her jaw square. The old man was at the foot of the bed, his back toward the door. Kate was fuming.

“We helped you!” Kate shoved the old man hard in the chest, and he stumbled backward to the floor. She hovered over him, fist raised, and it took both Mark and Rodney to keep her still.

“Whoa, hey, what is going on?” Mark asked.

Kate’s eyes bored into the old man, and while her snarl remained, the tension in her body released. “He won’t help Luke.”

Rodney and Mark both turned to the old man. Mark stepped first, picking the old man up to his feet and then slamming him against the wall.

“Help. Him.” Mark spoke through gritted teeth, the old man’s shivering throat in his hand.

“My niece,” he said, limply groping at Mark’s arm. “She’s back at the town. With those people who attacked us.” He leaned into Mark’s hand. “Help me get her back.”

“If you don’t help him, I will throw you out into the cold,” Rodney said.

“And then he’ll die!” the old man fired back. “The wound’s infected. And the only way to treat him now is with antibiotics and removing the infected tissue. You might have the supplies to perform the task, but that bullet is close to the arteries that run into his heart. You try and pull it out yourself, and he could bleed to death.”

Mark gave a slow turn of his head toward Rodney. The stare that passed between them told Mark that the old man was right. With gritted teeth, he let the old man go.

Four red finger marks lingered on the old man’s skin, and he gently rubbed them as he stepped from the room and rejoined his group.

“Where’s the town?” Mark asked.

THE DOCTOR, whose name was Harold, sat at the kitchen table, where he

removed the bullet from the boy just moments before. The older woman he brought was his wife, Marie, and the younger girl was his daughter, Lisa. The mother with the wounded son, Chris, was Gwen.

“Who are they?” Rodney asked.

“We don’t know.” Harold clasped his hands tightly between his knees and rocked back and forth in the chair.

“They were armed?” Kate asked.

The doctor nodded, and then his wife touched his shoulder.

“They shot anyone that tried to fight back,” she said, tears glistening in her eyes.

“I watched them kill my brother from our living room window,” Harold said. “After I saw that, I took my family and ran out the back.” He gestured back to the room where they put Chris and Gwen. “I found them on the way, and we all ran. They followed, but they gave up quickly. The snow was thick. There were a lot of trees—”

“Did you see your niece?” Rodney asked. “Did you see that she was alive?”

“I-I don’t know,” Harold answered.

“I’m not going over there to bring back a dead body.” Rodney pushed himself from the wall of the living room. “And I’m not letting any of my people die, so you can—”

“We’re wasting time!” Kate stepped between Rodney and the doctor, looking at Rodney. “Can you help Luke? Can you get the bullet out without killing him?”

Rodney ground his teeth, the muscles along his jaw twitching. He shook his head.

Kate walked toward him, her eyes pleading. “Then I need his help.” She stopped just short of reaching for his hand. “Luke will die if we don’t go.” She turned to the doctor. “But if she is dead, our deal still stands. You will operate on Luke.”

“If I see the body,” the doctor said. “Yes.”

Kate turned back to Rodney, those eyes still pleading. If there was one thing Rodney couldn’t stand, it was blackmail. But the choices were shit either way. If the bullet had just gone into Luke’s arm, the shoulder—hell the stomach—he could have risked fishing it out himself. But he knew the old doctor was right, and he hated it.

Kate leaned closer, her voice a whisper. “The same people that attacked

their town could be the same ones that hit the hospital. We need to find out what we're dealing with."

Without a word, Rodney disappeared into his room. A desk sat in the far corner, and he opened the top drawer. He removed a rolled-up piece of paper and then returned to the kitchen and slapped the paper on the table.

"Open it," Rodney said, looking at the old man.

Harold hesitated but then reached for the paper and slowly unrolled the parchment. As he did, he unveiled a map of upstate New York.

"Show me where the town is," Rodney said.

Kate sidled up next to him, gently holding his arm. "Thank you."

Rodney nodded and then looked at Mark while the old doctor examined the map. "Do you know how to shoot?"

"It's been a while," Mark answered.

"I'll give you some pointers."

4

The town was easier to find than Kate thought, but it was closer to the cabin than she would have liked. And from the expression on Rodney's face, he thought so too, and she wondered if that was the motivation for him to come. Despite the noble quest to help her son, Kate knew Rodney was pragmatic. He wouldn't have gotten them this far if he weren't. But in the end, it didn't matter. They were here, and they needed to find the girl.

The doctor didn't have a picture, but luckily his niece had very striking purple dye in her hair. So long as Dennis's men hadn't scalped her, finding her wouldn't be a problem.

"We'll stay toward the town's north side," Rodney said, pointing through the trees and toward a ridge. "With the town in a valley, we'll have the high ground."

Kate peeked around Mark at Lisa, the doctor's daughter, who had come with them. Rodney wanted someone who had some knowledge of the town, and Kate wanted an insurance policy for her son. She didn't think the doctor would go back on his word, but he'd be less tempted so long as Kate kept the girl close.

"There were a lot of them." Lisa spoke warily, staring at the town as if a monster slept below. "More than we have."

"That's why we're going to scout it first," Rodney said. "Keep your eyes peeled."

The foursome crawled along the top of the ridge, Rodney using the binoculars every twenty yards to check for the inmates below. They worked

their way down the ridgeline until they reached the end, and their view was blocked by forest.

Rodney waved them close, and they formed a small, broken circle. “All right, unless all of the inmates have moved inside the buildings, it doesn’t look like they have the same numbers anymore. I saw two guards at the town’s entrance and two stationed outside a single building.” He turned to Lisa. “I’m assuming that’s the inn?”

“Yeah,” Lisa answered, glancing back into the town. “That’s where we saw them putting everyone.”

Rodney removed his binoculars and handed them to Kate, and just when he was about to descend the ridge, she snatched his arm.

“What are you doing?” Kate asked, her voice a harsh whisper.

“We need to confirm the people are still inside,” Rodney answered. “It’ll be easier for me to go down alone.”

“What if someone sees you? What if you get hurt? What if you—”

“I’ll be fine.” Rodney removed her hand from his arm. “Keep an eye on me with the binoculars. If things go bad, head back to the cabin.”

“If we can’t get the girl back, then Luke dies,” Mark said. “No cowboy stuff. Just go down there, peek through the windows, and then come right back.”

Rodney nodded and then slipped down the mountain, gliding through the snow on his backside until it leveled out to where he could walk.

The binoculars made Kate feel as if she’d been thrust into the valley, and she tightened her grip as Rodney crept toward the window on the back side of a building.

For a moment, Kate considered the possibility of failure. Her thoughts crossed the line of morality, into the dark company of the very inmates they were fighting. She peeled her eyes away from the binoculars and found Lisa. If they failed, and the doctor still wouldn’t help her, then she would force him to—by any means necessary.

“Kate.” Mark touched her shoulder, pointing toward Rodney on his return.

Rodney kept low on the climb up, crawling on all fours, and Mark offered his hand to help him over the ridge. “I didn’t see her inside.” He turned toward the town, still catching his breath. “But I could hear them talking. One of the guards has taken a few of the women to the building next door. She might be there.”

“How many guards?” Mark asked.

“I saw four inside plus the two I saw stationed at the town’s road entrance,” Rodney answered. “And two more in the building next door.”

“Shit,” Mark said breathlessly. He shifted toward Kate. “It won’t take anything but a scream to break our cover.”

Kate nodded. It was riskier than she would have preferred, but they were out of choices. She turned toward Lisa, who trembled under Kate’s hand. “How good of a shot are you?”

“I-I don’t know,” Lisa said, staring at the rifle in her hands as if it were a foreign object. “I had a boyfriend that took me hunting a few times. He showed me a few things.”

Without asking, Kate took the weapon away from her and checked their position through the scope. Both buildings had back doors, but from their vantage point, even with the trees, it was a clear shot. She handed the weapon back to Lisa. “If you hear screams or gunshots, we’re coming out of those doors. You shoot anything that’s not us, understand?”

Lisa nodded and tried to position herself comfortably as Kate turned to Mark.

“Stay with her.” Kate’s eyes told the rest of her thoughts, and just before she descended the ridge, Mark pulled her close and kissed her. She tensed but then fell into him.

Mark slowly pulled back, tugging her lips slightly with him before they parted. He opened his eyes first. “Come back.”

Rodney took the lead, Kate struggling to keep her balance on the steep descent. At the bottom, they ducked below the windows on the cabin’s back side, creeping their way toward the door. Muffled laughter echoed through the log walls, followed by intermittent screams.

Kate held back the impulse to burst inside and open fire. This needed to be done quietly and quickly.

Rodney laid his rifle in the snow and removed a hunting blade from his belt. He carefully pressed his ear to the door, his free hand reaching for the knob.

Kate positioned herself near the window, and she raised her eyes to the windowsill. The room appeared in fragments. A chair, a desk, a fur rug, and then a bed. A man was on it, naked from the waist down. A girl lay beneath him, her hands bound and tied. Kate’s knuckles whitened against the rifle.

Rodney opened the door, exposing them to more laughter and the grunts

from the bedroom. The doorway opened into a hallway with the bedroom on the right, its door closed.

Kate eyed the door as Rodney crept down the hallway toward the voices up front. Kate started to follow, but then gestured for her to stay put.

As Rodney crept farther down the hall, the grunts in the bedroom grew louder. And before Kate knew it, her fingers were already on the brass knob, turning it slowly. She couldn't leave that woman to her fate. Not when she could do something about it.

The door cracked open, and another helpless whimper drifted past. The inmate's back was turned to Kate as she stepped inside. The man's thrusts were quick and violent. The woman beneath him kept her face turned away, her eyes shut. Her lower lip was smeared with blood.

Kate glanced down the hall, finding Rodney nearing the other guard. She needed to be quick. She raised the butt of her rifle, and three quick steps brought her toward the bed.

The boards groaned from Kate's movement, and the big man turned around. "What the hell, I'm not even done ye—"

The rifle struck the brute's forehead, eliciting a crack that drew blood and collapsed the piece of scum on top of the woman. Quickly, Kate knocked the man off the bed, and he hit the floor with a heavy thump.

Kate set the rifle down and then reached for the woman's restraints. When Kate's fingers grazed the woman's wrist, she bucked wildly in fear.

"It's all right, shh," Kate said, keeping her voice down as she quickly untied the ropes. "I'm here to help. We're going to—"

A woman's scream wailed like a siren from the front of the cabin, but it was overpowered by two gunshots, followed by hurried footsteps. Kate reached for the rifle, aiming it at the door, poised to fire.

Rodney appeared, a girl with a mop of purple in her hair draped under his arm. "We need to move!"

Kate turned back to the woman she'd freed, finding her standing and naked from the waist down, quickly trying to dress. Rodney shifted anxiously as Kate tried to help the woman with her shoes. Men shouted next door.

"Hurry!" Rodney said.

The woman finished, and Kate grabbed her arm, yanking her out of the room. Rodney was out the door first, the purple-haired girl limping next to him. Kate followed, pulling the second woman behind her. She landed in the snow, Rodney already making his ascent up the ridge, when the back door to

the inn opened.

Kate raised her rifle, ready to fire, when bullets bombarded the back side of the house, forcing the door closed. She glanced up toward the ridge, Mark and Lisa invisible save for the sound of their gunshots.

The foursome churned up the ridge, their retreat frantic amid the gunfire blasting both in front of them and behind. Kate's muscles burned on the ascent as she pulled the woman, who could barely keep herself upright.

Mark, Lisa, and the security of the ridgeline came into view, and just before they crested the top, the woman yanked her hand from Kate's grip.

"Stop!" the woman screamed, waving her arms at Mark and Lisa, who lifted their gaze from their scopes. She hyperventilated, gasping deep breaths of air and pointing back toward the cabin. "My son!" She turned her face away then clawed her nails through her knotted and tangled hair.

"Kate, c'mon!" Rodney said, now with the doctor's niece draped over his shoulder.

Hands were suddenly on Kate, and she turned to find the woman, her eyes wild with fear, her lower lip swollen and crusted with blood. Bruises lined her neck and cheek. "My son. They'll kill him. They told me they would." She sank her nails deeper into the sleeve of Kate's jacket until she felt the pinpoint pressure beneath each finger. "Help me."

Below, inmates flooded out of the cabin and onto the town's main street. They circled around a different building, and Kate looked at Rodney and Mark.

"Please!" the woman cried.

Kate stomped toward Lisa, snatching the rifle from her hands, and thrust it into the woman's chest. "You know how to use one?"

The woman stared at it a second too long, but just when Kate was about to lower the weapon and forgo the rescue, she snatched it from her hands. She spun the rifle around, staring down the sight, handling the weapon deftly. She opened the chamber then ejected the magazine, examining the bullets.

Kate turned toward Mark. "Help Rodney get Lisa and the niece to the cabin."

"Kate, this is—"

She kissed him hard, longer than she should have, and this time when she peeled her face away, his eyes were still closed. "Have the doctor start working on Luke. I won't be far behind. I promise."

Rodney handed the purple-haired girl over to Mark before he could

protest, and then Kate, Rodney, and the woman descended the ridge, back into the storm.

Kate fought the urge to look back up the ridge. If she gave in to it, she knew she'd leave. This was a risk that took her away from her family, but she understood a mother's drive to save her child. That was what cemented her decision to stay. Rodney had helped her, and now she could help another.

"Stay on me!" Rodney said as the snow leveled out at the ridge's bottom.

Kate kept the butt of her rifle locked into the crook of her arm, and her vision narrowed to the pinpoint accuracy of the weapon's sight. She placed her gloved finger over the trigger, careful not to squeeze as she brought up the rear of their pack as they entered an alleyway toward Main Street.

Rodney held up a fist, and their movement ended at the alley's exit. Kate covered their rear, and angry shouts and footsteps circled.

"All right," Rodney said, still peering through the scope. "We're four buildings down from the inn. That's where your son is?"

"Yeah," the woman answered.

"I'm gonna head for that building across the street. There's a good sniper window on the second floor." Rodney turned to the woman. "I'll make sure no one sneaks up behind you."

The woman nodded.

"Kate, are you good to go with her?" Rodney asked.

"Yeah."

"Don't move until I'm in position." Rodney sprinted across the street, his feet crunching quickly over the snow, and Kate took his place at the alley's exit.

The woman adjusted her aim, providing Rodney cover. Kate joined the cause, but just before Rodney entered the building, a bullet splintered the wood over the woman's head.

Instinct pushed both women from the alley, Kate turning and firing blindly at the pair of thugs at the alley's opposite end. They sprinted for the inn on Main Street, Kate stealing glances down the alleys they passed as the men followed on the building's back side.

Breathless, Kate and the woman crouched on either side of the inn's front door. Angry shouts rattled inside, followed by the quivering whimpers of those that were trapped.

"Shut up!" a man ordered, hushing the growing dissent of the hostages. "I'll put a bullet in every single one of you. Now shut—"

In one swift motion, the woman stood, kicked open the door, and stepped into the room, firing before Kate had a chance to stand. A scream erupted in time with the gunshot, and Kate followed, rifle up, but her sights only bore down on a huddled group of women and children.

“Danny!” The woman lowered her rifle and rushed to a small boy wedged between two older women. He lifted his head at his name and then flung his arms around his mother’s neck, and both burst into tears.

For a moment, everything was still, and Kate watched the reunion of the family. But the relief ended with the shattering of glass and the thunder of gunshots behind her.

Kate hit the floor, ducking along with everyone else, the world fading to black with a soundtrack of gunshots, groans, and screams. She waited for the surge of men or hands on her to whisk her away to a dark room to be raped, but as she lingered on the floor, the commotion ended.

Kate lifted her head, turning her neck sharply to see that the windows behind her were devoid of the hulking figures she expected, and saw only shards of broken glass.

Kate scrambled forward on hands and knees. “We need to move! Everyone, get out!” She leaned into the group, her haste triggering action as she spun around, rifle up, waiting for anyone else to come through. But none came.

A hand clapped Kate’s shoulder, and she turned to find the woman. “Let’s go.”

The group stopped at the back door, and Kate hurried past them. A gunshot pulled everyone back to the floor, but Kate opened the door. Snow and trees came into view, and then the quick dart of a body.

Kate kicked the door the rest of the way open and brought the thug in her crosshairs. She fired, the first bullet missing wide, and then steadied her aim. The second sent a geyser of blood out of the man’s back and a spray of crimson across the white snow.

Kate held her position, waiting for another inmate to appear, but none came. The coast was clear. She turned back toward the group, finally getting a sense of their size. Twenty faces looked to her for guidance, a mix of men, women, and children.

“Everyone run up the ridge and wait there.”

“What if they start shooting us?” a woman asked, terror laced in her voice.

“The trees will provide good cover,” Kate answered. “Now go!” She barked the order, and the group trickled out into the snow, most of them ill prepared for the cold, but freezing was better than dying.

Kate swiveled to her left and right, rifle aimed, making sure the coast remained clear as the last few refugees scurried up the hill. Sporadic gunfire echoed from the building’s front side, and when the woman Kate had saved brought up the rear, she lowered her weapon.

“Thank you,” she said, the rifle still clutched in her chest, her eyes watering.

Kate nodded, and the woman joined the retreat with her son. Once she couldn’t see them anymore, Kate turned back into the building, finger over the trigger, her eyes scanning the front of the building for anymore hostiles.

A puddle of blood formed around one of the dead men, and Kate skirted the gore and found two more bodies on the street, littering the snow, their limbs sprawled out at awkward angles, the rifles they’d carried still clutched in their dead hands.

Kate found the second floor of the building where Rodney had left the window open. The front door opened on the first floor, causing her to cast her eyes downward, and Rodney jogged into the street, away from her and toward the east end.

“Two got away from me,” Rodney said, jogging away. “I’m going to finish this.”

“Rodney, wait!”

Kate sprinted after him, following him into the building where the road dead-ended. Some souvenirs and trinkets lay piled on tables and shelves, but most of the store’s merchandise was broken and scattered on the floor. Kate crunched glass beneath her boots, and Rodney fired from somewhere out the back.

Rodney was already aimed, firing at two figures darting up the mountain, feet churning up snow in a hasty retreat. Kate sidled up beside him and took a breath, taking her time to line up her shot. The crosshairs fell against the man’s back. She followed his path for a minute, then squeezed the trigger.

The man ducked, and the bullet disappeared into the snow, and before Kate could readjust, the man vanished behind a cluster of trees.

Rodney followed the second man, his finger gently placed on the trigger. “I’ve got him.” He kept his right eye glued to the scope, his body still as the frozen tundra outside. He exhaled a slow breath and then squeezed the

trigger.

A splash of red burst from the convict's back, and he sprawled forward into the snow. The ring of the gunshot clung to the air as the man lay still, his body firmly planted in the soft, frozen powder.

Rodney raised his rifle to search for the inmate that Kate had missed, but quickly lowered it. "He's gone." He spun around, angry. "Shit."

"We should go," Kate said.

Rodney nodded. "Yeah, we need to get out of here before he tells the rest of his buddies what happened."

5

Frozen, stiff, and exhausted, Dennis shuffled into town. The entire trip back, there were only two thoughts that circled his mind. Bed, and laying that woman still chained up in his room.

A mechanical hum echoed from the large diesel generators that Dennis had sent his people to find, and he was glad to find them already hooked up to his house and the sleeping quarters of his men. Billy and Martin appeared from the big hunk of machinery, passing a whiskey bottle between them. They were brothers, and the best trackers that Dennis had ever seen. And while they fell short of finding the bastards who'd killed their men at the hospital, the supplies they sniffed out were even better. Though he knew most of the work was done by the younger sibling, Billy.

Dennis clapped excitedly. "About damn time. I hope you hooked that thing up to the Jacuzzi around back." He snatched the bottle away, took a few swills of liquor, then handed it to Mulls. "How many houses are hooked up?"

"Three," Martin said. "And we're getting ready to haul another one in before nightfall. We have enough fuel to last us a few months, so long as we don't go overboard with running it day and night."

"Hell no. Those fuckers are never going off!" Dennis spun around, arms spread wide, a yellow smile on his face. "We're the pioneers of the new world, boys! There's an ocean of fuel out there just ready to be taken!" He clapped his hands vigorously. "Let's get to it!"

The men behind Mulls remained quiet, as he dangled the bottle of booze from his fingertips. "Jimmy still hasn't come back. It's been almost two

days now.”

Dennis spun around, his good mood disappeared. “What do you want me to do? If the dumbass got lost, then there is nothing we can do about it.” He headed for his house, that little bug in his head starting to stir, but Mulls followed, and so did the others, causing him to stop. He felt an uneasy shift in the pecking order, and he didn’t like it. “Something you want to share with me, Mulls?”

“We’ve been collecting supplies nonstop for the past three days,” Mulls answered. “We’ve got food, we’ve got water, we’ve got enough guns for an army.” He separated himself from the group. “Everybody wants to enjoy what we’ve got for a little while.”

Dennis looked past Mulls, toward the convicts, who lowered their heads, staring at their boots. He stepped past Mulls, confronting the men who’d been whining behind his back. “Is that true? Everyone just wants to have a little fun?” The men retreated, taking steps back every time Dennis stepped forward. “Well, I don’t want you all to be left out! How about this—everyone can take turns screwing the woman I’ve got at my place.” He leaned forward, bouncing his eyebrows, and raised his left hand, which exposed the golden band. “I’ll even let you wear the wedding ring, huh?”

“Dennis, we’ve done everything you’ve asked,” Mulls answered. “We just want a break.”

Dennis spun around, then swiveled his attention between Mulls and the inmates who followed him. “Is that all?” He feigned an expression of empathy. “Well, if that’s all anybody wants—Oh.” He pressed a finger to his lips. “Oh, but there is something else, isn’t there?” He nodded to himself, the group parting for him to pass. “What was it again? It was on the tip of my tongue—Ah!” He smiled, lifting his finger up. “The cops.” He eyed each of the convicts in turn. “You remember? The little highway patrol center that holds the one group of people that can stop us? But hey, if you guys want to take it easy for a while, lay back and relax, I’m sure that station can wait.”

“Dennis, that’s not what we’re—”

“No!” Dennis barked, and the men cowered as he snarled his lips and exposed his teeth. “You want this place to last two months or the rest of our lives?” He hammered his fist angrily. “We take out that station, and we don’t have anyone to oppose us until the spring. Do you know what happens if those pigs find us? We go back in a cell.” He shook his head, wiping the spit that dribbled from his lower lip. “I’m not going back in a cell. Are you?” He

shoved the nearest man hard then turned to another. “Are you?”

There was a series of headshakes, and a few muffled *no*s escaped tight lips.

“*Are you?*” Dennis roared.

“No!”

He smiled at the echoed war cry and nodded, turning back toward Mulls slowly, deliberately. And to the big bear’s credit, he never looked away. “We take out the station, and then we can start to relax.”

“With what men?” Mulls asked, matching Dennis’s anger. “We’re spread too thin. Jimmy was supposed to fix that problem, but he’s god knows where now.”

“We send out more scouts,” Dennis said.

“And lose even more men?” Mulls shook his head and lowered his voice. “Let’s go back to the other towns, drag the people we want back here, and then torch the places. We need to centralize.”

Dennis leaned close enough for a kiss, and he got a nasty whiff of Mulls’s rotten stench. “No.” The defiance rolled off his tongue slowly. “I’m not giving up what we’ve taken.”

“All right, Dennis.” Mulls nodded, unsmiling. “All right.” He shook his head and then chuckled. “Christ, you think you would—”

But Mulls stopped, looking past Dennis down Main Street. Dennis frowned and then turned, his expression morphing into a smile.

Covered in snow and ice and looking half dead, Jimmy strutted into town at the helm of a large cluster of snow-covered orange jumpsuits.

“Son of a bitch.” Dennis laughed, performing a slow clap as he walked to meet Jimmy and wrapped him in a bear hug. “You squirrely son of a bitch! Look at you!” He clapped Jimmy on the shoulders, and bits of ice broke away from his clothes. “We thought the storm got you.”

Jimmy chattered his teeth together, and a goofy grin crinkled the left side of his face. “I-I-I t-t-thought-t-t w-e-e, co-co—” He shut his eyes, trying to concentrate. “Could make it through.” He huffed in fatigue and wobbled on both legs.

“Let’s get you warmed up.” Dennis stepped around Jimmy and opened his arms in welcome to the fresh meat for his grinder. “We’ve got heat, women, and booze, gentlemen. Just head on down to the Convict Motel.” Dennis laughed, and the frozen masses shuffled past.

Once they were gone and inside, only Mulls and Dennis remained on the

street. The pair of men stared each other down, but it was Mulls who shook his head and backed down first. And when the big man had walked away, Dennis slowly recounted the number of men that Jimmy had just added to his arsenal. Fifty. Fifty to his already robust forty.

Once fed, bathed, and satisfied with a woman, they'd do whatever he told them to do. Because just as Mulls understood, Dennis was the hand that fed them. Those pigs wouldn't know what hit them.

"Dennis!"

He stopped and turned to find another breathless man wandering into his town. It took a minute for him to recognize him, but the tuft of red hair gave Ken away. That little fire crotch was supposed to be in the valley town.

Ken skidded on his heels to a stop, hunched over with his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. He finally straightened himself out, wiping away a stringy collection of spit and snot. "The town's gone."

The muscles along Dennis's face tightened in anger, his tone flat but stern. "What?"

Ken rubbed his palms on his thighs again. "Christ, I barely made it out of there alive."

Dennis twitched, and the bug burrowed. The madness crept over him, and he turned away from Ken, stumbling aimlessly around Main Street. Rage gained momentum as the realization sunk in.

His town was gone? One of *his* towns?

Dennis froze, but that bug inside his head tunneled through his reason and control. "How many?"

"What?" Ken asked.

Dennis turned, his eyes focused on that red-haired bastard in the middle of his street. "How. Many. Were there?"

Ken took one step backward. "I-I don't know. I didn't really get a good look, but if I had to guess, um..." He swallowed and trembled. "A few?"

Surprise flashed over Dennis's face, but only a moment before anger retook control. "A few?" Snow crunched beneath Dennis's boot as he stepped forward slowly. "We had eight men stationed in the valley." Quick as a snakebite, Dennis lunged and curled both hands around Ken's throat, pulling him intimately close. "A few fucking people took back a town that had eight armed inmates?"

Ken struggled for breath. "We didn't see them coming."

The bug in Dennis's mind burrowed faster and faster, eating up his brain

as his hand tightened around Ken’s throat. The man whacked at Dennis’s arm, fighting for his life, and then just as quickly as Dennis grabbed him, he let go.

Ken collapsed to his knees, hands on his throat, coughing and gasping for air.

Dennis turned away from Ken, hiding the pistol that he removed from his holster. “Three people killed eight of my men.”

“They only killed seven,” Ken said.

Dennis spun around and fired, spraying Ken’s brain over the snow. He holstered the pistol. “No. Eight.” The bug in his brain calmed, and he watched blood crawl from Ken’s body like crimson fingers along the ground.

Dennis wasn’t sure how long he stood there, but when he turned around, Mulls was behind him. “They lost the town. He ran.” He strutted over to Mulls, whose eyes were still locked on Ken’s body. It wasn’t until Dennis clapped him on the back that Mulls finally looked away. “Cowards die, Mulls.” He laughed and then headed back inside. “Get the boys ready. We’ve got work to do!”

6

Kate sat outside Luke's room, the door closed as the doctor made good on his promise to remove the bullet from his chest. The inside of the cabin was dead quiet save for the occasional whisper. Kate had wanted to be inside during the surgery, but the doctor didn't want any distractions. The procedure was hard enough without all the necessary equipment, and he didn't need her breathing down his neck. It took every ounce of Kate's willpower not to choke him.

She and Mark had resigned themselves to the kitchen, each of them tapping a foot or hand nervously. Luke's condition had worsened by the time they'd returned, and even if the doctor was able to get the bullet out, there was no guarantee that the infection wouldn't have spread or that the antibiotics that Rodney had would kill it.

Kate turned left, eyeing the twenty-plus people in the living room, sipping water and nibbling on crackers and soup. She didn't know what they were going to do with them. There wasn't enough room in the cabin for an entire town to survive.

Rodney stepped from his room on the opposite side, weaving around the huddled bodies on the floor, and joined her and Mark in the kitchen. He crossed his arms and gestured toward the door. "Anything?"

"Not yet," Kate answered, her voice hoarse from staying quiet.

Rodney checked the pocket watch he carried. "It's been almost an hour."

"I know." Kate eyed the wooden slats on the door. She had stared at that door for so long that she had every groove of the wood memorized.

“Listen, we need to talk,” Rodney said, looking at both Kate and Mark. “Outside.”

“Yeah.” Kate was the last to leave the kitchen, and though she didn’t want anything to steal her attention away from Luke’s surgery, a part of her thought the distraction might help speed things along.

The contrast from the warmth of the cabin and the cold outside shocked Kate’s senses when she stepped outside. She flipped her collar up to guard herself against the stiff wind and joined Mark and Rodney in the snow.

“I think we all know we don’t have the room for these people,” Rodney said. “As much as I’d like for them to stay, logistically, it’s just not possible.”

“Can’t we take them back to the town?” Mark asked. “I mean, all of the bad guys are dead, right?”

“One got away,” Kate answered, her eyes lost in the sheer whiteness that blanketed the forest.

“I think having them return to the town is the best option,” Rodney answered. “I just don’t know how we’re going to convince them. They don’t have food, or water, and they know we have both here. There’s nothing stopping them from overpowering us.”

“How many people did you say attacked the hospital?” Kate asked, looking to Rodney.

“It was hard to tell, but it looked like at least a dozen.”

“Then let’s assume they have three times that,” Kate replied, pointing toward the cabin. “We get these people on our side, and we’ve got a chance at fighting back.”

“We don’t need to fight back, Kate,” Rodney said. “Those people aren’t our problem.”

“You saw what those animals were doing,” Kate said, her tone laced with accusation. “God knows who else they’re doing it to.”

“You want to throw us in the middle of some kind of war?” Rodney asked. “People will die, Kate. Hiding might not be the most noble thing to do, but it’s the smartest. We’ve risked too much already.”

“It’ll only be a matter of time before they find this place.”

The three of them turned back toward the cabin door. Stacy, the woman whom Kate freed from rape, clutched a blanket around her shoulders.

Shivering, she stepped forward, nearing the circle but not joining. “They talked about spreading through this part of the state like some type of conquerors. They’re a disease. And if they find this place they’ll kill it.”

“And what would you have us do?” Rodney asked.

“Fight them.”

Rodney laughed, shaking his head. “And who will do the fighting? The people in that town didn’t bother fighting back, and the ones that did are dead.” He looked to Kate and Mark. “You think taking in those people will give us an army? It doesn’t.”

Stacy stepped closer. “Those men talked a lot. I don’t know how much of it was truth, but I can tell you what I know. We can use it to bring them down.”

“All right,” Mark said, raising his hands to calm the growing eagerness. “Let’s just take this one step at a time.” He gestured Stacy into the circle. “What do you know?”

Stacy’s blanket was lifted by a strong gust of wind, and she pulled it tighter around her body. “They’re taking over towns. There are six of them up here that are strung pretty close together. I don’t know if they have all of them under their thumb, but from the number of men I saw sweep through our town, I’d bet they do.” She winced and touched the lump on her lip.

“How many were there?” Rodney asked.

“A few dozen,” Stacy answered. “But from the sound of it, they had more that stayed behind at the other towns like ours.”

“Did they say what they’re doing?” Mark asked.

“They’re doing whatever they want,” Stacy answered. “They think there isn’t anyone around to stop them.” She turned to Rodney. “I guess they were right.”

Rodney crossed his arms. “Listen, lady, I understand your worry. I really do, but we don’t have the resources to fight them.”

“Sure we do,” Kate said. “We have guns, and ammunition, and—”

“Nobody that knows how to use them,” Rodney said.

“We could teach them,” Kate said, looking at Rodney. “You taught us.”

Rodney sighed and rubbed his forehead. “We don’t know what we’re up against. We don’t know how many men they really have, and we don’t know what kind of weaponry they’re packing.” He eyed Kate and then Stacy. “I’m sorry, but the best I can do is take you back to the town with some supplies.”

“I can help you train,” Stacy said, trying her best not to sound desperate. “I was in the military. I wasn’t in combat, but I helped with logistical preparation with the army. We can set up a system. I can help get us organized.”

Rodney laughed and flapped his arms at his sides. “This is crazy. I’m not looking to start a war.”

“One’s already been started,” Stacy said. “Look, if you think that those people won’t eventually stumble onto this place, then you’re a fool. You need the numbers to fight back.” She straightened, fighting the cold. “One of the guards mentioned a highway patrol station off the highway. They’re worried that they’ll be found out, put back in jail.”

“There aren’t any more jails,” Rodney said. “And if there were cops in that station, they’re long gone by now.”

“How do you know that?” Kate asked.

“Look around, Kate!” Rodney gestured to the empty forest. “People ran. People fled. We fled. We came here to survive, and that’s not going to happen if we decide to go looking for a fight!” He spun around and violently kicked the snow, sending up a drift that caught in the wind. He kept his back to them for a long time, hands on his hips, his head lowered.

Kate walked to him slowly but didn’t step around to face him. “Rodney.” When he didn’t answer, she took another half step, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Rodney.”

He turned his head slowly. “You’re willing to expose us? Expose your family?”

“I’m doing this to keep them safe,” Kate answered. “To keep us all safe.”

Rodney slumped his shoulders then turned, his face still turned down to his boots. “All right, Kate.” He looked at Stacy. “Can you show me where the highway patrol station is?”

Stacy nodded. “Yeah. I caught a glimpse of one of their maps.”

Rodney shook his head as he stepped past them and headed toward the door. Stacy looked back at Kate and mouthed “Thank you” as she followed Rodney inside, leaving Kate and Mark in the snow alone.

“He’s not wrong,” Mark said.

“I know,” Kate replied, watching the front door close behind Stacy. “But neither am I.”

Mark took her hand, and the pair walked back inside, returning to their sentry post in the kitchen, and time returned to its slow, crawling pace. She closed her eyes, still clutching Mark’s hand, and for the first time since Luke was born, she whispered a prayer in her head.

Don’t take him from me. Don’t let me have brought him this far for nothing. He’s a good boy. Her lip quivered. *He’s my son.*

Mark noticed the tears and pulled Kate close. They held onto each other for a long time, and Kate sniffled, trying not to lose control. She just had to believe it would turn out okay. For once, she had to push aside the odds and the logic and the calculations. She needed faith.

The door opened, and the doctor stepped out. Blood covered both hands and stretched up to his elbows, with matching stains on the front of his shirt. He wiped the crimson away in dark smears on a towel, and the sight of so much blood made Kate fear the worst.

"I was able to get the bullet out," the doctor said. "And I was able to remove a lot of the infected tissue. But he lost a lot of blood." He turned back inside the room. "He's resting now, but it'll take some time before we know for sure if he'll pull through."

"But he's okay?" Kate asked, holding back tears.

"Yes," the doctor said. "For now."

"Can we see him?" Mark asked.

"Yes, but try not to wake him."

The doctor stepped aside, and Kate walked in first, fighting to keep her steps quiet and calm as she approached Luke's bedside. A fresh white bandage was stretched over his chest and shoulder. Blood covered most of the sheets. His cheeks were pale, and when Kate grabbed his hand, Luke's fingers were ice cold.

Mark stood behind her, both hands on her shoulders. "He's going to be okay. He just needs some rest, and he'll be fine in the morning."

Kate nodded, her lips pursed as more tears fell. She kissed Luke's hand, and then she started to cry. "I don't want to lose him. I can't lose him."

"You won't," Mark said, whispering into her ear.

The couple held each other tight and close, watching over their son. They remained still and quiet for a long time, both hoping for the best.

RODNEY MADE Stacy go over the locations a few times, and the exact conversation she'd heard from the men who'd attacked the town. He wanted to see if he could find inconsistencies with her story. He couldn't, which

made the situation even more dangerous.

If the woman's estimates were correct, then there were close to forty men spread over the remaining five towns. Forty armed and dangerous convicts against two dozen scared men, women, and children. He didn't like those odds at all.

Their only hope rested in the highway patrol station. He wasn't sure how many officers would still be there, especially with so much time passed since the EMP struck, but if anything, they might be able to find additional ammunition and guns.

Rodney looked at his closet, hoping he wouldn't have to use what was behind those doors. It was a last resort. He examined the map for a final time and then walked back toward the living room.

Most of the refugees camped in his living room were asleep, exhausted by the walk from town. The food they'd eaten was probably the first real stuff they'd tasted in a couple days. And with full bellies and heavy eyes, they passed out right where they sat. All but two.

A mother and daughter sat in the corner. The daughter sobbed quietly, her only signs of distress the gentle shake of her shoulders. Her mother stroked the girl's hair, her eyes closed, the motion repetitive, the sight reminding Rodney of a swing that had been pushed and never lost momentum.

"You're the man who saved us?"

Rodney jumped a little at the question, not realizing he'd been staring at her the whole time. He cleared his throat, keeping his voice down. "I was one of the people that came into the town, yes."

The mother smiled. "My name is Yvonne." She looked down to her daughter. "This is the first time she's slept since those men came into town." The smile faded, and the wrinkles along her eyes and mouth smoothed out. "They tried to take her from me. Made all of these threats. My husband, he—"

The tear fell first, and the wrinkles returned as she scrunched her face and lifted her hand from her daughter's light brown hair. It hovered there for a moment, and then she covered her mouth, stifling some sobs.

Rodney watched from afar, at least three other sleeping bodies between the two of them, making any attempt at physical contact impossible. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Yvonne wiped her eyes. "Thank you." She restarted the stroking of the daughter's hair, and kept her voice low. "It was very nice of you, taking us all

in like you did."

Rodney nodded, keeping the knowledge that he'd only gone to retrieve the doctor's daughter. He never had any intention of bringing all of these people back. But then again, he never had the intention of letting Kate and her family tag along.

"Did you," she paused, raising her eyebrows, "lose anyone?"

"No." Rodney fidgeted with his hands. "I was alone before the EMP." When the mother frowned at that last word, Rodney leaned forward. "It's what caused all of this to happen. Killed every piece of technology controlled with a computer chip." He snapped his fingers. "Faster than the blink of an eye."

Yvonne shook her head in disbelief. Her eyes remained red, the tiny veins highlighted by the glow of the fire. "It's hard to believe that people can become so violent in times like these."

"Fear is a powerful emotion," Rodney answered. "It can push you to do things you could never imagine."

Yvonne brushed her daughter's hair back behind her ear, and then let her palm rest on the little girl's shoulder, her voice dropping an octave but remaining quiet. "What those men did, what they are, it's more than just fear that drives them." She locked eyes with Rodney, her gaze like a magnet pulling him closer. "I'd never seen anything like it. Not even in films. It was animalistic. It was… evil. And it's spreading."

Rodney finally looked away, his eyes falling to anything save for the woman's ghostlike glare. "We're heading to the police station. I'm sure we'll be able to find you all some help there."

"The police?" Yvonne's voice fluttered into a laughing whimper. "They can't stop what I saw. They can't stop what those people are."

Unable to settle his eyes on anything else, Rodney finally looked back to the woman, who he found still staring at him. He shifted uneasily. "You speak like there isn't any hope."

At that, Yvonne finally broke away from her locked stare, and lowered her eyes to her daughter. "I'd love nothing more than to believe that everything will turn out all right. That my daughter will grow up in a world where she doesn't have to fear for her life." She traced her daughter's jaw with the lightest touch, and then finally lifted her eyes. "Do you know what the last thing I said to my husband was before those animals killed him?" Her lips quivered. "We were fighting about money, and I told him that if he was a

real man then he would be able to provide a better life for his family." The tears fell freely now. "You tell me what kind of hopeful world lets those words be the last spoken between a man and a woman who've been married for fifteen years." She cast her head down, her hand trembling as she restarted the motion of her stroking her daughter's hair.

Rodney waited for a moment, unsure if she would speak, and unsure of what he should say. But thankfully the mother kept her head down, and allowed Rodney a moment of reflection. With so much talk of family and death, Rodney couldn't help but think of his own family. Especially his dad.

He couldn't keep track of the number of times he wanted to call his dad up just to hear his voice and that boisterous laugh. To this day, he still hadn't ever heard a laugh so full of life. And he'd kill for one of his mother's pies. Any pie. So long as she was the one who made it.

Just one more dinner, one more trip up here to the cabin during the spring or summer to go fishing. One more hello, good night, or I love you. But his *one more*s weren't in the cards. Cancer and heart failure made sure of that.

Rodney looked at the huddled masses asleep on the floor and wondered how many of them had lost loved ones. How many of them wanted "one more"? He knew that mother wanted one more goodbye, a chance to do it the right way.

Their family and friends were left for dead back at the town, their hasty retreat leaving no time for proper goodbyes or funerals. Burials were hard, but despite the pain, they brought acceptance, a sense of peace.

The couch groaned in relief when Rodney stood, and his footsteps were hurried toward Luke's room. He found Mark and Kate inside, both kneeling by Luke's bed, and he gently knocked on the doorframe. They turned, smiling with sad eyes.

"Hey," Rodney said. "How's he doing?"

"The doctor said time will tell." Kate had her arms crossed over her chest, her hands rubbing her shoulders.

"Listen, I'm not going with you to the highway patrol station," Rodney said.

"What?" Kate and Mark both stood, walking to him at the door. "Rodney, you said—"

"You guys should still go, but I need to go back to the town," Rodney said. "I'll take the people who lost their loved ones. I want us to bury them." He glanced back at the group. "I want them to have a chance to say

goodbye.”

“Rodney,” Kate said, shaking her head. “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“I lost both my parents within the same year,” Rodney said. “Cancer took my dad, and then a broken heart took my mom. I was able to say goodbye to both before they were gone.” He gestured to the people inside. “They didn’t. But I can right that wrong.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mark said then looked at Kate. “You can lead the group to the station. They’ll follow you.”

“He’s right,” Rodney replied. “They will.”

Rodney watched Kate process his request, and when she finally worked through it, she simply nodded.

7

It didn’t take much coaxing for Rodney to convince the townspeople to head back and bury their dead. He waited until Kate and Stacy and the eight others made their trek toward the highway patrol station before he led the charge back to town with Mark, Harold, a young woman named Dalia, and Yvonne in tow. They were the only ones with family that had died. Everyone else had either perished with their loved ones or were vacationers with no family.

But Rodney figured the others that died had family somewhere, and even though they’d never see each other again, he still felt an obligation to bury them properly. That was what he hoped someone would do for him.

The return to the valley town was quick, despite the heavier snowfall. One hand gripped a shovel, and the other held the rifle strapped to his shoulder should he need to put anyone else beneath the ground.

They found the town deserted when they arrived, but Rodney still performed a thorough sweep before he let anyone enter. Once they did, the doctor, Harold, and the mother, Yvonne, and the young woman, Dalia, found their family members piled in the snow behind one of the cabins.

The cold had already turned their skin blue, and frostbite was showing on their fingertips. One by one, they pulled the bodies from the pile and laid them in a row. Final goodbyes were whispered, and then Rodney planted his shovel into the icy earth.

Winter made the digging difficult, but they didn’t need to be deep graves. The bodies would freeze and then decay in the spring, but by then, with any luck, the world would be back standing on at least one leg.

Rodney smirked. Kate's optimism was starting to wear off on him. No, it wasn't her optimism—it was something else. He'd been touched with a purpose that went beyond him. For as long as he could remember prepping, Rodney was always concerned with making sure that he was ready, but not once had he ever considered making sure everyone else was ready. Because if everyone was ready, they wouldn't have been in this position in the first place.

Each grave was marked with a small cross that the doctor constructed from dead tree branches. He planted them firmly at the head of each mound when it was finished, and then they moved on to the next.

It took almost two hours, and by the time they finished, the snowfall had worsened, bringing with it colder temperatures.

Mark appeared through the white haze, lifting his arm to shield his eyes from the snowfall. "We should get heading back."

Rodney nodded and then looked at the last grave they'd finished. It belonged to Yvonne's husband, and she knelt at the foot of the grave while the doctor finished up the cross at the grave's head. She had her hands clasped together tightly, her body curled forward in the position of prayer. How someone could still have faith after something like this, Rodney had no idea.

"Rodney," Mark said, prodding his arm.

"Right." Rodney stepped toward the woman, having to lift his feet higher in the snow now that it was starting to pile up again. He placed a gloved hand on her shoulder so lightly that she didn't even realize he was there until he spoke. "We need to leave."

Yvonne jumped, slightly startled, and then nodded, pursing her lips as she wiped her eyes. The doctor walked around to join them, and then he stopped in his tracks. He held up his hand and began to retreat toward the main road between the building alleyways.

"I'll be right back! My daughter wanted something from our cabin. It'll just take a minute." The old doctor broke into a halfhearted jog that stole his breath.

It wasn't until Harold was out of view, and Rodney turned away, that he heard the gunshot. He spun around, dropping his shovel in favor of his rifle, and sprinted down the alley toward the gunfire just in time to find the doctor on his knees, his arms limp at his side, and then face planted onto the icy pavement.

Rodney tried to bring the rifle up to his shoulder to aim, but a hand stopped him. He turned to find Mark holding him still, and another gunshot thundered through the hazy white of the snowfall. And then, toward the town's entrance, a light glow of orange burned through the snow like a rising sun.

"Burn it! Shoot it! Kill anything that's still alive in this place!"

The order boomed from the haze of falling snow, and Mark pulled Rodney backward. "C'mon!" he whispered harshly, heading toward the safety of the ridge.

Rodney stole one last glance on his ascent, just before the snow and trees blocked the town from view. He saw a man with a torch, standing over the slain doctor's body. He aimed a pistol at the doctor's head and then fired again, the doctor's lifeless body twitching on the pavement.

Rage flooded Rodney's veins, and he stopped his climb while Mark, Dalia, and Yvonne continued their ascent. Rodney reached for the rifle, letting go of the steep ledge, and slid down with an avalanche of snow.

"Rodney, no!" Mark yelled, but his voice was snuffed out by the growing wind. Rodney's boots planted against the snow and ice, and he cranked the lever of his rifle to load a bullet. He wanted to see these people. He wanted to meet the man in charge of those that would kill and rape so willingly. He wanted to see the face of the men he planned to kill.

Rodney leaned against the back side of one of the cabins near the town's east end. Flames grew hotter and wilder on the west end, the convicts marching their way down, torching the buildings one by one.

Heat from the flames burned a hole through the cold, and ash drifted down with the snow, staining the pure white with grey. He hurried down the nearest alley and stopped at the edge. He craned his head around the corner, and what he saw burning in the light of the flames made him gasp.

It wasn't a group of thugs, or a gang laced together with matching tattoos marching into town. The numbers that they'd estimated weren't even close. What Rodney got a look at was a group of eighty-plus armed men. It was an army.

He quickly scanned the line of men, all of them marching without any type of structural ranking. He crouched to one knee and aimed. He could pick off four of them before they even knew what hit them.

The first man came into Rodney's crosshairs. He steadied then squeezed the trigger. The man dropped, and Rodney moved to his right, finding a

confused and frightened man aimlessly gripping a shotgun. Rodney fired again.

The second convict joined his comrade on the ground. The ranks panicked now, most of them firing blindly to the east. A few bullets nicked the front of the porch that Rodney was tucked behind, but none of them got close enough for him to even feel the breeze.

Rodney lined up another shot and fired again, this time pushing the front lines back as a third convict dropped to the ground. A brass casing ejected from the rifle's side as another quickly took its place. He gritted his teeth and lined up another shot, but the crosshairs at the end of the scope wavered. He was shaking now. Trembling from anger, and from fear, and from the cold at his back.

One of the inmates screamed, charging forward, firing at anything that looked funny, and a few stray bullets pushed Rodney from the alley. He cut behind the back of the building and leaned against the wall, the rifle barrel tilted toward the sky. He shut his eyes, which stung with sweat. He knew he couldn't take them all on by himself. It was a suicide mission.

In one swift movement, Rodney darted from the cabin, sprinting as fast as his legs would carry him toward the ridge. His muscles burned as he ascended the slope, and once he was at the top, he turned to find the valley below in flames.

The fire burned bright and hot, and Rodney saw the clusters of inmates forced back toward the west end near the highway. Rodney wasn't sure how long he watched the buildings smolder into nothing but ash, but by the time he turned around, his eyes burned along with the town.

Rodney broke into a sprint and eventually found Mark and Dalia up ahead. Mark kept asking him questions. What did he see? What did he do? But Rodney kept silent. They needed to put distance between them and the army. And they needed to get to Kate before she left the highway patrol station. If it was even still there.

DENNIS LEANED BACK on the hood of an old F-150 and closed his eyes, but

the light of the fire was even visible through his eyelids. He smiled, listening to a few of the men hoot and holler as they watched the place burn.

But then Dennis heard the gunshots. When he watched four of his men go down, he leapt off the truck with the agility of a cat, landing gracefully on his feet. He watched from the road as his men were pushed back. He squinted up ahead to find the shooter, but the flames were too bright, and the fire cast too many shadows.

“You don’t back down!” Dennis spit the order from behind safety, and when they didn’t heed his words, they heeded his bullets. Dennis fired four shots next to the feet of the men in the rear, and pushed them forward. “Find them, you cowards!”

One of his men broke free at the front, charging wildly, but by then the flames had caught the rest of the houses, and it forced everyone back. The fire raged so hot that Dennis had forgotten about the cold. He found Mulls and ordered Martin and Billy to him immediately.

When the pair arrived, he grabbed Billy by his collar. “I want you to search the area. You find any tracks, and you stick to them until you find whoever made them. And do not come back to me without a body or another place to burn, you got it?”

They nodded, and Dennis flung the younger sibling back, sending them off into the storm. Dennis lifted his face toward the sky, squinting due to the snowfall. He wondered if it would be another bad one like they had before, but he didn’t think so. Those types of storms they’d experienced tended to be one in a season.

The prospect of the townspeople escaping was more troublesome. He thought of the people who’d killed his men at the hospital. The fact that there were people out there that slipped away made that bug in his head skitter. But they wouldn’t be able to evade his best trackers again. Those brothers were more bloodhound than human.

“Boss,” Mulls said, coming up behind him. “Let’s get out of here. There’s nothing to salvage, and we don’t know when this storm is going to end.”

“No,” Dennis said.

“Dennis, we have to—”

“We hit the trooper station, now!” He hammered his fist in the air and leaned toward Mulls in the process. “Get the guys, and tell them to get back on the highway.”

Mulls gestured toward the sky, the wind picking up and blasting a sheet

of snow against his body. “The storm is only going to get worse! We won’t even be able to see what we’re shooting at, and we haven’t sent scouts to the station to see what we’re up against!”

The bug gnawed at the bits of wiring in his brain, tearing violence and rage loose. The rest of the signals suddenly fried, and he whirled around, fist aimed for Mulls’s face, and the harsh contact caused the bone to emit a loud crack in the cold that bit and stung both men.

Mulls cupped the cheek that Dennis had hit. “Son of a bitch!” The big bear charged Dennis, tackling him hard to the pavement. His sheer weight and size gave him the upper hand as they sprawled over the snow, fists clenched and arms ramming them into whatever flesh they could find.

Dennis lifted his knee and connected with Mulls’s groin. Mulls yelped in pain, seizing up long enough for Dennis to fling him off.

Mulls rolled to his back on the pavement, scrunching his face in pain, as Dennis jumped on him to seize the opportunity.

Every punch into Mulls’s face bloodied Dennis’s knuckles. The cartilage in his nose crunched and dissolved with each blow. The tension in Mulls’s body released, and his arms and limbs lay limp at his sides. Dennis’s arm grew heavy, and he strained, but he kept beating the man’s face. The bug burrowed deeper and deeper into his mind.

“My way!” Dennis screamed into Mulls’s lifeless face. “My way! My way! My way! My way!” Each phrase was met with another blow until Mulls’s face was no longer recognizable.

Gasping for air, and exhausted, Dennis rolled off Mulls and sprawled out on the snowy pavement next to him. Blood covered his right arm, his face, and his chest. He coughed and then glanced over at Mulls’s lifeless body.

The bug stopped digging, and Dennis rolled to his side, pushing himself up off the ground. He wobbled back on his feet, and when he looked down at Mulls, he knew the big bear was dead. He turned around, finding Jimmy standing behind him, rifle in hand.

Jimmy’s gaze fell from Dennis to Mulls then back to Dennis. The thickened snowfall made it difficult to make out the features on Jimmy’s face, but it was easy to see the shotgun aimed at him.

“What did you do?” Jimmy said, his arms trembling, his voice stuck in that high octave. Three quick steps put him an arm’s length away from Dennis, and the anger on his face was clear as day now. “*What did you do?*”

Dennis glanced down at Mulls’s body and then back to the end of

Jimmy's shotgun. "You going to shoot me, Jimmy?" He made it one step before the familiar *tha-chunk* of a pump-action twelve gauge stopped him cold.

Jimmy lowered his eyes to Mulls once again, and the anger faded to sadness, but it was gone by the time they returned to Dennis. "Christ. You killed him!"

"And what did Mulls ever do for you?" Dennis asked, his eyes searching for any more of his men that could be lurking, growing bolder when he realized they were still alone. "It was my idea to take the towns. It was my idea to gather supplies." He shuffled very careful steps toward Jimmy with each sentence, unnoticeable in their small increments. "You know what Mulls wanted? He wanted us to lie low, forget about it." Dennis pointed toward the smoldering town. "This is what happens when you lie low!"

"Maybe." Jimmy shook his head, raising the shotgun to his shoulder and taking aim. "But you didn't do shit for me on the inside. It was all Mulls. And he did the same for you! Go to hell—"

With his arm now within the reach of the shotgun's barrel, Dennis lunged his hand out, ducking his head out of the way as Jimmy squeezed the trigger. The blast deafened Dennis to the world, and he felt a light pinch in his shoulder, but with Jimmy surprised by the blow, he easily snatched the gun away.

A quick adjust of his grip, and Dennis squeezed the trigger, shooting from the waist. The slug tore through Jimmy's stomach, and blood and intestines slid down the ridges of his ribs as he tumbled backward and lay still, falling snow slowly covering the exposed wound.

With the shotgun in his hand, standing between two dead men, he heard the shouts of the others heading his way. He quickly aimed the gun at Mulls's stomach and fired, blasting a slug through the dead man's big stomach, and a few seconds later, Dennis was surrounded.

The convicts appeared like ghosts through the sheets of snow, and every one of their faces fell to Mulls first, then to Jimmy, and finally to Dennis. As the circle of spectators grew, so did the number of angry expressions. Before any of them could shoot, Dennis lowered the shotgun and pointed at Jimmy.

"The skinny bastard tried to kill Mulls!" Dennis heaved exhausted breaths, shaking his head. "I tried to stop him."

"Bullshit!" A voice echoed from the circle, and a few murmurs of agreement followed. "Jimmy wouldn't do that!"

“No?” Dennis asked, laughing. “You don’t think those two didn’t have history? You don’t think Jimmy got tired of following orders?” He searched for the source of the voice in the crowd but had no luck in finding it. “I told Mulls we should go to the highway patrol station now, and when he told Jimmy that, the bastard shot him then started whaling on him.” He pointed toward the bullet wound that he fired just moments before everyone had arrived, to help corroborate his story. “And you know why Mulls wanted us to attack the pigpen? Because of that!” he shouted, thrusting his hand toward the town they’d just turned to ash. “I told everyone here that people would eventually push back! And what happens if the people that were here find that highway patrol station before we take it out? Huh?” He walked to one of the men on the circle’s edge. “You want to give up your warm bed?” He turned to the man next to him. “You want to go back to wanking it with your hand instead of having a woman?” Slowly, the heads started to shake in response, and a few *no*s filtered through the air, and Dennis retreated into the circle, and the majority of the inmates’ mood shifted. “If we don’t act now, then we can lose everything! And I’m telling you right now, boys, that I’m not going back in a cell. I’ll be six feet under before that happens.”

The agreement rippled through the crowd, and it wasn’t long before even those that had been friends with and loyal to Mulls nodded. It never ceased to amaze Dennis how far fear would push people. The fear of loss, of death, of pain. Humans had fought against that fear since the beginning of time. And in that battle, there was violence that had ravaged civilization and killed millions. And now Dennis would use that violence to kill every living thing that stood against him. His wolves were hungry now, and he had no intention of keeping them that way.

BY THE TIME they returned to the cabin, Rodney, Mark, Yvonne, and Dalia were cloaked in snow and ice. They burst through the front door like a group of snow monsters in search of fire to free them from their curse. Questions were thrust at them, but Rodney could only think of the relief that the flames brought to his body. As he thawed, his mind returned to the present.

“What happened?” Marie, the doctor’s wife, asked, and then, as if she had forgotten to count the number of bodies that returned, she gasped, covering her mouth.

Marie collapsed into a chair, sobbing. Rodney walked over, placing his still snow-covered gloved hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” His voice cracked, his body still raw and stiff from the cold. He turned to an elderly woman. “They haven’t come back yet?”

The grey-haired woman shook her head.

Holly scooted past Rodney and Mark scooped her up. “How far is the station from here?”

“Forty minutes,” Rodney answered. “In good weather.” The snow had thickened outside, but it still hadn’t reached blizzard levels yet. It was uncomfortable outside but still traversable.

“You think they’d stay at the station to wait for this to blow over?” Mark asked.

“Maybe.” But as Rodney spoke, he was already on his way toward his room. Snow tracked him all the way to his bed, and when he opened the closet door to the tall, black safe that rested inside, his fingers were so cold that he still couldn’t feel the dial as he spun it. The lock opened, and Rodney swung the door open.

Inside were the components to put together a fifty-caliber machine gun, and he grabbed the pieces, his hands moving over the metal deftly. It was heavy put together, close to ninety pounds, and the tripod mount added another forty. He’d need a sled to carry it.

When he brought the gun out and rested it against the wall by the front door, its sight was greeted by a series of gasps that ended with Mark’s “What the hell is that?”

“An M2 fifty-cal machine gun,” Rodney answered, heading to his room to grab the tripod mount. “The inmates that attacked that town were close to one hundred.” He went back into his room, grabbing the crates of ammunition. The box hit the ground with a heavy thud, and Rodney grabbed the sled from the closet, along with rope. When he came back out, there were still confused faces glaring at the weapon.

Mark grabbed Rodney’s arm, stopping him in the middle of tying his knot through the sled’s loops. “What is it that you’re planning here?”

“The plan? The plan is to kill as many of those bastards as I can.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mark said, running his hands through his hair, flinging the

melted bits of snow from his head.

“We need to get to the trooper station, get those cops out of there.” Rodney returned to the work on his knot. “If they’re still alive.”

Mark bent down to help Rodney with the ropes, but Rodney stopped him.

“No,” Rodney said. “You’re staying here.”

“You can’t pull this thing by yourself.”

“I’ve done it before.” Which was true. But he’d only done it once, a year ago, and it wasn’t storming outside. Rodney set the last piece of the weaponry on the sled. “You need to stay here with your kids.” Rodney stared at the weapon. Even with the glow of the firelight, the gleaming metal looked cold. He grabbed the ropes and headed for the door.

Mark gripped Rodney’s arm. He worked his mouth, at first unable to find the words, and then he sighed and wrapped Rodney in a hug. “Be careful out there, huh?”

Rodney nodded, and then Mark stepped aside, opening the path to the cold wilderness.

The slack of the rope disappeared, and it grew taut as Rodney dug his snow boots into the ground, lugging the hulking machine into the storm. He kept a steady pace, the sled easier to pull than he thought even with the snowfall. He could get there in time so long as he kept this pace. He just hoped there would still be people alive when he arrived.

8

The snowfall had just begun when Kate and her group arrived at the highway patrol station. And despite the road signs, they'd nearly missed it. All but the roof was buried in snow, save for a single trench that led down to the front doors, which meant that there was still a good chance the troopers inside were alive; if they hadn't already fled.

"Get your weapons handy," Kate said, getting close to the door. "I don't know what we'll find inside, so keep your eyes peeled."

Nervous nods answered, and Kate prayed silently to herself that she wouldn't get anyone killed. Slowly, carefully, she reached for the door handle, and with a light tug, it cracked open.

It was dark inside. The snow that covered the windows also blocked out the light. Behind her, the snowfall worsened, and Kate entered the station, the end of her rifle barrel guiding her way. "Hello?" Her voice echoed over empty office chairs, spreading through the darkness like sonar, searching for a response in the cold.

Chair legs scraped against tile to her left, and in the same sweeping motion, every gun moved toward the commotion.

"Who's there?" Kate asked, her eyes still not entirely adjusted to the dark. She stepped forward. "*Who's there?*"

"Put the guns down." The voice accompanied two figures that took shape in the dark, and then one of them stepped forward, pistol in hand, and wearing a highway patrolman uniform. The officer spoke like a man who'd given orders his entire life, and the greying stubble along his face suggested

he'd been doing it for a long time.

No one in Kate's group lowered their weapons. She kept the bead on the officer, her eyes scanning the rest of the office, and slowly she made out two more shapes off to her right. More officers, with guns trained on them. She flicked her eyes back toward the officer who spoke. "We didn't come here for trouble."

"Then put the guns down."

Slowly, Kate submitted, and so did her group. She raised her brow in response to the officer's pistol, and then they lowered their weapons, though he didn't holster it. Instead it remained at his side as he stepped forward.

"Are any of you hurt?"

Whatever doubts that Kate felt toward the officers ended with those words. "No. How about yours?"

He holstered his weapon. "Hungry, but okay."

"Good." Kate stepped close enough to read the name on his uniform. Captain Harley. "Captain, we need to talk."

"Well," Captain Harley said. "Might as well talk about it with the doors closed. It's cold enough in here already." He gestured to his men, and they shut the doors.

Kate followed the officers toward the back rooms and offices of the station. When they were all together, they totaled only five. It didn't take long for Kate to tell them what she knew. And she was surprised at how much the officers didn't know.

After the power had gone out, most of the troopers were sent out to assist stranded motorists. But after the first day, most of his men started disappearing without word. Captain Harley suspected most fled toward home, to be with their families, but he knew some of them probably froze to death in the blizzard that passed through.

The officers that remained included Captain Harley, Lieutenant Benson, Officer Terry, Officer Luis, and Officer Thomas.

"And you think the inmates are going to come here?" Lieutenant Benson asked.

"They had your station marked on a map of theirs we found," Stacy said.

"And they already have six towns under their control." Captain Harley looked at no one as he crossed his arms, nodding to himself. When he did meet a pair of eyes, it was Kate's. "How many men do they have?"

"More than us," Kate answered. "We weren't sure we'd get to you before

they ambushed. I'm glad we did."

"Us too." Captain Harley pushed himself off the desk. He wasn't a big man, but he held a presence, and it was on display as the rest of his men rose with him. "What do you need from us?"

"Gather as much food, weapons, and ammunition as you can carry. We'll help, but we need to move quickly. I don't know how much time we have."

Captain Harley nodded. "You heard the lady! Let's move!"

The officers scattered to the various dark corners of the station, Kate sending her people to help, until only she and Captain Harley remained.

Two piles quickly formed near the station's exit, one of food, and the other of weapons. The weapons pile was nearly twice the size of the food pile.

Lieutenant Benson added two more rifles to the cache and then wiped his hands. "Do you want me to grab it, Captain?"

"No. It hasn't gotten us anything so far, and we won't have the connections to—"

"Grab what?" Kate asked.

Captain Harley exhaled, tilting his head to the side as if he were annoyed to answer. "When communications went down after this"—he frowned, looking at Kate for confirmation—"EMP? We didn't think we could reach anyone. But after the blizzard, we started scouring every nook and cranny of this place to look for food or water. We didn't find much, but we did find an old Morse code machine. It was used here back in the sixties as a means to contact emergency services if someone was sick on the mountain."

"Morse code?" Kate asked, a well of hope rising within her despite the captain's expression. "Were you able to—"

"Yes," Harley answered. "But we haven't heard from them since we set it up."

"Who answered?" Kate asked.

"It was a National Guard unit stationed to the south," Benson answered. "I told them where we were and that we needed assistance, but we never heard back."

"National Guard?" The words left Kate's lips like a balloon of hope, drifting toward the sky. "Have you tried since then?"

"Every day," Benson answered. "It's been radio silence."

Three quick steps brought Kate within inches of the lieutenant. "We need to try again. We need to send another message."

“Kate, we’ve tried—”

“We can’t beat these guys on our own,” Kate said. “But with the National Guard at our backs, we might have a chance.” She flapped her arms at her sides. “What could it hurt?”

Benson glanced toward Captain Harley, and Kate knew that everything hinged on the thoughts behind that stoic expression. And then Kate’s chest swelled with hope when Harley nodded. “Don’t be long.”

The machine itself was small and surprisingly simple. It was hooked to a string of copper wires that ran up toward the radio tower on the roof, and the sight of the well-worn technology made her smile as she thought of the man who’d given her the old Skyranger Commonwealth that brought her up here. She had a small bit of knowledge of Morse code from her early days as a pilot, but she was on the tail end of the generation that was required to have some proficiency in it.

“Send exactly what I say,” Kate said and then cleared her throat as Lieutenant Benson poised his finger over the brass tab. “Mayday, mayday, mayday. Threat to life imminent.” She then provided the longitude and latitude coordinates for Rodney’s cabin, which she still had memorized. “Mayday, mayday, mayday.”

The machine produced the series of dits and dahs that were transmitted via radio waves. When it was finished, Kate stood there, praying for a return response through the headphones that Lieutenant Benson wore, but they heard nothing.

“Let’s send it again,” Kate said.

And they did. Three more times. And it would have been more, but Captain Harley found them, and despite her persistence, the captain’s authority won out. Kate lingered behind, looking at the machine, the one piece of equipment that could connect them to the outside world. She wanted to bring it but knew it was useless without the radio tower, and they didn’t have the time or resources to make that happen.

Supplies and people waited at the station’s exit when Kate walked up. She retrieved her gun and flicked the safety off, looking at the still-falling snow outside. The door swung open, and Lieutenant Benson was the first man to step out, and the first one to die.

The gunfire erupted like a thunderstorm, dozens of bullets turning the doors into Swiss cheese. Everyone ducked for cover, leaping behind desks and walls or whatever sturdy material that was close.

Captain Harley was the first to return fire, and Kate fumbled for the rifle she dropped on her hasty retreat. She joined the captain, planting her elbows on the desk as she fired in the direction of the doors, which were closed. But it wasn't until the captain placed his hand on her shoulder that she stopped.

"Hold your fire!" Harley bellowed.

A high-pitched whine of the wind replaced gunfire, and Kate's eyes fell to the lieutenant's body, his legs and arms twisted to the point of breaking. The pool of blood that spread from his right side resembled black tar instead of the flood of life that went through his veins.

"Thomas, Luis, on me," Harley said, and with their pistols still trained on the door, they moved efficiently through the darkness until they were side by side with the captain. "There's only one way inside this place, and it's through those doors. We can dig out way out the back while keeping them distracted out front."

"My people should go," Kate said. "Most of them are worse shots than all of you. They'd be better off digging."

"All right," Captain Harley said. "Anyone that's never handled a weapon before leaves."

A few more bullets hit the door, the enemy outside prodding them. But Kate knew that the convicts' army would charge. Especially if Dennis was leading them. He had no qualms about killing, least of all if they were cops. But Dennis and his people didn't know how many officers were inside. It was something they could use toward their advantage.

"No one goes toward the door," Kate said, looking at Harley when Thomas and Luis returned from showing Kate's people where to start digging. "So long as they think we've got thirty officers down here, they won't charge."

Harley nodded. "Terry, did you pack the riot gear?"

"No, I-I didn't think we'd—"

"Go and grab it," Harley said. "We'll shoot enough tear gas outside to blind them. If anything, it'll buy us some time."

Terry sprinted off, leaving Kate, Stacy, Captain Harley, Luis, and Thomas to hold the entrance. Despite the cold, sweat poured off Kate in buckets.

Their weapon barrels remained trained on the doors, the wind whistling through the bullet holes. It was the only sound inside, and as Kate's vision began to grow fuzzy from staring, the doors burst open.

Two men sprinted inside, the flashes from their gun muzzles striking the

darkness like lightning. But the spurt of violence was short lived as over a dozen bullets dropped both men to the ground, dead before the double doors swung closed behind them.

Bullet casings clinked on the tile, the heated metal cooling the moment it was ejected from its chamber. Kate trembled, her adrenaline forcing the muscles along her arms to shake. The dead convicts collapsed near Lieutenant Benson, their hands almost touching.

Terry returned with the riot gear, dumping a bag of tear gas, flash grenades, and the appropriate launchers needed to send the convicts outside running away in tears.

“On me,” Captain Harley said, the tear gas launcher in hand, the rest of his men in tow.

Kate hung back, rifle still aimed at the doors, as the troopers filed next to the exit, two on each side. She only saw their silhouettes, and then the quick nod from Harley as they shouldered open the doors, sending four cans of tear gas streaming into the air.

Shouts echoed inside before the doors swung shut, and Harley and his boys retreated toward Kate, Harley nudging her elbow. “Let’s hope that keeps them busy for a little while. Why don’t you go and check on your people?”

Kate nodded and then grabbed a candle to help light her path. The flame wiggled in time with her shaking, the light exposing her fear. But that was what light was for, wasn’t it? To cast out the darkness, to fight against the fear? She forced her hand steady, and by the time she reached her people, it had stopped.

The progress was slow, the snow was thick and compacted. Kate stayed for a while to help but kept one ear toward the front. She kept waiting for a series of screams or cries of terror, ending in a flurry of gunshots.

But with each pile of snow and ice they added to the floor while making their escape tunnel, Kate heard nothing. Maybe they could get out alive. Maybe this would work. She glanced at the small candle to her left, the flame wiggling in defiance of the darkness, holding on to hope.

THE SNOWFALL OFFERED POOR VISIBILITY, especially from the back of the group. After what happened with Mulls and Jimmy in town, he didn't want any of these guys with a gun in their hands standing behind him. Who knew what kind of stray bullet would find its way into the base of his skull.

And when the tear gas was thrown from the only entrance and exit of the building, Dennis was glad to have been in the rear.

Thick streams of gas left the cylinder canisters, blending with the white of the snowfall. Smoke crawled over the snow, spreading outward, forcing the inmates to retreat. Dennis stepped back, shielding his face with the front of his shirt, which he pulled up from beneath his coat. Three more canisters were flung from the station's entrance, and the poisonous fog continued to blanket the ground, lingering in the air.

"Watch the doors!" Dennis barked. "They could be coming out in masks! Be ready! Be ready!" But while a few of the inmates trained their weapons back on the station, most were too busy fending off the effects of the gas.

A burning sensation filled Dennis's eyes and throat, his nasal cavity growing thick with phlegm. He hacked with the rest of his men, who continued to backpedal from the gas. But the longer they stood out there in the cold, the more Dennis realized that the officers weren't coming out. Which meant one of two things: either they had enough supplies inside to wait them out, or they didn't have the numbers.

Dennis shielded his nose and mouth from the gas that still lingered, and while he tried to avoid it, he didn't always succeed. His eyes teared and burned, blurring his vision, but he kept his concentration on the station's entrance.

After a while the gas dissipated, and the retreated masses slowly crept back to their original front line. Dennis remained in the back, wiping the freezing snot from his face, flinging it on the snow. The smoke had cleared, but his vision remained blurred from the watery effects of the gas.

The slope they'd dug to the front doors was steep, and Dennis only saw the very top of the doors. He clenched his fists. He was so close. All of the days and nights where he was locked away in that cell flooded back to him. The endless hours that stretched for eternity. In prison, there was no horizon, no dawn of a new day. It was only the repetition of the same day, over and over and over again. All of the same atrocities and horrors, the monotony, the hopelessness of being locked in a cell where you would rot into nothing for the rest of your life.

The bug stirred in his mind, then burrowed, tunneling its way deeper into Dennis's brain, igniting all of the ways he'd like to kill the officers inside. There would be no quarter given to those that dropped their weapons, only torture. It would be slow, methodical. Maybe he would leave them to freeze out in the cold, cutting them open to let the animals in the woods feast while they were still alive. And once every pig inside had been slaughtered, then there was no one left to oppose him.

Dennis smiled, enjoying that idea as the bug burrowed deeper, deeper… deeper. He marched back to his men, most of whom were sitting on cars or rocks. "Everyone up! We need to move! We need to move now!" When his words didn't stir them, he fired three shots into the air. "I said up, goddammit!"

Asses lifted from the snow, the thunder of gunshots enough to stir the people from their hazy stupor.

"I want thirty men by the entrance! And I want to circle around the back!" Dennis cut the group in half right where they stood. "Shoot anything that moves, and if they surrender themselves, I want them brought to me." He passed over the squinted faces, making sure everyone understood. "Those aren't men in that station! They're pigs! They're the cowards who hide behind badges. But those badges mean nothing now!" He pointed to the group, the inmates swelling with anger at his words. "This is our world! This is our time! And no one will take that from us!"

Cheers erupted into the evening sky, and Dennis raised his arms high as his people rattled their fists and weapons. Chants of violence and anger washed over the group, and Dennis smiled as everyone departed toward their assignments. This was a fight that they would win, and Dennis didn't care how many of his people would die.

KATE DROPPED THE SHOVEL, her hands frozen and aching, the joints screaming now. She worked her way from the front of the pack, needing a break.

The front of the station had remained quiet for the past twenty minutes,

and while Kate tried to keep her attention on the progress of the tunnel, she found herself looking down the hall, waiting for the inevitable symphony of gunfire.

“I’m going to check the front,” Kate said. “See how we’re doing.”

A few grunts of affirmation answered back, and Kate continued to pump her hands into fists, trying to get the blood flowing again.

Stacy, Harley, and his men still had their guns trained on the bullet-ridden door. The captain noticed her first. “How are we looking?”

“It’s slow,” Kate answered.

“How close?”

Kate shook her head in uncertainty, and Harley nodded in response. She cleared her throat. “Have they sent anyone else down?”

“No,” Harley answered. “The gas seems to be doing the trick, but it’ll be running its course soon.” He turned back to Kate. “Better keep digging.”

Urgency was laced in the request, and Kate nodded in response, her hands throbbing again at just the idea having to curl around the handle of a shovel again.

“Kate!” The voice was breathless, and a silhouette took shape in the darkness. “We’re through! We’ve reached the top!”

Before Kate turned around, Harley and his men reached for their gear, retreating from their position. When they turned the corner of the hallway toward the back, everyone froze at the sound of an uproar that broke through the howl of wind and snow.

“What was that?” Luis asked, his worried expression made more ominous by the flickering candlelight in his hand.

“We need to move,” Harley said. “Now!”

The captain led the sprinted retreat down the hall, and when they reached the back doors, Kate shoved her people forward and up. Feet and hands slipped on the ice, and the howl of wild men and gunfire forced Kate to turn her gaze backward.

From the narrow view inside the tunnel, Kate saw Harley and his men, in the hall, firing at the enemy. The small space amplified the gunshots, making them thunder with a fiercer bang.

The bodies behind Kate propelled her forward. Two people were ahead of her. The first broke the surface and turned around, extending a hand to help the woman in front of Kate. They clasped hands, and another gunshot thundered, striking the man in his shoulder and severing his grip on the

woman’s hand. She slid backward, slamming into Kate, who dug the tips of her boots into the compacted snow.

Time slowed. Any way Kate turned meant certain death. She suddenly felt hands on her and then looked at Stacy. She was screaming something at her, a terrified expression on her face.

Kate couldn’t make out the words, but they weren’t needed as Harley funneled his men up the icy embankment. They pushed Kate toward the surface. Seconds later, snow whipped the top of Kate’s head as she squinted into the storm.

Amongst the white were figures hunched over in the snow. The weather had made them faceless, but Kate knew they were Dennis’s men. And when she reached for her pistol, she prayed that Mark made it back safely, and her mind flashed images of her children. Holly and Luke laughed, and as she straightened her arm to fire, Kate wished that she had been given another chance with Luke. She wished that they had been on better terms the last time they spoke. And she hoped that her son wasn’t tormented by the fact he never got to say goodbye. Because she knew she was.

“Kate, get down!”

The voice thundered from behind her, and Kate didn’t have time to get a good look at Rodney before hell rained over her head.

Kate clamped her hands over her ears, but her palms did little to muffle the gunfire above. Each gunshot vibrated her body, and when she lifted her face, she saw bullets flash in brilliant streaks of light, her cheeks warmed by the heat generated by the constant barrage of gunfire.

Minutes passed, and still the thunderous roar of whatever weapon Rodney had brought with him continued its assault on the convicts, and it wasn’t until she looked down into the hallway that she realized that Harley and his men had ceased firing as well.

And then it was suddenly over, the gunfire ended, only their continuous vibrations rattling through Kate’s body as she lifted her head toward the sky. She watched the snow fall, deaf to the world.

A rush of cold drifted toward her, and then Rodney was near, his lips moving quickly, extending his hand into the tunnel. But she just stared at him as if he were some type of mirage. A shove from behind propelled her body forward, and without thinking, she raised her hand to meet Rodney’s as his firm grip wrapped around her wrist.

Rodney pulled her from the tunnel, and Kate stumbled blindly through

the snow. She turned toward the direction where the prisoners had attacked, but the faceless silhouettes had been transformed into bloody piles in the snow.

Kate's jaw dropped at the number of corpses. It looked as if it stretched farther than she could see through the snowfall. Blotches of crimson and black contrasted with the white. And when she turned back around, everyone had already been pulled from the station, and Rodney was gripping her by the shoulders with both hands. Again his lips moved quickly, but she stared past him toward the hulking gun that was planted on a sled, smoke still rising from the weapon's thick barrel.

"Kate!" This time Rodney's voice broke through as he shook her harshly. "Kate, we have to go, now!" He pulled her with him on his retreat, but even as her feet moved, her eyes remained glued to the dead, and then as they passed the weapon that Rodney left behind, her eyes fell to it, and the mountain of bullet casings that rested beside it.

9

The snowfall didn't make the tracks any easier to follow, but Billy had once tracked a deer for six miles through a worse storm than this, and that was in the Rockies. Now, those were real mountains, not the hills he and his brother found himself in now. He missed the mountains of his youth. But if he had to choose between being back in a cell or stuck in these hills, he'd gladly choose the latter.

Martin brought up the rear, huffing and grumbling louder than he should have. He leaned against a tree trunk, his shoulder eliciting a loud thump against the bark, triggering snowfall from the dead branches. "Find it?" He hacked and then spit a wad of phlegm in the snow.

"No," Billy answered, his eyes scanning the endless sea of white, the rolling mounds of snow blurring together for the past dozen miles they'd already chewed up.

"Let's head back," Martin said. "The trail's cold."

Billy placed his gloved hand in the snow. He was tired. He was hungry. But unlike his brother, he wanted to get on Dennis's good side. Despite his older brother's apathy, he understood what Dennis was doing, and he wanted to ensure himself a seat at the table.

"We're close," Billy said, continuing his trek through the snow.

Martin groaned and shoved himself off the tree, continuing his labored breathing.

The group had done a good job of covering their tracks. Whoever was leading them made a smart move in having them walk in a single-file line,

but the real problem was the fresh snowfall. It was like searching for a piece of paper in a sea of white. The trail was nothing more than a subtle break in the pattern of the snow.

Billy stopped, his eyes catching a hint of that path up to his left. “C’mon.” He waved his brother forward and hastened his pace. He was close. He could feel it in bones like a radar signal.

Tracking had come second nature to him ever since he was a boy, when his mother used to send him out to fetch his father from the bar. Martin was good, but to Billy, tracking was like breathing. There wasn’t anything he couldn’t find.

Growing up dirt poor as a kid, Billy turned tracking into a game for himself. He’d time himself, blindfold himself, anything to make it more of a challenge. But he’d always find his target. It was a skill that his brother noticed quickly, and by the time he was sixteen, Billy was already running in a gang with Martin, hunting down men for anyone who’d pay.

In a way, he was a bounty hunter, though most of the time, the people that paid him wanted them not only found but also dead. Billy had never liked killing. That was Martin’s forte.

But if they could pull this off, they would have a seat at the table, just like they did when they performed all of those jobs for those mobsters in New York.

Billy remembered all of the perks that came with working for men in a position of power. The girls, the food, the liquor, the parties, the cars, and all of the shiny stuff he’d seen in magazines and on television as a dirt-poor kid in the mountains were suddenly his. And after six years of being locked up, he was ready to do whatever he could to get those things back.

He followed the broken trail, losing it once more before finding it again, and as his eyes scanned the endless forest, he stopped cold. Just ahead, between two groups of trees, he saw an unnatural mound of snow. It was pitched downward, lying flat, like snow that had fallen on a roof.

“What the hell are you stopping for—”

Billy held up his hand, and his brother froze. Then after a second’s pause, Martin crept as quietly as a mouse—each footfall in the snow was soundless. Billy pointed, and Martin followed his brother’s hand toward the slanted roof.

“Son of a bitch,” Martin said, whispering to himself in disbelief. “And here I was thinking you’d gotten rusty.” He clapped his brother on the shoulder. “All right, let’s go back and—”

“No,” Billy said, removing the pistol from his holster. He’d only fired it a couple of times. But ever since his hookup with Dennis, he’d gotten better at killing. Though he still didn’t like it, he didn’t mind it as much anymore. “The place doesn’t look big. Can’t be more than a dozen people inside.” He scanned the area. “And they don’t have any guards set. We can take them by surprise.”

Martin spun his brother around, shaking his head. “No. You remember what Dennis said. He wants us to come and get him.”

“By the time we find him, things could have changed. It’s better if we take care of this now. It’ll be less he has to deal with when he gets back from the trooper station.”

“What the hell’s gotten into you?” Martin asked. “Why do you care so much about what that asshole wants? You think he cares about you?”

“No,” Billy answered, though his tone was more defensive than he meant it to be. “I just don’t want us to get left behind.” He knew there was safety in numbers. And right now, Dennis had the most. If that changed, then maybe so would Billy’s opinion, but he’d go down that road when he crossed it.

Martin laughed. “God, you always were worried about shit like that, weren’t you?” He grunted and then removed his pistol. “You sure you can handle this? We’ll be outnumbered.”

Billy turned back to the cabin, tightening his grip on the pistol. “Not for long.”

LUKE AWOKE, sweaty and sore and alone in his bed. He blinked away the sleep in his eyes and saw the bandage across his chest. He lifted a hand and gently grazed the fabric. An aching pain throbbed his entire chest, his surroundings foreign.

He moved his tongue around his lips, which were rough and chapped. He tilted his head to the left on his pillow, finding a glass of water on the nightstand. He reached a shaking hand and curled his fingers around the cool glass. His grip was weak, and he could barely lift his head to drink, but when he tasted the water, he drank thirstily.

Luke emptied the cup and then weakly set the glass back on the nightstand, nearly dropping it as it hit the wood with a heavy thunk.

Lines of water ran down the corners of his mouth, and he shut his eyes. Slowly, his memory of events returned. Images from their escape from Fairfax, and then arriving here at the cabin flashed in his mind. And then his anger flared at the remembrance of his conversation with his mother.

The door opened, the knock that accompanied it more ceremonial than practical. “Luke?”

He smiled. “Hey, Holly.”

The door remained cracked, and Holly was only a tiny sliver in the narrow space. “Can I come in with you, or are you still sick?”

“You can come in, but don’t—”

Holly burst inside and then catapulted herself onto the bed, landing on Luke’s stomach and sending a bright flash of pain throughout the wound on his chest. He yelped, and Holly’s playful giggle turned to a gasp, and she slinked away, afraid she was in trouble.

“Jump on the bed,” Luke said through gritted teeth.

Holly lowered her head sheepishly. “I’m sorry.”

Luke closed his eyes, taking deep breaths until the pain eased. “It’s all right.” He opened his eyes and found her still sulking, and the rest of the anger melted away. “I’m fine. Really.” He forced a cheesy grin. “See?”

Holly approached, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. She picked up his hand, and started playing with his fingers. “Are you still mad at Mom?”

Luke frowned. “Who told you I was mad at Mom?”

She flashed him a teenager-like stare, and for a moment she looked older. He didn’t like that.

“There’s very thin walls in here,” Holly answered, then she paused. “So are you? Still mad?”

Luke sighed. “I don’t know, Holls. I guess a little.”

“You shouldn’t be mad,” Holly said.

“Says the girl who’s been mad at her for the past year,” Luke replied accusingly. “What’s changed your tune?”

“I don’t know.” The words matched a genuinely unsure tone as Holly tried to bend Luke’s pinky finger to an unnatural angle. “I like having her around.”

Luke had forgotten how much she missed as a kid. Their mom was gone a lot more than when he was little. Better jobs at bigger airlines meant longer

hours and more time away from home. “You missed her, huh?”

“Yeah,” Holly answered. “I guess I did.” She plucked at his leg hair, and she giggled when he winced.

Luke tried to smack her hand away but couldn’t reach due to his limited mobility. “Stop, you freak.” But that only made her try it again and increased the level of giggles, and even Luke started to laugh. “Ugh! You’re lucky I was shot!”

Luke took her hand, engulfing it quickly with one snatch, his grip gentle but firm. “Hey. I want you to do something for me, okay?”

“What?” Holly widened her eyes, making them grow big and round like full moons. They always looked so green whenever she was worried. It was as though the emotion brightened them.

“You know it’s not safe, right? That there are people out there who want to hurt us?”

“I know,” she answered. “I’m not a kid.”

“Good, because if something ever happens and we are in trouble, I want you to hide somewhere good and don’t make a sound, no matter what.”

“But—”

Luke tightened his grip. “No buts, Holly.” And before she opened her mouth to answer, he pulled her close, dropping his voice to a whisper. “And this isn’t a promise you can break.” He held up his left hand, extending his pinky.

Holly regarded the pinky, those eyes still wide and bright green. She nodded and then wrapped her pinky around his. “I promise.”

Luke exhaled, knowing she meant it. She might act like a teenager, but a younger sibling never forgets the promises from childhood. For them, that was the pinky promise. Whenever either of them did that, they knew the other meant business.

Luke kissed her forehead and then rested his head back on the pillow, yawning. Fatigue had gripped him again, and the room started to fade to black. “I love you… Holls…”

Holly reached up on her tippy toes and kissed Luke’s cheek. “I love you too,” she whispered in his ear and then left.

OUTSIDE, the snow had picked up, and it made it hard for Mark to see very deep into the woods. But he still kept his eyes glued to the horizon, waiting for Kate to return. Over the course of his relationship with his wife, he had become very good at waiting. He could argue that he was the most patient man in the world. But this kind of waiting was different than before. It was dangerous.

Mark squinted, thinking he saw something in the snow, but once his eyes set on it, it didn't move. Nothing but sheets of white waved against a sky fading into night. Uneasy, he walked to the kitchen and grabbed Luke's medication, passing the townspeople who had taken up whatever space they could find on the floor.

Most of them were asleep. Mark imagined that they hadn't had a good rest in a while—either that, or the adrenaline from the sprint here had finally worn off. But for the number of people crammed inside the cabin, it was quiet.

Mark tapped on Luke's door. When there wasn't an answer, he cracked it open. "Luke?"

The boy was asleep on the bed, his head turned away from the door, and the covers pulled all the way up to the white bandages that covered his shoulder and chest, which rose and fell steadily with each breath.

Mark watched him for a moment and then stepped as quietly as the old wooden floorboards allowed him.

Luke may have not been his biological son, but that didn't mean he loved the boy any less. Luke was eight when he first started dating his mom. And for a child that had experienced so much pain and trauma, he was wonderfully kind. There wasn't a trace of the evil that controlled his father.

But it was a thought that lingered in the back of Mark's mind, the question of "what if?" What if the smiling boy had that evil inside of him? Because despite the teachings of his mother and the guidance Mark had tried to give the boy, there was no guarantee that he would be good.

Luke knew the truth about his real father. He knew what happened to him as a baby, and the crimes his father committed. But now, all those worries that Mark had experienced about the boy's future when he was younger resurfaced. Dennis wasn't locked away anymore. He was out there, somewhere in the cold, killing people who did nothing to deserve to die.

And what would happen if Dennis found him here? What would the father do to the son he kidnapped all those years ago and used as a hostage to

escape the authorities? History enjoyed repeating itself. And Mark feared that another repetition was close at hand.

“Luke?” Mark asked, gently shaking Luke’s arm. “Luke, you need to get up.”

The boy groaned, his eyes fluttering open.

“Hey, it’s time for your medicine.” Mark extended his hand, his open palm holding two pills.

Luke reached for them lazily and then downed them with a swig of water. When he was finished, he leaned his head back onto the pillow, closing his eyes again. But sensing Mark was still in the room, he opened them.

“What’s wrong?” Luke’s voice croaked as he frowned with concern.

Mark battled with telling him the truth, about everything. About what happened with Claire back in Fairfax, about the fact that his real father was out there in the storm, trying to kill anyone that opposed him. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized what he needed to say.

“Your mother lied to you,” Mark said. “About what happened in Fairfax. About Claire.”

Luke tensed. “What?”

“After you were shot, your mother and Claire carried you through the forest,” Mark answered, gathering his nerve for the truth. “But they had trouble moving you. There was a lot of gunfire, and you need to understand that everyone was scared, including your mother—”

“What. Happened.” The words came out more as growls than actual speech, and Luke’s eyes glinted with fear and anger and confusion. And for a moment, Mark wondered if he’d made a mistake, if he’d gone too far.

“Claire left you,” Mark said, his tone blunt. “She left you to save herself, and it was your mother who dragged you to the plane and got you to safety.”

The words swirled through the air, and it looked as though Luke were examining them before he finally let himself hear them.

“Your mother wanted to spare you from that truth,” Mark said, watching Luke’s face contort to further confusion. “But I’m not going to sit here and watch you make her feel bad for trying to spare your feelings. You’re old enough for the hard truths of life.”

And so Mark waited, the silence passing between them building anxiousness.

“Why?” Again Luke’s words came out cracked and broken. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to make your own decisions and form your own thoughts, and you can’t do that without the truth.”

Luke nodded, his eyes drifting to the foot of the bed.

“And there’s something else,” Mark said, the spit disappearing from his mouth. “Something you need to know about the people that are out there.”

Mark reached for Luke’s hand when a gunshot thundered, followed quickly by shattering glass. Screams came next, and by the time Mark was at the door, there was already a bloodied body on the floor and two men with guns in the living room.

Mark stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him. The pair of intruders were dressed like the men at the town.

“Well, look what we’ve got here.” The older of the pair spoke first, the end of his pistol switching between the huddled group by the fire and Mark. “A party? And we weren’t invited?” He shook his head, clucking his tongue.

The second one, younger and thinner, stepped toward the group, his weapon trained on them as well. Holly was in that group.

Mark’s gun rested beneath the counter, blocked from view of the inmates by a short wall. It was just out of arm’s reach. He stepped toward it, and the fat man brought Mark into his crosshairs.

“Go on,” he said. “Join the others.” Then he looked past Mark to the closed door. “What you hiding in there?”

Mark shuffled closer to the gun, his eyes falling to the bloodied body on the floor, then looked back up to the big man. He slowly raised his hands, stopping them at waist level, just high enough for the gun.

“Don’t move,” the big man said.

But Mark’s hand was only inches away. He could almost feel the cold of the metal, the hardened steel. He didn’t dare look for Holly in the group. She was tucked away safe in the back somewhere.

“I said don’t move!” The big man stomped forward, finger on the trigger.

It happened quickly. Mark reached for the pistol and curled his fingers around the handle, placing his index finger on the trigger. The recoil from the gunshot caused him to miss, then a bullet entered his chest and slammed him back into the wall.

Cold washed over him, blood leaking through his clothes and staining the front of him red. A few screams filtered up through the air, but the only one he recognized was “Daddy!” His legs gave out, and he slid to the floor. The big man who’d shot him stomped over and knocked the pistol out of his

hands before he had a chance to use it again.

“Shut up! All of you!” the big guy shouted, keeping his gun aimed at Mark’s head, and then pushed open Luke’s door. “Got another one in here, Billy.”

Mark wanted to speak, he wanted to reach out and call for Holly, but darkness was falling over him now. Death pulled the veil over his eyes, and all sensation disappeared from his body. The last few noises he heard were the screams of women and Luke’s defiant grunting as the big man pulled him from bed and dragged him out with the others. He wanted to tell Luke that he loved him. He wanted to say the same thing to Holly. But all faded to black.

10

Kate wasn't sure how long they kept up their sprint before exhaustion finally gripped its relentless and inevitable fingers around their bodies. She only knew of what happened when they stopped.

"I can't." A puff of icy air flew from Stacy's mouth. "I need a break." Her legs stumbled along with her words, and finally she collapsed to her knees.

"We can rest at the cabin," Rodney said, though his tone sounded as if he was as weary as the woman. "We're close. It's not that much farther."

Captain Hurley squinted through a blast of snow, his officers clustering around him, most of them ill prepared for the sudden escape, finding themselves half frozen. "We can push it. C'mon."

Whimpering, Stacy complied and started walking. Kate waited for the officers to catch up to her, letting Harley pass, and then found Luis, who'd showed her the Morse code machine. "What are the chances that the message went through?"

Luis huffed, shuffling through the snow, his head down and his shoulders hunched forward. "One hundred percent." He groaned, fatigue catching up with him as well. "But the chances that the National Guard troop actually listened to it?" He shrugged, shaking his head.

"And you're sure it was the National Guard that you were hearing?" Kate asked. "It wasn't something else? Something you weren't—"

"I know what I heard," Luis answered.

Kate dropped the subject. She was pushing her hopes onto a situation she wasn't even sure would come to fruition. But that gun Rodney had brought

with him to save them killed a lot of Dennis's men, and they now had more trained shooters on their side. Even if the message didn't go through, their circumstances were improving despite the cold, and despite the odds.

A light flickered up ahead, breaking the monotony of the darkness and the shape of the cabin came into view. Kate hastened her pace, stumbling past the other tired bodies and taking the lead. But as she drew closer Kate realized that something was wrong.

The front door was open, and despite the distance, Kate saw someone sprawled out across the floor.

"No," Kate whispered and then sprinted from the group.

"Kate, wait!" Rodney shouted after her, no doubt having the same tingling suspicions as she, but she had too much of a head start on him.

Hot tears streaked down Kate's cheeks, running back into her ears and hair because of the wind, only to freeze in place due to the cold.

Kate leapt over the body and the pool of blood on the floor, launching herself into the living room.

"Holly! Luke! Mark!"

Four more bodies lay on the living room floor, the glow of the fire illuminating blank and lifeless stares of the dead. Relief flooded her veins when she didn't see Holly or Luke among them, and then when she stepped around the kitchen counter toward Luke's door, she froze.

When she first opened her mouth to scream, there was nothing. She shuddered, gasping cold air, and then it came slowly, her cry bellowing up and out of her like some ancient, primal thing born from nothing but pain.

She dropped to her knees, screaming until her throat went raw, and Rodney was standing next to her, staring at Mark's dead body. She tried to crawl to him, but Rodney held her back. She viciously smacked his hands away. "Let me go! *Let me go*!"

Rodney released her, and sobbing, Kate crawled to her husband. Her fingers hovered above his body, as if she were almost afraid to touch him. Her mouth quivered as tears dripped onto the wound that killed Mark.

Kate ripped off her gloves and tossed them aside in anger then cupped Mark's face, the scruff of his beard coarse and cold against her palms. She ran her hands through his hair, whimpering. Behind her, she heard the gasps and cries of the others who had lost loved ones, the others who had dead waiting for them to collect.

Luke's door was open, and Kate lifted her red and tear-soaked eyes to the

empty bed. The sheets had been torn off messily, and a cup lay on the floor, its liquid staining the wood a darker shade of brown.

Slowly, grief gave way to rage. Luke's body wasn't here. Neither was Holly's. Which meant they were taken. And Kate knew who had done it.

Anger pushed Kate to her feet, propelling her past Rodney and the others toward the front door. She was going to kill him. She was going to kill all of them.

The cold touched her face, and then Rodney grabbed hold of her, yanking her back inside.

"No, Kate."

"Let me go!"

Rodney pulled her close, keeping her from escape. "You can't do this by yourself."

"I'm not losing my children to him!" Kate huffed and lunged at Rodney like a wounded animal. "You don't know him. You don't know what he'll do." She turned away, stomping out into the snow.

"Who?" Rodney asked, screaming and following her into the woods, catching up to her and stopping her once again. "Kate, you'll die."

Kate stopped and collapsed into the snow on her knees. Rodney was right. She couldn't march into town alone, armed with nothing but a pistol. That would only get her killed, and that wouldn't help her children.

"We can get them back," Rodney said. "But the only way we get them back is if we're smart about it. And the only way we're smart about it is if we take our time."

"I don't have time," Kate said.

Rodney smirked. "We didn't have time in New York. We didn't have time on the road here. And I didn't have time to make it to the patrol station." He gripped her shoulders. "But we did it." He inched close, only a breath separating the two of them. "I swear on my life that I won't let them get away with it, and I swear I will do everything I can to get your kids back to you safely. Let me help you."

Kate wrapped her arms around Rodney, squeezing him tight, and she cried. The same guttural screams that she let go in the cabin escaped into the night air, which echoed her grief, and Rodney held her until it had run its course.

Kate peeled herself off of him and then looked Rodney in the eyes, wiping the tears from her own. She took a breath, clearing her throat and

doing her best to compose herself. “There’s something you don’t know. Something that’s important for you to understand before we go any further.”

Rodney pressed his eyebrows together questioningly. “What is it?”

“That man, the one who is in charge of the inmates, he’s Luke’s father.”

Rodney laughed, as most people do who are given such news, but when Kate’s expression didn’t break, when she said nothing else, the smile and laughter disappeared. He stepped away, running his hands through his hair, shaking his head in disbelief. “How is—” He turned around in a circle. “How?”

“That doesn’t matter now,” Kate answered. “All that matters now is getting them back. I don’t know what he’ll do if he finds out who he has. He’s never met Luke, and Luke’s never met him. But I know that if he does find out who he is, he’ll do whatever he thinks will hurt me the most. And that will involve my children.”

THE MARCH back to town was quick and then painfully slow. Dennis wasn’t sure how many men he’d lost, but from the looks of the survivors, he would have thought they’d all died. Every once in a while, he would scream, that bug of his burrowing around in his head, and he’d fire his pistol into the woods, striking nothing but snow, rocks, and trees.

A man clutching his stomach, struck by shrapnel from the big gun’s bullets, collapsed to his knees and face-planted into the snow. There he lay still, none of the inmates around even glancing down as they passed. It was just another dead man. All of them had seen plenty of dead men in their lifetime.

Firelight from the windows of Duluth fanned the flames of hope, and everyone sighed with relief. The fires of the town brought warmth from the bitter cold, the layers of ice on everyone’s body starting to thaw.

The moment Dennis’s men were back in their home base, anyone who wasn’t seriously wounded grabbed liquor and food. But mostly liquor. One of them passed by Dennis, and he snatched the bottle from the man’s hands and then smashed it on the ground.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dennis roared, turning every head in camp. “You think that you’re taking a break? *No!*” He pointed to the building that acted as their armory. “We’re going to find those pigs and kill them!”

“You saw what they had,” a voice cried out from the crowd. “It was a fucking machine gun. Heavy artillery. They mowed us down like cattle. That’s not a fight—that’s a massacre. I’m not going back out there.”

Nods of agreement rippled like a wave through the crowd, and Dennis watched his authority slip away. He wanted to shoot all of them. And the bug that burrowed deep into his mind, urging him to grab a cluster of grenades that they’d found and start flinging them around, was suddenly silenced by a single word.

“Boss,” Billy said, catching his breath, tapping Dennis on the shoulder. “We found them.” He was grinning, smiling from ear to ear, his fucked-up teeth and rancid breath up close and personal.

“What?” Dennis asked, but then he saw the string of bodies that Billy’s brother, Martin, pushed forward aggressively. They all had their faces down, all of them shivering, dressed in the same clothes that they were wearing tucked away in their warm houses.

“These are the ones who attacked the town,” Billy said proudly. “And I know where their cabin is if you want to take a look.”

Dennis clapped Billy on the back, his sour mood salvaged by this wonderful new gift. “Good work, Billy.” He gestured to his house. “My woman is inside. Help yourself to some fun. Hell, take your brother with you.” He laughed, rubbing his hands together greedily as Billy and Martin hopped off to Dennis’s cabin. He didn’t care. He was going to kill the bitch anyway to make him feel better. But this—this was a gift he didn’t see coming.

“So,” Dennis said, walking down the line of lowered heads. “You are the little bandits that got away.” He smiled, noting there weren’t as many as he hoped. “And which one of you was the one in charge?” He lifted the chin of an old woman who was crying, trembling wildly from his touch. “No, not you, I suppose.” He flicked her nose and moved on to the next person, a middle-aged woman, whom he undressed with his eyes. “Was it you?” He leaned close, tilting his ear toward her. “Speak up.”

“She’s not here,” the woman said, her voice shaking like her body. “The woman who helped us. She’s not here.”

“She’s not?” Dennis asked, his voice innocent, almost sweet. And then,

like flicking a switch, he grabbed the woman by the throat, his hand clamping down hard, and roared. "*Then where is she?*"

The woman could only choke, and she clawed at his arm. She looked at him the way everyone did when you killed someone with your bare hands. She was afraid, and her fear only made him feel stronger.

"She's dead." The voice came from farther down the line. It belonged to young man, shirtless and with a bandage over most of his chest. His skin was a shiny red and white. He fidgeted in the cold. Another few hours exposed in the weather dressed like he was, and he'd pass out then freeze to death in the snow. "A bullet caught her on the way back from the town. We buried her in the snow."

"Buried?" Dennis asked, then released the woman who collapsed to her knees, gasping for air. He walked to the young man. "Why? Plan on visiting her grave, boy?" Dennis noted the young girl at his side, clutching on his leg, acting like a crutch to keep him upright. He dropped to his knee and forced her gaze toward him. "Is that true? Did she die?"

The girl's face scrunched up in preparation in tears. "I-I don't know."

Dennis laughed and released the girl's face, which she buried in the boy's leg. He glanced up at the boy's face, and gauging from his expression, the little girl meant something to him.

"So," Dennis said, standing, the boy nearly meeting his eye line. "This woman died and left you all to fend for yourselves." He stepped close. "And you're sure she's really dead?" His voice was threatening, though his tone was barely above a whisper.

The boy didn't move, didn't even blink. It was one of the best poker faces that Dennis had ever seen.

"C'mon," Dennis said. "Let's go to my place and chat." He grabbed the boy by the back of his neck with his right hand, and used his left to swallow up the little girl's hand, forcing both toward his house.

In the kitchen, they could still hear the moans from Billy's good time upstairs, and Dennis spit a sharp and fast laugh as he shoved the kid into a chair, the legs screeching against the wood as it slid back. But he kept hold of the little girl's hand, keeping her close, which triggered an angered snarl from his new captive.

Dennis nodded to the bandage on the boy's chest. "What happened there? Girlfriend beat you up?" Dennis laughed, but the boy didn't react. "Oh, sorry. Boyfriend?"

The boy grimaced, and Dennis released a sympathetic moan. “Aww, don’t be like that. Hey, I’m not offended if you like to take it up the ass. Believe me, after a few years in prison, there were a lot of guys that didn’t mind it either.”

The little girl whimpered, and Dennis looked down to see the tears streaming off her face. When he looked back at the boy, his eyes were focused on her.

“So how do you two know each other?” Dennis asked, the innocence in his tone contrasting against the malevolent stare in his eyes. He kept both hands on the girl. “You two…” He bounced his eyebrows suggestively, and when the boy clenched his fists in anger, Dennis released another hearty laugh. “No? Well, then you probably don’t mind if I take a stab then, do you?”

“*Ahh!*”

The boy launched himself off the chair and at Dennis, his movements lethargically slow, and swung his fists like a windmill. But the boy was so weak it only took Dennis one arm to keep him at bay.

“Whoa! Easy there, cowboy!” Dennis thrust the boy back into his seat and brandished a knife that he placed against the girl’s throat. “Let’s not do anything rash.”

The boy tensed, but he stayed in his chair.

“We’re going to play a game,” Dennis said. “I’m going to ask you a question, and then you’re going to give me an answer. If I think you’re lying to me, then I cut her.”

The girl shivered, the boy’s eyes locked onto the knife at the girl’s throat.

“Now,” Dennis said. “Is the woman still alive?”

The boy’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed before he answered, “Yes.”

“Where is she now?”

“She went to a highway patrol station,”

“How many more of you are there?”

“Ten left the cabin to go to the station,” the boy answered. “I don’t know how many came back.”

The girl was crying hysterically now.

Slowly, Dennis glanced down at the girl, and when he raised his eyes back toward the boy, he smiled. “Is this your sister?”

The words hung in the air between them, and the boy moved his lips to

speak, but the silence spoke volumes.

Dennis applied enough pressure against the girl's throat to draw blood. "Is. This. Your. Sis—"

"Yes." The answer left his lips quickly, and for the first time since their interaction, the anger gave way to grief and fear, and the boy's eyes watered. "Please, let her go. If you want to hurt someone, then hurt me."

Dennis smiled then looked down at the little girl, pulling her hair back and exposing the soft pale flesh of her throat. "You know, I've never killed a kid before. Came close once, though."

More blood trickled down the girl's throat and into her shirt, staining the collar red. She sobbed violently now. "Luke, please, help me."

That bug in Dennis's head turned its gaze on the boy. The name sparked memories like hot flashes of flint and steel, stoking a blaze that meant to burn and ravage.

Dennis narrowed his eyes, his vision tunneling on the boy. He slowly lowered the blade from the girl's throat. It was too surreal, and he started to question whether or not he'd misheard what the girl had said. But the longer he stared at the boy, the more that fire grew, revealing the truth right in front of his eyes.

"I knew a boy," Dennis said. "A long time ago. He had your name. But he was just a baby then." He released the girl, and she hurried to Luke and flung her arms around him. But all Dennis focused on was the boy. The eyes he stared at were just like his own, so dark that they were practically black.

Dennis grabbed the boy by the throat and slowly lifted him from the chair, the vibrations from the boy's body thrumming against his hand. "I have one more question before our game is done." He adjusted his grip to the back of the boy's neck then raised the blade to the throat. "That woman. The one who went to the patrol station, the one who killed a lot of my men today." He paused. "Is she your mother?"

The boy trembled. "Yes."

The bug ignited into a fury Dennis had never known, that stretched beyond madness as his eyes widened and his voice dropped to a whisper. "What's her name?"

"Kate."

The name released the boy from Dennis's hold, and he stepped back, his breathing labored and painful. And at the slow realization of what he had, Dennis trembled with exaltation. The laughter rolled out from him

triumphantly, causing both Luke and his sister to retreat against the wall, holding onto one another.

Dennis opened the cabinet where he stored the whiskey and dropped the knife, opening the bottle and taking a long swig. The burn of the liquor helped steady him, and he walked over to Luke, a grin still plastered on his face and the hairs on his chin shiny with drips of whiskey. He extended the bottle to Luke, who stared at it with uncertainty. “Go on. Take it.” His smile widened. “I’ve always wanted to have a drink with my son.”

11

The bodies had been moved outside. No one could think or plan with them lying on the floor, their eyes still open, the flames from the fire offering the illusion of life behind their expressionless stares.

There was nothing to be done about the bloodstains. And while the map was sprawled out on the kitchen table, with Rodney, Kate, and the remaining group hovering over it, their eyes continued to fall to the stains where their loved ones once rested.

“Kate?” Rodney asked, his tone suggesting that it wasn’t the first time he’d called her name.

“Hmm?” Kate peeled her gaze from the kitchen and the bloodstain where Mark had been. Every face was on her, expressions ranging from empathy to violence.

“What do you think?” Rodney asked, gesturing down at the map.

Kate pressed her palms against the table’s edge, her weight causing it to groan. And while her eyes examined their attack on the town, her mind was still very much focused on Mark’s dead body.

Captain Harley spoke up at Kate’s silence. “Any way we slice it, we’re outnumbered. The only good thing about our plan is the element of surprise. We’ve already experienced the bulk of their forces, and for all they know, we still have more bullets for the fifty cal.” Harley rapped his knuckles against the table and crossed his arms. “If we go in quiet, do some recon, we have a chance at getting everyone back alive.”

Kate’s eyes returned to the bloodstain where Mark’s body had been. Her

thoughts drifted to Luke and Holly, both of them abducted by murderers and rapists. She knew that Luke would try to keep his sister safe, but he was so weak from the surgery. She wasn't sure if they'd last till dawn.

"There's only one way we get them back alive," Kate said, ending the bickering at the table, as she turned her gaze back to Rodney and Captain Harley. "I give myself over to them."

Confusion and a hint of skepticism circled the expressions around the table, but it was Captain Harley that spoke first. "You walk into that camp, and you're dead."

"They won't kill me," Kate answered.

"And how do you know that?" Officer Thomas asked.

"Because the man in charge will want to meet me," Kate answered. "I imagine he's been thinking about our meeting for nineteen years." Her eyes found the bloodstain again, but they didn't linger on it for long. "The man in charge of their group is my son's biological father. He was serving a life sentence at Renniger State Prison." She nodded. "At the very least, he'll want to speak to me before he kills me. And I know he'll have my children there, which means I'll be able to get in close." She looked at Rodney. "But once I'm inside, I'll need a distraction to get out."

Heads turned with Kate, glaring at Rodney, who was already shaking his head. "You walk in there, and you're not walking out."

"I'll go with her," Stacy said.

"No," Kate replied.

"You're not the only one with a child that was taken."

Kate wasn't going to argue. And the truth was that if Dennis had discovered who he had, she knew the bastard would want to keep them from the rest of the group. Kate stared at the little town of Duluth, marked on the map, that was Dennis's base of operations. She looked at Rodney again. "What kind of distraction can you work up?"

Rodney left the table, and while he was gone, a few of Harley's deputies whispered in the captain's ears, all the while his eyes not leaving Kate's face.

Rodney returned with a bag and a box that he laid carefully in the center of the table. "C-4 and detonators. I won't be able to trigger them remotely, but I've got enough wire to keep us safely away from the explosions. We'll place them behind the buildings, funnel everyone into Main Street, and then shoot as many of them as we can before they realize what's going on." He looked at Kate and Stacy. "And hopefully give you enough time to get our

people out of there."

"What we're dealing with here is a hostage situation," Harley said then gestured to the explosives. "And what you're suggesting here dramatically lowers the survival percentage for those hostages—physical confrontation always does." He looked at every face of the people who had loved ones who were taken, staring at Kate last. "It's important for all of you to understand those consequences."

"Do you really think you can get them out?" Lisa, the doctor's daughter, asked. "Do you really think that guy will let you get that close?"

"Yes," Kate answered, and then turned to Stacy. "But I don't know what he'll do with you."

"It's all right," Stacy replied. "I can handle myself."

Heads nodded, and Rodney picked the bag and the box up off the table. "All right. I'll start wiring these. Everyone else, get plenty of ammo and magazines loaded. The more the merrier. I have a feeling these guys won't have a weapons shortage."

"All right then," Captain Harley said, a thick reluctance in his voice. "It'll be best if we can get them right before dawn, which gives us about seven hours to set everything up. Let's move."

The room broke apart, everyone leaving the table save for Rodney and Kate. Rodney had his eyes on Kate, and Kate had her eyes on the bloodstain again.

"Kate, listen," Rodney said. "Even with the distraction, there isn't a guarantee that it'll do what you want it to. And Captain Harley is right. The use of physical force will drop survival chances dramatically." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "Kate—"

She left, heading out the door before he could finish.

The cold stunned her senses, and she gasped as if she were emerging from a frozen lake. The clouds above had cleared, and the moon and stars blanketed the black of the night sky. Her legs immediately started walking toward the bodies that they'd stacked on the left side of the cabin.

Tears fell before Kate even turned the corner. The bodies were lined in a row, covered with plastic tarps. Mark's body was covered at the very end. She just stood there for a while, staring at him, her body frozen by apprehension and cold. She hadn't helped pull the bodies from inside. It was Captain Harley and his men who'd done all of the work.

It still didn't feel real. Kate kept expecting to wake up from the

nightmare, and that she'd be in bed with her husband back in New York. Holly would be getting ready for school, and Luke would be down at George Mason.

But this wasn't a dream. Her dead husband was beneath that tarp, and her children were now under the murderous watch of a madman who happened to be Luke's father.

The past had come back to haunt not just *her* future, but also the future of her children. Her mistakes were now her children's burden, and she was the only one that could lift it.

Kate understood what would happen the moment she surrendered herself to the convicts in that town. But if she could get her children out, if she could save what was left of her family, then maybe she could save what was left of her.

She wasn't going to let the past define her future, or the future of her family. She wouldn't allow herself to fail her family now, and no matter what Dennis said, no matter what he had in store for her, she would endure it. She had already made it this far. She could survive a little longer.

Kate grabbed the shovel leaning up against the cabin's wall. She would let the others prepare their weapons and their bombs. She needed to put her husband to rest before she left. If she could do that, then she could go without reservations, without fear.

If Mark were here, she knew what he would tell her, how he would react. But he would do the same thing. He loved their children. He died trying to protect them. And she would give her life if it meant saving them from further harm.

12

Outside Duluth, Rodney and the group had determined that most of the inmates were confined to Main Street. They'd set up guards on the east and west ends, the bulk being stationed on the west end by the highway's entry point.

Rodney crept along the back side of Main Street, planting charges, his head on a swivel. But it was so dark that even if the goons were looking right at him, he didn't think they'd see him in the black. He was just another lump of shadows in the forest.

Officer Thomas accompanied Rodney. He had some explosives training at the academy and in his brief stint in the military.

The cold and the darkness made the work difficult, not to mention the sheer exhaustion plaguing Rodney. But his adrenaline kept him alert, and for the moment, it was enough to keep him going.

They positioned the charges close enough to the buildings to cause a rumble but far enough away to not kill anyone. He wanted to make sure the blasts maintained their purpose as a distraction. And with the amount of C-4 they had in their bags, it would be quite the fireworks show.

Rodney and Thomas finished and slunk back into the darkness. Unlike the previous town they helped liberate, this one was not located in a valley that provided a useful high ground for an attack. But they did manage to find a hilltop with a limited view of the main drag. At the very least, they'd be able to see the building where Kate was taken. If they didn't kill her on sight.

When Rodney and Thomas returned, Captain Harley and the rest were

nothing but frozen shadows nestled in the snow.

With Kate near the west entrance, waiting until it was her time to turn herself in, there were thirteen of them to assault a group that probably numbered somewhere in the forties. Their only hope was that they could pick them off from the hill, getting as many as possible until they had to change position.

“What’s the time?” Captain Harley asked.

Rodney checked the pocket watch, his eyes taking a minute to adjust to reading in the darkness. “Just under fifteen minutes.” He snapped it shut and then placed it back in his pocket as he made sure to place the detonator in a secure position.

The wires extended from the silver metal box like veins eager to pump life into the frozen hearts buried in the snow.

“You think she’ll actually do it?” Thomas asked. “I mean, just walk in there like that and give herself up?”

“Without hesitation.” And while he had accepted her decision, Rodney didn’t like it any more than he had to. But it wasn’t his place to deny her request, nor anyone else’s. It was her life. It was her children. It was her choice.

But whether he would ever see Kate Hillman again was another matter. He was suddenly regretful for not saying goodbye. In the heat of things, they had gone their separate ways without even a good luck. But he suspected that she had other things on her mind, and the last thing he wanted to do was distract her from her concentration on getting her children out alive.

The time passed slowly in the cold snow. And the added anxiety about the fight to come only made it worse. No one spoke, the silence pulled over them like the blanket of snow. But Rodney could sense the humming of thoughts behind the mixture of expressions.

Each of them with their own worries, their own concerns, their own fears about what would happen when Kate walked into town and set things into motion. They all had something to lose, some more than others. But they were together. And they would fight together. A cluster of strangers who shared nothing in common but survival and the fight against evil.

If Rodney could pull one good thing from the events triggered by the EMP, it was that the haze of apathy was lifted. All of the little petty things that people clung to in their day-to-day life were gone. There were no more traffic jams filled with motorists brimming with road rage. Gone were the

lines at coffee shops filled with people who were on their phones, huffing and puffing about their boss or office gossip, all the while ignoring one another and building a fake life on social media. The like buttons were gone, the emojis no longer mattered, and the plug had been pulled. And it had led to this.

A group of people fighting for life, uniting against a threat that was born from evil and greed. Of all the ways for his life to end, Rodney suspected it could be worse. He was no longer that guy hiding out in a city of millions, waiting for the world to end. And it had taken the memory of his late father and the righteous cause of a mother and her family, to show him the path of purpose, to see that without real human connections, a life wasn't truly lived.

Rodney checked his watch again—less than three minutes remained. He looked at the faces glued to the riflescopes.

"Do you have family, Captain Harley?" Rodney asked.

The question turned the captain's gaze, and everyone else's, toward him. He nodded curtly. "Two boys out in California. One of them has a wife with my first grandchild on the way."

A few smiles cracked along the worried expressions. Gena, one of the middle-aged women who had a sister that was taken, was one of them. "I have an aunt that lives in San Diego."

"That's where my oldest is," Captain Harley replied.

A whisper of conversation helped cast out the dark and their fears.

"Remember them," Rodney said. "Remember what we're doing here, because I can promise you that this isn't the only evil happening in the world. And remember that we're not the only ones fighting it."

The swell of confidence lifted the group, everyone sitting up straighter, hands and bodies steadier as they took up their aim on the town.

Rodney fished out his pocket watch again, and ran his thumb over the engraving, remembering the words his father told him just before the cancer wasted him away to nothing. A father's final challenge to a son who hoped he could answer.

"People want to do the right thing, Rodney. It's just that most of the time they're scared to. It's that fear that's the hardest thing to get over. It'll rot you from the inside out until there's nothing left. Be the person who helps rid people of that fear. Be the person who shows them the way. You'll get hurt, and you'll get knocked down and burned, but those wounds will heal, and those failures will fade. But what sticks with you, what others will see in you,

is that courage in the face of fear. Be better, Rodney. Always be better."

The minute hand finally ticked toward the final sixty seconds until Kate walked into town, and Rodney peered through the scope of his rifle to watch Main Street. Rodney had never been sure about the afterlife, but in that moment, as the final seconds of their preparation came to end, Rodney hoped there was, and he hoped that his dad was up there watching.

NEITHER STACY or Kate spoke to one another. Both mothers were lost in their own minds. Kate figured Stacy had her own fears to deal with. Kate knew she had her hands full with her own.

Standing motionless in the cold had only made the waiting worse. But for some reason, Kate couldn't force herself to move. It was almost as if any movement before the time on her watch expired meant failure. And she couldn't fail, not this mission.

A million thoughts raced through Kate's mind as she waited for the hour to end. And of all those thoughts, of all the memories that could have resurfaced, one replayed like a broken record.

The memory was older than her past with Dennis, or Mark, or even her children. It was of her sixteenth birthday, which was also the day that she had chosen to become a pilot.

Before the incident with Dennis, and before she had gotten pregnant and her parents disowned her, Kate was the apple of her family's eye. She had excelled in high school and already had a slew of promising prospects for college and scholarships. She was at the top of her class, and her parents had promised to reward all of her hard work with a very special birthday gift.

When she woke up that morning, praying that her wish for a car would come true, Kate rushed to the living room and saw her present sitting in the driveway. They had even put a bow on it.

She drove to school that day and bragged to her friends who were still bumming rides from their parents. By the time she'd gotten out of class that day, the high from her present still hadn't worn off, and when she received a text from her father to come home quickly, another surge of excitement filled

her on the drive home.

The next “surprise” turned out to be a three-hour road trip to the coast and a dinner at her favorite seafood restaurant, The Crab Shack. They had a great view of the sunset at the table, but her father quickly paid the check and then rushed her outside and back in the car, their mother staying behind, laughing at Kate’s confused face.

Another twenty-minute drive north led them to an airfield, and Kate shook her head in confusion. “Am I getting my own private plane too?”

“You wish,” her dad answered. “Now come on, we might miss it.”

“Miss what?” But her father was already running out to a man standing next to a small twin-prop Gulfstream that he had rented for the next hour.

Kate rode co-pilot, and from the moment she reclined in the seat of the cockpit and donned the headset, she was hooked. She’d never been in a plane before, and her father had arranged for them to fly along the coast so she could watch the sunset from the sky. And it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“Remember this, sweetheart,” her dad said. “When things get tough at school and you feel like quitting, remember that you can fly above it all. And that when you get to the top, there won’t be anyone that can stop you. You can do whatever you want, Kate. Anything in the world.”

And while the lesson was meant to teach her to aspire to greatness, the only thing Kate wanted to do when they landed was go back up again. Everything else faded from her mind—college, the car, her friends. The only thing that mattered was flying. She wanted to learn everything she could about planes, and from that point on, she knew nothing would stop her from becoming a pilot, and it was an endeavor that her parents supported wholeheartedly.

And then, three years later, Kate remembered telling that same father, who told her that she could do anything, that she was pregnant. And she also remembered that same father telling her if she didn’t get an abortion to kill that thing “he” put inside her, then she shouldn’t bother coming home again. So she didn’t. Not even to their funerals.

But while the adoration of her family disappeared, the passion for flying only intensified. Every penny that she saved went toward flight lessons, and her college aspirations transformed from Stanford to Embry-Riddle. Every night, she dreamed of being up in the sky again, and every waking hour was spent trying to make those dreams a reality.

The passion didn’t leave much time for anything else, and slowly, one by one, her friends stopped calling, and Kate stopped caring. She didn’t date, didn’t go out, and didn’t socialize. And then after Luke was born, she grew even more into herself and providing a good life for her son.

But over the course of the years, Kate became so focused on and busy with providing a better life for her family that she began to leave her family behind. She had lost touch with her daughter and put a strain on everyone by moving them from city to city until Mark had to issue her an ultimatum of either settling down or having the family split up for good.

Kate thought those memories of her parent’s scorn resurfaced because it was such a stark contrast to how she had approached her parenting. After giving birth to Luke and Holly, she couldn’t imagine disowning them, no matter what path they chose to walk. A parent doesn’t give up. No matter the odd or circumstances.

Kate checked the time, and the minute hand ticked past the hour mark. She turned to Stacy. “It’s time.”

Stacy nodded, and started to walk. Kate stared down at her feet, unsure if her body would even move after staying motionless in the cold for so long. But her right foot moved, and then her left, and then she was halfway down to the road that would lead her into town.

She kept a slow pace, taking her time but moving forward. She fought the urge to look to the north where Rodney and the rest were watching, because she knew that if she let herself turn once, she’d lose her focus.

As she approached the guarded front entrance, Kate made sure that the pair could see her coming from a long way off.

“Hey!” The first man who spotted her immediately lifted his rifle, aiming at her chest in the darkness. “What are you doing out there?”

Kate slowed, raising both hands in the air, and the second sentry raised his rifle as well. Smiles spread on their faces when they realized they were both women.

“Sweethearts, are you two alright?” The guard on the left was big and muscular, his beard thick and wild around his face and stretched down to his chest. A few silver teeth glinted in the darkness, and even with a bulky coat clasped tight around his neck, the top of a few tattoos still crawled out from beneath.

“Yeah, baby.” The guard on the right lowered his rifle. He was short, shorter than Kate, and bald, without a beard, and missing a few teeth. “You

looking to get warm?" He grabbed himself and laughed.

Kate retained her stoic expression, while Stacy remained quiet, both fighting the urge to shake from the cold.

"My name is Kate Hillman," she said. "I am here to speak with Dennis Smith. He knows who I am." She stared at each of the guards in turn. "And he will want to meet me as I am right now. I suggest you take me to him immediately."

"And what about her?" The shorter bald one gestured to Stacy.

"I'm here for my son."

The playfulness of both the big man and the shorter one ended, and the short man raised his rifle at her once again as the pair exchanged a glance.

"Ladies," the bearded inmate said, his voice with a glint of warning, "you are the dumbest pair of bitches I have ever met."

The shorter one circled behind Kate and then prodded her forward with the tip of his rifle. "Move!"

The little man trailed Kate all the way down Main Street, while the big man walked behind Stacy. Kate's eyes searched for the source of a monotonous hum, and she found it in what looked like a large generator, feeding power into three separate buildings.

The big guard knocked on one of the door's attached to the building powered by the generator and then stepped back. Kate's stomach twisted and flipped, her nerves threatening to shatter what remained of her resolve as she waited for Dennis to come out.

The sound of footsteps triggered her heart into a hastened rhythm. She tightened her hands into fists, squeezing until it hurt, and when the door opened and she saw Dennis's expression morph from anger to surprise, her heart stopped dead.

The big man turned, pointing toward Kate, his tone nervous. "She came into town, said she knew you and that you'd want to see her."

Dennis walked past the guard without a word, his eyes focused only on Kate, and he moved within a breath's distance. He then grabbed her roughly by the arms, forcing her body flush against his, and kissed her.

Kate tried to turn away, but he kept his mouth pressed against hers until her lip bled. He pulled away and then slapped her across the face so hard it sent her to her knees.

The contact between bare hand and cheek made her face throb, and it was made worse by the cold and Dennis's hysterical laughter.

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited to do that!” Dennis circled her, rubbing his hands together with enough vigor to start a fire. “Kate, Kate, Kate, Kate, Kate!” He tilted his head from side to side every time he spoke her name, and then he stopped his pacing when he faced her again. “Of all the little towns in all the little corners of the world, here you are.”

Kate lifted her face to meet his gaze, and she stood. A red handprint had formed on her cheek. “Where are they?”

The smile dissolved. Dennis again closed the gap between them to a breath’s distance. He shook his head and slowly lifted his hand, curling his fingers around her throat. The touch was soft at first and then slowly tightened as Dennis bared his teeth. “I know a lot about you, Kate. I know that it was you who fucked me over with the parole committee. I know it was you that called the cops on me and got me put in jail in the first place.” The grip around Kate’s throat closed her airway, and he dropped his voice to a whisper. “And I know that I have your children tied up inside my house.”

Kate clawed at Dennis’s arm, her muscles giving way and her vision fading as she choked. Black spots covered Dennis’s snarling face, and just before everything faded to black, Dennis let go.

Kate clawed her fingers into the snow, her face red and purple, and drew in deep, raspy breaths. She swayed from side to side, coughing. And just when she felt the effects of the asphyxiation fading, a bright flash of pain erupted in her left side as Dennis kicked her.

The force rolled her to her back, and Kate shrieked as her hands immediately rushed to guard the wounded ribs. She lay still, her back cold against the snow, Dennis towering over her.

“Do you know what I went through in prison?” Dennis’s cheeks grew red with rage. “Do you know what it was like?” He spit in her face and then kicked her again, harder, this time cracking ribs.

“*Ahh!*” Kate cried out, whatever resolve she had carried with her crumbling beneath her feet as she rolled to protect her injured side, only exacerbating the pain radiating from her ribs and spreading to the rest of her body.

“And do you know the one thing that kept me going?” Dennis squatted low, shoving his face near Kate’s. “The one thing that I held onto that got me through the rapes and the insanity that being stuck in an eight- by four-foot cell does to you?” He grabbed her face, forcing her gaze onto his. “This moment. Right here. The hope that I would one day get to hurt you so bad

that you wouldn't be whole again. So bad that you couldn't bear the thought of trying to live one more day. Because that's what it was like on the inside for me." He smiled, but the expression looked forced amidst the anger. "So thank you." He slammed her head back hard into the snow and stood. "Drag her inside, and take her friend and put her with the others. And get some men to search the area. I doubt they came here alone."

RODNEY'S STOMACH TIGHTENED, and it took every ounce of control in him to not flick the switches on the detonator box as he watched Kate take a beating. They all felt the urge to pull the trigger, but they had known that it could be like this, and they had to wait.

They still didn't know where the kids were being held, and when the beating was over and Kate was finally taken into Dennis's house, Rodney started the clock again. Five minutes. That was all the time she said she'd need.

"We've got something," Captain Harley said, peering through the scope of his rifle and catching the attention of group. "We've got six armed men heading into the woods."

"Shit." Rodney adjusted his rifle's scope from Dennis's house to the men heading into the woods. No doubt the bastards thought Kate had people waiting for her. He removed his eye from the rifle. "All right, everyone, listen up." Heads turned, including the captain's, and he didn't look too accustomed to receiving orders. "We split up. Make it harder for them find us. But we stay in pairs." He looked at Captain Harley. "Captain, you assign one of your men to each pair of civilians, and you can stay with me." He turned back to the group. "Find a good position where you can still see the street, and be mindful to stay back far enough from the explosives. The distance we are at right now is good."

Heads nodded quickly, and Rodney kept his voice down as he tapped on the detonator box. "Our signal is still with the explosives." He checked his watch. "We've got less than four minutes."

Harley assigned everyone quickly, and they disappeared into the

darkness, hunched low in the night. Rodney returned his eye to the scope, searching for the inmates under the cover of darkness, praying that he wouldn't have to blow the charges early.

EVERY BREATH HURT. It was as though glass had been ground up in Kate's body, and any movement sent the shards into muscles and bones and organs. She collapsed into the kitchen chair that Dennis shoved her into and tried to find a position where the pain wasn't so intense. She didn't find one.

The pain was so blinding that Kate wasn't sure how long Luke and Holly were standing in front of her before she saw them. Gags were shoved in their mouths, and their arms were tied behind their backs, with Dennis lording over them, large and in charge, the man who called the shots. The judge, the jury, and the executioner.

"Oh," Dennis said, smiling as he watched the realization spread over Kate's face. "Looks like someone is finally back with us." He looked down at both Luke and Holly. "Wave hello to your mother, kids! Oh, wait." He spun them around so Kate could see the rope tied around their wrists. "They can't. Ha ha!" He spun them back around and then shoved them into two chairs across from Kate, with him standing behind but still between them.

"Are you guys okay?" Kate asked, her voice shaking, her mind trying to process only three things: her pain, her children's safety, and any weapons that were nearby.

Luke nodded, and Holly cried. Kate tried to stand, but the moment she pushed herself from the chair, another bout of pain planted her ass back in the seat.

"So what do we talk about first?" Dennis asked. "I've already had a good conversation with my son about his heritage." He stared at Luke. "Medical history, girls, my time in prison." He flicked his eyes back toward Kate. "Mark."

Kate grimaced and tried another lunge, but an even bigger flash of pain pushed her back down into her seat, and Dennis let out a slow, methodical laugh, shaking his head.

“I can’t imagine what it was like going back to that cabin and finding your children gone and your husband dead. But then again, I can’t imagine what it would have been like to be married to you.” He wiped his nose, sniffling. “So how do you want to do this, Kate? Do I pick one to kill? Should I have you pick one to kill?”

Kate watched Dennis’s eyes. They had always been the tell in his poker face. And at that moment, they looked as they had on the night over nineteen years ago. He was going to take one of them from her. And she would have to pick.

“Well, Kate?” Dennis asked, those eyes boring into her soul, his hands massaging Luke and Holly’s shoulders. “What do you say?”

Time. That was all Kate needed. Just enough time for the distraction. She closed her eyes, drawing in quick gasps of breath as she remained hunched in her chair. She opened them again, a bit of clarity returning, and she spied a cluster of steak knives on the counter. Six or seven big steps—that was all she’d need to grab one. How much time was left till the detonators went off? She couldn’t remember. The pain had blinded her to it.

“Tick tock, Kate,” Dennis said. “C’mon! Don’t keep me in suspense!”

Kate straightened, adjusting her posture in the chair, gritting her teeth, and groaning in pain as a thick sheen of sweat appeared on her forehead. She was weak, and she knew Dennis saw it. But she just needed to pull his attention away from her kids.

“So that’s what you want to do?” Kate asked, trying to play off a sense of apathy. “Play a game? I think you spent too much time playing with yourself on the inside.” She laughed, and Dennis’s expression slowly faded to match his murderous eyes. “You know, that letter that I submitted to the parole board, I think I rewrote it a dozen times before it was just right. Before I knew that it would keep you in that jail cell for the rest of your life.”

Dennis released his hold on the kids and stepped toward her, but she didn’t let up.

“My lawyer told me that I didn’t have to come to the meeting, but I said that I wanted to be there. I wanted to make sure I saw the look on your face.” Kate forced a smile, and that was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Dennis screamed, lunging for Kate in the chair, leading with his fist. The first blow broke her nose, spraying blood down the front of her shirt, and knocked her from the chair. She rolled on the ground, her mind conscious enough for her to see Luke lunge at Dennis only to be backhanded to the

ground.

Another scream filled the room, and before Kate could determine whether it was hers or Holly's, Dennis lifted her off the floor, triggering more stabbing pain in her sides as he slammed her against the wall hard enough to knock the pictures of the family that had lived there previously to the floor.

"You've always been a hard one to nail down, Kate," Dennis said, tightening his hand around her throat like a vise. She clawed at his arm and swiped impotently at his face. "You were always smart, but you never knew when to quit." With one heavy flick of his arm, he flung her halfway across the kitchen, her shoulder landing hard on tile, eliciting another debilitating crack from her ribs.

The pain was so immense that when Kate opened her mouth to scream, nothing came out, and the screams that she heard now were coming from Holly, her daughter's face red and tearstained as her voice cracked with grief.

"Mommy!"

Kate could do nothing but stare at her daughter, as Dennis was on her once again, ramming his fist into her cheek, numbing her head and leaving her ears ringing. The next hit, she couldn't feel, and it took her a moment to realize that she was standing upright, Dennis holding her up against the counter as her body sagged.

"I thought about raping you before I killed you, but now that I've gotten a real good look at your face, I think I'll pass," Dennis said, his dark eyes wild with anger and violence. "But I bet there are a few guys out there that wouldn't mind it. Women have been in short supply, especially with our influx of men." He smiled, the specks of Kate's blood that had sprayed over his face filling the wrinkles around his eyes.

Kate moved her lips to speak, but the pain and exhaustion had numbed her tongue. She could see Luke trying to get up from the floor and could hear Holly screaming bloody murder. All sense of time disappeared, and Kate tried to remember what she was waiting for, but any attempt at remembrance disappeared with another punch to the gut.

Dennis released her, and Kate crumbled into a lifeless pile of meat on the tile. She blinked, which was the only movement allowed to her that didn't elicit a screaming symphony of pain. Her position on the floor granted her a view of her son. He was screaming something at her, but Kate could only watch the movement of his lips. She thought of how good a man he had become. She thought of how good of a man that he would be.

Would be.

Kate circled that thought, a meaning in it that the pain in her body wouldn't allow her to grasp, but when she felt the vibrations from Rodney's detonations, she remembered.

Dennis turned toward the blasts, and Kate lifted her head, the effort requiring what remained of her strength. The knife rested above her, but it was too high, too far for her to reach. But Dennis had his back turned, and she knew it wouldn't stay that way forever. She had to act, and she had to do it now.

With what remained of her strength, Kate pushed herself to her knees, buckling over at the waist and her clutching her chest as her ribs shrieked in pain and defiance. Kate extended her arm, her hand shaking as her fingertips grazed the knife's handle.

A scream escaped her lips as she raised it high, and Dennis turned, his eyes widening as she brought the blade down. He jerked away at the last second, only the knife's tip catching the meat of his chest, spraying a line of blood to the floor.

"*Gahhh!*" Dennis stumbled backward into the table as Kate collapsed to her knees, the strength from her body gone as she looked at her children.

"Run," Kate said, the word coming out cracked and inaudible. She tried again, screaming from the depths of her soul. "*Run!*"

Holly was out of her chair first, then Luke pushed her out the kitchen door. Dennis watched them leave and then turned his murderous glare to Kate. "You bitch!" But something at the door caught his eye, and at the last second, he sprinted out of the kitchen and deeper into the house as a gunshot thundered at the kitchen's exit.

Rodney burst inside, rifle up, scanning the kitchen until his eyes fell on Kate, and he flung the rifle's strap over his shoulder. Kate collapsed into his arms, forcing him to hold up her weight as she struggled for breath.

"Holly," Kate said, clutching Rodney's shoulder. "Luke—"

"They're outside," Rodney said. "C'mon, we have to get out of here, quick."

Rodney dragged Kate through the door, and she was surprised to feel nothing from the cold as the bottoms of her feet skidded across the snow.

Bodies littered Main Street, some of the buildings catching fire from the blasts that were set off, and up ahead, Kate saw Luke and Holly with Captain Harley near the highway exit. She then saw Stacy leading a group of people

from one of the buildings.

Random gunshots erupted in the night, and despite the violence around her, Kate swelled with hope. She was almost out. Her body was broken, but she was almost free.

“Just hang on, Kate,” Rodney said, his voice strained as he practically carried her away. “We’re almost there. Just hang—”

The gunshot and the sudden taste of snow in her mouth were simultaneous. Kate barely felt the scrape of the concrete as she and Rodney face-planted to the ground.

Kate lifted her head and found a red blotch rising on the back of Rodney’s shoulder. She reached for his arm, her face swollen and numb. “Rodney!”

More gunshots thundered, and screams followed the violent mechanical thunder as Kate watched a group of gunmen surround Captain Harley and her children.

“I want them alive!”

Kate turned back toward the house, finding Dennis with his arm extended with a pistol in his hand. The blood from the knife wound was still dripping, but the cold slowed the crawl of blood down his stomach.

More of Dennis’s men emerged from the houses and the woods, some of them leading her people by gunpoint. She felt hands on her, and Kate was lifted off the pavement, her body devoid of all feeling as Dennis pressed the end of his pistol against her cheek.

“Eighteen years,” he said, his voice haggard, and on the verge of tears. “Eighteen years in a concrete cell, eighteen years lost because of you and my bastard son.”

Luke was thrust to his knees next to Kate, and Dennis removed the pistol from her cheek and pressed it against Luke’s temple.

“Mom?” Luke asked, crying.

But she couldn’t answer. She could barely keep herself conscious.

“I want you to know that I take no pleasure in killing our son,” Dennis said, his voice steadying but that mad look returning to those dark eyes. “But I do take pleasure in watching his death cause you pain.”

Kate drew in a ragged breath and focused on those dark eyes that a foolish nineteen-year-old girl once found attractive but now made her sick. “He was never your son. You were never a part of him, no matter what you say.”

Dennis cocked the hammer on his pistol. “Fuck you, Kate.”

Gunfire rained over the town, the explosions erupting from behind her, and Kate only caught a glimpse of Dennis’s face as he removed the pistol from Luke’s head and fired above their heads, retreating down the street.

And as Kate fell forward, she saw the bullets that cut through Dennis’s chest and stomach, brilliant plumes of red spreading across his shirt as his body jerked wildly with each gunshot until he lay on the pavement, covered in blood. Dead.

A few more gunshots echoed, and then Kate felt hands up and down her body.

“Medic! We need a medic!”

“Ma’am, can you hear me? Ma’am? We’re with the United States National Guard. Are you the one who sent the Morse code message? Ma’am?”

Kate wanted to answer, but everything had suddenly turned cold, and the white of the snow faded to grey. She couldn’t feel her breathing anymore, and as she closed her eyes, she knew that she could find peace with the knowledge that her children were alive.

CHAPTER 13 (SIX MONTHS LATER)

Weeds and grass crept over the highway, trapping the broken cars and clogged road. The snows of winter had long since melted, and the heat of summer had descended upon northern New York State.

But while the days had grown long and hot, not a single man, woman, or child complained. The icy grip of winter had left a mark, and it would take a long time before that cold finally thawed.

Rodney adjusted the strap of his rifle as he weaved through the line of cars, Luke behind him, dragging a deer with him.

"You don't want to help me with this?" Luke asked, panting.

"You said you wanted to go hunting," Rodney answered, turning back with a smile over his thick beard, which was shiny with sweat. "Number-one rule of hunting is that the guy that does the killing doesn't have to do the carrying."

Luke rotated his shoulder as he gave the heavy buck another tug by the rope and tarp that he was dragging across the grass. "Last time, you said it was the hunter who does the killing that does the carrying."

Rodney laughed. "Well, that's the good thing about being the teacher. I get to make the rules." They walked another mile before Rodney finally broke down and helped Luke pull it. They walked all the way toward Duluth's exit then rolled the buck down the ramp to the highway into town.

It was almost evening by the time they returned, and the street was busy with chatter. Tables were already being set out for dinner, a mishmash of dining ware that stretched from one end of Main Street to the other.

Smiles and friendly faces greeted Rodney and Luke's entrance, and when

they flipped open the tarp to reveal the fresh game, applause erupted.

“Looks a little smaller than the one I brought home yesterday,” Harley said, leaning up against the doorway, finally looking comfortable in clothing that wasn’t a uniform.

“It’s a bit shorter,” Rodney said. “But it’s most definitely thicker.”

Harley laughed and then helped Dana Miles set the table outside their little general store. Rodney had discovered that he liked hearing the old state trooper’s laugh, and he tried to elicit a chuckle as often as he could.

“You remember how to gut it?” Rodney asked as they approached Luke’s place.

“Yeah, I remember,” Luke answered, blushing as Sarah walked out of their first-floor apartment and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Rodney watched the pair embrace and smiled as he returned to his little one-room studio on the back side of Main Street.

He’d stopped staying at the cabin after the last group of survivors that came through three months ago. With the numbers that were coming in from the highway, they had a nice linked group of community members now. Good people. Rodney forgot how much he missed good people.

Rodney leaned his rifle in the corner between the front door and the side wall, and before he could wipe the blood off his hands, the watch horn blared.

As quick as a snakebite, Rodney snatched the rifle from the corner and hurried outside. A stream of people followed him toward the town’s entrance, all of them armed. They’d prepared for something like this. Another confrontation was inevitable. But they were ready to face it. Together.

Rodney met Harley with his newly deputized officers at the town’s entrance, moving the cars across the road to form a blockade. Dean Smultz sprinted down the road from his watch post, the sky turning a golden hue behind him as the sun set.

“What is it?” Rodney asked, elbows planted on the hood of a rusted Buick.

“Trucks,” Dean answered, sliding over the Buick’s trunk and repositioning his rifle. “They’re armed to the teeth.”

The town behind Rodney was quickly boarded up, everyone knowing their role. They had evacuation routes planned to the neighboring communities, and there was already a runner in the woods, sprinting to let everyone else in the other towns know that something was coming.

An engine rumbled, the noise foreign after so many months without

traffic, and when the first truck made its way down the embankment, followed by a dozen more, Rodney tensed.

“If they charge, fall back!” Rodney said, his eyes still locked on the front grill of the first truck. “But do not fire until fired upon!” This was their group’s first real test of strength, and Rodney knew there was a flurry of nerves attached to those trigger fingers.

Through the scope, Rodney noted the soldier uniforms. They hadn’t had any contact with the United States military since the National Guard intervened, but he wasn’t sure how these fighters planned to greet them.

The lead truck slowed a few dozen yards before the barricade, and doors opened and two soldiers stepped out, brandishing their weapons behind the cover of their armor-plated cavalry.

“Drop your weapons!” But when the order wasn’t obeyed, the soldier scooted forward. “I said drop your—”

“Lieutenant!” The breathless voice was attached to a very small man dressed in a suit and tie, his glasses falling down the bridge of his nose, waving his arms. “Stop!” He slowed down at the convoy’s front, stepping between the two groups, arms extended to both parties. “We don’t need any bloodshed.” He looked at Rodney then at the lieutenant. “How about a show of good faith, huh?”

A few seconds passed, and the lieutenant lowered his rifle.

“Stand down.” The lieutenant’s order echoed down the line, and once all of the weapons were lowered, the small man in the business suit looked toward Rodney and the line of guns still trained on the military.

“Please,” the suited man said, his hands folded together. “I’m sure you have all been through quite a lot, but we’re not here to take anything or hurt anyone. We’re here to help.”

Rodney wasn’t sure of the man’s agenda, but the fact that they weren’t pointing their guns at them provided enough good will for him to reciprocate, and Rodney lowered his weapon, ordering the rest of his group to do the same. “Let’s get these cars pushed back.”

The old rust buckets were wheeled off, and Rodney was the first to cross the line to shake the little guy’s hand. He was even smaller up close.

“Bob Gally,” he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “The gentlemen you see behind me are with the army’s Eighty-Seventh Infantry. We were stationed in DC when the EMP went off. I, um... oh.” He patted his jacket, searching his pockets for something, which he found and handed over

to Rodney for inspection. It was a badge. “I’m with the Department of Reconstruction.”

Harley joined Rodney on his left as he handed the badge back to Bob Gally. “Never heard of it.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Bob said, laughing, which he quickly stopped once neither Rodney nor Harley joined in. He cleared his throat. “It’s a new department the president and his staff put together once we secured the capital. We’re in the process of reestablishing communications across the country, and our group is part of the northeastern efforts.” He looked back at Rodney’s group, offering a friendly wave, which wasn’t returned. “Are you the person in charge here?”

Rodney sized up the little man. If this was a charade, then it was one of the most elaborate charades that he’d ever seen. He looked at Harley, who gave him a slight nod, and Rodney exhaled. “Follow me.” He started to walk. “But your military stays outside the town.”

Bob Gally obliged and quickly fell into step behind Rodney, his short legs churning twice as fast.

Every eye turned toward Rodney, who led the representative of the Department of Reconstruction toward the town hall, where the bulk of their people were trained to go to during their practice drills.

Rodney didn’t like the idea of having her stay when something like this happened. His original plan was to send her to the next community with their runner. But she wouldn’t budge. He didn’t know how it was possible, but she’d grown even more stubborn.

Golden sunlight flooded through the door as Rodney stepped inside. Faces turned. Some of the people were armed, but they lowered their weapons when they saw it was him. He saw her at the other end of the hall, helping Holly with a pair of elderly women that couldn’t move on their own anymore.

“Kate,” Rodney said, his voice echoing in the open space.

When she turned, those golden rays lit up her scarred face and slightly crooked nose that came from a bad set by the medical team who’d revived her. The medic who worked on her told him that she had been dead for nearly thirty seconds. After she woke up, Rodney told her what happened and asked her what she saw during those thirty seconds that she was dead.

“This is Bob Gally,” Rodney said. “He’s with the United States government.”

Kate shook Bob's extended hand but didn't reciprocate the smile. "I didn't realize we still had one of those."

"We do, or at least we will," Bob said, that nervous laughter slipping through again. "So I'm told that you're the person in charge here?"

"That's what they tell me," Kate said, looking at Rodney.

Bob examined the hall and clapped his hands together. "You've got quite the setup. Very organized, which makes the transition back onto the grid easier."

Bob talked about sending Kate to DC to join the other "elected" leaders from similar communities that had assembled all around the country after the wake of the EMP. He spoke of the small pockets of resistance that still remained in the larger cities where the terrorists' strongholds were starting to dwindle away. But the only thing that Rodney focused on, the only thing that was repeated in his mind, was what she told him when she woke up.

"It was dark for a long time," Kate said, her voice so weak but her eyes alive as she lay on the cot set up in the tent. "But then everything was white, like snow, and it melted away. Grass and flowers, and life sprang up around me. It was warm, and I closed my eyes, thinking this was where I was meant to be." A tear fell out of the corner of her eye. "But I was alone."

Rodney squeezed Kate's hand and wiped the tear from her cheek, repeating the same words that she'd spoken to him when they left their apartment building in New York. "A world where you're by yourself isn't much of a world to live in, is it?"

And over the course of that harsh winter, Kate and Rodney kept as many people alive as they could. And then when the snows thawed, more people found their way to their towns. They built a community together. And now that community was on a journey to rejoin the rest of the world.

Bob Gally clapped his hands again, snapping Rodney from the memory. "Shall we get started?"

And to that Kate smiled. "We already have."

Many thanks to everyone who read my story!

Writing is the best way I know to express myself, and I'm so glad that you all have rewarded me with the opportunity to share my imagination with you. As an author, I learn and evolve from the input of others, so if you have a spare

moment and you enjoyed the story, please leave a short, spoiler-free review of the book. As readers, your personal opinions are often the best references for a writer. Your commentary allows me to further provide you all with fun, engaging material.

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