



ELLE RICHARDS

THE
FALLEN

Book one in the When the World Fell series

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Elle Richards

OceanofPDF.com

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Prologue

Liv

I never used to watch horror movies. Now I'm living in one.

You might think surviving a zombie apocalypse came about through sheer luck or because I latched onto a group of big, bad men to keep me safe, but that wasn't how it happened. It was all thanks to the careful plotting and planning I did in the early stages—and the fact that I'd never believed in the concept that ignorance is bliss. How could anyone be happy *not* knowing important details that had the power to change the course of their life? These days, it only had the potential to make you dead.

Years ago, I paid close attention to how people reacted to each Covid variant as it spread across the globe. The first wave brought panic and chaos. Face masks, restrictions, lockdowns. *Millions* of tragic deaths.

The second wave generated less concern and more complacency. We'd been through the worst and survived, so there was nothing more to fear, right?

The third wave? We were almost back to normal, and no one seemed too affected by the fear the media worked so hard to generate. Everybody just went through the motions and trusted it would all turn out fine. And it did.

Thanks to global warming, three years later a 50,000-year-old cluster of microbes previously trapped in a glacier escaped into the atmosphere. When those microbes became infectious pathogens, I didn't even see the initial rush for toilet paper that came when COVID-19 first hit the news.

No panic. No fear.

Nothing other than a handful of people rolling their eyes and saying, "Here we go again. It's always *something*."

That complete lack of reaction sparked the first inklings of concern for me, but I couldn't pinpoint why because everything just seemed so *normal*. A quiet hum of fear vibrated inside me for days, and since it showed no signs of letting up, it seemed like something that deserved my attention. So, while everyone else talked about their plans for the weekend or complained about

money, schedules, relationships, and kids, I maxed out my credit card stockpiling survival supplies—then applied for more cards and maxed those out, too.

I bought long-life food pouches, water-purifying drink bottles, a bowie knife and holster, a camp stove with gas canisters. The list went on. And on. It became my hobby, a project that kept me focused and took my mind off the virus. I researched as much as I could about growing food, tying knots, performing emergency first aid, and more, just in case the Internet went down, and I no longer had access to that endless source of information.

Part of me hoped I'd overreacted, that I'd just be left with a major case of embarrassment and some hefty credit card bills, because at least that would mean life had continued as normal.

But then the worst possible thing happened.

My fears were realised.

Widespread, *catastrophic* devastation across the entire planet in less than twelve months.

Scientists coined it the *Ultimus virus* and for reasons no one could explain, some of us were immune. At first, it was airborne and produced symptoms like those of Covid, but they were amplified to an alarming new level, and most who caught the illness just couldn't survive it.

When people died in the beginning, they were buried in the usual way and their families mourned their losses. All perfectly, tragically normal—until the numbers climbed so high that hospitals and funeral homes couldn't cope anymore. When it reached that point, it became clear we were dealing with something so much worse than anything we'd endured before.

By then, I had all my supplies, and I began spending most of my time at home.

The second wave followed soon after the first, and the virus mutated into something terrifying that none of us had ever seen outside of movies and television shows. When the fever hit, there was a ninety-five percent chance it resulted in violent convulsions and death. Only death didn't mean ceasing to exist.

Sure, your soul disappeared—if you believed in such things anymore—but once the convulsions ended and hearts stopped pumping, bodies started *reanimating*. They were almost as mobile as they had been before; slower, less coordinated, and limited in their abilities, but most definitely still moving.

The airborne version dissipated not too long after that, and the only way to catch it was through bodily fluids, namely a bite. An *actual* bite from another human being.

I'd always found the concept of life and death morphing into one to be oddly fascinating, but the reality of having someone with blank, bloodshot eyes and a slack mouth coming after you and trying to rip into your flesh? Not so much fun.

And although some were lucky enough to survive the original airborne version of the Ultimus virus, not a single person had outlived a bite. Once those teeth got a hold of you and the virus entered your bloodstream, it was over. Sometimes within hours, sometimes days. Either way, you knew you were a goner, so it was best to isolate yourself from your loved ones—if there were any left.

Even now, two years after society had crumbled and the last of modern conveniences like electricity, gas, and water shut off for good, seeing the dead lumbering around the streets could still throw me.

But I adapted. You needed to be flexible if you wanted to survive in this new, savage world.

And I truly wanted to make a life for myself. A future.

So few people had been given that privilege that it had never once occurred to me to throw the opportunity away.

One

Liv

My home was a modern, two-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a building in central Melbourne. I'd lived here for a decade—long before the pandemic raged through—and although my new life had been comfortable enough, my food supplies were dwindling and my options for finding more were risky in a city overrun with dangerous humans and the dead.

The rational side of me knew it was time to leave the place I'd called home since I was eighteen, but one emotional factor stopped me from taking that step; my eighty-year-old neighbour, Haruto. I'd convinced him to move in with me back when production shut down and it became obvious life wouldn't be returning to normal. The rest of his family lived in Japan, he had no children to care for him, and his wife died from the airborne virus at a time when dying meant being gone for good.

As far as I knew, Haruto and I were the only two people living in the building, but the dead still roamed the halls, bumping into doors and moaning throughout the day and night. I could have cleared them from this level and freed us from the sounds and smells, but I saw them as the equivalent of having guard dogs protecting us from fellow humans. Haruto agreed.

When society first showed signs of becoming a slow-moving car crash, I bought brackets and wide slabs of timber to reinforce my door. Each piece of wood could be slid free in an emergency, but we hadn't needed to use it since Haruto came to live with me. Whenever I left, I went out through the balcony, climbed down the rope ladder I'd secured to the room below, then slipped in through *that* door and out into the cleared hallway.

After that, it was a straight run down the fire stairs to access the streets and try to remain invisible until I returned home.

The process probably seemed a little over the top, but the second I left the safety of my apartment, every movement required thought and care. Being a woman alone in this world made me hyper-aware of my vulnerability, and I

couldn't risk leaving Haruto alone to fend for himself. Luckily for both of us, he seemed content with only hearing about my adventures rather than experiencing the outside world himself.

"I'll be back at the usual time," I told him as I sheathed my tantō, the short sword he'd gifted me that his father had passed down to him. "I'll see if I can rustle up some painkillers while I'm gone. Is there anything else you want me to look out for?"

Since the beginning, I'd given myself a two-hour limit outside each morning, mainly so Haruto would know something had gone wrong if I didn't return within that time. We had no technology for communication, and spending longer away from home felt like I was tempting fate. I'd created a safe little space for myself here, and I wanted to keep it that way until the time came for me to leave for good.

Haruto smiled from his recliner chair without acknowledging the mention of pain relief. His eyes were tired, his skin pale, but he continued putting on a cheerful front for my sake. "No. Nothing. Be safe, little ninja."

He hadn't been well throughout the spring and summer, and his condition had only worsened as we headed into the cooler months of autumn. I didn't have a background in medicine, but my grandmother had died of cancer years ago, and I recognized the signs. Haruto never complained about being in pain or discussed his symptoms at all, but lately, I'd catch a wince when he thought I wasn't paying attention, and he'd become more careful about how he moved, limiting the number of times he walked around the apartment.

"I'll be careful. See you soon." I returned his smile before I ducked out through the sliding door and closed it quietly behind me. Just before seven a.m., right on schedule.

Whenever I left home, I pushed aside my concern for him and focused on my surroundings. In a perfect world, I wouldn't have needed to leave him at all, but if I stopped forcing myself outside each day, it wouldn't take long for me to become mentally and physically weak, and there wasn't much room for softness anymore.

I stood on the balcony as cool air swirled around me and the rising sun threw the city skyline into silhouette. A row of multi-level office buildings sat opposite my home, an older one situated between two newer complexes that were finished not long before the pandemic began. They used to be all polished steel and gleaming, mirrored glass, but they were starting to take on the same tired, neglected look as every other building.

My gaze swept over the litter scattered across the ground like colourful tumbleweeds, and the abandoned cars left at the curbside or right in the middle of the road. Some of them had been set on fire long ago and were now burnt-out carcasses, and the rest were covered in dust but otherwise undamaged. Weeds grew in places I'd never seen greenery before, and sometimes I'd spot a stray cat darting around or—the thought made me shiver—a disgusting rat.

Funny how the streets could look chaotic and deserted at the same time.

A movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I glanced to the left to see three of the dead shuffling away from me, heading toward Douglas Street where more of them would be roaming. I heard no noises other than the distant moans from a bigger group of the infected, playing like a permanent soundtrack in the movie that had become my life. If I had to liken the sound to anything, it reminded me of the time I'd found my mum sitting in the kitchen with her forehead resting on the table, questioning her life choices after a big night on the margaritas. She'd let loose a long, low moan that sounded inhuman at the time, only her problem had been cured with a greasy burger and fries.

Seeing nothing of concern this morning, I adjusted the strap on my backpack and braced myself for another deep dive into reality. After a thorough scan of the area, I lowered the rope ladder and climbed to the balcony below mine, looking at each rung to make sure I didn't slip. Once my feet were on solid ground again, I used the attached string to hoist the ladder back to its original position, then secured the string and turned to check that no one had seen my climb.

Whenever I was coming or going from home, humans were my biggest concern. If anyone stumbled onto where I lived, they'd come for the supplies they assumed I had, and I'd be forced to defend the one place

where I still felt relatively safe. I hadn't been put in a position where I needed to injure any fellow humans yet, and I hoped to make it through the rest of my days without discovering what that felt like.

Jamming my knife into an already dead person? I'd long since come to terms with that.

From my vantage point, everything appeared to be in order... but just as I prepared to reach for the sliding door behind me, another movement registered.

My heart gave a hard thud, and I stood frozen on the spot.

The living were easy to differentiate from the dead. Humans moved faster, were more agile and graceful. The dead operated like those old Atari games my dad used to show me when I was little, limited in their abilities and reduced to basic forward-backward motions. They couldn't speak or understand words. They were unable to climb and lacked the brain power or fine motor movements to open doors. Their only focus was sinking their teeth into human flesh, and one bite never seemed to be enough.

My pulse raced, and I held my breath.

A man.

That on its own wasn't surprising.

A large gang roamed the area, and although I'd avoided them so far, I'd seen them in action enough that I'd never been tempted to speak to any of them in person. They barrelled through the streets as if the city belonged to them, sometimes in convoys of five or more cars, other times just one or two. The energy surrounding them came off as threatening and intimidating every time, and I'd never seen any women with them. Seriously, *where* were the women? For a lone person like me, it was best to keep far away.

As the song goes, *one of these things is not like the others*. Where the gang members were loud and obnoxious, this man was quiet and careful.

He was also alone.

On foot.

The tiny hairs on my forearms rose as I kept quiet and watched him from the safety of the balcony. He'd emerged from the office building directly

opposite mine as if he'd spent the night there.

Four of the infected had entered the street since I'd been watching, and he hid in the doorway as they lumbered past him oblivious to his presence. They didn't have the dog-like sense of smell that used to be depicted in entertainment. The dead needed to see you moving to catch onto the fact that you were bite-worthy, and even then, you could still outrun them if you were fortunate enough to not be surrounded. They were lethal—and forgetting that could be a huge mistake—but their lack of speed meant you at least had time to strategise.

The man waited until they were gone, then slipped from the shadowed doorway and out into the burgeoning light.

As his features became clearer to me, I let out a breath, a sigh of feminine appreciation. He was strong and lean, with tanned skin and black hair that looked as if it hadn't been cut in a while. He wore cargo pants and a grey henley, with an assortment of tools attached to his belt like an apocalyptic Batman. The small backpack he carried suggested he could have been staying somewhere nearby, but I wasn't so sure about that. I'd never seen him before, and his quiet, restrained demeanour made me think he might be someone I wanted to know.

Before he could disappear for good, I opened the sliding door, then raced through the empty apartment and out into the hallway. With panting breaths, I headed for the fire exit and dashed down the concrete steps, stopping at the bottom to compose myself before I opened the door to the outside.

This part always frightened me the most. Blind spots made me vulnerable for a split second—just long enough to be surprised by one of the infected or grabbed by a not-so-friendly human. Strangely enough, humans scared me more. The dead were at least predictable, and they never tried to hide what they wanted from you.

I eased the door open and peered through the gap. When it looked to be all clear, I sidled outside, checking that the duct tape I'd secured over the latch was still in place before I shut it again. It was my only way back inside.

I waited and listened. A group of the dead in the distance caught my attention, but they were far enough away that I didn't need to worry about

them yet. As I counted the numbers—seven, with another two joining from a side street—the man I'd been looking for crossed the road and slipped into the cinema complex on the other side.

He hadn't seen me. He didn't even look in my direction, but his presence left me feeling exposed in my current position. With adrenaline coursing through me, I followed his path and hurried across the street, flattening myself against the brick wall outside the cinema. My backpack dug into my spine as I caught my breath and considered my options.

I'd already been through the complex about a year back to check for supplies. Like most of the commercial buildings in this area, it had long ago been stripped of anything useful, and the dead roamed the ground floor. Not in large numbers, but enough that playing dodgem posed a few challenges and would be unnecessarily risky given there was nothing of value in there.

He could have been staying in one of the theatres or using the building as a ruse so no one would know where he'd really been holed up all this time. The emergency exits in each theatre led to an alleyway on the left and another at the rear. The laneways housed small apartment buildings, two cafes with offices on the upper levels, a newsagency, and a backpacker hostel.

As a general rule, I avoided narrow streets unless it was obvious I had the all-clear. They gave me fewer escape options, and the idea of being trapped made me anxious—but I ignored the inner warning and zipped around the corner, diving straight into the alcove of the newsagency entrance. While I waited to see if he'd appear from an emergency exit, I slipped my knife from my belt and gripped the handle to stop my fingers from trembling.

Anticipation built inside me, and my breaths came faster.

Sweat dampened my t-shirt in the middle of my back. My limbs were taut with nerves.

I wanted to see him.

I didn't want to see him.

Long moments passed before I heard another noise, and suddenly the thought of coming face-to-face with a human other than Haruto overwhelmed me. With my heart in my throat, I poked my head out from

my hiding spot to look for the man—and met vacant eyes and rotting flesh instead.

A cry lodged in my throat, and I stepped forward to throw the infected woman off balance.

You needed to think fast and act without hesitation to avoid being overpowered and bitten. It took a blade through the eye, the ear, or up through the jaw to kill one of them for good—and a straight, driving motion to ensure your knife didn't go off course and miss its target; the brain.

I grabbed the front of her filthy cardigan and yanked her toward me, sinking my knife into her eye socket. At first, I'd found it gruesome to end a former human in this way, but I'd done it so many times that I'd become accustomed to the sensation of decomposing flesh giving way to my knife or sword. As I eased her body to the ground, the smell of decay filled my nostrils, and I tried to stay as quiet as possible to keep my location secret.

I checked the alley in both directions and trained my ears for further sounds.

Nothing.

I waited a few minutes longer, hoping to catch another glimpse of him, but as my heart rate slowed, I pulled in a breath and shoved down my disappointment. He was either back in his hiding place by now, or he'd caught onto me tailing him and had decided to stay out of sight. I couldn't blame him if that was the case. It was impossible to know who to trust anymore. Taking a chance on a stranger could mean losing everything that mattered to you.

Telling myself I'd keep an eye out for him on my run, I turned to the door of the newsagency and pushed, figuring I'd pick up some reading material for Haruto while I was here. I'd been in the shop not long ago and there were no infected trapped inside at the time, but I still searched every aisle to confirm it was safe. Although the place had already been ransacked, looters were after chocolate bars and chips, maps and how-to books, not entertainment.

Haruto spent his working years as an architect, so I stuffed my backpack with a couple of home design magazines and a John Grisham novel, then

slipped behind the counter to check the backroom reserved for staff.

A desk and an overturned chair were in the far corner, with a filing cabinet and a bookshelf along the nearest wall. People hid medication and valuables in the strangest places, and I pulled open the top drawer of the filing cabinet hoping to find something useful. It was crammed with suspension files labelled with neat plastic tabs, all of them so bulky there was no room for anything else. I closed the first drawer and checked the remaining two to discover the same contents. No secret stashes.

While I kept my ears tuned for movements in the main part of the shop, I checked the desk drawer, expecting to see stationery and miscellaneous junk. A bottle of medication rolled from the back to the front, and anticipation rushed through me as I read the label. I knew to look for names that ended in *one* or *eine*, and I'd just hit the jackpot. With a silent cheer, I pocketed my find and thoroughly searched the rest of the drawer, resulting in a box of codeine tablets with a full blister pack still inside.

Now that I'd found a way to ease Haruto's pain, I focused on my surroundings and took in every little detail. The second I let down my guard, all hell could break loose, and I didn't want another surprise like the one outside.

I left the newsagency, spent a moment in the alcove assessing the area, then stepped over the woman's body and hurried from the alley.

With the group of infected heading my way, I took off in the opposite direction and swept my gaze from left to right. I still needed to search for food before I went back home. More painkillers would be a bonus, too.

And with plenty of time left before I reached the two-hour limit I'd set for myself, I wouldn't forget my five-kilometre run. I hadn't skipped a day since this whole mess started, and I refused to slack off now. If there was one strength I could add to the knowledge I'd gained pre-pandemic, it was speed.

My search for the man would have to wait until tomorrow.

If he stayed in the area long enough.

Two

Liv

He stepped out of the office building at the same time the next morning, confirming that he'd been using it as a temporary base. I'd already gone through a couple of the levels there searching for food, and I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to stay somewhere filled with cubicles and desks. There were no beds, and I had no clue where he was sleeping.

If my heart had thumped harder when I saw him the first time around, seeing him again brought on palpitations. He was just as appealing as I remembered from yesterday; tall, with golden skin and that rough-around-the-edges look that men did so annoyingly well. He probably had lush, thick lashes just to rub it in, too.

I liked the way he moved, with a confidence that suggested he could handle any challenge that came his way. From his body language alone, I'd already decided he had a deep voice and a direct manner that would leave me in no doubt of his thoughts or intentions. There was comfort in that for someone like me who'd soon be alone in this world.

I went through my usual routine leaving the balcony, and when I reached street level, he passed by me on the other side of the road just like last time, eyes ahead without acknowledging my existence. For a man who appeared to be as careful as me outside, being oblivious to my presence didn't fit right. Neither did his timing. Almost like he knew exactly when to expect me.

I gripped my sword and followed him from the shadows on my side of the road, keeping back so I'd have time to duck into a doorway if he turned around.

The man stayed visible for longer than he had yesterday, and a tremor of excitement moved through me as I waited to see what he'd do next. He was just so nice to watch after being surrounded by sadness and devastation. A flicker of light in the gloom, an escape from the mundane.

He stopped to take down one of the infected with an efficiency that impressed me—no wasted movements, no showing off—and after I'd been tailing him for a while, he opened the smashed door to the café I used to visit with colleagues when I worked on this block. The tinted windows meant I couldn't track his movements while he was inside, but I had no intention of stepping through the doorway to find out what he was doing in there.

I dived into the record shop opposite, my heart pitter-pattering as I stood beside the door and kept an eye on the café's windows. Long minutes passed by with nothing happening, and my curiosity only grew stronger as I waited. I wanted to know if he'd caught glimpses of me here and there and if he was curious about me, too. I wanted to see him up close. Hear his voice. Meet another living person after being holed up in my apartment for so long.

With the droning of the nearby infected to keep me company, I willed him to step outside into the open. Too much time had gone by with no sign of him though, and I had to accept that he'd slipped out through the back. Again.

Disappointed that the game appeared to be over for the day, I opened the door and leaned out to check the street in both directions. A cluster of seven or eight dead stumbled toward me from the left, and I had less than a minute before they became a problem. Once I got my sword swinging and my adrenaline firing, I could handle a group like that on my own, but I preferred to avoid those situations when I could.

I kept my eyes on my surroundings as I crossed the road and slipped inside the café. I eased the door shut and turned my attention to the interior. The early morning light made it difficult to see if anyone was hiding inside, but the place felt empty, and without being able to explain it, I knew I was alone.

Nothing appeared any different from the last time I'd come in here... except for the flash of yellow beside the cash register. I stowed my sword and stepped over broken glass, wandering through a maze of flipped tables and chairs. With my eyes and ears open just in case he was waiting in the back room, I reached the counter and grabbed the packet of peanut M&Ms. I

flipped them over in my hand, remembering the sweet, long-ago scent of chocolate. A smile crossed my face, and I turned in a slow circle as if he might magically reappear now that I'd found the offering he left for me.

With my heart thudding and my stomach filled with butterflies, I gazed out the window to the main street, holding my breath and wondering if he'd show up again. I needed to see him—if only to confirm that I hadn't lost my mind and made him up.

Seconds later, he jogged across the road with his easy stride, running past the record shop and heading for the dead I'd seen coming this way. I pulled in a breath and pressed the M&M packet to my chest, struggling to control the mixture of elation, apprehension, and nerves. I didn't want to get so caught up in this game we were playing that I stopped paying attention to my safety, but it was so hard to keep my excitement contained when it looked like I'd finally found someone worth getting to know.

I moved closer to the window to follow his progress, wondering how he'd handle a bigger group of the infected. With my hand resting on the hilt of my sword, or the tsuka as Haruto called it, I watched him swing his hatchet at the first one, take down another, and keep going with a steady rhythm until he had a collection of dead bodies scattered around him. By the time he was done, my heart was thudding faster and my fascination with him grew stronger.

He'd left the gift for me in a place he knew I'd check. He'd just told me he was aware of my presence.

How long had he been watching me?

And if he'd seen me leaving my apartment, why hadn't he tried to approach me?

Too many questions—but he was about to learn one thing about me.

I wouldn't let it go until I found answers.

~ * ~

On the third day, instead of continuing the pattern where I stayed one step behind and tried to guess his next move, I took the initiative. He'd given me a present, chocolate of all things, and I wanted to do something for him in

return. Setting up the offering felt a lot like flirting, which seemed crazy given the way things were now, but it had been too long since I'd experienced this kind of tension. Catching the eye of a handsome stranger turned out to be too tempting for me to resist.

So, while Haruto slept in his bed, I ducked outside before the first sliver of sunlight had crested over the horizon, and I left the man a gift at the entrance doors to his building. It took some careful maneuvering to get it down from my balcony and across the street without spilling any of it, but I managed to make it there without ruining the surprise.

When I came inside again, Haruto was still in his room, so I could keep watch without him twigging that I was up to something. I faced the balcony with my heart in my throat, waiting to see if the man would come outside. My hands were clenched at my side, and I ran through every reason why this was a bad idea.

I'd taken a chance.

I'd reached out to a stranger who knew where I lived, who could physically overpower me and take everything I owned if he felt so inclined. My life could alter in ways I'd never prepared for, never expected—but the thrill and the mystery had got hold of me now and there was no turning back.

Minutes later, the man sidled out through one of the double doors and stooped to collect my offering, his reaction time letting me know he'd been watching me from one of the windows. It should have worried me knowing he wanted to keep an eye on me from over there, but it didn't.

Weird.

My body had already decided before my brain could catch on that he was a trustworthy person, and I frowned, wondering what had triggered the response. We hadn't even made eye contact yet, but his presence made me feel safer and less alone whenever I went outside.

I nibbled on my thumbnail and kept just out of sight in case he looked up and saw me.

He lifted the travel mug to his nose and inhaled. While my breath came faster, he removed the lid, checked inside, and then took a sip of the steaming liquid without a moment's hesitation. That act alone had me

pulling in a surprised breath. He knew nothing about me, yet he trusted me not to poison or drug him. It was instant coffee made with powdered milk—nothing compared to the quality we used to drink—but it was heaven in our current circumstances and seeing him accept it made me feel like he'd just accepted me.

He didn't tilt his head in my direction to acknowledge me, but when he took another sip and smiled a little, he might as well have.

He was aware of me standing here.

Just as I'd been able to feel his absence in the café yesterday, he could feel my presence now. It made me nervous in the best kind of way.

I remained hidden and watched him like I used to watch my favourite TV shows, eyes glued to his movements, holding my breath from time to time while I waited to see what twists and turns would come next. From a distance, he looked like the kind of man I might have considered out of my league if we'd met pre-pandemic—but my mum had once told me if self-deprecation was an Olympic event, I would have won gold, so I didn't always trust my opinion in that area.

“Olivia?”

I jumped at the sound of Haruto's voice and turned to find him standing in the open doorway to his room.

“Morning.” I wiped the excitement from my face so he wouldn't catch on that I'd been sneaking around. He was a master at reading expressions, and I hadn't reached the point where I wanted to tell him about the other man yet. “You're awake early.” He usually rose just before I headed out each morning to remind me to be safe and watch me leave. I'd completed my coffee run extra early in the hope he wouldn't hear the kettle or the door opening and closing.

“You going out already?”

“No.” I smiled. “I will be soon. I was just checking the weather.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the spot where the man had been standing. He'd disappeared inside and taken the cup with him.

Seeing the empty doorway filled me with longing and had me more convinced than ever that I needed to meet him. When my last friend on earth was gone, I didn't want to take on this life alone. Haruto and I had propped each other up throughout the madness and thinking about the loneliness he'd leave behind was too depressing to contemplate.

He shuffled toward the kitchen to start his day, and my stomach dropped as I watched him. His navy pyjamas hung off his frame, and his wispy grey hair stood up in different directions, making him look like a little boy again. With a shuddering breath, I turned away from the sight and faced the balcony, torn and tempted.

The only thing I knew for sure was that my life would be changing soon regardless of my wishes, and if I didn't take control now, I'd be left floundering when it happened.

~ * ~

“You need to find new people,” Haruto said from his comfy spot on the recliner a few days later. "A group."

He'd been reading one of the architecture magazines I brought back for him earlier in the week, but he dog-eared the page and laid it on his lap as if preparing to deliver a lecture. Perked up from the relief of the pain meds I'd been scavenging for him, he'd shown welcome glimpses of the funny, energetic man he used to be before he became ill. I'd stocked up on enough of them now that they should keep him going for at least a month before I had to worry about finding more.

So... it looked like we were having this long-overdue conversation. I braced myself as I stood at the kitchen bench and ripped open the plastic casing on our final 36-pack of bottled water. Bulk cases had originally filled one of the floor-to-ceiling cupboards in my spare bedroom, but like with all the other supplies I'd accumulated during the beginning of the pandemic, these too were running low.

I wanted to play dumb and pretend I didn't understand what Haruto was talking about, but we knew each other too well for me to attempt a trick like that. “I know,” I said with a sigh.

He delivered an understanding look that only put me on edge. "It's time, Olivia."

Oh-liv-i-a. I'd miss the way he pronounced my name, his accent turning it into something musical.

"I know," I said again, only this time my voice shook.

When I went over to his chair, Haruto accepted the bottle I held out to him as I perched on the arm of his recliner. Emotion tightened my throat, and I wished so badly for things to be different. He was the last part of my before-life, and I wanted to cling to that connection for as long as possible. "Humans can be just as dangerous as the dead, though," I reminded him. "Sometimes even more so."

"You careful. You tell good from bad." He cracked the lid on the bottle, took a couple of sips of water, and set it on the side table.

I gave an absent nod and stared through the glass at the bright sky beyond. Without the help of social media and texts to get a feel for a person, all I could rely on were my instincts.

I thought about the man I'd seen on the streets; his low-key demeanour and the way his presence made me feel. A sense of safety had come over me every time we'd crossed paths, giving the impression I could have approached him at any point and been a hundred percent certain he wouldn't have hurt me. We still hadn't spoken yet, but we'd spent the past few days since the coffee drop continuing our cat-and-mouse game.

"I've seen a new man around lately," I told Haruto, knowing it would only make it harder for me to steer him off the path he was heading down. The conversation had been too long in coming though, and I needed to put his mind at ease, so he'd know I was going to be okay when he was gone.

"Not from the gang?"

"No." I'd shared endless stories of my adventures outside with him. Haruto knew what it was like even if the only outdoors he'd experienced were the times he'd sat in the wedge of sunlight coming through the balcony door. "He's different. I don't know how to explain it."

"You talk to him? You know where he lives?"

"We haven't spoken yet." I pushed off the chair and walked across to the sliding door, gazing at the office complex opposite. The thought that he might be standing there right now looking back at me was surprisingly thrilling. "But he's staying there." I pointed at the building and shot Haruto a glance over my shoulder. "He keeps giving me glimpses of him then disappearing. Not like he's playing with me or trying to lure me somewhere to do horrible things. More like he's letting me get to know him in a weird kind of way."

Apparently, it didn't seem so weird to Haruto. "Go look for him."

I faced him and tried to smile, but I couldn't quite pull it off. "I will."

"Today," he insisted. "No time to waste."

Both Haruto and I had slept late this morning for the first time. It was almost nine o'clock, and I hadn't even had my coffee yet let alone been outside. I closed my eyes and released a slow breath, forcing down the emotion building inside me. He didn't have long until the illness took him. I could hear it in his voice, in the urgency pushing him to push me. We'd spent every day together since the world fell apart, keeping each other sane when we would have otherwise been alone. I thought of him as my own grandfather, and I didn't want to contemplate what it would be like living without him.

"I'll go now," I said, opening my eyes again.

"Good—and when you find him..." He picked up the magazine and flicked to the page he'd earmarked. "You live here."

"Where?" I crossed the room and took the magazine from his outstretched hand.

He'd been reading an article about off-grid housing, featuring an architecturally designed home on two acres, with high fences surrounding the property and a security gate at the entrance. It boasted an extensive solar-power system with battery backup to heat water from a series of tanks and run all the lights and appliances inside. The walls were thick enough to keep out the summer heat and the winter chill—and if on the off-chance solar energy became a problem during the depths of winter, there was even a wood fire and a generator.

With the extensive orchard, chicken coop, and veggie gardens, the property would have been a peaceful oasis even before the world crumbled. Now? It was Nirvana.

It was also in Bridgehill, a six-hour drive from the city, about as far east as you could go without ending up in the ocean. For security reasons, the author hadn't included the address, and that didn't even take into account the fact that the owners might still be living there, or more likely, other people had caught onto its existence and overrun the place. Two acres of land could easily be turned into a colony with multiple residences if it was organised by the right people.

Just the thought of it got my heart thumping harder.

"It's six hours from here—in a car," I pointed out, then added unnecessarily, "I don't have a car."

Even though I knew how to drive, living within walking distance of work, entertainment, and all my favourite restaurants had made the idea of owning a car and dealing with the associated expenses redundant. During my prep stage years ago, I'd also Googled how to hotwire a car just in case the information ever came in handy. I'd discovered that anything built from 2000 onwards ran more like a computer, meaning if you didn't have the key fob, abandoned cars were pretty much useless—unless you wanted one for temporary shelter or to hide from the infected.

I had no intention of walking or riding for weeks to get to a house that may turn out to be a dead end. There were too many unknowns and a high probability of getting hurt or killed along the way.

"Find man," Haruto said. "Look for car together, and both drive to house."

Haruto had neglected to include himself in that scenario, and we both knew why. I hoped he understood there was no way I'd take off anywhere without him. He'd either make the trip with us or I'd wait here and nurse him through his final days.

"I'll find the man." I'd planned on doing that sooner or later anyway. "I'll bring him back here, and we can figure out together what we're going to do next."

"Now, little ninja," he said.

His insistence had tears filling my eyes. I blinked and looked away. "Let me get ready, and I'll head out straight away. It shouldn't be too hard to track him down."

Minutes later, I'd thrown on all my equipment, and I stood in the living room watching him.

He'd been so strong in the beginning that it hit me hard to see how much he'd deteriorated. He'd lost weight, his cheeks were hollow. He was fading right before my eyes, and I tried my best to keep a brave face when all I wanted to do was sit with him and cry about the unfairness of the world. The thought of leaving him this time scared me more than anything I might encounter outside, but he could be a stubborn man, and he wouldn't let me rest until I'd done as he asked. "I'll be back in two hours, hopefully with a new friend."

I bent to kiss his cheek, but he reached up to pull me in for a hug instead. His frail arms were surprisingly strong as he clung to me, and for a moment it felt like he didn't want to let go. "You good girl." He patted my back in a sweet, paternal gesture. "Best part of my life. Be safe, granddaughter."

"I will." I pulled back and smiled, letting him see the tears filling my eyes. He'd always felt like my family, but it was the first time he'd ever referred to me in that way. "I love you, Haruto."

Three

Cruz

Shit. She'd appeared again—*finally*.

My heart rate sped as I watched her from the rooftop of the building opposite hers. I usually kept an eye on her from one of the offices inside, but when she didn't show at her usual time, I grabbed a chair and rolled it out onto the roof, setting up my vantage point near the boundary wall. Two hours later, I was still sitting here like an idiot waiting to see her.

She emerged at seven every day, and when seven o'clock came and went with no sign of her, I wondered if something happened while I wasn't around. For someone I'd never met, thinking about her being hurt or worse had a surprising impact, and I stared at her building with a focus that would have had me arrested back in the day. The only thing that stopped me from climbing up to her apartment to check on her was having seen her in action other times and knowing her capabilities—and I had no interest in meeting the pointy end of her sword.

The woman stepped out onto her balcony just like she had every other time, her movements graceful, her head turning to take in her surroundings. She commanded my attention for obvious and not-so-obvious reasons, and every time I set eyes on her again, I felt like my favourite show had just started. The masculine side of me wanted to approach her a while ago, but my goal from the beginning had been to ease into it so I wouldn't scare her off. Women on their own had more reasons than ever to keep to themselves now, and she was smart to stay away until she felt safe around me.

She stood stock still on her balcony, watching, listening. I'd started tracking her several days before I put myself on her radar for the first time, and she was sprinting so fast it was obvious she'd kept up with her cardio. Smart. She ran the streets like she knew every single nook and cranny, making me think she'd been living here a long time. Probably before the world crashed and burned.

I wondered where her people were and why she kept heading out alone.

Once she was satisfied there were no dangers in the area, she climbed down the rope ladder and dropped to the balcony below hers. Normally, I would have already been on ground level waiting to play games with her, but today I stayed in position. With our usual routine interrupted, I wanted to see what she'd do next.

The sword on her belt made her look like a badass, and she had a slim, strong body, with dark hair that went to the middle of her back in a braid. I hadn't seen her up close to know the colour of her eyes, but she looked to be around five-eight, with long legs and a confident, capable vibe—the kind of woman who'd figured out how to exist in a world without any rules.

I rested my elbows on my knees and followed her movements. She disappeared inside the room below hers, and pretty soon she'd come out through the ground-floor exit. The door faced north, so I couldn't see her from the rooftop, but a minute or so later, she appeared around the corner with her usual caution, taking a beat to scan the area before she sprinted across the road in my direction. My heart pumped harder as I watched her run, taking in her smooth style despite the weight of her backpack and the weapons on her belt.

She was coming to see me again.

She hadn't even tilted her head to let me know she'd seen me up here on the roof, but I had no doubt she knew exactly where to find me.

Three days ago, she brought me coffee and disappeared straight afterwards. Today she looked all business, and my pulse jumped at the thought of speaking to her face-to-face. I could have headed down to one of the lower levels to make it quicker for her to get to me, but I had a feeling she'd appreciate the space on the rooftop.

The main doors were unlocked and undamaged, the stairs clear of corpses. A few of the dead were wandering around on different levels, but I'd avoided them or put them down as I passed through each floor searching for food.

I'd been sleeping on the leather couch in a lawyer's office while I worked on getting closer to the woman, but I'd about reached my limits there. I needed a real bed in a secure home, somewhere rural and permanent; a

property off the main roads to grow food and a future. It was the main reason I'd travelled from my home on the Victorian south coast to the city in the first place. I wanted to find people who shared my vision—or people who could at least be convinced to give it a try.

I dipped my hand into my backpack and pulled out the unopened bag of Skittles I'd found in a desk drawer. They were a year past their use-by date, but I ripped the pack open and tossed a couple in my mouth, sucking on the coating while I waited to see how long it would take for her to reach me. The thought of looking at her up close, listening to her voice, and feeling her presence, had anticipation humming inside me, and I forced down the urge to go inside and meet her halfway.

I blew the stripped Skittles from my mouth one by one, aiming for an old metal bucket near the wall and listening to them ping as they hit the rim. I'd spent the past few days thinking about how our first conversation might go, and after running through various strategies, I'd settled on letting it flow naturally so it wouldn't come off as calculated. I didn't want her to have any reason to take backward steps when she'd been brave enough to approach me first.

As I reached into the bag again, the air around me shifted and changed. My body stilled, and I waited.

She was here.

I had no idea how I knew. She hadn't spoken, and if she'd made any noise coming through the propped-open door to the rooftop, it must have been while I was rummaging around in the bag. I'd become attuned to her now without ever having spoken to her. Her movements, her energy. It was a strange feeling after spending so much time alone.

"Thanks for the coffee," I said without turning around.

"Thanks for the chocolate."

Her smooth, feminine voice had the hairs rising on my forearms, soft and breathless from her run up the stairs. I hadn't heard a woman speak in a while. It sounded so good that I wanted to keep asking her questions just to listen to her talk. "Did you see me from your apartment just now?" I asked, already sure of the answer.

“Uh huh, like an evil overlord surveying his subjects.”

“Evil, huh?” With a smile, I kicked off the wall and spun my chair to face her. I remained seated to avoid scaring her off, but after watching her for over a week, I had a feeling it would take more than that to intimidate her.

When I saw her up close for the first time—here, right in front of me—the attraction hit me like a punch to the gut and I pulled in a breath. She was seriously beautiful, with a petite nose, full lips, and intelligent blue eyes. She wore a beaten-up pair of boots, cargo pants, and a black, form-fitting tee that made it difficult for me to keep my eyes on hers at first. Looking at her brought the Tomb Raider to mind, and I couldn’t decide if I wanted to tussle with her or protect her from all the shit life could throw at you these days.

“Cruz Murphy,” I said, holding her gaze. “Good to meet you.”

She looked me over, giving me a slight smile that softened her features. I knew what she was thinking because I’d seen the expression a few times. How did a guy like me—black hair, dark eyes, tanned skin, and a first name like Cruz—end up with the surname Murphy? “My mother’s side was Mexican, my father’s Irish,” I explained. “Cruz was her maiden name.”

Everything once familiar had become past tense now. Both my parents were gone. My brother, Diego, too. The memories of my family were still so strong that if I gave in and allowed myself to reminisce about them, it made me feel hopeless about the future and determined to make it better at the same time.

“Do you know Spanish?” she asked. “You have the slightest accent.” She straightened her shoulders as if just remembering not to let her guard down around a stranger. I understood where she was coming from, though. I hadn’t felt this at ease around someone new since this whole shitshow started.

I gave her a quick closed-mouth smile. “My mother’s influence. We always speak—spoke—the language at home. My dad had to learn it too, so he wouldn’t get left out of conversations.”

She smiled a little before schooling her features. “Humour me and tell me something in Spanish. I’ve always loved the way it sounds.”

I figured this was her way of testing me to make sure I wasn't feeding her bullshit, but the only words she'd ever hear from my mouth were the truth. "*Eres muy hermosa.*"

She planted her hands on her hips, highlighting the fact that neither of them held a weapon... around a stranger... in an isolated place. I'd seen how fast she could draw both weapons, but still. She'd already shown tentative trust in me, just like I'd done by drinking her coffee. "Which means?"

"You're easy on the eyes."

A soft huff came from her, but I couldn't tell if she was flattered or amused. Maybe a bit of both. "Apocalypse pretty you mean? Doesn't any woman start to look appealing when there aren't many of us around anymore?"

I smiled. "Apparently *muy loco*, too."

Silence fell between us, and I waited while she gave me another thorough head-to-toe look. She was trying to figure me out just as I'd been doing with her since I first laid eyes on her. "So..." I prompted, lifting my brows. "Are you going to tell me your name?"

A fleeting look of surprise crossed her face as if it hadn't occurred to her that I didn't already know it. "It's Olivia McCall. Liv."

I tossed the remaining Skittles in my backpack and looped my arm through the handle. "Ironic."

She frowned. "How?"

"Liv in a world full of death."

She rolled her eyes, but I caught a glimpse of humour in them. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and rose from the chair, keeping alert for changes in her body language as I approached. Her demeanour didn't shift at all, though. No moving her hand closer to her weapon, no tension in her features.

Now that we were both standing, I was almost a head taller than her, but she didn't seem bothered by the difference in height. I gestured toward the door. "Want to come inside?"

Liv narrowed her eyes, and for the first time in months, the urge came over me to laugh. "And do what?"

Commenting on her appearance right before I suggested we go somewhere private probably hadn't been my smartest move. "Talk to each other in a place where we're less likely to be found?"

"About what?"

"Whatever brought you up here to see me."

She gave me a steady look that had a kick of desire coming out of nowhere.

"I have a knife."

"I know."

She followed it up with an appealing dose of side-eye as we walked toward the door. "And a sword."

"Saw that, too."

"If there's any funny business..." Liv stepped ahead of me and turned, walking backward for a couple of steps. "I know how to use them."

Her take-no-shit attitude reminded me of the women in my family, and being around her felt like home. "Again, I know. I've seen you take down more corpses than I can count."

"Okay, okay. I'm just making sure we're on the same page, that's all." She faced the door and pulled it open, poking her head inside to make sure it was clear despite being in that spot not five minutes ago.

I took the door from her and closed it behind me, leaving us in an enclosed stairwell. We made our way down a flight of steps to the sixth floor and wandered through a carpeted maze of cubicles with desks and chairs. Paperwork was strewn across the floor, a suit jacket had been draped over the back of a chair, and a lonely umbrella hung from a coat rack in the corner. The place had a stale smell to it, but it was better than the overwhelming stench of death I'd come across in other buildings.

"I've been staying over there." I pointed toward the fancy corner office with the views.

Liv sent me a wry look. "Of course you have." She wandered in that direction, her footsteps light, her head moving from side to side to keep ahead of any surprises. I'd already cleared this level, but I appreciated her

thoroughness—one of the many traits of hers that had caught my interest. Not *all* of them were physical. “Is there whiskey in there?” she asked.

“Used to be.” The more she spoke, the more I warmed to her, and she’d been borderline abrasive part of the time. I must have been alone for too long and convinced myself any form of human contact was a good thing.

Liv patted the nameplate on the door as she passed through as if in silent thanks to barrister John Angelone for the temporary use of his office space. She slipped off her backpack and dropped it to the floor. “I don’t drink it anyway,” she said, looking up at me as she sank onto the tan leather couch. “Whiskey, I mean. I just like the smell. It reminds me of my dad.”

I left the door open and took a seat behind the desk in the plush executive chair, engulfed by the scents of leather and money. I had no idea if she was telling me her dad was an alcoholic or if he used to be a whiskey expert. Either way, it probably didn’t matter. “I take it he’s gone?”

She perched on the edge of the couch with her feet planted firmly on the floor. “He died in the beginning during the first wave. He was a whiskey enthusiast. There were bottles and bottles of it at his place; he liked to tell me stories about the origin of each one, talk about the notes of this and the hints of that. I never understood any of it, and I wasn’t all that interested in the details. I just liked spending time with him.”

Her love for him was clear in her voice, her eyes. “What about your mum?”

Liv looked at the artwork on the wall behind me, her voice seeming to drift in the air. “I’m not sure. My parents were already divorced for a few years before the virus kicked off, and she was halfway through a trip around Australia with her new husband. Last I heard, they were in lockdown in their motorhome all the way over in Broome, and when communication went down, I lost touch with her.”

It sounded like she’d accepted the worst must have happened to them. The chances of two people making a trip from one side of the country to the other were slim, and back when we were still getting news reports, they’d estimated that ninety percent of the population would be gone by the time both waves of the virus had done their damage. After seeing the

devastation, I wouldn't be surprised if the number was higher. "Any siblings?"

She shook her head. "Only child."

The lack of emotion in her voice suggested she'd long since made the switch to survival mode. We were all in the same boat in this new, fucked up world. Allowing yourself to get too caught up in feelings made you vulnerable and opened you up to a whole host of dangers. All that emotion, all the missing someone, and the memories? Lock it in a box and save it for later.

"You?" she asked.

I rested my clasped hands on the surface of the desk and met her eyes. "My parents are gone. They both passed toward the end of the first wave before the biting started. My younger brother Diego was the last to go, and I've been on my own for about six months now. The place where you're staying..." I changed direction to avoid unearthing the memories. Losing my parents to the virus had been bad enough, but putting my own brother down would haunt me for the rest of my days. "Have you been living there the entire time?"

She looked like she wanted to offer sympathy, but we both knew it was pointless, so she focused on my question instead. "It was my apartment before the pandemic. I bought it with the inheritance I got from my nan when I was eighteen—and I know this is going to make me sound like one of those fanatical doomsday preppers, but I stocked up on... everything. Ordered online. Bottled water, canned food, special meal pouches with a twenty-five-year shelf life. I had it all shipped in, and we're only just getting low on food now."

I'd struck gold finding someone who believed in being proactive rather than reactive. I'd only ever seen her running the streets on her own, though. "You sound smart, not fanatical. And *we*? You're not alone?" If she had a boyfriend or husband living with her, it wouldn't change anything in terms of wanting to get to know her or form a group, but I couldn't deny the dynamic would be different.

"I live with my elderly neighbour," she explained. "His name's Haruto. I convinced him to move in with me when his wife died and everything turned bad. He's... not well anymore."

"Bitten?"

"No." She stood to look out the window, only she did it in stealth mode and kept off to the side out of sight. She was smart, one step ahead of the game, and if I'd been in PE class with her back in high school, I would have picked her first to be on my team. "I think he has cancer," she said, shooting me a glance. In that split-second look, I saw all the sadness and concern she'd been trying to keep contained. "He doesn't have long to go now. Weeks. A month if he's lucky."

I didn't consider *lucky* to be the best fit for his situation. He'd need pain relief and palliative care to make his last days bearable, but I was smart enough to keep that information to myself. "If you're thinking about searching the desks for medication while you're here, I've checked the top three levels so far. Nothing but stale snacks and staplers."

"Thanks. I've found enough to keep him comfortable for a while now, so we're good."

"Is he still eating and drinking?"

Liv turned to face me fully. "Drinking, yes. Eating, no. Not really. We've only been having one or two meals a day since the beginning to ration supplies, but he's not even interested in that anymore."

She was right about the end being near. All she could do now was keep the pain relief coming and wait for the end. I released a long breath through my nose and leaned back in my chair, wishing it could have been different for them. Sometimes it felt like you were taking one punch after another with no way out, and it would hit her hard when she lost the one person still tethering her to the old world. I'd been through the same thing with my brother and it sucked more than I could explain. Since I had no words for a situation like this, I tried to convey my understanding with a look.

Our eyes locked, and she slipped her hands in her pockets as she held my gaze, appearing completely at ease with the connection.

There were no pretenses with her, I realised, nothing that had me wanting to back off and reevaluate now that I'd met her. She was solid, upfront, and exactly the kind of person I needed to be around. "What did you do before everything fell apart?" I asked.

Liv wandered to the doorway and peered out into the open office space. "I was a personal assistant at Harmony Music just down the block from here." She faced me again and raised her brows. "What about you?"

"Cop."

She smiled, appearing thankful for the change in subject. Her gaze travelled over me, and she raised her brows. "What kind?"

I let out an amused breath, entertained by the playful look on her face. "Homicide detective, but when the pandemic took a turn, none of us had designated roles anymore. We were anywhere and everywhere trying to keep the madness under control."

"I guess you would have adjusted to the horrors that came after better than anyone. Do you miss telling people what to do now?"

I laughed for real this time, the first genuine laugh I'd had in... shit, *years*. Our eyes connected again, and we shared a smile as warmth passed between us. "I miss people in general," I said, wondering how I'd been fortunate enough to stumble onto her. I needed her on my team—or I wanted to be on her team. Whichever way you put it, I didn't want to lose contact with her now that we'd met.

"Are you going to show me your place?" I asked. "Introduce me to your friend?"

She flicked her long braid over her shoulder and huffed out a loud breath. "I don't know. We *literally* just met."

I lifted my brows. "I showed you mine."

Liv narrowed her eyes at my teasing tone. "This isn't yours. You're just passing through. You want to go my actual home."

"What makes you think I'm passing through?"

"Because I've never seen you before. You have that traveller look about you. Where are you from?"

I liked her style. She held her ground with a subtle softness that reeled me in and had me wanting more. I couldn't tell if she was aware of her power, and I had no intention of revealing that nugget during our first day together. "I lived on the surf coast. I came to the city looking for people interested in setting up somewhere permanently; a property out of town where there's space to expand if others want to join us."

"Anywhere specific?" she asked, perking up.

"I don't have a particular house in mind or a town picked out yet, no." I stood and rounded the desk, moving closer while still keeping a respectable distance. Going off her energy and interest, it wouldn't take much to persuade her to join me. "But it has to be somewhere semi-rural where we can grow real food and I can stop eating whatever stale, processed shit I can find."

She sighed and stared at me for a beat, thinking so hard I could see it on her face. We were still feeling each other out and would be for a while yet, but a sense of closeness had already started developing between us. I knew she could feel it, too. "I have seeds," she finally said, "lots of them. Vacuum sealed in tins. They're part of my survival kit."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" I'd never met a more organised person in my life, and the fact that she was sharing this info with me was another big step in the right direction. "Are you saying you'll think about coming with me?"

"Do you have a car?" she asked, ignoring my question.

Liv was a woman on her own talking to a man she'd just met. I had no problem letting her set the pace or the rules. She'd taken a chance coming to see me today, and I wouldn't make her regret her decision. "Having a car these days is a process I won't get into right now, but yeah, I have one. Does that mean you're on board?"

She tucked some loose strands of hair behind her ear. "I think so, but not yet." Her eyes took on a faraway look. "Not until..."

Her friend died.

I nodded in understanding. "Got it." As she'd mentioned earlier, it could be weeks before he passed, but it was more important to wait for the right

person than accept anyone who crossed my path. “Come on,” I said, grabbing her backpack and handing it to her. “Show me your apartment. Let me meet your friend. We’ll get moving before those *pendejos* start roaming the streets.”

"*Pendejos?*"

"The assholes in the gang who make all that noise."

~ * ~

We didn't go straight back to her apartment.

Liv had a system she followed each morning that she refused to deviate from even with me tagging along. I'd seen parts of it from a distance, but going through it firsthand with her turned out to be an eye-opening experience. We searched a couple of levels in nearby buildings that she hadn't been through yet and found some more food and pain meds for her friend. When we were done, the two of us completed one of several circuits she'd mapped out for herself around the central business district.

We ran what I figured must have been about five kilometres, and I kept pace with her while she jogged one block and sprinted the next, alternating between the two throughout the entire route. We dodged corpses when we could, stopped to take them out if it was unavoidable, and all the while talked and kept each other aware of our positions. By the time we were done, both of us were breathing hard, and I was fast on my way to developing a crush.

When it came time to head back to her place, going through all the steps she'd devised to keep herself safe had my admiration for her doubling. She pulled up the rope ladder on her balcony and stepped into her apartment, waiting for me to pass through the door before she closed and locked it behind me. Her eyes were filled with excitement as she looked at me, and a beat later, she shifted her attention to the room in general. “Haruto! I'm home—and I have company.”

Her apartment was an open plan design, with a small kitchen overlooking a living and dining area. A two-seater dining table, an L-shaped leather couch, and a mismatched green recliner filled the space. All neatly arranged, everything in its place. There were cushions on the couch, a plush

ottoman, and a big, useless TV on the wall. Liv had barricaded the main door to the hall with timber planks at some point, and it sounded like corpses were roaming the hall like demented security guards.

She liked to keep her apartment spotless. The complete opposite of the carnage going on outside her walls.

There was no sign of the man named Haruto.

“He’s probably taking a nap.” We offloaded our backpacks, and she frowned. “But he’s been finding it harder to get around, so he usually sleeps in his recliner during the day.”

She headed for what I guessed was one of two bedrooms, and I waited for her in the lounge room. The apartment had a cold, empty feel to it as if we were the only two people here, and I had a suspicion it wasn’t the lack of heating causing the sensation. Apprehension trickled through me, along with the instinct to check on her and make sure she was okay. I’d already taken a couple of steps in her direction when a long, low wail of pain drifted my way.

“Oh, no! *Nononononono!*”

Her voice had the same tortured tone I used to hear when I had the shitty job of informing people their loved ones had been killed. I jogged to the room expecting to see the worst and found Liv standing beside the bed with her hands pressed to her mouth and her shoulders hunched forward. The man—Haruto—lay on top of the covers with one of his arms draped over the side and the other hand resting on his stomach.

His skin was pale and lifeless, his eyes closed. He looked peaceful. Content. Liv froze for a split second, then dropped to her knees and grabbed his hand. She pressed her fingers to his wrist, and when she failed to locate a pulse there, she checked his neck in a pointless attempt to find signs of life. I knew a dead body when I saw one, though, and she was searching for hope where there was none.

I barely knew her. I sure as shit didn’t know him, but a weight settled on my chest anyway.

She looked up at me from her kneeled position, her eyes so distraught that something ripped open inside me. “He’s gone,” she said, her voice hoarse. “I can’t believe it. He’s *gone*.” A sob tore from her throat, and she closed her eyes, blinking tears free that rolled down her cheeks.

An empty water bottle sat on the bedside table, with a pill container and two cardboard packs of what appeared to be more pain relief. All the blister trays had been popped open, the tablets gone. When I realised what he’d done for her, how he’d freed her so she could move on and make a better life for herself, I rubbed a hand down my face and felt my chest tighten with emotion.

He knew her routine better than anyone. He would have set his plan in motion the minute she left to make sure there was no chance of saving him when she got back. I never had the opportunity to speak to him. All I knew about him was his name, but I understood him—how he operated and why he’d done what he did for Liv.

It said everything I needed to know about the character of the man himself... and the woman he’d given the limited amount of life he had left to save.

Four

Liv

I scanned Haruto's face from my seated position on the side of the bed and choked back another sob. My heart felt like it was breaking into tiny pieces and my breathing sounded strange. Too fast, too loud. The room was too quiet. Cruz stood beside me, but I had no idea what to say to him.

I checked the codeine packets and found them empty. Haruto had left nothing in the bottle of stronger pain meds either. He'd overdosed alone, and I wasn't sure how to handle the burden of knowing he'd ended his life to set me free. I didn't *feel* free. I felt heavy, guilty, lost. I should have been here with him to hold his hand while he took his last breaths, not outside getting butterflies in my stomach over a man.

"This isn't right," I said, hearing the hoarseness in my voice. "It isn't fair."

"No, it's not."

Cruz didn't touch me or offer words of reassurance, and I appreciated his restraint. Nobody could have made me feel better about losing someone in this way, and I didn't want to hear him fumbling around trying to find the right words. We were still strangers, the two of us, regardless of how quickly he'd grown on me.

I looked up and appealed to him to understand my position. There was nothing anchoring me to one place anymore, but the reason for that had tears flooding my eyes again. "I can't leave today," I said, hoping he wouldn't see this as an opportunity to move on faster. We hadn't even talked about where he wanted to go yet, and I still needed to tell him about Bridgehull. "I wouldn't be safe to travel with while I'm feeling this way. I need another night, maybe two, just to get used to the way things are now."

Cruz rested his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. The gesture was comforting and platonic, but being touched by someone other than Haruto was so foreign to me that it had me jolting in surprise. I turned my head to hide my reaction.

“There’s no hurry,” he said as I took in Haruto’s relaxed features. When it hit me that his eyes would never open again, another wave of emotion threatened to overwhelm me. “Take as long as you need. In the meantime, I’ll keep heading out and scouting for supplies—if there’s something you don’t already have in your extensive arsenal.”

“Thanks.” I looked up at him through blurry eyes and smiled, appreciating his understanding.

He squeezed my shoulder again before taking his hand away. “How do you feel about me staying here until we leave? I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Oh.” I blinked and took in his dark brown eyes, his strong, stubbled jaw, and the scar that travelled across the top of his eyebrow. He looked like a good man, and I had a feeling the surface decency I’d seen over the past week went bone deep. Although I was alone in my home with a stranger now, I trusted the instincts that had kept me safe all this time. “Why would you want to stay here?”

“Safety. Company.”

“I’m safe, and I’m fine being alone for one or two nights.”

“I wasn’t talking about you.”

A huff of laughter broke free, and I hadn’t expected to feel any kind of humour for a while. I met his eyes and smiled. “Yes, you can stay here. The company would be nice.”

“*Gracias.*”

I turned my head to look at Haruto again, rubbing the tears from my cheeks as I gazed down at him.

He’d kept me focused when everything around us had turned to chaos. He’d entertained me, shared his wisdom and knowledge, given me the confidence I needed to handle the outside world on my own—and he’d hung in there for as long as he could for my sake, then left me when he knew it was time.

I loved him. I missed him. My life would never be the same again.

“If we’re staying here...” Cruz said, his voice sounding careful in the quiet. “I’ll need to move your friend to another apartment.”

I shot up from the bed in surprise, sickened at the idea of moving a body, especially *his* body. Haruto had lived with me. I wanted him to stay here in his bed where he belonged. “Why? I can just shut the door.”

“I’m not going into detail about what happens to a body after death, especially if we’re hanging around for a few more days, but trust me, Liv. I’ll move him, you can say goodbye to him, and we’ll come back here together. Where’s his old apartment? On this floor?”

His take-charge tone should have raised my hackles, but the softness in his eyes made me want to believe he only had my best interests at heart. “Next door. His wife died before he moved in with me, so we left her in their bed.”

“Even better. We’ll lay him next to her so they can be together again.”

Oh, God. The idea of reuniting the two of them had tears springing to my eyes. Why hadn’t I thought of that? Haruto would have loved being laid to rest with Yoshino, but he’d never mentioned it because we hadn’t discussed his impending death. I pressed my lips together to get the emotion under control. When I thought I could speak again without hearing my voice wobble, I said, “She’d been dead for a long time.”

Cruz watched me, his expression filled with understanding. “It’s all right. I’ll take care of it.”

He seemed like a man who could handle anything, and I had a feeling he’d do it every time without complaint. “The dead are out in the hallway.”

“Any idea how many?”

I rubbed my nose with the back of my hand and walked out into the living room, wondering how long it would take to accept what Haruto had done. A heavy weight had settled on my chest that made it harder to breathe. “I’m not sure anymore,” I said as Cruz followed me. “There used to be four, but when people started scavenging on this level, I think they left some of the doors open and others came out to join them. It’s noisier out there than it used to be.”

“I’ll take a look.”

“I’ll come with you.” I sidled past him and headed for the door, needing to keep busy so I wouldn’t sit around thinking too much. If we got this done now, we could spend the remainder of the day planning where we were going next—and I could talk to Cruz about the idea of making Bridgehill our destination.

“You don’t have to be involved in this part,” he said from behind me.

Instead of turning to him and accepting the out he wanted to give me, I squared my shoulders and reached for the top plank. “This is the last thing I can do for him. Considering what he did for me, all alone with no one to hold his hand while he died, I owe him.” Tears filled my eyes as I slid the first length of timber from the barricade, and I lifted my shoulder to blot them. I rested the plank against the wall and reached for the next one.

Cruz didn’t try to talk me around or physically stop me. He stepped up beside me and helped remove the remaining three pieces. “Smart using these as a barricade,” he said as he took the last one from me. “You could have installed extra locks but that wouldn’t have stopped anyone from breaking the door in if they wanted to get through.”

I shot him a quick smile, thankful for the shift in conversation. As I flicked the two locks that originally came with the apartment, he slapped his hand in the middle of the door to stop me from following through. “Wait.”

I paused and gave him an expectant look.

“Are you up to this?”

I lifted my chin, relieved that my eyes were dry now. “Don’t worry about me.”

He kept his hand on the door and looked at me in such a soft, searching way I honestly could have melted into a puddle at his feet. “Can’t seem to help it, and I barely know you. Imagine how annoying I’ll be weeks from now.”

I bit back a smile and glanced down to hide the heat rushing to my cheeks. He had an easy way about him that made me forget my sadness, even if it was only for a moment. “I’m fine. I promise.” I looked into his eyes so he could see I wasn’t hiding anything. “This won’t take long, and I wouldn’t risk either of us getting hurt by going out there if I wasn’t up to the task.”

“We’ll need to clear the entire hall and shut any open doors before we move Haruto. I want a safe passage so we don’t get any surprises while we’re focused on him. You okay with that plan?”

I nodded.

Cruz looked me over one final time then released a loud breath through his nose. “All right then.” He lifted his hand from the door and pulled a knife free from his belt.

I grabbed my bowie knife—I saved the tantō for less confined spaces when I had plenty of room to swing—and flipped the shutter on the peephole to check if anything was lurking nearby. When it appeared we were safe to leave, I eased the door open and stepped out into the hall for the first time in twelve months.

I’d been back and forth down this corridor countless times visiting Haruto and Yoshino. At first, it had been purely as a friend and neighbour who enjoyed spending time with them, but toward the end, I’d helped Haruto take care of his wife when she got sick and the hospitals stopped accepting new patients. Once she was gone and I moved him into my apartment, I closed my door for what I thought was the final time.

There were ten residences and one elevator on this level. My place was situated at the eastern end opposite an apartment with its door closed and locked. The young couple who’d lived there had fled the city six months into the craziness, and the people who’d stayed behind in the other apartments had either died from the virus or been bitten by family members at home.

From a sweeping glance, several doors were hanging open and four of the dead were lurking at the other end of the hall. I knew more could be bumbling around inside the open apartments, so we’d need to be ready for anything.

As one of the infected turned to face us, I shared a look with Cruz. The man was big and muscular, dressed in tracksuit pants and nothing else, with a full beard and a torso completely covered in tattoos. I didn’t recognise him from before when life was normal. He looked fresh and hadn’t decomposed

to the level many of the others had. When Cruz said, “That one’s mine,” I didn’t even attempt to argue with him.

“I’ll get the doors and take down any dead I find along the way.”

“If you see corpses in the apartments, shut the doors and leave ‘em there.”

He’d obviously learnt the same things I had about the dead and knew they were harmless in a closed-off room. I wondered if he’d seen anything that I hadn’t come across yet and reminded myself to exchange information with him when we got done here. I nodded, and the two of us set off down the hall with Cruz keeping a couple of steps ahead of me.

After I’d helped Haruto relocate to my place, I locked his apartment to make sure no one could mess with it while he was gone. I stopped at the apartment opposite his, and as I grabbed the partially open door to pull it toward me, a row of fingers clutched my wrist from inside. There was the off chance a healthy human had gone in there looking for food or supplies, but I’d react as if my life was in danger until I could confirm otherwise.

Twisting my arm to break its grip, I pushed the door open wider and grabbed the shirtfront of an infected man. He had grey hair with rotting skin hanging off one side of his face, and his cold, dead eyes locked onto me. He let out a low moan and bared his teeth, but before he could get hold of me again, I jammed my knife up through his jaw.

Adrenaline coursed through me as I shoved him backwards into the apartment and swung the door shut.

“Okay back there?” Cruz called out.

I spared him a glance and found him caught up in his own battle, downing one of the easier infected before he shifted his attention to the bearded giant. His movements were quick and confident. He didn’t appear fazed at all—but things could change quickly without warning. “I’m fine. Be careful!”

“Always, *querida*.”

Keh-ree-duh. I made a mental note to ask him what the word meant when we were alone again. For now, I focused on the task in front of me and moved on to the next apartment. No hands reached out for me this time

around, and I didn't waste time checking to see if someone was inside. I pulled the door shut and continued on my way.

The noise Cruz and I were making brought out more of the infected from the next unit. An elderly man and a younger woman shuffled toward me, reaching with withered arms as they stumbled and bumped against each other. I used to say hello to the man in passing, but I didn't recognise the woman. Both were dressed in blood-stained pyjamas and robes, with dirty, tangled hair and blank eyes. They'd been dead for a while which made dealing with them easier, but it was still a case of two-on-one.

I switched into battle mode and strode toward them, eyes focused on the target. Grabbing the old man first, I slammed my blade through his ear and shoved him hard against the woman. The force threw her off balance and knocked her to the floor, where she immediately tried to rise again. With my heart racing and my knife at the ready, I bent over her and gripped her matted hair, killing her with a strike through the eye. While her gunk and blood spread across the carpet like a Rorschach inkblot, I heard a low whistle coming from the other end of the corridor.

Now the immediate danger had passed, I looked up to find Cruz standing over three dead bodies. He'd taken down the big guy without even breaking a sweat, and he was impressed with me. "Nice work," he said.

"Thanks." I smiled and stepped over the dead woman, shutting the door they'd come through in case there were more inside. "You, too."

What a strange world we lived in now, where it was considered a compliment to tell someone they were skilled at killing people who were already dead.

I stood silently and listened, hearing nothing but my breath and the blood pounding in my ears.

All the doors were closed, the hallway clear of movement. It looked like we were good to go. Cruz apparently shared my view because he headed straight for me. "Let's go take care of your friend," he said as he passed by.

Dread settled inside me as I followed him back to my apartment, where Haruto lay waiting to be taken to his final resting place.

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Five

Cruz

Liv unlocked Haruto's apartment, and the smell of someone long dead drifted out into the hall. She'd already given me the heads up that his wife was in there, so I carried his frail, lifeless body inside and arranged him beside her in the bedroom. Laying him to rest turned out to be a macabre task, as if we'd just opened a tomb to add another body, but I'd seen worse during my years on the job, and it hadn't gotten any better since the pandemic took over.

When I had him settled on the mattress, Liv covered him with a blanket that reached up to his chin, and it almost looked like they were sleeping side by side.

I stepped back while she said a few words over their bodies, giving her space to verbalise her feelings for a man who'd clearly meant the world to her. Her voice trembled with emotion, and I glanced around the room at the traditional Japanese furniture, wishing I hadn't just met her that morning. If I'd known her better, I could have hugged her without crossing an invisible line.

I felt her loss, in the air, in my bones; I'd been through the same thing myself not that long ago and it fucking hurt. Whenever someone you loved died, they took a piece of you with them, and you were never completely whole again.

Minutes passed by, and when she was done, Liv breathed a sigh and met my eyes. "This was a good idea," she said, sounding relieved. "I feel better knowing they're together again." She went back to looking at their bodies, and the silence stretched on for a while before she spoke again. "Haruto sent me out this morning to find you," she said, crossing her arms over her chest as she faced me. "He was so pushy about it, I should have known he was up to something."

I kept my eyes on her, watching the different emotions play across her face. She wanted to find a way to blame herself, but Haruto would have been

gone soon one way or another. For him, there must have been some satisfaction in taking control of his life while he was still physically and mentally capable of making that choice. “You had no way of knowing what he was planning—or if there was a plan at all. Sometimes people make spur-of-the-moment decisions like this because the conditions are just right... or wrong.”

She gave me a half smile. “I knew, I just didn't realise it at the time. I remember not wanting to leave him because something didn't feel right. I should have listened to my gut.”

Speaking of gut, my own chose that moment to rumble long and loud in the quiet room. I would have shut the fucking thing off if I could, but I hadn't eaten anything substantial since the room-temperature soup I scarfed down straight from the can last night, and there was no stopping it once it got started.

Liv seemed to appreciate the distraction. A glimmer of humour filled her eyes and the heaviness in the room lifted. “Someone's hungry. Should I feed you or would you rather keep sucking Skittles and ping-pong balls in a bucket like bullets?”

The mention of bullets reminded me of the gun I had in my backpack, but I wouldn't bring that up until we knew each other better. In a country where most people hadn't owned firearms before the pandemic, seeing or hearing about one now could cause her unnecessary concern. I'd never be a threat to her. “I'd rather you feed me.”

Liv slid one more glance toward her friends, then stepped away from the bed. “Let's go get some breakfast.”

~ * ~

I sat on one of the barstools at the kitchen island, and Liv grabbed a tub from what looked to be a fairly well-stocked pantry, despite what she'd said about running low. Before she closed the door, I caught sight of powdered mashed potatoes, soup sachets and dried fruit. Rice, jars of honey, bottles of multivitamins. The thought of eating something real with another living person had my stomach rumbling again.

She peeled off the lid and slid the tub across the counter. “This is the breakfast bucket,” she said. “If you pick something out, I’ll mix it up for you.”

I sifted through the contents, finding names like Strawberry Granola, Apple Cinnamon Crunch, and three or four others that had me eager to work my way through all of them. I looked up at her as I handed over the apple-cinnamon sachet. “You’ve been eating these since the beginning?”

“Almost.” She took the packet from me. “We started out with standard cereal boxes then moved on to these. There were six tubs originally, and this is our last one. They taste pretty good,” she said with a shrug in her voice, “and they’re hugely preferable to starving.”

I lifted my brows in surprise. Six buckets filled to the brim with specially prepared long-life food. “They would have cost you a fortune on top of all the other supplies.”

Liv huffed in amusement. “Let’s just say I’m happy I never had to pay off the credit card bill.”

I smiled. “*I’m* happy you have breakfast and you’re willing to share it with me. How can I help?”

“You’re a guest—just for today—so you can help by staying there out of the way.”

I hadn’t been around a woman in a long time, and I’d missed this softer, feminine energy. She fired up the kettle on her camping stove, then emptied the sachets into bowls and set up coffee with powdered milk in mugs. She moved fast without uttering a word, and in no time at all, our breakfast was ready.

Instead of suggesting we eat at the dining table, Liv placed a bowl in front of each barstool and slid two mugs over to join them. She rounded the island and hopped up onto the spot beside me, resting her leg close enough to mine that our knees almost touched. A current of awareness moved through me as I lifted my mug and inhaled the aroma. “I still can’t believe you have hot coffee—steaming hot.” I took a sip and swallowed after the initial temperature shock.

Liv stirred the contents of her bowl and filled her spoon with granola. “I bought the granulated kind in bulk along with a ton of powdered milk. Fat makes it unstable, so skim milk lasts longer than full fat. You can keep it for up to ten years if you store it properly.” She took a bite of her cereal and chewed.

And she had that nifty little camp stove with gas canisters to heat her kettle. I stared at her in wonder, equal parts appreciative and in awe. “You’re a force,” I said, setting my cup down. “I’ve never known anyone like you.”

Her cheeks flamed with heat, but she didn’t try to hide it from me. “I got a bit obsessed with research,” she said. “I had a feeling the pandemic was going to be bad—not *this* bad,” she added. “No one could have known that, but still. At least those preparations got Haruto and me through the first couple of years.”

Her smile disappeared at the reminder of her friend, and she laid her spoon in the bowl. She stared at me for a beat, then rested her elbow on the bench and brought her hand up to cover her eyes. It looked like a fresh wave of tears was on its way, so I reached across for her other hand and wrapped it up in both of mine.

It was the first time I’d touched another person like this in a long time, and the sensation of her soft skin stirred something in me. “You saved him,” I said, keeping my voice low, my attention on her, “then he saved you. The two of you got this far because you stuck together, and you were able to recognise what the other one needed at just the right time. I never knew him, but I’m a hundred percent sure he wouldn’t have wanted it any other way—and I’m just as sure you deserved that kind of friend.”

She shuddered and kept her eyes covered, but the dampness trailing down her cheeks told me the floodgates had opened. I normally tried to avoid being the cause of a woman’s tears, but it felt like she’d needed permission to let go, and I didn’t want her to think she had to keep it together for my sake. I sat with her for a few minutes while she worked her way through it, keeping her hand in my clasp, wondering how often she’d been able to let go since the world had gone to shit.

When she finally calmed, Liv uncovered her eyes and blew out a loud breath. “Wow, I’m a mess.” She slipped her hand from mine and wiped her

cheeks, gazing at me through reddened eyes. “You must be wishing you never came back here with me.”

“Not even close.” I picked up my mug and drank to help her feel more relaxed. I hadn’t realised how much I’d missed human company until now, and I wouldn’t care if she needed to cry all day to deal with her loss.

“I promise this isn’t normal for me,” she said, taking a sip from her cup. “I’m usually pretty stable, considering the way the world is now.”

“Don’t make excuses for being human.” I lowered my mug and grabbed my spoon to scoop up some granola. “I’d be more concerned if you weren’t upset.”

She looked at me for a beat as if deciding whether I was being sincere, then gave me a vague smile and shifted her attention to her breakfast.

We ate and drank in silence for a while, and when she was done with her food, Liv pushed her empty dishes away and looked at me. “Haruto showed me a magazine article this morning that took his interest,” she said.

I swivelled on my seat and gave her my full attention. “About?”

“Wait here. I’ll show you.”

Liv jumped off her stool and headed for the green recliner that didn’t match the rest of the decor. She slipped a magazine from the side pocket and opened it to a marked page.

I pushed my bowl aside to make room for it, and she came back to lay the magazine in front of me. “Here,” she said, indicating a full-colour, double-page spread. She returned to her seat, and I picked up on a thread of excitement in her voice as she explained. “It’s an off-grid, fully self-sufficient house with everything you could ever want or need. Five bedrooms, massive living areas. Gardens. The works.”

I spared her a glance, then focused on the article, my interest building as I took in more and more of the details. Every feature in the home had been carefully thought out and built to the highest level. Insulation, heating. Security fencing all around the two-acre property. There were water tanks, an extensive orchard, solar power, and heavy double gates at the entrance.

We could set up there for good—with plenty of room left over to create more housing and invite others if we wanted to build a community.

“Have you considered that people might already be living there?” I asked, looking up from the magazine. “The original occupants or others like us?”

She nodded and rested her hands on the bench, toying with her thumbnail. “That’s my main concern.”

“Tell me about the other ones.”

“I have maps of the entire state, but no physical address for the property.”

Depending on the size of the town and how far apart the acreages were spaced, it could turn out to be an issue—but we had unlimited time to search and could use a house in town as our base while we eliminated one street after another. “What else?”

“It’s on the eastern coastline, a six-hour drive from here.” Her gaze shifted to mine. “You said cars are complicated. What does that mean?”

“You know those post-apocalyptic shows where they’re still driving them around ten years after the big event? Fuel starts to go off after a few months. It causes issues with the pistons during ignition, the engine while you’re driving. I carry jumper cables and swap cars whenever I find one with keys. In general, though? They’re not reliable.”

“So... your car won’t necessarily get us all the way there?”

I finished off the last mouthful of coffee and set my cup down. “It’s been getting harder to start. The engine’s clunky, too.”

Liv frowned and gazed over my shoulder. “Should we try yours and see how we go or look for another one before we leave the city?”

That was the big question. Six hours on the road in an unreliable car would be pushing it even with breaks in between. If we went for it, we risked being stranded somewhere isolated when night came. If we spent longer in the city searching for an alternative car, we chanced being seen by the gang. Either way, we were putting ourselves in danger.

Given the car’s performance before I parked it in the underground garage days ago, we’d make it to the outer suburbs without too much trouble. Houses were spread farther apart there, cars more likely to be parked in

driveways with keys inside the homes. “I’d say we could drive for an hour or more before we need to start looking at other options.”

“So, we’ll do that. Are you interested?”

I kept my eyes on hers as I mulled the idea over. The prospect of being anywhere with her doing anything appealed to me, but I needed to keep her safety in mind when we were making decisions. Men saw me as a threat, meaning they were more likely to challenge me or stay out of my way. They were a danger to Liv for different reasons, and it wouldn’t be safe to stay on the road with her for hours at a time. She’d be too visible, too vulnerable. We’d have to make overnight stops—two or three at least—to avoid being out in the open for long stretches.

A trip like that would mean dealing with road blockages, gangs, and hordes of corpses potentially bigger than anything either of us had seen so far... but staying here would lead to nothing good, especially when her food stores ran out. We couldn’t grow crops or spend time outside without risking being seen. Her apartment would become our prison.

And if you reached a dead end these days, you generally ended up dead.

She’d just given me—*us*—the perfect out. A target, an end destination. The property might turn out to be a non-event for various reasons, but it gave us something positive to focus on, a reason to keep going each day. “Yes.” It only took one look at her eyes widening with excitement to have me smiling. “Yes, I’ll go with you. Did you think I’d say no?”

"I honestly wasn't sure. It's a long way, and there are probably much closer properties that would still work."

"We don't know where they are, though," I pointed out, "and it could take weeks to check out places before we find the right one. At least we know this house exists. All we can do is hope it hasn't gone to shit in the time since those photos were taken."

Her features brightened for a few seconds, then reality set in and her face fell. “I can’t leave today, though. Can you still give me another night or two to make sure I’m ready?”

I'd originally told her I'd wait as long as she needed, and I didn't want to push her, but her apartment had an expiry date. We couldn't get too

comfortable here. "We'll need to make a move tomorrow. With those corpses in the hall gone now, we won't know if anyone's up on this level until it's too late." That made her balcony our only escape option, and the process of getting down to the next level took too long for one person let alone both of us.

Liv pulled in a quick breath as if the thought hadn't occurred to her. "Of course. You're right. I'll work on being ready."

So, we'd use the afternoon to plan our next move, Liv would spend one more night in the apartment she'd lived in for years—and tomorrow before the sun rose, we'd hit the road and leave it all behind us for good.

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Six

Cruz

Liv encouraged me to go through her cupboards and check her stash to pass the time, so I rifled through her food and camping supplies, finding basic items like lighters, batteries, and torches. She had a first aid kit, flares, and other items I might not have thought about stocking up on myself; the kind of supplies she must have been saving for when it came time to leave here. It looked like she'd done a shit ton of research back when we still had the Internet, and if I'd known her before Covid and Ultimus when there was nothing tangible to worry about, her behaviour might have concerned me.

Now? I shook my head and smiled from time to time, impressed with her attention to detail. I didn't know how well her planning and prep skills would translate to living in unfamiliar situations and doing it tough, but I had a feeling it wouldn't take long for her to adapt even if she started out shaky.

When I'd had my fill of cataloguing her supplies, I found her standing over by the sliding door, keeping off to one side just like she'd done in the office building. I stayed quiet for a minute and took in her profile, from the slender line of her neck to the appealing curve of her breasts. She surveyed the street with an intensity that mesmerized me, her body still, her eyes alert. If I'd looked like an evil overlord up on the rooftop, she was... she was something different, something soft and sweet in a life that had become too hard.

“Do you know how to relax?” I asked.

She snapped out of it and sent a glance my way. “No, unfortunately. I even sleep standing up.”

There wasn't even a trace of humour in her tone. “I'm going to assume you're joking because that's about the saddest thing I've ever heard.”

Liv gave me a faint smile as she wandered closer. “I sleep pretty well, and when I'm not cleaning or running around outside, I spend most of my time

reading."

Probably non-fiction books on poisonous berries, DIY surgery, and trapping small game, if I had to guess. "Does the gang ever give you any trouble when you're out there?" With no laws to keep us in line anymore, people were harder to predict, and I'd seen the darker side of too many during my time on the road.

She got settled on the recliner before she answered me. "Other than being aware of their movements so I can stay out of their way, they don't have a huge impact on my life. I watched them for months to work out their routine. Found out where they were living. How they spent their time. I recognise a few of their faces now, and I'm pretty sure the leader's name is Jackson—he's a big guy with long hair, a beard, tattoos—but I don't think they've ever seen me."

I went over to the couch and took a seat, relaxing against the backrest. Our weapons lay between us on the coffee table. "What else can you tell me about them?"

Liv tucked her legs underneath her and considered my question. "They're not usually early risers. Most of the time it's mid-morning before I see or hear them, but there are enough exceptions that I'd never rely on that to keep me safe."

"How far away is their base?"

"It's in the tennis centre about two kilometres from here. I'm guessing they're using the corporate boxes and meeting rooms on the upper levels as sleeping quarters. They could grow vegetables on the arena floor if they brought in dirt, but I bet they won't. It would make a great set-up with the right work."

"I hope you're not thinking of a hostile takeover."

She let out a laughing breath. "No chance. I don't trust men anymore and stay far away from them."

"And yet here I am in your lounge room."

"That's true, but... you're different." She spent a long minute scanning my features, and I found myself liking it more and more when her eyes were on

me. "I don't know how to explain it in a way that makes any sense, but I could feel your decency from a distance. I knew you wouldn't hurt me, and I knew I needed to meet you."

Even before the world fell apart, humans used the same methods for recognizing danger. Body language, eye contact, the vibrations in the air. When you stripped it all back, how did that person make you feel? Did they create more questions than answers? Could you let your guard down around them?

"As far as endorsements go," I said, "that's about as good as it gets."

"Why did you want to meet me?" she asked, turning the tables. "There are plenty of others out there living on their own. I've seen them around. You could have picked anyone."

This was where honesty could get me in trouble. Yes, I'd been drawn to her on a purely physical level, but it was more than that. I appreciated her confidence, her mind, her direct way of communicating, and I couldn't deny getting a kick out of watching her take down corpses. She intrigued me for reasons I couldn't list now that she'd put me on the spot. "You were a mystery I wanted to solve."

Her eyes smiled at me. "And now that we've met?"

I let out an amused breath through my nose. "I'm not even close to solving it."

~ * ~

I fell asleep without being fully aware of it, and when I woke it took me a minute to acclimatise. Comfortable couch. Warm blanket. Feet resting on an ottoman. My eyes were open, but it still felt like part of a dream, a scene from the old days when furniture wasn't dusty or dirty or smelling of death, and the air itself didn't feel so stifling.

With a few test blinks, I looked around the room and came back to earth with a relieved thud. Funny that in the aftermath of an apocalypse, I could feel happier to be awake than asleep.

Liv lay across from me, curled on her side in the recliner with her hands tucked under her chin. Her eyes were still closed, her mouth soft. Her dark

hair had fallen across her brow and partially obscured one eye. I listened to her slow, even breaths, thankful she felt safe enough around me to sleep in the same room. She looked so peaceful I didn't want to do anything to wake her. After the ordeal with Haruto, she needed some rest, and neither of us had anywhere to be today.

So, I stayed where I was and watched her. Not in a sleazy kind of way. Just a man appreciating female company for the first time in too long.

She stirred in her sleep and repositioned herself, half-turning so her blanket fell to her waist. Her back arched as she rolled over, and her breasts strained against her t-shirt. The image hit me full force, and I closed my eyes to block it out so I wouldn't look like a creep if she woke and found me watching her. My focus should have been on running through game plans for our trip east, not imagining what she looked like underneath that thin layer of cotton.

Liv moved again, restless, and I opened my eyes to see her reaching her arms above her head in a stretch. She let out a sound somewhere between a moan and a sigh then looked my way. "How long have you been awake?" she asked, her voice still slurred from sleep.

"Not long." I checked my watch as I lifted my feet from the ottoman and sat upright, surprised we'd both been out for a few hours. "Thanks for tucking me in."

She smiled. "It gets pretty cold in here without heating, even at this time of year." Liv used her heels to jam the footrest back into place and rose from the recliner. "Are you hungry? It's already lunchtime. We could eat while we talk some more."

I bunched up the blanket beside me and ran my hand through my too-long hair. "I never turn down food."

We went into the kitchen, and between the two of us, we mixed pouches of carbonara noodles with boiling water and made a couple of glasses of powdered milk. When the water first hit the noodles, the smell of the manufactured bacon flavour had me desperate to start shovelling in spoonfuls. Once we were sitting at the dining table and I'd taken my first

bite, the taste didn't quite live up to the hype. It was food though, hot food, and I was grateful she'd given me some of her dwindling rations.

Liv spooned some noodles into her mouth and swallowed, apparently used to the strange flavour and texture. "How old are you?" she asked with a curious frown. "You have the kind of look where you could be five years either side of thirty, and I wouldn't be surprised by your answer."

"Thirty-two." I took a sip of milk to wash down the pasta, wondering if she'd just insulted me or complimented me. "You?"

"Twenty-eight."

She had the smarts and maturity of someone a decade older than her, but it would come off as patronizing if I mentioned it so I kept my mouth shut. Picturing her preparing for the inevitable while she was living alone and still in her mid-twenties had my respect for her climbing to new levels. But I reminded myself those skills didn't automatically convert to being able to handle the real world. Up until now, her day-to-day had been based on structure and routine. Nothing about living on the run was comfortable, and it sure as shit wasn't safe. When we left here, she'd be outside of her self-created comfort zone for the first time. "Do you drive?" I asked.

She drank some milk and used the tip of her tongue to catch a drop from the corner of her mouth. "I *can* drive. My dad insisted it was a life skill everyone should learn, but I've never needed a car, so I'm nowhere near your level when it comes to skill."

"I'm just gathering facts, it's not important." I spooned in some more carbonara. "Do you know if anyone else is living in the building?" I asked, shifting focus again. Apparently, I couldn't ditch the habit of trying to keep someone on their toes so they were more likely to give me honest answers.

"Not that I've seen or heard. There was a mass exit from the city when the power went off for good. Everyone switched to panic mode, and I stayed behind watching it all from my balcony. Haruto used to talk about how easy it was to control people with fear, and how they'd run without even having a destination in mind because it made them feel like they were doing something."

The news had been flooded with the rapidly rising death toll, riots, and fights in supermarkets. Helicopters had hovered over bumper-to-bumper traffic on the highways, the images influencing people to join the exodus rather than staying safe at home. The hysteria built to a level we'd never experienced with Covid, only it took a hell of a lot longer to get there. Months and months went by while people kept their heads in the sand, and it was only after the first footage of an animated corpse went live that the panic kicked in for real.

I remembered the first time I came across one in person. By that point, I was no longer solely investigating homicides, and I'd been sent with a team to disperse a mob gathered outside the state premier's house. They'd had her trapped in there for hours while they yelled, threw rocks, and tried to climb the fence. Others were doubled over, coughing, convulsing, and spattering blood on people around them. Everyone had been desperate for help in one way or another and needed someone, *anyone*, to listen.

No one had figured out yet that we were beyond help.

In the middle of the mayhem, I saw a woman lying on the ground being trampled by the crowd. Blood had trickled from her nose and mouth at some point, but it looked like it had stopped flowing and her body lay at an unnatural angle that made it obvious she'd died. While I pushed my way through the crush of bodies to get to her, she rose from the footpath right in front of my eyes. Hands and knees first, then moving to her feet and baring her teeth. I shouted to get the attention of the people around her, but with all the noise the message never got through.

She grabbed the nearest person, sank her teeth into his forearm, and ripped flesh from the bone like it was nothing.

What seemed chaotic before exploded into something I'd never seen in all my life. A frenzy. Complete fucking madness.

It spread across the globe faster than anyone could keep track of and took mere weeks before it became clear we weren't coming back from the carnage.

"Haruto was a smart man," I said. "I would have liked him."

Liv chased a noodle around her bowl, concentrating on the task instead of looking at me. "He was the best. He would have liked you, too."

The crack in her voice had me pausing to give her a chance to recover. I knew she wouldn't want me to make a big deal of it, so I drank some milk, forced down a few more mouthfuls of pasta, and let the silence stretch on until she was ready to talk again.

A while later, her eyes rose to meet mine, and she gave me a hesitant smile. "You have a talent for reading people. You seem to know exactly when to push and when to pull back."

"It's more of a learned skill than a talent. I used to be clueless." We went back to eating in silence, and when she appeared to be okay again, I asked, "Since we're travelling together, do you have any conditions that need medication or special treatment? Allergies? Depression, anxiety, asthma?"

Liv raised her brows, but I caught the amusement in her eyes. "I take back what I just said. Isn't that a little intrusive for someone you just met?"

"We left that social norm behind, oh..." I glanced at my watch. "About two years ago."

The small smile she gave me felt like a gift. "No, I don't have any medical conditions. What about you? Sleepwalking? OCD? Any homicidal or sociopathic tendencies?"

"A homicidal homicide detective? That jumped from harmless to horrific pretty fast."

Her blue eyes turned warm and knowing. "Just keeping you on your toes like you've been doing to me this entire conversation. Do you want to know about my menstrual cycle next?"

A bark of laughter burst from me without warning, and I leaned back in my chair, rubbing my hands down my face as it turned into a groan. I had a feeling she'd be my kind of person before we even spoke, and it made me happy to find out I was right. When I could keep it together again, I pulled my hands away and regarded her with a straight face. "I think we're good—but I'm not delicate about female-related topics, so if you need anything or you're not up to physical activity, just be straight with me and we'll deal with it, okay?"

She held my gaze, and the corner of her mouth turned upward in a sweet smile. “You lucked out and came along right at the end of my period, so you have a few weeks before you get to experience the worst of my hormones.”

I’d met this woman hours ago and now we were sitting around a table discussing her period. Not a single day was predictable anymore, and just when I thought I had it all figured out, something else would come along to tip it on its ass. “Appreciate the heads up. When’s your birthday?” I asked, continuing the light-hearted streak to keep that smile on her face.

“A couple of weeks ago. March tenth. When’s yours—no, wait! Let me guess your star sign first.”

My brows rose, and I smiled, already slightly enamoured by her. “You can tell just by looking at me?”

“I already have a pretty good idea, but let me think a minute.” Her eyes swept over me as she bit into her lower lip, and that single gesture had an internal groan moving through me. Her gaze sharpened when she appeared to have her answer. “Scorpio.”

“What gave it away?”

“Oh, you know, just your entire personality.”

“Is that right?” She was cute. Seriously cute. I’d seen at least a dozen people out on their own since I’d left my home, but after tracking each one and watching how they operated, not one of them had inspired me to approach and get to know them. The second I saw Liv, I knew we were going to meet with the same certainty that she knew I was a Scorpio.

“So, when’s your birthday?” she asked as she finished her last spoonful of noodles.

“October thirtieth.”

“Hopefully we’ll still be alive then to celebrate.” Her flippant tone somehow made her comment come off as hilarious. “What do you think of the carbonara?”

“Tastes like cardboard and despair.”

She laughed, appearing entertained by my honesty. “No more pasta for you then.”

A commotion outside interrupted our conversation. Our smiles disappeared, and I pushed back my chair to head over to the glass door. Liv got up and followed me, and we stood against the wall, checking out the side view of the street below. With the balcony blocking part of the road, all I could see were flashes of colour as each car raced past. One... two... three. The music blasting from the open windows competed with the engine noise to create chaos around them. They were a bunch of brainless clowns, but large enough in numbers that they didn't need to worry about fellow humans or the dead.

“Do you ever see them doing foot patrols?” I asked, glancing at her.

She was close. Close enough that I noticed the smattering of freckles across her nose for the first time. “Not anymore. Once they cleared everything useful from the businesses and apartments around here, they stopped walking from place to place. Now, they only do circuits in their cars. I have no idea what they’re getting up to on the other side of town.”

I stared out the window again, waiting for more cars. None came. “I’ve been watching the way they operate from the office building. My guess is they’re looking for more people to boost their numbers. Since it looks like they already have more than enough men, women would be their focus.”

“I’ve noticed that, too,” she said, heading back to the dining table to collect our dishes. “It’s the thing that worries me most about them.”

We spent a few minutes cleaning up in the kitchen and when we were done, the two of us returned to our positions on the couch and recliner. “Do you know how to fight?” I asked, wondering if we should go through some basics before we took off.

She moved into a cross-legged position. “Before the electricity went off, I watched self-defence videos over and over again, and Haruto practised Aikido in his younger years, so he taught me some moves before... you know.” Her eyes clouded over, and she pulled in a deep breath. “I’m okay with fighting; I’ve done enough of it defending myself against the dead. It’s the thought of being seriously injured or captured that scares me the most.”

Being part of a group and living somewhere stable would help ease the concern when it came to our day-to-day safety. As far as the other part

went...

"We'll do our best to keep you off their radar while we're leaving town, and if we see anyone before they see us, hiding is our preferred option. I don't want anyone getting near you."

The ghost of a smile passed over her face, and her gaze generated a buzz of electricity that had the same impact as a physical touch. "That sounds good."

Her eyes intrigued me; they were the brightest blue I'd ever seen. Soft one minute, intense the next. If I'd met her before the virus, I would have steered clear of her to avoid being pulled in too deep too fast. She was the kind of woman you built a future with, and back then I was so focused on advancing my career that I didn't want to make room in my life for someone else.

It took a pandemic to make me realize what I'd been missing.

Stupid.

Liv must have picked up on the subtle change in the atmosphere, too. She made a soft huffing sound and smiled as she glanced away.

I watched her for a beat longer fighting a smile of my own, then sank deeper into the couch satisfied with the progress we'd made today.

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Seven

Liv

I handed Cruz the last of the supplies, and he stacked them in the boot of the white sedan he'd hidden in the parking garage near my building. The sun hadn't begun peeking its head over the horizon just yet, and the streets were quiet. We hoped that leaving early meant we could avoid the gang, but it was still a risk being out in the open no matter what time of day we made our escape.

Closing the door to my apartment for the final time left me with bittersweet feelings—anticipation at the thought of going somewhere new, sadness at the idea of leaving behind Haruto and every memory of my time before the pandemic. I'd lived all my adult life in the city, and walking away knowing I'd never go back there again had me struggling to control my emotions. When we finished transferring every box and bag to the car, I locked my apartment door and slipped the key into my pocket, a physical reminder that my previous life had existed.

Cruz lowered the boot lid and clicked it closed. He turned to me and gave me an expectant look. “Ready?”

Filled with excitement and apprehension, I drew a deep breath and nodded. I hadn't been anywhere unfamiliar or spent more than two hours outside each day in years. I'd already come to terms with the idea of being physically and mentally exhausted. It was the thought of seeing the big, wide world again that was a little overwhelming.

His gaze searched my features. “Is your head in the game, Olivia?”

Hearing him use my full name had a completely different effect from when Haruto used to say it. A tingle worked its way down my spine, and I shivered.

I knew what he was getting at, though. When I'd first found Haruto lying in bed, I thought it would take days for me to get over the crying jags that seemed to come out of nowhere. Having Cruz around to distract me had

made all the difference. I'd woken this morning feeling lighter with the knowledge that my old friend was no longer in pain, and my new friend wanted to create a future with me. "I'm fine, I promise."

He gave me a brief nod, taking me at my word, and wandered around to the driver's side of the car.

Simple as that.

I watched him for a moment, appreciating the way he treated me like a capable person rather than a fragile woman who needed protection. Although I knew he'd protect me if the situation required it, he didn't display his masculinity in a domineering or patronising way.

When I lowered myself into the passenger seat, he gave me a quick smile and turned the key. It took him three attempts to get the car started, and relief rushed through me as we began easing our way out of the underground car park. The novelty of being in a moving car lasted until we'd rolled onto the main street then my attention shifted to our surroundings.

It was just before dawn. Cruz drove with the headlights off to avoid attracting attention.

My eyes swept over the debris littering the streets, the dead wandering in small clusters, the abandoned cars parked haphazardly here and there. I'd seen all of this before on my morning runs, but with the darkness blanketing the streets, it made the atmosphere feel heavier somehow, more intimidating. I sat up straighter, more alert than ever. My gaze jumped from one spot to another.

Tall buildings loomed over us, and I imagined their empty windows as eyes watching our every move. It was a surreal experience knowing how much my life was about to change from the comfortable routine I'd maintained for the past couple of years.

Cruz steered the car to dodge each obstacle and kept his attention on the road. There were no indicators that any of the gang members were up and about yet, and I couldn't see any non-gang humans out on their own. If we were lucky, it would stay that way until we'd made it out of the city centre.

"Watch out," I said, pointing to a tyre in our path.

Cruz gave it a wide berth, then swerved to avoid the body of one of the infected that lay in the middle of the road. I breathed a sigh and gripped the armrest. It wasn't just the obstacles that kept me on edge, but the pressure of knowing it could all fall apart at any second if the gang or a herd of the dead got in our way. My stomach was in knots, my breaths shallow. I strained my eyes to spot any potential dangers in the dark.

A group of the dead stumbled in front of the car several metres away, and Cruz locked onto them at the same time I did. Just as he eased off the accelerator and prepared to take a left onto a side street to avoid them, another one of the infected emerged from the shadows and stepped straight off the curb without warning. "Shit." He swerved to avoid hitting it, and the rear tyre rolled over something hard that jolted the back end.

I held my breath and waited, hoping it wouldn't be sharp enough to cause a puncture. If it did, we'd be stuck out in the open until we could take care of it—assuming there was an undamaged spare in the boot.

Cruz pulled up and shoved the car into Park. "I need to check it out. Can you keep watch and let me know if anything gets close?"

There were numerous dead roaming the streets, and with only the beginnings of a sunrise to work with, one or more of them could easily get the better of us if we weren't careful. "I'll take care of it."

I climbed out and pulled the tantō from my belt—a reminder of Haruto that I could take everywhere with me. While Cruz approached the rear tyre, I strode over to the infected man who'd caused the problem and used a two-handed grip to swing my sword at his head. His withered body dropped to the bitumen with a thud, and I performed a visual sweep to make sure there were no others close by.

My heart thudded fast, but I was focused.

The group we'd seen farther down the street picked up on the noise we were generating, and six of them turned in our direction. Taking on several at once required fast reflexes and all my concentration—in full daylight with every sense intact. This would be more of a challenge, but I'd left home determined to give it everything I had.

"We've got a flat," Cruz said, keeping his voice low.

“Do you know if there’s a spare?” I asked without looking his way.

“Should be, but I need to move everything out of the boot to get to it.”

Some of our supplies were on the back seat, but we’d packed the bulk of them in the boot. The repair job would take longer than I’d hoped. “I’ve never changed a tyre before. I’ll keep doing this while you sort that out.”

I walked a few steps away from him and heard the smile in his voice as he said, “You mean there’s something you *can’t* do?”

With a breathy laugh, I kept my eyes sweeping from left to right as I approached the group coming our way. Each step closer had my stomach clenching in preparation, and the familiar tremble in my legs made itself known. I could do this—I’d done it many times before—it just required accuracy and speed. No time to second guess.

The first contender was a woman with matted grey hair and one missing eye. As she reached for me, I jammed my sword through her other eye and yanked it free. She dropped to the ground just as two decaying men came at me from both sides. I used all my might to swing my sword hard enough to slice off the tops of both their heads with a single sweep. Two thuds followed and sweat began to build as I locked eyes on my next target. She was still several steps away, so I chanced a look over my shoulder at Cruz.

He’d already pulled out every box and bag from the boot and located the spare tyre. From a glance, it appeared as if he was happy with the condition of it, so he grabbed the jack and went to work. Since he had it all under control, I returned my attention to the infected woman and dropped her with a swift slice of my sword.

It had been easy so far, but whenever I was stuck in the middle of a situation like this, I reminded myself not to become complacent. During our brief time on the road, we’d already discovered that it didn’t take much to throw us off course. One wrong move at any time could mean the end.

Three more of the dead were in the immediate vicinity, and I’d already taken down one of them when the sound of car engines registered in the distance. I’d only heard vehicles on the road a handful of times this early in the day, and the noise had my heart pounding. Without turning around to check on him, I called out to Cruz, “You hear that?”

“Yeah. Get back here. Fast.”

I dropped the remaining two infected, and my pulse beat out of control as I ran in Cruz's direction. He gestured toward an office building with its main doors smashed, and I headed straight for the entry while he grabbed our two backpacks from the rear seat. I'd stored our seeds, toiletries, powdered milk, and a gas fire lighter in those packs, along with the jumper cables and a change of clothes for both of us. They were our go bags in case we were separated from the rest of our belongings.

The car was still up on the jack, the rest of our supplies stashed on the side that faced away from the road. The thought of leaving it all out in the open like that pained me, but with the vehicles likely to be heading our way, we were going to be outnumbered if they were crammed with men who wanted to start trouble. Best-case scenario, they cruised past in the dark without noticing, and we could pick up where we'd left off once they were gone.

Worst case... I didn't want to think about that.

Two sets of headlights shined on our location from a distance, pinning us like a spotlight.

They'd found us.

I gasped as I ran.

Our movements were too quick for them to mistake us for the infected. If they'd seen us, they knew we were human—and if they knew we were human, they were coming for us.

Cruz locked the car with the fob, and I took my pack from him as we ran into an expansive foyer. We crossed a polished marble floor, and when I pointed at the reception desk against the far wall as a potential hiding place, he shook his head. "Too obvious."

We pulled our backpacks on and scanned the area. "Maybe an office?" I suggested, and the two of us took off through a nearby doorway and landed in a long corridor. The lack of light made it difficult to see more than a few metres in front of me, but it looked like there were several doors on each side, most likely offices that were locked. It didn't matter. The cars hadn't arrived yet, so we still had time to find a better hiding spot.

"What's your lucky number?" Cruz asked, shooting me a glance.

My heart was beating so fast I bordered on lightheaded, and I frowned in confusion. "Three?"

He headed for the third room on the right with me in tow. "Definitely lucky," he said, turning the handle and pushing to reveal a large office space. There was a desk with a solid front that reached down to the carpet, giving us a place to hide until the men were gone—if they came into the building to look for us in the first place.

We stepped inside, and Cruz locked the door behind us. I was about to rush over to the desk to get into position when he grabbed my elbow. "We don't need to hide, we just need to be quiet."

He pulled me beside him as he stood next to the door. I swallowed and looked up at him, wondering why he wouldn't want to stay out of sight. "Why?"

He kept his voice low as he explained. "If they go to the effort of kicking the door down, they're going to sweep the room and check under the desk, too. I don't want them between us and the exit if it comes to that. The second they come in, we start swinging."

I stared at him open-mouthed. "For future reference," I said in a heated whisper, "that's absolutely *not* the best way to keep me calm."

Cruz held my gaze for a moment, his eyes almost black in the low light. His mouth kicked up on one side and sent a rush of excitement through me. "Duly noted."

There was plenty of room for both of us in our spot beside the door. The space had to be at least a metre wide, but he stayed close, and whenever either of us moved slightly, his body brushed against mine and made me far too aware of him. We kept our weapons in hand—his hatchet, my tantō—and stood quietly in the darkness waiting to see what would happen next. I mentally pleaded for a reprieve, for the cars to bypass the building and keep going. If they found us here, it could change everything.

Perspiration trickled down the front of my shirt, and my muscles were tense and braced for action. Blood rushed in my ears. I gripped the handle of my sword, prepared to tackle whatever threats came our way. If we were forced

to fight, we'd need to throw ourselves straight into it, just like Cruz had said. Take them by surprise and use every bit of strength against them.

My breaths came faster at the thought of the impending violence, but I was ready. I wouldn't let him down.

"Easy," he murmured in a warning tone, keeping his eyes on me.

"I'm fine," I whispered back, wishing I had an outlet for all the adrenaline flooding my body.

"I can feel the tension coming off you, *querida*. You look like you're ready to take down an entire fucking kingdom with your bare hands. *Hold*," he said, like a commander directing his army of knights.

If anyone had told me I could have laughed during a moment like this, I would have thought they'd lost their mind—but here I was biting my lower lip to control myself. His eyes smiled at me in the shadowed room, and my gaze dropped to his mouth. I took in the dark whiskers surrounding his lips and lining his jaw, the slight indentation in his chin that made me want to press my fingertip there. He smelled like the scented body wash we'd both used during our separate bucket-bathing sessions in the bathroom that morning, and for one sweet, unguarded moment, I let myself focus on nothing but him.

When an engine rumbled to a stop outside the building, the connection between us abruptly ended. My stomach lurched, and I wished I had a clear view of what was going on out there so we'd know whether to brace ourselves for action.

Male voices broke the silence—three or four by my guess. The building's glass front doors had been smashed so badly that they were nothing more than metal frames, and with no other sounds to drown them out, every noise the men made seemed as if it was coming through a loudspeaker. Another car joined the original one and several doors slammed. When it sounded like they'd all exited their vehicles, I stared up at Cruz, wondering how many of them were out there. I figured there must have been around seven or eight. Far too many for us to face on our own.

He gave me a brief look, then stared off into the distance as he tuned into the activity outside.

“You see this shit?” one of them called out, presumably talking about our supplies.

They spent a minute or two discussing the items Cruz had piled up beside the car then their voices went quiet. I listened to them loading our belongings into their vehicles and tried to control my anger. It had taken *months* for me to build that collection. Countless hours of planning, thought, and research. Our remaining food would have lasted us two weeks—longer if we were careful. If they took everything we had out there, we'd be left with nothing but the supplies in our packs.

And it was *ours*, damn it.

Cruz clasped my shoulder and squeezed. He kept his hand there, rubbing his thumb back and forth to keep me focused on his touch. We both knew what would happen if the men found us. Cruz would likely end up seriously injured or dead, and since I'd only ever seen men in their crew, I'd be taken back to their base where I assumed they were keeping the women.

“You see that chick run off with the guy?” a man asked.

Their footsteps headed our way, and my stomach turned queasy with anticipation. This was it, the moment our lives would change forever.

I'd fought so many of the dead that I'd lost count, but their movements were slow, their abilities limited. Grown men were coming for us now.

“Yeah. Dunno if they came in here or next door, though,” another man answered.

“Was she young?” a different man asked, his footsteps joining the first two. He had a deeper voice than the other men. I pictured him as big and burly, and the image frightened me more. “Remember that girl I saw runnin' around here? Skinny. Brown hair? If we find her, she's mine.”

Someone laughed. “They packed the car like they were on their way out of here, Jacko. Doesn't look like you're getting a chance with her.”

My stomach flipped with nerves. It had to be Jackson, the leader of their crew.

“We just took all their shit,” he said. “They're not going anywhere for a while.”

My heart thudded as I locked eyes with Cruz, and he gave just the slightest shake of his head. I thought my movements had been undetected up to this point, but they knew me. They'd seen me. The routine I assumed had kept me safe all this time had only made me delusional; dumb luck was the only thing that stopped me from getting caught.

No one else spoke, and the silence that followed turned out to be more concerning than the conversation itself. I imagined them using hand gestures because they'd figured out we were hiding nearby, and they were now making plans we had no chance of preparing for. Our only advantage was remaining still and listening for the direction of their movements.

Footsteps stopped outside our door and someone tried the handle. I pulled in a breath and let it out slowly, watching Cruz as his thumb swept back and forth in the same relaxed, repeated manner over my shoulder. His eyes stayed on mine, comforting me and giving me the confidence I needed to keep it together.

The men moved on to try the other doors down the hall, striking up a casual conversation as they went. My tension crept up a notch and long seconds went by where nothing at all happened. The waiting and wondering turned out to be equally as stressful as the running. Eventually, their footsteps headed back in the direction they'd come from, and I breathed a sigh. It looked like we were going to be all right. For now.

I gazed up at Cruz and whispered, "What do we do?"

"We wait until they're *gone* gone. If they're out the front and see us moving around in here, we're in trouble."

Their booted feet left the foyer and continued out onto the street. It sounded like some of the men had been searching the buildings on either side of this one, and everyone had reconvened at the broken entry doors to discuss their next move.

Cruz and I stared at each other and waited. I desperately wanted to move to use up some of the excess energy, but the thought of Jackson setting eyes on me kept me still. Neither of us knew what they were doing out there, but whatever it was generated a series of whoops and laughter that rang up and down the street. The sounds bounced off the empty buildings and echoed in

the early morning air, the ruckus going on for twenty minutes or more before their car doors finally slammed.

Two engines started up and both vehicles drove away.

When Cruz's features relaxed, I knew we were good to go.

He unlocked the door, and I kept my ears trained for unusual noises. He stepped out into the corridor first, and I followed, matching his stride as we walked toward the foyer. There were no men standing nearby waiting for us to reappear, and when we approached the entrance, nothing looked to be lurking out there either. It didn't matter, though. I'd probably be on edge now until we were driving along the highway with the city in the rearview mirror.

The sun had begun its ascent and the street was now bathed in grey light, making it easier for us to see what they'd been up to while we were hiding. My attention shot to the car, and as expected, the men had taken all our provisions—but at least we were safe. We'd be fine. All we needed to do was finish changing the tyre and continue on our mission.

Except for one thing.

Cruz locked onto that tiny detail at the same time as me. He swore under his breath and looked like he wanted to punch something. “Those *pendejos* slashed our tyres.”

My stomach dropped. Not only that, but they'd smashed the rear window of the car and taken the remaining items from the back seat, too. I closed my eyes and released a long breath, trying my best to keep it together. I knew next to nothing about cars, and I had no idea if this had the potential to ruin our plans. “Can we drive slowly like that while we look for another car?”

He scrubbed his hand down his face. “Maybe, but we won't get far—and I don't know how much noise we'll make driving on rims.”

Meaning we could attract unwanted attention and put ourselves in danger again. I imagined orange sparks and the screech of grinding metal, and I stared up and down the street in search of a better option.

Vehicles were parked bumper-to-bumper on both sides, and a delivery truck sat smack in the middle with its barn doors hanging open. A few of the dead

were stumbling around near an ambulance off in the distance, but they were at least a hundred metres away. “Why don’t we take one side each and do a quick check of the block to see if any cars have keys in them?”

Cruz shifted his gaze from our trashed car to the street in either direction. The way his lips pressed together suggested he thought it would be a pointless exercise, but we needed to eliminate every option since our current vehicle wouldn’t get us very far. “I’m betting those pricks have already been through and done that, but we can take a look. Stay alert. They could still be around somewhere.”

"I'll be careful."

We took off down the street to try our luck with the parked cars, but each time I ducked to search through a side window for keys, I noticed slashed tyres as well. On every vehicle.

I breathed a frustrated sigh. *That* was what they’d found so entertaining while we were hiding.

Neither of us had done anything to hurt them or impact their lives in any way, but they’d gone out of their way to ruin ours.

After coming up empty on my side, I ran over to meet Cruz. “You were right,” I said. “It was a dead end. They’ve slashed all the tyres, but there were no keys anyway.”

“They would have spent the past two years grabbing every working vehicle around here,” he said. “We’ll just have to take our time limping out of the city on rims, and when we get to the outskirts, we’ll start breaking into houses for keys and food.”

I stowed my sword and repositioned the straps on my backpack, mentally preparing for a slower journey than the one we’d originally planned.

But in our new world, if you couldn't adapt, you couldn't survive. “I guess we should get moving then.”

Eight

Cruz

Liv and I had been travelling in full daylight for a few hours, keeping to the side streets and cruising at a crawl in our beaten-down car. We'd seen countless corpses on the roads and lurking around buildings, but neither of us had set eyes on the gang. We could only drive around built-up areas for so long without running into them, though—and I couldn't keep driving in general. Not in this car. The sound of rubber flapping against bitumen had become fucking annoying.

After repeatedly stopping to check out abandoned vehicles at the roadside, I parked in front of a row of attached, single-storey houses to take a break and continue the mission on foot.

We climbed out and hoisted our backpacks on. Liv unsheathed her sword while I removed my hatchet.

"There." She immediately pointed to a laneway running alongside the end property, leading to an alley at the back where the garages would be located.

I scanned the street in both directions before we took off into a confined area with limited escape options. There were no humans or corpses in the area, so we wandered down the gravel lane, dodging potholes as the sun heated our faces and the breeze swished Liv's ponytail. She seemed to be doing okay after our rough start that morning, and I hoped the rest of her first day away from home would be uneventful.

"I don't know how much luck we'll have in this area," she said, looking my way. "A lot of people around here were like me and didn't own cars. We took public transport everywhere because it was easier than dealing with traffic and finding somewhere to park."

Even if that turned out to be the case, at least we could search for food. My stomach had started growling again a couple of hours ago, and the way I felt now I could obliterate pretty much anything. We turned the corner and

approached the nearest house. I tugged the handle on a dust-covered roller door, but it wouldn't budge. We'd need to go inside to look for the keys.

Liv sighed as she stared down the alley and back at me. "Do you ever feel like this is pointless?"

I watched her carefully, wondering if she was on the verge of a breakdown, but her tone seemed more curious than defeated. "Every day. Sometimes for an hour, sometimes a minute, but so far it's been every day."

She gave me an amused look. "So, it's not just me then?"

"No. This world's so messed up it takes work to stay positive, and it'd be a hell of a lot easier if we had food in our stomachs, so let's get our break-and-enter on."

Liv didn't move. She just stood there looking at me with her mouth quirking at the edges. She could be sweet one minute, funny the next. Sexy. Smart. I never knew what to expect from her, and as much as I enjoyed having her attention on me, her mood confused me. "What?" I asked, feeling the sudden urge to smile.

"I'm just happy you turned out to be exactly the kind of man I hoped you were. I wouldn't want to do this with anyone but you."

Something strange happened in my chest then. A thud, a thwack of emotion that threw me off balance. Every time I looked at her, the attraction hit me like a physical force, but her eyes, her words, they did things to me. "*Querida*."

She lifted her hand to block out the sun and tilted her head to one side. "I've heard you call me that before. What does it mean?"

"It means I like you." I turned and walked up the path beside the garage. Better to end the moment now before I did something stupid like make a move on her.

"How much?" she asked from behind me.

I smiled, surprised we could talk about this without any awkwardness. When it came to Liv, nothing felt forced or unnatural, and it floored me that it could be this easy with someone new. "No comment." I gripped my

hatchet and tried the door handle. When I found it unlocked, I switched from flirt mode to focused in the blink of an eye. "Ready?"

"Always."

I pushed the door and met resistance from the other side.

"What is it?" Liv rested her palm on my shoulder and leaned in closer.

I ignored the warmth of her hand and peered around the door, locating a lifeless body splayed face down on the kitchen tiles; a middle-aged man who looked to have only been dead a week or so. "It's a body, the non-moving kind." The stench of decaying flesh seeped through the crack, the smell so strong I considered shutting the door and moving on to the next house—but the dead man had me thinking we might find what we were looking for here. If he'd stayed the course throughout the pandemic, his car should technically still be in the garage. If he owned one.

I pressed my shoulder against the door and gave it a slow, steady shove. His bulky weight shifted across the floor, leaving a thick, rust-coloured trail behind it. When I stepped into the kitchen, the smell nearly overpowered me, and I blocked as much as I could with my forearm while I bent over the body to check for bite marks. It looked like he'd been sitting on the floor with his back resting against the door, and then fallen forward when he died.

Liv followed me inside and closed the door behind her, flicking the lock as a precaution. She kept watch while I pulled down the collar of the man's shirt and inspected his neck and shoulders. Finding nothing there, I slid up his sleeve and located a bandage on his left forearm. Blood had flooded the surface in the shape of a circle, brown and hard now. The amount of bleeding he'd done on the floor didn't match the severity of the wound, but I had a feeling if I flipped him over, I'd find a knife and a self-inflicted injury somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach.

"Bitten," I said, shooting her a glance. "Looks like he might have opted out to avoid turning."

She nodded in understanding, her eyes troubled. A reminder of Haruto, only differing circumstances.

He must have been caring for others who were bitten and ended up being the last one standing.

At least we knew to be ready for corpses.

"We'll clear the place first then search for food and keys." I switched from hatchet to knife, and Liv performed the same swap with her sword. We shared a brief look, then went to work clearing each of the rooms. Lounge, master bedroom, bathroom, laundry. The smell followed us everywhere we went, growing so pungent I could almost taste it as we headed down the hall.

All the doors were closed in this part of the house. It was dark as hell and hard to make out anything other than vague shapes. "We need some light," I said, approaching what had to be a bedroom. I opened the door and my arrival stirred the lone occupant in the darkened room. When I heard the shuffling, I knew I was dealing with a slow-moving corpse.

"I'll leave you with that one." Liv moved on to the next room.

"Watch your back," I reminded her as I grabbed the recently turned corpse of a woman and forced my knife through her ear. I eased her to the floor and stepped over her body, yanking the drapes open to flood the room with sunlight. A bed and a set of drawers filled the space. No more corpses.

A thud came from another room that had my pulse jumping. "You okay?" I called out as I strode back into the hall.

Liv must have opened the drapes in the next bedroom. More light spilled into the hallway right before she reappeared. She was breathing hard with blood spatter on her sleeve, her knife covered in gunk. "I'm good."

The sight of her had my protective instincts kicking into gear, and I pushed down the urge to ask if she was sure. I wanted to shield her from all this shit, but at the same time, I'd been drawn to her in the first place because of her ability to deal with it. "Messy one?"

"Little bit."

We continued to the final room. Another closed door with intermittent thumping sounds coming from the other side. I tapped the butt of my knife

against the wood and waited as the noises moved closer. “Anyone in there?” I called out on the off chance a living person was hiding from us.

When no answer came, I opened the door and sent a corpse stumbling backward. The curtains had been left half-open, casting a beam of daylight across the body as it landed flat on its back. While I scanned the space, Liv sidled past me and bent over it, putting her blade through its eye.

The room had been set up as an infirmary, with four camp stretchers lined up along the far wall and first aid supplies stacked on the shelves of an open cupboard. Three other corpses inhabited the room, two of them still near their beds. The remaining one, a skeletal, elderly man with hollow eyes, extended his hand toward Liv while she was pulling her knife from the corpse she’d just put down. His gnarly fingers tangled in her hair, and she gasped, reaching backward to stop it from dragging her off her feet.

My heart gave a hard thump as I dived for her. “*Don’t touch it.*” If any nicks or scratches on her own hand contacted its rotting skin, she was at risk of becoming infected. I went after it with my knife, leaning over the two of them as I drove my blade into its temple. It dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap, and when Liv straightened, I shifted my focus to the next one.

I’d just taken down a young woman with grey skin and open wounds on her face when Liv’s attention switched to the spot behind me. “Cruz!”

The smell hit me first. Death. Decomposed flesh.

Hands tugged at my backpack just before I felt pressure clamp down on my shoulder.

Adrenaline rushed through me, and for one pants-shitting second, I thought it had latched onto me—that one of these fuckers had finally got the better of me after all this time.

But there was no pain. No pain meant no bite.

Liv didn’t know that, though. She morphed into a whirlwind of fury, taking the thing down in seconds and shoving it off me with a strength and speed that left me speechless. Her anxiety was palpable, turning the air tense, her breaths harsh. “Liv.”

She flung her backpack and knife to the floor, her eyes filled with panic as she came at me. “*No, no, no. Take it off, take-it-off-take-it-off.*” She shoved my own pack off my shoulders and grabbed the front of my t-shirt, desperate and urgent. “Take it *off*, Cruz.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said as I dropped my knife to free up both my hands.

She ignored me, instead gripping the material and yanking it up my chest. With frenzied movements, she tore it over my head and threw it away, her quick breaths filling the silence as she circled me. Her hands stroked my skin, assessing, searching for puncture wounds. I waited, blocking out the sensation of her soft fingertips moving over me, letting her do her thing so she could see for herself that I wasn’t hurt.

Her hands stopped at my shoulders, and she pulled in a sharp breath. “I saw it,” she said. “It bit you. It got you *right here.*” She traced my uninjured trap muscle, her voice filled with disbelief. Her fingers paused on my skin.

“I didn’t feel anything,” I assured her. “It must have got the strap on my backpack.”

“But I—” Her voice cut off with a harsh sob, reminding me again that she’d lost the most important person in her life just yesterday. The thought of saying goodbye to the only other person she knew must have terrified her. She would have been all alone, away from home, with no idea what to do with the rest of her life.

Without thinking, I faced her and wrapped her in my arms. Our bodies were pressed together from shoulder to hip, and I hugged her hard, trying to transfer some of my strength to her. “I’m okay,” I said in a low voice beside her ear. “I’m still here. Everything’s all right.”

Her arms encircled my waist, and her cheek touched my bare skin, the heat of it searing. Her breaths whispered over me, and a shudder of relief moved through her just before she sagged against me. I hadn’t comforted her like this until now, and it felt good to take care of someone again. I stroked my hand over her ponytail, smoothing the tangles left by the corpse while I tried to remember the last time anyone had needed something from me.

Minutes went by as we stood together, and the longer we held each other, the more I realised this had been as much for me as it was for her. I hadn’t

been touched in a long time, hadn't felt this kind of closeness with anyone in years. As strange as it was to think, it seemed to heal me, to pull together some of the parts that were shattered when my brother died. So I sank into it and appreciated every second with her, waiting for her to ease away first.

When she finally stirred, I leaned back and checked her over. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes dry, but she still looked troubled. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't mean to lose it like that. It just scared me to think you could be gone so fast." She blew out a breath of air as she gazed up at me. "I really don't want to do this without you."

Her words and the fearless way she delivered them had warmth passing between us. Hearing her say she'd become as attached to me as I was to her made me feel like our lives could have a real purpose; that it didn't just have to be about trying to make it from one day to the next.

More comfortable with touching her now, I smoothed a few strands of hair back from her face. "I don't want to do this without you either, and I'm not going anywhere."

She stared at me, her expression tense. "But it could happen *exactly* that way—any time, any day. It's too easy to be taken by surprise when we're in new places and don't know who or what's waiting for us there. This is just the *beginning*, in mostly familiar territory."

I understood her point. "We're not used to looking out for someone else. We'll come up with a system to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Her arms loosened from around my waist as she searched my features. My answer must have satisfied her because her troubled look cleared a bit. "You're right. I think I'm too used to being on my own and sticking to my routine. Having a system would be a good idea. I like rules and order."

"Yeah, I already figured that part out." I smiled. "Now we've got that settled... can I put my shirt back on?"

She stepped away from me as if just realising what she'd done. Her gaze skimmed my chest and my abs, and her mouth opened in surprise. "Wow. I just... ripped that right off you, didn't I? I'm so sorry." Her attention lifted to my face then dropped again as if she couldn't resist taking another look.

I'd never minded a little objectification, and watching her check me out had a zing of pleasure shooting through me.

More relaxed than I'd been in a long time, I grabbed my discarded shirt from the floor and pulled it over my head. After I tugged it into place, I caught her glancing away again as if she'd been sneaking another look while my face was covered. The initial zing grew into a heavy throb of arousal, sitting low in my gut, pleasurable and warm. Once upon a time, I would have acted on it to see where it went, but we had more important things to focus on, and I shouldn't be entertaining thoughts like this while our safety was in question.

I collected both our knives from the floor and handed hers over. When our fingers touched, the shock that ran up my arm had me wanting to pull her close again. Instead, I stepped away and grabbed my backpack.

At Bridgehill, life would be different.

For now, I needed to keep my eyes on the prize.

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Nine

Liv

None of the garages at the rear of the houses had vehicles in them, and by the time we were done searching, it was three-thirty in the afternoon—too late to be heading off on the first leg of our journey even if we *had* been lucky enough to find a car. Both of us were eager to stay on the move, but we agreed it wouldn't be safe while we were tired and lacking reliable transport, so... here we were spending one more night in the city.

Cruz and I sat on a beige couch in the house opposite where we originally pulled up hours ago. We'd broken in and had been using it as a base to stock all the items we found throughout the day. In the morning, the plan was to throw everything in the back of the car and see how far we could get on flat tyres and fuel dregs.

I glanced around the room, taking in the modern furnishings, the beachy knickknacks, and the collection of white-framed, family pictures on the wall. Two blonde parents and their equally blonde daughters had once lived here. They were smiling and wearing matching neutral-toned outfits in a country barn setting. Back in the day, they might have been one of those perfectly presented Instagram families.

Now... I wondered what had happened to them. The house was clean and tidy. They'd taken most of their clothes. It looked like they'd made a calm exit rather than bailing in a frenzy like so many others had done. I liked to picture them moving to a relative's place somewhere rural, where they were as safe as anyone could be in the new world we'd inherited. Maybe they were thriving there and the girls were happy and healthy.

My gaze shifted to the window, and I let out an audible breath. "It feels peaceful here."

We'd left the white shutters tilted at an angle that gave us a clear view of the street and stopped others from seeing inside. Neither of us had spotted any human activity the entire time we'd been in this area though, and only the occasional group of infected had stumbled past.

Cruz sat beside me on the three-seater couch, his legs spread wide, his fingers laced across his abdomen. The lean, chiselled abdomen I'd had the pleasure of ogling right after I freaked out in the house we were searching. I couldn't believe I'd torn his shirt off him like we were in the middle of a heated make-out session—or that when my face pressed into his bare chest and his arms went around me, I'd found a place of safety and security I never wanted to leave.

“Is it because everything's clean and organised?” he asked, rolling his head in my direction.

I slanted him a look, enjoying the amusement in his eyes. “Are you... suggesting I'm a neat freak? Is that what you're doing?”

“If it walks like a duck...”

I scoffed and grabbed a patterned cushion from beside me, pitching it at him. He caught it and smiled.

Our gazes connected for a beat, just long enough for the warmth to build between us again, then we both looked away and sat in silence. I listened to the sparrows cheep outside the window, a sound I'd missed while living in an apartment. The last leaves of autumn were clinging to the branches they landed on, and the late afternoon sun provided a glowing backdrop.

I thought about how much Haruto would have loved it here. He could have sat with a blanket on his knee, watching movement and life outside the window instead of the never-changing skyline vista he'd had for the last two years of his life. I longed for this kind of peace, where I could kick off my boots and put my feet up, hang out with my favourite people and talk about nothing and everything—but there was no time for relaxation until we reached our destination. Our circumstances could change at any moment.

So, I sat in this cosy, comfortable room with Cruz, kept my boots on, my mind alert, and I listened for sounds that were out of the ordinary.

“I'm staying on the couch tonight,” he said. “So, if you want to take one of the beds and get some real sleep, I'll keep an eye on things out here.”

“I've been getting proper rest most nights since this whole thing started. I think you're the one who needs to sleep in a bed.”

“Should we flip a coin?” His gaze swung in my direction again, his dark eyes smiling at me. I already knew from the expression on his face that he had no intention of taking the bed. His fingers were still interlaced, his thumbs tapping a silent beat against his stomach. Relaxed masculinity oozed from him, and his body language seemed to invite me in—tempting, taunting—and then I’d remind myself that we’d only known of each other’s existence for a week, and I should probably calm down.

Flustered at the warmth spreading through me, I spoke without thinking. “Maybe we should just sleep together.”

The words didn’t register until they’d left my mouth, and when it hit me what I’d suggested—*out loud* to the appealing man beside me—the flustered feeling increased tenfold. His low laugh filled the silence, and I squeezed my eyes shut, mentally kicking myself for the slip-up. “Please wipe that sentence from your memory.”

“I can’t,” he said, his voice warm and teasing. “It’s in there forever now.”

My eyes opened again, and I let out an awkward laugh. “I didn’t mean it like that. I was just suggesting that you and me... that we could stay out here tonight and keep each other company.”

“I know what you meant, *querida*.” His gaze locked with mine and stayed there for a beat, taking the tension up another notch. “Watching a woman like you blush is the best entertainment I’ve had in a while.”

My cheeks flamed so hot I worried they might catch fire, but I refused to hide. If I planned on spending all my time with Cruz, I needed to learn how to deal with my body’s responses to him. There were a lot of responses. “A woman like me? Do I even want to know what that means?”

He let out an amused breath. “I just like seeing the softer side of a strong woman. *Eres la cosa más dulce*.”

“There you go again with those pretty words I can’t understand. You’re lucky I can’t Google that.” I stood to collect some pillows and blankets from the bedroom. Partly because the temperature would be dropping soon, and also to give myself a few minutes to get it together. “I’m going to go rustle up some bedding to keep us warm tonight.”

"All right—and Liv?" Cruz looked up at me from his position on the couch. A corner of his mouth lifted. "I called you sweet, that's all."

His directness had a frisson of excitement moving through me. There were already too many aspects of his personality that appealed to me, and we were only two days in.

Since I could feel my cheeks going red *again*, I thanked him and took off for the safety of the hallway, focusing on my mission to find blankets so I wouldn't get too caught up in thoughts of sleeping beside him.

~ * ~

Cruz and I had been snacking throughout the day. Whenever one of us stumbled onto packaged food that was still good—crackers, chips, salted cashews—we'd stop and share it with the other. When it came time for dinner, I found an unopened box of Sultana Bran in the back of the pantry. Not our preferred option when we could have been eating heated food sachets instead, but we'd reached the point now where getting our hands on any edible food was a win.

With the powdered milk in my pack and some of the water from our bottles, we were able to make ourselves cereal for dinner. I tried not to think about the meals those men would have been enjoying after stealing our stash.

We sat at the dining table with all the blinds closed, and Cruz used the portable gas lighter to set up a candle he'd found in the kitchen junk drawer. With the flickering light between us and bowls of food to fill our stomachs, it was a decent end to a day that hadn't gone anywhere near as well as planned.

When we were both done eating, I carried our bowls to the sink and stacked them neatly rather than washing them. The original occupants wouldn't be coming back, and there was no need to treat the house like an Airbnb, even if it looked like one.

Cruz cupped his hand around the candle's flame and headed back into the lounge room to set it on the coffee table. We resumed our previous positions on the couch, only this time there were blankets to keep us warm and pillows for later when it was time to sleep. We'd left our backpacks close

by, our weapons at our feet—and both of us remained fully dressed, shoes on, in case we needed to make a quick exit.

“Is this how you’ve been living the whole time?” I asked. “On edge and waiting for something to happen?” The candlelight threw dancing shadows across his face, making his features appear dark and dangerous. I had no doubt he could handle anything the world flung at him, but I didn't like to picture him sitting alone throughout the night wearing his clothes, listening for the smallest sound that might cause him to fight or run.

“Only since my brother died. We took turns keeping watch. After that, it all fell on me.”

I wanted to ask about his brother, but the expression on his face yesterday told me it was a no-go zone. “Did you have a wife or girlfriend?” I asked. “Kids?”

“No.” Cruz stared at the candle as he answered. “Work always came first for me, so I would have made a shitty partner. When it all went down... after everyone was gone...” He gave me a wry smile. “My job didn’t seem so important anymore.”

The pandemic had been an eye-opener for so many different reasons. “Same for me, but not because I was too focused on work. I just had terrible luck with dating.”

He relaxed deeper into the couch and sent me a sideways look. “How? In what way?”

I blew out a laugh. “In all the ways. I went on so many first dates that never progressed to second ones that I came to the conclusion I just wasn't cut out for romance.”

The way he looked at me—like he couldn’t believe for a second that someone like me would have trouble dating—made me feel supported and worthy. He had my back without question, even when I was sharing pieces of my past with him that no longer mattered. “What were the reasons for those second dates not happening?”

I smiled. “I have so much material I could write a book. It's probably best not to get me started.”

“Come on, Liv,” he said in a seductive, inviting tone. “Tell me some stories.”

Oh, God. That voice. Deep and smoky with just a hint of rasp. I had a suspicion he could get me to do anything he wanted if he decided to use his power for evil rather than good. He tempted me to share, and with no television or phones to distract us, it wasn’t like we had anything else to do. I released a long breath and prepared to entertain an attractive, appealing man with my humiliating rejections. “Don't complain when you get secondhand embarrassment,” I warned.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

I sighed in defeat and launched into my first experience. “Well... I was single for over a year when a woman from work suggested I try dating apps. I hated the idea of swiping and judging and having the same done to me—but I gave in and arranged to meet a man for dinner. We were waiting for our meals to arrive, and he excused himself to go to the bathroom.” I stared at my hands while I shared the next part. “I sat alone for ten minutes until I got a text saying I wasn’t his type and he’d taken off home.”

“What a weasel.”

I looked up to find Cruz staring at me, his expression neutral. I gave him a quick smile, appreciating the backup. “Another man talked about his mother for the entire date, to the point where I might have been jealous if I'd been his girlfriend.”

“Bet he still lived with her.”

“Probably.” I shifted to a more comfortable position, feeling better about sharing my stories. “There was a guy who asked if he could cut off a piece of my hair to keep in his wallet. *Just a small piece*, he said, as if that would make him seem like less of a serial killer. Another one ordered up big then conveniently forgot he didn’t have any money until payday, and—oh!” I said, encouraging a laugh from Cruz. “*One* guy seemed perfect on the surface, seriously perfect, but my friend looked him up on Facebook, and she found out he was married with three kids.” I tried to smile at the ridiculousness of it all, but the memories were still too frustrating.

“What a dick,” Cruz said. “A bag of dicks. You’re making me happy I chose the single life back then.”

I thought about all the times I’d dressed up, sprayed on my favourite perfume, and left my apartment feeling hopeful that *this* would be the night that I’d finally find a decent guy who liked me and wanted to share his life with me. Then I remembered leaving every restaurant, every movie theatre and café, still alone and searching for the long-lasting love that seemed as if it would always be out of reach.

Now, after a pandemic had swept through and left devastation in its wake, I knew what it was like to be excited about a man—a strong, *good* man, who appeared to enjoy my company. “It made me feel so pathetic that I deleted the stupid apps and gave up on chasing something that didn’t even feel real. I still had my family, my friends, my co-workers. It wasn’t exactly what I wanted out of life, but it was more than enough.”

Cruz rested his linked hands on his stomach and swung his gaze my way. He looked at me for a long moment before he said, “You deserved better.”

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach and warmth rushed over me. Other than my dad and Haruto, no man had looked at me like I was something special to be cherished. My heart swelled with emotion, and I gave him a small smile. “Thanks.”

He let the silence linger for a while, then said, “I’m glad you figured out you were better off alone before the virus hit. Imagine being stuck with a dud during those long-ass lockdowns?”

Melbourne had been known for the strictest lockdowns in the world during the first Covid wave, but that had turned out to be nothing compared to the rules we endured when the zombie virus raged through. I shivered, imagining being shut in my small apartment with one of the guys I’d tried dating. “You’re right, it could have been so much worse.”

He held my gaze and gave me a slight smile, creating more of a connection with one look than other men had achieved during an entire date. “At least you don’t have to worry about that anymore,” he said. “Everyone’s dead.”

“Cruz!” I tipped my head back and laughed, appreciating the timing of his dark humour.

We shared a smile, and when a moaning sound came from somewhere outside, reality crashed in and the lightness between us disappeared. I glanced at the closed window, wondering whether the glow from the candle could be seen from outside. I hadn't spent the night at ground level post-virus, and the thought of being near a pane of glass accessible from the street had my body tensing.

“Better kill the flame,” Cruz said, leaning forward to extinguish the candle.

The room plunged into darkness, and for a second I felt off balance.

Yesterday morning, I had Haruto in my life, a man I'd loved and trusted for years.

Last night I slept in my bedroom while a new man occupied my living room.

Now, I was about to make myself vulnerable by spending the night with that same man on a couch in a pitch-black room.

Cruz made the sounds of someone moving to a more comfortable position then said, “I don't know if I need to say the words out loud, but you're safe here with me. Try to get some rest, and we'll head off early tomorrow.”

~ * ~

I woke in the morning to find light seeping into the room, and a glance at my watch told me it was already seven a.m. I stretched and yawned, surprised I'd slept so well in a strange house with the infected lurking on the other side of the glass. Sometime during the night, I must have moved, or Cruz had moved me, because I lay on my back with a blanket covering me and my booted feet stretched out along the couch.

It took me a minute to realise that my head was resting on a pillow he'd laid in his lap.

I blinked and gazed up at him as my mind cleared. He'd slept sitting up to watch over us and make sure we both made it through to morning. He'd kept me warm and comfortable. Safe. It had my heart filling to bursting, and I drew a deep breath to calm myself. I knew part of the reason he'd initially wanted to meet me related to physical attraction. I saw it in the way he looked at me, felt it in the energy that thrummed between us—but this

tender side of his... I wasn't used to being cared for. I always fussed over others.

I stared up at him, taking in his features while his eyes were still closed. His mouth was soft, his lashes thick and dark against his golden skin. The scruff that covered his jaw and ran partway down his neck had me wanting to rub my hand across it to feel the prickly scrape against my skin. Whenever I looked at him now, I felt affection, butterflies. Lust. It was so confusing. We'd known each other for such a short time.

“Stop staring,” he said, his voice amused. “I can feel your eyes on me.”

I let out a breathy laugh and pushed myself up to a sitting position, cutting the moment short before those feelings had a chance to take over. “Sorry.” I crossed my ankles on the floor and wrapped the blanket around my knees. “I was just trying to figure out how I got there.”

Cruz opened his eyes and gave me a slight smile that was insanely appealing. “You fell asleep on my shoulder last night. I helped you get more comfortable.”

“Thanks.” I grimaced. “Did I drool on you?”

“It dried off overnight.”

Laughter bubbled up inside me, and I sent him an amused look. I shifted my attention to the closed shutters, wondering what we'd find when we ventured outside. The sounds of moaning and shuffling had continued long into the night, sometimes close enough that I thought we might need to act, but we'd been lucky and there were no attempts to gain entry to the house, from the living or the dead. “When do you want to leave?”

“As soon as we're ready. We can wash up with the tank water out the back before we head off. If you want to take the first turn with the water, I'll check the situation out front and make sure the car's still in one piece.”

“Sounds good.” I hadn't given the bathroom a once-over yet, so I grabbed a plastic bag from the collection in the kitchen and took off down the hall. After scrounging in the mirrored cabinet and the under-bench cupboards, I came up with paracetamol, unopened toothbrushes, a brand-new menstrual cup still in its box, and a bottle of unisex shower gel. When I spotted the two roll-on deodorants, I almost cheered out loud. We still had a few

toiletries that we'd been smart enough to keep in our backpacks, but when it came to hygiene in a post-apocalyptic world, you could never have too much.

The front door opened and closed as I filled the bag.

Cruz would only be out there for a few minutes, and I needed to get moving so he wouldn't catch me in the middle of a bathing session when he returned. I grabbed towels and face washers from the linen cupboard, snagged my backpack on the way out, and headed straight through the rear door. We'd cleared the yard yesterday and made sure the side gate was locked, so I hurried to the water tank in the corner and dropped my supplies.

With a quick glance at the back of the house, I slipped behind the tank to relieve my bladder—one of the major downsides to losing modern conveniences. When I was done, I stripped down to my sports bra and briefs and got straight to work.

The water was so cold it stole my breath, and I gasped as my skin turned pink. In the chill of the morning air, I lathered up one of the face washers and scrubbed myself from head to toe, checking the back door as I took care of the more private areas. I even managed to hold my head under the tap and shampoo my hair, shivering violently the entire time.

Once I was done, I felt wide awake and human again.

I draped a towel around me to use as a shield, then removed my wet underwear and slipped into clean briefs and a plain beige bra—the last undergarments I still owned after everything had been stolen from us. With only one change of clothes left in my backpack, I dressed in cargo pants and a grey tee. As I was pulling on my socks and boots, the rear door opened and Cruz came outside carrying his backpack.

As he stepped down from the deck and headed straight for me, I finger-combed my hair into a ponytail and worked the wet strands until they were smooth. “How did it look out there?” I asked, twisting a hair tie into place.

Cruz dumped his pack beside mine and toed off his boots. “The corpses from last night took off. Looks like we’ll have a clear run.”

“So we can start our search for a car all over again?”

He must have heard the resignation in my voice because he smiled in understanding. “It’s a pain in the ass, I know, but it needs to be done.”

He stripped off his t-shirt and went to work on the waistband of his jeans, as if we'd known each other for years and getting undressed in front of me was a totally normal part of our day. My breaths turned shallow at the thought of seeing more of him again, and I shamelessly took in the view. His body was lean and strong, with dark hair sprinkled across his pecs that met in the middle and travelled in a thin line toward the top of his boxer briefs. He had a gorgeous, highly detailed tattoo on the upper arm of a kneeling angel with her wings extended. I somehow missed that during my freak-out yesterday.

I wanted to touch him. Or lick him. Maybe both if he didn't mind too much.

“Are you just going to take off all your clothes while I’m standing right here?” I asked, wishing my voice didn’t have to sound so wistful.

He sent me a smiling glance as he pulled off his jeans. “Are you just going to hang around and watch me strip? I hate to point out the obvious, but you don’t need to be here. I've been dressing and undressing myself for years.”

Oh, God. I didn't. I really didn't. I should have been inside packing and getting ready to leave, not hanging around like I'd bought front-row tickets to a male strip show. “Um, yes. You're right.” With an awkward smile, I stepped away from him and pointed to the little stool beside the tank. “I’ve left a towel and face washer there for you. There’s some shower gel and shampoo. Deodorant. I’ll just... shut up now and... go inside.”

Cruz smiled as he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his boxer briefs. “I’ll be there soon. Try not to peek through the window.”

My mouth went dry at the thought.

I rolled my eyes and turned away, heading back to the house with a hot face and a tingling body.

Ten

Liv

By late morning, our mission to find a vehicle was starting to feel like a lost cause, and without a mode of transport, we couldn't make it to Bridgehill.

If we didn't go to Bridgehill, what then?

After Haruto had shown me the article with its inviting pictures and descriptions, the idea of having heating, hot water, and electricity again quickly implanted itself in my mind. All those basic conveniences that we used to take for granted could have been ours—which meant a shower and a toilet. An actual working toilet.

Now? At least I had Cruz, and I most definitely didn't take him for granted.

He and I sat outside the last house we'd rifled through to go over our options. In the end, we decided to head for the city limits in our beaten, broken car to try our luck closer to the highway. A ton of people fled when the hysteria hit full force, and many were caught up in traffic congestion or stuck on streets that were blocked by the army to direct the flow. When they couldn't physically drive any farther, news reports had shown them taking off on foot in a panic, somehow believing their chances of survival would be improved by leaving a populated area without the safety net of a car between them and the dead.

As much as I didn't like capitalising on their horrible experiences, we were hoping those people had left keys in their abandoned cars, but muscle memory could be a bitch and habit may still have won out.

We hadn't even reached the highway when we stumbled onto more deserted cars than I'd ever seen in one place. They were *everywhere*, all different types of vehicles crammed together at strange angles.

I hadn't visited this part of the city since the pandemic. It would have taken me too long to reach the outskirts in the limited time I spent outside, and I refused to push my luck in case I didn't make it back to Haruto. Although I

knew the area well—especially the pubs and nightclubs from my younger years—I hadn't seen it like this before.

Cruz pulled over, and we climbed out and slipped our backpacks on. We both drew our knives and spent a silent moment taking in the scene. Some of the vehicles had been dumped at the side of the road while others were stopped in the middle. A garbage truck, motorbikes, family cars, delivery vans. A few push bikes were lying on their sides.

It looked like a horde of the dead had come through at some point, and the people who'd originally been trying to leave were overwhelmed. There were bloody, smeared handprints on metal, belongings scattered across the bitumen, and dead bodies all over the place. From a glance, I guessed the humans had fought back and taken down a large number of the infected, but the homicide detective beside me would have a better idea of how it had played out.

As the autumn sun heated up our surroundings, the smell intensified right along with it, and I had to steel myself against the assault on my senses. It was a surreal experience standing amongst such widespread devastation and seeing the violence up close.

Whenever there were no infected lumbering through an area, the complete, utter silence still surprised me. Even when I used to go on early morning runs when life was normal, I had the distant sound of trucks on the highway or trains passing through to keep me company. There were dog walkers and taxis, lights on in the 24-7 service stations and laundromats. Now? Nothing—and that was a big part of what made the gang so threatening. When their convoy travelled the streets, and I heard their loud, unbothered voices, it filled me with fear every time.

"Stick with the cars on the perimeter that aren't boxed in," Cruz said. "The others are no good to us."

"Got it." I scanned the street, and my attention swept over the bodies this time rather than the cars. As I took in the damage and loss around me, a lump formed in my throat. All these people had once had dreams and goals. Families and jobs. Futures. Now they were spread across the ground like roadkill as if their lives had meant nothing—and no one could be given the dignity of a proper burial anymore.

After all the planning and preparation I'd gone through to improve my chances of survival, would I end up on the bitumen like discarded trash, too?

"Try not to think about it," Cruz said as he took in my expression. "Keep busy, focus on the goal, and the second we're ready, we're gone."

He used his take-charge tone whenever our next task looked to be a risky one, and it gave me the push I needed to snap out of my mood. We were out in the open with several roads leading to this spot. We had no cover and needed to move fast. "You're right. Do you want to start from opposite ends and meet back here in the middle?"

He gave the area a thorough inspection, turning to scan the buildings in every direction. Looking for movement. Danger. I'd considered myself to be a cautious person before I met him, but he'd taken attentiveness to a new level. "Yeah, okay. Let's get this done," he said as his gaze came back to me. "Watch out for corpses in cars. Whistle or wave if you find keys. No shouting."

This would be our first time separating to complete a task, and although we'd known each other for days rather than months or years, I'd already begun to lean on him. It felt wrong to be apart, but we'd work faster alone, and if we had to run for any reason, taking off separately made us more difficult targets to track.

I nodded my understanding of his instructions, then took off for the other end of the traffic jam.

With my steps light and fast, I scanned my surroundings as I approached the vehicle on the northern boundary. It was a police car with its front doors hanging open and blood splatter on the outside of the smashed windshield. I pictured the dead attacking as the officers sat inside, trying their best to strategise in a situation where everyone around them had lost their minds. It would have been chaos.

I leaned in to check the ignition, unsurprised to find no keys. Cops would be the least likely to overlook that kind of detail even in a life-threatening situation. It looked like other people had picked the car over at some point.

The boot had been prised open, and the interior cleared of any weapons we might have been able to take for ourselves.

I moved on to the next vehicle, a silver family van with the sliding door open.

A movement from the interior caught my eye, and my gaze landed on an infected woman sitting in the passenger seat trapped by her seatbelt. She had tangled brown hair and hollow cheeks, and she wore a floral dress stained with blood and fluids. Her arms reached out to me, her faulty wiring meaning she couldn't comprehend there was no getting hold of me with steel and glass between us. As her mouth gaped and her bloodshot eyes fixated on me, I spotted the dirty bandage wrapped around her neck. Someone had bitten her, most likely a member of her own family.

I killed the urge to create a tragic backstory for her and went around to the driver's side.

No keys.

Again.

A van would have been useful for carrying supplies and extra people if we happened to stumble on to any who appeared to be trustworthy.

With a sigh, I straightened and stared down the road in Cruz's direction while I indulged in a brief *what's-the-point-of-all-this* moment. He saw me looking his way and gave me a thumbs-up to show all was well on his end. I returned the gesture and got back to work, hurrying to the next vehicle in line.

The sooner we could get out of here the better. I yearned for open roads and endless space, and to finally leave behind a city that no longer had anything to offer us.

As I dipped my head and peered into a red sports car, the sound of an engine and pounding music had me freezing in place. My stomach lurched, and I glanced at Cruz to figure out what my chances were of reaching him.

He was still at the far end of the traffic jam, maybe fifty metres away. Given the proximity of the noise, I wouldn't have time to get to him and hash out a plan. It was either run and hide or stay out here in the open when they came

around one of the multiple corners leading to this area. My heart raced and a sick feeling came over me.

Cruz cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled over the sound of the car, no longer concerned with being quiet. “Run and hide! I’ll find you.”

He disappeared in seconds. The moment I lost sight of him, my stomach squeezed with fear. My legs tensed, and I glanced in every direction, trying to shut out the noise in my mind that stopped me from thinking clearly. I needed to move *now* to give myself a fighting chance.

Once they saw me, it was all over.

My gaze locked onto a boutique hotel across the road. The broken doors would make access straightforward.

I sprinted in that direction, keeping alert for any obstacles so I wouldn’t do something stupid like trip and knock myself unconscious. The racket from the approaching vehicle drew the dead from a shopping plaza beside the hotel. Several of them wandered outside and staggered along the footpath. Before they could surround me, I ran straight for the hotel’s main doors, praying for a clear lobby.

Two of the infected limped toward me from the open doorway. Another came at me from the side as I listened to the car screech to a stop behind me. I couldn’t see the occupants from my position, but it sounded like they’d pulled up near our car, which they’d no doubt immediately recognise since they’d slashed the damn tyres themselves.

Seconds later, a man yelled, “Found her. It’s that chick!”

Oh no. Please, please no.

“Nelson, you come with me!” someone called out—presumably Jackson. “The rest of you round up that asshole over there.”

Had they seen where Cruz went? Did they know exactly where to find him? Panic took hold, and I worked fast, striking the closest infected and driving my knife through the temple of the next. The third grabbed hold of my t-shirt, and I swiped at its head, missing on the first attempt. With a grunt and a second plunge of my blade, I connected with its eye and felt its weight drop to my feet.

No time to waste. My heart pounded and urgency ripped through me. I couldn't hear any voices coming from outside. Only the sound of thudding footsteps closing in on me *fast*. I scanned the navy lobby with its gold fixtures and fittings and saw another group of the dead coming for me from a function room off the reception area. The men would find me in seconds if I hid in here, especially if I needed to get past the infected to gain entry.

I ran to the fire stairs on the far side of the room, pushing through the heavy door and sprinting up one flight of steps. I paused on the concrete landing, my mind racing as I sifted through my options. Would they expect me to keep going and make as much progress as possible, urged on by the idea that higher levels meant I'd be safer?

I yanked open the door to the first floor and sprinted down a hallway with thick, burgundy carpet, thankful to find it clear of the infected—then a thought hit me full force while I was running. Hotel doors automatically locked when they were closed. They ran on batteries, but I'd still need a keycard to access any of the rooms. Unless I could find one that had been propped open for whatever reason, I'd just run straight into a dead end.

Literally.

I couldn't retrace my steps. The men would be in the lobby by now. There was no time for backtracking.

I stopped for a second to catch my breath and think.

Frustration and panic had me wanting to bang my head against the wall, to scream and swear and *kick* something. What a stupid, *stupid* idea to choose a hotel over an office building or a shopping mall. I'd just become one of those clueless characters in horror movies who had viewers yelling at the fucking screen.

Now what? I couldn't hear a thing from below, but they'd seen me come in here. I needed to get moving if I wanted to keep my freedom.

With my heart in my throat, I took off again, heading for the glow of natural light at the end of the hall. I kept watch for open doors along the way—a supplies closet or a maintenance cupboard. No options jumped out at me, and I didn't have time to stop and rattle doorknobs in the hope one of them turned.

When I reached the end, I discovered the light was coming from a floor-to-ceiling window in a small lounge area. My pulse thudded so frantically I could feel the beats in my ears, and I weaved between two velvet couches and a coffee table. Being on the first floor, there was a slim chance the window was the functional kind that opened. As I stepped up to the glass and discovered metal grips at the bottom of the frame, elation rushed through me. It was one of the older buildings in the area, so it took some work to shimmy the panel upward, but soon enough I had a gap big enough to climb through.

I leaned out and discovered a ledge about thirty centimetres deep. Enough space to fit my feet without any dangerous overhang.

I pulled my head back in and heard the main door opening at the other end of the corridor. My body tensed with fear, and I reminded myself to stay calm. Now more than ever, I needed to be switched on and focused on my goal. They were coming for me, and if I didn't hurry, they'd be onto me in seconds. I stretched one leg outside and held onto the frame to lift my other leg through. As I leaned forward to complete the motion, one of the metal grips snagged my pack, and my stomach dropped as it yanked me backward.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

Footsteps and conversation drifted toward me, along with the sound of one door handle after another being shaken. They were comfortable making noise and taking their time, and although I appreciated the extra seconds it gave me, I hoped their arrogance would eventually be their undoing. Why should I have to be *this* scared while they casually strolled down the corridor as if it was merely a matter of time before they got their hands on me?

This was my life. *I* was in control of what happened to me.

I worked the handle of my pack free and slipped outside, trying my best to keep quiet as I eased the frame down again. When I faced the building and shifted my foot sideways, my boot slipped on the painted ledge, and I gasped as I reached for the drainpipe beside me. I held onto it in a death grip, my breaths coming faster and faster, my mind reeling. I'd been so

close to falling, either to my death or a serious injury that would leave me vulnerable to the men and the infected.

With no time left, I shimmied out of view of the glass before they could see me.

Relief rushed over me, but I wouldn't let myself get comfortable.

Once I'd taken a mini break to regain my composure, I looked over my shoulder and took stock of my surroundings. This side of the hotel faced the road that led to the highway and freedom. If the gang hadn't interrupted us, we might have been jumpstarting a new vehicle by now and getting the hell out of the city.

I faced the bricks again and thought over my options. My position would only be safe for a short time. If one of the men walked by on the footpath below, they'd spot me up here and then I truly would be trapped. The dead might catch onto my existence too, and if they gathered below me it would be like a marker pinpointing my location.

I needed to figure out how to lower myself from the ledge and run.

I took in the entire length of the ledge on my right. There had to be a fire escape or some other way out for situations when the stairs and elevators were unusable, otherwise the hotel would be a death trap. Gripping the drainpipe with both hands, I leaned out backward to get a better view and spotted a metal ladder fixed to the wall. The sight had my heart soaring and relief washing over me.

With a glance in the opposite direction, I found another one closer to my location, but reaching it would mean passing by the lounge window, and I had no idea where the men were or if they were still lurking on this floor. I couldn't risk being seen, so I braced myself and ignored the nerves churning in my stomach. With my hands clutching the pipe, I used a shuffling motion to step around it, then reached for the next window frame.

No one could enter any of the rooms without breaking the doors down, so I wouldn't have to worry about being seen from inside. All I needed to do was keep my balance and hold on tight. Focus on each step.

The warm breeze blew my hair from my face while I continued my shuffle-grab-shuffle-grab movements. As I got closer to the ladder, I tried my

hardest to keep my emotions in check. Whenever my thoughts drifted to Cruz and I let myself wonder whether he'd evaded the gang, I pushed them out, knowing it would only lead to trouble. He was stronger than me and had more experience in these situations. Out of the two of us, he had the best chance of survival.

I glanced over my shoulder to keep track of what was going on behind me. Nothing appeared to be any different on ground level. A larger group of the infected milled around near the parkland behind me, but I couldn't see any movement from the gang members. Their car hadn't started up again either. Whatever they were doing while they remained on foot, they were doing it quietly—a little unnerving when their default behaviour had been obnoxious.

I returned my attention to the window. A harsh breath ripped from me, and I almost stumbled straight off the ledge. An infected man stared back at me from the inside, his hands and face pressed against the dirty glass. I surprised myself by keeping my scream contained, but the shock made me grip the window frame to keep myself from falling. His reddened eyes locked onto me, and he let out an inhuman moan that I hoped to God the men couldn't hear from the hallway.

I couldn't spend long recovering from the shock. With trembling limbs, I shuffled along the ledge while the infected man repeatedly banged his head against the glass, hitting it so hard that someone would surely have to pick up on the noise.

When the ladder was within reach, I grabbed the metal handrail and glanced up and down the length of it, noting that it went all the way to the roof. The ground still seemed like the safest option. I could find a place to hide while I waited for the men to head off somewhere else; stay there and be quiet while I worked out how to reconnect with Cruz. Climbing higher limited my chances of escape if they surrounded me, and the idea of being trapped up there made me itchy.

I moved onto the ladder and held tight, leaning out from the wall again to check the position of the windows below me. There was a wide one that looked to be located in the lounge area of the lobby. I'd have to step off the

last rung and sprint for the nearest hiding spot just in case they were passing through that area.

While I was still leaning back, a window above me slid open, and a man with tangled blonde hair and a lean face poked his head outside. He looked to be two floors up from me, and I gasped, immediately flattening myself against the ladder.

My heart pounded so hard it could have burst from my chest. I froze and held my breath, feeling so panicked that it took everything in me to be silent and still.

Please don't see me, please don't see me.

With my head tilted back and my gaze on him, I willed him to lower the window and go on with his search inside the hotel.

I didn't get my wish.

He glanced down and locked eyes with me.

My stomach pitched. Every nerve ending fired. His eyes filled with confusion at first, and it took him a beat to register that he'd found me. I made the most of his hesitation. Before he could react, I sprung into action, racing down the ladder and jumping to the ground from the third last rung.

"Hey! She's here!" he called to his crew, then to me, he said, "Stay there, baby. We're not gonna hurt you."

Baby was exactly the wrong thing to call me. It implied intimacy and warmth, and the sleazy undertone turned me cold. In what world would I ever give those assholes the benefit of the doubt? I'd seen them in action, I'd heard too much. Instead, I sprinted to the nearest alley and slowed down to hang a sharp right, then broke into a sprint again.

All of those men were stronger than me; I'd never be naive enough to tell myself otherwise. They were bigger in numbers, too, but I hadn't seen a single one of them do anything more strenuous than walking over the past two years. I'd committed to running every morning, and I hadn't allowed myself a day off. I'd completed circuits running fast, slow, carrying weights. In sneakers, boots, all kinds of weather. I had the edge, and I'd keep that advantage until I used up my very last option.

I took a left and heard them yelling out to one another behind me. They were strategising and trying to trap me, but they were also alerting Cruz to their location and mine. I had no doubt he could hear them. Just before I turned another corner, I risked a glance over my shoulder, and hope trickled through me when all I found was a narrow, empty street. Still no tail.

When my gaze returned to the front, I sucked in a breath and ran straight into one of the dead. The force knocked it off its feet and sent it falling with a hard thwack. My stomach dropped, and my knife slipped from my hand as I followed it to the ground. I landed on top of its gross, rotting body. My forehead smacked its chin, and the shock stole the breath from me. It shook me to the core. One second I'd been flying, and the next I'd rammed into the equivalent of a brick wall.

My head throbbed as I sprang to my feet and scrambled for my knife. The infected man reached for me, but I wouldn't waste time or energy ending him. I needed to get running again.

Move, move, *move*.

I checked behind me before I took off.

Still nothing.

Then a man skidded around the corner a block behind me, big and bearded and covered in tattoos. Jackson—*again*. I just could *not* get a break from this guy. He spotted me straight away and bellowed, “*Stop!*” then continued running in my direction, his face hard and determined, his arms and legs pumping like a machine.

The vision terrified me, and I pulled in a sharp breath.

Adrenaline rushed through me, and I set off like I'd just heard a starter's pistol. I rounded the corner, keeping an eye on my surroundings so I wouldn't hit another rotting roadblock. Racing down a street filled with apartment blocks and office buildings, I headed for a shopping arcade I knew of nearby. There were stairs that led to a second level where a row of offices were located. Assuming I'd find at least one door unlocked, I could hide there until the men got tired of searching for me.

Another group of the dead lumbered toward me, crowding together as their bony, decomposing arms stretched out in front of them.

I'd have to dodge them whenever possible. If I took any down, it would leave an obvious trail for the gang.

With a shove into the shoulder of the closest infected, I kept running and sighted the opening to the arcade. There were more dead swarming around the entrance—*so many more*—clustered together and moving like a herd of sheep. Seeing them had me rethinking the upper-level idea. If they gathered around the base of the stairs after I ran up to the second floor, it would look suspicious and leave me vulnerable.

I bypassed the arcade and set my sights on an apartment building half a block away. My breaths were wrenching from me, my calves and lungs on fire. My backpack seemed to weigh twice what it had when I first started running, but my fear and determination kept me going. I pulled up at the entrance to the complex, relieved to find one of the double doors swinging open. With a look over my shoulder, all I saw behind me were the dead.

No men, no danger.

I stepped inside the building and kept my knife at the ready, my senses on alert.

The smell of the decayed bodies scattered across the floor hit me like a punch to the face, and I tried to block it out as I scanned the foyer. There was a row of mailboxes to the left and a bank of elevators on the right. A wide set of stairs straight ahead of me split the room in two, and I took the steps as fast as I could, keeping my tread quiet, my ears trained for noises behind me.

When I reached the landing, I glanced left and right and considered my options.

There were no visible infected wandering about or dead bodies lying in the corridor. If the men came in here at all, they surely wouldn't expect me to choose the same level as I had in the hotel—and this looked to be the quickest, safest way to hide.

Two apartment doors were hanging open. The others were shut and most likely locked. I hurried inside the fourth apartment on the left, closing the door behind me. While I worked on calming my breaths, I engaged the

push-button lock, threw the deadbolt, and then followed up with the flip lock for added security.

Three locks between me and anyone who tried to force their way in here.

I gave silent thanks to the previous occupant and turned around, hoping I wouldn't find them lurking inside. I didn't want to be stuck with their body until I could free myself, which at this rate might not be until tomorrow morning.

I crossed the wood floor and took in the compact studio apartment. There was a lowered wall bed set up with pillows and blankets along the righthand side, and a table beside it housing a collection of framed photos that I refused to torture myself with while I was already in a precarious state. The kitchen took up most of the left wall, with every cupboard hanging open as if people had been in here scavenging. A closed door farther along presumably led to the bathroom.

All I wanted to do was sit and catch my breath, but I needed to ensure there were no surprises first. I gripped my knife and approached the door, listening for the slightest sound. Shuffling, breathing, moaning. While my heart still pounded from my run, I readied myself and turned the handle, filled with apprehension as I pushed the door inward.

All I found was a bath with an overhead shower; a toilet, and a washer-dryer combo.

A relieved breath whooshed out of me.

I left the door open and stowed my knife in my belt, feeling the trembling set in now that my adrenaline was beginning to wane. One more task to complete before I could stop. I went over to the window and disengaged the lock, testing the frame to make sure it was still operational. The smooth glide confirmed I had an alternative exit if I needed one. I lowered and locked it again, feeling secure enough to remove my backpack and set the weight on the floor.

My legs were shaking, my body flooding with every emotion I'd shut down to stay in survival mode. I hurried to the bed before I collapsed, wondering if I was on the verge of a panic attack. If there was ever a time to feel overwhelmed and out of control, now would be it.

Lowering myself to the edge of the mattress, I grabbed a pillow and clutched it tight to my chest. I focused on deep breaths in and out, wishing I didn't have to go through this alone. I'd never felt so isolated, so lost. I didn't have Haruto with his words of wisdom or Cruz with his strength and confidence. For the first time since the virus had obliterated the world we knew, I was completely, utterly alone, trapped in an apartment while a group of dangerous men tried to track me down.

My chin wobbled and my eyes burned with tears.

My throat hurt.

How long could I hide out and wait for Cruz to find me before it became obvious I'd need to take action and get out on my own? A day? Two days? I barely had enough water to see me through another twenty-four hours, and my food consisted of powdered milk, and... nope that was it. Fucking powdered milk.

I stared blankly out the window, feeling useless and helpless.

I pressed my face into the pillow and gave in to the tears.

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Eleven

Cruz

After I yelled at Liv to run, I dived inside the nearest building—an office complex with six levels according to the directory on the foyer wall. I headed straight for the fire door and charged up the steps, bypassing one floor after another, keeping up the pace while my backpack thumped against my spine. I pushed myself until my lungs were ready to burst, my focus on redirecting the gang to give Liv some breathing space.

It didn't take long for sounds from the floors below to echo through the building. The shouting and pounding footsteps told me at least a couple of them were on my tail, but I'd hoped for more. I'd only seen one car, which meant two or three of them must have gone after Liv. The thought motivated me to race up the steps even faster. I was too far ahead for any of those assholes to catch up to me, and none of them knew whether I'd hidden on one of the lower levels or kept moving higher. By the time they'd cleared each level and figured out my target had been the roof all along, I'd be gone.

I reached the top level and pushed through the door. After the darkness of the enclosed staircase, I squinted against the sun and stepped outside. There was no time to search for something heavy to barricade the door. Instead, I went straight over to the ledge and surveyed the streets below, hoping to see or hear something to indicate which direction Liv had headed. I'd been standing there for seconds at most when a man shouted, "Hey! She's here!"

The adrenaline that had started to calm after my run came rushing back full force. My gaze shot to the location of the voice, and I memorised the layout of the area. Tension rippled through me and my jaw clenched. I'd told her yesterday that she looked like she was ready to take down a kingdom. The same feeling tore through me now, turning my blood hot and filling me with a simmering rage. Anyone who touched her was a fucking dead man.

I walked around the perimeter to check out the closest buildings. My attention locked on one south of where I stood that offered the best chance

of landing a jump. Lower in height, rooftop aligned with rooftop, and only a couple of metres in between. With a run-up, I could make it, and if the door to the internal stairs was locked from the outside, the fire escape would get me down to street level.

My heart pounded hard, my limbs were pumped and ready. I ripped off my backpack and sent it across to the other roof with a two-handed lob. I followed it up with a test run, jogging toward the edge of the building, focusing on where I needed to land. When I went back to my starting point, I shook my arms at my sides, braced myself, and took off like a shot.

The second I reached the edge of the roof, I launched off my front foot and felt my body leaving solid ground. The wind flew through my hair and flapped my shirt. My stomach dipped with a falling sensation. I kept my gaze locked on the concrete rooftop opposite. No voices shouted out to let me know I'd been seen, and when I landed, I dropped into an immediate roll to save my ankles and knees.

The concrete bit into my elbows and shoulders. Scraping skin, bruising bone. When the momentum stopped, I wanted to take a minute to recover, but I didn't have a minute—and neither did Liv.

I stood and made sure all of my body parts were working, then grabbed my backpack and shrugged it on again. The rooftop door was locked, so I jogged to the fire escape and scanned the street below. No dickheads from the gang. I should have been relieved to find out I had a clear run, but I couldn't shake the feeling that they'd regrouped and shifted their entire focus to Liv. If all five of them were after her, I hoped more than ever that she could keep it together long enough to outrun them and find somewhere safe to hide.

I climbed over the ledge and half-stepped, half-dropped down the ladder, reaching the bottom in less than a minute. When my feet hit the ground, I took in my surroundings. Still nothing. No men, no corpses. I waited and trained my ears for any sign of their location or hers. The slightest sounds carried on the breeze these days, so it wouldn't be difficult to pick up on noises even a block from here. All I heard was the caw of a crow and the distant moaning of corpses, until another one of those assholes shouted, "*Stop!*"

My body jolted, and I took off in the direction the voice had come from, keeping my steps quiet, my senses alert.

Liv would have been terrified by now, knowing they were tracking her while she dodged the dead and had the added pressure of figuring out where to run next.

I turned a corner, caught a glimpse of colour, and immediately pulled back. It took me a second to process the image, and when it registered that all I'd seen was a corpse, I leaned out again to check if it was on its own or the first of a bigger group. After confirming there were no others nearby, I took off again and left it alone. Liv was smart. She'd know to do the same with any corpses she came across.

I ran until I reached the next intersection, then stopped to take in the scene across the road. A dozen or so corpses were loitering at the base of a flight of stairs just inside the entrance to a shopping arcade. Liv wouldn't have gone up there and left the equivalent of a neon sign indicating her location, so it must have been those clowns searching for her on the second level.

At least that meant they hadn't found her yet.

I backed up and hid in the alcove of a nearby restaurant, my pulse hammering as I waited. Every minute I spent away from her had my concern doubling, the urgency building. I hated not knowing if she was coping with the pressure, but it gave me a sliver of comfort realising she was more than likely still on the run.

A commotion went up near the shopping arcade, and my body turned rigid with tension. It sounded like the gang had come back down the stairs and were now taking down the corpses blocking the exit. Grunts, shouts, and wet, stabbing noises filled the air, going on for several long minutes. When the last thud of a body hit the concrete, a male voice drifted toward me.

"I *want* that girl." The metal clang that followed suggested he'd kicked something. "I've gotta have her."

My hand clenched around my knife, itching for a chance to do some damage. Unfortunately, real life wasn't like the movies where the bad guys stood in a circle politely waiting for their turn to take on the good guy. If I could, I'd yank out my hatchet and start swinging both weapons. Take out as

many as possible before the rest surrounded me. At least with fewer of them around, Liv would have a better chance of getting out of here—but then she'd be left to fend for herself in a world where it clearly wasn't safe for a woman on her own.

So, I waited. Silent and seething.

Breathing. Strategising.

Listening to the sound of my own heart pounding in my ears.

After they'd thrown around all their theories about where she might have gone, the group separated and dispersed. Two of them headed east while the other three ran right by me without even checking the doorway as they passed. They were sloppy and stupid, and the quicker Liv and I could get out of here the better.

When I was sure the street was clear, I stepped out from my cover and approached the arcade where the fresh pile of bodies lay. The men had taken them down fast, a reminder that even if they weren't smart in a strategic sense, they had one another's backs and were more than capable of working together to face a threat.

My gaze drifted over the corpses—fourteen in total—and a black object beside the nearest one caught my attention. I stooped to collect it, my pulse speeding as I turned the key fob over in my hand. It was too clean to have dropped from the clothes of a corpse, which meant I more than likely had the key to their fully functional car.

I had a key to a fucking car.

Renewed energy flowed through me, and I glanced around to make sure it hadn't been a plant to draw me out of hiding.

I was still alone.

I needed to get out of here before one of them realised they'd dropped it and doubled back.

My gaze lifted to the taller apartment blocks in the area. There were floors upon floors of places to hide. I doubted Liv would have kept running with a group of men after her who'd scattered to surround her. She'd hole up somewhere nearby and stay out of sight, knowing that I'd be coming for her

and a stationary target was easier to find. My attention shifted to the two apartment buildings opposite each other at the end of the street. I'd start with the left one, check the units on the lower levels, then move on to the other and try my chances there.

And I'd keep going, keep looking.

I'd tear the city apart until I found her.

~ * ~

The first building turned out to be a waste of time. A few minutes after running inside, I found level one crawling with corpses. Every apartment other than a couple at the far end appeared to have been left open, with sunlight beaming through each doorway into the hall. I couldn't begin to understand what had gone wrong in here, and I didn't have time to care. The corpses were scattered down the entire length of the hallway rather than gathered in one concentrated area, so I knew no humans were hiding nearby.

Liv wasn't here. At least not on this level.

I could have gone up another floor, checked the next corridor and the next, but something inside me screamed *go, go, go*. Get to the other building now before those dickheads retraced their steps. If they stumbled onto me out of pure, dumb luck, all my time and effort would go into evading them, and Liv would be left alone for too long, waiting and wondering. Losing hope.

I checked my watch; already nearly four in the afternoon. Even if I found her in the next half hour, there was no guarantee we'd get out of here before dark. It took time to come up with a plan to distract the gang while we stole their car, and since our exit would be fast and intense, we'd have to leave behind all the supplies we'd spent the past two days scavenging and putting together.

We'd be starting over again.

For the second time.

I took off down the stairs at a run and reached ground level. With a head check to make sure the street was clear, I jogged across to the other building and stepped into a foyer with dead bodies splayed all over the floor. They

weren't recent kills, so I knew Liv hadn't done it, but the smell knocked the breath out of me, and I had to push through it as I ran up the stairs to the first floor.

No corpses roamed the hall. No sound or movement.

My heart pounded like a drum and sweat poured off me, sliding along my temples and down the middle of my back. I stopped for a few seconds to listen, waiting for a shift in the air, a sound. *Something* to tell me I was on the right track. Desperation washed over me, and I stared at the ceiling, breathing hard. I needed to find her, for my own peace of mind as well as hers.

What was the point of any of this if we didn't have each other?

A soft, muffled sob drifted toward me, and I frowned. My head lowered again, and my gaze bounced from one closed door to the next. It *had* to be her, and she'd be trying to keep the noise to a minimum. For the sound to have reached me, she must have been hiding in one of the rooms at this end of the hall—or it was just wishful thinking on my part.

My heart thumped as the need to get moving ripped through me.

I stepped up to the first door and tried the handle, pressing my cheek to the wood as I whispered, "Liv?"

No response. No seconds to waste. I strode to the next room and kept alert for sounds behind me, hoping I found her before the gang showed up to give the building a once-over. I tried the same routine with the second door and came up empty again. By the time I reached the fourth room on the left, I was almost convinced I'd imagined the sound.

I rested my cheek against the door and whispered, "*Querida.*" A plea, a prayer. I just needed to hear her voice.

A shuffling movement came from inside. Corpse or human, I had no idea. My heart pounded. My breaths came faster. I knew there was a chance it was just a trapped corpse, but I'd sure as shit talk to the door as if she was on the other side of it scared for her life. "It's me, Olivia. I'm here. Open up."

Soft footsteps came closer, and when the mechanical sounds of locks disengaging greeted me, I gripped my knife and readied myself. I may have just confirmed a live person was in the apartment, but that didn't mean it was my person. Plenty of others were still living in the city even if they weren't always visible.

I waited, fighting the urge to pace off the adrenaline, staring at the door, shooting glances over my shoulder.

I needed to get out of this hallway *now*.

The door swung open, and I barged into the room, sending someone jumping out of my path. When my brain registered that it was Liv, it felt like my heart was going to explode from my fucking chest. Her eyes were big and round, her hair damp and stuck to her temples. She looked pale, drained, scared. There was a bump on her forehead that looked like it would bruise soon enough, but she was physically in one piece.

I sheathed my knife.

Liv didn't stand still for long. She shoved past me and engaged the locks on the door as I charged toward what I assumed was the bathroom. I yanked a white towel from the railing and shaped it into a long roll, then returned to the door and wedged it against the gap at the bottom. If any of them were smart enough to look underneath for moving shadows, the option wouldn't be available.

When we were as secure as we were going to get, I straightened and faced her. As I removed my backpack and lowered it to the floor, our eyes locked and tension vibrated in the air. I could feel everything she'd been through just by looking at her face; the fear, the uncertainty, the bone-deep exhaustion. It looked like she'd been crying, too.

She'd outmaneuvered five men on her own and found a safe place to hide.

Pride flowed through me as I reached for her. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and dragged her against me, sighing into her hair. She didn't say a word, but when she trembled and clung to me, a feeling of relief like I'd never experienced before came over me. I clasped the back of her head and held her tight.

All this time I'd been searching for her, I hadn't let myself think about what could have happened if the others had got to her first. Those thoughts swamped me now. I imagined her seriously injured or worse, in the hands of those assholes, screaming, crying, and wishing she'd never left home. I blew out a harsh breath and hugged her harder, soaking up her warmth and softness.

"Are you all right?" I whispered against her temple.

Her hold on me tightened, and she nodded against my chest.

"What happened to your head?" I kept my voice to a low murmur.

"I bumped into one of the infected. What happened to you?" she asked, presumably talking about the blood and scrapes.

"Rough landing." My palm moved up and down her spine, slipping higher to squeeze the back of her neck. I didn't want to let her go, but we needed to keep ahead of this while we still had enough daylight left. "I don't want to rush you," I said, easing away from her, "but we're running out of time. We need to come up with a plan to get out of here."

Liv took a deep breath and nodded as if she'd been thinking the same thing. She pointed toward the bathroom. "Want to go in there just in case?"

I followed her into the all-white room and flipped the lid down on the toilet to take a seat. She closed the door and perched on the edge of the bathtub, resting her hands on either side of her. We stared at each other in silence while we listened for sounds outside. The fear in her features had softened a bit since we'd reunited, and it gave me hope to see determination creeping in to take its place.

"How many do you think are out there?" I asked, keeping my voice just above a whisper.

Her thumb moved in a fast tapping motion against the lip of the tub. "I've seen three of them, but I'm confident I've heard five different voices."

Her estimation was in line with mine, so we could only assume our count was accurate. Five against two. Better than the eight we'd been dealing with yesterday. They could still get the jump on us if we were unprepared,

though. “Have you heard them talking to one another?” I asked. “Any info we can use?”

Her eyes settled on mine. “The only thing I know for sure is they want me. One of them put on a front like he was trying to be helpful, but I've never liked their vibe.”

I rested my elbows on my knees and held her gaze. “We're leaving here together. They're not taking you anywhere.”

Liv nodded as if she wanted to believe me, but the fear had started to seep in again anyway. Silence fell between us, and I shifted my attention to the wall as I mulled over our options.

I still had a gun in my backpack.

Three bullets.

The problem? Pull a gun now when everyone knew there was no ammo anymore, and it looked like you were trying to scare the shit out of them with a useless prop. I'd have to put a hole in someone to prove I still had a working weapon or waste a bullet shooting an object to make the same point. Either way you looked at it, one bullet gone.

My focus came back to Liv. She blinked and rubbed some life into her cheeks. “How are we supposed to buy enough time to outrun five of them and still find another car?” she asked. “We've had no luck so far, so it's not like it's going to get any easier. Should we just go back to my apartment until we can figure it out? At least it's safe there.”

Three kilometres from here? On foot? Not an option either, although I appreciated her including me in that scenario. “Pretty sure I've got their key.” I pulled the fob from my pocket. “It was beside a pile of corpses they put down.”

Her attention lowered to my hand. “Oh, my God.”

“And I have a gun.”

“*What?*” she asked, somehow whispering and shouting at the same time. She sat up straighter, her eyes widening as she glanced at the door and back at me. “Why am I only just hearing about this now?”

"I didn't want to scare you. I took a few guns from work after we abandoned the station, but they're useless without ammunition. I've dumped all but one—a Glock with three bullets."

Liv stared at me steadily as she processed the information. So many thoughts appeared to be flying around in her head that it made her impossible to read. "Why haven't you used them on the dead?" she asked. "Or the men out there?"

"I had a full magazine in the beginning. Six months ago, I was down to four. Now? I'm saving the last three."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why did you need to use one of them six months ago?"

I should have known my comment wouldn't get past her, or maybe I *had* known, and I just needed to say the next part out loud. I locked eyes with her to make sure she got my meaning. "My brother was surrounded by a horde of corpses. He was bitten by one an hour earlier, and the new group was about to tear him apart."

Two dozen or more were coming at us from every direction, and we'd been working hard to keep ahead of the pack. When I climbed onto the loading dock of a transport company, Diego was still several steps behind me, and I crouched to reach for his hand. I never got the chance to grab hold of him. Two corpses tripped over each other and fell, the weight of them knocking him off his feet. Once you were down and they closed in on you, there was next to no chance of coming back. The memory of him staring up at me with wild eyes as the first one bit into him, the sound of his voice screaming *shoot me, Cruz, fucking shoot me* would stay locked in my brain until I took my last breath.

Liv nodded slowly in understanding, her eyes flooding with tears. She pressed her lips together and looked away.

Silence lingered but there was nothing more to say, and the longer we sat idle without a plan, the easier we were to find.

Liv stood and let out a long breath, walking to the bathroom door and back again. She stopped in front of me with her hands on her hips, her thoughts

apparently moving in the same direction as mine. "What are you planning with the key and the gun?" she asked, her voice soft.

I appreciated that she didn't comment on what I'd done to my brother or try to make the best out of a shitty situation. As far as the gang went, I wouldn't make any decisions without her input. "Nothing concrete yet, but getting closer to the car to see if the fob works is out. All that'll do is let them know we're nearby."

Liv paced the small room, frowning, thinking. "We don't even know where they are or if they're together now," she pointed out. "We'll have to find a way to herd them into one area to make sure they're not in the only place we need to be."

Our biggest advantage was knowing they didn't have walkie-talkies to communicate. If they wanted to bring in more men to round us up, they couldn't radio back to base to send another crew. One of them would need to go there on foot—a half-hour walk at least. If we could keep them busy and push them in another direction while we closed in on their vehicle, we had a good chance of making it out of this alive.

"Exactly," I said. "If they're smart, they'll leave someone behind to watch the car, but two-on-one still gives us a good chance."

She stopped moving and looked at me as if something had just occurred to her. "We need to do this now before they have a chance to come up with a plan of their own."

We were both on the same page, and I got a kick out of seeing her problem-solving skills in action. "Right, especially since that plan could be to sacrifice their own car and slash the tyres on that one, too."

"I hadn't thought of that." Liv nibbled on her thumbnail. "How good a shot are you?" she asked.

I stared up at her from my sitting position, giving her a flat look to tell her exactly what I thought of her question. She caught onto my peeved expression and huffed out a laugh. "I'm sorry," she said with a smile. "I bet you're a crack shot. Super impressive and a hundred percent accurate."

"That's more like it."

“But still...” The humour slipped from her face as she sat on the edge of the tub again. “It’s something we should keep in mind. We’ll be under pressure with three bullets to protect both of us. There could be men running at us from everywhere when we make a move for the car.” Her leg shook up and down, and she regarded me for a long minute before she spoke again. “You could leave me, you know. Take off somewhere and not have to worry about this anymore. I can find my own way back home and figure out the rest from there.”

The look in her eyes made my heart pound, and I clenched my jaw until my teeth ached. I wouldn’t walk away from anyone in this situation, but the thought of leaving Liv to deal with it on her own made me sick to my stomach. I knew she’d said it out of misplaced guilt—as if we were only dealing with this because they wanted her—but those idiots were *our* problem. “You think I’m the kind of person who’d abandon a woman when she’s being hunted by five men?”

Realisation dawned, and her eyes flooded with regret. “God, I didn’t mean...” She lowered her head into her hands and let out a low groan. “This is so messed up. I don’t think of you in that way. I never would.” Liv rubbed her temples as if the tiredness of the day had suddenly caught up with her, and any irritation I’d been feeling toward her melted away. When her head lifted again, her eyes found mine. “Cruz... I don’t want you to leave me. I just don’t want you to feel like you’re responsible for me.”

Whenever I heard her say my name, it stirred a combination of emotions in me. The buzz of sexual attraction. Chemistry. Affection. Along with something deeper I’d probably pull apart and analyse when we weren’t trying to save our own lives. I held her gaze. “Like it or not, you’re stuck with me now... and it’s not *responsibility* I’m feeling, *querida*.”

Her attention dropped to my mouth then lifted to my eyes again. “What is it then?” she asked.

“I care about you,” I said, simplifying something that was too complicated to put into words, “and I protect the people I care about.”

Her mouth opened, but whatever she’d been about to say died on her lips.

We both heard it at the same time.

Several men were heading our way, and it sounded like they'd regrouped and come after us as a complete unit. We were back to five against two, but this time it worked in our favour, making them easier to control.

I stood and moved over to the door to listen in on their conversation. Liv joined me, and together we waited as footsteps pounded on the carpet. The men rattled handles and banged on doors on both sides of the corridor, trying to generate a moan from a corpse or, if they were lucky, a human scream. It was a repeat of yesterday morning when we'd hidden in the office building, and if all went well, it would be the last time we'd ever have to deal with these idiots.

When the banging finally came on our door, Liv jumped, but she didn't make a sound. I locked eyes with her and mouthed the word *breathe*. If we gave away our location while we were unprepared, we'd be at a serious disadvantage.

"She's gotta be on one of these floors," a man said. "No one can just disappear."

Liv's features tightened and her skin paled. She kept her eyes on me.

"It's going to be all right," I whispered.

She nodded quickly and closed her eyes.

"What about the other asshole?" someone piped up from outside the door.

"Haven't seen him. That pussy-whipped fuck's probably back with her by now."

His comment would have made me laugh if the situation hadn't been so serious. I waited for her eyes to open then murmured, "You *do* have me wrapped around your little finger."

Liv gave me a faint smile and trailed her thumb down the length of my forearm until she reached my wrist. She circled the bone there then slipped around to the more sensitive skin on the other side. I had no idea if she was trying to distract herself or me, but the way her eyes stayed connected with mine tugged at something deep inside me, bringing me closer to her in ways that had nothing to do with the physical.

I cupped her cheek and stroked her temple, hoping the men would share some information with us that helped to plan our next move.

Footsteps thudded away from our location as if a couple of them had gone off to search elsewhere. "If Trav hadn't lost the fucking key," one of them said, "we could have gone back to the arena and grabbed some more guys. That motherfucker's probably got it by now, and if we leave here without her, he's gonna take the girl *and* the car."

"They're not getting near you," I promised with a whisper. They weren't making it easy to reassure her, but at least we knew we had their key.

Jackson, the guy who had the biggest hard-on for her, went on to describe what he planned on doing to her when he finally caught up with her. His descriptions were so vile and over the top that I figured he had a hunch she was holed up somewhere nearby. He wanted to spook her so she'd run or scream, but the only thing he'd achieved was making me care less about putting a bullet in him.

"He's talking bullshit to try to flush you out," I said in a low voice, "but he'll need to go through me to get to you. I won't let him touch you."

She turned her cheek into my palm and kept quiet, but my words must have calmed her a bit because her body seemed to relax against me. "When they're gone," I said, whispering, "we're getting out of here. You and me, and any others like us we find along the way, we're making a stable life for ourselves. It's going to be good."

Liv nodded her agreement despite both of us knowing we couldn't be a hundred percent certain of our futures. One thing I knew for sure, though? I wouldn't be spending another night in the city. With a gun, a few hours of daylight left, and access to a fully operational car, we were leaving this place one way or another.

We waited for ten minutes as they moved around the building. Some went up higher while the rest thumped down the stairs and headed out to the street. They shouted back and forth to one another while they searched, not giving a shit about whether we could hear them. They were so sure they had the upper hand despite knowing nothing about us. Our pasts, our capabilities. I'd dealt with people like them during my years on the force.

All mouth and fake bravado. The minute they met any kind of real challenge, they crumbled under pressure.

When it sounded like all of them had left the building, I stepped back to give Liv some space. Without the outside distractions to focus on anymore, I turned my attention to her, checking for signs that she was struggling. Her features were tense, but when her gaze lifted to mine, the resolution in her eyes made me hopeful she had enough left in the tank to finish what we'd started.

"You hanging in there okay?" I swept my thumb over the bump on her forehead, wishing I could have put some ice on it to ease the swelling.

"It wasn't easy hearing them say those things about me," she said. "I'm in more danger than I ever thought I would be when I left home—and it scares me because I know what they're going to do to me if they catch me."

We both knew a future like that wouldn't be pretty, but when I told her they'd have to go through me to get to her, I meant every word. "It's not going to happen," I said. "It's okay to be scared. You *should* be, but don't let that fear derail you. Stay focused on the goal even when you're frightened—*especially* when you're frightened."

She glanced away as she appeared to be processing the circumstances and the risks involved. We were both in danger, only for different reasons. They wanted to kidnap and imprison her, but when this day came to an end, they needed me dead. If they dragged her back to their compound and left me out here, there was an unspoken understanding I'd come for them. They'd be stupid to leave a loose end like that behind, and we all knew the state of play.

"I'm not going to lose it out there," she said. "I'll do what I need to do to get through today."

She believed it, I could see it on her face, but saying it while we were in a locked room and backing it up out on the streets were two different things. For a woman who until yesterday had stuck to a strict routine, it would have been a lot for her to take in. We were about to encounter situations she'd never dealt with before, and having to think on her feet meant she wouldn't necessarily make the best decisions.

“Why don’t we work on a plan?” I suggested. "We’ll go over it again and again until we both know for sure what we’re doing.”

And when she thought we'd gone over the plan enough, we'd run through it one more time.

When it came to her safety and mine, I wouldn't take any risks.

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Twelve

Liv

“You’re clear on what we’re doing?” Cruz asked, his brown eyes searching my features.

Being around him made me feel safer in a world where danger lurked in every shadow. Nothing seemed to faze him. He had the ability to remove emotion from the process and see the mission as a series of steps, a skill I was quickly trying to learn. “Yep. It’s all locked away.”

“Keep talking to me. If you’re struggling, let me know as soon as it starts. Don’t let it drag on.”

“Got it.” I had no desire to be the weakest link in this partnership, but I wouldn’t lie and throw us both into a dangerous situation either. “Is there even the slightest chance we’re going to put all this effort into distracting them only to find out they went back to their car to wait us out? What if they’ve been there the whole time?”

He didn’t need to think about my question for long. “Based on what I know about violent knuckleheads, they won’t be there. Waiting at the car would be a passive move and men like that see it as weak.” He slipped his backpack on and checked the weapons on his belt. “Hunting people down like wild animals makes them feel powerful. They’re bored, they thrive on this shit, and we’re going to use it to our advantage.”

Cruz handed me my pack and wandered over to the window as I pulled it on. “If anyone’s guarding the car,” he said, throwing me a glance over his shoulder, “it’ll be the guy they see as the most dispensable, which coincidentally makes him an easier target for us. Ready?”

He sounded so calm and in control that I inadvertently absorbed some of his confidence. It didn’t hurt that he’d been trained to deal with these situations in his previous career either. “I’m good to go.”

Rather than chance running into one of the men on the stairs that led up to the apartment, Cruz climbed out onto the ledge and sidled across to the

drainpipe. With no ladder to make our descent easier, he used the drain to shimmy down as far as he could, then dropped to street level with a soft thud. I followed, and he stood watch as I landed beside him in the alley.

Our eyes briefly met, and his features were hard and alert. After a quick check of the alley in both directions, Cruz took off toward the main street with me sticking close behind. My eyes jumped from the knife in his hand to the gun peeking from the rear waistband of his jeans. My heart thudded at a steady gallop, and part of me still couldn't believe this was my life now.

His backpack bounced against his spine as he increased his pace, and I quickened my steps to keep up with him. Nerves churned in my stomach, but underneath the fear was a level of determination I hadn't experienced before. We were going on the offensive and making a move. No more hiding. It felt good, not just to be involved in a mission for the first time, but to be taking on that challenge with Cruz.

He glanced over his shoulder and pointed to the left, reminding me we were heading in the opposite direction of the one we'd come from earlier. Our plan was to circle around and approach the car from the other side of the street, giving us a better vantage point to track the men before we made our final move. We still had a few tasks to take care of first, though.

Two of the infected ambled toward us, and Cruz and I downed one each, dragging them across to a shop doorway to conceal their bodies.

“Keep moving.” He nodded toward the corner.

We took off at a leisurely run and turned onto Wilson Street, dodging the dead whenever we could to conserve energy and keep our location a secret. Minutes later, we were continuing along Barton Avenue which swung around in an arc for around five hundred metres or so, leading to the open area where the collection of vehicles had caused the traffic congestion.

No signs of trouble, no strange sounds.

We were looking good.

Our pace had my breaths coming faster, but it was more of a comfortable run than the long sprint I'd done earlier by myself. The side of me that hated jump scares imagined the men hiding nearby waiting to pounce, but

the rational part of my brain reminded me they'd never operated that way in the past. It wouldn't make sense for them to start sneaking around now.

"All good?" Cruz asked, stopping momentarily to check on me.

Nervous energy flowed through me, but it felt like the positive kind that helped me focus and get the job done. "I'm doing fine."

He took in my expression, examining my features as if to confirm that my words matched my body language. When he seemed content with what he found, he glanced over my shoulder and back at me. "You remember what comes next?"

"Under control, boss."

For a split second, his eyes gleamed with humour, then he spun his knife around until he was holding it in an overhand grip. "Let's get to work then."

Together we deviated from the main street and headed down a cobblestone laneway housing a row of trendy pubs and cafes. I'd been appointed the task of lighting a fire in the pub smack in the middle of the row—*Shenanigans*—and even now I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of intentionally destroying what had once been someone's livelihood.

I checked the lane in both directions then pushed through the smashed door and stepped inside.

Cruz waited for me on the footpath and kept watch. If the men showed up, my job was to run out the back and escape while he kept them occupied. I hadn't been able to budge him on that point, and I'd already accepted that I needed to choose my battles where he was concerned.

Apart from the broken door, the interior of the pub was mostly undisturbed. Chairs were resting upside down on the tabletops, and many of the bottles on the shelves were still in place. Only a few gaps in the rows of liquor suggested that humans had been in here at some point to help themselves. There were no sounds inside to cause concern, so I stowed my sword.

Shattered glass crunched underfoot as I walked to the bar. I slipped behind the counter and pulled open drawers, rummaging through them until I found a checkered tea towel. Using my knife to nick the edge, I ripped the

material into several strips and shoved the bundle in my pocket for later. Moving onto my next task, I collected four bottles of alcohol from behind the counter, tugging off my backpack to wedge three of them inside the already cramped space. I upended the fourth and poured the entire contents along the length of the bar's wooden surface.

Tension tightened my stomach, and the invisible clock ticking over my head hurried me along. When I'd sufficiently doused the area, I pulled the gas firelighter from my back pocket and pressed the trigger, offering a silent apology to the owner. I lit the corner of a paper napkin, tossed it on the pooled alcohol, and waited a couple of seconds to make sure it took.

Flames licked at the corners, and the moment the soaked tissue fully ignited, my heart leapt to my throat. Time for the next step. I turned and rushed to the door, peeking out to meet Cruz's eyes. He tilted his head to let me know it was safe to come out, and the two of us took off down the laneway toward our next location.

Just before we rounded the corner, I threw a final glance over my shoulder and caught the glow coming from the darkened windows of the pub. I was officially an arsonist. It wouldn't be long before smoke was billowing from the rooftop and drawing the attention we were hoping for—but we still had a long way to go and no time to appreciate the progress we'd made.

“This way.” Cruz hung a right, giving the area a visual sweep as he continued toward our next stop. I drew my sword again and stayed behind him, keeping on the lookout for trouble as we jogged together. My breaths were coming faster, but the longer we kept going, the more I found myself adjusting to the constant state of pressure. Pretty soon I'd be a natural.

“Incoming,” he said a while later, his volume low.

Six of the infected were heading toward us in a close-knit group, jostling one another as they moved down the centre of the street. Putrescent flesh hung off their bones. Their clothing was weathered and stained, and a few of them looked like they'd been out in the elements since the beginning. The frontrunner locked onto our existence just as a male voice shouted from somewhere behind them, nearby but out of sight. It sounded like he was communicating with the others in the gang, but my stomach still dropped and my gaze bounced from one building to the next.

We needed to get off the street *fast*.

The group of infected turned toward the new voice and gave us a few seconds to hide without them gathering outside the spot we'd chosen. We stopped jogging and scanned our surroundings. The door to the dry-cleaning business on our left hadn't been properly closed and was still intact. We could lock it while we waited in there for the men to pass. "Here," I said, touching Cruz's elbow to get his attention. My heart raced as I ran for the entrance and dived inside, happy to not hear a jingling bell announcing our arrival.

Cruz followed me in and closed and locked the door behind him. We ducked behind the counter to get away from the windows.

My breaths were panting from me as I took in the rows and rows of racks at the rear of the shop. Most of them were empty, but the remaining hanging bags blocked our view of the space as a whole. It was impossible to know from a glance whether we were safe from the dead, but it didn't have that telltale smell of decay and I couldn't hear any shuffling movements.

"Wait here." Cruz moved up and down each row checking for the infected then slipped into the back room. My nerves were already heightened after almost running into the gang, but my body tensed when I lost sight of him. I didn't want us to be separated while we were out in the open like this, and I strained my ears to listen to his movements while he was gone.

Seconds later, three men ran past the shop in an easy jog—the tattooed man named Jackson flanked by a skinny redhead and an older man with salt and pepper hair. They appeared to be sweeping the area, their easy gait giving the impression the fire hadn't made it onto their radar yet. We didn't want any of them to catch onto our plan until the very last moment, giving us enough time to get to the car without encountering any speedbumps.

"How many?" Cruz asked as he joined me at the window.

"Three, heading in the direction we just came from. Not in a hurry either."

"Good. Only two to worry about." He curved his hand over my shoulder.

"Are you still good?"

"Yep." It was mostly true.

“Let’s keep moving then. We’ll go out through the rear in case they double back.”

The thought of them heading our way again had my grip tightening around my sword, but I pushed down the fear and readied myself for the next stage. We were doing well. I needed to stay focused on the goal and not get too caught up in the what-ifs. I followed Cruz around the counter and weaved through the rows of clothing racks with him, stepping into a kitchenette out the back. He eased the door open and leaned out to check the alley.

After giving the all-clear, he slipped outside into the late afternoon sunshine. I stuck close to him, taking in every detail of our surroundings as we ran together. The confidence I was enjoying before had apparently been a fleeting thing, and all it took to shake it was catching sight of the men. Now, I felt like a gazelle approaching a watering hole while a bunch of lions lay in wait, and it made me wonder how long my heart could pound like this before it tapped out and gave up completely.

Urgency had taken hold of us both as we hurried along the cobblestones, our footsteps so light they barely made a sound. When we reached the end of the lane, Cruz popped his head around the corner for a glimpse then stepped out onto the main street.

“You smell that?” I whispered.

“Smoke. Better step up the pace.”

We’d hoped the smoke would draw all five of them in the direction of the fire, but our next stop would create another diversion if that one failed. Cruz and I rushed along the street, sidestepping three of the infected as they tried to make a grab for us. Another two stumbled from the opening of a destroyed nightclub, but we were moving too fast.

We reached the entrance to an apartment building a block away from the car, and Cruz pulled the door open. I checked the street in both directions before I followed him inside. The lobby had the same punch-you-in-the-face smell as the last one I’d occupied, and I recoiled for a moment before I chased Cruz up the stairs.

We’d decided on the second floor for this next stage, needing the extra height. By the time we’d raced up both flights, I was thankful I’d paid so

much attention to cardio during my daily training sessions. Cruz ran like he was crossing flat ground, and as soon as we reached the landing, he took off to check the apartments for unlocked doors as if the exertion had no effect on him.

“Here,” he said as he pushed open one of the doors. He stepped inside with his knife at the ready, and before I’d even reached the doorway, two thugs greeted me out in the hall.

I walked in to find him leaning over the bodies, still as calm as ever. As I secured the door, I took in the scene, impressed. “You move fast.”

The ghost of a smile passed over his face as he straightened. “Let’s just say I’m motivated.”

I sheathed my sword, intrigued by the lightness in his voice. “By what?”

His amusement lingered, and he gave me a steady look that stirred a chain reaction of thrills inside my body. “The need to get you out of here and somewhere safe, *querida*.”

The energy between us shifted, and the teasing look in his eyes made the room feel too warm. Whenever I was around him, I didn’t feel like I was just going through the motions anymore. I felt alive—and as much as I hated to admit it, we didn’t have the time to indulge in this... *whatever the moment was trying to be*... so I used humour to defuse the tension. “You might look all tough on the outside, but you’re just a giant ball of smooch, aren’t you?”

He huffed a laugh and tucked his knife in his belt, directing his attention to the window. “Maybe you bring it out in me.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, stepping up beside him.

Cruz gave me a sideways look that lasted a beat too long, and just when my heart had begun a distracting pitter-patter rhythm, he broke the connection and pressed his face closer to the glass. “We need one of those strips of material,” he said, sliding the window open.

While I reached into the pocket of my cargo pants, he moved in behind me and swept my ponytail to one side. A shiver passed over me as he unzipped the main pocket of my backpack. I tried my best to hide my reaction, but I

had a feeling nothing would get past him. He pulled out one of the bottles of alcohol we'd collected earlier, and the sound of him dragging the zipper closed filled the quiet.

My breaths were coming too quickly for someone who wasn't currently doing anything strenuous, but the way he touched me had all my nerve endings coming to life. He took a minute to prepare the bottle with a vodka-soaked scrap of fabric then slanted me a look. "Ready to light it up?"

I swallowed and nodded, unable to maintain eye contact with him for long. His knowing look confirmed my suspicion that he was able to read every expression on my face, and it left me torn between embarrassment and amusement. I pulled the firelighter from my rear pocket and depressed the trigger. The flame flickered, and for one fleeting moment, something innocent and sweet passed between us.

Cruz wrapped his fingers around my wrist and guided my hand to the mouth of the bottle. The fabric caught fire, and he released me, leaning out the window to throw the bottle along the length of the building. I watched his muscles shift and flex just before the sound of smashing glass rose to greet us.

He ducked back inside and lowered the window. "Time to run."

The lightness had left his expression and my heart rate kicked into gear again. I shoved the lighter back in my pocket and rushed to the door with him, excited to take another step closer to freedom. Instead of being cautious and continuing with the measured movements I'd perfected since we started, I barged out into the hallway like an idiot without even stopping to look, listen, or *think*.

I hadn't even drawn a weapon in readiness.

Before Cruz could finish warning me to slow down, I smacked straight into a wall of heat and muscle and cried out in surprise. The shock of stopping so violently hit me first, quickly followed by the smell. Body odour and stale weed. A solid, sweaty body covered in a black tee and jeans. Dark, scraggly hair.

Not one of the dead.

He recovered before I did and shot a hand out to grab onto my ponytail, yanking me off to the side of him like a stray, feral cat. “Here she is,” he said, his voice calm. His grip tightened in my hair, and he pulled me close enough to press something sharp against my side. “We’ve been looking for you, darlin’.”

“Let me go,” I forced out through gritted teeth. I tried to twist away from him, but the pressure of the sharp object increased and fear streaked through me. I felt it in my bones, in my muscles, in every frantic thump of my heart. A scream rose in my throat, but I closed my mouth just in time. Making any noise would only attract the kind of attention we *didn’t* want. We had no backup, no crew coming to save us. It was just Cruz and me.

Cruz stopped in the doorway and took in the scene. When I saw his expression... the look in his eyes... I let out a breath and my tension eased up *just* enough to handle the situation without losing my mind.

“Why don’t you stay over there, mate?” the man said to him. “Then you won’t have to watch me snap your girlfriend’s neck.”

“Take it easy,” Cruz said. His attention shifted between me and the man. When his jaw tightened and his eyes took on a feral glint, I almost felt sorry for the man beside me.

Cruz wouldn’t waste a precious bullet on him. Gunfire would only bring the others running, and we needed all the ammunition we had left for our final sprint to the car. He had another idea in mind, so I paid attention and waited for cues...

And somewhere hidden in the terror, I found a thread of steel that I grabbed onto and pulled. And pulled. Gathering threads until my panic faded into the background and logic pushed through.

The gang hadn’t chased us around the city all afternoon to kill me the second they got their hands on me. They had plans for me. They *wanted* me, even if it was for a deplorable reason—and that fact alone made me valuable. This man needed to avoid a physical confrontation with Cruz so he could take me back to their base, but Cruz understood what was going on, too. I could see it in his eyes.

They wanted me alive.

Preferably uninjured.

The more I allowed that thought to grow, the more it fuelled my anger and inspired me to stop waiting around for Cruz to fix this for me.

The man tightened his grip on my ponytail and dragged me backward, pulling hard enough that I stumbled while I tried to keep up with him. A breath wrenched from me, and I grabbed his wrist to stop him from tearing my hair out. He moved within a few steps of the stairs that led down to ground level and paused, his breaths harsh while he ran through his options. If he wanted to take me with him, he had to stop Cruz from coming after him. He couldn't control both of us and get to where he needed to be at the same time.

Cruz strode toward us with murder in his eyes and his hatchet hanging from his clenched fist. I still had a free hand and two weapons in my belt waiting to be put to use.

Without another thought, I yanked out my knife and slammed it straight into the man's thigh. The sensation of skin and muscle giving beneath my blade felt different from all the times I'd taken down the infected, and bile rose in my throat as I ripped it free and felt warmth spurt against my leg. If he didn't bleed out from the wound itself, the infection from a knife that had plunged into so many of the dead would surely finish the job.

I'd just killed a man, only he wasn't dead yet.

He bellowed and released his grip on my hair, then reached for me again because he knew he'd just lost his leverage. I could see it in his eyes, feel it in his desperate movements. His fingertips brushed the sleeve of my t-shirt as I dived to the side. Cruz went after him, and I watched with my heart in my throat as he shoved his shoulder into the man's solar plexus and sent him flying down the concrete steps. The man came to a hard stop at the bottom, thumping against the unforgiving concrete. Neither of us knew if it would be enough to keep him down.

"Come on." Cruz and I hurried down the stairs and stopped at the bottom. My attacker stirred and opened his eyes, and Cruz bent over him to smack his hatchet handle into the side of his head. He collapsed onto his back unconscious.

With his arms splayed out beside him and his mouth half open, he reminded me of all the bodies I'd seen in the traffic pileup. I winced at the sight and looked away, ashamed, relieved. If he survived, we'd hopefully be on our way out of the city before he could find us or rejoin the rest of his group.

"Are you all right?" Cruz asked, sparing me a concerned look as we stood at the building's entrance.

We didn't have time to indulge in an in-depth discussion about my mental health, so I kept my answer short as we checked the street for threats. "I'll be fine. I just really want to get out of here."

It looked like we had a clear path, but as we were about to take off, another loud, male voice came from what sounded like one or two streets over. He must have found the flaming bottle, and if they hadn't caught onto it already, the fire in the pub would be next. If we could keep them all contained to this area, they'd be too busy searching for us in the wrong spot to realise we'd moved on to our next location.

"We need to work fast," Cruz said. "Keep the momentum going."

We ran for another half a block, and he urged me into a narrow walkway between two buildings, stepping in behind me to rummage in my backpack again. While I slipped the lighter and scrap of fabric from my pockets, Cruz pulled another bottle free. We went through the same routine as before, only this time when he pitched the fiery bottle down the opposite end of the street, there was no man to scare the crap out of me when we ran.

My heart raced as we took off, and I hoped I had enough energy left in my reserves to keep up with Cruz.

We dodged several of the dead on the way to our final stop and took down a couple of stubborn ones that couldn't be avoided. All the while we kept on the lookout for the fifth member of the gang who hadn't been sighted yet; if I remembered correctly, he had to be the blonde one who'd leaned out the hotel window, the smallest one of the crew. He could have been hiding anywhere or watching us from a rooftop ready to alert the others to our location. The not knowing turned out to be almost as disconcerting as the physical threat I'd just been through.

As we reached the massive stone building that housed the bank, my pulse pounded and my nerves had reached an all-time high.

This was it—our final stop.

Situated opposite the traffic congestion where it all began, the bank gave us the best vantage point to survey the area before we committed to a sprint for the car. It was also the shortest distance between us and the vehicle.

The double glass doors of the bank had been caved in at some point and from the front steps, I could see bodies scattered across the floor. Camp stretchers were spaced out in the main area, with makeshift privacy curtains hanging from ropes in between each one. It looked like it was being used as accommodation for people who'd survived at least one wave of the virus, but I had no idea what had happened to them—or if the way it ended had anything to do with the gang.

Cruz and I stopped at the outer edge of the marble foyer and he reached into my backpack to grab the last bottle. "You did good back there," he said. "Not the part when you ran straight into trouble without thinking." I heard the smile in his voice as he rezipped the pocket of my bag. "The other bit, when you did the mental reset and figured out a solution."

Such a simple statement, yet it felt like high praise coming from him.

"Thanks." I held out one of the remaining scraps of tea towel as he came around in front of me, trying not to remember the feel of my knife sinking into another person's leg. "I didn't know if I had it in me. I can't believe I just... that I..."

Before he took the material from me, Cruz paused and cupped my chin, giving me a direct look that somehow seemed soft and caring at the same time. "Are you coping?"

"Yes," I said quickly, glancing away as my tongue darted out to wet my lip. It wasn't like either of us had a choice. We were being hunted by a pack of Neanderthals. Fighting was our only option if we wanted to feel safe at any point in the future.

"Look at me," Cruz said gently. He swept his thumb along my jaw, and when my eyes returned to his, he asked, "Can you *do* this?"

I pulled in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “What would happen if I said no?”

“We’d find another way.”

No hesitation, no question. He’d abandon the plan, lose the option of driving out of here, and give us the additional burden of coming up with an alternative solution. *For me.* I’d never known a man like him before. “I can get it done,” I said, confident I was telling him the truth, “but once we’re out of here, I need to stop somewhere just to... you know... *stop.*”

“Understood.”

My heart pounded like mad, and the adrenaline rushing through me made my knees tremble, but I’d hold it together until we were secure in the car and leaving this hellhole behind.

“Once we commit, there’s no going back.”

I gazed directly into his eyes. “Better get moving then.”

He gave me a long look and let go of my chin. “Dig deep,” he said. “Focus. Everything you need is in here.” Cruz tapped my chest with his index finger and held out his hand for the fabric scrap. He soaked and lit the material then passed the lighter back to me. When he stepped away, I breathed a sigh and watched as he threw the last bottle an impressively long distance. It crashed into the window of a café and straight through a set of gauzy curtains that immediately went up in flames.

It didn’t take long for the dead to appear. They wandered toward the growing fire from several different directions, blocking off the mouth of the street—or at least making it more difficult for the gang to get through.

“It’s time,” Cruz said from the bank’s entrance.

I closed my eyes and took a bracing breath before opening them again. “Okay.”

“Remember: I’ll cover you from behind while we run like the wind to the car. If anyone gets their hands on you, use your knife just like before. Don’t pull the key from your pocket until you’ve almost made it to the car. You still have it?”

I patted the front pocket of my pants and felt the rectangular shape. “Yep.”

“If you hear me shooting, keep running and don’t look back. You worry about your job, and I’ll worry about mine—and don’t forget, there’s one more asshole out there somewhere.”

The thought of a man lying in wait for me to pass by made my stomach lurch, but I stood beside Cruz and took in the long-dormant traffic build-up. There were no visible humans in the immediate area. The alcohol-fuelled fires had drawn the nearby dead to the flames, their numbers dispersed over four different locations. They were far enough away that they technically shouldn’t cause us any problems.

Smoke billowed from the pub that I’d set on fire, rising in a thick, black cloud above the rooftops. The smell carried on the breeze and mingled with the ever-present stench of decay.

I sucked in a breath and took it all in one last time.

Cruz shot me a look. “Run like the devil’s on your tail, *querida*. Go.”

“Try to keep up,” I said, then I bolted for the car.

Thirteen

Cruz

Liv ran faster than ever this time around, arms pumping, long stride eating up the bitumen. Pride rolled through me as I kept pace with her and watched her navigate the street. Just when it looked like she'd reached her limits, she seemed to find more. She weaved around a lone white van, leapt over a tyre, shot glances from side to side to stay aware of her surroundings. All the while she kept her knife pointing backward in her grip, minimising the chances of injuring herself if she fell.

I swept my gaze over the area as we closed in on our target, the blue Ford Focus parked diagonally beside our original car. That one elusive member of the gang still hadn't shown, and I didn't know how to feel about that. Part of me wondered if he'd gone back to base while the others were searching. If that was the case, more cars and men could be arriving anytime soon to complicate the situation.

Liv ran around a couple of bikes resting on their sides and approached a minivan on the outer edge of the bottleneck. I followed her with my gun in hand, checking either side of her as we got closer to the car.

We were almost there... almost out of this place...

Then the missing man launched himself at her from behind the van. My stomach turned into a ball of tension, but Liv's reflexes were on point and she sidestepped the scrawny blonde guy before he could get a hold of her. He glanced around, and when he spotted me, he yelled at the top of his fucking lungs, "*They're here!*"

My heart thundered as I approached. He switched his attention to Liv and lifted his axe. She took another step back but was still too close for my liking. If he lunged, and she took a dive, the motorbike lying on the ground behind her would trip her up. I stopped a few metres away and assumed a shooting stance, aiming the Glock at the guy's chest. "Don't move," I said, breathing hard. "Stay the fuck where you are."

He laughed and pointed his axe in my direction. "That thing's useless. No one's got ammo anymore. You might as well throw it at me."

His laughter had a sharp edge to it, and his gaze darted around. As expected, they'd left the weakest man behind to guard the car, and this little shit was desperate for backup. No one had appeared yet though, and I only had a small window of opportunity to wrap this up. "You want to take that chance?" He hadn't made another move in Liv's direction, so I waited to see if he'd back down and save me a bullet. As much as these assholes had pissed me off, I preferred not to kill anyone.

"Yeah, ya fuckin' hero, I do." The idiot sprung at Liv, but she stood her ground and lashed out, slicing his forearm with her knife. She must have fluked a deep arterial cut because blood poured straight down his hand and dripped from his fingertips. When he screamed and tried to grab her, red droplets sprayed her face and neck. The yelling, the volume... *Jesus*, he'd have the rest of them running in our direction in seconds.

Time slowed as I gripped my gun. I saw the fear on her face, the realisation that this could be the end—for her, for me, for everything we'd planned together. He stood between her and the car. Neither of us could go anywhere until we took him out. His blood slid off her chin. Her chest moved up and down with her laboured breaths, and when her eyes moved to me in a panic, it hit me then that I'd do anything, *anything at all*, to keep her safe.

I aimed for the biggest body mass.

No more warnings.

I'd been trained to use deadly force, and when I pulled the trigger, I did it knowing full well he wouldn't recover.

The sound ricocheted off the buildings. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air. He sputtered and stared at my weapon as a splotch of red bloomed on his chest. Before he'd even hit the ground, I sprang into action. Liv was frozen to the spot, whether immobilised by her actions or mine I had no idea—but we needed to get the hell out of here now.

We'd made too much noise, taken too long. They were coming.

"Liv. Car. *Move!*"

She snapped out of it and locked eyes with me. Hers were a little wide and crazed, but she appeared to be in control. “He’s dead,” she said, her breaths coming fast as she spared the man a horrified glance. “I think he’s dead.”

I needed to get her in the car and moving before the shock kicked in for real. “It’s going to be all right,” I said, turning her toward the vehicle while remaining painfully aware of the urgency. “Grab the fob. Let’s go.”

She pulled the key from her pocket, and just as I reached for the door handle, loud voices came from the direction of the fires. I glanced across the street to see three men running our way, putting as much effort into the chase as we’d been putting into escaping. A mob of the dead followed them at a slower pace, but whichever way you looked at it, we were about to be under some serious pressure.

“They’re here.” Liv fumbled the key and dropped it, sending it clattering to the ground. When she took a step toward it, she somehow *kicked it under the fucking car*. The two of us swore simultaneously, and as she laid flat on her stomach to retrieve it, I turned and faced the men.

“Tell me when you’ve got a hold of it.” My attention stayed locked on the three of them, and I lifted my gun. They were close, but not enough to create an immediate threat. I took a chance with bullet number two and pinged the knee of the skinny redhead on the left. He fell to the ground spewing a string of expletives then rolled onto his side clutching his leg.

The bearded, tattooed hulk in the middle glared at me with death in his eyes.

It had to be Jackson. Liv’s biggest fan. His attention shifted to the dead man at my feet, and if anything his expression darkened.

The guy on the right wouldn’t be too difficult to take out in hand-to-hand combat, but if I ran out of bullets and it got physical with Jackson, he looked like a tank could mow him down and he’d get straight back up again. “That was a warning shot,” I called out. “Back the fuck up.” I threw a glance over my shoulder. Liv was still on the ground. “How are we doing?”

“Just out of reach. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

The redhead stayed down and kept pressure on his shattered knee. The man with the greying hair slowed his steps until he was barely moving, his expression unsure. I'd just become an unknown threat. Had I used my last bullet? Did I have a full mag? Only Jackson didn't seem to care. He kept coming at me, walking now instead of running, his features hard, his focus on me.

The dead were closing in on them from behind, coming at them from all directions, but they were too caught up in what we were doing to notice.

"Update?" I asked Liv, staring straight ahead.

"I've got it," she said, her words breathless. "God, *I've got it*. I'll climb through to the passenger side."

I kept my attention on Jackson as the door opened behind me. If I didn't shoot this asshole now, my urge to spare a human life would come back to bite me. I'd seen his type before; he wouldn't let it go. Whether it was tomorrow or a week from now, I'd have to deal with him again. So, while he ignored my warning and strode toward me like the goddamn Terminator, I fired off my final round straight into his left pec.

Part of me expected him to shake it off and keep going, he looked *that* determined, but his mouth opened in surprise—almost as if he'd expected to keep moving, too—and he dropped to his knees.

He stared at me while his heart pumped its final beats. As he smacked face-first into the bitumen, the engine fired up behind me and death metal blasted from the car. Relief rushed through me, and I tore off my backpack, leaning inside to feed it through to the backseat. Liv was still scrambling across to the passenger side when I jumped in and slammed the door.

She immediately shut the music down so we could think, and before we took off, I threw a last glance at the redhead on the ground. He locked eyes with me and screamed, "*Fucker*," as I jammed the car in reverse. He was too focused on our escape to catch onto the group of a dozen or more corpses surrounding him and his still-breathing friend.

The tyres screeched as I backed up from the stationary vehicles blocking our exit. I shoved the car into drive and launched forward. We took off with no mechanical issues, and I rounded the outer edge of the congestion,

moving faster now we were in a fully functioning car. My stomach clenched as I mounted the curb, and I travelled along the footpath until it cleared up enough to get back on the road. All the while I kept looking out for obstacles to make sure we didn't damage this car, too.

My gaze swept everywhere, my senses on edge, and when I glanced across at Liv, she appeared to be barely hanging in there. She leaned forward with her backpack still on, checking the side mirror, over her shoulder, making soft wheezing noises as she breathed her way through it. The drops of blood on her face were drying. Her pupils were dilated, her eyes wide. The tightness in my own body didn't ease until we were on the highway heading out of the city.

We'd made it—but we still had a long way to go.

"You doing okay over there?" I asked, shooting her a glance.

She struggled out of her backpack in the cramped space and shoved it through to the rear with mine. Without the bulk behind her anymore, she pulled on her seatbelt and clicked it into place. "Yes."

Her answer came too quickly, her tone too sharp. I needed to get her somewhere safe a half hour from here at least—more if she could hold it together long enough. We both needed to stop and breathe.

We'd left burning buildings and dead bodies behind us.

She'd stabbed two people.

She'd watched me push a man down the stairs and shoot three others—two of them dying right in front of her. We'd been in a war zone, and for someone who'd spent the past couple of years hiding or running from danger, Liv had been thrown into the worst of it without warning.

I didn't need to ask to know she'd never been exposed to that kind of violence before.

"We'll stop soon," I assured her, keeping my eyes ahead. There were corpses to dodge, rubbish and debris scattered across the road. We couldn't risk crashing after everything we'd been through to get the car.

When we stopped today, I wanted to be in a secure house with her and *stay* stopped until we took off again tomorrow morning.

And all I could do was hope that she wouldn't look at me differently now after what she'd seen today.

I'd killed people, but I'd done it for her, for me—and because sometimes when your back was against the wall, the only way out was lethal force.

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Fourteen

Liv

Almost an hour after leaving the city, I still couldn't draw a breath without feeling an ache in my chest.

Other than one-word answers here and there whenever Cruz tried to initiate a conversation with me, I hadn't spoken. Not because I was angry with him or irritated or because I wanted to punish him in any way. It was just shock, pure and simple—but he didn't know that. He'd sent me enough worried glances throughout the trip that he must have thought I was on the verge of a breakdown.

To keep myself occupied, I pulled the last strip of tea towel from my pocket and dampened it with some water from my bottle. While I directed my gaze out the side window, I scrubbed my cheeks, nose, and forehead, and each time I pulled the cloth away to find deeper stains of red, my revulsion grew. I had a dead man's blood on my face. I'd slashed him as if his life meant nothing.

Cruz had killed two people.

Maybe three or four if the others didn't recover from their injuries.

We were only in their car now because he'd had the courage to make the hard decisions.

Even after all this time, I'd never seen one healthy person kill another healthy person. There were so few of us left that I couldn't wrap my mind around the idea of choosing violence and death over pulling together and trying to create better lives for ourselves.

One man had expired at my feet while the other lost his life charging at Cruz like a demented freight train. That look in his eye and his laser focus on Cruz had frightened the crap out of me, and I had a feeling I'd be seeing him again in my nightmares.

“I’m stopping here and finding somewhere to stay for the night,” Cruz said, breaking the silence for the first time in a while.

We were approaching an exit sign announcing a new suburb called Hammond Rise that I'd never been to before. This far from the city, there were more trees than houses lining the highway, and the ground was mostly clear save for groups of the infected and belongings littering the roadside. Since we only had around an hour of daylight left, it would be smart to find somewhere safe to sleep before the sun set for the day.

"This place is so new it's not even on the maps I studied." I heard the strained tone in my voice, but the fact that I was speaking at all after what I'd experienced felt like progress.

"You studied that pile of maps?" He sent me a side glance, then returned his attention to the road as we veered off the highway.

There'd been so many dead hours to fill back in my apartment that studying the medical books I'd taken from the abandoned library or the maps I'd collected during the prep stage had kept me entertained. I threw him a smile, even if it felt a little forced. "I wanted to be prepared, just in case I lost them. I never expected to have *this* much trouble hanging onto anything we owned, though."

We both fell silent as Cruz steered the car around a bend and came up to a cross-intersection.

Rather than heading straight for the town centre, he took a right and stuck to the outskirts, driving along the boundary where the houses were spread farther apart and vast expanses of land surrounded partially developed streets. The entire area looked new—or it *would* have looked new before time weathered the buildings. Houses were half finished; some were at frame stage while others appeared as if they'd almost been ready to move into just before the pandemic hit. Temporary wire fencing surrounded most of the sites, and others were easily accessed.

None of the dead were wandering this far from the main part of town. No humans in sight either, but that didn't mean they weren't hiding in one of the houses and watching us drive by. I pulled in a breath and vowed to stop

doing that; I shouldn't be frightening myself unnecessarily. We had enough real dangers to worry about that I didn't need to invent reasons to be scared.

Cruz shot me another glance as if he'd heard me gasp, then returned to searching for a place to pull over. He chose the last house at the end of the road, with a neighbour on the right and open paddocks on the left. There were no houses opposite; only earth-moving machines and massive piles of dirt.

He drove straight onto the dry ground next door to the house and parked close to the side fence.

We'd left everything behind when we escaped the city, so when I climbed out, I only needed to grab my backpack.

Cruz locked up and we threw our packs on as we walked toward the front entrance. Neither of us wanted to deal with another confrontation when we'd barely made it through the last one, so we paid close attention to every noise and movement around us. Birds were chattering in a tree, and it sounded like a gate nearby was banging in the breeze. Nothing out of place or alarming.

The house Cruz chose hadn't been around long enough for the owners to landscape the front yard, and we crossed an unruly patch of dirt and weeds as we approached the front door. The blinds covering the windows stopped us from getting a clear view of the interior, but the angle would still allow us to catch moving shadows if anyone occupied the home.

Cruz stepped onto the raised porch and turned the door handle. It was locked. "We'll try around the back," he said. "If we need to break in, we'll do it there out of sight."

A side gate led around to a backyard where a crude play area had been set up in an otherwise undeveloped space. A square of synthetic turf hosted a plastic climbing frame that looked to be suited to a toddler, and a matching swing set rocked beside it in the breeze. I immediately shut out the thoughts that tried to crowd my brain, refusing to think about the family that had once lived here, the kids.

The back door had been left unlocked with a well-worn pair of men's workboots outside. The discovery had us sharing a look and removing our

knives from our belts. Cruz went inside first, and I followed, stepping into a laundry with a trail of dried paw prints on the tiles. I closed and locked the door behind me, then went through to a clean, neutral-toned kitchen. The place had a musty smell to it as if no one had stirred up the air in a while. No decay or death, but I wouldn't let myself relax until we'd swept the place for living people.

By unspoken agreement, we stuck together to clear the house, and when we were done checking every room and cupboard, Cruz and I returned to the lounge room and dropped our backpacks on the floor. No one was living here, and it looked like no one had died in here either.

The exhaustion I'd been trying to keep at bay during our trip began seeping in, and I had a feeling if I didn't take a seat now I'd be on the floor in seconds.

I left my knife and sword on the coffee table within easy reach and sank onto the suede couch. There were still tasks waiting for us to complete before we settled in for the night, but we had plenty of time. For now, I just wanted to spend a minute or two doing nothing.

Cruz seemed to share the feeling because he dropped his weapons beside mine and took the spot next to me on the couch. I turned my head in his direction and searched his features, surprised by how comforting it felt just to be somewhere quiet with him again.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He gave me one of those looks he'd sent me many times in the car. Concerned, apprehensive. Like I was made of glass and might shatter at any second. "I should be asking you that question."

I rolled my lower lip between my teeth and considered what we'd been through that afternoon. People had died. Cruz and I had been under threat for different reasons, neither of them any less dangerous than the other. We'd outrun humans and the dead, but we'd made it through without any serious injuries. He had some scrapes; I'd earned a bump on my forehead that still throbbed a little, but we were safe and sitting in a clean, empty house on a deserted street. "I'm handling it the best way I can. I've never been through anything like this before. It was... surreal. Frightening."

Now that we'd stopped and I could breathe again, relief swept through me in a powerful wave. It rushed over my body, starting as a low hum that turned into a violent, all-encompassing shudder. I wrapped my arms around myself to keep it contained, but there was no stopping the flood. I pulled in a breath, and Cruz watched me without saying a word.

He knew.

A long moment passed, heavy with unspoken feelings. Instead of filling the silence, I waited and waited, letting it build until the emotion felt like it might explode from me or drown me. We could have *died* today, and it suddenly hit me with the ferocity of a whack over the head. My chin trembled, and my eyes stung with tears.

I blew out a sigh that sounded more like a moan of despair. "I'm sorry."

His gaze turned gentle as he watched me. "For what?"

"I think the adrenaline was keeping me going all this time and now it's gone, everything's—I feel like I'm going to..." Tears leaked free, and I gave them an irritated swipe with the back of my hand. I didn't even know what I was trying to say. It all just felt like too much.

"Maybe you should come sit with me." Without waiting for a response, Cruz scooped me up and arranged me sideways across his lap, providing a solid base to lean on. Strong arms to keep me contained. Being in a secure space gave me the permission I needed to let go, and it took me mere seconds to give in to the tidal wave.

He didn't make a sound, didn't try to comfort me with words. He just sat with me as my throat burned and tears slid down my face.

This life was *hard*, so much harder than anything I'd experienced before the pandemic. Every movement took thought, each decision made with the acceptance that no matter how careful you were, the worst could still happen—to you or the people you loved. And I'd been in charge the whole time, looking after myself and Haruto, taking responsibility. Taking the lead. It was exhausting.

Now I had Cruz to share the burden with me. The relief of feeling that pressure lift had me letting out a guttural sob.

When another wave of tears came, I did nothing to curb them. “I couldn’t let myself think about you while we were separated,” I said, my voice thick with emotion, “but it hit me out of nowhere while we were driving away. I could have lost you—or we could still be there now searching for each other. What if we'd had to spend the night apart not even knowing if the other was still alive? What if you'd never found me?”

I'd thrown a lot of what-ifs at him, but he didn't mock me for overthinking or brush aside my concerns. He hugged me tighter for a moment. “I wouldn’t have left the city without you.”

I believed him. I didn't know everything about Cruz yet, but one thing I'd become sure about was his determination to tell me the truth. It was comforting to know that we had each other's backs, especially since we were heading into the complete unknown in the morning.

When I'd calmed some more and my tears had slowed, I leaned back and inhaled a shuddering breath.

Cruz inspected my features with a concerned look that tugged on my heart. “Any better?” he asked, swiping his thumb under my eye.

I nodded and dried my cheeks with my hands. “Is that why you kept looking at me in the car? You thought I was going to lose it while you were driving?”

“I would have pulled over to give you a minute, but it was more important to put some distance between us and them.”

Always prioritising our needs, even under pressure. “Do you think they’ll come after us?” Of the remaining two men, I'd seen Cruz shoot one of them in the knee, and the dead looked to have been surrounding the other as we left. If a miracle happened and someone managed to make it back to base, we still had a huge headstart.

I felt safe-*ish* for the first time today.

"I doubt the last two would have made it, which means the rest of the group will never know what happened—or that we were involved."

His words inspired confidence, but his gaze roamed over me in a way that had stress building inside me again. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

His fingers moved absently across my hip, toying with the hem of my t-shirt. "I did some things today that I hoped I wouldn't have to do—especially in front of you."

My heart flip-flopped at his gravelly tone. The entire afternoon had been an assault on my senses; the shocking sound of gunfire, the smoke and decay, the violence and threats to both my life and Cruz's.

Yes, he'd killed people... but he'd given them fair warning to back off before he fired each shot. "Are you struggling with what you did," I asked, "or what I might think of you now after seeing what you did?"

He stared at me for a moment before answering. "Killing those clowns was unfortunate and unavoidable," he said. "I'm not second-guessing my decisions. You're the only one I care about, and I dragged you through a lot of shit today. I'm just hoping you haven't changed your mind about me."

My eyes stayed locked on his, and I gave a shallow shake of my head. "At least not in the way you think."

"In what way?" His voice had roughened further, and his hand slid upward to rest between my shoulder blades.

"It shocked me," I continued, choosing my words carefully. "It was upsetting and confronting and I wish we could have avoided it, but *you* don't scare me. We live in a different world now—and all it did was show me you'll do whatever it takes to keep me safe."

His eyes turned warm with affection. He held my gaze for a long moment. "Whatever it takes."

As the original tension between us eased, a different kind seeped in to take its place, making me uncomfortably aware of all the little details, like the thickness of his black lashes, the scruff lining his jaw, the tiny shards of honeycomb in his espresso coloured eyes. I hadn't seen him this close before, not in a way that allowed me to truly study him. We'd been so busy scavenging, running from the infected or fighting for our lives. Now it was just us.

My preoccupation with his appearance must have amused him because the corner of his mouth turned up.

"Why are you smiling?" I asked, unable to control a smile of my own.

"I was just thinking you're too far away."

My fingers came up to trace his dark eyebrow and the scar above it. "While I'm sitting here on your lap with your arm around me, you mean?"

"Mmm."

He had a way of making me forget all the terrible things that had happened. Later, when night came and there were no more distractions, the worst of it would creep in again. For now, I'd allow myself to get lost in the sweetness of our touches and words. I flattened my palm against his chest and traced the tip of my nose along the length of his, surprised by how fast a simple connection could get my heart beating. "Is that close enough?" I asked, feeling the deepness of the breath that moved through him.

He moved his hand higher, cradling the back of my head. The ghost of a smile hovered at his mouth. "Still too far away."

Before I could draw my next breath, his mouth closed in on mine, and I made a soft sound of surprise in my throat. His lips were warm and firm and... God, *everything* I'd needed at just the right time. I hadn't expected to be fighting for my life today, but I'd never pictured it ending like this either. Sparks ignited inside me, and I closed my eyes, giving in to the moment. His mouth cruised over mine with the same kind of calm confidence that he displayed in every area of his life. His lips were sensual, his whiskers brushing against my skin.

His touch had goosebumps rushing over me, and emotion flowed through me as I sank my hand into his hair and kissed him back. I turned my upper body toward him and wound my arms around his neck, trying to get closer still. There was nothing hurried in our kiss, no thrusting tongues or panting breaths, no pressure for more. It was comforting, a relaxed slide into intimacy after so long without anything like this in my life.

He made me feel like I was in safe hands. Hands that had the power to mess with the wiring in my nervous system the second he decided to step up the pace. Sometime soon, I'd press every button to make him lose that impressive control, but for now—in this moment—the pace was nothing but perfect.

Cruz seemed to instinctively understand when to pull back. He kissed me softly then eased away just enough to rest his forehead against mine. As we breathed the same air and the warmth between us lingered, I trailed my fingers down his cheek and indulged in the urge to stroke his dark stubble.

So much had happened to us today, but pushing through tough situations and coming out the other side had given me the confidence I needed to head into new territory tomorrow.

And I wanted to take on all of it—with Cruz.

"When we leave in the morning," I said, "and we go to places neither of us have been before, do you know I'll do the same for you? Whatever it takes?"

He didn't need time to think it over. "I do, and we'll be ready for whatever comes next. You and me—together."

THE END

Author's note: Thank you so much for reading book one in the When the World Fell series! I hope you enjoyed the beginning of Cruz and Liv's story. Book two, The Fearless, is due for release in January 2024. Book three will be coming in October 2024.

I'd appreciate it so much if you could leave a star rating even if you don't have time to write a review.

Thanks for your support! xo

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