

BOOK ONE OF THE CASCADIA SERIES

WORLD DEPARTED

The background of the cover features a sunset scene with silhouettes of a man and a woman walking away from the viewer. The man is on the right, wearing a suit, and the woman is on the left, wearing a dress. They are walking on a path through a forest of evergreen trees. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and purple, with the sun low on the horizon.

SARAH LYONS FLEMING

WORLD DEPARTED

THE CASCADIA SERIES: BOOK ONE

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*For all the f*ckers in my Facebook fan group. Thank you for laughing with me, for crying with me, and for amusing me (and yourselves) during the loooooong wait between books.*

Y'all are the best readers—and cheerleaders—a girl could ask for.

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Rose

I'M NOT sure how one is supposed to spend the day before one's twentieth wedding anniversary, but I'm fairly certain playing Magnum, P.I. to catch one's husband cheating isn't the usual. Even worse, one shouldn't be *hoping* to catch him in bed with another woman. But here I am, hoping away, because a dalliance would mean I could firmly and unequivocally tell him not to let the door hit him in the ass on his way out.

I slump in the driver's seat when Ethan exits an old Craftsman bungalow down the street. Eugene, Oregon is full of those quaint houses. Some are decent, some run-down, and some restored to their former glory of gleaming wood and leaded glass. The house Ethan exited is one of the run-down ones, and an unlikely space for an afternoon assignation.

He definitely isn't glowing with release. He walks quickly, hand fisted around his treasure, and his jaw works in anticipation of what he's purchased. He's still handsome at forty-two, with his tousled blond hair, caramel-brown eyes, and charismatic smile. I can see that much. But over twenty years and a torrent of water under the bridge have made me impervious to his charms.

I watch him get into his SUV across the street, my eyes just above the dashboard and my heart thudding in my throat the way it does whenever I pull this secret agent bullshit. His truck doesn't move, and I wonder what

he's up to. It has to be bad form to fix up directly outside your dealer's house.

Anger is the first emotion—the one that clamps my hands around the steering wheel. Then comes the numbness I've cultivated over the years, and even, as petty and juvenile as it is, a smidge of triumph. I knew. I *knew*, as I usually do. I'm not going crazy. I'm not the one with the problem. Except I *am* the one with the problem. And that problem is Ethan.

Fucking Ethan. Again.

I take a deep breath, then press my phone's home button and say, "Call Mitch."

The speakers blip and then the ring of a phone fills the car. "Woman!" Michelle—Mitch—yells when she answers. "What's up?"

"Talk me down," I say. "Tell me I need to stop this."

"You need to stop this. Wait, what are we stopping?"

"He's using again."

"Crap." Mitch sighs, a long, breathy exhalation that makes the car speakers crackle. "Crappity crap."

I close my eyes, partly from exhaustion and partly to stop the tears that threaten to come. I'm done crying about this. I've decided that already. Obviously, my tear ducts have other plans.

"Rose?" Mitch almost never calls me Rose, full stop. It's Rosie, or Ro, or a million other nicknames we have for each other after almost thirty years of friendship. Rose means concern, Rose is *serious*. "If he's the one using, what am I telling you to stop?"

"Oh, nothing. Except for the fact that I tailed him to his drug den, and now I'm hunched down in my car so he won't see me."

"You *tailed* him?" Mitch snorts. "Who are you, Magnum, P.I.?"

I giggle. It turns to a laugh, and then Mitch's laugh is everywhere, in surround sound, and it's almost as good as one of her hugs.

Ahead, Ethan pulls from his parking space. He zips to the corner, taps his brakes at the stop sign, and turns left. He isn't going home. I can only hope he'll nod out in his car for a few hours before he makes it there, since I'd rather stick a sharp object in my eye than pretend to like him at this moment. Thankfully, as I knew it would, Mitch's virtual presence prevents me from following—which was likely the next step of this insane plan.

“Why was Magnum the only detective I could think of, too?” I ask. “I don’t even remember him doing any detective work.”

“I think he was too busy seducing ladies and arguing with Higgins.”

I laugh. “*Spenser for Hire!* There’s one. Hey, remember *The—*”

“Ro,” Mitch cuts me off. “What are you going to do?”

“Discuss private investigators from 1980’s television. I thought that was obvious.”

“So I hear. But is it also obvious you need to do something?”

I rub my temples while the tightness in my throat becomes a dense ball that can’t be swallowed. Mitch knows how much I hate confrontation. Maybe everyone hates confrontation, but I’m a master of avoidance, especially when every talk with Ethan becomes a discussion of Ethan’s feelings and my inability to empathize properly. I’m practically made of freaking empathy, which is why I’m still here. I’m a pushover to the *nth* power.

“Ro?” Mitch asks, softer now. “I know you’re listening, and I know what you’re thinking.”

“How do you know I’m thinking about *The Equalizer*? Those were the scariest opening credits of any TV show, ever. Everyone is being stalked or about to be murdered. I would drop dead if I were them.”

“You done?” Her voice is deliberately bored. I stick out my tongue and don’t answer. “You just stuck out your tongue, didn’t you?”

I grin but stay silent.

“Yeah, you did,” she says. “I’m going to kick your ass when I see you tonight. Be prepared.”

“I love you,” I say because I can’t say what she really wants to hear. Not yet. “You know that?”

“I love you, too. We’re not done here, *you* know that?”

“Yes.” I sigh and flip down my visor mirror. I look like hell, especially since the daylight accentuates every single line around my eyes. I swear there are more than a week ago. The twitch under my left eye, which comes and goes depending on Ethan’s current sobriety status, has returned, and I press my finger to the tiny muscle in an attempt to calm it. “You should see my wrinkles. He’s aging me before my time. How much is Botox again?”

“First of all, I saw you five days ago, and you looked fine,” Mitch says. “Second of all, embrace the fact that you’re forty-two. Third of all, you’re a

gorgeous forty-two, wrinkles and all.”

“You have to say that, as my best fri—”

“Shut up. Fourth, and most importantly, you’re too chickenshit to get Botox. ‘But what if I’m the point-zero-zero-zero-two percent where it goes wrong?’ ” For the last part, she uses a small, scared voice that’s supposed to be me.

I laugh, mainly because it’s true. “Those of us who have no need for Botox need to shut up.”

I jump when something touches my leg, then gaze down at the tiny paw resting on my thigh. The face attached to that paw is half-squashed and chestnut brown, with a black snout and floppy triangular ears. A pug dog. Actually, a pug-something hybrid, which Ethan gave me four days ago as an anniversary present. I admit Willa is cuter than your average pug, but she still brings to mind a creature from a planet in a far-off galaxy. Willa whines, her bulbous eyes probing mine, and her tongue nervously licks her nose.

“It’s okay, Willa.” I scratch her head. “I think she has to pee.”

“What are you going to do with her?”

This sigh rises from the bottom of my feet. Since Holly and Jesse left for college, I’ve been enjoying the phase of life where I have no obligation to care for small creatures, where the future is open for the first time in decades. And now I have Willa, a ten- to fifteen-year sentence. “I don’t know. Find her a home, I guess. I feel like he gave her to me to trap me. Is that crazy?”

“The fact that he might’ve or the fact that you think that?”

“Either.”

“Both are crazy. That doesn’t make them any less true.”

As always, Mitch doesn’t skimp on bluntness. Before she can rekindle the conversation I’ve managed to avoid thus far, I say, “I have to get home before my ice cream melts, but I’ll see you tonight.”

“Holly and Jesse there yet?”

“They should be. Jesse texted that he was almost home and picking up Holly on his way.”

“Tell them Auntie Mitch sends her love and I’ll see them later. I’ll be over earlier than I thought. I was supposed to have a conference call with

St. Louis, but I got an email yesterday saying they were taking a company-wide sick day because of that virus.”

“Is it that bad there?”

“They said they were playing it safe. Anyway, I’ll see you in a few hours. I’m bringing a big-ass bottle of wine.”

“Mitch, we have more alcohol for the party than we could drink in a month.”

“This is why we’re friends. Love you, chickadee.”

“Love you, ladycakes.”

Mitch clicks off. I sit for another minute, staring at the corner. Willa is curled in a ball, eyes closed and any bathroom needs forgotten, so I follow the initial path Ethan took, then turn right for home.

Rose

AS I WAIT at the stop sign on Twenty-Eighth Avenue, two Army trucks roll past. At least I think they're Army trucks, since they're painted a drab brown and have camouflage-clad drivers. It's unusual enough that I stare for a moment, but there is an Army Reserve station smack dab in the center of town. Besides, Eugene has plenty of weird vehicles. There's the school bus camper with the Volkswagen bus welded to its roof, the colorful hippie buses, the guy who built a wooden house on his pickup, the trailers made out of pickup truck beds, and so on.

I continue uphill, jabbing at my phone when I realize I have time to get in a song before home. I refuse to think of how a forty-two-year-old woman singing at the top of her lungs might look to other drivers. It's better than therapy, and everyone knows you're invisible in your own car.

I stop jabbing and raise the radio volume when I hear mention of that virus. *"...increase in cases in California and the Midwest. Over ninety cases have been identified in Oregon, though authorities report only ten of those are in the Eugene-Springfield area,"* the female announcer says. *"Bornavirus LX causes aggression in patients, who bite and scratch their caregivers, spreading the virus through bodily fluids such as blood and saliva. Health officials urge anyone who thinks they may have been exposed to the virus to visit the emergency room for antiviral medication immediately. Failure to seek medical attention could result in death."*

My stomach jolts a little at that. You can bet your sweet ass I'd be at the hospital if I had it. The virus has popped up all around the world in the past few days, and though I'm not thrilled about the fact it's now here, I'm not that worried—as long as it isn't airborne, the likelihood of catching it is slim. Still, I'm glad the kids are home this weekend. Safe.

I press play on my *Fuck You* playlist for the rest of the ride home. When I pull up to the house, the gate is open, and Jesse's car is parked under the giant cedar tree at the end of the driveway. Our house sits back from the two-lane road in what's considered Eugene but is more like the country. Though it's only a modest mid-century ranch, I love its quirks and counter space and the woods that grow all around.

I park alongside Jesse's car and grab the bags from the backseat. Willa jumps from the driver's side and trots around the corner of the house. Luckily, she's not overly annoying. Equal parts lazy and loving, Willa doesn't demand much.

It's not raining for a change. I enjoy the dry walk up the steps and through the front door, where I enter the foyer at the corner of the living room. The kids' voices come from the kitchen and dining area, which we opened to the far end of the living room years ago.

"Watch this one," Jesse says. His deepened voice still surprises me at times, as if he were seven years old when I saw him last. Tinny screams, likely from a phone's speakers, follow his words.

I take a moment to compose myself—the less they know about Ethan's activities, the better. Especially this weekend. I enter the living room, pass the armchairs and picture windows, then turn into the dining area. Jesse and Holly sit on stools at the breakfast counter with their backs to me, both watching a phone. Holly's dark auburn hair hangs down her back in bouncy curls and loose waves. A lifetime of battling with my own version of the same hair makes it difficult to appreciate on myself, but I always admire it on Holly. When it isn't yours to contend with, it's lovely.

"How is that a zombie?" Holly asks, an eye roll plain in her tone. "It's blurry people running and screaming. Just like every video ever taken of Bigfoot. You could just as easily tell me it's a Bigfoot video."

"Zombies?" I ask. "Is that what they're saying now?"

Holly stands from her stool, but Jesse reaches me in three strides and hugs me tight. Except for a hiatus between the ages of twelve and

seventeen, he's always given great hugs.

"Hey, Mom." Jesse pulls back, pushing his brown hair from his face. He's taller than his dad now and handsome the way his dad was at his age. He takes the bags from my hands, his smile dimming with concern. "You okay?"

Jesse's acutely observant, always has been, and I suspect he knows. He knows the way I knew. I smile and shake my head. "Maybe a little tired, but fine. How was the drive down?"

"It was fine." At my continued raised-eyebrow stare, Jesse huffs. "No, Mother, I did not get any speeding tickets."

I smile. He deposits the bags on the counter while Holly comes in for a hug. She lives in town by the U of O and stops home regularly, but the Winter family hugs at hello and goodbye, and plenty of times in between. Holly is delicate and slight the way my mother was, with brown eyes like her dad, unlike Jesse's and my blue. Maybe it's the fact that I'm ruminating on Ethan, on this life we built that's falling apart—has *fallen* apart, if I'm honest with myself—but the two seem impossibly perfect at this moment.

"How'd I make two such splendid children?" I ask. "Good-looking *and* helpful."

"Time to get off the drugs, Mom," Holly says.

I force a laugh, thinking *if only you knew*, and head for the counter where the phone sits with the video paused. "What's this about zombies?"

"The virus," Jesse says, his voice light, though he watches me with the anxious gaze of before. "Bornavirus LX. Don't tell me you haven't heard about it."

"Of course I have. I just heard there's ten cases around here now. It's down by Uncle Craig, too."

"When's he coming?"

"He flies up tomorrow," I say. Craig is my other best friend and their adopted uncle. He's also the most neurotic person I know, though he says I should thank him for making my neuroses seem average by comparison. When I couldn't get through to him earlier today, I left a message joking that I hoped he wasn't infected with the crazy virus and too busy attacking people to answer.

"Tell him to be careful. This shit is fucked up."

"Did I raise you to speak that way?"

“Fuck yeah,” Jesse says, at the same time as Holly says, “You sure fucking did.”

I laugh. The Winter family also curses plenty. “Quiet, the both of you.”

They grin and return to their video. At an ear-piercing scream that lasts a good three seconds, I shove the ice cream into the freezer and walk around the counter. The video is of an empty city street, possibly San Francisco, and the bearer of the camera is running uphill past closely packed Italianate homes. Along with the standard noises of microphone jostling and heavy breathing, there are distant yells.

“Wait for it,” Jesse says.

The camera stops and pans to face downhill. At the base of the street, maybe two blocks away, is a throng of people large enough to fill the dip in the road past where it rises again in the distance. They’re coming toward the camera, though it’s impossible to make out details.

“Jesus Christ,” the camera holder says, his voice as shaky as the image. He’s around Jesse’s and Holly’s ages from the sound of it. “Do you see that? All those zombies?”

There’s fear in his voice. A horrified awe. It makes my stomach churn in a visceral, *get-out-now* kind of way.

“Go!” a female voice yells. The cameraman is jerked around, then begins to run, before the screen goes black.

Jesse clicks out of the video and scrolls down the web page. “It says they shut down communications in California yesterday, but he managed to upload this from San Francisco somehow. No one’s heard from him since.”

“He could’ve used footage of a marathon or protest or something,” Holly says. “You can do crazy shit with computers.”

“They haven’t said anything about closing the highways,” I add. “Craig would’ve called if it were that bad.”

Jesse lifts his phone and jiggles it. “He wouldn’t be able to call if they shut everything down.”

“Oh, God,” Holly says. “Imagine Uncle Cray in something like that? He’d die.”

Uncle Cray is short for Uncle Cray-Cray, which the kids took to calling him years ago. Craig got a kick out of it, and it stuck. I grab my phone and dial him again, disconnecting when I get voicemail, then return to my bags of groceries. It sounded like real fear in the cameraman’s voice, but it was

only a stunt of some kind, likely for subscribers. All anyone under the age of thirty wants is subscribers to their YouTube channels, and people love zombies enough that they'll be all over that video. I *might* believe an alien invasion, but zombies are a little much.

"While I have no doubt the government would deny a zombie apocalypse even while we were being eaten alive," I say, "I'm fairly certain there's no zombie virus."

Jesse sighs. I point at him. "But there's still a virus. Maybe you guys should stay in tonight, have people over and hang out in the basement if you want. You don't want to catch it, zombies or not."

The reports of the sick attacking others are real enough to kick off the familiar tingle of worry in my chest. Maybe the kids are in college, but they're my babies. Ethan jokes that I still fear SIDS will steal one of them in the night, and though I laugh, that doesn't mean it isn't true. There are so many ways to die, so many things that can go wrong, and I have a card catalogue of every single one of them in my head, ready to be rifled through and obsessed over at any given moment.

"Jess," Holly whispers, her features serious but eyes glittering, "look at Mom. She's doing her freak-out thing."

"Do you think she's imagining all the ways zombies could eat us?" Jesse murmurs.

I flip my perfect children the bird. They crack up. "How was your test, sweets?" I ask Holly.

She blows out a breath. "I don't know. Physics is kicking my ass. I forget everything as soon as I learn it, but I think I remembered enough to do okay."

Her right hand moves to her left, and she begins to pick at her cuticles. It's a nervous habit, one that leaves her fingers bloody at times. Though she'd always been apprehensive, Ethan's addiction brought it to the forefront. Between time and therapy, she's learned to handle it well, but it creeps out in stressful situations. I hate it, hate the thought that I might have given her my anxieties. Crazy hair is bad enough.

"I'm sure you did fine," I say.

"I have to do better than fine. If I want to get into a good vet school, I have to ace everything."

“You usually do, even when you think you haven’t. And if you don’t this time, you can ask for extra credit.” Holly nods quickly. I reach across the counter and place my hand on hers to draw attention to her picking. She smiles sheepishly and tucks her left hand beneath the counter as I lift a container from a bag. “I got you Toby’s Tofu Dip. And a spare to take home with you.”

“You’re still a vegetarian?” Jesse asks his sister. “Didn’t you outgrow that annoying phase yet?”

Holly smacks his arm. “Caring about the humane treatment of animals isn’t a *phase*, ass.” She squeezes his bicep. “Ooh, someone’s been hitting the gym.”

Jesse pokes her side. “Ooh, someone’s been hitting the ice cream.”

“I have not. And someone’s an asshole.”

I turn from the refrigerator. “It’s a miracle I didn’t drop you two at a fire station and take off for parts unknown.”

They make their usual faces at our long-standing joke. I may have been tempted to drop them at a fire station in the throes of the sibling rivalry decade, when they fought every waking moment, but they’ve been friends since their teen years.

“Mom, you look skinnier,” Holly says.

“I’m using the treadmill.”

I’ve been on it every day for three weeks in an effort to lose the few pounds I gain every winter, which I jokingly call my *winter coat*. The weight has always slid off in the spring without trying. Not this year.

“You mean the spare closet?” Jesse asks. The treadmill in the basement is often covered with things that need to air dry and old coats waiting to be packed up.

“Haha,” I say, and blow Holly a kiss. “Thank you, Daughter. You’re now my favorite child.”

I continue unpacking groceries. Listening to them joke-squabble, I could almost forget what I saw earlier and pretend Ethan is at work. *Almost*. But the food in the refrigerator, the bags of chips and boxes of crackers on the counter, and the wide variety of alcohol, remind me that Saturday is our anniversary party.

If the kids weren’t here, I’d be fighting the urge to search Ethan’s dresser drawers, his toiletries, and his desk in the basement for signs of

drugs: an almost-invisible line of dust on a smooth surface, a syringe, a pill or two, a bag of powder. Even if all the proof I needed was clutched in his hand on his way to his car, I'd already be doubting myself.

My chest closes. Dread works its way up to my brain, crowding out all other thoughts. I have to do it. The next time Ethan accuses me of wanting to leave, I have to find the strength to say he's right. I have to face his hurt expression and hold my ground through the recriminations that will come.

"Muh-om!" Holly yells.

I snap out of my thoughts. "Yes, girl child?"

"Dad said he was leaving work early. Where is he?"

"I guess he had to stay later than he thought." I shove a package of cheese into the fridge, glad my back is to them, and then about-face with a pasted-on smile. "I'm sure he'll be home soon."

"Okay." Holly stands from the counter. "I'm going to find Willa."

After she leaves, Jesse sets his arms on the counter. He *has* been hitting the gym. Where he was toned before is now thicker muscle, and I half want to ask him what he did with my little boy. "What's going on? With Dad?"

"Nothing. You don't need to worry."

"*You* don't need to protect me."

Three years ago, Jesse walked in on his father snorting pills. It's been impossible to lie to him about Ethan's recovery or lack thereof, depending on the moment. Holly knows about her dad's problem, but in a past tense way. Dad had a problem five years ago, and now it's fixed. She doesn't know about the relapses or how strained our marriage has become.

Jesse doesn't need to know that last part either, though I sometimes suspect he does. I wipe the perfectly clean counter to avoid looking at him, then move to the garbage can and brush off the non-existent crumbs. "Actually, protecting you is the official description of my job as a mother. The only things you need to worry about are finishing college and having fun. Then getting a job. We're tired of paying for your insurance, since you have fifteen speeding tickets."

"Two, Mom. *Two* speeding tickets."

"Whatever. Stop speeding. I don't want to have to identify your body on the side of I-5." I knock on the wood chopping block, as I always knock wood when I've jinxed myself. Usually, I wouldn't even joke about one of

the kids dying—it's too much like tempting fate—but it slipped out. I knock on my head for good measure.

“Mom...” Jesse’s eyes are full of an earnest love, the same as when he was little and would insist he loved me more than I loved him, which was sweet but so colossally wrong.

I walk to the kitchen side of the breakfast counter and touch his cheek the way I did back then. It’s rough now, but I can still see that soft little guy inside. “I love you, boy child. But you only need to take care of you. And maybe any zombies that happen past. I’d poop my pants if I had to do it.”

Jesse laughs and shakes his head.

Tom

I PARK my bicycle in the garage and walk through the door at two-thirty on the nose. When work is finished at the shop, we close for the day. My employees appreciate the bonus free time, and happy employees are good employees. Though if it'd been one of our swamped days, the news that Bornavirus has hit Eugene might've had me locking up early anyway.

Sheila is chopping vegetables in the kitchen, and she smiles when I enter. "Hi, sweetie."

"I don't like the look of that virus," I say.

I didn't pay much attention to Bornavirus until late last night, when I clicked a link here, another there, and ended up on various forums. I laughed off the crazy talk about how California's borders are unofficially closed and their communications down, how the virus leads to such aggression that some call it *the zombie virus*, how the victims resemble the dead—or *are* dead, though no one could agree on that—and appear to feel no pain. Today, one of my employees, Mark, went on and on about it. Zombie apocalypses and headshots and how he plans to take every last one of the undead down. Those zombie fanatics definitely have a screw loose, but I still don't like this virus.

"I'm fine," Sheila says in response to my announcement, "and how are you?"

"Sorry, hon. I'm good. We got that job."

“We did?”

I nod as if it isn't a big deal—a huge deal. It doesn't fool Sheila, who jumps up and down, planting a giant kiss on my lips. “Would you smile, Tom? I promise it won't kill you.”

I grin the way only Sheila can make me do. This job will put us in the black for the year, payroll included, and it's barely April. We do all right—better than many—but I want a decent retirement with no penny-pinching, unlike my parents. And I definitely don't want my kids to have to support me as I did my own folks.

“What do you say we go out this weekend to celebrate?” I ask.

“We are going out. Rose and Ethan's thing, remember?”

The dream of a good dinner and a movie, followed by some mind-blowing sex, is dead before it ever fully materialized. “Do we have to?”

“You know we do.” Sheila tucks her blond hair behind her ear. “Clara's coming down tomorrow, anyway. It's been months since she visited, and I want to see her.”

Small talk with people I don't want to see is not my idea of a celebration. And Clara will pick a fight with me the second she walks through the door. My daughter is too much like me—the parts of me I don't like. “We're barely friends with them. They won't notice if we don't show. Rose gets on my nerves.”

“Rose gets on your nerves because you're an antisocial grump. She's only trying to put you at ease. Herself, too. I know you won't believe this, but she's shy.”

I make a derisive noise. Sheila levels me with her serious expression. “Rose has been good for Clara. And me. Do you know how many times she talked me down during the teen years? Don't you dare be a jerk to her. She's good people.”

“All right, all right,” I say. Maybe it's that Rose is four years younger than us, or that she acts like a teenager herself, but she got through to Clara when no one else could. Though I'm thankful for that, Rose drives me a little crazy. Flighty people always do—especially flighty people who turn their flightiness into accidental success. Success is *supposed* to happen by buckling down, making plans, and not deviating from those plans. It's a tried and true method.

I spent years attempting to knock that work ethic into the kids' heads, and then Rose decided to be a realtor just before the getting got good, lucked into a high-priced home as a client, and, from there, grew a successful business that she and Ethan plan to sell later this year. As far as I can tell, she does nothing but flit around town. One of those people who never has to worry about a thing.

"Stop frowning, Tom." Sheila raises her knife jokingly. "You know, you'd like Rose if you gave her a chance. I wish I were a little more like her."

"I don't," I say, and resign myself to the party. I'll have a few drinks, put up with Rose yapping at me, make nice, and then come home the second it's permissible. "I like you just the way you are."

Sheila's eyes crinkle, and though I can see she's aged, those lines sit under the visage of the girl I met in college. She can still loosen me up, make me laugh at myself—as much as that's possible now. Once upon a time, it was easy enough.

"Okay if I get in a workout?" I ask. "I'll help with dinner after." I follow my exercise plan religiously. If you go soft in your forties, it's harder to get back in shape.

Sheila leans against the counter, one hip pushed out suggestively. "What kind of workout? Jeremy won't be home for a few hours."

I smile. Of course, every now and again, changing a plan is fine by me.

I GET in a quick workout after the first, then shower, towel off, and pick up my phone. I usually work out to music, but I listened to the news today, and what I heard—thirty-five cases in the Eugene area—has made me uneasy enough to call Clara. I can't remember the last time I called her. Usually, Sheila sticks me on the phone for a few stilted lines of conversation. Or, since Clara's at school in Portland, I see her on weekend visits. It's obvious Sheila misses her, and I hadn't realized it's been that long since she came down.

The notion that I'm likely the reason Clara doesn't visit more makes an unwelcome appearance. No sooner do we get in the same room than a fight

breaks out. If I'm truthful with myself, I know it isn't just Clara, but I don't know how to change it. Sheila is being punished by our antics, however, and if there's anything she doesn't deserve, it's punishment.

I check the clock. It's a little on the early side. I'll give it an hour or two, just in case Clara's busy. It has nothing to do with the fact I'm feeling good, happy even, and don't want to fight just yet. Or that's what I tell myself.

Rose

WILLA ARRIVED with a few soft toys from her previous life. The stuffed mouse is her favorite, and she chases it around the living room, her tiny nails clicking on the wood floor.

“Willa!” Holly calls. The dog spins in a circle and stops, her barrel chest heaving with anticipation. Holly tosses the toy. “Get the mousie!”

Even I laugh as Willa takes off on her stick legs with her curled tail bouncing. I can’t fathom why Ethan presented me with this gift, especially since I’m more of a cat person. Not that you can call Willa a dog; a freak of nature is more apt.

When Willa returns, Holly coaxes her into her lap, where Willa settles down and chews on her toy. Holly rests her cheek on Willa’s head. “I just want to squish her, I love her so much.”

“Don’t get too attached,” I warn. “I may be finding her a new home.”

Holly’s forehead wrinkles. “Isn’t she your anniversary present?”

“Yes, but she was...unexpected.” Trying to explain drains me of energy, like everything having to do with Ethan. “Dogs are a lot of work.”

Holly nods as if she understands, but it’s clear she doesn’t. Aside from the pets we already had, she spent most of her childhood bringing home animals to fix. We nursed baby birds, stray cats, neglected dogs, and even injured moths.

“Maybe I can take her,” Holly says.

“Does your apartment allow dogs?” Jesse asks.

“I can ask. She’s practically a cat, anyway.” She kisses Willa’s head. “Aren’t you, Willa Vanilla?”

Guilt twists in my middle, along with anger at Ethan for landing me in another no-win position. “She’s fine for now. Don’t worry about it just yet.”

Holly will worry. She worries about her dad most of all, though she pretends not to, which is the main reason I haven’t told her about his relapses. Added to the pressure she puts on herself with school, she’d tear her hands to shreds if she knew. And, on that note, Ethan still isn’t home. Holly called, her voice going high and sweet as she left a message on his voicemail. My bitchy side wants to tell her exactly what her father is doing rather than hanging out with us, but I don’t bad-mouth Ethan to the kids.

The front door opens. “Ding dong,” Mitch sings out. She enters holding multiple bags that she drops to the floor before she shakes out her shoulder-length dark hair. “Look who I found outside.”

My dad, Sam, follows her in. It’s not surprising she’s found him, considering he lives in a fifth wheel camper at the back of our property, but he hasn’t been home all day.

“Hey, Pop.” Jesse stands from the couch and heads straight to his grandpa.

“How’s it going, kiddo?” Pop hugs Jesse warmly, the way he does most things. He’s still a solid guy at seventy-two, though his auburn hair has grayed to blond, and recently he’s looked tired more often than not. “How’s school? Still getting those A’s and slaying the ladies?”

“You know me.” Jesse flashes the smile—braces made it almost too perfect—that makes him popular with said ladies.

“He’s the worst. The *worst*.” Mitch grabs him in a hug. “And the best. Don’t be a patriarchal male jerk, though. Break the mold.”

“A woman’s place is in the House,” Jesse says. Mitch raises a warning fist, and he adds, “And the Senate.”

“That’s my boy.” Mitch’s hug envelops Holly. “And how about you, gumdrop? I know you’re acing everything. Slaying the ladies, too?”

Holly looks everywhere but at Mitch. “Hardly.”

All of Holly’s relationship information is guarded like Fort Knox. Rather than ask and thereby send her into a tailspin of embarrassment, I rely on her best friend, Clara, for information—when Holly tells her anything. I

only want to know whether Holly is happy. She deserves someone as kind and gentle as she is.

I hug Mitch, then kiss Pop's cheek. "Hey, Daddy. How're you feeling?"
"Fine, Rosie. I'm fine."

I stare him down. He's had health issues in recent years, prostate cancer being one of them, and though he's okay now, he's not known for sharing his medical details. His excuse is that he doesn't want to worry me, though his alternate plan involves driving me crazy by forcing me to inspect him for signs of illness. He doesn't need to protect me from the truth, yet he will to his last breath, and that drives me crazier even as I love him for it.

His smile deepens the creases in his face, and his blue eyes twinkle as they usually do. Between the graying hair, the beard, and the pink cast to his cheeks, he could play Santa Claus. "I'm fine, baby doll. Would I lie to you?"

"Always. And that's why I never believe you." He throws me a kiss and doesn't say a word. I roll my eyes. "God, you're a pain in my ass. Come in. I was going to microwave a bunch of stuff for dinner."

"No need," Mitch says. "I brought Thai."

"Out of everyone in the world, we love you most, Auntie Mitch." Holly roots through Mitch's belongings. When she locates the Thai food, she grabs the two bags and heads for the kitchen.

"You didn't have to do that," I say. "But thank you."

"Who else will I spend my money on?" Mitch asks. "A single woman can only eat so much takeout."

"I guess last night's date was a bust?"

Mitch throws her hands in the air. "He showed up in sweatpants."

"Well, I mean, sweatpants aren't that—"

"And he wore those black and white plastic Adidas sandals. With white cotton socks. He didn't even spring for wool."

I cover my mouth too late to trap my laugh. I don't like to judge people based on their clothing, but that is not first date attire. Actually, Adidas sandals with white socks are *never* attire. "Really? Could he have been running late or—"

"Adidas sandals!" Mitch yells. "You have to draw the line somewhere, and I have drawn the line there." She links arms with Pop. "Papa will be my date for the evening."

Pop pats Mitch's hand and leads her into the kitchen. "His loss, my gain."

Mitch is tall and boisterous. Blunt and funny. And she has the biggest heart beneath it all. You have to get past the crispy outer shell to the creamy interior, and most men don't make it in, much to my chagrin. Whether it's because Mitch doesn't allow it, or they don't want to try, is dependent on the situation. But it's always the case.

Holly sets the table while Jesse takes drink orders. I stop in the doorway, thinking how perfect the scene is and how much I love every last one of them. My smile falls when I realize I don't miss Ethan at all.

Clara

MY DAD CALLS around the dinner hour, just as I'm about to let Nick in my pants for the first time. I let it ring. I ignore it when he calls again and then ignore the subsequent voicemail. The third call comes when the zipper of my jeans is in its descent, and I groan in surrender. There are only so many times your dad can interrupt your fooling around before the moment is ruined.

Plus, my dad never calls three times in a row. In fact, he rarely calls. Usually it's my mom, and she asks me a million questions about college life in Portland, all of which I answer as truthfully as possible without going into detail. Evenings like the one I'm spending with Nick are definitely left out of the Mom Report.

Nick's personality is yet to be determined, but he has silky brown hair that he pushes to the side and an easy smile—and I'm not looking for anything more than that. I spent most of my teen years pining over Jesse, which turned out to be a waste of time and energy. I'm not doing that again.

I push Nick away and reach for the phone on my nightstand. "Hey, Dad."

As a little girl, I called him Daddy, but Tom Jensen has been plain old Dad for well over a decade. And he's a Dad with a capital D—his lectures are legendary, his views black and white, and he pretends to have no

emotions. Well, no warm and fuzzy emotions; he has disappointment, anger, and exasperation down pat.

“Clara, you need to come home tonight.” His deep voice is firm.

I smack the hand trailing a path down my stomach. Nick wears a grin as though I’d think it was hot to have his hand in my pants while I speak to my father. Nope.

“What’s wrong?” I clench the phone and pace toward my reflection in the window, thinking *Mom or Jeremy, Mom or Jeremy*. “Is everyone okay?”

I’m afraid his calling means the end of a life that’s incredibly normal, at least to outward appearances—married parents, a younger brother in high school, me in college. Because all it takes is one phone call, one twist of fate, to decimate one’s entire universe.

“They’re fine, Clara. Everyone’s fine.” I let out my breath when his voice softens from commanding to calm. “Sorry I scared you. I don’t like the look of this virus and, besides, your mother would like to see you. It’s been a while.”

It’s only a two-hour drive, but it’s light years away from how I want to spend my night. Nick lies back on the bed and, to his credit, looks concerned by my side of the conversation. I don’t know him well, definitely not well enough to go where we’re heading, according to Mom, but it’s not like I’ve been saving myself for marriage.

The virus started somewhere in Asia, that much I know, and it’s only affected random people so far. People who’ve gone crazy, apparently, but still. “Dad, I’m not planning a plane trip, and I know enough to stay away from crazy people. It’s not even in Oregon. I’ll be down tomorrow. I’ll even leave early.”

“It *is* in Oregon, Clara. I heard it on the news.” My dad takes on his I-will-brook-no-argument-from-you tone. I thought by junior year of college he’d realize he wasn’t allowed to use that tone with me, or that I would be immune to it. Neither is true. “I’m asking, Clara, but I’m not really asking.”

Maybe an extra night home won’t be so bad. I’m tired of our push-pull relationship, of being at odds. “Okay, fine. I’ll leave in about an hour.”

“You will?” he asks, as if it’s impossible for me to be obliging. “I’ll wait up.”

I try not to lose my patience. “I know, Dad.” I say I’ll drive safely and toss my phone on the table.

Nick watches me from the bed, hands laced behind his head. “You’re leaving?”

“My dad’s worried about that Bornavirus. I was going home tomorrow anyway, so he wants me to come early.”

“I saw this video where some guy in California says it’s like a zombie virus. They’re eating brains and shit.” I laugh and pull out a small suitcase. Nick waves a lazy hand. “It’s not even in Oregon.”

“He said it is now. Only a few cases, though.” I’m warming to the idea of being home. My best friend, Holly, goes to the University of Oregon, and maybe I’ll spend tonight at her apartment. The whole reason for tomorrow’s trip is to see her family. I’ll call her on the way down.

“So,” I say when Nick shows no sign of moving, “I’ve kind of got to pack.”

He pats the bed. “You don’t have to run out the door, do you?”

I think about losing myself in Nick, and all my good intentions fly out the window. We could do a lot of damage to each other in an hour. I walk toward him, a slow heat spreading from my center to my limbs. “I can stay a little while.”

“Should you call your dad?”

I bought his rebel act, but he’s beginning to seem almost normal. “And say what? That I’m entertaining a young man in my room but *Don’t worry, Daddy, I’ll be home soon?*”

I pull my shirt over my head. Nick leans back, his eyes eaten black by his widening pupils as I approach the bed, and I don’t think of Dad again.

A little over an hour later, we’re in my car. Nick wants a ride home. A long ride home. Granted, he also grew up in Eugene, but he’s decided a spring break visit is in order. I offered him a ride because I knew he was angling for one, but I’m mourning the loss of two hours of music on the way down. It’s the only place I sing these days. Rose, Holly’s mom, insists the car makes you invisible, and I choose to believe her—otherwise I’d never sing at all.

I drive Nick to his apartment, pull up out front, and plug my phone into the stereo while I wait for him to grab his stuff. “See you in a few?” he asks.

“Of course,” I say, as if I’m not deep in a fantasy in which I leave Nick standing with his bag at the curb. Just because we’ve slept together doesn’t

mean I want to go on a road trip.

Before too long, Nick throws his bag into the backseat and slides into the front. “Thanks for the ride.”

I smile out the windshield instead of at him while I pull from the curb. Sleeping with someone is entirely different, and possibly easier, than having a conversation with him. Or feelings for him. I’m reflecting on this very subject and ignoring the way my nerves jangle at the thought of seeing Jesse this weekend, when Nick yells, “Shit, Clara!”

Someone has crashed into someone else and now the two someones are wrestling in the left lane. I skid to a stop five inches shy of the bumper ahead. I like to believe I’m independent, but my parents still pay my insurance, and I’ll never hear the end of rear-ending someone.

There’s just enough space to pass in the right lane and shoulder. The car in front of me crawls by, gawking at the altercation I can barely make out in the dark. I think about stopping, but someone else has.

“That dude was beating the shit out of the other guy,” Nick says. “I think we should go back. Maybe I can help.”

He’s a regular Good Samaritan, this Nick. The car’s interior flashes with police lights. “And get killed for it? Anyway, the police are coming.”

My dad lets my mom do most of the parenting, but he taught me to fight, as well as to stay out of fights that don’t belong to me, especially ones between grown men. He attached a rape whistle to my keychain when I was twelve, and it’s been on there ever since. Holly likes to say that she doesn’t know why he bothered, since I give it away for free. And that’s why I love Holly—she can always make me laugh.

Once we hit the main highway, I turn down the music and dial her. “Hey, you,” Holly says. “Why are you calling me before two a.m.?”

“I’m coming down early. Just left Portland. Have to stop at home first, then I’ll come to your apartment.”

“I’m at the parents’ house tonight. Jesse’s down for the party, and I’m helping my mom set up.”

The anniversary party I’m to attend. Holly’s parents have been married twenty years, which is crazy considering they’re both forty-two. Holly and I are twenty-one, and her brother Jesse—Jess—is a little more than a year older.

“Shit,” I say. “Forget it. I’ll just see you tomorrow, then.”

“Clars!” Holly yells out my nickname. “Are you crazy? Get your ass over here! There’s a ton of alcohol that needs drinking. They’ll never finish it all at the party.”

“Okay. After I drop someone off and see my parents, I’ll come over.”

“Someone? Who is this someone of which you speak?” I’m silent, which makes Holly squeal in delight. “Jesse, Clara’s got *someone* in the car. Okay, so do that and come over. Jess really wants to see you.”

Sometimes I wonder how much Holly knows about me and her brother. Not that there’s much to tell. Except for a brief make out session in our teens, it never came to any more. I’ve never breathed a word about my feelings. I like my status as the girl you never worry will beg you to cuddle or ask you a million questions. But Holly knows me so well I think she must suspect.

There’s a scuffling sound, followed by the voice of the only person on Earth who flusters me. “Bring him,” Jesse says. My chest flutters in an annoying, girly way. “Or *her*. Which way are you swinging these days?”

“Fuck off,” I mutter. I only ever swing the one way; I just swing that way often. “How’s Super Bitch?”

“Long gone,” Jesse says. “And good riddance. Now come and drink with us.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

This time the warmth doesn’t spread from my abdomen to my extremities—the thought of seeing Jesse always begins with a prickle of anticipation in my chest, turmoil in my belly, and warm cheeks. Flustered.

When I hang up, still smiling, Nick asks, “Seeing friends tonight?”

A ride is one thing, but I’m not inviting him to Holly’s house. Nick is on a need-to-know basis when it comes to my life, and he doesn’t need to know any more than he does.

“Yeah,” I say. “Old friends.”

“Who?”

“Holly and Jesse Winter.”

“I know Jess,” Nick says. “He plays guitar, right?”

“Yeah, I’m going over there later. It’s not a big deal or anything.”

“Cool.”

After a minute, I ask, “Mind if I put on music?”

“Sure.”

We continue in silence but for the music. A while later, I call my dad. I'll go home first, but I want to tell him I have plans. That way, when I arrive I won't have to listen to fifteen minutes of the *Your Mother Was Looking Forward to Seeing You* lecture. I get Dad's voicemail. Even better. He can get most of his complaints out of the way via Mom's ear. We'll have all the time in the world tomorrow during the day, when I'm bored senseless and wandering around the house. At least I'll see Holly and Jesse tonight, which means I'll take a few extra minutes to reapply makeup.

Nick says something, and I lower the music. "What?"

"It's funny we didn't know each other before. We should've hung out sooner."

"Well, we went to different high schools."

"I know, but it would've been cool."

I turn the music up with a nod. Nick speaks. I sigh and lower it again. "What?"

"Am I bothering you or something?" he asks, arms crossed. He's cute but, on second thought, maybe a little too Boy Band for my taste. And not as cute as he probably thinks he is.

"No."

"Because it really seems like I am. Sorry, I thought maybe you'd like to say more than two words on a two-hour trip."

He's hitched a ride and now he wants to talk. I have nothing to say to someone I barely know. Once the thrill is gone, I'm done. "Nick, I don't mind giving you a ride, and I had a great time tonight, but I'm not looking for more than that."

Nick breathes in. "Wow. Okay."

Maybe I'm the biggest bitch ever, but subtlety isn't my style when it comes to this stuff. I speed up; I can't wait to drop him off even if it does mean going out of my way. I look forward to seeing Nick's (admittedly nice) ass in my rearview mirror.

"Sorry. I just...sorry." I don't have an explanation, so I leave it there.

He shrugs. I *am* sorry that I was harsh but not sorry I said it. The sooner you nip that kind of shit in the bud, the sooner no one is confused about the future. Most guys find me refreshing, or pretend they do. I don't really care which it is.

Tom

DINNER'S BEEN ready for a while and the sun is setting, but Jeremy isn't home. My conversation with Clara went better than expected, I had some alone time with my wife on a kitchen counter, and I'm in a good mood, if hungry.

"I'll give Jeremy a call," I say to Sheila.

"Don't yell at him."

"Yes, ma'am." I find my phone on the kitchen counter. At first, I get a fast busy signal, though it goes through on the second try. A moment later, I hear Jeremy's ringtone playing faintly. I lower the phone and cock my head. It's coming from the front porch. "Think he's here. I'll go check."

Sheila murmurs something from the living room as I step outside into the twilight. Sure enough, there sits Jeremy on a porch chair beside the wrought iron table. He looks a lot like I did at his age—tall but not yet as broad as he will be, dark hair and eyes, olive skin—and he's slumped over, passed out, the way I might have been at his age, too.

He's smoking pot with his friends again. I know all about that, and about Jeremy's obsession with music and art, and I also know it will get him nowhere the same way it did me. Jeremy gets decent grades, but he doesn't have a focus. And as much as I want to be a good father, even a *cool* father, I can't condone my kids leaving their futures up to fate and luck.

“Jeremy!” Jeremy doesn’t stir. I move forward, dreading the arguments and lectures I’ll have to carry out over the next day or two. “Goddammit Jeremy, get in the house.”

Jeremy’s head lolls when I shake his shoulder, and the heat of my ire turns to cold fear. Something is wrong, and it sure as hell isn’t from a little weed. Blood covers his forehead. His coat is open, the shirt beneath torn and red, and his chest barely moves with shallow breaths. Maybe he was mugged, as unlikely as that is in our rural neighborhood on the outskirts of town. How long has he been sitting here while I stood inside, annoyed at his tardiness?

“Jeremy?” I get no response. “Sheila, Jeremy’s hurt!”

I grab Jeremy under the arms and pull him past Sheila at the door, then lug him to the couch, almost dropping him when his head flops to the side. The wound on his temple looks bad. Terrifyingly bad. At first, I think it’s a trick of the light, but something grayish-pink glistens in the center of the deep hole. My legs buckle before I regain my footing and set him down.

Sheila sinks beside Jeremy, face paling when she sees his temple. “He’s not breathing! Call 911.”

She shoves me out of the way, then pulls Jeremy to the floor and starts CPR. I run to the kitchen for my phone. It takes three tries before a recorded voice tells me to hold for an operator, and all I can think is that I’ll let Jeremy smoke pot until the cows come home—hell, I’ll *buy* Jeremy his weed—if this turns out okay. If he’s okay.

I drop the phone and run for the living room at Sheila’s high-pitched scream. Jeremy is on his feet with Sheila clutched in his arms, his mouth buried in her face. At my shout, he turns and locks eyes with me, lips thinning with a hiss.

It’s not Jeremy. Not this ashen thing with half its face coated in Sheila’s blood, its once-dark eyes a lighter brown under a filmy glaze. He turns back to his mother, mouth opening on the way to her neck, and the truth hits like a fist to the solar plexus.

Jeremy is infected.

I snap out of my shock and yank him away by his shirt. My son, the quiet kid who barely argues, the kid in whom I see echoes of my young acquiescent self, lunges for me with snapping teeth. I stumble back as he advances, grabbing his outstretched arm by the wrist and swinging him

around, then I grab the other arm to lock them both behind his back. His head thrashes side to side as I push him out the front door and toss him down the porch steps. I slam the door and lock it before rushing to the living room.

Sheila sits in the easy chair, her hand cupping her cheek. Blood runs through her fingers. Another bite mark blazes on her forearm. “What did...?” she asks, eyes round from shock and pain. “Something’s wrong with him. Don’t leave him out there!”

I shake my head and run for a dishtowel. I saw the deathly pallor of Jeremy’s face, the *nothing* in his eyes, his brain gleaming through that terrible hole in his head. And while I’m firmly grounded in reality, I don’t automatically dispense with far-fetched theories when all evidence proves otherwise. I laughed off the crazy talk on the internet last night, but I’m not laughing now.

Back in the living room, I land on my knees and move Sheila’s hand from her cheek, gulping at the ragged hole Jeremy’s teeth made. When I’d pictured someone infected with the virus, I’d imagined anger, maybe a feverish rage. I’d imagined *human*. I press the dishtowel to the mess of tissue and place Sheila’s hand over top while I rise to get my phone. Her eyes follow me, accusing me of betraying our son.

I swallow to hold back a sob, to keep the contents of my stomach where they belong. “Jeremy’s not right,” I say, as much to convince myself as her. “He would’ve killed you.”

Sheila stares, unwilling or, more likely, *unable* to take in this truth. She looks ill. Her hair is dark with sweat. Rivulets run from her temple, mingle with blood, and drip off her chin onto her blouse. Her good cheek is pale, the other pink as though infection has been brewing for days.

“No,” she says, although it’s weak. “No. Don’t leave him. Don’t do what you always...” She closes her eyes.

“Hang on,” I say softly. There’s no time to explain, and she probably wouldn’t believe me. “Just hold on, sweetie. We’ll fix this.”

If Jeremy has the virus, then Sheila has it now. I push down the fear and confusion, the horror of Jeremy out there, reduced to something I don’t recognize. I had to do it before he hurt her worse, but I still feel as though I turned my back on my son. If I can do anything, it’s lock those feelings

away and focus on the future. And right now the future involves keeping my wife alive.

I can barely breathe by the time the dispatcher answers on the fifth ring. “My wife. She’s been bitten. I need an ambulance.”

“Sir, can you make it to the hospital yourself?” she asks. “It would be faster. All cars are out on calls.”

I don’t answer, only hang up and try to ignore the memory of what I saw online: *100% fatal to all who contract Bornavirus*. But the radio said there’s a treatment. Maybe it works before the virus goes too far. Before you reach Jeremy’s point.

Sheila slumps against the back of the overstuffed chair. The hand that holds the bloody dishtowel rests in her lap. Blood races down her drooping jaw and soaks her shirt. She opens her eyes—unfocused and icy—when I touch her shoulder.

“I’m taking you to the hospital,” I say firmly, in an effort to hide my terror.

She gives a long, slow blink. I bend to scoop her up, but she pushes me with feeble arms. “Jeremy. Help. Please...”

Her eyes roll up until only half of each pupil is visible before they snap into place, awaiting my answer. I pick her up, arms under her shoulders and knees, and pause when I see the chair cushion beneath is sodden with blood. Far too much blood. Wetness soaks into my sleeve under her shoulders. Her arm drops from her side to reveal a tear in the armpit of her shirt—a wound I missed, and one much more important. I stanch the flow of blood from her cheek while the whole time she was bleeding out from a deep, shredded gouge in her flesh.

As I move through the kitchen toward the garage, Sheila releases a sigh that coincides with a loosening of her limbs. Her head drops back, mouth open. Dead weight. I set her on the kitchen floor and fall to my knees beside her, then shake her shoulder and shout her name. Nothing. Her face is pale, so pale. I feel her neck for a pulse, but my fingers shake so badly I can’t be sure I’d feel it.

I pump her chest, lean to blow into her mouth, and stop short. The virus is transmitted through blood and saliva, and Sheila’s lips are smeared with both. I pump her chest again, begging for assistance from God, from anything and anyone. Her blood spreads across the floor, a pool of dark

liquid on beige tile, but I can't stop. It would mean giving up, and I don't give up. I pump until my knees are wet, until Sheila's lifeless body jerks with every push of my hands. I'm hurting her. I don't want to hurt her.

Hissing noises come from outside, and rather than look at my dead wife, I stagger to the window. The sun is down. Jeremy sways by the steps, staring at the house with a slack expression, and the utter lack of life may be worse than his snarls. Two more figures stand beside him—a blood-soaked man, a woman in shredded clothing—attracted by the porch light in this dark part of town. I shut it off and return to Sheila lying in the light of the stove's hood. She can't be dead. It's not possible. I kneel and take her hand, averting my eyes from her mangled cheek.

I love her as much as I did when we met in college. Back then, I was focused on my degree, trying to prove myself to my father, but I never had to prove anything to Sheila. One day in class I made an off-color joke. She threw back her head with a laugh, then said, "Tom, you're not as straight-laced as you want people to think, are you?"

She's seen through me ever since, accepted me. She knows all humans are fallible and forgives them their trespasses. It's what I most admire about her, more than her intelligence or beauty or humor.

Her eyelids twitch, and a flame of hope lights in my chest. Maybe the CPR worked. I make a noise that's supposed to be her name, although my mouth is too parched to manage it. Sheila turns her head with a jerk. Her pallid skin and blank eyes are Jeremy all over again. I'd hoped the virus made you aggressive until you were dead, not *after* you were dead, but now the even more far-fetched truths are making themselves known.

Zombies.

Sheila's deep growl takes me by surprise. Make no mistake, we've had our share of arguments that Sheila usually wins, but this is venomous, almost like hatred. Her body shudders, and her hands flex before they reach for me.

For a split-second, so quick I can almost convince myself it didn't happen, I think I'll let her do it. I'll go down into the abyss with my wife and son. But my mind flashes to Clara on her way home. I can't give up.

I pull a steak knife from the block on the counter. Sheila rolls to her side, clawing at my pants. These are good knives—one length of shining

stainless steel. It takes almost no strength to pin her head to the tile floor, but the effort of will it takes is enormous.

I think of Clara as I sink the knife behind Sheila's ear; it's the only way I can bring myself to do it. I don't know that I *could* do it to Jeremy. The scrape on bone reverberates through my body, thickens my saliva, and I don't have the fortitude to remove the blade after Sheila goes still. I rush to the sink and vomit, then wash it down, moving the faucet side to side to eliminate every trace. As if my regurgitated lunch matters when Sheila lies only feet away.

Dimly, I hear myself mumble for forgiveness, and what makes it worse is that Sheila would forgive me. And she'd do it without a second thought.

Rose

EMPTY THAI FOOD containers litter the dining room table. The kids are in the living room with Pop, while Mitch and I sit at the breakfast counter with a bottle of white wine. “Did you rob a cracker store or something?” she asks, raising her chin at the kitchen counter, where no fewer than ten boxes of crackers reside.

“You know I have no portion control when it comes to party food,” I say. “And crackers soak up wine, speaking of which...” I dump more into our glasses. “After this glass, we’re going to the basement to play with the karaoke machine.”

I rented one for the party because karaoke is the best invention ever, especially when you’re worried you’ll throw the worst party ever. You can’t be bored when you have karaoke. Or maybe someone can, but Mitch, Craig, and I will have a great time.

“It’d better have ‘Islands in the Stream,’ or else we’re in a fight.”

“Of course it does,” I say. “I’m not a monster.”

Mitch laughs, and I lift my phone to check the time. “What the hell could Ethan be doing?” she asks. “Besides the obvious.”

I shrug. It’s dark, and he isn’t home. I added my own message to Holly’s, asking Ethan to call. I said we were worried. And I am, somewhat, but I’m also relieved. If he isn’t home, I don’t have to watch him for signs of drug use, don’t have to pretend all is well. If I don’t pretend, it leads to a

discussion in which Ethan accuses me of not caring for him, of being cold and distant, followed by speculation that I'm looking for someone or something else.

"What's going on?" Mitch leans in close. "Tell me."

"I'm just tired of it, you know?"

"I'm tired of it, and he's not my husband. Did you have another fight?"

I dip my finger in my wine and run it around the rim of my glass to produce a high-pitched chime, the way I did on Mom's glass when I was young. I always stuck my finger in my mouth afterward, grimacing at the taste while Mom laughed. It's a good memory.

"No fight," I finally say. "Another talk. It doesn't matter, it's over now."

Mitch deserves more, but I can barely explain to myself what happens in those talks. For years, Ethan joked good-naturedly at how I could spend an entire day inside a book, but now it means I'm ignoring him. If I make plans outside the house, he picks a fight with me before I leave. Instead of saying I look good, the way he always did, he maligns my makeup and asks who I expect to impress. He acts as if I haven't been faithful for over twenty years, as if he doesn't know me at all.

"It's not over," Mitch says quietly. "It never is. Do you realize you don't laugh half as much as you used to? You're not the same. I know there's more, and, fine, you don't have to tell me, but I can guess. And I can't stand it, Ro."

I want to blame the wine for the way my eyes sting, but it's the ring of truth in Mitch's words. I second-guess my every move. If I don't, Ethan does. At times I think I'm going crazy. Down is up. Up is sideways. And when Ethan says I've changed, that I've turned cold and callous, I double down to prove him wrong while wondering if he's right.

But Mitch has cut through the fog, made it crystal clear. Ethan controls me with his addiction, with his unpredictable emotions, and I let him do it. I'm already ashamed of my weakness, but now I'm one of *them*: the women who allow it to go on. The ones about whom everyone says, *I'd never let that happen. I'd be out the door so fast your head would spin.*

I once said the same, but now I know how it happens. Slowly. In increments. The fact that I've spent half my life with Ethan means I can't give up on him easily. I know who he is, who he was. Who he could be again. I've convinced myself it's best not to upset him, to encourage him, to

wait out his moods and yield to his whims because of his precarious sobriety. But the truth is that he's playing the tune, and I'm dancing like the organ grinder's monkey.

I look down at my limp hands in my lap, blinking away tears. Mitch touches my shoulder. "I'm sorry, lady. I shouldn't have said that."

We both know it's exactly what she should've said. I can't explain how I've reached this place, but Mitch doesn't need an explanation, which eases the mortification somewhat.

I don't love him the way I once did. He's hurt me too many times to let myself be vulnerable like that again. When I tell myself I love him, I'm coasting on familiarity, on the belief that I always have, so I still must. But I can't do this anymore, not now that I see it so clearly. Not if I have any self-respect left.

I wipe my eyes. "No, you're right." My small laugh has a sob quality to it. "Great timing with that speech, by the way, what with the party this weekend."

Mitch stares for a moment before her giant laugh bursts forth, and I join in until I clutch my stomach. I have to laugh. Otherwise, I'll cry, and I'm done crying.

"What's so funny?" Jesse calls.

That sets us off again. I bend to the counter, breaths coming in gusts. "My stomach. Ow, stop."

Mitch pats my back. She hiccups, breathes out, and hiccups again. Mitch isn't pretty in the conventional sense—except for her eyes, her features are sturdy, utilitarian—but she has *presence*. Her kindness lights her up, and her ability to laugh at everyone, including herself, makes her brown eyes glow. Her skin is gorgeous, with hardly a wrinkle in sight although she's basked in the sun for decades, which turns her from a tawny beige to a deep brown.

Mitch was adopted, her biological mother a fair-skinned teenager with blue eyes, and her father unknown. When asked her ethnicity, Mitch always replies *Human*. It caused her much distress growing up, when everyone wants to fit in, to belong somewhere. In true Mitch fashion, she finally said fuck it to the whole idea and blazed her own path.

I was glad to have been along for the ride, even if I watched from a distance. While I was twenty with a kid on the way, Mitch traveled the

world. When I was juggling two kids, community college, and a job, she graduated Berkeley with two degrees. She lived in San Francisco for years, then became successful enough to move home and work as a consultant, which is as mysterious to me as it is lucrative for Mitch. The crux of it is that she tells corporations and their employees what's wrong with them. Basically, what she's just done here.

I wipe my face a final time and roll my head on my neck. "Maybe you should be my life consultant."

"You'll be able to afford me when you sell Winter Realty."

I push her arm. I've been dreading the sale of the business, mainly because I worried about Ethan having nothing to do but drugs and even more money to blow on them. But maybe it's good timing. Ethan and I can split the money, go our separate ways. Not scouring the bank statement for suspicious purchases and ATM withdrawals will be refreshing. As will an empty house where I can do what I want without tiptoeing around. I could drag Mitch to visit Craig and see what kind of trouble we can get into. The idea sounds unbelievably freeing.

"Have you spoken to Craig?" I ask.

"Just eight thousand times. *Mitch, what should I wear? What are you wearing? Do you think the plane will crash? Why not? You can't know that for sure. What are you eating? Stop chewing into the phone, it's disgusting.*"

She asks the questions in the fast tempo of Craig's anxious voice, and I laugh. "Okay, good. I couldn't get in touch with him today."

"Not today. This was two days ago. I told him I'd see him when he got here, otherwise I'd have to strangle him through the phone."

I play peacemaker between the two, though it's more of a joke than anything else. When I moved to Eugene from Brooklyn in the middle of high school, I was angry and lonely and completely unprepared for how moving from the city seemed to move me back in time ten years. My combat boots and vintage clothes made me an outcast, and I endured snarky comments and outright animosity from kids who still teased their hair and pegged their jeans long after it was out of fashion back east. My shyness made me friendless, until the day Mitch and Craig descended on me like the Freak Squad Welcome Wagon. I'd found my people—funny, weird, and every bit as out of place as I was.

“I tried calling him again before you got here,” I say, “but he didn’t answer.”

“He probably took six Xanax and silenced his phone.”

The TV clicks into silence in the living room. Jesse and Holly murmur, and I lean off my stool to watch Jesse mess with the modem by the TV. “What happened?”

“Think the internet’s out,” he says.

I reach across the counter for my phone. Sure enough, the Wi-Fi symbol is missing. As I watch, my phone’s data icon changes from LTE to E and then disappears entirely. “Data doesn’t seem to be working, either. But I still have service.”

Internet can be finicky here, especially in the evenings, but data is usually fine. It would be worrisome when coupled with what Jesse showed me earlier, if that hadn’t been completely unbelievable. Pop stands from the couch holding his phone, on which he’s always reading a book or messing around. “Mine’s out, too. Maybe it’s your zombie apocalypse, Jess.” He winks at me and walks down the hall to the bathroom.

Mitch drops her phone on the counter. “Just as well. I wasn’t looking forward to the emails about my latest recommendation.”

“What now?” I love to hear how people flip out at Mitch’s proposals. Mainly, her clients are corporations attempting to go greener, usually for the *optics*, a word Mitch despises, and they’re dragged to the green side kicking and screaming. Not only is Mitch from Eugene, but she went to Berkeley. They have to know what they’re getting into when they hire her.

“They offered me more money to fudge a few numbers. I said I’d see what I could do and sent them the same report.”

I laugh and, not for the first time, wish I had Mitch’s mettle. Her next words are cut off by a sharp bark. Then another. Willa races for the front door, growling the entire time.

“She’s a good guard dog,” Mitch says. “I don’t know what she thinks she’s going to do with her fifteen-pound self once she has them in her clutches, but she gets points for enthusiasm.”

Jesse walks past the opening of the dining area and out of sight, where the living room continues to the foyer. “It’s too early to be Clara,” Holly says. She picks up Willa, who quits growling, and follows Jesse.

“There’s a guy out there,” Jesse calls. “Coming up the driveway.”

I head for the living room, where he has his hands cupped to the front window. “Is it Dad?” I ask.

“Don’t think so.”

I stand beside him at the glass. The door light is dim, and it doesn’t reach far, but it’s enough to see a figure on the gravel driveway, trudging slowly but steadily for the house. Another shape materializes from the darkness of the road: a woman who limps with the same slow gait. Off in the distance, a siren wails and then fades as the emergency vehicle travels farther away.

“Think they had a car accident?” Mitch asks right by my ear, and I jump.

Jesse unlocks the door. “I’ll go check it out.”

Their dragging steps make my skin crawl. The thought of Jesse outside is so alarming that I yank him back by his shirt and slam the door hard enough to rattle pictures on the wall. “No!”

Jesse’s eyes are wide. “Mom, I’m—”

“Wait until they get here. We’ll help them then, if they need help.”

Normally, I’m all for assisting in a crisis, but I want them to turn around. Leave. It’s a visceral reaction, like that video. Slowly, so slowly I can barely stand it, the man hits the front walk. We gasp when he reaches the light.

He’s around my age, dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks. The shirt was once white, though it’s now a deep red, still wet and glistening. His right arm is shredded meat, and it ends in exposed bone instead of a hand. But it’s his face that makes me woozy. One cheek is close to gone, an ear missing. His eyes search the window, the door, yet at the same time appear dull and unfocused. His head moves in little jerks. His mouth twitches. Blood cakes his lips and teeth.

“What the fuck?” Jesse whispers.

The man trips on the front steps. He doesn’t put out his arms to break his fall, doesn’t flinch as he lands on the brick. He has no reaction except to raise himself up with his one hand, get back on his feet, and stand swaying in the light. The woman catches up to him, though neither acknowledges the other’s existence. Her eyes are just as vacant. Skin pale. Mouth bloody. She wears a skirt and blouse, though only the top of her blouse remains, and

her abdomen is a gory, gaping hollow. With a wound like that, you should be bleeding out on the ground. You should be dead.

The woman spots us. Her mouth opens with a rasping hiss that travels through the glass. She staggers into the bushes with a sudden fervor, and we jump as her hand slams the window, leaving behind a dark blot. Blood. Maybe hers. Maybe not. Either way, it's horrible. It's mesmerizing. Horribly mesmerizing.

The woman is too short to see inside, but her palm beats without stopping. Another hand joins hers. The man's gruesome face comes next. His mouth hits the glass and moves side to side, smearing blood and saliva in an arc.

"What's going on out there?" Pop calls from the hall. "I—" He enters the living room and watches the hands pound the glass. Three hands, now that the woman uses both of hers.

My explanation sticks in my throat. There aren't words, not for this or for the cold, creeping terror that increases with every strike. I want to turn off the lights and hide in the basement. I want to crawl under my bed with the imaginary monsters because these monsters are fucking *real*. These monsters can see us, and I have no doubt they're out for blood.

"The lights," I manage to say.

I trip for the floor lamp while Mitch gets the switches. In unspoken agreement, we leave the outside light on. This isn't the kind of thing you want wandering around unseen. No fucking way do you let these things out of your sight.

"Mom?" Holly asks in a small voice.

I wrap my arms around her. She presses her face into my shoulder, and Willa's breath comes in quick blasts on my side. I wish I could do the same as Holly but with my own father, who's edging toward the window.

"Daddy, no!" I whisper.

He raises a hand in reply and stops a foot away, his broad frame bent to see out the glass, then turns to Jesse. I can't see his face well in the dark, or hear what he says, but Jesse nods and leaves for the kitchen.

At the rattle of the knife drawer, I transfer Holly to Mitch's arms and follow. Jesse has placed two knives on the counter, and he holds my good chef's knife up to the dim light of the stove hood. I take it from his trembling hand. Mine is no steadier.

“We might need them,” Jesse says. “What if they break the glass?”

His face and lips are pale, but his eyes are ready to fight. Ready to fight what’s outside—ready to fight *me* if I fight him on it. Though I love him for that, there is no way in hell he’s going near those things. “I know. I’ll use this knife.”

“Mom, I think they’re zombies,” Jesse whispers. He’s broadened out like his dad, has the same straight nose and cheekbones for days, but currently he looks closer to the chubby-cheeked little boy who’d wake from a nightmare and crawl into my side of the bed.

Maybe they aren’t *zombie* zombies, but they’re close enough that it doesn’t matter. I’m completely unequipped to deal with this, but I’ve always tried to be the person my kids need—a joker, a hardass, strong, comforting—even if I have to fake it. I’m not going to stop now, and I’m faking it big time.

I take Jesse’s arm with my free hand and look him in the eye. “I think so, too.”

He swallows, then squares his shoulders and grabs the knives from the counter before we return to the living room. Pop, Mitch, and Holly stand away from the windows. The beating hasn’t ceased, though it’s slowed somewhat. Mitch’s phone screen lights up as she dials 911, then darkens when she lifts it to her ear.

After the third attempt, Mitch shakes her head. “They’re not answering.”

She turns to the right and drops her phone to the floor. A face peers through the picture windows; another man, bloody, with a sagging mouth. My hand tightens on my knife. I’m not sure I could use it—I don’t know what the hell I’d do with it—but it makes me feel better.

Pop herds Holly and Jesse toward us, picks up Mitch and me on his way, then shuttles us all through the kitchen and into the hall. Enough light comes from the stove hood to see everyone’s wide eyes and expressions of disbelief.

“We have a problem,” Pop says, and I almost laugh. We have a problem, all right. Three of them. I press a hand to my chest to keep in the hysteria. “We need to close the gate. We could end up surrounded if there’s more.”

“They’re dead, aren’t they?” Holly asks. “Like that video.” Jesse puts an arm around her while she fights her tears with shaky breaths. “Are they?”

No one answers. Finally, Pop says, “They sure look that way.”

His concerned gaze sweeps to me, but it diminishes some after he takes me in. Nothing in this world matters more than Holly and Jesse. I’d die for them, I’d fight for them to my last breath, just as he’d fight for all of us.

“I’ll go out the back,” he says. “Get my truck and try to lead them out. I might need someone to close the gate.”

“I’ll do it,” Jesse says.

Pop’s truck is behind the house by his RV. My stomach turns at the thought of going outside, but it heaves at the thought of Jesse going. “No,” I say. “I will.”

Rose

THE SLIDING glass doors in my bedroom lead to the covered patio, and it isn't until I see our king bed that I remember Ethan's out there. I dispense with that thought before my brain goes into overload and concentrate on zipping up my coat.

Pop shines a flashlight out the glass. "Nothing," he says. "Ready, Rosie?"

"No, but yes."

He takes my arm. "If something happens, you run for the house. You do *not* wait for me. Understand?" I nod, mainly because arguing would be futile, but the chance I'd leave him is slim to none.

"Be careful," Holly whispers.

Jesse opens his mouth, closes it, and then opens it again. "If—if they are zombies, only head wounds will kill them. You have to get the brain somehow." He seems embarrassed he's said it, and I quash another hysterical laugh.

"Good to know," Pop says, sliding open the door. "Back in a jiff."

Mitch puts her arms around the kids' shoulders. "Careful."

The air on the patio is cool and damp. Rain is coming, as it usually does until mid- to late June. The world feels humongous. Big and ungated and ready to attack from all sides.

We begin the walk through the grass. Our property mostly levels out here until closer to the back fence, and though Pop's fifth wheel isn't far, it feels like two miles. My shallow, edge-of-panic breaths are loud in my ears. My lungs burn from the surplus of cold air.

"Almost there," Pop says. His white pickup looms ahead, parked just outside the camper. "I'll run in for my gun first."

He opens the passenger's side door for me. Once I climb in, he shuts it gently and moves to the RV. I watch him mount the steps and go inside, then see a brief flicker of the flashlight through the window. Only the back of the house and surrounding land are visible from this spot, along with a stretch of road that's hidden in the blackness of night.

A minute passes. Another. Pop should be back by now. I turn in my seat, mouth dry. I should've gone with him. One of *them* could've gotten into the camper somehow. The image of him dying on the floor of the fifth wheel's living room, weakly crying out for help, grows so strong that I grip the door handle. Thirty seconds and I'll go after him. Sitting alone in the truck, in the dark, is torture.

I've counted to twenty by the time he appears and sits behind the wheel. "Damn gun safe battery died and wouldn't read my fingerprint. Had to find the key."

I cringe as the engine roars to life. Quiet the truck is not. He puts it in gear and rolls toward the house with the lights off, veering left to go around. From here, it's a gentle slope to the gate. The plan is to lead them to the road, then quickly reverse up to the opening, thereby shielding me from danger when I jump out to close the gate. Pop wanted me to drive, safe in the truck, but I was sure, with the way my body trembles, that I'd end up landing the truck in a ditch. Or worse, ramming it into the fence and destroying the only protection between us and these monsters.

"I'll put on the lights in a—" Pop cuts off as a sedan's headlights bounce along the road, moving in our direction.

We watch in silence. The sedan illuminates five more people—if you can call them that—staggering down the asphalt. The three outside the house aren't the only ones. When the car nears, it swings into the oncoming lane. One of the figures lunges for it, and the car knocks the body into the opposite lane with a *thunk* of flesh on metal.

The sedan speeds on toward town with the remaining four bodies tagging along. The one it threw to the side struggles to stand and then lumbers after them. Like it was nothing. Like it wasn't just hit by a car. My eyes adjust to the gloom, and I spot the three who were at the living room windows heading for the road.

"I'll get down to the gate once they're through," Pop says. "Then we'll close it from the inside."

"Okay." I try to keep my voice steady.

The silence is broken by the wail of police vehicles and the honk of fire engines from the direction of town. Although muffled by distance, my heart speeds up. I'm positive the reasons for all that noise are walking down the road. There are probably many more in town, where there are tens of thousands of people.

Pop's pistol sits in his lap, the barrel carefully turned away from me. I've shot it a few times at his insistence, but I didn't enjoy it. I'm not against guns—I just have no use for them. They frighten me a little, but not as much as those bloody bodies do, and I'm thankful it's here. Thankful Pop is here. I'm an adult with two adult kids, but his presence has always made me feel safe. You fuck with Sam McGann at your own risk, and I've never been happier for that fact.

The woman is first out of the gate, followed by man one, then man two. A minute after the second man hits the asphalt, I breathe again. Pop puts the truck in neutral and coasts on the quieter grass, then stops at the end of the driveway. "I'll get it. You wait here."

Our fence is made of four-foot-high, wood-framed panels with thick gauge welded wire in their centers, though its posts extend to six feet and are connected by a wood top rail. It isn't the strongest fence in the world, and it won't hide us worth a damn, but it's better than nothing. I long for a tall privacy fence or the thick logs of Fort Clatsop up in Astoria. Concrete would be even better.

Pop opens his door and steps out. He pushes the gate closed while I grip my knife and cringe at the familiar squeal of hinges I always forget to oil. He latches it, stands for a few seconds looking down the road, then returns to the truck. Once inside, he says, "I'm going to park against the gate. That way nothing can push it open."

"Good idea," I say, then suck in a breath. "Ethan. He needs to get in."

Pop looks me over with keen eyes full of questions, the first of which is likely *Where the hell is Ethan?* I don't have the answer and now am genuinely worried. If there are eight of those things here, on our quiet road, then town must be swarmed with them. Less than a mile up the road, the houses sit closer together, more like suburbia. Another mile, and you're in Eugene with its closely packed houses, stores, and downtown.

"Ethan's smart enough to park his car near the fence and climb over," Pop says, and I nod. He moves the truck to the gate and turns it off. "All right, let's get back to the house. I'll go first." Pop leaves through his door, and I scoot across the seats to follow, since my side is flush against the fence. "Have to grab something from the back. Wait here."

I step to the gravel driveway. This went easier than expected, and my body hums with relief. I close the door quietly and turn to face Pop, who's coming around the tailgate. I whisper, "What do you th—"

The figure closes in. There's a brief moment to comprehend the man isn't Pop before he slams into me. I stumble back and hit the ground. He follows me down, his weight forcing the air from my lungs. In the dark, I can barely see who—what—has me pinned, but he smells like shit and urine and raw, bloody meat.

I lift my arms to cover my face. He dives into my neck. Dull, burning pain follows and is immediately overtaken by panic. I shove at his torso, buck my legs, but though I succeed in moving him down an inch or two, I'm no match for his weight.

My knife. It has to be close by. I push at the monster's head with my left hand and snatch at grass and gravel with my right until my fingers hit on the wooden handle. I grasp it in my fist, bring the blade into the air, and stab at his head. It barely makes a dent. I hack its neck, its shoulder. Every jab sinks deep, but the mouth never stops grinding. It never pauses.

Breathless panic turns to a shrill, piercing scream. The thing lifts its head. When he comes for my face, I thrust the knife into the open space and drive it upward, barely aware of a gunshot nearby. The six-inch blade disappears into his mouth, driving so deep that only two inches of handle peek from between its lips.

It drops onto my chest, and I scream again. It doesn't move. Doesn't gnaw. I squirm to get out from under the body before I lose my mind

entirely, but it's lifted and tossed to the side, and then Pop is on his knees beside me. "Rose? Rosie!"

My sobs are loud in the silence. This amount of fear is too much to keep inside. Pop holds me by the shoulders as I rise to my feet, gulping for oxygen. My neck hurts like a fucker. I lift my hand to the spot and probe gingerly. When I draw it away, the pale skin of my fingers is dark with blood.

You don't need to be an expert in zombie lore to know what this means—they said it on the news. Contact with saliva, with the virus, makes you sick. It's why you don't care for the infected. You take them to the emergency room, where doctors can treat it. They said they could treat it, but they lied about zombies. I have no doubt they were lying about a treatment, too.

"Rose! Sam!" Mitch calls from the house. She's under orders to keep the kids inside, and I'm sure that's grown near impossible after the commotion.

"We're fine!" Pop calls. "Stay inside!" He glances into the night, then turns to me. "One came at me at the back of the truck, but I think that's it. I shot it. They must have come in earlier and we didn't see. Let's get up to the house."

My neck throbs. A pit opens in my stomach. I have to know now, not inside, where Jesse and Holly will see my fear. Because I'm terrified. Of dying, of knowing I'm dying.

"Daddy, I—" His eyes drop to my hand at my throat. I whisper, "I think it bit me."

He throws open the truck's door and leans to retrieve the Maglite he keeps under the driver's seat, then flicks it on as he lifts my chin with a gentle hand. I can feel his fingers tremble, though, and I close my eyes against the light's glare and the heartbroken expression I know will come. That's almost worse than dying myself—my father's face when he knows, too.

Pop wipes at my neck. I wince as he scrubs the spot with the handkerchief he always carries in a pocket. "Your skin's not broken," he says. "Your jacket must have been in the way. It's not your blood."

It doesn't make sense at first, and then my knees give way with the relief that sweeps through me. "Are you sure?"

“Positive. But we’ll clean you up and check again.”

Something rattles the gate on the other side of the truck. If lights draw them, surely noise does, and a gunshot, my screams, would’ve called more this way. We run up the driveway to the house. Pop pulls me into the kitchen, turns on the water, and grabs a wad of paper towels. I let my coat fall to the floor, ignoring the stares of Mitch and the kids. Warm water soaks my shirt while Pop cleans my skin.

After he’s inspected closer, he grabs me in a hug. “You’re okay.” His breaths are short, and they tell me he wasn’t positive. He said that to get me inside. Of course he did.

“What happened?” Mitch asks.

“There were two more.” I sink onto a stool, too tired to stand, to think. Willa whines at my feet, and I lift her round little body into my lap rather than listen to it. “Pop got one with the gun. The other attacked me on the ground.”

“She stabbed it right in the mouth.” Pop finally smiles. “Gave him hell.”

I shake my head—Pop thinks everything I touch turns to gold. “I don’t think I quite gave him hell, but he’s dead.” I turn to the kids, who watch me with open mouths. “You were right about the head. I stabbed it in the neck and shoulder, and it didn’t flinch. Nothing.”

“Exactly what the fuck is going on?” Mitch asks.

She wasn’t here for the earlier discussion, nor in the room when Jesse told Pop. Jesse launches into a description, but Pop cuts him off with, “Rosie, go shower that off. We’ll try to find some news.”

I set Willa down. The walk to the master bathroom seems longer than usual. Willa follows me in, watches me toss my clothes to the floor, and sits by the toilet while I step into the shower and let the hot water soak in. Every few seconds, I recall the panic, the weight of that man on me, and how his face came for mine only to be stopped by the knife. If I hadn’t gotten it there in time... I *did* get it there. That’s what counts.

I dry off and stand at the mirror wrapped in my towel. The side of my neck is purple, the middle of the bruise speckled red with burst capillaries. Normally, I’d put on pajamas, but pajamas feel too flimsy, and I opt for jeans, tank top, and cozy sweatshirt instead. After applying the usual forty-two styling products to my hair to tame the beast, I return to the living

room, where everyone stands near the stereo. Holly lifts a finger to her lips when I enter.

A young-sounding voice comes from the speakers. I recognize it as the DJ of one of the college station's indie rock shows, though I don't know his name. *"...virus is all over Eugene. I-5 is closed up to Albany. Route 99, too, and authorities say to stay in your home for now. I have Kevin Larson here, who knows more about what's going on."*

"Yeah, it's crazy." This voice is as young as the first, and both of the boys' voices have an edge of bewildered excitement as they share this breaking news. *"There are infected people wandering everywhere, and I know how this sounds, but they're dead. Really dead. They die and then come back, like zombies, and you can only kill them by getting their brains."*

There's a pause. *"It sounds crazy, but I swear it's the truth. My dad's a police officer, and he had us come to the KLCC studio and warn people. You can hear the emergency broadcasts right now."*

I survey the living room. There are so many windows, so many ways in, though they turned off the outside light and drew the curtains while I was in the shower. At least we don't have many neighbors the way houses up the road do. We have a fence. I wipe my damp hands on my pants. They're sweating yet freezing.

"My dad said they're working on getting all the infected rounded up," Kevin says. *"After that, it'll be safe to go out. But until then you should stay at home. Don't let them scratch you or bite you. If they break the skin, you can get infected, and there's no cure. Nothing. You die if you get it, and then you turn into a zombie."*

My fingers go to my neck, where every pair of eyes in the room has come to rest. Holly takes my other hand, and I squeeze weakly.

"Dude, it's really the zombie apocalypse," the first guy says, and Kevin grunts.

We're being brought this mind-boggling news by Beavis and Butthead. I can't help the laugh that bubbles up, and I shrug when Mitch inspects me like I've lost my marbles. I wouldn't have believed it true—would've suspected a *War of the Worlds* type broadcast for the twenty-first century—but the distant sirens are still audible, and my bruised neck throbs with every beat of my heart.

“So, stay inside,” the first boy says. “We’ll update you when Kevin’s dad gives us more news. And now here’s a song.”

Pop twists the dial. Another voice sounds, this one crackly with static. *“...Bornavirus LX has been found in your area. This virus causes serious aggression in infected individuals. A mandatory curfew has been issued for all counties in the state of Oregon until further notice. Failure to comply with this curfew could result in penalties, including arrest. Stay inside and avoid contact with anyone you believe may be infected. A bite from an infected person carries a high risk of transmission. All persons infected with Bornavirus should be brought to the hospital or law enforcement for treatment.”*

Mitch huffs in disbelief. “How do they plan to treat *that*?” Jesse makes a gun out of his fingers, puts it to his temple, and fires.

“Please stay inside while authorities contain the spread of the virus. This broadcast will be updated as soon as possible. Attention. Bornavirus LX has been found in your area. This virus causes serious—”

It’s a loop. I turn the radio down low enough that it isn’t in our faces but is loud enough to hear if the recording changes. “We should check the local TV stations, too. Does anyone know where the antenna is?”

We canceled cable a while ago and now stream most everything, though we have an old-school antenna in case someone wants to watch the network stations live. “Maybe in the basement somewhere?” Jesse says. “I’ll find it.”

“Thank you. Did you try Dad again?”

The kids nod. Pop nods. Even Mitch nods. “Calls aren’t going through,” she says.

I locate my phone in the kitchen. It’s down to one bar, and a call produces a fast busy signal. I type a text to Ethan: *Where are you? Getting really worried. Kids here with Pop and Mitch. Parked truck by gate and we’re okay for now. Please let us know you’re okay. Come home, but only if it’s safe.*

I hesitate a moment, then type: *Love you.* That I actually contemplate that addition makes me sure I’m a horrible person. There are zombies outside and I’m deliberating whether or not to tell my husband I love him.

The text hangs in the ether for a moment, the green bar moving slowly across the top of the screen, and then goes through. I hold my phone to my

chest and will Ethan to call or text or walk in the door.

“Shit, Clara’s on her way down!” Holly lifts her phone to her ear. “It’s ringing.” After a moment, she says, “Hello? Clara? Hello?” She hangs up. Her fingers fly across her phone’s keyboard, and she watches the screen until she exhales. “I think the text went through.”

“I sent one to Dad,” I say.

Holly’s face is pale and eyes huge in the dark. “Do you think he’s okay?”

“He’s probably at the office. He would’ve gone there if it wasn’t safe to come home.”

“But wasn’t he already there? He should’ve been home hours ago.”

Her voice is shrill with fright. This is not the time to tell her about Ethan. I trot out a convenient lie. “He might’ve gotten stuck at a property. Maybe people came in wanting to see something.”

“Probably.” Holly’s hopeful smile trembles at the corners. “He’s probably waiting it out.”

She seems even smaller at this moment, and I pull her near. “Definitely waiting it out. You heard the radio—they’re rounding up the infected and everyone should stay put until it’s safe.”

I think of those San Francisco streets and hope it’s true, though I have a terrible feeling it isn’t.

Clara

THE REST of the ride down is highly uncomfortable, and I relax as we near Eugene. I have to detour west to drop off Nick instead of taking the exit closer to home, but at this point I don't care as long as it means Nick is gone. I wish I'd been a little nicer, but it's too late to salvage the situation. I've done it before, I can tell.

My phone rings. Dad. I disconnect my phone from the stereo and lift it to my ear. "Hi. I'm almost there. Maybe thirty minutes because I—"

"Don't come home—" He speaks urgently, his voice sounding scared before it cuts out. "Clara, your mother—" there's a long silence and then a garbled, "Go to Holly's. I'll come and..."

"Dad? Are you there? I have no idea what you just said."

I hear what could be a cough, but sounds more like a sob, before his voice comes again. "...here. Your mother...she's...sick and I don't want you to..."

Silence, followed by the three beeps of a lost call. I call back and get a busy signal, my body cold despite the blowing heat. Dad doesn't cry. He just *doesn't*.

"Everything okay?" Nick asks.

"I have to go to my house right now. I can drop you on the side of the highway if you want, but I can't take you home."

Two police cars race past, sirens blaring and lights flashing, and they add to my distress. My hands ache with the way they grip the steering wheel. Mom takes medication for a minor heart condition, but I still worry about her. I'm not going to Holly's to wait for bad news.

"What's going on?" Nick asks. He actually sounds like he cares.

"My dad said something about my mother being sick and then we got disconnected."

"What was it?" he asks. I don't answer. "What did he say?"

"I don't know!" I swerve to the shoulder of the highway. "Do you want to get out?"

"No. No, I'll come with you."

I'm trying hard not to lose it, but I don't know what I'd do without my mom. I could take something happening to my dad, as awful as that sounds, but not Mom.

He squeezes my shoulder. "Hey, I'm sure it'll be okay."

I feel even worse about what I said earlier. Maybe Nick is a nice guy. Maybe he's the nicest guy in the universe, and I didn't give him any sort of chance. I'll make it up to him by not treating him like a jerk when this is over.

I take the exit too fast and race to the more rural part of town, where the houses have large lots, fewer neighbors, and winding roads. I spot a group of people walking up the road, which is uncommon, especially at this hour, and then turn into my driveway. The house is dark and the motion light off, though the moon is bright enough to make out the top of our two-story house and the fir trees that reach high above.

I leave my headlights blazing, car chiming with the keys still in the ignition, to light our way to the porch. It's helpful until it comes time to open the front door, which is locked. Dad never locks the door when he knows I'm coming.

Nick and I turn at the rustle of bushes behind us. Jeremy stands on the path, listing slightly to the left like he's drunk, but he isn't a lush the way I was in high school. "Jeremy?" I ask. "You okay?"

I start down the steps when he stumbles. Nick reaches Jeremy first, only to be tackled to the grass when my brother throws himself at him. I've always prided myself on acting quickly, maybe too quickly. I make decisions and stick by them even when I'm wrong. But standing here, heart

racing and mouth dry while I watch my brother grapple in the dark with Nick, I'm at a complete loss.

"Jeremy!" I scream. "Stop it!"

I swear I hear him growl. He tears at Nick's shirt and buries his face in Nick's side while Nick struggles to push him away. My dad always pressures Jeremy to *shake it off*, to *man up*, but my sweet brother, who loves music and draws beautifully, isn't that kind of guy. And he isn't the kind of guy who attacks strangers like a rabid guard dog.

I drag Jeremy off by his shirt. He hits the lawn on his back. "What the hell is your problem, Jeremy?"

He turns, exposing the bloody side of his face. It takes me a moment to make out the hole in his temple. In his *skull*. I haven't eaten dinner, but there's enough lunch left to rise in my throat. Jeremy makes a hoarse, rasping noise and grabs my ankle, fingers digging through the denim of my jeans. I've never been afraid of him, but the way he looks at me—as if he doesn't recognize me, as if he wants to hurt me—makes me tear from his grip.

I spin toward motion in the corner of my eye. Five people move in the headlights' glare, their larger-than-life shadows dancing on the garage door. They look as if they've been in a battle with their ragged clothes and bloody faces.

They look like Jeremy.

Jeremy is on his knees. My instinct to help him is overwhelmed by my instinct to escape, and I bolt up the porch steps where I stand breathless and frozen. Nick shakes me. "Open the door!"

Jeremy closes in. I yelp when he trips on the first step and continues to haul himself up, one arm extended and fingers reaching. Maybe he's confused by his head trauma—maybe he needs help—and I'm not helping. Before I can move, I'm yanked backward into the house. The door slams, and my father's solid arms are around me, his gasps in my ear. Someone else pants in the dark. Nick.

"Jeremy!" I screech and lunge for the door.

Dad's arms tighten. "Shhh. We can't help him."

Jeremy is always a lost cause, in his opinion, and this time is no different. "We have—"

Dad covers my mouth. I struggle in his grip and, when that produces no results, try to bite his hand. “Clara, please,” he whispers. “*Please.*”

His chest heaves. His face is pressed to my hair, his hand clamped over my mouth. “I’d help him if I could, I swear,” he says so fervently that I stop fighting. He might give Jeremy a hard time, but he’d never, ever leave him to die.

He lets his hand fall. We listen to Jeremy on the stairs: a slow dragging sound followed by a thump on wood. “What the fuck is going on?” Nick’s voice is soft, but I startle. I forgot all about him.

Dad’s weight shifts toward Nick. “Come upstairs,” he says, stern but quiet. Now that my eyes have adjusted, I can make out the circular whites of Nick’s eyes. “Clara, your mom is...upstairs. Jeremy attacked her. I got him outside but she...she’s not...okay.”

“What?” I ask, but I know. I know by the flat tone of his voice. I know because if Mom were alive, she would be down here with me.

Was it only a few hours ago that I worried something was wrong, that it would only take an instant for life as I knew it to end?

The porch steps thump. “Come,” Dad says, more for Nick’s benefit than mine, since he has my arm.

Dad guides us upstairs to the guest room at the end of the hall, away from the master bedroom. He lights a bedside lamp and checks to be sure the drapes are closed. I sink to the edge of the queen bed and stare at the white and aqua bedspread, white pillows, and furniture. Mom went for an ocean feel, and with the way waves of nausea rush through me, I feel like I’m in a rowboat on stormy seas.

“Who are you?” Dad towers over Nick. He’s big at six-two, with straight shoulders and a muscled chest. Handsome with dark hair and defined features. Big smile when he’s happy, and when he’s pissed—which is more often than not—big frown.

Nick glances my way, but I’m far beyond stepping up to the plate for him. “I’m Nick. I really need to get home, sir.”

“I’m Tom, Clara’s dad. We’ll get you home.”

Nick tugs at his hair. I’m sure he regrets his decision to come now that he’s trapped with a girl he barely knows and her overbearing father.

“What happened to Mom?” I whisper. It takes all my courage to ask.

Dad refuses to make eye contact. His mouth opens and closes, throat clicking, and he shakes his head. “We have to leave before this gets worse. It’s that virus.”

“Is it contagious like they said?” Nick asks in a small voice.

My dad nods once. “Blood and saliva.”

Nick presses a hand to the torn shirt sleeve on his right arm. Blood drips from his fingertips to the white and aqua polka-dot area rug. A new pattern soaks in, this one dark crimson.

“I think he bit me.” Nick wets his pale lips and draws his arm to his chest. “I need to go to the hospital, right?”

Dad nods again. Without taking his gaze from Nick, he says, “Clara, go pack some warm clothes while I bandage Nick for the ride. Grab water and food from the kitchen, things that won’t go bad. We’ll go to the hospital first.” I watch more drops hit the carpet. “Now, Clara.”

I obey the way I haven’t in years, my usual resistance replaced by autopilot. I stuff jeans, socks and underwear into an old school backpack, then go downstairs to the kitchen, where the headlights through the windows provide enough light by which to see. I pull food from the cupboards, dropping a can of this and a box of that on the counter. A thud from the second floor startles me out of my daze. I stare at the can of soup in my hand and wonder why I let Dad avoid my question. I have to know. He needs to tell me.

Dad fills the kitchen doorway a minute later, a gym bag in his hand. “I have my gun. Are you ready to leave?” He wears the hunting knife he uses while camping, and he holds out a smaller leather sheath. “You get the truck and pull out of the garage when I’ve moved your car. If you have to, you stab them in the head and don’t let them bite you. If they bite you, you’ll die. Do you understand me, Clara?”

Jeremy bit Nick. He attacked Mom. I look Dad in the eye, ignoring his instructions. “What happened to Mom?”

“Put the knife on your belt, Clara.” He uses his growly voice, but his body sways and he sets a hand on the doorjamb to steady himself.

I search the shadows behind him. “Where’s Nick?”

“He can’t come. Take the goddamn knife, Clara.” He moves forward and roughly shoves the sheath into my hand. “We have to go.”

Moans and a crash from the woods come through the window. Nick mentioned zombies, and I laughed. It should be impossible, but it's the only thing that makes sense. I drop the knife on the kitchen table and grip a chair to stay upright. I want Dad to say it. I want him to speak the words aloud so I don't have to. "You said we'd take Nick to the hospital."

"Clara," my dad says in a barely controlled voice, his lips thin enough to see teeth. "Nick is dead. So is your mother."

My head fills with static at the inconceivability of his words. Mom is dead. Nick is dead, and Dad killed him. I want to ask if he killed Mom, but I can't form the words. Dad's face is set in stone until he glances out the window and curses. Zombies surround my car, the lights and door chime having drawn everything nearby. Our lawn is a thoroughfare for wandering figures.

"They might leave when your battery dies," he says, as if he hasn't just completely demolished every last bit of normalcy in my life. "We'll move your car then."

He leaves for the living room. Discussion over. I ball my hands into fists. I want to run after him, to scratch and bite him the way they would out front. But if I follow, he'll keep me from seeing her, and the weight of my mother's body presses down on me. I have to see. I have to know.

I find the kitchen flashlight and make my way upstairs, avoiding the creaky steps. At the top, I clutch the banister and swing toward my parents' room. I step lightly, my heart thudding so loudly I can barely hear, so forcefully I can barely breathe.

Before I can chicken out, I wave the light across the floor of their room. Nothing. My hand shakes when I raise the beam to their bed and find a lump on Mom's side. I drag myself closer. She's on her back, head on the pillow, hair messy beneath her.

I feel the rumble of my moan before it breaks the silence. Part of her cheek is gone and her molars are visible through the wound. Dried blood cakes her jaw and neck. Mom wasn't overly vain, but she'd aged well. Now, purple capillaries have come to the surface and there's a grayish tinge around her eyes.

Something glints on the pillow just behind her ear, wedged under her head somehow. I watch as my fingers hover above the silver. They don't belong to me. This doesn't belong to me. I've barely brushed the cool steel

when I identify it as one of our steak knives—the ones that never need sharpening even if they hit bone. It's embedded in the softer spot behind her ear.

I drop the flashlight on the bed and stumble away, then shriek when my father clutches me. He makes shushing noises, pinning my back to his chest, but I sink low and elbow him so that he releases me with a grunt. The flashlight's glow is enough to see his emotionless face. Mom was the sunshine to Dad's storm. The peal of laughter to his grudging smile. And now it'll be all storm and no sunshine.

My mother is dead. My brother is worse than dead. Poor Nick thought he got lucky, but Jeremy sentenced him to death and Dad carried out the execution. My rage boils over, coupled with my familiar urge to provoke a reaction—any reaction.

"You killed her," I spit out. "You killed her, you asshole."

He flinches, maybe, but his face doesn't change, so I go for him. I batter and kick, and he takes it. He mans the fuck up and shakes it off. It's only after I run out of steam and stand with slumped shoulders, my chest hollow, that his lips tremble.

"I'm so sorry. God...I couldn't leave her like..." Dad moves to the bed, where he smooths my mother's hair, a hoarse sob cutting off his words, before he mumbles, "I had to, Clara. We take care of our own."

It's the same thing he said to me when I was younger, when Grandma moved in while she waged, and lost, her final battle with cancer. It's what my grandma said about my grandpa, whom she nursed until Alzheimer's took him. We Jensens take care of our own.

Dad holds Mom's hand to his cheek, body bent double. I wanted to break him, but now I want my inflexible father back. I don't want him this way; it's almost scarier than what lurks outside.

He doesn't notice when I leave for downstairs. The banging on the porch has stopped. The zombies still wander, but most stand by the car, moaning over the maddeningly persistent *bing* of the open driver's side door.

DAD COMES DOWNSTAIRS EVENTUALLY and finds me flipping through channel after channel of snow—the cable is out. The couch groans when he drops beside me and takes my hand. Then, in a low voice, he speaks of Jeremy and my mother, of why he had to kill Nick. He comes clean the way I wanted him to, without holding a single thing back. I listen while he tells me about the end of our world—maybe the end of the whole world—in a matter-of-fact way.

But that's my dad. Bottle it up and hope like hell it doesn't explode. I shove the despair and tears down, then squeeze his paw of a hand before I leave for the kitchen, chest burning with a fierce insistence that I will survive. *We will survive.*

The knife is on the table. I unbuckle my belt and slide on the sheath. There isn't a ton of food, but I begin placing the contents into reusable cloth bags my mother uses at the farmer's market. Dad gets moving, too. He fills our pitchers and a few buckets from the garage while the upstairs bathtub fills.

My phone rings. It already seems out of place, as if Dad and I are the only people in the world besides the dead. I freeze before I come to my senses and pull it from my back pocket. Holly's name flashes on the screen, but there's no one there when I answer. I try her number to no avail.

Dad touches my arm. "Can't get her?"

He has a soft spot for Holly. She's friendly and agreeable in ways I'm not. She doesn't throw herself at guys the way I do. That's mainly because she likes girls, although she's too shy to admit she likes *anyone*, much less offer herself up to them. I shake my head. "What if she doesn't know?"

Part of a text arrives: *...gate blocked. We're OK. Where are you? Be safe! Love you!*

My dad reads over my shoulder and exhales. "They know something's up."

I want to be with Holly. I want this to be more than just me and Dad because this harmony between us is so foreign, so unnatural, that I'm not sure it can last. I want Holly's mom, Rose. I want Jesse to be okay.

"We should go there now, before it's too late," I say.

"No."

No explanation, no nothing. Just *no*. The inevitable annoyance rushes in. "Why?"

“We’re not leaving now.”

“We should be there. What if we’re stuck here tomorrow?” Forget an inch, I can tell he won’t give a centimeter. I pick up my backpack. “I’m going, with or without you.”

“Goddamn it, Clara!” he roars.

The moans from outside grow louder and the garage door rattles. Dad stiffens. I have to escape from this house with my brother outside and my mother upstairs. “I’m going! I’m not staying here with—” I cut off at Dad’s pained look. He thinks I mean I don’t want to stay here with him.

“Please don’t make me stay *here*.” I point to the ceiling, to my mother, with a strangled sob. “They have a fence, Dad. Please.”

“We’ll take the back way,” he murmurs, eyes on the tile floor.

“Thank you.”

He grabs me in a hug so surprising and powerful that it takes my breath away. It’s not a hug to keep me silent or safe, nor is it the perfunctory hug we’ve exchanged for years. It’s the hug of my childhood, back when he was King of the Universe and I was his princess. I kiss his cheek when he lets me go, just as I used to, and think I see the ghost of a smile before he says, “All right. Let’s go.”

We pack as much as we can carry. We’ll travel across the backyard and then cut through the woods in a trip I can practically do blindfolded. Dad peers through the blinds on the living room’s sliding glass doors. “We’ll have to run.”

I nod, feigning confidence instead of showing fear. There’s safety inside, and I’m forcing us into danger, which could very well be the wrong decision.

I can’t say goodbye to my mom; I want that image erased. I pull our most recent family portrait from its frame. I’ve always hated when my mother drags us every couple of years to take a photo in which we all smile like jerkoffs, but I’m glad for it now.

A clatter comes from out front. Jeremy. We can’t save him, but we can take care of him. I draw the knife at my belt and walk to the front door. My teeth clack together and my hand trembles on the knob when I think of what awaits us out front. I don’t want to say Jeremy’s name aloud. The only way I can do it is to think of him as something other than my brother.

“Clara! Where are you going?”

“We take care...” I can’t say the rest.

Dad’s face shows signs of crumpling before he tightens his jaw and joins me at the door. He moves my hand from the doorknob, flips the light, and steps onto the porch. Everything on the lawn starts toward the house, excited by the light and movement. I back up, thinking I’ve made another bad decision, but Dad searches the faces in the advancing crowd.

They mass at the base of the stairs. A few begin to crawl up, and I help throw the porch furniture onto the steps to give us time. The light allows for a detailed observation of dead eyes and blood-stained teeth that turns my legs to jelly. Dad points to where Jeremy struggles to break through the rear of the pack, and then he leans over the porch rail to grab one by its hair. He buries his knife in its ear and tosses the body to the side. Then he does it again and again, moving along the porch, stabbing at their eyes and mouths to clear an opening for Jeremy.

With my knife in my sweaty hand, I approach the porch railing and grab the first one’s grimy long hair. She snaps her teeth at my wrist like a wild animal, and her fingers brush my legs through the porch balusters. I hold my knife near her eye, shaking so hard I’m sure I’ll miss, and then push it in before I can think about it too long. My own eyes close, and I shudder at the thought, the *feel*, of the blade grating on socket bone. I’d planned to toss her to the side, but her wilted body slips from my fingers to the flowerbed.

The next two are almost as bad, though I manage not to shudder, and then Jeremy makes a beeline for us through the remaining few. I saw what taking care of Mom did to my father; I don’t want him to have to do the same to his son. I raise my knife, unsure I’ll be able to stab him the way I did the others, but I insisted on this. I’ll finish it.

Dad pushes down my arm, gun aloft in his other hand, and fires. The top corner of Jeremy’s head disappears, and his body crashes to the ground. I gape at his splayed limbs until Dad pulls me into the house and falls against the door. His frame is sunken, shoulders frail—the way he’ll look as an old man.

He did it so I didn’t have to, no matter what it took out of him, because my dad will take care of me until his final breath. We’ll fight again—it’s too ingrained in our natures not to—but I swear I’ll do my best to remember this moment.

Dad squares his shoulders and pulls me to the kitchen, where we quickly wash up. Without a word, we move across the back lawn, and I lead my dad through the woods that hold a million memories of my best friend. Holly is one of my own. There's nothing to live for if we don't have that.

Tom

I WAS a hair's breadth away from breaking completely when I called Clara from where I sat on the kitchen floor. Had she not come home despite my call, I might've snapped. I'm not surprised she came—Clara is as obstinate as I am. We fight like cats and dogs or, given our similarities, like alley cats. She always dragged her feet when it came to my requests, so I began issuing demands, and Clara likes demands about as much as I do. But her stubbornness will serve her well—she doesn't give up, either. It's time to shake it off, to be there for my daughter, whether she wants me to or not.

Maybe I should've insisted we set up for a long siege. However, there'd be no one to protect Clara if I die, and she's all I have. The only thing left to care about. I killed half my family tonight. I killed my wife and son, and, if that isn't terrible enough, I killed someone *else's* son. I made it as painless as possible: a snapped neck and then a knife in the brain just in case. Nick never saw it coming. Maybe I had no choice, but I'll lose my mind if I think about it at length. I can still hear the crack of Nick's vertebrae and feel the knife scraping Sheila's skull. I still see Jeremy left to rot on the lawn like he meant nothing to his family. To me.

I shove every last bit of it into the deep recesses of my mind as Holly's house comes into view. Clara will survive—I'll see to that. There were sirens earlier, but town has gone quiet except for gunshots that echo over the hills, which might draw the zombies away from us. I follow Clara over the back fence and around to the front door. She makes as if to barge in, but this is the wrong time for that. I hold her arm and knock three times. Brisk knocks. Human knocks.

The window curtain moves aside, and the door opens a moment later. An older man stands there, shorter than me but plenty broad. His beard and hair are blond-white, his face stony, and the pistol in his hand at the ready, but he smiles wide when his eyes move to Clara. "I know someone who'll be happy to see you, Miss Clara."

The man moves aside, squeezing Clara's shoulder as she passes. He locks the door behind me, then sticks out a hand. "Sam McGann, Rose's father. Call me Sam."

“Tom,” I say. “Clara’s dad.”

Sam gives a solid shake, then leads me into the dim living room. Clara sits on the couch by the windows, crying in Rose’s arms while Holly rubs her back. A tall woman I don’t know paces between the kitchen and living room, and a boy about Clara’s age sits in a chair staring at the couch with a furrowed brow. He stands as I near. “Hi, Mr. Jensen.”

It’s Holly’s older brother, Jesse. I haven’t seen him in years and have only an inch or two on him now. “Jesse,” I say, and dip my head.

It’s all I can manage. Hours ago, I was dreading small talk at the party. Now I’m here sooner than expected with most of my world destroyed, and small talk is out of the question. I want to be home. Need to be left alone to process the past hours.

“Tom.” The soft whisper comes from Rose, who looks up at me with sympathy in her eyes. She shakes her head to say there are no words, that she can’t believe what happened. What is happening. “What can I get you?”

My wife, my son, I think. I say nothing.

Rose kisses the top of Clara’s head and gently moves her to Holly, then motions me through the dining area to the kitchen. I follow as I’m supposed to, coming to a halt when she stops at the breakfast counter and mimes removing my pack. I shrug it off into her hands, and she sets it on the floor by the wall.

Her fingers settle on my forearm. “Sit.”

I do, on a stool. “Coffee? Soda? Beer or wine?” she asks. “Something stronger? We have almost everything.”

“Beer,” I say. “Thanks.”

Rose pulls a bottle from the fridge, then pops the top and sets it in front of me. She fills a glass with water and sets that there, too. My mouth is parched, and I drink the water down, then start on the beer. Once it’s half gone, she gets another, pops the top, and lines it up. She stands across the counter, watching the living room, then meets my eyes. Hers are hesitant, afraid, and a deep blue.

“Sheila and Jeremy?” she whispers. “Clara said they’re...”

I nod. Start on the next beer in this strange kitchen with these strange people. I’ve known them for a decade and yet they’re still strangers. I wish they weren’t, wish I’d been like Sheila, willing to make friends and give people a chance.

“I’m so sorry.” Rose’s eyes are wet with tears, and her hand is at her chest as if the news hurts her heart. “You’ll stay with us for now. Until it’s safe, or as long as you need to, okay? We have plenty of room.”

Without a doubt, the woman before me is kind and welcoming. Sheila told me as much. Rather than think on that, I nod again and down half the beer. “Your neck,” I say.

It’s a considerable bruise. Big and dark, as though a half-cup of blood is trapped beneath the skin. She pushes her hair behind her shoulder. Some of it is dry and curly, and the rest hangs in damp tendrils as if she’s showered recently. “When we closed the gate, one of them attacked. It tried to bite me, but my jacket collar was in the way. I killed it with a knife.”

She pulls a balled-up gray mound from the kitchen garbage can and brings it near pinched between two fingers. The right side is drenched in dried brown and black fluids. Where the collar meets the hood, it’s shredded though not bitten through. She lifts the garbage can lid with the foot pedal and drops it in. “Thank God I put on my coat.”

Rose stares at the can for a moment, then pulls out the mostly empty bag, knots it twice, and inserts a new bag. She washes her hands at the sink and returns to her spot across the breakfast counter.

“You know if you get bitten...” I trail off when she nods. “That’s what happened to Shei—” I breathe deep, focusing on the counter rather than that memory. Beer sloshes uneasily in my gut. “Jeremy was sick.”

She sets a hand on my arm again, and I remember that Rose is a toucher. Hugging Sheila, pushing my arm gently when she laughed, her arms around Clara when I’d pick her up after a sleepover. Even Jeremy got a hair tousele or a cheek pinch. It feels good. Reassuring. I have eight inches and close to a hundred pounds on her, and she seems twenty times stronger than I feel.

“Another?” she asks, motioning to my beer.

I shake my head. Another might get a buzz going, and though I want that buzz more than anything, I’m not stupid. This is no time to be drunk. “Thanks. What now?”

She tells me about a video she saw on YouTube. About some kids on the radio and how other stations play an emergency broadcast. Stay indoors, the government has it under control. “You believe it?” I ask.

The right side of her mouth lifts. A *yeah, right* smile that isn’t a smile at all. “I believe they want to. I also believe they wouldn’t have cut off

internet and phones if they thought it was as simple as they say. A good friend of mine lives in Oakland, and I haven't heard from him. He would've called if he could've."

A dog appears and sniffs my boots, then trots past me toward Rose. She bends below the counter to pet it. "It's okay, Willa."

"I didn't know you had a dog."

She straightens. "We didn't. She was an anniversary present."

Finally, I realize who's missing. I should've asked before. "Where's Ethan?"

Rose gazes over my shoulder toward the living room. "He was supposed to be home early, but he never came," she says quietly. She seems pensive, on the verge of saying more, but she doesn't.

"I'm sorry."

She nods and takes in the kitchen. The counters hold food for the party and are likely a glaring reminder of Ethan's absence, but it's good. We have food—more than at my house.

"How are you on water?" I ask. "If the power goes out, there won't be any."

"My dad already had us fill containers and the bathtub. His RV's tank is full, and that's around sixty gallons. We have well water, and we can get it out somehow if we need to."

I have no doubt she's scared—her eyes have dark rings and she hugs herself tight—but she's in survival mode. She continues, "In the morning, we'll make sure nothing got through the fence and then go to the shed. There's old plywood in there. We're going to board the sliding glass doors and bottoms of the windows. If there's anything else you think we should do, please mention it."

I welcome the chance to think about anything other than Sheila and Jeremy. "It seems like you have it under control, but I'll let you know."

"Do you want anything else? Coffee? Food?"

I shake my head. It isn't saying much, but this is the best I've felt all night. We have a plan. A focus.

Rose rests her hand on mine. "I should check on Clara. Feel free to eat anything, use anything. I'm here if you need me."

"Thanks," I say. "I'm good." My voice breaks. I turn my face to the wall, gulping down tears I haven't yet shed. Rose's soft hand squeezes once

more, and she leaves me sitting with the knowledge that I'm not good at all.

Rose

I WAKE in a sleeping bag on Holly's bedroom floor. Pop is on the living room couch, Mitch in the guest room, Jesse in his room, the girls in Holly's room, and Tom in my bedroom. Tom tried to argue, but I insisted, saying I wanted to keep an eye on the girls anyway, which was true. He was barely standing at that point due to grief and sheer exhaustion, and he thanked me and walked inside. Five minutes later, as I was carrying spare pillows and blankets down the hall, I saw him through the open door, his face mashed into a pillow and sound asleep.

My chest aches for him, for the crushing loss that has him reeling. I can barely believe Sheila and Jeremy are dead. Gone, just like that. Without a doubt, if I'd allowed Jesse into the driveway last night, he'd be counted among the dead this morning.

Which dead? my mind whispers. *The ones that walk or the truly dead?* It still seems unreal. A horror movie come to life. Whether they're sort of dead or actually dead doesn't matter—if they bite you, you're just as dead as they are.

We stayed up half the night listening for news, for Ethan's arrival, for anything. All we heard were gunshots, and, frighteningly, screams from closer houses. The two boys came back on KLCC to report that they were still fighting the zombies—the word said with no small amount of excitement—and that Kevin's dad was making progress. All other stations were repeats of emergency broadcasts. Phones were gone. Jesse found the old antenna in the basement, but every television station was the same—a screen of rolling text accompanying a voice similar to the radio: *This is an emergency broadcast. Bornavirus LX has been found in your area. The virus is deadly and causes victims to become aggressive. Do not attempt contact with these individuals. Call 911 and stay inside your home while authorities contain the infection. Check this station for updates and further instructions.*

How you can call 911 when they've shut off the phones is anyone's guess, and I assume they did the same thing in California. Craig has likely tried to call me as I tried to call him. I imagine him in his condo, panicked

and alone. And hungry; Craig never has much food in his house. Maybe he doesn't go with the flow, but this situation could send anyone off the deep end. If only we could speak, I'd tell him to hang in there. Help will come soon. It has to.

I picture California as a kind of epicenter, with the virus spreading north and east. It probably spread in all directions from the Midwest. Panic will spread, too, once people figure out the truth. Once they believe the videos. Maybe someone will, possibly on the East Coast. They might have time to prepare.

My body hurts, even with a sleeping pad beneath me. Little aches and pains have cropped up in recent years. A knee twinge here, a hip pain there, a day lying on the floor due to a back spasm. Forty began the long downward spiral, and forty-two isn't looking much better. I stand up, release my hair from its ponytail atop my head and let it fall, then roll my shoulders and wince when my bruised neck protests.

Holly and Clara sleep in Holly's full-size bed. Holly is on her back, peaceful but for the worried groove carved in her brow. Clara is on her side, blankets in a heap across her middle, legs bent and hands fisted in the sheet, as though she and sleep are duking it out. The two girls even sleep like their personalities.

Clara is olive-skinned like her dad, with wavy brown hair and, often, a stubborn expression on her pretty face. Not around Holly, though. Clara and Holly pair each other beautifully, tempering the other's weaker points. I'm glad they're together; they need each other now.

I leave the room, shutting the door quietly behind me, and move for my bedroom. I tiptoe past Tom—still in the same position—and grab my toothpaste and toothbrush from my bathroom, then creep by Pop on the living room couch to peek out a front window. The day is gray, overcast. The road in front of our house is empty, the house across the road quiet and dark. My neighbors don't have fences—most houses in the area don't fence their large lots.

Figures move farther down. Two men, both stumbling toward town, where a distant car alarm blares. The only zombies on my lawn lie by Pop's pickup down the rise. That seems like a dream—crushed under a zombie, fighting for my life—but for the ache in my neck. If nothing else, I know I

can kill one if I have to, though the thought of doing so is as horrifying as ever.

“No change I can see,” Pop says from behind me. He sits up on the couch and rubs at the soft, loose skin around his eyes, then motions at the TV. “Nothing’s changed on there, either.”

“Sorry I woke you, Daddy.”

“You didn’t. I didn’t get much sleep.”

Knowing him, he didn’t sleep at all. “Coffee?” I ask.

“That’d hit the spot.”

In the kitchen, I get the coffee going and brush my teeth at the sink. Pop sits at the counter. “Sugar and milk?” I ask.

He shakes his head. I pour him a mug and hand it over. He either likes it black or so sweet it’s crunchy. There’s no middle ground. He’s an all or nothing kind of guy, though he’s always generous with me.

Willa trots into the kitchen and sniffs her bowl, then rests on her haunches and stares at me. Her ears flop down beside her homely little face and her tail bangs against the floor. I’ve forgotten about the damn dog, and I pat Willa’s head as I fill the bowl with kibble, feeling very much ungrateful for this pain in the ass gift. That thought is followed by guilt; it isn’t Willa’s fault she arrived somewhere she isn’t wanted. I give her an extra pat to make up for it. “She’ll have to go out. Maybe in back on a leash?”

Pop watches Willa with a bemused expression. He needs no words—we can speak through a glance. “Don’t ask,” I say, “because I have no fucking clue.”

He chuckles and swigs his coffee. “I once bought your mother a fancy vacuum for our anniversary. She’d said she wanted the damn thing, but she didn’t really. She was not happy, though a run to the jewelry store fixed that.”

Jewelry would have been better, and I don’t care much for fancy jewelry. “I’ve never once mentioned wanting to pick up the poop of an alien life form for the next decade, I promise.”

Pop chuckles again. “You think he’s at the office?”

I sip my sweet and light coffee. I use coconut sugar and organic milk, and I lie to myself that it’s healthy because fuck total deprivation. “I think that’s where he’d go. Otherwise, I have no idea. I—”

Jesse walks in, his shiny brown hair hiding one half-closed eye. “Morning.” He goes straight to the coffee pot. “What are they saying?”

“Same thing as last night,” Pop says.

Jesse fixes his coffee, then slurps from his mug and leans against the counter. “We should see if we can get to the office and find Dad.”

If Jesse thinks he’s going anywhere, he’s living in a dream world. I’m not willing to risk anyone’s life to save Ethan’s, which is shitty but the truth. And though I’m pissed at Ethan for putting us in this position, I have no doubt he’d agree the kids come first. The problem is how to say this without seeming cold.

“Back up, there,” Pop says. “No one’s leaving. We sit tight until we know something. Your dad would say the same thing.”

Jesse’s finger taps his mug, but he nods. I shoot Pop an appreciative glance and sit in a dining room chair. After a minute of nervous energy coursing through me, I get to my feet. “Cheesy eggs? Bacon?”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Pop says, and Jesse agrees.

I open the fridge and pull out eggs and bacon, then plug in the big griddle. When in doubt, feed people. That’s why I ordered enough food for fifty when only twenty-something were expected at the party. Unfortunately, over half of that was meant to be picked up today and tomorrow, which isn’t happening. But it still leaves us with more than usual.

I whisk all dozen eggs in a bowl, then add shredded cheddar. The bacon on the griddle soon sizzles and pops in its grease. For toast, I cut slices of the bread I bought and froze for the party in case we ran out of fresh-baked bread, which I intended to buy the day of. I used to bake my own bread, but with no kids at home and my recent diet, I haven’t in a while.

As people emerge from their rooms, I make their eggs and toast, slap some bacon—vegetarian sausage for Holly—on their plate, and serve them at the table. Mitch eats hers with gusto. Holly and Clara eat silently, without their usual giggles. I throw Tom’s eggs into the pan when he enters, after I point him to the coffee.

He sits at the table with his mug, saying good morning but not speaking after that. Clara looks his way often, each time with hope that’s dashed when he doesn’t register her presence. She needs him to check in, to

acknowledge their grief. I'm not surprised, necessarily, but my heart goes out to her.

When I slip Tom's plate in front of him, he says, "Thank you, but I'm not hungry. Give it to someone else."

Last night, he looked like a man on his last legs. This morning, he's lost the bent frame and empty stare. His gruffness has returned, and though I'm not a fan of gruffness, it could mean he's a little better. "Just try," I insist. He has to be hungry, even if he doesn't know it. "I won't be offended if you can't eat."

"Rosie can cook," Pop announces. "It's the pinch of love she adds."

"Ethan says it's the hair," I say, then explain, "I manage to leave a strand in everything, even if it's tied—" I stop and focus on the griddle. I'm trying not to mention Ethan in front of the kids. And clearly doing a bang-up job of it so far.

"Mom?" Holly asks. "How are we going to find him?"

"Pop says we're not," Jesse says.

"Why?"

"Because your dad wouldn't want us to," Pop says firmly. "End of story."

Holly starts to argue, but Clara cuts her off. "Hols, you don't want to go," she says in a quiet, trembling voice. "We'd be dead before we got close, if it's like they said on the radio."

If Clara is preaching restraint, Holly has to know it's bad. "I promise we'll go as soon as we can," I say.

Holly nods, eyes welling. I cross the kitchen and take her in my arms. It's scary to think of what Ethan is facing, but the thought of the kids out there is scarier. I anticipate all the horrors, even when there aren't any. Now there are real horrors, in the form of dead people who will rip us limb from limb. I can easily picture Jesse hand-less, like that one zombie. Holly with no abdomen to speak of like the other. Nope, they aren't going anywhere.

"Who wants to help me check out the backyard?" Pop asks. Jesse and Mitch stand, as does Tom. "Finish your breakfast," Pop says to him, "we're only looking for now."

Tom sits while they leave. His breakfast is half gone, and he sets to work on the rest.

"How'd you sleep, Dad?" Clara asks.

“Okay, I guess. You?” Tom nods at her, then goes back to his plate.

Though Clara doesn't let out an audible breath, her shoulders fall. “Fine,” she says, and Tom grunts.

I reach out and stroke her hair. I can't imagine his emotions after yesterday's events, but I also can't imagine leaving either of my children to suffer the aftermath alone. After Mom died, Pop was there for me whenever I needed him.

“Why don't you and Clara get out the camping stuff?” I ask Holly. “It's in the back of the basement. I want to have lanterns ready in case the power goes.”

I smile in thanks. Clara does her best to return it and then walks with Holly to the basement door in the hall. I pop a piece of bread into the toaster, then spread it with peanut butter and honey. A minute later, Tom comes to where I stand eating and sets his empty plate in the sink. “No eggs for you?”

I push at the hair that's escaped my clip and break every rule of good manners by saying through a mouthful, “Eggs kind of gross me out sometimes. I like peanut butter.” Why I felt the need to share that is a mystery, and I stop myself from going any further.

“Well, the eggs were good,” Tom says. “Thanks.”

He gazes out the kitchen window, lost in thought. I'm sure they're the worst kind of thoughts. “Are you okay?” I ask softly. I don't want to make him feel worse, but I have to acknowledge his loss somehow.

“Fine.”

It isn't true. It can't be. But Tom has a right to grieve however he grieves. He pulls up his sleeves and moves to the sink. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“The dishes. Unless you have a dishwasher?”

“I don't, but you don't have to do them. I was going to.”

“Chef doesn't clean. I don't mind dishes.” Tom squirts soap onto a sponge, turns on the water, and starts scrubbing a plate, then lifts his chin at two canning jars on the counter. “What's in those?”

“Homemade kombucha.” I tap the half-gallon jar filled with dark liquid, then the smaller jar filled with an off-white substance. “Sourdough starter. To make bread.”

“Kombucha? That stuff tastes like sweat socks.”

I smile. "It does sometimes, but mine is good. I add juice and use fruity tea."

Tom's grunt is close to but not entirely outright dissent. I'm not mortally offended, though I almost expect him to announce I'm failing his class. "Why no dishwasher?" he asks.

"Because I'd rather do all the dishes than empty a dishwasher. I'd go to the ends of the Earth to avoid it. They dry just fine in the dish rack, and you can wash more without emptying it."

He shoots me a sideways glance, obviously thinking me peculiar. It's the Tom I've come to know through the years. At every school function, every party, the more I speak, the more of those glances I receive. Tom isn't much older than me, but he and Sheila always seemed of a different generation. I know people fifteen years older who act younger than them. Sheila was lovely, though more formal than me by far, and nothing like the overbearing father I've heard about through Clara.

I shrug. "I don't miss it."

Tom *humphs* as he soaps up silverware. I am not going to do what I usually do, which is to fill the silence with endless prattling in the hope he'll loosen up. I finish my toast, wipe down the counters and table with the extra sponge, then sweep the floor.

Seven people make a lot of dishes, and I dry as Tom washes. His forearms are muscled, tattooed with colorful though slightly faded images. I once asked to see them, had admired the leaves and greenery on one arm where beautifully shaded insects hide among flowers, the water scene on the other, where turquoise ripples and bright fish scales interplay. Afterward, he'd seemed almost embarrassed and pulled his sleeves to his wrists. They made me think there was more to him than he liked to present to the world, but I've since concluded that old Tom must have vanished long ago, leaving only the tattoos as a remembrance.

The last dish goes in the rack. Tom wipes down the counter around the sink, squeezes out the sponge, and sets it in the sponge holder. He's thrown a dishtowel over his shoulder, and now he helps me dry, handing me the dishes to put away. When every dish, every utensil, is dry, he *wipes down the dish drainer*.

"You know that's meant to be wet, right?" I ask, smiling. "That's its entire purpose in life."

The corners of Tom's mouth dip. "Not if there aren't dishes in it."

I hang my dishtowel over the side of the sink. It's fairly obvious I was kidding about the dish drainer. Instead of going through the rigmarole of explaining the existence of jokes to a grown man, I say, "Okay. Thanks for washing up."

"Yup. I'll see about helping your dad." Tom carefully drapes his towel beside mine. He steps back, frowns, and adjusts my dishtowel so it's perfectly straight to match his. Then he nods once and walks away.

I sigh. It's going to be a long zombie apocalypse.

Rose

I WATCH JESSE, Pop, and Tom carry the wood from the shed toward the house while Willa trots around on the end of her retractable leash. The large shed is in back, about forty feet from the patio, and that's as far as anyone is traveling if I have anything to say about it. Earlier this morning and against my wishes, Pop knocked on the door of our neighbor to the right, but Mr. Gustafson wasn't home. *Maybe he never will be.* I strike that thought from my mind. He's likely at his kids' houses in town. The house across the street is empty as well—my neighbors Kayla and Michael took their boys on a spring break camping trip in their RV a couple of days ago.

Nothing lurks in the woods to the rear and left. The fence is unbroken. We checked every inch of the property through the windows before going outside, but the mental image of a zombie appearing from nowhere and taking Jesse down is vivid enough that I step off the patio while I stifle the urge to scream at them to run.

Willa has already peed in seven different spots, and now, after turning in a circle fifty-two times, she squats. "How long does that dog take to crap, anyway?" Mitch asks, and I force a laugh. "Don't humor me. They're fine. Everything's fine."

"*Everything's fine?*" I ask.

"You know what I mean."

Mitch is taking this in stride, the way Mitch always does, but she's worried about her parents. They live in Florida now, playing Mahjong and golfing with the other retirees when they aren't asking if there are any grandchildren on the way. No matter that Mitch has made it clear there would never be grandchildren for years now. She's child-free and happy as a clam about it.

I exhale when the men reach the patio with the wood, and the knots in my stomach loosen as I follow them through the sliding doors into my bedroom. Pop sets down his half sheets of plywood and pats my shoulder. "It's hard work keeping the universe going through sheer force of will, isn't it, Rosie?"

“Shut your trap, old man.” I kiss Pop’s cheek and notice Tom watching. “He makes fun of me for worrying.”

Tom absorbs that information with a nod. “Should the wood go in the front?”

“Bring it to the basement,” Pop says. “We’ll measure and cut it down there, where it’ll be quieter.”

Tom lifts his load and heads that way. “The guy’s not a laugh a minute, is he?” Mitch asks me.

I snicker. Guilt rolls in a second later, though Tom didn’t hear. Clara told me the details of what happened last night before she cried herself to sleep. His wife and son are gone, and he had to finish them off. Even if this is regular Tom, there’s an excuse for it today. “We’re being mean. He’s had an awful couple of days. I can’t even imagine.”

“It’s okay, Rosie,” Pop says. “The universe knows you don’t have a mean bone in your body.”

That’s patently untrue. All he’d have to do is spend five minutes in my head and it would be obvious. “I have plenty of mean bones.”

“Maybe a pinky bone.” Pop winks and brings his load down the hall.

Before Jesse can do the same, I touch his hand. “How are you?”

“Okay.” Jesse shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Same here, baby. Thanks for helping out.”

He nods and picks up his wood. I watch him leave and sit on the edge of my bed. Tom made it this morning, and it’s neater than before he slept in it, which is not surprising.

“You have mean cartilage,” Mitch says, sitting beside me. “It acts like bone until it bends.”

“That doesn’t sound like a compliment.”

“It’s not, but it’s not an insult, either.”

I lean on Mitch’s shoulder. “Are we going to die?”

“One day.”

“I keep thinking Ethan will come home any minute,” I say. Mitch is silent. “I do want him to be okay, you know.”

The thought he might not be makes me ill. Everything else aside, he’s the father of my children, and they’ll be devastated. So will I, once I get past the disconnect I rely on to stay sane. It hasn’t always been this way. Once upon a time, it was us against the world, and we held our own.

The positive pregnancy test was more than a surprise—it was a shockwave. We were young and invincible enough to get swept up in the excitement of having a baby. I was a bit too fanciful with my fairy-tale view of our future, and we had our share of lean times, but I hadn't been far off in terms of happiness. Until five years ago.

“That cartilage is why I love you,” Mitch says. “Who else would love me the way you do?”

I'm about to argue how everyone would and should love Mitch, when Holly calls, “Mom!”

We dash down the hall to where Holly and Clara stand near the radio. Pop, Tom, and Jesse arrive, breathless from the run up the basement steps. The radio boys are back on the air.

“...and it's fucked,” Kevin says, nowhere near as keyed up as yesterday. *“My dad told me not to say that, but it's true. They're not telling him anything except to get everyone to someplace safe down here. He asked where that was, and they said, ‘Do the best you can.’ My dad and some of the National Guard are making a Safe Zone at the fairgrounds. If you need somewhere safe, and you can make it, come to the fairgrounds. If you're safe, stay home for now. Don't try to leave Oregon—they won't let anyone through the roadblocks in Portland, and you can't get across the mountains, so don't even try.”*

“The roadblocks were in Albany last night,” Mitch murmurs. Portland is far north of Albany, which means they couldn't hold the roadblocks, and that doesn't bode well for Portland. Or for us.

“They say to wait. Once they have us cordoned off, and the zombies die in a month, they'll come in and rescue us. We have to make it thirty days. We can do that, right?”

The other kid chimes in, *“Yeah, we can! Thirty days is nothing. If you have enough food and water, you'll be okay.”*

Thirty days seems so long and, then again, not long at all. It's finite. Survivable. The party supplies mean we have more food than usual. With the kids away at school, and Ethan and I not sitting down to dinner often, I bought much of our food ready-made. The days of me cooking up a storm, of an overfull pantry, are gone—a fact for which I could kick myself now. But we're lucky to have something. The people with bare cabinets, whether by choice or lack of funds, are not.

“All right,” Kevin says, “we’ve gotta go meet my dad, but we’re going to leave you with a song for the apocalypse. Bye for now.”

The frenzied piano opening of “Apocalypse Please” swells. It fits the chaotic thoughts in my mind, and I close my eyes. Thirty days. Prisoners of war survive longer. The kids will live because I’ll ground them for the thirty days the radio promised. We’ll find more food somehow. I open my eyes at a growl from Willa, who leaps onto the chair by the front window and begins to bark.

I grab the dog and hold her mouth shut, then freeze at the view outside the glass. Michael and Kayla are pulling into their driveway in their RV, and I watch as seven zombies appear from the roadside woods at the engine’s rumble. Surely they know what’s going on. They have to know, must have seen, though if they came in on the wooded back road with few houses, there might have been nothing to see. Where they camp—a friend’s vacant land in the woods southwest of here—lacks cell service. And with no service anywhere now, panicked messages left by family and friends likely never made it through.

The RV rolls to a stop on its smooth concrete pad to the left of the driveway. The running lights cut out, the side door opens, and my body floods with a prickling horror. They don’t know. I toss Willa to the floor and run to the front door, a scream caught in my chest.

“Rosie!” Pop yells, but I race down the hill, sliding in my shearling boots through wet grass.

The air in Eugene often feels heavy, as it sits at the narrow southern end of the Willamette Valley, and now it carries the stench of rotting bodies and the first few drops of rain. I run to the right of the front gate, where they might see me before they leave the motorhome.

“Don’t come out!” I shout. “Stay inside!”

I hit the fence screaming. Michael, early thirties and friendly, steps to the pad. He stares at the man who’s turned the corner of the RV and raises his hands like *back off*, moving aside when the zombie advances. Kayla stands on the bottom step of the door with their younger child, Julian, in her arms.

“Go in!” I wave my arms. “Get back inside!”

Michael punches at the zombie, who lunges and takes him to the ground. Kayla spares me a glance, then sets Julian on the lowest step and

runs for her husband as the other six zombies round the back of the RV onto the parking pad.

I bolt for the zombie I killed last night, reach into its open mouth to grasp the knife handle, and yank. It takes me only seconds to get around Pop's truck, to notice everyone from the house racing down the incline, before I jump the fence to the road. Of the six zombies, two go for Kayla and four move to where Julian stands. Where his older brother, Elliot, has joined him on the step to watch.

It could be Jesse and Holly. For a moment, it is Jesse and Holly. I hear Kayla's primal screams, register it's too late for her, and go straight for the boys. If I can beat the zombies there, I can lock myself in with the kids. Protect them until the others call the zombies away.

"Go inside!" I scream. "Shut the door!"

The boys watch me with giant, terror-stricken eyes. The last of the zombies spins at my shout. It's the woman from the driveway last night, her skirt stiff with dried blood and covered with moss and leafy bits from the woods. They're even worse in the light of day, when I can see every detail of her veined gray skin and staring eyes. The smell is awful—shit, rotten teeth, lunchmeat two weeks past its sell-by date. I had my doubts that they were truly dead, but this is a corpse, an *actual fucking corpse*, coming for me.

I almost turn tail and run. I would, if there weren't two defenseless, parentless boys in need of help. I garner my courage, recalling the way my blade bounced off the skull of the one by the truck. Eyes and mouths have to be easier. I take three steps forward and plunge the blade into her face.

It isn't a perfect hit, and my knife scrapes something solid before it slides into the gelatinous orb. The woman falls to the ground, and now a man is closing in. Before I can react, a gunshot roars, the top of the man's head disintegrates, and Pop is beside me, gun in hand.

Tom appears on my other side, gun raised, and fires at the zombie gnawing Kayla's limp body. I duck and run toward the RV. We can't chance a bullet so near the kids, and the doorway is obscured by three bodies. Though they lean inside, they haven't made it up the stairs.

I near a man in a green windbreaker. Tom's thick arm reaches past me, grabs it by its collar, and presses the gun to its temple. The report of the shot makes my eardrum squelch. A teenage girl turns and hisses through

blood-soaked lips, and I swing my knife sideways, hoping that ears are soft enough to breach. They are, though the gristle is tougher than an eye. The girl drops as Pop's shots ring out to the right. The last zombie at the RV turns my way, and I retreat a step at the sight of Pete Gustafson, my neighbor. He snarls, his white hair red with fresh blood and his neck chewed to a pulp. That's all I see before his face is obliterated by Tom's gun.

The two boys lie just inside the door on the RV's kitchen floor, bright red blood pooling beneath cabinets and soaking into the carpet of the living area. The air smells like iron and shit. Julian is gone or close to it—eyes glazed and neck a gash of red tissue. Elliot breathes in sharp gusts. His chest jumps and blood runs from his mangled midsection.

I climb into the RV, kneel over Elliot, and smooth his brown ringlets from his forehead. His eyes move to me, so frantic and afraid that I drop to the floor and pull his upper body into my lap. I cradle his head on my arm, using my other hand to brush his cheek. "It's okay," I whisper. "I know it hurts, but don't be scared."

Elliot nods, chest hitching. His cheek is so soft, so cold. He's dying, and I can't bear to see him afraid in his final moments. "Just go to sleep, sweetie. It'll be okay. I have you."

Warm, wet blood soaks into my pants from his abdomen. It wicks up from the floor. Elliot's eyelids lower. "I'm here." My voice cracks. "I have you."

This is a waste. A waste of two sweet children and their parents. We want to survive thirty days, and they didn't last thirty minutes. Nothing can reach me in the RV—between last night's zombies and these, it seems likely they can't climb stairs—but I look to the door while I stroke Elliot's cheek. Pop stands there, facing out. Tom watches me, his set features softened for once.

Elliot's body eases in my arms. His mouth is lax and his chest motionless. But his little brother is moving. Julian's chubby fingers twitch. His eyes flicker open and his head jerks. "Shit," I whisper.

Julian struggles to sit up as I slide from under Elliot and scoot backward on my hands and knees. The handle of my knife is beneath Elliot's leg, and I pull it free. We could lock them in here, but they'll be kid zombies rattling around in their RV coffin. That thought is worse than what I have to do.

Tom steps up and into the RV. He has a gun, but common sense dictates he won't fire it in here. Jesse shouts something from outside. "More coming," Pop says. "Move."

I slide through blood to where Julian has turned onto his side, press one shaking hand to his temple to pin him down, and push the knife under the base of his skull with my other. It takes two tries to pierce his smooth baby skin, and my stomach heaves at the give of flesh and the scrape against vertebrae. I thank the gods when his body slumps to the floor.

I don't want to do it again, but, like his brother, Elliot won't stay dead for long. I spin on my knees and do the same to him, all the while trying to distance myself from the awful coppery smell and the feel of the blade. I tell myself they're only meat now, no different from a steak or a roast, but a sob still pushes its way past my lips.

"Rose!" Pop yells. "Now!"

I get to my feet and step to the door. Tom practically tosses me to the concrete from the top step, where Pop grabs my elbow and yanks me toward the road. Jesse stands in the middle of the asphalt with a knife, his gaze moving from us to a group of zombies two hundred feet away. Mitch and the girls are behind the fence, and Mitch drops her knife to assist Pop, who makes it over easier than I anticipated.

We race up to the house and into the living room. Once the door is closed and locked, Pop takes me by the arms, his face tomato-red and eyes snapping. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Don't ever do anything like that again!"

I stare at him in shock. I can barely remember Pop ever yelling at me, and he's absolutely livid. "I had to try to help them," I say.

"No, you didn't!" He shakes me, his fingers digging into the tender flesh of my inner arms. "You didn't, Rose. And you didn't help them. All you did was almost die!"

He releases me and storms down the hall. My anger at him for treating me like a child dissipates. He's scared, the way I would be if Jesse or Holly pulled the same stunt. I've never hit my kids, but I might in this case, if only to smack some sense into them.

All at once, I'm terrified. My hands shake. It was insane to vault the fence and go after those monsters on my own, though I only wanted to lock myself in the RV. Watching two little boys die would've kept me up at

night. The guilt would've tortured me. Maybe it was the right decision, maybe the wrong one, but it didn't feel like a decision at all.

I let out my breath, then turn to the others with a rueful smile. "Think I'm grounded?"

Mitch guffaws. The kids crack up and Tom smiles, though he reverts to stern immediately. Holly turns from where she watches out the window. "It was pretty stupid, Mom."

I shrug. Even that small motion hurts. "Sometimes you have to try."

Holly lets the curtain close. "They're going past. I guess they were too far down to tell where we went."

Blood coats much of me and is beginning to dry on my hands. The backs of my thighs stick to my jeans where it's turned tacky. I have to wash this off, am dying to do so, but my legs won't cooperate. When I loosen my fist, my knife sticks to my palm. I pull it free with my left hand and hold the blade up in the daylight. Though it hit bone, it appears undamaged.

"That's a nice knife," Tom says.

Under the blood, the handle is burlwood with a band of turquoise, and the blade itself is narrower than an average chef's knife, allowing it to slide easily through smaller spaces. "It was a gift," I say.

By a stroke of luck, one of my first listings was a million-dollar home. I thought it luck—Ethan said it was the way I put people at ease—and those clients recommended me to others. One gave me this knife after the closing, even with my large commission, because I'd gotten more for their house than they'd dreamed.

I once looked up the knife online. They're custom made from the best steel and wood, used by both pathologists and serious chefs, and it likely cost five hundred dollars. Before zombies, it's only ever cut vegetables and meat for dinner. I wish that were still the case.

"I should wash up," I say, and tread wearily toward my bedroom. Sometimes you have to try, but that doesn't make it any easier when you fail. That whole family wiped out in seconds. At least they aren't walking around trying to eat people. That's something. Not enough, but something.

When I'm almost out of the room, Jesse says, "Mom." I look over my shoulder and find him smiling. "It was pretty stupid, but it was seriously badass."

My laugh drains the remainder of my energy. "Thanks."

Craig

ROSE TRIED to talk me into coming to Eugene early, but I wanted to finish up work, maybe tack on another day or two at the end of the trip. It's not the first decision I've ever regretted, but it's taken the top spot on *Craig's List of Regrets*.

And now, instead of safe with Rose and Mitch, I'm trapped in my condo in Oakland, staring out the window at a world I don't recognize. I don't *want* to recognize it. That would make it real, and it's too fucking crazy to be real.

"Too fucking crazy," I whisper. My forehead squeaks on the glass when I shake my head.

The sirens were insane, the lack of phone lines worse, but the dead bodies that walk around outside are unbelievable. I've watched them for days from the safety of my apartment, thinking I'll wake from the nightmare any minute, but the nightmare officially became more nightmarish when the water went out this morning. Just a dribble from the faucet and then nothing. Last night, I had the idea of filling the bathtub, and it might have been the best idea I've ever had. My heart skips at the thought of no water at all. Of going out there.

Although I know it's futile, I leave the window for my phone. It has battery left—plenty of it, since it charged all night—but that's about to change. The power went out with the water, and that was likely its final charge. I lift the phone and swallow, hoping to quell my panic along with excess saliva. Still no bars, no data, no wifi.

No hope.

A soft cry escapes my lips. I clap a hand to my mouth, ear tilted toward the door fifty feet away, across my living room and past the open kitchen. There are three of *them* on the other side, wandering the hall. Neighbors I recognize, people I nodded at when we passed in the lobby or shared the elevator. Two of them let out the infected neighbor, and I listened to their screams while I huddled at the peephole. If I so much as attempt to open the door, they'll be on me, tearing me to pieces the way the others tore apart

people on the street. The people whose bodies still lie there. The ones who didn't get up and stumble away to join their attackers, at least.

I want to cry, but I hold back tears for the first time since this started. My father always said that only pussies cry, thereby labeling me as a pussy without saying as much, until he did say as much. I clutch my phone and return to the window, my sole source of information. My hi-rise is the lone residential building on this corner, though I saw people looking out the windows of the hotel a block away. I haven't seen them yet today, and I hope the screams I heard last night weren't them.

It was only around a week ago that they began reporting about the virus in Vietnam. I paid a little attention—after all, it was a serious virus—but I figured it wouldn't affect my life going to and from work. It seemed like SARS, like the threat of Ebola in the U.S. Serious but negligible.

Tuesday night, they said to beware of people acting erratically. I took my usual Uber home, and the driver said he'd seen a few wackos already. I'd been ready to assist with a 911 call, but the streets out of San Francisco, the Bay Bridge, and Oakland were business as usual, except for the increased number of emergency vehicles that raced past with lights flashing.

Be safe, Uber Man said when he stopped at the front door of my building. *Maybe grab yourself some milk and bread like they do for snowstorms.*

I laughed a little; I'm not good at talking to strangers. Then I thanked the man—I'm awkward, not impolite—and went into the building without giving it another thought. I'm paying for that now. I've imagined another scenario countless times: the one in which Normal Craig decides Uber Man's idea is a good one, then goes to the store down the street and buys enough food for a week. Water, too. Or, better yet, the scenario where he rents a car or hops on a late flight to Oregon.

The takeout I ordered for dinner that night is gone. So are my cheese and crackers. I have three boxes of cereal, four cans of soup and a few of beans, a loaf of bread that's quickly going stale, six frozen (now thawing) microwave dinners, pasta I can't cook, peanut butter, a half jar of crystallized honey, blueberries, carrots, two apples, the can of water chestnuts for a stir-fry I never made, coffee, and sugar. After that, I have the large gourmet gift box sent to me a while ago by a happy client, which I

brought home and shoved into a cabinet. I look over the stoneground crackers and cacao nib shortbread cookies, the pesto sauce, organic cheese spread, and artisanal jam. The gourmet pretzels enrobed in fair trade chocolate. The paper-wrapped salami. The dried fruit and seed trail mix. The burlap bag of macadamia nuts that were lovingly hand roasted and salted with fancier salt than the commoners use.

I'm used to this kind of food, but I grew up eating Planters peanuts from the can. Too many Planters peanuts. Not only was I a pussy, according to Dad, but I was a fat pussy. He said that one day—one of his mean days—when I was slurping the dregs of milk from my cereal bowl. *Fat puss enjoying his milk?*

“Not fat anymore, Dad,” I whisper. I haven't been since my teen years, when I grew eight inches to top out at six feet tall. I watch through the glass as four zombies meander past the vegan soul food restaurant across the street. “Still a pussy, though.”

My half-crazed laugh fogs the window. You have to own up to your failings, Dad always said (though Dad never did), and I won't deny I've failed this test of my courage. If I were with Rose and Mitch, maybe I'd be different. Stronger. They always promised to protect me when the apocalypse came. Of course, they were joking at the time, but I know they would anyway.

It happened so fast. The sirens woke me at dawn. The screams. The television's local channels said to stay indoors until it was under control, that borders were closed so there was nowhere to go, while the national cable channels continued to play on as though the world wasn't ending. I called Rose in a panic, but there was no service. I reached the building concierge on the phone intercom system to ask if I could use their phone, but all of theirs were down, too. It was only after Wi-Fi cut out moments later, along with the cable, that I thought to send an email. But, by some miracle—maybe a brief moment of service or an act of God—my voicemail transcription downloaded last night, and on it is a message from Rose.

The automated transcript contains the usual odd words and lack of punctuation. I've read it twenty times and could recite it by heart, but I lift my phone to read it again:

Hey craze calling to say hi the can of okra machine is waiting for your ask to get here and so am I I hope you haven't been infected with the hazy virus and are too busy attracting people to answer call me back jerk love you bye oh also I made sure it has our songs so don't go out partying and come to me all hungover or I'll punch you in the face anyway love you have a safe flight you will be safe don't start thinking you won't be safe now sheet you are aren't you don't you'll be fine I'll see you tomorrow if I don't talk to you first wool love you okay I proms is I'm hanging up now bye

Rose rambles on voicemail—what should be a five-second message turns to thirty seconds or a minute—but I'm thankful for it now. It's a voice from the normal world. A voice who loves me. In my mind, I can hear her: playful at the beginning, then filled with wry humor during her admonishment, followed by enthusiasm—*wool* is her saying *woo!* Excited about the karaoke machine, excited to see me. If she left the message yesterday, as my phone says, it means she's fine. Oregon is fine. She doesn't know about California. If she knew what it was like here, she wouldn't have joked around. Rose is the mother of the three of us—the one who tempers Mitch and calms me—and the message would've been two minutes of her worrying about whether or not I was okay, with dire warnings to call her immediately lest she have to punch me in the face for not doing so.

I woke this morning thinking I might take a pill cocktail and lie down for an endless sleep. I don't have enough of any one type of pill to do the job, but I played with enough mind-altering substances in the past to guess that my Xanax, the last half-bottle of tequila, the leftover pain pills from a toothache last year, and whatever else I can scrounge up would be enough. There's always the hallway, too, if one is looking for a permanent way out. I shiver at that thought, glad my plan petered out with Rose's message.

I spin away from the window and move for the short hall to the bathroom and bedroom. I'm peeing down the sink drain for now, saving the toilet tank for solid materials. The drain gurgles as I do my business, but when I finish, the gurgling continues. I stand for a moment, ears perked in the murky gray light, and follow the sound to the tub.

The bathtub. Your only water.

My panic is swift and merciless. I fall over myself running down the hall for the kitchen, where my single precious flashlight lays on the counter. I snatch it up and run back, sliding on wood floors and slamming a shoulder against the doorframe on my way in.

The water is half gone. A slow leak. I don't take baths—lying in a pool of germs is not my cup of tea—and I never noticed the drain isn't watertight.

“No, no, no.” I look around wildly for a container. No container. I grab the hand towel from the rack and push it into the water to cover the drain, murmuring denials to keep from screaming.

I race to the kitchen and pull out Tupperware containers. Glasses. A glass pitcher. The set of mixing bowls with lids. The pasta pot. Any and every receptacle. I bring as many as possible to the bathroom, return to the kitchen for more, and then race back to kneel at the tub. My breaths echo off the tile. Sweat pours from my cheeks. I scoop the water using a large rectangular container, dumping it into the other containers one by one. The flashlight, on the floor by my knees, illuminates the stray hairs that have collected by the baseboard. My cleaning lady is due. In five years, she's never once been late or sick. If anyone's alive, it's Sofia. I imagine her showing up now, saying *Hi, Mr. Craig* in her Russian-accented voice, though I've told her not to call me Mister anything, and blowing past me to *tsk* at how I've cleaned for her visit.

I laugh. It echoes, sounding more psychotic for that, and I cover my mouth with one hand while I bail more water. At the very bottom is a quarter-inch of water the large container won't capture. I use a smaller, bendable container until it becomes a shallow puddle. The drain still gurgles, though slower, and I go to the kitchen for a straw. I suck the water into my mouth and swallow. I do it again and again. Fear has dried me out, and it's better to drink it now than to lose it down the drain. The last mouthfuls of water I spit into a glass container, then I wring the hand towel over top.

Once everything has a lid—whether matching or foil—I carefully truck all water receptacles to the kitchen. I can't remember exactly how long you can go without water, but it's not long. A few days. The news said authorities are coming. They didn't say when, but if Oregon is okay, they'll

come for me, for survivors, eventually. I only need to stay alive until they do.

I stare at the gallons of water on the counter and kitchen floor, trying to assess it in days. Fuck all if I know. I know nothing except that I can't leave, can't face one of those things without my heart exploding in my chest. The very thought makes my hands shake until the rest of my body joins in. My lungs close, and I gulp for air as though I'm breathing through that straw.

"You can breathe," I whisper-gasp. "You're breathing. You're okay."

I have to calm down. Have to relax before I completely lose my shit. Back in the bathroom, I open my Xanax bottle. I can take one, since I'm no longer planning to take myself out. I dump a pill into my palm, add another, and swallow them dry before I return to the living room, breaths easing at the thought of the coming pharmaceutical calm.

I read Rose's message again. Look over my food. Assess my water supply. It makes me edgier. One song. I need to hear one song while I wait for the pills to kick in. How much battery can one song use? I plug in my earbuds, sit on the couch, and cue up the only song I want to hear. The last song I might ever hear.

"I Know it's Over" begins to play. Morrissey's hushed voice is a time machine, taking me back twenty-five years. It was playing when I sat on a couch with Rose at seventeen years old, holding hands while I told her a secret I'd never told anyone. And she'd done what Rose always does: understood and loved me no matter what.

Ever since, it's been our song. Depressing? Check. Hopeless? Hell, yeah. Melodramatic? You bet. But it makes me happy, and I need to lose myself in something good, even if it only lasts five minutes and forty-eight seconds. When the song ends, I force myself not to hit replay. Too much of The Smiths and I'll be leaping headfirst from my fourth-floor balcony.

I shut off my phone and get to my feet, feeling just the right amount of loopy. First, I'll make a sign and hang it from my balcony to alert the authorities. Then I'll wait.

Clara

FIVE DAYS at Holly's feels like five weeks, but I made the right decision to come. Dad has shut down already, and being trapped in a house with just him to ignore me would've felt like five years. I have Rose, who lost her mother when she was young, to hug me and check in a few times a day. I have Holly to take my mind off things—things being my dead mom and brother, and the unknown of outside. I wish it were five weeks because it would mean the end of zombies. We're counting down the days.

We have a routine: wake up, check the fence through the windows to be sure the yard is empty, walk Willa, eat breakfast. After that, it's mainly keep quiet as much as possible and try not to die of boredom in the moments between a light lunch and dinner. We take turns sitting by the front window all day and night, watching for signs of living people and making sure no one dead comes our way. Because the windows are high off the ground, only an eight-foot-tall zombie would be able to see over the wood screwed to their bottom halves.

Holly and I sit on the high back of the easy chair to watch the road. A zombie is out there now, treading along in a single sneaker. "I still can't believe this," Holly says.

I know what she wants to say but doesn't because of me: she's worried about her dad. Ethan loves them more than anything, and his absence is not a good sign. Every time a new zombie appears, she takes a short breath then slowly releases it when it's not Ethan.

"I bet your dad's at the office, like your mom said."

Holly's hands twist together, though she doesn't start picking at her fingers the way she sometimes does. "I'm tired of zombies. Let's talk about anything else."

"Like what?"

"Like...who'll win the World Series this year."

"Name a single baseball team." Holly opens her mouth, and I add, "A team that's not the Yankees or Red Sox. Or tell me anything at all about professional baseball. Anything. One tiny thing."

Holly knowing about sports is about as likely as me becoming a nun. She sticks out her tongue and lays her head against my shoulder. "I'm so glad you're here to remind me of my failings."

I laugh. "Like you've ever failed anything in your life."

"There's more to life than school."

"What? Where's my best friend? What'd you do with her?"

Holly pokes my side, her head still on my shoulder. It's comforting, like everything in the Winter household. This was always my safe haven, my escape from the tensions of home. "Yeah yeah," she says, "we all know I'm a teacher's pet-slash-nerd."

"It's good. It makes me want to study."

She snorts. "No, it doesn't."

"True."

She jabs me again. Jesse enters the living room and comes to lounge sideways on the seat where our feet rest. The thrill of being in the same house with him hasn't arrived. Exhaustion and grief don't put you in a flirty mood. "Thought the zombie apocalypse would be a lot cooler than this," he says.

"You mean being trapped at your parents' house and essentially grounded wasn't what you pictured?" I ask.

"Not exactly." He smiles, his eyes as blue as the sky outside, and those absent stomach butterflies finally appear. "What kind of stories am I going to have? *Oh, so you killed a hundred zombies and created a Safe Zone? Cool. Me? Well, I ate hors d'oeuvres and looked out a window.*"

"We're lucky Mom lets us look out the window," Holly says. It's true. Rose would wrap them in bubble wrap if she could. She'd probably do the same to me, which is more than I can say for Dad.

"What'd you picture?" I ask Jesse.

"I definitely had cooler clothes," he says. Most of his clothes are at school in Washington, and he wears an older concert T-shirt over worn black jeans. "I had a gun, too. Several guns. Maybe a machete. You should've seen me. I was kicking ass and taking names right *and* left."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Don't believe me?" he asks, and hacks a hand sideways. "I'll have to show you my ninja skills later."

“You do that.” I act unconvinced, though I’ve noticed the bulge of bicep under his shirt. He’s filled out since I last saw him months ago, and his hair now reaches just below his ears, neither of which downgrades his appearance.

“*Please,*” Holly says. “The only time you’re a ninja is when you play that stupid video game, and you suck at it. I have to go to the bathroom.”

She jumps off the chair and heads down the hall. Jesse sighs. “Family, man. You can’t get away with anything when they’re around.” His eyebrows draw together. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

I shrug and look out the window so he won’t see my tears. I switch between pretending it didn’t happen, holding back tears that it did, and fury that it happened at all. Though I know it isn’t fair, I’m angriest at Dad. Maybe because he’s an easy target. My usual target. And because the most he’s done in five days is order me around. *Help out more, Clara. Don’t look out the windows so much, Clara. Don’t be so loud, Clara.* He hasn’t hugged me since the night it happened. Hasn’t once asked if I’m okay. I’m trying my best to remember that moment in the house, after Jeremy, but it’s getting more and more difficult to do. That version of my father has disappeared as if it never existed.

“Hey, Clary Sage.” Jesse’s voice is quiet. “I’m really sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

He began calling me Clary Sage in middle school, and he still does when he’s being nice or wheedling something out of me. He did the night we kissed, too, whispered it when he pushed my hair behind my ear and looked at me the way other guys have since, though none of them have made me feel the way he did. We were teenagers, both ludicrously drunk, but I was sure in that moment we were meant to be. As sure as I was that zombies couldn’t exist. Wrong on both counts, obviously.

I turn to him, ready to say not to worry about it. Instead, all the grief over Mom and Jeremy, the sadness that Dad hasn’t changed though he’s all I have left, bursts out in the form of tears. None of this is fair, and it’s too much to take.

I set my elbows on my knees and bury my face in my hands. A moment later, Jesse’s arms are around me. He smells like Jesse, like Holly and Rose and their house. I lean into him and let go of the tightness in my lungs, glad

I can't see what I imagine is his expression of bewilderment. I pretend he holds me not because I'm hysterical, but because he wants to.

Willa jumps to the seat of the chair and scratches at my legs with a whimper. When she begins licking my arms, I push her off, only to have her race back and lick me again. I laugh through my tears and lean away from Jesse, who drops his arms and steps back.

"You're such a weird dog," I say.

Willa puts her paws on my knees and pants up at me, tail spinning in circles. I can't help smiling at her ugly-cute face, which makes her tail go crazy. I pat her head and dare a glance at Jess. He watches me with a mixture of amusement and concern, then grabs a box of tissues from the side table by the couch and hands them to me.

"Sorry." I pluck out three tissues and wipe at my nose, thinking that of all the times to freak out, I had to choose when Jesse was nearby. Now I'm like every other crybaby girl he's come across in his life. "I'm fine."

"You don't have to be."

"Sorry? Or fine?" Before he can answer, I add, "I'm sorry about your dad. He's probably just hiding out until it's safe."

Jesse scratches under Willa's soft ear. "I guess my mom won't be able to get rid of Willa now." It's a strange response to my comment, and his usual carefree expression is tight, closed off.

"Why would she?"

"Things aren't great with them. She didn't even want a dog, but he did what he wanted, as usual. He—"

Holly enters the room. "What'd I miss?"

Jesse faces the window, back straight and jaw rigid. Whatever's going on between their parents, Holly doesn't know, and he wants it kept that way. I hold up my wad of tissues. "Just me losing my shit. I think I scared your brother."

Holly sits in the chair beside Willa. Her auburn hair, of which I've always been jealous, is fiery under the elusive Oregon spring sun. She tilts her head to watch Jesse, who I can't see off to my side, and gives me a smile pulled straight from her mother's playbook—kind but knowing. "Jess doesn't scare easily. If you haven't scared him yet, I think you're good."

I blow my nose and avoid her eyes.

"Don't listen to her," Jesse says, "I was terrified."

I throw an arm back to smack him and miss. He laughs, returning to the semi-obnoxious older brother persona I know well. “More outside,” he says. “They’re not looking our way, though.”

A dozen bodies move down the road. It’s the third big group today. We have no idea where they’re going, though they came from the direction of town. Eugene has over 150,000 people, plus college students. Springfield, the city to our east, has another sixty thousand. That’s a lot of zombies.

The radio guys haven’t returned with news of the anticipated Safe Zone. The TV turned to static on day four. The other radio stations continue to blare the same emergency status. Except for the occasional distant gunshot and the food changing at meals, every day feels exactly the same.

There’s a loud click, and the power goes out. Though it was already quiet, it’s another level of silence when all electricity ceases. The refrigerator’s hum dies, the low static of the stereo stops, and everything seems to still.

Dad’s curse carries upstairs through the basement door. “Clara, did you turn off the light?” he calls, annoyance plain in his voice.

I close my eyes and mutter, “Yes. I did it just to fuck with you.”

Holly snickers. The other day I shut off the light at the top of the stairs out of habit. You would’ve thought I’d personally sent a zombie down there to finish him off, which is becoming an increasingly attractive idea.

Jesse strides to the door. “Power’s out, Mr. Jensen.” Dad hasn’t given Jesse or Holly permission to call him Tom. I’m surprised anyone is allowed to call him anything else, including me.

Rose and Mitch enter the living room. “Pop’s sleeping,” Rose says, “and there’s no need to wake him to tell him things are about to get suckier. Don’t open the fridge or freezer unless necessary. We’ll eat that stuff first and move what we can to the RV.”

“What about the toilet?” Holly asks.

“If it’s yellow, let it mellow. If it’s brown, flush it down.”

“Glad I just pooped, then.”

Mitch drops her head back, though she keeps her laugh quiet. I’ve always liked her, but now I like her more. Probably because she doesn’t attempt to hide the exasperated looks she’s thrown Dad for the past days, and she meets his comments with plenty of snark.

“You’re gonna wish you’d taken a shower,” Mitch says to Holly.

Holly isn't the only one who groans. This means no showers, no hot water.

"We have enough for thirty days," Rose says. "For eating and drinking. But we need more if we want to wash up and flush the toilet. As long as we can fill the RV's tank, we'll have hot water and showers. Pop said something about making a bucket for the well. We'll ask him when he wakes up."

Dad enters the living room. "This can't be good."

"None of it is," Rose says. "But what in particular?"

Rose keeps up her cheerful commentary and attitude, which I suspect drives Dad insane. I also suspect she knows it. Rose is no dummy, and I've always thought of her as a genuinely happy person, which makes what Jesse said about his parents more surprising.

"Might mean no one is manning the power stations now. If they were, there'd be power. Maybe they ran out of fuel."

"We're mostly hydroelectric power, so I don't think they need fuel. But the dams are far, and maybe they were overrun, or no one can get near them." Rose pushes back a curl and shrugs. "We can't do shit about that, but we can figure out how to get water from the well. We have camping lanterns for light and wood for the fireplace if it gets too cold."

Dad blinks like he's surprised. "How do you know all that?"

"I went on the school trips to the Leaburg Dam. I guess we're having ice cream for lunch." She smiles at Holly and Jesse, though her brow creases once she takes me in. She's noticed the signs of crying. Dad didn't, of course. "You feel okay, sweetie?"

"I—" Dad watches out the windows, paying me no mind. He doesn't care, and I don't want to pour out my heart in front of him only to find out just how much he doesn't care. "I'm fine."

I can take something from Rose's playbook, too. I won't let him get to me.

Tom

SAM MCGANN IS A GOOD GUY. Equal parts quiet and sociable, he can shoot the shit, discuss a problem, and then shut up for twenty minutes while we work it out. His grandkids love him, and so does Rose. So does Mitch, for that matter, though I don't like her much. She's loud and pushy, two qualities I don't admire. Not ever, and especially not now, when I'm barely holding it together.

Clara fits in here. She's practically a family member. I knew that in theory, but the reality is uncomfortably close to an accusation of how I've failed her. They tease her, they laugh at her sarcasm, she knows their inside jokes—she was here for many of them. All the Christmases she celebrated with the Winters, the weekends she spent here, are apparent. They love her, and she loves them, and I might as well have lost her along with Jeremy and Sheila. It's clearer than ever I lost her a long time ago.

Sam lifts the four-foot length of PVC pipe he scrounged from the shed. It's a small enough diameter to fit down the well shaft once the cover is off. We sent it down to check, and it came up wet. Good news—we were afraid we'd have to pull up the submersible electric pump that sends water to the house.

We have an end cap that will turn the pipe into a long, narrow bucket, but if we lower that to the water, it'll float on top unless heavily weighted. There isn't space for a weight, if we even had one heavy enough to work.

"We need a valve at the bottom," I say. "One that'll let in water when lowered and close on the way up."

Sam nods approvingly. I feel a bit of pride, as if Sam is my dad and I'm fifteen instead of forty-six. Maybe all men are just boys angling for their father's approval in some way—particularly those who never got it. The image of Jeremy on the porch comes front and center, and I try to think of anything else, not wanting to recall how my last words to my son were ones of disgust.

Sheila said, *Don't do what you always...* She didn't finish the thought, but she didn't have to. What I always did was tell Jeremy he wasn't good enough, made plain my disapproval, and assumed the worst. That can't be

further from the tone of the Winter household. Jesse goes to that hippie college in Washington, where he studies music. No one here has a problem with it; if anything, they think it a swell use of time and energy.

None of it matters now, and it didn't matter before. I once believed that with all my heart, but for the past years, I rarely listened to my heart when it came to anything but Sheila. The shame of that is almost too much to bear, as is the thought that I ended up more like my father than I dreamed possible. Clara hates me for it, but not as much as I hate myself—of that I'm sure.

Sam surveys the pipe on the dining room table. "What do you think's the best way to go about a valve?"

"Aside from a valve, what else do we have?" I ask. "Maybe something rubber?"

"Why do we need rubber?" Rose enters the kitchen and yawns on her way to the coffee machine. She has one hand on the coffeepot before she remembers, and then she groans.

"We can make coffee in the RV," Sam says. "Batteries are charged. I've been waiting for everyone to wake up."

"Daddy, I love you."

She calls her father Daddy like she's five years old. Clara hasn't called me Daddy for well over a decade. I'm not sure when she stopped, though when I realized, I missed it.

Rose comes around the counter, sits on a stool, and pushes at the hair that falls all around her face. It looks like it could use a good brushing. "Why do we need rubber?"

"We need to make a valve for the bottom of the pipe, so that when we drop it in the well, it opens to fill but closes on the way up," Sam says. "You usually find them on pumps. They open based on water pressure and only allow the water to move one way. Sometimes it's a ball that moves up and down, sometimes a flapper."

"Like the toilet flapper?"

"That might work, if we cut a hole in the pipe cap and fit it in with a hinge."

Rose stares into space. She yawns again. "Are they on most pumps?" Her dad nods. "How about the sump pump? There's some sort of valve thingy on the pipe that runs out of the sump pit."

Sam beams at Rose. “That’s a great idea. Let’s check it out.”

“Can we have coffee first?”

“Nope.”

Rose makes a face like a teenager and grabs the flashlight that sits on the counter. The three of us take the stairs down, which deposit us in the strangest basement I’ve ever seen. I’ve thought it on previous visits, and it still holds true.

“This is some basement,” I say.

The flashlight bobs with Rose’s laugh. “Isn’t it cool? This is why I fell in love with this house.”

Rose *would* buy a house based on something so absurd. Small windows let in enough light to see the room, which was converted to a Tiki bar decades ago, complete with woven grass wallpaper, fuzzy barstools, and palm fronds. When the power works, the bar lights up green underneath. Another, larger room off this one has a fireplace, plenty of rattan furniture, and large amounts of fake greenery. The near corner holds a couple of speakers and microphone stands, along with something that looks like a stereo receiver with a screen attached.

Rose sees me looking and shines her light there. “Karaoke machine rental,” she says. “It’s the only reason I let the kids talk me into an anniversary party.”

Finally, there’s a reason to be thankful for zombies: I didn’t have to attend a karaoke party, which is a hundred times worse than the regular party I was dreading. Rose leads us past the furniture to a normal basement room. She points at the sump pit cover, then at the pipe that runs up from there and into the wall, where water travels to discharge outside.

Sam begins to loosen the clamps that hold the black rubber valve in line with the pipe. It’s a one-man job at the moment, and I stand back with Rose and her flashlight. “You didn’t want a party?” I ask.

“I’d rather stick a fork in my eye than go to most parties.”

“Rosie’d rather hang out with a book any day,” Sam says, grunting as he loosens a tight screw. “Me, too.”

I recall what Sheila said about Rose being shy, which I thought preposterous at the time. “Why don’t you let me do that?” I ask.

“I’m fine.” Sam grunts again. “Ah, got the bastard.” He unscrews a coupling, then removes the pipe. A little water splashes to the concrete

when he frees the valve. “We’re good to go. Cross your fingers the basement doesn’t flood if the power comes on.”

“And ruin my beautiful Tiki bar?” Rose asks. “I think that’s the least of our worries. I’ll cook up some frozen food while I’m in the RV. Help me get it upstairs? I want to get started.”

“You want coffee,” Sam says.

“I might even bring you a mug.”

“Now you’re talking.”

We reach the small freezer. Rose opens it, quickly pulling out a few boxes that she stacks in my outstretched arms. She grabs a couple more things and we head upstairs to where Holly and Clara sit in the kitchen.

“Morning,” Holly says. “Please tell me we have a way to make coffee.”

Rose laughs and drops her packages, motioning for me to do the same. “We do. You ladies can help me cook in the RV. The added perk is coffee, no pun intended.”

Clara hates to cook. I eye her. We’re guests here, and she needs to do her share. More than her share. “You’re helping, too.”

“Did I say I wasn’t?” Clara has my coloring, but she has her mother’s green eyes, and now Sheila glares at me from her face. “Gee, Dad, you always believe the best of me.”

The anger simmering below the surface boils up my throat. “You always try to get out of helping, and I believe what I see.”

Clara opens her mouth, notices the rest of the room’s occupants trying not to stare, and pinches her lips together. She’s reconsidered whatever she planned to say; she has better manners here than at home.

Clara stands with her head down. “I’ll be in Holly’s room,” she says, her voice strangled. “Get me when it’s time to cook?”

Her shaky shoulders extinguish my faint sense of victory. I’ve done it again, right after I finished berating myself for it. I walk into the living room rather than look at the others. For someone who prides himself on doing a job well, being on the right side, I’m not batting a thousand in recent days. More like recent years.

A lone zombie limps down the road, torn clothes colored brown by substances I don’t want to consider. This world is almost unbelievable, but I see it with my own eyes. I’m living it. The only solace I can take is that

Jeremy and Sheila aren't out there. They didn't become like this sad, soulless, hideous thing searching for a meal.

Rose appears at my side and stands on tiptoes to look over the window board. "Kids can be tough. Our own, especially."

I keep my eyes on the road, where the zombie is almost out of sight. "That doesn't seem true for you."

"We've had our moments, believe me. There were days I felt like the world's worst mother. You should've heard the screaming. I just hoped I'd have enough cash to cover therapy when the time came." I laugh despite myself. Rose pats my arm, and I can feel her watching me. "Be gentle with yourself, and Clara. You've both been through a lot."

I fill my lungs, which are tight with unshed tears. And though I nod, I can't help but think there isn't time for gentleness. Not now, not with what's out there. Rose needs to understand that as much as I do.

Rose

THE LAST BATCH of hors d'oeuvres are in the oven, and the vegetarian potstickers and meatballs are frying and heating, respectively. Thankfully, Pop's RV has two external propane tanks aside from the one built into the RV, since he likes to refill them as seldom as possible. The few things in the house freezer are still semi-frozen, and we moved the milk and other foods that will spoil to his refrigerator. Food is decreasing rapidly, though. Too rapidly. Six days of feeding seven people, even carefully, takes a lot of food.

Mitch sucks down her coffee at the U-shaped dining area, Clara beside her. There's only so much space to work in the fifth wheel's kitchen, although it's pretty spacious for an RV. Aside from a generous living area with couch and two recliners, there's a bedroom up a short flight of stairs. And a bathroom, which we try not to use unless necessary.

"Got my period," Mitch says. "How many tampons do we have?"

"Whatever's in the box, plus a new one in the cabinet," I reply. "Maybe the house across the street has some. They probably have food, too." I don't like to think of it as Michael and Kayla's house, although their bodies are still out front. "I have a menstrual cup and a spare one that I didn't like but didn't throw out. You can all use them."

"Gross. I hate those things," Mitch says. "What if it gets lost up there?"

"It can't get *lost* up there. How far up do you think it goes? Don't make me break out a mirror and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for an anatomy lesson."

"I know what we're doing this evening," Mitch says with a wink. "But it's still gross. We don't want your vagina germs."

"Yeah, we don't want your vagerms," Holly adds, and we crack up.

"You can sterilize them," I say. "Plus, little missy, don't forget you came out of there. It'll be like old times."

Holly giggles and groans simultaneously. "Sometimes I wish I had a mother who refused to talk about this stuff."

"Sex?" I ask. "Is that what you mean by *this stuff*? Sex?"

Clara laughs. Holly continues stirring the veggie meatballs in their veggie gravy while she shakes her head. "Don't encourage her, Clars."

“Remember in high school, when she’d sing the song?” Clara asks.

“How could I forget?” Holly says, and they both sing, “Sex, sex. Sex, sex, sex.”

Mitch and I laugh—back then, she’d sing it with me if she was around. I’d figured being silly might make everyone less embarrassed about the subject, though Holly’s never been open to discussing her sex life except to remind me that I don’t have to worry about an unexpected pregnancy. A red-faced Jesse took the condoms I gave him and practically ran from the room. I kept on regardless; though I’ve never regretted having kids, I didn’t want either of them following in my almost-a-teen-mother footsteps.

“Anyway,” I say, “back to the original discussion. I might not need my cup anytime soon, so you all should use them. Between the IUD and perimenopause, my last cycle was ninety days.”

“Lucky,” Clara says.

“Only if you like hot flashes.” I fan myself. “And I can assure you that you don’t like hot flashes.”

This new phase arrived quickly. One minute, my periods were lighter than ever, closer together, and then suddenly I was sweaty and cranky and skipping periods. The period-skipping part is cool, but the rest of it I can do without.

“I can’t wait to be menopausal and mad,” Mitch says. “I feel like that’s when you just don’t have to give a fuck anymore.”

“When did you ever give a fuck?” I ask, and Mitch dips her head like *you got me*. “I’m cartilage and you’re steel. Together we make...”

“Startilage?”

“Something awesome.” I pull the tray of perfectly browned puff pastries from the oven and say to Holly, “Party food, your favorite.”

Holly nods and lowers her head. I’m a moron for bringing up anything that has to do with the party, I realize after the fact, and lean over the stove to view her face. She resembles me when she cries—or tries not to cry—all pink-rimmed nose and eyes, with puffy lips. They say pink doesn’t suit redheads, likely because you can hardly find skin pinker.

I move Holly aside and into my arms. Mitch takes over the stove with Clara. Thank God I have Pop here, I have Mitch. Even Tom, as exasperating as he can be. Without them to help, to know they’d protect the kids, this would be more terrifying by far.

“It’s okay, sweets,” I say to Holly. “I mean, it’s not, but we’ll make it as okay as we can. We’re almost at a week, only three more to go.”

She snuffles loudly and steps back. “How about Dad? He has three weeks to go, too. Why won’t anyone try to find him? You promised we would.”

It was stupid to think she’d let the matter drop. Though I want Ethan safe, I can’t help but think things would be worse if he were home. Maybe that’s unfair and untrue—this situation is unprecedented, and I hope he’d step up to the plate. But even with zombies outside, I’m relieved I don’t have to watch my every move, which has brought with it the awareness of how much his moods affect me. It’s a sad state of affairs when you entertain the thought that zombies are preferable to your husband—and then push that thought deep down and pretend you never thought it at all.

“What if he’s sick or trapped somewhere?” Holly asks, and the dam holding her tears breaks. “What if he needs help?”

That he hasn’t come home could mean the worst has happened. He could be wandering a road, gray and empty-eyed. He might’ve died all alone. At the thought, my throat constricts and my eyes fill. It’s a relief to know I really do care, that maybe the wall I’ve built between my feelings for Ethan and myself isn’t completely impenetrable.

Wall or not, I don’t want Holly to know how I feel, or don’t feel, about her dad. I touch her sleeve. “I’ll talk to Pop, okay?”

Holly nods and snuffles, then mounts the stairs for the bathroom. Mitch wears a look of sympathy before she turns to the stove. Clara gives me a cautious smile and a light shrug. “She’s worried, that’s all.”

As if there isn’t enough to worry about, now there’s this. But even if I don’t want to brave zombies for Ethan’s sake, I need to do something for the kids’ sakes. I peer out the window and see Pop and Tom on the patio. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Once I assess what I can see of the road and find it empty, I throw on my raincoat and make my way through the drizzle. Tom and Pop stop what they’re doing with the PVC pipe, where that black valve now extends from the capped end and is sealed into place with caulk.

“Rosie-Posey,” Pop says. “How’re things in the RV?”

“Fine. Looks like you’re almost done.”

“We need to get a bolt through the top for a rope to lower it, then we’ll be good to go.”

“Food’s hot if you’re hungry. But I have a question to ask first.”

Pop sets down the rope he holds and comes to where I sit at the patio table. Rain patters the translucent roof above, which usually calms me, though today its quick tempo makes me jittery. “Holly wants to look for Ethan, and I said I would. But...”

Tom joins us at the table. His dark brow is knitted. I don’t want him to know—I don’t want anyone to know—but we can’t have secrets this big right now.

“But?” Pop prompts.

“But I don’t know where he is. The last time I saw him, Thursday afternoon, he was leaving his drug dealer’s house.”

Pop straightens, his face grim beneath his beard and not a spark of cheer in his eyes. “He’s at it again?”

“Again and again. I don’t even know the number of times he’s relapsed over the past couple of years. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry. I guess I hoped every time would be the last.” I watch my hands in my lap. They’re getting older, too, beginning to take on that thin-skinned old lady appearance. “And I felt stupid.”

“Rosie, you’re not—”

“I know.” I can’t have this conversation. Pop still doesn’t know the whole story and maybe he won’t ever have to. “That’s not the point. The point is I don’t know where he’d be besides the office.”

“Maybe that dealer’s house?”

“Maybe. But he knows people, and I don’t know who they are or where they live.” I look up. Tom watches with a vacillating mixture of concern, surprise, and vexation, as though he doesn’t know how to arrange his face at the news. “Sorry to drag you into my bullshit. He started having issues five years ago. It’s been fun.”

Tom’s expression settles on concerned. It unstiffens his jaw and the ever-present tension in his features. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. Holly doesn’t know about the relapses. Jesse knows about some of them, but not the most recent. He suspects, though. I’ve been trying to keep it from him.” I give Pop a contrite smile. “I learned that from the best.”

Pop's chuckle comes as quickly as it goes. "What do you want to do?"

I want to do exactly what we have been doing: waiting. "I have to go to the office, at least. Maybe he's there, or he left a note. I'm pissed off at him, but I know he'd come home if he could. I don't want Holly to think I didn't try."

"How about I go, and you stay here?"

"Daddy, I'm not letting you go alone. Are you out of your mind?"

"I'll go with him," Tom says. "We should see what's happening out there, anyway. Check the fairgrounds if we can."

"Thank you, but this isn't your problem. Clara needs you here with her."

"Clara needs you more than me. I'll go." His eyes shift to Pop. "Tomorrow morning?"

"Fine by me," Pop says. Tom nods once and walks across the patio to the pipe.

I narrow my eyes at Pop. "Why do I feel like I had no part in that decision?"

He pats my arm. "Because you didn't, baby doll, that's why."

My guilt wars with my relief. I'm terrified of town, of the zombies. Running at them the other day didn't make me brave as I'd hoped. If anything, I've gained a healthier appreciation of how easily they can end my life and those of everyone I love. If Ethan weren't getting high, he would've been home the way he'd promised. That anyone has to risk their life to find him is unfair, and I can't make them do it alone.

"Nice try, Daddy. But I'm going."

Tom

SAM and I debated the merits of a vehicle on our trip—the safety of being inside a steel pod versus the noise of the engine—until Rose mentioned the neighbors across the way have a virtually silent electric car. Bicycles would be smarter, but the hills on our end of town are challenging even when there aren't zombies chasing you.

A quick visit to the neighbors' garage, with a stop at the dead man to retrieve the keys, shows it's charged enough for our purposes. She also remembered the neighbor's RV has a washing machine that will run on the RV's generator, and we have plans to see if we can muffle its noise upon our return. It'll require moving those two little boys—a job I'm not eagerly anticipating—but washing clothes in the sink as we've been doing is no one's idea of a good time, either.

"Rosie's a smart cookie," Sam says as we cross the road back to the house. "It's the artistic mind. It's all over the place, but it makes connections my mind doesn't. She remembers almost everything you tell her." He tuts fondly. "Though she can't remember anything at the grocery store without a list."

Rose is turning out to be less flighty than I thought. She's still a flake and acts far too silly for the predicament we're in, but she isn't carefree or coasting along on dumb luck. What she dealt with the past five years—a husband on drugs and two kids—she managed to do with a smile while keeping up a successful business. When she told her father what Ethan was up to, she flushed with shame, and I was forced to admit I'd pegged Rose wrong.

Up at the house, we walk in on Rose and Jesse in the middle of a heated discussion. Rose is dressed for our trip in a slim canvas coat with leather gloves—she's said two instances of zombie blood on her hands were more than enough. Jesse wears leather work gloves, a coat, and an angry frown. "Mom, this way if we split up, each person will have a buddy."

"We aren't splitting up." Rose draws herself to her full height—still half a foot shorter than Jesse. "And you're not going."

Mitch and the girls watch from the couch, eyes moving back and forth tennis match style. “What’s the problem here?” Sam asks.

Jesse glares at him over Rose’s shoulder. “Pop, will you tell her I should come?”

Rose spins around, eyes flashing in a way that says Sam will be taking his life into his hands if he does. “We need room in the car in case your dad is there,” Sam says. “But next time, if there is a next time, we’ll talk about it.”

“No, we wo—” Rose stops at Sam’s raised hand.

“We’ll *talk* about it,” he repeats.

“We all know that’s the kiss of death,” Holly says. “Sorry, Jess.”

Everyone but Jesse laughs. He ducks when Rose tries to push his hair from his face. “Let us see what it’s like first,” she says.

“Mom, you know I’m twenty-two and don’t have to listen to you, right?”

“Yes, but I’m hoping you will anyway.” Jesse gazes at the wall, teeth gritted. In the end, he nods, though he doesn’t look at his mom. She pushes his brown hair to the side, and this time he lets her. “Thank you. I promise we’ll really talk about it, not do the Sam McGann talk about it, okay?”

Jesse mutters, “Be careful.”

“Take care of my kids,” Rose says to Mitch. “All three of them.”

Mitch throws her arms around the girls. “You know I will.”

I should say something to Clara, but she’s barely spoken to me since yesterday. “Be good,” I say, going for a joking tone at which I fail.

She grimaces. “Bye, Dad.”

I nod. After a last farewell, we head to the road, hop the fence, and make for the electric car. Sam is behind the wheel. I sit shotgun, and Rose sits in the backseat. We drive to where the road ends in a three-way intersection and turn left. My house is right, just down the road, where Sheila still lies in our bed. Once the thirty days are up, I’ll summon the strength to see what’s happened to her body in that time and bury her. I’ll bury Jeremy beside her. If that thirty-day mark is truly coming—something I’m beginning to doubt.

The car rolls silently past the first of the houses set on large treed lots. Many have broken windows and open doors. The screaming we heard that first night might have come from here, where unfenced lots mean an

uncovered light, an accidental noise, likely brought zombies near. These houses could have been me and Clara. We have a buffer in Rose's fence, and I'm grateful for it.

Two zombies lurk outside a Tudor at the base of a short rise. One big, one small enough to be a kindergartener. "Not many so far," Sam murmurs, almost as quiet as the car.

I figure that won't last. Gravity makes it likely they won't climb hills, or that they'll head downhill if they're wandering without a purpose. And though South Eugene is hilly, there will be many where the terrain flattens.

Sam takes a left at the fork and heads down an incline. "On your right!" Rose shouts.

A body bursts through bushes and drops where the car would've been had Sam not swerved. I turn in my seat for a view out the back window. It's a woman in jeans and a bra, though she wears a shirt of dried blood. She stumbles after us, one arm lifted like she's flagging a ride.

A newer two-story house has five out front, and all five follow. They reach the road as the car rounds a curve, and Rose says, "We might have a crew by the time we get down there."

Sam speeds up some, passing houses that have no cars out front. Maybe the people left, though there was nowhere to go. Or maybe the radio was wrong. Those people could be cooling their heels somewhere to the east or north while suckers like us are trapped.

The next few houses are trashed. Broken windows, open doors, and one with several dead bodies on its lawn. Up ahead, two cars sit in the road. They collided at their front corners, forcing both sideways. There's no way past due to trees on either side. "Go up and down another way?" I ask.

"Let me see something first," Sam says. He reverses to the last driveway we passed, which leads to a giant house in a sea of grass that's still manicured, though it won't be for long. The car bumps around the house, then down a steep grassy incline toward the neighboring house. Branches scrape the car's sides as Sam maneuvers through the landscaping that delineates the lots. We take the next house's driveway and exit onto the road just beyond the collision.

Rose claps where she leans on the center console between me and Sam. "That was some fancy driving."

“Glad it wasn’t my paint job.” Sam bends for a better view out the windshield. “Think we should head down Friendly Street or somewhere else?”

“Maybe stay on this, then down and over to Washington,” I suggest. “The office is on Fourteenth, right?”

It means close to fifteen avenues to travel. I make certain my knife is on my belt, then slip my hand into my jacket pocket and finger my pistol. My insides are wound tight like a spring, ready to pounce.

Sam nods. “We’ll do that. Okay with you, Rosie?”

“Far be it from me to question our route. Tom, are you like my dad with directions? I could be halfway to my destination before he’s finished discussing the best way to get there.”

Her voice teases, and I find myself holding back a smile. “There’s the right way to go and the wrong way to go. And that can change based on many variables, which are always open for lively discussion.”

Rose laughs—a great big *Ha!* followed by a giggle. “I like this guy,” Sam says. Even with my stomach in knots, there’s a peacefulness in the car. Sam and Rose are easy to be around, and I have to admit I like them so far.

The road spits us into a three-way intersection. From here, the wooded hills end and become streets with sidewalks and houses on smaller lots. No teeming metropolis by any stretch of the imagination, but crowded enough that I set my gun on my leg.

The first houses look fine, but as Sam turns left and makes his way down the quiet street, we pass a car with an open driver’s side door. Blood splatters the gray interior. The white ranch house just ahead is ransacked, and the breeze blows the curtains through the broken windows. Two houses are charred, and a group of six zombies stands at the unburned house next in line, sniffing around the front picture window.

Sam slows. Rose’s breathing picks up. “You think there are people inside? Should we check?”

“No,” I say, pleased that Sam says it along with me.

“We can’t leave them in there.” Rose’s voice is pleading. The zombies notice us and begin to leave the window one by one. “Just stop the car for a second.”

“Don’t you dare get out,” Sam growls.

“Really, Daddy? I’m not out of my mind.”

Sam slows on the incline. This street is a continuation of the hills; north, west, and east of here flatten out. Rose rolls down her window, then leans out and waves at the figures who stumble steadily toward the car. They're different than the ones a week ago, which were fresher, more like walking corpses. These have grayer skin with more missing patches of flesh. Knotted hair. Dirtier clothes. Maybe they're decomposing, as the radio said they would. The stench through Rose's window is up there with the worst things I've ever smelled, but if it's a sign we'll soon be rid of this madness, I'll gladly take it.

"Give them another minute, then pull to the top of the hill." Rose waves out the window again, which has them redoubling their efforts to reach the car. One hobbles on a foot twisted almost backward. I'm amazed he can walk until he falls and begins to crawl.

"Holy shit," Rose says. "That's Ms. Kelly. Remember Ms. Kelly from the girls' middle school? She taught Social Studies."

The woman Rose points out looks familiar, but I can't say for sure. Her blond hair hangs limp, and she wears leggings and a sports bra, as though she was mid-workout when she died. Sam pulls to the top of the hill when the zombies are ten feet away, then over the top when they close in again.

When the group crests the hill, Rose says, "Okay, go."

Sam drives slowly, the bodies trailing in the distance, and he swerves to avoid the truly dead bodies in the street. Rose leans her elbows on her perch between us. "We got them away from that house, so if someone's in there, they can escape. See? We did our good deed for the day, and it cost us nothing except a few minutes of our time."

"Rose is a bleeding heart on legs, Tom. She—" Sam brakes as we pass another abandoned car, this one with all four doors open wide, and he breathes out, "Oh, Jesus."

Rose covers her mouth. The car seat in the back is strapped in, as is what remains of a child. Two legs, with sneakers still firmly attached, are the only recognizable parts. The rest is a mess of dried tissue and bone. The head is gone.

My stomach flips before it rights itself. I breathe deep to keep it there. "Imagine having little kids right now?" Rose whispers. I shake my head. Whatever led to abandoning a child in the backseat of a car is too horrific to imagine.

The enclosed reservoir—a rectangular structure built into the hillside—goes by. The concrete surface is open to the public for skateboarding and roller skating, and the astronomical society holds monthly stargazing events there. Sheila always wanted to go, and I'd always meant to take her. Another regret I'll have to live with until I join her in whatever comes next.

Something pounds the window of a red and white house to our left. The sound of breaking glass comes when it's out of sight. Aside from garbage and random pieces of clothing—a shoe here, a hat there—the next downhill blocks are quiet.

Sam eases up on the corner of a city park, where he slows at the sound of banging metal. The fenced tennis courts at the top of the park come into view, and with them the source of the noise. Someone shoved zombies into the space, wound chain around the gate to keep it locked, and then torched them. As plans go, the intention was better than the outcome. Blackened figures hit the fence full force. Their eyelids and hair are burned away, leaving behind charred, melted heads and round staring eyeballs. Their clothes are mostly gone. Only a few lie on the ground, done in by fire. The rest are something from a horror movie, black flakes floating into the air as they start up a cacophony that gives me goosebumps.

Sam turns onto a parallel block. This one is crawling with them—in the streets, outside on lawns. He guns the car and speeds past the bodies, past houses that've been ravaged and chunks of devoured people on the streets.

“Holy shit,” Rose says, sounding awed.

I expected town to look bad, but seeing my expectations fulfilled is unreal. The destruction, the barrenness, leave no doubt things have changed irreparably. It's only taken a week to wipe out the city I've known for over forty years. If it spread—and I fear it has—the entire world might look the same.

A church's parking lot is full of cars and the undead. People may be in there, but leading away that number of zombies will cause us to bleed from more than our hearts. Rose doesn't suggest it, and Sam speeds up, swerving around a dark-haired woman and a little girl, both of whom watch the car pass with bared teeth.

We fly over speed bumps and around the island in the center of the intersection meant to slow traffic. More people lived here, and it shows in

the broken windows and splintered wood of the houses. There was looting. Fights.

Twenty zombies follow us. They're falling behind, but more join every few houses. By the time we reach our destination, it might be too dangerous to leave the car.

Rose clenches her knife in a fist on the console. Sam presses the pedal to the metal, shoots up Oak Street to the next avenue, then races down until he bumps up the curb to the sidewalk and stops sideways near the porch steps of Rose's office. "Think I lost 'em for now."

The street is silent. Most of the large old houses on this stretch of blocks are now businesses, and, based on their intactness, none holds anything interesting to looters. I don't know a ton about houses, but I know this is a historic home, with fancy wood trim and thick columns that meet the stone porch, painted in shades of brown and yellow.

Rose jumps out and scurries up the steps. Sam and I join her on the porch, where she holds her keys at the wood and glass door. She has a few freckles on her cheeks I've never noticed, but now they stand out in stark relief as she tries the knob. It swings open.

We step inside. It smells of furniture polish, not decaying flesh. The foyer and staircase are a dark honey-colored wood, and the rooms to either side are offices with large leaded glass windows. Beyond the stairs and front desk, in the larger main room, two couches and a few easy chairs are arranged in a square, with a beverage station against the wall. The coffee table in the center is covered with glossy magazines.

"Hello?" Rose moves into the living area with her knife aloft. "Ethan?"

She walks past the couches and peers into a couple of rooms in the back, then disappears through a door. Sam and I find her in the kitchen. Someone was here, and they ate a good bit of food. Wrappers and empty packaging litter the table and counters. Candy, granola bars, string cheese, crackers, Capri Sun drinks, soda—all the things you might offer clients or their kids to keep them happy.

Rose heads the way we came, then mounts the stairs. On the second floor, she checks every room, then stops in a larger room with two desks. More wrappers on one workstation. A picture of Rose and the kids sits on the desk, taken maybe ten years ago at the coast, and they all smile as if having the best day of their lives. Ethan's side of the room. Rose glances at

a blackened spoon on the wood surface. Off to the side, a cottony substance is pulled apart into white fluff, and a lighter sits nearby. Ethan's drug paraphernalia. That she can view it so dispassionately speaks volumes about their relationship.

"He was here," she says. "He would have hidden it, unless he left in a hurry."

Footsteps and groans come from the street. Sam leaves for the hall and returns quickly. "They're by the car. Maybe three dozen. We'll have to wait them out."

Rose curses softly, then turns to me and whispers, "Sorry."

I shrug. My eye is caught by something above the other desk. Rose's desk, which has only a picture of Holly and Jesse—another telling sign. The bulletin board above is plastered with business cards and reminders, but one glossy sheaf of papers has pictures of a large house and land. One shot is of a stretch of meadow, where white-capped mountains rise behind grass and flowers.

"That's my house," Rose murmurs. "Take it down and look if you want."

I pull the pushpin and leaf through the papers. Pictures of the interior of a giant house. Walls of windows with an expansive view, bedrooms, a sauna and private hot spring pool, gardens, and trees. Outbuildings. The accompanying text says the property is self-sufficient with solar and geothermal power, and the price makes me whistle. "Fifteen million dollars?"

Rose flaps a hand. "That's chump change. Want to go halvesies?"

I smile. The pictures show shady spaces under aspens, oaks, and pines, a carpet of green near a pond, and even a river that winds around two sides of the massive property. It includes an orchard of sugar maples and fruit trees. "Since when do sugar maples grow in Idaho?"

"Since some rich jackhole fancied himself a farmer and decided to plant them. I looked it up one day—sugar maples can grow in Idaho, but you have to water them in the summer."

"Easy enough with that river."

"Exactly." Rose taps her temple and tips her finger toward me, as though congratulating me for having half a brain. "It has a main house, a barn, and six guesthouses on close to a hundred acres. That valley is a

microclimate, so you can plant more than you can in other areas. I called the listing agent and pretended I had an interested client, and she told me every little detail. Doesn't it look perfect?" I inspect the papers again, and Rose sighs. "It's stupid, I know. I wouldn't know what to do with it if I had it. My plant-killing abilities are unparalleled."

Honestly, it looks like a dream. It *is* a dream; Rose's dream. Improbable, but maybe she needed that the past few years. A place to escape to, if only in her mind. "It's not stupid," I say, unsure of what else to add—definitely not what I was thinking.

Rose takes the sheaf of papers and tacks them in their place. She gazes for a moment, then pats them with affection. "You never know," she says.

The woman makes me feel like a downright curmudgeon.

Rose

WE BROUGHT small bags with water and food, but, like geniuses, we left them in the car that's now surrounded. The zombies don't appear to be doing anything other than standing around. They sense people somehow—by sight, sound, and possibly even smell—but they don't sense anyone in here. Yet.

I leave the couches where Tom and Pop sit and head into the kitchen. One forgotten, rock-hard cereal bar lurks in a drawer with the cooking utensils. I set it on the counter and spin in a circle, catching sight of familiar gray fabric pooled on the seat of a chair beneath the table.

Ethan's gray jacket. The one he wore when I saw him last. I snatch it up and drop it just as quickly with a small squeak. It hits the table and slides to the floor, bloody side up. A lot of blood, and it's dried to a deep brown crust on the chest and all down the arm. I cover my mouth. Maybe he was injured. Or bitten.

The door pushes open, and Pop rushes in with Tom just behind him. "What happened, Rosie?"

I point to the floor, a coldness creeping out from my middle, and try to say it's Ethan's, that he was wearing it that day. I must manage because Pop crosses the room and takes me in his arms. "He could be okay. It might not be his blood."

Pop hasn't smoked in years, but he still has the comforting smell of unsmoked cherry pipe tobacco. It tells me I'm safe and loved and that, at least in his eyes, there's nothing I could do that would make him love me less. I sink into him, tears overflowing. Even if I wanted Ethan out of my life, I didn't want it like this. Injured, alone, dead. I thought I was prepared to lose him, that I'd given up on him once and for all, but maybe I haven't completely. He would've come home if he were able. I'm sure of that. I'd believed he'd squeak through like he always does—the man could score drugs in a convent. And now I'll have to tell Holly and Jesse that if we'd only come sooner, we might have seen him, might have saved him.

I pull myself together, then cross to a tissue box. I can't change the past, but I can make sure I return home to my kids. "I'm okay."

Pop's lined brow pronounces him skeptical of that. Tom stares at the coat on the floor, and I avert my eyes while I pass into the living room. They follow, sitting delicately on the furniture, as if I'm a bomb waiting to explode. With tears, most likely. I blow my nose and then look to the water cooler. It's dry as a bone, as is my mouth, and I know for a fact the office was overdue for a water delivery.

"Great, now I'm thirsty," I say. "We could make a run for it out a window, but then we'd have to run home."

The house is an L-shaped duplex. We can't get into the other side from here, but if one of us goes out a window, captures the zombies' attention on the corner, and then climbs back inside while they follow, it might get them away from the car long enough to escape. I leave for a side office, where a glance out the window renders that plan moot. The side street and sidewalk aren't empty any longer, and if we attract these without drawing the ones at the car, they'll know we're in here and likely never leave.

A shadow moves behind me. "Guess we're waiting it out for now," Tom says. "Wish we could get our stuff from the car, but there might be some water in the toilet tanks and the water heater, if you have one."

"It's tankless," I say, then smack my forehead when I remember something. "Duh. Come with me?"

Tom follows me to a back room. The old pantry now holds supplies my office manager, Bonnie, buys in bulk. Buried behind a stack of copy paper boxes, I locate two red duffel bags and a five-gallon bucket. I haul them into the center of the space and lift a duffel. "Help me with the other?"

Tom throws it over his shoulder, takes my duffel and throws it over his other shoulder, then lifts the bucket. "I didn't expect you to carry it all," I say.

He shrugs and squeezes through the door sideways. Calling Tom standoffish may be putting it mildly, but he still seems like the kind of guy who carries in groceries instead of sitting on his butt inside, who fills your car with gas for no reason other than to be helpful. Kind of like Pop, who stands when we enter the waiting area and attempts to take a duffel until Tom motions him down. "What's that?" Pop asks.

Tom sets the bags and bucket on the floor. "Don't know."

"After that whole thing about the Cascadia earthquake, I had Bonnie get some emergency supplies for the office," I explain. "I forgot all about it. I

don't remember exactly what's in them, but they looked good at the time."

I never told Ethan about them, either. There was so much I kept to myself because he wasn't around or seemed disinterested. He never asked about that Idaho listing, except to half-jokingly—and half-accusingly—ask if I was leaving him.

I sit on the floor to unzip a duffel bag. Tom crouches and opens the other. I pull out gloves and two small flashlights, a pry bar, shovel, glow sticks, and duct tape. Masks, goggles, rope, tissues, wet wipes, water purification tablets, a radio, and more. Tom's bag is mainly food: vacuum-sealed blocks of something that call themselves Emergency Food Ration Bars and feel more like foil-wrapped blocks of wood, a case of emergency drinking water packaged in small foil pouches, and a first aid kit.

I tear the corner off a water pouch and guzzle it down, then hand one to Pop, who sets it in his lap. I bite my tongue rather than direct him to drink, though his pasty skin makes me think he could use it. There's no way he can run home, and there's no way he's getting in to see a doctor anytime soon. The thought leaves me cold. He can't die—not now, and not ever. He was always the strongest person I knew, but cancer took a lot out of him.

"You okay, Daddy?"

"Fine, baby doll." He smiles, and my tension eases. "Just a bit weary. Good thinking getting this to have on hand."

"The duffels are for ten people for three days." I point to the bucket. "This one was only for four people, but I liked that it was for earthquakes." Tom lifts the black plastic lid, and I say, "Look at it closely."

He pulls the lid apart. "Toilet seat."

"It has bags and everything, so you can use the bucket as a toilet."

The bucket's contents are similar to the duffels, though it also comes with a utility tool to shut off gas and water, candles, emergency blankets and ponchos, a Swiss army knife, a tube tent, and the *piece de resistance*: a radio/flashlight combo that works on solar and hand cranking. Pop's battery-operated transistor radio will run out of batteries at some point.

"Anyone hungry?" I hand Tom a water pouch and a wooden-block bar. He seems hesitant to take them, which is silly, although I'd probably feel the same. "Help yourself. It's all of ours."

Tom sits on the floor nearby, back against a couch and knees bent. He tears open the water and glugs it down. I hand him another. I'm not a wisp

of a thing like Holly, but he's big enough to make me feel like one. His dark hair has a few strands of silver at the temples, and a bit more in his scruff, but other than that, he doesn't look his age. Or he does, but he carries it well. Mitch said the same of me, but it's ridiculous how Tom's laugh lines are considered distinguished while mine make me a hag. With that thought, I roll my eyes.

"What?" Tom asks. He chews a piece of a ration bar, which also *looks* a lot like a block of wood—a yellowish orange square with a textured surface. It probably tastes like one, too.

"Gender inequality and society's unrealistic expectations," I answer. At his lifted eyebrow, I add, "Nothing."

We sit, checking the windows every so often. If anything, there are more outside. The radio produces only the same emergency broadcasts: *Bornavirus is in your area and authorities are getting on it right quick. No worries, and please call 911 on your nonexistent phone for some nonexistent help.* The endless loop hasn't changed in a week.

The ration bars taste better than I anticipated, like a crumbly block of sugar cookie dough. I munch on a square while I leaf through magazines to pass the time. The glossy pictures, the pretty neighborhoods, and the running water are like reading a history book, studying what people were concerned with in the past: the perfect house, the perfect room, the right clothes, the nice stuff.

I've done my share of that, but I tried to find balance. My house is hardly the home of a realtor known for upscale listings, but I like it, just as I like my older car that runs and looks fine. Office manager Bonnie jokes that I seem more trustworthy this way, as if I want to ensure the clients money but don't care about it myself. Whatever the case, it didn't hurt business.

I wonder if Bonnie is okay. She's a lovely older lady who knows far more than most about my issues. I broke down under the strain one night, thinking I was alone in the office, and she mothered the information out of me with tea, hugs, and gentle words. After that, she insisted on picking up some of Ethan's slack in her quiet, efficient way. She lives in Springfield and cares for her elderly parents. If it's as bad there as here, I'm not holding out for her survival.

"It all seems so frivolous now," I say, waving the magazine before I set it on the coffee table. "Things might not ever be the same."

“We don’t know that,” Pop says. “If they contained it to Oregon and California, the rest of the world could be going along same as ever. They said they’d come in thirty days. The people who got infected later will die off later, so I’m thinking more like forty-five or sixty days.”

“You saw Jesse’s video. Do you think they contained that?” I ask. Pop exhales through his nose, keeping his expression blank. He doesn’t believe they contained it, but he doesn’t want to upset me. The man would insist everything is going swimmingly while a zombie chomped my leg like a chicken drumstick. “It was in the Midwest, too. When the thirty days are up, it could be a different world.”

That coming world feels as foreign as the world in the magazine, but I won’t worry about that right now. All I want is to survive the next weeks. Maybe the seven of us can figure out whatever comes next together. The only thing more frightening than the unknown is facing the unknown alone.

“I’d give anything for some news,” I say.

“What we need is a shortwave radio,” Pop says. “Maybe a transceiver. If anyone’s out there, we’d hear them. It’s hard to believe there’s been nothing from the government.”

“I haven’t seen a plane or helicopter since this started,” Tom says. “Did you notice that?”

Pop nods, and his blank expression edges into worried territory. “Can’t be good,” is all he says, which means it’s bad. Very bad.

Even if there are no commercial flights to the West Coast, Army planes and helicopters should be in the air, if only to keep track of the infection’s spread. With the absolute quiet that surrounds us—current zombie groans notwithstanding—we would’ve heard the sound of engines or rotors. If the rest of the country were business as usual, there’d be some sort of contact with us.

All the realtors in the office, the few friends I invited to the anniversary party, have disappeared as if they never existed. I grew away from those friends in recent years, not that I had a ton to begin with. Rather than admit to Holly that Mitch and Craig were the only people with whom I kept in touch, I called the others to extend an invitation, saying my anniversary was only an excuse for a party, and I’d love to see them.

I felt pathetic, sure they’d blow me off the way I had their past invitations, but they’d sounded excited. Relieved, even. It made me wonder

if they knew more than I thought. And though I hate to throw a party in my own honor and would've likely wanted to send everyone home at nine, I looked forward to reconnecting.

Lost friendships are another thing I chalked up to Ethan, but that's not entirely fair. I've always been overwhelmed by too much contact with other humans. Ethan's jealousy played a part, but people can only treat you how you let them, and I let him.

I sigh to myself. Here I am, thinking ill of the possibly dead. Maybe it's a defense mechanism. Or maybe I'm as cold as he alleged.

"Sun's going down," Pop says.

So that we can use our newfound flashlights, we draw the shades and ready bedclothes to cover the windows once it's dark; the office has some on hand in case we need a bedspread or sheets during an open house. I keep my focus on the cabinets as I pass through the kitchen, avoiding what might be all that's left of Ethan on the floor.

POP SNORES LIGHTLY on one couch. I sit on the other, and Tom has taken the first watch shift in a chair. I try to sleep, but I can't relax when I can't stop thinking of how Mitch and the kids might come looking for us. I go to the bathroom, where I pee into the toilet that won't flush without more water. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that we get home before the kids do something stupid and heroic. Mitch is there to stop them, at least, and Mitch is bossy as hell.

I find my way back to the couch in the dark, then sit under a big old sweater to ward off the spring chill. After a few minutes of silent freak-out about the kids, I grab a magazine and hold it and a flashlight under the sweater.

"Can't sleep?" Tom asks quietly.

"No," I whisper. He says something that's lost in the outside groans. "I can't hear you. Come sit."

After a few seconds, a dark form makes its way over, and then he sits in the center of the couch. I face him and scoot my feet close to myself. "If the old man starts sawing wood too loudly, we'll have to poke him."

Tom nods before I shut off the light. There's no reason to use it when it might give us away. We sit in a slightly awkward silence, though it offers more reassurance than sitting alone. After a few minutes, he says, "I'm sorry about Ethan. He might be okay."

"I know." I listen to the scuffing footsteps. Every time I looked outside, I searched for Ethan, afraid he'd be with them. "You must think I'm a total bitch. I..." I shrug, though he can't see. "There's the fact that I don't know, and the fact that I'm angry with him. Maybe what he did before shouldn't matter now, but it does. I was thinking of ending it after the party. I feel horrible saying that now. Just...horrible."

I immediately regret telling Tom something I haven't even told Mitch, and my regret only intensifies when he doesn't answer. I resist the desire to check for his reaction with my flashlight and change the subject. "I keep thinking the kids will look for us. Either on foot or in a car. What if they do? They could be surrounded by zombies, and they probably wouldn't have enough food and water. It's not a stretch to imagine that happening." I wave at the windows, though Tom can't see that either. "We'd never find them."

Another thought occurs to me, and it's worse. "We shouldn't have taken both guns. What if something happens at the house and they need one? What if people come? All they have are knives, and everyone knows you don't bring a knife to a gunfight." There's nothing from Tom, and I fiddle with the flashlight switch. "I do think Mitch will keep them home, at least. But Jesse was pretty pissed when we left. He might not listen. God, I really hope he listens."

The words leave my mouth in a torrent and are met with the same silence. I can't stand it any longer, and I switch on the flashlight to find Tom with one arm extended along the back of the couch, staring in my direction with alarm.

"Are you always like this?" he asks. What could be the precursor to a smile carves a shallow C in one cheek, but his tone is flabbergasted.

"Like what?"

"So...worried?"

I sniff and shut off the light. He's making me out to be a maniac. Like Tom is some bastion of sanity. "Not always, but once my brain latches on to something, it's done for."

“How often does it do that?”

“Sometimes once a day. Sometimes all day. Sometimes not for days. It’s not crazy to be worried right now, you know.”

“Maybe, but it was a lot to lay out there at once.” He sounds somewhat entertained, even if it is at my expense. “We haven’t seen a single live person, so I’m not too worried about that. And I think Jesse has enough sense to stay home. Mitch doesn’t hold with bullshit. She’ll lock him in the basement if she has to. Clara never listens to me, but she likes Mitch, so she’ll listen to her.”

I consider bringing up Clara, specifically him and Clara, but I keep my thoughts to myself. Tom takes a breath. “I think it’s normal to be angry. It sounds like Ethan put you through a lot.”

The image of Ethan, young and loving and funny, comes into my mind, and my chest grows heavy with the sadness of losing him to drugs, then losing him again. “It wasn’t always like that. We were best friends once. The other half of each other, you know?”

“I do,” Tom says.

I hear the longing in his voice and don’t know what to say, but I can’t leave it hanging out there. “Sheila was...I liked her a lot.”

“She liked you just as much.”

“She did? I figured she was just being nice. I wish I’d gotten to know her better.”

There were many phone conversations when the girls were in high school, along with coffee meetups. Clara ran her parents ragged, and I offered to step in. By the time the girls were sixteen, Ethan was using, and though I was always available for our chats, it never went further than that.

“The day—” Tom’s voice is strangled, and I need nothing more to know the day he means. “That day, she said she wished she were more like you.”

“Now that you’ve heard how my brain works, you know how wrong she was.”

“No, I know what she meant. She admired your spirit.”

It’s a compliment I’ll treasure, especially with as spiritless as I’ve felt recently. I squirm, and my foot hits Tom by accident. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He shifts in his seat. “Mind if I grab the flashlight for the bathroom?”

“Sure.”

I hand it over. He turns it on and covers it with his sleeve as he moves away. He's a strange guy—almost genuine one minute and then aloof for the next year. I've always sensed a bit of humor under the stern façade, but getting it out is like mining for precious metal. The times he's cracked an unrestrained smile in my presence can be counted on one hand.

Pop continues his light snoring. The noises outside have lessened. I chew at a hangnail and try not to picture Holly limping down a road with gray skin and filthy clothing, her hair tangled like Medusa. If the kids decide to go on the hunt, they'll wait until daylight. They're not stupid.

Tom creeps back, quiet for his size, and hesitates by the couch. "Sit, if you want," I say, hoping he will. He settles down out of range of foot-kicking. "How was the bathroom? Exciting?"

The noise he makes might be amusement. "All I dreamed it would be and more."

I snicker. Almost a week of mining and I got a half-joke. Next month, I might get a laugh.

"Actually, those tiles in the bathroom are interesting," Tom says. "I saw them earlier today."

The tiles wind their way around the bottom wall like a baseboard, their raised surfaces depicting local leaves and plants in minute detail, all stained a natural brown to fit the Craftsman theme of the rest of the house. "Interesting how?" I ask. "Hideous interesting or nice interesting?"

"Nice. They're very intricate."

"I made them."

His coat rustles as he turns to me in the dark. "And you waited to hear if I liked them before you told me that."

I laugh quietly. "I wanted an unvarnished opinion. I used to make decorative concrete tiles. It was a little business I had for a while."

"How'd you make them?"

"I sculpted the designs from clay, made rubber molds of the designs, and then poured the concrete into the molds. I even have a concrete vibrator."

There's a long pause before he says, "Huh."

"You use it to vibrate wet concrete and remove air bubbles. Get your mind out of the gutter."

Tom chuckles. I've stretched out my feet some, and I feel the far cushion plump up as his body loosens. It didn't take a year to make him laugh, only a slightly dirty joke. "You're talented."

"Thank you." I sigh dramatically. "It was one of my frivolous escapades that didn't make enough money to leave real estate. There've been plenty."

"Real estate seems to work."

"It does. But I always wanted to do something with my hands or my imagination, you know?"

Tom shifts in his seat. "I wanted to play guitar. If that didn't work out, maybe run the soundboard at a studio or on the road with a band."

I sit open-mouthed. I would've sworn Tom was born shouting commands at subordinates. "Really?"

"Yeah. I guess we give up dreams in the name of security."

It's true. In the name of the familiar, too. And for fear of failure. "I don't like it," I say.

"Me neither."

Resignation makes his voice tired. I've never heard a whisper from any of the Jensens about Tom playing music. "You know Jess plays guitar?" I ask, and Tom grunts something close to a yes. "He has a thousand guitars, and he'd love to play with someone. If you're ever feeling the urge to tickle the strings or whatever."

He grunts again, though it's more of a dismissive *humph*. A very clear *Game Over* that I recognize from the Tom of the past decade. Maybe it was the mention of Sheila, of dreams dashed, but the guy who was infinitely more interesting than Tom has gone back into hiding, and I don't have the energy to draw him out again. "You should try to sleep," he says.

"There's no way I'm sleeping now. Why don't I take first watch shift? You can have the couch."

"I'm fine in the chair." Tom gets to his feet. "Wake me when it's my turn."

"Okay." I listen to him settle into the easy chair, and then I stare at the dark ceiling, imagining all the horrible things that could happen, until it turns gray with the rising sun.

Tom

MORNING BRINGS the thundering of gunshots, and I sit upright in my chair. Screaming follows. High-pitched and far-off, maybe a few blocks away, but terror is evident in the raw sound even from that distance. Rose didn't wake me for watch, and judging by Sam's heavy-eyed bewilderment, she didn't wake him, either. Her couch is empty. Sam turns to me, now wide awake, and leaps to his feet. I'm up first, running into the foyer, where the door is still locked. She has keys, though. She could've left. I turn and rush through the waiting area to the kitchen. No Rose.

My heart pounds as I retrace my steps to Sam, who's making his way upstairs. The offices are empty. We return at breakneck speed to the couches, where Rose stands by the coffee table, head cocked. "Those were gunshots," she says with no inkling that she's scared the shit out of us.

"Jesus Christ," I say. "Tell us something we don't know."

"Where were you?" Sam asks. His chest moves with short breaths and his face is red.

Rose points toward the back. "In the storage room."

"I looked in there." I try, but I can't keep the accusation from my voice.

"I was behind the boxes. Why didn't you call me?"

I scowl at her. Obviously, I didn't want to alert the zombies, not knowing how close they are now, since I awoke to the sound of gunshots and was immediately forced into searching for flaky people who can't stay in a room like they're supposed to. Maybe it isn't a hard and fast rule, but it is common sense.

Rose crosses her arms and glowers, mirroring my stance. "Sorry if I scared you guys."

"It's all right," Sam says. "Why don't we have a look out the windows?"

Rose and Sam walk for the foyer while I seethe. We were in the storage room yesterday, and while there's no reason I can name that she shouldn't go in there again, I still want to throttle her.

They return quickly. "Zombies are gone," Sam says. "Probably followed the gunshots. You ready to go?"

“Do I have time for the bathroom?”

Sam nods. I stomp there, where I use the facilities and take a last look at those tiles. They could be in one of those magazines on the coffee table, and that annoys me, too. When I return, Rose and Sam stand in the foyer with the duffel bags and bucket.

“Count of three, we go,” Sam says. “I’ll drive, unless you want to.”

I shake my head—this is their show. We open the door, take in the empty street, and then rush to the car. Rose slides into the backseat with the bucket, and I throw the duffels in after her while Sam goes around. Once Sam is in, I duck inside the car, and we pull off the curb to the street.

“Still want to see about the fairgrounds?” Sam asks. I nod.

“Maybe we should just head home,” Rose says, her voice low.

Sam doesn’t hear, and I ignore her. I want to see if there are other people, another place to go. This morning, I’m not as thrilled at the thought of staying at Rose’s as I was yesterday, and it wasn’t on my wish list then.

Sam drives the wrong way down a one-way avenue. Cars are stopped by the curb and mid-street, but there’s room for travel. The street is two lanes, lined with stores, squat office buildings, and trees that will be thick and green in a month or so. The fire station—a brick building with rolling glass doors—is empty, the doors smashed to hell. Two zombies lurk within, and they trip for the sidewalk as we pass. The businesses are looted, though there aren’t many before it turns residential, and the streets are the same as on our way into town—destroyed houses, bodies on lawns.

How many people didn’t have food, or left a light on and were attacked, or went out searching for a loved one? All the gunshots we heard, the sirens, painted a picture in my mind, and that picture was eerily accurate. Stores come again—a corner market destroyed, a fire in a small plaza. The food establishments have broken doors and windows, leading me to believe that food was scarce in this part of town.

“Shit,” Rose hisses when we’re close to the fairgrounds.

Three blocks ahead, where the fairgrounds take up a good six blocks, is a mass of people. Not people. Zombies. The street is packed with them. Whoever is in the fairgrounds, if there *is* anyone in there, is not having a good day. Sam slams on the brakes, pulls into the driveway of a vandalized house, and turns the way we came. He makes a right at the next street, only to brake at another throng two blocks down.

“Goddamn it.” He spins the wheel and heads back to Thirteenth.

“It looked clear down Oak,” I say.

Sam nods and flies by Rose’s office, then turns south past more office suites and tree-lined sidewalks. A pack of zombies veers into the street, possibly heading for the source of the earlier shots, and comes toward us. Sam makes a hard right into a parking lot, then bumps over the curb into another lot and shoots out onto the perpendicular avenue.

A clunk comes from the back, followed by a yelp, and I turn to see Rose holding a hand to her temple. She leans around the driver’s seat, eyes huge. I face forward. The Safeway parking lot is crawling with bodies, and every single one sees us coming. Three hundred, maybe four hundred, and the first fifty are moving into the intersection ahead. Sam loses a string of expletives and swings up the curb, shearing off the side view mirror on a telephone pole. Two zombies in the dry cleaner’s narrow parking lot advance. It’s either hit them or stop, and there’s no stopping now.

“Hold on!” Sam yells.

We clip the first body and throw it to the side. The second, a slumping man chewed through the middle, hits the hood at the right corner. The thud shakes the car, and his torso rolls up the windshield with a spray of liquid that coats my side of the glass. Sam thumps over the man’s lower half and swerves into the street.

“Rosie?” he calls. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Rose watches the road with round eyes, waiting for whatever new horror it’ll bring. I don’t blame her—I’m sure there are plenty.

“Damn wipers,” Sam mutters, fumbling with various levers while keeping his eyes on the road. I reach over and push it to get the washer fluid going. After twenty seconds, the glass is clean enough for a view. A few zombies lurk, but not many, and I allow myself to relax just enough to breathe.

“Take this down or cut over?” Sam asks.

This street curves, and the only outlet is onto Willamette Street. The plus of Willamette is that it’s wide. The minus is the stores and supermarket ahead. If it’s anything like Safeway, we might be fucked.

“You can cut across,” Rose says, “but almost everything’s going to lead you to Twenty-Eighth, and if it’s blocked, we’re screwed. Whoever designed Eugene should’ve been taken out back and shot.”

I've had that thought many times. In Eugene, streets end and don't go through. They curve and dog-leg and dead-end without notice, as if modeled on the aerial view of a toddler's scribbling.

"Let's see where this takes us," Sam says.

A few small apartment complexes flash by. Short, ugly office buildings. A bookstore on the left. Small restaurants and stores set back in a plaza on the right. It isn't too bad, though we've gained a small following of bodies. We pass a bicycle shop. Bikes would be useful—all of mine are at home—but there isn't time to stop.

We hear the next group before we glimpse them between the stores ahead. A swarm like the last, but hundreds more in number, stands in the shopping plaza with the supermarket, PetSmart, and a sporting goods store. More are across the street. The droning sound grows to a hum I feel in my chest and ears, and sweat forms a slippery layer down my back. There'll be no barreling through these if they reach the street before we pass.

Sam keeps the car straight down the middle and zips forward, jaw set. I'm sure he has the pedal to the metal, but there's no roar from the electric engine, which makes me want to jam my foot over his to be sure. I don't like losing control, and losing control of your own survival is as bad as it gets.

The zombies are on the curb. Stepping off. Stumbling out. Sam moves as far left as he can without hitting the other encroaching pack. At the entrance to the shopping center, the first bodies of the righthand pack thump into our rear. A short, high-pitched squeak comes from Rose when we fishtail toward the bodies on the left.

Hands batter the hatch window, but Sam spins the wheel like a pro, slowing only enough to straighten out. He floors it past a collision in the next intersection and heads uphill, past a couple of lone zombies in the street. Beads of sweat run down his face into his beard. "That was close."

"Nice save," I say. "You should've driven a stunt car."

"Thirty years of New York City driving is almost the same." Sam glances in the rearview. "You okay, Rosie?"

"Fine," Rose says quietly.

I turn back to where she sits, still and stiff. And with good reason—that swarm was no joke. She meets my eyes and looks away just as quickly, and I remember how irritated I was before. Clearly, she hasn't forgotten. I'm not

good at apologies, and if she wants to be annoyed at me, she has every right to it.

Sam veers right and climbs uphill. We're entering our territory now, where the homes spread farther apart and the trees are plentiful. Morse Farm appears on our right. The green expanse of public land dips down to a historic farmhouse and a dog park where we ran our old dog years ago. A few moving bodies dot the landscape. We turn again, still rising, past houses with cracked windows and open doors.

"There's a turtle on the dash," Sam says after another minute. There's nothing on the dashboard, and I think Sam is going senile before I follow his finger to the display behind the steering wheel. Sure enough, the icon of a turtle flashes where before there was a number—the number of miles the car would travel before the power went. "Pressing the gas but it's not going any faster."

The car slows, losing speed until it stops gently at the side of the road. "I didn't look when we got in, but maybe the gauge was off yesterday," Sam says. "Or something ran down the juice overnight."

Rose leans forward, both hands on her father's headrest, then peers out the windows. "It's not that far of a walk. Let's go before anything comes."

We're out of the car and walking down the paved road a minute later, me shouldering the two duffels, and Rose the bucket. Sam protested at that, and Rose quieted him with the idea that he's in charge of shooting at things. When I came around to her other side to keep her between me and Sam, she didn't say a thing, though she did inch closer to her dad.

We take a few backyards to avoid zombies, then come out at the intersection. The road is quiet. So are Sam and Rose. I look behind us, then into the trees on both sides. Clara's old elementary school appears on the right. It opened again a few years ago, and it appears untouched.

"The cafeteria might have food," I say.

Sam nods. "Good plan. Maybe in a day or two."

Rose says nothing, though she's usually the first to praise someone's idea. I know why—she was friendly last night, told me things I'm sure she doesn't share readily, and I responded before I shut her down. Only Rose would insist someone pick up a guitar in the midst of the zombie apocalypse. It's a ridiculous idea. Even more ridiculous is that, for a brief moment, I imagined myself doing so. Then I thought of how Sheila loved to

hear me play—would dance around our apartment with baby Jeremy in her arms—before I used work as justification to stop. How I made excuses when Clara asked to sing with me, until I sold my guitars and she finally quit asking. If I refused to do it for the three people I loved most in the world, I have no business doing it now. Two of those people are gone, and there's only one task I need to be concerned with—keeping Clara from meeting the same fate.

We walk another half mile to where the house sits above the road, shaded by a few trees. The door opens and Mitch comes onto the front stairs waving. Rose waves in return and blows out a breath.

“Told you they'd be fine,” Sam says to her.

“No, you didn't.”

“Well, I should've.”

Rose elbows her dad, then watches the house glumly on our approach. “They're going to be upset. About Ethan.”

“I think it's a good sign he wasn't there. He didn't bleed out, and he would've been inside if he'd been bitten and sick, since the doors were closed. It tells me he went out for more food or supplies. Maybe he's somewhere safe for now.”

“Will you tell them that? They'll believe it coming from you.”

“You don't?” Sam asks.

Rose shrugs. The bucket hits her calf with a dull bonk, and she pushes her hair from her face with the hand that holds her knife. She looks exhausted. Since she didn't wake us for watch, I assume she didn't get any rest.

We pick up the pace at a snap from the woods beside the house. A tall, thin woman stumbles over branches and twigs to reach the road, and we break into a run, Rose pacing herself beside Sam. I hang back with them until they reach the fence, then I toss the duffels over and wait to give Sam a hand.

“Rose first,” Sam puffs.

Rose throws her bucket over, then herself. Sam gets a leg up on the top wood rail and does a sideways hurdle to the lawn, and I follow as the woman comes for us. Her jaw is off-kilter, and her teeth don't meet when she bites at air. It's enough to twist your stomach, but it's the eyes I hate most. The same staring, menacing gaze as Jeremy.

I wait for the woman to near. She hits with a growl, and I slam my blade into her eye, grimacing when the feel of socket bone reminds me of Sheila. Her chin smacks the fence with a loud clack on her way down, and she lands limp on the grass.

By the time we make our way up the slope to the house, all three kids stand with Mitch on the step. Holly is in tears, and Rose goes straight for her, taking her into her arms and murmuring softly. I hear the word *Dad* and the sob in Rose's voice, and I feel bad about how short I was with her.

I smile at Clara, who watches me warily with Sheila's eyes. I can't even smile at my daughter without it being a problem. Without a fight. I shake my head and walk inside. It would've been better for everyone if I'd gone down with Sheila and Jeremy.

Clara

WE SPENT THE NIGHT WORRYING. When Rose, Sam, and Dad got home, it was a relief, followed by mourning. Ethan is missing. I know my mother is dead, and though it still seems unreal that I won't go home and find her reading a magazine on the couch, I have some closure. That kind of closure sucks, but so does imagining the worst, especially when you know it's the likeliest.

Holly and I sit in her room the next day, in our usual spots: her cross-legged on her bed, me at her desk, watching out the window. Of course, that window is now half plywood to keep zombies from looking in, but I stare at it the same way I would the glass.

There's no scrolling through phones, no music to play, nothing to do except talk, read, play a game, or draw. Well, Holly draws. I doodle and scribble and fawn over her beautifully illustrated pictures. After our fortieth round of War, Holly shuffles the cards and holds them up. "Want to play 52 Pickup?"

"That joke never gets old."

Holly grins, face slightly swollen from last night's tears she thinks I didn't hear. She and I are alike in that we keep many feelings to ourselves. The difference is in our methods: I fight while I pretend nothing's wrong; Holly feigns a cheeriness that puts Pollyanna to shame. And because we understand, we don't pry when the other makes it clear a subject is a no-fly zone.

She falls back and flings the cards into the air so that they cascade onto the bed. "Want to check the front window? Maybe they're gone."

"Someone's sitting there. We'll know when they're gone."

We'd intended to hit the nearby school for any food in the cafeteria, but zombies killed that plan by congregating out front of the house. Dad and Rose are allowing us to go as packhorses, and though staying in the house is boring as shit, going outside makes my heartbeat erratic. At least I've killed a few zombies. Holly is a virgin when it comes to zombie-killing.

"I might go crazy if this doesn't end soon," she says. "What would you be doing if we weren't here?"

“Sitting in a boring class, probably.”

“Who would you be doing if we weren’t here?”

I laugh, then roll forward in the chair and kick her. “Hey, at least I was getting some. Unlike *some* people who run away from people they like.”

Holly peers at me from between her curls. “Who? I don’t like anyone.”

“How about what’s-her-face? Helena. All I heard was Helena this and Helena that, and then she calls to ask you out, and you don’t answer the phone. Or call her back.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that. Aren’t lesbians supposed to move in together after the first date or something? You won’t even *go* on a first date. You need to up your game or they’ll kick you out of the club.”

She laughs and buries her face in her pillow. “You know I hate the phone. Unless it’s you, I get weird and have nothing to say.”

“Then text that you’ll meet them somewhere in person.”

“You know I can’t.” She flips onto her back with a groan. “I’ll just get a lot of pets and be single forever.”

Holly hooks up occasionally, and she had one semi-serious three-month relationship, but she somehow fell into those experiences without having to exert any effort, or was drinking when they occurred. Her shyness is legendary, and it attracts admirers like moths to a flame, most of whom are politely sent away by a speechless, blushing Holly.

I throw a pen at her. “I thought we were going to live together if we were spinsters. You’re ditching me for a bunch of cats?”

“You say that now, but you’ll find someone one day and fall head over heels in love.”

Holly smiles, her light brown eyes warm, as though she has the perfect candidate in mind. It’s these times where I’m half-convinced she knows exactly how I feel about Jesse. But that’s a definite no-fly zone. An exclusion zone. I will shoot down any attempt at entry, and I won’t even radio a warning first.

“I’ll just be over here holding my breath,” I say.

“He’ll be perfect. I mean, he’ll have a penis, but I guess that can’t be helped. *Some* people like those, though I have no idea why. They’re so... penis-y.”

“They really are. And yet men think they should be shared with the world via messenger services. I got three last month.”

“They’re like the mother who thinks her ugly baby is beautiful. A face only a mother could love.” Holly’s giggles turn to snorts. “Imagine one wearing a baby bonnet?”

I crack up. “Now *that’s* a dick pic I need to see. As much as I’d like to discuss penises all day, we should probably stop before my dad hears and has another reason to hate me.”

“Fine.” Holly sighs and stares at the ceiling. “I’m scared to go out, but maybe we’ll see living people. We might be able to get downtown.” Her ulterior motive is to look for her dad, though she doesn’t say it. Ethan is another no-fly zone.

Jesse stops in her doorway on his way past. “I want to get out of here. Not that the trips to the well and RV aren’t exciting and all.”

“I heard you get to heat the food tonight,” Holly says. “That might be fun overload.”

Jesse smiles and flips his hair from his face, though it barely flips due to the fact we’re all greasier. Smellier. At least we have water, even if we do have greasy hair. We can drink and flush the toilet and take a quick shower in the RV every few days. There have to be people out there who can’t do any of that. There have to be people out there, period, though it feels like we’re the last ones on Earth.

“You guys want some analog entertainment?” Jesse asks. “I pulled out the board games from downstairs. You could be a winner at the game of Life. If you’re done discussing penises, that is.”

That sends us into a fit of giggles. Jesse is the odd man out, since most of his friends are away at school and the few in town unreachable, though we include him in all conversations that don’t involve anatomy. He’s taken the situation in stride in the quiet way he has, but being unable to play guitar must be the hardest part. Sometimes his fingers twitch as if they don’t know what to do with themselves. They probably don’t. In high school, he usually had a guitar somewhere nearby, if not in his lap. It didn’t hurt with the girls, a fact I found annoying at the time, though I was one of them. But all that time with a guitar paid off, and he went to school for music. Classical guitar, though he can play anything. Whether or not the girls still

tumble into his lap along with the guitar is something I don't like to think about.

"I'll play," I say. Though we hang out, I keep my physical distance from Jesse, if only because I'm afraid to fall for him again. Close proximity does that.

"Okay." Holly stands from her bed, ignoring the cards. If I want to sleep in a card-less bed tonight, I'm going to have to play a round of 52 Pickup. "Willa needs a walk first."

I grab her leash from the desk. Willa knows what that means, and she allows me to clip it to her collar, then happily trots toward the hall.

"I'll do it," Jesse says to me.

"I want some air anyway."

Holly rubs her arms. "I don't. It's wet and freezing." She points at Jesse. "Protect her out there. I'll set up Life."

Jesse salutes Holly and follows me onto the covered patio. Willa makes her way into the grass to begin her ritual of sniffing and spinning. We watch in silence until I say, "You never told me what you meant. About your mom wanting to get rid of Willa."

I keep my eyes on the yard, though I see the rise of his chest when he takes a deep breath. I imagine being close enough to feel the heat off his skin, his lips closing in on mine. And that, right there, is why I stay clear of him.

"My dad hasn't been doing so great. You know, with the drugs."

I face him, shocked. "What? I thought he had four years or whatever."

"More like four months, and I think it's more like none." Jesse crosses his arms and exhales a plume of breath fog. "Holly doesn't know. You can't tell her."

Of course she doesn't know, or I would, and she'll be crushed when she finds out—if she ever does. If Ethan is gone, it won't matter. "Why didn't your mom tell her?"

I can answer my own question. When Ethan's addiction came to light in high school, Holly was sick with worry. Although by all accounts he was sober when it came time for college, she insisted on attending the University of Oregon despite Rose urging her to choose Penn State, which was a much better fit for her pre-veterinary major. Holly said the East Coast was too cold, that she'd miss everyone too much, but I knew it was because

she didn't want to be far from home, just in case. She absorbs tension the way Rose does, as though she thinks that if she sucks it all up, it'll disappear. If they'd told her about Ethan, she probably would've moved back home and slept in her parents' bed.

"Mom didn't want to upset her. I caught him with his pills, so she couldn't lie to me. He's relapsed, like, a dozen times or something in the past three years." Jesse shrugs, though I'm sure he knows exactly how many times. I see the worry around his eyes, and his frustration in the way his fingers strum his biceps. "As you can imagine, it hasn't helped their marriage any."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I always thought they were so perfect together. The memories I have are all of them laughing, or him cornering her for a kiss, or things like that."

Jesse's lips move up the tiniest bit. "Those are some old memories, or you've been here on a good day. It hasn't been that way for a while."

"God, if your parents can't make it work, whose can?"

"Yours did."

Mom and Dad got along, loved each other, which is more than you can say for many couples, but they talked about bills and business, which everyone's parents discuss. They didn't have that playful easiness I so admired in Ethan and Rose. They didn't listen to music together or stay up late binge-watching television or smack each other's butts as they passed.

I stop thinking about Mom when the hollow feeling in my chest threatens to spread out and take over. "Yeah, I guess so. I always wanted to find someone like your parents, you know? It was either that or nothing serious. All or nothing."

"You're good at the nothing serious."

He might be joking, but my eyes prickle with tears at him voicing aloud what he thinks of me. Maybe I was fine with it before, but I don't want to be that girl anymore, and I never wanted to be her with Jesse. I move away a few feet and watch Willa spin. "Thanks. Should I put on my scarlet A now or later?"

"I was kidding."

"I know. So was I." I wasn't, and we both know it. He clears his throat and says nothing. I fill the silence with, "How was school going?" I say it in

past tense and almost correct myself, but everything seems past tense. Everything good, anyway.

“Fine. I really liked my professors. I was working on my thesis for music.”

“Let me guess. Some obscure musician and how he singlehandedly changed the music world though no one but you and three goateed music scholars have ever heard of him?”

“Pretty much,” Jesse says with a laugh. He can laugh at himself; all the Winters can, and it was always refreshing coming from a house where Dad never did. “How about you?”

“I decided to major in psychology, much to my dad’s delight. He wanted economics or business.”

“Seriously? Does he know you at all?”

“I don’t know me at all, which is why I decided to major in psych. I thought I could get some therapy while I figured out if I had any skills whatsoever. You have music, Holly can draw and get straight A’s in organic chemistry, and I, apparently, have *nothing serious* locked down.”

Willa kicks her hind legs enthusiastically, ripping grass from the ground three feet away from where she pooped. If she’s trying to hide it from predators, she’s doing an awful job. She walks back, blinking in the drizzle that falls.

“Good girl,” I say, and her curled tail wiggles.

I turn for inside, but Jesse’s hand on my arm stops me. “I’m sorry,” he says, his eyes searching mine. “It’s just...We usually kid about this stuff, but I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I was trying to be normal.”

I stare up at him. He’s like his sister, who I love with all my heart—just in a package I want to sleep with. “Do you feel normal?” I ask.

“Not at all.”

“So let’s try a new normal, whenever we figure out what that is.”

“Okay.” He tugs at my sleeve. “Clary Sage, just because you can’t play music or draw doesn’t mean you have no skills.”

His gaze bores into mine so penetratingly that I look away. “Well, when I figure it out, you’ll be the first to know. We should go in.”

He follows me through the back door. Willa takes off for the front of the house. When we arrive at the dining area, she stands on her hind legs pawing at Rose, who sits at the table with Holly and Mitch.

“Fine, fine.” Rose lifts Willa into her lap and scratches behind her ears. “I don’t know why this dog likes me.”

“Because you’re her mama,” Holly says. Her head is down, and she doesn’t see the wrinkle in Rose’s forehead. Now that I know why it’s there, I want to give Rose a big hug like the ones she gives me.

“It’s probably because I feed her,” Rose says. “Speaking of which, we’re running out of dog food along with people food.”

“We’ll go to the school soon as these are gone,” Sam says from the window. I can just see where he sits on one of the breakfast counter stools and peers out the glass.

“If someone else hasn’t gotten there first,” Dad mutters. He’s on the couch, separate as usual. He’s been that way since they returned. Anger simmering and rising to a boil every now and again, especially where I’m concerned. I’ve never done anything right, pre- or post-apocalypse.

“If they have, we’ll find somewhere else,” Rose says. “The houses we passed might have something left.”

Dad frowns, grunts, and then picks up a book from the coffee table. Rose shrugs, letting his ire roll off as I can’t. She’s gone through so much, is still going through it, and she isn’t bitter. I want to be more like her, and I decide to start right now. “Hey, Dad. You want to play Life with us?”

He sets down his book and stares at me from under his lowered brow. “Do I ever want to play board games?”

“No.”

“Then why would I start now?”

There are so many reasons I could name: Because the world is different now, because I’d thought he was different now, because you do things with the people you love, especially now. Instead, I say, “I guess *you* wouldn’t.”

He doesn’t blink an eye before he picks up his book. Rose squeezes my forearm and smiles, though her frustration is plain. Maybe it doesn’t roll off as much as I thought.

Craig

NO ONE HAS COME. No rescue choppers, no tanks, no TV buzzing to life with promises of rescue. But I have water and food. I can wait them out. I can wait as long as it takes because it shouldn't be too much longer. It can't be.

I brush my teeth, swallowing the rinse water, then go to my front door for the first thing I do every morning. My hands tremble as I look through the peephole at the opposite apartment's front door. I hold my breath and listen for the ones in the dim hall. They have to die at some point. One morning I'll wake up and they'll be lying there, their horrible noises silenced forever. My knee clunks into the door when I twist for a better view, and I freeze at the shuffle of feet in the hall.

This is not that morning.

The sound is joined by more feet, then a hiss and a groan. I shiver at their approach, though I don't think they've located the source of the clunk. Apartment 4B, the guy with the little dog, limps past with short snuffling noises. 4C, one half of a newlywed couple, follows, her brown hair matted with dried blood. 4F, an older man who practiced piano every night at seven o'clock sharp, brings up the rear. He turns sideways as he passes, regarding my door with dead eyes.

I draw back with a gasp, then throw my hand over my mouth. I can't do it again. Can't bear another two days of pounding on my door like the last time I made an accidental noise. They were close that day, and they zeroed in on my location immediately. I ran into my bedroom, took a precious Xanax, and got under the covers with my hands over my ears.

Thankfully, they pass by. I carefully move away from the door. Next is my daily phone check. I press the button and it comes to life, all glowing apps and normality. No service. Fifty-two percent battery remaining. I read Rose's message quickly, though today it doesn't make me smile. Today it makes me want to leap from my balcony. I power the phone down and set it by the couch.

My big pitcher now holds coffee. I'd call it cold brew, but lukewarm brew is a better description. Still, it's coffee. The last of my coffee. Another

few days' worth. I strain it through an old shirt until I have half a glass. Then I add sugar and stir.

"Should we enjoy this on the veranda?" I whisper. It's a sure sign of crazy to talk to yourself. But I'm afraid if I don't say a few words every day, the silence will drive me crazier and I'll be out of my gourd when rescuers arrive.

I pull on a coat and head for a chair outside, sipping at the brew in the cool, damp air. Sometimes I sit and ponder what Rose and Mitch might be doing. Other times, I imagine being brave enough to leave my apartment. I usually bring a book, though I end up staring into space more often than not. Listening. Hoping.

I most want a book at night, when it's scariest. But my one flashlight would be dead in days if I used it to read, so I remember stories, go through movie plots, and listen to virtual songs until I drift off. It's in the dark that I get up the nerve to say I'll leave in the morning. I'll make it to California's border and into Oregon. Into safety. I won't sit on the balcony waiting all day, I won't give in to my fear, I won't be what Dad said I was.

Every morning, I don't do it. I can't.

The sound of metal crashing to pavement echoes in the distance. Zombies knock things over all the time. By now, I'm used to it—if *used to it* means I jump silently rather than jump while yelping in surprise. Footsteps shuffle below. They always shuffle, never run or trot like live people. I watch three bodies round the corner, heading toward the noise.

The city is desolate. I haven't seen a single live person. Sometimes I think I'm the last human for a hundred miles. Maybe all the way to the border. Sometimes I wonder if the rest of the world has only walking bodies and blowing garbage and strange noises in the dark. And that's when I make myself stop wondering. Oregon was fine—I have Rose's message as proof—and they must be waiting for the virus to die out before they come.

When the sun hits the top of the tall building three blocks down, it's lunchtime. I move inside and pour a glass of water, then set a half cup of granola, four macadamia nuts, and the second half of the canned soup from last night on my table. After two weeks, I know I'd rather feel semi-full for a short while than eat one lousy nut and obsess over the next until it's time.

I have another two weeks' worth of food before I'm out, if I ration carefully. Enough water for a little longer. After that, I'll have to make a

decision. But, for now, I eat until every morsel is gone and then return to the balcony.

Rose

INSANITY, some say, is repeating the same thing over and over while expecting different results. But you don't need to expect different results to feel like you're going insane—repeating the same thing over and over is enough.

Breakfast, cooked in the RV. Watch the windows. Pull water from the well, which, thankfully, is behind the house. Cook and eat lunch-dinner, now one meal to save on food. Watch the windows. Bedtime. Watch the windows, if it's your night. Wake up and begin it all again. The endless loop of emergency broadcasts on the radio has disappeared. And though I didn't put any stock in its promises, the fact it's now dead air is disheartening, to say the least. The waiting, the uncertainty, is enough to drive you bonkers.

The zombies have been outside our fence for days. Keeping quiet has become a full-time struggle. I've never wanted to scream so badly in my life, just because I can't and, possibly, because the food is dwindling. Seven people eat a lot. More than I imagined. What seemed like so much food was not nearly as much as I thought.

I once loved to cook, but after the tedium of two decades' worth of nightly dinners, I swore off cooking unless I was feeling inspired. As it turns out, not starving to death is pretty inspiring. I try to stretch our food, to be creative, but there's only so much you can do with nothing and a fuck of a lot of crackers.

Tonight's dinner is macaroni and cheese, since the cheese will soon go bad. I stir the pot of sauce, grimacing at its gloppy consistency. You need a roux and milk to make a decent cheese sauce, and I have no milk. Too late, I remembered making cheese fondue with wine, of which we have plenty, but to add it now will likely make this concoction worse.

The last of the fruit (apples) and the last of the vegetables (cucumbers) sit sliced in bowls to eat with our meal. Mitch crunches an apple and perches on the edge of the RV's table. "It smells good."

I lift the spoon and watch clumps drop to the pot. "It looks like puke."

"Now I can't wait for dinner. Are you going to eat some of this meal?"

“What do you mean?” I turn off the burner, giving up on creamy or smooth cheese sauce.

“I mean I see you not eating, woman.”

I haven’t stopped eating, but I don’t eat as much. Instead of focusing on the lack of food, I watch the kids eat and think of how it’s worth it. It usually works, until mealtime is over and I want to eat everything in sight. “I was on a diet, remember?”

I smile at Mitch, who does not smile back. In fact, she crosses her arms and glares. “I’ll tell Jesse and Holly what you’re doing. Or your dad.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

“Then you’re an asshole.”

Mitch appears thoughtful for a moment, then nods. “Agreed. I’m an asshole.”

“You’re such a jerk.”

“That, too.”

“Seriously, don’t. I’ll eat more. But a box-and-a-half of pasta for seven people isn’t enough to count for two meals. It’s just not.”

“We’ll find more food.” Though her voice is determined, Mitch’s glance toward the front of the RV—the zombies on the road—is dubious.

“I wish I’d bought ten times as much food at Costco. Soon I’m going to be pouring salad dressing over crushed crackers and calling it a casserole.”

“But you’ll make it taste good,” Mitch says. “Imagine if I were cooking?”

I groan. Mitch hates to cook, and it shows in her meals—she can ruin cereal. “At least I got toilet paper and butt wipes at Costco.”

“I am appreciating the butt wipes, so thank you for that.”

“Holly and Jesse would die without them. One of these days, we’re going to run out, and those kids have never wiped their asses with just toilet paper.”

“Are you crazy? I love butt wipes.”

“Me, too.” I lift a fist. “But, as children of the ‘70s and ‘80s, we managed to wipe our butts without them.”

Mitch lifts hers in return. “We were raised on benign parental neglect, scratchy toilet paper, and processed foods. We’re ready for anything.”

“Amen.”

Tom enters the RV, takes in our smiles and fists, and his expression flattens in disapproval. “They’re moving.”

“The zombies?” Mitch asks.

“Of course the zombies.” Tom stops short of an eye roll, but his annoyance is clear. “What else?”

Mitch stands tall. Though he has inches on her, she’s close to six feet, and she knows how to use it. “It was a simple question. I’ll be in the house, Ro, so I don’t throat punch anyone by accident.”

She picks up the cucumbers and apples, then leaves the RV. I glance at Tom, who looks after Mitch with a frown. “What’s her problem?” he asks.

I stir the cheese glop, contemplating how to answer his question politely, then dump the sauce over the pasta. It forms strings and clumps, but it does smell good. “She doesn’t have one,” I say. “Like she said, it was just a simple question.”

Prolonged exposure to Tom has cemented his place as one of the most infuriating people I’ve ever met. I’ve spent years trying to be nice, to make conversation, to make him feel welcome, and he’s almost always the same—detached and aloof. Still, I tried, in part because I’m nervous around strangers, and Tom wasn’t a stranger. But he *is* a stranger, and he’s the worst kind: a stranger by choice.

He’s been even more of a jerk since our trip downtown. I lived with one in recent years, and I’m not thrilled to be stuck in my own house with another, especially one with whom I didn’t vow *until death do us part*. It’s bad enough that he’s barely polite to anyone, but if I have to watch him rebuff Clara’s every attempt at connection much longer, I will lose my mind.

Tom’s exhale is a disdainful laugh. “What else would be moving?”

I drop the spoon as frustration moves up my throat to my mouth. I usually hold back angry words, but maybe it’s time to let them fly. Keeping them in doesn’t work, I know that much. I spin to face him. “That’s not the point. The point is that it costs you nothing to be nice. Why can’t you give people a chance?”

“You don’t know what I do or don’t do,” Tom says, face tight like I’ve struck a nerve. He seems to grow by inches with his irritation. He doesn’t scare me. Zombies scare me, but not this man who could do better but just *won’t*.

“I know your own daughter keeps trying to talk to you, to get you to love her, and you won’t. Maybe you can’t. Either way, I’m tired of it.”

His dark brows meet, and he growls, “Of course I love Clara.”

My face heats with the arrival of another wonderfully timed hot flash. It pisses me off more, and I clench my hands so that my nails dig into my palms. “And how do you show her that? By yelling at her? Or is it by never once asking if she’s okay when she’s just lost her mother and brother? She cries herself to sleep, and you know how I know that? Because I gave you my bed and sleep on Holly’s floor. Because I’m fucking *nice*! So either be a nice person or...or get out.”

I’m not screaming, but I’m not whispering either. Tom wears a look of shock, mouth open. Good. He needs to be shocked. I pick up my casserole dish, push past him, and head for the house. Halfway there, I stop in the quiet. Blissful, peaceful quiet. No moans or dragging sounds, no skittering of rocks or thumping of bodies into the fence.

Guilt is already creeping into my consciousness, making my stomach tighten. Even if every word was true, I shouldn’t have yelled at Tom. He lost his wife and son only weeks ago, and I told him to get out. How’s that for nice? I shake my head and enter the house, where I drop the food on the table.

Footsteps sound behind me. Tom. Everyone else is crowded around the window, and I join them. The road is empty once again. “Which way did they go?”

Pop points toward town. “Long as they keep moving, we should be good to get to the school. We’ll go to the neighbor’s first.”

“Sounds good. Dinner’s ready. Thanks to whoever set the table.”

“Clara did.” Holly turns from the window and walks for the dining area. “It smells good.”

Tom has filled the glasses with water, and he sits as we approach. I sit at my place and don’t look at him. Mitch dishes out the food, placing a fair amount on my plate with a stern expression, and she smirks at my admittedly weak glare.

I take a bite. It isn’t too bad. Not creamy like regular macaroni and cheese, but hot and filling and salty and possibly the last cheese I’ll eat for a long while. “Sorry it’s not as good as usual,” I say to Jesse, who used to love my mac and cheese.

“It’s good anyway.” He sucks a string of cheese into his mouth. “Thanks.”

Everyone murmurs the same. I nod and watch my plate. Much of the reason I don’t flip out is because I hate being at odds with people. I hate tension. I didn’t call Ethan out on his actions the way I should’ve, I didn’t stand up for myself, all because I’m a coward. Instead of fighting back, I pulled back, marinating in my hurt until things were smoothed over, usually by Ethan’s apologies or my willingness to pretend it didn’t happen. But it was akin to smoothing a bedspread over twisted sheets—it looks good on the surface but is a mess underneath.

After another minute, Tom says, “We should have a plan for tomorrow.”

“Up early, then across the street,” Pop says. “We’ll take the truck to the school. No one should be walking the roads, and we’ll have plenty of room for food.”

“What will we use for weapons?” Clara asks. “I have the knife Dad gave me, but I don’t know if it’ll work forever.”

“Would I give you a crappy knife?” Tom asks her.

“Not on purpose, but I’m guessing it has to be pretty strong to go through skull.”

“If you’re trying to get through thick skull, you’ll need more than a knife,” Tom says, as if it’s the most elementary of ideas. “Maybe you should stay here until you know what you’re doing.”

Clara’s eyes narrow. “How will I know what I’m doing if I don’t get to do it? Besides, I already killed some with that knife, remember?”

Tom doesn’t answer, though his throat moves with a hard swallow. Clara’s speaking of the ones they killed along with Jeremy. I think Tom’s trying to keep her safe, but he’s going about it the way he does everything else—mulishly.

“Clara, I think your dad is worried,” I say. “You know to go for somewhere softer. An ear or eye or maybe under the chin.”

“I am worried,” Tom says. “Worried you won’t follow directions, as usual.”

He regards Clara with something like distaste. Maybe it isn’t truly, but it’s close enough, and I can’t imagine Pop looking at me that way. Nothing I said sank in—not a word of it.

Clara drops her fork with a clatter, eyes incensed. “Are you ever going to—forget it. I’m going, and good luck trying to stop me.”

“You do what you want, Clara. You always do.”

A silence falls over the table. Clara bends to her plate, scooping up pasta and swallowing it almost whole. Tom does the same. If this is how family dinners went at the Jensen’s, it’s no wonder Clara ate half her meals with us.

I choke on an apple slice and force down as much food as I can, then toss the rest onto Jesse’s plate when Holly shakes her head at the offer of half. “You sure?” he asks.

“Of course.”

Jesse shovels it in while the rest of us try to make normal conversation. When dinner is through, Tom stacks the plates and brings them to the sink, where we’ve set a collapsible water container with spigot. It sat at the edge of our picnic table on family camping trips through the years, and seeing it now brings back too many memories of good times. And bad times. And my failures.

Clara throws glances at her dad while he soaps up dishes, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. She doesn’t look angry, just hurt. I scrutinize Tom’s broad shoulders for a few seconds, hoping to gain some clue as to his mood, then realize I’m doing what I always do: searching for a way to be the peacemaker, to not upset anyone. It’s exhausting. I’m tired of other humans, of having no alone time, of zombies and rationing and even myself. I am officially peopled out. All I want is for today to be over.

“I’m going to lie down in the basement,” I say. It’s the only place I won’t be in the way.

“You feeling all right?” Pop asks.

“Just tired. Don’t wake me if I fall asleep. Maybe I’ll sleep until morning.”

“Sleep in your bed,” Tom says, still facing the sink.

My first reaction is to refuse, but it’s my bed. I want it back, especially since I gave it to a jerk. “Okay.”

I walk down the hall and get under the covers. It feels huge all alone, but I don’t mind. There’s no one I have to placate or mollify or convince all is well, and that makes it perfect.

I WAKE EARLY, feeling better than I did. I'm not raring to take on the world, but I don't want to cry or murder everyone, which is more than I can say for last night. A big lump sleeps under bunched blankets on Ethan's side of the mattress. I try to rise stealthily, but Mitch wakes and rolls over. "Morning."

I sit down on the covers with a yawn. "Sorry, I tried to be quiet. Why are you in here?"

Mitch runs a hand through her hair. After almost thirty years of friendship, I'm still envious of the way her dark, silky strands obediently settle into a sleek line. "I gave my room to your dad so Tom could take the couch. Tom offered to sleep in the basement, but I said I'd sleep with you from now on. He asked if I minded, and I told him how we like to have pillow fights in our lingerie and giggle until dawn, so it'd be fun."

I laugh and toss my pillow at her. "Like so?"

"Exactly." She tosses it back. "You know, it's a shame Tom's an asshole. He'd be hot if he weren't."

I didn't lust after Tom the first time I met him, but I was more self-conscious than usual around the muscular guy with the dark eyes and striking bone structure. That passed quickly, and now a decade later all I see are glowering eyes and set shoulders that don't give an inch.

"I guess," I say. "Unfortunately, his personality cancels it out. Are you sure you want to sleep in here? You wake at everything." It's why I gave Mitch the guest room and slept on the floor in the first place. Nobody sleeps in the basement, where only one means of egress could result in being trapped by incoming zombies. Upstairs, every window is an escape hatch.

"I haven't been sleeping well, anyway. You may not have noticed, but there are zombies out there."

"Really? Thanks for telling me."

Mitch sits up. "Go fetch me some coffee, Jeeves. And draw a hot bath while you're at it."

"I wish." I pull out my ponytail and flatten my hair the best I can. "I can do the coffee part, once I brush the disgusting taste out of my mouth. Did everyone decide what we're doing today?"

“First the neighbors. Then the school. You should’ve seen all the knives lined up on the table. Jesse was getting really into it. I think he might be a serial killer.”

I shake my head, but I can’t stop my smile. “Lie down. I’ll get you coffee.”

Mitch drops on her pillow. “You’re the best. Why don’t I find you even the remotest bit sexually attractive?”

“If you did, you wouldn’t like me anymore.”

“True.”

“But thanks for that dose of confidence,” I say. “I’ll be back with coffee if I don’t slit my wrists first.”

Mitch’s laugh follows me to the kitchen, where I freeze at the sight of Tom by the window. He doesn’t turn, and I move out of view to quietly brush my teeth at the sink before I put on rain boots and walk to the RV.

I set water to boil, then start on coffee. Coffee was another Costco purchase and one of the only things I bought multiple months’ worth of at a time. I brew a full pot even though the thought of being in the open makes my heart jump like I’ve had twelve cups already. And it isn’t only zombies—there are likely people out there with guns, and everyone knows people do desperate things. I believe that people are good, or they *want* to be good. Most people, anyway. But some aren’t.

In the best of times, people murder and rape and steal. It won’t be any different now, except there’s no one to stop them. Eugene is hardly a place where you have to watch your back, but that could change. Maybe it already has.

I’m so lost in thought about Holly and Clara being abducted and used for purposes I don’t want to imagine, that I almost scream when Tom enters. I hold my chest and pant, speechless with surprise. “Sorry,” he says. “Thought I’d help you bring coffee and breakfast down.”

I set a hand on the counter and look at my raggedy nails instead of him. Maybe I was in the right for what I said, but I still feel bad about how I said it. Of course, the one time I open my mouth, I go overboard and practically threaten to feed someone to the zombies. “I was thinking oatmeal,” I say. “No one loves it but Pop, but it’s warm and filling and he just bought a new container.”

“I like oatmeal.”

I add oats to the boiling water. Tom's presence is disconcerting. Not only is he a big guy, but it feels as though he's acting in a supervisory manner. The man is a control freak. I side-eye him. Maybe he takes the hint because he walks into the living room and stops by the gas fireplace. "This is a nice rig."

"Pop bought it, hoping to travel. Then he got cancer, and it didn't happen. He thought maybe this summer he'd head for Alaska. I guess that's not happening, either."

Tom grunts. I return to the oatmeal, wishing I had milk to make it tastier, and recall an extra can of sweetened condensed milk bought in case of any pumpkin pie mishaps last Thanksgiving. "Will you stir the oatmeal? I want to get something from the house."

I hand him the spoon and take off down the grass, my breaths coming easier once I'm out of the enclosed space. I grab the flashlight by the basement door and head to the downstairs pantry, which is a closet with shelves and nowhere near as full as I'd like, find the milk and grab what's left of the walnuts, then cross the grass to the RV.

At a snapping sound in the woods, I freeze. It came from behind the RV, where the fence marks the end of our property. Another snap and a crack, and then a doe and fawn bound through the trees. Crashing follows them—a man in a Carhartt coat, whose hisses are loud enough that Tom steps through the RV's door. I raise my finger to my lips and move inside quickly.

"They must eat animals," I say once the door is shut. "It was a man chasing a doe and fawn."

"Anything alive, I guess." Tom leans on the small island that separates the kitchen from the rest of the space.

The oatmeal is done. I open the can of condensed milk, pour some into the pot, and let it heat through. I debate adding the walnuts, since food is precious, but I decide to think positively and dump them in. We'll find more food, and we need the protein. "It's ready."

Tom takes the pot. "You get the coffee."

I grab the coffee pot and shut off the machine, then make sure everything else is off. The batteries recharge via solar when there's no electricity, but there isn't much sun in an Oregon April, and I don't want to waste what power we have.

As we make our way to the house, it occurs to me that maybe Tom is trying to be more agreeable. If so, I should show him I noticed. “Thanks for helping.”

“I came up there because you shouldn’t go alone. You should know that.”

I stop on the patio and find his eyes chock-full of disapproval. Mitch is right: they’d be attractive, and he would be good-looking, if he ever fucking smiled or expressed anything but displeasure. It’s too early for this bullshit, but it seems Tom is ready to school anyone, morning or night.

“I have a dad, Tom, in case you didn’t notice. I’m also forty-two and more than capable of deciding what I can and can’t do. But thanks for the concern, if that’s what it is.” I pull open the door. “Coffee’s getting cold.”

Tom walks past me with a frown, but he doesn’t say a word.

Tom

THE HOUSE across the street had a shotgun and box of shells, as well as hygiene supplies and some food. It's maybe four days' worth for the seven of us. We'll need more to reach the end of the month, but I think we'll need more than a month anyway—we'll need a lifetime. Even if the zombies die after thirty days, I have my doubts all will return to normal.

No planes, no radio reports. They can broadcast long distances these days. They can do all sorts of things, and there's been nothing. The world has gone down the tubes. I'm sure of it—have become more certain as the days tick by since the trip downtown. This is it. This is my future: a daughter who hates me and people who can barely stand me.

I tried to be nice to Rose this morning, and I screwed that up, too. I followed her to the RV to tell her that I would try with Clara. Not only did I *not* say that, but I also lectured her on safety. I couldn't help it. We have to lay some ground rules or things will get out of control. Everyone knows that.

We lock Willa in the basement when we leave for the school. She's usually quiet, but no one knows if she'll bark while we're gone. She stands on the top step whining, and I'm thankful when her pitiful noises fade into silence. Little purse dogs aren't my thing, but Willa is a good girl. She seems to like me, though the scraps of food I sneak her from my plate likely help with that.

After a check of the road, which is clear as far as we can see, we jump in the truck. I sit in the pickup's bed with Rose and watch the woods intently. I'm not nervous about making the trip myself, but Clara out here makes me jumpy as hell. If she were gone, that would be the end of me. There'd be nothing left to live for.

If I were gone, I'm sure she'd be sad but relieved to have me off her back. It wasn't always like this between us, but I've forgotten how to be any other way. I'm not a drunk, but everything else I hated about my father is exemplified in me. The very thing I railed against until I finally surrendered—doing things the “right” way, my father's way—I forced on my kids. Am I truly that much of an asshole that I wanted them to suffer the way I did?

I push the unwelcome thought from my mind. I have the conversation with Rose to thank for that, and by thank, I mean *blame*. Why I let her get inside my head is anyone's guess. The woman doesn't have enough sense to use the buddy system.

She sits on the storage box in the bed, wearing an army-type jacket—green, with various pockets—and beat-up black paratrooper boots, the latter of which made Mitch laugh when Rose broke them out earlier. *You still have those?* Mitch asked, and Rose joked she'd been saving them for the zombie apocalypse. Apparently, I wasn't wrong when I thought she dressed decades younger than she is. I have to admit she looks ready to fight, though. Her hair is tied back, damp with the drizzle that falls, and she holds her knife at the ready. The rain is good; the patter on leaves in the woods will help to hide any noise.

One of the last houses before the incline to the school has a decent privacy fence. We've been hiding out so far, which has worked, but with what I suspect, what I *know*, about the virus, we need a taller boundary around the house—one zombies can't see through. I'll have to insist on that.

Woods are on our right, field and playground on our left. The school is built into a slope and is made up of two connected structures: a round white building on the lower level that houses the cafeteria and gym, and the upper building that houses the classrooms and offices. Both levels have a small parking lot out front. We enter the lower lot, stop at the sidewalk outside the round building, and exit the truck.

"I never thought I'd be looting my elementary school," Clara says. She went here, though Holly and Jesse lived in another neighborhood when they were young. They didn't meet until middle school, when the Winters moved to this part of town.

"I prefer the term plundering," Holly says, and they giggle. I do my best to hold in my sigh, though Rose eyes me as if I haven't.

There are several doors into the cafeteria, and all are locked. I lift the prybar from Rose's emergency kit, set it between the door and metal frame, and motion for the mallet. A set of irons, like I used in my volunteer fire department days long ago, would be easier. Almost nothing stops a halligan and axe.

Sam pounds once. It's loud, and the once-straight prybar is now warped. I hold up a hand. "This thing's a piece of crap. We'd be better off breaking

the glass with all the noise we'd make."

"Fuckers," Rose grumbles. "Those kits were expensive."

The windows are five feet tall and wide enough to get through sideways. I pull a flattened roll of duct tape from my coat pocket. "I'll tape the glass to keep it from falling."

Duct tape comes in handy more often than not, so I took it from my house when we left for Rose's. Sam helps tape the glass top to bottom and in an X. The kids and Mitch face outward, watching the big unfenced field behind the school. Only one house is visible past the school grounds, but there's an entire neighborhood behind that house.

"That's about as good as we'll get without wasting all day here," Sam says.

I raise the prybar and give the glass a solid thwack. A few pieces fall, but most remain stuck to the tape. I widen the hole and pull out a chunk, then work on the next piece. Rose helps, her leather gloves protecting her fingers, until we've emptied out the frame.

When nothing appears at the window, Rose steps inside then opens the nearest door with its push bar. "Seems quiet," Sam says.

"Stay here and watch," I order the kids. Holly and Jesse turn to the field and lot. Clara does the same, though with an attitude. Rather than admonish her, I follow the others inside.

The cafeteria is seventy by thirty feet. At the far end of the room, past lunch tables folded against the wall, the serving window is open. We peer inside. Two doors—an interior door and an exterior door—let in light, though the kitchen remains gloomy and gray.

"It's not very big," Mitch says.

"It was always a small school," I answer. Mitch *would* complain, probably because this place was my idea.

Rose lifts a knee to the steel counter and climbs through to unlock the inside door. I glance out the cafeteria windows and see the kids' backs, still doing as they've been told. I follow Mitch and Sam from the cafeteria into the gymnasium, where we enter the kitchen. A large stainless-steel freezer and two refrigerators take up the back wall. Two rolling steel tables sit in the center of the tile floor, and the right side and rear are all cabinets.

Rose opens a cabinet and makes a happy noise. "Beans, enchilada sauce, canned fruit." Another door reveals granola, pasta, and small

containers of cereal. She lifts the top package of a stack of tortillas and inspects its contents, then crouches by several large bags. “Oats and beans from Crest Mills. They’re that stone mill by Junction City. Too bad we’re not by them. It’d be a good place to plunder.”

Sam hefts a bag of red potatoes onto a counter. “You can plant potatoes, but damned if I know how.”

“Once they sprout at the eyes,” Rose says. “It’s supposed to be easy, but mine were the size of marbles and tasted horrible. I’m sure I’d murder these, too. We should just eat them.”

Sam shakes his head sadly. “I raised an Irishwoman who can’t grow a potato. Where did I go wrong?”

Rose drops her head back and laughs, her body going limp the way it does when she surrenders to hilarity. Which is far too often, especially in a situation like this.

The refrigerators and freezers are a total loss. Vegetables rotted to a soupy mess, meat gone soft and greasy. Mitch opens an individual-size container of milk and groans. The smell of it all combined is pungent, and it fills the room although we shut the doors quickly.

“Not as much as we hoped,” I admit. So much of it was frozen, now thawed, and there’s likely less due to spring break. I hadn’t considered that until now.

“Still, this is great,” Rose says. “Good idea, Tom.”

I pretend I’m not pleased at the praise. “Maybe we should get one of your cars, too. I can go.”

“I’ll go with you.” Rose raises her eyebrows in rebuke, though her smile teases. “Don’t you know you shouldn’t go alone?”

The reference to this morning doesn’t tickle my funny bone the way it does hers. I know she’s trying, and somewhere inside I want to try in return, but I can’t get past the stumbling block of annoyance, of anger, that seems permanently lodged in my chest. It’s been there for years, but it’s doubled in size in recent weeks, threatening to choke me once and for all.

“Can you run?” I ask.

“I can run for three minutes on the treadmill. After that, I’m zombie food.”

Mitch laughs, and Sam says, “I’d rather we don’t split up. Let’s see how this fits first.”

I head outside through the kitchen's exterior door, pushing it wide so that it locks open. Rose follows me to where Holly, Clara, and Jesse stand. She touches Holly's coat sleeve. "You okay, sweets?"

I notice Holly's pallor, the way her eyes shift quickly from side to side. "Yeah, I just don't like it out here."

"You'd be crazy if you did," Rose says. Holly responds with a slim smile. "We're going to start loading. Yell if anything comes, and we'll leave it. Nothing here is worth dying for."

"Okay," Jesse says. He's a solid kid all around. Has some muscle and might actually be handy if Rose ever stops coddling him.

I walk past a square gated area that contains dumpsters and a small trash compactor, then hop in the truck and start it up, wishing it weren't so damn loud. I go easy on the gas to keep the engine low, but I'm nervous as I take the grass around the compactor area and pull to the kitchen door.

"We're good to start loading," Mitch says.

Rose climbs into the bed of the pickup and holds out her arms. Mitch deposits a giant bag of oats in them, which Rose sets in the truck. Sam is out next, arms laden. I go inside to help with any last gathering. When I come out a minute or two later, Clara is in the truck with Rose. Holly and Jesse stand by the window, watching the field and lot.

"My mom made good enchiladas," Clara says while she stacks a can of enchilada sauce. "Maybe I can make some one night."

Rose takes the potatoes from Sam and sets them on a few large cans. "That would be great. I remember your mom saying she liked to cook, but only certain things."

"She said she made five things well and the rest sucked." Clara takes Mitch's latest load and deposits the boxes behind her before she summons a small smile. "But she tried."

Rose tucks a stray lock of Clara's hair behind her ear, returning the smile, and my edginess turns to a pounding in my ears. Clara is supposed to be with Holly and Jesse, not reminiscing about her mother to Rose, of all people.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my voice too loud. They were murmuring, and my annoyance is plain in my tone and volume.

"Helping?" Clara says slowly.

"Sounds like chatting."

“All I said was that Mom—”

“I heard.” It hurts to hear talk of Sheila, it hurts to see Clara get comfort I can’t give. Comfort I want, too. “Maybe your mother would’ve tried harder if you’d bothered to come home more often. Or at all.”

After I say it, once my pulse stops its frenetic beat, I know it’s bad. I know by Rose’s shocked expression, the way she turns to Clara as if I’ve fired a shot and she’s trying to stanch the blood.

Clara’s eyes fill. Spill over. She stands, and Rose stands with her, hand on her arm. Clara pulls away. “It’s fine.”

It’s not. Her sob makes that clear as she walks toward Holly and Jesse. Rose watches for a moment, torn on whether to follow, and then sinks to her knees. She doesn’t look at me, only holds out her arms for the next load.

Mitch climbs into the bed. “Here, I’ll help. You guys hand it over.”

My face burns with shame. That stumbling block is gone, and what it concealed—regret, sorrow, pain—bears down on my chest and strangles my throat. I’ve held back tears for two weeks, but they’re here now, fighting to get out. I stride to the tables, grab a few large cans of pineapple, and set them in Mitch’s arms. She looks at me squarely, judgmentally, as she takes them. I deserve the judgment, and I take it in return.

The stacks grow taller. Smaller things on the bottom so they stay put. Larger things over top. Rose is pale, her lips tight and colorless, and she keeps her eyes on the food. She can’t dislike me more than I dislike myself, though. To put that on Clara was unforgivable. It’s possible even Sheila wouldn’t forgive me that.

Rose and Mitch get to the ground, and we fill in the bed with what’s left. In the truck, it looks like more than it did inside, which would be great but for the heavy pall that has descended over our group.

I’ve given in to my anger one too many times. In the back of my mind, I always suspected the day would come when I went a step too far. Where the damage wrought was irreversible. But, then again, I didn’t really believe it, not enough to stop. I wish with all my heart I’d heeded that warning.

“I just realized they’ll have toilet paper inside,” Rose says. “And teachers always have those antibacterial cleaning wipes and baby wipes. Maybe we should grab them.”

“My butt says *yes, please*,” Mitch says, and Rose grins. I’m jealous of their friendship. Jealous of Clara’s friendships. Hell, I’m jealous of Sam for

being so beloved.

“It should only take five or so minutes.” Rose looks to Sam. “Are we good, do you think?”

“I think so. I’ll take Jess to check the road before we pull out.”

“I’ll come with you,” I say to Rose. “I know my way around.”

Her shoulders tense, but she nods. I follow her inside, where she hands me a flashlight and a bag. She sets a cardboard box of paper napkins on the counter to grab on the way out, then walks through the double doors of the gymnasium.

“The first bathrooms are right behind that wall,” I say.

“I’ll take the girls’ room.”

She says nothing else. I want to apologize, to ask for help with Clara—help with me—but I don’t know how to broach the subject. I don’t know what to say. Sheila always came to me when I screwed up. She made it easy, laughed it off whenever possible. Here I am, criticizing Rose for coddling her son in the zombie apocalypse when Sheila coddled me like a big baby for most of my adult life.

Rose enters the door marked *Girls*, and I step through *Boys*. The stalls have several rolls of toilet paper each. I pop the plastic case off the stall walls and toss the rolls into the bag. Move to the next. A bang comes from outside. It’s muffled, and I can’t tell from what direction it came, only that it sounded like a gunshot.

I race from my bathroom to find Rose running from hers. “What was that?” she asks, breathless.

Before I can answer, she runs for the cafeteria. I catch up quickly, and we skid to a stop at the sight of walking bodies outside the open door. Rose whimpers as she creeps forward. The truck is in the same spot, and it’s surrounded. Mitch stands on the food in the bed, screaming into the distance, “Stay there!”

The window to the left shows at whom she screams—the kids and Sam, who stand in that fenced area on top of the compactor and dumpsters. Clara and Holly hold hands, each with a knife in their free hand. Two sides of the same coin, Sheila used to say, as Clara is right-handed, and Holly left.

There have to be forty zombies if there’s one. They rock the pickup, hoarse groans echoing. They pull at the fence. Rose looks to the right, across the field, and her face goes whiter than I thought possible. Another

pack makes its way down the slope and across the grass toward the school. As long as these make noise, more and more will arrive.

“We have to draw them away,” Rose whispers. “Are you coming?”

Her eyes are fierce. That she thinks she has to ask is comment enough on my behavior, but that can be examined another time. I’d die for Clara without a second thought—it’s the one area I’ll never fail her.

“We can go out the upper doors by the classrooms,” I say. “We’ll call them up the hill and lead them to the intersection.”

Rose nods and sticks her flashlight in her pocket, then draws her knife from her coat. We return to the gym. I grab a few whistles hanging from a wall hook before we travel through the gym doors to the upper level’s courtyard between classrooms. The concrete is stained with brown blood, the murals on the walls splattered with the same, and the plants in the center garden trampled flat.

I picked up Clara and Jeremy here many times. I grew teary-eyed at their first days of school. Attended parent-teacher conferences where I was told my kids were bright and friendly and a pleasure to have in school. And still I treated them as though they set out to displease me. To disappoint.

The doors to the parking lot are open, locked into place the way they do when pushed wide. They were closed when we arrived. I noticed it, looked for it. People took refuge in here, turned, and then something caught their attention so that they pushed on the doors and headed for my daughter.

I peer around the corner of the building. Two hundred feet away, zombies clamor for the kids. As of now, they’re safe in their enclosure, though one section of fence is beginning to sag. I hand Rose a whistle. “We go to the far end of the lot. Blow the whistles until they’re coming, then head up the hill.”

We run across the upper parking lot, not bothering to hide, and then stand together in plain sight while we blow the whistles again and again, until a few zombies in back hear over the hisses of the others. Rose waves her arms as she blows, her face pink with effort.

Sam and the kids turn our way. I raise a hand and lower it, palm side to the ground. “Get down!”

Sam shouts and points to his feet. One by one, Jesse, Holly, and Clara disappear below the top of the fence. Sam follows. Maybe Mitch will get the picture and can find some way to hide under our supplies.

I blow my whistle, shout along with Rose. This time, with nothing more interesting in front of them, the entire pack spins our way and starts across the lower lot. When the first few reach the closest edge, I take Rose's arm. "Let's move up."

We back along the upper lot, biding our time, and then step onto the grassy incline beyond the school. Behind us is still clear, though I don't expect that to last—the whistles will call everything in range.

The first of the pack hits the upper lot and pours onto the asphalt. They've grown in number with that group from the field. Rose breathes heavily beside me, and my breath is no better. This many coming for you is enough to weaken your lungs.

We walk backward, glancing over our shoulders. When all but one have reached the upper parking lot, the pickup appears from behind the cafeteria and rolls toward the enclosure with Mitch at the wheel. The kids and Sam climb onto the compactor, then step over the fence and into the bed.

The pickup reaches the parking lot exit. Rose sobs once, her hand to her mouth, and moves a few more steps. I release my pent-up breath and take her arm again. "Let's go."

We run uphill through an opening in the chain-link fence, where what we couldn't see behind the trees comes into view: zombies on the road, more coming from the woods, and all moving our way. The pickup sits at the school entrance as if waiting for us, and I wave it in the direction of the house. The truck turns right almost reluctantly, but Mitch does as asked.

"We'll go up and find our way around," I say. Rose's eyes are huge, but she begins to jog, slowing when ten appear in the intersection at the top of the rise. I keep my grip on her arm. "Straight to the stop sign, then veer right. We can get through."

It's not a lie. It's not the truth, either. It's a maybe. But the sounds behind us have grown into a softer version of that hum we heard in town, and it's our only option. Rose puts on a burst of speed, and I match her on legs slick with sweat.

At the top of the hill, I yank Rose right. She stumbles, shakes me off, and shoots diagonally across the intersection. There are fewer zombies, but I shout when she barely dodges the hand of a snarling man. I plow through behind her, pushing first a woman and then the man from my path, and reach Rose's side as four more appear from the trees. I lift my knife, but I

only have to shove them again. There are too many to kill. If we stop, we'll be surrounded.

The road ahead is clear, though the woods aren't. Bodies break through brush on their way toward the school. Rose glances that way and keeps running until we round a bend and stop short. Thirty, forty, are in the road, feasting on something. Maybe a deer. Maybe a human. The woods here—our shortcut to Rose's house—are full of crashes and snapping branches.

We back up and hide behind a tree. "We need to get inside somewhere," Rose whispers.

There aren't side streets here in the country. The nearby houses might be full of zombies, but I know of one that's empty: mine. Though it's the last place I want to go, I say, "My house."

Rose jogs in the direction we came. We have time to make it before the zombies do, if we get a move on. Our boots pound the asphalt, and we turn into my driveway as the first few of the large pack appear down the road.

Clara's car still sits, door open, in front of the garage. Bodies lie at the porch, and I divert my gaze so I won't see Jeremy's among them. I retrieve the spare key from its spot beneath a rock and fit it in the door. Rose rushes in and I follow, though I have to force myself over the threshold.

Clara

SAM PACES THE LIVING ROOM. His face is almost as pale as his hair, and he rubs his eyes every few minutes, digging fingers in until the skin beneath is baggy. I stand with Holly and Jesse by the front window to watch for Dad and Rose. There are only zombies.

We came home quickly after our narrow escape and unloaded the truck as fast as we could, tossing items onto the back patio. Sam moved the truck to the gate again while we brought our food inside. It sits on the counters and kitchen floor, since no one has the heart to put it away.

I thought we were dead outside the school. I clutched Holly's hand and wondered how you outlast monsters who keep their eye on the prize without the need for sleep or food or anything else. The answer: you don't. Then Dad and Rose came to the rescue, drawing the monsters toward themselves, and we were safe. But they weren't; most of the bodies followed them. We watched many more cross that intersection at the top of the hill as we drove toward Holly's house.

Mitch comes to the opening of the dining area, arms around her waist. "Anyone hungry?" We all say no, and she drops against the wall. "Yeah, me neither."

The last thing Dad said to me pierced my heart, in part because I wish I had come home more. I thought there'd be time. Endless amounts of time to see Mom and eat her terrible dinners. I'm hurt and angry, but it doesn't change the fact that I want him here. Just like he'll do anything to save me, he'll do anything to get back to me. He'll rescue me and then scold me for breathing wrong. That's Dad, in a nutshell. He'll get Rose home, too. Knowing Dad, he'll make sure she gets home before himself. He's chivalrous that way, and he knows how much I love her.

I peek over the wood again. More than a dozen. Jesse turns from the window. "They won't get past with those out there. I'm going to take care of them."

"I'll do it," Sam says, and Jesse shakes his head vehemently. "Jesse, you —"

“I’m sorry, Pop, but this is bullshit.” Jesse squares his shoulders, and his normally easy-going tone is firm. “I’m twenty-two years old, and you’re trying to keep me in the house like I’m twelve. If I weren’t here, I’d be in Washington dealing with this shit. What if they don’t come back? Are you going to keep me inside forever?”

He stalks to the kitchen, slams open drawers, then throws open the basement door and thuds down the stairs. “Geez, Jess,” Holly says under her breath. “It’s not like we’re trying to be quiet or anything.”

Sam watches the hall for a long minute, then turns to Holly. “I’m following your mother’s wishes here.”

Mitch walks into the living room. “Jess has a point, you know. Rose gets a little crazy about this stuff.”

Sam tugs at his short beard, grabs a flashlight, and heads for the basement door just as Jesse reappears with full arms. He dumps the variety of tools he holds onto the coffee table and pushes his hair from his face. It swoops to the side in a way that makes my stomach swoop, and it also makes me realize that almost every guy I’m interested in resembles Jesse in some way—and that attribute was what attracted me to them in the first place. Nick’s hair had that same swoop, Jake had the blue eyes, Keith the soft lips and strong chin. I’m ridiculously transparent, and possibly not quite as over pining for Jesse as I told myself.

Jesse reaches in his back pocket for his fitted leather work gloves, then pulls them on. “You can come with me, or not, but I’m going down there. They can’t get us through the fence. All we have to do is wait for them to come to it.”

“Hang on,” Sam says. “Can you give me three minutes?”

Jesse nods, arms crossed over his chest. Sam leaves for the hall and the back door closes a moment later. “Where’s he going?” Holly asks.

“Don’t know. Are you coming with me?” Jesse stares at his sister in challenge. “You’ll have to do it sooner or later. You should get it over with.”

Holly chews the end of a finger while she walks to the coffee table, where she lifts a steel spike attached to a glossy, ball-shaped wooden handle. “What’s this?”

“Scratch awl,” Jesse says. “From Mom’s woodworking period.”

Holly sniffs in amusement. Rose is forever getting excited about a new hobby, and when they tease her about it, she only laughs and says she's well-rounded. "Do you think it would go in far enough?" she asks. "Like, into an eye or something?"

Surprise propels me forward. "Wait, you're going?"

Holly's eyes are huge and dark, but her head shifts up and down. "They have to get home, right? And Jess has a point. You know you can do it, I don't. I'll use this and bring my knife from the school." She walks to the foyer, lifts the seat of the storage bench, and retrieves the gloves we used earlier. "Thankfully, Mom doesn't throw anything out unless it's in front of her or she's in her Feng Shui period."

Jesse and I laugh. "All right, that's enough ranking on your mom," Mitch says.

"*Ranking?*" Jesse asks. "Is it 1985?"

"Funny guy." Mitch punches his arm. "What should I use? I'm not letting you young'uns get all the glory." She roots around in the pile. "Screwdriver's longer than that awl, Holly-Bird. If you're interested."

The back door opens. Sam appears a moment later, out of breath and with a duffel bag dangling from his hand. It clanks when he sets it on the table. "Have a look-see. I had this stuff ready to go, just in case." He turns to Jesse and extends the sheath he wore to the school. "This is my old knife, but it's a good one. Had it for over thirty years. It's yours."

Jesse draws it out. The handle is bone and silver, and the sturdy blade curves in slightly to end in a point. It looks deadly and narrow enough to slip through an eye socket. "It's great. Thanks."

"Your grandma got that for me. Handmade. As long as you take care of it, it'll take care of you."

"You should keep it if Grandma got it for you." Jesse holds it out. He and Holly never met their grandmother, as she died before they were born, but it's always been clear how much she's missed by Rose and Sam.

"She'd want you to have it. Don't be a numbskull."

Jesse's smile is brief but no less bright for that. "Thanks, Pop."

Sam nods. "Since I can't talk you out of it, here are the rules. We go down together, we stay behind the fence, and if any of you try to pull a Rose Winter, know that I will whip you soundly after I drag you back over." We snicker. "Be careful and don't be stupid."

Mitch lifts an axe from the bag. “I like this. What else do you have out there, Papa?”

“That’s about it. Got rid of a lot of tools when I sold the house.”

I move to the bag and pick up a black hammer type-thing with a spike where the nail puller would normally be. The hammer part has small spikes, and the longer spike is silver along the edge, where it’s more like a blade.

“That’s a war hammer,” Sam says. “A buddy of mine got it for me as a gag, but it’s a solid piece.”

“Use it,” Jesse says to me. “It fits you.”

“A *war hammer* fits me?” I ask, though I like that he thinks so.

“Yes,” Holly says with a laugh, twisting her long hair into a knot on the back of her head. “It does.”

I set it down, then pull on my gloves and coat with shaky hands. Maybe I killed them on the porch with my dad, but that feels like a million years ago. And it was different—it was for Jeremy. I was more determined than afraid. Now I’m just afraid. But Dad and Rose are out there with many more than the dozen on the road. I’m behind a fence. I’ll do what I can to get them home.

Mitch swings the axe. It would be a scary sight if I didn’t know her—the woman is tall and tough—but Mitch’s cover doesn’t match her insides. She’s like a mom herself, though she always says Rose’s kids are more than enough for her.

She motions me and Holly closer, then speaks out of the corner of her mouth, “Ladies, I’m going to need you to fuck shit up out there. No squealing or otherwise being a discredit to your gender. Got it?”

“How about grunting?” Holly asks.

“Grunting’s cool. You ready?”

We set out for the road. Halfway there, an old lady spots us. She rams the fence, arms outstretched and fingers clawing the air. Her noises alert the others, and they stumble forward until they’re clumped together. The fence rattles, though the posts don’t budge.

“Spread ‘em out when we get down there,” Sam says, looking less enthusiastic than ever at agreeing to this.

Closer, the zombies take on details. The teenage boy still wearing a backpack, the woman in the yellow and green U of O tracksuit, the

professor-type guy, the hippie lady with gray hair, the cop whose presence doesn't bolster my confidence that this situation will ever be under control.

Their noises—hissing, harsh, and raspy—grow louder. The fence moves. Just half an inch, but enough to stop Holly and me in our tracks. Mitch plows onward. “They won't leave now that they know we're here. Fuck shit up, ladies!”

Holly starts forward again, faster this time. She isn't normally the type to saunter headlong into dead bodies. I catch up to her. “Where's Holly? Who's this person practically running toward zombies?”

Holly tries for a smile, but her stiff lips barely move. “There are, like, five people I'd do anything for. You and Jess, my dad, Pop, and my mom.”

“I'm honored.”

“You should be.”

We stop three feet away from the fence, out of arm's reach. Because I'm not in a complete panic, I have time to take in their faded eyes and rough grayed skin. The wounds that, though gaping, don't bleed. One—backpack kid—is almost fresh. He has red blood and pinkish-gray skin, with eyes less faded and veins not yet as dark. His parents must have worried about him, if they lived long enough to worry.

Mitch walks left, moving close to the fence as she does, then lightly taps her axe on the wood. Two break from the crowd and follow her. Then two more. She steps back, winds up her arms, and brings the axe sideways into the head of the hippie lady. The woman goes down, and Mitch flies forward when the axe doesn't dislodge from skull. She lets go just before she hits the fence and backs away from the reaching hands, then glances at the rest of us. “I did that so you could see what *not* to do.”

Jesse's laugh comes from behind, and then he's at the fence with his new knife. He seizes the professor guy by his shirt and rams the blade into his eye. Then he moves down the line, waits for one to follow, and gets him in the ear. Dark gore sprays from the hole he makes. He may not be a ninja, but he's not hurting in the strength department.

“Ears work,” Jesse calls, then shakes off his knife and goes for another.

I inspect my hammer. The spike could get stuck same as the axe, though blunt force is worth a try. I step to the side of backpack kid, then bring the hammer down on his head with all the strength I can muster. His body jerks at the force before he tries to catch me, not the least bit hindered by the

blow. If anything, his groans are more enthusiastic. I, on the other hand, have an aching arm and the likelihood of a sore neck later. Blunt force is not a winner.

Holly sets her knife in the grass and walks past me to the fence, paler than ever. The kid grabs at her, but she pushes his arm aside and holds his wrist in her right hand. She's a full foot shorter, and she lifts onto her toes as she raises her awl in her left hand and jams it into his eye. He drops, and she jumps back when another takes his place.

"Oh, God," she says. "That felt..."

"I know," I say.

Holly takes a deep breath, captures the next one's arm, and slams the spike in again. It falls. Another lunges for her, but she dances down the fence line. It follows, and this one she strikes in the temple. She retreats from the fence, shaking out her arm, and turns to find my jaw hanging.

"Damn, girl," I say, and she laughs.

I take my knife from my sheath and head for a woman. I don't want to get close, but there's no choice in the matter, and I'm not about to be a baby while Jesse looks on. The woman takes hold of my coat with gray, rotted fingers. I hold the knife in my fist and stick it into her light brown iris. Her fingers loosen, her body slumps over the fence, and I shove her to the ground.

While I stab the next, Jesse takes down one beside me, and Mitch jabs another with a knife. Sam finishes off one and then stands close by, ready to jump to our rescue if necessary. When all are down but the final one, he brings his long knife home under its chin.

Over fifteen zombies lie on the ground. Rose and Dad don't suddenly appear, but we've made it safe for them to arrive. Holly pants, the freckles on her face matched by the spatter of brown juice on an old light blue jacket I remember from high school.

Silently, so we don't attract more, we make our way to the house and remove our outer clothing. Holly washes her hands at the sink and releases her hair from its knot, letting it fall around her face and reverting to my sweet-tempered best friend.

"You were like the Angel of Death out there," Jesse says to her.

"Seriously," I say. "I'm glad I've never pissed you off."

Holly smirks. "Never pissed me off *enough*, you mean."

Jesse turns to me. “Not too bad, either. I was going to call you War Hammer from now on, but that was a no-go. I guess we’ll stick with Clary Sage.”

I smile sweetly. “And I’ll continue to call you Dickwad.”

EVENING COMES without Rose and Dad, and we really start to worry. We went down and killed another four who stopped by the first group, then dragged them all across the road. Way past nightfall, Sam stands at the window, though it’s pitch black, and he’s not only told us there’s no point but also assured us they’re somewhere safe for the night.

“Why don’t you kids go to bed?” he asks.

“I’ll stay with Papa,” Mitch says. “Get some sleep. I’ll wake you if they come.”

Holly hands Sam the windup flashlight, kisses his cheek, and takes a lantern with us. We have two lanterns, but we use them sparingly because batteries are low.

After the three of us brush teeth at the sink, Jesse follows Holly and me down the hall and hangs back in her doorway. “I think they’ll be home in the morning. Like last time.”

Holly sits cross-legged on the bed, her eyes huge and now absent of her earlier bravery. Willa curls by her side, head on her knee. “I’m scared, Jess. What if Mom doesn’t—” She shakes her head, unwilling to say it aloud.

“I know.” He comes into the room and drops to her quilt. “Let’s make a rule. No matter what, we stick together. The two of us don’t split up—the three of us, if Clary Sage wants in.”

The smile he gives me is lit ghostly by the lantern. I bring my feet onto Holly’s desk chair and hug my knees to my chest, happy to be included. With Dad gone, they’re all I have. “Of course I do.”

“Okay, cool.” Jesse heads for the door.

“Jess,” Holly says, “do you want to sleep in here, on the floor?”

“Sure.” He returns quickly, as though he dreaded going to his room and sitting in the dark alone. I don’t blame him.

Holly slides under the covers closest to the wall. It's her side. Mine is the outside, as it has been since our first sleepover. I tuck myself beneath the blankets and watch Jesse set out Rose's sleeping bag and pad on the floor. Once he's climbed in, only a few feet away from me, Holly shuts off the lantern. I hear her breathe in, about to add something more, but she only says, "Good night."

We say good night and then I lie in the dark, wondering where my dad is. If he'll return, and how soon we'll fight if and when he does. I'm tired of it, but he doesn't give me a chance. He never has. And while I admit I have a part in our conflict, I'm trying. I told Jesse I wanted a new normal, and I still do.

Holly's breathing soon takes on the deepness of sleep. I turn onto my other side. Five minutes later, I turn again. "You awake?" Jesse whispers from the floor.

"Yeah. I can't sleep."

"Me neither."

A moment later, the covers rustle and he sits on the floor by the nightstand, his shoulders a foot away. His profile is just visible in the moonlight that streams through the uncovered part of the windows, and I study him while he can't see.

Crushing on your best friend's brother doesn't leave much room for sugarcoating, especially when you've known him since middle school. He's farted in front of me more times than I can count—gleefully, I might add—been sick, been obnoxious, been grouchy and happy. He's had stupid hair and cool hair and said dumb shit and surprised me with his perceptiveness. And I've never stopped liking him through any of it. Of course, this means he's seen me in the same circumstances—though not farting gleefully—and that has likely killed any chance I had with him.

"So, talk to me," he says.

"About what?"

"Whatever."

"What happened to Super Bitch?" I've been wondering what became of his girlfriend. Holly didn't like her, and Holly likes everyone, so I didn't like her either.

"Long story, but it all ends with it wasn't meant to be."

I poke my hand from under the covers and flick his head. “That was a terrible story.”

He rubs his ear. “Yeah, okay. Neither of us was feeling it, I guess. And then she made out with a friend’s friend at a party in front of me, which was the icing on the cake.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, she was aptly named.”

He doesn’t sound broken up about it, but it had to have hurt, at least a little. My straightforwardness with guys has been known to verge into bitchy territory, but that crosses a line to malicious. “What an ass,” I say. “Did she ever apologize?”

“Boy, did she ever. Listen to this.” Jesse’s voice brims with the humor I know well, and I’m relieved any hurt has been replaced by amusement. “She said she wanted to make me jealous, so that I knew she could leave me at any time. Also, she said if we made up, I could only practice guitar when she wasn’t around, since it felt like I loved it more than her. Oh, and did I want to move in together?”

I cover my mouth to stifle my laugh. “That is crazy. Like, *crazy* crazy.”

“Right? I thought she was semi-normal up until then. We weren’t even serious.”

My heart soars at that last bit of information. “Silly girl. Like you’d ever love anyone more than your guitar,” I say, and his teeth gleam in the moonlight. “Well, let’s hope the next one doesn’t do that.”

“I’m done for a long while. Relationships aren’t worth all that stress, you know?”

My heart takes a nosedive. I conceal it with a joke. “Pretty sure you know I know. Come on over to the unserious side. We have cookies and blissfully empty beds, when we want them.” Jesse laughs softly, though he doesn’t reply. “I thought I was crazy, but Super Bitch was a whole new level of bananas.”

“You’re not crazy. I don’t think, anyway. Obviously, I’m not a good judge of who’s crazy and who isn’t at present. What did your psych major say?”

It said I have father issues. Intimacy issues. “I don’t think it matters anymore,” I say aloud. “But I’m not Super Bitch, so that’s a win.”

Jesse looks in my direction, though I don't know how much he can see. "How about you? That guy you were with?"

"He wasn't anyone." I close my eyes. Poor Nick. "That sounds horrible. He *was* someone. He was Nick, and he went to school with me. I was giving him a ride home. He grew up in Eugene."

"Wait, Nick Grundy? He went to your school."

"Yeah. I forgot he said he knew you when we were talking in the car."

"He was a good guy."

"I figured that out too late. But he seemed like it." Tears fill the space under my eyelids, then leak out. I wish I'd left Nick on the side of the road. He would've had a better chance.

"Hey." Jesse's fingers brush my hair. "You didn't know what was going to happen."

"But I was shitty to him before that. When my dad called, Nick said he'd come to the house. He was so nice about it, telling me it would be okay. I thought I'd apologize after, but I couldn't even do that because he was dead. Because of me."

The words rush out along with tears. I can't apologize to Nick, but I'll try not to do it again. My issues don't matter anymore, I decide, because I will be different. I *am* different. I guess losing people you love has a way of doing that.

I wipe my face on Holly's sheet. "God, are you tired of me crying in front of you yet?"

"Have you met my mom? I think she secretly loves when people cry in front of her. I'm well-trained in the role of cry facilitator."

It's true. His hand still rests on my hair, brushing it softly. I want it there all night. To superglue it to my head. "Your mom is the best at that. But who do you think does it for her?"

Jesse's hand stops before it resumes stroking. "A few years ago, I would've said my dad. Now I don't know. Shit, that's depressing."

"I'm sorry about your dad. About all of it."

Jesse leans his head back. "Yeah, me too. I want him to be okay, and I want to punch him. My mom doesn't know, but I heard him say something not so nice to her a while ago, and then I started listening more. It was just little things, like he'd ask her about a client and then ask if she got his

digits. Or joke that she was looking for a date when she was dressed up for an open house. But you could tell he wasn't joking, you know?"

"Yeah," I whisper. It would devastate Holly to hear this, and I understand why he kept it from her.

Jesse swallows. "It wasn't all the time, I don't think, but if you...if you could see her face when he does it." He inhales shakily, then blows out a breath. "I started coming down more just to make sure she was okay. I said I was playing with some guys I knew, that we were thinking of starting a band after school ended. Then I'd go to the movies or something when I was supposed to be with them."

This. This is why I like him, no matter his hair or his flatulence or anything else: his heart. "I don't blame you. Your mom doesn't deserve that."

"I know. I was going to see how things were this weekend, then talk to her about it. I didn't know if she'd be mad, but I couldn't watch it anymore."

His voice is tight with anger, maybe with unshed tears. After a few moments of deliberation, in which I decide it's stupid to worry that simple comfort will reveal my true feelings, I lay my hand over where his sits on my hair. He runs his fingers along mine, keeps them there lightly, and my entire body thrills at the touch of our fingertips. *Fingertips.* I might explode if he ever touched more of me, but I'm more than willing to take my chances.

"She'd never be mad at you for that," I say.

It's the truth, though she'd be mad at herself for letting him see. Rose will discuss your issues until the end of time—we had many deep conversations during my teen years—but she barely speaks about her own. I knew about Ethan's addiction, but only as much as Holly did, and I never would've guessed there was more based on Rose's demeanor.

"Just don't tell Holly." Jesse pauses. "It might not matter anymore."

Sorrow laces his voice. For his mom, for his dad. "I won't. You can trust me."

"I know."

He squeezes my hand before he returns to his sleeping bag. I wish he hadn't let go. In this room, with the moonlight and what he's told me, things feel different. I'm an adult in age, but I haven't felt like one very often. I

haven't had to be one—as long as I had decent grades, my responsibilities were pretty slim. I was lucky.

No more, though. Just weeks away, with the zombies dead, the world might be unrecognizable. If it's spread as Dad thinks, our lives will be about trying to move on from the deaths and destruction. There might not be a government, or even many people, and two semesters of psych are worthless when it comes to finding or making food, or any of the other things we'll need to survive.

I lie on my back and stare at the ceiling. I'll do my best to get ready for that future, whatever it brings.

Rose

TOM'S HOUSE smells slightly of death. He moves into the kitchen and tries the dry faucet before he fills two glasses with water from a pitcher on the counter. Canned soup and crackers sit nearby, and a couple of grocery sacks rest on the floor. I guzzle half my water. That was over three minutes of running, and I feel it in every bit of my body. I don't know how much longer I had in me, honestly, and I'm glad we stopped.

"There's more water," Tom says. "We filled containers before we left."

"I'm good for now." I peek through the opening between the kitchen curtains. The zombies announce their arrival and come into view a moment later. A few wander down the driveway, though they do so aimlessly. "They didn't see where we went. I think we're okay."

I sip at my water. Now that I can breathe, relief floods in. If I had to rate my life in terrifying moments, watching my children surrounded by zombies with almost no chance of escape blows every other moment out of the water.

"It worked," I say. "Thank God the kids got away." Tom, staring at the floor by the sink, doesn't answer. "Are you all right?"

"That's where I did it," he murmurs.

"Did what?"

"When Sheila...turned. That's where I took a knife and..."

I look down at the tile, which he must have cleaned—an awful thought—and then up at Tom, who still watches the floor. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that was..." I trail off when I can't find a non-gruesome way to end the sentence.

"She's upstairs. Jeremy's outside, and—" All six-plus feet of Tom begins to shake, and he brings his hands to his face as a sob breaks through. I want to comfort him, but I'm not sure he wants comfort. Not Tom, who eschews every attempt at friendliness or sympathy.

"Clara might as well be gone, too," he says between ragged breaths. "She hates me, and I don't blame her."

I feel even worse about what I said yesterday. I know Tom loves Clara. I only want him to show her, precisely because she *doesn't* hate him. Not yet,

anyway. I cross the tile and touch his arm. “Clara doesn’t hate you. She loves you.”

“I keep fucking it up, Rose. Every time I tell myself I won’t, I do it again.”

My eyes flood at the raw anguish in his voice. Tom’s words remind me of Ethan, of his promises to change, but they feel different. I’d wager my life that adult Tom has never cried like this in front of someone. Sheila once mentioned she’d only ever seen a tear or two out of him at his mom’s funeral.

“But she’s not gone,” I say. “She wants you with her. If you can’t see it, I can. All you have to do is let her in.” Tom shakes his head in a hopeless motion, as if he doesn’t know where to begin. I give his arm a gentle squeeze. “Tell her you love her. Tell her you miss Sheila and Jeremy, too. Hug her. Cry with her. The rest will fall into place, I promise.”

His breath hitches a few more times, thick fingers still covering his face, but he nods. It’s possible I’ve never seen someone more in need of a hug, or simple kindness, than Tom at this moment. “I should warn you,” I say, “I can’t be this close to a crying person and not hug them. It’s coming any minute now, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

He sobs out a laugh and sniffs, but he doesn’t refuse. I wrap my arms around him as much as I can, since he isn’t what one would call tiny. Slowly, incrementally, Tom relaxes. His hands drop from his face and his arms come around my shoulders. I breathe deep, hear his heart slow. I once read that a twenty second hug has a therapeutic effect, releasing oxytocin and calming the mind. Twenty seconds is an awkwardly long time to hug someone you don’t know well, but I hold on and envision all the ire leaving him. When his grip lessens after a minute, I pull away. “I’ll let you go now. Don’t want to freak you out.”

The skin under his eyes is puffy, and he looks tired, older, but his lips move up the tiniest bit. “Thanks.”

“Never underestimate the power of a hug.” I dip my hand into my shirt collar and pull a tissue from my bra, then pass it to him. “Don’t worry, it’s clean.”

Tom stares as if I’ve handed him a Martian. “You honestly just pulled a tissue from your bra. Are you my grandma?”

I cover my mouth to keep in my laugh, then double over when that doesn't work. My shoulders buck while I try to quiet myself, knowing my hysterics are partly a release of tension from our close call. After a minute, I calm down enough to straighten, though my chest jumps with silent giggles. "Sometimes I forget what's normal in civilized society. I guess that's not, huh?"

"It is if you're eighty."

I suppress another crazed laugh. Tom watches me, eyes glinting with amusement and tissue balled in his hand. Maybe it's odd to stick tissues in your bra, but he used it. "The kids call them boob tissues," I say. "Aside from the fact that I'm allergic to Oregon, someone always needed a tissue when they were little, so I started sticking a couple in my bra. They come in handy."

Tom lifts the tissue as if to say *touché*. I smile and walk to my water glass, then take a gulp and brace myself. Avoiding confrontation is my schtick, and bringing it up again is never easy, especially when it's to apologize. "I'm sorry for what I said yesterday. I know you love Clara, and I didn't want you to leave. I only wanted you to understand."

"You were right."

"Those are my three favorite words," I say. Tom's sniff is more of a laugh, though when I turn, he watches me somberly. "But I took my anger about other stuff out on you, and it wasn't fair."

Tom's shoulders lift and fall. "Maybe, but you *were* right. I'm sorry I made things harder for everyone."

"Well then, stop doing it already," I say in a fake exasperated voice.

He rolls his eyes like a teenager. "Fine. Geez."

Multiple jokes in one day. It might be a record.

A CHECK out the sliding glass doors reveals zombies in the woods. While we wait for them to leave, we sit on the couch, eat crackers, and drink warm beer from the fridge. Tom turned an easy chair to face the wall, though not before I saw the dark stain on the seat cushion. He glances to the stairs every so often, face strained.

“Do you want to go upstairs?” I ask. “I’ll come with you.”

He shakes his head quickly. “I don’t want to see her now.”

“I could check first. I—”

“No,” he says quietly. “I’ve thought about burying her and Jeremy. And Nick.” I cock my head in question. “Clara’s friend. I had to do it, but…” He gazes at the stairs and wipes a hand on the knee of his pants, then switches his beer to his other hand and wipes that one, as though erasing the things he’s done.

“I’ll help you.”

“It’s too dangerous now. I don’t know when it won’t be.” He finishes his beer and stands. “Another?”

“Sure. I want to be drunk when they break in and eat us.”

Tom arches an eyebrow and leaves for the kitchen. When he returns, I ask, “Do you think everyone is okay?”

He hands me a bottle and sits, elbows on knees. “They’re fine. They didn’t have far to go, and the road looked clear in that direction. What could have happened?”

“They could’ve gone into a ditch, been thrown from the back, and knocked unconscious.” I can picture it so clearly—Jesse and Holly lying in the grass, unresponsive until they wake to a nightmare too late to get away. “Or, I don’t know, maybe the truck’s gas tank exploded.”

Tom chokes on his beer. “Where the hell did you get that one? Why would it explode?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes tanks explode.”

“Not very often. What else have you got in that head of yours?”

“That’s it for now.”

“The tank is not going to explode, and they didn’t run into a ditch. Is Mitch a good driver?” Tom asks. I nod. “Then they’re fine.”

I let out my breath. He has to be right. The exploding gas tank is not one of my more rational ideas, and I’ve had some doozies. “When the kids were little, I wouldn’t let them have helium balloons in their rooms at night.”

“Why?” Tom asks.

“You know how they float around the room? I was scared it would dance its way over while they were sleeping, the dangling ribbon would sit on their necks, and they would turn over and accidentally strangle themselves.”

Tom leans back and pinches the bridge of his nose. “That’s just plain crazy.”

I giggle. The second beer is kicking in. My house is full of alcohol, but we’ve restrained ourselves from drinking more than a few ounces for fear it’ll be the moment zombies come through the fence. After this afternoon’s events, I don’t care—I need a drink.

“And I wouldn’t let Jesse wear hooded sweatshirts, the kind without a zipper, to kindergarten. I was afraid the hood might get caught on a hook, no one would notice, and he would hang himself.”

Tom’s incredulous expression pronounces me insane, and then he starts to chuckle. “What else?”

“I cut their grapes until they were six. Holly told me, the first week of kindergarten, that I wasn’t allowed to cut her grapes for school because she wasn’t a baby. And I used to bring them into bed with me when they were sick because I was sure they were going to choke to death on phlegm. And, when I was a teenager, I made up a secret kiss signal with my dad so I’d be able to tell if it was an impostor pretending to be him on the phone.”

“Was Sam a spy or something?”

“He was an English teacher.”

Tom dips his head, cutting off his loud laugh. We listen, but the noises come no closer. “Don’t tell me any more, or they might make it in here.”

“I used to tell Ethan my crazy thoughts. If I said them out loud, I could let them go. I haven’t done that in a while.” I watch my fingers tap my bottle impatiently, as though everything I’ve kept inside wants out. “I’ve been expecting him to die for years now. Maybe with a needle dangling out of his arm or in a car wreck because he nodded out. We were so disconnected it was like he did die at some point, and I mourned him then. I just...shut down. I don’t know when it happened, exactly.”

“It makes sense to me,” Tom says. “There’s only so long you can live that way before it changes you.”

“It’s true, but it sucks.”

“It does.”

I get the feeling he’s speaking from experience, and I wonder with whom. Having this conversation with Tom could be weird, but he’s easy to talk to when he actually talks. We listen to the noises outside while his eyes flick to the stairs again and again.

To distract him, I ask, “How do you think this virus happened?”

“I don’t know. But I can tell you what I read the night before. I was reading about the virus online, and you know how it goes, clicking from one link to the next, and I ended up on Reddit. A few people said it was us. The U.S. government. Some military weapon allowing soldiers to continue fighting after death. They said the project was called Born Again.”

He frowns dismissively, and I say, “But you don’t believe that.”

“Seems far-fetched they’d test it out in the real world, especially since the soldiers would be just as likely to eat their own side as the other. As a bioweapon, maybe you could plant it in a country somehow. Other people said it mutated, jumped from an animal to us via a parasite. The Borna Disease Virus lives in the nervous system, so it could be why they still walk even if they’re dead. Have you ever seen those videos of the zombie ants?”

“Holly and Jess showed me once.” I recall the image of the poor ant, frozen in place on a leaf while the fungus grew a stalk from its head in order to deliver spores to other unlucky ants. “But that’s a fungus, right? It scattered spores around.”

“Yeah, and thank God this isn’t. Imagine if it were floating in the air out there? One post said this virus works the same way somehow. It controls the nervous system, which is why you have to get the brain or brain stem, shut it down.”

“If someone did make it, that someone is an idiot.”

“If someone did make it, that someone is responsible for the largest genocide the world has ever seen.”

Tom lifts his beer to his mouth while I finish mine. I need it for what I’m about to ask. “This is it, isn’t it? The end of the world.”

In my heart, I think I know. But Tom is sensible—he doesn’t imagine all the unlikely ways things could go wrong. He sets his empty beer on the side table and turns to me, lips compressed in apology. “I think so.”

“You were supposed to tell me it was a crazy idea so I could let it go.”

“Can’t do that. But I promise the gas tank didn’t explode.”

“I guess that’s something.”

One side of Tom’s mouth lifts. He checks his watch. “I don’t think we’re going anywhere tonight. We can sleep down here.”

“I’m fine on the floor.”

“You’ve had enough nights on the floor. You get the couch.” When I protest, he raises a hand. “You’re insulting me, the gracious host who’s fed you crackers, beer, and nothing else. Sheila would kill me. Are you hungry?”

“I saw some soup on the counter. We can eat it cold if you don’t have a camping stove.”

“We have one in the garage.”

I follow him through the kitchen. Tom turns on his flashlight as we enter the three-car garage. Half of it is walled off by drywall with a door set in the center, and enough light comes in the garage windows to see the one SUV inside. The remaining half of a parking space is taken up by a worktable and at least seven bicycles sitting on the floor and hanging on the wall. Except for two smaller bikes, the rest appear to be Tom’s size.

“Are they all yours?” I ask, and he nods. “You have a lot of bikes.”

“I do.”

“Is it like one for every day of the workweek? Or to match your outfits?”

Tom smiles and shakes his head as though he finds me odd yet entertaining. It’s only taken a decade. “Outfits. Definitely.”

“For real, though. Why so many bikes?”

“They do different things. You have your mountain bike, your road bike, your fixie, your commuter, your touring bikes. They can be made of steel or carbon fiber or titanium or any number of materials. You need a different bike depending on what you want to do.”

“And for outfits.”

“Right,” he says. “And outfits.”

I grin and point to the door in the wall. “Is that the hangout for the kids?”

“Yup. And exercise room.”

“I’ve never seen it.” In later years, Sheila and I usually met at the café by my office, but I’ve heard about the room from Holly and Jesse. The kids had loved having a place to go with no parents, and I loved that I knew exactly where they were.

Tom leads me around the SUV and past neatly organized shelves to the door. Inside, two windows allow in enough late afternoon light to see a sitting area with rug, couch, and chairs. The furniture faces a large TV and

stereo system on one wall, while shelves of DVDs, CDs, and what look like records take up another. In the back are free weights, a weight bench, and a couple of tall workout machines whose functions are a mystery.

I point to one—all metal bars and pulleys, with another bench attached. “I know that one’s for waterboarding, but what’s the other? The rack?”

“That one’s for drawing and quartering.”

I keep my laugh low; a zombie lurks in the trees outside the window. Though far enough it probably won’t hear, I’m not about to tempt fate. “I’m impressed. You know your medieval torture. I thought I was fancy with my treadmill, but you win.”

“You did all right running before.”

“I was dying inside, believe me.”

Tom hands me the flashlight and goes to the shelves we passed, where he pulls a long, deep bin from a top shelf and sets it on the garage floor. It clunks as if heavy, and his easy handling of the weight is proof of how often he used his medieval torture devices.

“Should be in here.” He pulls out a green camping stove and small tank of propane. “If we crack a window for fresh air, it should be fine. We won’t have it on long to heat soup. Will you grab that lantern?”

I find the electric lantern among spare propane tanks, something made of sheet metal, and sets of camping dishes and cookware. Once in the kitchen, I peer through the crack in the curtains. Immobile bodies lay scattered on the lawn; loitering bodies stand in the street.

Tom noiselessly retrieves a pot and lid, then the can opener. He dumps in two cans of lentil soup, lights the burner, and sets the pot on the camping stove. “Don’t want to open a window in case they hear.” I nod despite my misgivings, and he asks, “What’s the matter?”

“We won’t know we have carbon monoxide poisoning until it’s too late.” I think I can feel the odorless gas fogging my brain, though I know that’s impossible in the five seconds the stove has been lit.

“The carbon monoxide detector runs on batteries, and it’s right outside the kitchen.”

“That makes me feel better,” I say, “until it goes off and draws all the zombies to our door.”

“You worry about everything.”

“Not *everything*. The thing is I’m a naturally happy person. I just fuss about stuff.”

Tom stirs the soup. “Worry obsessively about stuff, you mean.”

“I prefer *fuss*.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

That C appears in his cheek. I elbow him and move to the cabinets, opening two before I find bowls. Yesterday, I couldn’t imagine being in the same room with Tom without murdering him, and now we’re making soup while we joke around. Maybe it’s the beer, or the tears, but he’s mellowed an enormous amount in a short span of time. Or maybe it’s the opportunity to change. Sometimes you need someone to assure you it’s possible before you believe it yourself.

“Soup’s on,” Tom says. “Let’s eat in the living room.”

He points me to the silverware drawer while he dumps soup into the bowls. It smells good and looks hearty. I hold my hands over the steam to warm them. Though it’s still light, the cool dampness of the April evening is finding its way through layers and into bones.

He sets the pot in the sink and lifts the bowls along with his eyebrows. “And we’re still alive. Imagine that.”

I follow him into the living room smiling. I could get used to this Tom.

I WAKE at the first gray in the sky. Zombies stand on the road and in the trees, but far fewer than yesterday evening. Tom lies in a jumble of blankets on the floor, pistol beside him on the rug. I tiptoe to the kitchen, drink some water, and eat a few crackers. We’ll take his food and whatever else we can carry when we leave.

Yesterday, we ate our soup and went to bed just after dark. When it came time to get the blankets, I saw Tom steel himself for the trip upstairs, and I offered to go instead. The hallway linen closet contained only sheets and towels, and I grabbed Clara’s comforter and pillows, then went to the guest room to look for extras in that closet. I didn’t want to bring down Jeremy’s.

The smell that wafted from under Tom and Sheila's bedroom door was bad, but no worse than what's assaulted my nose for weeks now. The boy in the guest room, however, was bloated and blackened and liquid, with a horrific shit-like, greasy odor. I shut the door quickly, gagging, and went for Jeremy's bedclothes, though I covered his comforter with a spare sheet and used it myself.

I saw a sewing kit in the linen closet last night, and I hope Tom won't be angry at what I plan to do this morning. I creep upstairs and pull out the kit and some sheets, then stand outside Tom and Sheila's bedroom door for a full minute before I work up the courage to open it.

The smell is manageable, as I thought. I move to the window, open the curtains, and turn to the bed. It's bad—Sheila's face is purple and black, a hole in her cheek edged with rot—but she hasn't become the bloated mess of that poor boy, Nick. Tom killed him while still human and barely infected, which leads me to think the full-fledged virus keeps putrefaction at bay.

I imagine Tom carrying Sheila to their room, laying her down and tucking her in. The blankets are neatly folded over, her head centered on the pillow. Before yesterday, he seemed so brusque, at times unfeeling, but there's a gentle, heartrending love in the way she's arranged.

I take a shallow breath and pull back the blanket. Sheila's clothes are stained brown with blood, but the sheet beneath her is clean. It happened downstairs, and most of the mess must have stayed down there, on that chair and the kitchen floor. I don't need the white sheets after all, since Sheila lies in bed over a white top sheet.

I'm scared. Scared of dead bodies, scared of death, the way most people are these days. For centuries, millennia, people cared for their dead until funeral homes took over the business. They washed them and cared for them and said goodbye. It's the right thing to do, if you can, and I can. I remind myself this is all that's left of someone who loved, who was loved, and there's no reason to be afraid.

The sheet is too low. I pull on dishwashing gloves I found in the kitchen, then try yanking at the fabric. When that doesn't work, I ease my hands under Sheila's torso and scoot her down a foot, the way I moved Holly and Jesse when they were small and I didn't want to wake them. My

back complains that Sheila is heavier and I'm older now, but I ignore it. Thankfully, the gloves protect me from the feel of cold flesh.

I once watched a show where they prepared a body for a green burial and have an inkling of what to do. But first, I have to remove the knife buried behind Sheila's ear. I grasp the handle and ease it out, wincing at the crunching sound of blade on bone, then set it on the floor. I smooth her blond hair while I concentrate on how pretty it looks and not the sunken flesh of her face below it.

Then I fold the sheet. First, all four corners in. Then the top and bottom, followed by the side closest to me over the length of Sheila's body. The other end is longer, as it covers more of the bed. I draw it toward me, tuck it under Sheila's side, then move to the far side and pull it through, folding and tucking it under again so I have an even edge to sew. With a needle and white thread, I work quickly from top to bottom with neat looping stitches. I sewed some when the kids were little, enough to sell a few handmade items. I never officially learned how, and I can make it look good, though a true seamstress would likely be horrified by what's beneath.

When I'm finished, Sheila looks tidy, which is how I remember her. She made me feel unkempt, though not deliberately, and not necessarily in a bad way. Her hair was smooth where mine is unruly, her clothes clean lines where mine are grungy or fairy-like. Her words were meaningful and judicious where mine tumble out and venture so far off topic I can hardly remember where I started.

I remove my gloves and sit on the floor with the pink and green flowered sheets I found in the closet. The knife from Sheila's skull is only feet away. I push it under the bed with my foot and cut the sheet in long thick strips with the kitchen scissors, then fold the strips to hide the raw edges. When I have three, I feed them under the shroud—one below Sheila's head, one around her middle, and one above her feet—and tie them in simple knots that resemble bows. I cut them to the same length and whip stitch the very ends closed to hide the edges, then stand at the end of the bed.

I would prefer fresh flowers, but this looks pretty. Sheila looks pretty, as she usually did. Floorboards creak in the hall, and I leap, my heart pounding. Tom stands in the doorway with his face in shadow.

“I thought maybe...” I begin, then stop because I don’t know how to explain what might not make sense to him. “I can take it off.”

Tom steps into the light, eyes brimming with tears, and shakes his head. He walks forward and drops to his knees beside the bed, then rests his forehead on Sheila’s torso. I tiptoe downstairs and into the kitchen when I hear his voice, deep and low. Whatever he says to Sheila is between them, and it feels wrong to eavesdrop even if by accident.

I search the motionless figures on the lawn through the window until I find Jeremy. He lies on his side, body shrunken and long limbs askew. He looked like his dad, would likely have been the spitting image when he grew up. He idolized Jesse the times we were all together, eyes shining with a kind of hero-worship and almost too shy to speak. I picture Jesse out there and hug myself tight; it’s a wonder Tom can smile at all.

Fifteen minutes later, Tom joins me at the kitchen window. “Why’d you do that?” he asks, his voice hoarse.

“I thought maybe you’d want to say goodbye.” I keep my eyes on the lawn. “I thought she’d like it. She was always so pretty.”

Tom swallows, loud in the silence. “Thank you.”

“I wish I could do it for Jeremy.”

“I’m coming back for him when it’s safe.” Tom stares out the curtains for a long moment, then draws them closed. “The woods behind the house look clear, but I don’t know if there’s anything past where I can see. Are you ready?”

“When you are.”

We pack what we can fit in old backpacks. Tom returns from the garage, holding the sheet metal thing I saw in the camping bin. “A folding oven for camping. We could use it for baking on your fireplace insert or a camping stove.”

Normally, I would marvel at something so neat, but we’re about to run through the woods, and breathing is difficult. I take another sip of water and trip over my feet on my way to put the glass in the sink. I can barely walk, and I’m planning to evade a gazillion zombies?

Tom zips his pack, throws the bag with the folding stove over a shoulder, and readies his knife. I clench mine in my fist. This is crazy. We’re going to die.

Tom checks outside the sliding doors. “Still good.”

I tug at my backpack straps, feeling weak and ridiculously ill-prepared next to him. He's all muscle and take no shit. I, on the other hand, am half-convinced fairies are real. Or magic is, at least sometimes. I hope it is. I need some now.

He glances at me, does a double take. "You okay?"

I attempt to put some verve in my nod, but even that feels feeble. Tom lets go of the blinds. They swing into place, and he settles his bulk against the door frame, arms crossed. His dark brows are low, but he seems more serious than annoyed. "Let's play a game."

"What?"

"A game. It's called *What's the Worst that Could Happen?* So, what's the worst that could happen? Lay it on me."

I moisten my lips. The possibilities are endless, but it all ends the same way. "We could die."

"We could always die, at any moment. How could we die now?" It's dim, but I swear there's a twinkle in his eye.

"There could be a thousand in the woods, and we could be surrounded," I say. "Or maybe I trip on a branch, and you turn back to help me and they eat you, too. Or we get through the woods, but we lead them to the house and then they break down the fence and we die along with the kids. There could be a cougar. Or maybe we get lost in the woods. People die of exposure all the time."

"So we die. It'll be over quickly, unless it's exposure, and then we won't care anymore."

I lift my stiff shoulders. "No biggie."

"We're not dying today." He's *smiling*, the lunatic. "But point taken. I won't turn back to help you."

Though I would've sworn nothing about this is funny, a laugh slips out. It grounds me, puts me back in my body instead of floating in my worries.

"Ready?" he asks.

I grip my knife tighter. "Ready."

Tom slides open the door.

Tom

ROSE PROVES to be a lot quicker and quieter than I expected. Her face is set while we move through the woods, stopping at any noises. She knows the route as well as Clara, and I let her lead the way. Being early spring, there isn't much cover, but the downed branches and trees of years past hide us well enough from a body here and there.

It isn't far. At worst, we'll have to run it and hope whatever follows doesn't break down the fence after we go over. Rose steps on a bed of leaves and then freezes at the loud crack that follows. She turns to me and mouths *Sorry*.

I shrug and wave her on. Maybe I would've been irritated a day ago—unjustly irritated—but that's changed. Yesterday, I finally realized how stupid I've been. How wrong. Rose called me on my shit, and while I like being called on my shit as much as anyone does, she was right.

This morning, I stood in the hall and watched Rose gently weave the ties beneath Sheila's shroud and finish them off with needle and thread. Her face was relaxed, serene, and her movements tender. There was no reason to do that for Sheila, for me, except kindness. Those moments I had with Sheila, where I said goodbye and promised to do better with Clara, are something for which I can never properly thank Rose.

Rose comes to a halt and motions to a few zombies ahead. I gesture left, and she edges in that direction. The rain, which was soft enough to barely make its way past the fir boughs, begins falling in earnest. It's good, and it covers the crunch of a stick under my boot as we make our way around a blackberry thicket.

A house sits just beyond the trees at the end of a long driveway, and at least twenty zombies mill outside. I put a hand on Rose's shoulder. She spins around in alarm, then relaxes when she sees it's me. I point at the pack, she nods, and we slink from tree to tree. Raindrops run down Rose's face and turn her ponytail a deep brown. I blink them from my eyes.

Only a quarter mile to go, through an open field and then more thick woods to the back of Rose's house. "Should we make a run for it?" she whispers, looking behind us at the pack and then toward the field again.

I nod. “Stay close. Shouldn’t be more than three minutes.”

Rose half-smiles before we take off into the field. The ground is wet, low-lying areas soaked, and my boots squelch in the muck. Rose slides for an instant, regains her footing, and keeps going. Groans come from behind, and a quick glance confirms we’ve been spotted. The tree line is only a hundred feet away. I could outrun Rose, but I won’t. We’re in this together. It was a sentence of sorts two days ago; now it’s a comfort.

The pack is midway through the field when we hit the trees and jump over a downed trunk. Rose pushes branches and leaves from her path, backpack bouncing, and raises a hand when the rear of her house is in view.

Two by the fence, and they’ve seen us coming. I draw my knife as Rose pulls hers from her coat pocket. She needs a sheath of some kind—one wrong fall and she’ll slice herself. She ducks under a low branch and heads for the smaller zombie, as is practical. A hand on the shoulder, her knife under the woman’s chin. I kick the feet out from under the large woman who lunges for me and bend to deliver the fatal blow after she lands on her side.

I remove the knife with an internal shiver. Maybe I’ll never get used to that feeling—a sucking wound, the scrape of bone, and the smell that blossoms when the dark matter inside is released. Rose pulls my arm, and I become aware of the sounds behind us. That pack, crashing through the trees.

I vault the fence after Rose, take her hand, then yank her through the trees and down the grass. So far, I can’t see the pack. Maybe they didn’t see where we went. We pass the RV and make it behind the tall bushes by the patio, where Rose skids in her mud-caked boots. I keep her upright, and we listen to the cracking of branches two hundred feet away, loud enough to be heard over the raindrops on the patio roof. Rose watches through the bushes for a minute. “I think we’re okay.”

“We need a privacy fence,” I say. I realize how dictatorial that sounded and add, “If you want.”

She smiles. “I was thinking the same thing.”

The back door flies open. Holly and Jesse bound out, followed by Clara, Mitch, Sam, and Willa. Rose meets her kids without a moment’s hesitation, her laugh no less joyful for being quiet. Clara smiles tentatively, hopefully. That she can’t be as glad to see me is both a shot in the heart and a kick in

the ass. I want back all the years I yelled and fought and refused to listen. That's impossible, but I swear I'll do better. I promised Sheila this morning. I promised myself.

I set down my knife and go to Clara, gathering her in my arms. She returns the hug, though she's stiff. "I'm so sorry, Clare-bear," I say into her ear. "Can you forgive me?"

At the nickname I haven't uttered in years, she loosens and holds on like when she was small. "Of course, Dad," she whispers.

My eyes sting. *Of course, Dad.* I don't deserve that easy forgiveness. I don't deserve it one bit, but I'll do my best to earn it.

THE KIDS HELPED to kill that pack in the woods behind the house. It had to be done, so that we could steal fencing from nearby houses. Sam, Jesse, and I went out with the truck and got lucky at some new construction down the road, where we found enough privacy fencing to cover the front and back of Rose's property, along with posts. Under a tarp in the half-built house, we found bags of cement mix.

From places down the road, we managed to salvage enough fencing for the sides, and the new fence screens the yard. If you're at a distance, the top of the house is still visible on its rise, but we black out the windows come nighttime when lights make our presence obvious.

Rose has a post hole digger, and Jesse is busy using it while I get the wood in order. "This deep enough, Mr. Jensen?" he asks.

I take a look. It's plenty deep. Jesse insisted on taking over, and he's been at it ever since, getting the holes dug faster than I would've. "Looks great," I say. He's a good kid—a good man—and I add, "Call me Tom, Jesse. You're making me feel old."

"You *are* old," Clara says from where she helps Rose.

"I take offense to that," Rose says. "You're only as old as you feel inside, and I'm stuck at thirty. Sometimes twelve. Plus, have you seen your dad run around and lop heads off zombies?" It's absurd to feel pleased by the compliment, but I do. Rose looks up from the wheelbarrow that holds the concrete and winks. "You'd think he's eighteen instead of sixty-five."

Clara and Jesse laugh while I shake my head, though a chuckle comes through. Rose knows damn well I have almost twenty years to reach that age. Clara catches my eye, still smiling. We've had three days without a fight—unheard of until now. I'm tempted to post one of those wipe-off boards like they do on job sites to count the days without injuries.

"We're ready when you are," Rose says.

Sam, Mitch, and Holly are making their way down the side of the yard with their own set of posts and concrete. Thankfully, the found fences were panels, and we were able to attach them to the posts of the original fence. Not only would hammering pickets take longer, but it'd be loud as hell. I lift a new post into the hole and tamp down the gravel, then make sure it's flush with the middle of the new fence panel. These posts aren't strictly necessary, but I feel better knowing there's added stability in case of pressure on the fence. Rose fills in the hole around the post with dry fast-setting concrete, and Clara slowly dumps the gallon bucket of water on top.

"I know they say you can do it dry," Rose says, watching the water sink through the concrete into the hole. "But it just feels wrong. When we built the first fence, we used wet mix, but we also didn't use concrete that hardened in fifteen minutes."

"You built it?" I ask. I was impressed with the strength of the posts and figured it was a professional job.

"We were barely able to make the mortgage every month at first, but we loved this place. We did everything we could ourselves." Rose's gaze wanders the trees, the house, the fence. I wonder if she's thinking of Ethan. Of better times. She shrugs. "It's not fancy, but I still love it."

"Is that why you never got a new place? You were in the right business for it."

"It's either this or my spread in Idaho, and we paid this off early a year ago. You know what I like better than a fancy house? No mortgage."

"I hear that," I say.

"Besides, I'd have to sell a lot of houses to pay that fifteen-million-dollar bill."

"That you would."

Clara looks confused but doesn't question us. I like having this in, knowing the joke. Building something—whether it's a fence or, possibly, a friendship. I think of Rose as a friend, and I hope she feels the same.

We move down the line while Jesse leaves to dig the final holes. Though the gate has been covered with panels and doubly secured with a plank of wood you turn horizontal to lock, it remains a weak spot. Rose cuts her eyes my way, lips twisted. “I don’t like it, either, but I can’t think of something better.”

“How’d you know what I was thinking?”

Clara giggles. “The frown, Dad. You have a wide assortment of frowns.”

That isn’t true. I cock my head at Clara, and both she and Rose burst out laughing. “You’re doing it now,” Rose says, and turns to Clara. “I think that’s the Dubious Frown, but you’d know better than I would.”

“Definitely the Dubious Frown,” Clara says. “The one before was the I-don’t-like-it-but-there’s-nothing-I-can-do-about-it frown.”

I feel my hackles rise out of habit, though it vanishes at the way Clara’s face shines with delight at her dad taking a ribbing good-naturedly. I wink at her. “Didn’t know I was so transparent.”

“You are,” Clara says. “I’ll get some more water.”

She heads up to the well with the larger bucket. Rose pushes her wheelbarrow past the gate and sets it down with a thump. I offered to push it twice, and the second time she told me to mind my own business.

I pick up a post and tamp down the gravel, then Rose does her bit with the concrete. While we wait for Clara to return, Rose says, “Just so you know, you’re doing great.”

“What?” I ask.

“You’re doing great with Clara. I know how easy it is to fall into old patterns, but you’re not. Did you notice how she volunteered to be on our team today? How she sat next to you at breakfast? It’s because she wants to be with you.”

I’d hoped that was the case, though I was just glad to have her nearby. To hear that Clara feels the same fills my chest and lightens my feet. Rose pats my arm. “Now you’re wearing my favorite kind of frown.”

“I’m not frowning,” I say. The woman is off her rocker.

She twists a finger in her cheek where a dimple would be. “It’s your upside-down frown.”

I chuckle. She’s off her rocker, but Sheila was right: Rose is good people.

Rose

THE HOUSE FEELS LIKE A FORTRESS. It isn't, of course, but the wood fencing alleviates fears I didn't know I had. It's nice not to have to slink back and forth to the RV, and even nicer to sit on the patio in the daylight. With the house windows partly boarded, it's dim inside, and I miss sunlight after a gray Oregon winter.

It's been almost three weeks since the world went to shit, and I like to think we'll make it, though everyone knows thinking something like that is a jinx. We all agree Bornavirus has likely spread, that the world outside Oregon must be just as bad, but we remain hopeful the zombies will die. According to books and movies, they last for years, but those are books and movies. This is real.

"There's such a thing as fucking *science*," I mutter.

Mitch, sitting beside me at the patio table, lifts her head from her book. "Yes, there is. Thanks for the report."

"Shut up. Realistically, how long can dead bodies walk around?"

"The question should be: How the hell *can* dead bodies walk around? The answer is that, if they can, then anything is possible."

It's true. I feel sorry for the people out there, though maybe they've created their own safe places from the virus. Craig pops into my mind, as he does multiple times a day. I miss his texts and self-deprecating jokes, but most of all, I miss him. "Do you think Craig might be okay?"

When we imagined the apocalypse as teenagers—especially after we all read *The Stand*—he always reiterated his wish that he die immediately so he didn't have to deal. He's tall and thin, with glasses he's forever pushing up his nose. Compared to Craig, Mitch and I are practically ninjas.

Mitch sets down her book. "I hate to say it, but I think Craig was probably among the first to go. It's *Craig* we're talking about here."

Her words might seem callous to a casual observer, but her jaw is too firmly set and her shoulders have inched to her ears. I blink back tears at the thought of Craig dying, scared and alone. I can't think about it at length or my heart begins to crack, so I tell myself he's safe in Oakland. It could be

true—Craig is far stronger than he believes. “I wish he’d come up early like we told him to.”

Mitch pats my arm, then picks up her book and resumes reading. Pop walks past with the well bucket and grabs a couple of the five-gallon buckets on the patio. I set down my book and follow with the remainder to save him the trip.

It’s a gray day, though warm. The Gustafsons had an old reel mower that works well enough to silently cut the area around the house. Jesse mowed the other day, and it might’ve grown an inch since then. Oregon springs make for grass that grows like weeds, and weeds that do the same. No sooner do you mow than you have to mow again. And then, when the dry summer begins, your lawn is dead in a week and brown until October.

I set the buckets down by the well, flip one over, and sit on it. “Thanks, Rosie,” Pop says.

“Sure.”

I watch him remove the cap and lower the pipe bucket down the metal shaft that extends eighteen inches aboveground. Once the bucket hits water, the line goes slack then slowly moves through his fingers inch by inch as the bucket fills. When the rope has fed out about the length of the bucket, it’s full, and he pulls it up hand over hand.

“Want me to do that?” I ask, and he shakes his head. “Maybe we should make a winch.”

“I could use the exercise.”

“So could I.” I know how heavy it is on its way up, and though Pop went to his gym before zombies, he looks as tired and worn as I feel. “You feeling okay, Daddy?”

He dumps the water into a five-gallon bucket. “I’m good, Rosie. Just not sleeping well.”

I set my chin in my hands. “Why? Aside from the obvious.” He shrugs, doing his close-mouthed bit, but I know when he’s fibbing, same as Ethan. “Don’t make me beat it out of you.”

His smile doesn’t take over his face the way it usually does. “I’m worried about you and the kids. This isn’t the world I wanted you to live in.”

“It’s not the world I wanted for them, but we’re all together. Imagine if we weren’t?” The times I do imagine, it feels as though an ice-cold hand

clutches my heart. “We’ll make it okay as long as we’re together.”

“We will.” He offers a bigger smile that’s still lacking. “I know you will. Have I ever told you how smart you are?”

I roll my eyes. “Once or twice.”

We’re playing our usual game. Though he’s more worried than he’ll let on, he won’t tell me any more, at least today. Chilly fingers pinch at my heart, giving me a taste of what it would be like if Pop weren’t around. He’s my champion, my rock, and though I know the day will come when I don’t have him, I can’t bear to anticipate it. When Mom died less than a year after we moved to Oregon, I found there was no preparing for that kind of loss. He’s my last parent, and no one else will ever love me the way he does—unconditionally, wholeheartedly, and, often, blindly.

Tom walks across the grass. “Let me do that, Sam.”

“Let an old man pull his weight, would you?”

“All right,” Tom says, looking amused before he turns somber. “We’re out of batteries. I just put the last of them in a lantern.”

I knew it was coming, but that doesn’t make it any less troubling. We need light at night; at the very least, I want to *see* the zombies before they eat me.

“We’re not running low on food, but we will at some point,” I say. *Some point* is if the zombies don’t disintegrate, which they both understand without my explaining. “We have most of the RV’s propane to use after the second tank is gone, but we should save it if we can. There have to be tanks for barbecues around here.”

Pop lowers the empty bucket down the well. “You think we should chance it?”

“We can leave the kids here and the four of us go,” I say.

Tom watches me steadily. “More hands mean quicker work. They can keep an eye out.”

“They can handle it, you know.” Pop says it casually, but it’s his gentle way of telling me to chill the hell out.

I have no illusions I’m the voice of reason on this subject, but there are zombies. *Zombies*. I’ve seen the kids in action, though from behind the safety of our fence, and all three are watchful and quick. That doesn’t stop the terror that I’ll lose them, but I have to let Jesse and Holly be the smart and cautious adults they are.

“Then we’ll all go,” I say, and force a smile. “Now we just have to figure out where we’re going.”

“I might know a place,” Tom says.

MR. GUSTAFSON’S pickup has gas, and we have the keys. Pop’s truck is close to full. Though we’ll keep the vehicles together, Tom and I drive the Gustafson’s truck with the kids in the backseat. Adults or not, there’s no way in hell I’ll be separated from them for the drive.

“It’s cramped back here,” Jesse complains.

“Tough potatoes,” I reply. “You can stay home if you’d rather.”

Jesse grumbles. Tom’s shoulders jump with a silent laugh as we make our way down the road. The plan is to circle around the edge of Eugene, then head in at the west end of town. There are fewer houses, more businesses, and areas that are industrial as well as undeveloped due to protected wetlands. The plan is also to turn right the fuck around if we come up against anything too deadly. I haven’t forgotten the first trip into town.

“Maybe we’ll see Dad,” Holly says softly.

It’s meant for Jesse’s ears, but I pretend to be looking at something out Tom’s window and catch a glimpse of Holly’s earnest expression. She doesn’t mention Ethan, though she holds out hope. Mine has faded, and I’ve locked my sadness away. At some point in the future, I’ll mourn for Ethan, for what once was and for how it ended. There are more pressing matters to deal with now. Namely, keeping our kids alive.

“Doubt it,” Jesse murmurs.

I fight tears at Holly’s optimism and Jesse’s ambivalence, then stretch a hand to touch Holly’s knee. “I hope we do, sweets.”

Tom glances at me, but I return to the view out the windshield. The two-lane road is bordered by fields that once held sheep and farmhouses that once held people. The fence is down in places, and a zombie is caught in barbed wire that wrapped around his legs and tripped him to the ground. He kicks his feet and rolls as we pass, entangling himself more. A few bloody,

wooly carcasses lay by the side of the road—at least we don't have zombie animals along with everything else.

We turn toward town. A house on the right is gated, its first-floor windows boarded. “Maybe someone's there,” Jesse says.

“We'll check it out on the way back,” Tom answers.

An elementary school on our left has a wall of shattered windows. A woman's body hangs over the glass, folded so that her long hair brushes the ground with the breeze. The parking lot is full of cars; if people fled to the school for safety, it didn't work out. We pass a few more quiet houses. The grass is green, overgrown, and the land flat until it reaches the buttes in the distance. Power and telephone lines stretch for miles under the gray sky.

“The Willamette Valley can be so ugly,” I say. “Everyone goes on and on about how pretty Oregon is, but the ride from Eugene to Portland is like the road from Purgatory to Hell. Except for the eight seconds when it's not raining and you can see distant mountains.”

“Why'd you stay here?” Tom asks.

“Kids, Pop, friends, you know how it goes.”

“I do,” Tom says, as if he truly does. “Eugene's not a bad town, but I could do without the rain.”

“You know what they called it back in the day? Skinner's Mudhole.”

He laughs. “For real?”

“For real. If we didn't live in the South Hills, I'd go crazy.”

We thought about moving years ago, but Ethan is from the area, and there was nowhere specific we wanted to go. Len and Diane, my in-laws, ditched the winter rains for Arizona when the kids were teens. If this is everywhere, they're likely gone. A condo on a golf course, in a place where water isn't abundant, doesn't bode well for survival.

They're good people. Nice people. I love them, but I didn't feel much like speaking to them in recent months, and I feel terrible about that now. I was tired of putting a brave face on things, smoothing shit over. Diane called to check in the day before the virus hit, and I ignored the message, thinking we'd speak on my anniversary. It's likely we'll never speak again.

I press my forehead to the window. A cul-de-sac of pastel houses branches off the main road, and a big group of zombies loiters outside. The next three cul-de-sacs are empty. Houses come one after the other, all looking worse for wear unless they're fenced. An apartment complex to the

left is burnt, the freestanding buildings blackened. A mini storage's doors are raised, and the roads between the garage-like buildings are covered with garbage, discarded clothing, and a few barbecue grills. Someone took refuge inside, but I see no people besides the few dead ones who follow our vehicles.

Pop slows to a stop just before Thirteenth Avenue. Tom pulls alongside, engine idling, as Mitch rolls down her window. "Walmart's just down there," Pop says. "You want to check it out?"

The road is empty fields and a few industrial shops before it curves right, where it will put us at the Walmart side entrance. We've already agreed it's likely the first place people went for supplies, but, if they didn't, it'll have everything we need.

"Let's give it a shot," Tom says.

We go slow around the curve, then pull into the side entrance past the garden center. The spring plants out front are still in bloom, having been watered by rain, and pallets of garden amendments are lined up on the asphalt. I file that information away. Soil and manure won't feed us now, but we might need them one day. When it comes to keeping plants alive, I need all the help I can get.

Tom stops beside Pop's truck. The parking lot is jammed with vehicles in parking spots, in the lanes, stopped half up on curbs. A few have shattered windows, as though someone took a bat to them. An SUV rammed the driver's side door of a tiny import outside the exit doors, and its driver still slumps in the seat, face mashed into the steering wheel.

Bodies lie on the asphalt, surrounded by empty packaging and paper bags that have been rained on and trodden upon until they turned pulpy and stuck to the ground. Some bodies look the same as Nick did: bloated and wet and a rainbow of colors. They were human when they died.

The horror stretches across the gigantic lot. I can imagine the fights over supplies, the struggle for life over death, and how it culminated in these accidents, the traffic jam, and then total desperation. More bodies lie in the lane to our right, some sporting head wounds. I point when something moves. A torso, devoid of arms and legs, begins to wiggle. Its head lifts as it struggles to peer at us from the ground.

"What the fuck," Jesse whispers, echoing my own thoughts.

Zombies stumble from the entry doors and head our way, their hisses loud in the silence. Five bodies walk around the side of a van. Dozens more stagger from the entrance behind the first, then more after them.

“Let’s go!” Pop calls.

Tom reverses past the garden center and curved entrance, then backs into the street. Pop trails us to the road we traveled into town, which is still clear but for a few zombies. We dodge more who stumble into our path, then circumvent an accident in an intersection by taking the crosswalk.

7-Eleven is destroyed. Two *dead* dead bodies lie in the Dari Mart lot, covered with broken glass. An industrial plaza and an auto repair shop go by on the left. To our right is an open field where zombies slog through the muck, traveling for our trucks. The kids haven’t yet seen the destruction, and all three wear the same devastated expression I likely did on my first trip into town.

“Will we be able to get past again?” Holly asks.

“Of course,” I say automatically, although I’m far from sure.

I tuck my hands beneath my thighs and regret leaving the house more than I ever have in my life—and that’s saying something. We’re safe there. We can sit in the dark, stretch the food, until the zombies die off. It’s better than taking this risk. I’m not a gambler, especially when it comes to the people I love.

Tom turns onto First Avenue. We pass airplane hangar type buildings that house construction, hydraulics, and shipping companies, along with businesses at whose trade I can only guess, since their names provide no clue. Our next turn takes us down a dead-end street lined with buildings that resemble two-story apartment complexes, though they have rolling metal doors rather than residences on their ground floors.

Tom pulls into the last parking lot outside a long one-story building with a few entry doors and multiple rolling doors between them. None has a sign, and the only hint we’re at a business is a sheet of laminated copy paper in the closest window, on which is printed ALWAYS READY.

“Here it is.” Tom stops beside the entry door, then shuts off the engine while Pop does the same. “They take up this end of the building.”

Nothing moves on the street or in the lot. The two businesses across the way are gated, and the building to our right is quiet, all loading doors shut tight. We sit in silence, windows rolled down and waiting for any zombies

to approach, until Tom says, “Looks clear. I’ll make sure no one’s here.” He leaves the truck and knocks on the door, then taps the glass and turns with a shrug. “May not be anything left.”

I step to the ground. Mitch comes to my side, eyes circling the lot. “What the fuck was with that body at Walmart?”

I grimace. Of all the crazy things I’ve seen, that torso is in the top five. “They only need a brain, I guess.”

Tom and Pop inspect the door while the kids watch the streets as they’ve been ordered. The block seems empty, and with wetlands all around, it should be easy to spot something coming. Of course, a dead-end means nowhere but one direction in which to run.

Rather than stew on that, I watch Mitch stretch her arms and pick at the butt of her jeans. “You okay?”

“Fine, but your husband’s jeans fit me like shit. I was going to grab some in Walmart.”

“You, Mitch Brenner, were going to shop in Walmart?”

Mitch has money, and she spends it. Good shoes, nice clothes. She loves a bargain, but lack of a bargain doesn’t stop her from buying something she wants. Only Walmart does—she holds an ecowarrior grudge against them that even the apocalypse hasn’t mended.

“I was going to steal from Walmart, like Robin Hood, and give it to my needy ass.”

I laugh. “I’m sorry we can’t go to your house and get stuff.”

Mitch lives on the east side of town, by Hendricks Park. Her house is gorgeous, with big windows and expansive views, but the roads are small and winding, and the neighbors all close by.

“Whatever, I’m alive. I’d be trapped there with all the basket-toting richies. Can you imagine anything worse?”

Mitch also holds grudges against people who use baskets instead of regular cloth bags, and there are plenty of them in town. I drop my head back with a groan. “You and your baskets.”

“Except for picnics, is there ever a good time for a basket instead of a bag?” Mitch argues for the millionth time. “It takes up more space, it doesn’t close to keep out the elements, and everyone can see your organic crackers. Which is why they carry them—so everyone can see their organic crackers. It’s a club. No basket, no entry.”

Tom, fitting a crowbar into the crack between door and jamb, lets out a chuckle. “What’s with the baskets? They weigh a few pounds alone. I don’t see how that’s more convenient than a bag.”

Mitch throws up her hands. “Thank you, Tom.”

Though I’m glad Mitch and Tom agree on something, I still shake my head. “There are good and bad basket carriers. You can’t lump them all together.”

Tom looks over his shoulder. “You carry a basket?”

“Hell, no,” I say, hands on my hips. “Do I look like I carry a basket?”

“It could go either way.”

I make a face. He turns to the door with a grin and motions for Pop to hit it with the mallet. After the first thud, he adjusts it for the next hit. It takes five solid whacks before the door gives way with a splintering sound.

We all pause. After a full minute, nothing arrives eager to eat us, and Tom pushes the door wide. “I’ll go in first and open the loading door.”

He takes a flashlight from his back pocket and enters cautiously, gun in his other hand. I get a glimpse of a small room with a couple of desks before he disappears through another door to the right.

“What did you do to him?” Mitch asks me quietly.

“What?”

“Tom. What’d you do to him while you were gone? He left a total jerk and came back a human being. You did something.”

I haven’t given details about our time at his house. It’s too personal, and Tom isn’t the type who broadcasts his business. “I gave him a hug.”

Mitch rocks back on her heels, eyes squinted in suspicion. “You gave him a hug?”

“He needed one. You know hugs are magic.”

“It’s more like *you’re* magic, but okay.” Mitch assesses the building. “He knew this place from before?”

“His company filled a big printing order for them. They sold to survivalists and preppers, and they did survivalist shows.” The steel garage door trundles up. The kids start forward, but I raise a hand. “Stay.”

Holly pants like a dog while Clara and Jesse laugh. Pop, Mitch, and I enter, turning on our own flashlights. “You weren’t kidding, Tom,” Pop says.

The front of the large storeroom is occupied by a long steel table. One side has an arm that holds a roll of bubble wrap, the other a roll of plastic. Packing tape dispensers sit at every corner, while flattened cardboard boxes are stacked beneath.

A network of shelving surrounds the table and extends into the dark, crammed with boxes. I train my light on one shelf, where labels beneath open boxes read *Breakfast Skillet*, *Beef Stroganoff*, *Granola with Blueberries and Milk*, and *Pasta Primavera*. More than fifteen varieties of freeze-dried food for camping and backpacking, all in mylar pouches.

Mitch has walked behind the first shelves, and now she yells, “Big cans back here. And boxes that say *Meals, Ready to Eat*.” She lets out a whoop. “Hey, I see lanterns. And the Lord said *Let there be light!*”

I laugh and hear Pop’s echo toward the back. He comes forward, flashlight blinding until he reaches the light at the door, and his smile is almost as bright. “They have a whole mess of camping stuff, too. And those water pouches. We’ll never get all this home, but we could live off it for a year if we could.”

“Let’s decide what we need most.” Tom runs a palm over his hair and his gaze sweeps the room as if surprised at the bounty. “Maybe the owners had enough at home and didn’t need to come here.”

“Or they didn’t make it,” Mitch says.

We stand silent for a moment during which I think it’s the luck of the draw that I’m alive. That any of us are. If we’d been at the wrong place at the wrong time, if we had no fence, if Holly, Jesse, and Clara weren’t home, some of us might be wandering the streets. It’s a breathless relief, one that makes me hurry outside to the kids. Jesse watches me advance, his dark-lashed blue eyes hopeful. I’m his mother, but it isn’t my partiality that leads me to think he’s gorgeous. He resembles his dad, and, once upon a time, I thought Ethan gorgeous. “It’s good?” he asks me.

“It’s great. Go in, all of you. I’ll keep watch.”

They don’t wait for me to change my mind, not that I will. They’re safer in there. I climb into the back of Pop’s pickup and watch the empty street, the silent buildings, the green fields and distant trees. The lot across the street has a few cars, and I wonder where the people are. Did they get a ride home on that day? Carpool and head for safety? Are they dead somewhere? Undead?

The horror is unimaginable, even as I stand in it. There were thousands, millions, maybe *billions*, of Julians and Elliots torn apart beside their parents. Watching their parents be torn apart. I shiver, both from the thought and the chill in the air. The valley is temperate as winters go, but spring can leave a lot to be desired when it comes to warmth.

“Don’t you know you shouldn’t be out here alone?” Tom asks behind me, voice stern.

I glance back, ready to argue, but he wears a smile. It’s been a common sight the past few days, like he’s making up for lost time. “I knew you or my father would be out to yell at me any minute.”

He jumps into the bed with a quiet laugh, the pickup dipping under his weight, and walks to where I stand. “You shouldn’t be, though.”

“Better me than the kids. If anything comes, all they’d have to do is pull down the door and they’d be fine with that food and water.”

“The worst that could happen?”

“You know me,” I say.

“I guess I do. They’re figuring out what to bring home. Any requests?”

“Aside from lights and food, what could we use the most?”

“A shortwave radio or transceiver of some kind, but it doesn’t look like they carried them.” Tom leans his elbows on the cab’s roof, eyes on the road. His hair is unkempt, blowing in the breeze, and the hair at the nape of his neck has lost its clean edge and now rests in little whorls and spikes on skin gone browner with time spent outside. “I’d say the batteries, the medical stuff—they have blood clotting supplies and suture kits. And the stoves. They have a few different kinds of stoves. I made a list.”

I hide my smile; of course he made a list. “That sounds good. I can’t believe I never knew this place was here.”

“Not so strange. Their business was mainly online, though you could pick up your order if you were local. They shipped all over the country.” He straightens suddenly, gaze fixed on a field to our left, before his shoulders come down. False alarm. “I wouldn’t have known about it except for that job. There’s enough in there to feed us for a while.”

“I know we can’t take it all, but should we leave it here? If someone else finds it, they could clear it out before we come back.” I hate the anxiety that makes me want to hoard everything. It’s greedy—or maybe it’s fear.

But fuck it. I've tried not to be greedy all my life, and this time I'm giving in. "Could we hide some of it? Maybe in a business no one would check?"

"That's not a bad idea."

"I'm full of not-bad ideas. Some might even be good. Great might be overstating things a bit, though."

Tom's eyes glint. Pop comes to the door. "Want to move the trucks over with me, Tom? Rosie, come in and start packing."

I make my way inside, where three square white lanterns provide a strong but not blinding glow. Upon closer inspection, they resemble five-inch square balloons. I poke one. It's made of translucent vinyl and has a solar panel on top.

"Cool, right?" Jesse asks through a mouth full of something. "They're inflatable and charge by solar. Look how small it is before you blow it up." He lifts a square less than an inch thick. "Oh, and they're waterproof."

I turn it over in my hands. It weighs next to nothing. "Very cool."

Holly and Clara are chowing down on freeze-dried cheesecake bites from a pouch. Holly tosses a package to Jesse, then shoves another handful in her mouth. It's a welcome sight—I want them to gorge themselves. "Want some space cheesecake?" she asks me.

Her anxious demeanor isn't gone, but it's hard not to be positive when you're surrounded by shelf after shelf of food. I hold out my hand, and Holly dumps in a bunch of little squares edged with graham cracker crust. After more than a week of little to no dessert—*real* dessert, because the canned fruit from the school is a pathetic excuse for dessert—the rush of sugar is heaven-sent. "These are delicious."

"I know. We put more on the table to pack up." Holly watches the open rolling door, her smile giving way to a distracted stare.

"It's safe in here," I say. "We could pull down the doors and practically live forever."

She pulls her eyes to me and gives a quick shake of her head. "It's not that. It's—it's worse than I thought. Everything is just...gone."

I nod, saying nothing because I know there's more. She was always reticent when it came to her emotions, but it worsened when a fellow third grader declared that girls who married girls go straight to Hell, which produced many tears on her part and resulted in me storming the principal's office the next morning, ready to kick an eight-year-old's ass. Holly was the

child who hated to see anything suffer, who was genuinely shocked when people were mean for no reason. No matter how supportive we were, she'd learned not everyone would accept her, that certain parts might be best hidden, and that maybe pretending it didn't hurt would make it go away.

She draws in a breath, eyes filling. "I don't know why I thought Dad might be out here. There's *nothing* out here. How stupid was that?"

"We're okay, and he might be, too," I say, cupping her dainty cheek in my hand. At times, I marvel at how someone so delicate looking came out of me, but I'm positive underneath she's as strong as she'll ever need to be, even if she doesn't yet know it herself. "It's never stupid to hope."

Holly nods and sniffs, then takes the tissue I offer and wipes her nose. By the time she's done, she's rearranged her features into her customary pleasant expression. "Pop told us to bring out some stuff from the back before we pack the desserts."

"I'll pack them," I offer. She smiles before following Clara and Jesse to the shelves. I look over the stack of freeze-dried desserts, open one to eat myself, and then get busy taping a large box to throw them in.

Though we have food for now, the idea we'll run out sooner or later has been a dark spot on an already dim path to the future. Now that path is paved with freeze-dried food, light at night, and a way to cook when the propane runs out. It makes breathing easier; the thought of the kids going hungry never fails to shorten my breath.

Mitch tosses a shitload of food into a shipping box she's constructed, then examines my pile of desserts. "No lecture about going for foods with the most nutritional value?"

"Fuck that," I say, and take another bite of my freeze-dried ice cream sandwich. "If I'm dying at any minute, I want dessert." My diet days ended with zombies, but even when dieting, dessert was non-negotiable. More salad equals more dessert, and I ate a lot of salad.

"Amen." Mitch saunters back to the shelves. "Chicken fried rice or rice and chicken?"

"Chicken fried rice. Or both. Get vegetarian stuff if you can."

Though Holly is the official vegetarian, I prefer my meat un-canned or otherwise doctored. My pickiness is easy enough to work around when supermarkets and variety are the norm, but my choices grow more limited

by the day. When it comes down to it, I'll eat what I have to, but if I have options, I'm taking them.

The kids walk past with boxes labeled *Meals, Ready-to-Eat* as the pickups back to the open door. Mr. Gustafson's truck has a cap that'll keep smaller items from flying off as we drive, and bigger boxes will go in Pop's truck, including the giant boxes we pack at the table.

Tom holds his list and marches between rows. He returns with full arms and sends the kids to the shelves with instructions they follow dutifully. "The man has a plan," Mitch murmurs. "I like it."

I smile and push stray hair from my face. Mitch and Tom getting together might be one of my more fanciful ideas, but crazier things have happened. He's the right height for Mitch, who often dwarfs men—a fact she doesn't mind as much as they do. I'd bet my life he wouldn't be caught dead in cotton socks and Adidas sandals.

Tom isn't hard to look at, and now that he acts like a human with a sense of humor, they could be a good match. Understandably, having lost Sheila only weeks ago, he isn't on the market, but there's no harm in letting things blossom naturally. Maybe subtly helping them along if I see the chance. If Mitch suspects I'm playing cupid, she'll feed me to the zombies.

Pop dumps a load on the table and then helps pack. Once we decide what we want to bring home, Tom and Jesse break into a gutter repair company in the complex. We load the trucks with extra supplies and unload them in the warehouse, hiding the boxes behind stacks of rain gutter covers. After another load, the sun has arced across the sky, and we pack for the ride home.

By the end of it, the trucks are crammed as high as their cab roofs, and we have over three months of food, maybe more. *Three months*. Even if the zombies take three times as long to die out, we'll be okay.

THE RIDE HOME has more zombies to outmaneuver, which necessitates a bit of swerving on the two-lane road and results in a parade of zombies following the trucks. Down by the school, it's quiet, and the woman hanging from the window still sways with the breeze.

“That boarded house is coming soon,” Holly says. “Should we stop?”

“It’s getting late,” Tom replies. “And we’ve got bodies behind us.”

I watch the gated lot as we pass. A person moves out front, quickly stepping around the side of the large gray house before I can make out details. “Wait a minute. Did you see that?”

Tom slows until he comes to a halt with Pop just behind. “What?”

“People. Someone ran behind the house when we got close.”

“Sounds like they don’t want to be seen.”

“What if they need help?”

Tom glances in the rearview. So far, the zombies haven’t caught up. “They can’t want that much help if they don’t want us to see them.”

He could be right, but he could be wrong. Whoever it is might be scared. Hungry. There are no cars in the driveway, only an old RV. My hands sweat inside my gloves and my mouth is dry. Maybe it’s foolish to risk it, but this house holds the only other people alive in the world, as far as we know.

“They have kids.” Holly points to the plastic toddler-sized playset on the lawn. “We should check.”

Pop pulls alongside and rolls down his window. “What’s going on?”

“I saw someone by that house,” I say. “They hid, but it looks like they have little kids.”

Pop examines the house and then me, his face creased with a frown but affection in his eyes. “Are you going to drive yourself crazy thinking about them?”

I smile. Pop is a soft touch—softest when it comes to me. “Probably.”

He motions for Tom to back to the driveway with him. Once there, Pop puts his truck in park and waves me out. “C’mon, then. We’ll go to the gate. They get one minute before we leave.”

I open my door and step to the road. “If anything happens, drive away. Don’t wait.”

Tom’s brow lowers. “Mom—” Holly begins, but I shut the door before I can hear the rest.

My legs tremble at being out in the open, from fear the people might be hostile, but I move to Pop’s side. He holds his gun and keeps a shoulder in front of me as we walk to the iron gate.

“Hello?” Pop calls. “We don’t want anything. Just wanted to see if everyone here is okay.” His words are answered by a whisper of breeze in the trees.

“We promise we won’t hurt you.” My voice sounds high, worried. “We didn’t think anyone else was alive.”

After thirty more seconds, Pop takes my arm. “There’s your minute, Rosie.”

My fear of a bad exchange has intensified, and I don’t protest when we make our way to the trucks. I climb into my seat and shrug. “We had to try.”

Tom waves Pop on first, then rolls after him past another two houses before he brakes, eyes on the rearview mirror. I spin in my seat. A woman stands on the asphalt, waving her arms. She spots a lone zombie coming from a nearby house and runs up the driveway.

Tom throws the truck in reverse, backs to the driveway, and steps out his door. The zombie is a man on the short side, and Tom finishes him off with a strike from his knife, then turns to the woman behind the gate.

“Watch the road and tell us if more come,” I say to the kids, and jump from the truck. “Anything happens, and you drive—”

“We know,” Holly and Jesse say in unison.

Pop and Mitch join us in the short driveway. The woman has both hands on the gate, her fingers clenched around iron until her knuckles whiten. Her brown hair is greasy, her face thin above a bulky cardigan sweater wrapped tight around her waist. She’s late twenties, but tension lines her eyes and mouth so that she seems closer to my age.

“Hi.” I smile, hoping to convey our peaceability. “We wanted to make sure you were okay. I’m Rose, and this is Tom and Mitch. My dad is Sam.”

The woman looks over her shoulder at the house and gives a quick shake of her head. Tom’s gun hand tightens. I’m sure Pop’s does the same, though I can’t see past Mitch. Just because people may not have shot us without warning a month ago doesn’t mean they won’t now.

“I’m Kara.” The woman sniffs, runs a hand under her nose, and whispers, “Did you see anyone on the road? Or a silver Ford Expedition?”

I wait for the others to answer because I pay absolutely no attention to cars and barely know one model from the next. If it plays music and runs, I’m happy. “We didn’t see anyone alive,” Pop says, sounding apologetic, “and I don’t remember an Expedition. Are you looking for someone?”

“My husband.” Kara peers over her shoulder again. “He left yesterday to get more food. We’re almost out. Our son is...he didn’t want to take us with him in case it wasn’t safe.” Kara’s chin doesn’t just tremble—it shakes vigorously with the effort of holding back tears.

“Do you know where he was going?” I ask.

Kara shuts her eyes tight. “He said he’d try Walmart first, since it’s close. Then he’d see from there. You didn’t see anyone at all? Javier’s five-ten, with long hair.” She points to Tom. “Same shade of skin as you. He was wearing a red shirt, jeans, and a blue coat.”

I don’t want to say Kara’s husband is likely not coming. That Walmart was a mess of bodies and everywhere else is probably the same. “We didn’t see anyone matching that description, and there was no one...alive at Walmart. Why don’t you and your son come with us? We don’t live far. We can leave a note for your husband to find you when he gets here.”

Kara gazes down the road, past trees and toward the distant hills, as though the answer to her conundrum lays in that direction. Her shaky hand pushes a clump of hair from her forehead. “What if he needs me when he comes back?”

“What if he doesn’t come back?” Tom asks, his voice gentle.

Kara swallows, eyes full of such despair that I choke back a lump in my own throat. “He wouldn’t leave us.”

“Of course he wouldn’t.” I put my hand over Kara’s, though I want to shake some sense into her. It doesn’t matter how much you want to get to someone—what matters is what prevents you from getting there. “How old is your son?”

“Three. Mateo is three.”

“You and Mateo really won’t come with us?” I ask. When Kara shakes her head, chin raised, I know it’s a lost cause for now. “Then we’ll give you food for while you wait. Do you have water and a way of heating it?”

A tear rolls down Kara’s cheek. She wipes it with the back of her hand and nods. “We have a camping stove and the RV.”

“Okay. Dad and Tom, will you get her some food? Enough for two weeks.” They leave quickly. I motion at the neighboring houses. There are a few, and all seem empty. “Are any of your neighbors around?”

“They’re gone,” Kara says. “Some said they were heading north. The others went looking for family.”

I point southeast. “Turn left at the corner, and we’re about three miles down on the right, in the blue house with the tall wooden fence. Will you come if you need to? Just knock on the gate or call for us, and we’ll come right away.”

Kara nods. I squeeze her hand and let go.

“We’ll check on you in a few days,” Mitch says, her brow creased. She might come off as curt, but she’ll always be a founding member of the Freak Squad Welcome Wagon.

“Mom!” Holly leans out the truck window, face flushed with alarm, and points toward town. Dozens of zombies walk the road, heading our way.

My pulse accelerates, and I pull my knife from my coat as Pop and Tom reappear holding three cases of MREs and a box of freeze-dried food—well over what two people need for two weeks. Kara unlocks the gate and swings it open. They race to deposit them by the front door and then return, weapons in hand and eyes on the zombies.

“We have to go,” Pop says. “You’re sure we can’t talk you into coming?”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll be back soon,” I say to Kara. “Go inside before they see you.”

“Thank you,” Kara says quickly, then turns for her house.

A larger group of zombies crests the hill while we jog to our trucks. As we pull away, I pray Kara will have no reason to regret her decision. I struggled with fear in the early days with two young kids—what if Ethan died in a car crash, of an illness? Having to raise our children alone was enough to keep me awake at night. But there was always the assurance that even the most menial of jobs could be found and Pop’s babysitting help relied upon. Kara has nothing but what we’ve given her and little to no chance of finding more with a small child in tow.

“She should’ve come with us,” Holly says.

“I know. I wish we could’ve talked her into it.” I watch grass fly by, disheartened at having left a woman and three-year-old boy on their own. The odds of her husband returning are slimmer now that those zombies have arrived.

“We did what we could,” Tom says. “We couldn’t force her.”

He sounds as though he would’ve liked to. We pass sheep carcasses and the zombie trapped in barbed wire. One person. We’ve seen one person and

so many dead people. And while I'm certain our situation is more promising than Kara's, it doesn't exactly make me optimistic about our own survival.

Craig

I'VE SAVED the cacao nib shortbread cookies for last. The first four were yesterday's dinner. The four that remain are today's brunch. I considered saving two—brunch and dinner—but then I'd think about them all day, fixated on how hungry I am and how, when they're gone, I'll be closer to dying than ever. Better to eat them, enjoy them, instead of meting them out.

I arrange the cookies in a perfectly straight line on my granite counter. Round, a creamy color spotted with flecks of dark brown. Delicious. Buttery. All the food I could have eaten in the past years tortures me. I'd give anything to sit on my mother's hideous flowered couch and spoon frozen Cool Whip into my mouth the way I once did. I'd even put up with Dad's comments for the chance.

I take a sip of water and screw on the lid, then set the bottle down carefully. Going by what remains on the counter, I estimate I have a few days' worth. I would have more except for the half-gallon I accidentally dumped on the floor two days ago. I was carefully pouring the day's allotment into the liter bottle when one of *them* in the hallway thumped against my apartment door. Down went the glass pitcher, shattered into a million pieces. By the time I used towels to mop it up and wrung them out, I had four ounces of water and multiple shards of glass in my hands.

Has it really been over a month since this started? I count the crossed-off days of the calendar on my kitchen wall. The calendar doesn't lie, and every morning I draw an X over the previous day like clockwork. Surely, rescuers will be coming any day now. Any minute now. If not, I'll plug in my earbuds, put on the playlist Rose made for me (which she titled *It's a Cray-Cray World*) and take my end-of-the-world cocktail of Xanax, pain meds, and tequila. I have only the one flashlight that's steadily dimming, and I'm not sure how many more dark, lonely nights I can take. I keep my phone off except for once per day, when I check for service and read Rose's voicemail, and still the battery is down to six percent.

A clang of metal and a soft shout from outside send me running for the balcony. I keep the door open to hear any noises and for fresh air. Not that you can call the air fresh—between zombies and my body's excretions that

I toss over the railing, the sidewalk below is not fresh as a daisy. Neither am I; I haven't showered for a month, though every week I shave with my cordless razor.

I burst onto the balcony and search the street four stories down. The diner across the way, a low-slung building attached to the modernized hotel a block over, has a large parking lot. Two cars have sat there since the day this happened, but the row of four bikes is new.

People. Living people. I watch, sweaty hands strangling my balcony railing. When the people come out, I'll beg them to help clear the hall so I can leave. Maybe they'll let me come with them. I have a bike I never use because I get nervous riding in traffic, but there isn't traffic anymore.

After what seems like an hour but is closer to ten minutes, a burly man steps into the lot from one of the windows, his boots crunching on broken glass. He wears a full backpack and a multitude of things on his belt. An axe dangles from his hand while he scans the street.

I know better than to scream and alert any nearby dead people to the person who might be my savior. I hang off my balcony waving my arms, the only sound the whooshing of air. The man turns the other direction. *Fuck. Think, Craig.*

I've hung a sheet from the railing with old shoelaces. My lone Sharpie went dry mid-message, and I finished writing *PLEASE HELP, PERSON INSIDE* with shoe polish. It didn't rain, but there've been a few foggy mornings, and now the sheet looks like a prop from a horror movie with the way the last two words dripped and bled. *I wouldn't rescue myself if I saw that sign.*

I rip it off the rail and flap the fabric. The snapping sound has to carry across the concrete. It *has* to. A woman enters the lot, her pack no less full. She hitches it up and walks to the man, where they have a whispered conversation. I flap harder, and she spins around, combing the street until she spots the movement.

I flap one final time, then drop my sheet and wave. The woman keeps her gaze on me, smacking the man behind her on the arm. From here, she looks maybe in her forties or early fifties, with a buxom hourglass figure and bobbed brown hair that curls out from under her army-green hat. The man with her motions at the diner, and two more people appear, one a teenager and the other a big guy in a leather coat and cargo pants.

The woman and the first man pick their way across the street while the other two watch the surroundings. When they get near, the man's foot slides a little and he curses, lifting up his boot and twisting to peer at the sole. He's stepped in my shit.

"Fucking motherfuck," he says. It carries clear as a bell to where I stand, as does the woman's laugh.

"Sorry," I whisper, praying it won't hurt my chances of getting help.

When they're below but outside my excrement-tossing area, the woman calls, "Hi! Whatcha doing up there?" She keeps her voice low so that it doesn't echo.

"I'm stuck," I say, trying not to betray my terror. Once I hear the pitch of my voice, I know I've failed. "I need some help getting out. I need to get to Oregon."

"Why Oregon?" the man asks with a slight Texas drawl. He wears a baseball cap, and when he tilts his face, I see dark eyebrows and a salt and pepper beard. He has to be fifty, and he looks like he doesn't take much shit.

"I have family there. Can you help me?"

"What's the situation?"

"What?" I ask.

"The situation." The man gestures to the building. "Inside."

"Not sure. I haven't left my apartment. There are too many in my hallway to try. I understand that you probably don't want to risk your life for someone you don't know, but I—"

He holds up a hand to cut me short, then speaks softly to the woman, who nods. "We're gonna check it out," he says. "What apartment are you?"

"Fourth floor. Apartment G. 4G."

"All right. Don't go anywhere."

The man laughs at his own joke. The woman smiles up at me, and I try to laugh, though what I produce is more of a baby hyena screech. The two cross to confer with the other two members of their group, then return to my building, where they disappear beneath.

My heart gallops in my chest. What if they decide it's too much trouble? Will they leave me to die? If faced with a similar situation, I would likely apologize and run away. But that's because I'm a pussy. These people, with their weapons and bikes, are not.

The man and teenager in the lot look bored. *Bored*. They alternate their time between sipping from cans of soda and having what appears to be an idle conversation. And though I want more than anything to be rescued, I've just realized that it means I'll have to go out there. Outside. I'm not sure I can.

I gasp when a figure stumbles around the hotel building, heading straight for the parking lot. Those hisses, those groans, make me sick to my stomach. The man sets his can of soda on the ground as though he has all the time in the world, then starts forward unhurriedly. When he's two feet from the zombie, he lifts a long knife and stabs it through the front of its face. The body, so menacing only a moment ago, falls like a rag doll. The man wipes his blade on its dirty clothing, heads back to the teen, and picks up his soda, resuming the conversation as though nothing has happened.

I leap into the air at a pounding behind me. The zombies are breaking through. Finally breaking through. "Are you gonna let us in or not?" a man's voice asks with that same slight drawl.

I run from the balcony to the door, then look through the peephole. The man and woman are visible in the dim light from the one hall window. I flip the two locks with trembling hands and throw open the door. "Come in, quick."

They step in with the same lack of haste as the man outside. The woman holds up a knife covered in reddish-brown gore. "Do you have a towel or something?"

"Sure, sure," I say, trying hard not to shoo her inside. "Let me close the door."

"No need," the man says. "There's nothing else out there."

I peek out the doorframe. Three bodies lie in the hall. It took what, six minutes at most? And that includes walking up four flights of stairs.

"The stairwell and lobby were clear," the man adds. "I guess most people took off."

I nod dumbly. I've been trapped for a month by something they killed in minutes, a fact I probably shouldn't find as surprising as I do.

"Towel?" the woman asks. A few drops of gore drip onto the foyer tile.

"Oh, right." I head into the kitchen and hand her a dishtowel. "Um, thanks. Thank you. I'm, uh, Craig."

“Troy,” the man says. He takes the towel after the woman is done, cleans the blade and sharp point of a deadly-looking axe thing, then snaps it to his side somehow. It’s impossible to see due to the leather coat he wears. “Nice to meet you.”

“Lana.” The woman offers me a smile. She has a round face and rosebud lips that bring to mind a silent movie star, though her leather coat, tight pants, and boots are *Mad Max*. She sticks her knife into the sheath on her belt. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.” I point to the remains of my water and four cookies on the counter. “I’d offer you something, but that’s all I have.”

“Thanks, but we can’t stay,” Troy says. “Just wanted to make sure you were good before we go.”

Hysteria races through my body and unsteadies my legs. These are the first people I’ve seen in a month and they’re *leaving*. “Go? Where are you going?”

Troy shrugs. “Heading north, don’t know where, exactly. We came up from L.A. Ran out of water there fast. Fucking water wars, man, along with Lexers? I wasn’t sticking around for that. We couldn’t get to the mountains—half the state went that way.”

“I need to go north!” I take a breath, calm myself. What I need is a freaking Xanax. “I have to get to Oregon. They’re okay there, right?”

Troy and Lana exchange a glance. The one parents share when their kid is living in a fantasy world and they want to let him down easy. “Hon,” Lana says gently, “no one’s okay anywhere. We heard it spread all the way to the East Coast. Canada, South America, Europe, Asia. Everywhere.”

My breath sticks in my chest. I won’t cry. I will *not* cry, if for no reason other than proving my father wrong. I hold on to this vow until the first tear works its way down my cheek. It’s over five hundred miles to Eugene. It’s three hundred to the border of California and Oregon, where I hoped to get to safety, and that was bad enough. But *five* hundred? I’m dead. Just as dead as I believed myself a month ago.

Now, if I even make it, which is looking more unlikely by the minute (and, let’s face it, was always in the realm of *fat fucking chance*) there’s no guarantee I’ll find Rose and Mitch. As far as I know, these are the last four people in the world.

“Please let me come with you.” I gulp back my tears. “You’re going that way anyway.”

The glance the two exchange now is full of reluctance. I know how I must look: a grown-ass man who couldn’t—wouldn’t—kill the three zombies in his hallway, who’s half-starved and throwing his shit off his balcony while he waits for help that’s never coming.

“How many Lexers have you killed?” Troy asks, mouth downturned.

“How many *whats* have I killed?”

Troy sighs. Lana pats my arm. “Lexers. Zombies. They were calling them Lexers for the LX in Bornavirus LX.”

“None.” I whisper my answer, but it still resounds like I’ve pounded the final nail into my coffin.

“Listen, buddy—” Troy begins, but Lana cuts him off with, “Let us talk to the others. We’ll be back in a few.”

She tugs Troy into the hall by his arm. I watch them walk the hallway and exit through the stairwell door. The second it closes behind them, I run for my closet. They’re going to leave me. I know they are. I’ll follow them if I have to. My older brother, Mike, called me Little Mister Tag-along as a kid. I have the experience, and I have the utter desperation.

I throw things around until I locate the Timbuk2 commuter backpack I bought to go with the bike I never rode. Into it goes a pair of jeans, two shirts, socks, underwear, and my spare pair of glasses. I race to the bathroom—toothbrush, toothpaste, Xanax. I decide I still need one of the latter and remove the lid with shaky hands. The bottle falls, scattering light blue pills on the tile.

“Fuck!” I shout. I drop to my knees, pack hanging from my shoulder, and scoop up every pill I can find. Then I pop one and dump the rest in the bottle.

Deodorant. I need deodorant. After that’s in the bag, I rush to the hall closet. It’s decent weather, but it seems leather coats are *de rigueur* for the apocalypse. I can see why: human teeth won’t easily bite through. I throw on my black leather coat, then stick my socked feet into boots I never wear. Mitch and Rose talked me into buying the black shitkicker boots, saying I looked tough. That’s a laugh—I never look tough, and I haven’t worn combat boots since high school—but I bought them in the unlikely event I

might be tough one day. Considering how sweaty I am, how terrified, that day is not today.

I run for the balcony, tripping over the untied laces, and stop with a short cry. The bikes are gone. The people are gone. Troy and Lana never intended to be back in a few. And though I hate strangers, avoid people, it feels as though I've lost my best friends. In a way, I have, because I'll never get to Rose and Mitch on my own.

I choke back a sob. I knew they would leave me. Deep down, I don't blame them. *I'd* leave myself if I could.

"Yoo-hoo," Lana says from my living room. "Looking for us?"

I spin around. The four are gathered by my couch, leather-clad and prepared for anything with the gear they carry. I do my best to play it cool, walking through the balcony door without falling on my face. "You're back."

"Said we would be." Lana's smile adds that she knows exactly what I've been thinking. "This is Francis."

She gestures to the big guy I saw in the lot. His skin is a deep brown and his eyes four shades lighter. He gives me a nod that isn't unfriendly but says he isn't entirely on board with a plan that involves rescuing a weakling.

I wave like a moron. "I'm Craig." I may be tall, but between Francis' and Troy's girths, I feel like a ninety-eight-pound weakling.

Lana points to the teenager, who isn't a teenager at all, but a very petite Asian woman in her early thirties. "This is Daisy."

She's cool with her short black bangs and the black tattoo that winds its way up her neck. The kind of cool that trips up my tongue. I felt the same when I met Rose years ago, was hopelessly tongue-tied by the funny girl with the red hair until I was comfortable. Rather than speak, which will come out even more moronic, I wave again. Daisy waves lazily in return.

"Ground rules," Troy says. "You pull your own weight. If you don't, we will leave you behind. That doesn't mean we won't help you, but we won't die for you like your dear old mom and dad would, so act accordingly."

"Okay," I say.

Lana looks me over. "You seem ready to go. Except for the laces."

"Right." I sit in a chair to tie my boots, double knotting them so I don't trip again. When I'm finished, I stand, unsure of what to say or do. Afraid

to say or do the thing that will result in being left behind.

“Weapons?” Troy asks. At my mystified expression, he adds, “You got any? You’re traveling a little light for the zompoc.”

My entire body heats. Of course. Weapons. I’m going to have to kill zombies. I force myself to the kitchen. A knife would be good. I fumble at the knife block, eventually choosing a large chef’s knife.

Lana appears at my side. “That won’t work. Too wide. In the movies, they’re always sticking their knives through solid skull, but that’s the movies. You need something like an axe or a super strong knife and arm. Otherwise, you should go for a knife skinny enough to fit in an eye socket, by the ear,” she raises a hand to her ear, then touches the back of her neck, “here, or under the chin and up. Francis can get through skull with his knife, but even Troy has trouble with that.”

“Hey!” Troy shouts, his light tone making clear he jokes. “Don’t disparage my manhood.”

“You do that all on your own, honey,” Lana says. Troy laughs, as do the others. She pulls a thinner knife from the block and stabs it into a cabinet door with a mighty *thunk*. It sinks in a half-inch. “That should be good until we find you something better. Do you have a screwdriver? Those work, too.”

A small drawer in the corner cabinet holds my tools, of which there are few. I choose the longest screwdriver, and Lana nods. “Don’t forget your water.”

I shove the bottle into the water pouch on the side of my pack, then fill another for the opposite pouch. I put the screwdriver in my coat pocket. Far too long, it falls to the floor with a clank. At titters from the living area, I jam it into my pocket so that the metal rips through the lining and the handle is safely seated, and then I clutch the knife in my hand.

Lana moves for the door. “Now you’re ready.”

I follow the four into the hall, wondering how much it will hurt when the zombies tear me apart.

Craig

BY THE TIME we retrieved my bike from the storage area beneath the building and made it to the highway entrance seven blocks away, my hands trembled on the handlebars and my feet slipped off the pedals every fifth rotation. I wished for my sneakers instead of the clumsier boots. And, as long as I was wishing, I wished for all of this to be a horrible dream. We saw six zombies on the route to the freeway. Thankfully, all of them were at least a quarter-block away, but I almost careered into a building when I saw the first. The next five made me pedal like mad, until I was out of breath and covered with sweat in my cocoon of leather.

The freeway we're on now is three lanes on both sides, with a shoulder on either side, making ten lanes in which to travel. Empty lanes. According to Troy, they shut it down the first night by blocking the exits, and the mass exodus the next morning mainly occurred on the streets—at least until people forced their way past.

“It's as safe as we're getting,” Troy assured me. “If we see a big group, we cross over the median. If it's too many to mount a distraction, we turn around and take the streets to the next entrance.”

The plan is to ride this to less-populated territory and then take smaller roads. According to Troy, people fled north and east, and they heard it was a fuckshow all the way to Sacramento. Also according to Troy, the fact that people fled, didn't listen to reports to stay inside, is why we're in this mess. They left, they were bitten, and now California is crawling with zombies. The man seems to know what he's talking about. Maybe we need to print up a pamphlet titled *According to Troy: Your Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse*.

I laugh aloud. Daisy, pedaling in front and to my left, glances over her shoulder and faces forward again. Is she shaking her head? Probably. The weirdo who's deathly afraid of zombies is laughing for no apparent reason. What she doesn't know is that another half Xanax has kicked in and this is my mellow. We stopped for a drink once we were on the freeway. I surreptitiously opened my bottle and palmed one out, then split it along the scored line before I took half. The other half waits in my jeans' pocket for some indeterminate time in the not so distant future.

By the time we reach the San Rafael Bridge, everything has taken on a welcome haze, and I watch the bridge shimmer in the distance before the road turns. It's a testament to how fucked up things are that this much Xanax only reduces it from shit-your-pants terrifying to piss-your-pants terrifying. I've taken this trip by car many times, and though my surroundings resemble the world before, it looks as though a post-apocalyptic movie crew has redecorated the set.

Below the elevated freeway, parking lots are strewn with broken glass, motionless bodies, and plenty of locomoting bodies, too. Starbucks and Mickey D's are among the plundered, and though Lana gave me a protein bar and some diner food, my stomach growls after weeks of almost nothing. I wasn't in tip-top shape before, but a month of hunger and inactivity have me perpetually winded and my legs struggling to keep up.

Stopped cars fill the streets beneath us. Some abandoned in the midst of a traffic jam with doors left wide open when the occupants ran. Others are massive collisions with cars wedged together at odd angles, like a frustrated toddler attempted to fit puzzle pieces where they didn't belong. Jesse and Holly did that when they were small, and it always cracked me up when they proudly showed me the finished product.

I pray they're okay. Rose, the founder of The Society of Overprotective Mothers, will make sure of it. Unless Jesse was still up at school. If he was, Rose is in Washington now, knocking down zombies—Lexers—in a quest to save him. I swallow hard when a sob tries to work its way out. I'll seem even crazier if I cry after laughing like a loon.

Holly and Jesse are the closest I have to kids of my own, and I love them in a way I love nothing else. I love that they call me Uncle Cray and that they came to visit me alone once they were teenagers, the way real nieces and nephews would. I watched them grow from distressingly odd-looking newborns into funny, smart, gorgeous adults. When they were small, Mitch and I were named their guardians if anything happened to Rose and Ethan, and though the kids are now too old to need legal guardians in the event of their parents' demise, I still take the role seriously. It's no small thing if Rose trusts you with her kids.

I need to get there. Need to see if the kids are okay. If they aren't, if I can't find anyone, I don't know what I'll do.

"Watch out!" Francis yells from behind me.

The road slopes down here. With my mind elsewhere, I didn't notice I've pulled ahead and am heading straight for nine Lexers who spill from behind an abandoned van. My boot slips off the pedal into my front wheel, stopping me short, and I fly over the handlebars onto the pavement with my arms out to break my fall. I kiss asphalt and land on my side, where my temple strikes with a decisive *clunk*.

Through a burst of white fireworks in my vision, I see four bikes stop, then eight feet hit the ground and move for the van. I roll to my hands and knees. Nine zombies. Four people. I know I should be with them—know I could fight off the pounding in my head and attempt to do my part—but Craig the Puss is on the scene, and I'm too scared to move.

I watch as the four perform a dance that seems choreographed. Take the closest first, always keeping backs to safety. Francis does indeed get one right between the eyes with his knife that's more machete than culinary. Troy swings his arm to the side and slams his axe's spike into an ear. Lana gets close, one hand on a bloody man's shoulder, and strikes him beneath the chin with a quick upward jab. Daisy, small but speedy, kicks out a Lexer's knee and bends to deliver a killing blow to its eye.

They keep one another in their sights, Lana helping Troy with a particularly hefty zombie in a police officer's uniform while Francis clobbers another two over the head with a hammer he's produced out of nowhere. Brown liquid sprays in an arc. Daisy ducks behind the last one, a woman in jeans and peasant blouse, and does something to the back of her skull that cuts off her growl and sends her lifeless to the ground.

Francis and Daisy watch the road while Troy and Lana make their way over. I sit up straight, fingers pressing on the temple lump that's begun to throb. "Sorry," I say.

"You okay?" Troy asks, lines on his face bunched with something. Concern? Annoyance? "Why'd you take off like that?"

"I was thinking about some people I need to get to."

"Don't get out in front if you can't watch the road."

I start to speak, realize I have nothing to say, then nod. Blood from my scraped lips makes it into my mouth, coating my tongue with a sickening metallic taste. We've gone fifteen miles and I've already fucked up.

Troy walks away. Lana sinks to her knees in front of me. She fishes a tissue from her pocket and hands it to me before motioning at her own lips.

“Road got you good.”

I press it to my mouth. “Wouldn’t be the first time. I’m not known for my athletic prowess.”

Lana laughs, her short brown waves bouncing. I decide she’s in her late forties at most, not that much older than I am. When she looks at me again, laugh lines make her eyes kind. Forgiving of my idiocy. She brushes her hands on her knees and stands. “We should get moving. It’d be a good idea to get out of the city by nighttime.”

Nighttime. I don’t like darkness. I never have, but I adulated myself out of that fear, or I did until zombies became a thing. I get to one knee, then raise myself to standing. A little bruised, but not bad. If there’s one thing I can do, it’s take a knocking. A pummeling, even. Elementary schoolyard bullies drove that lesson home.

My bike is okay. My glasses, too. Thank God for small favors. I set my ass on the seat and pedal after the others. Once we’re past the van, Troy points to the exit midway down the sloped road. “I bet they got in that way. Might be a lot more where those came from.”

There’s no end to the good news, apparently.

The road dips below street level, though the roadsides rise to concrete wall or chain-link fence. Bodies watch us from the fenced overpasses, which is horrible, and it’s made worse by the rattle of metal and groans that follow us for a hundred feet beyond.

Cars appear in the distance, their windows winking sunlight, and Francis slows his bike after the next overpass. I move to the side to see past his large silhouette. The traffic jam stretches until the road curves out of sight.

“Streets back there are going to be busy now that we’ve passed.” Lana peers behind us. “Too late.”

I spin around. A group of figures moves on the empty road we just traveled. The others nod sagely. Calmly. How the fuck they can be calm, I don’t know, and I clench my handlebars while I wait for a decision.

“Sometimes the only way out is through,” Troy says, squinting into the distance.

“As long as you don’t pull the shit you pulled in Fresno,” Daisy says, though she laughs a tinkling little laugh that Troy joins in.

“I can’t make any promises, Daisy Duke. But I’ll let everyone else die before you.”

“Don’t bother.” Her fist hits his shoulder. “I don’t want to be stuck alone with you.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Troy winks. “What do you think, Francis? Lana?” He reaches into his pack and pulls out a pair of binoculars. “Can’t see much, but we can always backtrack to that exit if it’s bad.”

He hands the binoculars to Francis, who takes a turn and then passes them to Lana. “I say we try,” Francis says, and Lana nods.

They begin cycling slowly. I follow. They seem to have forgotten my existence, and I’m not sure if I’m disturbed or comforted by that thought. Maybe they figure I’m game for anything. They’re dead wrong, of course, and it’s an unlikely theory, but the notion that they might not see me as an impediment is too attractive to discount.

We pedal forward, my bowels churning with every rotation. The exit is long, sloping up alongside the freeway, and it’s only when we get close that I see the group of Lexers who wait under the dead traffic light at the top. Five bikes make enough movement that we’re spotted immediately, and the Lexers start down the ramp.

“Plan B!” Francis calls over his shoulder.

What’s Plan B? And, for that matter, what’s Plan A? I don’t remember, not sure I ever knew, but Francis increases his speed toward the stopped traffic and curve in the road. Zombies ahead and zombies to the side make it the only plan. What I fail to factor in—and it’s a big fail—is that the Lexers won’t stick to the road. With no walls at the exits, they stumble off the exit lane and down the grassy embankment to the main road.

Francis veers between the first of the cars, stopping to swing a door closed and holding us up for a second or two. Thirty feet behind, the zombies are closing in. My panic comes out as a shrill yelp that probably should embarrass me but doesn’t.

I back up and move between an SUV and sedan the next lane over, propelling the bike with my feet. A hand reaches from the SUV’s open window and grabs my pack. It’s a man—a zombie man—still buckled into his seat, his arm gouged by teeth and caked with clotted blood. He hisses and strains against his seatbelt while pulling me toward his open mouth.

I have to touch it, have to pull off its hand. I clamp my bike between my legs and grasp the bloodied fingers curled around my pack strap. They're cold, solid. Like meat from the fridge coated with waxy leather. Like when I touched my dead father's hand, except my dead father was in a coffin, dressed for a job interview that didn't exist. He wasn't clawing at twelve-year-old me with murder in his eyes.

Its eyes are terrible. The watery brown of crappy diner coffee with tiny purple-red veins in the grayish whites. Rimmed with black and filled with anger. *Hunger*. I pry the last finger off my strap, breath coming in great heaving gasps, and walk my bike another four feet.

The Lexers are close enough to reach me with a lunge. I dig my toes into the ground to push off, then lift my feet to the pedals. Troy and the others wait in the next lane until I catch up and then pedal on. They didn't leave me, at least. I fly after them, still feeling that hand on my shoulder and consumed with terror another will grab me any second. The Xanax is long gone, pushed from my bloodstream by adrenaline.

On the opposite side of the road—westbound—the stopped cars face east, too. Everyone tried to leave the state, it seems, and they had the same luck over there. A woman with lank hair and a filthy peach sweater throws herself against the concrete median and pounds the roof of the nearest car. Dark liquid oozes from a hole in her cheek. Five more who wander the westbound lanes come closer at her clamor.

I smelled their stench from my balcony and in the hallway when we left, but that had nothing on the odor permeating the air. It's rotting meat and sewage and a musty, fishy undertone that clings inside your nostrils. It's the smell of spinach a month past its best-by date, reduced to a swampy liquid and mixed with shit. I gag as it grows stronger with every foot we travel.

Bodies flow onto the road from the westbound exit, merging into stopped cars on their way to the median. We speed up. After we round the next curve, we come to a stop at Lana's shout, and I follow the line of her finger past the giant RV just ahead.

My heart skips then stutters to a stop. Lexers are everywhere. Two dozen on the road, moving toward us between cars. Thirty on the grass to the right, also coming our way. The zombies behind will arrive soon, and the waist-high median separating the roadways is little more than a

slowdown for the ones who topple face-first onto our eastbound lanes and get to their feet again.

My handlebars shake in my hands. Leaving my house was a bad idea. The worst idea. I knew it and still I left. What the fuck was I thinking? Three zombies in a hallway are better than this. Dying of starvation is better than this.

“Well, shit!” Troy yells over the buzzing groans. “Out of the frying pan and into the fire!” He grins beneath his beard as if certain death isn’t coming at us every which way.

Troy is out of his fucking mind. They’re all crazy, with the way they coolly take in our surroundings. Anyone can see that the grass is impassable, ahead and behind us are not going to work, and, even if we could make it across the zombie-filled westbound lanes, the twelve-foot barrier wall is not scalable.

Lana drops her bike and races for the RV, then scrambles up the rear ladder to the roof. Daisy is right behind her, followed by Francis. Troy inclines his head my way completely unnecessarily, since I’m already clambering up. I make it to the roof and stand there, legs wavering, until Francis bops my shoulder with a meaty hand. “Move back for Troy.”

I pick my way past a rectangular air conditioning unit, then collapse on the white fiberglass. Liquid stings my eyes, and I wipe a lake of sweat off my forehead. We’ve barely left my neighborhood and are already trapped. We’re off the asphalt, but there’s no way out of this.

A pounding starts up below—hands slapping against the sides of the RV with a frenzy of hisses as accompaniment. Troy’s head appears on the ladder. The rest of him follows, and then he stands atop the RV beside Francis while they study the scene. He shouts something I can’t hear over the din. I get to my feet and walk to Lana and Daisy by the A/C unit.

“What?” I shout to Troy.

“I said, we’re good and fucked now!”

I nod while I watch the bodies converge. They’re already two-deep around the RV, and more are spilling over the median. The Lexers on the road ahead make their way between cars to join the ones from the grass. All in all, we *are* good and fucked, but it would be nice if Troy didn’t take pleasure in it.

“We’re not yet, but we will be if you keep standing in plain sight.” Lana pulls Troy from view by his sleeve. “Let’s sit and eat something while we wait.”

HOURS LATER, the zombies haven’t stopped. I’m not sure how many hours it’s been, since I cracked my watch somehow—maybe in the fall off my bike. I asked the time and then asked again after what felt like hours but was only thirty minutes. The next time I asked, it’d been a twenty-minute “hour,” and I stopped asking to reduce my annoyance factor. I’m trying hard not to be annoying, not to speak, not to show fear. But the pounding, the odor, and the moans fill my ears and chest with a slithery panic that prods me to climb down the ladder and run, if only to escape the ceaseless reminder I’ll soon be eaten and get it over with.

The sun has moved across the sky. Maybe it’s afternoon. A cowboy who can tell time by the sun I am not. They gave me some food from the diner to carry, and I cracked open a can of tuna and packets of mayonnaise, mixing it together and scooping it into my mouth with my fingers. The others have utensils, but I didn’t consider the need for a fork or spoon until the moment I needed one. My meal was followed by maraschino cherries from a jar Daisy passed around. The sweetness was quickly obliterated by the rot smell from below.

Francis straightens where he sits on the air conditioning unit, eyes on the westbound side of the freeway. “We have a problem.”

I get to my feet with the others. How our predicament could worsen, I’m not sure, but I’m sure Francis knows what he’s talking about. Off in the distance, a dark mass files steadily through the cars. Hundreds, maybe a thousand. I’m a bad judge of that kind of thing; I avoid large groups of people whenever possible.

Large groups of zombies are worse. The tuna gurgles uneasily in my intestines. My nervous stomach is a curse, always has been, but I am not, repeat *not*, going to shit my pants. Or have to crap in front of these people. I don’t care if my eyeballs turn brown from holding it in. It isn’t happening.

“We can’t stay,” Daisy says. “They’ll never leave.”

“Flare?” Troy asks.

“We’re out,” Lana replies. Her head moves slowly from side to side, though her eyes remain fixed on the encroaching mob. “It’s on the list of things to get.”

Daisy dashes to the back of the RV, then returns. “There aren’t as many at the ladder. We can fight our way through if we move them.” She kneels and leans over the edge of the RV, then pounds on the side. “Hey, fuckbags! Over here!”

Lana does the same. Francis heads to the other side of the RV, where he adds a deep shout. I watch, clueless, until Troy says, “We’re calling the ones in back up here. We’ll get down the ladder easier.”

He joins Francis, yelling and pounding along with him. I drop to my belly near Lana and hang my arms off the side, slamming on the fiberglass open-handed. “Hey!” I shout, my voice lost in the groans of the zombies and the shouts of the others.

What the hell do you say to zombies? The others are cursing up a storm, but I feel ridiculous doing the same, and I pound harder rather than yell. Bodies move from the back of the RV, pushing each other to get near. All eyes are trained upward, all mouths open. Gray skin, mottled with purple, caked with dried blood. Open wounds that haven’t festered so much as coagulated and turned black at the edges. Pale irises bleached by bright sunshine. It seems impossible. Yet it’s possible. They’re here.

Daisy gets to her feet, runs to the end of the RV once again, then yells, “Go! Let’s go!”

I stand. Across the roof, Troy lifts his chin at Francis, then juts it toward the ladder. Francis draws his blade, nodding, and Troy glances my way. “You stay with me ‘til they’re through. Tell me when they’ve made it off the road.”

I stare. Troy can’t mean I have to stay here while the others leave. A hand squeezes my shoulder, and Lana leans close. “You’re with Troy. You’ll be fine.”

Then she’s trotting to the end of the RV. Francis descends first, blade in hand. The three will come out on my side to reach the grass, and it’s up to me to keep them safe. I’ll do my best; Lana’s kindness deserves to be repaid.

I drop to the roof again. This time, I yell, “Hey! Up here, fuckheads! Over here!”

I fumble the screwdriver from my pocket and slam the handle against the RV’s side. It makes enough of a racket to hide the groans of the ones who notice Francis, Daisy, and Lana running through cars toward the grass. They race around a sedan, Lana stopping to brain a woman in her way, and then plow uphill toward a group of tall, spindly evergreens by the fence.

I pound harder, calling over my shoulder, “They’re at the top of the hill!”

Seconds later, Troy grabs the back of my coat. “Move!”

I push back from the edge and get to my feet, which I trip over on my way to the ladder. “I go first,” Troy says. “You come down fast, then we run.”

I nod. Fear shakes my shoulders, my legs, but it’s as though I watch Terrified Craig nod. It’s likely I’ll watch him die in a minute, too. On the bright side, if I have to die, better it’s with this curious detachment than shitting my pants.

Only a few Lexers stand at the rear of the RV. Troy starts down, axe in hand, then stops midway and swings the spike into one’s eyeball. It hangs on the spike until he kicks the inert body into the two behind so that they fall. Then he drops to the asphalt.

I turn and set my feet on the top rung. My boots slip on the next, and I slide down gripping the ladder rails until my feet hit asphalt with a thump that rattles my neckbones. Troy wields his axe on the next Lexers to arrive. He’s a big guy—broad but not the trimmest physique—and he has power. Brown liquid and bone shards fly before he points out a path through the cars and takes off. I bust my ass to follow, almost stepping on Troy’s heels as he pushes a zombie down, then steps on its face.

We reach the side of the freeway at full speed. The long grass wraps around my ankles, forces me to slow, but I still move faster than a zombie. As we make our way uphill, Troy whoops, holding his axe aloft. The three figures at the fence yell something I can’t hear, though it sounds celebratory. The slope steepens, and by the time we reach the trees, I’m winded. Troy hits the chain-link and begins to climb while I chance a backward look. The Lexers on the freeway are coming, but they’re barely

past the shoulder, and they'll have trouble on that hill. I take a deep breath. It's another minute lived, and I've never been more grateful to be alive.

"On your left!" Daisy shouts.

I see the figure just before it slams into my left side. I bounce off a tree trunk and stumble until I catch my footing. One side of the Lexer's face hangs in a loose flap of skin, exposing cheekbone and working jaw. He lunges in, mouth wide, and it's only when I shove at him two-handed that I realize I've held on to my screwdriver.

Troy is on the other side of the fence. He and Lana begin to climb, but they'll be too late to save me. Fifteen miles, that's all we've traveled, and now it's over. Rose and Mitch will wonder about me, assuming I died quickly. It sucks; deep down I'd hoped to surprise them—to surprise myself.

The zombie man moves toward me in slow motion, every tooth distinguishable from the next and his purplish tongue on display. He's stronger. He isn't tired. I lift my hands and again see the gleam of my screwdriver—a length of shiny steel I've only ever used to assemble furniture.

Someone screams a desperate scream that begs me to live. I grip the handle and shove it into the man's eye. Fluid bursts, spraying a putrid juice onto my hand, and the man falls to the ground. I think he's dead, but I drop and drive the screwdriver into his other staring eye just in case. The jelly pops, brown liquid oozes around the metal, and someone screams in horror. Not someone. *Me*. I'm screaming, and when I force my mouth shut it's quiet but for the sounds from the freeway.

Troy yanks me up by my arm. "C'mon, buddy. Over the fence."

The zombies are past the base of the slope. I stick my screwdriver in my pocket and pull myself up the metal links, then throw a leg over and drop to the grass. It's unkempt and dry now, but you can tell it was carefully cultivated a month ago.

The ground is flat for fifteen feet before it slopes down, crisscrossed by narrow asphalt roads until it hits trees a quarter mile away. There are no houses, and few trees except the ones by the fence. I stare at the view, numb and confused. A park, maybe.

"You okay?" Lana asks. "Let's move away from the fence and clean you up."

I look down. My hands are stained brown. I peer closely at a blob of something. Is that...? Yes, it's eyeball. Stuck to the edge of my fingernail like brown Jell-O. My stomach flops. Another person's eyeball is *on my hand*.

"You need a pair of gloves," Troy states, then claps my back so hard it hurts. "Popped your zombie cherry with that one. I knew you had it in you."

Maybe I had it in me, but everything else is fighting to come out. I heave twice and puke my lunch all over the ground. If there's a more disgusting vomit than tuna fish stained pink by and dotted with chewed maraschino cherries, I haven't had the pleasure of making its acquaintance. My stomach surges a few more times, sending up pink tuna-cherry flavored bile, and then I dry heave at the taste in my mouth.

I raise a hand to wipe my face, remember the eyeball, then spit and fumble at my side for water. I swish and spit, then do it twice more. I'm never eating tuna again. Rose hates fish with a passion, and I've always thought her overdramatic. No more. She's the smartest person I know. She's a fucking genius.

"They're coming," Daisy says, moving toward us from the fence.

"Let's go, Cherry," Troy says with a chuckle. He steers me past a stand of trees by the fence, where a couple of buildings are visible down the hill. "They won't see us farther down. Not a thing in here. Must be fully fenced."

Lana hitches up her pack and points at the buildings. "The first is probably a mausoleum, but the second could be an office. We should check it for supplies and figure out where to go from here."

My boot lands on something hard. A headstone, the kind set flush with the ground. Finally, I recognize the spaces where no grass grows, the gentle rolling hills split by roads one travels to visit with a departed loved one. A distant corner with traditional upright headstones. It's a cemetery. Of course we're in a goddamn cemetery. We're on the run from the dead, and we've ended up in the safety of a cemetery. Maybe it isn't true irony, but it's certainly absurd.

My laugh splits the air. I feel their eyes on me, but I don't care. I killed someone—not a true someone, but still. The world is so over it isn't funny, and my mixture of amusement and mania makes me laugh harder.

"What's funny?" Lana asks.

I gulp in air and manage to wheeze out, “A cemetery is the safest place around.”

Lana cackles, and Daisy giggles over Francis’ low laugh. Troy shakes his head, though he cracks a smile. “You’re an odd one, Cherry. Welcome to the club.”

Craig

THE OFFICE IS A LARGE HOUSE, made up of tasteful waiting areas and multiple offices where they sold burial plots and whatever else cemeteries hawk. Large windows in every room look out at the grounds. I stop at the water cooler in the waiting area, which sits beside a table laden with tea bags, instant coffee, and the accompanying accoutrement.

“Can I use this to clean up?” I ask.

“I don’t know, can you?” Troy asks in return.

I force a laugh—the minute in which I felt like I belonged has passed. I killed that zombie, sure, but I don’t remember how I did it, like a dream gone hazy. Repeating the experience doesn’t seem likely.

“We’ll check out the rest of the place,” Lana says. “Do you need soap or anything?”

Like utensils, soap was another item I didn’t consider. I shake my head rather than admit it. They must have dispensers in the bathrooms. After the others disappear, I fill two paper cups with water and head for the restroom, where I drop my pack to hold the door open while I wash up in dim light. The soap is wonderful, the cool water glorious, but I don’t allow myself to go back for another cup. Potable water should be saved for drinking, even I know that.

I dry my hands with a paper towel, use another half-cup of water to take that half of Xanax—I *need* it, for God’s sake—and head in search of the others. A door marked *Employees Only* leads me into a large central space attached to untidy, non-public offices and a kitchen. It’s silent. If they came this way, they’re no longer here. And since they haven’t returned to the other side, there’s only one explanation.

Of course they left you. You screamed and puked like a baby.

Something slams in the kitchen, and my four traveling companions spill from a door I didn’t notice beside the refrigerator, holding boxes they dump onto the counters. Francis nods my way. “There was a lot of food in there. Snack stuff.”

I enter slowly, eyeing the small bags of cookies, fruit snacks, nuts, and crackers. My stomach growls. I watch as they divvy it up, choosing their

favorites from the selections and cramming them into packs and pockets before they rip open fresh bags and stuff their faces.

“What are you waiting for?” Lana asks. “If it’s for us to stop eating, you’ll be waiting a long time.” As if to drive the point home, Daisy opens another bag and shoves a butter cookie into her mouth.

I don’t want to seem too eager, but once I pick up a package of fruit snacks, I tear into them as though possessed. I’m so hungry, and I want the tuna taste gone. Once my mouth is filled with the magnificent flavors of fake grapes and strawberries, I say, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us.” Troy wipes Ritz Bits crumbs from his beard. “Thank the fella down the hall in the manager’s office. But don’t. He’s dead. Looks like he blew his brains out.”

“He ran a cemetery but was afraid of dead people,” Daisy says. “Maybe he thought they’d come back to punish him for price gouging.”

The others laugh. I want to be one of the cool kids, but I can’t be so flippant about the man down the hall. I admit I’m overly sensitive on the subject to begin with, but it was also only this morning that I entertained the same idea. Before I can stop myself, I whisper, “He must’ve felt hopeless.”

Quiet descends over the group. Chewing slows. I catch the *what a party pooper* look between Daisy and Troy. “Sorry,” I say.

“You’re right,” Lana says softly. “But if you don’t laugh, you’ll cry. And I’ve cried enough recently to last a lifetime.”

“Good Lord,” Troy says, “she sure did. She blubbered for the first two days after I met her.”

“That was because I’d realized I was stuck with a Republican for the foreseeable future.”

Troy barks out a laugh. “Libertarian, thank you very much. And I admit I shed a few tears when I found out you were a communist.”

“Democratic socialist, twerp.” Lana turns to me with a grin. “Don’t hold it against him, though. Troy’s all right. And he knows his way around a gun. Taught me almost everything I know.”

Troy salutes her, then sizes me up. “When we find a decent weapon, it’s yours.”

I nod noncommittally. I don’t like guns, never have. Instead of saying so, I start on a bag of Wheat Thins. They’re delicious. Buttery and crunchy. It’s possible nothing has ever tasted better.

“Load up the stomach and the bag,” Troy says to me. “Then we’ll move the rest of this to that waiting area and figure out what’s next.”

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, a map is spread out on the coffee table between the couches, and the five of us stare at the twisting lines that mark roads out of the area. They lead to a choice of two bridges that cross the water to the north, or a few roads east that will get us either to another bridge or closer to Stockton—a city they want to avoid. Troy runs his hands through his salt-and-pepper hair, then massages his temples. “Maybe we can get across the bridge into Vallejo.”

He pronounces it the Spanish way, rather than the English-Spanish mishmash the way locals do: Va-Lay-ho. It took me years to get the local names right, and Rose said it was similar in New York City: You could always spot a tourist when they pronounced Houston Street like the city in Texas. It’s HOW-ston, and I didn’t make a fool of myself when we went there for a visit six years ago. Rose showed me and Mitch the place she’d grown up while marveling (and lamenting) at how much it’d changed. We had a great time, just the three of us, the way we always do. Even going to the grocery store turns into tears of laughter and stares from people who wonder why three grown humans are acting like teenagers.

The conversation has continued while I was woolgathering, and I return to it as they debate the zombie population of the bridges versus heading east toward Stockton. Traffic is the issue, since traffic usually means zombies. I take a breath and then point at the Benicia-Martinez Bridge. “There’s a railroad bridge in between the two car bridges. Maybe there won’t be Lexers on it.”

It feels funny to say *Lexer* aloud, but it’s also less frightening, less implausible, than *zombie*. I decide I like it.

“Sounds like a plan.” Troy stares at the map a moment longer, tracing a route with his finger. “Going to be quite a trek. We’re hoofing it without bikes unless we can find a vehicle and empty road.”

Francis checks his watch, worn on his left wrist, along with a wedding band on that hand. Evidently, Francis once had a wife. And though his

cargo pants and boots bring to mind a gunslinger or ex-military, his watch would be better matched to a suit. I wonder what, or who, these four people were a month ago.

“How far do you think we can make today?” Francis asks. “I’m thinking we shouldn’t stay here any longer than necessary. With those ones at the highway, they’re going to flock to the fence. They’ll get through if they try hard enough.”

“What if we make our way to the railroad tracks and take them to the bridge?” Lana asks. “Lots of times they’re fenced. Might be safer than roads.”

“I think they run along the water,” I offer, then quickly add, “but I’m not positive about that.”

Francis checks the map and nods, then looks to me. I shrug—I don’t want this plan resting on my head. It’s bad enough I mentioned the railroad bridge at all. If it’s blocked or covered in Lexers, it’ll be my fault. I shut my trap before I can dig the hole deeper.

Troy squints my way. “What? Don’t hold out on us. We don’t know this area well.”

I clear my throat and point north of the red dot Lana drew on the map to denote our current location. “Um, well, this is all pretty populated. That means more zombies, right?” I see the others nod out of the corner of my eye, though I don’t look up. “Someone might say that we should take either the John Muir Parkway or,” I point below the parkway, where a thin black line travels east-west, “Alhambra Valley Road. They’re both pretty rural out of the city. We could cut up to Martinez and get on the tracks there, then get to the bridge.”

“*Someone* might say?” Daisy asks. “Or *you* might say?”

Moisture rolls down my back, pooling under my ass. It’ll probably look like I’ve wet myself when I stand. “It’s what I’d choose,” I mumble. “If it were just me.” I leave out the part where if it were just me, I’d be dead in my hallway right now, likely with pants full of pee *and* poop.

Francis pulls what resembles a pocket watch from his coat. It’s silver and round, with a tiny disc that extends from a foot at the bottom. He presses the disc to the map and runs it from the red dot along the coast all the way to the second bridge, then inspects what would be the watch face. By now, I’ve seen it isn’t a watch at all, but some sort of dial with a spinner

and numbers. Francis does it again with the two other routes, then nods. “That southern route is shorter by five miles. If it’s not packed with traffic, we could use a vehicle.”

“Safer *and* shorter?” Troy asks. “That’s one for the record books.”

The others laugh. I try, but my mouth won’t work. I might’ve just sent us all to die. This is the time to tell them that they shouldn’t pay any attention to me, to do what they think is best, but I can’t even do that.

BEFORE WE LEAVE, we check for keys to the few vehicles out front. One, a van, is the most practical, but try as we might to find them, the keys are nowhere. When the noises from the fence become loud enough to hear—meaning a shitload of Lexers have joined the first—we buckle on our packs and go. My bag is too small to carry all the food I want, so I tie a found shopping bag to my pack that crinkles softly with every step.

The cemetery’s front gate deposits us onto a main road with a gas station and small shopping plaza, both empty of cars and zombies. Aside from a few houses that line the right side, and two churches on the left, it’s quiet. The sun blazes in the blue sky above, though it’s dropped low enough to the west that Troy adjusts his baseball cap to escape its glare.

After we walk past a beat-up sedan parked on the shoulder, Troy stops at a shiny silver pickup outside the next house. It’s compact, with a tiny bed, though the cab is four-door. “Road looks clear so far. Let’s see if we can’t find the keys.”

It’ll be the difference between walking or driving what Francis’ magic map reader said is twenty miles of travel. The brown ranch house is fully fenced with tall wrought-iron, and when Daisy reaches inside to open the latch, the gate swings inward with a faint creak. We step into the graveled front yard one by one. I have no clue what I’m supposed to be looking for, though I assume being aware of advancing zombies is probably smart. So far, there are none.

My hand sweats on the screwdriver handle. Experience should’ve made me more confident, but it hasn’t. It was a fluke. I held the screwdriver at the

right height as a zombie came for me—nothing less, nothing more. There’s no way I can do that again.

“Looks good,” Francis says.

The door is locked, and a gentle rap goes unanswered for thirty seconds before something throws itself against the other side of the wood. I gasp. The others appear unperturbed. Lana steps to the window beside the door and cuts through the screen with a box cutter, then pushes up on the glass until it opens wide. “I love people who didn’t lock their windows.”

Her voice draws a man to the opening. He has the same dark-veined gray skin and light raging eyes of the other Lexers, though without the mangled skin and open wounds of most. It isn’t until he throws his arms out the window that the round bite mark on his forearm is visible. The gauze with which he bandaged it has come loose to rest around his wrist like a gruesome bracelet. Maybe he was bitten and came home for safety.

Lana side-steps the man’s flailing arms, snatches his short brown hair, and drives her long, thin knife into his ear. He falls immediately, his torso bent over the windowsill and the fingers of his dangling arms just brushing the gravel.

“Looks like that’s it,” Troy says.

He yanks the man through the window, drags the body a few feet away, and then climbs inside. A few seconds later, the front door opens, and we follow Troy through a foyer and into a living room. Toys sit in a corner, though there are no signs of an actual kid.

Francis inspects a key rack by the door. “No car keys here.”

“Maybe the kitchen,” Daisy says.

The kitchen looks out on a graveled yard landscaped with bushes and littered with outdoor toys. Two dirty glasses wait in the sink. Otherwise, the kitchen is clean, with no keys in sight. Troy lifts an envelope on the table, addressed to someone named Gwen. “Poor bastard must have written this.” After a pause, he pulls out the note inside, his eyes scanning the paper quickly. “Oh, Christ. When am I going to learn not to do this?”

“Never, obviously,” Lana replies. “What’s it say?”

“He says he waited as long as he could, and he’s sorry he took the pills to kill himself. But once he realized the virus was making people into monsters, he didn’t want to hurt her and Jackson, their kid. He said he thinks God will forgive him, since he was about to die anyway. Blah, blah,

blah, love you forever, Lonnie.” Troy drops the paper to the table. “Well, it didn’t work, Lonnie. You still turned into a zombie.”

No one mentions the wife and kid, though going on the sighs and downcast eyes, I’m certain everyone thinks of them. They didn’t return. They probably never will.

A search of the house turns up a few cans of food. I help myself to a fork and spoon in the kitchen, a hand towel and bar of soap in the bathroom, then grab a package of baby wipes. I reenter the living room to find the others shaking their heads. This time, I notice an empty prescription bottle on a side table. It reminds me of my pills, of how I planned to end it all, just like Lonnie.

“Dammit,” Troy says. “No keys. We’ll try another house.”

“Did you check his pockets?” I ask. “If he was bitten when he got home, he might’ve shoved them in his pocket and forgotten.”

Troy gives me an odd look, then steps out the front door. We listen to him huff and puff until he peers through the window with a grin and a set of keys dangling from his hand. “Cherry gets a point. The rest of us get the dumbass award.”

I try not to smile when Francis claps me on the back. We throw our packs in the pickup’s bed and take off down the road, me in the backseat with Lana and Daisy.

The houses become more numerous, though the town has a rural feel. The sky is huge above us, and the green mountains of what I think is the Diablo Range sit in the distance. For me, all the ranges blend together until you get to the Sierras or the Cascades, where the peaks are taller and covered with white for much of the year.

I can identify the mountains of the Oregon Cascades. When Dad wasn’t either angry or absent, he was eager to impart his knowledge of the outdoors. Our camping trips were the only time I felt close to him, even if I spent them feeling like I didn’t measure up. Those were the times he seemed interested in his sons, if disappointed in one of his son’s abilities.

It was only years after he died that I entertained the idea that maybe it was Dad who hadn’t measured up. He wasn’t the father he should’ve been. After Mom died last year, I cleaned out the house, hoping to find something, anything, that would take the sour taste from my mouth where

my father was concerned. A note, maybe one Mom had kept from us. An explanation of some sort.

I found bills paid on time, papers organized, and nothing of a personal nature that wasn't Mom's, except for the dusty camping gear in the basement. I gave it all to Goodwill. Mom had given Dad's guns to one of his buddies decades before. I had Rose sell the house, gave half to Mike, and put my half away for retirement. The plan was to retire by fifty-five, and I was well on my way. Not that it does me much good now.

Retiring early was a challenge. Leaving the Bay Area eventually and moving closer to Mitch and Rose. Our plan is to grow old together in a retirement community of our own design—with plenty of alone time built in—and, though I never told them, I had every intention of footing as much of the bill as necessary to make it a reality.

Not that I would've had to. Mitch is fine money-wise, and though Rose didn't have much for years, she kicked ass with her realty and gave me her money to tend. I babied the shit out of it, growing it slowly and sensibly, only taking a big chance when I was almost positive it'd pay off. Whenever I tried to explain the risks of what I was doing, she waved a hand. *I trust you, Craigy. I know not everything's a sure thing.*

"Whatcha smiling about?" Lana asks beside me.

"Just thinking about my friends, the ones in Oregon."

"Is one a special friend?"

"They're special, but not in that way. They're like family."

"That's nice."

I nod and watch the road's curved descent. More houses go by. Three Lexers lurch from a driveway hidden by wooden fencing, and Troy swerves to miss them. He's ready for the next four, which he avoids by gunning the engine and flying past with a loud hoot.

"I hear some Texas in that hoot," Francis says.

Troy hoots again. "Damn straight. Thought I might clip one, but this little truck's got some power."

"It's almost like he enjoys this," I mutter.

"Oh, he does," Lana replies, then says at a louder volume, "Hey Troy, were you ready for the zombie apocalypse?"

"Ready, willing, and able!" he calls, then swings right at an intersection, almost sideswiping a collision. "I knew it when I saw the first reports. No

one believed me, but that's why I'm here and they're not. There were a lot of motherfuckers I wanted to see dead, and, God help me, I still don't regret it."

I don't know if Troy means he killed them himself or the virus did it for him. Probably a question better left unanswered.

A mechanic shop, a small convenience store, and a locksmith flash by. A few cars are parked haphazardly at the curb, two others crashed, and two more left in their lanes as if their owners tired of driving and took off.

"Make a left," Francis says at the next dead traffic light.

Troy does and then slams on the brakes. The road is four lanes, and every one of them is blocked. The map rustles in the passenger's seat. "Go back the way we came," Francis says. "I see a road that'll get us near a nature preserve a couple miles down."

Troy does as requested while I watch figures pick their way through the stopped cars. Inside the truck feels safe—well, safer than a bike, and certainly safer than walking. Francis fires off directions, but, once again, we're stopped by traffic. I was wrong to say this was the way to go. Everyone is silent, likely pissed they listened to me. I should've kept my mouth shut.

Troy briefly touches his forehead to the steering wheel. Francis holds the map between them, pointing out an open area with dotted lines instead of the solid line of a road. "The nature preserve has hiking trails. Might work."

Troy throws the truck into reverse. "We've got four-wheel drive. I say we try it."

He backtracks until we're on residential streets and climbing higher, past large houses with carefully landscaped lots and swaths of grass that once thumbed their noses at the drought, though they've reverted to crunchy brown carpet. There are no Lexers, likely because the road gets steeper by the minute. There are no people, likely because their water went out. The houses grow larger, with terracotta roofs and balconies for the western view. The coast mountains—I'm pretty sure—loom that way, differing shades of blue-gray beneath the afternoon sun.

We reach the end of the road, where an almost-hidden driveway travels up to a gigantic house set on the summit of the rise. Troy whistles. "Just like my place down in L.A."

Daisy laughs. "Mine, too."

It's modern, all angles and planes, with lots of glass and wood. Pleasing in an architectural sense, though nothing about it screams *welcome to our home*. More like *admire our home, and don't you dare drop anything on the floor*. The view is amazing. To the west, the Bay and mountains. To the south and east, green meadows and trees on rolling hills. Maybe even the Sierras on a crystal-clear day.

Troy pulls the truck near the edge of the parking pad and we step out to peer down the grassy slope of the preserve. Clumps of trees stand on land crisscrossed by trails wide enough for the truck to travel.

Francis points to an open area below, at a brown trailhead kiosk under a cluster of trees. "I'm going down to see what it says."

"Want company?" Troy asks.

"Nah, I'm sick of you." Francis punctuates his words with a grin and tromps downhill, sidestepping small green bushes. He's agile for his size, and clearly not terrified of Lexers.

Lana stretches her arms above her head and leans to either side. "That incident on the RV roof took more time than we had. I think we should stay here. No one's home. And they have solar. That means light, possibly hot showers."

I spot the panels on the roof. The sun is nearing those distant mountains, and though it'll be a while until sunset, I can think of nothing worse than driving in the dark with zombies.

"Damn, woman," Troy says. "You knew you'd get me with hot showers."

FRANCIS RETURNED with the news that the trailhead has a map. He drew the trails over our map in black ink, marking off a spot on the opposite side of the preserve where we can return to a road. The idea is that, this far out, we'll bypass any traffic jams.

We broke into the house, which is as chic and pristine as I imagined. Francis took a look at the solar, fiddled with a few things, and pronounced it would only last until sundown, as there's no battery bank to store the

electricity. After that, we took quick showers using water from the giant water heater, and I watched a month of stench go down the drain. We turned on lights in rooms full of sunlight for the sheer fun of it, and we cooked the meager food in the cabinets—pasta, red sauce, and olives—on the electric stove.

Now I sit in one of the sleek recliners in the living room, watching the sunset through gigantic windows that face west. The soaring ceiling and walls are a soft white, with a colorful painting taking pride of place over the nonoperational gas fireplace. The wood floor glows orange with the last of the light.

Troy flops on the couch opposite. Daisy, on the other end of the couch, sighs without looking up from her architectural magazine and brings her feet closer to her butt. Francis lies in the other recliner, eyes closed, and Lana is stretched out on one of the mattresses we pulled from the bedrooms. They informed me of their rule—when unsure of their safety, they sleep in the same room to protect each other.

“I declare these Tempurpedic mattresses worth every penny,” Lana says, propping her head on another pillow. Her hat is off, and her brown hair has dried into soft waves. She wears a bathrobe, since her clothes hang outside on a balcony to dry from a sink washing.

I wonder where these four people came from, how they met up, but I don’t want to ask. Inevitably, it will involve loss and heartache, and I’m never good with those things around strangers.

“What’s your story?” Troy asks, his attention settling on me.

It’s akin to the teacher calling on your unprepared ass. I stammer for a few moments before I speak. “Just...lived in Oakland. I’m a—I *was* a—financial advisor. I grew up in Eugene, where my two best friends live. Rose and Mitch. And Rose’s kids. I’m supposed to take care of them if anything happens to her.”

I think I see a glimmer of respect in Troy’s eyes. It’s respect I don’t deserve, since it’s foolish to think I can protect the kids when I couldn’t leave my own apartment, but it makes me feel the tiniest bit stronger, as if I *could* kill the next zombie who happens by. Maybe I could, if I think about Holly and Jesse. Because I’d do whatever I had to for them. Without a doubt.

“Any girlfriend in Oakland?” Troy asks. “Sorry, or boyfriend?” I shake my head, and Troy winks. “Figured they’d be all over you with that apartment. You were doing well for yourself.”

It’s best to get it out there before this goes any further, but I don’t want to discuss my sex life—or lack thereof—with a gun-toting macho man, no matter how decent a guy he appears on the surface. “I don’t really date,” I say.

“Too shy.” Troy nods sympathetically. “You’ve just got to put yourself out there. He, she, or they, it doesn’t matter to me. If it makes you happy, go for it.”

All eyes are on me now. Even Francis has come out of his stupor to watch. “I don’t date because I don’t *want* to date. Anyone. I’m not into that.” I wipe sweat from my brow, which was clean a minute ago and already feels greasy.

“Oh, come on,” Troy says. “Who doesn’t want to date? Get a little action? Don’t you—” Troy yelps when Daisy’s magazine connects with his temple. “Ow! What the hell, Daisy?”

Daisy drops against her pillow, rolling her eyes. “How dense are you? Maybe he’s ace.”

“He’s an ace? What does that have to do—”

“He *is* ace, not *an* ace. Asexual.” Daisy tilts her head toward me. “Am I right?”

I nod, thankful she’s hijacked the conversation. Troy frowns, deep in thought. “Like a plant? How does that work?”

Lana’s laugh echoes off the high ceilings. “Really, Troy? Have you been too busy cleaning your guns to pay attention to the rest of the world?”

“Even I know what ace is,” Francis adds.

“Well, goddamn if it isn’t new to me.” Troy crosses his arms, resting one hand beneath his chin, and asks me, “How’s that work?”

I wish someone else would jump in, but, apparently, I’ve been thrust into the role of post-apocalyptic ace spokesperson. I’m comfortable with this piece of myself now, maybe the one piece of myself with which I *am* comfortable, but some people don’t get it. They blame it on my childhood, or they think I need fixing, or they decide I’m a freak.

Not Rose and Mitch, though. When I told Rose as a teen, the day we sat on her couch listening to The Smiths and holding hands, I was afraid I was

less than human, incapable of love—*real* love, according to the rest of the world. Rose turned to me with teary eyes and a soft smile that was a balm on my battered heart. *This is real love*, she said, her conviction leaving no room for doubt. *And no one does it better than you.*

“I just...don’t have any interest in sex,” I say. “I think the whole thing’s kind of odd, actually. Put it like this: give me a choice between sex and cake, and I’ll go for the cake every time.”

“Hell, I might go for the cake today. I miss cake.” Troy chuckles. “I guess sex is kind of odd, if you really think about it. Bodily fluids and all that. So, you have no interest in a relationship or anything?”

The ball of tension in my belly dissolves a little. Troy is absorbing this information with far more equanimity than I foresaw. I decide to lay it all out there. “Not really, though some aces have romantic and physical relationships. It’s a whole spectrum. Mainly, close friendships are enough for me. I don’t miss the other stuff. I’m what you call an aromantic asexual.”

These days there’s a name for it, groups to attend and forums to join, and the notion that others don’t have to feel as lost and confused as I did never fails to cheer me. Until now, that is, since they’re probably all zombies.

Troy nods slowly. “You learn something new every day. Like I said, if it makes you happy, I’m all for it.” He rests his hands behind his head. “I’ve gotta say, though, it must be nice not to think with your little head. That gets you into heaps of trouble.”

I burst out laughing, and the others join in. Troy throws a hand in Francis’ direction. “Does it not?”

“Hell yes, it does,” Francis says.

“All right, then.” Troy grins and rubs his gut. “We have any more of that pasta? Let’s heat it up again before the light’s gone.”

Craig

THE SUN COMES in the east-facing windows early, and everyone springs into action. After a bowl of warmed soup pilfered from the diner, we pack our gear and head out. The pickup bumps over grass and trails until my head feels like it might detach from my spine. Wildflowers grow in patches near what Francis says is rare manzanita, and Troy does his best to avoid squashing it, which I appreciate. He doesn't have to give a shit in the midst of this, but he does, and sometimes it's the little things that show a person's true colors.

When the tires hit smooth road at the preserve's main entrance, everyone groans in ecstasy. The street outside the park is a housing development, with stucco structures topped by terracotta roofs. As we roll down the hill, signs of unrest begin to show themselves: broken doors and windows and a couple of burglarized cars, though most vehicles are either garaged or gone. Lower down, two bodies lie on the sidewalk, truly dead. A hundred feet later, dozens are scattered on lawns and sidewalks. Some sport head wounds, others died of unknown causes.

The sky is blue, studded with puffy white clouds, and green hills roll behind the homes as far as the eye can see. It likely seemed safe out here once upon a time, but it's quickly becoming clear that nowhere is safe. The downfall of civilization took less than a month. That thought makes me sigh louder than I intended.

"This isn't so bad," Lana says. "You should've seen some places we went through."

"They looked like an end-of-the-world movie," Daisy adds.

The two women were nice enough before, but this morning they smile at me and throw multiple comments my way. It often happens once women find out there'll be no attempted entry into their pants—their guard lowers and they talk to me the way they do each other. I appreciate women for purely aesthetic reasons, but that's as far as it goes. They're more likely to understand that physical contact can be only about comfort and friendship. Not that I go around hugging random people when I barely speak to them. There are few I want that intimacy with, the same as everyone else.

Everyone except Rose, who'd hug everybody on Earth if given half a chance.

"This is the turn," Francis says.

Troy swings right. We're greeted by the sight of burned houses. Bodies clutter the lawns, and just past the first intersection—the one outlet to the main road—is a mashup of cars and a box truck, all burned to create a hulking collection of charred metal that blocks the way forward.

Aside from the carnage, the day is peaceful. Troy stops the truck and takes in the scene, fingers tapping the wheel. "Maybe we should walk down to the road and see if it's worth trying to move this mess."

"Let's all go," Lana suggests.

I feel for my screwdriver in my coat pocket and draw my knife from the side pocket of my bag in the truck bed. My hand vibrates with foreboding, and the smell of dead flesh doesn't help to alleviate the feeling.

Daisy steps onto the wall of the corner house's garden bed, then skirts sideways between charred bushes and the rear of a burnt SUV. A moment after she disappears from sight, she peeps around the side of the SUV and lifts a thumb. The others start through. I go last, ashamed of that fact even as I suspect they wouldn't want me in front anyway.

The main road is a hundred feet down, and the stopped cars make it obvious we won't be cruising east anytime soon. We continue to the housing development entrance anyway, where a large sign welcomes us to Pleasant Hills Homes.

"Nothing pleasant in these hills," Troy mutters.

The road is packed with vehicles: cars and SUVs with boxes tied to their roofs, RVs, even a garbage truck. They face east in every available lane, whether eastbound or not.

Lana climbs a sedan roof and lifts a pair of binoculars. "There's a roadblock up ahead, or another accident. I can't tell, but we're not getting through unless we get farther down."

"How far?" Francis asks, his map already out.

"Not sure. The road curves, but it looks open after that."

Francis studies the map. "If we can take those trails higher, I think I see another road that'll get us past that curve."

Lana spins at a hiss and groan from the west. My grip on my knife tightens. Just before the road curves out of sight in that direction, two

Lexers weave their way through the vehicles. No one seems as alarmed as I am by their presence.

Troy helps Lana down from the sedan. “Guess we’ll do that? The good news is, if we can get past the blockage, it may be open the rest of the way.”

They discuss the plan while I shift my gaze from my fellow travelers to the approaching Lexers, then back again. I don’t understand how they’re so fucking *calm*. I clamp my teeth together so they don’t chatter, though my churning bowels can’t be stopped. This is an inopportune moment, to say the least, in which to excuse myself for a bathroom break.

The hisses grow louder. Under them comes a soft drone, then the distant clang of metal hitting concrete. More Lexers round the bend, stumbling between cars. They’re followed by a dozen more, then another dozen, and now I see my alarm mirrored in the others’ faces. Milder alarm, but it’s there.

“Time to get out of Dodge,” Troy says.

Sweeter words have never been spoken. I slow to allow the others to go first, though I don’t argue when Francis and Troy wave me through the bushes before them. I pop out the other side behind Lana and Daisy and force myself not to run for the pickup.

Daisy disappears around the side of the truck. A moment later, a high-pitched shriek sends Lana running in that direction with me on her heels. Behind the pickup, Daisy wrestles with a man, her knife on the ground. The Lexer has her pinned against the rear door, and she’s straightened her arms, hands planted on his chest, to keep his teeth from her face.

Lana moves for a woman closing in on the right, whom Daisy can’t fight off with both hands occupied. Daisy’s locked elbows bend, and the man’s teeth near her cheek. I race forward and yank the Lexer by the back of his filthy striped shirt. It’s only after the man turns for me, silver-blue eyes wild and tattered lips drawn back from brown teeth, that I admit I’m in way over my head.

I lift my knife as the man lunges. The blade hits skull at his hairline, glances off bone, and flies out of my hand. I back away. I can’t do it. I knew that, and still I tried to play the hero. Blood roars in my ears as I stumble backward, trip over the curb, and land on my ass. The man closes the few feet with a snarl. I shut my eyes. If this is it, I don’t want to see.

Two gunshots crack. My eyes open in time to see the man hit the road with a torrent of brown jelly spilling from the back of his head. The shots' thunder carries up and around the hills. *The pleasant hills*. I let out a high, reedy laugh, slap my hand over my mouth, then look to where Lana and Troy stand holding their pistols.

"That was me," she says.

Troy turns to her, mouth agape. "That was *me*. You missed by a mile."

"Nope." She drops her weapon to her side. "I'm calling it."

Troy holsters his gun with a grumble. "You don't get to *call it*. That's not how it—"

"Too late." Lana crooks a finger at me. "Let's get out of here."

My survival is so unexpected that it takes a few seconds to get my ass in gear, even with the noises from the road now audible over the thud of my heart. I scramble onto shaky legs and run for the pickup, where I jump in after Daisy.

Troy is in the driver's seat a moment later, Lana on Daisy's other side. Francis points the way we came, and after passing the bodies and pillaged houses once again, we bump over a ridge trail. It takes until the preserve for me to find my voice, and it still quakes when I say, "Thank you."

Troy meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. "Hey, no problem. That's what we do."

It's what I tried to do—save Daisy—and I failed miserably. In addition, I didn't think to retrieve my knife from the ground in my haste to reach the truck. It doesn't matter; I've proven I can't use it. I've proven myself useless. They know it as well as I do. I bite my lip hard and twist my hands in my lap. The sinking feeling in my stomach is no stranger, but it's all the worse for having no way to alleviate it. Usually, I can go home, lick my wounds, and give myself the old pep talk. Or have Rose give me one. This time, I'm stuck—with myself, with these people.

"Why are you taking credit?" Lana asks Troy. "It was my bullet." She leans past Daisy and winks at me.

"Jesus, woman!" Troy shouts, and the others snicker. "It was *my* bullet, and you know it."

"I don't know any such thing."

Troy counters with another argument, and the two bicker on the trip across someone's farmland until the pickup busts through old barbed wire

fencing onto the road. The bickering is probably for my benefit, to make me feel less like a weakling, but it makes me feel worse. My brother Mike turned out just fine—married, kids, living in South Carolina. I'm the weird one. Too sensitive for my own good and peculiar enough to be an embarrassment.

We pass a white farmhouse with a small red barn set between the swell of two hills. Trees line the road and the spring grass grows lush and green. It's beautiful land, but I can take no pleasure in it. In anything, not even my continued existence.

We've been out for two days and barely gotten anywhere. There are still five hundred miles to travel. Maybe I need these four, but they don't need me mucking up their plans. As soon as I find a good place to slip away, I will. Better I die on my own than drag them down with me.

Craig

THE TWO-LANE ROAD spits us onto Alhambra Valley Road, which promises a short ride to Martinez. It's proven good on that promise so far, past a few houses and ranches that appear empty, though Francis spots a person in a tree near one hilltop farmhouse, who might be waiting for signs of trouble. We slow to ask, but the warning shot we receive draws zombies our way and gives us reason to inquire no further.

Farther on, the occasional Lexer turns to watch us pass with vacant eyes. The woodlands close in, then open up again. Many large lots are fenced, something for which their owners must be grateful. Rose has a fence, and I'd bet anything Mitch went over there at the first sign of trouble. They'll figure out how to survive this.

The road turns north. A new housing development sits a few hundred feet after the turn, surrounded by a chest-high rock wall. It might've been a decorative touch pre-zombie; now it's a lifesaver. Troy slows at the mixture of cars and fencing that block the ungated entrance, where a man sits on a lawn chair in a pickup's bed. He's somewhere in his sixties, with white-blond hair and permanent sunburn across his cheeks. The kind of guy who's been outside much of his life.

When Troy rolls down his window, the man eyes us warily, though he doesn't lift the rifle set across his knees. "We only need directions, if you don't mind," Troy calls. At the man's nod, Troy pulls into the circular driveway alongside the truck. "How's it going?"

"I've had better weeks," the man says.

"Tell me about it. Say, we're trying to get to Martinez, to the train tracks, then over the railroad bridge to Benicia. You think we can make it?"

The man jaws a wad of gum for a few seconds, then shakes his head. "Not without a tank."

"I'm fresh out of tanks."

The man finally smiles. "You and me both. We've got a roadblock up a ways to keep out traffic. When you get to that, turn left. You'll see a yellow farmhouse all the way down. Go across their land, and you'll hit the trails in the regional parks. Shadow the road north 'til you can't go farther because

of the parkway. Unless it looks different than it did a week ago, you'll have to walk the trails north about two miles to the rails, but I can get you that far on wheels."

"Farther than we would've gotten. Thanks." Troy puts the truck in gear, then stops. "How are you set up? We have extra food in the back that'll go to waste if we have to walk."

"Pretty good. Have food and all that, killed as many of those dead motherfuckers as we could. These weren't our houses, but they are now." He hooks a thumb at the *For Sale* sign, which advertises homes starting at over 400K. "Don't think they'll be selling them anytime soon. You keep your food. I'll be up that way soon, and I'll find it if you leave the truck behind."

"Fair enough. We're much obliged for the help. Stay safe."

The man's face hardens, though it isn't directed at us. "I've got a daughter pregnant with my first grandson. You can bet your ass we will."

Troy lifts a hand as we pull off. The man observes our leave and then resumes his watch. He looks like he's planning to sit there through wind and snow and a hurricane, all to protect his family.

Lana leans to smack Troy's shoulder. "That was nice, offering him the food."

"If I didn't, you'd beat me to it and take all the glory. Again."

"Troy," Daisy says, "we all know you're not a total douchebag."

"I don't know where you got that idea," he says. "Gonna have to work on that."

All four of them smile. They've become a tight-knit group in a short span of time, or maybe they knew each other before. I would ask, but I don't want to know any more than I do or like them more than I do. I'll cross the bridge with them, then bide my time until I find my own way.

Once we've jostled and jolted over what might be every grassy knoll in California, the man's directions deliver us where he said. We retrieve our packs from the pickup before we start on a narrower trail. Our boots are loud on hard-packed dirt rutted by years of bike wheels and horseshoes, and we walk the grass in loose formation. After a couple of minutes, a spot on my heel begins to burn. These boots were not made for walking, or maybe they need to be broken in. Either way, it's a shit time to discover that piece of news.

Less than a quarter mile later, the park descends to a road—two car-lined lanes that parallel the raised parkway just beyond. Lexers congregate a hundred feet down the road, and Daisy sets off in a crouch, steadying herself on car bumpers as she crosses. The others follow, and I take up the rear. The prospect would've terrified me earlier, though I don't care now. Death is bound to happen sooner than later, and I can't obsess over it *every* second. In my case, it's likely the sooner, the better.

I make the opposite sidewalk without embarrassing myself (a first) and slip behind the others into a squared-off tunnel hollowed into the underside of the parkway. Our steps echo softly on concrete as we make our way toward bright sunlight on the other side. The paved trail slopes down, easing the burn on my heel, but it soon turns to a treeless uphill dirt track. I sigh and plod behind the others. The only positive is that it'll take zombies a year to climb the godforsaken thing.

It feels like hours of trudging through the same long grass, the same dust. I didn't think to look for a watch to replace mine, and I have zero concept of time once again. My throat crackles with every swallow. When the others speak, I can only grunt or nod. Daisy and Francis are younger, but both Troy and Lana have years on me, and they're merrily trotting along.

The sun is atrocious, blinding my eyes and beating down on my head. Rose hates the glare of overhead lights, and I come to the conclusion that the sun is the most fucking infuriating overhead light of them all. The thought makes me chuckle to myself. I need to get to Eugene if only to share it with her.

Sixty years later, we summit a ridge. The land around us dips and swells in shades of green, dotted with stands of bushy dark trees. In the distance are the buildings of Martinez. Troy inhales through his nose, spinning in a circle. "Nice view. Let's take a break."

I drop to the earth like a stone, grab my water bottle, and allow myself enough to not die of dehydration. After a quick snack of crackers and fruit snacks, the others stand, and I haul myself to my feet.

"Maybe halfway there," Francis says. "Then the tracks."

My burgeoning blister goes from burning to raw, and eventually the heel of my sock dampens and then sticks to the inside of my boot with every step. The blister has popped, kindly reminding me of an additional item I

overlooked: Band-Aids. I can't ask for one without sharing another instance where I'm not as prepared as them in both supplies and abilities.

Twenty more years pass, and we mount another incline to find the water of the mile wide Carquinez Strait sparkling in the sunlight. In the distance, the bridges cross the water, and Troy hoots with joy before we keep moving.

"Looks like it's all downhill from here," Francis says.

"Never thought I'd be glad to hear someone say that," I mutter. Lana giggles and the others grin at me. Normally, I like to make people laugh, but my sense of humor has taken a beating in the past month, and my fragile good humor has popped with my blister.

The trail descends into the welcome shade of a wooded ravine, where we stop short at a rustling in the bushes. Fifty feet ahead, a Lexer moves in the underbrush. The woman, clad only in a ripped shirt and underwear, steps onto the trail and staggers forward. Her thighs are mangled, the pink inner flesh not yet gray. Her lower legs are drenched with dried brown blood, as though she bled out when her attackers bit an artery.

Francis jabs under her chin, then pushes her off his blade into the brush. The trail becomes a path through a small meadow that deposits us in an empty graveled parking area. After making use of the vault toilets, we cross a cracked and pitted two-lane road to the train tracks. They're not fenced as we'd hoped, but with four tracks, they're wide enough to see anything coming.

"Mile and a half to go," Francis says.

I hold back a groan. That's only the distance to the bridge; we still have to cross the fucking thing and figure out where to go from there. My heel is wet and bloody in my boot. Each time it hits the ground, I wince at the scrape of raw skin and wet sock on leather.

As we near the town, industrial buildings surround us and waist-high fences appear on either side—easy enough to vault if necessary, yet they'll keep Lexers off the tracks. Though we try to step silently on railroad ties, loose gravel crunches under our feet. Eventually, the fence on the right becomes a wall, and a narrow bridge passes overhead, connecting to a pier on the strait. The two center tracks rise on an embankment while the outer two split off at ground level. Immense steel holding tanks appear, each

several stories high, and the familiar yellow and red Shell Oil logo marks the area as a refinery.

High on the tracks, we have a clear view of tank after humongous tank. To our right, an immense network of silver catwalks, piping, and silo-type structures resembles a futuristic city. Tanker cars sit below, ready to ship their fossil fuel goodness to various points. That won't happen now. And though I miss many of the delightful things fuel supplied—electricity for one, Ubers for another—the thought doesn't exactly break my heart. Maybe Mother Nature is finally having her revenge.

A hiss is followed by the clinking of rocks on rails. Below us, three Lexers clad in orange safety vests attempt to climb up. Even I can tell they'll never make it. "Sucks for you," Troy calls to them, and is answered by frustrated groans.

Up ahead, the elevated freeway curves toward the tracks before it splits for the northbound and southbound Benicia-Martinez bridges, with the southbound road passing over the rails. Hundreds of cars sit motionless in the sunlight. The traffic jam continues onto the mile-long bridges and then for as far as I can see. Maybe all the way across. Maybe all the way to Oregon.

With every few steps, I make out more details—open doors, the broken glass of a truck's windshield, and zombies. They wander the road or stand in a daze, waiting for something to catch their attention. Something like five delicious humans traipsing along the train tracks, no doubt.

Our tracks hit ground level. I don't like it. Nor do I like the Lexers who watch us from the pedestrian walkway of the freeway, even if there is a fence atop the concrete border. Rattling metal and eerie moans drown out the whoosh of wind off the water.

Though it's obvious the Lexers can't get through, everyone speeds up. Francis squints at the freeway, bouncing his knife by its leather-wrapped handle. It's fifteen hundred feet to the water, where the tracks turn to bridge, and it feels like forever. I look over my shoulder. The three Lexers down the tracks still follow, and they've picked up a few friends along the way. Now that we're at ground level, it doesn't suck so much for them anymore. The suckage is firmly in our court.

When we reach the southbound freeway overpass, the zombies above lose their shit entirely. Howling moans mix with hisses and groans. The

fence creaks. There's no time for a reprieve in the shade under the freeway, not with the others coming up behind us. The railroad bridge sits five hundred feet away, a continuation of our two tracks on a framework of rusty-looking trusses that cross the water.

We step into the sun, eyes on the roadway to the northbound bridge. It's similar to the southbound road but for one very important detail: there's no fencing above the concrete side. Rotted bodies crowd the space, some bent double over the edge while they eye their out-of-reach meal. Behind them, dozens more push forward for a view.

"Well, shit," Troy says, slowing to a stop.

The first body takes a nosedive to the ground. It lands with a thud a hundred feet away and lies there for a few moments before it lifts its head. Still alive, or *whatever*, though one leg is bent in three places. It begins to drag itself toward us as more bodies plummet to the dirt, sending up clouds of gray dust. A shadow appears on the ground to my right, growing larger at an alarming rate, and I jump when a body crashes to dirt two feet away.

There's no fence on the inside of the southbound road, either. In the time it took for me to comprehend this fact, to fully contemplate the figures leaning over the roadway above, five more have taken the plunge. I grab the nearest person—Lana—and yank her forward by her arm.

"Move!" I yell.

Daisy is the first to heed my warning, and she runs with no hesitation. Troy lucks out when a Lexer falls on either side, both missing him by inches. Francis isn't as lucky: one collides with his shoulder, sending him to his knees in the dirt. Lana rushes over and drags him out of range by his coat.

Falling zombies drum the earth in time to my heart. A few are up on their feet, miraculously unhurt. The plan was to scope out the railroad bridge and assess the best approach, but that was before it started raining zombies. We race for the bridge, leaping the ties over water seventy feet below and not slowing until we hit a quarter of the way across, where rounded trusses soar overhead.

"Sweet baby Jesus," Troy says, panting. His hat has disappeared, and his hair is wet with sweat. He glances behind at the few Lexers following. "That was a learning experience. You all right, Francis?"

Francis nods, lips set in a line. I think he's less all right than he lets on, and it's probably much worse than a blister, since he now carries his knife in his left hand. Francis' fortitude makes me glad I haven't bitched about my heel, which our run has turned to a constant throb-burn. I do my best not to limp, only wincing every fifth step.

The railroad bridge is half the height of the vehicle bridges on either side. The vehicle bridges from which Lexers continue to fall, landing in the water with giant splashes that ripple outward in waves.

Troy squints behind us when we reach our bridge's midpoint. "We'll be gone before they make it."

The trailing Lexers slip and stumble. All it takes is a toe between railroad ties to trip you up, and it's worse for the zombies who are too dumb to work out that riddle. I think of the horror movies I've seen—fast zombies, smart zombies, Michael freaking Myers—and find something to be grateful for. Anything other than stupid and lumbering would be an immediate death sentence.

As we near the north end of our bridge, roadblocks appear on both vehicle bridges, in the form of police buses parked across the lanes. With my ever-present arrhythmia and breathlessness, it's easy enough to imagine the fright and panic of the people who were trapped behind the barricades. How long did they wait, hoping for traffic to move? How long did it take before they knew it was the wrong choice? Maybe they ran, but it doesn't look like many of them got far.

"Fuck me," Daisy says, voice soft with sympathy.

Troy's laugh is more sardonic than amused. "They were sitting ducks. Poor bastards."

The bridge ends and becomes tracks that curve under the roadway. This time, we're prepared for dropping bodies, but it's eerily quiet with only the wind rustling the long grasses. The tracks travel alongside a highway, and a quick walk up the grass reveals a mainly empty road with few stopped cars.

"Looks like we'll need a vehicle." Troy points at what looks to be half industrial park and half shopping plaza below us, where a couple dozen cars sit neatly in parking spots. "Let's see what we've got."

We're thwarted by eleven locked cars before we find a sedan whose driver sits behind the wheel. She slams her leathery gray face into the glass at our approach, bucking at the confines of her seatbelt. Her fingers scratch

and pound over muffled hisses. My insides still turn at the sight of living death, at the unrelenting hunger, but I'm surprised to find I'm not quite as terrified. Then again, she's buckled in behind glass, quite possibly the least dangerous zombie in the history of zombies.

Troy opens the sedan door and swings his hatchet into her face. Unlike the others, she oozes only an ounce or two from the wound. Weeks of heat in a closed car have dried her out. Her body is unceremoniously dumped on the asphalt before Lana reaches in and turns the key. The engine starts up immediately. "Smells like ass, but there's a half-tank of gas."

Everyone makes quiet noises of relief. Except Francis, who breathes in through his nose, then out his mouth while he holds his right forearm to his chest. Droplets of sweat run down his cheeks. "Are you okay?" I ask.

The others turn. Francis grits his teeth and nods. "Fine."

"I call bullshit," Troy says. "What's going on?"

Francis keeps his eyes on the nearby street. "That one hurt my arm. Pretty bad, I think."

"Were you ever planning to tell us?" Lana moves for him, brow lowered in consternation. "Let me see."

"Later," he says. "Let's get out of here first."

Lana argues until Francis tips his head at forty Lexers meandering past a mini-storage two blocks down. We jump into the sedan and take off, pausing only to enter the freeway, where the buildings turn to rolling jade-green mountains a mile ahead.

Cars came this way, evidenced by the garbage that litters the road—cans and plastic bottles, food wrappers, baby diapers, and even a used maxi pad, along with a baffling number of shoes. Sneakers, dress shoes, sandals, and footwear of all sizes and types are strewn across the lanes. We can't go more than twenty feet without at least one battered shoe. I wonder at them, and it's only when I notice the absence of boots that I realize they've dropped off the feet of the dead. Boots are laced on tight. Even untied, they won't fall off easily. It makes the next round of shoes—two of which are child-sized—more than a little depressing, and I wish *The Mystery of the Shoes* had remained unsolved.

Francis deflects Lana's attempts to check his arm from the backseat. Eventually, she sits fuming with her arms crossed. "Fine, Francis. Die."

“It’ll be time to find somewhere for the night soon,” he says. “I can wait. We don’t want to get caught out here.” Lana glares out the window, ignoring him. He reaches his good arm between the seats and pokes her knee. “Lana. Laaaaa-naaaaa.”

“No,” she says, fighting a smile.

Francis grins and sends the map into the backseat for our inspection. The plan is to travel north somewhere between Napa and Sacramento, where fewer people might mean fewer obstructions. There are towns on the way, though I have no idea how large they are. How obstructive. And forget finding the smallest local roads on a simple folding map like this.

“You need a good atlas,” I mumble, half to myself.

“We had an atlas,” Daisy says. “Troy lost it.”

“I did n—” Troy begins. “Oh right, I did.”

The four break into laughter. I smile, my chest filled with longing for that easy jokiness among friends. I hope it waits for me five hundred miles away—perhaps four-sixty by now—but it’s possible Rose, Mitch, and the kids are gone the way most of the world is. Their empty shoes might be sitting on the shoulder of I-5 or by a curb in downtown Eugene.

I banish that thought. They’re smart, they’re strong, and they have Rose’s dad. Sam was a father figure to me all those years ago, and he loves Rose and the kids beyond reason. If he has anything to say about it, they’re fine. Ten years ago, I would’ve added Ethan to that list, but I know from Rose’s evasive answers to my recent questions that all is not well in Ethanville. I planned to corner her drunk ass during the party weekend and demand the truth. One look at her face would’ve told me all I needed to know.

After a few minutes of discussion, we circumvent Fairfield on a small northern road lined with a few vineyards. This isn’t the touristy part of Napa Valley, more the eastern edge going into the mountains, but it’s lovely all the same. The grape leaves are unfurling, jewel-green against the bright yellow mustard that still blooms. One field is a sea of delicate purple flowers, another orange with the first of the poppies, and another frosty with small white blooms.

Usually, spring fills me with life and promise, but there’s a distinct lack of life and promise this year. Death is everywhere. It lies with the bodies out front of a small blue house. It stomps in a distant field of mustard in the

form of three Lexers. It soaks a once-white, now brown, sneaker that sits on the center yellow line like roadkill.

The two-lane road grows more rural, passing the occasional gated driveway that meanders up to houses screened by trees. There have to be people here, alive and waiting for this to end. The last anyone heard was sixty to ninety days for the zombies to die. Lana said they were told this by a soldier they met somewhere south of San Francisco. He was bitten, and he blew his brains out promptly thereafter. If that timeframe is supposed to make me feel better, it doesn't—when the world can change this much in a month, who knows what three months will bring?

We're in the hills now. Troy gives a mobile home park full of zombies a wide berth and then turns east for a road that will deposit us far to the west of what's surely a zombie-filled Sacramento. The question of where we'll spend the night weighs on me. I thought I'd slip out tonight or in early morning, but I can't leave in the middle of nowhere. Though I'm not as gung-ho on the idea as earlier, it's only a matter of time before this mostly zombie-free ride ends and I make a fool of myself again.

The car climbs higher into the mountains, surrounded by woods except where it opens to a vista of green peaks and valleys. No houses, cars, or zombies until a large gray ranch house appears on the left. The sign out front says MARINA-BOAT RENTALS-LAKESIDE CABINS, and the small parking lot holds at least a dozen zombies, with more down at the narrow cove of blue-green water. Maybe zombies don't hike uphill for fun, but all it takes is one infected person to show up.

"If it were only the parking lot, I'd say we try it," Troy says. "But we can't take them all, definitely not with Francis out of commission."

Francis grunts in displeasure, and Daisy pats his good shoulder. "We still love you, Franny."

I absorb this reminder of my uselessness while I watch passing trees, through which I catch glimpses of blue water below. Our next point of interest is an RV park with small motel that caught fire and burned until black. Across the road, a long building is unburned. A campground office takes up one end, with a small store on the other. Troy slows until the store door opens and a shotgun waves us along. The person wielding the shotgun stays in the shadows, barrel tracking us until we're out of sight.

"Warm welcome," Francis says.

“Can you blame them?” Troy asks. “Zombies are stupid. People are crafty. Mark my words, the biggest threat will be people eventually.”

He’s probably right. If things get back to normal, or some vestige of normal, people will likely fight over something—anything. It’s a discouraging thought.

The road continues its gradual slope downward, the rocky soil changing to tall grass and bushy trees. Late afternoon sunlight hits the car windshield and blinds all inside. It’s hard to believe we started out from the solar house just this morning. My tired body and blistered foot insist they’ve run a marathon, though in reality they’ve walked maybe six miles. Francis’ map reader says we’ve traveled fifty miles. Which, when you work it out with time spent traveling, has us moving at a breakneck five miles per hour. At this rate, we’ll reach Eugene half past never.

“We’re getting closer to the next town,” Lana warns. “Maybe four miles. Either we need to find a place to stop for the night or plan our route north. I vote for stopping. We need to check Francis.”

“I’m fine to keep going,” Francis argues.

“Fine enough that you wince at every bump?” Troy asks. “We’re stopping. And first order of business in the morning, we get an atlas to replace the one Lana lost.” Lana smacks the side of his head while he cracks himself up, and I can’t help but laugh along.

Six mailboxes on the roadside guarantee houses are tucked up a hill, and Troy swings that way. The first three houses are spaced far apart. A travel trailer sits outside one, a pickup truck and boat outside another, and nothing by the third. The next three homes are down the road, and there isn’t a zombie to be seen.

The pickup truck house is a ranch style painted a dull brown, and based on its cleared lot and views of surrounding land, it’s designated our home for the night. After a minute of waiting, we open our doors to cool, grass-scented air. It was pushing seventy degrees earlier; it’s now closer to high fifties.

“Let’s see what we’ve got,” Troy says, holding his pistol. The others have their weapons, too. Even Francis, who carries his pistol in his left hand while keeping his right firmly tucked to his side like a winged bird. In contrast to their guns, I grip my screwdriver, feeling like the biggest moron on Earth.

Troy knocks. Nothing answers, and he shouts victoriously when the door opens easily in his hand. The living room just past the foyer is tan carpet and overstuffed brown leather furniture centered around a big television. Sliding glass doors look out over a vista of grassy fields and hills in the distance. The kitchen is wrecked; someone came looking for food, took it all, and they weren't neat about it. But all else is clean. It even smells good due to the baskets of potpourri set here and there. The walls hold pictures of generations of people, from old-fashioned sepia-toned prints to modern professional baby pictures.

"Come with me to find the water heater?" Lana asks Daisy, and they head down the hallway. Like the solar house, the water heater tank will provide drinking and washing water.

"You, sit." Troy points at Francis, then motions me toward the door. "Give me a hand out there?"

When we come inside with the gear, Francis stands in the center of the living room while Lana removes his coat. His left shoulder is firm and well-shaped. His right pitches down, and where rounded deltoids should be, the skin stretches tight over a lump shaped remarkably like the end of a chicken drumstick. The others exclaim over the sight while I swallow the excess saliva it brings on.

"Looking a bit off-kilter," Troy says.

Francis' smile is tired. "Feeling a bit off-kilter."

"I think it's dislocated." Lana turns to Troy. "Will you get your book?"

He pulls a thick sheaf of papers from his pack. I catch a glimpse of the words *Austere Medicine* before Lana flips through. She grimaces and holds up a black and white photo of a man with a shoulder eerily similar to Francis'. "Oh, yeah. That's what it is." She scans a few pages. "How long do you think it's been since you hurt it?"

"Maybe four or five hours now?" Francis says, sucking in his breath when Lana palpates his injury.

"It says that if it's been a while, the muscles might've swelled too much for it to pop back easily. I knew we should've stopped." She seems about to go into a diatribe before she reins herself in. "Okay, it says to lay the patient face-down on a table with their arm hanging off. Attach a weight to their arm or put gentle downward traction on their wrist, and it usually pops into place. If that doesn't work, they have another method to try."

Francis is ordered onto the dining table in the corner. Lana kneels on the floor, grips the wrist of his injured arm, and applies gentle traction. Gentle or not, Francis' forehead beads with sweat and he whimpers in a way that makes me woozy.

"Shit, Francis," Troy says, wiping his own brow. "Hey, Daisy Duke, wanna check out those houses across the way?"

Daisy, watching Francis with slight horror, says, "Hell, yes."

They're out the door in seconds. I couldn't foresee a time when the outside would be preferable to inside, but here I am, wishing I'd been invited to go up against a few zombies.

"Relax," Lana says to Francis. "You have to relax your arm muscles."

"I'm trying," he growls.

I attempt to speak with my parched mouth, fail, and swig from my water bottle. "I have Xanax. Would that help?"

Lana looks up from where she sits cross-legged, relief plain in her nod. "God, yes," Francis groans.

I unzip my pack and find my bottle, then dump two into my hand and break them in half. Francis opens his mouth for me to drop them in, then swallows with his eyes closed. "Thanks."

I nod and return the pill bottle to my bag. There aren't many left, a fact that constricts my chest. In normal life, I take one or two a week. Three or four, if I'm super stressed. But just having them makes me feel better. Without them on hand, it's possible I'll lose my mind entirely.

After fifteen minutes, Francis' grimace has become a slight smile. Lana grins at me before she tries traction again. After a few more minutes, she says, "I think we have to try the other way. Craig, I need your help."

The blood drains from my face and hits my feet, and I set my hand on the couch for support. "Maybe I should get Troy and—"

"We don't need them. Grab that blanket off the couch over there."

I do it while I try to think of an excuse, then go with the truth. "Lana, I can supply the controlled substances, but I'm not cut out for this."

Lana's gaze is firm. "Yes, you are. All you have to do is loop that around his waist and pull toward yourself while I pull his arm. But we have to turn him over. Francis, get on your back."

Francis cracks open an eye. "This's comferble," he says, slurring in a way that makes me nervous I've accidentally killed him with my dosage.

“It won’t be when those meds wear off. Turn over.” Lana pokes his back. Francis flips with a beleaguered huff and settles himself on the table. She positions the blanket around his waist and hands the ends to me, then takes hold of his bad arm. “Okay, here we go. Relax.”

“You got it, bosh.” Francis almost giggles. “I mean bosssh.”

I laugh and take hold of the blanket ends. If Francis is going out, at least it’s on a wave of good cheer. “Okay,” Lana says, peering at the papers on the table above Francis’ head. “I straighten the elbow and ease it out at an angle. You apply counter-tension.”

While Lana pulls Francis’ arm, I hold my breath and resist her traction. A full minute later, I hear a faint thump. Francis groans, and Lana gasps, her cheeks ruddy. “Is it in?”

“Think so,” Francis whispers, close to lucid from the pain. He moves his shoulder a little, then lifts his arm with a wince. “Still hurts, but I can use it. Oh, thank Jesus.”

“Thank *who*?” Lana asks.

“Thank *Lana*.” Francis’ grin practically splits his face in two before he closes his eyes. When he opens them again, they’re unfocused. “I love you, Lana.”

“Same here. C’mon, big boy, let’s get you to the couch.”

“Comfortable,” he mumbles, eyelids sinking. “On the table. Comfortable. Get it? Comfort-taaaaable.” And with that, he’s out.

Lana comes around and puts a hand on my arm. “Thanks, hon.”

I nod. It wasn’t as bad as I anticipated, once I stopped freaking out. “Let’s not do that again, though.”

“Seriously.” Lana walks for her bag. “I need to eat something and read over what we do once he’s out of his Xanax coma.”

TWO HOURS LATER, the sun is almost down. Francis’ right arm is in a sling we fashioned from a bedsheet, and it has to stay there for at least three days or he risks dislocating it again. He sits at the table eating with his left hand, which provides the evening’s entertainment both because it’s his non-dominant hand and he’s still loopy. Every third cracker misses his mouth,

which never fails to make him giggle like a teenager who's smoked weed for the first time.

Troy and Daisy returned with news that two of the houses are occupied by zombies and the pickup truck out front not only works, but it also has a full tank of gas and a California road atlas. We'll take it and leave the sedan when we move on.

"Three days here won't be so bad," Troy says. "We'll clear out those houses and see what's inside."

I try not to scream in frustration. Every day the chance of finding Rose and Mitch decreases, and my desperation has grown greater than my fear. "I have to go," I accidentally say aloud, and the conversation stops.

"Go where?" Lana asks. "Now?"

I shake my head, face burning under their watchful eyes. "No. I don't know. I have to get to Oregon."

"That's where we're headed, buddy," Troy says. "We can't leave just yet. Another few days and we're out of here."

I tamp down a flash of anger. Is there anything worse than being called *buddy* in a patronizing tone? I've been waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike out on my own, but maybe there won't be one. Now that they have the truck, they won't mind if I leave in the sedan. I'll only take what's mine and whatever gas it has left in its tank. Besides, Troy will probably want help clearing out those houses tomorrow, and I'm not up to the task.

I'll leave in the morning before they wake.

Craig

I SURREPTITIOUSLY PACKED my bag last night and hoped I'd wake before the others. It turns out I needn't have worried; I volunteered for the last watch shift, and when the sky is light enough to see shadows, I slide from my blankets in the corner of the living room already wearing my boots.

I tiptoe past Francis on the couch and around the mattresses that hold the others. Troy mumbles something in his sleep, and I freeze until he flips over. I set the short note I wrote on the kitchen counter and palm the sedan keys, clutching them in my hand so they don't clink on my way to the door.

My stomach twists. Underneath the nervousness of being caught, of hitting the road on my own, is a heavy sort of sadness. I don't know what I'll do if I can't find Rose and Mitch. Troy's prediction that people will be the biggest threat feels like more of a prophecy in this moment. Of the three people we've come across, two moved us along with the barrel of a gun. But I was lucky. The first people I met saved me from certain death more than once, and here I am leaving them without a proper goodbye. I remind myself that's half the reason I'm leaving. I can't expect them to carry me forever, and I don't want my stupidity, my weakness, to be the cause of their deaths. There are more than enough ways to die out there without adding *Death by Craig* into the equation.

I unlock the door and step into chilly, still air. The quiet of the dawn is peaceful, and nothing lurks under the nearby trees. I make sure the front door is closed tight, feeling guilty I can't re-lock it even if a zombie wouldn't know to turn the knob.

The hills are beautiful in the blue-gray light, their eastern sides edged by gold. I walk to the sedan slowly to minimize the crunching of gravel under my boots, then gingerly lift the door handle. The road is downhill, but the car sits hidden behind a rise in the driveway, so I'll have to run the engine instead of coasting. It doesn't matter; by the time they hear the rumble and realize something's up, I'll be gone. They won't chase after me.

I throw my pack in the passenger's seat, then pull it closer and fumble for my Xanax. I pop half a pill and insert the key into the ignition, fingers stopping just short of turning it. It's idiotic to leave. My best chance is to

stay put, travel with them, but I can't stand to be as inept as Dad thought I was. It's proven true other times in my life, and, frankly, I'd rather be dead on my own than have it proven for keeps in front of an audience. Besides, I might make it. If I have no choice, no one watching, I might actually prove the theory wrong.

A knock on the passenger's side window makes me leap. My head cracks on the car's ceiling. "Shit," I say as Lana opens the door. "You scared me."

"Sorry." Lana tosses my pack into the back and settles on the seat, then watches the hills. "Where ya off to?"

I don't look her way. "North."

"Don't know if you heard, but that's where we're heading."

"I heard," I say. "I didn't want to be in the way any longer."

Lana opens her hand. My note is crumpled in her palm. "So I read. *Thank you all for everything. You'll be safer without me. Good luck, Craig.*" She tosses it into my lap. "You know you're going to die out there?"

"Yeah, I know." I lift my shoulders. Even Lana, booster of confidence, knows I'm going to die. "Better than killing you all along with me. Have you not noticed I'm a pussy?"

It feels good to get it out in the open. Admit it. Lana's silent for a minute, then she says, "Here's what I've noticed. You killed one when you had to, you pulled me to safety under the freeway, and you saved Daisy from being bitten. I saw that Lexer. He was this close to biting her cheek." She holds up her hand, two fingers an inch apart. "No one else would've gotten there in time. *You saved her.*"

I haven't thought of it that way, but I'm still not winning any awards for valor. "And then you and Troy had to save me when I didn't do a fucking thing to stop him from eating me."

"That's how it works. We've all been afraid, we've all been in a tight spot, and we've all been saved. You're scared, too scared, and you need to face your fear."

"Why do you think I'm sitting here waiting to drive away? Which I could do if you would get out of the car already."

Lana laughs. She has a good laugh—on the husky side, like her voice. "I like you when you're snarky. I'm not getting out until you do, though. I'm going to help you face your fear." I turn to her, and she raises her

eyebrows. “I’m pretending you didn’t write that note. In fact, you woke me up early to kill those zombies in the houses as a surprise for everyone.”

It’s my turn to laugh, though it fades when Lana’s serious expression remains. “I’d at least like to get in a few miles before I die,” I say.

“Snarky again.” Lana yanks the keys from the ignition and pockets them. “Now put that spirit into the rest of you.”

She leaves the car and stretches her arms above her head, then bends to peer in the window with a *c’mon already* expression. I open my door. I’m not going anywhere without keys, and the truth is I want to stay, even if it means extra days. I just didn’t want to be a burden.

Once I’m out, Lana trots to the steps and returns holding Francis’ knife, then pulls Francis’ gloves from her pocket and hands everything to me. “He won’t mind you borrowing them. Let’s go.”

She sets off for the first house as though she has no doubt I’ll follow, which I do while pulling on the gloves. I have my dad’s hands—big for my size—and they just about fit. When I catch up to Lana, she says, “It pisses me off when men refer to a weakling as a pussy, so you need to stop that right now. Whether woman or cat, pussies kick ass. Call yourself a coward or whatever other insult you want, but not that.”

I can’t help smiling. “You sound like Mitch. Sorry. It’s my go-to. My dad called me that.”

“Well, your dad was wrong.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” I say, unsure if she means Dad was wrong about me or wrong for using the word. I don’t ask for clarification on the grounds that I want to believe it’s both.

“You’re limping,” she says. “How’s the blister?”

I glance at Lana, whose smiling eyes declare nothing gets past her. “It hurts,” I say. “I found some Band-Aids in the house’s medicine cabinet, but they’re not doing much.”

“I have some good bandages for that. A bad blister can kill you out here, you know.” She stops in front of the ranch house down the way. “There are four inside this one. The best thing to do is get them in a position where they can’t come at you, but you can reach them. Remember the house where we got the pickup?”

I nod. Lana enticed that zombie to the window, and now I watch as she steps onto the front porch, cuts through the screen, and pushes up the

window glass beside the door. Francis' knife is heavy but comforting in its solidness. And seriously badass. If I can't kill a zombie with it, I may as well lay myself on a platter with a sprig of parsley.

When the window is up partway, Lana knocks on the glass, then steps back. "They're coming."

There hasn't been enough time for the Xanax to kick in, though I'm not sure it would be enough to touch my fear, anyway. My hand shakes. My knees knock, which I've always thought was some literary bullshit but now find is a thing—I actually tremble hard enough to clunk my knees together. *That's* the real bullshit, that I'm so afraid. The Lexers are behind a window, for shit's sake.

I hear footsteps just before a face presses to the glass and an elderly woman drops to jam herself sideways out the opening. Her sagging skin has cracked along each wrinkle, and her front teeth are missing, though that doesn't stop her from snapping at air. The other zombies growl in the background, hands on the glass, unable to advance with her in the way.

"You have gloves," Lana says. "Touch her."

I step forward, skin crawling. The woman's arm shoots out to grasp my jeans, and I jump back. Her hisses grow to a babbling mess of grunts and growls. Her purple tongue lolls over her lips. It's wretched what humans have been reduced to, but I suddenly understand they want to eat me with a singlemindedness that can work in my favor. The other Lexers aren't unlocking the door or devising a plan to sneak out the back and up behind me. They're impatiently waiting their turn at the window. This doesn't mean you can afford to be blasé about the whole thing, but they're somewhat predictable.

I step forward again, and when the woman snatches at my leg, I clutch her wrist. It's disgusting, even with gloves. But she barely fights my hold, only tries to drag me closer.

"Good," Lana calls over the noises. "Now get her in the ear or eye."

I focus on the whorls surrounding her ear canal, then aim for that dark spot and bring the knife down with all my strength. The crunch jars my arm up to my neck, and my shoulders shudder involuntarily. Brown liquid oozes out around the blade. The smell of death increases tenfold. But she's limp. Gone. I did it.

No sooner does Lana shove the old lady inside the window than a man takes her place. His graying combover has come loose and flops to his chin on one side. The other side of his face has been gnawed down to bone, possibly by Grandma. I shake my head, remembering my own grandma—sometimes it's better to think of them as *it* instead of people.

I watch the Lexer, really take it in, now that my brain has convinced my overtaxed nervous system that I'm safe. Well, safe enough that I have time to assess what my best move would be. I played drums years ago and know muscle memory is essential when it comes to playing a beat. Killing Lexers likely won't ever be akin to mindlessly tapping out a boom-chuck rhythm, but if I do this enough, maybe it'll get easier.

I sidestep the Lexer's arm and stand behind its head at its shoulder, then pin its temple to the windowsill while I fight its bucking. They're strong, I can't forget that. No pain means they don't need a breather. No life means no fear. The man twists his head, wild eyes fixed on me and mouth opening like a fish stranded dockside.

Fuck you, I think, and grunt as I jam the blade through its temple.

I'm ready for the next until Lana pushes the window higher and jumps back from the man who comes for her. This one is younger, maybe forties, short and big enough that he fills the window frame when he bends out of it.

"Don't think," Lana calls, her knife at the ready. "Go, or it'll make it out."

It's already leaning out far enough that its next move will be to fall at our feet. I rush forward the way I've seen the others do. I bat the Lexer's hands out of the way, stab for its eye, and miss when it moves. This is why they hold them still. I grasp its dark hair, draw my arm back, and send the blade through its pale iris.

It falls forward, head striking the porch floor with a thud. Lana grabs an arm, I get the other, and we pull it through to make way for the last one, whose hisses are soft in comparison. Once the body is out, I move for the window again, steps faltering at the sight that greets me.

It's a kid. Maybe eight years old, with long brown hair still half in braids. Her—*its*—mouth and teeth are coated with dried blood the way I now realize the others' weren't. This little girl did in her family. Maybe

they tucked her into bed, hoping the fever would pass. It's possible they believed their sweet girl could never hurt them. But she did.

Her quieter hisses are no less ravenous. She grunts, her chest pressed to the windowsill and dirty hands clawing for me while her brown-crackled teeth bang together.

I jump at a hand on my shoulder. "You have to," Lana says. "It'll kill you just as dead."

This is insanity. *Unbelievable*. The word has bounced around my head ever since this nightmare began. It kept me trapped and scared and unwilling to act. But this is real as fuck. Would I rather die at the teeth of one of these things than finish it off, even if it is a little girl zombie wearing Laura Ingalls braids in her hair?

No, I wouldn't. I want to live.

I step into the circle of her arms, ignoring her scrabbling fingers and satisfied growls, then angle the knife under her chin the way Lana did on the freeway. The girl topples into the house, skinny arms flung out to the sides. And, like that, the morning is silent again—until the applause begins. I spin around. Lana stands clapping behind me, while the others watch from the lawn doing the same. Except for Francis, who slaps his good hand on his thigh.

My initial response is to feel stupid. I'm not six years old and in need of a participation trophy. But they seem genuinely enthusiastic, and instead of wondering if they mean it—if they like me—I flourish Francis' knife and bow to hoots and catcalls.

"Let's do the next house," Troy says, and laughs when I groan.

TROY LET the five Lexers in the second house out the front door, much to my distress. But I managed to kill two while all except Francis took one each. Though my arm is sore and I stink to high heaven, I'm more than a little proud. I'm also stuffed with food and soon to take a hot shower, since we found a generator and a half-stocked pantry. The room smells of the brownies currently baking in the oven, which both warms the house and is a major improvement over the aroma of the brown liquid I cleaned off my

glasses. All in all, I'm happy. Content, even. It's freaking me out a little. I don't do content. Discontent, anxiety, the heebie-jeebies? Yes, yes, and yes. Contentment? Nope.

Daisy sits cross-legged on the floor eating vanilla icing out of a container, and she points at me with her spoon. "We have to find you a better weapon tomorrow. There's a workshop behind the first house. I bet I can make you something cool."

"Like what?" I ask. Daisy shrugs and plugs her mouth full of icing.

"Daisy built custom bicycles," Lana says. "From scratch."

I'm not surprised. Daisy has a tough-girl vibe that proclaims she knows her way around machinery. "How'd you guys meet?" I ask.

"Walmart," Troy says.

"Really?"

"Yeah, we all ended up there one way or another." Troy picks at the label on the beer he drinks—another find—as though his *one way or another* isn't the best memory. "We had supplies and weapons, all that stuff. The plan was to hole up and see if it blew over. Did you hear the radio reports?"

"I didn't have a regular radio. Only the TV. Until it went out."

"TV went dark before radio, but it was all bullshit anyway," Francis says. "Stay inside and all that, but how could you stay inside without water?"

Troy swigs his beer. "They were surprised at how fast the whole thing went down. One guy at the Walmart knew someone who worked in the governor's office, and he told us the Guard pulled out of California fast. They said it was to concentrate on keeping it from spreading to other states, but it was already in the Midwest, and he'd heard of a thousand cases along the East Coast—and that's only what they knew of. They'd grounded air travel and were opening treatment centers there, thinking if they rounded up the sick in time, they'd be able to stop it."

"Worked like a charm," I say. "Do you know what happened on the East Coast?"

"The reports said they blew up New York and D.C., who knows where else. After that, there wasn't much of anything. Europe and Asia reported the same shit. Things went bad for us before we heard much more."

News has always been transmitted to me through media—newspapers with photographs and television with video, all supported by corroborating sources. It feels wrong to rely on word-of-mouth or emergency broadcasts made by God knows who, but I suppose that’s how news will travel for the foreseeable future. “What happened at the Walmart?” I ask.

“Lasted less than a week,” Troy says. “Then some people busted in and brought Lexers with them. There were, what, twenty-four of us?”

“Twenty-five,” Lana says quietly. “We’re all that’s left.”

I don’t have to point out that only four people sit with me now, a sixteen-percent survival rate. A sixteen-percent survival rate of the *survivors*. The survival rate of the general population has to be in the single digits, especially in California. “If it’s everywhere, why are you guys heading north? Where are you going?”

The four of them look at each other, then Daisy speaks, “Troy knew of a place by the Sierra National Forest, but we couldn’t get close. We heard there might be Safe Zones in Oregon. But we thought no matter what, there’s more water and fewer people. Maybe we’d find a house in the mountains or something. Make a home base.”

They’re almost as lost as I am. Instead of depressing me, I feel better I’m not the only one without a solid plan. I’ve killed a few zombies, but it hasn’t made much impact on my fear of traveling alone. Even my fellow travelers banded together after a few days in Walmart; there’s safety in numbers. I speak my next words carefully. I want them to sound authentic and not desperate, because although it’s partly that I’m afraid, it makes me sad to think of parting ways when people are so hard to find. “If Rose and Mitch are there, I know they’d insist you guys stay with them, too. Maybe we can find a place like that for all of us. If you want to come to Eugene, that is.”

Four pairs of eyes regard me cautiously, and I flush with mortification. What was I thinking? They don’t want to go somewhere random based on the word of a person who can barely defend himself. I’ve killed a few zombies; I haven’t been crowned King of the Apocalypse.

I shrug and keep my eyes on the carpet. “I know it’s a long way, and you can probably think of a million better places to go. I don’t know, I just thought that people should stick together now, and Rose and Mitch are a lot

more—they're not...like me. Mitch doesn't take any shit, and Rose is really tough. So, there's that—”

I almost scream with relief when the timer dings in the kitchen, and I walk that way rather than look at the others. I pull the brownies from the oven, shaking my head at my well-meaning but illogical proposal, and almost drool at the chocolatey aroma and crusty dark edges along the sides of the pan. Mitch likes middles, but Rose and I love brownie edges. We had it down to a science in high school: cut out the center square for Mitch, then divvy up the outer portions for Rose and me. From what I remember, brownies need to cool in the pan a while, so I set it on the counter and turn off the heat.

Murmurs come from the living room, and I take my time before returning. Once I do, I grab my beer and pray they've forgotten the last five minutes. “The brownies are cooling,” I say. “Did you want me to bring them in?”

Troy waves a hand in refusal. “We're thinking we'll come to Eugene. Check it out, at least.”

“Really?” I almost drop my beer. “Why?”

Francis' laugh rumbles, and the others join in. Lana winks. “Because, like you said, people need to stick together. Craig, it's a good thing you weren't a salesman.”

That sets everyone off again, including me. Maybe people are crafty and will be the biggest threat eventually, but I've fallen in with good ones.

Clara

BETWEEN THE SCHOOL and Always Ready, we have enough food for four months. Half of it lives in the house, the other half in the RV, as Dad proposed. Rose approved, saying that if the house burned down, we'd have a place to live and food to eat. Dad rolled his eyes and said the house wasn't burning down, but it was a good idea anyway, and Rose laughed. I laughed along, amazed at how two total opposites have become friends—and don't seem quite as opposite as I thought.

Though seven of us crammed in the RV would suck for sleeping, we've taken to spending evenings here in the past weeks. Sam's fifth wheel has a TV, DVD player, and electric lights. The lanterns we looted work fine, but real lights illuminate the entire space rather than surrounding you with a pool of light and utter blackness beyond.

Holly rolls onto her stomach where she lies on the rug between Jesse and me, waiting for the movie to begin. Dad and Mitch sit in the recliners, Sam and Rose on the couch. As *the kids* we get the floor due to a lot of whining about old bones and aching backs.

"We're past thirty days," Holly says. "Shouldn't they be disintegrating?"

"I doubt it's an exact science," Sam says. "Another month and I'll start to worry."

Holly sucks in her lower lip and says nothing. The zombies aren't decomposing any more than they have. They aren't slower. Rose, Dad, and Mitch drove to Kara's a few days after we left her and couldn't get close, and they tried again this morning. They said not a single zombie, out of the two hundred in the intersection by her house, looked ready to drop to the ground so far.

Dad drums his fingers on his armrest. "We're good on food, and we know where to get more. If it takes a couple of months, we'll be fine." He says it in the voice that makes you sure he's right, and I find myself nodding almost against my will.

"You may have to become a carnivore, though," Jesse says to Holly. "We're running out of squirrel food. But we're no longer at the top of the

food chain, so you don't have to feel bad about that."

Holly drops her forehead to the rug. "I have three weeks of food still."

She sorted through the food and set aside the vegetarian meals. I love animals, but Holly wants to be a vet, volunteered at an animal rescue, and had a full-time job at a veterinary practice lined up for the summer. She has a soft spot for any organism that isn't human, although that soft spot extends to most humans, too.

"You can't not eat, sweets," Rose says.

Holly raises her head and strokes Willa on the floor by Rose's feet. "I'll eat what I have to, as long as it's not Willa."

Maybe we aren't planning to eat her, but what to feed her is an issue. Willa doesn't mind eating people food one bit, but we mind the gas she expels when she does. She can stink up a room faster than a zombie.

Rose rises from the couch. "Let's have a movie snack that isn't Willa. How about kettle corn?"

A chorus of agreement greets her suggestion. Though we're not hungry, snacks and junk food are portioned out along with everything else. Fortunately, Rose likes junk food, and since she's taken on the role of chef most days, she always fits some in.

"You can *make* kettle corn?" Dad asks. "I thought you could only get it at carnivals and craft fairs."

"That's what they want you to think," Rose says in an ominous tone as she heads for the kitchen. "Come watch the magic happen." Dad follows with a chuckle.

"Come with me to pee?" I ask Holly.

"I will," Jesse says. "I have to go, too."

We try not to use the RV's bathroom, since dumping the black water tank will leave a pile of poop and pee in our yard now that there's no truck that comes by to drain it. Before, I thought RVs were cool. Now, I can help hitch it to the truck, fill and empty the tanks, and understand what an inverter is. Sam's inverter isn't working properly, but since most of the RV's equipment runs on 12-volt, we're able to watch movies, brew coffee, and use lights. The microwave is the only unusable appliance, along with anything that needs household voltage.

The neighbor's camper now lives in the yard, and it washes the laundry we don't do by hand in the bathtub—things like jeans and coats. You can

barely hear the generator thanks to a special box Sam and Dad built. But it'll be all bathtub washing if this doesn't end soon; the generator needs diesel, and the camper's tank is running low.

I put on my raincoat and shoes, then find a flashlight. I don't like utter blackness. If you give me a nightlight, a flashlight, anything to keep the boogeyman away, I'll take it gladly and clutch it until sunrise. I still have a nightlight in my room, and possibly my most hated thing about this new world—aside from zombies, death, and destruction—is the lack of that nightlight.

Jesse and I walk into the yard and swish through wet grass. Outside the camper is dark, since we cover the windows at night. The rain has turned misty, and a soft halo glows around the moon.

"I never said thanks," Jesse says.

"For what?"

"For talking about my mom. For not telling Holly. I know you two tell each other everything."

"Not everything," I say, thinking of that kiss. "But close."

He glances at me. I stare straight ahead as we step into the house. "Use my mom's bathroom," he says. "I'll use the hall."

After I'm done, I decide the yellow in the toilet has mellowed long enough. I flush it, then refill the tank from the water bucket in the corner. I wash my hands using the pitcher and enter the bedroom. The sound of a guitar whispers from the hall.

I walk to Jesse's doorway. His room is the same as when he left for college. Music posters on the wall, books on the shelves, papers and pens on the desk. He sits in the desk chair playing a guitar with his new lantern on the dimmest setting. His fingers fly, seeming as if they barely touch the strings. This is classical guitar, and it's always been my favorite. Jesse can also sing, but he doesn't like to.

I lean against the doorjamb and close my eyes. The Winter family is all about music, which is one of the reasons I fit in so well. We're all going through withdrawal with this imposed silence, maybe Jesse most of all.

The song changes from something I don't recognize to one I know well. Holly and I begged him to play it a million times in high school, and he almost always did. "There is a Light that Never Goes Out" was the anthem

of our teenage years. Rose joked that it'd been the anthem of hers, and she'd passed it down to us.

I open my eyes to find Jesse watching me, his lips just curved. The song holds so many memories of long talks with Holly, of being hopelessly in love with her brother, of laughter and sadness and being a teenager. Mostly, it reminds me of our kiss. It was playing in the living room of a house party while Jesse and I were down the hall in the party-thrower's bedroom, looking for something that by now has faded from memory.

I leaned against the wall and said, *Hey, it's our song*. When Jesse met my eyes, it was as though a switch flipped—his usual smile was replaced by something sweet and hopeful before he moved forward and pressed his lips to mine. The rest was a blur, of his lips and his tongue, of my heart swelling, of thinking finally, *finally* this was it.

After a few minutes—minutes in which I learned just how good a kiss could be and just how powerfully my body could respond—Jesse pushed my hair behind my ear and whispered my nickname. Then his stupid drunk friend busted in, dragging him off on a mission to hide someone's car keys. When I saw him two days later, it was like it'd never happened. I wasn't sure he even remembered, and I acted overly casual for a few weeks so he'd think I didn't either. But I waited for a sign the whole time, reliving those few minutes while my hope ebbed and flowed, until it eventually withered into nothing.

I push the memory I've gone over a thousand times from my mind. In the desk chair, Jesse's fingers dance, the music swells though still quiet, and I sing the end softly. He keeps his eyes on mine while the last notes fade away. "You have a great voice. I always thought so."

"It's passable," I say, though his compliment pleases me more than a little. "I'm not about to compete on *The Voice*. We should probably get back."

He sets down the guitar. "I thought one song would be okay."

"It was a good choice." I step into the hall, where it's dark. "It reminds me of your family, you know."

"It reminds me of you."

I walk for the back without a reply, turning on the flashlight with a trembly hand. Jesse leans past me to open the door. It's those little things he does—opening doors, making sure you're okay, offering to bring you

something from the kitchen when we actually have food—that make him special. Rose may have trained him, but I think he does it because he likes to.

“Remember when you peed your pants because you were laughing so hard?” he asks.

I step onto the patio, cheeks faintly warm. “It reminds you of me peeing my pants when I was thirteen. Great.”

“The song reminds me of you. Peeing your pants is a bonus laugh.”

I push him. “I *really* had to pee. It was your sister’s fault for choosing that moment to spill oil on the floor.”

One night, Holly dropped a big plastic bottle of olive oil on the kitchen floor, where it cracked open and glugged out into a puddle. As she tried to escape the spill, her feet shot out from under her. She froze in a half-split, attempting to get upright in a series of jerks and frantic tap dance-type movements, then went down into the mire, arms pinwheeling.

Between the look on her face and her laughter after the fact, I lost my shit. And the partial contents of my bladder. I could’ve stayed quiet on that fact, since it wasn’t a full-on pee, but I announced it to her and Jesse, which made us laugh harder. As much as I don’t want to be known for peeing my pants, the story is part of Winter Family Lore, and I like that I share in that.

“We’ll never speak of it again,” Jesse says.

“Yeah, right.”

He opens the RV’s door with a smirk that leaves no doubt I’m correct. Inside, Rose is dispensing kettle corn from a pot into bowls while Dad waits beside her. He delivers three of them across the room before he returns, where he inspects his bowl and slowly extracts a long strand of auburn hair.

“Lucky!” Rose says. “You won the prize.”

Dad’s solemn face fissures into a smile. The kind of smile I’ve seen on him more and more recently. His sense of humor is more than restored—it’s improved. “What do I get?”

“The hair *is* the prize.”

He lifts it high over Rose and lets it fall onto her auburn curls. She pats her head. “Fine, return it whence it came. One day you might want it back, though.”

“I doubt it.”

“Me, too.” Rose pulls a bottle of her kombucha from the refrigerator. “Sure you don’t want some?”

“Liquid sweat socks? No, thanks.”

“You’re not allowed to besmirch my kombucha until you’ve tried it.”

“After that, you can join our ranks,” Mitch says from her recliner. “We besmirch it all day long.”

Sam laughs. “That we do.”

“I’m one comment away from repossessing your kettle corn,” Rose threatens the two, then wiggles the bottle at Dad. “You know you want to.”

Dad wears his *no way in hell* face for a moment, but then he shrugs. “Fine.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Lay it on me.”

Rose pours some into a glass. Dad inspects the purplish liquid, then sniffs it like a wine connoisseur. Rose sets her elbows on the counter and rests her chin in her hands, eyes alight. She loves kombucha and doesn’t understand how someone wouldn’t, even though she’s disappointed more often than not. He sips carefully, then swallows and takes another taste, frowning in concentration. “Well?” she asks.

“Grape, with notes of sweat socks,” he announces. “Which is better than all sweat socks.”

Jesse snickers beside me. Rose leans across the counter to push Dad’s shoulder. “It’s good for you. And it cancels out sugar. If you drink kombucha, you can eat as much dessert as you want.”

His laugh rumbles. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“Killjoy.” Rose winks and drops a few pieces of popcorn on the floor for Willa. “That’s all, dog. I don’t like you *that* much.”

Willa gobbles them down. Dad crouches to pet her, and she falls belly up on the floor, snorting in ecstasy. “She’s a good girl. Aren’t you, Willa?”

This from the man who always said small dogs are oversized rats. I have no idea what happened the night they were gone, but somehow Dad turned human. A slightly stubborn human still, but he wouldn’t be himself otherwise.

Rose watches him rub Willa’s belly, and I imagine it’s hard to see this reminder of Ethan for many reasons. After a moment, her shoulders come

down, and her half-smile is one of surrender. “She is a good dog. Are you even a dog, you odd-looking thing?”

Willa pants up at her, tail thumping the floor. Rose spots me and Jesse. “Oh, hey. We thought you got lost.”

“I started to play a song and couldn’t stop,” Jesse blurts out. “It was quiet. Nothing heard.”

“It’s okay. I wish I’d heard, though. I miss hearing you play.”

“Me, too,” Holly says through a mouth full of popcorn.

“Me three,” Mitch says.

We watch Sam’s DVD collection of movies and old TV shows, but always with the subtitles on and at a volume almost impossible to hear. Music carries, and it isn’t worth the risk.

“Maybe we can soon, in the basement or something.” Rose hands us our popcorn bowls, lifts her own, and turns off the kitchen light. “Movie time.”

I sit in my spot on the rug. Instead of returning to Holly’s other side, Jesse lowers himself to the floor beside me. He’s over a foot away, but I’m very aware of the rise and fall of his chest and the way his fingers scoop up a handful of popcorn to toss in his mouth. I envision him reaching for my hand instead, his fingers tracing mine the way they did that night in Holly’s room.

“Okay if I sit here?” he asks. “Am I too close?”

I shrug. “It’s fine.”

“We’re watching a comedy, and I don’t want you to laugh too hard and pee on me.”

Holly cackles. “Well, she did just pee, so we’re probably safe.”

“The two of you are assholes,” I say, and shove them both to the floor.

Rose

IT'S BEEN THIRTY-SEVEN DAYS, and dead people still stroll the roads, they still linger at the intersection where we left Kara and her son, and they still brush up against the wood fences, which never fails to stop my heart. *The fences are sturdy. The fences are strong. We are invisible.* It's a mantra I repeat several times a day while going over the escape plan just in case.

Tom took charge of that, but not in a domineering way. Aside from the fact we needed a plan, he's good at organization, and organization is not my strong suit. Always Ready had several pamphlets about what's called preparedness, and one of the recommendations is to have an evacuation plan. We have two. One is on foot, carrying backpacks filled with a few days' supplies—what the pamphlets call a Go Bag. For the second, Pop's truck is hitched to the fifth wheel, and Mr. Gustafson's has the honor of holding the gate closed.

In an emergency, we'll all run to the RV. If we can't exit through the front gate, and the ground is covered with zombies, we'll escape through a wider fence panel Tom rigged to be removable from the safety of the pickup. I hope it'll work, that we'll get through the wave of whatever has entered, and that we can head toward Washington or the mountains.

We don't have a specific place to go, but we'll take it as it comes. Perhaps head over the mountain passes and see if we can get into Sisters, Oregon. Though Sisters is likely the same as Eugene, at least we'd have confirmation of that fact. Knowledge is power, and we're powerless.

A particularly rowdy group of zombies passes on the road. Mitch and I listen to their angry hisses, their clomping feet, and the sound of something dragging along asphalt. God only knows what it is. Willa spins in a circle, tiny feet pawing the ground. I point a finger down, and she sits, looking up at me while her pink tongue licks her snout. It only took two hours to teach her that. At least Ethan gave me a smart dog.

Mitch cocks her head toward the house. "Let's beat it."

We trudge up to the well for the day's water. I lower the PVC pipe bucket down the shaft while Mitch sits on an overturned five-gallon bucket.

Willa drops by my feet and sets one paw on my boot. "I'm not running away, Willa. Promise."

"You finally like your dog?" Mitch asks.

"It's hard not to like something that adores you this much. Look at her."

Willa's tail bangs the ground while her wrinkled face and imploring eyes give her an irresistibly pathetic air. She sleeps on my legs at night, follows me around all day, and asks for nothing but a little attention in return. She still has the face of an alien lifeform, but it's a cute alien lifeform.

Mitch glances around the yard. It's only the two of us, but she leans in. "Are you okay? Really?"

I haul the water to the surface, dump it into a bucket, and send it down again. "I'm okay, which makes me feel like a terrible person."

Sometimes I think it's precisely because I don't know where Ethan is that I'm able to be okay. Other times, I think I must be evil. Maybe it's a defense mechanism. I've built up plenty.

"You are not a terrible person. How much shit have you put up with in the past few years?"

"Enough. More than enough."

Mitch begins to whisper-sing "Enough is Enough," and I crack up. "C'mon," she says. "I'll do Donna and you do Babs, like the old days."

"And get eaten? I wish we had some of our mix tapes." As teenagers, we mined our parents' old records for the songs we'd grown up with, and we could be found listening to everything from golden oldies to disco to Barry Manilow along with our alternative music. I have all the songs in carefully curated playlists on my phone, but it isn't quite the same. I'd take them, however, over the nothing I do have. My phone sits at my bedside, a treasure trove of books and music, but the key to unlocking it is electricity. Though we use the big RV's generator to keep it charged in case of restored service or an emergency alert, I can't waste car batteries or fuel for my own personal entertainment, especially since the kids haven't once asked to charge their devices. I have to at least pretend to be more mature than them.

"We were forty before we were forty," I say.

"You know it, baby. Seriously, though, you have every right to feel the way you do. One day, you'll start crying over something ridiculous and it'll all come out."

“Looking forward to that,” I say. Mitch has been a trooper so far, but she’s never been one to bare her soul. “How about you? I know your cloak of inscrutability protects you, but are you secretly losing your mind?”

“You mean am I going to snap and murder all of you in your sleep? Not yet.”

“There is an in between, woman. Your mom and dad—”

“Maybe they’re sitting in their community center worrying about me.” Mitch shrugs and blinks a few times. “But you know they’re probably not.”

I keep my hold on the bucket rope and kiss the top of her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too. I’m just glad I came over that night.” Mitch sighs and rests her chin in her hand. “Day thirty-seven.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“What if they don’t die? Or whatever the hell you call it when a zombie dies.”

“I don’t know.”

I pull the bucket from the well. It takes effort, but I need the exercise. I want to be strong. I want to be sinewy and dangerous and able to kick the world’s ass. Anything that will make me feel more prepared to handle that possible wave of zombies through the fence. What I want and what I am—a fairly slim but untuned forty-two-year-old—are two very different things.

I dump the water, splashing my feet and Willa in the process, and send the well bucket down again. The day is sunny, warm, and especially welcome after days of rain. I wonder what my surroundings would be like if we hadn’t left Brooklyn all those years ago, if the city is a wasteland, or if it escaped this. If anywhere has.

“In answer to your question, I guess we keep doing what we’re doing until we get close to running out of food,” I say. “We have a while, but Kara doesn’t.”

“That poor woman.” Mitch rubs her face. “Maybe she can make it last longer. How much can a three-year-old eat?”

“Not a lot, thankfully.” I yank the rope, pulling hand over hand. It might be easier than a week ago, though it’s hard to tell, since my arms still have the delightful bat wing of flab that sprang into existence two years ago.

“I can’t imagine being alone in this.”

“Me neither,” I say. “If you all were gone, I’d find a nice pharmacy, take thirty Valium, and drift off to sleep forever.”

Being alone in this world is a fate worse than death. I’ve already pictured the lonely days of trying to survive for nothing and the dark nights filled with the sounds of zombies, always waiting for one to finish me off. And to what end? A lonely end. I’ve never been suicidal, but that thought—that I could end it myself rather than have it end with teeth—is strangely comforting.

“Damn, woman,” Mitch says, jaw hanging. “You’ve planned it out?”

“Not planned, but what would be the point without anyone? If you all die and I don’t, I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Well, now I’m depressed.”

I dump the bucket and send it down again. I’ve filled two five-gallon buckets and have two more to go. Mitch flips over the one on which she sits, then lifts the two full ones. She turns, almost bumping into Tom, then shakes her head when he tries to take her load. He steps forward as Mitch moves for the house. “I’ll do that,” he says to me.

“I know you will. That’s why I’m doing it before you could. I need the exercise. Half-assed yoga and walking around the yard aren’t cutting it.”

“I used to teach self-defense years ago.”

“How’d you get into that?” I haul up the full bucket, doing my best to make it look easy. The truth is my arms are tired, but I’ll admit that over my dead body.

“I learned it for myself at first. But there were a few sexual assaults on campus when I was in college, so I started offering free workshops. If you want, we could go through some of the moves. It’s good exercise. I could use some, too.”

The thought of doing any sort of exertion near Tom, where he’ll get a front-row seat to my sweaty self, is not appealing. I’ve always wanted to take a self-defense course, but it involves being in a room with strangers, pretend-yelling at a pretend attacker, and I feel dumb even thinking about doing it, much less doing it in reality.

“Sure,” I say. “Sometime soon?” There’s no way to refuse his offer politely, and my hope is that I’ll be eaten by zombies before the day arrives.

“Sounds good.”

I turn back to the well and hear him humming. “Song stuck in your head?” I ask. “I keep getting ‘Wave of Mutilation’ stuck in mine. I know it’s because it’s fitting, but it has to stop already.”

“The Pixies. Great band.”

“You like The Pixies?”

The bucket hits the water with a distant splash, and I turn to find him watching me with arms crossed. “Yeah,” he says. “Saw them in ‘91 and ‘92.”

“Pre-break up? Nice. I always forget you’re an old man. I was still in high school, then I got knocked up and never had any fun ever again.”

Tom continues staring, arms crossed, but he’s amused. I’ve picked up on the signs: the slight uptick of a single eyebrow, the hint of a cheek crease, and a tiny light in his eye. “Saw a lot of bands,” he says. “The Cure, My Bloody Valentine, R.E.M., Dinosaur Jr., Sonic Youth. Even saw The Smiths in ‘86.”

“Wow, you *are* old.”

Tom attempts to glower, but his laugh spoils the effect. “A friend’s older brother took us down to California for a couple of days. You’d best watch yourself, young lady.”

I grin as I bring up the bucket. This information doesn’t mesh with the Tom I know. *Thought* I knew. He likes good music, at least as far my taste goes. “If I ever get to use my phone, we could listen to a lot of that stuff,” I say.

Tom’s cheek crease becomes more pronounced. “I’d like that.”

“Cool.” I keep my smile small, though it feels wide inside. Why Tom changed into the stern, disapproving person he was a month ago is a mystery, but I’m glad he reverted. “What else did you listen to?”

“Misfits, Bad Brains, Black Flag, Social Distortion, that sort of thing. I was into the music scene down in L.A. for a while. Long time ago.”

I dump the bucket and set it at my feet. “So what you’re really saying is that you used to be cool. What happened?”

Tom’s grin showcases white teeth and twinkly eyes that make my stomach flip in a way that’s more than unsettling—it throws me off balance. I step back, fumbling the bucket before I send it down to water.

“I’m still cool,” he says. “I just don’t feel the need to broadcast it.”

“Is that so?” I shake my head, but I can’t shake the feeling. *That* feeling—the one where your stomach goes fluttery and warm with some sort of promise. With potential. Heat spreads from my chest to my face, morphing into a hot flash. Sweat blossoms everywhere. I didn’t know ankles and kneecaps could sweat until perimenopause, and I was quite happy to live in ignorance of that fact.

“That’s so.” Tom moves to my side and lifts the bucket from the well. “You look hot. Maybe take a break?”

Tom wears one of Ethan’s long-sleeved shirts. It’s a little tight on him, and it shows off the tapering of muscles to his waist when he turns to dump the bucket. I’ve seen Tom’s torture equipment, his bikes, and how easily he handles things like killing zombies, but I haven’t thought about what that means in terms of what’s under his clothes until now. It isn’t helping to cool me down. At all.

I step away, tongue-tied and heart thumping. This is crazy. Crazier than crazy. The only explanation is that I have a husband who was missing long before he truly went missing. Evidently, my hormones are glomming on to any stray testosterone that can go over three minutes without using an addictive substance.

Mitch appears with two empty buckets, and I quickly cut my eyes from Tom. “Filled the pitchers, sink container, and toilet tanks,” she says. “What’d I miss?”

I fan my face, grateful I can blame my discomfiture on a hot flash. They have to be good for something. “We found out Tom was once cool.”

Tom shakes his head in an amiable fashion, making clear he’s allowing this to go on only because he feels charitable. “Oh, yeah?” Mitch asks. “How so?”

“He likes good music. He even saw The Smiths in ‘86.”

“Get out. Color me impressed, Thomas.”

Tom glances over his shoulder. “If you call me Thomas, I’ll call you Michelle.”

“All right, Tom, that’s a deal,” she says, then asks me, “But does he lip sync?”

“That remains to be seen, but I doubt it. I don’t see him doing karaoke, either. Maybe dancing?”

Tom lowers the bucket down the well. “He does none of the three.”

“I guess he gets a six out of ten on the coolness scale,” Mitch says. “Not bad, considering he was a big fat zero before. He can raise it by showing off his skills at some point.”

“He’s okay with six,” Tom says.

Mitch laughs her big laugh. It wasn’t long ago that I thought they’d be good together. I still think so, and I snuff out the spark of envy that flares. This is the kind of thing you have to wait out. Silly hormonal crushes always pass, and then you realize how ludicrous they were in the first place.

Tom

I WAKE TO SCREAMING. Holly and Clara are on watch at the living room window, and I jump to my feet, thinking it's them. The girls face me, mouths shut while the screaming continues. Now that I'm fully alert, it's obvious it came from a distance, somewhere by the road.

I step into my boots, grab my knife and pistol, and throw on my coat. "Stay here," I order the girls, then jog out the door.

A few drops of rain strike my face as I make for the neighbor's pickup by the fence. It helps hold the gate closed, but it also provides a view of the road if needed—we removed the cap for just this purpose. I jump into the bed and lean over the fence to find a good number of walking bodies before the curve in the road, their edges softened by fog. They face the other direction and move into the woods. Damp air muffles their hisses, but they're on to something, that much is apparent.

Whoever was screaming has gone silent. This is the right time to keep quiet, but there's no way to tell where they are, if they're still alive, unless they scream again.

"C'mon," I whisper, quickly tying my boots.

Rose and Mitch climb into the truck bed, both semi-dressed. Rose wears boots and pajama pants, her hair in a limp ponytail and eyes still puffy with sleep. But they're sharp, searching. "What is it?" she whispers.

"Not sure," I say. "It stopped."

My breath comes in short plumes of vapor, mixing with fog in the air and Mitch's and Rose's unsteady breaths. At these moments, I question why I'm alive in a world like this. It's pure fucking crazy to watch dead people wander the road, to be unable to help someone who's trying to evade those dead people. There's no order, no plan, no future except to survive each day. To keep Clara alive until there's some light at the end of this miserable tunnel.

The crack of branches comes from my left, across the road and down, and is followed by the rustling crash of something moving fast through the woods. Traveling our way. I lift my pistol. The times I took it to the range, I was thinking of a home intruder. It's easy enough to hit a man in the chest at

close range with a short-barreled .357. A headshot on a more distant moving target requires a level of accuracy—and, likely, weapon—I don't have. I know that much, but what I don't know about guns has become all too evident. Sam knows a good bit, but without weapons to illustrate his descriptions, it remains abstract.

Mitch points to the woods as the sounds grow louder. A figure materializes, flashing between trees and bushes. On the short side, running clumsily, maybe carrying something. Leaves shake as they push their way closer.

The person bursts from the trees fifty feet past the far corner of Rose's lot. It's Kara from down the road, with a child clutched to her chest. She trips on the incline to the paved surface and drops her son when she sprawls on the asphalt. Kara pushes herself up with both arms, gets to her feet, and lifts her crying son while she watches the zombies advance. The first are forty feet away and gaining ground. I put my gun in my pocket, stand on the edge of the truck's bed, and lean against the fence, hoping it'll hold all two hundred-some pounds of me.

"Run!" I call. Kara turns my way, mouth open. "Goddammit, run!" I hold out my hands to pull her over. She has plenty of time to make it, but she doesn't move. Her eyes are huge, her face striped with dirt.

"Move the truck," Rose says.

I would, but it'd take minutes we don't have. "No time," I say.

I catch sight of Rose's shocked face, but there's no time to explain, either. I scale the fence and land with a thump before I race for Kara. The zombies are closing in faster than I will at this distance, and I fire at the nearest one. Maybe it's a headshot, maybe it's not, but the force of the bullet drives it down for the moment. All the weeks we've avoided loud noise of any kind, and now I've just announced our presence to everything in a mile radius. But I'll be damned if I let another mother and child die if I can stop it.

I'm at the end of the fence when the first of the pack reaches Kara. They snatch at her clothes, yanking her backward. It knocks her out of her daze, and she rips free and spins for me, though she only makes it two steps before they catch her from behind. Her terrified eyes meet mine, and she holds out her son. Though kicking and crying, he's a cute kid, with dark

eyes and a mop of curly brown hair. He resembles Jeremy at that age, and it's both horrible to look and impossible not to.

I put on a burst of speed I didn't think possible. Kara releases an ear-shattering scream as a woman in a blue dress sinks teeth into her arm. A man grabs her head, twists it toward him, and bites into her cheek. She holds her boy aloft even as she screams, until they're both swallowed up by the next dozen bodies.

I close the final feet and rip a man away, then a woman, firing point-blank into her head when she comes for me. Something moves to my left—Mitch swinging her axe, Rose her knife. Two zombies go down, then another two. I shoot the one that gnaws the back of Kara's bloody head where she's hunched over her boy. I shove three more zombies, sending them to the ground, and then flip her limp body. Her son is gone. Ten feet away, three zombies are on their knees in a widening pool of blood. A lone leg with a preschool-sized shoe emerges from the huddle.

More of the pack arrives. Rose hacks into a woman's face, then kicks another with a well-placed boot. I take her arm, grab Mitch mid-strike, and pull them for the fence. Sam and the kids watch from the truck bed, and I wave them back before they come to the road. "Help them over!"

Jesse holds out his hands. Rose seizes them, feet slipping on fence boards as she fights for purchase to climb. I push her until she scrambles over top, then give Mitch a boost into Sam's hands. I haul myself over and fall into the truck bed as the first zombies hit. The gate rattles on its hinges while I get to my feet, more thankful for the truck's added defense than ever.

The rest of the pack strikes, fifty strong. Hands batter the fence and the noises grow in volume. The wood groans, but the posts hold. A shit smell wafts up along with the scents of rotting flesh and fresh blood. Some bodies wear cleanish clothing, but the majority is torn, stained with brown, and clotted with chunks of dried viscera. Whoever they were is erased by grayed, sunken skin and ratty hair. One looks up with silvery vacant eyes, sees me, and lets out an unearthly moan.

I step out of sight into the truck bed. "Can they get through the fence?" Mitch asks over the din.

"If they can't, they'll keep pounding and draw enough who will," Sam says. "We've got to get them from this side." He points up the hill. "Girls,

get my truck.”

Clara and Holly take off without a word, racing up the grass and around the house.

“Bullets will make it worse,” I say. “We need something long.”

A spike of some kind, or a long-handled blade. I’m sure I could make something, but there’s no time to shit around with that. Rose lifts a hand in a *hold on* gesture, takes Mitch’s arm, and leads her toward the house. Dirty, decaying hands yank the pickets, and one begins to pull away from the top rail. Just a centimeter, but one centimeter will beget another, until a picket is missing. With one gone and more surface for hands to grab, the next will be easier to remove. Once a few pickets are gone, there’ll be space enough to squeeze through.

I draw my knife from its sheath and grasp the arm of the man on the loose picket. I haul him up a few inches, bury the knife in his eye, and then drop him to the ground. A woman hisses, her blond hair hopelessly tangled and left eye hanging by a bundle of veins and nerves. I lift her by the hair, put my blade in the remaining eye, and release her onto the first.

A couple of hundred feet down, at least twenty more zombies stroll the road on their way to join these. Over a dozen come from the other direction. They’re reaching us faster than I anticipated, which means there are more around now. More in the woods. More ways to die.

Another picket board squeaks, pulls out an inch. I start that way, but Jesse beats me to it, lifting a man by his shirt and delivering a jab with his bone-handled knife. Thumps rise down the line when the next packs arrive, and the fence shudders on its posts.

Rose and Mitch return with full arms and dump their loads in the back of the truck. A fireplace poker, a few three-foot round metal spikes, two broomsticks, a hammer with a nasty looking blade opposite the head, an axe, two pieces of rebar, and assorted garden tools. Under it all is a digging bar, likely from when Rose and Ethan built the original fence. Made for breaking up hard soil, it’s five feet of forged steel, with a blunt pointed end opposite a wider chiseled end.

Sam’s truck rolls down the slope, Holly behind the wheel and Clara in the passenger’s seat. The truck pulls beside the fence, moving forward and back until it’s close, then the girls run for us.

“This is all we could find,” Rose says. She takes a spike and hops into the truck with me.

I lift the digging bar. It weighs close to twenty pounds, and it feels solid. Deadly. I turn to where Rose stands tiptoe on the raised edge of the truck’s bed, hanging over the pickets with the spike in a fist. She raises her arm and slams it down, presumably into a zombie, then yells, “It works!”

I join her. The digging bar needs almost no force, as gravity supplies enough weight to slam into eyes and mouths and even a nose. Rose grunts beside me, her spike gouging one eye and then another. A plus—maybe the only plus—is that the creatures are dumb. They wait below, mouths ajar and eyes staring, while they beat on the wood. They don’t dodge or feint or understand they’re meeting their end.

More zombies arrive. Clara, Holly, and Jesse take the other truck with Sam, while Mitch joins Rose and me. She holds the fireplace poker, and she’s no joke. Her arm slams down, an eye caves in, and the zombie drops. Between the three of us, we have a dozen finished off in less than two minutes.

After another five minutes, bodies cover the ground. The zombies still on their feet trip and stumble over the fallen, making it difficult to get a weapon close. “I’ll move the truck down,” I say. “Just enough to give us room.”

Rose and Mitch step into the bed while I climb across the cab into the driver’s seat. I pull up as far as I can with the end of the truck still blocking the gate. By the time I reach the bed, Mitch and Rose are at it again, though Rose lifts her spike and hesitates, hand in the air.

Kara stands below. In comparison to the others, she almost looks human. Barely grayed, fresh red blood. But her panic and distress have been replaced by hunger. Her once terrified eyes are blank. Rose drives the spike into one, and Kara falls onto her side in the grass. I spot her son behind her, half-hidden between two zombies whose waists he barely reaches.

The boy trips over his mother’s body and pulls himself to his feet, only to be knocked down by a larger zombie who staggers to the fence. I drop the digging bar into its open mouth. The kid disappears, lost underfoot in the next dozen zombies. Mateo. His name was Mateo. Kara told us that much.

One by one, the zombies fall until there are three left. Two down the way, and Mateo. He struggles out from under the bodies, hissing like a feral kitten. His pudgy hands hit the fence. I swallow my reluctance and lean as far over as I can, aiming for the center of his face, then bring the chiseled end down with every bit of force I can muster. The first time has to work; I don't have it in me to do it twice. Mateo crumples to the ground. Clara brings the spiked end of that hammer into a face with impressive force and then whips it out again, while Jesse fells the final one with his knife.

Silence fills the air. You don't realize how much those hoarse hisses and groans wear on you, fill your head with noise. Silence is fucking golden, as far as I'm concerned. Silence is safety. I set down the digging bar, flex my hand, and release my breath.

Rose sits on the edge of the truck bed, massaging her biceps with opposite hands. Her hair has lost the ponytail and curls around her face. The kids and Sam make their way to the tailgate, and Sam lays a hand on her shoulder, face lined with sorrow.

"She was so close," Rose says quietly.

"I'm sorry, Rosie."

She nods and says to the kids, "Nice work, guys."

"Those spikes were perfect," Holly says with no excitement in her tone. Her face is pale and spattered with gore, her eyes almost haunted.

"They're from when we poured the patio." Rose dredges up a smile and brushes Holly's sleeve. "You did good, sweets. I know it wasn't easy."

Holly blinks a few times. I search Clara for a sign of the same disquiet, but her expression is composed, if tired. A few strands of human hair hang from a clump of scalp on the end of her hammer, and she wipes it off on the rag I hand her. It's odd to be proud of your kid for murdering zombies, but I am. She has the right combination of grace and power. Added to her stubbornness, it'll help keep her alive.

"Goddamn those things," Mitch says, and drops beside Rose. "*Fuck* them. This shit has to end soon, or..." She stares at the fence and doesn't finish.

I didn't make it. I didn't save them. All I did was acquire a new image, a terrible one, of a desperate mother entreating me to rescue her son. That Mateo resembled Jeremy—that I've killed him not once, but twice—makes it worse. I'm not sure what happens after we die, but I hope that Jeremy

knows how much I love him. How sorry I am that I wasted time trying to change him instead of enjoying him as he was. How sorry I am that I didn't save him, either.

I shake my head in a bid to clear my thoughts, then take in our group. We seven killed over a hundred zombies. Even through the dullness of defeat, I have the encouraging thought that every one of us is a complement. Somewhere along the way, we've formed a unit.

My gaze returns to Rose. Whether or not she's the glue that holds us together, she's certainly a big part of it. I continue watching, concerned by the way her eyes have reddened, how she holds her lips tight. "Everyone go and clean up," she says. "I need to sit for a minute."

"Mom?" Holly's brow wrinkles the same way Rose's does. Apart from their difference in size, I imagine seeing Holly is akin to seeing Rose twenty years ago.

"I'm fine," Rose says. "I'll shower in the RV last. Go wash off the germs. You don't want me feeling your foreheads for fever all night, do you?"

The kids smile wanly and start up the hill. I step to the grass with Mitch and Sam. "You sure, Ro?" Mitch asks.

Rose nods, keeping her eyes on the fence. "I'll be up soon."

Sam and Mitch get moving, and I follow only because they seem to think it okay. Midway up the incline, I look back. Rose's head has dropped to her arms. Her shoulders shake. Without a word to the others, I make my way to the pickup and climb into the bed, where I loosely set an arm around her curved back.

Rose is a peculiar combination of empathetic and guarded. She'll storm your castle walls to give you a hug, while her drawbridge remains locked up tight. I'm prepared to leave if requested, but she leans into me, and I tighten my arm a little. "I knew she should've come with us," she whispers. "We should've made her."

In hindsight, I wish I'd thrown Kara and Mateo over my shoulder and forced them into the truck. "We couldn't. We tried. She would've come had she known."

"I keep trying, and I keep failing. First Julian and Elliot, and now—" Rose motions at the fence. "Maybe it's hopeless."

I've thought the same many times, but to hear Rose say it is far more demoralizing. She's the one who does dumb things like insist on leading zombies away from a house, jump a fence to save kids, and stop to help a stranger, all because she believes it the right thing—the good thing—to do. Honestly, those things aren't dumb; they're kind and softhearted and *human*. As far as I can tell, this fucked-up world has devastated humanity, and I can't stand for it to take that away, too.

"It's not hopeless," I say. "We'll keep trying." My words are meant to cheer her, but they come out easily, like I believe them myself. Either I've lost my mind or Rose is rubbing off on me. Possibly both.

Rose nods. When she fishes out her boob tissue, I can't help an amused grunt. She laughs brokenly. "Just be glad I'm not wiping my nose on you."

"True."

After a minute, she straightens and swipes her fingers beneath eyes turned bright turquoise from tears. They search my face. "You did your best to save them. More than any of us did. Please don't beat yourself up."

Somehow, Rose knows, and I smile in thanks. She takes a deep breath and shakes out her arms. "And please don't ask me to lift anything for the next week."

"You're the one who wanted exercise."

"I take it back."

"Nuh-uh," I say. "No backsies."

She pushes me, and though the sound she makes isn't anything close to her usual laugh, it pleases me all the same.

Clara

ALL ROADS into town are blocked by bodies, but the woods behind us aren't, and we're heading through them to a house on the road opposite. The owners had NRA bumper stickers and five dogs, which makes it the perfect place to look for weapons and dog food.

I brought the war hammer. Because I'm not an idiot, I also have a knife and a sharpened screwdriver, but I'm going to figure out this hammer if it kills me—and it might. The trick, which I learned during the fence incident, is to get the spike into a softer area. If that fails, bash them with the hammer end and then drive the spike through skull in that spot. Between the first pack at the fence and then the stragglers over the next day, I got pretty good at flipping it around quickly to do just that, but I need more practice. And while I don't *want* to run into a zombie today, I also kind of do want to run into a zombie.

Holly walks beside me in the forest behind the house. Mitch, Sam, and Rose are ahead, Dad and Jesse behind. When the virus hit, the woods were scraggly. Since then, they've filled out with leaves. Light rain hits the new greenery and wind rustles the trees above, which makes it a perfect day for covering up noises, though I could do without the damp chill. You get used to rain when you grow up in Oregon, but you don't necessarily like it any better.

Mainly, we're looking for guns. Dad and Sam want guns. I guess I do, too, not that I know what to do with them. But the past two nights we've heard gunshots in the distance, and it freaked me out. It could be someone shooting at zombies, not humans, but there's no way to know that for sure. Dad showed me how to hold and fire his pistol, though I only got in two shots down the road from the house. The noise and our lack of bullets made more than that unwise.

Rose stops at a nearby sound, hand in the air, then motions for us to move on a few moments later. Holly steps over a log and plants her boot directly on a stick. It splits with a crack, and she stills with her hand lifted to her mouth. Everyone freezes with her, then relaxes when nothing comes.

“Sorry,” Holly whispers. Her cheeks burn even after everyone murmurs that it isn’t a big deal.

“It’s fine,” I whisper to Holly as we continue on. “You’ll just have to live with the fact that you’re the reason for our deaths.”

Holly tries to smile, but her shoulders are tight and her eyes roam the woods. She was already quieter than usual, but she’s been practically silent since Kara and Mateo. In the house, behind the fence, we can pretend the world outside isn’t so bad, but when the world is trying to break through your one defense, there’s no room for make-believe.

Ahead of us, Rose walks with her knees bent and feet hitting the ground slowly but silently. Mitch watches her for a few seconds, shrugs, and attempts to copy whatever Rose is doing.

“When did Mom become a ninja?” Jesse whispers from behind.

“You must have inherited it from her,” I throw over my shoulder. Jesse chuffs, to which Dad clears his throat. He’s right—we need to shut up. I turn my head to the side and salute him. A second later, he tugs my ponytail.

I still can’t get over Dad not being an asshole. Maybe he can’t get over me not being one, either. And though a month ago it seemed impossible that I could feel content, I like the way the seven of us fit together. There was talk of a schedule, but so far we don’t need one. Someone draws the water without complaint, someone mows the grass, someone cooks, another person washes dishes or does laundry or straightens up. It’s boring but peaceful, aside from the fact that living dead people roam the land. It’s exactly what I need, what Dad needs: some normalcy, a family, and, at the same time, something different enough from our old life that we don’t spend every minute of the day missing what we’ve lost.

In the old world, I would’ve gone back to school, achingly aware of my mother’s and brother’s absence. Dad would’ve gone back to the office, lived alone in an empty house, and withdrawn more than usual. If we’d retreated in that way, I’m not sure we would’ve found each other again. He certainly wouldn’t have been yanking my ponytail and laughing when I made fun of him.

That first night, I had the thought that the peace between us couldn’t last, but now I see how it could. I feel it between us again, as if I’ve been

transported back in time to when he was Daddy, I was Clare-Bear, and the love between us was simple.

There's a crunch to our left. Seconds later, a man stumbles from behind a tree and trips toward Rose, Sam, and Mitch. Mitch swings her axe in a wide arc that ends with a fast jab into the side of his head. He falls while she retains her grip on the axe, then raises it in triumph.

Short-lived triumph. The woods crash to our right, and then nine more come lurching through the trees. I've killed them over the fence, on a porch, but these are right here, on the same level. My mouth dries up. My hammer weighs a million pounds. I know they don't move fast, but my mind insists they're running at me, that I'm about to die.

Holly whimpers. Dad brushes my shoulder as he passes, his knife in his gloved hand, and stops where Rose, Sam, and Mitch stand on last year's leaves with their weapons raised. Jesse is right behind him. The first zombies arrive, hissing and limping, with the others close behind. Rose moves left, and a man follows. She slams her knife under his chin and releases her hold on his shoulder when he falls. She spins toward Jesse, then watches him take a body down before she steps into the trees for another.

Mitch's axe slams into a teenage girl's head. Dad fells two in quick succession. Sam pins one against a tree trunk and jams his blade into its eye. I need to move past this fear, but I'm frozen, Holly by my side, until I hear a groan from behind.

"Shit," I whisper.

I pivot in what feels like slow motion. The woman was in her thirties, and she's still pretty, even with half her chin eaten away and her forehead clotted with blood. Her curly hair is matted and full of twigs. Her lips curl as she advances.

It's now or never. Flight or fight.

I draw in a breath and run at her, raising my hammer two-handed, and bring the spike end directly into her face. She flies back and drops to the leaves, revealing two more behind her. The first is a man with no shirt, chest hair plastered to his gray skin by rain. I slam the hammer end into his forehead, my arms jolting at impact, then flip the hammer and bring the spike down into the same spot. It penetrates the shattered bone with a sick crunch, and he falls.

The next man is huge, and I remember what Dad taught me when it comes to humans: Get them down when you can, especially if they're bigger. Go for the weak spots. Keep it simple. Fight dirty. When your life is on the line, use whatever means necessary to stay alive.

It should work for zombies, too. I kick his leg right at the kneecap, and he topples to the ground. Two steps later, I'm bringing my spike into his face. It sinks so deep it sticks. I leverage my boot on his chest to pull it out, panting with the effort, and turn around.

The woods are quiet—the birds stop their calling and the smaller critters go silent when zombies are nearby—and Holly watches me with round eyes. Her scratch awl is in her hand, unused. Dad stands two feet away with his knife at the ready, waiting to jump in if needed. Behind him, Rose winks, then puts her arm around Holly's shoulders and begins walking toward our destination. The others follow.

Dad steps alongside me. "Not bad, Clare-Bear," he murmurs, wearing his half smile.

I shake out my right arm. It hurts like a bitch, and sweat rolls down my legs, which aren't exactly steady. But I did it. I killed three of them with my hammer, and I'm more than a little proud. "Really? Just *not bad*?"

He pulls me to his side with a soft chuckle as we reach the end of the trees. The green ranch house sits across a large lawn, the last house at the end of a road that's more like a long driveway. A few bodies wander outside the homes farther down. I keep my eyes on them the entire way and let out my breath when we reach the safety of the back of the house. I wanted zombies, I got them, and now I've had enough for the day.

The landscaping is trampled, but the raised garden beds out back are fine, thanks to the wire surrounding them to keep the deer away. Six of the eight beds are empty. The other two hold leafy green plants. Rose checks them out, walking normally now, and raises a thumb. "Lettuce and spinach," she whispers upon her return. "We'll take it with us."

My mouth waters at the thought of something green and crunchy after so many meals of reconstituted vegetables. The back door is unlocked, and when nothing comes at Dad's knock, we enter. It's a nice house, nothing fancy, with a giant TV and a hallway full of photographs of the same two parents and three children—two boys and a girl. The open gun safe in the living room is cleared out.

“Guess I expected as much,” Sam says. “I’ll check down the hall. Maybe they left ammo somewhere else.”

“I’ll come,” Dad says.

The faint odor of death is stronger in the living room, though it’s old and musty. Holly and I follow the scent to the foyer, where what was once a dog has been reduced to a thin, furry husk. The front door is marked with deep gouges and covered in brown streaks of dried blood. Claw marks. It tried to escape until its paws were bloody, and then it must have died of dehydration.

My throat tightens at the thought of hours spent in a desperate battle with the door. Holly sniffs a few times before a tear runs down her cheek. I pull her arm, but she rips from my hand and continues watching the scene.

“Do you think my dad died like that?” she asks quietly. I stare at the poor dog, unsure how to answer the question. Unsure it *is* a question. “He could’ve starved to death or been trapped without water. Or maybe he was lucky and was eaten really fast. What do you think?”

“Hols,” I whisper, “don’t torture yourself.”

I thought she was doing okay, but despair lurks in her eyes. “Why? Why shouldn’t I torture myself? He was probably tortured.”

Jesse enters the foyer and takes in the dog, then his sister. “Dad would want us torture ourselves?” he asks.

“No, but—”

“He’d want us to stay alive, and to take care of ourselves and Mom.” Jesse puts an arm around Holly’s shoulders and guides her into the living room. “He’d want you to be the Angel of Death again. That’s what he’d want.”

Holly’s laugh is short, and she wipes her face on her sleeve. “Dad wouldn’t expect *me* to be the Angel of Death. I don’t think I can do that again.” She moistens her puffy lips. “I want everything to be normal and for him to be alive.”

Jesse’s reddened eyes meet mine briefly before he exhales. No matter how angry he is, or was, at his dad, his pain is evident. “I know. Me, too.”

He hugs her to his chest, where she reaches inches below his shoulders. Rose peers into the living room from the kitchen entryway. At the sight of Holly and Jesse, she lowers her brows in concern. When I nod that they’re okay, she retreats.

Holly pulls from Jesse with a quivery smile. “I’m glad I have you, even if you are an idiot.”

“Same,” he says.

Jeremy and I weren’t as close as Holly and Jesse, likely because he was four years younger. But we could always count on the other for moral support and a lively round of parental bitching, for a movie or a music-listening party. I’d imagined we’d get closer as he matured, since we already had. But he’ll never be a grown man, or have a family, or get to know our new father, and that makes my throat tighter than it already was.

Holly comes to take my arm, her lips pursed in sympathy. “I’m glad I have you, too. You know I like you better than that jerk.”

She points to Jesse, and my impending tears recede with my laugh. “Ditto,” Jesse says. “Especially after the woods just now. Guess I can call you War Hammer after all.”

The gentle curve of his lips reminds me of the night we kissed, so much so that my face overheats and my stomach somersaults. I nod and look away. He can’t ever know how I feel because I couldn’t stand for him to let me down easy. And he would—it’d be kind and jokey and full of understanding, and it would completely demolish my heart.

“Ditto here, too,” I say. “Are we staging a love-in or doing something productive?”

“Love-in,” Holly says, but she pulls me toward the hall.

THOUGH THERE ARE NO WEAPONS, they left behind food, clothing, and ammo—the latter of which doesn’t match our guns, but we take it anyway. Mitch finds a few shirts that fit her better than Ethan’s t-shirts, which makes her happy. Dad and Sam are pleased with their new holsters. And the fifty-pound bag of dog food makes everyone happy, though Willa may not be as pleased when human food becomes a memory. Dad loads the majority of the dog food into his pack, with the remainder split between us.

The two boys shared a room. We poke around and survey the shelves. Holly holds up a case of Hot Wheels cars. “Remember when you liked these, Jess?”

“I like them now.” He unsnaps the case and removes a sports car, which he proceeds to drive along the top of a bookshelf while making *vroom vroom* noises.

“So mature.”

“Your mom,” he says, and Holly laughs. Jesse ramps the car off the organizer, flips it in the air, and drives it back into the box with a squeal of tires. He snaps it shut. “Look at all the Nerf guns. We can practice killing foam zombies.”

“I don’t think that will prepare us for real-world experiences,” I say.

“Did I say it would? Nerf guns are just cool.”

I roll my eyes. The girl’s room holds nothing we need, but the bathroom has medicines and prescription bottles. We dump them into our packs and set out for the kitchen. Every cabinet door is open, and what’s left of the food sits on the counter.

Rose and Mitch pack the various cans and pull food from outer packaging to save on space. Dad opens the refrigerator, releasing the stench of rotten vegetables, then slams it shut again. I unsling my pack and layer cans over the dog food, then line the top with a bag of popcorn.

Rose squeezes my shoulder on her way past and holds up a box of Velveeta. “This is as close to cheese as we’re getting. I don’t care if it’s made of plastic and whey solids, we’re eating it.” She sets it in her pack on the table. “You girls okay?”

“Yeah,” Holly says.

Rose kisses her head and then studies me. “Fine,” I say. “Really.”

“Did I ever tell you you’re my other favorite daughter?”

“You have.” Though I smile, my throat aches with the sharp grief I can usually keep at bay. I never thought my mom wouldn’t be here to watch me grow, to love me, to protect me. Not until I was a real adult, possibly with adult kids of my own. Not until I was ready—as ready as you can be to lose your mother, anyway.

The others resume packing food. Rose moves to hug me one-armed, pressing her lips to my hair. “A moment?” she asks softly.

I nod, blinking back tears. She told me to expect these moments where the pain barges in like a surprise visitor rather than loitering like an unwelcome roommate. Where I’d feel lost and lonely and even angry. I’m all of those things right now, but I’m also grateful for the security of Rose’s

embrace, the compassion in her eyes, and I feel lucky to have someone who understands.

The ache isn't gone, but its grip has lessened. I've never been one to wallow in emotions, and I take a deep breath to vanquish it entirely. Though I wouldn't call it a success, I'm able to speak. "What are you wearing?" I ask Rose.

After a brief inspection to confirm I'm not verging on a breakdown, Rose spins to show off the tan camouflage pack on her shoulders. It's more like a vest with a small pack in back and two storage pouches on both front straps. One hip holds a water bottle pocket and the other a canvas holster. "I guess it's for hunting. Cool, right?"

"Very." I take in her army jacket and tight bun. I always wanted to be like Rose when I grew up—cool, but not *trying* to be cool in the embarrassing way of some parents. "You look kind of badass."

"As badass as a mom can look," Holly adds.

Rose *tsks*. "You might be a mom at some point, dear child, and one day when you're feeling pleased with your bad self, I want you to remember this moment and feel very, very guilty."

"What was with the ninja walk, anyway?" Jesse asks.

"A character did it in a book I read as a kid, and I thought I'd give it a try." Rose lifts a foot. "You set your foot down gently and roll heel to toe. Did it make me more badass?"

Jesse smirks. "You're as badass as they come, Mom."

"I can't believe my own flesh and blood would forsake me like this." Rose hugs me to her side. "It's official—Clara is now my favorite kid."

I stick my tongue out at Jesse and Holly, who laugh. Dad watches from where he leans against the counter, something like relief behind his smile. A peace that wasn't there before. I've known all along that Rose will watch over me. Maybe he didn't.

BACK HOME IN THE RV, Sam assesses our haul and lifts a box of found ammo. "Wish I hadn't gotten rid of my other guns. This nine-millimeter's about as useful as rocks."

Dad grunts in agreement. “We should go looking again soon. There have to be guns out there.”

“You both should stay right here,” Rose says from the kitchen, where she washes the lettuce and spinach. “We’re lucky we got back with no problems.” Sam fails to hide his smile, and Rose huffs. “Sorry I want people to live. Even the ancient ones.”

“I’m not useless just yet, Rosie. But I know you’ll take me elk hunting when it’s time.”

“You and your elk hunting.” Rose turns to the rest of us. “Pop says if he ever gets dementia, I’m supposed to tell him we’re going elk hunting, lead him into the woods, and shoot him in the back of the head.”

“No wonder you’re nuts,” Dad says to her. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Sam roars with laughter, and everyone joins in. Everyone except Holly, who sits on the far end of the couch with Willa. I plop down beside her while the conversation in the kitchen continues. “What happened out there? In the woods.”

Holly shrugs, running her fingers along Willa’s head. “I got scared.”

“So did I. Did you not see me standing there like a moron?”

“But you didn’t let it stop you. Not for long. I would’ve been eaten.”

“You would’ve moved your ass if you needed to.”

Holly shakes her head, mouth twisted. “I was so scared, Clars,” she whispers. “Frozen scared, like Kara was.”

I don’t like the fatalistic tone in her voice, as though she’s not going to try. Holly tries at *everything*. She’s not punking out on me when it matters most. “Come on, you never fail. Pretend it’s an organic chemistry exam.”

“More like physics, at which I suck ass. All I could think was that I didn’t want to do this. I want everything to be the way it was.”

“We all do,” I say quietly.

“I know.” Holly lowers her head in apology, and I squeeze her arm—she has as much right to be sad as anyone. “It’s just...I keep thinking about that dog.” Her voice cracks and her hand tightens around Willa before it strokes a velvety ear. What she means is she keeps thinking about her dad, too. “I wish we knew what’s happening. At first I thought, okay, thirty days isn’t so bad. But then it didn’t end. Are we supposed to do this forever?”

I wish I had an answer. One that would make her happy. “Want some advice?” I ask. Holly nods, head bowed. “Take whatever’s happening as what it’s going to be for now. If it changes, you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“I hate that advice.”

“I didn’t say it was *good* advice. Just advice.”

She laughs and wipes her nose with the tissue balled in her hand. Disappointed groans come from the kitchen, where Rose and Mitch chew something, their faces screwed up.

“They’re bitter,” Rose says to us. “The lettuce and spinach bolted.”

“How do you know?” Dad asks.

“Every patch of lettuce I’ve ever planted was ruined by an unseasonable heat wave. It gets long and stinky practically overnight, and then it goes bitter. This was in the ground too long, I guess.”

My dream of a salad is crushed, and so is Holly’s, judging by her protracted sigh. She turns to me with a wry smile. “Guess it’s going to be complete and total suck.”

I pat her shoulder. “That’s the spirit.”

Tom

WE'VE STOPPED our nightly watches, mainly because I sleep on the couch. It makes no sense to keep someone awake staring into the dark when I'll just as easily hear any noises worth hearing. I've always been a light sleeper, but now it feels as though I only briefly dip into sleep, like I'm sticking my toes into a pool to test its temperature, and my body refuses to dive in.

The dreams don't help. During the day, I can distract myself from thoughts of Sheila and Jeremy. It's both a blessing and a curse because my brain makes up for it—gets even, more like—when I'm vulnerable, and the nightmares are brutal. There are the ones where Sheila and Jeremy are monsters, and, possibly worse, the ones where they aren't. Where I wake on the brink of a sob and the loss seems unbearable.

I lie on the couch and listen to the low sounds of the zombies on the road. More have come in the days after the pack that followed Kara. Many more. One pack passed for thirty minutes yesterday, though the last of them lingered out front into the evening. They have no interest in the fence so far, and the plan is to take care of them later if they don't move along.

When the sky lightens, Rose enters the kitchen as she does every morning. I turn to watch her at the sink. Her hair is in a ponytail atop her head, and her curls come down like a fountain. I'm always glad when she appears. It's another night over. The sun coming up. Rose usually has a smile, something silly or weird or ridiculously random to say, and I hardly believe I once found it annoying when now I look forward to it.

In the kitchen, Rose sneezes twice. It happens every morning. Two sneezes before she takes her allergy medication, after which she mutters something along the lines of *Fucking Oregon* or *Goddamn grass*. This morning it's *Stupid Willamette Valley*.

I smile to myself as she takes her pill and wets her toothbrush, then I throw back the covers and sit up, running a hand through my hair. I was late for a haircut before the virus, and it's getting longer than I've had it in years.

Rose spins from the sink with her toothbrush in her mouth. “Did my stupid sneezing wake you? I’m sorry. The hall bathroom is out of water, and I—”

“You didn’t wake me.” I stand to fold my blankets while she continues brushing. It’s funny how many of the things that were once private are now done in front of others. Thankfully, the bathroom doors close. “Where’s Willa?”

“Still sleeping on Mitch. I didn’t know dogs could be that lazy.”

I stow my bedclothes in the storage ottoman and enter the kitchen. Rose has finished brushing, and now she opens cabinets and peers at bags of freeze-dried food. She squints at one bag with particularly small type. “I swear, last year I could read everything. Now I feel like my dad, cursing at all directions not printed in twelve-point font.”

“Welcome to old age,” I say.

Her hair is insane now that I see it up close—a spill of auburn with lighter strands that are likely graying but appear more blond. She sees me looking and her hand goes to her ponytail. “Let’s pretend I took this out before I came to the kitchen.”

“I like it. It’s very 1983.”

Rose laughs, her cheeks pinker than they were. “It’s the pineapple.”

“The what?”

“The pineapple. You pile all your hair atop your head before you go to sleep so that you’re not a frizzball in the morning. For me, it has a sixty-three percent success rate.”

She pulls out the ponytail tie and lets her hair fall, then works her fingers in to flatten it some. It’s still insane, but it suits Rose—slightly crazy, spilling everywhere all at once, yet warm and soft. At least I think it’s soft. I haven’t actually felt it. I have a lunatic urge to ask if I can and bite my tongue.

“The struggle is real,” she says, and throws up her hands as if admitting defeat. “Silk pillowcases, countless hair products, wide-tooth combs, plopping, and the pineapple, and still I lose the battle.”

I wonder what plopping is, but I’m half-afraid to ask. “Why not cut it?”

“If I cut it, I’d look like a deranged poodle. I did that once, and never again. I’ll be one of those old ladies with long gray braids.”

“Ah, one of those hippie old ladies.”

“You know it.”

I squeeze toothpaste onto my toothbrush, then wet it under the water container spigot. While I brush, Rose pokes around in the cabinets some more. She throws a couple of things into a cloth bag and starts out of the kitchen.

I spit out my toothpaste. “Want some help with breakfast?”

“Sure. I’m only making freeze-dried food and coffee.”

Her *only* freeze-dried food is twenty times better than what anyone else makes. I rinse, dry my face, and take the bag from her as we enter the yard. The few clouds in the sky are lit in shades of orange and yellow. The start of a perfect spring day.

Rose freezes and points straight ahead. My adrenaline spikes until I see a gray-brown rabbit hopping through the grass. “So cute,” Rose whispers. “I should probably be thinking of him as dinner, though. You think he burrowed under the fence or there’s a hole somewhere?”

“Let’s check just in case.”

Her hand goes to her knife in a sheath from *Always Ready*. She wears it all day, as I do my own. We start at the back fence, making a circuit, but there are no holes, no loose boards, no gaps. Only the quiet shuffle of feet from the road.

We head toward the camper. “I know we missed Easter and Passover,” Rose says when we’re far enough from the bodies, “but what’s today?”

“You really don’t know?”

“I really, truly don’t. Of course you do.” She side-eyes me, smiling. “You probably have an internal clock and calendar.”

I do, but I’m not telling her that. She’ll tease me for days. “May Fifteenth.”

“Dang it. We missed May Day.”

“You celebrate May Day?”

Rose raises a fist. “I love my union brothers and sisters.”

“Goes with the braids.”

She elbows me. “It’s also the pagan festival of Beltane. We could’ve had fun with that. I can picture you dancing around a bonfire clad in only a kilt.”

“Who needs a kilt?” I ask, and Rose covers her mouth before her laugh makes a sound. She sneaks a glance to find me smiling and matches it with

her own.

It's as though the spring day has made its way inside me, too. I feel light, even with the zombies on the road and a night full of bad dreams. I wouldn't be caught dead dancing around a bonfire—or dancing in general—but I can almost see how one might. Rose would fit right in at a pagan festival with her wild red hair. When I think of Rose, I think of her hair; the two are inextricably linked in my mind.

Rose puts on water to boil while I make coffee, then she sticks her head into the small pantry. "I forgot about the Velveeta! This is gonna be good." She throws a frying pan on the stove and removes a giant can of spinach flakes from her bag. "We need fresh food, not that powdered eggs, Velveeta, and dried spinach are fresh. But we'll have the illusion of fresh food, since that real spinach betrayed us."

She squints at the directions on the can, then mutters and moves to the closest window. I fish my reading glasses from my inner coat pocket and dangle them in front of her. "What're those for?" Rose asks.

"For seeing."

Rose takes the glasses and holds them up to her face. "Hey, it's magic. Who knew?"

"Everyone."

She sighs, handing them back to me once she's done. "Thanks. I don't know why I refuse to give in to this."

"Because getting old sucks."

"It's terrible. Let's not do it anymore. Deal?"

"Deal."

I watch the coffee sputter into the pot while Rose putters around, slicing the Velveeta and mixing the egg powder with water. She sautés the rehydrated spinach, then sets it aside. "Maybe we should have a garden if we can get some seeds. I haven't had one in years. I gave up after I spent more time online trying to figure out why everything was dying than I spent in the actual garden."

"My mother gardened," I say. "She was good at it. She grew her own chili peppers for harissa in little greenhouses."

"I love harissa. I've only had it a few times, but it was delicious."

"It'd be good with those eggs." I remember my mother toasting the spices and grinding the dried chilies for the smoky, spicy chili paste, and

my mouth waters for the tastes of my childhood. Not for the first time, I wish I'd learned to make them. "My mother's harissa was the best. And her *marak kubbeh*. That's like a stew soup."

"What's in *marak kubbeh*?" Rose asks while she whisks the eggs.

"*Kubbeh* are meat-filled dumplings. She'd fry up the meat with spices, stuff it in little pouches of dough, then cook it in broth. *Marak* means soup in Hebrew."

I think I must be boring her, but she seems interested with the way her head is cocked. Since she does most of the cooking around here, she likely is. "What kind of broth?" she asks.

"She made different ones, but usually with tomatoes and zucchini or eggplant."

Rose peers sadly into her bowl. "And we have powdered eggs." She pretends to pout and stamps her foot. "I want *kubbeh*. Are they both Moroccan dishes?"

"Harissa is. My mother said her *kubbeh* was Iraqi by way of Israel. My grandfather was Moroccan and my grandmother Iraqi."

"Both your parents were from Israel?"

"My mother was. My grandparents were smuggled into Israel and lived in the refugee camps until they got housing. They moved to America when she was young. She met my father as a teenager, and the rest is history."

I loved my mother fiercely, maybe because it was the opposite of how my father loved her. I often wished she'd never met him, had lived a happier life. She shushed me when I once said as much, claiming she'd never regret having me, but I'm sure she regretted staying as long as she did.

Rose has paused in her cooking to listen. When she smiles uncertainly, I realize I've stopped speaking and am likely frowning. I quickly add, "My mother was Sephardi, specifically Mizrahi, meaning her family came from North Africa and the Middle East. My father was half Ashkenazi Jew, meaning half his ancestors came from Europe. Confused yet?"

There's more to it, but I doubt she wants a course in Judaism. Rose wags a finger. "Hey, I know my Ashkenazi from my Sephardi. You forget I grew up in New York. I've been to my share of Bar Mitzvahs and Seders. I've even found the hidden matzah." I smile, and she continues, "But where the heck did Jensen come from?"

“A Dane snuck in somewhere along the line.”

Rose laughs, picks up her bowl, and whisks again. “My ancestors came over by boat during the Potato Famine. Not nearly as exciting as being smuggled to Israel.”

“Maybe not for you. I’ll bet they were excited not to starve to death.”

“I guess.” She winks and dumps the eggs into the pan, then turns to her other ingredients.

Sheila was Ashkenazi, and I didn’t care which traditions we followed, only that we celebrated the holidays. Those were the few times, in later years, when there were no fights with Clara, when we’d call an unspoken truce. Fighting during the holidays was too reminiscent of my own childhood. Looking back, it might be the one thing I did right as a parent to teenagers. This miniscule victory doesn’t fill me with pride, but it’s something.

Mitch enters and makes a beeline for the coffee pot, interrupting my thoughts and nodding while she passes. “Morning. Coffee.”

“Morning, sunshine,” Rose says. “I’m making a big-ass omelet thing.”

Mitch grunts while she pours coffee. I fill two mugs with the brew, then add that weird brown sugar and a spoonful of looted powdered milk into the one I hand Rose. “Here you go, Red.”

“Thank you.” She sips her coffee, then peers at me over the rim of her mug. “Red?”

It’s too late to take back the nickname that’s been bouncing around my mind for days now. “It fits, no?” I ask in a light tone, hoping she won’t take offense.

I’m relieved when Rose beams and kicks Mitch’s foot. “Hear that? Red is a *real* nickname, unlike that Ro bullcrap. Get on the ball, woman.”

Mitch grunts dismissively—she barely speaks before her first cup of coffee. The kids enter with Willa, then chat while they drink coffee. Jesse’s fingers move on the counter as if searching for a guitar, which brings to mind Rose’s offer that I play with him. Resuming an instrument in an environment where quiet is paramount isn’t the smartest move, but there has to be a time when you tell the world—or the zombies—to fuck off. A moment when you take your chances and do the thing because it’s good, or right, or makes someone happy. Maybe even if that someone is you.

I set my mug on the counter, startled by this notion. There's no future to speak of, no world as far as we know, and I'm half-interested to see where it goes. It's a blow to my old worldview, but maybe a new world needs a new worldview. And there's the minor detail that my old worldview sucked.

Rose turns off the stove and sniffs the pan. She always smells her food before she eats, and I'm pretty sure she thinks no one notices. "Breakfast," she says, and cuts the thick circle of eggs like a pie, placing a slice onto the dishes Holly lays out. The kids bring theirs to the table. Rose pushes the largest slice toward me and hands Mitch a plate. She leans against the counter to eat her own. "This is better than I thought."

"No peanut butter today?" I ask. We found MRE packets of peanut butter at Always Ready, and she usually smears one on a pilot cracker for breakfast with some of her rapidly depleting honey. "I thought eggs gross you out."

"Only sometimes. And powdered eggs are fake eggs, which are kind of gross but not slimy."

"I'm beginning to think you have a lot of weird food rules."

"Don't get me started on that," Mitch says to me now that caffeine has hit her bloodstream. "She's the worst with food."

"What?" Rose's mouth drops. "I don't see you complaining when your meals arrive magically on the table."

"It's why you make the best food, but you're still the worst."

Rose shrugs and lifts another forkful. "I can live with that."

I take a bite. It is better than I expected, with a smoky taste and just enough heat to make it interesting. When I say as much, Rose answers, "Smoked paprika and chili powder. I threw them in at the last minute. You inspired me with your talk of deliciously spiced *kubbeh*."

My next forkful of egg reveals an auburn hair, which I extract from the remainder of my breakfast. There's no escaping her hair. It winds around things and sticks to any and every surface. I found a strand inside my sock the other day. "Another prize?"

"Oh God, really? I put my hair up for just that reason." Rose holds out her plate. "Sorry. Take mine. I'll finish yours."

I cover my plate protectively. "Nope. Now that I know what goes into the making of it, it does seem like a prize. It's been pineappled nightly and slept on silk pillows. It's the veal of hair."

Rose tosses her head back with her laugh. “And no baby cows were murdered in the making of it. Though a few silkworms might’ve met their end.”

“Who’s murdering baby cows?” Holly asks from the table.

“Nobody, unfortunately,” Mitch says. “I would kill for some fresh meat.”

Holly’s retort is interrupted by the same loud hum we heard in town, along with the clomp of feet on asphalt. She sits up straight, face drained of color. I jump along with everyone else when it’s followed by the long, insistent peal of a truck’s horn. Maybe an air horn. It’s far off, coming from the west, but lack of ambient noise makes it feel as though the world is ending all over again.

“Shit! Pop.” Rose drops her plate on the counter and sticks her head out the door. “He’s coming.”

A few moments later, Sam enters the RV. “Can’t see much from the house, so I figured I’d best come up here in case we need to leave.”

Rose nods, fist clenched to her chest. I walk outside and stop beneath the trees. From this vantage point, I’ll see the zombies once they pass the fence and before they move out of sight around the curve. The others join me as a pack of dead people appear, covering both lanes. They round the curve and keep coming, a steady stream of zombies following the sound and each other. They limp and stagger and groan their way west. The horn sounds again, this time for a good fifteen seconds. It splits the air and destroys any peace the spring day has brought. If this number of zombies comes to the fence, it’s going down. There’d be no driving through them, no escape but to run, yet nowhere to run to.

I pull Clara to my side, then see Rose and Mitch have done the same with Holly and Jesse. Sam watches the road, his eyes hard in a network of lines and his hand on his holster. Someone else is alive, and that someone is leading zombies out of town. The horn comes again, more distant now, though it lasts for thirty seconds, broadcasting its location to every zombie in the area.

“Like the pied-fucking-piper,” Sam says in a low voice. Rose nods, flinching when something rattles the fence by the road.

It takes an hour for the pack to pass the house. By the time it does, I’m no longer hungry.

Rose

THE ROAD HAS BEEN quiet since yesterday, especially after a series of explosions rumbled somewhere off to the west. At first, I thought it was thunder. We don't get many thunderstorms in Oregon, and I always relish them. As a kid, I'd sit at our apartment window with Pop and Mom, watching lightning strobe on Brooklyn streets while thunder rattled the glass in the window frames. Thunderstorms were one of my favorite things, both because of the raw power of the spectacle and because my parents made me feel safe from that intensity.

But this was something else, something purposeful. On the one hand, I welcome living people. On the other hand, I don't know who they are. Absurdly, my stress levels have been low for the past week, aside from zombie skirmishes. Though we're barricaded in a house and surrounded by dead people, life behind the fence is calm, except for the worry about something coming through.

We've decided to give it a day or two and then drive into town. If nothing else, maybe we'll find news of the outside world or the estimated date of zombie death. I'm no expert, but the thousands of zombies that passed yesterday looked pretty fucking mobile.

Thirty days, my ass.

I lift the well bucket and dump it. The kids sit at the patio table playing cards fifty feet away. I can't hear what they say, but I see how Holly's smile drops quickly when she thinks no one's watching. Although she insists she's fine, every zombie she kills seems to kill some of the life in her. She's always required time to process big changes, and this is a change of epic proportions. I've been standing back to give her space, but I'm worried. In this world, you can't fall down, then get back on your feet and brush yourself off with no harm done. Not with a zombie bite, at least.

Mitch, sitting on an overturned bucket, follows my line of vision. "She'll be okay. It's a lot to take in."

"I wish she would talk to me. It's not healthy to keep it all inside and pretend everything's fine."

“Gee, I wonder who she gets that from.” Mitch stares at me, then lifts her shoulders and releases them with an overdone sigh. “I guess it’ll have to remain a mystery.”

“Bite me,” I say, and she laughs.

I watch the kids a moment longer, long enough to catch the way Clara’s eyes drift to Jesse again and again. She had a crush on him in high school, and for a time I suspected Jesse liked her in return, but it never came to anything. I always thought they’d be good together. I had no doubt that beneath Clara’s wild teenage side beat a loyal, loving heart; it’s only now on display for all to see.

“Our girl is thirsty,” Mitch whispers. “What does Jess think of that?”

I send the bucket down the well. “It’s none of my business. Though I’m *dying* to make it my business.”

“Have you plumbed Holly for information?”

“No. I’m not sure how she’d feel about it. She’d be partly happy, I think, but imagine being stuck with your best friend and brother all lovey-dovey?”

“Kind of like being stuck with you and Ethan on that trip we took to Mount Hood.”

“Seriously?” I ask. “Are you ever going to forget about that? I’ve been apologizing for over twenty years.”

“Nope. Craig tripping balls, along with you and Ethan starring in your own production of *Romeo and Juliet*, was officially the worst vacation ever.”

I dip my hand in a bucket and flick water at Mitch, who ducks. When we were nineteen, we went to Timberline Lodge for a few days. Craig took far too many mushrooms, and Ethan and I were obnoxiously overinfatuated with each other. I apologized and was forgiven, though Mitch still likes to hold it over my head.

My smile falls the way it does whenever I think of Ethan at length. He passes through my mind a dozen times a day, and it always leaves me with a sick feeling of how he must have died: alone, terrified, and in pain. My anger has faded, and now I’m just sad.

Tom materializes, as he usually does when there’s work to do. He lifts a full bucket and walks it into the house. When the next bucket is full, Mitch lugs it up to the RV, where we have a siphon hose to fill the tank.

Tom reappears and watches as I dump out the next bucket. “Let me do that.”

I hand him the bucket and step back, then studiously avoid watching him. He fills and dumps the bucket before sending it down again. “You want to hear something funny, Red?”

A tiny buzz goes through me at the nickname. “Sure.”

“I didn’t want to come to your party. I was dreading it.”

There’s a teasing note in his voice, which I like almost as much as the nickname. That silly hormonal thing is not passing as quickly as I’d hoped. “So was I. But how is that funny?”

“Without fail, you’d find me in my corner and rope me into a conversation.”

I gasp in fake outrage. “That was *my* corner.”

“Which corner is yours?”

“All the corners are mine.” I’d usually been glad to see Tom because it meant I wouldn’t have to stand alone. He’d seemed so ill at ease that the desire to loosen him up outweighed my inhibition, which led me to talk. And talk. And talk. “I was being polite, and I would hardly call your side a conversation. There were three other corners, you know. I gave you plenty of opportunities to escape, but you always came back.”

“I did, didn’t I? Why’d I do that?”

Tom’s smile doesn’t help with the hormones, and I curse Mitch for reminding me he’s attractive. I probably would’ve gotten there on my own, but I’m blaming her. “Better the devil you know,” I say. “You could’ve been ambushed by a basket carrier.”

A deep laugh breaks from Tom’s chest. “To answer your question, it’s funny because Clara and I ended up here anyway.”

“Is this a nice way of telling me to shut up more?”

He lifts the bucket, dumps it, and then faces me, his gaze both intense and earnest. I wear sunglasses, but it makes me feel exposed all the same. “It’s my way of saying I’m glad we did. Thank you for being here for Clara and for welcoming us the way you have.”

Heat suffuses my cheeks, the blasted blush that gives me away every time. “Of course.”

Tom dips the bucket. After a minute that lasts a year, I give up racking my brain for something to say. It’s easy to blather on when you don’t care

what the person thinks of you. And the fact that I care this much is beginning to worry me.

Just hormones, I tell myself. My sex life was non-existent in the months before zombies, mostly because I couldn't bring myself to let Ethan touch me when I was so damn angry. Tom, now, *he* could touch me. With those arms, he could lift me against a wall and—

“Hello?” a man's voice calls from the street. Tom and I stare at each other in shock before we take off for where the kids stand motionless on the patio. Inside the house, Willa barks and throws herself against the back door until Holly lets her out and lifts her in her arms.

“Hello?” the stranger calls again. There's a knock on the wood fence. “Anyone here?”

Pop and Mitch stride down the grass from the RV. “Tom and I will get on the truck,” Pop says. “You stay behind us.”

Though I feel I should argue on the grounds of gender equality, the fact is that two big men will be received differently than a woman. We follow them around the house and down the grass. Tom jumps into the bed of the truck and then gives Pop a hand up.

“Who's there?” Tom asks before he ventures closer to the fence. The deep, firm tone of his voice is not one I would mess with sight unseen.

“We're from the Safe Zone at the fairgrounds. Is this the Winter residence?”

Tom peers over the fence. Pop does the same. “We went by the fairgrounds and couldn't get close,” Pop says, not answering the man's question.

“We cleared out the streets and built an outer boundary.” The voice says this as though we know there's an *inner* boundary. Or live people. “Sir, we're taking all survivors to the Safe Zone while we can.”

I climb into the truck and step onto the edge of the bed. A large van sits on the road outside the gate, with a Eugene Police SUV idling behind it. Five people stand on the asphalt. Three are in the far lane, weapons pointed toward the surrounding trees. Two men watch the fence. One is a decade older than me at most, with a short ponytail of wavy brown hair and a lined face that's spent many years tanning in the sun, giving him a rugged cowboy appearance. The other is more of a kid dressed in fatigues, with buzzed blond hair and two big dimples.

The kid starts to speak, but the older man cuts him off, “Are you Rose? Rose Winter?”

I nod hesitantly. A smile splits his face—the smile of someone excited to share glad tidings. “He said you had red hair. Ethan sent us. He’s at the fairgrounds. Are your kids here?”

Thank God Ethan’s alive is my first, weak-kneed thought. *Oh shit, Ethan’s alive* is my second. The third is no clear thought, only a confusing mixture of the first two. My head buzzes so loudly that I barely hear Holly’s squeal of joy from the ground.

“Everyone’s fine,” Pop says. “I’m Rose’s dad. Why didn’t he come with you?”

“You must be Sam,” the man says. “I’m Barry Wright. We’re only letting military and law enforcement out at this time, since we weren’t sure how the streets would be. You might’ve seen we got rid of a good bit of the Lexers yesterday, passed right by here. Ethan’s going to be a very happy man.”

Barry twists his head, searching for a threat. “We’d rather not be out here any longer than necessary. We’d appreciate it if you’d let us inside while you pack your things, then we’ll get on the road.”

I stare at him, the wood pickets digging into my hands. Pop touches my arm, says my name, but I don’t answer. Ethan, whom I’ve written off as dead, is alive. *Ethan is alive.*

Someone tugs at my shirt from behind. Holly is in the truck bed with a glowing face. “Dad’s okay!” She laughs. “Mom, let them in!”

I snap from my daze. Force a smile so wide my lips hurt. “I guess I just...”

Holly laughs again. I hug her close, gladdened by her happiness, though I’m more than a little disturbed about my lack of it.

Tom

I DON'T HAVE much to pack. It's all in a bag within two minutes, and then I wait in the living room with Barry and the blond kid, Dalton, while the others run around. Rose waves me into the kitchen. Willa, who views the proceedings anxiously, follows at my heels. They said she can come—Ethan already warned them about the dog—as long as she has her own food.

When I reach the sink, Rose says quietly, “You can stay here, if you want. We have to go. I have to go with the kids, but...”

“They're taking our food.” The food is being *requisitioned*, according to Barry, who seemed apologetic. Big fucking whoop. Barry's apologies won't feed us if we have to leave the fairgrounds.

Rose's eyes cut toward the living room. “How can they take it if you stay?” She leans in closer. As grave as this conversation is, I can't help noticing she smells good. Not like roses, as would be fitting, but like the lavender Sheila planted in the yard. “You'd have the RV,” she whispers.

Half the food is in the large storage compartments under the living space—what Sam calls the basement—and everyone has kept their mouths shut about it. It's our insurance, our getaway plan. I shake my head. “Clara and I won't stay without all of you.”

Rose is in a state, as my mom used to say—lips deathly pale, hands trembling, eyes roaming like a prisoner in search of escape. The best way to counter that is to act calm even if I don't feel it inside.

“It's a bad idea,” she murmurs. “I don't like it. He said there are over five hundred people. All crammed into one space in the center of town.”

I don't like it any more than she does. But that pack of zombies the other day made it clear this might be the wrong choice as well. The military and secure fencing—an *outer boundary*—is likely better than a jerry-rigged wood fence. There's no way to know, and we don't seem to have much of a choice in the matter, anyway. Ethan is waiting for them.

“Why didn't they just bring Ethan...” Rose's voice fades on the last bit.

“I'm sure Ethan has a good reason. It must be safe there.” *He'd better have a damn good reason*, I don't say.

Rose turns her attention to the hall and rakes a hand through her hair. “Okay. Thanks for your help, Tom.”

She says it like we’ve just concluded a business call, then treads in the direction of her bedroom. Willa follows with a whine. Good God, the woman is in *a state*. It has to be Ethan. If the thought of seeing him has her this worked up, I am not looking forward to our arrival at the fairgrounds. I’m not looking forward to our arrival anyway, for a multitude of reasons I have yet to fully parse. All I know is that the prospect has left me with an empty feeling in my stomach. This isn’t my house and I haven’t lost anyone else, but it almost feels as though I have. Or will.

I return to the living room as the other three soldiers enter. “Where can we find the food?” one asks. She’s about Clara’s age, with brown hair that just grazes her shoulders, and she seems friendly when she sticks out her hand. “Hi. I’m Nora.”

“Tom.” I shake her hand and don’t say pleased to meet you when I plainly am not. “Food’s in the kitchen. Some stuff is in the fridge. For storage. It’s not cold.”

They head in that direction. The kid, Dalton, smiles at me. He has to be older than Clara by a few years, but he gives off a naïve vibe. This is not a guy I would arm and send into a pack of zombies. His superiors must know something about him I don’t.

“Sorry,” Dalton says, dimples deepening in apology. “We have to take the food.”

I grunt. My size and demeanor are usually helpful in these types of situations, even if at times I feel like the gangly kid I once was. “Why the fairgrounds?” I ask.

Barry perches on the arm of the couch. He’s an inch or two taller than me and broader to boot, and his choice of seat makes him resemble a trained bear on a kid’s tricycle. “It was the only fenced place big enough in the middle of town. When they started rounding up survivors, it was easiest to bring them somewhere close by. Or have them get there themselves. We’ve been surrounded on and off until yesterday. The alternate location, Autzen Stadium, has only the one access road, and it’s been blocked since the first night.”

Autzen has thick walls and few entrances. It’s a better spot, maybe, but if the zombies come calling, nowhere is a good spot. “What’d you call the

zombies before?”

“Lexers. Apparently, a bunch of the Guard down in California started calling them that. For the LX in Bornavirus LX.”

“What’s happening in the rest of the country?” Sam asks from the dining area. A big army-type pack rests by his feet. I’ve been waiting to ask for more until we’re in their vehicles, since our visitors have been close-mouthed on the subject and time is of the essence.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Barry says. “There’s a rumor they first found it in Vietnam a month before the big outbreak. They swept it under the rug, as anyone would.” He shrugs. “Then it popped up again in Vietnam, but also all over Europe and Asia. It hit California and the Midwest right after. They closed down a section of Chicago real fast, said there was a bomb threat and ongoing police investigation, but it was Bornavirus.”

Sam and I nod. I vaguely recall a news story about that, but it quickly faded from consciousness when it didn’t develop into more.

“Down in California, there was a rash of bite marks in the hospitals,” Barry continues. “A dozen people all over the state went to different ERs and urgent cares to get checked out. No one put two and two together because no one knew there was anything to put together. Most were sent home. And the rest, as they say, is history.”

“Damn,” Sam says.

Barry nods soberly. “The word on the rest of the country—world—is that there’s no word. Our last official contact with anyone off the West Coast was in April. They said the virus had spread everywhere, communications were failing, but that we were sixty to ninety days from all Lexers expiring and to expect what was left of the government around then. They said hang on, so we’re hanging on.”

It’s what I suspected, what I knew, but the confirmation still takes my breath away. The virus is everywhere. Every country. How many pockets of people are alive like us, waiting for this to end? Hoping to survive until it does. I don’t buy that new story of sixty to ninety days. It sounds like more of the same: a lie to keep the masses calm.

“Now they say sixty to ninety days?” Mitch asks from behind me.

She stands in the dining room with her arms folded over her chest, barely moving to let the three soldiers pass, and she gives their armfuls of

food the evil eye. I didn't like her at first, but I do now. Mitch is straight with you. It was what she thought of me at first that I disliked, and I've come to agree with her assessment of that guy.

"You have to account for the people who were infected later," Barry counters. "We were told they lowballed it."

"Who's *we* and *they*, anyway? Why would they tell *you* the truth?"

"*We* is the National Guard and police who were at the scene from day one. I used to be Army, long time ago. We lost a lot of people the first weekend, and I unofficially signed up again."

Mitch waves an arm at the windows. "Do you see any of them dropping like flies? I don't. Not one."

Sam coughs into his fist, smiling. Barry looks to me for backup, and I lift my shoulders. "Sixty to ninety is the revised timeline," he says, and is stared down by Mitch until he looks away.

"Hey, they can't live forever," Dalton says. "I'd bet a year or two at the most."

"And this is good news how?" Mitch asks.

Dalton's smile falters. "Because it's not forever?"

Mitch closes her eyes as though marveling at his logic, then laughs. "All right, kid, I'll give you that."

I catch a brief smile on Barry before he resumes the seriousness of before. "There are more of you here than we thought. Any chance of using that truck down by the gate so we can bring the food and your gear? If it sweetens the deal any, we'll gas her up."

Though it's the neighbor's truck, Sam looks as enthusiastic as I feel about that idea. "We get to keep the keys," he says. "You can have the spare set in case you have to move it."

"All right. But don't say anything about the keys to anyone else."

"They saw how fast the virus moved here," I say. "Why didn't they do more to stop it?"

"Between California and the Midwest, the Guard was stretched thin, local law enforcement, too. It was too late when it hit the East Coast; they said New York City was going down hard, and that was the last we heard. They didn't come right out and say how bad the virus was so as to avoid a panic."

My laugh is mirthless. "And instead they got a slaughter."

“Sure did.” Barry blows out a breath. “Listen, I know you don’t want to come. I get it—you’ve got a good thing going here. But we’ve got water and power. The city reservoirs hold enough water for three days of normal usage. We’re running at less than one percent of the population, and we’ve shut it off to most of Eugene. Even accounting for leaks, it’ll last past the ninety days.”

“Do you think they’ll be gone in ninety days?” Sam asks. He’s taken the words out of my mouth.

“Down at the fairgrounds, we say yes.”

Mitch releases a scornful grunt. “He asked what *you* think.”

Barry squares his shoulders defensively, then exhales as though he’s tired of keeping up the pretense. “We’ve also heard, from unofficial sources, that it could be much longer. I’m not sure what to believe. Not all is lost, though. There are Safe Zones in Salem and Portland. We haven’t heard from them in a week, but it could be they lost power. There are a bunch in Washington, too. Last we heard, they were holding a chunk of Seattle.”

“Seattle?” Sam asks in disbelief. “How’re they doing that?”

“A lot of guns. They said if Seattle goes, they’ll move to the islands there once they’ve cleared them out. There was another Safe Zone at Timberline Lodge.”

Barry’s referred to most places in past tense, which doesn’t inspire much confidence in our Safe Zone. “How about east?” I ask.

“We don’t know about Bend and Sisters, but there are some ranches doing okay. They’re used to being self-sufficient.” Barry lifts his big hands. “My first instinct was to leave, too, but wouldn’t you rather be with people? Once the Lexers go, we’ll have to get this city running again.”

Rose appears with the kids. All three wear packs we got at Always Ready, and Rose also rolls two suitcases. She appears calmer, though still pale. “Part of this is for Ethan. I thought he might want some of his things.”

“Good idea.” Barry gets to his feet. “I’ll help with the food. C’mon, Dalton.”

If he expects us to join in, he doesn’t mention it. When the five soldiers make their next trip to the kitchen, Jesse straightens from the wall he leans against. “Nora?”

The girl who introduced herself to me stops. “Holy shit, Jesse?” She grins and goes in for a half-hug. “I thought you went to school in Washington.”

“Did. I was home for break.”

“I didn’t realize this was your house or Ethan was your dad.” Nora moves out of the way of the other soldiers, already departing with fresh loads of food, then does a double take at Holly. “Hey, Holly. It’s good to see you.”

Holly’s smile is tight-lipped. “Hi.”

“That’s Holly’s friend, Clara,” Jesse says. “My mom, Rose, and my grandpa, Sam. And Mitch and Tom.”

Nora nods at us. “Nice to meet you.”

“Why are you out here?” Jesse asks. “I thought no one could leave.”

“Army Reserve,” Nora says. “I knew I might be deployed before I graduated, but I didn’t think it’d be here. I was home for break and ended up at the fairgrounds. After I told them I was Reserve, they put me to work.”

“What’s it like at the fairgrounds?” Clara asks.

“It’s all right. They have us in different buildings. You don’t want to be in the Events Center building if you can help it. It’s dark. Try for the Expo Halls, they have windows. Oh, I think your dad’s in there, so that’s probably where you’ll be.” The two guys with Nora file past again, and both fix her with very obvious looks of annoyance. “I have to help, but we can talk more later. It’s good to see you.”

“I’ll give you a hand.” Jesse ignores Holly’s scowl and leaves for the kitchen, appearing with a box of freeze-dried food a minute later. When she scowls again, he says, “It’s all going anyway. Don’t you want to get down to Dad?”

Holly watches his back as he leaves with Nora, then marches into the kitchen and lifts a box. Clara follows, giving me a *what-are-you-gonna-do?* look as she passes. Rose sighs once the girls are out the door. “Might as well dig our own graves.”

Sam gets a chuckle out of that before he follows Rose in. Mitch shrugs at me, I shrug back, and we head for the boxes.

Ten minutes later, the seven of us ride in the van while we peer out tinted windows. Clara sits beside me on a bench seat, leg bouncing. “You

all right?" I ask.

"Yeah. I just hope it's okay."

"Me too, Clare-Bear. But we'll have the truck. We can always leave."

"Thanks for coming, Dad. I know you don't want to."

"I don't want to stay here by ourselves, either. No offense."

Clara's smile is full of an affection I haven't seen in over a decade. "I know what you mean."

"Maybe they're right. It makes sense to be with people. They have weapons and fences." Whether or not I believe it is another story, but my job is to take care of Clara, to make her feel secure. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know."

I hesitate for a second before I put my arm around her shoulders; it wasn't long ago that she would've shied away. When she leans in, I know we're making the right decision. For better or worse, I'm casting my lot with Rose, Sam, and Mitch. We'll have to be vigilant, but this isn't the time to go it alone. Maybe there isn't ever a time to go it alone, contrary to what I thought before.

Across the aisle, Rose sits on a single seat with Willa by her feet, and she gives me and Clara a gentle smile. That smile, contrasted against the hands she twists in her lap, sums up Rose in a nutshell. All you need is a dash of intermittent temper. I've seen it come to the surface—directed at me, no less—but I get the feeling it's only called out in dire situations.

"You okay, Red?" I ask.

"Great," she says cheerfully, smiling at Holly, then watches out her own window. She isn't a half-bad liar either.

We take a different route than the ones we took to Rose's office and Always Ready. Chambers Street is wide and straight once you get over the large hill, and it's been blocked off at the intersections with various cars and trucks. They don't keep out zombies—or Lexers, as Barry called them. They do seem to discourage large packs, though that might be due to the pied piper bit from yesterday.

The few we pass watch us with dropped jaws, then stumble behind the van. Bodies lay in the driveway to a well-kept apartment complex, tossed like discarded mannequins into a large pile. The houses have broken windows and doors, and mangled limbs peep through overgrown grass.

Nora, who rides with us, says, “It got real fucked here. The police couldn’t make it near for days. It’s good the Lexers didn’t come over the hill to you guys right away.”

Our first fence wouldn’t have stopped a big pack that wanted in. Neither will the current one, though it’s a step up. Maybe the fairgrounds *are* the right move. Now that I know the whole country—the whole world—is like this, nothing seems like the right move, except maybe a well-stocked bunker.

“Don’t your parents live over here?” Jesse asks from his seat with Sam.

Nora nods without looking Jesse’s way as we roll up on Eighteenth Avenue. “We cleaned out that Bi-Mart, the Albertson’s, and both the gas stations.” Clearly, she isn’t going to say more on her parents.

The Bi-Mart shopping center is a collage of stopped cars, *dead* dead bodies, and broken glass. The Albertson’s across the avenue is the same. “They tried to cordon off a straight boundary around the fairgrounds, but there are too many little streets that don’t go through, so it’s kind of a hodgepodge.”

“Fucking Eugene,” Rose mutters under her breath, and I suppress a laugh.

“They’re using school buses and fencing at the intersections,” Nora continues. “Lexers get through, but only a few at a time. We can take care of them that way, you know?”

Everyone nods. We cruise along Eighteenth and stop at one of the aforementioned school buses at the next intersection. The truck beside it roars to life and pulls forward, leaving us room to turn up Polk Street. The houses are marked with an X spray-painted by the front doors. “What’s with the X on the doors?” I ask Nora.

“They checked houses for survivors. If there’s an X, it’s cleared out. If there are numbers, it’s how many Lexers are trapped inside. They didn’t have time to take care of them all, but they don’t want to be surprised next time. If you see a zero, it means there are some inside but they couldn’t tell how many.”

“Good system,” Sam says.

“Yeah. We were making our way to your neighborhood, slowly but surely.” Nora looks to Holly. “Your dad was worried sick.”

Holly's stiff smile returns. She's usually friendly, which means she's either nervous or she doesn't like Nora, though I can't imagine why. By all indications, she seems like a decent kid.

The van turns onto Fifteenth Avenue. A large apartment complex is set back behind enormous cedars on the right, and the houses on the left are all marked with an X. "Did they clear out the apartments?" Jesse asks.

"Yeah," Nora replies. "Those were senior apartments. By the time we got there, a bunch of them had died. But we brought about a hundred-fifty to the fairgrounds."

We pull to a stop, and I lean to look out the front window. The street dead-ends at a chain-link fence set in tall bushes and topped with three strands of barbed wire, with a swinging gate at the street. Another fence is just behind. That one is black chain-link, taller, with a gate that rolls to the side. It's covered with plastic sheeting of some sort, but the roofs of a few of the fairgrounds' buildings are visible over top. We're not entering by the main entrance; maybe this is the main entrance now.

The black gate slides open. A woman in camo exits and swings the first gate wide while two men watch the street with rifles. The van rolls through and between the livestock building and a long office building, then stops at the side of the indoor ice rink's entrance. The parking lots are just ahead, where there has to be space for over two thousand vehicles, though only fifty or so are parked inside: fire trucks, police vehicles, a couple of ambulances, a few military trucks, and some civilian vehicles. Across the lot and to the right are more buildings.

"You have to go into the ice rink first," Nora says. "I'll tell your dad you're here. He'll be waiting for you when you're finished."

"Finished with what?" Rose asks, but Nora's already through the back door. Barry comes around and waves us out.

"Ready, Clara?" I ask. She grabs her smaller bag and follows me to the asphalt. The uniformed soldiers—who seem more like boys in age—unload our larger bags from the SUV and line them up at the glass doors of the ice rink.

"Come on in," Barry says, and we follow him to the lobby doors. "They'll check you over, get you cleaned up, and then you'll be good to go. Grab your bags as you go in."

I take my backpack and Rose's second suitcase on our way through. She thanks me, her voice high with unease. Past the admissions desk and through the doors at the end of the lobby, we enter an open space floored with black rubber mats and furnished with wooden benches where one sits to tie one's skates. Large windows overlook the ice rink. It's now a dormitory, with cots set up in the wide oval that was once ice. A few soldiers sit on them or on the bleachers outside the rink, chatting with one another.

The smell of popcorn hangs in the air, and the shelves behind the rental counter that once held ice skates now hold weapons. Guns. Knives. Long and short pointy things. Stuff that I have no idea what it is. The might of the U.S. Army sits behind an ice skate rental counter.

Two women and a man, all dressed in fatigues, exit a snack bar area with plastic cups full of buttery kernels of popcorn. All three head for Willa. The youngest soldier, who looks more like a girl fresh out of high school, crouches low. "Hi, puppy! Aren't you cute? What's your name?"

"It's Willa," Rose says.

Willa puts her paws on the girl's knees and licks her chin. The girl laughs. "Can she have popcorn?"

"Sure," Rose says with a weak smile.

The soldier drops a few pieces and seems about to speak until she looks past me, does an about-face, and follows her two friends back into the snack bar. I turn. A man makes his way over. Medium height, with an oily face and wide, protruding lips that bring to mind a frog. Though the man smiles, I don't like the coldness in it. Like he's pretending to smile.

"Welcome," the man says. "I'm Master Sergeant Boone. When you're here, you're on Army ground. We feed you, we house you, and we expect you to follow the rules."

The guy is not concerned with niceties, that's for sure. I want to tell him where he can shove his food and housing, especially since they've taken *my* food, but I stay silent. Another man appears, this one older. He's dark-skinned and tall, with a thin frame and face. "That'll be all, Sergeant Boone."

Froggy nods. "Yes, First Sergeant."

He walks ten feet away as the other man offers a genuine smile. "I'm First Sergeant Carver. I bet you have no idea what that means." There are a

few laughs. “It means, for us, that I’m in charge of this place until someone higher ranking comes along. Barry tells me you had plenty of food and water. Built yourselves a nice fence, too.”

Clara settles on one of the benches and puts her chin in her hand. She looks so grown, yet young enough that I’m frightened. Everything I wanted for her, all the stupid shit, doesn’t matter. The only thing I want now is for her to survive.

“He also said you’re not thrilled about being here,” Carver continues. “Ethan’s been a big help with his nursing skills, and we want his family to be as comfortable as possible. If you need anything, come straight to me. Okay?”

There are nods all around. I’d forgotten Ethan was a nurse, though he quit years ago to join the realty business. *Better hours, better pay*, he’d said with a grin. He’s back at nursing now. It explains why Willa made it in, too.

A frown flits across Rose’s face before she smiles. “Thank you.”

“Mrs. Winter—”

“Rose, please.”

“If it’s Rose, then you’ll have to call me Carver. I’d say call me Leonard, but no one but my mother has called me that since I was ten. We’re going to get you through intake as quickly as possible so you can see your husband. Ladies to the ladies’ locker room and men to the men’s.” He shakes our hands in turn. “Very nice to meet you all. See you around.”

The popcorn-eating team returns, and, along with Froggy, they lead us into the rink area and down a hall. Froggy and a kid with a nametag that says Marquez bring us to the men’s locker room, and the two female soldiers take Rose, Mitch, and the girls to the women’s room. Ours is tile-lined, with lockers and a bank of showers in the corner across from toilet stalls and urinals.

“First, showers,” Froggy says. “We’ll look through your stuff while you do that.”

Sam’s face goes rigid. “Look through our stuff?”

“That’s the rule. We’ll put aside any contraband and you’ll sign a form saying we have it.”

“What does contraband include?”

Froggy points to our guns. “Those. You can have a knife nine inches or shorter. No drugs or alcohol.”

I catch Sam's gaze, and it becomes obvious where Rose got her baby blues, and where she learned that icy *hell no* stare. Jesse's doing a pretty damn good job of it himself. I bring myself to full height. "We want to see Carver."

"You don't need to see—"

"Carver," Sam says, his voice like thunder.

Froggy's mouth squashes so that he resembles a frog more than ever. "Go get him, Marquez."

The kid runs out, and we stare at each other until the locker room door opens. "What can I do for you?" Carver asks. He frowns at Froggy, whose name I can no longer recall. "Sergeant Boone, I'll take it from here."

"But—" Froggy stops mid-argue and says, "Yes, First Sergeant."

Carver watches him leave, then faces us. "Marquez tells me you don't want to give up your guns." Marquez stands beside him, hands behind his back. We didn't say as much, but the kid isn't dumb.

"That about sums it up," Sam says. "I understand you don't want people running around armed, but you know what's out there. If they come in, I don't want to be empty-handed."

Carver lifts a hand to his chin and leans on a bank of lockers. After a few seconds of thought, he says, "Marquez, can you keep a secret?"

"Absolutely, Top," Marquez says.

Carver smiles, his sharp cheekbones almost cutting through flesh. "Good. I'm taking your guns, but Marquez will return them to you by nightfall. I'll sign them in where Boone can see, lock them away, and then you will hide them and not speak a word of it to anyone, understood?"

"Fine by me," Sam says, and I nod.

"You got that, Marquez?"

"Yes, Top."

"Marquez here, he's the guy to see if you need anything. He can always find me. I like him because he does as he's told and calls me Top. Right, Marquez?"

The kid's eyes glitter. "All the time, Top."

Carver laughs—a light laugh full of good humor, and I decide I like him, if not this place. "All right. Enjoy your showers. It's the last truly hot water you'll get for a while."

We head for the showers, where I do enjoy the steaming water and soap. I take a minute longer than absolutely necessary, just to feel the luxury of hot water cascading from a faucet. I barely fit in the RV's shower, and turning water on and off while soaping yourself up is not what anyone would call relaxing. Once out, I towel off to find Marquez and another guy waiting in the locker area, both looking a bit uncomfortable.

"We have to inspect you for bites and scratches," Marquez says. "Sorry."

"Of course," I say. I'd be worried if they didn't.

They make it as perfunctory as possible, then check Jesse and Sam before giving them the green light to get dressed. While we do, Jesse says, "It's stricter here than I thought."

"That's because you're in the rink." Marquez runs a hand through his short brown curls. "It's different out in the dorms. First Sergeant Carver is a good guy."

I sit to put on my socks. "What about Boone?"

Marquez rolls his eyes. "Battlefield promotion, and he wants everyone to bow to him. Just ignore him. We do when we can. You'll have jobs to do, but you'll do a lot of sitting around and they're afraid you might go crazy. That's why they take guns. One dude went nuts a week in and started pointing his at everyone."

"Home's sounding better and better," Jesse says. He buttons his jeans and throws on his shirt.

Marquez grins. "Nora said you had a dope setup. You know how to use a weapon?"

"I've shot a pistol and a rifle, but that's it."

"Come by the Pavilion once you're settled. Nora and I can show you some stuff. Barry's been talking about training civilians."

"Yeah? Cool."

Jesse eyes his grandpa, who takes no notice. After he looks away, Sam winks at me. I have to agree staying out of it is the best course of action. First off, neither one of us will tell a twenty-two-year-old man that he can't learn weapons, especially now. And second, neither of us wants to be on Rose's shit list when she finds out.

Our belongings are returned, minus the guns, and we head out to the main area. It's full of soldiers who call to each other and joke around as

they pass in and out of the building. Maybe a shift change. The majority are young men, and the majority of those check out Clara and Holly as they go by. The two girls whisper beside where Mitch and Rose sit on a bench with their belongings. All four have damp hair.

Rose and Mitch stand as we approach. “How’d it go?” Rose asks.

“Assholes took my axe and Clara’s hammer,” Mitch says.

Sam moves forward and speaks low, telling them about the guns. He finishes it off with, “I’ll bet we can get them back.”

Mitch nods and straightens her brown shirt. “They have better-fitting clothes here, anyway.”

Barry comes toward us with a smile. “You ready?”

We follow him to another set of glass doors at the corner of the building, where he points to a group of long, low interconnected wooden buildings just to our right, painted barn red and forest green. The centermost building has a peaked roof and is attached to a long rectangular building on either side. Another peaked roof building sits at the end of those rectangles, with one more oblong building at either end, to make seven buildings total. These are the Exposition Halls, where one can see the farm animals at the county fair every July. Clara loved the chicks when she was little, especially the ones hatching under the warming lights.

“Just take your smaller packs,” Barry says. “We’ll be right behind with the rest.”

A man exits the building and waits on the asphalt, rocking from foot to foot—Ethan. He’s a few inches shorter than me, slim but toned, with a boyishly handsome face and blond hair worn longer than when I last saw him. Holly puts her hand against a window, her face shining.

Rose stares through the glass. She sniffs once, twice, and then swipes at her cheek. Holly hugs Rose to her, their hair blending into one mass of damp curls, before Rose pulls back. “Go ahead, say hi.”

Holly runs out the door, down the steps, then across the small road to the buildings. Ethan’s face breaks into a joyous smile before he clutches Holly. Jesse casts a somber look toward Rose’s back before he follows. By the time he reaches Ethan, Jesse is grinning, and he goes willingly into his dad’s embrace. Sam pats Rose’s shoulder and heads out after them. Knowing what I know, what Rose has confessed about their relationship, I

have no idea what to say. But I do know Ethan is a fool if he fucks this up again.

Mitch places her hand on Rose's arm. "You okay?"

I hear Rose whisper, "I'm not sure," as Clara and I move into the sunlight. A few moments later, Rose walks past us toward Ethan. He looks up from the kids, both of whom speak a mile a minute in answer to his questions, and his smile leaves no doubt that, however much of a fool he may be, he loves his wife. He strides to Rose and pulls her into his arms. Rose's head presses to his shoulder until Ethan takes her face in his hands, kissing her once, then again. Rose sets a hand on his cheek, says something in a soft voice.

There'll be no such reunion for me. I stare into the parking lot, chest burning. It's full of people walking here and there or sitting in the sunlight. Tables are grouped under a giant outdoor tent near a half-circle of food trucks. The dining area. Another large tent with full sidewalls, purpose unknown, is off to the side, taking up two rows of parking spots between the Expo Halls and main Events Center building. The latter building takes up much of the east end of the grounds and is made of brick, with a silver roof and a glass atrium that rises well above the roof in the center.

Islands of grass are scattered throughout the lot and in front of the buildings, many with a tree or two, and long stretches of trees and bushes line the entry roads to the parking lots. Even with the foliage, it feels like we're adrift on a sea of asphalt. A mix of soldiers and civilians roam outside the tents and buildings, and the people who walk by seem dirty, bedraggled. One woman carries a food-stained toddler in her arms, and they both look in need of a nap. The rest of the gigantic lot is empty, with windblown garbage collected at the base of the far-off fences, which are covered with everything from house doors to rugs and blankets.

Here's the next part of our future, and it's depressing as all hell.

Footsteps sound behind me. "Hey, Clara," Ethan's voice comes, friendly and warm.

I spin in time to see Clara hug Ethan. Ethan releases her and moves toward me with a big smile. "Tom, good to see you. I can't believe you're all okay."

He puts out his hand, and I pump it a few times. "We thought you were a goner, too."

Ethan laughs the laugh of a man who's just won the lottery. "So did I. I'm glad you're here. Thanks for keeping them safe."

I nod. "They kept me safe, too."

Behind Ethan, Rose's eyes flick my way, but I can't read what's in them before she gazes into the parking lot. My chest burns again.

Barry appears with Marquez, Nora, and our bags. "Let's get you inside. You're in the Expo Hall right here. Building Seven." He points at the last oblong red building closest to us. Whereas the other buildings have standard doors, our entrance is via a metal rolling door. "You can enter here now, or, at night or in bad weather, through building Six's doors and then cut over inside. Let's walk the long way so you can see. Nora and Juan, you bring the bags through and we'll meet you there."

"I'll move my stuff," Ethan says. He gathers Rose and Holly to either side of him and moves for the building. "Then I'll show you all around."

Jesse hangs back to wait for Clara while Sam and Mitch start forward. I follow last, swallowing down an acrid lump that feels a lot like jealousy. Ethan has managed to come through this with his family intact, and I'm jealous. That's all it is.

But that's not all it is, and I draw to a stop when it hits me like a pack of zombies. I'm jealous Ethan has Rose by his side. Not just a partner, a wife, but *Rose*. I watch the group tromp into the building, then trail them with heavy footsteps.

This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

Rose

EXPO HALL SIX is a long space with peeling tan walls and a high, peaked ceiling. It's cool inside and dimly lit by an expanse of windows that stretches over the doors at either end, though a few overhead lights make it brighter. Wide openings with sliding doors connect to Expo Halls Five and Seven on either side. I've only ever seen the interior cordoned off by metal animal pens, the floor littered with hay and feed, and the entire complex stinking of barn. Now it smells of unwashed people and their belongings, like bedsheets long overdue for a washing.

I slide out from under Ethan's arm, ostensibly to get a closer look, though it's really to escape his hold on me. *In more ways than one.* I no sooner have the thought than I rebuke myself for being awful. The tears came unbidden when I saw Ethan standing outside the building. Something like love welled for that brief moment, but so did hurt and anger, until love was banished back to its dark cave. He saw the reproach on my face. Felt it when he kissed me. Ethan can read me like a book, as I can him, and the slight dip of his lips, the tightness around his eyes, means he knows all is not well.

I trace a finger along the wall seams, then inspect the rest of the room. The space is divided into makeshift rooms by a framework of metal poles with blue fabric curtains that drape to the floor. They're the same ones they use to divide booths at craft shows—the ones I myself used when I did Holiday Market at the Events Center years ago. I was selling handmade soaps and candles then. Or maybe it was pottery. In any event, they're better than no dividers. I'd pictured rows of cots like in the photos of refugees and disaster victims. The survivors of a zombie hurricane.

Most of the rooms with open drapes are unoccupied by people, and all contain a mattress or two on the floor, covered by blankets and comforters. Bags, shoes, and small items—hairbrushes, toiletries, a book or toy—mark the spaces as inhabited. Clothes are strung between the poles, likely to dry from washing or rain.

Barry brings us through a wide doorway and into the last long building. Our new home. This one has a gray-painted concrete floor and peeling

yellow-cream walls. It's much brighter due to the row of high windows that run its length and the monitor roof: a raised structure, almost like a narrow second roof, that runs along the ridge of the main roof and whose sides are lined with clerestory windows. The space is ugly and depressing, but at least it isn't dark.

The soldiers have piled our bags at the end of the last row of drapes. Barry nods his thanks before they leave, and then he turns to us. "This building is pretty empty, but they'd like you to only take up four spaces, if possible. They decide based on family size and gender, but you can choose who goes where." Barry pushes one of the poles that hold the curtains, sliding the square metal base with a toe. "You can move them a little to suit you, too."

"So, we're living in here, huh?" Mitch asks. "I always wondered what it would feel like to be a goat."

My quiet laugh echoes. I'll have to talk low inside if I don't want to be overheard. Barry wears a perplexed expression, and I explain, "The county fair. They put the farm animals in here."

"Right," he says with a chuckle. "Well, I'll leave you to it. I'd tell you what you need to know, but Ethan can do that."

Ethan nods. His blond hair is shiny, and he has a bit of a tan. He looks good. Healthy. "Thanks for going, Barry. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Just rest that knee of yours." Barry leaves for the roll-up door, which is open to let in fresh air. He's nice, friendly, and huge. I'm always on the hunt for a mate for Mitch, and I file him away just in case.

"What happened to your knee?" Holly asks.

"Twisted it again, no big deal now." Ethan pulls one of her curls. "I'm sorry I couldn't come. What happened over there?"

"We built a new fence," Holly says. "And we went on two trips to get more food. Mom, Tom, and Pop tried to find you at the office, but you weren't there." At this, Ethan's shoulders stiffen almost imperceptibly, and I know he's thinking of the spoon and cotton he left on his desk.

"Where were you?" Jesse asks. "You were supposed to be home early that day." His blank expression is negated by the challenge of his crossed arms.

"I got a last minute call to show a house. The place off River Road." Ethan glances my way, the lie evident in his eyes. "I texted Mom, but I

guess it didn't go through. On my way home, I was almost surrounded, and I got out and ran to the office. I stayed there until they came around and brought me here. I tried to get home to you guys, but it was impossible."

"We got in on the west side," Jesse says.

I mentally beg him to stop. It'll do no good to press Ethan now. The muscle under my left eye spasms. The twitch is back—I'd forgotten it existed.

"We were surrounded over here," Ethan says easily. "I'm glad you got into town, though. Did you get anything good?"

"Freeze-dried food and lanterns and stuff," Holly says. "And MREs. Do you know what those are?"

"I know very well what MREs are. It's all we ate for the first week I was here. Terrible, right?"

Holly nods eagerly, returning Ethan's grin. They were close until his drug use made him distant, and though she wouldn't admit it to me, it hurt when he pulled away. Ever since, she's been overly cheerful in his presence, attempting to include him with a quiet desperation that makes my heart twinge.

"Let's figure out rooms," I say. "Or curtains. Tom and Clara don't need to hear us rehashing the events of the past month."

I turn and bump directly into Tom, who steadies me. It's the first time we've been this near to each other when neither of us is crying or running from zombies, and the weight and warmth of his hands on my shoulders throws me even more than I am already. "Sorry," I say with a semi-hysterical laugh. "Stop sneaking up on me."

His hands drop, and his lips curve before he steps away. "I don't care where I sleep. Just tell me where to lay my head."

"Can the three of us be together?" Holly asks, pointing at Jesse and Clara. "Then you guys can have the other three."

It's decided that Pop and Tom will bunk together, Mitch will have her own space, and Ethan and I will take the last. A slew of voices enters on the other side of the network of curtains, one a screeching toddler. Ethan walks to the end of the aisle and waves. A moment later, a woman appears. She's younger, somewhere in her mid-thirties, and she has five kids with her who range from preteen to toddler, and who take off at the sight of new people.

"This is my wife, Rose," Ethan says, and then introduces everyone else.

The woman's dark blond hair swings along with her ankle-length skirt. Her nose is pierced with a silver hoop, and she has an armful of bracelets that clink when she extends her hand, which I shake.

"I'm Gabrielle." She points behind her. "That was my brood. I'm glad you're here, but I'm sorry they put you with us. I apologize in advance for being annoying."

"I like kids," I say.

"So did I, once upon a time." Gabrielle grins when we laugh. "Anyway, nice to meet you. My husband, Alan, and I are on the other side. Please tell us if we're too loud. The only thing I hate more than being annoying is when someone doesn't tell me and hates me instead."

"I'll tell you," Mitch says.

"Good." An unearthly scream comes from the neighboring aisle. Gabrielle peers over her shoulder. "I might be down to four now. I should probably check."

She hurries around the curtains, then can be heard talking softly on the end of the opposite row. "She seems nice," I say.

"She is," Ethan says. "There are a few other people in here, but I don't remember who right now."

In the corner is an assortment of bedding taken from nearby houses, along with cots and air mattresses acquired at some store run Ethan mentions. "We can use the power to blow them up, and you can charge your electronics if you brought them, but they don't like you to keep things plugged in. We're operating on less power than normal, but as long as the hydro plant stays in operation, we're good."

"Which plant?" Tom asks.

"Leaburg Dam. They have a few guys out there with the dam operators."

"Have you gone outside much?"

"They haven't let civilians out since things quieted down." Ethan pulls a queen air mattress from the pile, and I cringe at the thought of it being for us. "We had mattresses from the houses nearby, but those were snapped up quick. Pop, I have one of the better cots. I'll grab it for you."

"Thanks, son," Pop says with a warm smile. "That sounds like just the ticket."

He and Ethan always got along well, and it's likely that only I notice the slight reservation in his eyes now that he knows Ethan's been using. I avoid Pop's *are-you-okay?* glance just as I've ignored Mitch's twenty *what-the-hell-are-you-going-to-do-now?* glances in the last five minutes. Ethan takes my hand, and my fingers fall into line the way they have forever—his thumb over and mine under. It could be a metaphor for our relationship, if I'm feeling particularly aggrieved. He squeezes gently. "Come with me to get the cot while they get settled?"

I nod, though I would rather do almost anything else, and say to the kids, "Be back in a bit. I guess. I have no clue where we're going."

Ethan smiles. "Not far. Let's walk outside. It's unwritten etiquette around here, so that you're not in someone else's space."

We exit the open rolling door at the rear and walk through a gated area stacked with the metal fence panels used to corral animals at fair time. A road runs behind the Expo Halls, bounded by a fence on the opposite side. The chain-link is covered with a patchwork of cloth and plastic, in what I assume is an attempt to shield our presence from zombie eyes. But I know that just beyond the fence is a tangle of bushes, blackberries, and trees that slope down to Amazon Creek. The creek runs through Eugene, sometimes rushing but mostly creeping. The water often looks stagnant and garbage makes its way in only to be fished out at later clean-up events. But it's a water source if we need one, and the steep banks likely help to keep this side of the fairgrounds zombie-free. Most fairgrounds are in the country, on the outskirts of town, but Eugene's is plopped down right in the center like a bull's eye. It's a chilling notion.

This is the way I think now, and I hope it means I'm adapting. Still not sinewy and kickass, apparently, since the number of people in the parking lot scared me. When I told Tom all the corners are mine, I wasn't kidding. I prefer small gatherings and minimal human interaction. What possessed me to become a realtor, I'll never know, but I was able to fake it when in Realtor Mode.

We walk past the first building in silence. When we hit the next one, Ethan tugs me to the fence and releases my hand to face me. He waits until I look at him and says, "I'm not going to lie to you."

Because you're caught is my unkind thought. "Okay," I say aloud.

"I was getting high."

There's a rip in the fence coverings here, and he gazes past the creek and across a large fenced field to the houses lining the streets beyond, all of which have overgrown grass and a broken window or two.

"I know," I say. "I saw."

"I left my stuff at the office, I—"

"Yes, that. But I saw you buying them. That first day. I followed you because I thought you were getting high."

"Oh." He cuts his eyes to me. It's a look I know well—a slight widening, followed by a muted panic in which I can practically see the gears of his brain spinning, searching for an explanation, a plausible lie, a distraction. "*Oh*. You knew before...why didn't you say something?"

It's faintly accusatory—somehow, some way, I'm partly to blame. I blink slowly and breathe in the gentle breeze. I'd rather run from twenty zombies than have this talk for the thousandth time. Kill another hundred over the fence than deal with all of those people in the lot. I want my house, my fence, and the six people with whom I feel most comfortable.

"Because it's not my job to catch you and call you out like a toddler," I say. "Do you know how tired I am of this conversation? Do you have any idea?" Tears come, and I swipe at them angrily. "Is that why you didn't try to get home? Figured you'd wait until your stash ran out and then it was too late?"

"No." His voice breaks, and he goes for my hands. I snatch them away. "I swear. Rosie, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You know rock bottom? I hit it. I hit it when I thought I lost you and the kids. I should've been home. I said I would be, and because I wasn't, I might've lost you all. It couldn't get much clearer than that." Two streams of tears run down his cheeks to his chin, where they fall and make dark circles on his gray shirt. "Can you forgive me? Please, Rosie."

I watch the field. How many times have I forgiven Ethan now? I'm tired, so tired. It weighs down my feet and my brain and my spirit. I wanted to be rid of him so badly. I hadn't wanted him dead, just *away*. Disappeared.

I got my wish. And here he is, begging for another chance. Until this moment, I haven't fully admitted to myself how happy I was without him. I'll never tell a soul because it's too horrendous, too unspeakably selfish, that I reveled in his absence for even one second. Maybe it would be kinder

to let him go right here, right now, though it'll hurt him. Or maybe that idea is a thinly-veiled justification to be selfish once more.

"Please," Ethan says. "I'll never ask again, I swear. I won't have to." He motions at our surroundings. "Can't you see it's different this time? How can I make you believe that?"

I lift my shoulders with effort, drag my gaze to his face. He's aged, but he's still the guy with the sandy hair and bright smile I fell in love with. "I guess you can't."

"I can show you, though. If you let me." He takes my hands and leans in, bloodshot eyes searching mine. "I know I've been an asshole. I know I don't deserve this, or you, but I'm begging for one more chance. It'll be the way it was. I'm so sorry for what I put you through. Believe that if nothing else."

I'm not sure he truly understands what he's put me through. Not even now.

Don't do it, my brain whispers, but how can I not? This seems like the old Ethan: honest, willing to talk and take the blame. I can't say no to him without seeming as cold as he's accused. I won't be able to look Holly and Jesse in the eye and say I tried. We came here to be a family, and I can't be the one who breaks us up. Not if Ethan has changed, not with the way the world is in shambles—with the way the world is shambling. This is it, though. His final chance. It has to be. I've said it before, but next time I won't chicken out or give in.

"I'll try," I say. "But you have to give me time."

"I know, I will." He lifts my hand in his, wiping my tears with his thumb, and his smile promises everything I want but probably won't get. "Thank you, Poodle."

It's what he calls me when my hair is particularly poufy, but he hasn't said it in years. A cracked laugh escapes my lips. "Really?"

"Yes, really." He pulls me to him, arms snug around my shoulders. "Your hair's looking extremely poodle-riffic today."

"It's still wet, jerk. Do you actually want me to forgive you?"

His warm laugh vibrates from his chest to mine. This is familiar, but it doesn't feel *right* the way it once did. *I* don't feel right. I feel trapped once again, and it's worse than ever because I was free. That tells me more than I

want to know, so I attempt to force it from my consciousness. I can love Ethan the way I loved him before, if only I try hard enough.

Tom

A TEN BY ten room isn't very large. Not large enough for two grown men who aren't imprisoned, anyway. I'm sure I could've gotten my own room had I asked, but part of me doesn't want to be alone even if it means being cramped.

Sam finishes making up his cot while I survey my own. Ethan found me a better one than the camping special in the pile, with a real foam mattress instead of taut canvas stretched over an aluminum frame. I've been sleeping on a couch, but this seems worse somehow. The couch was impermanent. It's only been a matter of hours, but this cot seems to say: *Welcome to your lonely future, Tom.*

I set one of the solar lanterns beside it, then straighten out my blanket—a comforter with the Care Bears on one side. Clara handed it to me as a joke, and when I hugged it to my chest and refused to give it up, she laughed her ass off. She hasn't laughed that hard at one of my jokes since the age when she loved Care Bears, which makes using the damn thing more than worth it.

Sam moves to the center of our space and rummages in his pack. "Have to say, the bed at the house was more comfortable."

"Tell me about it," I mutter. "Why are we here?"

"I follow Rose and the kids. Seems like maybe you do, too."

I look his way, certain Sam has somehow heard my earlier thoughts, but the man's face is impassive. "Clara does, and I follow her."

"Barry seems to think we'll be good in another month or two. I'm thinking..."

"Fat chance of that?" I offer.

Sam winks. "I knew I liked you."

The curtains move, and Rose sticks in her head. The rest of her follows, wearing jeans, a black tank top, and her sheath on her belt. It's warm in the building, and I heard her huffing and puffing while she made her bed on the other side of the curtain. I purposely don't look at her creamy cleavage, instead studying the tattoo that covers her shoulder and upper arm—a spill of flowers that I admired (silently, of course) when I first saw it years ago. I

also try not to remember what she said about Ethan. How happy she seemed without him and how she's gone quieter since his appearance.

"This is small for two big boys like yourselves." Rose moves the pole on my side of the room six inches into her space. She does the same with the back corner and then uses her knees to shove my cot that way. She takes in her changes with a nod, then flops down on the Care Bears.

"We're fine," I say. "Don't take space from you and Ethan."

"How much space do we need?" The Care Bears comforter wrinkles. She twists onto her side, messing up the smooth lines I perfected only minutes ago. This might be a source of irritation except for the fact that Rose lies in my bed, and I can't find much fault with that. "This is comfortable, Daddy. Better than my air mattress."

Sam lowers himself to his cot, eyes twinkling. "You might want to ask Tom before you take a nap in his bed."

Rose covers her mouth. "This is your bed? I thought it was my dad's, and here I am getting all comfy in it. Why didn't you say something?" She jumps up and straightens the covers. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I say, though I can't resist pulling one corner to smooth out a wrinkle.

"I like your comforter."

"Me, too."

She laughs, then walks to the curtain and stands with her hands clasped at her waist. "It's time for dinner. The kids said they'd meet us there. Ethan is I don't know where, and Mitch went to explore but said to go if she wasn't back. Are you guys ready?"

"I'm not hungry, baby doll," Sam says. "But you go ahead."

Rose blinks and twists her hands together. "Tom?"

"Sure." I'm not very hungry, but it's clear she wants company. "Let's go."

Her smile practically blinds me. Rose retrieves a hoodie from her room and zips it up as we walk through the open loading door toward the tent in the lot. She's silent for a few feet, then she says, "I guess you're wondering about me and Ethan. He swore he's been clean and asked for one more chance. I'm either an optimist or an idiot. Or maybe an optimistic idiot. But I felt like I had to."

"He's your husband," I say evenly.

Rose nods and tucks a curl behind her ear. The rest of her hair sways down her back. A few tendrils blow in the breeze. I've stood beside her for years, hardly thinking of her hair, and now it's begging me to touch it. I stick my hands in my pockets.

"I brought my phone," she says out of nowhere. "Once it's charged, we can listen to music, if you still want to. Or you can borrow it. You don't have to listen with me. It's not a package deal or anything."

She keeps her focus on the tent while the words spill from her mouth, and I sense a deeper question: *Are you still my friend?* The fact she'd worry about that lifts my spirits an unreasonable amount. "Can we listen together without headphones?" I ask. "I don't think they'll like us making noise."

I know they won't. It's on the list of rules that seems a mile long. Stay relatively quiet, no fighting, showers every four days, charging electronics every three, privileges revoked for infractions, be prompt for your meal hours, sign up for work or risk no meal hour. I'm always ready to do my share—more than my share—but I hate to be ordered around like a child, and a dumb one at that.

"I have earbuds," Rose says. "We'll stick one in your ear and the other in mine. Mitch and I did that all the time in high school."

"Okay."

I try to sound casual, am sure I fail. Though Rose doesn't look at me, I see how her cheek curves with a smile. "Okay."

Maybe what I feel for Rose is gratitude. Gratitude, along with the loss of Sheila, has me all mixed up. Of course I want a partner. I'm human. But Rose and I are only friends, though there's no *only* about it. For two decades, my friends were people Sheila gathered and kept in touch with, who showed up at our house when she invited them. They were nice enough, but I never connected with them the way I did in my younger years. Rose is my first real friend since before college, and I'll do my best to keep her that way.

She slows as we approach the tent, hand shielding her eyes from the sun. Once inside, where the noise of people talking turns to a clamor, she inches close enough for me to smell lavender.

"Should we get food or wait for everyone?" I ask.

"I guess...get food? Do you see where to go?" Her gaze roves the tent's interior, darting place to place until it settles on the far wall.

“Are you all right?”

“Of course,” she says.

But her discomfort is obvious, and I realize the woman who leapt a fence into zombies and told me off pretty spectacularly is terrified of the regular old people sitting in this tent eating dinner. I shouldn't be surprised; like me, Rose sticks to the corners when out in the world. I do it because I can't be bothered, but she does it because she's overwhelmed.

“What's the worst that could happen?” I ask.

“Countless horrors.” Rose shrugs as though embarrassed. “I don't like not knowing where to go or what to do. And I don't like big groups of people. Especially if I'm alone.”

“You're not alone. I'm sure, if we put our minds together, we can figure out how to get a plate of food without the world crashing down around us.”

“It already crashed, so we're good there,” she says, eyes crinkling at the corners. They're bright blue, and her lips are so pink in contrast. I've never denied Rose is pretty, but it's always been a cerebral acknowledgment. This isn't cerebral; this is wanting to taste those lips, grab a handful of curls, bury my face in her scent.

I scrub the thought from my mind, somewhat horrified at its appearance. It has to be this place. I was fine at the house, never thinking of Rose in this way. At least I thought I didn't, but I can't deny I wait for her to wake every morning, that she brightens my day with her jokes and easy way. Maybe deep down I imagined a future where I'd be ready for more, and Ethan's presence has brought it into consciousness, forced my hand. The more I learn about Rose, the more I want to get to know her, and the chance for that to unfold was plucked from my future by a fifteen-minute ride to the fairgrounds.

Mitch strolls up. “Ready to eat? There are empty tables out back by the food.”

I follow the two while berating myself. Sheila deserves better than to have me lusting after every woman in close proximity less than two months after she died. A bothersome voice in my head declares there are other women here—I saw plenty when Ethan showed us around—but only one holds my interest, and she's Ethan's wife. And, the voice continues, as long as we're on that subject, Ethan's wife doesn't seem to like him very much. She *said so herself*, as a matter of fact.

I tell the voice to shut the hell up.

Outside the rear of the tent, steam billows from the food trucks. Long tables are set up under a smaller tent, behind which people serve food to a line of diners holding plates. There are old folks and kids and a slew of thirty- and forty-something adults. Rose waves at Holly, Jesse, and Clara when we pass a round table. They sit with a few people their age, including Nora.

“Don’t they look like babies?” Rose asks. “I felt so old in my early twenties, but I probably looked like that. Thankfully, they don’t have two kids to raise.”

“I don’t know how anyone our age could date someone that young,” Mitch says. “The only thing I want from a twenty-year-old is for him to move my furniture and weed my lawn.”

I chuckle along with Rose. “There’s something to be said for experience.”

“Ooh, Tom,” Mitch says, hand to her chest. “That sounded vaguely risqué.” My face warms a bit, and I’m thankful a blush doesn’t show on me the way it does on Rose.

Rose narrows her eyes, though she’s smiling. “*Oh, please.* Next you’ll say that wrinkles are a sign of character and you like a little meat on the bones.”

Both are true. The thought of being with a twenty-something-year-old—Clara’s age, for God’s sake—both exhausts and disturbs me. And I’ve always been a fan of naked ladies of all shapes and sizes. The things Sheila harped on—her thighs, her stomach—were things I didn’t examine with a magnifying glass the way she did. They were warm and pliable, and they shuddered under my touch. That’s the biggest turn-on there is.

“Is there any way I can answer that without damning myself?” I ask.

Rose and Mitch laugh as we get in line. Both say, “Nope.”

“Then I plead the Fifth.”

Ethan walks our way, nodding and waving to people, and I recall how he was always out in the center of the room. When he reaches us, he smiles like he wants in on the joke. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing worth repeating,” Rose says. “The kids seem happy.”

“There are a bunch of people their age here. I’m glad they found each other already.”

Ethan puts his arm around Rose's shoulder. She stiffens briefly before she relaxes, then steps out from under his arm as the line moves. The arm returns, and a minute later she bends to retrieve a stray piece of paper and walks it to a garbage can. Mitch watches her and turns to find me doing the same. Her raised eyebrow is cynical before her eyes flick to Ethan and away. It's immoral that Mitch's thoughts on this subject please me. It's appalling, really. I smile anyway.

The food is unappetizing: a ladleful of rice, topped with canned vegetables and potatoes in a pool of brown liquid they call stew but is actually meatless, salty gravy. The four of us eat at one of the round tables. Or three of us eat; Rose appears to be forcing down her food by taking tiny bites with big sips of water.

"No good?" I ask her.

She wrinkles her nose. "Why do people dump stuff over rice so that you can't taste the rice?"

"Because ninety-nine percent of the world likes it that way," Ethan says.

"Then I'm a one-percenter. Rice belongs on the side so you can mix it together at will, depending on your desired level of sauce-ocity. That way everyone's happy."

"You should see her at a restaurant," Ethan says to me. "Everything on the side or not mixed together. And God forbid you buy her blended yogurt."

"Blended yogurt is an atrocity." Rose shivers and points her fork at Ethan. "An *atrocity*. And anyone who likes gloppy rice is crazy."

I examine my rice, which is even less appealing now that I've realized she's right. Barry materializes and draws up a chair. "How's it going? What do you think of the place?"

"Honest answer?" Mitch asks. Barry nods. "The food is terrible and the beds suck. But I guess it's better than being eaten by zombies."

"Ouch." Barry winks. "That review will hurt our Michelin rating for sure." Mitch sniffs in amusement and returns to her food.

"It can't be easy to feed all these people," Rose says. "How much food do you go through a day?"

"You don't want to know. We have a lot in reserve, and we send out teams to find more. Now that we've cleared out the largest groups of

Lexers, it should get easier unless more come. We have some places we can hit.”

“Need any help?” I ask. I already want out. A chance to clear my head. Things were good at the house. I knew where I fit in, but now I’m back to square one. Worse than square one.

“Maybe at some point. We lost a team the other day, so know what you’re getting into.”

“How could we not know?” Mitch asks.

“You can never be too careful in today’s litigious society, but we’re out of waivers.” Barry seems pleased when Mitch’s stern countenance cracks at his joke, and Rose’s gaze pings between the two of them before she smiles to herself.

“I’ll go.” Ethan runs his fingers through Rose’s hair and pushes it behind her ear. “I don’t want you out there.”

She ducks from his hand, patting her hair carefully. “I can go if we need to. I lived *out there*.”

Ethan covers his frown with a smile he sends our way. “I forgot there’s no touching the merchandise, especially if it’s still damp. If you do, the curls frizz and you never hear the end of it.”

I nod, glad I never touched it, though I still want to. “Where do you guys get the food?” I ask Barry.

“Anywhere we can find. If you know of any place we may have missed, chime in. We have a map in the Events Center if it’ll help jog your memory.”

Mitch pauses in her eating. Rose seeks me out across the table but doesn’t speak. Always Ready is there for the taking, but I’m as reluctant as them to give it up. We might need it.

“I assume you’ve hit up WinCo,” Rose says. “They have tons of bulk foods.”

“It’s on our list, but it’s been surrounded since the beginning,” Barry says. “Not sure there’s anything left anyway.”

Rose nods. “It’s the first place I would’ve gone. How about Crest Mills? It’s on the way to Junction City. They have flour and beans and other stuff.”

Barry pulls a small pad and pen from his coat pocket, then writes it down. “Great idea. Thanks.”

“Hummingbird Wholesale?” Rose continues. “They have everything from pasta to nut butter. There’s Glory Bee—you can get all kinds of oils there, since they supply soapmakers. And honey, of course. Mountain Rose herbs probably doesn’t have that much food, but they do have oils and natural medicines. And Grain Millers, by the highway? It’s only a few avenues away.”

“We have Hummingbird but haven’t been able to get over there yet. I don’t know why we didn’t think of Glory Bee. And Grain Millers was a bust. We thought there’d be a ton, but there was almost nothing.”

“Oh, you know what? I read that they bought a big warehouse on Bertelsen Road a while ago. Maybe most of it’s there?”

She gives him the approximate address, then lists a few wholesalers I’ve never heard of. Barry finishes writing on his pad and breaks into a grin. “Ethan, you didn’t tell me Rose was a walking encyclopedia of out-of-the-way food stores.”

“She’s amazing,” Ethan says. I want to find fault, but his expression is transparently adoring, and the knife of jealousy twists a little in my gut. I have to let this go. Will let it go right now. *Now*. Done.

“It’s my job to know what’s where,” Rose says. “Real estate.”

“And a realtor will save them all.” Barry gets to his feet and sticks the pad in his pocket. “This is helpful. Thanks.”

“Sure. I’ll let you know if I think of more.”

“See you all later,” Barry says. He nods at Mitch before his big frame makes its way through the tables.

“He seems nice,” Rose says.

Ethan eats his last bite of food and pushes his plate away. “He is.”

Rose nudges Mitch. “I said, *he seems nice*.”

Mitch lifts her head, inhaling noisily. “Please don’t start. If you’d seen the shower tent, you’d know this is not the time for intimate relations.”

“What’s wrong with the showers?”

“We get camping showers. Lukewarm water in a rubber bag with a hose. You get a bag’s worth every four days. Otherwise, it’s cold water city.”

Rose lifts a forkful of sodden rice, inspects it, and drops it onto her plate. I consider offering to get her a scoop of plain rice, but it seems overly familiar and too much like something Ethan should do. “It’s not that

different from the RV shower,” she says. “At least the cold water runs, and we brought deodorant. Just skip over third base and slide straight into home.”

I choke on a tasteless vegetable while Mitch laughs loud enough to catch the neighboring table’s attention. Ethan shakes his head, though he grins. “Her class is unparalleled.”

Rose dumps the remainder of her dinner onto Ethan’s plate, then stands with her empty plate and curtsies. “I do know how to class up a joint.”

She walks to the nearest bussing station, hair as bouncy as the rest of her. I’m not sure how I can let it go when I don’t even want her to leave the table.

Rose

LIGHTS GO OUT AT TEN, though everyone has a lantern or flashlight they charge through the day—the only things one can leave plugged in. The Events Center’s gigantic main space has been divided into fabric-bordered rooms like the Expo Halls. The Performance Hall, a separate room on one side of the main space, is where people eat in inclement weather and where they show movies or have other activities at night. A meeting room on the other side, what they call the rec room, is open all hours, and it’s furnished with chairs, tables, and a pool table. It’s where we hung out after dinner, the kids playing pool while we played one of the board games the soldiers found in nearby houses.

I long for an after-dinner dessert, but they were gone by the time we reached the dessert tables. I made sure to save one for every night at home, but my food is no longer mine. Or ours. *Ours* has grown by about five hundred people. The one saving grace is that the fairgrounds absorb this many people easily, at least until you walk into the windowless Exhibit Hall. Though they keep the doors open, it needs a case of air freshener to counteract the various smells its two hundred residents give off.

We leave the Events Center a little after ten, and I pull up my hood against the evening drizzle as we cross the dark lot. Holly walks alongside me, emanating a peace that’s been absent since the first night of zombies.

“Happy?” I ask her.

“Of course,” she says, as though there’s no other way to be. She watches her dad ahead before she flashes a wide smile. “We’re lucky.”

“We are,” I say, hoping my tone is appropriately upbeat.

“Are you okay, Mom? You seem...” Holly shrugs, and her brows meet over uneasy eyes in a way that’s all too familiar—I’ve seen it in the mirror often enough.

“I’m fine, sweets. It’s just a big change coming here so quickly. I guess I’m still trying to wrap my brain around it.” I paste on a smile, glad she can’t see well in the dark, and am relieved when her expression eases into tranquil. I change the subject. “I noticed Nora was around a lot tonight.”

Nora played pool with the three kids, and she always managed to be on the same side of the table as Holly. While proficient with a cue, she failed at playing off the hopeful glances she threw Holly's way, much to Mitch's and my amusement.

"Mom, do not start with that."

"Why is everyone saying that to me? I only notice these things and pass them along to the interested parties."

"There is no interested party." Holly purses her lips. "Nora's a jerk, if you must know."

"Why? What'd she do?"

"Nothing recently. That I know of. But she was a jerk in middle school before we moved."

"Ah. Well, we all know it's impossible to change over the course of ten years. For instance, you're still collecting Beanie Babies and begging for a Myspace profile. Which, by the way, I now give you permission to have."

Holly makes a noise in her throat. "How are you so annoying?" she asks, then skips to catch up with Ethan and the others.

Tom laughs from behind. "It's a gift," I say to him. "They're just so much fun to annoy."

He takes a large step to reach my side, then paces himself to me. As I said to Holly, people can change, and maybe none more so than Tom. It turns out he's smart and funny and, now that he's lost the constant frown, his strong features are handsome, his dark eyes expressive. I never truly entertained the thought of cheating on Ethan, even at my angriest points, but Tom might've made me think twice. He *is* making me think twice. He's making me think thrice and then ten times more.

I keep my eyes on Ethan up ahead. His five-ten was the perfect height for me, but now he seems short. Too eager to please. He spent the entire evening dousing me with compliments. He touched me until I wanted to rip off his arm and fling it across the room. I told him I need time, but he's jumped in with both feet. How is it annoying that he loves me so much? What kind of person is irritated by her partner's adoration? A fucking crazy one, that's who. But I've sworn to give it a chance. Holly's happiness is no small thing, and if Ethan is sober, treats me well, then I have no good reason to leave. Not when it would cause so much strife.

I come back to Earth from Crush-land and resolve to live in Fairgrounds-land, where you're faithful to your husband in thought and deed. "What do you think of this place?" I ask. Tom is silent. "That good, huh?"

I glance over in time to see his shoulders lift and fall. The rain on the asphalt sparkles in the lantern light and glitters in his hair. It looks cute with the way a little wave pushes it to the side. I force my eyes straight ahead. *Already failing miserably at the thought part.* Earlier, I thought there was a moment when he looked at me with something like interest, but I likely imagined it. Saw what I wanted to see.

Ethan gives a wave as we near our building. I smile and don't let the feelings I have on the subject of my husband mature into clear thought. "I wish we were back home," I murmur.

"Me, too," Tom says, almost too low to hear.

He stops to allow me to move to the door Ethan holds. I don't look back, although I'd give almost anything to see his expression.

CLARA AND HOLLY have left the women's restroom along with the other ladies getting ready for bed, and only Mitch and I remain. I spit out the last of my toothpaste and rinse with bottled water. Not sealed bottled water, but water that's been boiled before it's transferred into bottles. The water we drink here is untreated when it reaches the fairgrounds. I have no interest in a bout of giardia. They may have electricity, but at least at home I didn't have to worry that the water could kill me in addition to zombies.

Mitch rinses with her own bottle, then examines me in the mirror. "You're sure about this?"

"I told him I'd try, so I'm trying." Mitch heaves out a sigh, and I avoid our reflections. "I know you disapprove, Mitch. Believe me, I know."

Tears spring to my eyes, and I move to a stall to both hide them and pee. The past years have been hellish, but I can't discount the decade-plus beforehand. Even the first couple of years Ethan was using, he wasn't suspicious and spiteful. My brain knows he's better than that, capable of being different. Naturally, it'll take time for my heart to catch up.

When I exit the stall, Mitch leans against a sink. Her dark eyes bore into mine. “I’m sorry. I go on what you tell me, and I hate what you tell me. I fucking hate it, Ro.”

I nod, then wash my hands and dry them on my jeans. Paper towels are hard to come by, apparently, and the stained towels that hang in the bathroom will likely do more harm than good. No one mentioned laundry, but going on the clothes hanging all over the place, it’s handwash only.

Well, it won’t be the first time I’ve washed things in the sink, even before the apocalypse. When Holly and Jesse were young, we had no money, and the sink was cheaper than the laundromat. Pop would’ve given me the cash, but I hated to ask for a loan I’d be hard-pressed to pay back. Even worse, I hated to ask for money that wasn’t a loan on top of the twenties and fifties he slipped me all the time.

Don’t fritter it away on necessities, he’d say with a wink. It made me laugh, though it was always spent on necessities. There was a time when a shared bottle of good beer was a splurge and ramen was a food group. Ethan and I weathered that storm together and came out the other side. Now I can buy whatever I want, within reason, and all I want is what money can’t buy. It’s the tritest, yet truest, cliché in the world.

Mitch watches me in the mirror. In response to the face I make, she lifts a fist, circles her other fist beside it as though reeling in a fishing line, and slowly cranks up her middle finger. I laugh. Nothing pleases Mitch more than flipping someone the bird.

We leave the bathroom and tiptoe past silent rooms into our building, where someone snores over the drumming of rain on the roof. I stop outside my room on the corner. Mitch waves and continues to her curtain. The kids’ space is dark, though their soft voices are audible. Pop and Tom’s curtain is lit from behind, and I walk past my curtain to theirs. I truly do want to say good night. It’s not my fault it has the added benefit of postponing my entry into the room I share with Ethan.

“Knock, knock,” I whisper.

“Come in,” Pop says. He sits on his cot wearing sweats and a T-shirt, still broad and solid in his seventies. My heart brims with love at the man he is and has always been. Maybe that’s my problem—expecting too much of Ethan, for him to be too perfect.

“Love you, Daddy,” I say. “Good night.”

“Love you, Rosie girl. Get some good rest.”

“I’ll try.”

Tom lies on his side, reading a book in the lantern light—the soldiers also brought in found books to help ease boredom. I definitely don’t look at his biceps or the way his shirt pulls against his taut stomach. And I most definitely do not feel a hot flash coming on when he smiles at me from under that dark hair. “Night, Red,” he says.

“Weep slell.” I only realize what I’ve said when he grins. *Oh, for the love of all that’s holy.* There’s no clear demarcation where hot flash ends and blush begins—every inch of me is an inferno of awkwardness. “That was *sleep well*. I bet you didn’t know it’s backwards day.”

Tom chuckles. “You weep slell, too.”

I salute rather than reply, since my mouth can’t be trusted. I let the curtain fall behind me and stand in the hall while I fan myself with my shirt. The heat recedes, leaving me in a cold sweat, and I shiver as I enter my room. Ethan sits in a folding camping chair beside the plastic storage bin that holds his belongings and doubles as a table. He’s been at the fairgrounds long enough that he has more personal effects than later arrivals.

“Hi,” he says with a smile.

I return his greeting and set my toiletries bag in the corner by my suitcase, willing my hands to stay steady. I’m a mess—a hot mess, as Jesse and Holly say. I lower myself onto the air mattress and pull the covers to my neck. Ethan joins me a moment later, propping his head on his hand. “Everyone all settled?”

“Yeah. It’s weird to be here with all these people. How can you stand it?”

“I couldn’t. Not until you came. But it’s safer than the house for now.”

“Maybe, but the house didn’t have five hundred random people.”

Ethan’s laugh is low, and his caramel-brown eyes smile down at me. “They’re not so bad. I’ll protect you from the people.” He’s outgoing enough to take the heat off me, but I don’t want his protection the way I once did. “Speaking of random people, how was it living with Tom?”

He’s waiting for a punchline, but he won’t get one from me. “It was fine,” I say.

“No, really,” Ethan whispers in my ear. “Did he evaluate our stock portfolio? Maybe suggest a few retirement strategies?”

He’s only saying what we might’ve said months ago, when Tom seemed ages older and sterner, but a fierce protectiveness rises in me. Tom is a man who lost almost everything and then turned his whole way of being into something more compassionate, funnier, kinder. I fist a hand under the blankets. “Tom’s actually pretty cool. You’d like him. Ask him about music sometime.”

“Should I be worried you think he’s so cool?”

His smile teases. *Maybe*. I’ve thought this type of comment a joke far too many times, only to have it turn around and bite me in the ass as an accusation. I try to keep my expression in the territory of semi-playful admonishment, though I want to punch him. “Really?”

“I’m just kidding. Sorry.” Ethan strokes my cheek. I close my eyes as my body fills with a crawling, agitated sensation. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I whisper. It’s easier to say if I don’t have to look at him. Besides, I do love him. I must. Somewhere.

“I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

I open my eyes, view his repentant face. The problem is never that he isn’t sorry, it’s that being sorry doesn’t prevent him from repeating it. “I know,” I say. “I’m tired. Ready to go to sleep?”

“Sure.” He leans to his side to switch off the lantern. I pray he’ll stay there, but he returns. Hot, irrational anger swells when he runs his fingers through my hair. He *knows* it’ll make it frizzy and does it anyway.

I let out my breath. It’s not my hair. It’s him. It’s every old and new hurt. Good people forgive, though. They move on. I breathe in deeply and exhale my anger, imagining it rising to the high ceilings. Then I do it again.

Ethan’s fingers slide to my neck, my collarbone, and then under the covers. His thumb brushes my breast. I freeze until his hand returns to my neck. The blankets rustle and then his lips are at my ear. “I missed you so much.”

I can’t say it in return. I just *can’t*. My mouth won’t allow me to speak that lie and lose any more of my self-respect. But if I don’t answer, it’ll be noticed and remarked upon. Instead, I kiss him. It’s preferable to a conversation, to an explanation, to questions I can’t answer. Ethan responds

like a man dying of thirst. His hands knot in my hair, eventually heading south again. His breaths are short and eager when he presses against me.

I feel nothing, as if the cage surrounding my heart has grown to encompass my nerve endings. My mouth goes to Ethan's to keep him quiet. Tom sleeps only feet away, closest to our side curtain, and though the rain is now a staccato drumbeat on the roof, I don't want him to hear. He'll likely assume, of course—in the unlikely event he gives it any thought at all. But I don't want him to know, and I don't want him to feel more alone than he must in his single cot.

A subtle warmth comes to life in my abdomen at the thought of Tom. In his cot, in my bed. The darkness allows me to imagine it's him instead of Ethan. His mouth on my breast, his fingers inside me. The warmth turns to heat. I raise my hips, and Ethan's—Tom's—breath explodes on my neck. By the time we connect, I'm panting, and I press my lips to his shoulder to keep silent while I shudder. Ethan follows, lies gasping on me, then kisses me deeply.

“I love you.” His voice is hoarse, full of happiness.

I'm a horrible person. Truly, a horrible person. “Love you,” I whisper into the dark, and I hope it'll soon be true.

Craig

NOW THAT THERE'S A PLAN, everyone is antsy. Daisy has stolen the generator for the workshop, and it's Lana's and my job to watch the surroundings while she gets up to something she's kept a secret so far. The generator is remarkably quiet. The sander or grinder or whatever she's using is not, and it isn't long before I catch sight of something plodding up the hill.

The Lexer is tall and thin, its loose clothing blowing in the wind and arms hanging by its sides. Lana cocks her head at me in a directive to take care of it, and I say, "Fine. But I'm starting to think you're not trying to teach me shit. You're just lazy."

Her laugh echoes as I walk to the edge of the dirt, where grass grows before the ground begins to slope. This isn't the first Lexer we've seen in the past days. All came from the direction of the closest city, Winters, that sits nestled in the hills to our east. It isn't huge, maybe eight thousand people, but every populated place is a hazard.

The Lexer spots me and puts on some speed. I ready myself, bracing my legs and raising my left hand to grab hold of hair or an arm or shoulder. As it staggers nearer, I stifle my compulsion to take off. All four of my traveling companions have copped to their urge to run as well, and the fact that I'm not the only one helps me stand my ground.

It's over quickly: grab its outstretched wrist, bring Francis' knife into its eyeball, let it drop. The worst part—aside from the killing of a once-human who wants to devour you—is the stench its liquids produce, which has a way of sticking with only a few drops. The cologne of the apocalypse is truly disgusting.

I walk toward Lana, who raises a thumb. "You didn't hesitate at all. What number was that?"

"Twenty-three," I say. "I hesitated in my head, though."

"You'd be dumb if you didn't."

Daisy sticks her head out the shop's door. "Done. Come inside."

The shop is huge, with worktables and machinery in every available space. I don't know how half of it works, but Daisy is right at home. She

walks over to a bench grinder and returns holding two shiny silver spikes. Each is over twelve inches long, one thicker than the other at just under half an inch, and their tips gradually narrow to an evil-looking point.

The thinner one has a wooden handle, and she presents it to me. “This is yours. It’s solid steel. A long drill bit. I epoxied it into the wood dowel. It’s not going anywhere.”

I now understand what I’m looking at. She drilled the bit part into the handle, leaving the smooth end—which usually goes into the drill—exposed for sharpening. And sharpen it she has. The silver gleams in the dim light, and she flattened the edges slightly to resemble a razor dart.

“The handle’s kind of rough,” Daisy says with a note of defensiveness. “We’ll sand it down and shape—”

“This is amazing.” I shake my head in wonder. “How’d you think of this? What’s the other one made of?”

“Just a piece of an old crowbar. I’m not sure what I’ll use for a handle, though.” Daisy usually does her best to look nonchalant, I’ve noticed, but she can’t hide the smile at the corners of her mouth. “You like it?”

“I love it.” I turn it over in my hands while Lana calls dibs on the other spike. Dad fancied himself a carpenter, and I picked up a little along the way, though I don’t see a lathe among the power tools. “I can help with the handles, maybe. Is there a drill?”

“There’s, like, twenty drills.” Daisy’s smile wins out. “Cool.”

I SET my spike on the back deck’s table and tie my boot. My blister is gone, thanks to the ultra-sticky, gel-type bandage Lana supplied. I’ve done a lot of walking the surrounding land this past week in an effort to break in my boots, but I plan to keep it bandaged just in case.

Francis sits in a chair across the table. Three days of rest turned to over a week when his shoulder didn’t heal enough for our liking. It came out of the sling yesterday, and we’re giving him another day to regain more range of motion. Though I would’ve liked to get going sooner, I no longer want to do it alone, and I won’t have Francis risk his life for my impatience.

“These are great,” he says, tapping his own spike. “Can’t wait to use it.”

“Daisy’s good at what she does.”

“So are you. Wouldn’t be the same without the handle.”

I smile, uncomfortable with the compliment though I know he means it. I chopped madrone firewood into manageable sizes, then turned and sanded the wood using a makeshift lathe of sander and spinning drill to shape it into smooth, ergonomic handles. Daisy taught me how to grind the steel, and I thinned the tang, leaving a wider lip on the bottom and top. Once the wood is fitted around the spike, the lips keep the spike from pulling or pushing out of the handle when you strike bone—a predicament one of the Lexers on the hill showed is possible. I added holes for string, so the spikes can be attached to our belts, and ferrules cut from copper pipe we found. The finished product is nice enough to sell in a post-apocalyptic gift shop.

Francis motions at the atlas on the table. “I have a route mapped out. Two routes. One takes 505, the other back roads.”

My fingers worry at a string on my jeans, and I flatten my hand on my knee. If I’d left on my own, most likely I’d be dead, and although I can now kill Lexers, there are still so many things that can go wrong. Worse, I could make it to Eugene and find no one.

Francis picks up his map measuring tool and rolls it along the atlas’ cover. “That thing’s cool,” I say in an attempt to take my mind off my thoughts. “What’s it called?”

“We always called it a map measurer or curvimeter,” Francis replies, “but it’s officially called an opisometer. My grandpa brought it back from Germany after World War Two.”

He hands it to me. I run the little wheel along my finger and watch the dial spin around the numbers. The other side is a compass, and I find north—the direction I hope will lead me to everyone I care about. “My grandpa was in the war, too. South Pacific.”

“Mine was Seven-Sixty-First Tank Battalion. The original Black Panthers.”

“I’ve heard of them. They were badass.” My father was a World War II buff. On sleepless nights, he’d watch cable until the wee hours of the morning, and he lauded the feats of the all African-American 761st Battalion.

Francis smiles, looking out over the mountains. “Gramps was no joke. Their motto was *Come Out Fighting*. Taught me to do the same.” He takes the curvimeter when I hold it out. “He fought for his country and came home to the same Jim Crow bullshit as before, but he never stopped fighting. Marched on Washington, got his degree, and died with nineteen grandchildren at his bedside. Every single one of us showed up. That’s how special he was.”

Francis drops the curvimeter in his shirt pocket. The gold band on his left hand glints in the sunlight. I look away, but not before Francis sees. “My wife died,” he says.

“I’m sorry.” It’s the lamest response, yet I say it anyway. What else can you say? I can’t ask how she died, though I’m curious, if only so I can try not to die the same way.

Francis breathes in slowly. “We didn’t know what was happening at first. By the time we did, it was too late to leave. Then the power went out, and we didn’t have water. They’d drained the condo pool for maintenance. The one fucking time in years that we needed that pool, and it was empty.”

I make a sympathetic noise somewhere between a grunt and a groan. I wanted to know, but I don’t anymore. I don’t know what to say, don’t know where to look when Francis’ face is tight with grief and pain.

“So, we left,” Francis continues. He stares into space as though narrating the story to the movie in his head. “Got about a half-mile in the car and then had to walk it. Stayed in a house the first night with some other people. A few were going for the mountains, but we were headed for the water. For a boat. We thought we could get to Canada, maybe. It was a stupid idea.”

Francis’ short laugh holds no amusement. “Or maybe it was a good idea. A lot of people had it, since there were no boats left. We turned around, headed northeast. She’d dropped her knife when we had to run, and we were looking for another in a store when a group of them attacked. I was trying to protect Lianne from Lexers ahead of us, and she jumped in front of one coming up behind me. She didn’t have any weapon except herself.”

“God,” I whisper.

Francis’ lips tremble, and he presses them into a thin smile. “I think God’s on vacation right now. Drinking margaritas on a lounge chair by the pool.”

He may be right. If there's a God, He's washed his hands of humans. Francis' pain is almost too much to bear, but I force myself to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry about Lianne."

"Thank you. You'd think I wouldn't want to hear her name, but I do. It's almost like she didn't exist if no one else knows about her."

Francis slumps as though sorrow and guilt push down on his shoulders. Lianne's sacrifice has to be torture, especially for someone as big and able as Francis, who likely thought her protection his responsibility.

Before I can think of a response—soothing words Rose would have at the ready—Troy appears. "We've got a dozen coming from the south. Francis, you up for helping?"

He doesn't ask me. A week ago, it would've been because he didn't think me capable. Now it's a given I'll do my part, and I get to my feet with my spike in hand.

Francis pushes out of his chair and straightens his shoulders, then nods at me with a bit of life in his tired eyes. "Come out fighting, right?"

"Come out fighting," I agree, and we follow Troy into the grass.

Craig

THE ROAD to Winters is barren but for grassy farmland, the occasional Lexer, and orchards of what Francis says are walnut trees. The houses and a winery are dark and quiet. Animal paddocks are empty, their once-electrified fences now broken wires. A cow carcass is torn apart so that its head is the only thing still resembling a cow.

“Lexers eat animals?” I ask. I guessed they did, but I haven’t given it a ton of thought; I’ve been wholly consumed with keeping my own hide safe.

“Yeah,” says Lana, who sits beside me in the pickup.

After another minute, she sniffs, then sniffs again. A tear drops from her lowered face to her jeans. Daisy rubs Lana’s back. “Lana’s dogs...” is all she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Lana lifts her head. “I know it’s stupid to cry about dogs when so many people lost...” Her eyes move to Francis in the passenger’s seat. “But they were my family.”

“It’s not stupid.” As a kid, my dog Lola was my best friend, the one I hid with when Dad was on a rampage. When she died, even Dad cried, though he told me to suck it up an hour later.

Lana begins to answer, then quiets when a small office building appears, its parking lot home to five Lexers. We have to pass through the city of Winters to go north, and no one is feeling optimistic about the prospect, least of all me. I remind myself I’ve killed many Lexers (I stopped counting at forty) while I rub my spike’s smooth-as-silk wooden grip. I raised the grain and sanded all the handles with a fine grit sandpaper, then rubbed in tung oil, sanding and oiling each consecutive layer before I finished with a final layer of oil. If you’re going to do something, do it right. I learned that much from Dad, at least.

But it turns out Winters is empty. Eerily empty. Doors are closed, windows unbroken, and aside from those first Lexers, nothing alive or dead greets us. A dinky little gas station has a sign in the window: OUT OF GAS. It’s obvious the convenience store is empty, since the sign in that window reads: EVERYTHING SOLD OUT.

Troy turns onto another road surrounded by farmland with only the occasional house set back from the road. Mountains to the west, flat land to the east. Uniform rows of plants grow in the fields, wilted from lack of irrigation.

Francis snaps open the map, where he's traced our overall route—the atlas is better for local roads. “This is one hell of a drive. Maybe we should check out I-5, shave eighty miles off.”

“What say you all?” Troy asks the back.

The roads we plan to travel are not only longer, but they're also twisty and narrow. It'll take us forever to get north. If I-5 is clear, we'd be in Eugene tonight or tomorrow morning. “Fine with me,” I say.

Daisy and Lana agree. However, a mile down the road that leads to I-5, we hit what might have been most of the population of Winters. Abandoned vehicles fill every lane, surrounded by golden-green fields of drying grasses. Shoes dot the asphalt and bodies pick their way through the cars. Troy releases the disappointed version of his Texas hoot and turns the truck around.

AN HOUR LATER, past a few one-horse towns, we're well into the mountains. At the end of another hour, the road slopes to flat, and Troy slows doubtfully when Francis instructs him to turn right. The road we travel is two-lane new blacktop. This next road is much older, with dark spots of patched asphalt where it isn't a cracked light gray.

“You sure?” Troy asks, and Francis nods.

It leads us past a long stretch of orchards and spring grass already turning brown. A giant red barn comes next, then a small house set in a grove of trees. The latter's driveway gate is latched tight and hung with a homemade sign that reads *Trespassers Will Be Shot*. Based on the tire swing hanging from a tree in the front yard, I can't blame them for their policy.

The road narrows to an incline freckled with patched potholes, then winds up another hill, dropping off sharply on one side. Rose hates these kinds of roads—she's terrified she won't be able to stop herself from

jerking the steering wheel and plunging to her death. And she says *I'm* neurotic.

Valley stretches out below, rising into green folded mountains with not a soul in sight. Places like this are safe, at least for now, but you need enough food, water, and shelter to survive any length of time. The desolation that clung to me, alone in my condo, creeps in. If the world is destroyed, the end of ninety days will be the end of most things. There'll be no grocery stores. No gas or communications. Maybe all my time in the woods with Dad will pay off, if I can remember any of it. I wasn't the King of Campcraft, either.

Three hours later, we've passed a few quiet farmhouses, no Lexers or humans, and are once again on flat ground. No one is sure how far the tank of gas will get us in the pickup, but there's plenty left—a good thing, since there are no gas stations. Houses appear and grow more numerous, as do cars on the sides of the road. Fallen bodies dot the asphalt, and a few Lexers loiter in a church parking lot.

The cars become a traffic jam. Doors hang open. Bags, suitcases, and purses lay abandoned, much of their contents strewn across the dirt lot set back from the road, which is almost entirely blocked by vehicles.

My best guess is that the people were waiting in their cars when Lexers arrived, and those who couldn't drive past made a run for it with their belongings. Judging by the dark stains on the dirt, the torn clothing, and the shoes, it didn't go well. Judging by two bloody kids' backpacks—one *Dora the Explorer* and the other *Star Wars*—it was pretty fucking horrific. Troy pulls into a narrow pathway between vehicles, then stops the truck and opens his door. "Back in a sec."

On the front path of a small house, where bodies and a white picket fence fell in the grass, he bends to collect a few things. Back in the truck, he sets two guns, a shoulder holster, and two knives beside his seat before he weaves to the intersection. The reason for the pileup becomes apparent at the general store: vehicles sit bumper to bumper at the two gas pumps out front, where what might've started as an orderly line turned to a melee.

Three non-zombie bodies lie by the pump. One car rammed another in its side, and the rammed car's driver slumps out the window. The store's windows are gone, the planters out front upended. The bar and grill across the street is in a similar state. There must have been a fight for gas, then the Lexers came and made it worse, as usual.

Troy manages to get the truck across a field behind the store, then resumes our route past a post office and more destroyed homes. There are far fewer corpses than the cars would suggest, which means it's possible their zombie selves are up the road and could be munching on us by nightfall. Gradually, the personal belongings and shoes disappear, but that cheerful thought keeps me company for the fifteen minutes it takes to pass a few houses and a farm full of mutilated cow carcasses.

The road meets with a roadblock on a small bridge into the next town. A former roadblock, since the chain-link fence has fallen onto the car blocking one lane, and the car that blocked the other has broken through the guardrail and is now parked in the creek below. Beyond the bridge, the road continues, empty but for the few stores of a tiny town and the garbage people left behind.

Troy rolls slowly over the open lane. Growls come from the creek bed. I lower my window and watch three zombies trip in the rocky water. The small store ahead has an aboveground gas tank with pump, though the hole in the bottom of the tank and the destroyed store don't entice us to stop.

"Did they really think that fence would hold back people?" Daisy asks.

"Probably not," Lana says, "but I bet they were hoping it'd hold back zombies."

HOURS LATER, Lana is behind the wheel. Aside from the occasional ransacked house, nothing has changed, and the never-ending grass and trees lull me into a stupor until she slams on the brakes. Daisy yelps, and I lift my spike like a madman intent on murdering the passenger's seat. I let it fall, though I keep my grip at the sight of people on the road.

Three young guys, early twenties at most, all well-muscled and sporty-looking. One waves his arms as if flagging a rescue helicopter. Another watches us hopefully, though he keeps his hands in his pockets, and a dark-haired third guy leans against a red sedan like he's already written us off. All three wear holstered guns and have a blade of some sort on their belts.

"Don't lower your window," Troy says to Lana from the backseat, where he sits on Daisy's other side. "Let me do the talking."

Lana pulls forward slowly, lining up Troy's window with the three. He rolls it down. "How's it going?"

"Not good," the arm-waver says. He pushes back his blond hair with a tanned arm. He, like his friends, wears only a T-shirt with ripped-off sleeves, which is a ludicrous choice for a number of reasons. The main three being, in no particular order: fashion, the weather, and zombies. "We're out of gas and could use a lift. We'd really appreciate it, bro. We've been walking for a day now."

"Why'd you come this way if you didn't have enough gas?"

"We were hoping we could siphon from a car, but we couldn't get any out." He tilts his head at the dark-haired guy. "Lance thought we could make it to the next town, or at least find another car. We didn't know we were heading into North Bumblefuck."

"Almost impossible to siphon out of newer cars without a siphon made for that purpose," Troy says. "They have a valve in there in case the car rolls over. Older cars, any tube will do. Newer ones, punch a hole in the gas tank and drain it out underneath."

"That's good to know." The blond guy shows us blinding white teeth. "Wish I'd known yesterday, though."

"Where are you headed?" Troy asks.

"Anywhere, bro. You name it. We can hop in the back and jump out when we reach civilization. That's all we want."

Troy scans us to gauge a verdict. When he finds no outright refusal, he nods. "Grab your things and hop in the bed. I'm Troy, by the way."

"Josh," Blondie says. "That's Lance, like I said, and this is Tanner."

Lance salutes us, and Tanner runs a hand over his crew-cut brown hair. "Thanks, bro."

The three hoist their giant packs, pushing each other in a joking fashion as they move for the pickup. Once they've taken a seat, Josh knocks on the back window and lifts a thumb, showing his white teeth again.

Troy angles himself against his door. "I'm keeping an eye on them, but I don't think they're up to anything."

"Except pledging the nearest fraternity," Daisy mutters.

"There bros the neighborhood," I add.

Daisy cackles and shoves me with her shoulder. These guys are the antithesis of everything I was in my twenties. In fact, one of their older

brethren probably tried to start a drunken fight with me in a bar at one point or another. These guys don't seem like assholes. They just seem really enthusiastic, *bro*.

Lana picks up speed, head shaking while she watches the road. "Want to know a good rule of thumb? If you have a guy named Lance in your group, go ahead and kill him now. Save everybody the trouble."

Daisy screams with laughter over Francis' deep guffaw. "Untrue," Troy says. "I've known a good Lance...oh, wait, that was Larry." That garners more laughter, and his eyes shift to the pickup's bed. "Look at him now."

Francis and Lana turn for a peek along with me and Daisy. Josh and Tanner are watching the countryside, but Lance is using his reflection in the back window to fix his hair. I lose it along with the others.

ON A NORMAL DAY, if you haul ass, you can drive I-5 from San Francisco to Eugene. On a zombie day, when you take winding backroads, you can get about two hundred miles, not all of which head strictly north. We've driven two-hundred-thirty miles in nine hours, which isn't breaking any records but is much more than we accomplished in a week's time.

The gas gauge is just below half a tank. It won't get us to Eugene, not with the extra miles on our current route, and now that the road has turned to dirt, the going is slower than before. Josh and Company have tied t-shirts over their faces to protect from the dust the truck kicks up. At an earlier rest stop (in the non-working bathroom of a farmhouse) the three said they're heading north. They're from the Midwest, were out in California for spring break, and have a plan to make their way cross-country once they can travel east.

When Lana turns onto the next road, complete with smooth asphalt and yellow center lines, a cheer comes from the back as well as inside. The land is scrubbier and a white-topped mountain peeks over distant hills. I shift in my seat. My ass hurts. My back hurts. I'm hungry. Tired. Nervous.

Lana pulls over by a few cars stopped on the road. None has the hallmarks of a hurried exit in the form of open doors and bloody upholstery. "What do you think that's about?"

“Bet they came off the highway,” Francis says. “Route 36 cuts over from I-5.”

“They’re probably out of gas,” Troy says, “but let’s check.”

I open my door. It’s best not to think about what can go wrong and just get it over with. Daisy slides out after I hit the asphalt, standing on her toes and stretching her arms above her head. “If I’m this cramped, you must be about to die,” she says, looking up at me. “You’re pretty tall.”

“I’m all right,” I lie.

Josh and Company eye Daisy. Though it isn’t quite an ogle, they could do with a little restraint in the undressing-with-the-eyes department. Daisy drops her hands to her hips and glares at them. “Help you with something?”

The boys flush and look away while Daisy winks at me. I was considering how to defend her honor, forgetting she can probably beat the crap out of all of us.

“What’s going on?” Josh asks, venturing another peek our way. At Daisy’s warning frown, he quickly busies himself with his shoe.

Troy walks around the back of the truck. “Checking those cars for gas. Wanna join?”

“Sure.” Josh and Tanner jump to the ground. They both hold a knife and flex their muscles when they pass Daisy. Lance follows with a cocky smile.

Troy opens an SUV’s door and leans inside to turn the key in the ignition. The engine doesn’t so much as crank, but the dash lights up and the gas gauge shows empty. The next cars are the same. The two without keys present more of a problem. After he takes a look under one, Troy pokes around in his pack until he pulls out a collection of tubes stored in a large Ziploc bag.

“Gonna use the siphon on this one,” he says. “Most cars today have plastic tanks, but this is metal. Stab it with steel, and you could spark any fumes. If I’m going to die, it’ll be by zombie, not dumbassery.”

Troy removes the gas cap and feeds a wide hose down, then threads a smaller diameter tube down the center of the first. He notices my interest and asks, “You see how the end of the smaller tube is angled?” I nod. Troy spins the tube as he pushes it farther. “Once you get down to the valve, you’ve got to kind of work it around until it gets past—” He pushes again. “Got it. You can buy a fancier one, but a homemade one works, too.”

He connects the end of the smaller tube to another hose with a black rubber squeeze pump, while Lana sets the end of that hose in a gas can we found at a house. A moment later, liquid patters into the receptacle and the scent of gasoline fills the air.

I join Francis keeping watch on the shoulder, though the chance of something sneaking up on us is slim due to our altitude and the low scrub. Daisy arrives a second later. “I think Lana was right about that Lance guy,” she mutters.

Francis casts a dark look over his shoulder. “You want me to set him straight?”

“No, I can do it myself. I’ve done it a million times.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Francis smiles at her, then resumes his watch.

Daisy catches her lip in her teeth, pretty brown eyes searching Francis’ face, before she realizes I’m watching. She crosses her arms and blows her bangs off her forehead. “Anyway, we’ve gotten far today. Knew it’d be easier up north.”

Her voice is too high, trying to play off the moment. I may not have romantic inclinations, but I can spot them, and Daisy has more than a few for Francis.

“Now you’ve jinxed us,” I say, and try to show her with a smile that her secret’s safe with me. “Thanks for that.”

Daisy pushes me lightly. “Let’s check on the gas.”

When we get there, Troy is removing the tube from the car. “About half a gallon. Better than nothing.” The next car would be easy—hammer a spike through the plastic gas tank—but someone got there first. Troy slides out from under the chassis. “Someone else knows what they’re doing. Let’s go.”

As the road descends, rocky soil becomes grass and trees. A barn-red building appears. Another plundered general store. We stop anyway, but it’s stripped of food and fuel the same as other towns we’ve traveled through. Even the cars have been defueled, many with Troy’s method of a hole in the gas tank.

“Maybe we should stop for the night,” Lana says. “It might take a while to find a place.”

The sun is dipping west, and an entire day in the car has taken its toll on body and spirit. Lana mentioned that they camped before meeting me, but

no one slept well, if at all, when nothing stood between them and zombies. I don't blame them—I'm a big fan of zombie-proof walls.

After a few more miles, we come upon a log cabin store, pillaged the way the others have been yet otherwise deserted. Francis drives into the lot, then toward the concrete pad that provides access to the underground gas tanks. The metal cover is missing, along with the cap to the inlet pipe.

While Troy and Francis hunt for a stick long enough to check the level in the tank, I go to the store with Lana and Daisy. The front deck, where one once sat at picnic tables to enjoy a snack, is caked with mashed food, strewn with food packaging, and crawling with ants. Inside the store is dim, but it's easy to see it's been picked over countless times, and every shelf is bare except for some toiletries, random trinkets, and auto supplies like air fresheners. The café area is decimated, with dishes and pots and pans scattered on every kitchen surface behind the serving window.

A body lies in one aisle, its boot just visible. It's responsible for the smell of death that I've barely registered except to make certain it isn't a Lexer. I check the beverage coolers, find them empty, and give the body a closer look. The man is facedown, the back of his head covered in wispy white hair and a knife planted in his shoulder. His cane's handle peeks out from under his thigh.

An old man. Not a zombie. And someone killed him. There's always the chance he was an evil old man, but how much trouble could a cane-wielding elderly gent in orthopedic shoes really get up to? Probably nothing stab-in-the-back worthy, at least.

Daisy comes to my side. "I hate the zombies, but I hate the fuckers who do this the most. You know?" I nod. After a few seconds, she says, "Francis is nice, that's all. He's not even my type."

I don't laugh, but I can't hide my amusement. "Nice isn't your type?"

Daisy grins. "No. Isn't that terrible?"

"The world could use more nice—"

"Gross," Josh says from behind us. "That guy reeks."

Tanner and Lance join him, and Lance prods the old man's leg with the toe of his boot. A swarm of flies lifts directly into Tanner's face, causing him to yell and trip backward over Lance's shoe. He hits the ground ass-first and smacks at his face. "What the fuck, Lance?"

Josh and Lance scream with laughter. I pull Daisy away from the triad of geniuses and out the front door. Lana's on the porch, eyebrows raised. "What happened?"

"Don't ask," I say. "I'll see how Troy and Francis are doing."

I walk across the lot, small rocks crunching beneath my boots. An old woman's body sits in one of the cars by the truck, with no obvious wound on her purplish skin, and I wonder if she's the old man's counterpart. When I reach Troy and Francis, they shake their heads.

"Nothing." Troy drops his long, dry branch to the ground. "Let's find a place to sleep."

A PLACE TO sleep ends up being a double-wide manufactured home just down the road. The people are gone, and the clothes, food, and suitcases thrown throughout the house reveal they left in a hurry. Possibly hoping to beat the virus north to safety, when north was still safe. If it ever was. From what the others say, it was only a matter of days between the major outbreak in California and the fall of the East Coast.

While we make a space to sleep and check our surroundings, Lance regales me with tales of his battlefield prowess. "...so I knocked down three of them, then threw a new clip in my gun and got the others just before they reached us. It was sick."

I wince for the fifth time. Dad would not be happy to hear *clip* when one is speaking of most handguns. I toss a pile of discarded clothes into a corner and straighten the sheet on a mattress.

"And then there was that time we fought those people," Lance says. "They were in, where was it, Tanner?"

"Not sure," Tanner says.

"Maybe Bakersfield," Lance continues. "Doesn't matter. Anyway, so we're biking along, and these dudes come out of nowhere. I mean *nowhere*, bro, and started popping off rounds like crazy. And Josh is all, 'Hide!' And I'm like, 'No, fuckers!' So I rolled behind a car and started shooting. Popped out the clip and—"

“Magazine,” I say because I can stand it no longer. I think I hear Troy laugh in the kitchen.

Lance squints in confusion. “What?”

“*Magazine*. The thing you load with bullets is not a clip. It’s a magazine. Only a few guns use clips, and you’ll know one when you see it.”

“Oh.” Lance quiets as if the very foundation of his world has been rocked. He recovers quickly. “So, I popped out the *magazine*,” he points a finger gun my way, and I nod in acceptance of his props while I try not to roll my eyes, “and took them out. It was nuts, bro. But it’s kill or be killed now. Vigilante justice and shit.”

I suppose it is, but the days when I took pleasure in that disappeared with my pubescent testosterone. Honestly, there never were those days. I already lived in a world of constantly rocketing adrenaline and anxiety when there weren’t zombies, and it’s never been fun.

“I wish we could meet some girls,” Lance says. “It’s gonna suck if there aren’t any girls left. Right, Tan?”

Tanner’s jaw drops as if he hasn’t considered that, and he looks to me. “That would *suck*.”

There’s no way in hell I’m explaining asexuality to these kids. I’m not a fucking afterschool special. “I’m sure there are harems of girls just waiting to be bedded by the two of you,” I say. “Right now they’re probably more focused on staying alive than hooking up, though.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Lance says. “I’m going outside. Help keep watch. You coming, Tan?”

I lift a hand as they leave. And though I feel the tiniest bit bad for taking the wind out of Lance’s sails, I appreciate the silence. Troy leans into the living room. “Safe to come out? Oh man, you had me laughing in there. He was driving me crazy with clip this and clip that. How do you know it’s a magazine?”

“My dad,” I say. “He was a gun guy. He taught me how to shoot.” At Troy’s bemused expression, I add, “I know, I don’t look the type.”

“You said it, not me.” Troy grins so amiably that I laugh. “You should carry one of those pistols I found today.”

I know I should. I don’t want to, but I’m not a moron who’ll shoot myself in the foot by not carrying a gun when it could be a lifesaver.

Though it's been so long there's a good chance I *will* literally shoot myself in the foot. "I'll take the revolver, if it's cool with you."

It's a Smith and Wesson .357, which means it'll fire .38 as well. Dad owned one—his favorite. I try not to think about that part, only that familiarity might make foot-shooting less likely. I haven't held a gun since Dad died, and I'm not looking forward to it.

"Good choice. Revolvers will go forever. Chamber's full, but we don't have extra ammo. We'll keep an eye out. And take one of the knives, too. Spike is good for zombies, but you'll need a knife if it's human."

Once the house is set for the night and the sun is going down, we eat. Along with bemoaning the lack of the fairer sex and recounting tales of their exploits, it seems deliberating the origins of the virus is Josh and Company's favorite pastime, since they've done nothing but discuss it for the past thirty minutes. "I'm telling you," Lance says for the fourth time, "someone planted it everywhere. All you had to do was infect a couple dozen people in a bunch of cities and let it ride. China would do it to us, too."

"Except it started in China," Tanner says dismissively. "The LX stands for a city in China."

"No, it was in Korea."

"Actually," I say, looking up from my bowl of beans and corn, "it was in Vietnam. Long Xuyen." I've heard of the city before. Dad wasn't big into sharing feelings, but he shared his Vietnam War stories with Mike and me. It gave us nightmares until Mom forced him to quit.

"Same difference," Lance says.

Daisy growls. "Yeah, we Asians are all the same, right? Jackass."

"That's not what I—"

"I'm eating outside." Daisy leaves for the deck with her bowl. I start to follow but sit when Francis and Lana go after her.

"Anyway," Lance says, eyeing Troy and me.

If he expects commiseration, he's disappointed. I glare, and Troy's brow darkens. "Say something like that again, and you're walking."

"Sorry." Lance throws up his hands. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"Then say things in your head before you say them out loud," I say. "That's what big kids do."

Lance mutters to himself and continues eating. The boys have MREs, which are sealed plastic pouches of pre-cooked food that range from vaguely to wholly unappetizing. Not that my beans and canned corn are delicious, even loaded with the hot sauce Lana found in a cabinet.

Josh speaks into Lance's ear. Lance ignores him until Josh whacks the side of his head. "What the hell, man?"

"Now," Josh says loudly.

Lance stands, lips in a pout, and clomps out the front door. "He's apologizing," Josh says to us. "Sorry. He's not a bad guy, he's just a moron who doesn't think before he speaks. I've known him since fifth grade. My parents call him Motormouth."

"Apt name," Troy says. "Where are your parents?"

"Iowa. We all grew up about an hour outside of Des Moines."

That's not a giant surprise. For all their muscles and weaponry, they act like they've just rolled in from Farmland, USA. "How old are you?" I ask.

"Lance and Tanner are twenty. I'll be twenty next week. Happy birthday, right? I spoke to my parents two days before the phones went. They said there were some cases in Des Moines. They're probably fucked by now."

Josh's Adam's apple bobs, and my sympathy grows a tad. They're practically babies, close in age to Holly and Jesse, and thousands of miles from home.

"The city is," Troy says. "But your parents might not be. You're not."

"That's true." Josh looks to Tanner, who smiles as though he wants it to be true but isn't sold on the idea. "Well, we're going there as soon as we can. Once the zombies are gone."

Lance walks in the front door, followed by Lana, Daisy, and Francis. "I forgave him," Daisy announces, "with the understanding that I will kick his ass if he does it again."

Lance hangs his head. Behind him, Lana mouths *Told you*.

Craig

THE REVOLVER WEIGHS down my shoulder in the backseat of the truck. With only seven rounds, I didn't want to waste any on a test shot, so I'm hoping for the best—the best being I won't have to use it. Considering the world is crawling with zombies, I'm sure that hope will soon be dashed. It's comforting, in a way, to know I have a last resort if a pointy object doesn't work.

Still, every gun brings to mind walking into the room where Dad did it. The red-splashed wall behind the bed. The bloody mess of the back of Dad's head. His hand still slightly curled as if holding the pistol grip, though his weapon had dropped a foot away.

They said it was suicide caused by PTSD. At the funeral, a friend of Dad's told me that before that official diagnostic name, it was called *battle fatigue*, and before that it was *shell shock* and *soldier's heart* and *nostalgia*, going back generation after generation all the way to the 1600s. Even ancient writings referenced the trauma of war, though it remained nameless.

I thought *soldier's heart* the best description. Dad wanted to be different, to stay with us, but his heart wasn't in it. Maybe it'd gone down with a chopper or been unintentionally dropped beside a dead Viet Cong soldier. I pictured Dad's heart, forlorn and forgotten, in the mud beside that soldier's motionless leg, flattened by boot treads as my father, and the war, marched on.

Mom, Mike, and I marched on without Dad. Except we didn't march; we trudged and faltered. Mom was sad and tired and snapped all the time. I was nervous and jumpy and convinced my father would've tried harder had he not been saddled with a weakling son. Mike threw himself into school and friends and afterschool jobs as if nothing had happened, though I heard him crying in the bathroom more than once.

Mom remarried a few years later, when I was fifteen, to a nice-enough man I barely knew, and I suspected she was relieved when I spent most of my time at Mitch's and Rose's houses. I was the weird one, the oddball, and with Mike off in the Army, she could start a new life. I didn't blame her, honestly, and I did the same—made a family from my two best friends.

Maybe the gun will get me to them. Maybe it will come full circle and not be the object that takes my family away, but the object that brings them back. I stare out the window, fingers grazing the black grip, before I set my hand in my lap.

Spirits in the truck are bright this morning. Francis' curvimeter says it's three hundred-eighty miles to Eugene, despite the winding route we mapped out and assuming that I-5 after Grants Pass is drivable. If it isn't, we'll be driving BLM and Forest Service roads, for which we'll need a good Oregon road atlas.

The trees turn to farmland and five cows grazing without a care in the world. A farmhouse and barn have a gated driveway, though the gate hangs open. Troy, behind the wheel once again—he says he gets carsick otherwise—asks, “Should we stop and see?”

“Maybe we can find a car for Josh and them,” Francis says. “Or gas for us.”

Troy turns into the driveway and rolls up the rise. The house's door is open as well, and there are signs of a scuffle out front: planters knocked over, a men's slipper discarded on the bottom step of the front porch. Nothing comes through the door, and, judging by the peaceful cows, nothing has tried to eat them in recent memory.

Troy pulls to a stop. After a minute, we leave the truck, and Josh and Company hit the dirt. “What's up?” Josh asks Troy.

“Thought maybe we'd find another vehicle, but doesn't look like there's one. We could check for food.”

Inside, the house is dim, quiet, and odorless. Everything seems in place until we reach the kitchen. Open cabinets, drawers pulled out, and the fridge a mess of condiment containers that appear to have been swept aside to reach real food. We purloin an unopened bottle of ranch dressing, as well as the ketchup, mustard, and lemon juice.

I take a last look out the window at the barn and make out the shape of a small tractor inside. Every so often when Dad took Mike and me camping, we stopped at his friend's farm by the town of Sweet Home. The friend had a gravity-fed fuel tank to fill his farm equipment, in order to avoid driving his tractor to the gas station. In a place like this, with no stations nearby, these people likely had something similar.

I share my thoughts and finish with, “We could check by the barn.”

“Let’s a few of us do that,” Troy says.

Francis and Daisy volunteer, and we four take the back door into the long grass. When I spy something blue fifteen feet to my right, I cautiously make my way over. It’s a sneaker, attached to a woman wearing jeans and a flowered shirt. Her clothes are covered in dried blood and her face eaten away, likely by insects rather than zombies.

“Looks like people did it,” Francis says.

“Fuckers,” Daisy says.

We nod and continue on. Before the virus, the sight of a body would’ve haunted me for weeks. It would’ve become the story of *The Time I Found a Dead Body*, to be trotted out in party conversations. I probably would’ve puked, though I might’ve left that out of the story depending on my audience. Now it’s just another dead body—and a welcome one, if there can be such a thing, since it isn’t attempting to eat me.

The barn is empty of gas tanks, though we luck out in the lean-to behind a mound of unsplit firewood. “That’s a gas can on steroids,” Troy says.

The cylindrical red metal tank is close to four feet high, with wheels on the bottom for transport and an iron hand crank connected to a hose. A glass gauge on the top of the tank is three-quarters filled with pale gold liquid. The sticker on the side says *GAS CADDY*, leaving no doubt as to what it contains.

“Holds thirty gallons, which means we’ve got over twenty here,” Troy says, squatting to read the small print on another sticker. “You just got us to Eugene, Cherry.”

The tank is loaded into the bed with much grunting. It has to weigh over two hundred pounds, but it’s two hundred pounds no one minds lifting.

Once we turn onto our next road twenty minutes later, civilization appears in the form of ten houses within eyeshot of each other. Farther on, a town called Douglas City is more like Douglas Two Streets. Every stopped car is out of gas, and they grow more frequent with every mile.

People likely drove as far as they could, watching the fuel gauge drop before the low fuel light came on, and then they coasted to a stop with their hearts sinking in their chests. Past the cars, belongings are discarded by the side of the road. A suitcase, a photo album, a matching pair of expensive high heels. Things they carried until the weight or inconvenience became heavier than the thought of leaving them behind.

Troy pulls the truck to the shoulder near a hybrid sedan, whose open door shows keys hanging from the ignition. "This should work for them." He steps to the road, motioning Josh and Company to join him. "If you take that turn we just passed, you can make it to Redding. We can give you a jump and five gallons of gas. It should get you there and back twice."

Josh nods, face pale. "We're leaving now?" Tanner asks, then shoots his friends a worried sidelong glance. Even Lance, self-proclaimed badass, appears dazed at the thought.

"Wasn't that the plan?" Troy asks.

"Well, um, yeah," Josh says. "But I think, if it's okay, we might want to come north with you?" His voice climbs on the last words, the declaration fading into a question.

Troy faces the truck where we wait, brows lifted in question, and I imagine them doing the same about me. Now I'm the one making the decision, and I can't say no. I nod along with Francis and Lana.

Daisy sighs. "Of course." I smile at her, and she whispers, "But I reserve the right to shoot Lance."

"Not if I do it first," Lana murmurs, and the four of us laugh.

"What are you waiting for?" Troy asks the guys. "Hop in. Let's hit the road."

After a few towns that look like tornadoes blew through, with Lexers that trail the truck until we're out of sight, the road moves into the mountains of the Klamath National Forest. Snow-covered peaks and a sign that warns there's no snow removal in winter remind us that only a month or so earlier, this way may have been impassable.

"If this had happened in the winter, we'd be better off," Lana says. "The Lexers wouldn't have been able to travel as far."

"Maybe they freeze," Troy says. "If so, the safest place to be right now is Barrow, Alaska."

"Or Siberia," Daisy adds.

There have to be places that are doing okay. Remote places not as far removed as Barrow or Siberia. But maybe not. Those who made it out would likely run for small towns and out-of-the-way places. All it takes is one bitten person to make a few more, who will then continue the hunt. After this long, it's possible the majority of places are rife with infection.

Those that aren't would be the places food and people are scarce, like deep in these mountains.

That's what we'll do, I decide. When—not *if*—I find Rose and Mitch, we'll head for the mountains. There are cabins, empty homes, tucked deep in the woods. There are fire lookouts that stand high above surrounding forests. With enough food for a couple of months, we could outlast the zombies. If all else fails, I'll do my best to hunt with the revolver or a found rifle. I was shit at it when I was young, but maybe desperation is the impetus for success.

Occasionally, we pass a house or car but continue on. We have gas now, and there's no sense in stopping unless necessary. That goes for the town we pass, which is accessed by a single road that's been walled off by scrap wood and fencing ten feet high. The fencing continues into the forest—two by fours nailed from tree to tree in a way that won't stop humans but will delay mindless bodies.

We climb higher, where the towering fir trees remind me of the deep-green forests of Oregon, and large patches of snow still linger in the shade. Green valleys stretch to our left, and a white-topped dark ridge of peaks looms directly ahead.

"It's beautiful," Lana says softly.

"It is," I reply. I always thought so, even when I wanted nothing more than to go home, sit on the couch, and eat frozen Cool-Whip.

In a valley once again, farms and houses dot the road. Outside a town named Etna, we come to an intersection packed with cars in all three directions but our own. Dead Lexers lie in front of the vehicles, and a man steps to the hood of a car, rifle pointed our way. Four more men do the same at various points in the intersection, so that we'll be sure to die from every angle if we get any big ideas.

The first man lowers his rifle and steps carefully from car to car until he's on the road, walking toward Troy's window. "Can't come through," he says. "Where're you headed?"

"Oregon," Troy replies. "We don't need anything. We have gas."

The man's eyes rove around the pickup's interior, then to Josh and Company, before he releases a breath. "Sorry, I can't let you in. I would if I could. Turn back and take Eastside Road to Fort Jones, then get on Scott River. Don't take Route 3. Bunch of our people been killed there, and not

only by zombies. We had seven hundred people before this, now we have four hundred. That's why no one else is coming through."

"What's in Fort Jones?" Troy asks.

"Nothing but zombies now," the man says. "Don't bother looking. Got yourselves a good map?" Francis holds up the atlas, and the man nods. "We heard I-5 in Oregon is pretty clear after Medford if you want to cut over."

We travel the way instructed through a valley full of fields and barns, though there isn't an animal to be seen. The lone gas station is burnt to a crisp, and the farmhouses are pillaged. Forest surrounds us once again, the road narrowing and turning to dirt at points. A river bubbles merrily on our left, and mountains climb on either side. We continue along, the river playing peek-a-boo through trees and brush before it reappears on our right.

We've been traveling all day—six hours and counting—but there are hours of light left. The odometer says we've gone 174 miles. We won't make it to Eugene today, but if we get nearer to Grants Pass, it could be only another day's drive. The thought of I-5 being drivable is almost too good to be true, and I refuse to believe it while I fervently wish it so.

Against all odds, we're getting closer. I've added and subtracted three times to be sure my math is correct. Which is insane; my math is always correct. My math is the reason Rose didn't fail math in high school, since she sucked at it and Mitch had zero patience when it came to tutoring. Schooling you on your shortcomings, now, is something Mitch does well, though I love her for it. She'll be more surprised than I am if I make it to Eugene. Rose, on the other hand, will say she knew I could do it, which is why I love her.

A few miles later, we come to a rustic campground with a few metal carports, a small building that resembles something from the Old West, and porta-potties. Peeing outside is no big deal, but crapping, especially when you don't want to stray too far from your traveling companions for fear of being eaten, is more difficult. Thankfully, I've avoided it thus far, and the porta-potties couldn't have come at a better time.

Troy pulls in. A sign welcomes us to a mining camp and wishes the prospectors luck with their find. We exit into warm sun and air that smells of river and forest peat.

"How're you holding up?" Francis asks Josh and Co., who stretch their legs and arms.

“A little stiff,” Josh says with a smile. “But it’s way better than walking.”

I explore after I use the facilities. A spigot labeled POTABLE H₂O produces water, much to my surprise, and I fill the gallon containers we have in the truck, then wash up with the soap I took from that house a lifetime ago. It’s not a hot shower, but I might never take running water and lathered soap for granted again.

Once the men have washed up, Lana and Daisy send us away. We sit in the carport, listening to water splash and the two women’s quiet laughs. “That’s a good sound,” Francis says. Though he likely thinks of Lianne, he smiles. “Reminds me of being shooed out of the kitchen as a kid. I always wanted to know what they were laughing about.”

“Don’t even try to walk into your Texan Mama’s kitchen.” Troy leans back, unsmoked cigar in hand. He smoked one every day before zombies, but he saves his remaining ones for special occasions. “It is a good sound. Almost makes me miss wife number four.”

“*Four?*” I ask.

“I’m either unlucky in love, or very lucky, depending on how you look at it. Married four times, divorced four times, and not looking for number five.”

“You know you can have sex without being married, right?”

Troy laughs good and loud at that. “I go in with the best intentions. Forever and a day, and all that. Just never works out that way.”

“I miss my mom,” Josh says. Tanner and Lance nod, and all three stare into the woods past the river. Maybe it’s that their defenses have dropped some—or maybe mine have—but I like them. They’re just kids, really, and scared kids at that.

Troy sets his cigar on his leg, lips twisted sympathetically. “Me too, boys.”

The water shuts off and the women appear, wearing damp hair and smiles. “Holy shit, that was cold,” Daisy says. “But good.”

Lana scrunches the ends of her hair with her small towel. Rose has taught me more than I ever needed to know about scrunching. “How much more will we do today?” she asks.

“Three hours?” Troy says. “Maybe four. Let’s see if we can hit the Oregon border.”

“I say we go as far as we can. You have to when you get a good day.”

“My thoughts exactly. Milk it for all it’s worth.”

“Lana and Troy agree?” Francis asks. “The stars must be aligned or some shit.”

We laugh and pile into the truck, our spirits raised. It’s amazing how feeling the tiniest bit more human does that. On the next road, the occasional abandoned house pops up here and there. Abandoned cars come next. Once again, we seem to be following in the footsteps of the exodus from California.

The houses grow more frequent until we’re in the town of Seiad Valley, where a sign boasts a population of just over three hundred. Cars have been pushed to the shoulders, some into ditches, and bodies lie here and there, all finished off by head wounds. We near a white wooden building on the roadside—a store with a few cars parked out front. An SUV sits crosswise on the road, blocking travel in a way that seems more than coincidence.

“Careful,” Lana says.

Everyone pulls their weapons. I reach for mine, hand quivering, and I’m sure Daisy can feel the rest of me shaking, too. This could be it, the part where I’ll have to prove myself. I can already tell I’ll fail.

A man bursts out of a sedan and runs into the road waving his arms. He’s thin and dirty, though he wears nice clothes under the grime. He pushes back his greasy blond hair. “Hi! Hello! I don’t have a weapon. We need some help.”

Troy stops but makes no move to open his door. The man squints through the windshield. “Sorry. I’ll move the truck. We put it here so we didn’t miss anyone, but I won’t keep you. Let me just get my wife to help.”

He motions at his car. A woman leaves the vehicle holding a preschool-aged kid in her arms, then sets the kid on the passenger’s seat and joins her husband on the road. She flashes our pickup a puny smile and climbs into the SUV.

“You have it in neutral?” the man asks the woman.

She nods, and he pushes at the hood until the SUV rolls into one of the parking spots. Once the wife exits, the man waves us along. Troy sighs, foot still on the brake. “What do you say? Stop or go?”

“Stop,” Francis says. “They have a kid.”

I nod along with Lana and Daisy. “I’m inclined to agree,” Troy says, “but let’s be cautious. Lana, you do the talking. Everyone but me and Francis put your guns away.”

When we step from the truck, the man’s mouth drops. “Thank you! Thank God! The last three people just sped past. Thank you.”

It’s almost pathetic. It reminds me of myself, and I feel sorry for the man. The woman goes back to the car to retrieve their kid, who has the same blond hair as her dad. She clings to her mom’s leg with round eyes, and when I smile at her, she furrows her golden brow in return.

Lana introduces herself and then the rest of us. “I’m Carl,” the man says once she’s done. “My wife is Lily, and my daughter is Bailey.”

“Nice to meet you,” Lana says. “What’s going on? Are you stuck?”

“We ran out of gas a few miles down. We’ve been here five days now.” Carl wipes at his forehead. “Good thing there’ve only been a few eaters. Where are you guys going?”

“North, to Oregon.” Lana’s smile is kind. “We can fit you in.”

Carl’s shoulders droop. “Thank you. That’s very nice of you to offer, but we’re heading east and south. Lily’s family is in Yreka, and last we heard they were doing okay on their land. We have to go there.”

“How far is it from here?” Troy asks.

“About fifty miles. We’d walk it,” Carl glances at his daughter, “but there are some stretches where I’d be worried about making it past.”

“Hold on.” Lana waves all of us, including Josh and Company, to the other side of the pickup. “What should we do?”

“Give them some gas,” Daisy says. “Just a few gallons. It’ll get them fifty miles, and we have enough, right?”

We survey the family. Carl’s arm is around Lily, and his other hand on their daughter’s blond hair. They stare up the road, tension apparent in the set of their shoulders, as though awaiting a life or death judgment. Which I suppose isn’t too far from the truth.

“Let’s do it,” Troy says. “You cool with that, Cherry? You did find the gas.”

“Of course.” I watch the family, warmth spreading in my chest. It feels good to help someone else. That I’m in a position to do so is astonishing.

Carl practically falls at our feet when Lana tells him the news. “Oh my God, thank you! I have a can right here.” He races to his car and lifts a five-

gallon gas can. “We found a car down the way you came. A hybrid. We’ll walk to that.”

“Good plan.” Troy climbs into the bed with the Gas Caddy and sets the can down. “This looks pretty self-explanatory.”

While Troy sets up, I take in the store. It has a sign for a café off to the side, which touts it’s the home of the *infamous pancake challenge*. I have no idea what that is, but I assume it involves eating a lot of pancakes, and my mouth waters. With the food we found in that house’s pantry, we have enough for five or more days, but none of it is pancakes hot off a griddle and dripping with maple syrup.

Troy cranks the gas tank’s pump while keeping an eye on the gauge. When it’s lowered some, he sets the can into Carl’s waiting arms. “I need to find me one of those,” Carl says. “What’s it hold?”

“Thirty gallons,” Troy replies. “We found it close to full at a farm. Might be worth a look if you pass any farms on your way.”

Carl nods eagerly. “Oh, we’ll check. Don’t worry about that.”

“How’re your food stores? Need any?”

“You’ve done enough.” Carl lifts the gas can. “This is fine. I don’t want to—”

“You have a daughter who needs to eat,” Francis says. “How about a few things?”

“We could use it, yeah, but—”

“Then take it.” Daisy leans into the bed with Troy, where she pulls cans and assorted items from our plastic tub of food. “Lily, you want to grab these?”

Lily steps forward, hands in prayer position. “Thank you. God bless you. Are you Christians?”

“Some of us are,” Lana says, “and some of us aren’t. All of us want to help.”

“I’ll say a prayer for all of you.”

“I never say no to prayers. You take care on the road, okay?”

“You, too,” Carl says. “Thank you again. How are you getting north? A few people came through a day ago and said Route 199 was blocked, but this road here seems okay. It meets up with 238 and goes north all the way to Grants Pass.”

He motions to the first turn after the store. Francis opens the atlas, finds the winding road, and confirms it goes that way indeed. "Thanks for the heads up," he says to Carl. "We would've wasted a lot of time and gas."

We say our goodbyes and turn up the road to Oregon.

Craig

“I MUST SAY,” Troy announces, “I’m feeling very Christlike at the moment.”

Lana takes a sip from her bottle and grimaces at the metallic tasting water from that campground spigot. “Feel free to turn my water into wine.”

“Are you Christian?” I ask Troy.

“Sure am. I love me some Jesus. You?” I shake my head, and Troy says, “Daisy is a maybe, Francis is a not anymore, and Lana is a—”

“Lana is a hell no,” Lana says. “Which is also where I’m going, according to Troy.”

Troy’s laugh booms. “Me and Jesus have our own thing going on. You can pray to the Mother of Trees for all I care. I do know some churchy people who might not have made it, but I’m sure I’ll see you up there.” He lifts a hand from the wheel and points toward Heaven.

Lana groans. “So I have to spend eternity listening to you, too? Next time you speak to Jesus, would you ask if we can live in separate towns?”

“Lana, Lana, Lana.” Troy shakes his head sadly. “You’d be miserable without my cunning wit.”

Lana sucks her teeth in disagreement, and the rest of us laugh. I look out the back window at Josh and Co. The guys’ hair whips around, their cheeks and arms are sunburnt, and their faces are dirty again. They haven’t bitched at any of our bathroom stops, though, not even Lance. “Should we switch off with them in the back?” I ask, feeling guilty for not having considered it until now.

“I said I was *Christlike*, not Jesus himself,” Troy says. “They’re young and...shit.”

The truck slows at a jumble of cars in the road. There have to be over twenty at differing angles, as if people came this far and then gave up. Or they came this far and ran into zombies, as a few gnawed bodies with head wounds suggest.

“Turn around and go that other way?” Troy asks.

Francis opens the atlas. “Remember what he said? It’s blocked even worse. We’re just over twenty miles from the Oregon border now. It’s this

road or that one. No other choices unless we want to backtrack and go east toward I-5.”

Grumbling ensues. I remind myself of all the ground we covered today. It’s been a good day, as these things go, with few zombies. I haven’t gotten a chance to use my spike or gun, which I’m not brokenhearted about.

Josh and Co. walk in front of the truck. After a few seconds of deliberation, Tanner comes to Troy’s window. The scalp beneath his buzzcut is a deep pink that’s going to hurt later. “We can move them. It shouldn’t take long if we all pitch in.”

He claps his hands together, end of huddle style, then returns to his friends. “Ah, the optimism of youth,” Troy says. “Let’s do it.”

There are a couple of ways to move the cars without keys, Lance tells us, but the simplest is that many cars have a shift lock release that allows the car to shift into neutral. The trick is finding the access panel, usually by the shifter, then either pulling up on a strap, using a screwdriver to push a tab to the side, or a combination of both.

“And here we were disconnecting the transmission,” Francis says. “How do you know this?”

“My dad once lost his car keys and we had to move his car. The mechanic said you can find the location in the manual if it’s not obvious.”

“Good work, kid,” Daisy says.

Lance barely looks her way, likely because she now terrifies him. “Yeah, so I guess we should start?”

We begin with the first car in line, pushing it far ahead and into the left lane to make room for the cars behind. Though it’s easier than what Francis described with the transmission, it takes a long time, especially when we first have to search for the owner’s manual to find the location of a few. With three people watching the woods, and two cars that won’t budge no matter what we do, it takes two hours to clear a winding lane for the pickup.

The sun is lowering and the road is cool in the shade. After a few miles and only two houses, Troy slows at a small, tin-roofed house set in the trees. “If we go any farther, we might not find a place before dark.”

It’s disappointing not to reach Oregon, even if it’s only twenty miles closer to Eugene. I wanted to hit that mental milestone. But it’s better to be alive to reach Oregon than dead by the border.

I help set up the sleeping areas and heat food on Josh's and Lana's backpacking stoves. We use the house's plates and silverware to keep ours clean and refill our water containers from the water heater. After the sun has set, I settle myself on the floor and close my eyes until my watch shift just before dawn.

I'M AWAKENED with a violent shake and a soft hiss. "Something's out there," Lana whispers, then crawls toward where the others lie sleeping.

It's dark, with barely enough moonlight to see shapes. I hear more whispers across the room, then sit up straight at the crack of a branch outside, my heartbeat drowning out all else. We didn't see any Lexers except the dead ones in town, but that doesn't mean anything. Zombies are mobile.

A flashlight flares in the corner of the living room and is quickly dimmed. Francis' head is silhouetted in the light of the window before he ducks out of sight. I don the shoulder holster, find my spike in the dark, and then crawl across the room toward the others, moving slowly to minimize creaks in the old wood floor.

When I arrive, Lana leans to my ear. "People. Francis saw at least five."

That's worse than zombies. Much worse. I press my back to the wall. There'll be no Oregon border, no seeing Rose or Mitch or the kids. Troy crawls to my side, the whites of his eyes reflecting the moonlight. "I'm going out back and around while Francis and the others keep them at the window. Can't wake the boys without them hearing."

Josh and Company are in another room. I stare at Troy, unsure what this means for me, until I understand he wants my help to ambush the people. There was a little something extra in Troy's after-dinner cigar if he thinks I'm up to that task.

"Okay," I whisper, though what comes out is a rush of air and a squeak.

Troy clamps a hand on my shoulder before he crawls toward the back door in the kitchen. I follow because whatever I am—terrified, incompetent, weak—I keep my word, even if it kills me. And I have no doubt it will kill me.

Troy stays low as he opens the kitchen door. Moonlight outside affords us a better view, though it's still lacking. He pushes open the screen door and crooks a finger. I slip through the open space and off the back step to kneel at the side of the house. The damp ground soaks through my jeans. The cool air sears my lungs.

"Stay low," Troy whispers. "When we get to the front, we fire once. Francis will turn on the light. Shoot anything that moves."

I fumble for my pistol. Something I should've already had in hand. I try to breathe, to think of something that will give me peace in these last few minutes of life, but there's only fear. When Troy moves, so do I, rounding the side of the house in a low trot until we reach the front corner.

"Now." Troy's arms raise, then comes a deafening boom and a flash of orange.

I lift my pistol as the flashlight shines out the window into the trees. Two men are near the front door. Two slighter people, possibly women, stand thirty feet away where the trees are thicker. Another few figures are to the left of those, and every gun is turned toward the house. A cacophony of shots sounds—Lana, Daisy, and Francis firing into the night. Troy gets off two and then shoves me back as bullets hit the siding with deadly thumps.

"Stay low." Troy crouches and ducks around the side of the house.

I follow, my knees sinking into earth behind the bushes out front. The woods echo with gunfire, a steady *boom boom boom* that shatters the house's windows and drowns out everything but a sharp, piercing scream. Something—many little things—hit my head and back. I almost scream myself, until I realize it's glass shards from the window above me. I can't see anything, anyone, and I sink lower to stay out of range.

Ahead, Troy aims steadily at the trees, returning fire that comes our way. The men at the door are gone. Maybe they decided it wasn't worth it. Left for something easier.

I can't think, can't move. I'm as frozen and useless as ever. Holding a gun when I have no business with one. That's what Dad said during our last trip to the woods, after I missed my third clear shot at an elk. *Some people have no business with a gun.*

I could turn and run. I could leave right now and walk the final miles alone. There have to be supplies somewhere—a can of food here, a water bottle there. I'll walk it. I'll hike to Eugene, ashamed but alive.

My attention is caught by a figure behind the bushes on the other side of the door, just under the living room window. A man coming for Troy. In a split-second, I see myself explaining to Rose and Mitch how I made it there on the backs of the people who rescued me. I've already died myriad ways in my mind, and though terrifying, any one of those deaths is preferable to living with that cowardly, pathetic version of myself.

I tackle Troy to the ground just before the man's gun sputters orange. I land low, belly sinking into mud, and lift my revolver. When I wasn't nervous, which wasn't very often, I was a decent shot. Better than Mike. Sometimes better than Dad.

I pull the trigger twice, forgetting not to flinch. But the man falls, and then I pull myself into a crouch and inch toward the open front door, eyes on the trees. A bullet splinters wood above my head. Not a warning shot—a test shot. They can't see me with the flashlight in their eyes. They've moved into the deep gloom beyond its glare, hoping I'll fire and give away my location. A shout comes from inside, and then the sound of an engine along the side of the house. Troy is up beside me, breathing heavily. "See anyone?"

"No," I whisper.

Brake lights flare red in the driveway. The truck. Someone has the pickup. Two figures break from the trees at the same time as a car on the road flashes its headlights and honks its horn. I aim. Breathe in. Let it out. Then I fire. When one stumbles, I know I've hit them. I track the figure's slower course and shoot twice more until they fall.

Troy drops the other with a single shot, then leaps to his feet and races for the truck. Lance darts through the open front door, gun in hand, and follows him. I spin to the trees to cover them, but whoever was there is gone with the vehicles. Troy and Lance fire down the road a few times before they give up. It's a lost cause, and ammo shouldn't be wasted.

They lope for the house while I enter the front, calling out, "It's Craig!"

I'm unspeakably relieved to see Francis at the window with his gun, and Lana and Daisy kneeling with a flashlight in the corner. An unknown man is facedown in the shadows opposite. It's only when I return to Lana and Daisy that I notice the two bodies they kneel beside and recognize Tanner's buzzed head and Josh's blond hair.

“They ran out of their room,” Lana says, her face pallid in the light. “Right into the two guys.”

My mind still languishes in the world of fifteen minutes ago, when all was well. The sight of the two boys on the floor won’t compute. They were smart enough to stay in their room, or at least not run directly at people with guns. Troy and Lance burst through the doorway and stop dead. *Dead, like Josh and Tanner.*

“What...?” Troy asks, his voice faint.

Lance lands on his knees in front of his friends, hoarse sobs breaking my daze. This is reality: two young men dead over a truck in a world full of fucking trucks for the taking. I have two of the seven bullets left, and I want nothing more than to put them both into the people who did this.

Lance drops his head in his hands, shoulders bucking with sobs. Lana wraps her arms around him, and he holds on like a heartbroken little boy. A branch cracks outside. Francis and Troy head for the door, and I fall in behind them. Another crack, then one from the opposite direction. Lexers, making their way toward the noise and light. I lift my spike from my belt while Francis waves the flashlight around.

“Can’t be that many,” Troy says. “Let’s wait and see.”

Two women stumble onto the driveway from the trees. Not only have some human fuckers killed people and stolen our truck, but their scheme has also brought on another threat. I stride toward the Lexers, just now realizing I wear only socks.

Fuck it.

I close in on the first. The flashlight’s beam lights half her face in a way that makes her one staring eye and rotted cheek more grotesque. I bring my spike into that one eyeball and yank it out, spinning for the other before the first falls. Troy is already there, and the woman hits the gravel.

Francis hollers as he storms the woods opposite. We move that way, Troy’s flashlight keeping Francis in sight as he meets with the five Lexers advancing. By the time we reach him, two are down, and I’m almost gleeful as we take the last ones to the ground.

Rose

THE INFIRMARY IS in the Events Center, in a long, narrow office space at the rear of the giant building. Now, the office holds cots in the back and chairs in the front, split by desks and cabinets which help to screen the patients along with the omnipresent trade show drapes. When I enter, Ethan is rooting around in a cabinet. He glances over his shoulder and rises quickly.

Too quickly. I'm trying to quell this suspicious voice, but it's impossible to undo five years of mistrust in a few days. "Hey," I say.

"Hi." Ethan wears a real smile, a happy-to-see-you smile, that helps dispel my wariness.

Drapes part in the back of the office. The woman who exits is a decade younger than me, with chin-length bleached hair and small, pretty features that would be prettier if she weren't so sullen. She strolls toward the front of the office in her tight black jeans and boots, her lips pouted.

"Rose, this is Eva," Ethan says. "Eva, Rose. My wife."

"I know. You've only been talking about her non-stop for, like, ever." Eva rolls her eyes and stops in front of me. "Nice to meet you."

At this distance, it's apparent Eva's closer to fifteen years younger, somewhere in her late twenties. And though she's declared it nice to meet me, her crossed arms and chilly smile give off an annoyed and slightly superior vibe that only increases when she takes me in from top to bottom.

"Nice to meet you, too," I say, and battle the urge to pat my hair or check myself in a mirror. I'd chalk Eva's rudeness up to youth, but Holly and Jesse don't greet people this way. If they did, I'd open a can of whoop-ass on them.

"Eva helps out in here," Ethan says, moving to us. "She's learning the ropes."

"Were you a nurse before?" I ask.

Eva sniffs. "Not at all. But I had some experience in the healthcare industry."

"That's good. I'm sure Ethan appreciates the help."

"I sure hope so," Eva says, as if the thought she'd care either way amuses her. She grabs a coat off the desk chair. "See you later."

“Bye.” I watch her walk out the door, then I turn to Ethan. “Why do I get the feeling she doesn’t like me?”

“Don’t take it personally, Eva doesn’t like anyone.”

“Isn’t she a little too angsty to be a nurse? I feel like she’d just as soon murder me as cure me.”

Ethan laughs. “Some days, maybe. But she’s good at the medical stuff.” He takes my hand. “What did I do to deserve this visit?”

“I was nearby with nothing to do. I thought I’d say hi and see if you needed anything.”

“The only thing I need is you.” He draws me closer and gazes down, face creased with pleasure. “And here you are.”

I smile as best I can. When they say guilt eats you up inside, they have to mean this gnawing sensation in my stomach that makes me vaguely nauseous. “Where’s Rhonda?”

Rhonda is the other nurse. She retired ten years ago, which is likely the reason she’s still alive. I’ve been told most medical personnel died in the outbreak with everyone else at the hospitals.

“She went for lunch.” Ethan kisses my hand before he lets go, then points to a chair. “Sit. Hang out. I have a few things to do, but I can go to lunch with you when she’s back.”

I put my feet up on a desk while Ethan writes something in a notebook and then sorts through pill bottles in the cabinets. He quit nursing partly because of his habit—a while into his addiction, he started recommending drugs for homebound patients who didn’t need them, then pocketing most of the pills. He stopped before he was caught. That was before he progressed to buying pills, and then to heroin.

“Those are the pain meds.” Ethan points to a locking file cabinet, as if he can read my mind. “We keep count.”

“Okay.”

I don’t know what else to say. I watch his back while he works, observing his straight shoulders, his sure stance, and force myself to remember the good things. The love in his eyes when he looks at the kids, tucking my hair behind my ear while saying he was the luckiest man in the world, our talks late into the night, when sometimes we laughed so hard we cried, our agreement on most things—humor, politics, what constitutes a happy life.

He's a good person; that's what makes this so hard. It's as though there are two people in there, one of whom came along later and was most unwelcome, and he ruined everything.

Ethan closes the cabinet door and sees me watching. "What?" he asks, his slight smile unsure.

"Just looking."

"You like what you see, baby?" He says it in a Brooklyn accent, raising his chin in my direction, and my laugh is genuine. He comes to my chair, where he sinks to eye level. "I know I like what *I* see."

"Frizzy and wrinkly does it for you, huh?"

"Guess so."

I push his chest. He smiles and leans in for a kiss. Instead of backing away, I close my eyes as our lips touch lightly, then meet again. It's better than the last time, and though my body stirs, it also protests. It would be so easy to do this by rote—it's been over twenty years, by now I have it down—but I don't want to pretend anymore. I want it to be as real as it was before.

The opening door saves me from having to make a decision. Ethan stands as Carver enters and nods at me. "Ethan, I've got a few sick people over in the ice rink. Was wondering if you'd take a look."

Ethan finds his stethoscope and a bag on a desk. "Sure. What's wrong?"

"Slight fever, achy, that kind of thing."

"Were they out of the gates at all?"

"Nope, not a one. First thing I checked, believe me."

It would only take a couple of people to turn and then attack, making more zombies in the process. I imagine the scene, locked inside the gates with Lexers. We have no way of escape except our feet or our truck, and getting a vehicle out from behind locked gates might prove impossible. If we have to leave unexpectedly, our plan is to meet up at the house and put our original exit plan into effect if necessary. But in order to do that, we have to be able to escape in the first place.

"Guess I won't be around for lunch," Ethan says to me. "I'll see you later?"

"Maybe. I might be out running errands."

Carver finds that amusing, judging by his smile. I like him, and his soldiers like him. That other guy, the one who looks like a squashed frog, is

creepy. And though I try not to base my opinion of others on appearance, he acts exactly how he looks. If anything, he gives frogs a bad name.

We leave for the front of the building, taking the long corridor on the side of the Exhibit Hall and exiting one of the many sets of glass doors from the lobby to the parking lot. Just around the corner of the building is the southeast gate, at which three soldiers stand. To my left, a locked person-sized gate meets with a footbridge that crosses Amazon Creek. Though the chain-link is covered, I peeked the other day and saw that the footbridge's far end is blocked by a vehicle parked in the grass.

The Expo Halls sit just ahead, stretching almost to the ice rink, behind which another bridge, this one wide enough for a vehicle, crosses the creek. I have to admit they've done their best to minimize the chance of zombies coming through the gates, and there are none on the streets outside the fences. Still, I worry. About the boundaries, about the zombies, about our drinking water and food. If the water runs out and we're trapped inside, all the rules that keep this place in order will turn to chaos.

At home, I could find the kids at any given moment—they were always a shout away. Here, in an emergency, I might not be able to find them. I try to keep tabs on their whereabouts in an unobtrusive manner, though they likely know my breezy *What are you guys up to today?* is more a gale of anxiety.

People wander in and out of the Expo Halls as we pass. "Any news of the outside world?" I ask Carver. They don't tell us much, though it seems there isn't much to tell. Barry's unconfirmed reports that the zombies won't die soon are always on my mind.

"Some broadcasts from around the country, where they've made Safe Zones. We thought we heard something official from California, but it fizzled out." At my disappointed noise, Carver pulls his gaze from the lot, where tents hold showers, people eating, and a dozen kids chasing a ball. "Planning a trip?"

"One of my best friends lives in Oakland. I'm hoping he's okay." Carver's expression is sympathetic while it warns me not to get my hopes up. I know that. I *know*. But I want so badly for Craig to be alive that I can't help it, even if everyone thinks I'm crazy to hope. "I'm also hopping on the first flight to Hawaii once I get the all-clear."

"That sounds perfect."

“You’re invited. I’ll buy the first round of Mai Tais. You seem like you’d be fun when you’re not yelling at an underling.”

“I’m there,” Carver says with a chuckle.

My stomach drops when Ethan’s face hardens, and I begin to review my tone and body language before I make myself stop. It’s obvious that inviting Carver on my fictional post-zombie trip to Hawaii was a joke, not a come-on.

When we reach my building, Carver waves. Ethan returns my smile with a wink that fills me with relief. I have to stop reading into his every flinch or minute facial expression. It’s what he does to me, and it drives me crazy. I walk into the hall, thinking that for the first time since coming to the fairgrounds, I didn’t want to scream at Ethan’s touch. I actually *liked* him for ten whole minutes, even if I am relieved he’s been called away. Keeping my guard up is exhausting.

I turn the corner into our row of drapery-rooms. Mitch, Holly, and Clara sit in varying states of boredom on the folding chairs we set in the open space outside our curtains, where the back wall is bare. Our makeshift living room. “You gals look excited to be alive,” I say.

“It’s sad when the best part of my day is terrible food.” Mitch checks her watch. “Twenty minutes and counting.”

“Where are the boys?”

“Jess went somewhere with Nora, and Tom’s walking Willa. Your dad’s asleep.”

He’s been sleeping a lot. I eye his curtain as Pop’s voice comes through. “I’m just resting, Rosie. Yes, I’m alive.”

I roll my eyes at Mitch, who calls, “Papa, your daughter’s rolling her eyes at you.” Pop’s laugh sounds.

“I’m finding me a new best friend,” I say.

“Good luck with that.” Mitch flips a hand toward the front of our building. “They all come nowhere near my magnificence.”

“True. Though I’d gladly kill you for some caffeine.”

The fairgrounds went through their limited coffee supply quickly, and we’ve been in withdrawal since we arrived. I’d drink black tea instead, but some sadist decided coffee and tea are low on the list of things one needs to survive, and they don’t devote any of their precious cargo space to caffeine

on their food-finding expeditions. Kombucha is a distant dream, though I'm probably the only one who misses it.

Mitch moans. "I'd even drink some of that instant International Coffee right now."

I raise an invisible mug and saucer, then take a pretend sip. "Remember Paris?" I ask Mitch in an overly chipper voice. "What was that waiter's name again?"

"Jean Luc!" we both exclaim, cracking ourselves up in the process.

Clara and Holly watch us in bewilderment. "It's from a commercial back in the day," Mitch tells them. "You had to be there."

I drop into a chair, amused but, sadly, no more caffeinated than I was. "There are sick people in the ice rink, so don't go inside."

"What kind of sick?"

"Not sure, but it's not zombie. Ethan just went to check it out."

Holly chews her cheek. "I hope he doesn't catch it."

"Or give it to us," Mitch adds.

The *tick-tack* of nails on concrete arrives before Willa rounds the corner curtain with Tom just behind. The tiny dog and big human are an entertaining spectacle, both emphasizing the other's size. "Willa, heel," Tom says. Willa stops short and waits for him to catch up.

"Impressive," I say. "Did you just teach her that?"

"I started yesterday." Tom crouches to pat Willa's head. "She's the smartest dog I've ever met. Where'd she come from?"

"You know, I have no idea. Ethan said a rescue. Someone returned her because they couldn't take care of her." He'd also said that he knew I didn't want a puppy but wouldn't be able to resist a pathetic adult dog face.

"Watch what else she can do. Willa, stay." Tom drops a few pieces of kibble on the floor nearby, then sits on a chair and ignores her.

Willa's bottom hits the floor. Her gaze flicks from Tom to the food, then back again, until she stares at the kibble with a desperation that's hilarious and pitiful at the same time.

"I think she's trying to move it with telekinesis," I say.

Clara and Holly giggle. "Dad, you're torturing her," Clara says.

Tom smiles and holds up a finger. "Okay, Willa."

Willa scrambles, legs slipping every which way, and gobbles down the food. Tom fishes in his pocket for more and lowers it to pug level. She

rushes forward for the rest, then licks at his hand while he holds her down with his palm and rubs her belly.

“I think you’re her new favorite person,” I say. “I was wondering where she went late at night. Is she in your bed?”

Tom’s teeth flash. “She comes in after you’re asleep, jumps on my cot, and licks my face.”

“She makes me pet her for ten minutes and then comes to you for more? You can kick her out.”

Tom shrugs one shoulder and scratches Willa’s chest. I’ve been virtuous for the past days, not once imagining Tom and myself as anything other than friends. Which means I now strike down the image of Tom in his cot while I absolutely do not swoon at his fondness for my dog. Ethan has all but ignored Willa since we arrived. “She’s working us both. Aren’t you, Willa?”

At her name, she grabs her stuffed mouse from under a chair and leaps into my lap, then spins around once and collapses into a ball. I stroke her short fur while she chews her toy. Ethan was right about me feeling bad for Willa, though I wouldn’t have been at the rescue in the first place. There’s no way to ask why he thought this gift suitable without insulting him. Since we’re on good terms at the moment, that’s the last thing I want. Besides, Willa has grown on me. She’s a comforting presence on my legs at night, she listens to me with all-consuming interest, and it isn’t as though she ties me down the way I feared, since zombies have me locked behind fences for the foreseeable future.

Mitch gets to her feet, tapping her watch. “Lunchtime. Let’s move, otherwise we’ll get the worst of an already bad situation.”

Pop exits his curtains, combing his fingers through his short beard. He looks okay, which sets my mind at ease some, though he still doesn’t look himself. In reality, none of us does. Everyone is tired, spaced-out at times. The magnitude of this hits you on and off. One minute you’re making it through the day okay, and the next you feel as though you’ve been dropped into an alternate universe.

I tuck my arm in Pop’s while we stroll for the doors. “You hungry, Daddy?”

“I am a bit peckish,” he says. “Did they say when we’re getting something to do?”

“I saw Barry while I was out with Willa,” Tom says. “He said he’d meet up with us at lunch to talk about it.”

“Good,” Mitch says. “If I have to sit and stare at a wall for much longer, I’m going to start biting people.” The lunch line stretches out of the tent and down a few parking spaces. Mitch groans. “Lunch is going to suck.”

“When does it not?” I ask. We take our place at the end of the line, and I peer at the clouds forming above. “It might be wet, too.”

With this line, finding a table in the tent will be difficult. If it isn’t too cold or raining miserably, we eat outside, covered or uncovered. Five hundred people make a god-awful mess when they eat inside the building, and the unwillingness of a portion of the residents to clean up after themselves leads to ant infestations.

“If some people didn’t ruin it for everyone, we could eat wherever we wanted,” I say. “But people suck.”

“As will lunch, I hear,” Pop says.

I rest my head on his shoulder. “It’s bad enough people don’t wipe their pee off the toilet seats or flush their poop. All it takes is one little lever. You press it and the poop goes away.”

“Maybe that can be our job,” Mitch says. “Toilet-using lessons. Consideration of Other Human Beings 101.”

“The men’s room is just as bad,” Tom says. “Their aim leaves something to be desired.”

I grimace. “You’re in charge of that one. Let’s hope they have better aim when they’re shooting zombies.”

The line moves steadily, and we’ve reached the inside of the tent when Barry shows. His short ponytail is threaded with gray, as is his beard, and his squinty-lined eyes make him an appealing combination of hippie and Marlboro Man.

“We were discussing jobs,” I say. “Mitch and I want to teach people how to actually flush the toilets. Tom’s in charge of aim.”

“That’s been attempted.” Barry shakes his head to convey the cause is lost. “Thankfully, their aim with a rifle is better.”

I push his shoulder. “That’s what I said!”

Barry’s smile is extra bright when it faces Mitch’s direction. Mitch pretends not to notice and inspects the white tent while he lifts his clipboard. “We’ve got cleaning of restrooms, general cleaning, cooking,

serving and cleanup, washing dishes, fence patching, inventory and stocking.” He looks to Pop. “You’re excused due to age, unless you want a job.”

“You trying to say I’m an old geezer?” Pop asks with a wink. “I’m not old enough to sit around watching daytime TV. What about helping watch the fence?”

“Only adults between the ages of eighteen to sixty-five, and those are all filled. I’m sorry. I don’t make the rules.”

“Face it, Daddy, you’re old,” I say.

“Not that old,” Pop grumbles. “I’ll do any of the above. But how about we put me down as sixty-five?”

Barry scrutinizes Pop with the good humor that seems to be as much a part of him as his laugh lines. “I can do that.”

Holly leans to view the clipboard. “Clara and I will take anything where we can be together. You can put Jesse with us, too.”

Holly and Clara have each other, but Jesse has none of his friends. He didn’t bring a guitar to the fairgrounds, which I didn’t notice until after the fact. That told me all I needed to know about his mental state, and I’m glad he and Nora have rekindled their friendship. The two already sit at a table, and they wave Clara and Holly over.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Tom says to Barry. “But I’d like to be on the fence when possible.”

Barry lifts his brows my way. “Cooking,” I answer. “But I’ll do anything.”

“Same for you?” he asks Mitch.

“If cooking means ordering takeout, then yes. Otherwise, I’ll do anything *but* cooking.”

Barry laughs heartily. There’s no doubt he finds her entertaining, at the very least. “Mind if I eat with you guys?”

“Of course not,” I say.

“Shouldn’t be that bad. I hear it’s tuna salad.”

My suppressed groan comes out as a sigh. I’m hungry, but not hungry enough to eat tuna. Maybe if I were starving to death, or if I had to eat it to save Holly’s and Jesse’s lives, but those are the only two instances in which I can imagine willingly swallowing fish flesh.

Pop pats my head. “Poor baby. She lives in Oregon and hates fish.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’m not that hungry anyway.”

“You drink sweat socks, but you don’t like fish?” Tom asks.

“She won’t even eat the seaweed,” Mitch says. “If I drag her out for sushi, she orders vegetables and rice wrapped in rice paper.”

“The real shocker is that anyone likes fish,” I say. “It tastes like *fish*. I like everything about sushi but the fish and seaweed.”

“Which is all of sushi,” Tom says.

“Not true. I like soy sauce and pickled ginger and wasabi, and I like dipping things. Plus, the little bowls and fake grass are cute.” Tom eyes me with the barest trace of a cheek crease, and I glare at him while struggling not to smile. “Am I complaining about lunch? No. So can we not make it a thing?”

Tom lifts his hands in surrender as we near the plate-covered serving tables, where each plate holds an ice cream scoop of creamy tuna salad with a pile of crackers on the side. “Zombies smell better than this lunch,” I murmur.

He coughs. “Sounds like a thing.”

“A simple—and true—observation isn’t a thing.” I choose a plate where none of the crackers touches tuna and pick them off before they can slide over. “Someone needs to be quiet.”

“Yes, you do,” Tom says.

I poke his arm—which I absolutely do not notice is firm as all get out—then hand Pop a plate. A sea of tables stretches out before us, full of families and older people and adults. Most residents have been at the fairgrounds long enough to make connections, and I’m glad to see old folks sitting with younger ones. Many of the elderly likely haven’t had this much company in years. A few kids pet Willa, who can’t be outside for more than a minute without being showered with attention. She licks the tuna off their hands, tap dancing with pleasure.

“Outside?” Mitch asks.

There are plenty of empty round tables under the gray sky. Tom asks Barry something quietly, then nods at the answer. He hands his plate to Mitch. “Bring this for me? I’ll be there in a few.”

I wonder where he’s going while we head to a round table. Barry sits beside me, with Pop and Mitch across, and I watch the two shovel in tuna salad while I nibble at my crackers. There’s no way I’ll so much as consider

putting that creamy half-orb of fish slop in my mouth, and the fact that it's flecked with green canned peas makes it worse. I love vegetables—a crisp salad, broccoli or green beans perfectly cooked to an *al dente* state—but the overcooked and canned versions make me gag. If I want fresh vegetables anytime soon, I need a vegetable garden, though my black thumb and the fact I'm surrounded by concrete make that unlikely. You have to plant around now to harvest most summer vegetables.

“Where'd you guys get all this food?” I ask Barry.

“Supermarkets, mostly. A few schools. There's another wholesaler we plan to hit this week along with some of those places you mentioned.”

I chew my next cracker slowly. I'm hungrier now that I've put something in my stomach. Still not hungry enough for fish, though.

“Supposedly,” Barry continues, “just over the Oregon border in Idaho, there's a USDA National Warehouse. There's only three in the country, I think. This one stores food for distribution to the West Coast, including for emergencies. If anyone in the area knows about it, they're set.”

Tom appears holding something wrapped in a paper towel. He deposits it in front of me and then takes his seat. “What's this?” I ask.

“Peanut butter and jelly. They'll give you one if you ask nicely.”

I peel back the paper towel. The homemade bread is thickly cut, and peanut butter and red jam ooze from between the slices. “It looks delicious, and not just because tuna is the alternate choice. Thank you.”

Tom nods like it isn't a big deal, but it is to me—the kind of thing Ethan did once upon a time but hasn't for years. At some point, I moved from being hurt that he didn't to not wanting him to. That way, I wouldn't feel indebted to him, no matter how small the reason. I'm not sure which is worse.

I tear off a bite and chew it slowly. It's yeasty and peanut buttery and sweet. In a word, perfect. “This is so good. I thought they didn't have an oven.”

“One of the trucks has one,” Barry says. “They can only make a few loaves at a time, and it's a highly sought after item.”

“Put me on cooking so I can make sourdough bread. I'll sneak you some.”

“How could I refuse that offer?”

I rip off a hunk of crust. Crust is the best part, and homemade crust is even better. “If we could plant food, we’d have fresh vegetables, too.”

“I’ve been thinking that. Do you usually have a garden?”

“No, but not for lack of trying. I unintentionally murder everything, including houseplants. The only things that survive my affections are succulents.”

Barry laughs. “My wife loved to garden. We had—I *have*—a house by the Cascades, and she spent all summer gardening.”

“Do you go out there often?”

“Not in years. But I couldn’t seem to get rid of it.”

He looks thoughtful, a little sad, but not devastated. The others are in the middle of a conversation, but I keep my voice low anyway. “I’m sorry about your wife.”

Barry’s smile splinters his face into a hundred crevasses. “Thank you. It’s been six years. I’m okay now, though I wasn’t for a long time. I guess that’s why I held on to the house. I should’ve sold it years ago.”

“It’s up the McKenzie?” I ask, referring to the river—and road—that run east toward the Cascade Range.

“Yup, with views of the Sisters and Mount Washington. Fifteen acres, but it’s surrounded by protected forest.” I chew my sandwich, raising my eyebrows to show I’m impressed. Barry dips his head almost bashfully. “Yeah, it wasn’t cheap, but we did get a good price.”

“What’s the house like?”

“Big. Too big for me. It’s five bedrooms, a few outbuildings, things like that.”

He acts nonchalant, but you can’t fool a realtor. Even at a good price, his house cost a pretty penny. “What’d you do before this?”

“After I came home from the Gulf War, a friend asked if I wanted to go in with him on a tech startup. I didn’t know a thing about it, but I said sure. We sold it after a good run, before things went bust. I invested in a few companies along the way. It worked out.”

“Did those companies have names that rhyme with Hoogle and Famazon and Gapple?”

Barry’s cheek dimples with his suppressed smile. “A few of them might.”

“I always wanted a time machine so I could go back and buy some Hoogle stock,” I say. “Tell me more about the house. I love houses, if you didn’t figure that out from my job.”

My love of houses and a flexible schedule drew me to real estate when the kids were older. I loved walking through homes, imagining myself in them, and it wasn’t a stretch to do the same for clients. Aside from the usual duties of the job, I’ve dried tears, bolstered shaky confidences, plunged toilets, crawled under houses, and been snagged by countless blackberry brambles. Himalayan blackberries are delicious come summer, but they’re also an invasive species that takes root everywhere and anywhere in the valley.

“It’s rustic lodge style, with fireplaces and a big wood stove,” Barry says. “A shop, a small guest house, that kind of thing.”

It sounds a bit like my Idaho spread, although it likely cost one million dollars rather than fifteen. The place in Idaho is rustic the way only the filthy rich do rustic, and though Barry is well-off, he isn’t I-have-my-own-helipad well-off. Or he doesn’t act like he is, since those people are usually assholes. I’ve met a few, usually potential home buyers who came to Eugene and left in a snit when it didn’t meet their expectations of opulence.

“Why aren’t we there?” I throw an arm around Barry’s shoulders. “Hey Mitch, I found my new best friend.”

Mitch breaks off mid-speaking to mock glower while Barry chuckles. He seems like a genuinely good person. He also seems somewhat lonely, or at least alone, and I don’t like it.

Ethan arrives with Clara and Holly, sets a plate of tuna on the table, and sits in an empty chair. “Hey.”

“Hi,” I say cheerily. I wait a few beats and then drop my arm from Barry’s shoulders. I don’t want to act guilty—there’s no reason to—but my usual anxiety surfaces. Ethan, for his part, doesn’t seem to notice, which leads me to think I’m being oversensitive. Even, dare I admit, *wrong* in my skepticism of his newfound lease on life.

“Where’d your brother go?” I ask Holly.

“Off with Marquez and Nora.”

“What did you eat?” I lift my second half of sandwich. I want it, but I want Holly to eat more. “I have half a PB and J if you want.”

“I had one. It was good.”

“Am I the only person who didn’t know about the sandwiches?”

Holly pushes a curl behind her ear. “I didn’t, either. Nora got one for me.”

She frowns as if the sandwich was an insult. I catch Clara’s eye and receive a shrug in response. Nora is still a jerk in Holly’s book, which I find hard to believe, but I keep my mouth shut on that subject and instead ask, “What’s going on with that sickness?”

Ethan finishes chewing his first tuna cracker. He’d better not try to kiss me before a good tooth-brushing. “Not sure. Seems like flu or a virus of some sort.”

“Could it be the water?” I ask. Most of the table snickers. They think my insistence that their water be purified borders on obsessive. They’ll thank me when everyone but us comes down with explosive diarrhea.

“Not food poisoning or the water,” Ethan says. “That’d most likely be gastrointestinal. Plenty of people ate and drank the same things they did, and they’re fine. Just be sure to wash your hands and don’t go to the ice rink unless you have to.”

After we finish lunch and Willa has cleaned the plates, we walk toward our hall. The dark clouds begin to spit rain and receive a glum glance from Clara. “Another boring, rainy afternoon.”

“We could go see who’s playing pool,” Holly says.

“It’s probably kids. You know they never leave the table during the day.”

“We’ll tell them they have puppies in the lot and to run and grab one before they’re gone.”

The girls giggle—a sound I love to hear, even if they are plotting semi-evil deeds. “Who knew our children could be so diabolical?” I ask Ethan and Tom. “Why don’t you play *with* the kids?”

“Because they’re annoying,” Clara says.

“That’s true. Kids are super annoying.”

Holly snorts. “But not nearly as annoying as parents.”

She jumps out of reach when I swat her behind, then laughs at me over her shoulder. Instead of pale, her cheeks are flushed. Instead of sad, she’s back to her natural cheerful state, though there’s a touch of hysteria in there, as though she can make everything go our way if she only believes it enough. I recognize the look; I did the same when Mom was dying.

“That’s why I didn’t want kids,” Mitch announces.

“Never did?” Barry walks beside her, though far enough away that it seems purely by chance. After today’s lunch, however, it’s obvious he likes being around Mitch. He laughs at her jokes and watches her with an expression somewhere between amusement and admiration. Men who like strong women are awesome, and men who like Mitch are the best kind of awesome.

“Briefly,” Mitch says. “My ex and I debated it, but I dodged that bullet when I found out he was an asshole and swore off men forever.”

Barry blinks, digesting her words and the fact he’s a man. I glare at Mitch and receive a smirk in return. She can harangue me about my issues all day long, but Mitch has a boatload of her own.

“I live vicariously through Rose,” Mitch says. “Her kids are a little less annoying than most.”

“Such praise for decades of work,” I say. “It makes it all worthwhile, doesn’t it?”

“Sure does.” Ethan squeezes my hand. “I have to get back to the rink, but I won’t kiss you with fish breath.”

“And that’s why I love you.”

It comes out inadvertently, and Ethan grins before he takes off. A moment later, Barry excuses himself to do inventory. “Really, Mitch?” I ask, once he’s out of earshot. “Trying to scare Barry away?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mitch says primly, then turns to Holly and Clara. “Hey girls, want to take the pool table by force?”

“Now I’m scared,” Holly says. “But let’s do it.”

Mitch steers them toward the Events Center. “Nice avoidance tactic,” I call after her. Mitch raises a thumb above her head, and I laugh. Even jerky Mitch is amusing.

“What’s with Mitch?” Tom asks.

“She avoids intimacy. The better suited someone is for her, the faster she runs in the opposite direction.”

“She’ll figure it out,” Pop says.

I trudge toward the door, dreading the next hours until dinner. “And then there were three. Is it me or was it far less boring at home?”

“Not you,” Tom says. “And that was pretty boring.”

“It was. But at least we had things to do.” Inside, I plop onto one of the folding chairs and wince when my butt hits metal. “We had a couch. I miss couches.”

Pop draws open the curtain to his and Tom’s room, and the metal pole falls out of its attachment for the hundredth time. I drag my chair over to deal with it before Pop can climb up on something and break his neck.

“Let me.” Tom steps onto the chair with the end of the pole in hand. “Some duct tape should do it.”

“Maybe Barry has—” I cut myself off when Tom fishes a flattened roll of duct tape out of his coat pocket, and I remember him doing the same at the school. I also remember thinking he was the kind of guy who helps just to be helpful, which has proven to be true. “Do you always have duct tape on you?”

“Pretty much. It can do anything and everything.”

“You sound like MacGyver.”

“I wanted to be MacGyver when I was young, so I’m taking that as a compliment.”

Pop lies back on his cot pillows, hands behind his head. “Remember how you loved that show, Rosie?”

I think about saying I had a teensy-weensy crush on MacGyver, based less on his appearance and more on his MacGyvering abilities, but that could be misconstrued as flirting. Awkward flirting, my specialty. “Who else could make a bomb using a stick of gum and an armadillo shell?”

“Did he really?” Tom asks, and rips off a long strip of tape.

“No, but he probably could’ve.”

Tom smiles as he winds the tape around where the pipes meet. He adds another piece for good measure, then wiggles the connection. “That should hold it for a while.”

“Thanks, Tom,” Pop says.

“No problem. Need anything else duct-taped?”

“Now that I know you have that, I just might.” Pop gets to his feet with a groan. “These old bones need to walk for a bit. You want to come, Willa?”

Willa scoots to his feet in answer, and the two make their way outside. I return the chair to our circle and sit down, very aware that Tom and I are alone. When it’s just us, it’s harder not to entertain the thoughts I’m not entertaining. I’ve disregarded that little fantasy from the other night, telling

myself everyone has those thoughts. Plays out scenarios. Tom inspires the same tenderness I feel for Mitch and Craig. That's all. I have to stop mooning over him like a teenager and act like a woman with two grown kids and multiple hot flashes.

Tom lowers himself to a chair across from me. "And then there were two."

I smile and pretend to be interested in our surroundings. The paint is peeling off the walls *and* floor in here, and the top layer of exposed concrete has turned to dust in places. If my phone weren't charging, we could listen to music, but I only got space on a plug today. And the fact that I'm now trying to think of something to say means I never will. It's the same when someone asks me to name a favorite book or song and my mind goes blank, as if I don't understand the concept of music or the written word.

"Thanks for my sandwich," I finally say. "It was delicious."

"Can peanut butter and jelly be *delicious*?" Tom asks. "It can be filling, or adequate, but not delicious."

"It's my favorite. One of my greatest fears was that my unborn children would be allergic to peanuts, and I'd have to give them up forever. The peanuts, not the kid, though it was a close one." He grins, and I add, "There are entire restaurants devoted to peanut butter and jelly, you know."

"Are they all hipster restaurants in Portland?"

"Probably."

"I wonder how they're doing," he says. "Portland, not the hipsters. *They're* probably zombie food."

"Hipsters can be annoying, but I like lattes and good cheese and social consciousness, so I hope they're alive."

"Is there anyone you can't see the good in?"

"Of course," I say. "I'm super evil in my mind."

His cheek creases. "I highly doubt that."

"I may feel guilty about it later, but it's true. My mom always said we should try to see the best in everyone and to help if we could. But she didn't just say it. After she died, people came out of the woodwork to tell us about things she did for them. We had no idea of the half of it."

Pop and I treasured those stories, although with each one we felt our loss more keenly. My mother wasn't perfect—she was human, with a smart

mouth and ordinary grouchy moods—but her kindness came straight from her heart, and she was never stingy with it.

I miss her every day. I often wonder if she'd be proud of me, if I'm the person, the mother, she hoped I'd be. What advice she would give about Ethan and the kids. Sometimes I think I'm doing okay, and other times I feel as though I'm hiking through the wilderness without a map and compass.

“She sounds like she was special.”

“She was. I decided I wanted to leave behind the same legacy, so I do my best to remember that whenever I'm tempted to be an asshole. Which, I'll have you know, is surprisingly often.”

Tom's laugh rumbles. “I still doubt that. But I guess it works in our favor, though you may threaten to evict some of us to get the point across.”

I groan, dropping my head back. “I'm *sorry*. I usually don't threaten people, but the zombie apocalypse shortened my patience.”

“That's not always a bad thing.”

“Maybe not. Not sure it stuck, though.” It's the most I'll say about Ethan. About how I wish I were less pliable. More sinewy and strong. I talk a good game, but when push comes to shove, I fold like the uncomfortable chair on which I sit.

“Practice makes perfect? Feel free to keep me in line if necessary.”

“Somehow I don't think it will be,” I say.

“You don't?”

There's no mistaking the pleasure on his face, and I study the floor before he sees what might be on mine. It isn't just hormones, though there are plenty of those. I like him the way I like Mitch and Craig. And in another way entirely. Two months ago, I would've laughed my ass off at that idea, and now I'm trying my hardest to pretend it isn't the case.

After all he's been through, Tom could've surrendered to his anger and grief. He could've let guilt shut him down. When he came to a fork in the road, he chose the better, kinder route—though it was likely the harder one—and I can't imagine him changing course now.

“I think you're good,” I say, and I mean it in every sense of the word.

Clara

THE FAIRGROUNDS ARE SURROUNDED by a tall chain-link fence in some parts and an iron fence in others, and all have been covered to hide the interior. Privacy fencing, plastic sheeting, sheets, curtains, carpets, cardboard, doors—all have been taken from nearby homes and affixed to the fence.

At first, the residents were under siege by zombies growling through the links and rattling the fence every time they left the Events Center. Once shielded, they were invisible as long as they were quiet. Now that they've pushed the zombies back a couple of blocks, they keep the fences covered just in case.

Everyone over the age of eighteen has a job, and mine, along with Holly and Jesse, is to check those coverings for holes. I don't mind working. Card games and pool get boring, and laziness quickly loses its appeal. This is work people avoid, though I don't know why. No one looks over our shoulders. If holes are patched, we're good, and the possibility, however unlikely, to practice killing zombies through the fence is a plus. It could be they avoid it for that reason—many of the residents fought zombies at the beginning, but some wince at the thought of doing it again. I don't want to be like them. A month without zombies has allowed their fear to intensify. Just under a week has me doubting my own abilities. I'd carry my hammer with me just in case, if it didn't have to remain hidden under my cot.

"Over here," Jesse calls from ahead.

The wind has torn a sheet. I pull the cart containing our camouflage closer, and we search the contents until we find a small area rug that fits. Holly peeks out the hole, relaxing when there's nothing but grassy field in view, then helps me hold it in place while Jesse clips a length of wire from a spool. He pokes it through the corner of the rug and winds it around the chain-link, moving through the carpet and more links until it's secure. He finishes it off by twisting the ends of the wire with pliers, his hands as dexterous with them as with his guitar.

Nora walks by as Jesse tackles the next corner. She slows to a stop and puts her hand on the spot Holly holds. "I have it. You can let go."

Nora is much taller than Holly, who stands on tiptoes. “I have it,” Holly says. “I didn’t ask for help.”

Holly’s heart-shaped face is set in bitch mode. It’s unlike her, to say the least, and Jesse pauses in his wire wrapping to glance her way. Nora stills for a moment, seeming puzzled, and, I think, hurt. She’s been nothing but nice to Holly—overly nice—and Holly has been politely dismissive since we arrived. This latest interaction doesn’t even fall into polite territory.

“Fine,” Nora says. “See you later.”

She walks off, tall frame bent. After she rounds a corner, I say, “Geez, Hols. What was that about?”

“I don’t like her.” She moves her fingers when Jesse reaches her hand with his wire, then steps away. “I don’t have to like everybody, do I?”

“Yes. That’s what you do.”

“Nora’s cool,” Jesse says. “Besides, Clary’s the bitch. You’re the nice one.”

I punch his side lightly. “But she’s nice. And she’s cute.”

If I were to design the perfect girl for Holly, she’d be tall and thin, friendly and kind, but also sporty and strong. Nora is all of those things, and she’s all of those things while she carries a rifle. Holly’s a sucker for a tough girl with a gun, which is why she’s dragged me to every action film ever made.

“Then maybe you should date her,” Holly says.

“Okay, I will. Maybe we’ll go to the drive-in tonight. Get a couple of malteds and neck.”

Holly looks up at the clouds, then sighs. “Fine, you want to know why I don’t like her?”

I nod. She pulls me away from Jesse, who calls, “Hey, I want to hear!”

“Nope,” Holly calls back, then faces me. “Remember that girl before I moved, at my old middle school? I know I told you about her.”

“Of course. The one you liked since second grade, who asked you out? And then she was a jerk or something? I can’t remember details.”

“I didn’t tell you the details. But that girl was Nora.”

“That was *Nora*? Hols, she’s a thousand years older now. You can’t hold seventh grade against her.” Holly’s crossed arms and unyielding expression argue that point, and I say, “You know dating in middle school is ridiculous. People say they’re going out and then never talk to each other until they

break up. It's like practice. Maybe she didn't mean to be a jerk. What did she do?"

"She asked me out at the end of the day, and we spoke for two hours on the phone that night. I was so happy." She shakes her head, annoyed at that past version of herself. "You know how my parents didn't really have money until we were older?"

"Yeah." I didn't know her when they had next to nothing, but cash was tight for a couple of years after we met. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Some moving guys threw open the back doors of their truck in our apartment complex, and it shattered our car's rear window. The company had to pay for it, but it was all this paperwork and stuff. Which meant we had plastic sheeting on the back of our car for a couple of weeks. My parents couldn't afford to get it fixed until they got the money."

Holly pushes her hair from her face. "Anyway, I walked into school the next day and heard people talking about our car. Saying it was already a heap of trash but now it was official, things like that. I peeked into the room and Nora was there, laughing with them."

Her eyes are fierce. As she said, there are five people in the world she'd do anything for—her family and me—and she wasn't kidding. In high school, a girl started talking shit about Jesse, and tiny Holly got up in her face and threatened to beat her down. The girl steered clear for the rest of the year. Holly may seem timid, but if you fuck with her family, prepare to die.

"That *was* pretty dicky," I admit.

"I know. I broke up with her through a friend and ignored her when she asked why. We were moving, anyway."

"But that was forever ago. She seems nice now. She kind of seems lonely."

"No." Holly scowls. "You are not going to get me to like her by saying she's lonely. She has friends here."

"Sort of friends." There are some other people our age aside from the soldiers: Amber, Damon, Kevin—whose policeman father was eaten a week into the outbreak—and Brenna. All are nice enough, though I don't like the way Brenna eyes Jesse. I'm not about to throw down, since I'm not a

nutcase like Super Bitch, but if Jesse ends up with her, I'm throwing in the towel for good. "I still think she's lonely."

"Too bad for her." Holly looks away, lip caught between her teeth, and I sense that's not the whole story. Maybe she was protecting her family, but it hurt her, too. Enough that she kept it to herself for ten years. She doesn't easily confess to romantic feelings, and to have done so and gotten shit in return definitely didn't help on the future relationship front.

"Okay, fine," I say. "You have the right to hate her forever, but I still think you should give her a chance."

Holly shakes her head as we return to our work. Fifteen minutes later, we come upon Rose crouched out back of our Expo Hall, messing with a contraption we found at Always Ready. It's a tall steel cylinder shaped like a bottle, with both a side spout and an opening on top. It sits on a steel base with a hole in its side, through which I see a small fire burning.

"You brought that?" Jesse asks.

Instead of answering, Rose hums. I motion at the white cord that snakes out of her coat pocket, through her hair, and ends at earbuds plugged into her ears.

"I swear, sometimes..." Jesse pokes her shoulder. Rose jumps, yanking out her earbuds and grinning when she sees it's us. "Mom, we could've eaten you."

"It was the one song I turned up, of course. Sometimes you need to blow out your eardrums. What's going on?"

Jesse motions at her project. "You brought that thing?"

"It's called a Kelly Kettle. I wanted to try it." She points to the hole in the base. "You put water in the kettle's tank, build a fire in here, and it's supposed to boil in minutes. They say you can use any fuel, and you don't need a lot of it."

Rose has a small mound of twigs and mulch beside her, taken from under the trees and bushes around the fairgrounds. She drops a few pieces down the center hole of the kettle. "Once the fire's going, you feed more fuel down the chimney. You can cook on top of it, too." She opens a green drawstring bag and fishes out a metal pot and tiny rack that fit into the chimney. "Cool, no?"

We agree it is. "But why are you boiling water?" Holly asks.

“To drink. They ran out of treated water. They need to boil a batch and get more bleach. You guys aren’t drinking from the tap? Even for brushing teeth?”

“No, for the thousandth time,” Jesse says.

“Sorry for trying to keep you alive, smartass. We need to be in the best shape possible in case we have to leave.”

“We won’t have to,” Holly says, her voice higher than usual. “It’ll be over soon, right?”

Rose gazes at the fence with a slight frown, though she covers it with a reassuring smile. “I hope so, baby.”

Holly returns her mom’s smile. Her hands are behind her back, though, and her right thumb and forefinger pick at her left hand. She’s seemed much better since we came here, but it’s possible she’s only gotten better at hiding her fear.

Jesse throws me a look over Holly’s head: *What’s with my sister?* I shrug, but I suspect Holly has shored up the wall between herself and reality. With her dad alive and well, she’s regained her own unaffected bubble. Or she thinks she has, since she doesn’t know the truth about Rose and Ethan. I see the truth in Rose’s wary expression when he’s near, the way she consistently places herself out of reach as though by chance. I recognize someone avoiding intimacy—I’ve done it a few million times. Holly is observant enough to notice; maybe she’s hiding that, too.

Dad exits the door of our building. “What’s up?”

“I’m boiling water in the Kelly Kettle,” Rose says. “Are you drinking the—”

“I am not drinking the tap water, but I might start if you don’t stop asking me.”

“I’m saving lives here, and this is how you all repay me?”

Dad smiles and crouches to hold his hand above the kettle’s chimney. “Hot.”

“Fire usually is,” Rose says.

He laughs. Their eyes hold for a beat before she looks away, though he takes a moment longer. Rose lifts an earbud from her lap and holds it in Dad’s direction. “C’mere.”

“Why?” he asks.

“You can’t listen from there.”

He lowers himself to the ground. She sticks one earbud in his left ear, the other in her right, and then pulls out her phone. “Do you know My Morning Jacket?”

Dad’s big hands splay on his knees as though he doesn’t know what to do with them. “Sure. They’re great.”

That he knows My Morning Jacket exists is news to me. He liked good music once—Jeremy and I spent hours playing his old CDs and records—but I thought he stopped listening about the same time he got rid of his guitars. Some of my earliest memories are of watching his big fingers skim his guitar’s strings while he sang with me. Those recollections seemed so much like a dream, and so out of character, that I once asked Mom if I’d made them up. She’d assured me they were real, and when I asked why he’d stopped, she gave me a half-sad smile and said, *I don’t really know, honey* in a tone that matched her expression.

“This song is one of my favorites.” Rose’s finger hovers over her phone before she looks our way. “Don’t you people have work to do?”

We grumble and resume fence patching. Fifty feet down, a spot demands our attention. While we seal it up, I look back. Rose drops a twig into the kettle’s chimney, watching for the plume of steam that means boiling water, while Dad studies her as if he’ll be tested on the subject later. As if she’s a meal he plans to savor.

My stomach roils with a mix of emotions, the strongest being anger and resentment on Mom’s behalf. I have every right to make him feel guilty. I’ve never hesitated to hold something over my father’s head in our unending battle to prove the other wrong. I’d win this in a landslide because it’s too soon, and the wounds too fresh, that no one could blame me.

I watch Dad watch her. When Rose turns to him, his gaze cuts away until whatever she says makes him smile. Not just any smile—an unguarded grin I’ve hardly ever seen before. He’s fucking *smitten*.

The roiling intensifies, until I think of how broken Dad was, and how Rose has drawn him out of his shell—one Mom didn’t fully drag him out of, except maybe in death. Sometimes it seems like Mom died yesterday. In other ways, it feels like a lifetime. If she were here, she’d remind me that he’s a good man, the way she always did when I railed against him. There were times I hated Dad, but I never once doubted his love for my mother;

more importantly, *she* never doubted it. If what I see is real, he must feel guilty enough.

I don't hate him anymore, and I don't want to lose my new father. For the first time in years, I care about his happiness. If it were anyone other than Rose, I might not feel the same, but I can't—*won't*—blame him for his fondness of someone I love, too. I've always wished the Winters were family. Granted, I hoped it'd be me and Jesse who were getting it on, but this would be a close second.

I watch a moment longer, long enough for him laugh at whatever she says. Long enough to see Rose's contented smile, the way her gaze lingers on Dad before she dips her head. And though I know it might break my best friend's heart, I can't help but root for him.

WHEN WE FINISH OUR WORK, it's hours later and beginning to rain. We bring our cart and tools to the Auditorium, which sits on the other side of the lot from the Expo Halls. A giant Quonset hut building with a curved wood ceiling inside, it's stuffed with food and supplies. Toilet paper and cleaning products are stacked beside a collection of bedding, boxes of tools, and shelves full of medicines. Pallets and crates of food are arranged in aisles like a warehouse. About a dozen people are busy organizing stuff they found outside the gates yesterday.

Nora is with Barry as we enter, and she glances at Holly before she turns to a shelf and lowers her head. She *still* likes Holly. Holly hates her, and Nora clings to a ten-year-old torch. Meanwhile, I could throw myself naked on Jesse and he'd joke about the time he walked in on me coming out of the shower when I was fourteen.

"How's the fence look?" Barry asks.

"We had to patch a few places," Jesse says. "Otherwise it looks good."

"You finished up right in time. The weather's turning to shit. Maybe we'll have a movie tonight. You in, Nora?"

Nora shrugs and moves a box from one shelf to the next. She's freaking *moping*. Barry wears a perplexed expression and seems about to speak

when a uniformed guy sticks his head inside. “Sergeant Wright! Sergeant Carver needs you now.”

He takes off without a goodbye. “Barry seems to like you,” I say to Nora, mainly because I feel sorry for her. “Did you know him before?”

“No.” Nora meets my eyes. Hers are a pretty brown like Holly’s, and they match the freckles sprinkled across her nose. “We just get along. He kind of feels responsible for everyone, steps in when your parents are zombies, I guess. Surrogate dad.” Her laugh is as far from humor as you can get.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” I say, wondering what happened. I won’t ask—you don’t force someone to rehash their personal horror.

“I came down from OSU that day. I was downtown that afternoon, when it started getting crazy.” Nora speaks in a monotonous voice, as though reciting something she’s memorized. “They think people came up from California before the roadblocks, maybe were infected but not turned. It started by the Park Blocks and worked its way over. I made it home, but my parents left a note saying they went out looking for me, so I went looking for them. I saw them both downtown. It was too late.”

“My mom and brother...” is all I say before my voice goes out.

I didn’t see my mother as a zombie—something for which I’m eternally grateful—but the image of Jeremy’s vacant eyes, his sweet expression turned murderous, haunts me. That’s another reason I won’t give Dad grief: I haven’t forgotten that moment after he took care of Jeremy so I wouldn’t have to. He was a shadow of himself, and I never want to see that again.

“I’m sorry, too.” Nora’s eyes gloss over, and I do think she’s sorry. If she was a jerk once upon a time, she isn’t now. “I couldn’t get back home. I ended up at Josie’s house.” She turns to Holly. “You remember Josie?”

“Of course,” Holly says. “Where is she?”

“She didn’t make it.”

Jesse lets out a breath. “Did anyone?”

It’s more of a rhetorical question, but Nora answers, “No one we know. No one *I* know, at least. Except you guys.” The box of ibuprofen packets she holds is mangled, and she attempts to straighten it out. “That’s pretty much everybody’s story, right? Anyway, I’ll see you at dinner, maybe. I have a lot of stuff to do with all the sick people.”

“All right,” Jesse says. “Come find us if you can.”

Nora returns to her shelves. Holly stands for a moment, watching her back. "I'm sorry about your parents."

Nora nods and moves a box while Jesse and I follow Holly through the doors. "Told you she was lonely," I say.

Holly shoves me. "Fuck off."

Rose

I STAND in one of the food trucks, where I've spent the past few hours boiling water and cooking dinner. They've given a lot of thought to production, and cooking for five hundred people went more smoothly than I'd imagined. One truck—my truck—was pasta. Gabrielle and I boiled pot after pot on the big gas range inside, tossing the pasta with enough oil that it didn't form a blob before the sauce truck got it covered.

Gabrielle pushes her blond hair from her face. The youngest of her five kids clings to the fairy skirt she wears. I smile at the little blond girl, who jams her thumb in her mouth and closes her eyes. "If she can't see you, you don't exist," Gabrielle says.

The woman is a saint. I know my limits, and *three* kids would've done me in, forget five. "Watch out, Lucy," I say. "The invisible lady's about to dump another pot."

Lucy tucks herself deeper behind her mom. I've always had a terrible fear that one day I'll drop a pot of boiling water on a small human. When the kids were little, I made them clear the kitchen entirely before I'd dump pasta into a colander. Tom would probably get a kick out of that if I told him. Or he'd think I'm crazier than he already does.

I lift the pot of freshly boiled water and walk down the steps to the lot, where giant barrels hold drinking water. Most were taken from rainwater collection systems, which are popular enough in town that they only needed to look in backyards. The water inside is cool enough to pour the hot over top. That makes another full barrel, and that makes me happy. So do rows of food like the ones in the Auditorium, the lavender-scented bar of soap I managed to acquire, and the gallon containers Barry gave me when I asked, which I filled with water I boiled myself in the Kelly Kettle. It's the little things, especially when the big things aren't bringing me much joy: the fairgrounds, the people, Ethan.

It's fine, in that we're alive. But the armed guards, the rules, and the lack of privacy are wearing on me. Even Willa has grown tired of the adoration. She's under the food truck where she's been hiding for the past hours, only slinking out when I gave her the last few bites of my dinner.

Mitch rolls up with one of the metal dollies the fairgrounds has on hand. "I've come to collect pots before it starts pouring again."

"Does that mean we're done?"

"Yup. You don't want to see the dishes. It's fucking frightening."

I dig my hands into the dull ache in my lower back. "We're too old for this shit."

"Word. I won't be done for hours."

"But who's going to sit with me in the Performance Hall?" Everyone is in there tonight. First to eat, and then to watch a movie. Word went out that there's a last-minute meeting planned as well.

Mitch tilts her head, finger under her chin like she's pondering one of life's great mysteries. "I don't know, maybe sit with your husband?"

I ignore the sarcasm. Things with Ethan are fine. He's been on his best behavior, and I've softened a bit toward him. But only a bit—he's held out longer in the past. It's once he gets too comfortable that his old habits come to the forefront.

Someone clears their throat behind us. A young boy stands in front of a woman our age with a severe blond bob and a colorful woven jacket made for hiking the Andes. "Do you have any organic pasta?" the woman asks.

"I have no idea," I say. "We cooked what they gave us. It's all inside."

The woman sniffs. "I try to eat organic whenever possible. If I can't, at least Hawk should." She motions at the boy. "My son."

Of all the people to survive the zombie apocalypse, this woman had to be one. I know her type: demanding, entitled, and annoying as shit. Before I can think of a polite response, Mitch says, "Lady, there are zombies outside and you're worried about organic food?"

I put my hand to my mouth to cover my smile. A giggle comes from inside the food truck.

"We're not *animals*," the woman hisses, and stomps off with her kid.

"If we're not animals, then why'd she name her kid Hawk?" I ask.

Mitch chortles. "You know she has a basket. She probably has a basket *collection*." I jut my chin toward the food truck and smack her. Mitch rubs her arm. "What's your problem?"

I sigh as Gabrielle pops out the door. "That was Adele. She's a piece of work. What about baskets? I have a basket."

"Nothing," I say.

Gabrielle disappears inside. Mitch whispers, “How was I supposed to know she has a basket?”

“Because half of Eugene has baskets, dumbass. She’s nice. I know it may be asking for the impossible, but could you try not to alienate everyone within the first week?”

“No promises.”

I whack her arm. “Be quiet and take our pots.”

Once the cart is full, Mitch salutes before she rolls off. Twenty feet away, Barry appears and tries to take the cart. Mitch shakes her head and continues on.

I’ve heard that Barry has barely dated in the years since his wife died, though he’s not unwilling. There’s a lot of gossip, and all you have to do is stand in the same spot long enough to hear it. The quieter you are, the more people tell you. I’ve always collected secrets without trying, and when people realize I don’t run my mouth, they tell me more.

I return to the food truck. “Go. I’ll wipe up. I’m sure your other seventy kids are waiting for you.”

Gabrielle laughs good-naturedly. I knew she would, which is why I like her. “Thankfully, I have an IUD. Alan was supposed to get snipped, but we weren’t sure we were done.”

“Six kids? You’re out of your mind. I have an IUD, too. Someone out there must know how to remove them.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Gabrielle lifts Lucy into her arms. “You sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course not. I’ll see you in there.”

Gabrielle thanks me and leaves, her skirt swinging above her Birkenstocks and basket hanging from her elbow. She made the skirt herself, and she’s full of interesting knowledge about chickens and canning and gardening. I spent most of our hours together picking her brain and learned that she and her husband lived outside of Eugene on a small piece of land where they did many of those things. However, the appearance of zombies and the lack of a fence sent them scrambling into town. You can barely get crunchier than Gabrielle, yet you don’t see her demanding organic food like Adele. In other places, my kombucha, sourdough starter, and coconut sugar would mark me as crunchy; in Eugene, I’m middle ground.

Once I've left the truck's kitchen clean enough for the next shift, Willa and I take the long way around the Events Center and enter through the lobby rather than walk directly into the Performance Hall. I stop to use the bathroom and inspect myself in the mirror. Yesterday's shower in the shower tent was every bit as underwhelming as Mitch predicted, and I already look as though I haven't bathed in a week.

I wasn't thinking clearly when I packed to come here—not only did the thought of seeing Ethan have me agitated, but I also left most beauty supplies home in a well-meaning and now regrettable bid to avoid vanity. Maybe it's vain, but I want a real shower, multiple hair products, and a tube of mascara; I'm tired of looking tired and frizzy. I wet my hands and smooth my hair, then make two braids. After a quick assessment, I decide I'm probably too old for braids until I'm *old* old.

"Fuck it," I say to Willa. "I've never claimed to be the height of maturity."

Willa wags her tail in agreement. We leave the bathroom and head toward voices at the end of the lobby corridor. Half the lights in the Performance Hall are out, and the large room is full of people milling around tables of diners. Suddenly, the dinner I scarfed down in the food truck doesn't seem so bad, since I didn't have to eat it in here.

I can't find anyone I know. There are familiar faces, but only because I've seen the same people for days. Someone bumps me from behind, then apologizes as he goes past. I leave the doorway and stick to the edge of the room, working my way to the far right corner, by the stage, with Willa at my heels.

I hate this part, where I feel out of place and certain the whole world is staring. Where my entire body floods with tension that precludes normal movement and facial expressions. After forty-two years of life, I should be inured to it, but I still fervently wish for an invisibility cloak. Or to close my eyes like Lucy did, thereby rendering myself invisible.

As I near the corner, I raise my eyes to find Tom there, scanning the room with his arms folded like he doesn't give a fuck what anyone thinks of him. My stomach unclenches, my shoulders lower, and a pleasant warmth lights in my chest. It feels the same as the rows of food, the Kelly Kettle, the little things. Except Tom isn't little, either in real life or in my mind.

He spots me and cocks his head like *get over here*. By the time I arrive, he wears a welcoming smile. “Fancy meeting you in the corner,” I say.

“I knew you’d come if I stood here long enough, Red.” He bends to pat Willa’s head, then lifts a hand, stopping just short of my braids. “Though maybe I should call you Pippi.”

“I’m practicing for when I’m an old lady. Have you seen my dad?”

“He was here a few minutes ago. I’m sure he’ll be back.”

I face the crowd along with him, comfortable enough to observe now that I’m not alone. “I was just thinking about you.”

He turns my way briefly. “You were?”

“Well, it was really about me. How I used to make the kids leave the kitchen when I was pouring out boiling pasta water, so I didn’t trip and dump it on their heads.”

“The worst that could happen?”

“In that situation.” I point at where the kids sit at a table with people their age. “Should we go say hi? Lick our fingers and wipe their faces?”

Tom’s low, rumbly laugh washes over me. We listened to music before my dinner shift, shoulders almost touching, and though I lost count of how many times I made him laugh, it still gives me a sense of accomplishment.

He digs in his coat pocket and holds out a cellophane package of chocolate-covered wafers. “Dessert,” he says. “You were going to miss it out on the tables.”

I follow his arm up to his face. How I ever thought it incapable of friendliness or humor is beyond me, with the way his eyes crease at the corners and that C carved into one cheek. “Thank you. How did you know I love Nutty Buddies?”

Tom’s eyes are dark, much darker than Ethan’s, and they take on a teasing silvery glint. “I took a wild guess, since you think peanut butter is the height of gourmet dining.”

My laugh bubbles up, as much from his words as the lightness I feel in his presence. “Nutty Buddies are the perfect combination of peanut butter, wafer, and cheap waxy chocolate.”

“Sounds almost as delicious as a peanut butter sandwich.”

“Hey, don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it. That was sweet of you. Pun intended.”

Tom surveys the room again. “Yup. Not a big deal.”

His face is set like he never smiled in the first place. I won't read more into this than I should, though the free-fall of my stomach at his reversal in manner tells me I already *am* thinking of it as more. Wishing it were more. Because I'm an idiot.

Ethan appears on my left, and I stick the Nutty Buddy in my coat pocket. It's better not to give him ammunition, the same way I didn't mention a new client if it was a single man. I know how cowardly that is, that it's the path of least resistance, but I don't have it in me at the moment. Not with the way I felt a minute ago. This time the ammunition wouldn't be entirely blanks, though I've done nothing for which to feel guilty. Or almost nothing. Nothing *in reality*.

"Hey." Ethan stops beside me. "Hey, Tom."

"How's it going?" Tom asks.

"It's going."

I smile at Ethan. "Where were you?"

"Nowhere special. I just saw Barry, and he said the meeting is before the movie. In a few minutes."

The room grows louder with the influx of families and older folks, as well as people of all ages who appear unrelated yet acquainted. The noise worries me. This whole place worries me. It's almost better to feel unsafe, to be able to hear what's outside. If you don't, you forget. I forgot several times today, as if we're all vacationing at some awful adult sleepaway camp.

"How was dinner detail?" Ethan asks.

"Fine. We cooked a shit-ton of pasta." I motion to where Gabrielle sits with her kids and husband. She seems content, even with eighty-seven small people to tend to. "I'm on breakfast tomorrow."

Voices quiet down as Barry, Boone, and Carver make their way onto the stage. Once facing the crowd, Carver clears his throat. "We received a radio call from Portland just before dinner." Murmurs rise again, and he patiently waits for them to stop. "They're trapped inside the Moda Center with several thousand people, and they need assistance leading the Lexers away. Therefore, half our people will be leaving at first light tomorrow to lend a hand. We should return in five days to a week."

"What if you don't?" someone shouts.

"It's a chance we'll take."

“Let’s hope that amphibian’s going,” Tom mutters. I know he means Boone, and I cough-laugh into my fist. When a man in front looks over his shoulder, I thump my chest like I’m coming down with something. Once he turns away, I kick Tom’s foot. A moment later, he nudges mine, and I lower my head to hide my smile.

“Sergeant Boone will be in charge while I’m gone,” Carver continues. “But nothing else will change. I have complete confidence that he and Sergeant Wright will do an excellent job.”

I suppose it’s some sort of Army hierarchy thing, but I wish Barry had been put in charge. Whenever I see Boone nearby, I make sure to skedaddle in the opposite direction. The man picks on the soldiers in a show of power that reminds me of the bratty kid who takes his ball home if the game doesn’t go his way.

“We’re short-staffed with this illness, but we’ll be okay.” Carver goes through a few more points, which add up to everything will be the same for now, at least for civilians. They leave the stage after thanking everyone for rolling with the punches.

“How are the sick people?” I ask Ethan.

“Five more sick today, but three of the first are improving.”

“Thank God for that,” Pop says from behind me.

I didn’t know he was there. I wonder if he saw the game of footsie between me and Tom, and what he might think about that. I attempt to cover it up with a cheerful, “Hey, Daddy. Did you eat?”

“Yes, ma’am. It was perfect, as always.”

“It does take a lot of skill to boil pasta. Did you hear the whole thing just now?”

“Did. And I think driving a hundred miles is a good way to die, but they’ve got to go, I guess.”

The kids have risen from their table and now make their way over. Holly arrives first, and Ethan slings his arm over her shoulders. “How’s my girl?”

“Good,” she says. “Glad I don’t have to go to Portland.”

Clara appears a bit wan at the thought. “I can’t imagine being there. I’m glad someone forced me to come home.”

Tom discharges a long breath. “I’m glad someone listened for once.”

I tense, worrying a fight is imminent, until Tom winks. Clara's answering smile is pure loveliness, all white teeth and sparkling eyes. Jesse, Nora, and the soldier named Juan—who they all call Marquez—join the group. Jesse's attention goes to Clara, then leaves and returns in what might be more than brotherly consideration. On both Jesse's and Marquez's parts. There's never been a shortage of guys interested in Clara.

"We came to say bye," Nora says. "They just told me and Marquez we're leaving in the morning. Guess we'll see you when we get back."

Their fear is evident under their attempts at stoicism. I'd volunteer before I'd allow Jesse to ride into that hundred-mile deathtrap, and I'm sure their mothers would do the same. Because that's what it is—a deathtrap.

"They're sending you two?" I ask. They nod, and indignation flares to life in my belly. "But you're babies. What are they thinking?" I search the room for Carver to no avail. Barry, however, is conversing with a man by the stage. "What if I talk to Barry?"

"Nothing to do about it," Marquez says. I would believe his indifference if it weren't for the trembling hands he tucks in his pockets. "It's the Army. You go where they tell you."

"But that's ridiculous. You can't drive a hundred miles in this! You'll die—it's not safe." I touch Nora's arm. "Aren't you Reserve? Do you have to go?"

Nora swallows. "It doesn't matter. Army is Army."

"That's bullshit," I say. "They must know that this is—"

Ethan grasps my elbow. "Rose, they don't have a choice. Don't make it worse."

"Sorry." I force a smile at the two. "I didn't mean to..."

"S'okay," Marquez says. "It's nice to know someone gives a shit."

I can think of nothing to say to that. Nothing that doesn't involve cursing and storming around like a lunatic, at least. The heat of anger spreads, crawling up my neck to my face and drenching my back. I fan myself with a hand, angrier now that a hot flash has taken this opportunity to drop in. They're like tears, showing up at inopportune moments to fuck with you.

"Guess we'll go pack," Nora says. "See you when we get back?"

I wipe the river of sweat off my neck with my sleeve—there's no dignity in a hot flash, either—and watch Jesse shake their hands. Clara and

Holly say goodbye. Tom, Pop, and Ethan wish them luck.

“Can I hug you?” I ask, and they nod. I hug Nora, then Marquez, and they both hold me tight though they barely know me. “Sorry I’m sweaty. Hot flash.”

“My mom gets them,” Marquez says. His lips turn down. “Got them. Anyway, we’ve gotta go. Bye.”

The two walk toward the doors, reluctance apparent in their slow gait. They’re so young. So scared. Marquez said it was nice to know someone gives a shit. Giving a shit won’t do anything for them, but doing *something* might.

Pop watches me with lively eyes. “And now you’ll let it lie, right?”

“Rose—” Ethan begins, but I’m already heading for the stage.

Barry lifts his chin as I approach, though his expression of good cheer fades when he takes me in. I stop in front of him, and his conversation partner makes himself scarce. “You’re sending half your people to die,” I say.

Barry raises his hands, palms up. “I know. Don’t you think I know that?”

“Then why?”

“Boone got the call, and he said it was bad. You help your fellow soldiers when they need it. They’re stuck in the arena up there, and they’ll starve if no one moves those Lexers away.”

I understand that. Honor. Doing the right thing. They’re what keep society from becoming a free-for-all. I release a breath. “Can you maybe do me a favor, then?”

“I’ll try.”

“Nora and Juan—Marquez. Is there any way to keep them here?”

“Why them?”

“They’re so young, and I’m a mother who doesn’t want to see other mothers’ babies die. They have no one to fight for them, so I am.”

Tears well at the thought that someone might do the same for Jesse or Holly one day, if I can’t. Though I blink them away quickly, Barry’s expression turns sympathetic. I didn’t summon forth tears to elicit his help, but I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Maybe they can come down sick tonight but suddenly get better?” I suggest. “Or maybe you need them for some Army reason I don’t know

enough to make up. But I bet you could.”

Barry’s mouth tics beneath his beard. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

I put my hands in a prayer position and clap them quietly. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. It probably won’t work.”

“Thank you for being willing to try.”

“Well, I *am* your new best friend.”

I laugh and lay a hand on his arm. It’s nice and solid, another selling point for Mitch. “That’s right. Now I owe you a best friend favor. Name it.”

“I’ll keep you posted. I don’t know how you talked me into this. My mother always said redheads were witches.” Barry’s laugh lines deepen into chasms. “She was a redhead.”

“She was right,” I say with a wink.

“I’ll do my best, witch.”

I grin as Barry walks to the side exit. When I spin around, the others watch me from the corner. Except for Ethan, who turns and heads for the door. It could be annoyance I recognize in his tight shoulders and brisk walk. Or anger. I can’t fathom why he’d be either of those things, but it wouldn’t be the first time.

When I reach them, I ask, “Where’s Dad going?”

“He had to check on patients,” Holly says, though she casts an anxious glance at the door.

I nod as if it’s normal behavior, but Ethan has subtle ways of showing his displeasure, and disappearing unexpectedly is a favorite. It usually leaves me unsettled and preoccupied, with a pit in my stomach until I know for sure. And though my mind is already trying to dissect the past ten minutes, I shut it down. Either he is or he isn’t, and he’ll get over it or he won’t. I won’t let it ruin this moment the way it has so many others.

“Barry promised to see what he could do about keeping Nora and Marquez here,” I inform them. “Cross your fingers.”

“How’d you do that?” Tom asks.

Pop smiles in the indulgent manner I’ve seen all my life. “Rose has ways we mere mortals can’t comprehend.”

I lift my eyes to the ceiling, though I smile. “Sometimes you have to try.”

Rose

ETHAN IS asleep when Willa and I leave for my breakfast shift. He came in late last night, and though I briefly awakened, I pretended to be asleep. Yes, it's avoidance. Yes, I'm gutless. But relief at escaping a middle-of-the-night argument outweighs the apprehension of any argument to come. My eye twitches in traitorous contradiction to that thought, and I press it into submission as I approach my assigned food truck.

Gabrielle is already inside, her long blond hair wound in a bun. "Oh, good, they put you on with me. We're reconstituting and frying hash browns." She shakes a small milk carton-type container so that its contents rattle. "To go with the pancakes from the sandwich cart."

"All we need are biscuits and gravy, and we'll have all the carb groups covered," I say. "I can feel my intestines slowing already."

"I keep thinking of the spinach, lettuce, and broccoli that's going to seed in my garden," Gabrielle says sadly. "We left the coop open, so the chickens might be okay."

We get started filling pots with water from the barrel out back, then set them over the flames to boil. I motion at Gabrielle's legs, where Lucy is absent. "No little helper today?"

"She's with her daddy, but she might be here soon. Sorry."

"Why? I like having her around. I'd say I miss the days when the kids were young, but I don't at all."

"Everyone else tells me to cherish every minute because I'll miss it."

I picture Holly's sweet little head of corkscrew curls, Jesse's chubby cheeks, and my heart whimpers a little. "If I could have an hour with those babies again, I would in a second. But the day-to-day drudgery? The worry? Not having a full day—or even a minute—to myself? No way in hell."

"I want to be like you when I grow up."

"If you are, just don't tell people. They'll think you're evil."

Gabrielle laughs. "I'll have to remember that." She pulls the cooking utensils from the shelf above the range while I open hash brown containers. After a minute, she says, "My mom watched the kids one weekend a month. Alan and I would escape in a friend's RV sometimes, or we'd go camping

in the summer. Alone time helped us remember why we got married in the first place.”

“Where is she?” I ask quietly, watching her back.

Gabrielle’s shoulders lift to her ears, then fall. “She lives on the coast. Is it *lived* now? I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

“She *lives* on the coast.”

“She and my dad live on the coast. That’s where we were going at first, but the road was full of Lexers. We thought if we got through the first group, then hit another, we’d be stuck. Same thing on the other roads. So we turned around.”

“I’m sorry you couldn’t make it out there, but I’m sure your mom would’ve told you to turn around. I would say the same to Holly and Jesse.”

Gabrielle nods and continues facing the range. I try to think of something more to say, some comfort, but I’ve got nothing. One main road leads to the coast from here. There are alternate routes—Oregon has more National Forest roads than any other state—but they’re smaller roads, not to mention logging roads on which people get stuck and lost every year. Many are unmaintained, and because they travel through high elevations, they have unpredictable weather from the fall through late spring.

Every now and then, Ethan will suggest we take an alternate route, and I remind him of the people who are stranded on those roads every year. Of the people who enter the woods and never come out. The Oregon wilderness is vast and impressive; I have a healthy fear of it. Some might argue my fear isn’t *that* healthy, but I’m alive instead of starving to death in the woods, so they can suck it.

“It’s where we’ll go when this is over.” Gabrielle douses the griddle with oil. “How about you?”

“I want to go to Oakland to look for my friend who lives there.”

Lives. Craig lives in Oakland. If I can’t find him, I’ll have to accept his death the way Mitch has. For now, he’s alive, if only because I don’t want to imagine life without him. After Mom died, Craig checked in every day, made dinner with me and Pop, rented a movie and brought it by, and laid awake with me when I couldn’t sleep, distracting me with talk of everything and nothing. He became our family. Craig got the short end of the stick when it came to parents. In spite of that, or possibly because of it, he turned into one of the most loving people I’ve ever known.

I shrug. "Aside from that, I haven't really thought about it."

"You haven't?"

"It's more of a general *what will the world be like?* than planning exactly where we'll go. Seeing where there is *to go*, you know?" I think about adding that it might not be over, and to base your hopes on that prospect might be setting oneself up for disappointment, but I keep that optimistic thought to myself. "I'm lucky. I have most of my family with me."

"And Ethan was here," Gabrielle says. "You must've been so worried."

I make a sound of agreement. The *phew* to end all *phews*. It sounds lame to my ears, but Gabrielle smiles. "Ethan looked bad when he came in. His knee took a while to heal, but he spent all his time nursing the people who needed it. Carver joked he was running on vim, vigor, and Vicodin."

It's possible, though unlikely, she means Tylenol. "When did Rhonda come? Was he on his own for a long time?"

"Only about a week before you did. He was fine by then."

"Good." I can think of nothing more to say. My stomach stews. He said they counted the painkillers, that they were locked up, but if Ethan is the one counting, his math is known to be a little wonky.

I scoop out boiling water with a glass pitcher, pour it into the hash brown containers one by one, then lean against the stainless-steel counter to wait for reconstitution. The food truck is a marvel of engineering, all shiny surfaces with a three-bay sink, griddle, range, fridge, and cabinets cleverly fit into every spare inch of space. It has water tanks and a generator, though they don't run the latter since we're plugged in. The stove runs on propane. If the power goes out, we can still cook.

I don't like that thought. Without power, the fairgrounds would be dark. Huge and dark. The water will stop eventually if it can't be pumped to refill the reservoirs. If that happens, we'll go back to the house, collect what remains of Always Ready, hit up anywhere else we can, and wait it out as long as necessary.

A knock on the serving window makes me jump. I spin around to find Nora and Marquez at the glass and slide it open to a rush of cool air. Over to the right, by the ice rink, five Army trucks spit exhaust from their mufflers.

My heart falls at the thought they've come to say goodbye until Marquez's lips split in a grin. "Barry says to thank you for saving our asses."

Nora's smile is as bright as the rising sun. "He also said you own us now, and if we ever say no to you, he'll send us on a long trip himself."

"You're staying?" I ask. They nod, both with a faintly awed expression, and I want to kiss Barry. He did it, and he called *me* a witch. "The person you really have to thank is Barry. I may have asked him, but he made it happen."

After more thanks, Nora and Marquez leave to help move the trucks out. I practically dance back to the potatoes, dumping out the excess water and readying them for the griddle, where Gabrielle and I begin to fry in earnest.

Hours later, we're sweaty and greasy, and I have a burn on my wrist. No sooner do we fill a chafing dish than we have another to load, and two more besides. The food packaging is thrown into a bin outside, which is carted off occasionally. I don't yet know where it goes, but based on this breakfast alone, the trash heap must be staggering.

"Five hundred people eat a fuck of a lot," I say.

Gabrielle wipes her forehead with her arm. "I thought feeding five kids was a pain in the ass."

At first, pretending I was a short-order cook was fun. After being given Spam to slice and fry along with the hash browns, I've decided short-order cooks need a raise and two months' paid vacation. Splattering grease and a hot griddle merit hazard pay. Especially when you're frying meat that looks and smells like a gelatinous rectangle of wet cat food.

"Try it," Gabrielle says, in response to my cat food announcement. "It's not so bad."

"No freaking way," I say with a shiver. "And if it's not so bad, why don't I see you eating it?"

"I'm not hungry. Everyone has to try Spam at least once."

I shake my head and flip the pink rectangles on the griddle. Now they smell like *warm* cat food, which is a new height of disgusting.

"Try it, try it, try it," she chants. "I dare you."

I wipe grease off my cheek and turn to where Gabrielle leans against the counter grinning. "Are you six years old? How are you the mother of five

children?”

She cracks up. “They keep me young. Don’t you know the rule? You’re not allowed to say you don’t like something if you won’t try it.”

“I can tell by the smell.”

“It tastes better than it smells, scaredy-cat.”

I stick out my tongue, though she’s right that I’m a huge baby about eating things that gross me out. However, with the future of grocery stores what it is, I may soon be forced to eat a lot of those things. And who knows? Maybe Spam *is* good. There must be a reason it’s sold in every supermarket.

I chop a corner off a browned rectangle and take a sniff—it smells no better up close. Gabrielle watches as I tentatively put it in my mouth and chew. At first, it’s reminiscent of salty smoked ham, though it separates into flakes under my teeth like pork particleboard. Then comes the full flavor: gelatinous, warm cat food.

I gag and spit my mouthful into an empty Spam can while Gabrielle screeches with laughter, pounding a hand on the counter so that her many bracelets clink. “What the fuck?” I yell. “It tastes *exactly* how it smells!”

“It sort of does,” she says between giggles. “The jalapeño kind is better. You should try that one.”

“Don’t even.” I eat a forkful of hash browns to rid my mouth of the taste, then point my fork at her. “I’ll never trust you again. You’ve proven yourself untrustworthy.”

Gabrielle snorts, then jumps for the griddle when the Spam begins to smoke. Every processed meat on Earth could go up in flames for all I care, but I still grab my spatula and join her. God only knows what they’d give us to fry if the Spam were gone.

Barry appears in the doorway at the back of the truck as our work is winding down. Fifty feet behind him, the hectic pace at the food tent is also slowing. “Hey, Rose. Did you see Nora and Marquez?”

Gabrielle waves me from the griddle. “Go. I’ll finish cleanup.”

“You should, as your punishment for feeding me Spam.” She giggles while I step onto the asphalt and give Barry a giant smile. “Yes, I did see them. And I’ve been thinking of how I want to kiss you, you big lug.”

“I never say no to a kiss from a pretty lady.”

I look over my shoulder for the pretty lady, then shrug. “How about a kiss from an old sweaty lady?” He laughs, tapping his cheek, and I lay a giant smooch on him. “Thank you. I don’t know what you did, but thank you.”

“I planted a seed in Carver’s head. Boone didn’t like it, but Carver was in charge until he drove out the gate.”

“I owe Carver, too. What do you want for your trouble? Extra Spam?”

“Think I’ll pass on that.” He glances left and right, then moves a few inches closer. “I was wondering something, though. It’s, uh, Mitch. I was getting a few signals. *I thought*. But she mentioned not being interested... I’m not too good at this stuff, so I’m thinking I misread.”

“Reading Mitch is like studying Spanish for five years and then being given a test in Chinese.” I pat Barry’s arm. “She can be hard to get to know in that way. The boyfriend she mentioned did a number on her. It was a mess.”

It was so much of a mess that I flew to San Francisco for a week to mop up Mitch’s tears along with her suddenly half-empty house. Craig and I hid her sharp things and meted out her Valium. We got her smiling again, then laughing, and, finally, back on her feet. But in the years since, Mitch has never let down her guard. She wants to, but she’s afraid to be hurt again.

I understand that sentiment all too well. Judging by Barry’s somber nod, he does, too. “What you’re saying is that there’s not much hope.”

“Before I can determine that, tell me one thing. Do you ever wear Adidas sandals, with socks or without?”

Barry eyes me like I’ve lost my mind. “Those black and white sandals? No, never.”

“Then there’s hope,” I say with a wink. “What I’m saying is forewarned is forearmed. Be prepared for some pushback, but also know that she’s worth it. She’s been my best friend since we were fifteen, and now we’re, like, a hundred and ten.”

“The two of you don’t look a day over eighty.”

I shove his shoulder. “I like you, Wright. I hope you make it in.”

Tom

WITH HALF THE MILITARY GONE, the remaining troops are stretched thin, especially with the sick. Going for a meal or a bathroom break means there's a gate or barricade left half, if not completely, unguarded. I stack boxes of canned chili and macaroni and cheese while I listen to Boone bitch about this to a group of soldiers in the Auditorium. I move as far as I can from Sergeant Blowhard and begin inventorying food in the middle of the room.

After two days in the Auditorium, I've seen how fast the food goes. A pallet provides between one to two meals for all the residents, depending on what it holds. Three meals a day. Two to three pallets a day. Twenty pallets' worth of food seems an astounding amount until you realize it's a week, give or take, for over five hundred people. By my count, there are twenty-five pallets, plus whatever's left on the shelves.

I've toyed with the idea of giving them Always Ready, and I will if I have to, but the MREs and dried food would be gone in no time. That same amount would feed the seven of us for a long while, and I'm unwilling to let that bit of security go.

Eight. There are eight of us now, with Ethan. I don't like to think about that part of it. Nope, in all the moments where I picture us back at the house, Ethan is...elsewhere. I won't say a bad word about him to Rose, but I want to tell her she deserves to be happy. Whether or not I'm part of her happiness, I can't say, but based on how she seeks me out, plugging a headphone in my ear when we have a half hour to spare, I think I might be in some way. I *hope* I might be in an entirely different way—something I've admitted to myself with the warning that I keep those sentiments locked down tight. Rose can't know, and neither can Ethan. Neither can Clara, for that matter. She'll revert to hating me for sure, and I wouldn't blame her. I'm not too pleased with myself.

Voices come from my right, where shelving holds more food, toiletries, and medications. I lean over and catch sight of Nora, Jesse, and Marquez huddled by a shelf at the end of the building. Curiosity piqued, I head that way. No one cares what you do as long as you get your work done on time.

Marquez sees me and whispers something. Jesse says, “No, he’s cool,” before he turns to me. “Hey, Tom. They’re showing me the M9.”

“Mind if I see?” I ask. My pistol is tucked away in my backpack, but the fairgrounds are full of this particular Army-issue handgun, and there may be a time when I need to use one.

“Sure.” Nora takes the black pistol from Jesse and hands it to me. It’s heavy, but a good kind of heavy. “You know this is a nine-millimeter, right?”

I nod. We have a few boxes of 9mm ammo at the house, which makes getting my hands on one even more attractive. “And that’s about all I know. Except for one time with a Glock, I’ve only ever shot a revolver.”

“Why don’t you show him, Jesse?” Nora asks.

“All right.” Jesse takes the gun from me and thumbs the button to release the magazine. I’m glad to note that Jesse’s finger stays alongside the trigger and the gun pointed away from people. Sam taught him the basics, and I appreciate not being the recipient of an accidental bullet.

Jesse pushes in the magazine with the palm of his hand. “You seat it like that. Here’s your safety—it’s ambidextrous. Pull back the slide to chamber the round. The hammer’s cocked.”

He points to the hammer at the rear of the gun. “It’s ready to fire. Switch the safety down, and the hammer goes up. It’s on safe. But you don’t have to leave it there if you don’t want to.” He flips the safety up, exposing the red dot that means danger. “It’ll take one long trigger pull for that first shot, which is a safety, too.”

He flips the safety on and hands it to me. Marquez elbows Jesse. “Sure you don’t want to join up?”

“My mom would kill me,” Jesse says with a wry smile. “I wish I could fire it, though. I was all right with my grandpa’s gun, but that doesn’t mean shit.”

“We miss more heads than we hit,” Marquez says.

“We?” Nora asks.

Marquez grins. “We, not including Nora.”

Nora laughs, then walks me through loading and unloading several times. By the end of it, I can seat the magazine and ready the pistol to fire. It’s unsatisfying, though, as what I really need is target practice.

“We have to go,” Nora says. “We’re on gate duty soon.”

“What’s going on out there?” I ask, handing her the pistol.

“Same shit as ever,” Marquez says. “See a zombie, kill a zombie. A lot of them are still gone for now, at least around here. See you later.”

Once they’re gone, Jesse squints my way. “You won’t tell my mom about this?”

“Hell, no. You think she’d be mad?”

“Who knows? But when she’s really mad, don’t fuck with her.”

“I think I’ve seen that once or twice.”

“I heard her tear into you once. I was coming out to the RV, and I turned right back around and went into the house.”

Jesse fails to hide his smile, and I laugh. “If it was the time I’m thinking of, she was right to do it. Are you leaving? I’m just finishing up here.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

He follows me to the pallets and pokes around while I cross off and fill in the remaining food on my chart. “Looks like a lot, but it’s not,” I say. “I don’t know if they have a plan, but they’re going to need one before ten days are up, if not sooner.”

“Nora says they’re waiting for the others to get back.”

“They need a plan for if they don’t.”

Jesse scratches his chin, where stubble has taken hold. He’s a few inches taller than his dad and with similar facial structure, but he has an easy way about him, as if he’s watching the world and not judging, exactly, but *noticing*. That quality and his eyes are Rose all the way.

“They’ll have to let us out there.” Jesse lifts his shoulders. “I’ve been under lock and key for a while now. It’s getting old.”

“I’ll bet it is.” I set my clipboard on the nearby table, and we head for the door. “I haven’t gotten to hear you play yet. Why didn’t you bring a guitar?”

“Seemed stupid.” Jesse stares across the lot, face giving nothing away. “I didn’t want to be the asshole with a guitar when I should be carrying a machete, you know?”

“I get that.” I don’t like it, though. It’s too close to my past—giving up what gave me pleasure for a bleaker notion of reality that doesn’t necessarily have to be. “But you do have two hands. And a guitar strap.”

Jesse’s exhale is almost a laugh. “Maybe, if I can find one.”

“I’ll play with you, if you find two.”

“You play? I didn’t know that. Clara never mentioned it.”

“I stopped when she was young. She probably doesn’t remember. Keep that in mind when you hear me. It’s been a while.”

My brain notes with mild alarm that I’ve just promised to play guitar with Jesse. The urge to backpedal makes a brief appearance, but I’m doing it for Jesse as well as myself. Yes, I’ll suck. At least at first. But I can still feel the strings under my fingers, the contentment of making something with my hands, even if it’s only sound.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Jesse sounds enthusiastic about the idea now that I’m on board. “If they ever let us out of this place, maybe we can find a couple.”

“Deal. I—”

I break off when I see Ethan heading our way from the ice rink, looking none too happy. After he falls in step with us, he says, “A few people have pneumonia, or it’s heading that way. We started them on antibiotics. Boone’s planning to make an announcement tonight. It’s mandatory.”

“Great,” I say. “I just listened to him for an hour in the Auditorium.”

“I think he likes to hear himself talk,” Jesse says.

“I know he does,” Ethan says. “Be thankful you’re not in the rink. His lectures are both long and numerous.” He squeezes Jesse’s shoulder. “I have to go to the infirmary for a while, but I’ll see you at dinner.”

He cuts across the lot. Jesse watches, face inscrutable once again. The kid would be killer at poker.

THE BEGINNING of Boone’s speech is to the point: they need people on the inside gates if they’re going to defend the outer boundary. I volunteer, as do Rose, Sam, Mitch, and the kids. Rose watches unhappily when the kids write their names on the roster that’s passed around, but she doesn’t say a word. It’s easier than allowing them to leave the gates, and I don’t want Clara out there any more than Rose does Holly and Jesse.

“Thanks to those of you who are signing—” Boone is cut off by a man’s voice, “Will we get weapons?”

Boone purses his lips. “No, no guns. Each gate will have one of my men—people—with them. If necessary, more will be called to assist them.” He ignores the muttered complaints that statement evokes. “As I was saying, we’ll be going down to two meals a day in the interim. Once Sergeant Carver is back, we’ll go out for food again. Therefore, expect breakfast beginning at seven and dinner beginning at five.”

More groans come at that. He looks the room over coldly. “Would you rather be a little hungry or dead?”

No one speaks, as the answer is obvious. Off to the side of the stage, Barry cringes. He’d have everyone believing they were part of a common cause and begging to switch to two meals.

“How about small children?” a woman asks. She has a strident voice and short blond hair. “They need more than two meals a day.”

“Kids will get a snack. Happy?”

Mitch releases a gust of air. “That lady’s a pain in the ass, but she’s right. Am I the only one who wants to punch him?”

“Nope,” I say.

“I wouldn’t mind a shot,” Sam murmurs.

Mitch snickers. After Boone finishes and leaves the room, voices explode. Barry steps from the stage and is instantly surrounded. He raises his hands, looking like a man in need of a stiff drink. I say as much, and Mitch says, “I’m a woman in need of a drink. Do they have any alcohol here?”

“Not that I’ve seen,” I say.

“That’s strange,” Ethan says. “They had some before. Maybe the Army’s been drinking it.”

Mitch glowers. “Jerks.”

“I guess it’s for the best,” Rose says with a sigh. “People would fight over it.”

Ethan puts an arm around her shoulders. “But people like Mitch would win.”

Rose laughs up at him, and Ethan taps her nose. I won’t come between the two of them, but that doesn’t mean I have to watch. Instead, I keep my eyes on the emptying room. Most of the older folks are heading to bed, or to wherever they all head at nine o’clock most nights.

“We’re going to the Pavilion,” Clara says. It’s a circular building by the Auditorium—used for supply overflow—where the young people hang out. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Don’t go in the rink,” Rose says.

“Mom, we know.” Holly’s tone is mildly exasperated. “Good night. Love you.”

I say good night to Clara and sneak a glance at Rose, who watches me with a wrinkled brow. I smile before I turn to the room once more.

Mitch elbows me a minute later. “Earth to Tom. You coming to the rec room?”

I’m not sure I want to observe more of Rose and Ethan, but part of me can’t stop trying to gauge her feelings on him. It’s like a car wreck, and I’m the moron rubbernecking in the passing lane. “Sure, be there in a few.”

Rose, Sam, and Ethan head out. “Sucks, right?” Mitch asks me.

“What does?”

“Wanting something you can’t have.”

“We’ll get alcohol one day,” I say. “There’s plenty at the house.”

“Right. Alcohol. That’s what I meant.” I become aware of Mitch staring. Between her height and intense gaze, the woman has menacing down to a science. “I’m pulling for you. Just one thing, Thomas—hurt her and you die.”

My face heats. That sentiment lockdown doesn’t appear to be going as well as I’d hoped. I think of a few things to say, all of which would come out in stammers and half-assed denials. Instead, I nod.

Mitch punches my arm hard enough that I wince. “Glad we had this talk.”

Clara

WE START GUARD the day after Boone's announcement. Barry has put me, Holly, and Jesse on the southwest gate with a soldier named Gus. He's older, not prone to smiling, and takes off periodically to loom over two other gates also manned by civilians. Every time he does, we breathe a sigh of relief. When the sun is lowering, which means a shift change for the outer boundaries, Nora, Marquez, and a few others appear on foot.

Nora calls Jesse over to the side, where they perform what looks like a drug deal in the bushes. I pull open the gates after Holly gives me the okay from the viewing platform they built to check the street. "See you later, Fobbits," Marquez says. It's a joke, though it's obvious the word is not complimentary.

"What the hell is a Fobbit?" I ask.

"The troops who stay behind, safe in the FOB."

I know he doesn't mean a key fob. "Okay, and what's a FOB?"

"Don't you know anything? Forward Operating Base." He shows me gleaming teeth. Marquez is cute—more than cute with his amusing personality—but I'm not doing my hop-into-bed-with-anyone-cute act anymore. "Fobbits stay behind, avoiding combat and missing all the fun."

"You were a bit of a Fobbit yourself," I say. "I didn't see you volunteering to go to Portland."

The other three soldiers *ooh* at that. Marquez laughs. "Damn. No need to blow up the spot and emasculate a brave young man such as myself."

I can't help my smile. He *is* cute. "Sorry, Marquez. Thank you for keeping this Fobbit girl safe from the scary monsters outside."

"No problem, sweetie."

I bat my eyelashes at him, and he blows me a kiss as he leaves the gate. Nora follows, a beanpole next to the bulkier soldiers. I've given up asking Holly about her. Holly has stopped the bitchy act, and though she's never anything more than polite, her eyes continually flick to Nora when we all hang out. It could be Nora isn't the only one who still holds a torch—or a flame of some sort.

“Is there anyone you can’t flirt with?” Holly asks me. She tears her gaze from Nora’s back and hops down to the asphalt from the platform.

“That was hardly flirting. It’s called joking. This is why you’re hopeless at flirting.” I watch Jesse lock the gate, wondering if he was listening. Wondering if he cares about my possible flirting with Marquez. If he does, he gives no sign. “You’re not made to flirt. Your flirting is to sit in a corner until women flock to your silent mating call.”

Holly runs her hands through her hair and sweeps it into a ponytail that puffs out above her refined features. She has a delicate thing going on that makes people want to rescue her. “Yeah, I can hardly fend them all off. I was thinking of hiring a bouncer until zombies happened.”

“Maybe still get one,” Jesse says. “A zombie bouncer would come in handy.”

“Did you get us some weed or something?” I ask him.

“What?”

“You and Nora in the bushes. What were you doing?”

Jesse studiously watches the gate, which is ridiculous, since we can’t see through it. Our job is to listen and occasionally stand on the platform to check the street. If you stand in plain sight for too long, zombies might come to investigate. “Nothing. M-Y-O-B.”

“Really? You’re going with M-Y-O-B? You’ve been hanging out with the acronym crew too long, Fobbit.”

“She gave me something, and it’s none of your business.”

Holly is now as curious as I am. I cock my head his way, and she nods slightly. “Fine,” I say. I move to my bag and sip from my water bottle, then walk back toward them. “But I’m pretty sure it’s still on your person, so we’re going to have to find it.”

Holly springs into action. Her arms lock around Jesse’s torso so that his arms are pinned to his sides. I race forward and pat him down while he fights off his sister, who laughs so hard she can barely hang on.

Jesse throws his arms wide, breaking out of Holly’s embrace and pushing her back, then grabs my arm in a vise grip. “Stop!”

I freeze, surprised at his heated tone and how tightly he holds me. “Fine. Geez. Sorry for being curious.”

Jesse’s eyebrows lower. “Yeah, well, sorry for not wanting you to shoot yourself.” He drops my arm and reaches into his coat, then pulls out a big

black pistol. “Here. This is what Nora gave me.”

I back up a step, though he points it at the ground. Firing Dad’s gun twice hasn’t exactly made me comfortable around firearms. Sam taught Holly to use a small rifle when she was young, and she’s had a turn with his pistol, but she still retreats to my side.

“Jess!” she hisses. “What the hell are you doing with that? You could shoot someone.”

“That’s kind of the point.” Jesse sticks it in his coat. “They have a ton of them. Nora said no one would notice.”

“Do you even know what you’re doing with it?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“How? Where did you shoot it?”

Jesse’s poise slips a bit. “I’ve done everything but shoot it. Because, obviously, I can’t do that here. They’re going to have to let us out to find food, and I’ll practice then. Or I’ll find another way.”

“Do Mom and Dad know about this?” Holly asks. Before he can answer, she says, “Of course not. And you don’t want me to tell them you’re walking around with a loaded gun, either.”

“That would be correct.” He puts on the face he wears when he plays older brother—slightly paternal and full of a maddening patience. “It’s not a big deal. The safety’s on.”

“Oh, if the *safety’s on*, then whatever.”

“Hols, we can’t depend on this place or these people to risk their lives for us. I know some of them will, but some of them are going to save themselves. I don’t blame them. But no matter what, there are a lot of people here and not enough military. What if a gate goes down or something? We’d be fucked.”

I nod. I have to admit he’s right about that. “See?” Jesse says. “Clary agrees.”

“Hold on,” I say. “I agree about the fairgrounds. I’m not sure if your inexperienced ass having a gun makes me feel better, but I appreciate the thought you’ve put into it.”

Jesse’s eyes twinkle. “All right, she agrees on half of it. She’ll agree with the other half when she sees me go into ninja mode.”

I laugh while Holly fights her smile. “I just don’t want you to kill yourself,” she says. “Because I love you even though you’re a giant

asshole.”

“Your mom,” Jesse says. It never fails to make Holly giggle, and this time is no exception. He puts an arm around her shoulders. “I only want to protect you. Remember in the woods, when—”

“So now it’s my fault you’re going to shoot yourself?” Holly steps out from under his arm, chewing her lip. “I didn’t ask you to get it, or to protect me. But thanks for the reminder of how inept I am.”

“C’mon, you know I didn’t mean it like that.” Jesse’s tone softens, as does Holly’s expression. She’s incapable of staying mad at him for long. “Marquez and Nora are the same age as us, and look at them while we’re…”

“Fobbits,” I say.

“Exactly. Fuck being a Fobbit. I’m not going to sit around and wait to die.”

I can’t help but agree with him there, too.

“Pretty soon we won’t have to worry about it,” Holly says.

“Hols,” I say carefully, “what if this doesn’t end? Barry said they heard it might not.”

She turns toward the gate, avoiding eye contact. “Why would they have said it if it wasn’t true? Besides, that was unconfirmed sources. Right, Jess?”

Jesse doesn’t seem to notice when his hand touches his jacket, as though ensuring his weapon hasn’t disappeared. “Nora said there was more chatter on their shortwave radio, saying it could take years. They don’t want to tell everyone because they’re afraid we’ll freak out. They’re giving it the ninety days just in case, but no one believes it’ll be over.”

I thought I was prepared to hear our suspicions pretty much confirmed, but Jesse’s words clutter my mind, raising more questions than I can speak aloud. “What does Nora know?” Holly asks.

“A lot more than us.”

Holly lifts her chin, which wavers slightly. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

She’ll have to believe it, especially if a zombie is trying to eat her six months from now. After a glance my way that says *maybe you can talk some sense into her*, Jesse lets the matter drop and walks to the viewing platform. Holly’s right hand picks at her left before she catches herself and tucks them in her jacket pockets.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m fine.” Her throat moves with her swallow. “Why?”

“Aside from chicken hands,” I lift my hands in the air and peck them at each other, “you’re too quiet. I miss having to tell you to shut up all the time.”

Holly smiles at my joke, but her eyes are glassy, the color high on her cheeks. “It can’t last that much longer,” she whispers. “Can it?”

“I don’t know,” I say, though I think I do, and my answer isn’t what she wants to hear. “But no matter what, we’re all together. We can last as long as it takes.”

“Can we?”

“Yes.” My voice is forceful, surer than I feel. “It won’t be the same after it’s over, but that doesn’t mean it’ll be horrible. It might even be good.”

I have a feeling my version of good isn’t quite hers, since hers involves Rose and Ethan together. I tamp down the stab of guilt the thought brings. Anticipating the demise of her parents’ marriage isn’t exactly best friend material, even if I truly believe Rose would be happier.

“It just feels like everything’s falling apart.”

“Um, that’s because it *has* fallen apart.”

“Not like that. I thought, once we got here, it would be—” She stops speaking and faces the fence. “Forget it.”

“What?” I ask, and she shakes her head. “Hols, what’s falling apart?”

“Nothing. It’s fine.”

After a few more tries, it’s clear I’ve been shot down. I give up and spend the rest of the time wondering if she meant her parents. Wondering what we’ll do if there are years of this ahead. I have no good answer to either question.

We get ready for bed at the end of our shift, and I return from brushing my teeth before Holly. Whatever intimacy Jesse and I shared in Holly’s room is absent here. We’re roommates, just as he and Holly are. Jesse looks up as I come in, then pulls his improvised cardboard box dresser from under his cot and buries his gun inside. “Thanks for half-taking my side.”

I sit cross-legged on my cot. “I don’t want you to die, either, you know.” It’s the most I can say with only curtains to block our words. We have Dad and Sam on one side and Mitch on the other.

Jesse inspects his feet, then uses one to push his box under the cot. “There’s always a chance they’re wrong, Clary.”

“Not much of one. What do we do?”

“I don’t know. We’ll find somewhere safe.” He sees my expression, and his forehead furrows. “It’ll be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you and Holly.”

He hasn’t even shot his gun yet, but I believe him. Maybe it’s the determined set of his jaw, or the fact that he can put his mind to something and not let up until he’s mastered it. Back in high school, the girls fell into his lap because of his ever-present guitar, but he always had a guitar because he was always practicing. I met him when he could play pretty well, and then I saw him spend hours mastering finger work others could only dream of. He played until his fingers were sore and blistered, until they became callused and tough and more than proficient. He makes it look effortless, but I saw firsthand how much effort it took, and I have no doubt this will be the same.

My hammer is tucked under my cot, my knife always on my belt, but they might not be enough. “Maybe you can show me how that gun works. When you have time.”

“Anytime,” he says. “I’m all yours.”

I want that to be true with a longing that’s physical—cheeks warming, fingers tingling, heart panging. It only worsens when he smiles his super shiny smile, and his clear blue eyes stay on mine until I look down. I’ve spent years telling myself that this is only a crush, that it’ll pass one day, but I’m pretty sure I’m in love with Jesse Winter.

Craig

AFTER WE BURY Josh and Tanner, we head out on foot in the early morning light. The other bodies are left to the elements. Carl, the man who stopped us yesterday, is one of those bodies, and it all clicked once we saw his face and bloody blond hair. The group wanted our gas, most likely, and now they have twenty gallons of it along with the quarter tank in the truck. Carl probably sent us toward the stalled vehicles on purpose, with the intention of ambushing us when we returned to town. When we didn't return, they came looking.

Lance wanted to go after them, lone-wolf style, and it took a lot of convincing to get him moving north. For one thing, our attackers are almost certainly long gone, cruising down a road somewhere thanks to their newfound gasoline. For another, Lance is on foot, with no working vehicle in sight, which doesn't exactly give him the upper hand.

Fortunately, we brought our packs inside with our weapons, though our extra food and water were in the truck. We split Josh's and Tanner's supplies among ourselves, and I now wear Josh's backpack, since it's far larger than my own. I found a strip of condoms down at the bottom, which both amused me and broke my heart, and I left them there when Troy mentioned they're useful for things other than pregnancy and STD prevention.

After the first couple of miles walked at a brisk pace—aside from stopping at the few houses to search in vain for a vehicle—we come upon a sign that informs us county road maintenance ends from here on out. I feel pretty good so far. My blister is gone, though I wear another bandage from Lana just in case, and Oregon is in view. Not actually in view, since all I can see are trees, trees, and more trees, but I can feel it coming. The air is cool, and though the creek that runs alongside the road won't allow us to hear zombies in the woods until they're close, the sound of bubbling water is peaceful.

Beside me, Daisy sips from her water bottle and coughs up as much as she swallows. "You okay?" I ask.

"Fine," she spits out.

I don't take it personally. Daisy's throat is sore and bruised, and her pride is bruised worse. One of the men who went into the house held her by the throat in the crook of his arm, gun to her head, while he demanded the truck keys. Francis and Lana complied. Everyone insists it could've been any of us—I assume the honor would've been mine had I been inside—but that doesn't cheer Daisy in the slightest. She feels weak, and she's making up for that by retreating into her shell and growling at anyone who happens by.

Lance walks behind her, head down. Every once in a while, he takes in the scenery as though surprised by his surroundings before his shoulders hunch once again. His bravado is gone, and his round, dazed eyes make him appear childlike, as though he lost years along with his best friends.

Josh and Tanner rushed the men who entered the house. Lance stayed in the hall, as any sane person would've done, and it saved his life. As someone who has frozen many times, I know it makes no difference to Lance that his friends were reckless. He remembers his fear and failure to act, and it's eating him up inside.

And maybe that's why I feel good. I thawed in time. I still spent the morning mentally picking apart the things I did wrong, the ways I was a coward. But, ultimately, I faced my fear, and I didn't blow it for once in my life. And I think I could do it again if I had to. That does not mean I *want* to. No, thank you. If that was my first and last altercation with marauders, it's more than fine by me. But I have a kernel of faith that next time (God forbid there is one) I won't freeze at all.

The dirt road rises to a curve that's more like a switchback, and the next portion of road is an even steeper angle to another curve. It continues this way with no reprieve in sight. Seeing as how we're in a place called Seiad Valley, it makes sense we need to move up to move on, but I'm beginning to harbor a dislike of mountains, at least when I have to climb them.

Two-and-a-half miles in, the grade steepens. We left the creek below, and everyone sips their water rather than guzzles. Lana and Francis both have a water filter, Troy and Daisy bottles of water purification tablets, and I'm now the proud owner of tablets of my own, courtesy of Josh and Tanner. However, one needs water if one wants to purify it, and we don't know when our next source will appear.

Troy and I walk behind Daisy and Lance because neither seems worried enough about a zombie coming their way. Lana, up ahead with Francis, swings her spike as we crunch over dirt and gravel. She said she hiked often with her dogs, and it's apparent by the spring in her step. I've ridden Uber often, and it's apparent in my aching leg muscles.

"You know what really burns my ass?" Troy asks quietly.

"This walk?" I reply.

Troy chuffs. "Yeah, but also that we gave that asshole food. We *insisted* he take it. No good deed goes unpunished."

"It feels that way sometimes. But you guys saved my life more than once, and—"

"We got you out of your apartment. No big deal."

"I wasn't going to leave. I was too afraid." I recall my utter despondency in detail, so much so that it briefly washes over me before I shake it off. "I had a plan to take all my pills with a tequila chaser once my water was gone. And then I heard you outside."

Troy frowns, though it's more sympathetic than condemnatory. I shrug. "I can't ever make it up to you, but I appreciate everything you've done. My point is that your good deed wasn't punished. Your good deeds, plural, though being stuck with me might be its own punishment."

"Cherry, you're an idiot," Troy says with a wide grin. "You saved my life last night, no question. Can't say I enjoyed going facedown in the mud, but it's better than bleeding out from a bullet wound. So, let's call it even." Troy extends a hand for me to shake, which I do. "Glad we met you, Craig. You're all right, and a damn sight better with a gun than I thought you'd be."

"Thanks. Does this mean you're not calling me Cherry anymore?"

"Hell, no. You're Cherry until the end of time, far as I'm concerned. If you don't mind."

I smile. I don't mind at all.

TWO HOURS LATER, even Lana's steps have slowed. There was a forest fire at some point, and we've trudged through long stretches of burnt tree trunks

slowly being reclaimed by stunted greenery that does nothing to shade the road. I have a perpetual squint due to sunlight reflecting off patchy snow on the roadside, and I vacillate between sweating from exertion and shivering from my sweat drying in the wind. The snow has partially melted on the ridges above us, exposing brown rock that turns to fir trees lower down. A distant mountain, blanketed by white, is visible over the smaller peaks.

“That’s Mount Shasta,” I say to no one in particular. It’s a landmark I recognize, and it reassures me that, though far, I’m nearing home.

After an eternity, the road flattens at the summit, and the shoulder widens into a dirt parking area. We head for a shady copse of trees, drop our packs, and collapse on a bed of soft, dry pine needles. A sign marks the area as part of the Pacific Crest Trail, which cuts across the road and continues northeast into Oregon. Dad talked about thru-hiking it one day, walking straight from the Mexican border into British Columbia, and I always nodded enthusiastically while praying he didn’t expect me to come along.

We passed a small waterfall partway up where we refilled our empty bottles, and I drink half of mine before I can stop myself. Lana throws herself on her pack and stares up at the trees. “Please tell me we’re two miles from Oregon.”

“You wish.” Francis opens the atlas. After a minute with his curvimeter, he says, “We went seven miles. That’s not bad.”

“Which means we have how many left?”

Francis grimaces, scratching at the beard he’s sprouted since he last shaved. “Ten miles to the border.”

Lana groans. “That’s just the border,” Troy adds, his glee at Lana’s misery plain. “Who knows what’s there? Could be more of this.”

Lana attempts to kick him with her eyes closed. When she misses, and he laughs, she points in his direction. “I’ll get you when I’m standing. Sometime next week.”

Lunch is a bag of tortilla chips, over which we dump a surprisingly delicious cheese sauce and salsa mixture warmed on a stove. Daisy and Lance eat their share, though neither says much.

Once the food is gone, we haul ourselves to our feet. Ten miles with heavy packs is nothing to an experienced hiker with good equipment. For people who spent their night fighting armed attackers, buried two young men at dawn, and carry heavy packs in semi-inappropriate footwear, it’s

going to be a slog. The road curves here, disappears from view and reappears on the mountain beside ours, and then on two mountains after that, before it winds out of sight. I'm not sure if seeing it before us makes it better or worse.

I step onto the road with the others. A shout comes from somewhere in the trees by the trail, and every last one of us jumps before going for a weapon. I still have those two bullets, and I did not just walk up a mountain to die. Last night was a wake-up call. An epiphany, maybe. This world is harsh and brutal, and though I'm neither of those things, I'll have to fake it. Remembering how my shovelfuls of dirt landed on the blanket-wrapped bodies of Josh and Tanner—with a soft thump of finality, a door closing on lives that had, against all odds, lasted this long—I think that maybe I won't always have to fake it. My anger is real enough.

A guy appears at the trailhead on the southbound side, jogging toward us and waving his hiking poles in the air. A Nalgene water bottle hangs from his pack and slams his leg with every step. "Hey!" he calls. "Hey, wait up!"

He grins as he approaches, his teeth white under a bushy brown beard, and then he lifts his sunglasses to rest on his winter hat. We're unintentional hikers, and we look the part with our mishmash of gear, but this guy is decked out in hiking pants and boots, with a thin down coat under an outer shell. All filthy at this point, but professional gear nonetheless.

The guy stops a few feet away. He's in his early twenties, with hazel eyes that are striking against his windburned cheeks, and brown dreadlocks that come past his shoulders. "God, I'm glad to see you guys. I wasn't sure there was anyone left. What the hell, man? What's going on out there now?"

"The zombie apocalypse," Troy says.

"Dude, I know that much. Got on the trail in late March, earlier than most because it was a light snow year and I wanted to beat the crowds. I like some peace and quiet, you know? Got my first resupply boxes fine, and then the next time I got off the trail, shit was crazy." His eyes widen and his jaw drops as they likely did when he saw what the world had become. "I needed to get home. So this trail angel says he'll get me north, and we head up the east side of the range, but Nevada's no better and we get stuck. And

then he gets eaten right in front of me, and I'm like, *I'm getting back on the trail because fuck this shit.*

“So I just walked, man. I’ve been getting off at towns and breaking into the post offices where my resupply boxes are. No one thinks to look in there. At least not yet. I scored a few boxes that weren’t mine. But now there aren’t any left because my friend was supposed to mail them later. I guess she couldn’t. I can’t get through to anyone.”

He watches us expectantly. I understood the gist of his monologue—the kid is a hiker on the Pacific Crest Trail—but the talk of boxes and angels makes me think he’s losing it after so much time alone.

“I’m Troy.” Troy sticks out a hand. “And I have no idea what the hell you just said, but I think it was English.”

The kid laughs, moves his hiking poles to his left hand, and clasps Troy’s. “Gabriel. Gabe.”

After introductions, Gabe explains that he set out to thru-hike the Pacific Crest Trail in March, a journey of over 2,600 miles and many months. Resupply boxes are food and gear you mail in advance to general delivery at post offices along the way, then leave the trail to pick up and resupply yourself. Trail angels are people who offer things like rides, food, and lodging to hikers on the trail. Gabe lives in Maryland, and he knows he isn’t getting home anytime soon, but he figured he might be better off north for a while.

“I’m worried about my mom,” he says. “Have you guys heard anything about the East Coast?” The six of us are silent; no one wants to be the one to break the news. Gabe ducks his head. “For real?”

“I’m sorry,” Lana says softly.

Gabe spins away, wandering toward the trail again. “What the fuck, man?” his voice carries on the breeze. He reaches the sign at the trailhead and kicks it, screaming, “What! The! Fuck!”

His hiking boot smashes it with every word. A simple sign on a wood post, it isn’t prepared for the assault, and it shifts to the side. Gabe drops to his knees, pushing the post straight and attempting to tamp down the dirt at its base. When that doesn’t work, he lets loose with a plaintive wail, the way Holly and Jesse did as toddlers. It’s heartbroken and lost in a way that makes my own throat raw.

By the time Lana and I reach him, Gabe has both hands in the sandy dirt while tears leave tracks in the dust on his cheeks. “I fucking ruined it,” he says, choking on his words. “You respect the trail, man. That’s the rule.”

Lana kneels beside Gabe, her hands on her thighs, then stretches one to his shoulder. “It’s okay. It’s only a sign.”

Gabe wipes a hand under his nose, leaving a smear of dirt, tears, and mucus along his cheek. “No, it’s, like, a *rule*. People take care of this shit. *Volunteers*. So that people who want to hike, can. So you know where you’re going. It’s *important*.”

He takes a great heaving breath and begins to sob. Lana puts her arm around his shoulders. I walk three feet down the trail to where a few small rocks lay, pick up two, and return to the sign, where I crouch and straighten the post. I wedge the rocks into the gap by the post, test it to be sure it’s tight, then push loose dirt into the space until it looks mostly undisturbed.

“There,” I say. “Fixed.”

“Thank you,” Gabe whispers. After another minute in which his sobs lessen, he wipes his cheeks with a bandanna from his coat pocket. “The whole East Coast?”

I sigh and meet his eyes, hating to be the one to put more pain in them. “That’s what they say, but there have to be people still alive, like us.”

Gabe sniffs. He unscrews his Nalgene bottle and sips, then dumps some water on his bandanna and cleans his face. “My mom—she broke her leg right before I left to come out here. She told me to go anyway. But she could barely walk.”

I have no response for that. There’s always a chance, but it’s slim if you can’t outrun the zombies and don’t have a safe place to hide.

Lana rubs Gabe’s shoulder. “Maybe someone helped her. We don’t know how bad it was in Maryland. Just that New York and D.C. didn’t do so well.”

Gabe sucks in a breath, nodding, then stands and brushes off his legs. “She has a lot of good friends. They wouldn’t leave her alone. Even if they did, she’s a survivor.” He motions at himself, his gear. “She taught me all this stuff.”

Lana uses the same motherly smile on Gabe that she used on me. “There you go.”

“Where are you guys going? Hiking the PCT?”

“We were on the road,” I say. “Heading for Oregon. To Eugene.”

“Cool town. But why there?”

“My good friends live there, and I’m checking on them.”

Gabe scratches at his head, his expression hopeful. “Do you mind if I come along? I kind of don’t want to be alone anymore. I won’t eat your food or anything. I need to find some more soon, but—”

“Of course we don’t mind,” Lana says. “We were about to head out. Do you need to rest?”

“Nah. I only did a mile today, I’m good for twenty more. But I do need to get some water at the spring.”

We scrutinize our surroundings until Gabe points out a nearby path. “Goes to a spring. Or it’s supposed to.” He fishes in his inner coat pocket and pulls out a few pages of maps that have been printed and laminated, then points at the six thousand lines on one page.

“We could use more,” I say. With the promise of water, I can polish off my bottle, which I’ve been dying to do.

We collect everyone’s empty bottles before Lana, Francis, and I follow Gabe down a short trail to a pipe that juts from the ground and flows steadily into a rectangular concrete trough. “Does it need to be filtered if you get it from the pipe?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Gabe says. “It’s not tested, so you should filter it even though it’s probably fine. You guys have a filter?”

We show him a filter and the water purification tablets. Gabe takes out a blue plastic object that resembles a miniature light saber, then pulls off the translucent plastic cap to reveal a light bulb emerging from the handle. “UV filter. It kills everything as long as you do it right.” He takes a closer look at Francis’ filter. “Dude, I wouldn’t use that if I were you. Not now. You’re better off boiling or bleaching your water.”

“Why?” Francis asks.

“That filter’s good for bacteria and protozoa, but it doesn’t do dick against viruses. And this is a virus, right? That’s what they kept saying. Those suckers are small, and they’ll slip right through there. The purification tablets work on viruses, though.”

“Good to know,” Francis says, eyeing his filter with mistrust.

“I mean, this is coming straight from the ground, but out there, when you don’t know if one’s upstream or wherever? What if you drink the virus

and turn into a zombie? Can that even happen?” Gabe scoops some water into a bottle, then sticks his light filter inside and swishes it around. “I’m sure yours is fine. You could use it here, anyway.”

Maybe it’s fine, but I’m not willing to take that chance. I open my box of tablets and extend a blister pack to Francis. “I’m not using it, are you?”

Francis grabs the tablets. “Hell, no.”

THE WAY IS MOSTLY DOWNHILL, and just over four hours later, we’re on an asphalt road and exiting the Klamath National Forest, having entered Oregon less than a mile ago. If I weren’t so tired, I might celebrate that fact. My foot is complaining a little, though the blister hasn’t rematerialized. We turn onto the road that promises fewer miles if we have to walk the entire way to Grants Pass. At an empty campground, we debate whether the vault toilet buildings should be our home for the night, but we decide to press on.

A half mile later, the road turns to dirt and the forest closes in, providing welcome shade. A mile after that, I’m trying not to limp. The blister is back, and it’s taking no prisoners. I don’t want to be the person who holds things up, but being the person who can’t walk and stops things entirely will be worse. I think, if I were injured at some point, the others would stay with me until I heal the way they did with Francis, but I’m not certain of that.

“Hold on a sec?” I ask. “I need to check my foot.”

I sit on a downed tree to remove my boot. The bandage Lana gave me is twisted into a sticky mass inside my sock, and the skin on my heel is a swollen bright pink, though it hasn’t blistered.

Gabe has been quiet for miles, but he springs to life at the sight. “That’s a bad hot spot. I have moleskin.”

He grabs a first-aid kit from a pocket of his pack, then sets to work cutting out a smaller square from a square of adhesive fabric. I remember Dad having the same stuff, though I never used it. Gabe sticks the moleskin over the spot, then shows me his water bottle, which has a layer of duct tape wound around its center. “The tape’s slippery, so your skin won’t rub.” He peels off a short length and sticks it over the moleskin. “All right, you’re good to go.”

I put on my wool sock—I do remember that wool is better than cotton—and then test walking in my boot. A slight tingle remains, but the raw, scraping feeling of a worsening blister is gone. “Like magic. Thank you.”

Gabe salutes me. “No problem.”

After groaning our way uphill for another mile and refilling our bottles in a creek, we come upon a gated driveway with a no trespassing sign. The corner of a white house is visible through the trees. “Looks like home for the night,” Troy says. “Probably a summer place.”

The seven of us stumble up the long driveway. Actually, six of us stumble—Gabe has energy to spare, and he’s first to the front door of the two-story house. The shades are drawn and dried leaves have collected on the front porch, suggesting no one’s been here in a while.

Once inside via a window, we collapse in the living room. We hiked twenty miles. And though we’ve finally reached Oregon, it’s all we can do to keep our eyes open long enough to eat.

Craig

MY HEEL DOESN'T HURT this morning, but the rest of me is in agony. Twenty miles in one day, after a decade of fairly sedentary existence, has every joint rebelling. My hamstrings are half their length and my calves were replaced with rocks sometime during the night. "Even my fingers are sore, and they have no fucking right to be sore," I say as we walk down the road. "My body hates me."

Daisy points to Gabe, who's chugging along happy as you please fifty feet ahead. "I hate *him*." She's mostly over her indignation from the other night, though her hard edge may be a little sharper than it was.

"We all do," Troy says. He takes every step gingerly, like each might be his last. "Because he sucks."

Gabe doesn't really suck. Especially not when he was the first awake, set up his stove, and treated us all to the last of his coffee. It wasn't much, but it was delicious. In a display that revealed Troy's love of coffee, he twice announced his inclination to kiss Gabe for the caffeine.

Lana turns from where she and Francis walk up ahead. "Hey, slowpokes. How you doing?" Troy gives her the one-finger salute, and she cackles before she spins around.

The houses we've passed have been looted, though respectfully, if there's such a thing. Everything is in place, unlike houses in other areas, but we found only empty cabinets and no toilet paper or paper towels or decent medications. Every vehicle, even the ones with keys in the houses, was empty of fuel. Someone—likely someone familiar with the area—has been busy. The looters had no use for an Oregon atlas in a car, and that treasure is now in Francis' pack.

The house searches cut into time that could've been spent gaining ground, but a car will turn a two- or three-day walk—the forty-something miles to Grants Pass—into an hour-long trip. Which will be welcome, even disregarding my legs, because another thing yesterday's jaunt has made clear is that we're going to be hungry if we keep walking. I demolished my breakfast of nuts and cookies twenty minutes ago while we strolled the road, and my stomach is already growling.

A crash comes from the right. I stop with the others and examine the thick fir trees. A man appears, shadowy at first before he stumbles onto the grassy area by the shoulder. His brown hair is full of pine needles, and more forest matter sticks to his ripped cotton t-shirt. He limps for us with a hiss.

I walk to meet him with my spike in hand. I'm still nervous I'll screw up one of these life-or-death moments, but the more I shy away, the more fearful I'll become. At least it isn't human, which has become a plus after the other night. I let the man advance. It takes a second to adjust myself for the blow, and once I've readied my arm, I step forward to take the Lexer's shoulder in one hand while plunging my spike into its eye with the other. It's gross, especially once the zombie drops and I'm left with a gore-covered weapon. I wipe the worst of it on the Lexer's t-shirt, then clean it on the grass.

Gabe has rejoined us, and he motions to my spike. "That's badass."

"Daisy made them," I say.

Gabe gives Daisy two thumbs up. "Right on. It's awesome."

"Craig made the handles," she says.

"Daisy does the metal, Cherry does the wood," Troy says, pointing at me in case there's doubt as to whom he refers.

"Cherry?" Gabe asks me. "Why Cherry?"

"He popped his zombie cherry killing his first with us," Troy explains, "and then he threw up tuna and maraschino cherries a minute later."

I groan. "Don't remind me. I'm never eating tuna again."

Gabe laughs a low, slow stoner-type laugh. "I like it. It's your trail name, man."

"My what?"

"When you get on the trail, you meet other hikers and get to know them and their quirks. Eventually, most people get a nickname. It can be something like where you're from or something about you. Or, like, if you do something stupid or funny or whatnot on the trail. You can give yourself one, but I wanted to earn mine, you know?" He tugs on a dreadlock, eyes downcast before he raises them. "Maybe one day I'll get back on the trail and get a name. You gotta believe, right?"

"Yeah," Lance says, surprising us all by speaking. "I'm going to Iowa soon. I'm gonna find my parents."

“Cool, man.” Gabe punches Lance’s shoulder, then hitches up his pack. “We should get going. I know you guys can make twenty miles today once you’re warmed up.”

We watch as Gabe and Lance move ahead. Gabe laughs at something, practically bouncing in his boots, then beams us a gigantic smile over his shoulder.

“That kid’s all right,” Troy says. “But I still hate him.”

A COUPLE of abandoned farmhouses later, what was an overcast sky becomes rain. Gabe pulls on a high-tech looking raincoat and slips a rain cover over his pack. I zip up my leather coat, wishing Josh had thought to acquire a poncho. He didn’t, likely because the three boys started hiking north in San Diego, where rain was the furthest thing from their minds. Though I can do without being wet, I grew up in rain. The joke is that you can tell the tourists and non-Oregonians by their umbrellas, since no one else uses them. You put on your raingear—or not—and go on your way.

We pass nameless but numbered dirt roads that intersect with ours. We hike uphill and downhill and then uphill again. The forest is quiet with only the patter of rain on leaves and the crunch of gravel underfoot. When the road turns to asphalt, we eat lunch under trees, pushing crackers and salsa into our mouths with cold, damp fingers.

A gravel track with six houses provides nothing of value except a brief respite from the rain, and two houses up a hill have a few boarded windows but no people. Every single home is vacant—doors locked, shades drawn, cars gone, and cabinets barren, as if they all picked up and decamped somewhere together. That’s our going theory at the moment, anyway.

“Maybe it’s the Rapture,” Daisy says as we walk.

“No chance of that,” Troy says. “I’d be first one up there. Right, Lana?”

Lana lifts her hands to Heaven. “Lord, hear my prayer.”

Rain has seeped into my jacket collar and down my shirt. My jeans are soaked. Dad always dressed me and Mike in wool, synthetics, or silk in the woods. *Denim and cotton will kill you*, he’d say. It gets wet, loses its meager insulating properties, and pulls all the heat from your body. I have

to admit that Death by Denim would be pretty dumb. Although, as band names go, it could work.

A sneaker sits by the side of the road. It's followed by another sneaker fifty feet on, and then a men's dress shoe a hundred feet after that. Dread sets up shop in my stomach. "That's a lot of shoes for the middle of nowhere."

Troy shrugs. "Yeah."

"Have you noticed that where the zombies walk, they sometimes—"

"Leave shoes behind," Francis says. "I've noticed."

Everyone's steps grow softer, though we don't stop walking. The view changes from forest to farmland, and four mailboxes sit at the end of a connecting road, with more up ahead. A road sign that once warned of cows crossing or fire safety is now covered by cardboard lettered in black with the word **WARNING!** scrawled at the top in block handwriting. Underneath, a piece of copy paper sealed behind packing tape says:

APPLEGATE - PROVOLT - MEDFORD
TOO DANGEROUS FOR TRAVEL ON FOOT OR BY CAR
DETOUR: ROUTE 199 OR GRAYBACK ROAD, IF
PASSABLE
SAFE ZONE: NINEMILE CIDER FARM, 1/2 MILE
AHEAD, GATED DRIVEWAY
ALL PEOPLE WELCOME
ALL INFECTED SHOT ON SIGHT

I read it twice, then stare at the letters in an attempt to make them rearrange themselves into something I want to read. At best, the news sends us back into California. At worst, it means we'll get no farther than southern Oregon, even if we do backtrack. No one else cares where we end up; I'm the only one with a vested interest in reaching Eugene. The safety of a cider farm might prove irresistible to my companions. The thought of biting into an apple, or ten, makes me salivate. The idea of safety makes me swoon.

"We should check out the Safe Zone." I face the group, attempting a placid expression. "If it's a good spot for you guys, I'll backtrack and get to

Eugene on my own. I can do it.”

The thought is dismal, frightening, but it’ll be okay. I’ll be okay. I killed two humans the other night. I’ve killed zombies. Maybe the undead will be gone in a month or so, but that’s more than enough time for Rose and Mitch to disappear. I have to get to the kids. When they were small, I gave my word I’d protect them, and I don’t go back on my word.

“I don’t know about y’all,” Troy drawls, “but if Cherry’s friends are special enough for him to go all Chuck Norris on us, then I want to meet them.”

“You don’t have to,” I say.

Lana’s laugh lines deepen. “Guess you’re stuck with us. Or with me and Troy, anyway. Though why I’ve agreed to stick with him is anyone’s guess.”

“I’m in,” Daisy says.

Francis nods above his thick folded arms. “Come out fighting.”

Lance and Gabe eye each other. The hippie and the frat boy are polar opposites, but they’ve chatted all day in quiet voices. Gabe elbows Lance. “How are we gonna get cross-country if we can’t make it two hundred miles north?”

Lance nods. He even smiles.

Yesterday, I wondered if they’d wait for my blister to heal, and now they’re putting themselves in danger for me. I also thought this world harsh and brutal—and it is, but that makes finding these people all the more extraordinary.

“Thank you,” I manage to say before the tears roll. I don’t care if only pussies cry. This is who I am, and it’s enough for people to want to be around me. Rose has said it for decades, and it’s possible she hasn’t been blowing smoke up my ass the entire time.

Troy lifts his hands. “Aw, Cherry, don’t cr—”

Lana smacks his shoulder. “Don’t tell people not to cry. Only dumbass men are afraid to show their feelings, you Texas yahoo. Anyway, he’s probably crying because you’re coming.”

My tears turn to laughter that mingles with the others’ laughs. Even if we die on this journey, I’ll be entertained along the way.

IT MAKES sense to visit the Safe Zone. Maybe stay for the night, mooch some food, and glean what information we can. But we don't get a half-mile before we have to stop. Whatever the Safe Zone once was, it's safe no longer. The two-lane road is packed with bodies, and dozens lurch in the field opposite the sign for the farm. It's possible, though doubtful, there are people inside, but we can't get close enough to find out.

We stick to the trees and walk slowly until we're out of sight around a curve. The rain that's been a drizzle turns to a shower, and we retrace our steps to one of the houses up the hill—a blue manufactured home that has a stovepipe and a view that will allow us to see anything on the road.

The inside is as chilly as outside, though drier, and Francis goes straight to the woodstove in the corner. The rest of us locate mattresses and blankets, bringing them to the living room where we'll sleep in warmth. As I'm straightening blankets, the long high-pitched beep of an emergency broadcast sounds from the kitchen. The kind that has always been followed by the words: *This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. This is only a test.*

Those days are over.

We're in the kitchen seconds later. A radio sits on the counter. Every radio we've tried has been nothing but static, but now a computerized male voice speaks under squealing feedback and static:

“This is an emergency broadcast for the state of California. Based on documents found in a Safe Zone, which state the infected will remain active for years, it is unclear when this emergency will end. Initial reports of thirty to ninety days are not accurate. To repeat: the infected will remain active for years, instead of the ninety days previously stated. Bornavirus LX has spread to the Eastern Seaboard and to all points in Canada, Mexico, and South America. California residents are advised not to travel to any location previously named as a Safe Zone. There are no known Safe Zones in the state of California. The following Safe Zones are known to be operational as of three weeks ago.

“In western Oregon: Crater Lake National Park, Lane County Fairgrounds in Eugene, Oregon, the Moda Center in Portland, Oregon,

Timberline Lodge at Mount Hood. In Central Oregon: Pine Mountain Observatory...

The list continues, but I've heard the most important one—Eugene. I'll go to Rose's house first, then the fairgrounds if she isn't there. I have a goal. I have a chance. I just have to get there before it disappears the way California's Safe Zones have.

After listing places in Washington and a few in Idaho and Nevada, the robotic voice says, *"This will be the final broadcast on this frequency for the state of California due to lack of functional generators. God bless you and keep you safe."*

There's a final beep before the radio goes silent. The only sound is the scratch of Francis' pencil on a pad he holds, where he writes down Safe Zone locations. He dots a final *i* and then sets the pad and pencil on the counter, looking troubled.

"Years?" Lana asks, her normally pink cheeks bleached of color. "How is that possible?"

I shiver with a chill that has nothing to do with the temperature. In my excitement about Eugene, I kind of glossed over that part. Years of running for my life and trying to stay alive. Of the stench and the fear. Of death literally waiting around corners. I shake myself out of that thought spiral. One thing at a time. I'll get to Eugene first, and then I'll freak out about the rest of it.

"Why didn't we hear anything like this before?" Daisy asks. "They said it was the final broadcast."

"It's a weather alert radio," Troy says. "An emergency alert automatically turns on the receiver, as long as it has working batteries."

Someone, somewhere, is trying to spread the word. Unfortunately, the word sucks. We stand in a loose circle for a few more minutes, analyzing what the radio said while I fidget. If Rose and Mitch get this news, they might leave for somewhere they think safer. Somewhere I might never know to look. I need to reach them before I lose them forever.

I follow the others into the living room, breathing deep. If they aren't at Rose's, they're likely at the fairgrounds. It would make no sense to go trotting off into the unknown when there's somewhere safe nearby. I'm almost sure of it, though I would give anything to tell them I'm on my way.

I sink onto the couch beside Gabe, wincing at the feel of cold, wet jeans on my thighs. Lana rests a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll get there.”

“We will,” Troy says. “Once we figure out how we’re gettin’.”

“How detailed is that atlas?” I ask.

Francis hands it to me, then squats at the stove where a small fire has caught. It takes me a minute to find the correct map page. When I do, it’s clear how wonderfully detailed the atlas is. Regular roads, Forest Service roads, Bureau of Land Management roads, and hiking trails are all in evidence.

I like maps. Dad taught me orienteering, and it was the one thing at which I didn’t fail. I trace a route with my finger that follows trails and what the map refers to as *unimproved roads* north toward Grants Pass. Gabe peers over my shoulder. “We could totally piece that together,” he says.

“It’s a lot of walking,” I say.

“How much?” Lana asks. She holds her hands over the stove to catch the beginnings of heat.

“Not sure. Francis, can I use your curvimeter?”

A few minutes later, curvimeter in hand, I say, “With all the curves in the trails, sixty miles to get near Grants Pass.”

No one looks especially pleased by this news, except maybe for Gabe. Our other choice is backtracking into California on the chance other roads are passable. Unlikely, but within the realm of possibility. After discussion, Troy says, “I’d rather be heading into the unknown than going where we know there’s nothing.”

Lana nods. “We’ll be hungry either way. At least this way we’ll be hungry while traveling in the right direction.”

“You guys need better clothes,” Gabe says. “It’s going to be cold in the mountains. We’ll have to camp.”

The room has already warmed a few degrees, and the thought of spending cold nights on mountaintops is truly awful. But the thought of reaching Eugene warms me by contrast, and I’m going to focus on that as much as I can.

Craig

THE SURROUNDING houses supplied clothes for everyone. I wear long johns under my jeans, and I have rain pants to go over it all. Francis and Troy have insulated camo hunting pants. Lana and Daisy wear fleece-lined leggings under their rain gear. We found fleece jackets, vests, and hats. Gloves. Wool socks. Sleeping bags that Gabe says suck but are better than nothing. Tarps. Rope. Stove fuel. Tea bags, coffee, and hot cocoa packets found in someone's camping gear in a basement.

We went to sleep last night in front of a roaring fire, and now we say goodbye to that fire before we march into the rain. It's three miles down to the Forest Service road, and then another two miles along gravel to the trailhead. We enter the trail at the wooden sign and travel alongside a creek, where we refill our water and zap it with Gabe's UV filter. The uphill path through the trees is pleasant until we reach a steeper section, complete with switchbacks, and my leg muscles groan when they discover the plan for the day.

The trail cuts through green meadow with flowers that haven't yet bloomed. Fir trees are dark green against the spring green of the grasses. It's likely beautiful when not cold and raining, but all I see are trees and fog. All I feel are my boots hitting the ground and the cold rush of air into my lungs with every trudging step. My hiking companions say nothing as we make our way higher. The trail turns to another, then another into denser fog at a higher altitude.

My stomach growls. We stop to eat at a pile of boulders when the day hits peak lightness—a lighter gray—and continue on. My pack, with added sleeping bag and tarp, cuts into my hips and shoulders, even after adjusting the straps again. My legs are dry, but when the wind picks up, it sends the rain into my face, batters my rain pants, and throws my pack off-balance. I give up on cleaning my glasses and resign myself to viewing the world through raindrops. We have to be nearing the top of the mountain, as evidenced by patches of snow that grow larger and larger until they cover the ground entirely. The rain hits the packed, granular snow to form a slick

sheet of ice. I slip, then slip again, catching myself before I fall, though my back seizes each time.

Not only did I have a bike, but I also had a gym membership that I used about as often as said bike. Why the hell do people hike, anyway? It's torture. Pure torture. My thighs burn. My brain has shut down. There's nothing but the next step. Endless steps.

The wind buffets me, slapping at my hood and whipping the drawstring across my face until it gets caught in my glasses and pokes me in the eye. I slap it out of the way. "Fuck. You."

Behind me, Lana asks, "Who are you cursing at?"

I look over my shoulder and get another lash with the drawstring. I bat at it so heatedly that I punch my own cheek. "Not who. What. I'm cursing at the wind."

Lana answers with a breathless laugh. We've spread out some on the ascent, and Troy lags behind, with Francis and Daisy between him and Lana. Gabe and Lance are bounding ahead, and I have an irrational urge to beat them up.

"Stupid youth," I mutter, slipping for the tenth time.

Lana laughs again, which relieves some of my outright fury at the motherfucking wind that doesn't ever stop. When the light fades to a deeper gray, we reach a snowy point where the trail descends. At first, I think it's messing with me—a subtle dip before more uphill climbing, like earlier, but there's no mistaking the slope. The beautiful, wondrous slope.

I slip and slide down the icy trail. It turns to mud, then to muddy grass. I know I have feet because I'm moving, but they've gone numb. Up and down, up and down again, though never up quite as high, and then we're at the trailhead, stumbling from a grassy clearing toward a gravel road. I have the feeling I got when I was young and we were exiting one of Dad's forced forays into the wilderness: *Civilization! Amenities!*

Except there's no civilization. We're not going to pull into a drive-thru and stuff our faces with burgers, fries, and root beer. My stomach gurgles, eating itself. Troy is last out of the trees, and he drops onto a boulder under giant firs by the trailhead sign, bent over so that he looks like a backpack with legs sitting on a rock.

"I am done for," he announces. "How many miles was that?"

“Sixteen,” I answer immediately, having spent the last hour adding the miles in my head. I say it as breezily as I can, as if I’m ready to keep going and not dying inside.

Lana sets her pack in the grass. “Maybe we should stop for the night.”

At her words, Daisy falls flat on her back with a joyful groan. A chorus of agreement comes from everyone but Gabe, who, insanely, looks disappointed but proceeds to throw his limitless energy into readying our camp. The ground is wet but not soaked under the firs. We string up a large tarp between trees and lay the second tarp beneath. Onto this go sleeping bags for five of us, since Lance and Gabe plan to squeeze into Gabe’s small pop-up shelter.

Two cooking stoves are lit, and three cans of soup heat between them, with Minute Rice added for calories. I hold out Josh’s hiking cup to receive my distressingly small amount of hot soup, then sip at it while I tear open my bag of honey roasted peanuts.

It’s ambrosia. Salty chicken broth, too-soft noodles, and mushy carrots have never tasted so good. I crunch peanuts in between sips, forcing myself to go slow. I want it all. I want a burger loaded with cheese and bacon and French fries—the real kind, the *pommes frites* kind—dipped in that European mayonnaise. I want an egg sandwich and diner food and the vegan soul food across the street from my apartment. And a salad. And panang curry. And candy bars and cake and pie with a browned flaky crust.

I stop chewing at a moan. Daisy has her cup to her face and her head back so as not to miss a drop. Then she stares into the empty receptacle as though more will magically appear, the way my cat Murray used to do with his food bowl. And though I’ve missed Murray in the two years since he died, I’m glad he isn’t here for this. Watching him die of starvation would’ve killed me, too. Better he was put to sleep in my arms than suffer that way.

I eat my last five peanuts, crunching through the sweet honey-roasted outer shell into the fatty nutmeat. They’re delicious, and then they’re gone. I wiggle my tingling toes in my boots. The burn is unpleasant but welcome. It means I still have working toes.

We laid out our food while cooking, and now I look it over. Four MREs. Fifteen mini bags of crackers. Eight mini bags of cookies. Sixteen small bags of nuts. A can of beans. A can of diced tomatoes. A half-jar of peanut

butter. Ramen soup. Two cans of generic Chef Boyardee. A half-dozen protein bars. The scant remainder of the Ziploc bag of Minute Rice. And seven people to eat it, all of whom have finished this meal and are ogling what remains.

The gray light grows murkier. The air chillier, with a wetness that seeps into my bones. After a brief washing up, we lie in our sleeping bags, too exhausted to speak. Gabe takes first watch while Lance sleeps in his tent, and I get the middle of the tarp between Lana and Daisy, with Troy and Francis like bookends on the sides. I don't care where I am as long as I don't have the first watch shift. I close my eyes, the ground lumpy under me, and tumble into sleep.

I wake in the dark, legs aching from the soles of my feet to my lower back. Tiny muscles and tendons demand to know why I'm treating them this way. Lana's butt is jammed into my hip, and Daisy has snuggled up to my other side. I'm warm and cozy, like sleeping between Rose and Mitch. Rose jokingly calls me a cuddle slut, though she's just as bad, and I miss her head on my shoulder, her arm around my waist. I soak in the comfort for a minute, until the glow of a muted lantern is apparent at the edge of the tarp.

I carefully extricate my arm from under Daisy and out of my sleeping bag to check my new watch. Four in the morning, and I'm on watch duty at four-thirty. For ten minutes, I attempt the meditation trick of relaxing every muscle in my body, starting at my feet, until I'm a puddle of Zen calm. Eventually, I give up. I sucked at it before a sixteen-mile hike through a zombie-filled world, so it's not surprising I still do; Xanax was my Zen calm. *Xanax*. I haven't taken one since the morning I tried to leave on my own. It hasn't occurred to me, which is strange. Good, but strange.

After a minute of careful shifting so as not to wake the ladies or cause me to yelp in pain, I slither out of my sleeping bag and then rearrange it over Lana and Daisy. Francis sits in the dim light, just under the edge of our tarp roof and out of the soft rain. I retrieve my water bottle from my pack and drink, wishing for something—anything—food-like to put in my stomach.

Francis nods when I settle beside him. It would've been smart to use my sleeping bag like a cape, as Francis does, but the night wind has died down, and I don't want Lana and Daisy to freeze. It's a generalization, I know, but

women seem cold more often than men. Besides, I like the two, and when I like people, I like to take care of them.

“Hungry?” I ask Francis quietly.

“Starving.” Francis looks out into the night, arms crossed and hands under his armpits. “Legs hurt?”

“Like fuckers.”

“Same here. Gabe says we’ll get used to it.”

A soft snore comes from the sleeping bags, and I’m filled with gratitude. It would be very different to stare into the night alone, with hundreds of miles and little food in my future. “Thanks for coming all this way with me. I appreciate it.”

“You know what Lana said to me, at the Walmart?” Francis asks. “She saw how close I was to walking out the doors because I didn’t care anymore, not with Lianne gone. She and Daisy stayed with me for twenty-four hours straight. They’d take breaks, like a tag team. Pretending they couldn’t get enough of my company. They even waited outside the bathroom.”

I laugh quietly when Francis smiles. “Finally, I got pissed. I asked them why they cared so damn much. And then Lana said, ‘You’ve seen what’s out there. If we can’t help other humans now, what kind of world do we have left?’ ”

“It’s true,” I say softly. It sounds like Lana. It sounds like all of them, actually.

Francis nods. “She put it in perspective. Everyone there was the same as me. They’d lost everyone and everything they loved, and they were still trying. I figured I could, too. See how it played out. So I did.”

“I’m glad you’re still here,” I say.

“When I don’t want to be, I tell myself to try one more day. Maybe I’ll get the chance to comfort someone who’s lost everyone, the way Lana and Daisy did for me. But the chance to help someone *find* everyone? I’m here for that.”

I can’t speak without tears. Francis punches my arm lightly. “And now you can freeze your nuts off while I get some rest. See you at dawn.”

Francis picks up himself and his sleeping bag, then settles down away from the light on Daisy’s other side. After a few minutes, his deep breaths are added to the other sleeping sounds.

I ruminate on my hunger while listening to the rain. This is likely how life will be from now on. Constant hunger and a constant search for food. With zombies around for the foreseeable future, we'll be on the hunt for undiscovered caches, places that are safe to enter. If we find somewhere secure to settle down, we'll have to make our own food. Between Rose's black thumb, my subpar hunting skills, and Mitch's inability to cook anything that isn't takeout, we have it made.

I laugh to myself. We'll figure it out somehow. The desire to find my friends—my family—sparks anxiety that compels me to hike, to climb, even on achy legs. If they aren't in Eugene, I'll do like Francis and try to go on anyway. I have new people with whom to figure it out.

That doesn't change the fact that I want everyone. Maybe it's too much to ask of this fucked-up world, but fuck it, I'm asking.



BREAKFAST IS a half bag of crackers, a glob of peanut butter, a few over-processed raviolis, and hot coffee or tea. I wander off after my coffee and find I hate crapping in the woods as much as I did when young. I do it without too much trouble, though, which makes me thankful for previous experiences. Dad is coming through after all these years.

The BLM road we travel ends abruptly in what, according to the map, appears to be the middle of nowhere. But we're leaving it beforehand and plunging into the forest, where we'll walk northwest until we hit a creek we'll follow to a road. In a fit of misplaced confidence I now wholeheartedly regret, I declared I can get us through the woods with the map and Gabe's compass.

After the fifth turn on the gravel road, I orient the map by lining up the orienteering arrow with map north, then spinning it all until the magnetic needle is lined up, too. I hold the map in place, turn the compass until the edge is aligned from where we stand to our destination, then spin the dial until the orienting arrow and red magnetic needle meet, which gives me our direction of travel. *Put red in the shed*, as Dad used to say.

I stand and peer into the thick forest. With the continued rain striking branches and ground, it'll be impossible to hear a creek less than a mile

away until we're on top of it. And though a mile isn't long, it's more than enough space in which to get irretrievably turned around. Especially when you consider declination. Depending on where you are on Earth, there's an angle between true north and magnetic north, called magnetic declination—and it changes over time. In Oregon, it was 18 degrees east when I was a kid. Based on how Dad told us it was 20 degrees when he was younger, and with the number of years that have passed, I've decided 14 to 15 degrees east might be close. I adjusted Gabe's compass to reflect that, but if I'm off, we could end up a quarter mile from our destination.

"That way?" Troy asks.

I nod as I step into dense underbrush, compass in hand and hoping to God I did it correctly. Worst case, we'll run into a road at some point and have to figure out our location while not getting eaten alive. Actually, worst case is we're lost in the wilderness and starve to death.

The ache in my legs turns to wobbly uncertainty. Six pairs of feet follow me blindly, years of dropped pine needles and dead ferns crunching beneath their weight. Bright green ferns swish against my rain pants. I watch the compass and the trees. Dad's voice whispers, *Keep steady. Follow your reading, and you won't get lost.* Those sporadic gentle moments are the hardest to dredge up from the morass of bad memories: Dad's smile, small but pleased. His hand light on my shoulder while he allowed himself to be led instead of roughly steering. A simple *Good job, Craigy-boy.*

The tightness in my chest eases. I know how to do this. Doubt comes from the part of my brain that second-guesses and criticizes, which at times feels like the only part there is. I step over a moss-covered downed tree, past brush developing its summer leaves. A heavy fog floats at the tops of the firs, but below the air is clear and redolent with the zing of pine and the earthy scent of forest humus. For the first time in decades, the woods feel close in a way that seems more protective than threatening.

At long last, a splashing sounds over the rain, coming from up ahead. I hold my breath as we near a lighter patch of forest—a clearing. I break through the brush onto a rock and watch the creek burble to wherever it's going, calmly absorbing my companions' accolades while inside I scream jubilantly.

The creek leads to a narrow gravel road that deposits us on asphalt. Forest turns to fields filled with lush, tall grass and dotted with trees. The

first house we pass is empty of useful items, the second intact, with an old car out front and four junkers off to the side that were reclaimed by grass years ago.

A rap on the door produces a few thumps. Though no one particularly wants to deal with zombies, their presence makes it more likely there'll be good stuff inside. Francis hits a locked window with his knife handle, shattering glass and drawing two Lexers. An old couple, one still in overalls like the farmer he once was. Lance rushes him, stabbing a knife into its eye before he gets the woman under the chin.

When he finishes, he wears a semi-cocky smile. Gabe, leaning against the porch rail, claps slowly, then leans to pinch Lance's bicep. "Nice, dude. All that working out's paying off."

Lance colors pink and mumbles something before he crawls through the window. Gabe grins at the rest of us and follows. "Did he really blush?" Lana asks. "I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it."

The front door opens to a mess inside. Whatever happened, it wasn't pretty. Two dogs, golden retrievers by the looks of the long golden fur attached to scraps of dried skin, were almost fully consumed. One in the kitchen, one in the living room. Clumps of dried muscle and sinew have dried to the floor and walls. It stinks of death.

But we score the keys to the car, cans of stew, packets of tuna that make me gag, two half-pints of what appear to be home-canned strawberry jam, two Hershey's Bars, and some canned vegetables. The full garbage can is proof they were well long enough to eat some of their food, though everything in the fridge has gone bad. I do a final inspection, trying not to note the floral plates that remind me of my own grandma's or the chicken scratch handwriting on the notepad by the wall phone. *Janet's birthday Thursday*, it says. *Call AB Auto in a.m.*, is written just beneath.

"Some old people have the worst houses to loot," Daisy says from where she sits on the only chair not covered with gore. "Because they don't eat that much, maybe? You'd know why, Troy."

Troy laughs, though he pats his holster. "One of these days, Daisy."

She hops to her feet at the rumble of a motor. Outside, Francis sits behind the wheel of the old white Ford LTD, and he revs the engine when we appear. We pile in and settle on the plush red interior. With seating for three on the front bench seat, four fit in the wide backseat without too much

squishing, though I wouldn't care if I had to sit on a lap. Sitting is an oft-undervalued state of being, especially sitting in a big old American car that feels indestructible.

"A quarter tank might not get us far in this gas guzzler," Troy says as he puts the car in gear. "Enjoy it while you can."

THE ENJOYMENT—MINUS the smell of seven unwashed bodies—lasts five miles, until the road fills with cars. Dozens of vehicles struck out across fields when they hit the blockage and then were abandoned in the grass at various points. Unlike everywhere else, this traffic was heading south. Away from somewhere. Maybe the center of town, maybe Grants Pass to the north.

More like away from *some things*, plural, that emerge from the trees at the sound of the LTD's engine. We watch the zombies approach, our own disappointed groans mingling with those of the undead. We'd hoped to bypass the arduous trek we've plotted on the map, and this was our only option.

Troy reverses until we face south, muttering curses, and guns the way we came. The car bucks several times then smooths out while Francis directs him onto the next road, which starts off as a two-lane and becomes a narrower paved track on a steep incline.

Heat blasts from the vents. Glorious heat. Though it isn't horribly cold, the rain makes it feel colder. Life was warm once, and I went from one heat-filled place to another, taking it for granted most of the time. Not anymore.

After five miles, the car bucks again, then stutters for twenty feet. Troy curses, mashing the gas as the LTD gives a final rattle—a death rattle—and then stills. He plays with the gears, turns the car on and off, and then throws up his hands. We sit in confounded silence, the windshield wipers thumping back and forth, until I say, "Call AB Auto."

"What's that?" Troy asks.

"They had a notepad by the phone. It said *Call AB Auto*. I'm guessing it was their mechanic."

Lana sighs and opens her door. “Pop the trunk. Looks like we’re walking.”

We retrieve our bags, shouldering them as we start uphill.

Rose

AFTER SIX DAYS, there's been no word from the soldiers who left for Portland. The notion that Carver and his people are dead has been passed around in whispers. Even if they didn't expect to return for a week, they haven't made radio contact. Barry insisted he's not worried, but his laugh lines dragged as he did, and he walked away rubbing his face.

I've cooked more meals and stood at the fence with various people, waiting for something to happen while hoping nothing will. There's an announcement scheduled for after dinner, and Ethan catches up to me as I enter the Performance Hall.

"Hey, sexy lady," he says, giving my backside a pat.

He's in a good mood, and I do my best not to be annoyed at something that never annoyed me in the past. He's been somewhat irritated the past days, which means that when he disappears for hours, I'm happy. Wondering what he's up to, but happy. "Hey, yourself," I say. "How is everyone?"

"Most are on the upswing. Three more people are sick, though."

"Even with moving the others?" They brought the sick people to the rooms in the livestock arena and disinfected the ice rink.

"It's fewer than there were. I think it's winding down."

"Thank God for that."

"I'm going out tomorrow," Ethan says as we head toward Pop, who's in the corner with Tom and Mitch. "We're heading to those places you told Barry about. Plus, we could use some more medication. Rhonda and I are throwing everything we've got at this, and we're running low."

I slow to study him. My disconnect is still in place, and my concern is nowhere near what it should be. What it once was. "Is it safe?"

Ethan shrugs, then rests his arm on my shoulders when we join the others. "Looks like we're getting started."

Voices quiet down. Boone stays off to the side while Barry walks to the center of the stage. "Can everyone hear me?" It's silent except for our murmurs and the shrill squeal of a toddler. "The reason I'm here is that we

need volunteers to go out for food tomorrow. With half our people gone, and some of the rest sick, it's all we can do to watch the boundaries."

There are muttered complaints about that. Those people are morons. I would be more worried if Barry promised they could handle it all no problem. When he shrugs at the complainers, I like him more than I did. "It is what it is," he says, "but we all need to eat."

Ethan's weight grows heavy on my shoulders. I turn my head, and he straightens. "What?" he asks.

Slack eyelids, an unfocused iris. There are many indications he might be using, and I know them all. I step away with my heart in my throat, but when Ethan cocks his head, gaze clear, I doubt what I saw. It's one of the myriad ways I'm slowly being driven insane.

"So, say, five groups of six," Barry continues. "That's thirty people. I have ten already, and I'm looking for volunteers. The only things we ask are that you be able to finish off a Lexer and that no parents of young children go unless there's another parent here."

Tom's hand shoots up, as do many others. Barry points to him, and the worry I should've felt for Ethan settles in my chest. I don't want a single one of our group out there—if we were home, we'd still have plenty of food to eat. Food they took from us. We risked ourselves to get it, and now they want us to risk ourselves again.

I don't want to leave, but I'm able-bodied enough to do so, and I get my hand halfway up before Pop yanks it down with the hand he's not holding in the air. "No," he says, jaw set.

It's bad enough Ethan and Tom are going. Pop would be too much to take on top of that. "I have another hand," I whisper. "And it's going up unless you put yours down."

Pop glares. I glare back until he sighs and lowers it. Barry skips over Mitch's hand, for reasons I can probably guess, and points to people in the crowd, counting as he goes. When he reaches nineteen, he gestures near the table where the kids sit and counts off the final two people. I stand on my tiptoes. I can't see who it is, but I have a bad feeling.

Barry smiles at the crowd. "Easier than I expected. Thank you. Okay, last thing. Tom—where's Tom?" Tom raises his hand again, and the entire room turns our way. "Tom used to teach self-defense. Mainly to women, but anyone is welcome to join. He's going to start classes in the next day or

two. We'll put up a note about times in the rec room. I'll be at the tables to answer questions and assign groups for those of you going. That's it, folks. Thanks."

"We have to get to dishes," Mitch says. She links her arm in Pop's, who winks on the way out. Willa follows, as she never misses a chance to lick the food left behind on plates.

I watch Barry step from the stage, my anxiety mounting. It was Jesse. I know it. "Was it Jess?" I ask Ethan.

"Was what Jess?"

Ethan's answer is slightly befuddled, and my familiar annoyance rises. "Did Jesse volunteer to go?" I say slowly. "I couldn't see."

"He had his hand up," Tom says apologetically. "He was counted."

I take a breath that doesn't calm me at all, then stomp to the kids' table through people leaving the room. As I near, Jesse pales a bit, though he sits tall. "I need to talk to you," I say. "Outside."

Fury builds in my chest until I'm certain I'll smack Jesse when I face him, and I slam out the door into the night. It's dark, though light spills through the glass doors and reflects on the wet asphalt of the side lot. The food trucks are quiet, waiting to be moved to the main lot for breakfast if the weather is good. Waiting to feed everyone—the children and old people and even me.

My confidence, my anger, falters. That's what they're doing here: protecting people who need protection against something unbelievable and downright terrifying. That's why they need the ones who can protect themselves to head through the fences. It's not fair to Jesse, to everyone, to insist my family not be put in harm's way, no matter how much I would like to do just that.

Jesse steps out, slightly cowed but looking me in the eye. "Mom, I—"

"Be quiet," I say, and his mouth closes with an audible snap.

My heart rebels against saying my next words, but I force them out. "Promise me you won't do anything stupid tomorrow. There are two things in this world I love more than anything—you and Holly. I don't know what I'd do if you two were gone. I'd want to die, honestly." Tears come to my eyes, and the rock in my throat threatens to cut off my voice. "And I don't care if that makes you feel guilty, because maybe you'll feel guilty enough to not do anything stupid. Promise me."

Jesse's set expression turns to a smile. It's his father's smile, and it's so damn handsome. "I promise."

My plan was to forbid it, to go in his place, but I have to let him be the man he is, even as I want to fight it tooth and nail. It isn't fair that this is the world in which he has to do it, but his raised hand means he'll do it anyway. I want him to go with my blessing, and, maybe, with a little guilt. The life-saving kind of guilt.

"Caution is good," I say. "It keeps you alive. I know you're brimming with testosterone and bravado, but remember when you were little and wanted to get school lunch for the first time?"

He begged for a specific school lunch and chose the day carefully—corn dogs—but, when the morning arrived, he cried and cried, worried he wouldn't know how to line up and get his tray. Both he and Holly were careful children, too much like me at times, but it will serve them well in moderation.

"Yes, Mom," Jesse says with a laugh. "But I got it, and it was fine."

"You did, and it was. I don't want you to freak out tomorrow, but a little fear would be good."

"Scared but not scared shitless. Got it."

I smile and tuck his hair behind his ear. "I love you, sweet boy. You have no idea how much. All right, you can go back to your friends now."

My attention is drawn by two figures inside the glass doors. I wave them out, and Holly and Clara walk into the night. "You're still alive," Holly says to Jesse. "We were taking bets."

"Funny girl," I say. "Did you raise your hand, too, and I don't know it yet?"

"Definitely not."

I pull Holly to my side. That's one thing I don't have to worry about. Though I wish she weren't so scared, I can be sure she won't go bounding into the streets to prove herself. "Where's Dad?"

"Inside. Waiting for you."

"Why didn't he come out here?"

Holly shrugs. "I'll get him."

Before I can refuse, Holly does bound inside. She always jumps for Ethan in her quest to make sure he doesn't ever feel hurt, as though she can prevent his drug use through sheer buoyancy.

“How about you?” I ask Clara. “Were you tempted to go?”

“I’m not crazy,” she says. “My dad would kill me.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Jesse says. Clara shoves him. He pushes her back lightly, then grabs her hands when she retaliates. “Say uncle.”

“No.” Clara struggles in his grip, though she doesn’t seem to mind all that much. Neither does Jesse, for that matter. He watches Clara with amusement and more fondness than I remember seeing before.

“I could do this all night.” Jesse gazes up at the sky like he’s bored. “Or until someone says uncle.”

“Were you paying attention in there?” Clara asks sweetly. “My father taught self-defense, so I know the two best places to hit a man are the eyes and the nuts. I can’t reach your eyes, but...”

I laugh as she lifts a knee. Jesse drops her hands and backs up. “Did I ever tell you how amazing you are, sweet Clara?”

Clara smiles. She’s lovely with the light reflecting off her dark hair, supple skin, and black-lashed green eyes. Most girls her age are. I was, too, but you never see it on yourself until it’s long gone.

The doors open, and Ethan emerges with Holly. “Mom said you could go?” he asks Jesse. “I knew she would, after she was done freaking out.”

“She didn’t even freak out.”

Ethan puts his hand to my forehead. “Feeling okay?”

“Haha.” I narrow my eyes when his words click. “You knew he was volunteering?”

“Okay, so we’re going in,” Jesse says with a wince. “Good luck, Dad.”

The kids file through the door. Ethan faces me, wearing his patronizing don’t-provoke-the-crazy-lady expression. “He asked if he could, and I said it was better to ask forgiveness. You have to let him out of your sight once in a while.”

His comment both pisses me off and makes me glad I didn’t react the way he expected. “I do let him out of my sight, but this isn’t like his first car trip alone. One wrong move and he’s dead, Ethan. Sorry if it seems crazy I’d worry about that.”

Ethan’s fingers brush my arm. “Hey, I know. But he’s twenty-two, Rosie, and he can do what he wants. I’ll be with him. You know I’d die before I let anything happen to him.” I nod. Ethan loves the kids as much as I do, of that I have no doubt. “We’re not going far. Only to that grain

warehouse on Bertelsen. We zip there, we load up, we come back. I told Barry to put us on the safest route.”

“You did?”

“It’s not like I’m dying for him to go.” He widens his eyes in terror. “Plus, I knew I was going to get in trouble and would have to do something to make you forgive me.”

I laugh, my irritation lessening. He made it as safe as possible for Jesse, but he did it for me, too. “You’re an ass.”

“But I’m your ass. I’ll take care of him, I promise.”

He tugs me into his arms, presses his lips to my hair, and I allow myself to relax in his familiar, comforting embrace. I take a deep breath. The skunky odor of weed is also familiar, but it’s most definitely not comforting.

“You smell like weed,” I say quietly.

Ethan’s arms drop, and he disengages with a frown. “I didn’t smoke any, if that’s what you’re saying. Besides, pot’s not opiates, Rose.”

I hate when he calls me Rose in that disdainful tone. I have no problem with weed, might smoke some if I had any, but Ethan does nothing in moderation. A toke of weed leads to waking and baking, and that leads to a pill, and so on and so forth. It’s part of his sobriety, part of the promise he made to me and the kids.

I could say that, but I’ve said it all in the past, and it’s hard enough for me to say what I need to say next. It’s always bad—either start the conversation and start a fight, or keep silent and have it eat me up inside. “It’s just...before. You seemed high or something.”

“When?”

“Inside. When Barry was talking. You seemed out of it.”

I brace myself when Ethan’s jaw tightens. “For fuck’s sake, I don’t even know what you’re talking about. I’m tired. If you haven’t noticed, I’ve been a little busy taking care of sick people. I’m not allowed to be tired now without you thinking I’m doing dope?”

“That’s not what I’m say—”

“Then what are you saying?”

His voice and bearing are intimidating. I feel myself shrinking down, down, down to the asphalt. It always goes this way, even after promises it won’t, and it usually means he’s using. “I’m *asking*. Are you clean?”

Ethan gazes across the lot, his head moving side to side as if astonished by my question. “Yes, Rose. I’m clean, and you still want nothing to do with me. So, what’s the point?”

The words sting, likely because they hit home. But the point is to do it for himself, for his kids, not based on what I do or don’t give him. “I don’t want nothing to do—”

“You barely let me touch you. You’re cold as fucking ice. I’m trying, but you’re not at all.”

“I *am* trying.” It comes out a whisper. Against my better judgment, I’m trying, and it still isn’t enough. He expects me to forget everything he’s said and done because he’s moved past it, but it doesn’t work that way for me.

“Yeah, I can see you trying.” His words drip sarcasm. “Don’t you think I see you with him?”

Sweat springs up on my back and my hands go cold. “What? With who?”

“With who?” Ethan parrots, his voice high-pitched to mimic mine. “With Barry. Hanging on him, kissing him. You’re nicer to him than you are to me. Maybe you could make it a little more obvious so everyone knows.”

I stare at him, both utterly baffled and wholly relieved. Even when there might be something to see, he sees only what he’s fabricated. “That’s insane,” I sputter. “I kissed him on the cheek because he—”

“That’s not the point. The point is that you barely touch *me*. Like I’m a fucking leper.”

“I told you I needed time. I—”

“How much time? A month? A year? Have you seen the rest of the world? How much time is left?” The bitter expression he casts my way alters to heartbroken, complete with trembling lips. “Just say it already, Rose. Say you’re done.”

So much of me wants to, but the words won’t come. They’re big words—maybe the biggest I’ll ever speak—and the fallout will be immense. “I need time,” I whisper. My eyes fill and overflow against my will. “Why can’t you give me that? I should be able to ask if you’re clean without...”

I choke on my tears and turn my head, overwhelmed by him and myself and this situation. A hundred feet away, fabric flaps on the fence. I want to hop it and run. I hate fighting, hate the way Ethan not only doesn’t let me get a word in edgewise but also knows me well enough to see part of my

heart. But mostly I hate the way my throat closes up and prevents me from fighting back. The way I turn teary and silent and weak.

“Take all the time you need.” Ethan’s voice is clipped, moving toward the building. “I’ll sleep somewhere else tonight. I’m sure you can find someone to sleep in my place, if you haven’t already. Maybe I’ll see you in the morning before I leave.”

I spin around. “Ethan, that’s not fair—”

He slips in the doors, letting them close behind him. I can barely remember how the conversation imploded, but it ended the way it usually does—I lose the thread at his onslaught of words and accusations, and then Ethan storms off, leaving me in tears. Later, he’ll apologize, and I’ll do my best to forgive him. Except I don’t think I can forgive him anymore. I’m done—if not aloud, then in my heart.

Through the glass, I see Ethan stop to talk to a few guys I don’t know. They laugh and head out of the room together. Families are pulling up chairs, setting blankets on the wood floor in preparation for the movie. Gabrielle sits with her brood, the youngest in her lap while she leans against her husband’s chest. It’s like looking back at Ethan and myself fifteen years ago. Though nothing is ever as simple as it appears on the surface, they seem content.

I wipe my eyes and pull a tissue from my bra. I can’t go inside until I look like I haven’t been crying, and that’ll take a while. At least my phone is in my pocket for entertainment.

Tom materializes at the glass, and I pivot away before he sees my face. The door creaks open. Slow footsteps advance until he stops beside me. “I didn’t see you come in. You okay?”

I can’t tell Mitch, who will—rightfully—tell me it’s insane to do this any longer. I’ll never tell Pop because it’s too shameful. The daughter he thinks he knows would refuse to let Ethan twist her around this way. I swallow a few times, fighting back new tears, and then lose the battle.

After a minute, Tom pats my shoulder. Thump. Thump. Thump. It’s so awkward that my tears turn to laughter that might scare him more. “Poor Tom,” I say between giggles. “Sorry you came out here yet?”

“Maybe a little.” That C appears in his cheek, and he shakes his head. “Not sorry.”

I blow my nose, then find my pack of tissues and use two more. It's going to suck when I run out of tissues. I always have them, between occasional crying and constant Oregon allergies.

"Sorry," I say. "Done. Promise."

"Want to talk about it?" he asks.

The light from the doors illuminates his concern. I never want to talk about it, but maybe that's part of my problem. I'll leave out the Barry parts, which are too mortifying to tell anyone, especially Tom. "I asked Ethan if he was smoking pot because I smelled it on him. He said he wasn't, and then he got angry at me for asking if he was clean. It turned into a fight. He doesn't think I'm trying to make this work."

"Are you?"

The question is simple. The answer isn't. "I think so. I don't know. It's more like I'm trying to find what's left so that I *can* try."

"It sounds like you're doing the best you can. That's all he can ask for."

"Tell that to Ethan."

"Want me to?"

I laugh, though I'm not entirely certain he's kidding. "No one else needs to be embroiled in my drama. In fact, let's stop talking about it."

"All right. Do you want to go in?"

"No." It's peaceful outside, even with a clatter from far off; zombies are forever knocking things over in the dark. "You can, though."

"I'll stay."

That makes me happier than I want to admit. "Okay," I say, and breathe in the cool air.

"Do you want to sit somewhere?"

"I want to go to the museum, but I'm not sure we're allowed." I point across the side lot to the entrance of the Lane County History Museum. I spent the afternoon staring at the small building from my food truck. "I haven't gone in years. I usually go during the county fair."

"During the fair? Why?"

"I feel sorry for it. Everyone is more interested in eating funnel cakes and riding the Ferris wheel. It looks lonely."

"It's a building," he says. "How can it look lonely? Is it sitting by itself in the cafeteria? Staying home alone on Friday nights?"

I laugh. "I don't know, it just does."

“Well, we can’t have that. Let’s go.”

“I’m not sure we can. I’ll ask Barry tomorrow.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” he asks.

“They’ll yell at us and tell us to get out.”

“That’s definitely something to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid.” I cross my arms, though I am a teensy-weensy bit apprehensive. “I just don’t like to break the rules and get in trouble.”

Tom finds this entertaining, judging by his high-and-mighty chuckle. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but *I’m* going to the museum.”

He starts across the lot. I glance around, see no one, and follow. He’s right—the most they’ll do is tell us to leave. Still, I feel as if any moment an alarm might go off, scaring the bejesus out of me and marking me as a problem. I’m not proud of my goody two-shoes side, but I can’t help it.

I catch up as Tom reaches the metal doors. He pulls one open and holds it until I step inside, where nightlights illuminate the space with a soft yellow glow. Once the door closes behind us, my heart slows enough for excitement to outweigh worry. The museum is a large windowless space, with a few offices and the admissions desk in front. A row of antique vehicles, ranging from a covered wagon to a Model-T, are lined up in the center of the room. A photo exhibit takes up one corner, an old toy exhibit another. Antique furniture lines a wall, along with a case of clocks.

It’s full of tiny treasures, and it’s all ours. I clap my hands. “Remember when you were a kid and dreamed about getting locked inside the museum or a department store overnight?”

For a moment, I think Tom will say no, but then he grins. “I wanted Disneyland. No lines, and all the food and souvenirs you wanted.”

“How would you run the rides?”

“I was seven. That wasn’t important.”

“Good point.” I find the lights and switch on enough to see without losing the ambiance. “What should we do? Upstairs first?”

Tom nods and follows me up a carved wooden staircase—itsself taken from the old courthouse—to the small mezzanine, where I become very aware it’s only the two of us. I briefly fret about what people will think if they realize we’re both missing and then discard the thought. I’m too content to care.

We wander past a display of old medical equipment. Most of it is thick steel with evil-looking edges. “Jesus,” Tom says. “No wonder everyone died.”

I laugh. The resuscitation contraption is basically a bellows of death. An antique amputation kit looks more like a torture device, with its saw and blades. “That belongs in your gym,” I say.

Tom reads the placard that describes in detail how surgeons amputated limbs in the Civil War, which involved bone saws and dirty equipment in unsterile conditions. He grimaces. “At least most of them got chloroform. Can you imagine?”

I shake my head, though I can imagine Tom doing whatever he has to do. We inspect antique household items and books, then a collection of old-fashioned hats that a sign invites us to try on. I don a cowboy hat and stick a pink flowered hat on Tom, who stares at me unblinkingly while I giggle.

“You can take it off,” I say. “But it suits you.”

“Well, if it suits me...” He smiles and leaves it on.

The mezzanine ends at a collection of vintage beauty products. I stop in front of a century-old book that’s opened to wrinkle reducing facial exercises, then sigh and tap the glass case. “Was there ever a time when women were allowed to age? I should take this and study up.”

“You don’t need it,” Tom says so quietly I almost think it my imagination.

I peek at him, find him still wearing the ridiculous pink hat, and laugh as I remove it. My cheeks are likely just as pink from his compliment, though I know for a fact the man wears reading glasses and everything close is probably blurry.

We descend the stairs and make our way through the final exhibit, where Tom declares the antique toys almost as deadly as the medical equipment, and then we peruse the small gift shop. Aside from old-fashioned toys and postcards, there are books on Oregon history as well as old-timey stuff and the wilderness. I pull one, titled *Nature’s Garden*, from the shelves. “This is all about food you can find in the wild.”

Tom squints over my shoulder while I thumb through pages covered with color photos. “You can eat acorns?” he asks.

“I guess so. It might be good to know one day.”

He sets another copy of the book on the counter, then removes a tome titled *The Lost Ways*. He riffles the pages. “This has everything from pioneer cooking to how to navigate by the stars. Let’s take them when we go.”

I nod, though the thought of returning to life beyond the doors makes me want to cry again. There isn’t much left to see, and I dawdle over every vehicle from the wagon to the Model-T at the end of the line, my anxiety increasing by the second. According to Ethan, he won’t be in our room, but I’ll lie awake awaiting—and dreading—his possible arrival.

“Want to sit for a while?” Tom asks.

“Sure.” I duck under the velvet rope at the driver’s side, only realizing afterward that I could’ve at least *tried* to play it cool. “You want to drive? Some men get weird about not driving.”

“I think I’m secure enough in my manhood to not imaginary drive.”

I sit on the leather bench seat that resembles an old parlor couch. My cheeks ache from smiling the past thirty minutes. If there’s anything bad about this jaunt through the museum, it’s that my passing fancy has taken a seat, put up its feet, and decided to stay a while. And the worst part is that I can’t find it in myself to care. Being with Tom makes me feel good, and it’s been a long time since I’ve felt that way.

Tom settles beside me and leans back. His legs are long enough that he keeps one to the side, his boot resting on the lip of the open doorframe, and his shoulder brushes against mine. He smells of shampoo and deodorant and something warm and woody underneath. I don’t know what it is, but it isn’t weed, which is a plus.

I can feel his warmth, hear his soft breathing, and my mind moves to that night with Ethan. The real thing sits a centimeter away. If I turned my head, and he turned his, we’d be near enough to kiss. My heart speeds up, seeming loud in the silence, and I run my fingers along the wood steering wheel while I inch farther away.

I have no idea how long it’s been since we last spoke, but probably long enough for it to be weird. I blurt out the first thing I think of. “There’s a spring in my butt.”

Conversationally, the statement leaves much to be desired, but it breaks the silence. Tom chuckles. “Mine, too. Do you want to get out?”

“No.”

“Me, neither.”

“We need driving music.” I dig in my pocket for my phone. “What should it be?”

“You choose.”

I scroll through my music, debating. “The closest I have to Model-T times is Billie Holiday.”

“Lady Day,” Tom says. “Good choice.”

“Any requests?”

“Any of it.”

I queue up an album and set the phone on top of a wooden box in the center of the dashboard, of whose purpose I have no clue. The first notes of “All of Me” play, and then Billie’s voice comes in, rough and sweet and pure magic. It isn’t surround sound, but my tension drains away as the music fills the space around us. I won’t let Ethan, or the thought of seeing him in the future, ruin this, too.

“How many times have I heard this song?” Tom asks, though it isn’t a question. “But I never get tired when she sings it.”

“I’d listen to her sing the phonebook.” I turn sideways in the seat to face him. “You know who can do a mean Billie? Your daughter.”

“Clara?”

“No, your other daughter.”

Tom smiles, though there’s an edge of sadness to it. “Clara has a great voice.”

“She does. I used to beg her to sing with Jesse. Maybe we can get her to do it for you.”

“I’d like that.” Tom looks past me as though deep in thought. Finally, he releases a long breath and meets my eyes. “My dad drank. My mother bore the brunt of it. He never hit her, but he was a hardass. An asshole, really. You did what he wanted, or you were shit in his eyes. And we did it.”

It explains a lot about Tom. Old Tom. I feel sorry that no one told him he was good enough as he was. Or maybe they did, and he didn’t believe it.

“Did it work? Was he ever proud of you?”

“More or less. Usually less than more.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tom shrugs. “He spun you around. Confused you. It took the heat off him, and it made us feel like, if only we could do it right, he’d stop.”

Sometimes I thought I was going crazy. What's the term, when someone—"

"Gaslighting," I say. Tom watches me, nothing but empathy in his expression, but humiliation still heats my cheeks. "You can see it afterward, but when it's happening..."

"I know."

There's no judgment, only concern. And something else in his eyes. A glimmer I recognize as fondness, maybe even desire. My heart goes into overdrive. Imagining is one thing, reality is another, and I am not ready for reality. I look away while my mind reaches for something, anything, to say. My brain is a barren wasteland.

Another song passes, then another, until Tom asks, "What else do you have on that phone?"

"Some of everything." I hand it over and watch him inspect my music, feeling as though I've handed over my soul. "The phone won't last forever. We might need a Victrola and a record store one day."

"Vinyl's the best way to listen," Tom says, still intent on my phone. It's making me antsy.

I recall the records I saw in his garage. "Are you one of those vinyl purists?"

"No, but I'd like to be. You have a playlist named *Fuck You*?"

"That's for when you're fed up with someone's shit."

Tom raises an amused eyebrow. He knows whose shit I'm most fed up with. "Let's see, you've got '80's, *Crybaby*, *Disco Inferno*, *High School*, *New Wave*, *Oldies*, *AM Gold*—I don't even want to know what's on there, but I'm guessing some Air Supply and John Denver." I crack up but don't deny it, and he snickers. "*Road Trip*, *Cheesy Love Songs*, *New Wave*, *Radiohead Rules*—which I agree with—and the list goes on. *Cruisin' in the IROC*? What's that?"

"That's freestyle. It was big in Brooklyn back in the day. The guidos would blast it while they cruised up and down Eighty-Sixth Street in their IROCs, picking up ladies with big hair."

"I know freestyle. I dropped out of high school and moved to L.A. when I was seventeen. It was everywhere."

That *Tom Jensen* dropped out of high school is possibly the most surprising thing I've ever heard. "You dropped out of high school? *You*?"

“Don’t sound so shocked. Maybe I’ll tell you the story later.” His enigmatic smile says he’s proud to have thrown me for a loop. “You have a lot of playlists.”

“I like them. They’re the mix tapes of the twenty-first century. Remember mix tapes?”

“Of course. Mine were legendary.”

“As is your modesty.”

“It’s not bragging if it’s the truth.” He winks, which makes my heart skip, and then scrolls some more. “What don’t you have on here?”

“Let’s see...absolutely no jazz after 1960.”

Tom drops his head back with a groan. “Come on. You’re one of *those* people?”

“Yes, I’m an unenlightened being who doesn’t like modern jazz. Go commiserate with my dad about that. Give me some Duke Ellington or Count Basie, and I’ll listen all night. Otherwise, nope.”

“You have *disco* but not jazz?”

I kick his boot with mine. “Disco is amazing. Stop looking and put something on already.” He hands over the phone, and I threateningly hold my finger above the screen. “You sure you want me to choose? I’ll play ‘It’s Raining Men.’”

Tom snatches it away and chooses the ‘80’s playlist. “Enola Gay” begins. We listen for a minute before I say, “You know how this song is about the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima? I used to think it was odd our kids wouldn’t know what it was like to grow up believing they’d be bombed into nuclear oblivion at any second, but then they got terrorists and mass shootings, and now...”

“Zombies,” he says. “A little Cold War sounds pretty good.”

“Exactly.”

I smile, and Tom returns it with one so warm I can barely recall how he once waged a Cold War of his own. I like him, and, as of tonight, I think he might like me back. It’s a startling turn of events, and I have no clue how to navigate the situation. Or the guilt.

It’s not as though I can help my feelings, as long as I don’t act on them. Of course, there’s that whole emotional affair thing, but I have emotions for Ethan, too. It’s not my fault they’re annoyance, frustration, and aversion.

He expects me to be lying in bed, waiting for him to grace me with his presence, and he can suck it.

“Your Love” is next out of the phone’s tinny speakers, and Tom nods approvingly. “Nice job on the playlist.”

“Thanks. Does this mean you’ve forgiven me my love of disco?”

“Not sure it’s a forgivable offense.”

“You know what’s worse than people who don’t like jazz? Vinyl-purist music snobs who don’t like disco.”

Tom’s laugh shakes the car, and he pushes my foot with his. There’s a lot of foot nudging going on, which I don’t mind at all. “I might die if I don’t hear the story about the Tom who ditched high school for L.A.,” I say, and he grins. “You grew up in Eugene, right?”

“Born and raised.” He goes on to say he tired of the small city, grew sick of his father’s abuse, and left for California, meaning to never return except to visit his mom. “I spent a couple years playing guitar, working random jobs, and partying. My band started to do pretty well. Then I found out my parents were broke. My dad gambled away most of their money—what he didn’t drink away. I got my GED and went to college. Community college for a year, then UCLA, where I met Sheila. Graduated and got a good job at a big printing company, so I could send money home.” He shrugs, though I know it wasn’t easy to shrug what he wanted aside. “As long as my mom held the cash, they were okay.”

He and Sheila lived in California until his dad’s drinking became too much for his mom to handle, then they moved young Clara and baby Jeremy back home. Clara thinks her grandpa died of Alzheimer’s, but it was alcoholic dementia and complications from drinking that did him in.

“I didn’t mean to stay,” Tom says. “But then my mom got cancer not much later. She fought it, but it came back again and again. She barely had any time before she got sick. She said she didn’t regret it, but I know she wished she’d left him earlier, lived for herself.”

Whether or not Tom notices the parallel to my situation, I do. Maybe I’m not sick, but the world is. I’m wasting time. Precious time.

“She told me to go live my life instead of caring for her,” he says. “But I couldn’t do that. It was too late by then, anyway. Two kids, a mortgage, a business.”

“You were a good son. But it’s never too late. You can always start over in some way, even a small way, especially if it makes you happy.”

I haven’t forgotten his talk of guitars. While I’m curious to hear him play, now that I know his story, I want him to do something he once loved. Tom searches my face, maybe for proof I believe my own words, and then smiles at whatever he sees. “I guess you can. You and your dad seem close.”

“After my mom passed away, all we had was each other. She died when I was sixteen. Pancreatic cancer.”

Tom makes a sympathetic *oof*. “That’s a rough one.”

“It was,” I say, which is putting it mildly. “It’s strange to think I’ve been alive without her longer than with her. I always thought that I just had to get Holly and Jesse to adulthood, and then I’d worry less if I had to go.”

“Did it happen?”

“I think you know the answer to that one,” I say. “I must be programmed to worry.”

“And like disco.”

“How can you not like disco?”

“Because I have good taste.”

I lift a fist his way, and the mood lightens. We drink water from the cooler in a back room and eat found potato chips from a desk drawer, speaking of music and childhood and random things. It feels like magic. Like the conversations I had when I was young, where I never grew tired of speaking or listening. Where I knew I’d found someone I wanted to be around. Tom’s story of his broken collarbone at thirteen is as interesting as his stories of the punk scene in L.A., and he listens just as intently to my stories of growing up in Brooklyn and living out west.

It isn’t until the music cuts off that I think to check the time. I press my phone’s power button to no avail. “We killed it. My next charge isn’t for two days.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not.” I see how that pleases him and wonder how to make it less *something*, then decide to leave it be, if only because it’s true. “I have no clue what time it is.”

Tom checks his watch. “Shit. One a.m. I have to be up early.”

I've dragged the night out long enough, though I wish it didn't have to end. Wish we could continue talking until the sun rises, the way I used to. We collect our new books and leave for the side lot. The doors to the Events Center are dark, and the only sound is old rain dripping from the tall cedar just ahead. We circle around the building and cross between the tents in the parking lot. A dim light glows where the fence parallels Thirteenth Avenue and people stand guard. There's a lot of fence to cover, a fact that always causes my blood pressure to spike.

The real world seemed so far removed, but now it all comes to the forefront, and I feel stupid for believing in whatever magic I felt in the museum. Stupid for forgetting about my life and its complications. Tom plods along beside me, head bent to the ground. After hours of non-stop talk, neither of us speaks, as though we're strangers again.

At the Expo Hall, Tom stops, hand gripping the door handle. I come to a halt when he faces me, lips twisted in a half-smile. "That was fun."

His voice is soft, almost shy, and electricity zips through me as quickly as exhaustion did. The magic wasn't my imagination.

"Me, too," I say. It takes a moment to realize my response makes absolutely no sense, and I still don't care.

He has nice lips. Just the right thickness for a man and surrounded by the right amount of dark scruff. My stomach flip-flops at the utter *like* in his eyes, the way the lines around them smile with the rest of him. His gaze flicks to my mouth, a second at most, and then up again.

I step back, breathless at the thought of those just-right lips on mine. Can he see how much I want him to kiss me? I hope so. I hope not. It can't happen, if only because I made a promise to Ethan long ago. If I break it, I'm no better than him. With the desire I feel, it might be easy to talk myself into it, convince myself I owe Ethan nothing. It might even be the truth.

Tom nods slightly, as if I've said as much aloud. "Good night, Red."

I release my pent-up breath, relieved and disappointed in equal measure. "Good night."

He holds the door and closes it with a soft click once we're through. Nightlights plugged into the walls light the way to the curtained rooms of our hall. I can't make out Tom's face, but he waits until I raise my hand and pass through my curtain before I hear him enter his own.

Without a light, I can't find my toothbrush and toiletries. I can't find a light without a light, and my dead phone is of no help. I set down the books, peel off my jeans and coat, and drop them to the floor. On the other side of the curtain, I hear Tom's soft rustling as he does the same. I sigh and lower myself to the mattress, sliding under the blankets and then stiffening when I detect Ethan's presence.

I lie stock-still on my side. Maybe he's asleep. A few moments later, his hand lands on my hip. The rest of him follows, warm against my back. "Where were you?" he asks, his voice slurred with sleep. I hope it's sleep. Actually, I don't give a shit, which may be worse.

"The museum," I say, and I like the steel in my voice. "I thought you were sleeping elsewhere tonight."

"Sorry." He threads one arm under me, the other over. Locking me in his embrace so that I want to scream. "I'm sorry, Rosie. I shouldn't have said that. I know you're trying. It's hard for me, that's all."

"For me, too." Is that bitterness in my voice now?

"I know. I just love you so much. I don't know what I'd do without you."

When did that stop being a good thing and become a tool used to control me? Ethan doesn't mean it that way, perhaps, but it is nonetheless. I cover his hands with mine, hoping he'll overlook how I haven't said it in return. "Sleep. You need rest before tomorrow."

He squeezes me tighter, until his arms loosen and his breaths even out. I stare into the dark and imagine lying in someone's arms without edginess and resentment. Only when I think Tom must be asleep do I finally drift off with him.

Tom

I'VE ALWAYS SAID jealousy is a waste of time, and I hate wasting time. You work harder, you keep your eyes on your own prize, and it pays off. But I'm jealous of Ethan, and it's driving me crazy. I should stay away from Rose. That's what anybody with a sense of honor would do, but I can't bring myself to do it. Maybe she isn't a prize, but she's my friend.

I didn't have many, but I had none to whom I told my deepest thoughts. Things I never said to Sheila for fear she'd think I was unhappy with our life. I wasn't, but there was an undercurrent of *How did I end up here?* playing on repeat in my mind. I figured that's how life usually happens, no matter how you plan, and you shut up and get on with it.

But I told Rose my past ambitions, and she thought them worthwhile. I told her about my parents, my regrets, and she acted as though I could run out and start living the fabled life of happiness I once envisioned. Two months ago, I would've chalked it up to Rose being Rose—flighty, silly, foolish Rose. Now, God help me, I believe her. I'm not about to land a gig as the sound guy for Radiohead in a world full of zombies, but she makes me believe there could be something more. She makes me want to joke around and think the best of people and listen to music in antique cars.

I finish brushing my teeth and tap off my toothbrush on the bathroom sink. Ethan enters yawning. "Hey, Tom."

"Morning."

He visits a urinal and sighs, then comes to the sink beside mine a minute later. "You ready to go out?"

I rinse my mouth and cap my water bottle. Rose also has me believing that drinking the water is certain death. Not really, but the fact that she cares, checks my water bottle to be sure I have enough, makes me feel good. And I don't want to hear *I told you so* anytime soon, especially when I'm shitting my brains out.

"I'm ready," I say. "Jesse will be with us?"

Ethan nods and gets to work with his toothbrush. I eye him surreptitiously while I pack my things neatly in my shaving kit, trying to

catch a glimpse of the other Ethan. The one who isn't personable. After a minute, I give up. "See you out there."

Ethan waves. I leave the bathroom feeling worse than I did when I woke and remembered how close I came to kissing Rose last night. How badly I wanted to. I'm not sure what bothers me more: how Rose stepped away in alarm, or what Sheila would think of my desire.

Rose exits the women's bathroom. Pink seeps up her neck when she spots me. I made her uncomfortable last night, and I didn't mean to. It was the last thing I wanted, but there's no way to explain without making it worse. I would try, if I could think of one, and that's about as far from the old me as you can get.

Rose clutches her toiletries bag to her chest. "Hi. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be." I walk alongside her toward our curtained spaces. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Don't ask *me* that. I'll jinx you." Her voice is light before her face scrunches with worry. "Will you watch out for Jess today? I know Ethan will, but..."

I come to a stop. "Of course. Jesse will be home with me this afternoon." Maybe I shouldn't say it, but if Jesse doesn't come home, then I probably won't either. I wouldn't leave the kid out there; I've grown to like him, and I know all too well how it feels to lose a son.

Tears come to my eyes unbidden. Unwelcome. Most of the time, I can pretend Jeremy is elsewhere: at a friend's, at school, anywhere but on a lawn slowly decaying into the soil. He haunts me in dreams I barely remember when I wake, though they leave me choked with horror, saddled with regret, and vowing I'll do things right from here on out.

"Thank you." Rose's smile is tinged with sympathy, like she can hear my thoughts. Hell, maybe she can. She seems to know how I work without having to explain. If nothing ever happens between us, I'm glad to have her as a friend. More than glad. Lucky. The world is in the shitter, and I feel *lucky*. That alone is mind-blowing.

"How's your water situation?" she asks.

"I've decided to start drinking from the tap. What's the worst that could happen?"

Rose pushes my arm. Her hand stays there for a second before she drops it to her side. "Just give me your bottle, jerk."

“Yes, ma’am.”

She follows me into the space I share with Sam, who sits on the edge of his cot looking decidedly bleary-eyed. Rose *tsks*. “And you wanted to go out. Slacker.”

Sam runs a hand through his hair. “You’re never too old for a spanking, baby doll.”

The look he gives his daughter is blatant adoration. Rose reflects it back, and, not for the first time, I wish Clara would look at me that way. I want that ease between us, but maybe it will come in time.

I retrieve my large water bottle from the floor beside my cot and hand it to Rose. “Be right back,” she says. “Daddy, do you need water?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer and takes his bottle with her, too. “She can boss a fellow around sometimes,” Sam says.

“A fellow needs to be bossed around sometimes,” Rose calls from her side of the curtain. “Did you forget I’m right here?”

Sam winks at me. “Whoops.”

I pack an extra knife but leave my pistol, since they’ll give me a gun today. The gun rules are growing laxer by the minute now that they need the help of civilians.

Rose appears with my bottle. “Straight from the tap.”

I laugh and shove it into my bag. “Thanks.”

She delivers Sam his water, then leaves when she hears the kids’ voices. Once I’m all zipped up, I follow with Sam and find Rose in the hall area, her hand on Jesse’s cheek. “Be careful. Please.”

“I will.” Jesse wears a new leather coat, a knife and M9 at his hip, and a remarkably patient smile. He might be putting on a brave face for his mom, for Holly and Clara, but I don’t think so. Jesse has the right amount of wariness in his expression, stands tall with shoulders squared instead of swaggering. “Tom, Barry sent me to tell you we leave in ten.”

He hands me my own M9 and a holster, which I attach to my belt. “I’m ready.”

Mitch joins us as we head for the parking lot. “Came to see you off, boyo,” she says to Jesse, linking arms with Rose. “And to pick up your mother when she faints after you leave.”

Rose laughs along with everyone else, though she bumps Mitch with her hip. It’s the seven of us as it was at the house, and it feels right.

Comfortable.

“Leaving without me?” Ethan asks, striding up to our group. Holly moves to his side, and he puts an arm over her shoulders.

“I thought you’d gone to the truck already.” Rose’s voice is tense. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Ethan says. “Leave poor old dad to fend for himself, as usual.” Holly giggles. Rose does not.

Two trucks sit at the side gate, and Barry nods at our approach. It isn’t often I feel on the smaller side, but Barry is a beast. A gentle beast, as far as I can tell. He taps the door of one box truck. “Ethan, you want to drive this one? Tom and Jesse will be with you.”

“Sounds good.” Ethan puts his hands on Rose’s shoulders and smiles down, and it’s not just wishful thinking that her answering smile appears strained. “We’ll be fine, Rosie.”

I check my knife when they kiss, swallowing down the bitter feeling that’s become all too familiar. Maybe Ethan has changed—or can change. I’ve changed, and I’d be an asshole if I insisted others can’t.

“Careful,” Clara says to Jesse while nibbling at her thumb.

“Later, Clary.” Jesse flashes white, even teeth, which I remember being full of metal years ago. Braces paid off, judging by Clara’s small sigh.

“Don’t get eaten,” she says lightly. But Clara’s tenseness, the worry in her eyes that maybe only I can see, bring home the certainty she feels more for Jesse than she wants to admit. She was the same as a little girl, refusing to watch movies for two years because one made her cry, as though punishing the entertainment industry for evoking emotion. Unfortunately, she got that trait from me. But if I can unlearn it, I know she can.

Fortunately, the kissing portion of the morning is over. Ethan hugs Holly and moves for the truck. Rose hugs Jesse tightly, then watches him walk after his dad before she turns to me. “See you this afternoon, right?”

“That’s right, Red.”

She smiles, and it’s clear where Jesse learned that bit. Everything about her joins in, from her eyes to how she rocks up onto her toes. Ethan didn’t get this smile. It’s petty as hell, but I call it as a point in my favor.

Clara walks me toward the truck, tucking her arm in mine. “Careful, Dad.”

“I will be, Clare-Bear. I promised Rose I’d look out for Jesse, too.”

“Thanks.” Clara stops at the rear of the truck. I pull her into a hug markedly different from the stiff ones we endured for years. When I release her, she leans in and whispers, “She likes you, too, you know.”

Before I can say a word, Clara winks and backs up to where Holly stands. I stare for a moment, then walk around to the passenger’s side. It isn’t until we drive through the gate that I realize Clara’s expression was a dead ringer for the ones between Rose and Sam.

THIRTEENTH AVENUE WAS ONE-WAY, and it feels strange to drive the opposite direction on a street I’ve traveled hundreds, if not thousands, of times. Once we pass the outer barrier—two city buses—we’re out on the streets with whatever’s wandering around.

“They say it’s still pretty clear around here.” Ethan holds the wheel one-handed, his other arm on the window frame. “We’ll take Thirteenth to Eleventh. Then up Seneca to First and over to Bertelsen.”

I nod. It isn’t a bad choice, though I’d avoid Eleventh as much as possible if it were up to me. Ahead, Barry taps his brake lights. “Just a few, to the left, but watch out,” he says through the radio Jesse holds.

“Copy,” Jesse says, and releases the radio button. Then, to his dad, “Was that right? Copy?”

“Sure. No one cares as long as you respond.” Ethan moves the truck to the right, bypassing two raggedy men and a woman who lurch off the lawn of a small blue house. “Maybe we should check some of these houses. We could always use more clothes and medicine.”

The first few drops of rain hit the windshield as we travel west past stores offering tires, mattresses, and office supplies. Rose was right that there are some butt-ugly parts of Eugene, and it’s gotten even uglier with the addition of broken glass, abandoned cars, and dead bodies. The street is bordered by telephone poles whose many wires stretch into the distance, and the stunted trees are few and far between. So are zombies for the most part, though a few appear when the trucks roar by.

Ethan points at businesses that have been emptied. “They got a lot at Staples, believe it or not. The restaurants, too.”

He's more animated than jittery, but it's getting on my nerves. Jesse intersperses Ethan's monologue with the appropriate *uh-huhs* and *ohs*. I listen, watching the world go by. Clara said Rose likes me, and as much as I should put that on the back burner, it's taking up most of the space in my mind. She's noticed something between us, and it seems she isn't angry about it. Two things that are revelations unto themselves.

"Change of plans," Barry says through the radio. "Up here to Fifth and then Seneca to First. Deb just called in, said the Fred Meyer parking lot is a bitch. Full of Lexers."

We narrowly miss a collision when we round the corner. It's industrial through here, and empty of bodies. I can't bring myself to call them Lexers after calling them zombies for so long. Maybe it's a psychological thing, to call them something else, but to forget what they are for even a second seems dangerous.

The north side of First Avenue is mainly trees, the south side the occasional building, and all are surrounded by wetlands. Always Ready isn't far up the road, and I recall the warehouse I passed on my first trip to visit the owners.

"Did they check out the Bi-Mart distribution center?" I ask, though I'm sure they did.

"Not that I know of," Ethan says. "Where is it?"

"Just down this road on the left."

Ethan calls to the truck ahead. "Tom says there's a Bi-Mart distribution center up the road. Did you guys get to it?"

"Well, shit," Barry says. "No, we never came this way. It was blocked from the east. It's on First?"

"Yeah."

"We'll check it out."

Barry's truck slows soon after, and his arm comes out the window, finger pointed at the red and white Bi-Mart sign affixed to a chain-link fence. It cordons off a long driveway, which leads to another gated fence and one-man guardhouse. Behind that is a large concrete building with a few tractor-trailers parked ass-end to the loading docks.

Ethan pulls alongside Barry. After a scan of the street—nothing in either direction—we leave the trucks. Nora rides with Barry and a tall, thin man named Jared, who nods at me. I nod back.

“Looks closed,” Barry says. “That’s promising. Think we should try it? Bi-Mart’s got a lot more than grains.”

Bi-Mart has all kinds of useful things. Sheila teased me for shopping at what she deemed an old man store, but it reminded me of the five-and-dimes that were on their way out when I was a kid. They carried everything from hunting and camping supplies to packaged foods to hardware, home goods, and medicines.

“They’ll have air mattresses, cots, and sleeping bags,” I say. “Flashlights and batteries, too.”

“Sold.” Barry returns to his truck, leans inside, and emerges with a bolt cutter that makes quick work of the lock.

I wave them into the vehicles. After they pass through, I pull the chain-link closed. It’s impossible to be silent, though I do my best before I get into my truck. So far, this outing is easy. The thought that it can’t last is forefront in my mind, although our trip to Always Ready went off without a hitch.

“You two are quiet,” Ethan says. “There’s nothing to worry about. Look at this place.”

Jesse shrugs and taps his leg. He’s been mostly silent, eyes roving our surroundings. I think we’re doing just fine. Better to be quiet so you can hear and see what’s coming.

“He’s always been a mama’s boy,” Ethan says. “Worry, worry, worry, just like Mama.” He knocks Jesse’s arm with his elbow and pulls to a stop in front of the building, where steps lead to the loading dock and an entry door. “Lighten up, Jess. I’m kidding.”

Ethan opens the door and hops out, missing the way Jesse’s expression has flattened into a deep, festering anger whose intensity takes me aback. I recognize it. I recognize myself in it. My father said the same about me, and it wasn’t a compliment.

“Full disclosure, from one mama’s boy to another,” I say. “Your mom asked me to watch out for you. But going on what I’ve seen so far, I’m not sure you need me to. Your head’s in the right place.”

Jesse’s eyes mellow. His mouth loosens from a hard line to a slight smile. Though he mainly favors his dad in looks, his spirit reminds me of Rose.

“Stick close anyway,” I say. “You know how she gets. She’ll probably interrogate us separately to see if our stories match.”

Jesse grins. “You think you’re kidding, but you’re right.”

I open my door, pausing when Jesse asks, “*You* were a mama’s boy?”

“Card-carrying member. You know what that means? We’re good with the ladies.”

Jesse laughs and follows me to the asphalt. The others wait outside the trucks, eyes on the entrance. There are a few cars in the lot, though their thick coating of pollen means they haven’t been moved in a while. Anything that sits still long enough in a Willamette Valley spring ends up the same.

“We’ll do the usual,” Barry says. “Give a knock, see who’s home, and go from there.”

I draw my knife. It’s done the job so far, but I want a better one. That’s another thing Bi-Mart carried: a wide selection of knives, guns, and ammo. As we take the steps to the dock, the daylight darkens a few shades. The light drizzle turns to rain, and the increasing wind blows it sideways under the overhang.

The door is locked tight. A window ten feet over offers a glimpse of office desks and an interior window that looks into the main storage area, though it’s pitch black.

Jared slams a fist into the door. I face the road. It’s still clear, but this hubbub could change that. After a full minute of pounding, he shrugs. “Nothing right here, anyway.”

“Let’s check it out,” Barry says.

The door is bolted shut, and a quick check of the loading doors proves they’re locked. However, the window is easy enough to break. Barry clears out the glass while Nora runs to the trucks for extra flashlights.

“I’ll go.” Jesse sets two hands on the ledge and jumps through with surprising agility. He takes a moment to look around with his flashlight, points in the direction of the door, and disappears into the dark. No wonder the kid is always fighting Rose to do more. I wasn’t buttering him up when I said he doesn’t need a babysitter, but I’m glad to see my opinion confirmed.

Two locks click, and then we’re inside. Light from the doorway reveals an open space with three forklifts by the wall. Tall shelves loom past the

outer corner of the office, though it's impossible to see what's on them. We move slowly to where the room opens up, waving our flashlight beams.

"Wow," Nora says.

Row after row of shelves fill the space, loaded with pallets of goods. Being spring, there's seasonal stuff in the front: seeds and gardening tools along with Easter candy and baskets ready to travel to Bi-Mart stores in the area. The next row is housewares, then hardware and camping. Beyond that is sporting goods. A large opening connects to another room where we hit the motherlode: food.

Two entire rows of canned goods and packaged goods, everything shelf-stable and much of it ready to eat. Cleaning supplies are in the back, and the few pallets of bleach are just what we need for water purification. Rose doesn't trust the water is safe unless she's boiled it herself, but the smell of bleach might be enough to convince her someone else is capable of keeping everyone alive, too.

We head back to the main door, where Barry says, "I'm going to see who we can call up on the radio. I know Deb can drive a truck. Anyone willing to learn? We could take these three semis, load them up with good stuff if they aren't already."

I lift a hand. "I'll give it a go."

"Me, too," Ethan says. "Jess, you'll ride with me."

Barry walks to the edge of the dock, speaking into the radio. I hear the squawks of someone answering over the rain before Barry returns. "All right, they're on their way. Let's see what we've got before they get here."

As we enter again, Barry flips the light switches. It's habit, or wishful thinking, because he seems as surprised as the rest of us when the first section of the warehouse floods with light. "Guess the substation we're running on at the fairgrounds powers out here, too. Or we're powering another substation and didn't realize."

I tuck my flashlight in my pocket. We walk the rows, really seeing now, and it's better than before. The others go with Barry to food and medicine, though Jesse and I branch off down the camping aisle.

"Look at all of this," Jesse says.

There's freeze-dried food, lanterns, sleeping bags, tents, and the many small but interesting things, like waterproof matches and compasses, that hang in the camping aisle at the store. I inspect one pallet and use my knife

to cut the plastic over cartons of water purification tablets. I pull out a display-sized box containing multiple bottles, then tuck it under my arm. “For your mom.”

“She’ll love them,” Jesse says.

We continue on. At the end of the aisle, smaller shelving is lined with boxes of knives, and the wire mesh that protects the knives from thievery is unlocked. No guns, but I suppose those aren’t out all willy-nilly, if they’re in the warehouse at all.

“What’s the deal?” Jesse asks. “Can we take what we want?”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“Cool.” Jesse bends to the lower shelves and chooses a few larger boxes. “I know KA-BAR’s a good brand.”

He pulls a black knife from one box. The nine-inch blade is sleek and lethal, with a black sheath to match. Jesse drops it in his bag. “Want one?”

“Absolutely.” I check the remaining shelves after I stick a few different knives in my pack. Bows, arrows, holsters, more sheaths. It’s a toy store for the zombie apocalypse. “Let’s tell them about this.”

Jesse zips his pack, and we wander to the food room. Barry approaches, holding a paper in his hand and smiling widely. “We’re set for a while.” He motions to the four levels of shelves, all full of pallets. “We figured it out—each pallet has about two thousand cans of beans. Soups and fruit, too. About a thousand cans of stew.”

Actual numbers make the sheer quantity of food staggering to behold. “Did anyone check the trucks out front?” I ask.

“Not yet. You want to do the honors?”

“Sure.”

“Where’ve you been?” Ethan asks.

“We found a ton of knives,” Jesse says. “Bows and arrows, too.”

“Yeah? Nice.” Ethan gestures behind him, where smaller shelves hold cardboard cartons. “Unfortunately, they only have over-the-counter meds. We need to find a pharmacy or the pharmaceutical distribution center where the pharmacies get their meds.”

“Today?” Barry asks.

“If not today, then soon. I have a list of what the elderly patients need. A long list. We’ve still got some of the other meds, but if anyone else gets sick...”

Barry strokes his chin. "Let's see how this goes and then make a decision."

Working power means charged forklifts, which Jared knows how to operate. Ethan, Jesse, and I leave for the loading dock to check out the trucks. Though it's raining, the western sky is blue, and the storm will pass soon.

One truck is empty, another full of a mixture of items that must have been bound for a store, and the third half-full of food already. Ethan pulls Jesse to his side while I'm in the last truck. "Hey kiddo, I didn't mean to rag on you before. You should be worried. I just don't want you to be scared and freeze. I'm sorry if I upset you."

Jesse mumbles something I can't hear. As much as I would like not to, I have to admit Ethan's apology is more than I did through most of my parenting career. I wait for silence and exit onto the loading dock. "Looks good in there. Let's tell them what we've got."

Before we can head in, two trucks pull through and close the gates behind them. They arrive, engines chugging, and Deb steps from the first truck's driver's side. She's older, a no-nonsense lady in her sixties, and I'm not the least bit surprised she can drive a truck.

"Hey," she calls as she walks closer, the rain dampening her cropped brown hair. "Hear you found some good stuff inside."

"Not just good," Ethan says. "It's everything we need for a while, except for meds."

The rest of the search party consists of four men and a woman I've seen around, this one somewhere in her late twenties, with short blond hair. She strolls forward on heeled black boots to where Ethan stands on the loading dock, crosses her arms at his feet, and looks up with pursed lips. "No meds? We need them, don't we?"

"Yeah, Eva," Ethan says. "We might find somewhere after this."

Eva does not look pleased with that news. I'm not thrilled to be out longer than expected, either. She pushes herself up and swings her legs to the side, then jumps upright on the loading dock and straightens her leather coat. "I'll come if you need me to."

Ethan nods noncommittally before he turns away, and Eva glares in his direction as if he's slighted her. I'm the only one who sees; Jesse's head is

in the back of a truck, assessing the contents, and the rest of the new arrivals have walked fifty feet down to climb the steps.

Eva saunters up to me. “What’s your story?”

She stands swaybacked, hands on her hips, as if she can’t imagine I won’t fall all over her. I smile politely but dismissively. “No story to tell.”

“*Oh-kay*,” she says, and saunters inside after Ethan and the others.

Jesse stops beside me with an enormous sigh. “She’s so annoying.”

I clap him on the back. “Kid, I like you better every minute.”

Tom

THE TRUCKS ARE LOADED, which was a pain in the ass even with forklifts, and I'm more than ready to go home. Part of the reason is to give Rose the things I found for her—a solar-powered battery pack to charge the phone, for one. Of course, this is somewhat selfish, as it means I get to listen to music with her, but I hope between that and a few other things, she'll be pleased. I got Clara plenty of stuff—beauty products, gum, candy, and a humdinger of a knife I'm certain will kill anything that comes at her, alive or dead. I didn't forget Mitch and Sam, either, and Jesse took care of Holly. The rule is you can fill a pack with as much as it'll hold. Mine is stuffed to the brim.

The day has warmed, and steam rises from the wet concrete as the sun burns down. Deb pins a map of Eugene to the side of a truck with one hand. With the other, she moves her finger west and then south until it rests on a spot just out of town. "It's right here. You can go around, come down this way, and only have to pass over West Eleventh."

Not only can Deb drive a truck, but she also knows of a pharmacy that supplied long-term nursing and skilled care facilities. It's less likely to have been looted the way public pharmacies were.

"You coming, Jess?" Ethan asks.

I open my mouth to object, thinking Rose would not be on board, then shut it. I'm not Jesse's father. When Jesse nods, I say, "I'll come, too."

I won't go back without him. I know Rose's worried face well—her eyes grow round and she stares into space, likely calculating the odds of every horrible outcome—and it won't be me who sets that in motion.

"I'm coming." Eva says it like she's in the middle of a fight, her brows lowered. Ethan nods, though his annoyance is plain.

"Let's move some stuff from your truck so you have room," Barry says. "I think we can squeeze it in somewhere else."

After that's done, we pile into the vehicles. Deb has given two others a quick lesson in truck driving, and they falter and buck on the way out, though by the time they hit the road, they're moving smoothly enough to make it home.

Ethan turns the opposite way, and we head west then cut up to a through street whose grassy fields back northwest Eugene. A few zombies move in the grass, marching toward us as we go by. I shift in an attempt to ready myself for whatever might come, but it's impossible when squashed against the door due to Eva. She sits between Ethan and Jesse—or half on Jesse, who keeps his arms crossed to avoid touching her. When we go over a bump, Eva squeals and grabs Jesse's thighs. The exasperated look he gives me is priceless.

“Relax, Eva,” Ethan says.

She points ahead, where a Lexer waits in the right lane. “You should hit him.”

“No.”

“Remember when you were sayin—”

“Eva!” Ethan shouts. “If you want to live, I need to concentrate.”

That shuts her up, I note with satisfaction. Though I also can't help but note that Eva seems to know Ethan well. Maybe too well. A quick glance at Jesse does nothing to tell me if he's noticed the same.

The two lanes plus center lane provide ample room for Ethan to outmaneuver zombies. We cross the Beltline, a highway that loops through north Eugene, which looks somewhat passable to the north. To the south, cars are stopped in every lane. Dark shapes of Lexers move in the sunlight that glints off distant chrome and glass. Many dark shapes. Maybe the reason for the traffic jam and abandoned cars, or possibly the product of it. Either way, Ethan steps on the gas and turns south at the next road.

Where it isn't open grassland, it's industrial—construction and metal recycling and mini-storage. Old cedars tower over a cemetery on the left and a solitary farmhouse on the right. A dead man slouches in a porch chair, rifle still in his lap, as though making a last stand at both the encroaching development and zombies.

We cross Eleventh Avenue and continue past tree-dotted wetlands with green buttes rising in the background. It seems like smooth sailing until we crest a small rise to find a pack of fifty zombies in the road. Ethan slows the truck. “Fuck. Even if we get past, they'll follow us. How about that other road, the dead end?”

It requires a short walk to the parking lot of the pharmacy building rather than pulling the truck to the front door. “Let's check it out,” I say.

This is turning into more than I bargained for, though that isn't saying much—I didn't bargain for any of it. Ethan makes a left onto Eleventh, then another left onto the dead end. A hundred feet down a gravel road, a fence and two hundred feet of grass separate us from the pharmacy building that sits at the end of a dead-end street. There's nothing in sight.

"Maybe someone should keep watch out here?" I ask. "We have the two radios."

"I'm going in," Eva says.

Jesse shrugs. "I'll do it."

"Maybe I should," I say. I won't be the one who leaves Jesse alone.

Ethan pulls to a stop. "Let's all go. We'll decide there."

I step into the grass and peer over the fence, which is threaded with green privacy strips. The rear and side of the boxy gray building have windows only at second floor level. A small fenced loading dock extends perpendicular from the side, with four open-air bays and a single rolling door into the building.

I see nothing, hear nothing, smell nothing. All three are a good sign. Once the others join me, we climb the fence and walk through the long, wet grass to the building. A side entry door and the loading door are locked tight. The front is tinted glass with double doors. Only a small metal sign gives a clue to the building's purpose, likely to keep away would-be pharmaceutical thieves.

"Guess we're smashing our way in," Ethan says.

"Break it," I say. "I'll keep an eye on the street."

The front parking lot is small, the grass between it and the street filled with trees. It was a nice touch when there weren't zombies lurking behind half the shit out here, but now it's a pain in the ass. I walk to the lot entrance and inspect the neighboring structure—a larger building that touts itself as a Forest Products Equipment Manufacturer. But for a few corporate buildings like this one, the rest of the street is empty until it curves out of sight.

Behind me, the glass goes with a loud crack and quiet tinkle. I scope out the street for another minute, then return to the door where the others wait. "Nothing so far."

"Nothing in here, either," Ethan says.

"Want me to stay outside? Jesse can go in with you and Eva."

“Sure.” They enter the building, crunching on broken glass. Ethan calls back, “No lights. Have a flashlight ready if you come in.”

“All right,” I say. Once their footsteps fade, I cross the lot to the street and stand under a tree. There’s no way to see everything at once, and I break up the time by wandering into the lot to check the adjacent building before returning to the street again. The volume on my radio is low, but I’ll hear if they call.

Five minutes later, Jesse appears at the broken glass and waves me over. “We need another set of muscles. Have you seen anything out here?”

“Nothing.” I step through the glass with some hesitation. “How’s it going inside?”

Jesse leads me past a reception area and down the hall with his flashlight. “There’s a ton of meds on the list. My dad says it’s all the old people. But finding things in the dark is taking a while.”

I turn on my flashlight and follow him into a large room. Desks with dark computer screens line the front. Off to the side is a long counter where, I assume, they fill prescriptions the same as any pharmacy. Aside from the lack of a customer counter, the main difference between this and a retail pharmacy is the size: this is quadruple the space.

Ethan appears between two shelving units, hand at his eyes to block our flashlights’ glare. “Hey, Tom. We either have to carry a cabinet out or bust it open. It has meds we need.”

“Is it bust-able?” I ask.

“I’m thinking not, but thought you might have an idea. Eva’s looking for the keys, but no luck so far.” Ethan shines his light near Jesse. “Why don’t you keep an eye on the street?”

Jesse takes my radio and leaves with his flashlight. I watch him go, anxiety flooding my chest, then shake my head. I’m getting as bad as Rose. “Where’s this cabinet?”

Ethan brings me to a four-foot-wide metal cabinet at the back wall. My knuckles produce a deep metallic thud, owing to the thickness of the steel. “They don’t want anyone getting in there for sure. What’s inside?” I’m not a moron—I know what’s inside, but I’m curious what Ethan will say.

“Narcotics.” Ethan shines his light on the lock. “We need the benzos in there—we have a few older people who take them. I’ve lowered their doses

to stretch the pills, but if they stop abruptly, they could have a seizure. Pain meds wouldn't hurt, either. Just in case."

I leave that last part alone. "What do we have to pry with? Anything in the truck?"

"Nope." Ethan holds up a hammer and a screwdriver. "Found these in a hall closet. Maybe with one of us pulling it back, the other can get the hammer claw in. We can bend the metal and break the lock."

I take the screwdriver and fit it into the opening around the door, then leverage all my weight. The door pulls out less than a millimeter. I try again and succeed in bending it a little, though nowhere near enough to get the hammer in. "Jesus, you'd think the crown jewels were in here."

I insert the screwdriver again. Ethan leans on the cabinet. "Rose says you have similar taste in music."

"That's what she tells me," I say evenly, holding back a smile when I think of Rose's unreserved love of disco. The similarities end right there. "By the way, thanks for letting me and Clara stay in your house. I appreciate it. It was good for her to be with Holly."

"Clara's always welcome. I'm sure Rose told you that. So are you."

I nod. It's possible the faintest bit of guilt is making itself known as I converse genially with the man whose wife I covet. I push on the screwdriver with a grunt, and the door eases open a bit more. "Try the hammer now."

Ethan wedges in the claw and begins to pry along with me. The corner of the door comes out an inch. Then another. Whether or not we'll be able to force the lock is another story. Ethan takes a break, shaking out his arms. "Harder than a zombie's skull."

I laugh. "Might be."

We get to work again, this time moving down toward the lock. We've gotten the top corner of the door out three inches when Eva appears. "Found the keys."

"Oh, thank Christ," Ethan says.

Eva edges past me with a giggle, laying her hand on Ethan's shoulder. Ethan takes the keys and opens the cabinet. It's lined with metal shelves that pull out, all of which are full of bottles. Eva lifts the bag in her hand. "I'll get it. I know what we need."

"Eva helps out in the infirmary," Ethan explains.

My stomach churns a little. I thought the worst of Ethan, but it seems I was wrong. That I *wanted* the worst to be true makes it more fucked up. Makes *me* more fucked up. “What else do we need?” I ask. “Or maybe I should relieve Jesse?”

Ethan kneels beside Eva, then hands me a folded paper from his pocket. “The list and the shelves are both alphabetical. We’re up to L. Just toss what you find in one of the bags.”

He points to several bags on the cabinet. I grab two and wander in the direction of the shelves. When I reach L, I look between my light and the paper, then take a few bottles of the first drug and locate the next.

A giggle comes from the cabinet forty feet down, then the rattle of pill bottles falling into a bag. I move that way, turning off my light and peeking out the end of the shelves. Illuminated by two flashlights, it’s easy to see how Eva grins at Ethan while holding a bottle aloft.

Ethan grabs the bottle and tosses it into the bag, then turns back to the cabinet. “Grow up. We don’t have much time.”

I move away and find M, then N, working my way down the list. Though Ethan didn’t seem party to Eva’s hijinks, there’s still something I don’t like about the situation. Nothing I can put my finger on, but something nonetheless.

Ethan appears at the end of my row. “We’re going to bring out the first things. I’ll send Jess in.”

“All right.”

I continue my search for heart medications and the like. Jesse shows up a minute later. “What do you need help with?”

“If you want to take a peek at the list, I’m at R.”

I hand Jesse a bag, and we move down the line, one pointing to the needed pills, the other bagging them while the first moves on. Five minutes later, Ethan returns. “Still clear?” I ask.

“Fine,” Ethan says. “Eva’s out there. What else needs to be done?”

“We’re almost there. Still need vancomycin, if you want to head that way.”

“Cool.” Ethan disappears down the shelves, calling, “This was easy. The way home shouldn’t be too bad.” There’s a pause, then, “Mom would say I jinxed us. Right, Jess?”

Jesse dumps bottles into his bag. “Yup.”

A few minutes later, Eva calls on the radio Ethan holds. “Get out here. They’re coming.”

We run for the front, where Eva huddles against a wall. Groans are audible before we reach the view, and it’s no surprise to see a pack of zombies in the lot. We sidle closer to the windows, staying out of sight. The zombies are mainly to the left of the building—the opposite direction we need to travel.

“Is there a back way?” I ask.

Ethan points left, where the zombies are thickest. “Only an emergency exit to that side. And the loading dock on the other side.”

“If we move fast, we can probably make it over the fence.”

Jesse peers to the right, which offers a limited view. “There are a few in the grass and the street, but I think we can.”

I dither for a moment between pulling my knife or gun, then settle on gun. With my load looped over my shoulder, it might be easier to blow them out of the way if necessary. “Jesse and Eva first.”

Ethan nods. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Jesse arranges the handles of his bag over his shoulder and pulls his gun. He’s carrying it with the safety off, as he showed me. Once they step out the window, they begin to run. Ethan jumps through, and I follow, my boots beating the narrow sidewalk that parallels the building.

It takes only seconds for us to be noticed. One loud hiss-groan later, the noises become a riot. The parking lot zombies are quickly closing the twenty feet between us, and there are plenty more straight ahead, in the field we couldn’t see from inside.

I circle around the loading dock. Only the grassy area is left to travel. The way seems clear until Jesse and Eva pull up short at the fence we climbed to get to the building. Heads are visible over the top, milling around our truck as though waiting for our arrival. The fence clangs against its metal posts, and the groans from behind grow in volume.

Our plight wasn’t bad—more like a close call—but now my breath stumbles to a stop as my feet do the same. This is how it happens. How you never get home that final time. This is how you die.

Rose

IT'S hour two on the fence with Adele and Mitch, and I've concluded that one couldn't find a more volatile combination of two humans if one tried. Adele tests my patience, and I have a lot more of it than Mitch. After the first hour at Gate A, I tired of Adele's bitching, and Mitch lost any semblance of serenity. It's less a tirade and more small, snotty comments that fall from Adele's mouth as she picks apart the food, the bedding, and the people at the fairgrounds.

"It's ridiculous that we can't take more showers," Adele continues. "If the water's running, then why does it matter? I would think keeping germs at bay would be a major concern. Also, this processed food might kill us sooner than Lexers would. Factory-raised meats, canned in BPA cans, then heated in aluminum pots? It's a recipe for Alzheimer's and other issues."

Mitch stares past Adele, lips working not to say all the things she wants to say. Adele scratches at her head. "At home, I only consume raw milk and grass-fed meats. Hawk has never had refined sugar."

"That's good," I say. Mitch makes her Mitch Snort. Hawk is with the other kids in the rec room, and I'm fairly certain he's cramming his mouth with refined sugar as we speak. I've seen Nora sneak treats to them on more than one occasion.

"It's the only way to eat. No grains, no sugar. Some people say dairy is bad, but I'm of the opinion that raw dairy is fine. It has beneficial bacteria and enzymes. I do the paleolithic diet. Paleo. I'm sure you've heard of it."

I nod, keeping my eyes on the fence in the hope that lack of eye contact will make Adele stop talking. If I even look at Mitch, I'll burst into laughter. I agree with much of what Adele says—a diet of canned food isn't exactly healthy, grass-fed meats are better, fermented food is good for you, and so on—but the woman is insufferable. There are zombies outside, for the love of God. One has to live a little, especially when one might not be able to live a lot. Or at least shut up about it when there's no other option. I feel bad for the people for whom allergies are a real and present danger, and whose options to find food that won't harm them are now slim. But I don't feel bad for Adele, who is a real and present annoyance.

“What’s your blood type, Rose?” Adele asks.

“O,” I reply.

“There’s a blood type diet. For your type, you should be eating lean meats and vegetables while avoiding wheat and dairy.”

“Give up cheese and bread?” I ask. “I’d rather die young.”

Adele blows out an impatient breath. “I’m trying to help. You two seemed like you might care about what you put into your bodies.”

“We do,” Mitch says. “We care about making sure as much cheese as possible gets in there.”

This joke is received the same way. Adele scowls and tromps closer to the fence, posture erect as though trying to be better at fence-watching than us. Mitch shrugs. “I’m staying in the shade.”

We stand under a line of trees at the northwest corner of the fairgrounds. It’s hot in the afternoon sun, a reprieve from the rain we’ve had. To our left is a gated field, to our right the entire complex. Across the parking lot, steam wafts from the food trucks. Knowing how hot it can get in there, I am not sad to be missing a shift.

Plus, the foraging trucks will enter from the west gate when they return. I’ll hear them and see them, and then I’ll relax. I’ve tried to distract myself, but my mind races with silent prayers: *Please let Jess be okay. I’ll do anything, anything at all, if he’s okay.*

I console myself with the thought that Tom will watch out for him. That Ethan is there. I’m still not certain if he’s using, which means his judgment could be questionable. But Tom’s judgment isn’t, I re-remind myself, and thus begins another cycle of worry.

“Now I want a cheese board,” Mitch says. We have a deep and abiding love of cheese and are on a first-name basis with every cheese board menu in town.

“I want brie brûlée.” My mouth waters at the thought of the brie with the burnt sugar crust that cracks when you cut into it. It comes on a plate with various cheeses, raw honey, jam, olives, and tiny pickles. “Somehow last night’s dinner of canned roast beef and instant mashed potatoes just wasn’t the same.”

“Speaking of last night, where were you? I couldn’t find you after dishes.”

“I went to the museum.” I pick a nonexistent piece of lint from my hoodie. “Ethan and I got into a fight.”

“You’re just telling me this now? Of course you are. What happened?”

I watch the fence. “He smelled like weed, so I asked if he was getting high.”

“And?”

“And he said he wasn’t.”

“How was that a fight?”

I wind my hair on top of my head, then let it fall. “He didn’t like the question.”

The silence is loud enough that I turn to Mitch, who watches me with the same look she gave Adele. “What did he say?”

“That I was cold and didn’t want to be with him.” I force a laugh. “He accused me of coming on to Barry. How crazy is that?”

Mitch’s expression doesn’t waver. “Pretty fucking crazy. What’d you say?”

“I tried to explain. I’m not really sure how it went after that, but not well. You know how I get during fights. It ended with him telling me he’d see me in the morning.” I focus my attention on Willa, currently sitting on my foot, rather than meet Mitch’s disapproving stare. “Anyway, it’s fine now. Can we stop talking about it?”

Mitch doesn’t answer. I peek at her with a small smile. “I should’ve said that Barry wants to make sweet, sweet love to you, not me.”

Mitch’s stern veneer cracks a bit. “*Please*. Not interested. But you know who I do like?”

“You like someone?” I clap my hands, happy for this bit of news and a topic that doesn’t involve my shortcomings. “Who?”

“Tom. I thought he was an ass at first, but he grows on you, you know?”

My heart plunges to my stomach, which has dropped somewhere near my feet. Tom seemed interested last night, but he laughs with Mitch, too. Smiles at her. I’m an idiot to think he’d want someone who cries every time he turns around, who’s frizzy and gutless and *married*.

I press my lips into a feeble smile, then bend to pet Willa. “You—” My voice is too soft, and I start again. “That’s great. You guys would be good together.”

It's what I thought a month ago. My eyes try to fill, but I send the tears packing. It isn't Tom, it's everything. Jesse is outside being eaten alive, my husband is an asshole, and living at the fairgrounds sucks, in no small part because of the second thing. Mitch is my best friend, and she deserves someone reliable and decent and tall. I'll adjust, forget these feelings eventually.

Mitch wheezes a few times. It's followed by the unmistakable sound of her full-blown laughter. I raise my head to find her holding her stomach, cheeks red and eyes wet with tears. "You should see your face," she says between gulping breaths. "Your fucking face!"

I straighten, knowing I'm the butt of her joke, though I'm not quite clear on the joke. "What?"

Mitch hiccups, her laughter barely under wraps. "I don't like Tom. I mean, I do, but not like *that*. I was checking to see if you did, and you do. Don't even try to deny it."

Heat blooms in my chest, my cheeks, the backs of my knees, and other places I didn't know I could blush. Instead of denying, I watch the fence while beads of sweat work their way down my back. But even under the hefty dose of mortification, there's relief. After last night, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to forget these feelings. Not easily, anyway.

Mitch's arm comes around my shoulders, and I shove it away. "For real?" she asks.

"No. Not for real. But you're still a jerk."

"I really am." Mitch's arm returns, hand dangling over my shoulder. "Sorry, but not sorry at all. What are you going to do about it?"

"Love you despite your jerkiness."

"Not me, idiot. You don't have a choice in that. What are you going to do about Tom?"

"Nothing," I say. Mitch's dour sigh reveals what she thinks of that answer. I mimic it so that she laughs. "I'm married, remember? And he was, too, not that long ago. *Happily* married. Besides, who knows how he feels?"

"I do. You're *his* brie brûlée. He'd spread you on a cracker if he could."

I groan. "Please never mix creamy cheese with sexual innuendo. Now I don't want brie *or* sex—I want Monistat."

Mitch howls. "I admit it was not one of my better analogies. But, again, what are you going to do about Tom?"

Though her analogy was gross, the declaration behind it has me as giddy as a seventh grader who's just learned her crush likes her, too. But if I let Mitch see that, she'll never stop pestering me. And, besides, there's nothing *to* do. "My answer is still nothing. Because I'm still married."

"Time for that to end, if you want my opinion."

"I'll just pop right on down to the courthouse," I say, snapping my fingers. "And I know your opinion, believe me. But I wouldn't leave Ethan because of anyone else. I'd leave Ethan because of Ethan."

"I don't care why you do it. Just do it."

"Stop trying to boss me and go jump Barry's bones. How about when you do that, I'll do this?"

"It'd almost be worth it," Mitch says. "But not quite. He looks like he listens to Phish, and I can't get down with that."

I crack up. "And you say I have issues."

WE PASS the next half hour shooting the shit while Adele casts us evil glances. She's melting in the sun, and any time I try to motion her into the shade, she pretends not to see.

"Give it up already," Mitch says. "She hates you now. You're just going to have to deal with the fact that someone doesn't like you."

"I don't care if she doesn't like me," I say, which we both know is a total lie.

Mitch laughs loud enough that Adele glares. "Yes, you do. You can't stand it. Take it from me, the world won't end if you piss someone off. You should try it sometime. In fact, I know someone you could give it a shot with. His name starts with an E and ends with—"

"I'll add it to my to-do list." I spin toward the ice rink at the distant drone of trucks. So far, one group has returned, but it wasn't Jesse's. "This might be them."

Three tractor-trailers pull in, followed by one of the trucks from this morning, then the two trucks of another group. I can't leave my post, but I squint across the lot. One truck is missing, but maybe it broke down somewhere. The three extra trucks have to be a good sign.

The doors open and people jump to the asphalt unhurriedly—another good sign. Barry is easy to pick out. Tom will be, too, and I know Jesse's and Ethan's forms like I know my own. Better than I know my own. The tall, thin guy is Jared, whom Ethan seems to like. Nora and Deb, and three other guys. I wait for more people to come around the trucks, my heart skipping when they don't.

"Do you see—" Mitch begins.

I take off across the lot at a fast walk, trying not to panic. Barry breaks off talking to a soldier when I arrive. "Hey, Rose. I was just about to come to you. Ethan went to a pharmacy farther out in West Eugene for meds. He took Tom, Jesse, and Eva."

I hear his words, know they're true, and still ask, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Barry blinks. His hand yanks at his chin, and he wears an expression of relief when Mitch reaches my side, until she sees my face and turns on him with a growl. "Where are they?"

Barry has five inches on her, but he steps back. "Ethan went to a pharmacy," he repeats. "He took Jesse with him. Tom and Eva, too. We need meds in case anyone else gets sick, and some of the elderly are out of their medicines."

"He took Jess," I say, almost in wonder. I trusted Ethan to go and come back, as we agreed. I didn't specifically tell him *not* to go anywhere else, but he's a fucking imbecile if he thinks I'd be fine with it.

"They would've turned around if they couldn't make it." Barry watches me intently, his eyes screaming an apology. "It was smooth sailing all the way back for us. They shouldn't be more than three hours, at most. We'll go looking if they aren't back. We always do."

"You always do?" I think of the soldiers who went north with Carver. They haven't returned, either. "And how many times do you find them?"

Barry's eye twitches. Mine is ramping up, and I press the muscle flat with a finger. "We find their empty trucks, usually," he says.

I can't think about that, not if I want to stay sane. "Thank you for not lying to me."

I head for the fence before I can cry. I should've forbidden Jesse to go. Fuck being reasonable. The world is unreasonable, why shouldn't I be?

Adele stares as I return to the tree. What was a major annoyance now seems insignificant, and I ignore her. Mitch touches my arm. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. Are you okay?”

I nod, jaw clenched so hard my teeth hurt. I un hinge it long enough to say, “I’ll kill him. If anything happens to my baby, I will kill Ethan.”

“I’ll help you.”

I breathe deep. Anger is better than fear. It’s sharp, dangerous. Three hours. They have three hours, and then I’m going after them.

POP and the girls came to finish out our watch shift, and now we all sit in front of the ice rink building watching the gate. Clara chews a finger while Holly spins a lock of hair until it’s frizzy. Her fingertips are pink, two of her nails surrounded by blood, but I don’t have the heart to point it out. Mitch brought food that sat uneaten, and the edges of the chili have dried and stuck to the sides of the bowls.

When the girls leave for the bathroom, Pop exhales. “I’m sure they’re fine, baby doll. I know that doesn’t help at all, but I have to say it.”

“What was he thinking?” I ask. “He wasn’t thinking. Or he wanted to die by my hand.”

Pop’s laugh is short. “Maybe he knows Jesse can handle himself. He can, you know.”

“So could the soldiers who went to Portland. So could the billions who didn’t make it before that.”

Pop nods a few times, then wipes his face with his handkerchief. His worry is evident in the tightness around his eyes and in the ball of muscle behind his jaw that flexes and bulges while he searches for something comforting to say.

Twenty-five minutes until three hours. No radio call has come. Nothing but silence in a silent world. I want to scream loud enough to pierce it, but I sit with my cold hands between my knees. It will seem insane if I hold this vigil and then they breeze through the gate unharmed, but even the knowledge that I’m outing my crazy to the world can’t make me stop. If I sit long enough, worry hard enough, they’ll be okay.

The clock ticks down to twenty minutes. I stand and ready myself for a fight. “I’m going to find out how you get out of this place.”

Pop and Mitch get to their feet. “Rosie...” Pop begins. At my expression, he changes his objection to a nod. “How do you want to do it?”

“We’ll use our truck. They only have to let us through the gate. Which they’ll do if they don’t want a truck-shaped hole in it.”

Mitch’s attention is caught by something behind us. She widens her stance and puts her fists on her hips. “What?”

Barry stands there, decked out in an Army jacket with a long gun slung over his shoulder in addition to the pistol on his hip. “We’re going out for them.”

“I’m coming,” I say.

“We don’t want to have to worry about you, too.”

“You don’t have to worry about—”

Pop grips my arm. “Let them go. I promise we’ll break down the gate in two hours if we need to.” He counters my glare with a stern expression. “You out there is like Jess out there. Barry knows what he’s doing.”

“I do,” Barry says. “We do. We’re taking two trucks and six people.” He closes the few steps between us and looks me square in the eye. “I will find them. Give me a chance to do that before you go running into the zombies?”

I take a deep breath, insides warring. Five soldiers file past, Marquez and Nora among them, as two trucks pull to a stop—one a police SUV and the other a green transport truck with canvas stretched over the back. If I refuse and tag along, I might throw off their plan. They must have a better one than I do, which is to drive to West Eugene in a panic, scream my head off until I spot them, and likely get eaten in the process.

“You have two hours,” I finally say.

Barry nods once. Holly and Clara return, taking in the soldiers and trucks with wide eyes. “Did they hear something?” Clara whispers, her voice thin. I want to punch Ethan for putting this fear on her face and in her heart. She’s lost enough for a lifetime.

“No, they’re going to find them.” Mitch wraps her arm around Clara and stares Barry down. “They’d better.”

“I’ll find them,” he repeats, then motions his people to the vehicles.

It’s only after he leaves that I realize he didn’t say he’d find them alive.

Tom

ZOMBIES at the fence mean our truck is out of reach. More closing in on our left and rear mean the loading dock is our only option. I motion to it, and Ethan shouts for Jesse and Eva. When the two don't hear over the hisses and groans, we run for them through grass slippery from earlier rain. Jesse turns from the fence and looks past us with round eyes. He glances to his left, where bodies travel the space between building and fence, then yanks Eva toward the loading dock.

A hand seizes my shoulder. I throw my elbow back and knock a man with one eye to the ground. A woman takes his place, another clutches my left side, and the one-eyed man grabs my boot, tilting me off-balance before I stomp him in the face.

I will not die in a field for no goddamn good reason. I roar as I spin, knocking them to the ground, then drop the bulky bag of pills from my shoulder. Beside me, Ethan grapples with a woman, her grayed face mottled with dark veins and her mouth heading for his neck. I raise my pistol to her temple and pull the trigger. The shot echoes over fields and trees, over the dozens and dozens of zombies staggering toward us through wet grass.

Ethan and I race for the loading dock, where Jesse and Eva already climb the chain-link fence that cordons off the side and rear. The gate at the front is open, and the space already full of bodies, but the dock is still our safest bet. Our only bet.

I throw a bloody teenager from my path. Kick out the knee of a three-hundred-pound man who could take me down through sheer mass. He crashes to the ground, tripping the next four in our way. I hear a growl to my left and then one face-plants into my shoulder, but I'm gone before she can get purchase.

Ten feet across asphalt, and we're at the fence. Ethan shoves a growling woman aside and climbs while I do. Jesse's thrown his jacket over the barbed wire at the top so we won't get snagged, and I let Ethan go first, then lift it carefully before I drop to the concrete surface of the loading dock.

"Thanks." I hand Jesse his coat. "Put it on."

The dock is four feet off the ground. Bodies are pressed to its front, their hands smacking and scratching the concrete only feet away. A short metal staircase on the opposite end, by the building, is crawling with them. Literally crawling. One reaches the top step, about to make it to the concrete. I stick to the middle of the dock, steering clear of the zombies at the back fence, and pull my knife as I run. The man makes it onto hands and knees. I jab the blade into his brain stem. He falls, but the next two are on their way. Jesse, beside me, buries his new knife in one's temple.

Ethan and Eva go to work at the edge of the dock. After a few minutes, the ones still upright begin to stand on the fallen, and a tall woman drags herself halfway onto the dock before Ethan flings her off. The more we kill, the easier it will be for the others to use the corpses as a stepping stool.

Fifty new zombies march across the field. Once they arrive, we'll be in bigger trouble. I look up—the flat roof is supported by square steel posts, and the fence at the rear of the dock is higher than the side fence, closer to the roof. We could climb the chain-link and shinny up a post the rest of the way, then pull ourselves onto the roof. A fall will mean dropping into the fray, but standing here, in the midst of the fray, isn't a better deal.

I point skyward. "We can climb to the roof. I'll go first and help the rest of you up."

They crane their necks and nod while I fit my boots into the links. The bodies outside the fence grab at my toes until I'm out of reach. Once I hit the top, I grasp the square support and stomp the strands of barbed wire, which snap and drop out of the way.

I look down at the crowd waiting for dinner to fall, then make the short leap, hugging my body around the pole and pulling up with my hands while I dig the soles of my boots into smooth steel. Another two pulls, and I've reached where the pole joins the exposed steel frame under the roof. A thinner bar runs lengthwise. I wrap my sweaty hand over it, thanking God—and Rose—that I have a good pair of leather gloves, then swing my upper body out and up to grab the rooftop. Once my hold feels secure, I let go of the lengthwise pole, move my legs up another foot, and meet the first hand with my second.

I've done plenty of pullups in my garage, but none involved the threat of a twenty-five-foot drop into zombies. A little motivation never hurts, but this is overkill. I push with my legs while I yank my weight higher. My

chest hits the roof. Another push, a draw of my arms, and I scramble onto the surface, out of breath.

Ethan watches the dock for new arrivals while Jesse and Eva climb the fence. They saw enough of my route that they both find the lengthwise bar without issue. I go to Eva and drop to one knee, my foot planted beside a small lip at the edge. The last thing I need is for her to pull us both over.

When she comes within arm's reach, I call, "Give me your hand!" She stretches it up. I ignore her splayed fingers and grasp her wrist. "Now the other, and then push with your legs."

Panic crosses her face, but she complies. I rise and step back as she thrusts her legs, and she slides onto the metal. I leave her there and run to Jesse, who's already halfway onto the surface, and pull him the rest of the way.

Jesse immediately spins to the edge for Ethan, who's just now fitting his feet into the chain-link. Once he reaches the top of the fence, he balances the same as we did, but before he gets his body around the post, an enormous, bloody woman slams into the fence.

It sways. Ethan loses hold, his face frozen in surprise as he falls backward. I hear Jesse shout as though from a distance. *He's going to die. Jesse will see his dad eaten by zombies.* The thoughts feel impossibly long when they could've lasted a split-second at most—a split-second in which Ethan manages to fling his upper body forward and grab the fence links.

He loses his grip and slides down the metal, stopping low enough for a hissing man to catch hold of his foot. His mouth can't reach, but another grips Ethan's other foot, tugging him down an inch.

"Dad!" Jesse screams.

He drops to his knees and turns to lower himself again. I lift him by the back of his coat. The kid has heart, but we didn't make it to the roof so I can tell Rose he died after the fact. "Stay here," I say.

I lower myself until my feet hit the fence's top rail, then crouch, one hand on the post, and lean over. Ethan stops kicking long enough to look up. He's tired. I see it in his eyes, in the quick, shallow jump of his chest. There's no way he can fight them off long enough to climb to my hand.

I'd be a liar if I said it doesn't occur to me that Ethan's fall would solve Rose's problems—and, a terrible voice whispers, mine—but I won't let him die. Not when I have a chance of saving him. I avoid the hanging strands of

barbed wire and climb down until my feet are level with his waist, then sink into a crouch at eye level. “I’ll wrap my arm around you and pull you up. Climb with me if you can.”

Ethan nods, arms trembling with exhaustion. “My knee is fucked.”

I edge sideways and set my shoulder under his armpit, then wrap my left arm around his torso. I send my other hand up the links, grab hold as high as I can, and straighten my legs. Ethan kicks off the grasping hands, grunting with exertion. Something pops in my left shoulder, but I haul him upward until we fall against the fence out of reach.

Ethan fits his feet into the links and pants. I rest my face against the metal, panting myself. “You have a grip?” I ask.

Ethan nods. His gaze moves to the side of my face, and he grimaces. “The barbed wire. It’s under you.”

I lift my head and feel the metal catch. Two lines of wire rip from my cheek, forehead, and scalp where multiple barbs have dug in. It hurts, but not nearly as much as it will when the adrenaline wears off, I’m sure. “Can you get up there again?”

Ethan nods and inches up, favoring his leg. He hits the pole, then scoots his way into Jesse’s and Eva’s waiting hands. Once he’s disappeared over the lip of the roof, I start the ascent. This time is harder, with my muscles sore and the pain in my shoulder, and I’m thankful for Jesse’s assist at the end.

I drop to my ass on the metal roof. Down below, the zombies have lost their damn minds. I tuned it out before, but now the growls and snarls of frustration fill my ears. The rotten smell fills my nose. Jesse kneels beside me. “Tom, you okay?”

I nod rather than speak. My mouth is parched. There’s no reprieve from the sun. I unzip my coat and let it fall, wincing when my shoulder tweaks.

Jesse reaches into his inside jacket pocket and passes me a handkerchief. “For your face. Hold it there.”

I raise it to my cheek as the wounds begin to sting. When I pull the handkerchief away, it’s red with blood. Ethan takes it and presses it to a spot just above my temple. “Hold it here. None of it looks good, but that one’s bleeding a lot.” I nod, and he drops to the roof three feet away, hands clutching his right knee. “Thank you. I don’t know how much longer I could’ve held on.”

“You would’ve figured it out,” I reply, though I’m not sure it’s the truth. “What’s wrong with your knee?”

“Just a bad knee. It flares up every once in a while, but usually not like this.”

Eva returns from where she was peering over the roof. “They’re not going anywhere. How about we—” She screeches when the metal dents under her boots.

“Sit down,” Ethan says. She gingerly lowers herself to his side, arms around her bent knees, while he studies the surrounding area. “Barry knew where we were going. They’ll come and lead them away. It just depends on when they decide we’re missing.”

“Anyone still have a radio?” I ask.

“I put it in my bag.” Eva gestures at the fence in the distance, where she and Jesse dropped their loads of medications.

“Mine fell off my belt down there,” Ethan says. “Could be a long night.”

“No way.” Jesse positions himself beside me, facing his dad and Eva. “You really think Mom will let us stay out here all night?”

“Oh, fuck.” Ethan blows out a breath that flattens his lips. “Your mother is not going to be happy.”

“Understatement of the century, Dad.”

Ethan watches the road, shaking his head remorsefully. I’m not going to argue. He was given enough rope to hang himself, and hang himself he has.

Jesse shrugs. “It happens all the time, Mom knows that. She got stuck away from us twice so far. Once when they went to find you and the other time when we went to the school cafeteria.”

“What happened at the cafeteria?” Ethan asks.

“We got surrounded, but she and Tom led the pack away on foot. They couldn’t get home until the next day.”

He shares a few more details, all of which make Ethan shake his head again, this time in admiration. “Your mother…” He smiles, then seems to notice me. “Where’d you stay that night?”

“We ended up at my house. Took the woods home in the morning.” I’m able to answer neutrally, maybe because that night wasn’t anything but the beginning of a friendship. Sheila still lies in our bed, though that thought isn’t as terrible as it was, thanks to Rose. I refuse to think about Jeremy,

except to think that maybe I've spared Rose that same loss today. If Jesse went after Ethan... I won't think about that, either.

"God, it's hot." Eva walks to where the loading dock roof meets the higher roof of the building, then climbs over the three-foot-high dividing wall. Once there, she says something I can't hear over the zombies below, then disappears.

"What'd she say?" I ask.

Ethan shrugs as if he couldn't care less. I definitely don't, and it isn't until she climbs over and stomps close again that I hear her say, "Same shit all around the building." It might be my imagination, but she appeared to get crankier the more Ethan spoke of Rose. Of course, cranky also seems to be her natural state.

"Any shade?" I ask. Eva shakes her head and stares glumly into space. "How about a hatch into the building?"

She nods, then curls her lip. "It's locked, and, anyway, it's probably full of zombies down there."

"The first floor is," I say. "But maybe we can get on the second if we need to. What time did we leave them at Bi-Mart?"

Jesse checks his watch. "Almost two hours ago."

"How long until they usually start looking?" I ask Ethan.

"Could be a few hours, could be tomorrow."

"Guess we'll wait." I fold my jacket into a pillow shape, then set it behind me, lie back, and close my eyes. As Jesse said, Rose isn't about to let us sit here all night.

I DREAM OF JEREMY, who chases me through our house, groaning so loudly that I can't hear my own screams. I wake when he's following me up the stairs, *running* up the stairs the way zombies don't. I crack open an eye to the same cloudless sky as before, thankful it was a dream. You know it has to be one hell of a nightmare when you're *glad* to wake up on a roof with hundreds of the undead clamoring for a taste of you.

Jesse isn't in sight. Ethan and Eva sit in a small sliver of shade where the roof meets the building, whispering heatedly. I'm thirsty, my shoulder

hurts like a bitch, and the right side of my face is fiery. I check my watch. It's been thirty minutes of dozing, though the dream felt like an eternity.

The sounds from below are the ones from my dream, and they aren't helping to shake the memory of Jeremy coming after me. Punishing me. I sit up, rolling my head on my neck. That hurts, too. Getting old is for suckers.

Ethan and Eva stop their talking to stare at me. "You look like shit," Eva says.

"Thanks," I say.

"No, I mean, your face." She brushes the side of her own face.

I touch my cheek. The blood has dried, thick in places. Underneath feels swollen and warm. Ethan limps over, and I get to my feet. After a quick inspection, he says, "We can't clean it now, but we will when we get back. Have you had a tetanus shot in recent memory?"

"Maybe three years ago," I say. "I got one when I took Clara for hers."

"Good. Sorry about that. Thanks for saving my ass."

Now that the exam is over, I step away. "Not a big deal. How's your knee?" I glance at Ethan's leg as I ask, then look up in alarm. It's swelled enough to strain against his jeans. "Maybe we should cut those pants off."

"Debating it. If we have to run, though, I want protection."

I smile. "Might be the least of your worries. If we have to run, you're fucked."

Ethan laughs. A full laugh, head back. "Tell me about it. Thankfully, I don't think we'll have to." He winces. "I've got to get off this leg. Want to join us in the paltry shade?"

"Think I'll explore for a bit."

Ethan salutes me with a finger and hobbles back to the wall. If I hadn't heard Rose's side of the story, I'd never guess that Ethan angers so easily. But Dad was a charmer, and no one guessed with him, either. There's always the possibility Rose is mistaken or too sensitive, but for all her flakiness, she's eminently sensible when it matters.

I climb the wall. Jesse leans on the far corner ledge of the building's roof, where a couple of tall trees provide a smattering of shade. As I approach, he does a double take. "I know," I say. "I already heard about how bad it looks."

"Does it hurt?"

“Not too much.”

Once I’ve joined him, Jesse leans over the ledge. “They’re not going anywhere. Are you as thirsty as I am? I can’t stop thinking about drinks.”

“I might be. Guess we should always have our packs on, huh? Or cargo pants.”

“Lesson learned. The hard way.”

“That’s usually the way I learn. I don’t recommend it.”

One corner of his mouth lifts. “At least you learn. Some people never do.”

Again, I’m struck by the quiet way Jesse observes what goes on around him. I wouldn’t worry whether or not he had my back in a jam, yet he’s kind and calm. Sensitive, even. It reminds me of Jeremy, and I wonder if my quiet son would’ve handled this world the same way Jesse has. The thought makes my eyes burn along with the cuts on my head. “I’m glad you’re okay,” I say. “If you weren’t, I was thinking of running off rather than facing your mother.”

“Normally, I’d be rolling my eyes, but I can’t wait to see her. Mostly because she’ll have beverages.”

My laugh sets the zombies atwitter on the grass below. Jesse faces the other direction, resting his back on the ledge. “I was going to stare at the street for a while. Want to come with?”

“Sure.”

We walk to the other side of the roof. Ethan and Eva are still in their spot. Eva quickly tucks something into her coat and turns her head our way. “Hey. Want some gum?”

At our nods, she brings us each a piece. It isn’t a drink, but it takes the edge off the thirst. The four of us watch West Eleventh to the east, the direction from which help will arrive. We hope.

“If they don’t come, we’ll figure something out,” I say. “We can see about getting into the hatch if it comes to that. Maybe there’s water inside.”

“They could be down there for days before they get bored and move away,” Ethan says. “We might need it.”

It’s a depressing thought, and I spend the next fifteen minutes inspecting the roof hatch. It’s steel, locked from the inside, and looks harder to open than that drug cabinet. After another round of sitting, Jesse leaps to his feet

at the distant sound of engines. A minute later, two trucks pull to a stop at the turnoff to the dead-end street.

I wave my arms. Barry rolls down his window and waves back, then holds up a hand, fingers spread. The transport truck pulls to the side of the road, and the passengers duck out of sight as the SUV lays into its horn. The sound of the engines has already attracted the closer zombies; at the horn's peal, more begin to cross the grass. Fifty, one hundred, two hundred zombies stumble into sight and lumber toward the main road. As the first close in, the truck drives fifty feet down, then a hundred, and then moves off, horn still bleating.

I walk a circuit of the main roof. All are gone except for a one-legged zombie, though he's gamely trying to catch up on his stomach. Once they've disappeared down the road, Barry's truck starts toward the dead end. I help the others down the fence, then drop to the loading dock. Over two dozen zombies lie on the concrete, and Jesse pushes the ones on the steps out of the way.

Our bags of pills lay where we dropped them, and though zombie feet have scattered some, we collect what we can find and head for the fence. Barry meets us halfway across the grass with a relieved smile. "Glad to see you're okay. I wasn't sure I'd find all four of you."

"You almost didn't," Ethan says.

"Let's get you home." Barry shoots Jesse a look that's amused and, possibly, a bit intimidated. "Your mother's coming after us if I'm not back in an hour."

Jesse laughs. "Of course she is."

Rose

THEY CAME HOME at the same time another group limped in truck-less, injured, and with two of their people missing. I watched the wife of one of the missing men sob, pulling at her hair and clothes, and I hugged Jesse tighter. Ethan's knee looked terrible, but I gave him no words of sympathy, even when he apologized. He had to help Rhonda, anyway, since the injured people had a broken arm, a missing finger, a zombie bite, and various other ailments. I wondered what they do about zombie bites, and then I thanked the universe again for sending Jesse home unscathed.

Once I've made sure Jesse is okay, and he's told me the story of their day, I find Tom sitting outside the infirmary with Clara. One side of his face is the usual light brown, the other a haphazardly cleaned smearing of dried blood. His smile is lopsided from the swollen wounds in his cheek, and it's so goofily cute that my own smile widens.

"Jesse good?" he asks.

"He's fine. Clara, I happen to know they're all going to the Pavilion to do things they shouldn't be doing. Jesse and Holly said for you to meet them there."

"Maybe later," Clara says. She hasn't left his side since they entered the gate.

Tom pats her hand. "Go, Clare-Bear. I'm fine."

"I promise I'll stay with him until he's all better," I say. "Go have fun."

"You're sure?" Clara asks. Tom nods, and she jumps to her feet with an almost devious grin. "You guys have fun, too."

I watch her go, wondering if she knows something, if she sees something in my expression, because once I established Jesse was okay, it was all I could do not to rush here. I sit in Clara's vacated chair. "They're making you wait?"

"Triage." He turns to me, only his good side exposed, and lifts his eye to the ceiling. "I said I'd do it myself, but they want to make sure it's done right. I'm giving them another five minutes and then I'm going against nurses' orders."

"Hang on, Mr. Patience. Wait here."

I slip inside the infirmary. I've hung around enough to know the general whereabouts of supplies, and I head for one of the front cabinets to find what I need. Eva emerges from behind a curtain. I wink, lifting a finger to my lips, and receive a frown in response. When I hear Ethan's voice behind a curtain, I grab the remainder of the required items and sneak out to where Tom sits. "Come on, quick."

"Where are we going?"

"Do you want to get out of here or get caught?" I whisper. "You know I don't like to get in trouble."

He laughs, raising a hand to his swollen cheek, and follows me outside to the food trucks, where we find an unoccupied vehicle. I set my stolen goods on the griddle and pat a lower counter area. "Sit."

Once I've collected boiled water from outside and set some to heat on the stove, I inspect his face. Seven lacerations, a few of which are nasty-looking tears surrounded by purple, puffy flesh. The right shoulder of his coat is torn, and I peek in there to find dried blood. "It got you in the shoulder, too. Take off your coat."

He does, with the wince and jerk of someone hit by a rush of unexpected pain. "Your shoulder hurts?" I ask.

"The other shoulder. I tweaked it on the fence when I was helping Ethan."

"When you were saving Ethan, you mean." I rub antibacterial gel into my hands and feel the water with a finger.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Stop being modest. Jesse told me the whole story. Thank you for doing that."

Tom shrugs, gaze on the floor, and I drop the subject for the moment. Jesse explained how Tom went down instead of him and managed to pull Ethan to safety. I think Tom is Jesse's new hero; I know he's mine. Though I'm glad he rescued Ethan, I'd like to kill Ethan myself. They may need meds, but I can't shake the idea that he *wanted* meds enough to make the trip. If he risked our son's life for his habit, I'll never forgive him.

I dip gauze into the warmed water, then set to work cleaning Tom's face until skin begins to show through coagulated blood. "Shouldn't you have on gloves?" he asks.

"I don't think you have cooties."

“I did get my shot when I was six.”

I push his hair aside to clean a nasty rip. “I’m a licensed cootie shot provider. It’s time for your booster.” I trace two circles on his arm, then put a dot in the center of each. “You’re good for another ten years.”

Tom chuckles. “Thanks. Almost done?”

He shifts restlessly and turns his face toward the door. I swivel it back. “You’re a terrible patient. I’m getting there. Relax and enjoy the food truck.” Maybe he doesn’t want to seem vulnerable, but it’s too late. There’s no convincing me he isn’t human. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches in any of these, but someone with more expertise should look later.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.”

“Would you let me take care of you?” The words seem weighted with meaning. I pause for a moment, then continue cleaning as if I haven’t. “It’s the least I can do.”

I cup the good side of his face with one hand while I dab his wounds with the other. His scruff is scratchy on my palm, the skin of his lower neck silky and warm on my fingertips. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand as a wave of lightheadedness hits. The harbinger of a hot flash. I try to ignore the tingle of heat that spreads from my core to my skin, but I’m a blast furnace within seconds. The neck sweat arrives. So much neck sweat.

I fan my face and dip a new piece of gauze into the warm water, doing my best not to faint. Every inch of me is coated with a film of sweat. I want to strip off my clothes and plunge into a tub of ice, gobble down a bowl of ice cream, and sit in front of an industrial strength air conditioner all at the same time. Maybe you can’t die from a hot flash, but I’m pretty sure I’m actually melting.

“Hot flash?” Tom asks. “Why don’t you take a minute?”

Instead of arguing, I drop my cheek against the cool steel serving counter. Tom rustles in a cabinet, and a moment later a breeze wafts past. I laugh when I open my eyes to find him using a baking sheet as a fan. “That’s a new one.”

“Sheila hated hot flashes.”

“They don’t have much to recommend them.” I prop my chin in my hand and savor the breeze until my sweat cools. “Thank you, I think I’m good now. I may be old, but I’m too young for this shit.”

Tom slides the baking sheet into the cabinet. “Did you see a doctor?”

“Yup. She said enjoy perimenopause, possibly for the next ten years. I don’t always get them, but when I do, they come in packs.”

“Like zombies.”

“Exactly.” I straighten, face cooler, though I’m sure it’s still pink. “All right, my medical emergency is over. Back to yours.”

He sits with a grumble. Once his face is clean, and I’ve used an antiseptic wash and ointment, I say, “Now for the one on your arm.”

I don’t want to tell him to take off his shirt. In truth, I *do* want to tell him to take off his shirt, but I wait as he pulls his arm from his sleeve, then lifts that side onto his shoulder. “Good?” he asks.

I nod, mouth dry. It’s more than good; it’s fucking fantastic. I inspect the wound, pretending I don’t notice the way his abs flex when he twists so I’ll have better light. “You speared a fish,” I say. “Right in the eyeball.”

Tom peers to view the upper part of his tattoo, where a koi fish bleeds from its eye in a gruesome way. “Poor little guy,” he says.

I laugh as I clean, cooling down from the hot flash and Tom’s proximity to my apparently far too undersexed self. “Your tattoos are beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Tom straightens out his arm, then lets it fall. “The color’s held up pretty well. I got them in L.A. I had a friend who was just starting out, and he did these for free as long as he got to put me in his portfolio.”

“If this was him just starting out, he must have been amazing.”

“He was. Got pretty famous until he OD’d.”

“That’s terrible.”

I consider asking Tom what pills they got today, if Ethan acted odd or suspicious, but I refuse to let myself go there. My mind never stops investigating, obsessing, and scrutinizing when it comes to this, and I dream of the day I won’t have to anymore.

“I like your tattoo,” he says. “I didn’t see a rose in there, though.”

“It seemed too obvious.” I finish cleaning the cut, then cover it with a bandage. “All done.”

Tom puts his arm into his sleeve and pulls down his shirt. “You’re good at this.”

“You pick up a few things when you’re married to a nurse for twenty years. Will you have someone look at that other shoulder?”

He grabs it with his right hand and circles the joint a few times. “It’s just sore. It’s fine.”

“How about this—will you not be an impossible man-baby and do what I ask?”

Tom grins, then bends to the pack at his feet. He pulls out a rolled-up paper bag and hands it to me. “Payment for your nursing skills. They let us fill our bags at the store, and I got a few things I thought you’d like.”

He brought me something from outside. A *present*. Hot flash number two threatens to arrive with my flushed cheeks, and I set the bag by the serving window where it’s cooler. I reach inside, feeling awkward until I see he’s watching the floor instead of me, and then I lift out the first thing I touch: a bar of lavender soap.

“Lavender’s my favorite,” I say. The packaging is pretty, made of handmade paper. I sniff it while I wonder if he randomly chose lavender or if he’s noticed it’s what I use.

“Are you going to take this long with everything in the bag?” he asks.

I set down the soap to find his eyes glinting with amusement. If I have a hot flash now, I *will* die—of embarrassment. “How many things are there?” I ask.

“Five more.”

“Really? You didn’t have to get—”

“They’re small. Which you’d know if you’d actually take them out of the bag.”

“Fine. You want me to do it kid-on-Christmas-morning style?”

“Yup. Get it over with.”

He nods as though eager, and, with the way his fingers tap the counter, possibly nervous that I’ll like what he chose. Considering I was bowled over by a peanut butter sandwich and a Nutty Buddy, he doesn’t have much to worry about.

I pull out a bottle of water purifying tablets and hug them to my chest while Tom grins. “I have more for when those run out,” he says.

Next are two bottles of styling products. Brands I use and regretted leaving at home. It could be he’s trying to tell me my hair looks terrible, but it’s more likely he heard me bitching to Mitch about my frizz. “How’d you know I use these?”

“I’ve seen them in the RV bathroom. We wouldn’t want the veil of hair not being treated in the style to which it’s become accustomed.”

I laugh. “My hair is such a jerk. They’re perfect, thank you.”

I squeal at the bag of mini Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs, then immediately shove one into my mouth and force Tom to eat one, too. They're my favorite, and something I missed when Easter was ruined by zombies.

"Okay," I say, reaching into the bag for the last time. "Here goes number five."

It's a green plastic rectangle, about six by four inches, with a solar panel on one side and a USB port on the end—a power bank to charge my phone. It means unlimited access to my music, to my books, to my sanity, and I need that now more than ever. I set it on the counter with the other items. Every single one was carefully chosen not just for me, but for *me*. For my crazy hair and my anxieties and my favorite things. I've forgotten what it's like to feel cared for, to feel known. It's possible the thought that went into this is better than the gifts, and the gifts are absolutely perfect.

Tom clears his throat in the silence. "You won't have to wait for a plug anymore."

I realize I've been staring at it in wonder instead of thanking him as I should. "I love everything, but this is the best of all. Thank you so much." I run my fingers over the charger and hope he hears the sincerity in my voice. "You're a good present giver."

"I am."

I turn to find him wearing his half-smile. "And clearly as modest about it as your mix tape skills. So, if you ever made a mix tape as a present..."

"Your head might explode."

"Well, isn't someone full of himself? I was also well-renowned for my mix tape abilities. Did *you* make cassette case inserts with original art?"

"I didn't need that. The music was its own art." He arches a brow at my snort. "Are you challenging me to a mix tape battle?"

"I'd whip your ass," I say, to which he laughs. "Too bad it's not 1987, so we'll never know for sure. Thank you. I really do love everything."

Tom studies his boots, shrugging as if it's nothing, but I refuse to let him brush off my thanks again. When he starts to rise, I move to the counter and set my hand over his. "You can run away in a minute, but I want to say thank you. For this, and for keeping Jesse safe. You wanted to get home to Clara, and then you almost didn't." What was supposed to be heartfelt turns weepy, and I blink to hold back tears. "I appreciate it more than I can say."

“I promised I’d get him home.” Tom’s voice is hoarse. “If it were Jeremy...”

A tear makes its way down his good cheek. I use my free hand to brush it away before I can overthink the impulse, and when Tom looks up with bloodshot eyes and a sad smile, I barely restrain myself from touching his cheek again. He flips the hand I cover so we’re palm against palm. It’s soothing, as if words of solace flow between our fingers, and it speaks more eloquently than I could.

The moment isn’t charged like last night—it’s tender and honest. Everything about him is real. No lies, no defenses. Just Tom, a man who made mistakes and has regrets, but who’s trying so hard to make it right. Trying, and succeeding.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He starts to shrug, then simply says, “You’re welcome, Red.”

Craig

ARDUOUS TREK IS SPOT-ON. We hike five miles up a constant grade of paved road, rain pelting our bodies. The temperature drops with the altitude, while the wind grows stronger and blows the raindrops off the trees onto us. Double the rain for the same price. Somewhere around mile four, at what Gabe's fancy watch says is an altitude of four thousand feet, the fir trees give way to sparser vegetation and tree stumps littering the landscape.

A hazy mountain view is visible through the clouds, if you're able to keep your eyes open long enough to see it. Mainly, we walk with our heads down against the barrage of raindrops, moving up until my quads are on fire.

Then we're in thick forest again, though the trees are shorter due to altitude. Where the road flattens in a wide gravel clearing, we sit under two trees to eat and read the map. Everything feels damp, including the food I shove into my mouth: peanuts, crackers, and three spoonfuls of jam. A deconstructed PB and J. Once we've filled our water bottles at a tiny stream, Francis leads the way along a dirt road that continues upward and levels out after a quarter mile.

Every now and again, I see a white-topped mountain behind a cloud, but I don't give a shit. Even with gloves, my hands are numb. It's a struggle to open my water bottle, and I wouldn't bother except Gabe hounds us to do so, going as far as to stage water stops.

At one such stop, he peers at everyone from under his rain hood, eyes bright above his thick beard. "You guys are amazing. We climbed thousands of feet in a few miles, that's no joke, man. The first few days kill you on the trail."

I do my best to nod, hating the woods and zombies and Gabe's relentless optimism. He throws an arm over Lance's shoulders. "You could've thru-hiked with me, no doubt."

Lance slides out from under Gabe's arm, wiping his wet face with his equally wet hand while he turns away. "Should we walk?"

Gabe watches Lance hit the gravel road, brows drawn in puzzlement, then follows. The rest of us do the same, with markedly less enthusiasm.

Road and rain, road and rain. That's all there is as we march miserably onward. And wind. Fucking wind.

Miles later, after a pause to tape both Francis' and Lana's feet, the sky has changed to a dark gray that signals evening. We stop beneath a thick stand of firs where the rain barely makes its way through and begin to set up camp in silence. At the LTD house, we covered our sleeping bags with garbage bags, and mine is the only dry thing I own. Where the rain didn't wet me, my sweat did, and the body heat generated by walking quickly dissipates and leaves me shivering.

Gabe wanders off and tromps back from wherever he went with an armful of semi-dry wood, then proceeds to clear a circle of dirt in the pine needles with the heel of his boot. "Campfire," he says. "We'll all feel better afterward."

He removes a few small white ball-shaped objects from a plastic container and drops them on the dirt, then pulls dry needles and leaves from under the top layer of forest floor and arranges them over top. With damp wood to burn, we'll need a hot fire, and I circle our camp, collecting a mix of small twigs and thicker branches. When I deposit my finds by the fire pit, Gabe smiles broadly. I smile back, partly because I'm anticipating warmth with much delight and partly because Gabe's good cheer is real enough. No need to shoot him down for *not* being an asshole.

The roof tarp is strung up, the other tarp laid on the ground beneath. Troy, Lana, Francis, and Daisy unpack the food while I help with the fire. Lance stands at the edge of camp, hands fisted at his sides.

"What's wrong with him?" I ask quietly. Gabe shrugs while he adds more kindling to the flames. "What were those white things you put in there?"

"Cotton balls soaked in petroleum jelly. They light easy, even in rain."

"My dad used to make firestarters from sawdust and paraffin wax. We used them all the time when we went camping."

"Yeah, that works, too." Gabe hacks at the firewood with his knife, exposing dry interior, then places it on the larger sticks I found. "Camping, huh? I got the feeling you didn't like the outdoors."

"I didn't," I say, sinking to the dirt. "And I don't right now, either. But I guess sometimes it's all right."

“I love it, man. It’s, like, my church.” He spreads his arms wide. “I believe in this, right here.”

“My father always said the woods were where you could find your true self.” After I say it, I wonder if that’s what Dad was doing during those camping trips—looking for himself, for his heart. Maybe trying to share what was left of himself with Mike and me.

“I believe it.” Gabe spreads his dirty hands above the flames. The bigger log catches, and he nods happily when the fire crackles and throws up sparks, as though he expected nothing but success while building a fire in the midst of a rainstorm. He probably didn’t.

“Believer,” I say. “That’s you.”

“What?”

“Your trail name. Believer. If you don’t mind me giving you one. We are on a trail, sort of.”

Gabe gets to his knees and throws his arms around me in a hug that’s almost desperate in its need for connection. I return it, hugging this kid who is Jesse’s age and smells of dirt and sweat and patchouli, while I pray that Jesse has someone to hug.

Gabe pulls away and wipes his eyes. “It’s perfect. I thought it’d be Granola or Dumbass or something.”

“Or Cherry?”

Gabe laughs as the others join us, and Lana sets down the stoves and stew. At the thought of food, my constant hum of hunger becomes a roar that drowns out the ache in my legs. It’s been over a month with too little food, weeks with more exercise than usual. I’m not starving to death, but I’ve never known hunger like this.

Troy hands me half a protein bar. It goes into the gaping maw of my stomach like a raindrop into the ocean. I eye where Daisy kneels before the two backpacking stoves, carefully spooning canned corn into the stew in the two small pots. Is it wrong that I want to knock her over, grab a pot, and run off into the woods with it like a feral dog?

Yes, I remind myself, *that would be very wrong*.

The smell of food draws Lance closer. He takes the half protein bar Troy hands him and perches on the opposite side of the fire with his arms around his knees, chewing his lip instead of the bar.

“You all right?” I ask.

“Fine,” Lance says sharply.

I consider killing and eating him, but I’m not ready to go there just yet. He cheered up when Gabe first appeared and befriended him, but he’s back in obnoxious mode.

Ten minutes later, we eat our food around a crackling fire, faces and bellies warm. Lance brings the pots to the road, where a big pothole in the gravel supplies wash water. Gabe watches him intently, then walks to the road and crouches beside him. After a few seconds of talking, he touches Lance’s arm.

“Get the fuck off me!” Lance yells, rearing back and leaping to his feet.

Lance stalks our way, drops the pots at the fire, then lifts his backpack and storms into the trees without a word. I’m about to go after him, but he stops fifty feet away under a big fir and sits with his back to us. It’s impossible not to stare, and my four companions wear expressions of mild surprise and utter interest. All we need is some popcorn for the show.

Gabe sits by the fire again. The five of us turn to him. “What was that about?” Lana asks.

“I’m gay.” Gabe’s gaze shifts to Lance, then back to us. “Lance and I... last night.”

A chorus of *ohs* follows this information, and then we all study Lance in his new campsite. After a minute, Lana asks, “Did he tell you about his friends who were with us?” Gabe nods, mouth sagging sympathetically. “They were heterosexuals in a big way. Small town and everything. Maybe he didn’t tell them. Or anyone.”

Gabe roots in his pack and pulls out a perfectly rolled joint. “I’ve been there.”

He lights the joint and inhales, holding his breath before he exhales a huge plume of smoke. He passes it to Daisy, who does the same and sends it to Francis. Troy and Lana are next, and then I hold the joint, undecided. “Should we all be stoned? Who’s going to watch for zombies?”

“Dude, it’ll take a lot more than this to get me that stoned,” Gabe replies. “I could smoke that whole thing and still win *Jeopardy*.”

I laugh and fill my lungs. It probably isn’t the smartest move, but we’re thousands of feet up a mountain, there are no zombies, and I want something to take the edge off.

After another round, Gabe calls to Lance, “We’re smoking some ganja over here, if you want any.” Lance’s head twitches. He gets to his feet and sways for a few seconds, fighting his body’s inclination to join us. Gabe smiles. “You know you want to. Everyone’s doing it. Peer pressure!”

The six of us crack up. It’s good weed, though I expected nothing less from Gabe. Lance trudges toward us, head down. Gabe holds the joint in the air, not looking at Lance, who takes it from him and sucks in a giant drag, then another, finishing it off.

Darkness is falling. The fire lights our faces orange as a new joint makes the rounds. “How much do you have in there?” I ask.

“Three ounces,” Gabe says.

Francis leans forward, elbows on his knees and chin in hand. “Damn. That’s a lot of weed.”

“I found some of it in Northern Cali. I couldn’t let all that sweet bud go to waste.”

Lance sets his ass on the ground, next to Gabe but not too close. I smile at him, and his lips spasm before he stares into the trees.

“There’s one thing we didn’t consider,” Lana says. “The munchies.”

Everyone groans. The joint swings by again, and I pass it on without smoking. My body and brain are mellow, but there’s a too-stoned point where they’ll go into anxiety mode. No one, especially me, needs that.

Gabe tells us how he flew out west and got a ride to the beginning of the trail. How the desert was both plain and beautiful, harsh and lovely, and how his body toughened up over the course of the first two weeks. “I thought I was dying, man. My legs woke me up with charley horses every night. It passes, though, and then you can do any mountain you set your mind to. You’ve just got to push through and believe.”

He laughs at his words and points double finger guns at me. I point my own finger guns back. “Believer,” I say. “That’s his trail name.”

“Cherry and Believer,” Gabe says. “The rest of you need your names.”

“I want a cool one,” Troy says. “Han Solo? Batman?”

“Yours is Atlas,” Lana says with a giggle. “Because you lost ours.”

Daisy laughs over Troy’s complaints. “Too late, it’s Atlas. What’s mine?”

“Spike!” I shout, then cover my mouth. Mitch says I have no volume control when stoned. I whisper loudly, “Because you made them.”

Daisy grins. “Nice. And how about Francis?”

“Fighter,” I say immediately.

Francis lifts a fist Black Panther style, and Troy yells, “How come he gets a cool one?”

“Because he didn’t lose the atlas,” Lana says, and our laughs echo. “Cherry’s good at this. What’s mine?”

I say the first thing that comes to mind. “Poochie. Because you love dogs.” I hold up a hand. “Wait, I can do bett—”

“I love Poochie. I’m keeping it.”

We all look to Lance, who hasn’t said a word. He watches the fire as though he doesn’t care about a name, but not before I see the hope. The wanting to belong. My life’s story in his eyes. “Ladies and gentlemen,” I say, “I present to you Neutral, formerly known as Lance.”

The others clap. Francis explains to Gabe how Lance moved those cars, and Gabe pounds Lance’s shoulder. “Nice one, man.”

Lance’s lips quirk. “Thanks.”

We watch the fire in silence, listening to the wood snap and pop. It’s peaceful, warm. The wind has calmed and the rain has stopped for the moment. I scan the tranquil faces of my new friends. Even Lance has loosened up. Except for the growling of my stomach, I feel as serene as they appear.

“I like you guys,” I say. Once it’s out, I decide it’s one of those stoned thoughts better left unsaid, since I’m not five years old, but I receive giant smiles in return.

“Me, too.” Lana squeezes my shoulder, then sighs. “I can’t stop thinking about those two Hershey’s Bars.”

“We could die tomorrow,” Daisy says, “and it would be a waste if we didn’t eat them.”

“I might lose them,” Troy adds, which prompts a round of snickering.

It’s shaky reasoning, but we need no more than that. A minute later, we’re eating chocolate sandwiched between cookies, laughing like teenagers cutting school. And I’m struck by the thought that despite the way the world has soured, life can still be sweet.

Craig

WE WAKE to blue skies and sunshine. After packing up camp, we set out along the dirt road. Everything aches, and my stomach pleads for food, but I feel the best I have in weeks. I've even remembered why people go into the woods. After days of rain and fog, we're surrounded by a gorgeous view of mountains upholstered in the dark green velvet of firs. The taller ones still have a dusting of snow at the very top. The tallest and more distant are white-capped and streaked with dark veins of rock where snow has begun to melt.

Applegate Valley sits to the east. From here, it looks peaceful, though it's probably anything but. Today's hike is a descent toward Murphy, with Grants Pass just beyond. As we walk down one rise to the next, the squares of farmland and swathes of road that mean civilization come into sight. Instead of filling me with relief as it once did, my nerves jangle. No sooner do I get the hang of one thing than another pops up, this time a trip into a heavily populated area.

The road turns to pavement, and a mile later we're on two-lane blacktop by a few houses on large wooded lots. Two of the houses' doors hang open, though the third is tucked away from the street, screened by a thicket of tall firs, and surrounded by a fence made of log poles with rigid metal mesh in the open spaces. It reminds me of Rose's fence, and I'm very happy to see it intact.

Nothing moves in the long driveway or detached carport, the latter of which contains two cars. The wrought iron gate is locked but easy enough to climb. Even if a vehicle only brings us a few miles closer, it'll be less walking. Less time to reach Eugene.

When we're nearing the carport, an upstairs window of the house opens with a crash, and the barrel of a shotgun appears through gauzy curtains. "Turn around and keep walking," a woman's voice calls. It's high-pitched with fear, though firm. "Or I *will* shoot. Don't think I won't. I've done it before."

We stop. Troy's hands raise, fingers splayed. The rest of us do the same, heavy breaths mingling with the sound of the breeze. "Hiya," Troy drawls.

“We thought the house was empty, and we need a vehicle to get north to Grants Pass. Sorry ‘bout that. We’ll be on our way now.” Out of the corner of his mouth, he murmurs, “Turn around and go slow.”

I about-face and wait for the others to move ahead, then keep near their backs. Troy is beside me two steps later, hand on his holster.

“You won’t have much luck going north in a car,” the woman calls, and we stop.

Troy walks a few steps toward the house and squints at the window. “Why’s that?”

“The roads are blocked up to Grants Pass. If I were you, I’d follow the power line easement to the Applegate River. Cross it, and the easement will get you to the Rogue River. You’ll have to figure out your own way from there.”

“Where’s the easement?” Troy asks.

“Go north on this road. When you get to the school, cut diagonal across the fields. You’ll see it.” A screech travels out the open window. A child. “Good luck.” The window shuts, cutting off the kid’s next screech.

I wave at the glass in thanks and climb the fence with the others. Two miles later, past trees, no fewer than eleven zombies, and houses stripped of all food, we reach a school set back across an open field.

“And not a moment too soon,” Troy murmurs, eyes on the stopped cars up the road.

We set out across the grass and follow the string of power lines—two telephone poles connected by steel far above ground. The grass beneath is overgrown except in two ruts left by years of work trucks. Bugs whine in the grass and birds fly overhead. It’s warm after days of cold rain, and Daisy lifts her face to the sun with a happy sigh. The road on the other side of the woods is blocked and zombie-filled, but we walk in a world that feels like the world of before, where animals still do their animal business.

After a mile, we hit a two-lane road where no zombies lurk, and the sound of water draws us forward until we’re at the river’s edge. It’s two hundred feet across and shallow where it burbles and bubbles over a gravel bar. Only the middle remains a mystery as to depth, though the current isn’t dangerously fast, even with the recent rain and snowmelt.

“How deep could it be?” Gabe sits on the grass and begins untying his boots. “Tie your shoes around your neck and hold your pack overhead.

That's what I did in the mountains. You can strip down if you want, but pants will dry fast in this sun."

Gabe pulls off his socks and stuffs them into his pack, then produces a pair of water sandals. "I have these, but I don't need them."

He tosses them to Lance, who catches them and then watches as Gabe hefts his pack over his shoulders and steps into the water. Lance loosened up last night, and I was on watch when he crawled into Gabe's tent. This morning, he isn't exactly lovey-dovey with Gabe, but he isn't walking ten feet away at all times, either. And though he probably thinks no one notices, he watches Gabe constantly, face mirroring Gabe's expressions. I've seen a lot of people in like through the years, and Lance definitely has a case of the likes.

Once past the gravel bar, Gabe wades into deeper water. When it's up to his waist, he turns back with a grin. "It's cold up in this bitch!"

We laugh and untie our shoes. I tuck my socks in my pack and hang my boots around my neck. The river is cold, but not as cold as some of the rivers I've been in, and I step carefully across rocks smoothed by years of flowing water.

"Stay on this side," I say to Daisy, the shortest of the group, as she picks her way beside me. She holds her pack above her head, the muscles in her arms sharply defined. If the water is over waist-high on Gabe, it'll be near chest-high on her, and she won't be able to fight the current as easily. If she's swept off her feet, I'll catch her. I hope.

The water rises to my knees, then my thighs. The smooth rocks change to larger ones mixed with river debris, and I feel each spot before I set my weight down. Gabe hits mid-river, where water swirls his shirt around him. "It's getting shallower already!" he calls. "We got this."

"Gabe, watch out!" Lance yells from behind.

Something—a log, maybe—surfaces in the current and slams into Gabe's side. He goes down with a yelp of surprise. It's not deep, but he disappears under the water with a torrent of splashing and waving of appendages. Too many appendages. It's not a log—it's a zombie.

Before I can drop my pack, sacrificing it to the river gods, Lance is past us and diving into the shallow water. He cuts through it like a pro swimmer and quickly reaches where Gabe wrestles with the Lexer, then yanks up a slightly bloated man and tosses him downstream.

Gabe is next, coughing and sputtering while water pours from his dreads. Lance holds him by the waist to keep him upright. “Are you okay? Gabe?” His voice is panicked. “Gabe!”

“Dude, let me finish choking to death,” Gabe coughs out. He extends his arms to inspect them. A few spots are the deep red of a pre-bruise, but there are no bite marks. “Check my back?”

Lance spins Gabe around, lifting his shirt and examining the skin until he relaxes. “You’re good.”

Gabe raises two thumbs to our side of the river, and my breath comes easier. I don’t want to lose anyone else. Bury anyone else. Josh and Tanner were more than enough.

After retrieving Gabe’s waterlogged pack at the base of a rock, we wade across the rest of the river, then collapse on the riverbank in the trees. Lance’s pack is only partly wet. He dropped it on the gravel bar in his haste, and Lana plucked it from the water immediately. Gabe has dry bags to hold his sleeping bag and clothing, and he reposes on a log in a new outfit while his sopping clothes dry in the sun.

We crack open three MREs. I once had the thought that they were unappetizing, but now I eat every molecule I’m allotted and wish for more. Four zombies have floated by during our rest stop. Daisy points out another, this one face up as though peacefully watching the clouds.

“Can’t believe one almost got me.” Gabe folds his hands under his chin and bats his eyelashes at Lance. “My hero.”

Lance smiles at the ground. Lana winks at Gabe over his head, then settles on the grass with her pack as a pillow. “How much longer, Francis?”

“A hundred-forty miles, give or take.” Francis consults the atlas and shows us where it denotes power easements, though he hadn’t thought to use them this way. “About six miles to the Rogue River.”

When all the food is gone, we set off again. The plan is to cross the Rogue River and make it to the highway. My feet are dry, my pants are drying, and my good mood is made better when we come across an abandoned house with a pickup truck. We throw our bags in the bed and drive along the rutted track. We’re closing in on Eugene, about seventy percent finished with our trip. I know better than to jinx it (Rose and I have a strict no-jinxing policy) but I can’t wholly tame my excitement.

The six miles take only twenty minutes to cover and deposit us on a well-traveled road. Troy whizzes past houses, turning at an intersection onto Rogue River Highway. The street name is a good sign; the traffic-blocked road and advancing zombies are not.

Troy swings into a restaurant parking lot. We exit the truck quickly, circling the building for the river, and come to a halt twenty feet from the water's edge. Something downriver has stopped it up, and bodies bob and float as far as the eye can see, spinning with the current and bashing into each other. We sure as hell aren't fording this.

At groans from the parking lot, Francis points left. "There's a bridge that way. Less than a mile."

I grip my spike as we weave through trees and bushes, around flowerbeds and decks of the riverfront houses. A Lexer tangled in blackberries at the shoreline thrashes, and it sets off the ones around it. Water flies and groans pass from body to body until the river is a roiling soup of limbs.

We break into a jog-run. Days of walking and hiking have exhausted me, but they've also given me endurance. We're in a park-like area a few minutes later, running for the nearby bridge. Even at a distance, I can see it's four lanes full of cars and zombies.

"Plan B!" Francis calls.

Beside me, Gabe gasps, "What's plan B?"

"Bust through," I say between breaths. I know what plan B is now, and it's my least favorite plan of the bunch.

"Fuck," Gabe says, but he speeds up.

When we reach the asphalt, Lexers approach through the traffic. Daisy hops onto a sedan, leaps onto the roof and to the hood, then jumps to the next car. I do the same in another lane, then skid to a stop three cars down. The high back of an SUV is next.

Two zombies arrive. I shove my spike into the first's eye. The other, a woman, grabs me around the legs and sinks her rotten teeth into my calf. I bring my spike into her ear, thankful teeth can't breach denim easily. The next lane is all sedans, and I hop from one to the next, my pack pushing me forward. Francis is ahead, Troy and Lana two lanes over, Gabe and Lance to my right. The Lexers don't know who to chase, and they stumble from spot to spot without their usual focus.

Daisy makes it to a roof at the end of the bridge. Troy and Lana reach her first, followed by Gabe and Lance. I close in on Francis as he hops to the asphalt and waves us right, onto another road where a game of cat and mouse ensues, with Lexers moving around cars and the seven of us dodging the larger groups, until we make it down a dead-end street and over the fence of a mini storage. I land on the ground, clothes stuck to my sweat, though there's no way they're coming off. That woman bit my leg, and if I needed any further evidence that covering my skin is crucial, I have it.

We head past long rows of metal rolling doors. At the last building, we collapse with our backs against the wall and watch the rear fence. I cap my water bottle after a long drink. "I really hate Plan B."

The others laugh in gasps, as breathless as I am. Francis pulls out the atlas and points at the field beyond our fence, which is fenced on the other side as well. "Train tracks are behind there. After that is a street that'll take us to I-5."

"What if it's a no-go?" Troy asks, putting into words what everyone doesn't want to say. No one has a good feeling about I-5 now that we've seen the roads. If it was clear once, chances are it isn't now.

"We can hike up alongside the highway." Francis taps the lines on the page. "We might find a car if we stick close to the roads."

Banging starts in the distance—bodies at the front fence. Lana stands with her pack. "Let's check it out."

WE FOLLOW the tracks until they begin to curve south, then we cut across a field behind a fenced compound that resembles a prison, though likely a minimum-security prison if it was one. I ponder whether prisons released their inmates once they understood the magnitude of the virus. On the one hand, people are imprisoned for minor crimes, and they don't deserve to starve to death in a cell. On the other hand, the inmates who murdered or raped with impunity, and who'd continue those activities if released, might do so with vigor when there's no law and order.

Maybe someone played God, releasing those who posed the least threat, but there's no way to be sure how someone will react to a world like this.

Carl, the father who attacked us, likely wouldn't have done such a thing before, while the murderer who reformed in prison might make it his life's mission to save others. It's an ethical quandary I'm glad not to have faced myself.

The trappings of civilization are across the way; as we climb the rise to the highway, I make out signs for Fred Meyer and Applebee's, among others. Midway up the final incline, the top of a tractor-trailer comes into sight. Smaller vehicles are visible a moment later, filling the lanes until the road curves out of sight around the mountains, and, presumably, for miles after.

We duck for nearby trees before the few zombies on the highway spot us, where I breathe deep to calm the rage brewing in my chest. Nothing is easy, or simple, or straightforward. Not even the road that's supposed to run straight fucking north.

Francis lays a hand on my shoulder and squeezes before he drops it by his side. "I say we check out those stores or the hotels. If we're walking a hundred-forty miles, we'll need more food."

I trail them down the hill toward the shopping center, still seething. As civilization goes, it's remarkably empty. I see the red sign on a building at the same time as Lana breathes, "Ooh, WinCo!"

"What's WinCo?" Daisy asks.

"Only the best grocery store ever."

I smile, my irritation lessening some. Rose loves WinCo for its prices and giant bulk section, and the times she's dragged me into the store to *grab a few things* have turned into an hour of exclaiming over the many varieties of granola and barrels of gummy candy. They also sell huge bags of grains and five-gallon buckets for those prepper people who store food. Those folks are probably sitting happily in their fortified houses, eating massive amounts of oats and powdered milk while they count their ammo. I hope they're enjoying the hell out of it if they are.

After we turn the corner to WinCo's front lot, it's obvious it's a wash: abandoned cars, shattered windows, dead bodies out front. We enter the doors anyway, flashlights ready to illuminate the gloom, though the numerous skylights make them unnecessary.

"Cleanup on aisle everywhere," Gabe says, muffling his voice like a PA system.

The shelves are bare. The floor is coated with a layer of crumbs, dried liquids, and torn packaging that's been compacted by shoes and turned a uniform shade of brown. A rotten scent hangs in the air—not dead humans, but in the same family. Decaying produce and meat, most likely. Because hope is truly a ludicrous thing, we walk farther in. There's nothing. Not even a bag of chips nor a pack of gum in a checkout line.

Though we can hike to Eugene with only the food we have, we'll be hungry. If you're hungry and sitting around, maybe you'd be fine. But if you're hungry and walking twenty miles a day, which Gabe says burns over four thousand calories, you might be very weak. And if you're weak and hungry and hiking twenty miles a day while attempting to fight off zombies, you might be very dead.

We check the other stores. The hundred dead people inside Fred Meyer are enough to put us off. Grocery Outlet is empty, the fast food joints are empty, the restaurants are empty. Empty, empty, empty. The hotels that once offered deluxe continental breakfast offer no sustenance. But with the sun moving down in the sky, they do offer a place to sleep. A bed with pillows seems the height of luxury after the past few days.

We stand out front of the lobby, looking down at the shopping center. Troy points at the possible prison—a collection of green-roofed buildings set in a square. “How about there? If it's an institution of some kind, they'd have food. They would've been locked up tight. If there's anything left, we can start off in the morning and not waste time looking.”

It's too attractive an idea to pass up. As we approach the complex, I draw my gun. Troy flips his pack around to dig inside, then hands me a dark gray revolver. “You've only got two bullets. This holds eight, and I have more. Keep it until we get ammo for yours.”

“You sure?” I ask. “You love your guns like children.”

“True enough,” Troy says with a laugh, “but I'm sure. You get extra points if you use it to save my life again.” He drops spare ammo into my coat pocket, nodding at my thanks.

Aside from the fencing, whose upper third curves inward to prevent escape, the buildings could be a high school or something similar. The sign names it as a youth correctional facility, and I find myself hoping they did let these offenders loose. We cut across the grass to the unfenced corner

building, where another sign requests that visitors remove all contraband before entering.

Troy's axe makes short work of the glass, and I keep an eye on the road while they clear it out. When Francis suddenly backs from the doors, pistol raised, I point the revolver that way. Though my hands sweat, my arms are steady.

"Put them down!" a deep voice yells from inside. "Weapons down! We don't want to shoot, but we will!"

I lower my pistol with the others. Two men appear at the door, each holding a shotgun, though they don't step outside. One, an older man with pale skin and white hair, kicks at the shattered glass with his boot. "Goddamn it, you had to break the glass?"

The younger guy, mid-thirties and Latino, sighs as though he's disappointed in our behavior.

"Sorry." Lana hangs her head. "We didn't think anyone was here."

"What do you want, anyway?" the older guy asks.

"We were looking for food," Troy says. "We're hiking up to Eugene, and we don't have enough. We can help fix the door, but we've got to be quick about it. Sun's going down in two hours, and we still need to find a place to sleep."

The two men glance at each other, and then it's the older man's turn to sigh. He lowers his shotgun. "Come on inside."



WE'RE LED through a few institutional corridors lined with offices and then through a metal door with a thick glass panel, until we arrive at a large room full of people ranging in age from infant to elderly. They sit on a giant sectional couch, at tables and chairs, and in a play area full of toys under an inoperative wall-mounted television. Big windows look out on a central courtyard with a field and basketball courts. An attached dormitory holds two rows of beds, all neatly made. Outside the day room, as they call this, are an eating area and another large room that holds more beds along with what might be an aisle's worth of WinCo.

All of the youths were released, Ignacio, the younger guy, explains. “A lot were local, and some had their families come by for them. But wouldn’t you know it—a bunch came back after they saw what was out there.” Ignacio cuffs a blond kid who sits on the couch with a few other teens. “Right, Nathan? You missed me.”

Nathan, no more than seventeen, laughs with his friends. “As long as I can leave when this is over. Time served.”

“I’ll let you go with your Pops. He’ll keep you in line. We’ve got a job for some of you out front. A broken door that needs to be boarded up. Go see Mandy, and she’ll get you the tools.”

The kids rise from the couch with fewer groans than most teens and head out of the day room. “We’ll do that,” Troy protests.

“Keeps ‘em honest,” the older guy, Norman, says. “They don’t mind working.”

“Idle hands and all that,” Ignacio adds. He gestures at the rooms around us. “This is one unit. There are three more. We took in a lot of local families. We’ve got people living in the gyms, in offices, at the school, everywhere you can think. Good thing we had stores nearby.”

“You did a good job emptying them,” Troy says. “Not a scrap in there.”

Norman smiles proudly. “We’re set for over a year. We’re hoping that’ll outlast them.”

“Then you know it’s not ninety days?” Francis asks.

“Yeah, we know.”

“You heard the weather alert, too?” I ask. “We weren’t sure how far it went.”

“We didn’t hear any alerts,” Ignacio says. “We heard it straight from the source. Want to meet him?”

Craig

AFTER WE SET our things in a cot-filled gymnasium, the two men bring us out an exit and onto a path in the grass. Outside the perimeter of the main buildings, the bottom half of the fences are covered with what appears to be black plastic that renders us invisible to anything lurking outside, and a metal footbridge leads to a newer building in an open field. It's made up of angular-roofed boxes in neutral colors, with wood beams and huge windows.

"This is the high school," Norman says. "We moved most of our electrical stuff here to use the solar. They say it has enough power for fifty-five refrigerators. Don't ask me how much that is, but it's a hell of a lot."

It's a nice building. Modern, yet made with natural materials that harmonize with the distant mountains. Inside, large banks of windows keep the polished concrete floors, neutral walls, and honey-colored wood well-lit.

"The boys love it in here," Ignacio says of a group of teens cleaning a table-filled room. They're up to the usual teen hijinks—calling to each other amid the occasional rattail with a towel—but they're doing their jobs. "You should hear them lecture the newcomers on keeping it nice. That's where we eat these days, but you wouldn't know it once they're done."

A classroom with a large sink is lined with cooking equipment; stoves and counters were relocated to make a new kitchen. A few rooms have become dormitories, where people lounge at desks beside cots. Another is a science room, with waist-high lab tables set in rows. A man is at one, using tweezers to move something from one petri dish to another. The rest of the school smells of food and cleaner, but a faint odor of zombie rot hangs in this doorway.

"Hiya, Fred," Norman says. "You busy, or can you talk?"

The man looks up from his work. He's in his fifties, with brown skin, curly graying hair, and a good-sized belly. He waves us in. "Sure. We can talk, as long as you don't mind the smell."

"We're used to it," Lana says. "We probably smell just as bad."

“These folks are staying the night, and they wanted to meet you.” Norman says to us, “This is Fred. Fred Pierce.”

We say hello while Fred strips off his latex gloves, crosses to a sink, and washes his hands. “You have water,” Daisy says.

“They pumped it to one of the town’s reservoir tanks a week or so in, the rest works on gravity,” Norman says. “It’ll take us a while to go through five million gallons as long as no one else is using it.”

Fred finishes at the sink and comes forward, resting his hands on his belly. “What can I do for you?”

“They heard a report saying the Lexers would last longer than ninety days. I said we didn’t have a report, but we had you. They wanted to hear about it.”

Fred drags up a stool. “Mind if I sit? I’ve been standing all day.” He settles himself with a groan. “I’m not sure how much I can tell you. I live here, in Grants Pass. I’m a middle school science teacher.”

I nod, though a middle school science teacher is hardly the official government source we expected. He sets his hands on his knees and watches the wall over our heads. “I went to the Safe Zone after the roadblocks failed. At first, they were telling us to stay put, all was fine, then suddenly there’s what sounded like a war going on. The radio reports changed to stay in your house or come to the fairgrounds. That’s where the Safe Zone was.”

Was. Because I’m standing in the local youth reformatory, it’s no great revelation the Safe Zone fell, but it still comes as a jolt. We’re headed for the Eugene fairgrounds, and those could just as easily be gone. I asked Norman and Ignacio if they’ve had any contact with Eugene, and the answer was a worrisome no, though that’s because they don’t have radio contact with anyone. They’ve heard broadcasts from a few Safe Zones around the country, though, even as far away as New Hampshire.

“The Safe Zone lasted about a week,” Fred says. “But in that time, we were all helping out. They’d gotten a few important people out of California that first night, but the helicopters they expected the next day never came. They were supposed to go to some government facility in Colorado.”

“Probably Cheyenne Mountain,” Troy says. “It’s a government bunker near Colorado Springs. Built to withstand an EMP and nuclear blast. Has its own power and water, too.”

“Maybe we should head there,” Lana says. “Though, if it’s not a secret, half of Colorado Springs probably already did.”

“No one got in who they didn’t want to get in. They would’ve closed those blast doors. They weigh over twenty tons.”

“How the hell do you know this stuff?” Francis asks. “Know anyplace closer?”

“I wish.” Troy motions at Fred, who has watched the exchange patiently. “My apologies. We’ve forgotten how to have polite conversation. Carry on.”

Fred smiles. “It’s nice to see people. All we get are more dead. Anyway, those choppers never came. They had word from the higher-ups that the Midwest was shot, the East Coast gone. After that, everything went dark except the shortwave.”

“We heard about the East Coast,” Daisy says. “They used treatment centers to try to stop it before it started.”

“Those *treatment centers* were more like slaughterhouses. And the sixty to ninety days—thirty was what they said at first—was more hopeful than anything else. They were sure they’d have it eradicated by then. Not treated, mind you, but killed into submission. They were positive, in fact, until they were positive they wouldn’t. But they came up with another plan.”

He rises from his stool and waves us to a table where ten petri dishes sit. Three clear disks are full of something black and fuzzy, another three are half full, and the remaining four contain a chunk of something gray with spots of black fuzz, as well as another gray chunk.

“Fungus,” Fred says. “You’re looking at a fungus found on a subject a couple of weeks before the big outbreak, when they were studying the virus.”

“They knew about it then?” I ask. It’s stupid to be shocked, but I am. They knew about it, they had time, and still it took over.

“They did. And they called in the world’s best mycologists to take a look when this fungus couldn’t be identified. It’s a new fungus—a mold, actually. Harmless to humans, but it’s the one fungus that will decompose the infected. A saprotroph. If you haven’t noticed, they’re not decomposing out there. Or not enough to be worth a damn. The virus resists or repels decomposition somehow.”

“How does the virus work?” Troy asks.

“They said it was a virus and parasite working in tandem. Symbiosis. When it gets into the nervous system, it’s the perfect storm.”

“But where did it come from?” Daisy asks.

“They thought the first cases in Vietnam were a naturally occurring mutation, but when they studied it further, they suspected it was engineered. They didn’t know by whom. No country would take responsibility. No terrorist group, either. They got to work studying it in anticipation of staving it off.”

Fred shakes his head. “Before they could, it turned up everywhere. Major cities on the West Coast and in the Midwest, as well as major cities in other countries. That’s when they knew for sure it was deliberate. With the way the virus is transmitted through direct contact, it should’ve stayed localized, and they would’ve had it under control quickly. Airborne would be a different story.” He taps a petri dish. “They suspected the infected would keep going for years, maybe decades, and this is what they thought might shorten that timespan. If anyone was still alive to see it.”

“Why do you have it?” Francis asks.

“When Dr. Sandri, the researcher who made it out of California, found out I was a science teacher, she put me to work propagating the mold. She’d brought what she could from their lab and planned to make as much of it as possible when they got where they were going. They were thinking they’d drop the spores on groups of the dead by plane. We can’t do that now, but I have our scouts put it on a few when they go out. They let those wander off to spread it to others.” Fred lifts his hands. “We hope.”

I stare at the table. A small dish of fuzzy black mold might eventually prove more dangerous to zombies than any knife or gun. At this moment, it’s the most precious substance on earth.

“We might be looking at the cure right here,” Lana whispers with the same awe I feel. “How long will it take?”

“There are a lot of factors involved. It has to spread, then it has to eat away at the bodies. Dr. Sandri thought it could take a year, or longer, for the fungus to finish off a body.”

“Where’s Dr. Sandri?” I ask.

“She didn’t make it out.” Fred moves the full petri dishes to the side, shoulders wilting. “I wish she had. I think I’m doing okay here, but I’d like an expert’s take. And we have no way to spread it the way they’d planned.”

“We’re heading up to Eugene. It’s not that much farther, but we could bring some with us and try to spread it.”

“Hell, yeah,” Troy says. “Anything we can do to pitch in.”

Fred smiles and clasps his hands over his ample belly. “I’ll take you up on that.”

I WAKE in the morning to gray light streaming through the gym windows and a buzzing hum that vibrates in my chest and tickles my eardrums. I sit up in my sleeping bag, rubbing my face in confusion, and slip on my glasses. The full-time residents sleep on cots and mattresses they brought over from the nearby county jail, and almost every one of them is awake, faces screwed up with anxiety. Whatever it is, it isn’t normal.

I step into my boots, since I’m already dressed, and watch the pajama-clad residents throw on sweaters and coats and pants. One plus of sleeping in your clothes is that you’re ready to bolt if necessary. Lana’s hair is stuck to the side of her head, and Daisy’s hangs in greasy strands. We’ve been promised showers this morning, and I’m not the only one looking forward to that.

Ignacio and Norman enter the gym doors. Norman climbs atop a table and waits for silence. “We have a big group of them coming up the highway. Everyone stays inside for now. We have no idea how many are heading north, but we don’t want to make any noise that’ll encourage them to come into town.”

The closest exits are only blocks away. A few mothers pull their young kids closer. The sleepy eyes of only minutes ago are now frightened and all too aware of what this could mean.

“Go about your normal business as much as possible,” Norman continues. “We have plenty of food in the buildings, and we’ll only go to the high school if necessary. Breakfast is available in the day rooms. Go help yourselves.”

People disperse, heading for the halls. Ignacio lifts his chin our way before he joins us in the back of the room. “I know you wanted to leave

early today, but we can't let you attract attention. It's not a good idea, anyway. You don't want to get stuck in that."

"We're locked up in juvie?" I joke to hide my disappointment. I don't want to put them at risk, but it sucks.

"Sorry," Ignacio says. "It's happened a couple times so far. It usually takes an hour or two for them to pass, depending on how many there are. You'll be out of here by lunchtime."

LUNCHTIME COMES AND GOES, and the zombies keep on coming. Ignacio lets me onto the roof, where I stay low and watch the visible curve of I-5. A solid stream of bodies swarms through and around the cars. The streets are full again, and the ones who've detoured off the highway wander the shopping plazas. We saw a few large groups on our way north, but this is a flood. A legion.

"Where are they going, do you think?" I ask Ignacio once we're inside.

"No idea," Ignacio says. "The population of California was around forty million. I guess if a few decide to walk, some will follow."

Half of California would be twenty million Lexers. Twenty million who could stroll up this way. If the people at the Eugene fairgrounds don't know this group is incoming, it could spell the end of their Safe Zone.

Hiking fast, I might be able to beat the bodies to Eugene and warn them in time. Unlike zombies, I have to rest, but if all daylight hours are spent switching between cars, bicycles, and feet, it's within the realm of possibility. Ignacio clocked their pace at one to two miles per hour, and it's just under one hundred forty miles to Eugene.

Ignacio excuses himself at the day room entrance, and I walk to where my traveling companions sit at a table. "How'd it look?" Troy asks when I get close.

"Pretty much how we thought. They might make it there before us." I drop next to Daisy on one of the table's built-in benches, feeling heavier than I have in days. "If we leave right after they pass and haul ass, we might be able to beat them. But it's going to be a lot. I understand if it's too much for you guys."

Troy frowns beneath his beard. “You’re starting to piss me off with that martyr bullshit, Cherry.”

“Yeah, stop trying to ditch us,” Daisy says. “You guys are the only family I have left. You can’t ditch family. At least not family you like.”

Daisy’s smile wavers. She hasn’t offered up any information about her past, but the brave face she normally wears brims with tears. I can’t take crying I’ve caused on top of everything else. “I’m sorry,” I say. “From now on I’ll just assume you all want to die with me, no matter what idiotic plan I may have.”

Daisy laughs and dabs at her eyes while Francis sets the atlas on the table. “All right, let’s figure out how we’re gonna die.”

A few minutes later, while we’re discussing the likelihood of finding bicycles and the merits of the train tracks, I notice a man at the next table leaning in our direction as though listening. Our plans aren’t secret, or very interesting, and I figure he’s bored until he leans closer and asks, “How about a hi-rail truck?”

“How ‘bout a what now?” Troy asks.

“Hi-rail truck.” The man crosses his burly arms and nods his block head. He’s big, with sandy hair and chapped cheeks. “A road-rail vehicle. It’s a truck that can drive on the tracks and on the road. It has railway wheels you lower down.”

“I’ve seen those,” Lana says. “That would be perfect. But where do we get one?”

The man spins around on his bench as if he’s been waiting to answer this question his entire life. “You wouldn’t have a problem finding one in White City or Medford, but I doubt you want to backtrack. I’d look at the timber company down the way first. They load freight onto the trains. The railroad contracted for some of its maintenance work, and I’ve seen a hi-rail every time I’ve gone there.”

“The one just down the tracks?” Troy taps the map. “I saw it yesterday coming in.”

“Yup. Hop the fence out back and walk west. It’s less than a quarter mile.”

My pulse speeds up at the thought of a truck so close by. It probably won’t be that easy, but we could use some magic. We *deserve* some magic.

Rose believes wholeheartedly in moments of serendipity, and I pray to Saint Rose for one to come our way.

“How do they work?” Francis asks.

“Depends on the truck.” The man scratches his belly and sticks out his hand. “Name’s Bruce. Let’s find us a piece of paper and pen, and I’ll show you.”

Craig

BECAUSE THE TRACKS are just behind the correctional facility, we receive a special dispensation to leave though the Lexers are still on the move. Some math-obsessed resident stood counting the bodies in an average period of time, then multiplied that number by the amount of time the long line has passed, and came up with a quarter of a million zombies so far. *So far*, and they haven't slowed.

It's helpful information, in that it's more precise than *a fuck of a lot*, but it's stressing me out. That many would be unimaginable but for the steady buzz in my head from their noises the past hours. The first of the legion are somewhere between ten to twenty miles closer to Eugene than they were this morning, and we have to get a move on.

Ignacio and Norman walk us to a rear service door. Bruce and that kid Nathan, who, it turns out, is Bruce's son, have volunteered to come along and get us started with the truck. If there is a truck.

"Thanks for your hospitality," Troy says. "Sorry again about the door."

"No problem." Ignacio shakes hands down the line. "Good luck. We'll get a radio going here soon. You can tell them what frequencies to check."

We nod, shaking hands with Norman, then slip into the late afternoon and through the trees alongside the tracks. Our packs are heavy, and mine has already formed a sheet of sweat on my filthy back. With the school being off limits, we didn't get our showers, and our bird baths in cold water didn't do much to combat our stink. But we're moving, and that's all that matters.

The one set of rails splits into six. A few tracks hold long rows of train cars, the kind made up of a network of metal trusses. I've seen them running through Oregon all my life, loaded with lumber taken from surrounding forests.

"Those are centerbeam flatcars," Bruce says. "If you don't load 'em evenly, you're in big trouble."

He's one of those railroad enthusiasts, the type who watch YouTube videos of trains leaving stations and switching tracks. I've always thought it

the most boring hobby ever, but now I love Bruce for it. Bruce is the goddamn man.

A Lexer in a torn three-piece suit stumbles from between the flatcars. I have my spike in hand—we promised Ignacio and Norman no guns unless death is imminent—but Lance lopes to meet it and shoves his knife under its chin.

He wipes his blade on the dead man's suit coat, then grins as Gabe helps him upright. "Maybe not all Lances are bad," I say to Lana.

She laughs under her breath. "Fine. But my ex was a Lance, and he was an asshole."

"Anyone who did you wrong is an asshole."

"You're a sweetie. With the way a few ladies in the prison were looking at you, you could have your pick." My grunt is skeptical, and she takes my arm. "You don't even notice."

I shrug. Rose and Mitch say the same thing, not that it happens often. I'm sure Lana is exaggerating. "If it's blatant, I do."

"Can I ask you something personal? You don't have to answer. I was just wondering what it's like...how you knew. I'm saying this all wrong, aren't I? I'm sorry, I—"

"It's fine." I don't mind answering when it's simple curiosity, especially from a friend. I only mind when *I'm* deemed the curiosity. "I kind of knew when I was small. It was like everyone else was speaking a language I didn't understand. I understood love, but not the kind that makes you want to stare into someone's eyes or rip off their clothes." I accidentally kick a rock and wince when it clacks on a rail. "When everyone started to like girls—or boys—I thought I was defective. It's hard for anyone who isn't ace to understand because sex and romance are such huge parts of their life. They act as if I should be sad I'm missing something. But I don't miss what I don't want. I like having close friends, and I also like being alone."

Lana squeezes my arm. "Actually, I think that sounds nice. Romance is a pain in the ass."

"So I hear. I also hear it's pretty cool when it isn't a pain, though it does make you all act like idiots sometimes."

"Truer words were never spoken."

I have nothing against romance. In fact, I like discussing Rose's and Mitch's trials and tribulations on that front. But I'm happy not to have to

deal myself, and I'm lucky to have two friends who love me the way they do. Not many people, ace or otherwise, have that.

The leftmost set of tracks splits, one veering into the timber company's lot before it disappears into a giant building. The lot is full of trucks and silo-looking things whose purpose is unknown, at least to me. Troy, walking ahead, points in that direction.

Before I can help with what I've anticipated will be an exhaustive search, Bruce leads us to a white pickup parked by a few other trucks. Troy knocks on the hood. "Thank you, Jesus."

"Oh, she's a beaut," Bruce says. He runs his fingers along the truck's side, then crouches to inspect what he told us is called the railgear. He also described the ride he once took in a hi-rail vehicle with such reverence that I thought he might invite himself to Eugene for a repeat experience. "Isn't she a beaut?"

Aside from the railgear under the bumpers, it looks like every other work truck in existence. It has a light on the roof of the cab, and instead of a regular bed, this one has thicker sides that house storage compartments. I nod anyway. It's beautiful if it gets me to Eugene ahead of the zombies.

"Where should we look for the keys?" Francis asks.

Bruce gestures to his son, who drops the small duffel bag he carries by his feet. "All I need's a screwdriver," Nathan says. "This is a fleet vehicle. They don't have any of that fancy shit."

"That's why he was in juvie." Bruce shakes his head with a long-suffering sigh. "Five years for stealing cars. I figured he'd come in handy." He levels a pointed look at his son. "But only today. I can lock your ass in solitary if need be."

"Promise, Pop." Nathan pulls a long flathead screwdriver from his bag and pries the black plastic casing of the door handle away from the metal. A quick reach inside unlocks the door. He slides onto the bench seat. "Hand me the pliers?"

Bruce does, still shaking his head. Nathan pries off the black plastic ring that covers the ignition, does something with the pliers, then inserts the screwdriver into the slot and turns it. The engine roars to life. We cheer quietly, and Nathan slides along the seat onto the ground, where he bows low.

“Sorry,” I say to Bruce. “But he might have just saved some lives with that trick.”

Bruce knocks his son’s arm, a smile evident under his attempt at a frown. “He always did accomplish what he set his mind to, the little shit.”

Nathan grins. “We should get back.”

“Let me show them the railgear, then we will.” Bruce pushes a button on the truck’s dash labeled *railgear pump*, then shows us the railgear at the front and back of the truck. Two ten-inch steel train wheels attach to a thick metal axle that lowers or raises hydraulically with the pull of a red handle and the touch of a button on the attached control box. “Line it up with the tracks, then set it down. I wouldn’t go over forty miles per hour, but you should keep it well below that. You could derail.”

After a few more helpful tidbits and another caress of the truck, Bruce and Nathan refuse our offer of an escort back to the facility. “We’ll make it all right. Good luck.”

“Thank you,” I say to Nathan. “You used your knowledge for good instead of evil.”

The two laugh, and then Bruce says, “Take care, now. Maybe we’ll see you again.”

They leave the timber lot, Bruce’s arm around his son’s shoulders. We watch them walk the tracks until they step into the trees. After they disappear, Troy rubs his hands together. “And we’re off.”

THE TRUCK CAN ONLY BE MOUNTED on rails that are flush with the ground, and we ride on regular tires beside the tracks until the first railroad crossing. Once we’ve checked to be sure the street is empty, Francis and I leave the pickup’s bed and guide Troy until he’s lined up the tires on the rails, then we head for the rear railgear.

Four Lexers stumble from a lot just past the crossing. Lana, Daisy, Lance, and Gabe hop to the street from the cab. “We’ve got it,” Lana says.

I hear the sounds of weapons hitting home while I pull the red handle and Francis pushes the *down* button. The hydraulic motor grinds, the metal

wheels lower, and the truck chassis lifts an inch or two when they settle on the rails.

We motion Troy backward. The rail wheels glide along the track, their flanges inside the rail as Bruce mentioned, though he didn't think to mention the loud, zombie-attracting beeps the truck would make while reversing. We run for the front gear, pull the red handle, and press the button. Five seconds later, nothing has happened.

"Damn it," Francis mutters.

Lana shouts and points in the opposite direction. I turn. At least forty Lexers, a block away but gaining ground. Francis glances over his shoulder and then pulls the red handle. Pushes the button.

Nothing.

Troy leans out the window. "Put up the back ones and try again next crossing?"

I check the street. The group is half a block away. The other streets might be worse, and if we don't get on at a crossing, we can't get on the rails. It'll be the same as driving any other car on the tracks: we'll have to travel at a crawl and likely blow a tire anyway.

"Turn the pump off and on again!" I call.

Troy leans inside, then sticks a raised thumb out the window. Francis pulls the red handle. Pushes the button. Nothing. Lana, Daisy, Lance, and Gabe come to our side, weapons out, but they can't take forty on their own.

Francis kicks the railgear with a curse, then pulls the handle and pushes the button one more time. The hydraulic engine whirs, and the railgear settles on the track. "Go, go!" he yells.

Francis, Gabe, and I leap into the bed while the others enter the cab, and the first Lexer's fingers brush the truck as we pull off. It isn't a smooth ride, nor a quiet one, but even at a whopping ten miles per hour, it leaves our followers in the dust. I peer in the rear window. Lana, in the backseat, pokes Troy's shoulder. Troy spins with his arms raised like *Look Ma, no hands!* He controls the accelerator and brake, but the steering wheel locks so that the rails steer the truck.

There are five more rail crossings before we leave town—five chances for something to go monumentally wrong—and I cross my fingers like I did when I was young and really, really, *really* wanted an Atari 2600 for Christmas. It worked then; it's worth a shot.

The first crossing passes without incident, and the next two are clear. Gabe, sitting on the wide edge of the bed across from me, raises his own hands, fingers crossed.

The fourth crossing is in a downtown area. Lexers pour from the shopping plazas as the truck rattles along the tracks, but they're no match for our brisk twenty miles-per-hour pace.

A minute later, Troy stops well before the two dozen bodies who block the fifth crossing. Thankfully, we don't need to kill them, only move them off the tracks. I stand, bang my spike against the truck, and yell, "Hey fucknuggets, come and get us!"

Gabe laughs and lets out a yodel that's both hilarious and extremely well-done. Francis curse-calls them over, chuckling the entire time.

They move for where we stand laughing in the truck's bed. I recall the RV roof, only hours into meeting Francis and the others. I'd felt stupid cursing, and I didn't understand how you could laugh or joke when zombies were afoot. I get it now—you have to, or you risk being overwhelmed by fear, by encroaching death, and by your slim odds of survival.

When the last one steps off the tracks, Troy steps on the gas, and though the bodies hobble after us, we lose sight of them quickly. Breaks in the trees provide glimpses of overgrown yards and lawns, of shattered houses and bodies left to rot, of simple, possibly happy, lives that ended in a horrible way. The houses disappear after a long curve, and then it's only trees with small green mountains rising to our right. Though the truck is loud, the buzz from the highway has receded, and the birds swoop from tree to tree, calling out to each other. They were absent in town, and I assume any non-winged wildlife sprinted somewhere safer, too.

I let myself be lulled by the clack-clack of rail wheels on track. We're cruising at thirty, which could have us in Eugene by nightfall. It won't, of course, because we're bound to run into problems, but I pray serendipity is still on our side.

WE WEAVE in and out of the woods, over crossings on quiet roads with abandoned cars. In one instance, we have to push two cars off the tracks,

but we're escaping the worst of it. The tracks veer west and then east again at Wolf Creek, where we travel alongside I-5 for a short distance. The lanes are mostly empty, and I hope the zombies don't speed up when nothing impedes their flow.

The constant rattle-clack of the truck is joined by a new sound. Francis knocks on the rear window, and Troy slows to a stop. "What's up?" he asks out his window.

"Listen," Francis says.

A low hum comes under the nearer sound of wind in the trees. That legion is close and closing in. Nearly twenty miles of walking, and they've done it in less than fifteen hours, putting their speed around one-and-a-half miles per hour.

Troy throws the truck in gear. "Better get a move on."

We pass through a Lexer-free tunnel, a Lexer-filled town, and then, in the forest once again, across a trestle bridge far above a river. A house and outbuildings sit below, bounded by water on three sides. On the fourth side, ten people work steadily, lifting logs into place like fort walls while four kids play in the grass behind them. They turn to stare at the truck. Gabe, Francis, and I wave. After a second, they lift their hands in return and watch until we're out of sight.

Two hours later, after more woods and a few lonely crossings, Troy stops the truck. "Got to take a leak," he says, and walks into the trees.

Everyone does the same, and when all have returned, Francis opens the atlas. "Almost sixty miles since Wolf Creek. Eighty miles total. Halfway there."

We've done it in hours instead of days. After a few self-congratulatory murmurs, we decide to get through Roseburg, the next city, and then rest for the night. As much as I want to keep on, it'd be stupid to drive in the dark. Headlights are a beacon for Lexers.

"How big is Roseburg?" Daisy asks.

"About twenty-five thousand people," I say, and examine the atlas, where the tracks travel straight through the middle of town. Or they look as if they do—I don't know Roseburg well enough to be sure.

"We could go around here or here," Daisy runs a finger along a road far out of the way, then another, "but if those are blocked, we're fucked."

“I say we Plan B it,” Troy says. “Worst case scenario, we reverse a few miles and get off the tracks. We’re talking ten miles of track to thirty miles of possible blockages.”

Heads nod, including my own. The faster the better. If we waste time and fail to find a way through, the Lexers might beat us to Eugene. Since I left my condo, I’ve felt rushed in the sense that I want to get to Rose and Mitch before anything worse happens. Now I know something worse is walking up I-5, and *rushed* is entirely too tame a word for the anxiety goading me north.

The tracks dump us in an industrial section of town. At thirty miles per hour, the buildings go by quickly. The few crossings are clear. Though scattered cars are abandoned on the streets, complete with their Lexer counterparts, none sits on the tracks. And then we’re clickety-clacking along the rails between the river and a large hill.

“Are we through?” I call to Francis, though I know it’s too good to be true. He shakes his head.

Houses appear on the right, larger buildings up ahead. Troy speeds up at the few Lexers, then slows before the next crossing, where a car blocks the rails. I see Francis curse rather than hear him, and we jump from the bed. Lana, Daisy, Lance, and Gabe are on the tracks a second later. Lance runs to the car with a screwdriver, yanks the dead body out of the driver’s seat, and leans in. Thirty seconds later, he’s popped it into neutral.

The Lexers close in. I leave the others to push the stranded car and meet a grandmotherly one at the landscaped median. Her gnarled hand snags my left arm as I slam the spike into her face with my right. Down she goes, and I get the next—a man dressed for the office—under the chin.

“Craig!” Lana shouts.

I leap into the truck bed. The tires squeal on rail before they catch, and the scent of burning rubber fills the air while we parallel a road filled with cars and walking corpses. On the other side, in the distance, I get a glimpse of I-5. Also packed.

The tracks veer into the trees behind houses. I-5 is alongside us now, rising to an overpass under which we’ll have to travel to cross the river. An overpass that teems with bodies. The truck rattles onward, announcing itself to everything above.

The first few fall as we near. Troy speeds up until the railgear whines in protest. Even with the wind whipping my hair and clothing, sweat rolls down my back. One might fall on my head. One *will* fall on my head, most likely. Francis crouches in the bed, pressing himself flat against the back of the cab, and motions for me to join him. Considering that Francis is wide, this is easier said than done, but the cab roof might partially protect us from a plummeting body.

A hoot comes out the driver's side window, followed by, "Hang on, fellas!"

I raise my arms above my head and pray. Just before we enter the shade of the overpass, a man hits, rocking the chassis and showering us with stinking brown sludge. I fight my natural inclination to gag and help Francis shove it off the side of the truck as we come out into the sunshine.

Troy decelerates on the trestle bridge now that the highway is behind us. If I never see another overpass again, it'll be too soon. I find the towel in my pack and carefully wipe at my cheeks, then remove my glasses to clean off the brown spatter. Without them, everything a hundred feet away is a blurry mystery, but I can see up close, and Francis is soaked in Lexer fluid. A glob of something sticks to his cheek and a stream of brown liquid is headed for his lips.

He starts to speak. "Close your mouth!" I yell.

His lips smash shut. I fumble in my pockets for a clean tissue, find a raggedy one, and use it to wipe the stream up and away, cleaning off the glob in the process. Whether Francis could be infected that way, I don't know, but I'm not about to chance it.

Francis roots around in his pack for antibacterial gel, then squirts a good-sized glob into his clean, ungloved hand before he hands me the bottle. I do the same, rubbing my hands together and spreading it onto my face the way he does. My glasses become a smear of brown fluid and gel, but, theoretically, they're no longer contagious.

A mile out of town, Troy stops the truck in the trees and hops to the rails. "Hoo-boy, that was close! You guys all right?"

The others lean into the bed, noses wrinkling at the stench. "I was going to offer to trade seats," Lana says, "but neither of you is getting in that cab if I have anything to say about it."

Francis grins. "Thanks. Anyone have water to spare?"

Gabe produces a liter bottle, which does little to help the situation. I clean off my glasses and rinse my face as much as possible, though I give up on my leather jacket when the sludge becomes watery zombie juice.

“Next stream, we stop,” Troy promises.

Down the tracks, we come upon a pond beside a run-down modular home, which will serve as bathing and sleeping quarters for the night. Francis and I scoop cool water with found buckets, washing our faces and hair with soap while the others clean out the truck bed, then we scarf down dinner as the sun sets. Ignacio and Norman were generous with the food, and we eat until our stomachs distend.

“Fifty miles to Eugene,” Francis says.

Gabe holds up his crossed fingers, and everyone else follows suit. I do the same, just in case, though there has to be a point when you’re close enough that you don’t need luck.

Rose

ETHAN HAS BEEN busy tending to various patients for the past two days. That's what he says when I see him in passing, usually with Eva in tow, but I think he's avoiding me. Not that I mind if he sneaks in late at night and I'm cooking breakfast by the time he wakes. My stomach has double-knotted itself in anticipation of our next conversation, which I have no doubt will be a doozy.

On day three, Ethan arrives at dinner and takes the seat beside me with a conciliatory smile that I return in an effort to avoid that conversation. Everyone else is grumpy; Boone has just decreed we'll now get showers only every fifth day. No one can fathom why he's imposed the rule, except that he's enjoying his power trip.

"Tell me you aren't happy I talked you into laser hair removal," Mitch says to me.

"I am very happy you talked me into it." It was nice not to have to shave before, but now it's a godsend. At Tom's and Pop's bewilderment, I explain, "Where they zap your hair and it doesn't grow back."

"That really works?" Tom asks. "I thought it was a scam."

"You have to go six hundred times," Mitch says, "but it works."

Holly glances at her armpit. "I hate both of you."

"Can they do it anywhere?" Clara asks.

"As long as the hair is dark enough, which, thankfully, mine was," I say. "It doesn't always work on redheads."

Jesse makes a puking sound. "Can we please stop discussing my mother's body hair? I'm eating."

"I can't believe you don't want to discuss my armpit hair," I say. "What kind of son are you?"

Jesse snorts as we dig into our food, which has improved thanks to Bi-Mart. It still isn't fresh, or necessarily delicious, but it isn't tuna. I saw the pallet of canned salmon they brought in, however, and I plan to be scrubbing toilets instead of cooking the day they pull that out.

I take a bite of beans. "Holly, don't eat—"

It's too late. Holly already chews her first bite with a look of horror. She spits it into her bowl and wipes her mouth. "What's in this? Hot dogs?"

"I think it's canned ham. They must have added it." Holly's lower lip trembles, and I reach to pat her hand. "Honey, I know, but you'll have to eat meat at some point."

She's managed to avoid it thus far. If she can't get an alternate meal, she picks the meat from dishes with an intensity bordering on obsessive. When she became a vegetarian at nine years old, I thought she'd stick with it for a few months, especially after she learned she couldn't eat gummy candy, Jell-O, or marshmallows due to the gelatin. Twelve years later, she's still at it, and though I know she's practical enough to understand our reality, she hasn't quite embraced it. Any of it.

"My first meat, and it's *canned ham*?" Holly inspects her bowl, blinking rapidly. "That was disgusting when I did eat meat."

"It's just a little factory-farmed pig," Jesse says. "He or she didn't even have a name in their cramped cell before they were trucked to the slaughterhouse and brutally killed, which was the only time they ever saw the light of day."

Holly raises her head, face pink and a tear rolling down her cheek. "Fuck off, Jess." She throws her chair back, then stalks past the other diners and out of the tent.

I start to rise, but Clara jumps up. "I'll go. I can't eat it now, anyway." She glares at Jesse and leaves in search of Holly.

"Really, Jesse?" I ask.

"I was kidding." He crosses his arms, eyes defiant. "I don't want it, either. It's not like we ate this crap before, but she has to join the real world, where we do eat this crap."

"I understand that. But you knew she was upset and made it worse. This situation sucks for everyone, and we all have our things that will upset us more than others. Maybe be more understanding of her thing."

Jesse huffs, trying to stay in the right, and rolls his eyes when he loses the battle. "Fine. Sorry."

"I'm not the one you need to say sorry to."

I smile to lessen the scolding and take a bite of my dinner, which is pretty gross, while I listen to the others talk. Out of the corner of my eye, I

watch Jesse take a few more bites, chewing slowly and swallowing with effort. He stands abruptly. “All right, stop staring at me. I’m going.”

“I wasn’t staring at you.”

“You don’t have to be looking to do your mom stare. Just so you know, you’re evil.”

I smile. “Love you, baby.”

“Yeah, yeah. You, too.” He pushes his hair off his face and follows the path of the girls.

“Nice work,” Ethan says.

“Thanks.” I turn to the rest of the table and pump a fist. “I’ve still got it.”

Pop laughs. “You learned from the best.”

I blow him a kiss as Barry appears with his bowl. “These seats taken?”

“Help yourself,” Pop says. “Rose just chased away the last kid.”

Barry sits. Now I’ll be overly conscious of every word I say, every glance his way, so that Ethan won’t find something to harp on later. The thought pisses me off, and I give Barry my biggest smile. “I was mothering with moderate guilt. You don’t want to clobber them over the head with it, so their conscience does most of the work.”

“It’s a good skill. Works on the young ones.” Barry gestures at a nearby table of soldiers. “Speaking of which, a few have asked about Jesse training with them. Not like he’d join up, but he’d go out to guard the boundaries, learn the weapons, that sort of thing.”

My heart seizes. I feel everyone at the table watching, but I keep my gaze on Barry. “What did Jesse say?”

“I’m asking you first. My mom just about murdered me when I signed up and didn’t tell her beforehand. I’m making it up to her.”

“Still have some moderate guilt?”

He winks. “I just might.”

I consider saying no, but I want Jesse to learn. Next time he goes out, and I have no doubt there’ll be a next time, I’ll worry less—or at least know I *should* worry less. I still want to be dangerous and kickass, but I want him to be more so. “It’s Jesse’s decision. Ask him.”

“All right, I will.” Barry takes a bite of his beans and chews slowly. “This is terrible. Did they add something?”

The entire table bursts into laughter. “Long story,” Mitch says in answer to Barry’s puzzlement.

Tom asks him a question about the water, and the conversation carries on from there. I turn to ask Ethan about his knee and find him holding his spoon in midair, eyelids hanging low, before he jerks into consciousness and brings the spoon to his mouth. I look away, heart pounding in my throat. He’s on something. I’m sure of it.

No one else has noticed. Ethan eats a few more bites and puts his arm around me as if he isn’t high, as if our last real conversation wasn’t a fight. “You did the right thing about Jess,” he says into my ear.

I lower my head. “Glad you think so.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” It comes out automatically, but I’ve sworn I won’t do this again. I won’t brush it under the rug. I won’t live the lie. After two false starts, I say, “Something. But I’m not discussing it here.”

He goes very still, then removes his arm and shovels food into his mouth. I watch my tablemates talk without hearing a word they say, as if they’re on the other side of a pane of glass. A window to normalcy.

I’m tired of wishing I could join the normal world. Tired of being lonely when my partner is sitting beside me. Tired of holding on to something that no longer exists, either in me or in reality. I push aside my bowl. “I’m done. I’ll see you all later.”

Willa shadows me through the tent into the lot, where Ethan appears at my side. “Where are you going?”

I lift my shoulders with effort. Every bit of me seems to weigh a thousand pounds. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk or not?”

“I think we should, don’t you?”

Ethan searches the fairgrounds, his blond hair blowing in the breeze, then strides across the pavement toward the Auditorium, limping slightly. He opens the door, and I trail him into the dim, quiet world of pallets and stacked boxes. The fairgrounds are set until the end of ninety days. Possibly for longer than that, though I can’t imagine staying longer unless I have no other choice.

Ethan leads me into an office, where I perch on a table covered with clipboards and papers. My hands are freezing, my stomach leaden with

dread. Willa sniffs the desk and rug, then trots over to sit at my feet. Ethan is a stranger to her, which is one more way it feels like I've started a life without him. It's felt that way for a while now, and time apart has only made it more obvious.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

I think of seven ways to say it. To hedge and suggest and timidly inquire. But it won't matter how I do it. It never does. Instead, I say, "You're high."

"What?" He glances toward the door. "No, I'm not."

"I saw you nodding out five minutes ago. I think you are."

Ethan stares at me, mouth ajar. After five incredibly long seconds, he says, "Okay, I took some pills. But it's the first time." I nod, though I don't believe him. He moves closer and takes my hands. "I'm sorry, Rosie. I didn't...I have no excuse, except my knee."

If he admits to this, there's more he won't admit to. The other night, the past days, months, years. His hands clutch mine so fiercely that his knuckles pale. Holding on tight. Ethan is as guilty of it as I am. Maybe he wants it back, too, but it's gone. It's a painful thought. It's the truth.

"You swore you were clean." I pry my hands from his as gently as possible. "You promised."

"Jesus, Rose. It was one time. Do you even understand how stressful this has been?"

My irritation rises. It's the same story as the past five years: everything is worse for Ethan, or so he believes. "Yes, I do. Some people lost everything and everyone. They lost their kids, and they're not using that as an excuse."

Like Tom, I don't say. Nothing more happened after the food truck, except I feel closer to him than I did. I don't know if we'll become something more, or if we'll remain friends as we are, but it doesn't matter. I told Mitch I'd leave Ethan because of Ethan, and I meant it.

Ethan's eyes narrow. "Not everyone's as perfect as you, Rose."

He's ramping up for a fight, spilling over with the anger I know well. I've often wondered how he can view me with such loathing when he never did before, but now I think I understand. Ethan may still love me, but his addiction hates me. As the person who keeps him from his pills, I'm an obstacle, a bother that must be dealt with by any means necessary until I

shut up and go away. It wants me weak and ashamed and powerless, maybe because it's all of those things, too.

"I never said I was perfect, Ethan. But you promised—"

"You can't understand that I made a mistake? You can't fucking move on?"

I hesitate, then shake my head.

Ethan mimics my head shake. "What does that mean, Rose?" he asks, his voice booming in the stillness. Willa cowers behind my legs, and I feel bad I brought her into this. "Do you want to end it? Should I get my things and move out?"

My silence has always been protection against saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. The word burns in my stomach, begging to finally be heard. It's a single syllable, yet it'll destroy everything. It'll change my world, and Ethan's, and the kids' as well.

But everything else has changed. Maybe there's never been a time more suited to change than now. I have the key to my prison cell; I only have to fit it into the lock and turn.

"Yes." I force the word out on my breath. My hands shake. My head buzzes. Now that I've said it, there's no going back. I know that as surely as I know I don't want to go back.

"What?" Ethan whispers.

He didn't expect an answer. That much is clear from the way he sways, arms limp at his sides. This is usually the point where I start to cry, where I crumble and he apologizes, says he'll never do it again. I believe in chances, in redemption, but I'm done being a pushover. I'm done disregarding my needs for his wants.

"Yes," I say, louder now. "I can't do this anymore."

The whites of his eyes are huge with disbelief and quickly reddening. I offer nothing else. No platitudes, no explanations. It's all been said in the past and then patched with promises that were never kept.

"How can you say that?" His voice breaks on the last word. I watch him cry as dispassionately as I can. Perhaps our past should have rendered me heartless where he's concerned, but I still hate to see him hurting from a blow I've inflicted.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Ethan's laugh is bitter. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand. "Yeah, I'm sure you are. I was right all along. How long has it been? How long have you wanted this? I was right, and you're a fucking liar."

I clasp my hands to control my trembling. I want to tell him that I tried. That every time I thought I'd found it again, he pulled the rug out from under me. I thought—hoped—there was more left. Maybe I should've spoken up sooner, but I wanted us to survive this as badly as he did.

Ethan turns to the desk behind him and sweeps its contents to the floor. The notebooks and stapler hit with a crash. The papers twist and float in the air before they land on the carpet. "Well, now you can fuck whoever you want, if you aren't already. Maybe Barry's free tonight. Hope you two have fun together."

He's attempting to hurt me as I've hurt him, and arguing will only prolong the agony. I've always hated my silence in the face of his fury, but this time—this last time—I'll make it work for me. Ethan switches gears suddenly, his eyes pleading. "Why? Why are you doing this? It was one time."

I measure my words before I speak. "It's not this time. It's all the times, it's everything. I don't feel the same anymore. I'm sorry."

"Again with the sorry. If you were sorry, you wouldn't do it." His short laugh says *this is exactly what I'd expect of you*, as though I haven't spent years encouraging and forgiving him. Even, as much as I don't want to admit it, enabling him—by keeping secrets, keeping up appearances, and keeping quiet. "Fine. Have it your way, Rose. I'll move my stuff now."

He waits for a reply, for me to change my mind. I could apologize, ask to try once more, and this would all go away. But then my cell door would clang shut again. "Okay," I say.

Ethan shakes his head incredulously. "I'll let *you* tell the kids how you've been lying all along. I have no fucking words. I can't even look at you." He walks out the office door. "Fucking liar!"

I hear the outer door slam and release my breath. My body vibrates with a mix of tension and relief, and I sink to the desk, hand at my mouth. I did it. I actually did it. Except now I have no idea what to do.

BREAKING up with one's husband of twenty years is bad enough. Doing it while trapped behind fences means there's nowhere to hide. I don't know if Ethan will retrieve his belongings immediately, but I can't be there when he does. Willa and I wander through the pallets to the shelves, where I find a blanket, a package of Nutty Buddies, a bag of crackers, and bottled water before I head out the far door to the side lot. When no one is there, I quickly cross to the museum.

Everything inside is as it was, minus the few books we took, and Willa trots off to inspect this new world. I climb into the front seat of the Model-T and imagine Ethan packing his things. My breath shortens, and I glug down water. I'll have to tell the kids. Jesse won't die of shock, but Holly might. I have to think of a way to explain that won't leave her hating me. Or Ethan.

I spread the blanket over my legs. Willa makes a running jump into the car, then plops down on the blanket, where she looks up at me with sympathetic dark eyes. I open the crackers and give her a few.

"Shit, Willa," I whisper while she crunches. She sets her chin on my thigh when she's finished. I'm glad she's with me—a warm, small ball of comfort when I'm chilly with disbelief. "I did it."

Willa sighs morosely, though her tail thumps, and I laugh because it's exactly how I feel. Under all the strain, all the astonishment and exhaustion, I'm lightweight, like I've been filled with helium. My bed will be my own. I won't be waiting for the sobriety check, for a fight, to hear how I'm not measuring up. If there are eggshells, I can stomp the shit out of them. I'm beholden to no one, and it's fucking glorious.

I rest my cheek on the back of the seat. "Fucking glorious," I say to Willa, and close my eyes.

Rose

I WAKE when the museum door opens, Willa snoring at my side. Mitch calls, “Ro, you in here? Rosie?”

“Yeah,” I say, my voice scratchy. Mitch and Pop come into view, and Willa rushes to greet them. “Over here.”

Mitch gives me an odd look, then walks to the front of the car. “You’re actually sitting in the Model-T. I thought Tom was kidding.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ethan came to our hall and started packing his shit and slamming things around. We asked him what was going on, and he said we should ask his ex-wife. We looked all over, then asked Tom if he’d seen you. He said to check the Model-T.”

“How’re you doing, Rosie?” Pop asks.

At his gentle voice, his kind eyes, my chest weights with sorrow. I burst into tears and drop my head into my hands, shoulders shuddering with sobs. I thought my marriage would last forever, and though the certainty of that lessened over time, this is truly the end. Maybe it’s fucking glorious, but it’s fucking heartbreaking, too.

The car shifts under Pop’s weight. He draws me close and holds me tight the way he always has. After Mom died, when he was shattered himself, he never made me feel as though he couldn’t handle my grief along with his own. It makes me feel worse that I’ve kept so much from him.

“I couldn’t do it anymore, Daddy,” I eventually manage to sob out. “I’m sorry.”

Pop shushes, rocking me the way he did back then. “You don’t need to be sorry, baby doll. I hoped you guys could work it out, but only you know what’s best for you.” His thick fingers brush my hair. “What happened?”

I sit up and fish out a boob tissue. One blow and it’s useless. A box of tissues appears over my shoulder, and I find Mitch in the backseat, her mouth twisted in sympathy. “Did you bring these with you just in case?” I ask.

Mitch bonks me on the head with the box. “I just found them in an office, goofball.”

I blow my nose a thousand times while they wait. When I'm done, I take a few spares. "I thought he was high at dinner. He said he took something. I don't believe it was only today, but it's not just that. The past couple of years, he's been—he says things that...aren't nice. About me." I blot a new tear that comes with the rush of humiliation, hoping Pop won't ask for specifics. "I was an idiot for putting up with it at all, let alone for as long as I did."

Mitch squeezes my shoulder from behind. Pop's jaw works, and I set a hand on his arm. "I know you want to punch him, but please don't. It's over, and you'll only make things worse."

"I don't want to punch him," Pop growls. "I want to kill him."

I smile; I expected nothing less. "He can't hurt me anymore. Promise you won't try to defend my honor."

Pop nods grudgingly. "If he does it again, though..."

"I know." I recount the story, though I omit the Barry part to tell Mitch later. "It's not just that he took a pill, or twelve, or twenty. It's that I don't feel the same. Even if you could guarantee he'd be sober forever starting this second, it'd be too late." I sniffle again. "I know it doesn't look like it, but I'm actually happy right now."

"Then I'd hate to see you sad," Pop says with the familiar twinkle in his eye.

I laugh and kiss his cheek. Laughter is the way we got through Mom's death and all the lonely months afterward. "Is Ethan gone? Did he take his things?"

"Yup," Mitch says. "He's gone."

I wipe my eyes one last time and step out of the Model-T. Telling the kids will get harder the longer I wait, and I want them to hear it from me.

We walk through the burgeoning twilight to our Expo Hall. I keep my head down. If Ethan is out here somewhere, I don't want to see him—I'm sure there'll be more than enough awkward encounters in the coming days. I wash up in the bathroom and stop by my room after. Ethan's bin is gone, along with his coat, his extra shoes, and the suitcase I brought for him. The air mattress has been liberated of its blanket and his pillow. His chair and lantern are gone. Only my backpack, suitcase, and the cardboard box that holds random items remain. The emptiness is depressing and heartening at the same time.

I set my storage box beside the mattress, then pull my solar lantern from my backpack and set it on top. I'll find a blanket later. Maybe a cot, too. It feels strange to have a big bed when it's only me, and air mattresses are cold at night.

When I emerge from my curtain, Mitch sits in a chair in our living space. "How're you doing, lady?" she asks.

"As days go, I've had better."

One side of her mouth rises, and she combs her hands through her dark hair. "I wish you'd told me what was going on."

"I'm sorry. I guess I wasn't feeling very share-y about being someone's doormat."

"Don't apologize. I just love you."

"I love you, too." I put my hands on my hips and raise my eyebrows. "Now that I've done my thing, I expect to be hearing all about you getting it on with Barry."

Mitch gets a good laugh out of that. "Keep holding your breath. When are you telling the kids?"

"Now. Wish me luck."

"It'll be fine."

I leave on shaky legs and cross the lot to the Pavilion, where the soldiers and other young people hang out much of the time. The large circular space is half-filled with pallets of food and other provisions—the spoils of the first trip to Bi-Mart, plus a subsequent trip to retrieve what was left. Jesse sits at a grouping of tables close to one wall, a boot on the tabletop and one arm slung over the back of his chair, chatting with Marquez and another soldier. I wonder if Barry asked him about joining their ranks, and, if so, what Jesse decided. His confident and easy posture, as though he's one of them, is likely my answer.

A small garbage can is full of soda bottles and empty chip bags. The soldiers are smart enough to keep their extra rations away from prying eyes. Holly and Clara sit on a table, feet swinging while they talk to each other and a girl named Amber. Holly waves, and I wave back, though I don't move farther in.

I knew this would be difficult, but now that the moment is here, it feels impossible. I tuck my chilly hands into my coat pockets and tilt my head for

Holly to come over, arranging my stiff lips in what feels like more of a grimace than a smile.

Holly kicks Jesse's leg and starts my way with him just behind. When they get close, her eyes flicker with alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Everyone's okay. I just need to talk to you two somewhere private."

"About what?" Jesse asks.

I shake my head, then open the glass doors and lead them past the Auditorium to the museum. I had the words planned out, but now I can't think of a single one. There's no way to soften the blow, no promise of better things to come, or even a future with two houses that would be awkward yet normal in the old world.

After the museum door shuts behind us, Holly spins around in the open space. "This is so cool. I forgot all about the museum."

"Remember how you always wanted to climb into the wagon and play pioneer?" I ask. "There's no one to yell at you now."

Holly grins and tucks her hair behind her ear. "I'm totally going to."

I don't want to wipe the smile off her face, and instead of saying what I should, I ask, "Did you forgive your brother for being a jerk?"

Jesse grunts, and Holly nudges him. "Yes, but only because he promised to sneak me vegetarian food."

"Seems fair," I say. I can't bring myself to destroy this perfectly normal moment where life feels as it should, as it has, even with the craziness around us. I want one more minute before it's lost forever.

"What's up, Mom?" Jesse asks, effectively ending the minute. He even stands like a soldier—relaxed yet straight-backed—and he watches me carefully.

I swallow and lean on the admissions desk for support, looking between their expectant faces. "Your dad and I..." I take a breath and let it out slowly. "We're going to be living apart from now on."

Jesse blinks, and his composure takes a hit before he straightens again. He may not have expected to hear this today, but he doesn't look all that surprised. Holly is another story. Her face has paled, her features twitching as her brain struggles to keep up. "What do you mean, living apart?"

"We'll both still be here," I say. "No one's going anywhere, but we won't be together."

"She means separated," Jesse says. "They're separating."

Holly's eyelids are pink, the precursor to tears. "Why?"

I take her hand in mine, holding it between us. "Dad's been using on and off for a while now. Years, really. Pills, sometimes...other stuff. It's been...difficult. We're not getting along, and I just—I can't do it anymore. It's too much. I'm not happy, and neither is he."

"He's using?" she whispers. Every fear she's buried for four years is apparent in her trembling lips and stricken expression. I want to tell her he'll be okay, but I don't know that he will be, not if he has access to a pharmacy's worth of pills. A world's worth of pills, if he's outside the gates.

"Yes," I say, "though I don't know what exactly, or how often or how much. And I'm sorry you have to find out like this, but I'm hoping he'll realize—"

"He's sick." Holly's voice is strangled. The pink around her eyes meets with her cheeks, which have flared red, and she pulls her hand from my grip. "He's sick, and you're leaving him? He could *die*."

Those same words kept me with him far past when I should've left. *He could die*. He could choke on his vomit, his breathing could stop, his sadness could overwhelm him, my absence could be the final straw. Reason after reason to stay and deny myself happiness. But the words have lost their hold on me. If he dies, it's his own doing, not mine.

"I know he's sick," I say softly. "But it's not something I can cure. I tried. I promise I tried, but I have nothing left to try with. Things have changed between us, they changed a long time ago, and I—"

"Does Dad want to separate?"

I search for a way to dodge the blame, and then say, "No."

"*You're* the one who said it's a disease. If he had cancer, would you leave him?"

It's as if my conscience, my guilt, has sprouted a set of legs and is spewing everything I've ever thought back at me. Maybe if she knew the whole story, she'd understand. But I can't tell them about his insults, his accusations. Partly because I don't want the kids to view Ethan in that light, and, honestly, because I couldn't stand for them to view *me* in that light. I can't give examples, say the words aloud, and not want to die of humiliation.

"This is different," Jesse says to Holly. "He keeps relapsing even when he knows how to cure himself. He's *injecting* himself with the cancer no

matter how much we try to help him. Do you have any idea how hard that is for Mom?”

She spins on him, hands fisted at her sides. “You knew, didn’t you? And you didn’t tell me. What the fuck, Jess?”

“Because I told him not to,” I say quickly. No matter what happens between me and Ethan, I don’t want their relationship spoiled. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

Holly laughs. It’s a broken sound, full of betrayal, and it makes it all too clear I’ve messed up. I should’ve come clean long before now. I thought I was protecting her, but all I did was shield her from the smaller blows until she was knocked out by a big one she never saw coming.

“I know you’re scared,” I say. “You’re scared for him. We all are.”

“You’re not scared enough, apparently.” Holly’s narrowed eyes are full of tears. I reach out, but she steps back, shaking her head so that her hair flies all around. “I don’t understand you. You wait through all of this and then leave *now*? That’s how much he means to you? No wonder he’s using. Maybe if you actually cared about him, he’d want to be clean.”

I stand open-mouthed, dumbfounded by her words. No matter how angry she is, her fear of losing Ethan is evident, and my heart hurts for that even as I want to smack her for putting his actions on me.

She glares at her brother. “And you’ve written him off, too, Jess? Well, I never will. *Never*.”

Her anger cracks under a flood of tears, and she looks so tiny and frightened that I move to hug her. “Sweets, please don’t—”

“Don’t talk to me.” She spins away from my arms, shakes off Jesse’s hand on her shoulder, and walks swiftly for the door. “I can’t believe either of you. I just can’t.”

“Holly,” I say. “Please, let’s talk about—”

“What part of *don’t talk to me* don’t you understand?”

She stomps into the twilight. The door closes behind her, leaving me and Jesse standing in silence. I close my eyes and rub my forehead, where an insistent beating has begun. “God, that didn’t go how I pictured.”

I open my eyes when Jesse doesn’t answer. He can be inscrutable at times, but now he watches me with something close to accusation. “Why didn’t you tell her?” he asks.

“Tell her what?” My voice is weary. I don’t think I can take any more blame today. “What should I have said?”

He swallows, the mask slipping to reveal as much pain on his face as there was on Holly’s. “About how Dad talks to you. The things he says about you. *To you.*”

I stare up at him in shock, my head spinning so that I have to grip the desk behind me. All at once, his frequent ambivalence where his father’s concerned makes sense. Jesse heard, he saw, and my heart cracks at the thought of him carrying that around. Holding it inside.

The pity in his eyes makes me want to sob with a crushing shame, with sadness for the both of us, but I’ve fucked up with one kid already. I won’t surrender to those feelings and fuck this up, too. I blink away tears and clasp his arm. “I don’t know what to say except that I was trying to make things work, and I thought it would go back to how it was one day. I’m so sorry you heard any of that. It must’ve been awful.”

Jesse’s face screws tight, lips mashed together, and I pull him close as his shoulders begin to jerk. He lets go of months, maybe years, of sadness, until my shoulder is damp and his shaky breaths have leveled out. He pulls from me, wiping his face and staring at the line of antique vehicles. “Sometimes I hate him so much.”

“But you love him so much, too,” I say. He nods and takes the boob tissue I offer, his face turned away. There’s no end to the injuries addiction throws at you, expects you to absorb and move past. “He loves you, please remember that. More than anything, drugs included, even if it doesn’t seem like it sometimes. He’s just...lost his way.”

Jesse nods again, then crosses his arms over his chest. “You need to tell Holly. *I’ll* tell her.”

I spin him by his sleeve, wearing my best don’t-you-dare expression. “No, you won’t.”

“Mom...”

I shake my head firmly. As much as I want Holly to understand, I can’t bear the thought of her knowing. Of viewing me with pity the way Jesse did. It’d likely backfire anyway; at this point, she’d hate me all the more for trying to poison her against her father. “You know Holly—she’ll understand eventually. Promise me you won’t tell her.”

Jesse’s eyebrows lower. Eventually, he nods.

“Thank you.” I perch on the edge of the desk. I’m so tired I could sweep the brochures and flyers off the wood and lie down for the night right here. “I’m sorry, sweet boy. I wanted your life to be all sunshine and lollipops.”

Jesse sets himself beside me with a sigh. “No one’s life is all sunshine and lollipops, but it was close for a long time.”

My eyes sting. I set my arm around him, marveling for the millionth time at how strong and grown-up he is. “I’m glad for that, at least. Have I ever told you how much I love you? Or how talented and caring and handsome you are?”

“Once or twice, maybe.”

“Don’t you forget it. Did Barry talk to you about joining up?”

He tenses under my arm. “Yeah.”

“I assume you said yes?” He nods, and I give him a squeeze. “Good. Whatever you learn, will you teach me? We all know I’m a straight-up badass, but a little more couldn’t hurt.”

Jesse’s laugh is small, but it’s a laugh nonetheless. “Clara does say I get my ninja skills from you.”

“I’ve always liked that girl.”

“Me, too,” he says, and I hear something soft in his voice before he rises to his feet. “I have to be at a gate soon, but I can find someone to cover my shift and come back here.”

“You’re sweet, but I’m fine. Go learn some badass skills to impart my way. I’m going to see if I can find Holly, and then I’m going to bed. I may look like shit, but I’m all right.”

The concern that lines his face lifts a little. “Okay. Love you.”

“I love you. Be careful.”

“Of course.”

I watch him leave, hoping that softness in his voice was for Clara. I can’t think of anyone else who deserves him.

Craig

I'M AWAKE BEFORE EVERYONE, brewing multiple tiny pots of terrible coffee on the backpacking stoves. I found the container in a cabinet and doubled up on grounds, though it hasn't done much to improve the flavor. You can't grow up in Oregon and live in the Bay Area for twenty years and not be a bit of a coffee snob. I drink my share because it's still coffee, and you don't have to be a genius to know that no one will be importing French roast fair-trade beans anytime soon. Or ever.

"Anxious to leave?" Lana asks after she gulps half her brew. "You knew we'd get up if we smelled this."

"I had a sneaking suspicion." I top up her mug. She guzzles some more, then grins my way. I thought her kind from the minute I met her, and my opinion has only improved. "Thank you, Lana."

"For what?"

"For walking up four flights of stairs to my apartment and everything since."

Lana sips from her mug, then shakes her head. "Hon, you gave us a plan. I could feel we were...not breaking apart, but losing heart, maybe. It doesn't feel that way since we met you."

At her words, a strange sensation spreads through my body, loosening my limbs. It takes a minute to name the feeling, maybe because it's rare: peacefulness. I have no interest in dying, but it might not be so bad today, when the sun is shining and I know I've made a difference, no matter how small it may be.

"If for some reason I don't make it there, will you tell Rose and Mitch I tried?" I ask. "Tell them I love them and the kids. Maybe tell them I sucked at first, but I ended up being okay."

I give a little laugh to make light of the last part. I feel stupid asking, but I want Rose and Mitch to know I wasn't a sniveling mess the *entire* way. Lana raises a hand to my cheek, her fingers still warm from her mug. "Cherry, apart from those first rough patches, you're as good as any of us."

Why I can believe Lana when I've doubted the same words from Rose for the past decades is beyond me, but I do. "Thanks."

“Thank *you*.” Her eyes flick over my shoulder before they return to mine. “But next time you have a choice to save Troy’s life, I want you to really think about it. He’s a pain in the—”

“I can hear you!” Troy shouts from behind me.

Lana dissolves into laughter. “You were supposed to, Atlas. Have some coffee. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

WE FLY through the towns heading north. Nowhere is untouched; all have busted windows and broken doors. You can see where they attempted to create safe havens. Those are the places where the most Lexers congregate, the places where fences are bent to the ground, where the concrete is stained brown and covered with body parts. In spots, cars sit in a line waiting to leave town via I-5 or another route. The first vehicles likely made it north, but all it took was one accident, one fight, and possibly a few Lexers, to create a hopeless jam.

In the unfortunately named town of Drain, we’re shadowed by thirty Lexers. The elevated tracks are littered with debris, maybe from an explosion. Though we’re making good time, my confidence falters. The chance of finding Rose and Mitch seems as low as my spirits. The small road alongside the tracks, with its sporadic abandoned cars and truly dead bodies, is depressing as hell, and I’m glad when the rails swing east through forest. For someone who’s embraced city living for decades, I can barely stand to see a house anymore.

Coming into Cottage Grove, only twenty miles from Eugene, the tracks parallel Route 99. People attempted to escape both north and south, and that caused more than a few problems. Cars have collided, or they sit facing each other in a single lane, locked in a never-ending game of Chicken. A few enterprising souls tried to take the tracks. I’m sure some made it. The others blew a tire or ran out of gas, and we have to stop to move them from our path.

After the fourth car has been pushed over the rails and driven into the side of one of its abandoned comrades on the road, Gabe uses a bandana to

blot his pink cheeks. The SUV was heavy, and two tires sitting on rims made it even more sluggish.

“You okay?” Lance asks. “Maybe sit out the next one.”

Gabe lifts his dreads and fans the back of his neck. “Just hot.”

“That twenty pounds of ropes on your head doesn’t help,” Lance says.

Gabe laughs easily. “Gettin’ saucy on me. I like it.”

Lance’s lips press to hide his smile. They slept snuggled together last night, in full view of everyone, and Lance only blushed a little when Lana and Daisy declared them a cute couple this morning. I’ve seen enough movies to know that this is the point where one of the boys is bound to kick the bucket—the same way every cop dies the day before retirement—and it won’t happen if I can help it.

“At least the Lexers are somewhere else,” Gabe says. “Let’s get out of here before we find them.”

Or they find us.

Gabe and Lance ride in the bed with me and Francis while we clatter up the rails toward a small trestle bridge. Trees grow thick at the river, and it’s only once we cross the bridge that we see the middle school campus full of zombies. The complex of buildings and sports fields was fenced—possibly a Safe Zone—until two cars rammed through the chain-link from the tracks. And with the number of Lexers poised to exit the school grounds, we’re in deep shit.

“Hang on, boys!” Troy shouts out his window.

The engine roars. We crouch in the bed rather than chance being tossed to the mob. Fifty feet ahead, bodies pour through the fence and make their way up the graveled embankment. Troy guns it harder, and the whine of the railgear becomes a scream.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I think. And then we’re blowing past the first of the bunch, one of whom grabs at the truck and has his arm ripped off. A hundred feet later, an unholy screech rends the air and the pickup tips sideways, clunking to an abrupt halt that slams my shoulder into steel and throws the four of us into a jumble of body parts at the bottom of the truck bed.

Gabe is up first. He pulls Francis to his feet, then Lance and me. The truck sits at an angle to the tracks, the right side a foot lower than the left.

We derailed. We derailed with zombies a hundred feet away, and they're closing in.

Troy, Lana, and Daisy spill from the doors. "Lift the gear!" Daisy yells. With it up, we can drive on tires, at least far enough to get out of range.

"You do the front!" Francis calls. "Did you get the switch?"

Troy raises a thumb on his way to the front bumper with Lana and Daisy. I leap over the tailgate with Francis, turning my attention to the railgear rather than the zombies streaming down the tracks. Gabe and Lance take up posts behind us.

Francis pulls the red handle. I push the up button. The hydraulics kick in, and the railgear lifts a quarter inch before it stops, though the motor grinds on. Francis drops to his knees and inspects under the bumper. "It's bent!"

At Francis' words, Troy, Lana, and Daisy run to the cab for their packs, Lance and Gabe behind them. I find my bag smashed in the corner of the bed, tug it and Francis' out by their straps, and we toss them over our shoulders. Lana, Daisy, and Troy are at our sides a second later, though Lance helps Gabe wrest his pack from where it's jammed under a seat.

The Lexers are forty feet away. "Leave it!" I shout.

Gabe gives a mighty yank, then falls backward with his bag. He tumbles down the embankment and clangs into the fence headfirst. Lance races after him. I don't want Lana to have to tell Rose and Mitch I held my own; I want them to see for themselves. But two kids are not dying on these tracks today. They are *not*.

I slide down the gravel, heart pumping so hard I fear a coronary event is imminent. Lance takes one of Gabe's arms, I take the other, and we heave Gabe to his feet. "C'mon, man!" Lance yells.

Gabe nods almost dreamily and begins to limp up the gravel with his pack clutched to his chest. I wrench it from him and push at his back. "Go!"

He shakes his head as though clearing it out and gets a move on. Ten feet away, at the back of the truck, Troy and the others slam their weapons into the first Lexers to arrive. They turn at my shout, and we sprint off the tracks to Route 99, weaving between cars faster than the Lexers can. Across the way, the houses of a development have been looted, and the broken windows and doors offer no sanctuary. We turn left at the next intersection,

past another field and single-family homes that are no better. Two Lexers wander from a side yard and are cut down by Daisy and Francis.

“Can you carry your bag?” I ask Gabe after another block. “I want my hands free.”

He nods, and we lift it onto his back. I’d ditch it if necessary, but Gabe has half the mold in there. It’s likely the reason he wouldn’t leave it behind—he’s talked of heading for his mother on the East Coast, spreading it as he goes.

We scramble through a clogged intersection and kill four Lexers on the other side. The hum of the track zombies is distant, over a quarter mile away, and Lana scans the area with her binoculars. “They don’t know where we went.”

Gabe has his wits about him, but he’s limping. I scrutinize the leg he favors and point it out to Francis, who says, “Next good house, let’s stop and see where we are.”

A quarter mile later, we choose a brown house with a fence out front, break a window, and head inside.

WE’RE twenty miles from Eugene as the crow flies, as Dad used to say. Twenty-five miles driving distance on impassable roads. Thirty or more miles on back roads that might be blocked. Francis found the easements on the map, which is a doable hike, but Gabe’s leg is bruised all to hell. Nothing broken, fortunately, and not even badly sprained, but twenty miles of walking is not going to happen.

“Dude, I can do it,” Gabe says. He sits on the house’s couch, leg elevated on a chair. “I was wrecked the whole first week of the PCT. Did I tell you about the blisters that popped and then—”

“Yes,” everyone groans. No one needs to hear that story again. It’s almost as gross as zombies.

“I’ll wait with you,” Lance says. “We can meet them up there.”

I shake my head. “No way. No one splits up. We’ll find a truck and get it ready this afternoon, and then we’ll leave in the morning.”

It kills me to be this close and stop, but they stuck by me even when they probably shouldn't have. That's how this works. It's how you stay alive.

The others murmur agreement. Gabe exhales, his eyes bright with tears. "Thanks, Cherry. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," I say. "I'm glad you're still here."

It's the truth.

THE TRUCK IS ready in the morning, and so are we. Thank God Oregonians love their pickups—it was easy to find one yesterday, and easy to siphon gas from a garaged car that was overlooked. We start up a network of small roads and the occasional easement, working our way north. After yesterday, I've concluded that there's never a point where you don't need luck. If there are zombies, you need all the luck you can get.

We narrowly miss an immense group of them to the west and manage (we hope) to infect a few stragglers with mold spores, then come into the South Hills on back roads. I'm convinced luck is on our side until we turn onto Rose's road, where my Zen leaves me high and dry. Or, more truthfully, wet. Soaked with sweat now that the moment of truth has arrived.

We pass empty houses, some still in decent shape though empty, then close in on Rose's house. At first, I'm confused—Rose's short fence is now a tall privacy fence. But her blue house is visible at the top of the rise, as is the roof of Sam's RV under the trees.

They built it after zombies. They were alive. Troy slows at my knock on the rear window, then pulls close enough to the fence for me to peer over. I release my breath at the sight of intact windows and closed front door.

I knock on the fence. The sound carries in the silence and should bring anyone inside to investigate, but nothing stirs. The new fence has posts set behind each panel for extra support against pushing bodies, and they fashioned a wood closure for the gate, but it's vertical. Unlocked. I get to the grass, keeping an eye on the empty road, and walk for the gate. It's been closed from the outside with thick wire. I lift the wire and swing it open.

The whole place feels uninhabited—a feeling I’ve come to recognize—but I walk the incline and step through the unlocked front door. It smells like Rose and Holly and Jesse, and nothing like decomposition. “Hello?” I call.

My boots echo on the wood floors. The kitchen is barren of food. Not a thing in the cabinets except some herbal tea bags and many spices. A half-full water container sits beside the sink—a replacement faucet when the water went out. Dishes line the dish drainer, waiting to be put away.

I head down the hall to Rose’s bedroom. Drawers are closed half-assedly, and a small suitcase is on the bed along with a few items of clothing. Mitch’s phone—I recognize the green case—rests on a bedside table. I make a joyful noise that’s loud in the silence. Mitch was here, just as I hoped.

Holly’s and Jesse’s rooms look as though someone hurriedly packed, though not frantically, and I head out the back door to check the RV. The well shaft is surrounded by five-gallon buckets, and a long piece of PVC pipe sits in the overgrown grass, a rope connected to its top. They had water. And they were here for a while—that much is obvious by the new fence and water system.

Sam’s RV is unlocked. The cabinets hold a bag of popcorn kernels, some packaged food, and a few large cans of dried food. Clean pots and pans sit on the stove. They weren’t starving when they left, either, if they left this behind. I smile at the strand of auburn hair on the kitchen counter. Holly and Rose both shed like dogs.

I leave for where my new friends wait in the truck. “They were okay for a while. It looks like they left, but not in a big hurry.”

“The fairgrounds?” Lana asks.

“I hope so,” I say, and cross my fingers for the trip downtown.

Tom

ROSE LEFT ETHAN. She was quiet, puffy-eyed last night, after she took Holly and Jesse to an undisclosed location and returned alone. She said Holly didn't take it well, and then she went to bed. I read a book late into the night, listening for sounds from her space, but she didn't make a peep.

She was up early for her breakfast shift. I can see her inside the food truck from where Clara, Jesse, and I eat at an outdoor table. "How're you doing?" I ask Jesse.

"Fine." Jesse watches his bowl, one shoulder rising. "It was coming for a while."

Clara bites her lip. Holly is conspicuously absent, though I don't ask where she is. Already there are whispers in the fairgrounds—people love their drama, and in the absence of afternoon television, they're eating this up. I've heard more discussion of Ethan and Rose than of the zombies outside who want to eat us, which only bolsters my belief that people are idiots.

Jesse checks his watch. "I have to go."

"Reporting for boot camp?" I ask.

"I guess so."

"They giving you a haircut?"

Jesse flips his hair theatrically. "They're not getting anywhere near this luxurious mane." Clara snort-laughs, and Jesse finally cracks a smile. "See you later, Clary. If you see my sister, tell her I want to talk."

"Okay. Have fun."

After he leaves, Clara spoons oatmeal into her mouth. It seems there's more oatmeal in the world than anything else, and the powers that be are hell-bent on feeding us every last ounce of it. At least they added dried fruit and nuts this time, along with some shredded coconut. It's a suspiciously Rose thing to do.

"Where's Holly?" I ask Clara.

"She came to bed late and left early. I think she might be hiding somewhere in the Pavilion. I'll look after breakfast before work."

"She's pretty upset, then."

Clara stares across the lot. “Yeah. I think Rose should have told her more than she did, but she didn’t. She told Jesse he couldn’t, either.”

“How do you mean?”

“It wasn’t just drugs, Dad.” Clara meets my gaze, and she looks so grown-up that I feel a hundred years old. “Ethan was treating Rose like shit for a while now. Saying mean things and accusing her of stuff like cheating on him. Jesse told me.”

I absorb that calmly—on the outside. Inside, I’m stunned. I can attest to Rose’s loyalty, and I’ve only known her well less than two months. Ethan is a damn fool. “Sounds like she made the right decision.”

“She deserves someone better. Someone who knows how great she is.”

Clara’s expression, though an attempt at guileless, still holds enough mischief to make my face heat. Not only has she given me implicit permission; she’s attempting to play matchmaker. But I have Sheila’s memory to contend with, not just my daughter’s approval. I nod once and change the subject. “Are you coming to my class later?”

It started two days ago, and there’s been a decent turn-out so far. I even got a few of the Army guys to volunteer to be beat on. Rose hasn’t attended, and I haven’t asked again.

“I’ll miss the beginning, but I’ll get there for the second half.” Clara cocks an eyebrow. “Don’t I know it all already?”

“You got the slimmed-down version. I think you’d learn better now.”

Our past relationship didn’t leave much room for either teacher or student to be at our best, though I don’t want to say so. Clara finishes her oatmeal, smiling as if she understands. “Okay. I’ll be there, ready for you to teach me to kick some ass.”

“Defend yourself.”

“Whatever.” She gets to her feet. “Love you, Dad.”

This is new, and I choke up a little. “I love you, Clare-bear.”

I watch her leave, noting the soldiers who also watch. I’ll have to get them to volunteer for class so I can give them a good knocking. After I finish my breakfast, I sit at my table and tell myself I’m not waiting for Rose, which is a lie. I run with it anyway.

Rose steps out of the food truck thirty minutes later, when the tables are almost empty, and pulls her clip from her hair. She starts forward and spots

me, then veers to my table. Her eyes are rimmed with pink, but she smiles. I motion for her to sit. “How are you?”

She sets an elbow on the table and rests her chin in her hand. “I’m okay. Tired of being stared at, but okay.” I nod, unsure of what to say. Rose’s eyes skim the fairgrounds and return to me. “Is that offer for private self-defense lessons still on the table?”

“Expired yesterday,” I say, and she smiles like she’s too tired to laugh. “Of course it’s on the table.”

“Okay. Just so you know, I want to punch someone, and the *Fuck You* playlist isn’t cutting it. I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

I laugh, though it wouldn’t surprise me if Rose turns out to be ferocious. The quiet ones often are. “Today? I’m free until class in the afternoon. Have gate duty tonight, though.”

“How about tomorrow? I need to hide from the world today. My plan is to resurface at dinner, unless it’s salmon.”

“Tomorrow it is.”

“Where?” Rose takes stock of our surroundings. “The museum? No one ever goes in there, the uncultured schmucks.”

“Sounds good.”

Two older women pass by, openly gawking, and Rose murmurs, “Yup, it’s the lady who ditched her husband, sitting at a table. I hope you got a hair in your oatmeal.” She stands. “That’s my cue to hide.”

I make sure to conceal my disappointment. I wanted to talk longer, offer some sort of consolation. “Be gentle with yourself,” I say, which were her words to me not that long ago.

“Trying. But it’s hard when one of your kids won’t speak to you.” Rose takes a step, then peers over her shoulder. “Do you want to come? I can’t promise laughs or even halfway decent conversation, but you’re welcome to join me in our Expo Hall. Not that you have to be invited to your own living area. I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. If you want—”

“Yes,” I say. I don’t care what the offer is or where we’re going, my answer is yes. I throw my bowl in the nearby washing tub and join her.

On our way across the lot, Rose frowns. “You know what’s pissing me off?”

“What?”

“Right now, there are thousands of ripe strawberries going to waste all over Eugene. I love fresh strawberries. I used to go to the farmer’s market early in the spring to get the first ones. They were always sold out by ten.”

“*That’s what’s* pissing you off?”

“Everything’s pissing me off.” She side-eyes me with a sly smile. “Well, not you. Not yet, anyway.”

“I’ll do my best to stay on your good side.”

She grins, then focuses her attention on the ice rink. “Something’s happening.”

A group of people wearing large packs stands outside the building’s entrance. We watch them as we near our hall. A big guy is doing most of the talking. More like arguing, with the way he throws his arms around.

A petite woman drops her pack at her feet, then sits on it. A guy joins her and swivels to take in the fairgrounds. The cloudy sky reflects in his eyeglasses, rendering the lenses opaque before he turns around. Rose comes to a halt with a gasp. “That kind of looks like Craig. It can’t be Craig. Can it?”

Mitch and Rose have mentioned Craig, but I have no idea what he looks like. From what I’ve heard of him, it’s doubtful he’s managed to travel all this way, but I say, “Let’s go see.”

We move across the asphalt. Closer in, Rose takes my arm with tight fingers. “Holy shit, I really think that’s Craig. What if it’s not? I can’t run over and jump on a stranger.”

She drags me past our hall. The man faces the other way. He’s tall, with tan skin and wavy brown hair. His jeans are baggy and filthy, and a good-sized revolver hangs from his shoulder in a holster. When we’re fifteen feet away, Rose calls out, “Craig?”

The man turns. His face is as filthy as the rest of him. When he sees Rose, he blinks a few times behind black-framed glasses. “Am I going crazy or is that really you?”

Rose runs forward with an ear-piercing shriek. The man—who, apparently, *is* Craig—spins her around while they both talk at once. After a minute, he sets Rose down, where she beams up at him, her cheeks wet with happy tears.

“The kids?” Craig asks.

“Everyone’s here. The kids and Mitch and Pop. And Ethan.”

“Thank God.” He hugs her again, then pulls away shaking his head. “I can’t believe you’re really here.”

“Of course I’m here. It’s three miles from my house.” Rose jabs his chest with a finger. “How the hell did *you* get here?”

Craig’s shoulders quake. He pulls off his glasses and rubs his eyes instead of answering. Rose wraps her arms around him and pulls him close while he sobs into her neck. Eventually, he lets her go, using his shirt to wipe his face.

Rose digs a tissue from her bra. Craig takes it and blows his nose without a word. When he’s finished, he shakes his head mournfully. “I can’t believe I just used your boob tissue. That’s how dire things are.”

I laugh—I’ve been there. Rose kisses Craig’s cheek, then pulls him over to me. “This is Tom. Tom, this is Craig.”

“Hi, Tom.” Craig shifts his eyes to Rose. Barely moving his lips, he says, “Who is Tom? Why am I being introduced to him?”

It’s all murmured at a normal volume so I can hear, and I chuckle. Rose takes it in stride, as if this is par for the course. “Tom is a friend. You know Holly’s friend, Clara? This is her dad.”

Craig sticks out a filthy hand. “Nice to meet you. I love Clara.”

“Me, too,” I say while we shake. The guy is nutty, but I like him.

“We need to find Mitch,” Rose says. “She’s on dishes. Did they say if you have to go in the rink before you can come in?”

“Is figure skating a requirement?” Craig asks. “Because I’ll tell you right now I’m failing that test.”

Rose cackles and throws an arm around him, eyes shining with a joy that’s mirrored in Craig’s smile. Four of the six people he came in with, all equally dirty, join us. The two younger guys, one with an impressive head of dreads, continue speaking with a soldier.

“Hey there,” says the man who was waving his arms, his voice marked with a subtle drawl. “Craig, they’re saying we can have a hot shower. They wanted our guns, but I told them where to stick that idea.”

“I’m sure you did.” Craig squeezes Rose closer to his side. “This is Rose. Rose, these are the people who got me here. Troy, Lana, Francis, and Daisy. They saved my life.”

Lana, a woman around my age, smiles warmly. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

Rose goes straight for a hug, wrapping her arms around Lana like she's known her for years. "Thank you for bringing him home."

Lana returns the hug, smiling. "I'm not sure you want to hug me. We're really dirty."

"I don't care." Rose embraces Francis on her tiptoes, engulfs the petite Daisy in her arms, then goes for Troy, who hugs her so tight her feet leave the ground. "Thank you."

"Don't listen to Cherry," Troy says with a wink. "He saved us right back."

"Cherry?" she asks.

Craig smiles. "Long story."

Rose presses his hand to her cheek, glowing with pleasure. "I can't wait to hear it. What's California like?"

"It's fucked," Troy says. "We're fucked. We met someone who knows that for a fact. The Lexers aren't dying. No one knows how long they'll live, but it could be years. Could be decades."

"You're sure?" I ask.

The five of them nod. It's what we suspected, but my stomach clenches to hear it verified. The future in which I'll have to keep Clara safe, keep Rose and her family alive, can now be measured in years instead of weeks or months—maybe even a lifetime.

"There are at least a quarter-million coming up I-5 now," Troy says. "We're thinking they'll catch up with us in three days."

While the first part wasn't a surprise, his second announcement makes my blood run cold.

THE MEETING they call is short and sweet. All hands needed on deck, both to build up defenses and acquire as much food as possible. There's a chance the quarter-million zombies won't come into Eugene, but there's a good chance some of them will. One percent is twenty-five hundred, ten percent is twenty-five thousand. We have to prepare for a siege.

A few soldiers are heading upriver to the power plant, both to restock and warn the power plant operators. If the power goes, life will be more

difficult than it already is. If the water goes, life will be impossible.

Boone reads off the list of required duties, then eyes us, his audience, with doubt. Barry steps forward. “Thank you for your help,” he says. “I know this is scary, but we’ll make it through. In addition to everything we’ve spoken about, we’re sending a team outside Eugene to a safe location. If we’re surrounded, they’ve volunteered to try to lead them away for the rest of us. We thank them, and we thank you.”

He and Boone step from the stage, stopping to answer questions. The people who have young children leave to retrieve them, since they weren’t invited to this meeting, and others head for a clipboard-filled table to sign up for what needs doing. There’s been no mention of how long the zombies are expected to live. I figure they’re saving that gem for after they’ve dealt with the current threat.

“Let’s wait for the line to die down before we sign up,” Sam says.

Rose, standing beside him, wraps her arms around her waist. “Maybe we *should* leave. We might be able to find somewhere far enough in a few days. We can go to Always Ready and then head east or north to... wherever.”

We discussed it briefly and haven’t come up with a good plan, though as the minutes tick down, it’s sounding better and better. Rose’s house is out of the question; that many zombies versus a wooden fence will not end in our favor. And if we can’t find a safe destination, a worse fate may wait outside the fairgrounds.

“We could go to my office,” Rose continues. “Bonnie printed out the listings every week. There were always houses along the McKenzie River and up north. We could find one of those. Or how about Belknap? They have a lodge, and they’re on the river.”

Belknap Hot Springs is nestled at the base of the mountains, far from populated areas. I’ve been there a few times, but so has a good bit of Oregon. “People probably went there already,” I say. “They might not want more to show up.”

“What about Breitenbush Hot Springs?” Mitch asks. “They have geothermal power.”

“With the hippies?” Craig asks. “No way are we going there. They walk around naked.”

“That’s what I’m saying. They’ll let us in, and we can take down a bunch of hippies, easy.”

She gets a few laughs, though solemnity quickly returns. “We can’t leave,” Holly says.

“Why?” Rose asks.

“You’re fine leaving Dad, obviously, but not all of us are.” Holly’s face is mottled pink, and a tear works its way down her cheek. “You can go if you want, but I’m not coming.”

“Holly—” Rose begins. Holly ignores her and heads for the exit. After an apologetic glance, Clara follows, and Rose turns to the rest of us. “I was going to say we’d ask Ethan, too.”

“You think he’d come?” Mitch asks.

Rose’s shoulders slump. “Probably not, but I can ask.”

“I’ll do it,” Sam says.

“Maybe I should,” Jesse adds.

Rose shakes her head. “I’m not putting either of you in the middle of this.”

Rose

IT TAKES all of my nerve to seek out Ethan in the infirmary, where he's examining a little boy with a gash on his arm. Once he's bandaged the cut, he hands the boy a lollipop. "Hey, River, next time someone dares you to climb a pile of metal, what are you gonna say?"

River smiles sheepishly. "No."

Ethan pretends to be surprised. "I was going to say *sure*, but I think your answer's better. Go with *no*."

River and his mom laugh, and I smile. Ethan is good with kids. Good with people. Once mom and son are out the door, Ethan busies himself putting things away while I wait at the desk that separates waiting area from treatment area. After two long minutes, he faces me. "Do you need something?"

He asks like I'm a stranger. Worse, as though I'm a stranger he dislikes. I rub my cold hands together. "No. Well, yes. I have a question." He says nothing, and I go on, "We're talking about trying to find somewhere safer before those zombies get here. Maybe go toward the mountains. Is—is it something you'd consider?"

Ethan places a roll of gauze in a cabinet, his back to me. If my presence makes him nervous or upset, he hides it well. "Would I consider leaving where I'm needed and wanted to go to an indeterminate location with you and your friends who hate me?"

"And your children, who we both want safe," I add. "They won't go without you. No one hates you, Ethan." His shoulders stiffen. "I'm sorry. I really—"

"Stop saying that." He spins around, mouth twisted. "You're not sorry. If you were, you wouldn't have done this. So no, I'm not going, and neither are the kids, I guess."

I nod slowly to conceal my fury. There's a chance he'll change his mind if I don't provoke him. "You're risking their lives in order to spite me?"

"As usual, you think it's all about you. It's safer here, Rose. What are you going to do? Hide in the mountains and live off berries?"

“We have some food already,” I say, ignoring his jibe. While my first impulse at being hurt is to retreat, Ethan’s is to attack. “We know where to get more.”

“How about fences? Guns?” His laugh is contemptuous. “You know what? You could tell me you have a goddamn castle in the mountains, and I wouldn’t go with you. You’d just as soon see me dead as try to save me.”

He makes good points about supplies—the same ones we raised ourselves—but I can’t believe he’s unwilling to consider something of such great consequence. Though I want to scream to make up for all the times I should’ve but didn’t, to let loose all the things I kept inside, I say quietly, “If you truly believe that, you know me less than I thought.”

Ethan’s hard expression turns remorseful. I think I’ve gotten through to him, until the door opens and he smiles past me, all thoughts of a truce abandoned. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

Eva stands in the doorway. Her eyes move over me dismissively and then stop on Ethan, at whom she smiles. “I decided to come in early. Should I come back later?”

“Nope. We’re done.” He waves her into the treatment area, giving me his back again. Eva brushes past me and joins him. “With so many people going out today, we’re bound to have more injuries. I organized a few things this morning. Let me show you.”

I watch for a few seconds, long enough for Eva to glance over her shoulder and offer me a cold smile. A proprietary smile. I spin on my heel and leave the infirmary. She can have him, and good riddance.

WE ROLL car after car to the outlying streets until the lanes are blocked with a sea of traffic. It’s done under the watchful eye of armed guards, who quickly take care of any approaching threats. Whenever a short whistle blows, our orders are to stop and stand on the vehicle we push.

After one such whistle, Tom, Mitch, Craig, and I climb atop our current SUV. Eleven zombies lurch across the field to the west, more than any group so far, which likely means we’re drawing them. Dalton, the young blond soldier, stands in a jeep and rests his rifle on the roll bar while four

more soldiers head into the field. I feel stupid waiting here, though not stupid enough to possibly die.

“I can’t believe Ethan said no.” Mitch crosses her arms over her chest. “What an asshole.”

I nod as the first four zombies go down, then watch the soldiers move for the next.

“That’s not all he said,” Craig murmurs. “Did you hear what he said about Barry?”

“Yes. It made him more of an asshole.”

I feel Tom looking at me, and I close my eyes briefly. “Could you two please stop?”

Craig shakes his head. “Of course we can’t. Why are you defending Ethan?”

“Oh my God, I’m not defending Ethan!” I whisper-yell.

“You *are* defending Holly,” Mitch says. “And she’s treating you like shit.”

“When did Holly become such a bitch?” Craig asks. “Don’t get me wrong, I like it, but not when it’s directed at you.”

Tom chuckles to my right. “I’m glad someone’s amused,” I say to him. “Welcome to my world. If they’re not fighting, they’re gossiping or ganging up on me.”

“We are not,” Craig says. “Right, Mitch?”

Mitch snorts. “We totally are. But only because we love you.”

At Tom’s next laugh, I elbow him, then jump to the street now that eleven zombies are on the grass. “You can all push as payback.”

I sit in the driver’s seat to steer while they push the SUV past houses on the right. The blooming spring flowers and bushes seem incongruous beside busted doors and broken windows. The grass is long now, full of Queen Anne’s Lace, and I can feel every mote of it in my sinuses.

Just ahead, Holly, Jesse, Clara, and Pop move another car. I watch Holly strain against the vehicle while she laughs at something Clara says. Last night, I found her in the Pavilion, but she deflected every attempt to discuss it further. I understand her anger, how she feels betrayed I didn’t tell her about Ethan, how scared she is that he’ll die. Although I understand, I can’t deny my feelings are hurt at how quickly she blamed me. She won’t admit how Ethan checked out of her life the past years. She wants everything to

be the same. Maybe that's partly the cause of her anger—I've made sure things will never, *can* never, be the same.

Once the vehicles are bumper to bumper, the eight of us walk down the street with the other residents on car detail. I pretend not to notice how Holly keeps her distance. As frustrating as it is to be her scapegoat, I've always encouraged Holly to speak up and tell people off. I just wasn't planning on any of those people being me.

"Uncle Cray," Jesse says, "you don't have to be out here. Aren't you tired?"

Craig drapes his arm around Jesse's shoulders. "Not tired enough to ditch you guys."

I smile at the sight of two of my favorite men together. Though I haven't yet heard the full story of Craig's adventures, I can tell they've changed him. He walks with more assurance rather than as though his existence in the world is unjustified, and my heart swells at the thought he's finally beginning to recognize how awesome he is.

Craig glances in my direction. "Are you plotting to murder me?"

"Maybe," I say, and arch one eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"You're staring."

"I stare because I love. If Mitch stares, get worried."

"True." Mitch mock-glares at him, but she can't keep it up, so she whacks the back of his head. "I can't believe you made it five hundred miles."

"Me, neither." Craig rubs his hair. "I wouldn't have made it without Lana and the others."

"How'd you talk them into dragging your sorry ass all this way?"

Craig's lips twitch. "I told them they could hand me off to you guys once we were here."

He could be insulted at her words, but Mitch burst into tears when she first saw him. It was only after she hugged him twenty times that she remembered her policy of friendly ridicule where Craig is concerned.

"Great," Mitch replies. "I thought you were their new best friend. Now we're stuck with you?"

"Forever," Craig says.

Mitch only smiles. When she sees me watching, she says, "Shut up."

Clara

ALL WE'VE DONE for hours is move cars and bolster fences, but darkness has fallen and everyone not at a gate or boundary has been sent to rest. Jesse got a chance to shoot his gun when they collected more food on the east side of town, and now he sits at a table in the Pavilion while Nora and Marquez discuss how well he did.

"Bro, he took out two with perfect headshots," Marquez tells Dalton. "He might be as good as you and Nora soon."

Dalton, across the table, rubs his blond hair and grins. He smiles constantly, like a goofy, good-natured dog. He's from the Dakotas somewhere, and though I suspect he's not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, he's quite possibly the nicest person ever. "That's great. I'll show you the M4 when we get a chance."

"Cool," Jesse says. "Thanks."

Dalton's dimples appear. When he looks to where Holly and I sit on a nearby table, they deepen more. He rises with a paper bag in hand and makes his way over.

"Hi, Holly," he says upon his arrival. "I have something for you."

He reaches into the bag and pulls out two cans of vegetarian soup, a package of vegan marshmallows, a box of crackers, and a container of shelf-stable hummus. Once everything is plunked onto the table, he smiles again. "There's no meat in any of it."

"I'm gay," Holly blurts out.

I twist to the side so Dalton doesn't see the laugh I manage to keep quiet. There's a long silence, and when I turn back, his smile has grown slightly puzzled. "That's good. Do you like the food?"

"Yes," she says, her face beet red. "Thank you."

"No problem." Dalton folds his bag carefully and walks away, but not before gracing us with a huge grin.

"What the hell was that?" I whisper.

"I have no idea." Holly looks to me, her eyes round. "Does he not understand what gay means?"

"Maybe he thinks it means you're really happy," I say. "Like him."

Holly drops her head into her hands while her shoulders shake. “Not again. Remember Jimmy?”

“How could I forget Jimmy?” Jimmy was in love with Holly during junior year of high school. No matter what she said or did, he thought she’d grow to love him, and Holly couldn’t bring herself to be mean in order to send him away. “That’s what happens when you’re overly nice.” I hesitate a moment, then say, “Speaking of being nice, your mom is—”

Holly holds up a hand, her amusement fading into a frown. “Do not bring up my mother.”

“Hols, maybe try to look at it from her side of things.”

“Jess already lectured me, so save your breath. Maybe you two should think of my dad’s side of things.”

I want to tell her about Ethan so badly that I forcibly clamp my lips. When I told Dad this morning, his expression went from shock to pity before he covered it up. Though he hasn’t shown Rose that pity, which she’d hate, he was at her side all day, as if to fend off anything coming in her direction. Holly might change her tune if she knew, but it’s not my place to break her heart where her father is concerned, even if I don’t agree with Rose’s reasoning.

“How could she not tell me?” Holly asks. “She didn’t tell me for years. *Years.*” Her voice fades on the last words, and she swipes at a stray tear. “No matter what I did, he was just so...distant. I decided he thought I hated him for using and he didn’t want to be as close or something. But if I’d known it was that, maybe...”

She blinks furiously. I always envied her relationship with Ethan, as it was everything my father-daughter relationship wasn’t. I know how it feels to wish your dad liked you, and now that I’m on the other side, I can imagine how much it would hurt to lose it again. Maybe her heart is already broken, just in a different way.

I put my arm around her shoulders. “I might not know much about dad stuff, but I know your dad loves *and* likes you. Your mom was trying to protect you, that’s all. If—”

“I’m tired of everyone trying to protect me.” Holly leans away, eyes blazing amber. “*Holly can’t handle knowing anything, Holly can’t kill zombies, Holly is sweet and nice and weak.*” She scowls in indignation. “Maybe it’s time to stop being nice.”

I lift an eyebrow, unable to keep my skepticism in check. “You, a bitch? I don’t think so.”

“Works for you,” she says, and I laugh. “Seriously, Clars. I’m done with that.”

As if to prove it, she slides off our table and waves to Dalton. He trots over, smile in place. “Hi, Holly!” he says, like they didn’t just speak four minutes ago.

Holly tugs at her hair. “I have a favor to ask. Do you think you could teach me how to use a gun and, like, tactical stuff or whatever?” She falters a little on the last part, since she has no idea what she’s talking about. She covers it with a smile that’s Nice Holly down to her toes, though there’s a grim determination behind it.

“Um…” Dalton peers around the room. “I’m not sure I’m supposed to —”

“I will,” Nora says, appearing to our left. “I’ll teach both of you, if you want.”

Holly sucks the corner of her lip, warring between not wanting to take anything from Nora and getting what she desires. After a few seconds, she says, “Okay, thanks. If you don’t mind.”

Nora face lights with pleasure. “Of course I don’t. Jesse and I have gate duty tonight, but we’ll start when everything calms down a little?”

Holly nods, eyes downcast. “Thanks,” I say to Nora. “Don’t get eaten out there.”

“Doing my best to avoid it,” she says.

Jesse stands and grabs his coat, holding it hooked on his fingers as he approaches. “What’s going on over here? Secret meeting?”

“Nora’s teaching them to shoot,” Dalton says.

Jesse puts a hand to his chest as though wounded. “I thought that was my job, Clary. You’ve ditched me already?”

“You haven’t clocked in,” I say. “You snooze, you lose.”

He graces me with his easy smile, and my legs go a little wobbly. “Nora’s the better choice, since she’s the one teaching me, but I can help. That is if my sister, who isn’t speaking to me, will allow it.”

Holly rolls her eyes. “I’m speaking to you, idiot. Just not about one subject.”

Jesse grabs her in the crook of his arm. She smacks at him with no more effect than a pesky fly until he releases her with a resolute stare. “Fine. *For now.*”

“Go guard your gate and stay alive, asshole.”

“Your mom.” Jesse claps his hand to his mouth. “Can I still say that, or am I in trouble again?”

“Goodbye, Jesse Jerk Winter,” Holly says in the needling tone only a little sibling can achieve. Jeremy was a master at it.

“Goodbye, Jolly Holly.”

Although she hates being called Jolly Holly, she laughs. Jesse winks at me before he moves for the doors, which does things to my insides that go far beyond what a wink should do. I watch him walk, thinking that his squared shoulders and the gun at his side have done nothing to hurt his rear view.

“See you later, Holly.” Nora’s voice is as hopeful as her smile, and Holly’s cheeks redden in reply. I’ve always been glad I don’t blush like she does—she can hide nothing if her blood vessels decide to get in on the act. By the time Nora follows Jesse outside, Holly’s face has lightened from fuchsia to rose, but she’s still flustered.

“You’re gonna have to step it up if you want to be Bitchy Holly,” I say. “Otherwise, it seems Jolly Holly is here to stay.”

She flips me the bird.

Tom

THE FOLDING-CHAIR AREA outside our drapery rooms has become a genuine living room with the addition of couches, chairs, and tables taken from houses by the fairgrounds. With all the comings and goings of people in the past days, fortifying the boundaries and collecting what we can, it was easy enough to grab furniture on the way back. The soldiers are too busy to argue if you take a little side trip. We managed to grab a few bikes as well, which could come in handy if we need to leave.

Craig and his traveling companions now reside in the spare rooms of our row, and there's always someone hanging out. Not that I don't like them all, but I appreciated Rose moving a few chairs into a corner and calling it *the quiet area*. She's reading in one now, feet on Craig's lap in the chair opposite.

"This book is awesome," she says, holding up one of the books we took from the museum. "I just learned how to raise a posse when you have to take the law into your own hands, and now I'm reading about how to make pemmican."

I stop on the way to my room. "Remind me what that is again?"

"A mixture of dried meat and rendered fat, sometimes with dried berries. They say it lasts close to forever." Rose drops the book onto her chest as though exhausted. "It's a fuckload of work, though. Between that and posse-raisin', I'm plumb tuckered just readin' 'bout it."

Her exaggerated cowgirl voice makes me laugh, and then she grins in a way that makes me hyper-aware of my heartbeat. "They just finished getting everyone inside the gates," I say. "The pack is past Cottage Grove."

Rose closes her eyes and takes a breath, opening them on the exhale. "So this is it."

"This is it."

The zombies are less than twenty miles away. They'll be here—or they won't—in the next day. We'll be safe only after the entire pack has gone by, assuming it doesn't turn around.

"What are you doing now?" she asks.

"Waiting, I guess."

“Come wait with us.” Rose pats the chair beside her. “You can put your feet on Cherry. I’m thinking of swapping his trail name for Ottoman.”

Craig sets down his book. “I only allow one set of stinky feet on me at a time. No offense, Tom.”

“None taken, believe me,” I say, sinking onto the chair.

Rose pokes Craig’s leg with her socked foot. “Offense taken here. Do they really stink?”

“Let’s just say they don’t exactly smell like roses. But they do have me craving Fritos, so thanks for that.”

She tosses her head back and laughs uproariously. I like to see it. In our hall, she’s her normal self. Outside, she’s quiet and on edge, likely because Ethan could crop up at any minute. Thankfully, the gossip has died down with the advance of a quarter-million zombies.

I pull my eyes from Rose. Craig watches intently, as though evaluating me, before his lips curve upward. He gives a faint nod, then squeezes Rose’s foot and picks up his book. At first, I thought there was something between them, until Clara explained there *is* something—friendship and deep love. I like Craig, which has nothing to do with the tacit approval I’ve just received, though that doesn’t hurt any.

“Guess what Craig and I found today on our way back from car-moving?” Rose asks me, wiggling in her chair.

“I have no idea.”

“Guess!”

“An antelope.”

She eyes me like I’m insane. “Where the hell did you get *antelope*? Why would that be the first thing you thought of?”

“I have no idea.” Her laughter is contagious, and I give in. “Why are you asking me to guess random things?”

“I’m glad I did. There has to be a reason you went straight to antelope, but we’ll get to the bottom of that later. No, unsurprisingly, it was not an antelope. We found two acoustic guitars.”

“That’s good news, but I’m not sure it’s practical with zombies on the way.”

“That’s what I said,” Craig murmurs, eyes on his book. “But try telling *her* that.”

I've omitted the fact that I'm nervous. If I had a place to practice first—a quiet spot without people or zombies—I might feel different. Playing for the first time in years is something one should do alone. I wish I hadn't stopped, wish I hadn't done a lot of things, but even with my nerves tingling the way they are, I itch to play.

Rose's hand brushes my arm. "You can't hear it outside the museum—we checked—and yours is waiting for you in the Model-T. Jess tuned it."

Somehow, she knows. No, it isn't somehow—it's Rose, who anticipates things like this, who does her best to put people at ease. I curl my fingers, wondering if they'll work the way they used to. "Thanks."

She squeezes my arm lightly, then sets her hand in her lap. "Now we just have to wait for the zombies to pass, and we'll have us a regular hoe-down."

Voices come from the corridor, and then Craig's friends round the corner in mid-conversation with Sam and Mitch. Jesse, Clara, and Holly trail behind, talking with the two young guys, Lance and Gabe.

"...don't know about this," Troy says to Sam. "But they do have an arsenal if we need one."

Lana breaks from the group and heads for Rose, where Willa has inserted herself beside Rose's thigh for a nap. "I brought Willa a treat," she says.

Willa lifts her head, tail thumping, then stretches before she hops to the floor and dances over to Lana. It doesn't take Willa long to figure out who her treat dealers are, and she acts accordingly, showering them with attention. Lana laughs when Willa licks her face. "I love doggy kisses," she says in a sing-song voice. "Thank you."

She dumps the contents of her plastic cup into Willa's dog bowl: leftover dinner, which was an unappealing mass of goop purported to contain meat and vegetables. Lana sets her cup on the table against the wall—another new piece of furniture that holds our brand-new sanitizing station.

To save on dishes, everyone in the fairgrounds has a drinking cup or bottle that they bring to meals and fill and wash themselves. We're supposed to use filtered water for washing, but I've seen more than one person rinsing theirs in the bathroom sinks. I haven't, and as of yesterday I use the station Rose set up with Gabe, who's possibly more obsessed than

Rose with the purity of our drinking water. He flipped out over her Kelly Kettle, and she promised him one of his own if we return to Always Ready.

The gang spreads out on the couches and chairs. Mitch turns to the quiet area. "Lockdown has begun."

"We heard," Rose says. I was impressed with her composed acknowledgment of that fact, but now her hands tremble, and she sticks them under her thighs.

"We need to agree on a place to go," I say to the room. Our plan is still to meet up at the house, but if we can't get there, we need to nail down an alternate spot.

"North or east," Sam replies with a nod. "Any suggestions?"

"Timberline Lodge?" Rose asks. "I know it's far, but isn't there a Safe Zone there?"

"A Safe Zone they haven't heard from," Mitch says. "And a hundred-fifty miles is a lot to travel."

Craig nods. "But doable. Even if the Safe Zone is gone, there shouldn't be many Lexers that high."

Timberline Lodge is aptly named, as it sits six thousand feet high at Mount Hood's timberline—the altitude above which no trees grow. Whether or not we can reach the lodge is another story, but whether or not we can reach anywhere is anybody's guess.

Francis plunks a beat-up road atlas onto a coffee table. "Maybe we should see where we're going."

Craig, Rose, and I stand by the couches while they flip the pages. I have the same atlas in my truck, but I've never inspected it this way. I've never had to. Now that I have, I'll be sure to retrieve it before setting off anywhere. Every road, every trail, every track is on the map. Driving through Oregon, you get the sense there aren't many routes of travel, but if you're on foot and desperate, there are plenty.

"I have this same atlas," Sam says. "It's gotten me out of a tight spot a few times. I wonder if we can find any in the cars here. A spare or two wouldn't hurt."

"They have a copier in the museum office," Rose says. "We can make copies of the important parts."

Rose traces a line from the fairgrounds to her house. Francis marks it with a pen, then entreats his friends to commit the route to memory before

we study the pages north and east. Traveling I-5 is not an option, for obvious reasons. Belknap Hot Springs sits about sixty miles east, and we agree it's our alternate meeting point, even if there are likely people there.

"Barry," Rose says suddenly. "He has a house with views of the Cascades. It's somewhere east of here, though I'm not sure where."

"Do you think he'd let us use it?" Francis asks.

She screws her lips to the side. "I don't know him well enough to ask. But I could try telling him what we're thinking and see if he wants to come."

"Great," Mitch mutters from her couch.

Rose bonks her friend's head with the flat of her hand. "Really? You'd rather be eaten by zombies?"

"Yes."

Rose rolls her eyes. "Anyway, I can ask him now."

"He's outside on night watch," Jesse says, "but he'll be back early in the morning."

"I'll ask him at breakfast, then. Assuming we haven't been eaten."

"Can I tell Marquez and Nora? They don't have a place to go."

Rose smiles at Jesse. "Of course."

We have nowhere near enough food at the house to sustain our original group for long, much less these new people and those kids, too. But it's the same answer I would've given, and no one else raises the point either.

"I'm telling Dad we're meeting at home," Holly says. "It's his house, too, you know."

"It is," Rose says evenly. "I already told him he's welcome to come if we leave. You can tell him about the new plan if you'd like."

Holly deflates, seeming almost disappointed Rose didn't argue, then stamps from the hall. Rose closes her eyes while she rubs at her forehead, but not before I see the sheen of tears. Maybe if Holly saw how her mother is hurting, she'd ease up a little.

Mitch stands and puts an arm around Rose's shoulders. "When is it too late to eat your young? Have we passed that point yet?"

Rose laughs with everyone else, though I see the strain in the way she stands, shoulders curled inward. I like to think I know Holly well, and this isn't her. My parenting style was *Yell First, Ask Questions Never*, and I

admire Rose's ability to keep her cool when faced with a kid who's declared mutiny.

After more discussion of routes, we close the atlas for the time being. "Y'all have your BOBs ready to go?" Troy asks.

Mitch cocks her head. "Our what?"

"Bug-out bags," Craig explains.

"What's with the apocalypse and acronyms?" Clara whispers to Jesse, who snickers.

"You should have enough food and water for three days in there," Troy says. "Along with clothes, emergency supplies, and extra weapons."

"We had some stuff ready," I say. "We were calling them Go Bags."

I wish we had more. As it is, we've used the clothes and toiletries in our packs, but maybe I can sneak some spare supplies out of the Auditorium on my next inventory shift. If Barry gets on board with the plan, maybe I won't have to sneak. "There's more at the house," I add. "Lanterns, non-perishable food, and things like that."

"Good. Do y'all have any guns?"

"Two," Sam says. "In our packs. Three, with Jesse's. And a shotgun hidden at the house."

Jesse wears his pistol openly like the other soldiers now. He's fired it, too, on a trip to find food, and Barry told me he did extremely well. "I might be able to take a few and some ammo when no one's looking," Jesse says. "They don't keep count."

"Don't get in trouble," Rose says, and frowns when Jesse shrugs.

"Don't get yourself court-martialed or anything, but you should get them if you can." Troy leans back on his couch, shaking his head. "It's bullshit they haven't armed everyone. I guarantee you everyone in Texas has a gun right now. More than one."

"Guns call more zombies," Mitch says. "Besides, you're not in Texas anymore, *pardner*."

Instead of taking offense, Troy belts out a laugh. "I get the feeling you and Lana will be good friends." He lifts his chin at Craig. "You weren't kidding when you said she didn't take any shit."

Mitch punches Craig's arm as the conversation splits into smaller discussions. I take a break from company to straighten up my room—things get out of hand in such a small space if you don't stay on top of them—and

then return to the living area. Rose is in her chair again, book on her lap, though she watches the others talk instead of reading.

I sit beside her, content to do the same. “Holly will come around,” I say.

“I’m hoping.” Rose taps her fingers on the book’s cover, then faces me. “With all the hoopla, I never did get my first self-defense lesson.”

“Name a time.”

I can barely stand when she looks at me this way—the hint of a smile on her lips, her blue eyes warm with a touch of playfulness behind them. I’m in deep, and that realization is confusing and guilt-ridden and thrilling all at once. It isn’t as though a decision has to be made now, though I suspect it’s already been made and is waiting until the right time to announce itself.

“Same as before?” Rose asks. “In the museum after breakfast?”

“I’ll be there.”

We sit until the daylight fades and the lights come on. I picture the zombies making their way up the highway, searching for something, anything, to eat. Closing in. Maybe homing in on the people sitting in the middle of town, one lonely rectangle of humanity in what Craig and the others say is five hundred miles of near-total destruction.

We’ll know soon enough if our plan has to be put to the test. Not just our plan—*us*—and I hope I’m up to the challenge. I watch Clara talk with Jesse and the others, her face pensive with the knowledge of what might come. She catches my eye and smiles. I smile back, full of love for my girl whose kindness and humor and compassion I almost missed out on.

Fuck hope. I’ll make damn sure I’m up to the challenge.

Rose

BREAKFAST SHIFT IS ALMOST OVER. It's been a silent affair in the food trucks, even if the zombies blocks away aren't likely to hear the clang of a pot. I'm not taking any chances when we're surrounded. They think most of the zombies continued north, but enough came off the highway to fill the streets near the fairgrounds.

All meals are inside, as are all people unless moving between buildings or guarding a gate. Gabrielle nods when I mime bringing in the last of the Vienna sausages, and then she murmurs that she'll finish the cleaning in return. I lift the chafing dish and move across the lot to the Events Center doors.

Nora is there, keeping an eye on the lot and making sure silence is observed. She opens the door and waves me through. "Thanks," I say in a hushed tone. "Want a sausage? You're too skinny."

Nora plucks one out. "Thank you. Is this the last dish?"

"Yeah. We're done until dinner."

Nora chews her sausage gravely. She does most things with a serious air, as though she carries the weight of the world on her shoulders. It must feel that way at times, especially with her family gone and while wearing a uniform that promises to protect others. I know what it's like to be motherless, but not everyone-less. It's my greatest fear, the one that paralyzes me until I push it away. Some things are too awful to imagine.

I stop inside, wanting to say something that might make Nora feel a little less alone. "You're doing a great job, Nora. We appreciate it."

Nora has a cute nose with a smattering of freckles, and it crinkles when she smiles. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*. You should hang out in our hall more often. You're always welcome."

"Jesse says that." Nora ducks her head shyly. "Okay, I will."

I continue to the Performance Hall and deposit my dish on one of the serving tables set against the wall. The full room is quieter than usual. With zombies in the streets, everyone eats in their buildings until further notice,

and with all of my friends eating across the fairgrounds, this room seems full of strangers.

A laugh carries over the hush, drawing my attention to Ethan and Eva at a table with other diners. They face away from me, but a few of their tablemates shoot unsympathetic glances in my direction. Eva looks over her shoulder and then shakes her head, resting her arm on the back of Ethan's chair in an easy and intimate way.

It hurts. I have zero regrets, but it still hurts in a way that makes my next breath a struggle. I leave the room, cheeks fiery with humiliation. This is how it's going to be—me as the bad guy, Ethan as the injured party. I can only imagine what explanation he gave. Well, I'll let him have his lies. I have my freedom, which is far more valuable, and everyone who matters knows the truth.

Barry walks down the corridor, the sunlight through the glass entryways accentuating every tired line on his face. "Morning," he says.

"How does it look out there?" I'm pleased my voice sounds solid. Strong. I've been weak for too long, but no longer.

"Not so great. We haven't heard from the soldiers we sent out. I think we'll be okay, though. Don't worry."

I almost laugh at the impossibility of that suggestion. "I have a question for you. It's kind of a lot, and you can say no. No hard feelings at all."

"I'm intrigued."

Now that he's in front of me, it seems a colossal request. I wipe my hands on my pants and force myself to speak. "We have a plan in case we have to leave quickly. We meet at my house, where we have some food, and then find somewhere to go by the mountains. We were thinking Belknap, maybe Breitenbush or Timberline Lodge, but if there are people there, they might not want more. I had the idea of looking at listings in my office for empty houses east of here that could work, if we can make it to the office, but—"

"My house," Barry says. His expression gives nothing away.

I nod, my cheeks hotter than before. "It would only be for a little while, until we saw what it was like over there and could figure something else out. We thought that maybe you—"

"I've had the same thought. Some company would be nice. Like I told you, I haven't been there in years, though I have someone check on it. I

can't say it'll be livable since he hadn't made it over after the snow this winter, but it's usually in pretty good shape." His laugh lines deepen a tad. "Wait, am I invited?"

His smile says he's teasing, and I laugh with relief. "Of course I meant *with* you, bestie. We'd help fix whatever needs fixing."

"How could I refuse that? I'll come by your hall later and we'll figure it out." He lowers his brows. "You have food? I thought you turned it all over to us."

I give him my best hangdog expression. "Yeah, about that... We don't have a ton, but it's enough that we won't starve to death immediately."

"It'll be our secret. I'm going to get some breakfast. Did you eat?"

"I did. I'd join you anyway, but I have someplace I need to be. Thank you. For everything."

"Thanks for inviting me." Barry winks as we part company, and I turn when he calls my name a moment later. "We may need that plan. I hope not, but we may."

The way he stands so somber in the sunlight, all traces of humor gone, makes my head fuzzy and my legs unsteady. I nod and push out the doors, mind racing. We'll also need food and water and weapons. We'll need to carve out an existence in a world that wants us dead in countless ways, and we'll have to anticipate them all. Head them off at the pass.

Panic flaps in my chest like a caged wild bird. I close my eyes and lift my face to the sun. It's perfectly warm and dry, the kind of spring day that promises summer is coming. My mother, an Oregon native, said the beautiful Oregon summers were payoff for gray winters. We moved out here in fall, in time to start the school year, and Mom died the following spring before she got that payoff. Pancreatic cancer came on fast, and it seemed no sooner did she complain of a stomachache than she was in a rented hospital bed in the living room, filled to the gills with morphine and drawing her final breath.

Maybe that was when I realized how many things there were to worry about, if cancer could swoop in and knock what seemed a healthy, vibrant woman to her knees in mere months. I'd always been somewhat fretful, but now I had to be vigilant. To try to see the bad thing coming because I wouldn't—*couldn't*—be blindsided like that again. If I saw it coming, I could stop it, or at least be prepared. It doesn't work that way most of the

time, I've learned that much over the years, but you can't blame a girl for trying.

All the fears I've wrestled with pale in comparison to what I face now. We're stuck between worlds—the old world is gone, and there's no guarantee of making it to the next one. Building the next one. I can see what's coming, but I can do nothing to stop it. I'm not prepared. That doesn't mean I can't get there, though. I started the other day, and I won't stop until I'm sinewy and dangerous and able to kick ass.

I walk across the lot to the museum, then slip in the door. Soft music greets me, the gentle twang of a guitar and a low, melodic voice. I can't make out the words, but the tone is lovely, and I know from whom Clara inherited her singing talent.

When I enter the open space, Tom looks up from where he sits, his fingers stilling the strings. He sets down the guitar, and his smile makes my next breath a struggle in a different way—a not entirely unpleasant way. “Ready, Red?” he asks.

I fill my lungs, as much with courage as with oxygen. “Ready.”

Thanks for reading!

Stay tuned for *World Between*
Book two of *The Cascadia Series*, coming in 2021

Read the two series that started it all:

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